Editing a higher education journal: gatekeeping or development?

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Abstract

Editors of academic journals play a key part in the production of knowledge and the continuation of scholarly conversations about practical and intellectual issues of the day. While peer review, an essential part of journal processes, has received considerable attention both in the scholarly and the popular press, much of it critical, the role of the chief editor remains rather shadowy and underexplored. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 11 editors of academic journals in the field of higher education probed for editors' thoughts about their work. The editors, located in seven countries, described dual roles as gatekeepers—keeping up standards in the field—and academic developers—supporting and encouraging novice and other potential authors. They searched for balance between these often contradictory expectations amidst complexities and challenges of contemporary academia.

keywords: editors; journals; higher education; gatekeeper; academic development

Introduction

Academic publishing enables the sharing of new knowledge and the continuation of conversations about challenges, issues and good practice. It is the key currency in the academic prestige economy, important for hiring, promotions and grant success (Kwiek, 2021). In recent years, driven by neoliberal trends in academe, individuals have been urged to increase their publishing productivity (Acker & Webber, 2017). Journal editors clearly play a critical role in the publishing process. Yet as noted by various authors (Hirschauer, 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2016; Newton, 2010) there is surprisingly little research into their deliberations and decision-making.

The exploratory project described here enquires into the outlooks, experiences and meaning-making of editors associated with journals in the field of higher education. Using a qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured approach, we interviewed 11 individuals, residing in seven countries, who hold or have recently held editor-in-chief or equivalent positions in higher education journals. They edit a variety of 'types' of journals, which we classified as generic, niche, disciplinary or regional. Note that we use 'editor' as a shorthand for editor-in-chief unless otherwise noted. This article takes an in-depth look at a question that was largely emergent in our study: *Are editors best seen as gatekeepers or developers?* For the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) community, of which this journal is a part, relationships between gatekeeping and development should be particularly interesting. We uncover a tension between these two elements of editors' work and investigate their efforts to find a manageable balance, all in a context of intensifying editorial workloads.

Background

The work of editors

On the surface, at least, the journal editor's role appears fairly transparent. Typically, an editor or sometimes a delegate reads a new submission. If the reader believes the article is inappropriate for the journal or has major flaws, they can 'desk reject' it. Otherwise, editors or their surrogates, such as associate or assistant editors, will identify peer reviewers and solicit agreements to review. They may need to chase slow reviewers or find substitutes. Once reviews are in, they compare results and determine next steps, which may include another round of revisions and reviewing, and then make a final decision. Editors also deal with issues like plagiarism, ethical violations, technical glitches and negotiations with the publisher and make efforts to improve and promote the journal. Larger journals have more layers of associate or other named editors. Most journals have an administrative or managing editor who is usually part-time and modestly paid.

The available literature on journal editors' work includes advice (e.g., Contributors, 2017), critical essays (e.g., Resnik & Elmore, 2016; Texeira da Silva et al., 2018), personal accounts (e.g., Linders, 2016; Starfield & Paltridge, 2019) and surveys (e.g., Committee on Publication Ethics, 2019; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2016). Qualitative empirical studies are scarce. Among them are Hirschauer's (2015) ethnography of editorial decision-making, Newton's (2010) 'natural experiment' comparing editors' comments on similar articles in different journals and Feeney et al.'s (2019) use of document analysis to demonstrate the under-representation of women on editorial boards. Wasserman and Richards (2015) qualitatively analysed responses to ten questions sent on-line to 11 editors of journals in journalism and communication. Their particular interest was in equity issues concerning submissions from the

Global South. Like ourselves, Glonti et al. (2019) and Wellington and Nixon (2005) conducted semi-structured interviews with editors. Glonti et al. reported on what 56 biomedical journal editors thought about peer review. Wellington and Nixon (2005) interviewed 12 editors of education journals in the UK. They described the editor's role as a series of 'poles and continua: filter/gatekeeper, mediator/guardian, definer/defendant' (p. 646).

Unlike these two interview-based studies, our focus is on the editors of higher or tertiary education journals. The field of higher education has grown rapidly in the past few decades (Kwiek, 2021; Tight, 2018; Vlegels & Huisman, 2021). It is often described as 'fragmented' (Jones, 2012; Vlegels & Huisman, 2021) or existing in 'silos' (Tight, 2018, 2019), as its scholars come from a variety of disciplines and there are competing subgroups, for example professionals such as academic developers, who often focus on improving pedagogy, and traditional researchers pursuing a variety of topics (Jones, 2021). Higher education and science studies often operate in isolation from each other, despite shared interests; moreover, higher education researchers need to respond both to scientific agendas and to policy-makers' agendas (Musselin, 2014). As in other fields, there is substantial stratification among journals and authors compete to publish in those considered 'high level' or 'top' journals (Bentley, 2019; Kwiek, 2021). All of these features might create challenges for editors. While there is important work available classifying higher education journals and describing the research found within them (Tight, 2018, 2019), in-depth interviewing has not often been used as a way to illuminate the preoccupations of editors in the field.

Pells (2018) writes: 'Most journals are still edited part-time by practising academics on what is in effect an amateur basis' (p. 2). Commentaries allude to the lack of recognition, remuneration and respect (Contributors, 2017; Feeney et al., 2019) and the excessive time

commitment required for the work (Contributors, 2017; Starfield & Paltridge, 2019). Editors compensate for the negative features of the role by the value they place on influencing their disciplines, seeing new work and improving their journal (Contributors, 2017; Mullen, 2011) and, for some, by the satisfaction of mentoring novice authors (Randell–Moon et al., 2011).

Gatekeepers or developers?

The last point above, the satisfaction of mentoring novice authors, brings us to the topic of this article. Individual editors might emphasize (a) their *gatekeeping role,* ensuring that the discipline and the journal maintain their quality (Lund Dean & Forray, 2018), or (b) their *developmental role*, encouraging, enabling or supporting researchers and authors by offering advice for improvement (Ragins, 2018; Randell–Moon et al., 2011; Starfield & Paltridge, 2019; Wisker, 2013).

Bretag, one of the co-authors in Randell–Moon et al. (2011), tells an interesting story of a submission by a Nigerian author that she thought was potentially important but 'nowhere near the standards required for publication' (p. 233). She worked for over a year with the author to improve the paper so that it could be sent for reviewing, after which further revisions were required before the article was eventually published. While this tale has a happy ending, she adds that since that time, she has been inundated with African submissions and her own 'limited resources' have not allowed her to repeat the level of support she provided to the original author (p. 233).

What we see in the Bretag example is clearly a developmental approach to editing. When institutionalized in universities, often directed towards teaching improvement, academic development (also called educational or faculty or staff development) may be regarded as a

feminized field, given its majority-female population and associations with caring and empathy (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017; Wilder, 2019). On the other hand, 'help' by academic developers and certainly by editors comes from a position of assumed superiority. Critics point to ethnocentric biases within the process, thought to result from the largely White and Western backgrounds of editors and reviewers of major English-language journals (Abu-Saad, 2008; Chakravartty et al., 2018). The dominance of English-language journals also puts authors whose first language is not English at a disadvantage (Wasserman & Richards, 2015).

Methods and data

The three co-authors drafted an interview guide based on the literature and a pilot interview. As we were concerned with the ways in which editors constructed meanings from their ongoing experiences, it was logical that we would turn to qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach meant that we could probe for feelings and emotions rather than the simpler responses found in questionnaire research. Given the paucity of scholarship directly on our topic, our approach was exploratory. Our chosen method was a qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interview, with questions about motivations for becoming an editor, procedures of editors' work and satisfactions and dissatisfactions.

After completing ethical protocols, we subsequently received approval from the ethics review boards of the two home universities that required it. The next step was to produce a spreadsheet with details of 33 higher education journals. Although we consulted lists compiled by others (e.g. Tight, 2018), we relied on our own knowledge of the field. Our intention was not to achieve full coverage but to produce a spread of journal types that would enable choice of participants across a variety of journal sizes, types and countries. The journals were classified into five categories, listed here with examples of each type (not those necessarily included in the

study): generic (n = 9) (e.g., *Studies in Higher Education*), niche (14) (e.g., *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*), disciplinary (5) (e.g., *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*) and regional (5) (e.g., *Australian Universities Review*).

Next, we selected examples from each category, aiming additionally for an international spread based on the location of the journal and/or the editor. We contacted 17 editors over email and 11 agreed to take part in the study.[1] Participants comprised six women and five men; journal types included two generic, six niche, two regional and one disciplinary. Editors were located in seven different countries. Interviews were conducted by the authors in 2019, either face-to-face or over Skype or Zoom, and lasted 60–90 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed in full. Field notes were composed after each interview. We chose pseudonyms for participants, selecting first names that sounded 'English' and did not reveal the country of origin. Pseudonyms are: Brian, Daniel, David, Jane, John, Julie, Lori, Melissa, Pamela, Sophia and Tim. Journals and countries are not named.

Given the small number of interviews and the exploratory nature of the study, we analysed the data using Microsoft Word rather than by means of a specific software program for qualitative data analysis. Initial coding was done by one of us and the other two then added additional codes and comments to the transcripts. Agreement on themes for further analysis was reached through team discussion (Saldaña, 2016, p. 37) .

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[1] Two did not reply; one stated that he did not consider his journal to fall within 'higher education' and two others agreed to participate but did not respond to follow-up communications or a suitable date could not be agreed.

Findings

All of the editors aim to uphold the standards of the research and the quality of the writing in their journals. They are at pains to avoid ethical breaches such as plagiarism. In that sense, all are gatekeepers. All wish to improve the level of authors' work and in that sense they are all developers. In other words, there are no editors who are *solely* gatekeepers or developers. The two categories might be better thought of as ideal types or poles (Wellington & Nixon, 2005) or, given that individuals lean towards one side or the other, a continuum.

Journal rejection rates, according to our interviewees, were mostly between 83% and 90%, with two others around 60%. In most cases, desk and peer review are a gatekeeping exercise. With increased numbers of submissions in recent years, the process has become more competitive. Several participants noted that the range of countries submitting had also expanded, points substantiated by the literature (Kweik, 2021; Musselin, 2014):

> It started off the first few issues were very much European, Scandinavian and some North American. Now we have people from all over the world submitting articles from everywhere, the Middle East, Asia, China, Japan, Australasia, South America, Central America, everywhere. (David)

Difficulties of finding peer reviewers were mentioned by almost everyone, often linked to the increasing number of submissions. Brian says: 'more often than not. . . I'm looking for reasons to reject an article instead of accepting it because of the volume of submissions'. Similarly, Tim states: 'Desk reject is about 60 to 70 percent of the papers, because I don't have space. . . so I must be pretty strict'. However, he estimates that 'once they are sent out for review the chances of being published are fairly high. . . my guess would be 70 to 80 percent'. Melissa echoes his point, estimating that 'about 25 percent of the manuscripts [are] put through to peer review and

then I think most of the manuscripts do get through in the end'. John comments that the publisher thinks a high rejection rate is an indicator of quality, although he personally disagrees.

Reasons given for desk rejection were interesting. Officially, they are due to incompatibilities with the scope of the journal or to poor quality. Digging deeper, 'out of scope' can mean related to higher education, but relying upon literature from a different discipline (such as psychology or economics) or consisting of an under-theorized report on a classroom or leadership initiative. Julie addresses the latter point: 'People think that some intervention that they've done in their classroom is worthy of a journal article', while Daniel notes that 'because I see a lot of those papers in my classes' he can identify and reject similar submissions at the first stage. Sophia states: 'Some I just immediately reject because they are about teacher education', although she then qualifies her response: 'if the focus is more on teachers learning in school'. Editors of smaller, regionally-based journals may encounter conflicts when submissions come from friends or colleagues (Daniel).

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of desk rejections is the national or cultural distribution of submissions that the editors deem unsuitable for the journal (see Wasserman & Richards, 2015). Julie believes that some of these submissions from low or middle-income countries might be due to pressures to publish in order to keep a position or receive a promotion (Gao & Zheng, 2021).[2] Julie says: 'All of us [editors] spend a huge amount of time rejecting articles and we are all aware that it's tragic, it's sad for everyone'.

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[2] Incentivizing publication in high-ranking journals is a feature of developed countries too (Opstrup, 2017; Pietilä, 2019). One of our participants indicated that if she published in her own journal, she would receive 'points', while for editing the journal there was nothing.

Tim indicates that he has no problem rejecting submissions, but 'what I struggle with sometimes is that I know that people who submit may come from different cultures and different backgrounds and from their perspective they think that their publication is a solid one and . . . how can I make clear in a nice way that this is not the paper that fits the journal'. Several editors tried to address the desk rejection issue by 'customizing' (Julie) the letter of rejection or 'writ[ing] a kind letter' (Sophia). Authors may also be referred to services provided by some publishers such as Taylor & Francis or organizations like AuthorAid.

It is evident that gatekeeping produces stress for the editors. Some go beyond the kind letter or referrals to author services to find developmental ways of providing an extra layer of support. One version involves opening up the journal focus and making efforts to welcome different voices and perspectives. Lori and her colleagues made strenuous efforts to rewrite their journal's mission and change its title. She is pleased with the results: 'I'm no longer having to have people ask, is this a place where [an article on a particular group] could fit?'

The gatekeeping role of editors coexists with efforts to soften, or even bypass, the first rejection stage as well as the point at which reviewers' feedback is returned to authors. Many of the editors, especially but not exclusively women and those whose journals have a teaching and learning component,[3] argued that the review process should have a developmental or pedagogical aspect to it. Perhaps this divide is an instance of the fragmentation described by scholars of the higher education field (Jones, 2012; Vlegels & Huisman, 2021). Jane says, 'I try

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[3] These categories overlap: at the time we began the study (2019), our list of 33 journals indicated that most of the editors of teaching and learning higher education journals were women and most of the editors of generalist higher education journals were men.

very hard to be a supportive editor'. Melissa states that 'we expect reviewers if they're rejecting to give pedagogically supportive reviews that are going to help develop authors'. Lori refers to 'this journal's values' as keeping a focus on a 'developmental review process':

> So even if someone's manuscript is not accepted in the journal we want them to walk away with good feedback that they can use to improve their work. We work really hard to make sure that feedback is always developed in a way that doesn't make them feel shut down and . . . invalidated as a scholar.

Pamela created an unusual system of pre-peer review, reminiscent of Bretag's (in Randell–Moon et al., 2011) description of working with one author. Pamela reads a submission, often not publishable, and does a thorough edit, sending back a marked up manuscript and a detailed letter, asking for the author's feedback. She calls this process 'critical encouragement'. After further correspondence, the article may be ready for peer review in the usual sense. At that point, Pamela's co-editor will handle the reviews and the decision making.

Tensions between the gatekeeper and developer approaches surfaced when participants were asked if there were components of their work that were emotional or required emotional labour. Melissa's response provides a poignant example:

> I guess emotional to the extent of that tension between my politics around wanting to be developmental and supportive and take the pedagogical position and then the actual reality of having to reject papers, I don't like that, I don't like that role at all and I don't like the fact that I'm contributing to it. [It's] emotional in the sense that I really care about the journal and I'm very dedicated to it.

Discussion

Our analysis of editors' descriptions of their roles has focused on the two poles of gatekeeping and development. Gatekeeping is similar to Wellington and Nixon's (2005) category of 'filterer/gatekeeper', in the sense that the editor's initial review desk rejects articles that are unsuitable for the journal. Wellington and Nixon also refer to being a guardian of the field, which we see as part of gatekeeping. Practising gatekeeping would appear to invoke the image of an editor as a powerful figure (Feeney et al., 2019; Newton, 2010), yet our participants do not appear particularly powerful, often the reverse, trying to do a good job with a responsibility that is ever more difficult and often carries very little if any recompense, financially or otherwise.

While participants were aware of controversial issues for scholarly journals, such as the open access movement, the ubiquity of metrics such as impact factors, and profit-making by publishers, their attention appeared more focused on improving their journals and managing their workload, which normally was added on to an academic responsibility. They were concerned that rising pressures on academics around the world to publish in journals were contributing to unmanageable workloads for themselves and for peer reviewers and potentially to the necessity for harsher gatekeeping. Whether further advances in technology, such as artificial intelligence taking a role in finding reviewers, might alleviate some of the pressures was not often discussed (Heaven, 2018; Horbach & Halffman, 2020). Many of the editors try to soften the impact of rejection, especially at an early stage of the publishing process, by various means. Few go as far as Pamela, who for at least some submissions, gives 'critical encouragement' until the submission is ready for peer review. But others have tried to revise and customise letters of rejection to make them more encouraging and less harmful to self-esteem (Chan et al., 2020). Some editors believe that their journal needs to rethink its responses to culturally different

submissions or expand its efforts to encourage and support diverse voices and perspectives (Abu-Saad, 2008; Chakravartty et al., 2018).

Limitations of our study include its small numbers and its focus on one field. Even the most prestigious higher education journals do not resemble science journals such as *Nature* in their submission numbers and thus the issues may be different. Higher education may have some features that limit generalizations, for example disagreement over whether higher education research is 'a (scattered) field, a discipline, a tribe, a territory, a (a-theoretical) community of practice, a cluster of silos, or an archipelago' (Brankovic, 2020). A larger study would speak more directly to the question of whether schisms in the field influence editors' responses, especially their tendencies toward acting as gatekeepers or developers. Moreover, our interviews took place shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have altered submission and publication practices (King & Frederickson, 2021).

Conclusion

The editor's role in rejecting submissions, especially through desk review, was regarded by our participants as both inevitable and a source of consternation. Taking a developer perspective was one way of reducing the tension but carried workload consequences and was impossible to apply on a large scale. Probing ways in which editors reduce these tensions, including restructuring or leaving the position, deserves further research. In conjunction with Sutherland's (2018) exhortation to broaden the remit of academic development, we might go beyond looking at the developmental role of editors to consider the potential for institutional academic development units to undertake training for editors and peer reviewers.

We have also moved beyond seeing editors' work as a 'role' into its implications for knowledge production, as well as considering the pressures generated by neoliberal incentive schemes for academic publishing and publishers' notions of rejections indicating quality. These topics are part of 'wider struggles and tensions between people and knowledge systems' (Grant & Manathunga, 2011, p. 353) and need to be incorporated into discussions within the higher education research community and the academic development community.

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