

Editorial 29(3): Is too much research being published?

For IIER editorial staff, 20 May 2019 marked an important achievement: the finalising of review advice to authors of the 469 submissions IIER received in 2018. Under rising pressure from large annual increases in numbers of submissions (Table 1), the date for finalising the 2018 submissions was a full month later than our finalising dates for the three previous years. Under these circumstances, a provocative question posed recently by Robert Cannon to HERDSA members caught my attention:

Is too much research being published? (Cannon, 2019, p.15)

From IIER's perspective (refer Table 1 again), Robert Cannon's question could be rephrased to, "Is too much research *seeking* publication?", for which the answer is "Yes", if we focus upon Table 1's 2018 rejection rate, 83.8%. Our endeavour to provide helpful, formative, soundly-based and timely advice is under considerable strain. However, I hasten to add that the matter of "too much research" deserves a probing deeper than the immediate issue of journal editorial workloads. In IIER's case, probing deeper requires reflection upon the purposes of research publishing, especially as implied in submissions received from the authors in our 83.8%, and our correspondence with them.

Table 1: Article review outcomes IIER 2015-19 (a)

Year of receipt	No. rec'd	No. (%) rejected (b)	No. (%) with-drawn (c)	No. accepted (d)	No. published (e)	% accepted (f)
2019	237	-	-	-	51	-
2018	469	393 (83.8%)	5 (1.1%)	71	60	15.1%
2017	306	238 (77.8%)	3 (1.0%)	65	50	21.2%
2016	196	144 (73.5%)	5 (2.5%)	47	40	24.0%
2015	124	77 (62.1%)	4 (3.2%)	43	31	34.7%

- a. Data for 2015 finalised 22 April 2016; for 2016 finalised 17 April 2017; data for 2017 finalised 24 April 2018; data for 2018 finalised 20 May 2019. Data for 2019 is to 30 June 2019 (except for number published).
- b. Includes review advice composed by IIER editorial staff and review advice composed by external reviewers. Some of the rejected articles may appear again as receivals later in the same year or in a subsequent year. The reasons for counting these instances as rejections are to enable a clearer cut off for each year's outcomes, and to align data collection with the editorial advice, used in a significant proportion of cases, 'Reject. Invite resubmission of a revised or expanded work for a new review process', or similar.
- c. Withdrawn means withdrawn at the request of the authors.
- d. The number of articles accepted from a particular year's receivals (d) does not correspond to the number published in each year (e), owing to time taken for review and revisions, and fluctuations in the speed of these processes.
- e. The number published in a calendar year, except for 2019, where the number is only for 29(1), 29(2) and 29(3).
- f. % accepted = No. accepted x 100/No. received

Conveniently, the reference cited by Robert Cannon (2019), Altbach and de Wit (2018), can be contrasted with another reference from the same publication, *University World News*, namely Lee and Maldonado-Maldonado (2018). The word "conveniently" simply indicates that Editorial 29(3) needs a way to hasten the composition, as all other files for 29(3) are ready to upload, and there are 50 authors waiting for their good news email from us.

The *University World News* articles provide sharply contrasting perspectives with high relevance for IIER operations and prospective authors. Altbach and de Wit (2018) titled their article with their conclusion: "Too much academic research is being published". They accorded it the impact of a statement of fact, not the lesser impact of a question, as was used by Robert Cannon (2019) to address the issue. After citing just one specific example of a publication "cutback" (ASHE, 2018), Altbach and de Wit (2018) summarised their remedy bluntly:

Our argument is a simple one. There is too much being published because the academic system encourages unnecessary publication – and drastic cutbacks are needed.

However, their detailing of "drastic cutbacks" says little about identifying those authors who are subjected to cutbacks and the impact upon them and their academic communities. As IIER is a journal having considerable experience with non-Anglophone, non-Western authors researching in developing country contexts, who *may* be very much in Altbach and de Wit's (2018) sights, we tend to identify readily with *our* authors. So we find the contrasting views from Lee and Maldonado-Maldonado (2018) are a better fit with IIER's operations:

In sum, our message is also a simple one: rather than stopping research publications, we should promote more diverse publications that help to expand the different disciplines, allowing for new inquiries, approaches, interpretations and even discoveries.

...

Rather, more publication outlets are needed and should be recognised, particularly locally-based research that informs local problems. ... Additionally, journal editors and reviewers should consider the added value of research from parts of the world that tend not to be well represented in their respective fields (Lee & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2018)

However, Lee and Maldonado-Maldonado's (2018) views are not entirely a best fit with IIER's operations. In Editorial 29(2) we discussed a journal's role in "looking after authors":

Viewing the "really vital central core of academic publication" as "looking after authors" may seem somewhat radical, given that many other descriptors need to be also in mind, such as "academic merit"; "contribution of new knowledge"; "novel findings"; "significant advance in topic X in field of research Y"; and so on. However, attaining these qualities is the core purpose underlying our "looking after authors" (Atkinson, 2019).

Returning to a reflection upon the purposes of research publishing, Altbach and de Wit (2018) provided little discussion about purposes, but seemed to imply that the purposes are best served by being restrictive:

Academic systems, with differentiated missions for post-secondary institutions, should ensure that research and publication is encouraged only at universities designated as research-intensive – and research funding provided almost exclusively to those institutions (Altbach & de Wit, 2018).

Lee and Maldonado-Maldonado (2018) did discuss purposes of research publishing, with emphases upon knowledge creation ("should not be limited to the elite universities"); knowledge evaluation ("external reviewer biases that lack appreciation or knowledge about a 'faraway' context or unfamiliar issue can easily lead to rejecting a manuscript"); knowledge dissemination ("major publishers need no sympathy for being flooded with manuscripts"); and, very importantly, promoting diversity.

To this discussion of purposes for research publishing, we could add *career progression*, or somewhat colloquially, "looking after authors". Altbach and de Wit (2018) offered one specific suggestion about alternatives for career progression, "Professional doctorates can become an alternative path to research-based PhDs for people not aiming for a research-focused career". Lee and Maldonado-Maldonado (2018) did not present specific suggestions, but did argue that research training must be a part of advanced career progression, "doctoral students must be trained in the research process, whether or not they become academics, in order to discern rigorous research as well as understand how to participate in it."

Perhaps the lack of stronger attention to careers is surprising, given that for IIER and perhaps the great majority of journals, our day to day editorial and review work is concerned predominantly with mentoring and advising authors, in contrast to undertaking a gatekeeper function that is simply sorting research articles into "reject" and "accept". What contribution can we make, however modest and time constrained, to progressing the careers of authors and educational advancement for the students and communities they represent?

Roger Atkinson
Co-editor IIER 29(3), 2019

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