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# **Perspectives in applied academic practice: development of a cross-institutional open access journal to support early career academics**

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## **Abstract**

Engagement in the scholarship of learning and teaching contributes to the enrichment and enhancement of academic practice. One method of engagement is through contributing to the scholarly discourse by publishing in academic journals. The publication process however can be daunting for the uninitiated, with high levels of competition and equally high rates of rejection. Project work produced by academic developers or students on postgraduate education programmes as part fulfilment of their academic programmes of study are often of publishable standard, yet publication rates from such scholarly outputs remain relatively low. The paper outlines a collaborative initiative developed by staff from Edinburgh Napier University, Aston University and the University of Dundee to implement an alternative publishing route designed to support staff new to academic publishing, and students on postgraduate programmes in education, to publish their work in a supportive environment as part of their first steps to becoming a published scholar.

## **1 Introduction**

In recent years there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of the scholarship of learning and teaching, and the benefits this can bring in terms of enhancing and disseminating good academic practice (Hutching, Huber & Ciccone, 2011). This has contributed towards, a greater recognition in the scholarship of teaching and learning practice as an important area for academics within the disciplines to engage in. In short, research and scholarship in learning and teaching is no longer seen as the domain of academics who are specialists in education, and many institutions have developed a number of activities to support scholarly engagement in learning and teaching (Kreber, 2010; Lee and Boud, 2010). Despite these advances significant challenges remain for academics seeking to engage in the scholarship of learning and teaching, particularly where they are aspiring to publish their work in relevant journals. Writing out with the conventions of their own discipline area can potentially be daunting, as can the thought of being in competition with more experienced educational specialists, and subjecting their work to peer scrutiny. Equally, although perhaps less well recognised, there are also challenges for more experienced academics who have successfully published on aspects of their educational research or practice, and who may now be looking to broaden their professional engagement in education as a discipline by becoming involved in the peer review process or in an editorial capacity with relevant periodicals.

This article describes the development of a new open access online journal in academic practice which has a unique developmental focus. It will explore how a truly open and developmental ethos (characterised by practices including structured support for new authors, a non-blind peer review process, open licensing, and editorial internships) can empower academics in becoming engaged contributors to the published discourse on effective learning, teaching and assessment. The idea for the journal stemmed from a plenary presentation at the Spring Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Conference in 2012 where Dr Helen Walking presented the development of the open access journal, Geoverse, which is a journal aimed at promoting the engagement of undergraduate students in research.

## **2 Open access publishing**

The landscape of open access publishing has gained momentum in recent years with the advances in technology enabling authors and publishers to make scholarly works more

readily available (Weller, 2011). Within the UK open access publishing has become a serious issue for higher education institutions as a result of the Finch Report (2012) which examined the ways of providing better, faster access to research publications for anyone who wants to read or use them. Previously most journals were published by large publishing houses and only accessible through subscriptions which limited accessibility. As a result of the Finch report the UK government announced that all publicly funded scientific research was to be available for anyone to read by removing subscription only access from April 2013.

Two main routes have been developed for making papers open access: green and gold. The green route is where an author deposits the paper in an open access repository. The most common type is university based research repositories. These routes have been the subject of much debate. The gold route is where the author or their institution pays a fee (access processing charge) to the publisher for their paper to be made immediately publicly accessible (Weller, 2011). The difficulty with the gold route for new authors is that institutional funds may not be available with the demands of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) placing emphasis on institutional support for established researchers. Our journal bridges this important gap by providing an outlet that is both open and subject to peer review, as well as providing support for new authors and opportunities for those wishing to gain experience in reviewing and editing.

### **3 Establishing the journal**

The journal is a collaborative venture, initially between Edinburgh Napier University, University of Dundee and Aston University in Birmingham, with the Editorial Board made up of members from each of the collaborating institutions. An international dimension has recently been added with the introduction of a new collaborative partner with a representative of the University of Auckland in New Zealand joining the Editorial Board.

The editorial team are all academics or academic developers involved in teaching on institutional programmes in academic practice in higher education. As part fulfilment of their academic programmes of study, students on postgraduate education programmes often conduct several pieces of project work which is often commented on to be of publishable standard, yet publication rates from such work remain relatively low. The development of the journal was seen initially as a way of encouraging and supporting these students to become

published authors in the field of education however it quickly became apparent that the journal would have wider appeal and the editorial team agreed to develop the journal as an open access vehicle to support all prospective authors in the field.

The journal has an ISSN number and is indexed in relevant scholarly databases including ERIC, MEDLINE and CINAHL.

## 4 Journal ethos

The *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* (JPAAP) is a biannually published, cross-institutional open access peer-reviewed academic journal which contributes to the enhancement of the educational research infrastructure by providing a publishing outlet for scholarly work and acting as a vehicle for building capacity in academic publishing experience across the sector. The *JPAAP* aims to provide a supportive publishing outlet to allow established and particularly new authors to contribute to the scholarly discourse of academic practice (both generally and in their discipline area) through the publication of outputs that are theory-based and supported by evidence, as well as through the publication of Opinion Pieces and 'On the Horizon' papers on emerging work. In relation to the general ethos, the journal exists not simply for the publication of papers within our thematic scope but also as a collegiate and developmental platform for new authors, those new to journal reviewing, and for scholars who are seeking to gain experience in journal editing and publishing.

## 5 Journal themes

The themes of the Journal reflect the breadth of perspectives in academic practice from a wide variety of disciplinary lenses. The journal promotes evidence based academic practice through the publication of papers that are theory-based and supported by evidence. The editors welcome submissions of articles, research notes, opinion pieces and book reviews. The types of articles we publish include:

1. **Original research:** formal research projects with appropriate analysis of data, either with a quantitative or qualitative emphasis or mixed method studies. Action research studies are also particularly relevant to practice development and are welcomed by the journal. All research projects published must have ethical approval.
2. **Reflective analysis papers:** reflective evaluations of academic practice, either practitioner based enquiry or reflections that challenge current practice and

encourage experimentation, novel conclusions or offer new perspectives derived from prior work.

3. **Review papers:** Literature reviews illuminating new relationships and understanding, meta-analysis, analytical and integrated reviews, etc.
4. **Case studies:** Case study papers focus on examining academic practice in a particular context, drawing out lessons learned that are usually generalizable to a wide and multidisciplinary audience.
5. **Multimedia articles:** articles which are presented in multimedia formats offers an innovative way to present scholarly work in academic practice and is in keeping with current trends in digital scholarship and open publishing (Weller, 2011). Prospective authors are encouraged to approach the editors with ideas for potential submissions in formats other than the traditional paper.

## 6 Developing capacity in academic publishing

The developmental ethos of JPAAP manifests itself in a range of activities and opportunities that help create a supportive environment in which a culture academic scholarship and discourse can flourish. The journal provides support at every stage of the publication process. The journal's unique ethos extends to providing opportunities for staff to gain experience of the wider academic publishing process, engaging early career academics and researchers in both the peer review process and as editorial board members.

### 6.1 Developing authors

The journal offers direct support for authors who are seeking to publish their first paper in one or more of the thematic areas of the journal, through assigning 'critical friends' from within the editorial team who are happy to advise on the development of initial ideas for the formats of paper we publish. Experienced authors are encouraged to publish as second authors, thus giving strong support for developing new authors. This model replicates the approach taken in similar university online academic journals (the "Care" journal at Glasgow Caledonian University, "Geoverse" journal at Oxford Brookes University and the "Scottish Universities Medical Journal" at University of Dundee) but is aimed at developing academic staff. The editorial team also provide online webinars for new authors to help provide a platform for development and discussion around the writing and publishing process, highlighting common errors and offering guidance on structural and stylistic conventions as pertaining to academic writing.

Academic peer review is a long-standing practice in the publication process, with blinded peer reviewing being widely seen as unbiased and impartial, however the authors of this paper consider that blinded peer review is not what sustains the integrity of the practice; rather, it is the shared belief in its importance, as well as providing an opportunity for further development (Biagioli, 2002). All articles submitted to JPAAP are peer reviewed by two reviewers. In an attempt to overcome the “nasty reviewer” experience the editorial team chose to make the review process open so that the names of the authors and reviewers were known to each other. This approach seeks to avoid the potential for bias incumbent within anonymous peer review and address perceptions that the process can be abused to delay or prevent work from being published (Peters, 2013). It is felt that this transparency is in keeping with the Journal’s overarching developmental ethos and will result in the provision of more balanced and constructive feedback to authors.

## **6.2 Developing reviewers**

The Journal provides an opportunity for academics with experience in the thematic areas of the journal, but who are new to the journal submission reviewing process, to become involved as reviewers for the journal. An open call for applications resulted in the establishment of an extensive pool of appropriately qualified individuals who will serve alongside a group of established academics who are already experienced as reviewers. It is planned that reviewers will serve for a maximum period of 2 years to allow further individuals the opportunity to engage in the review process and gain this valuable experience. To scaffold the support of these new reviewers the Editorial Board complete the feedback loop by providing comments to reviewers relating to the feedback provided to authors. Through this dialogue Editors seek to highlight aspects of good practice and identify areas for development when the reviewer provides their assessment on future submissions. To facilitate wider discussion around peer review, online webinars led by members of the Editorial Board provide a platform for reviewers to engage in peer-to-peer discussion around the reviewing process.

## **6.3 Developing editors**

Editorial internships are an additional way of offering experience in academic publishing. We will soon be offering editorial internships for academics who are experienced in the thematic areas of the journal, have some publications of their own and experience as a reviewer, and

who wish to develop knowledge and experience on the editorial side of journal publishing. This again builds on the developmental ethos of the journal.

#### **6.4 Providing opportunities for the wider academic community**

The *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* welcomes the opportunity to work alongside colleagues in the field to develop “Special Issues” of the journal dedicated to particular themes or emerging areas of work. This offers the colleagues from the wider academic community, who have a good idea for a special issue, the opportunity to take on Guest Editor responsibilities for the special issue (with support provided from the regular Editorial Team for the journal). Coinciding with the open call for submissions for the first issue of the journal, expressions of interest were invited for potential future Special Issues. Response to this aspect of the call has been positive with a Special Issue focussing on technology-enhanced learning with contributions and overall editorial leadership from students and tutors at the Open University planned alongside a further Special Issue focussing on the topic of scholarship within the HE in FE sector.

#### **7 Open access**

*Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Whilst the Finch Report (2012) identified two routes to open access publishing, this paper has highlighted that the gold route may pose potential barriers for early career academics or academics working in areas where publishing papers in academic practice are not prioritised due to the competing demands of REF. JPAAP seeks to offer a third route of open access publication which is specifically aimed at supporting early career academics by providing free open access publication.

#### **8 Joint copyright**

In continuing the ethos of open access and empowerment of authors the copyright of all articles published in JPAAP is shared between the journal and the author(s). This allows the author(s) to republish their paper or article in full through their own and other online outlets, for example, their own blog or website or institutional websites or research repositories (Rice, 2013). Where papers are re-published elsewhere, it is expected that the original source of publication will be acknowledged by citing the *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* and providing a full reference including authors, title, volume number, issue number, page numbers and direct link.



## **9 Future Plans**

The first issue of the journal will be published online in June 2013, thereafter biannually, with additional occasional special issues. We also plan to evaluate the experiences of the authors and reviewers who have contributed to the journal.

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