

Higher education journal editorial board networks and working practices – preliminary results

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores how academic knowledge about higher education is shaped and sanctioned by the editorial boards of higher education journals. To do so, it provides an analysis of editorial board networks as well as editorial board practices in relation to the published aims and objectives of higher education journals. In particular the paper identifies the range of different approaches adopted when recruiting new editorial board members; the extent to which editorial boards appear to be exclusive or open networks of scholars; and, the degree to which editorial boards overlap or interlock. The paper explores the likely extent that some scholarship about higher education is effectively excluded from publication for factors such as its geographical origination or authorship outside of known networks. By doing so the research provides evidence of the inclusivity or exclusivity of knowledge production about higher education.

Full paper

One consistent measure of academic prestige is the authorship and publication of high-quality research. Academic recruitment and progression are often dependent on an ability to publish, as exemplified in the aphorism '*publish or perish*' (Moosa, 2024; Bridges 2011; Fejes & Nylander 2014). The evaluation of what counts as the best academic research has become increasingly "metricised", and there is evidence that publications in more prestigious journals gain higher value in research assessment systems (Kelly and Burrows 2012). At the same time the knowledge hierarchy has been consistently dominated by journals and publishers from Western contexts (Heilbron, 2014; Demeter, 2020; Mills, 2023). Between 1996–2018, 'the bulk of global higher education research published in elite journals was produced in Anglo-Saxon countries (70.0%), Continental Europe (16.7%), and East Asia (5.1%)' (Kwiek 2020, 515), albeit with a growing importance of other world regions in the observed study-period. This has raised concerns about inequalities in editing and authorship, prompting calls for more inclusivity and diversity in scholarly publishing (Shahjahan & Kezar 2013; Liu et al. 2023).

Journal editorial and review processes are a form of gatekeeping, determining the knowledge considered relevant and valuable. Given the power imbalance between authors on the one hand, and editors and publishers on the other (Saurin 2016), the make-up of editorial boards is of high importance. Hamann (2018) uses Merton's (1968) concept of the Matthew effect in science, wherein research prestige attracts more funding and, in turn, more prestige. Similarly, a circular nomination process for

editorial board members results in predictable inequalities visible throughout academia such as those of race, class, gender and centre-periphery (Goyanes et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2023; Nyúl et al. 2021; Cummings & Hoebink 2017). Goyanes et al. (2022) further elaborated on the concept of editorial board interlocking, where academics may serve on several editorial boards, increasing their agenda-setting power. However, this practice also runs the risk of reducing diversity in research themes, approaches and paradigms overall (Goyanes et al. 2022).

The publication of research about higher education (HE) is particularly significant because this is work that legitimises or potentially challenges understandings of universities, including practices that reproduce social injustices or inequalities. HE is a growing inter-disciplinary field with diverse foci and results relevant for policy (Tight 2018). However, it is also a field in which universities' reputation and influence remains remarkably static along geographical/regional and historic lines (Bhopal & Myers 2023).

This paper explores how academic knowledge about higher education is shaped and sanctioned by the editorial boards of higher education journals listed in Scimago that are categorised as social sciences, education journals AND have a title with either of the following words: "higher"; "university"; "college"; "tertiary", totalling 62 journals. The paper focuses on the following three research questions:

RQ1: What does the overall network look like for higher education journal editorial boards?

RQ2: How do current editorial board members see the journal practices in relation to a) being gatekeepers of scientific and robust knowledge, and b) global / local relationships?

RQ3: What is the current policy and practice of adding new editorial board members to higher education journal editorial boards?

We utilise social network analysis to explore editorial board. Wasserman and Faust (1994) define the term 'relational tie' as the connection between actors. The various types of ties can include evaluations of one person by another, transfer of resources, behavioural interaction, and association or affiliation. Our network model focuses on a set of individuals (first mode, editorial board members) and a series of occurrences or incidents (second mode, journals) that these individuals are associated with. Within this framework, we found that multiple scholars are found to serve on multiple editorial boards, commonly referred to as editorial board interlocking (Goyanes et al. 2022).

Further to exploring editorial board networks, the paper draws on interviews with board members. In particular, the research identifies a range of different approaches adopted when recruiting new editorial board members, to better understand the degree of editorial board interlocking. The paper explores the extent that some scholarship about higher education is effectively excluded from publication for factors such as its geographical origin or authorship outside of known networks. By doing so the research provides evidence of the inclusivity or exclusivity of knowledge production about higher education.

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