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Getting published is not a walk in the woods

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EDITORIAL

Getting published is not a walk in the woods

The pressure on academics to publish is incessant and intensifying. Instruments abound for judging the putative quality of research: the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, the Standard Evaluation Protocol in The Netherlands, the Excellence in Research for Australia, the work of the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education in France, the Triennial Research Assessment in Italy, and so on. It becomes *de rigueur* for each country to have its own devices for measuring and supposedly improving the quality of research, rewarding the pick of the crop and punishing the slackers. The momentum of the push for evaluating the quality of research, and the potentially dire consequences for institutions and individuals, is both worldwide and apparently unstoppable.

Research assessment exercises and frameworks, of whatever hue and by whatever title, are simply too juicy for policy makers and governments to resist. The push for publication at all costs is not only worldwide, but journal editors can predict the timing of research assessment exercises in the plethora of papers received in the run-up to the timing of such exercises.

Not only does the press for publication become heavier for institutions to “pass” muster, but authors must publish in highly cited and high-impact journals if they are to have their contracts renewed or their applications for promotion taken seriously. If it’s not a “world-class” paper or journal – whatever that means – then you may as well pack up and go home. Fitness for purpose, even though it is routinely bandied about in quality assurance circles, seems to be superseded by the impact and frequency of citations: a popularity vote in an age of populism.

Cynics might argue that the impetus to publish is a delicious instance of the Red Queen Effect – running faster and working ever harder just to stay in the same place – or evidence of the intensification thesis (e.g., Hargreaves, 1992). Others argue that assessment instruments for judging research and publication are instances of organizational control theories which, as Rebora and Turri (2013) aver, “focus on the link between the characteristics of assessment systems and the behaviours that they trigger” (p. 1658). Protagonists of the movement to measure everything might argue that research and publication assessment exercises enable the cream to rise to the top and to be seen as such: the “best”, or maybe the tastiest, research papers stand out from the relative dross.

Like it or not, journal editors are caught up in this *mêlée* of papers, agendas, debates, and policies. Becker (1967) reminded researchers to consider carefully the question “whose side are we on”; this can apply to editors as well. Here, the answer is very clear: Editors are on the side of ensuring that their journal publishes high-quality, rigorously conducted research with the potential to make a positive difference and a positive contribution to the field. In this, they rely on blind external peer review to assist them in making judgements. In carrying out their work, editors and reviewers consider several questions, for example:

- Does the paper have the potential to make a difference, and to whom, what, where, and how?
- Is it likely to make a difference?
- Is the research sufficiently rigorous and correct at all stages?
- Does it advance the field in which it is working, for example, substantively, methodologically, conceptually, theoretically, practically?

- Does it make an up-to-date, original, significant contribution, and if so, what is it, and to what, and to whom?
- Is its content worthwhile, and if so, for what and whom?
- Who is the research for?
- Will it be of interest and use to a wider, international readership?
- What could be its likely impact, and on what and whom?
- Does it have implications for policy makers and decision makers?
- Is the evidence cited valid and reliable?
- Are the conclusions valid?
- Are alternative explanations for the findings presented, with a defensible justification and “warrant” made for the explanation chosen?

A paper is rejected if it is little more than an indulgence of its author(s), an airing of ignorance, a dismal attempt to polish the author’s resume (witness, also, those conference papers that are little more than high-sounding hot air, with higher education institutions contributing to conference expenses in exotic destinations: holidays abroad), offering little of value or use to readers, incapable of making a difference to practice and decision making, with little or no potential for improvement and development in their fields, and based on ideology rather than evidence. Many papers are rejected simply for being wrong or methodologically suspect. By contrast, however, on the bright side, many papers make the cut and are published. So it is with the papers published here.

Even though the agendas and time frames of researchers and policy makers often collide rather than coincide, or research bears little direct relation or relevance to policy formation and decision making, nevertheless policy should be expertly informed. Governments and policy makers are charged with the responsibility of examining issues in depth. In an age of evidence-based everything, educationists have a right to have policy decisions informed by more than ideology. Answers to questions such as “what evidence?”, “evidence of what?”, and “whose evidence?” are essential. Solution-focused and strategic policy making, in all areas of educational policy making, should be informed by the best evidence available. Ask yourselves: “is it happening?”

Similarly, best practice in education should be informed, if not necessarily determined, by evidence. Research evidence is a key means of updating and benchmarking practice, taking forward and improving practice, for practitioners of all types and persuasions, not simply for a coterie of academics or like-minded educationists. High-quality research should make a difference; it should open minds. As with policy making, educational practice should be informed by the best evidence available. Ask yourselves: “is it happening?”

The four papers here, in their own different ways, can “make a difference” and inform policy making and practice, for example: in recruiting participants for randomized controlled trials (Terrell & Bugler); in ensuring reliability of onscreen markers of examinations and assessments (Yang, Yan, & Coniam); in regulation of voucher programmes in the USA (DeAngelis & Burke); and in understanding the relationships between students’ attitudes and mathematical reasoning skills (Hwang, Runnalls, Bhansali, Navaandamba, & Choi).

Getting published is not a walk in the woods, nor should it be. It should be demanding, just as policy making and best practice in education are demanding.

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