

IIER Editorial 33(4): The award winner is ... The need to publish!

Roger Atkinson
IIER Co-editor

If asked to nominate an award for the major driving force underlying IIER's year 2023 editorial and publishing activities, our leading nominee would be "The need to publish". This nominee has built great momentum, for example as recorded in this year's Editorial 33(1), which characterised the need to publish as "a frequently occurring plea" [1], and in 2020's Editorial 30(2), which observed that "Of the various perspectives of aspiring authors, one of the most familiar to us is the *need to publish the research*." [2].

As support for the nomination of "The need to publish" is mostly in the form of anonymised, autoethnographic-style pleas, it is timely to refresh this perspective using a 2023 case that is presented below. During routine duty editor activities for one of 2023's months, we found that an article under consideration for adding to the month's short list for IIER external reviewing had been published, online open access, in another journal. In accord with usual practice, we issued an "IIER has declined your article" advice, which included the text:

Upon initiating a detailed review of your article early in [month deleted] 2023, we found the following publication that is very nearly identical to your IIER submission:
[full citation including web address deleted]

We note this publication has "RETRACTED" overprinted in a large, bold font on each page of the file [filename deleted]. As far as we can ascertain, [journal name deleted] has not given a date or reason for the retraction, and a justification for not deleting [filename deleted]. We noted the annotation "Received [dates deleted]", and that [journal name deleted] states "Published: [date deleted]". These statements show that submission to IIER occurred after acceptance by [journal name deleted]. We noted also that the [journal name deleted] version is available also at: [address on an academic social networking site deleted].

To progress the matter, IIER advises that you should ask [journal name deleted] to reinstate your article, although we do not know whether retraction was an action that you requested. If you are unable to make progress with [journal name deleted], IIER may reconsider your article as a new submission, but we would need a frank and full explanation of the retraction action, and there would be no obligation upon IIER to accept that explanation.

Author X responded very quickly with a "frank and full explanation" [Author X's response quoted below has been subjected to some editing and paraphrasing to improve anonymisation, without changing Author X's expression of his/her/their 'voice']:

The reason for the retraction of this article is that [journal name deleted] was delisted from Scopus. We initiated retraction. We submitted our article in [date deleted], and a

week later we found out that the journal had been delisted. We immediately wrote to the editor of [journal name deleted] to retract; they promised to retract. Having believed and calmed down, I submitted to IIER, but later we found out that our article was published on [date deleted]. We sent a number of emails to this journal and finally they answered that they would definitely retract it. They retracted, but very late unfortunately.

I have been trying for many years to publish my article in an international journal that is included in the Scopus database, so that I can finally defend my dissertation paper. According to requirements of defending a dissertation work in [country deleted], it is necessary to have a published article in a journal included in the Scopus database. Kindly ask you to understand and forgive me.

We are very sorry and ask for your forgiveness. Please let us submit a new submission to your journal again.

We advised Author X that we recognised and accepted this explanation, invited a resubmission or new submission for 2024 consideration, and sought permission from Author X to publish his/her/their anonymised case as a significant illustration of *the need to publish* (this permission was granted).

We can reflect upon a number of IIER actions and considerations backgrounding the Author X case.

i. Submission stats

During 2023, IIER has averaged 66.6 submissions per month to end November. On the basis of data from 2022, we estimate an average of 12.4 per month for year-2023 submissions being flagged for external review, and an average of 7.9 submissions per month being accepted for publication. Author X had been flagged for external review and the prospects for acceptance are positive, hence the invitation to resubmit was well-justified.

ii. Verification of Scopus delisting of [journal name deleted].

The Scopus list of titles indexed is freely available [3], so I confirmed that in [year deleted], [journal name deleted] was "Discontinued by Scopus", with "Reason for discontinuation" given as "Publication Concerns".

iii. Specifying Scopus indexing

We are familiar with the problems created by dictates to get a Scopus-indexed journal to publish an article from a candidate's thesis before awarding a doctorate. See, for example, IIER Editorials 33(1) [1], 30(2) [2] and 31(3) [4]. Relevant insights into the problems this requirement creates for authors are beginning to appear in submissions to IIER and IIER acceptances. For example Indrayadi (2023) focused on the core of the problem: "To be accepted in the journal is not easy." [5]. He noted that "Publishing articles in a reputable international journal has been initiated by many universities around the world, including Indonesia's universities, as a graduation requirement for a doctoral program" [5]. However, this kind of requirement, now becoming more common and more influential, can be deeply troubling for a journal such as IIER, and probably also for very many other

journals. Borrowing a word used in internal combustion engineering, this requirement is supercharging *the need to publish*. Academic research journal publishing in education and probably many other fields needs supercharged capacity to provide good quality services to greatly increased numbers of aspiring authors, who often are not sufficiently well-prepared for complex "challenges in preparing and publishing research in reputable international journals", to use a phrase from Indrayadi (2023) [5]. Some of the matters that are deeply troubling for IIER and are needing supercharged capacity are outlined below, and very likely others may appear in future editorials.

iv. Scopus coverage

We appreciate and value how Scopus pursues its aim in relation to content coverage and its policy of open access to bibliometric information:

Expertly curated content

We seek out and ensure that only the most trusted, peer-reviewed scientific articles, books and conference papers are available on Scopus [6].

However, we are also well aware that good quality articles may occur quite frequently in journals that are not Scopus listed or have been delisted by Scopus. One of the main reasons for this awareness is IIER's very extensive use of Google and Google Scholar, as discussed in Editorial 31(1) [7]. One highly significant contribution is that Google Scholar does not attempt to make quality judgments about journals or articles. That is left to the reader to undertake. This may be advantageous – undertaking extra reading is an outcome that IIER encourages, as we argued in Editorial 31(1) [7].

Author X's case was IIER's first encounter with a problem due to Scopus delisting of a journal. There are interesting questions about what to do when unforeseen circumstances arise, for example a journal that was Scopus listed when an author submitted to the journal, but it became Scopus-delisted before author's doctorate could be officially confirmed? What's to be done if the journal became delisted after the author's doctorate was officially confirmed? Presumably "de-awarding" is not an option! There are some broader questions of interest, for example, is there any responsibility to be borne by thesis supervisors and research leaders in the author's university who (presumably) were providers of advice to the author? We do not have information, and are not seeking information, but this surmising links back three years to several cautiously expressed "Problem themes" in Editorial 30(2) [2]. To quote two of the four themes, emphasising that these express general concerns that may or may not relate to the Author X case:

- c. A need to improve the performance and vision of editorial boards and senior academics, which relates to helping beginning or junior researchers to improve their presentation of articles (sometimes we feel that journal editorial staff spend too much time acting as mentors or informal supervisors);
- d. A need to inform university leaders and national governments about new visions and more realistic expectations concerning the purposes of research publications (should the "why try to publish research?" question encompass answers that go beyond the simplistic aim, "to create and disseminate new knowledge"?). [2]

v. Why headline "The award winner is ... The need to publish!"?

Finally, this reflection surmises that a headline that may seem to be inspired by performing arts industry awards could be perceived as facetious. Not so, the underlying issues are substantial and serious. However, we should make an effort to lift spirits after a very trying year. Firstly, we are not trying to formally measure the "disappointment level" amongst submitters to IIER, but we can surmise that it is high and rising. Acceptance rates are tightly limited in order to fit within our self-imposed cap of 80 articles published per year. Our current estimate for 2023 is 800 submissions, which is substantially larger than the 2020 to 2022 numbers - see i. above, and Editorial 33(2) [8]. As *the need to publish!* becomes more impactful, the cautiously expressed hope in Editorial 33(2) concerning 'a very tentative glimpse of a "steady state"' is fading. The contribution of falling acceptance rates to the hypothetical "disappointment level" is exacerbated by another trend we very much regret. This is a much increased use of rejection notices that include no formative advice, and notices that state "... we are unable to consider any new submissions at present. ... Please send your article to another journal." The latter was foreshadowed in Editorial 33(2) [8]. The current general template for the former is:

After a careful consideration of your article submitted on [date], "[title]", we regret to advise that we decline to accept it for IIER publication.

We regret that due to the emergence of a backlog in IIER's review process, we have temporarily suspended or curtailed our providing of the formative advice from IIER editorial staff that usually accompanies IIER's "Initial assessment" advice. The backlog is due to continuing high rates of submission, and some recent retirements of associate editors. During 2023, IIER has averaged 66.6 submissions per month to end November.

In time, we will resume the usual provision of formative advice under the heading "IIER editorial staff comments". We are very aware of the value of advice on reasons for declining a submission, and suggestions on how to attain an acceptable standard for publication in an international journal. However, resumption may take some months, owing to the current high rate of submission of articles and the problem of long queues waiting for responses. Therefore, we advise, please send your article to another journal.

We wish you all the best for the successful continuation of this research.

Secondly, there are many other reasons for regarding 2023 as a very trying year. One reason is a feeling that the pace of change is disappointingly slow in many matters affecting academic research journal publishing in education generally and IIER in particular. For example, we see little progress towards increased recognition of *career progression* as a factor in publication activities (Editorial 33(1), [1]). Another example, we see at best only slow progress towards improving *inclusivity* (Editorial 30(2), [2]). Another example, we do not find "... a good number of emulators of IIER..." (Editorial 33(1), [1]). Another reason for characterising 2023 as a trying year was identified in Editorial 33(3), item (ii) *The Voice* and voices. As predicted by many, *The Voice* referendum failed. Although the concept of "voice" remains important for IIER and probably many other journals, there could be an ongoing setback to a hope expressed in Editorial 33(3) [9] that:

... we [in Australia] may see increased attention to researching links between indigenous education and the topics of identity (or self-identity or social identity), and efficacy (or self efficacy). Or, in other fields of social sciences research, even links between *Uluru* and *Yes* rejection, and the sub-fields of *identity* and *efficacy*. [9]

That is enough grumbling about 2023 (although there are many not-yet-grumbled topics). We wish you all the best for a successful 2024, especially those in our *need to publish* category!

References

1. Atkinson, R. (2023). Editorial 33(1): Revisiting the "need to publish ..."; (ii) ChatGPT and academic journal publishing. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(1), ii-vi. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/editorial33-1.html>
2. Atkinson, R. (2020). Editorial 30(2): (i) IIER's 2019 review outcomes; (ii) Unprecedented. *Issues in Educational Research*, 30(2), ii-ix. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier30/editorial30-2.html>
3. Elsevier (n.d.). *Titles on Scopus*. <https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus/content#4-titles-on-scopus> [the file we consulted, "ext_list_December_2023.xlsx", is about 24.4 MB] [note that the term "Publication concerns" is outlined in <https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus/content/content-policy-and-selection>]
4. Atkinson, R. (2021). Editorial 31(3): "Please help me to identify the status of the journal...". *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(3), ii-v. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/editorial31-3.html>
5. Indrayadi, T. (2023). Doctoral students' challenges in preparing and publishing research in reputable international journals. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(3), 1012-1029. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/indrayadi.pdf>
6. Elsevier (n.d.). *Expertly curated content*. <https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus/content#2-expert-curation>
7. Atkinson, R. (2021). Editorial 31(1): Is Google search essential for IIER? *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(1), ii-viii. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/editorial31-1.html>
8. Atkinson, R. (2023). Editorial 33(2): (i) IIER's 2022 review outcomes; (ii) Approaching IIER's first one third of a century. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(2), ii-iv. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/editorial33-2.html>
9. Atkinson, R. & McBeath, C. (2023). IIER Editorial 33(3): (i) IIER's first one third of a century; (ii) *The Voice* and voices; (iii) Peer review ... Revisited! *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(3), ii-vii. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/editorial33-3.html>

Please cite as: Atkinson, R. (2023). IIER Editorial 33(4): The award winner is ... The need to publish! *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(4), ii-vi. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/editorial33-4.pdf>