

## **Editorial**

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## **British Educational Research Journal (BERJ) Editorial, 17 January 2025**

MacKenzie, A., Hoskins, K., Xu, Y., Wong, B., Cheng, M., and Read, B.

### **A Year in Post**

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, we became the new editorial team for British Educational Research Journal (BERJ) one of the flagship journals of educational research, having very little idea of what to expect save that we would have a lot to learn about the acts of editing and the editorial process. And so it proved to be: we had to learn fast in, sometimes, quite unexpectedly challenging circumstances and to respond deftly, swiftly and, we hope, diplomatically. For the most part, however, the practice of journal editing is one many will recognise if they've had an editorial role: reviewing manuscripts to check they meet the journal's aims and scope, and the quality threshold; then, finding suitable and willing reviewers, transmitting the decision to the author, and responding to queries about the review process, reviewer comments, and so on.

### **The Context**

The current context framing education research, along with much research in the social sciences, is driven by neoliberal universities seeking to maximise the quality and quantity of staff outputs. Whilst this pressure has existed for the past few decades, recent years have witnessed a funding crisis in higher education across the UK, extending to both post- and pre-1992 institutions. An outcome of the sector shrinking is increased competitiveness for early career academic posts, which, in turn, has reinforced the need for publications as a marker of distinction in a crowded job market. This shift in the academic labour market has intensified the work of journal editors as they seek to ensure a socially just approach to fostering and enabling the next generation of researchers, whilst managing ever increasing numbers of submissions (discussed below). Universities are also setting aspirational research targets for their staff, whilst resources, most especially time, is ever more pressured. The aim of this editorial is, therefore, to reflect on some of the challenges and opportunities we have encountered through the first year of our tenure, and to note some potential future directions for publishing.

### **Challenges**

One of the biggest challenges we face, and this is a challenge common to all journals, is finding reviewers. The main reason the review process sometimes takes so long is because it can take very many invitations, up to 20 invitations is not unusual, before reviewers are secured. When we've exhausted our data bases and contacts, we return the paper to the authors so that they can submit elsewhere and without further delay. As is standard practice, we rely on the review process and our decisions are informed by the reviewer assessments. Our thanks go to all the

reviewers who have given up their time to review manuscripts for BERJ and thereby support the publication of high quality, trustworthy educational research. We know there is little reward in reviewing, either in work allocation models or in payment by journals whose financial model depends on the free labour of authors and reviewers. In 2024, we handled 1,167 original articles with an 11.5% acceptance rate. Although many authors may regard the acceptance rate as an indication of how difficult it is to get published in a journal, we want to emphasize that it is not necessarily so, at least for BERJ and many other educational journals with which we've editorial experiences. BERJ's low acceptance rate is also explained by the large number of submissions that are out of [scope](#) - the main reason we desk reject papers. However, whenever possible, we transfer papers to our sister [BERA journals](#) and other Wiley journals that we identify as relevant to some submissions to BERJ.

A growing threat to research integrity and trust in social science and science are AI written manuscripts, hard-to-trace authors and paper mills which produce fabricated or manipulated research. Although a recent phenomenon, papermill research, the process by which 'manufactured manuscripts are submitted to a journal for a fee on behalf of researchers with the purpose of providing an easy publication for them, or to offer authorship for sale' (COPE 2020) has attained estimated profits of one billion euros (Candal-Pereira et al 2024). To combat this fraud, publishers are working collaboratively to detect as many of these kinds of publications as possible, supported by guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Wiley launched its AI-powered paper mill detection service in March 2024 to protect research integrity. We can now benefit from a number of research integrity tools such as papermill similarity detection; problematic phrase recognition where, for example, established terms are replaced by tortured or nonsensical phrases such as 'counterfeit consciousness' for 'artificial intelligence' (Cabanac et al 2022); researcher identification verification and Gen-AI content detection. Fortunately, so far, we have had very few cases, and the papers were detected by these new tools. However, despite these efforts, for as long as employment and promotion depend on publication, and doctoral students must publish before they can graduate, paper mills will persist, threatening to undermine trust in research, and potentially overwhelming the editorial and peer review process.

## **Opportunities**

As part of our commitment to inclusion, equity and justice in publishing, we launched the Early Career Reviewer Scheme to develop early career researchers' capacities to peer review. We had a high level of interest and put a call out for mentors. We increased the size of the editorial board to 40, making sure to include Early Career Researchers and colleagues from the global south, and welcomed Professor Paul Downes as the Chair of the Editorial Board and Dr Oliver Hooper as the Vice-Chair, whom would like to thank for their support of our efforts to increase inclusivity and maintain regular contact with the board. Thanks are also due to the board who have proved to be willing reviewers, particularly to those who exceeded the number of required reviews.

To extend the reach of the journal and promote the research of our contributors, we appointed Dr Asma Lebbakhar as our social media editor. BERJ is now on Twitter (X), LinkedIn and Bluesky where papers published with BERJ, calls for special issues, and other news are shared. We are pleased to see growing engagement with and from BERJ authors and readers in those digital spaces and we thank Asma for her hard work promoting the journal.

We also launched an initiative to promote papers from the global south through our ‘article of the month’ scheme. These papers will be available on an open access basis for one month. We launched the scheme in December with a paper from Espinoza et al, *The effects of free tuition policy on university academic performance in Chile*, <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.4094>; and our article of the month for January is by Ahmadi and Yousofi, *Hearing student voice within the context of Iran: Building schools for the future*, <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.4056>

As we are now already busy with the editorial work in 2025, we will continue to consolidate the initiatives we listed above. We will develop the capacity to support early career researchers in both peer reviewing and academic publishing, through the early career reviewer scheme and writing workshops we have planned.

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