

Academic publishing: Lessons learnt from the *Southern African Business Review*

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ABSTRACT

Writing and publishing of research constitute an integral part of academic life, *inter alia*, extending the frontiers of knowledge, enhancing the status of the individual and his/her institution and generating subsidy income from the Department of Education. However, publication outputs are relatively low and are largely contributed by only a small number of academics. This concentration of research publication in a few academics is closely related to the high rejection rate of manuscripts by refereed (accredited) journals. Insight into the academic research-to-publication process could inform aspiring authors of the academic publishing procedures and scholarly standard required for publication in refereed journals. This article aims to describe and analyse the editorial review process and its outcomes with reference to the *Southern African Business Review (SABR)* as well as weaknesses of manuscripts submitted for publication to the *SABR*. This analysis is based on the more than 300 manuscripts and approximately 600 referee reports submitted to the *SABR* during the five-year period 2004 to 2008. The findings reveal a variety of reasons for rejecting manuscripts. These are multidimensional and range from weaknesses in research design, presentation of research findings and failure to contribute to the body of scientific knowledge, to more mechanical problems such as language style and referencing. A proper understanding of shortcomings in academic writing will highlight the guidelines for compiling good scientific articles.

Key words: academic publishing, peer review, *Southern African Business Review (SABR)*, academic reviewers, editorial practice

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Introduction

Writing and publishing scientific articles is an important activity of academic life. It not only enhances the academic status and profile of the author and his/her institution, but also contributes towards the subsidy transfers of the Department of Education to universities. Furthermore, academic promotion is increasingly subject to a strong track record of research publications – not only in South Africa but also across the globe (McGrail, Rickard & Jones 2006: 19; Kapp & Albertyn 2007: 1). Most importantly, academic publishing is the primary vehicle for the advancement of scientific knowledge.

Despite the compelling advantages of academic publishing, research outputs of South African researchers are low at about 0.4 research outputs per researcher per year (ASSAf 2006: xiii). The figure for the University of South Africa (Unisa) as a whole stood at approximately 0.42 research outputs per academic in 2005, comparing favourably with the average for higher educational institutions of South Africa (Ligthelm 2007: 56). Similar findings are reported in other countries (McGrail et al. 2006: 20; Kapp & Albertyn 2007: 1).

This average figure conceals the reality that a high proportion of publications were contributed by a small number of academics. In the College of Economic and Management Sciences of Unisa, for example, 16.5% of academics generated all the research output points in 2007. This concentration is further accentuated by the fact that approximately 4% of academics produced close to half (47.3%) the research output points (Unisa Research Directorate 2009). This phenomenon of ‘many published by the few’ is confirmed in international literature and appears to have changed little since its first observation early last century (McGrail et al. 2006: 20).

An important reason for this research concentration among a few academics is closely related to the high rejection rate of manuscripts, especially those by first-attempt authors. Worsham (2008: 2) confirm that the acceptance rate of any good scholarly journal is typically quite low, so the chance of rejection is always relatively high. Summers (2001: 405) mentions that the rejection rate of leading international research journals currently averages around 90%. A study among editors of 73 accredited South African journals also confirmed an exceptionally high rejection rate (Kapp & Albertyn 2007: 8).

A process of empowering academics to participate in academic publishing will contribute substantially not only towards enlarging the authorship of academic writing, but will also stimulate the process of scholarship and knowledge creation. Knowing the ingredients of a good scientific article and effectively utilising the outcomes of the editorial review process can be regarded as valuable guidance to assist fellow academics towards publication.

The comments and suggestions of reviewers usually provide guidance to authors and contribute towards the professional development of both the manuscript and the author. Gilmore, Carson and Perry (2006: 474) confirm that effectively responding to reviewers' comments raises the authors' chances of publishing in the *European Business Review* from about 20% to 80%. Consequently, the experience in this regard of the accredited journal of the College of Economic and Management Sciences of Unisa, entitled *Southern African Business Review (SABR)*, is briefly documented in this study.

Purpose of the study

The aim of the study was to analyse the editorial review process of the *SABR* and the lessons learnt from it regarding the research-to-publication process. The analysis is based on more than 300 manuscripts and almost 600 review reports submitted to the *SABR* during the five-year period 2004 to 2008. The analysis will ultimately serve as a basis for informing aspiring authors of the scholarly standard required for publication in refereed/accredited journals, particularly the *SABR*. The following objectives were set for the study:

- To describe and analyse the editorial review process and its outcomes for the *SABR*
- To briefly identify the weaknesses of manuscripts submitted for publication to the *SABR* during the past five years.

Literature shows that editors frequently write about editorial peer review in their journals (Rajan 1996; Weller 2001: 3; Gilmore et al. 2006). Their analysis provides information on the many issues related to academic publishing and specifically the areas that editors experience as important, problematic and in need of explanation in an attempt to improve the publication rate in their journals.

The analysis of the *SABR* is preceded by a literature review on issues concerning academic publishing, particularly with regard to the peer review process. This process serves as the cornerstone for ensuring high quality scholarly publishing and ultimately the standard and status of scientific journals. However, it should be stated at the outset that the subject of academic publishing, and particularly editorial peer review, is not a discipline-specific field, implying that literature on this subject matter is published in every scholarly field. The literature overview presented in this study therefore does not pretend to be exhaustive – this would be a daunting task.

Literature overview

Context: academic publishing

Academic publishing is a vital and integral part of academic life (Gilmore et al. 2006: 468). It not only creates opportunities for promotion (McGrail et al. 2006: 19), but also fulfils the all-important role of knowledge creation. Day and Gastel (2006: ix) state that research is not completed until the results have been published. They continue by declaring that the cornerstone of the philosophy of science is based on the fundamental assumption that original science must be published to ensure its addition to the existing database known as 'scientific knowledge'. This important role of academic publishing is also acknowledged in South Africa. The Academy of Science of South Africa (2006) noted in its 2006 report that fostering academic publication in South Africa contributes towards home-grown intellectual talent as well as towards maintaining and accumulating the global system of knowledge production and accumulation.

The extent of academic publishing is immense. Internationally, it has been calculated that approximately 6 000 to 7 000 scientific articles were written every day in the early 1990s (Arndt 1992, quoted in Weller 2001: 27). Today, this figure could be a multiple of the calculations made in the early 1990s. In South Africa, about 7 000 research articles are published annually in journals accredited by the South African Department of Education and from South African addresses in ISI-indexed journals (ASSAf 2006: xiii).

According to Mouton, Boshoff and Tijssen (2006: 29), at least 255 South African scientific or scholarly journals are recognised by the Department of Education as meeting the minimum requirements for state subsidy. A small percentage of these journals appear on the ISI Citation Indexes (9.0%) and the International Bibliography of Social Sciences (5.5%).

The Department of Education, in its accreditation system for scientific journals, prescribes that all published articles be pre-evaluated. Some or other form of pre-publication review has been part of the journal production process since the first scientific journals appeared more than 300 years ago (Weller 2001: 1).

Peer review

The reputation of a journal and the value of any refereed academic publication depends on the quality of the double (or sometimes more) blind peer review process (Gilmore et al. 2006: 468). This basically entails a process whereby other scholars

in the author's field or speciality ('expert readers') assess a manuscript prior to its publication. After reading and evaluating a manuscript, the reviewer informs the editor whether the manuscript complies with the minimum requirements (Robert Kennedy Library n.d.; University of Illinois Library n.d.). The review process therefore ensures the maintenance of the global system of knowledge production, accumulation and use (Gevers 2006: 7).

Although some minor variations are applied with regard to editorial peer review processes, the following criteria, among others, are normally applied to ensure fair and responsible editorial oversight (Gevers 2006: 7): the existence of an editorial policy accessible to authors; the selection of appropriate peer reviewers; careful assessment of reviewer reports to guide the editor in his/her decision whether or not to publish a manuscript; protection of the focus or mission of the journal; and the detection of misconduct such as inconsistent data sets or plagiarism.

Overall, peer reviewers should ensure that the standing and progression of the subject is enhanced, and advice and guidance is provided to fellow academics towards publication (Gilmore et al. 2006: 471). In more detail, these responsibilities include, *inter alia*, scrutinising research methods, identifying gaps in the manuscript that should be filled, suggestions on how the manuscript can be improved in terms of style and focus, assessing the proper citation and referencing in the manuscript, contesting conclusions not justified by the results and placing the work in the existing matrix of knowledge in the relevant area or field (Gevers 2006: 7). In an effort to guide reviewers, most editors provide some type of guidelines for reviewers when they send a manuscript to be reviewed (Weller 2001: 160).

Any journal requires reviewers of high academic standing. The considerable growth in the number of manuscripts submitted to refereed journals, however, has increased the demand for good reviewers and their time. Good reviewers play an important role in assisting to protect the scholarly level of refereed journals. However, they are sometimes difficult to find.

Gevers (2006: 8) concludes that the core functions of journal editorship and peer review are fundamental to the global system of ordered knowledge accumulation. The process is time consuming and voluntary, but should be applied to protect the integrity of academic publishing.

The *SABR* and its editorial practice

Prior to analysing the referee reports of manuscripts submitted to the *SABR*, this section provides a concise background to the *SABR* and its editorial practice in order to set the framework within which the detailed analysis can be interpreted.

Background

The *SABR* is an independent refereed publication of the College of Economic and Management Sciences of the University of South Africa (Unisa). The journal was first published in 1997 by the School of Business Leadership (SBL) of Unisa as a vehicle for academic staff to publish their research in the field of business leadership, management and administration. With the transfer of the journal to the College of Economic and Management Sciences in 2004, its scope was broadened to encompass all disciplines in the fields of the economic and management sciences. The journal was accredited by the South African Department of Education in 2004 to serve as a vehicle for researchers to earn research output points.

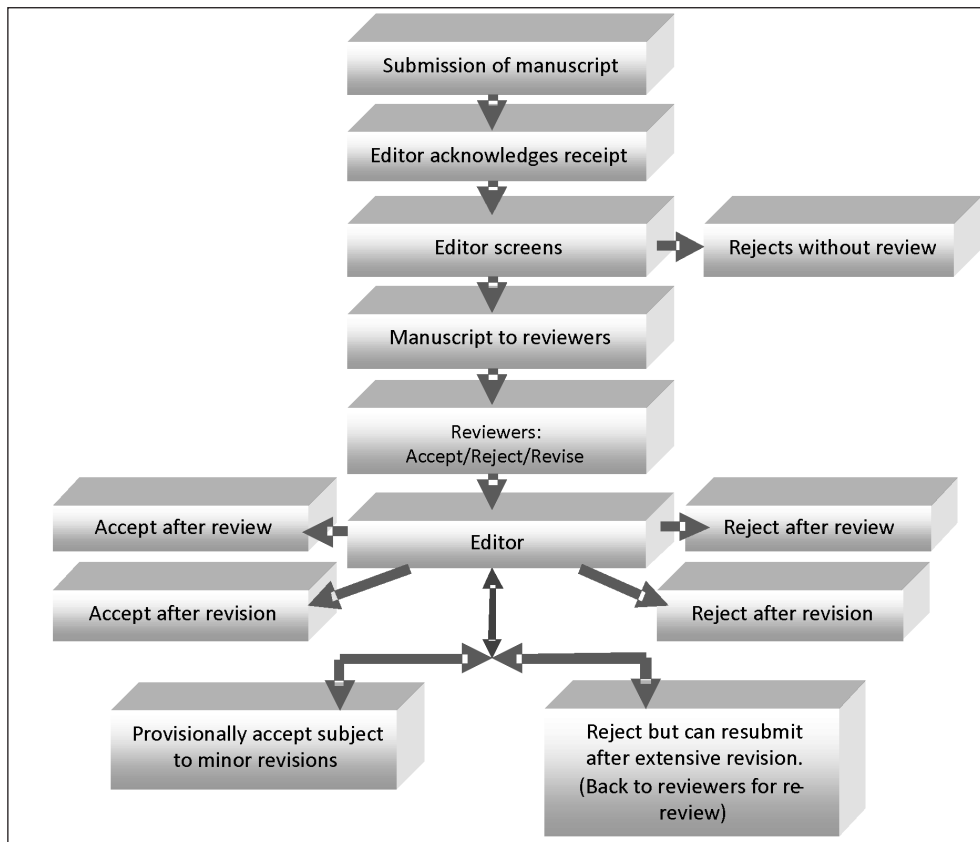
During 2008 the *SABR* was converted from hardcopy publication to electronic format as an open-access journal. The journal is hosted on the Unisa website and incorporated on several open-access journal search facilities in South Africa and abroad. The journal is also available in hardcopy format on request.

Editorial practice

As stated in the literature overview, a fairly standard editorial review process is applied by academic journals internationally. This process (also known as refereeing) is essential not only for protecting the integrity of science and scholarly communication (Weller 2001: 321), but also in assisting authors to enhance the scholarly levels of their manuscripts. Figure 1 shows the flow of manuscripts through the *SABR* review system. Aspiring authors send a manuscript to the *SABR* editorial office. This is acknowledged by the editor, with a note on the time-consuming process of peer reviewing. The journal editor then screens the manuscript to ensure that the subject matter falls within the scope of the journal and that it complies with journal's guidelines for contributors and is of a suitable quality for outside review. If the manuscript does not comply with these criteria, the editor may reject the manuscript without input from reviewers. A further justification for screening by the editor is to avoid wasting the precious academic time of reviewers in evaluating manuscripts that are substandard and/or not related to the subject matter published by the journal. The editor selects two or more reviewers to evaluate the manuscripts and make a recommendation whether to accept it; to accept it with minor revision; to reject it but allow the author/s to resubmit after extensive revision; or to reject the manuscript. After receiving the review reports, the editor then decides whether to concur with the recommendations of the reviewers. If the reviewers disagree, the editor may subject the manuscript to another round of reviews or may adjudicate to accept or reject it. In the majority of cases in which manuscripts are accepted for

publication, they are returned to the author/s for revision. In the case of extensive revision, the manuscript is again subjected to a full review process, preferably by the same reviewers who were involved with the initial manuscript. Reviewers' reports, as written, are returned anonymously to the author/s.

In the majority of cases, the comments of the editor also accompany the reviewers' reports. Reviewers are advisors only, and the editor may sometimes take a decision contrary to reviewers' recommendations. Such a decision is extensively substantiated by the editor. Once accepted, the manuscript is placed in the queue for publication.



Source: Adapted from Weller 2001:2

Figure 1: Flow of manuscripts through the *SABR* peer review process

The following are also relevant to the *SABR* peer review process:

- To protect the blind peer review process, the following approach is applied: where possible reviewers are not from the same institution as authors, the names of reviewers are unknown to authors and the names of authors and their institution/s are withheld from reviewers.

- Reviewers are supplied with assessment criteria but can go beyond the set criteria.
- A list of approximately 150 reviewers is published in the journal. The large number of *SABR* reviewers stems from the fact that the journal serves as a publication medium for all disciplines normally accommodated in Faculties of Economic and Management Sciences, ranging from economics and management sciences to accountancy and industrial psychology.
- Each volume of the *SABR* (consisting of three journal issues per annum) is annually subjected to a qualitative evaluation by the international Editorial Board.
- Guidelines for authors are available on the *SABR* website and are also published in hardcopy journal issues.

Method

For this descriptive study, an analysis was conducted of more than 300 manuscripts and approximately 600 referee reports submitted to the *SABR* during the five-year period 2004 to 2008. A template was used to record all the information contained in the *SABR* editorial data system, ranging from manuscript-related information such as scientific field of manuscript; to number, origin and designation of authors; and referee-related information such as the time limit within which to submit referee reports, the location of reviewers and the main issues to be addressed by reviewers in their referee reports. The latter were extracted according to the following headings:

- New contribution to the study area
- Clearly formulated purpose and objective
- Sound theoretical foundation
- Adequacy of literature references
- Adequacy of technical and experimental methods
- Well-planned and executed qualitative methodology
- Correct interpretation of results and clearly linked to literature
- Applicability of title
- Logic, systematic and coherent presentation
- Writing style/use of language.

Findings

The findings of the study are discussed according to biographical information of manuscripts, followed by an analysis of the review process.

Biographical information

The scientific field of study of the manuscripts embraces the whole spectrum of disciplines normally covered by Faculties of Economic and Management Sciences. Figure 2 shows that most of the manuscripts were in management sciences (28.8%) and accountancy (20.7%), followed by marketing and communication (10.3%) and industrial and organisational psychology (9.4%).



Figure 2: Scientific field of manuscripts

A total of 586 authors, averaging 1.8 authors per manuscript, were recorded in the database of the journal during the study period. Figure 3 shows the distribution of manuscripts by the number of authors. Just more than a third (35.8%) of the manuscripts had a single author, while almost half (46.5%) the manuscripts were co-authored by two authors.

Of these authors, 34.2% were from Unisa, 54.8% from other South African universities, 5.5% from foreign universities and 5.5% from the non-tertiary educational sector.

Figure 4 shows the status of the authors. Almost three in every five (57.9%) were professors/associate professors; 20.0% were senior lecturers and 11.1% lecturers. The majority of authors at lecturer, senior lecturer, student and non-tertiary educational levels acted as joint authors with senior academics.

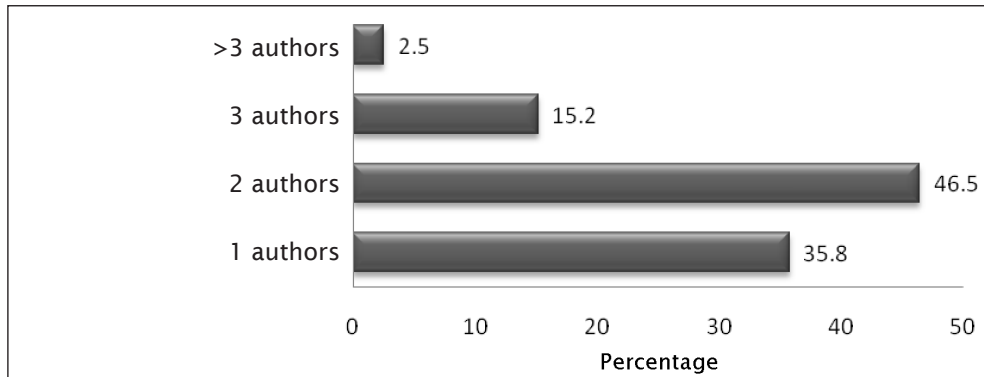


Figure 3: Number of authors per manuscript

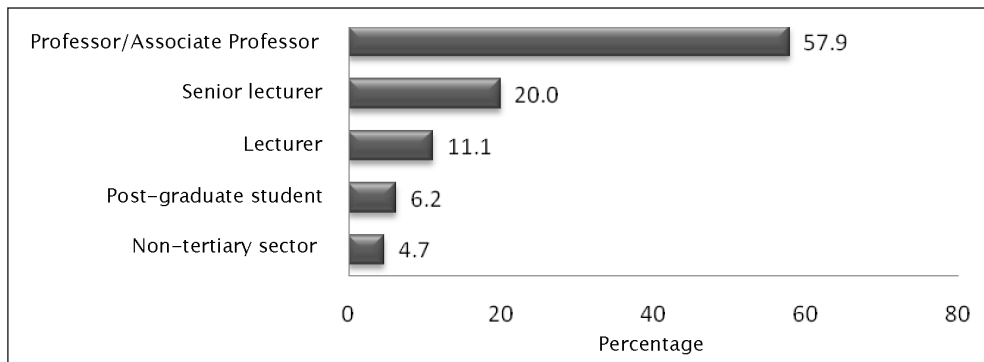


Figure 4: Status of authors per manuscript¹

Note:

1: Represents the comparison of only the 82% of authors with known designation.

Review process

Screening of manuscripts

Figure 5 shows the results of the screening or pre-review process by the editor. A total of 17.0% of the manuscripts were rejected for publication by the editor prior to the peer review process. The majority of these (12.5%) were rejected due to a poor scholarly standard; 2.6% were declined because they had already been published

elsewhere; and 1.9% fell outside the scope of the *SABR*. The rest (83.0%) were distributed for peer review.

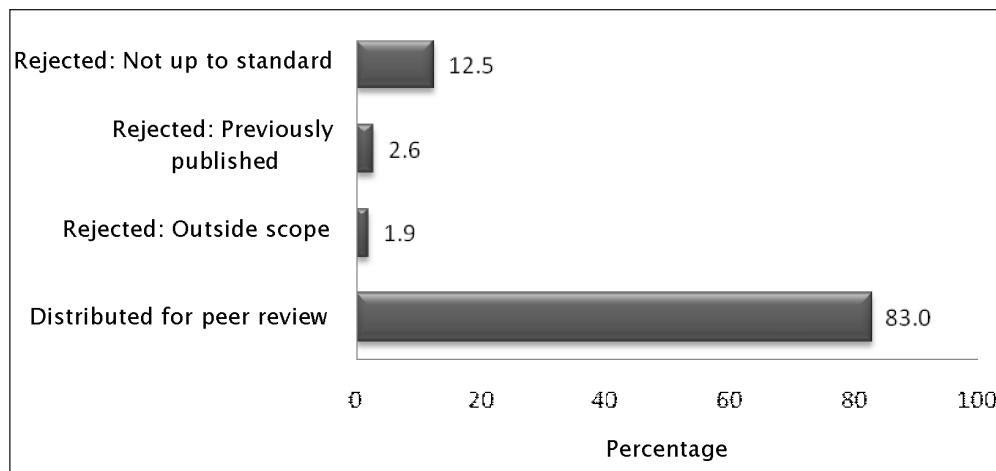


Figure 5: Results of the pre-review process

Duration of the peer review process

As already noted previously, the time-consuming nature of the peer review process can take several months (or even years in some fields) before a submitted manuscript is published; this is one of the most common complaints about academic publishing. The review process is voluntary and is done part-time. Editors can therefore not force reviewers to review a manuscript within a specific time limit.

In addition to the time taken by reviewers to compile their review reports, the review process is also prolonged by activities within the editorial office itself. These may include registering manuscripts, selecting and recruiting appropriate reviewers, time available to the editor (who also acts in a voluntary capacity) and general academic routine. Experience has shown that communication with scholars during university examinations and summer-recess periods is not very effective. It should also be noted that the double blind peer review process followed by the *SABR* implies that the communication of the review reports to the author can only be effected after the second reviewer has responded.

Figure 6 shows the time period between the submission of manuscripts to the *SABR* and reporting back to authors on the outcome of the review process. Almost seven in every ten authors (70.2%) were informed within ten weeks of submitting

their manuscript of the outcome of the review process. Almost one in every ten (11.8%) was informed of the outcome more than 14 weeks after submission.

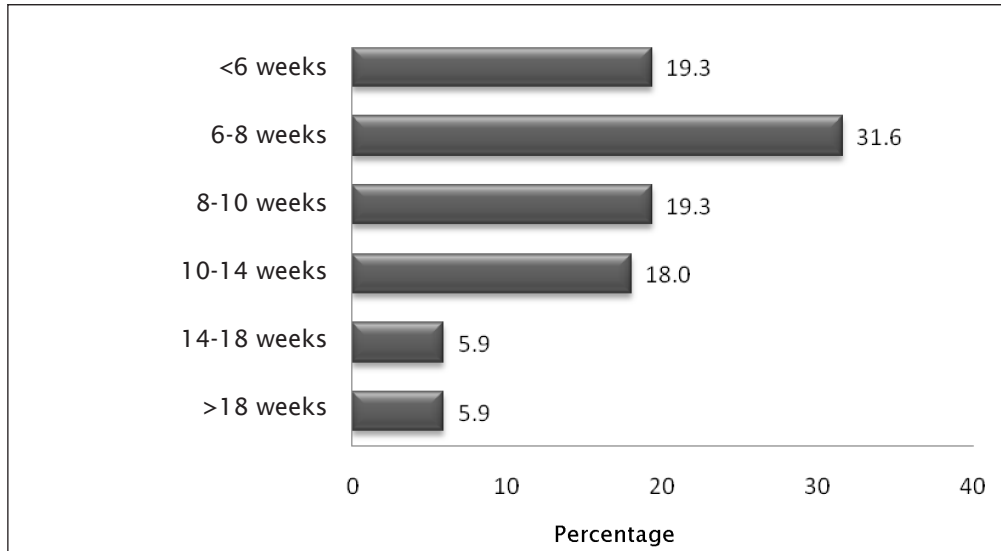


Figure 6: Duration of peer-review process: from submission to editorial decision

The average time period between submission of manuscripts and reporting back to authors on the outcome of the review process and the editorial decision amounted to 9.4 weeks.

A perspective on the duration of the peer review process is supplied by Gilmore et al. (2006: 468), who state that authors should be aware that the review process could take some time. They propose that authors should allow at least 12 weeks before checking on progress, or at least six weeks if there has been no acknowledgement of submission. It was also observed in an international study by Friedlander and Besette (2003: 16) that authors are generally satisfied with peer reviews, although the delays caused by this process may be frustrating.

Review results

Reviewers are requested to explicitly recommend the handling of the manuscript according to one of the following categories:

- (a) Accept unconditionally for publication
- (b) Accept with minor revisions

- (c) Not acceptable, but could be resubmitted after extensive revisions
- (d) Outright rejection.

Table 1 shows the variation in recommendations submitted by referees. Only four in every ten manuscripts (44.2%) elicited a consensus recommendation (for example, both referees recommended publication: 3.6% of manuscripts; minor revision: 17.9%; extensive revision: 12.9%; or rejection: 9.8%). The table also confirms that there were minor variances between the recommendations of the two referees in the case of 45.1% of the manuscripts. This implies that the recommendations were one category apart, for example, publication (referee 1) and publication with minor revision (referee 2). It is also clear from Table 1 that major differences occurred in the recommendations with respect to 10.7% of the manuscripts. These recommendations were at least two categories apart and in some instances (1.3%), even as far apart as unconditional acceptance (referee 1) and outright rejection (referee 2).

Table 1: Recommendations by referees regarding acceptability of manuscripts for publication

Referee 1	Referee 2	Percentage
1. Consensus		44.2
(a) Accepted	Accepted	3.6
(b) Minor revision	Minor revision	17.9
(c) Extensive revision	Extensive revision	12.9
(d) Rejected	Rejected	9.8
2. Minor divergence		45.1
(a) Accepted	Minor revision	5.4
(b) Minor revision	Extensive revision	20.5
(c) Extensive revision	Rejected	19.2
3. Major divergence		10.7
(a) Accepted	Extensive revision	3.1
(b) Minor revision	Rejected	6.3
(c) Accepted	Rejected	1.3
		100.0

Reviewer disagreement is a general occurrence in the peer review of manuscripts. Reviewers of scientific manuscripts act independently without being required to reach consensus. Reviewer disagreement is not necessarily a negative factor, but

may assist the editor in evaluating a manuscript from several different perspectives. Numerous studies have been conducted on reviewer disagreement. Weller (2001: 193) highlights several reasons for disagreement. These include that some reviewers may detect major methodological problems in the research design that were not identified by others; some reviewers simply provide better reviews than others; disagreement may stem from focusing on different aspects of the manuscripts; while some may regard flaws as correctable, while others perceive them as errors that cannot be rectified. Fortunately, most reviewers are more likely to identify poor manuscripts and agree on rejection.

Weller (2001: 200) concluded that the most important aspect is not that reviewers disagree but the reasons for disagreement. If the disagreement stems, for example, from different views on the research methodology applied, the editor needs to resolve the problem. If differences originate from different theoretical stances or ideologies, disagreement is irrelevant. These considerations therefore confirm the need for an editor to make well-informed decisions.

SABR rejection rate

Table 2 shows the status of manuscripts submitted to the *SABR* over the five-year period 2004 to 2008. The percentage of rejected manuscripts was 50.0% in 2004 and 56.1% in 2005. It increased to close to 70.0% for the 2006 to 2008 period.

Table 2: Status of manuscripts (2004–2008)

Year	Rejected	Accepted	With authors	Withdrawn	Total
	%	%	%	%	%
2004	50.0	41.9	-	8.1	100.0
2005	56.1	38.6	-	5.3	100.0
2006	69.2	30.8	-	-	100.0
2007	69.0	26.8	4.2	-	100.0
2008	65.7	27.1	3.5	-	100.0

Some changes occurred in the authorship structure of manuscripts during this period. Single authorship manuscripts declined from 46.8% in 2004 to 34.3% in 2008, while dual authorship increased from 38.7% to 50.0% during the same period. Universities increasingly apply the requirement that senior degree graduation is subject to the submission (not publication) of a co-authored manuscript (with the study leader) to an accredited journal. Anecdotal evidence often suggests limited involvement of study leaders in compiling and editing their students' manuscripts,

resulting in the submission of substandard manuscripts. Moreover, many study leaders may have limited academic publishing experience. These issues, together with the submission of manuscripts by less experienced authors, may to a large extent explain the increase in the rejection rate of manuscripts from approximately 50% in 2004 and 2005 to close to 70% during the past three years.

Reflections on the *SABR* review process

Blind peer review is the backbone of the academic publishing process. Authors and reviewers are unaware of each other's identities in an attempt to make the process more impartial (Calfee & Valencia 2007: 2). Furthermore, authors should recognise that the rigour of the peer-review process at most academic journals has risen continuously over the years and is destined to increase even further due to advances in the conceptual, theoretical and empirical domains of research (Rajan 1996: 1).

This section reflects on the common weaknesses of manuscripts and the guidelines that may be deduced to assist authors with their submissions to the *SABR*. These shortcomings stem from almost 600 review reports completed by referees during the past five years. They reflect only the more generic issues that are relevant for academic writing generally and do not dwell on discipline-specific issues.

Common weaknesses

As stated earlier, the peer review process is primarily aimed at filtering out weaknesses and obvious errors along with making suggestions for improvements. The *SABR* provides a review template to reviewers as a guide to note shortcomings (or strengths) in a systematic way. This section identifies and discusses the common weaknesses noted most often by reviewers in terms of the *SABR* review template. The counter side of the weaknesses suggests the guidelines for authors. A lack of space prevents a full deliberation of the guidelines, which will be done in a follow-up study.

Scientific relevance

The first issue addressed in the *SABR* review template is the extent to which the manuscript represents a definite new contribution to the study area. The following main concerns are often highlighted by reviewers:

- Manuscript does not add value to the current body of knowledge
- Should be more than a synthesis of existing knowledge

- Lacks latest thinking on the subject matter
- Discussion should be more critical and original
- Contains too little of the author's own thinking (only uncritical summary of literature)
- Does not explore anything innovative
- Mostly sources from popular press and/or text books and/or websites.

These concerns confirm that scientific publishing requires the shifting of the frontiers of knowledge. Something new should be added to the body of knowledge. A critical analysis is required for a scientific article. This is different from writing a chapter for a book or a post-graduate dissertation or thesis.

Purpose and objective

Reviewers are requested to comment on the clarity of the purpose and objectives of the study. The main weaknesses reported in this regard include:

- Purpose and objectives not clearly stated/vague
- Clearly stated but not achieved
- Cover far too many topics – should be more focused
- Not challenging enough
- Contains conflicting aims
- Disjunction between purpose and empirical findings.

A clearly stated purpose and objective of a research study gives direction to the whole study. It ensures that the entire discussion, from the theory and literature review to the discussion of findings and recommendations, is focused and interrelated.

Sound theoretical foundation

The foundation of any research study is its conceptual grounding and development (Rajan 1996: 3). Because of its importance, reviewers commented fairly extensively on weaknesses in this section of manuscripts. Some of the major concerns in this regard include:

- Absence of theoretical foundation
- Research questions should be embedded in a sound theoretical framework
- Theory is insignificant and/or outdated
- Dumping of unrelated theoretical concepts
- Inordinate reliance on a single author

- Theoretical framework and empirical findings are unrelated
- Does not reflect latest developments in subject field
- Discussion uncritical and very basic
- Manuscript should be grounded on theory
- Hypotheses are not theoretically grounded.

The research issue or subject studied in a manuscript should be thoroughly grounded, shaped and directed by theory (Calfée & Valencia 2007: 4). The theoretical or conceptual framework should also fit the phenomenon or research issue studied and should expose the state of the art knowledge on the subject matter. Rajan (1996: 5) also states that there should be a logical connection between the theory evoked and the hypotheses stated. In discussing a study among journal editors in South Africa, Kapp and Albertyn (2008: 282) mention that 94% of editors noted poor contextualisation as being problematic.

Literature review

Comments are requested from reviewers on the adequacy of literature references as well as the scholarly standard of discussion in this regard. The following weaknesses are often cited by reviewers:

- Absence of peer reviewed (journal) sources
- Too many sources from popular press, industry reports or text books
- Overreliance on single sources
- Original sources should be consulted and quoted
- Literature review not critically evaluated
- Large body of literature but not integrated
- References are dated
- Key facts and statements need references
- Literature review not linked to rest of manuscript
- Views too strongly opinion-based – need scientific substantiation.

A well-researched literature base is one of the key characteristics of any academic study. Its point of departure is to recognise the contributions of fellow scholars, especially those in top scientific journals. This ensures that a research study does not exist in a vacuum and stray from the existing knowledge base.

Technical and experimental methods

The following weaknesses are reported in relation to technical and experimental methods:

- Failure to demonstrate research design
- Statistical analysis techniques should be motivated
- Statistical analysis can enhance academic standard
- Statistical analysis not interpreted correctly
- Validity and reliability of data not demonstrated
- Simple descriptive statistics not good enough for accredited journals.

Research design, measurement and statistical analysis should preferably go beyond simple descriptive techniques. Inferential analysis often allows more rich and complicated analyses, causalities and interpretation.

Empirical and qualitative research

The overwhelming majority of manuscripts submitted to the *SABR* applied quantitative research methodology. The following, often very basic, weaknesses were reported:

- Validity and reliability of data not demonstrated
- Inadequate discussion of survey methodology with regard to aspects such as sample size, sampling method, data collection method and instrument development – this should affirm the scientific basis of the methodology
- Unrepresentative survey data
- Sample size too small.

A substantial portion of manuscripts are rejected due to the application of unscientific survey methodology, which cannot be corrected.

Correct interpretation of results

With regard to the interpretation of results and their linking with the preceding literature review and statement of objectives, the following weaknesses are often cited:

- Analysis should be stronger – not only descriptive statistics
- Incorrect interpretation of inferential statistics (for example, confusion between dependent and independent variables)
- No/little linkages to literature study
- Analysis does not relate to objective
- Lacks rigorous scientific analysis
- Uncritical and not properly integrated.

The discussion of the results should be placed within the context of the original problem statement and objective to be achieved in the study. It should also be linked to the existing literature, with some indication of the broader implications of the findings. The quantitative elements of the study often form the heart of the research. These should receive special care and be presented in such a way as to offer an in-depth and scholarly interpretation of the results. Correctly selected inferential statistics often contribute to the richness of the interpretations. The discussion of the findings should be above average, show a scholarly insight into the subject matter and be properly integrated in a logical way.

Presentation

Comments are required on the logical and systematic way in which the research is presented. This issue presents itself as the major weakness of manuscripts, and it is not surprising that reviewers' comments in this regard are often very extensive and critical. Major shortcomings include:

- No golden thread that links the different sections
- Title, objective, conceptualisation and discussion of findings not in line
- Manuscript is poorly assembled
- Does not follow a logical development of ideas
- Manuscript is uncritical, and presentation is fragmented
- Discussion is disjointed
- Manuscript lacks cohesion
- No links between sections and does not form an integrated unit
- Discussion lacks academic rigour.

Many more comments point towards a lack of coherence, integration, logical flow and linkages between the different sections of a manuscript. Gilmore et al. (2006: 472) state the following in their first point of advice to authors:

A paper needs to have a strong theme of focus, be well-structured and easy to follow for a first time reader such as a reviewer. ... each part of an academic article should contribute to the whole article, should have its own role within the article and be carefully and explicitly linked within the context of the whole argument. An ideal article should be a string of interrelated ideas that have a focus and are easy to follow.

Clarity and flow through linkages between sections cannot be overemphasised as an important ingredient of a successful manuscript.

Title

With respect to the applicability of manuscript titles, the following comments were made by reviewers:

- Title not applicable to contents of study
- Does not reflect full spectrum of study
- Title must reflect focus of study
- Title too broad or generalised
- Study does not address the title.

The title of the manuscript should reflect some key words that capture the contribution or content of the study. It should be concise, and it is often proposed that it should not exceed eight words (Gilmore et al. 2006: 472).

Writing style, grammar and language

A wide spectrum of weaknesses is highlighted by reviewers, including the following: grammar and spelling mistakes, wrong numbering, unclear sentences, incorrect referencing, no academic or scholarly formulations, usage of casual and colloquial language, usage of adjectives and adverbs in academic journals, and a writing style that is not fluent. Kapp and Albertyn (2008: 281) also report ‘style and language’ as a common error experienced by South African journal editors, 98% of whom noted this about manuscripts.

General

The foregoing discussion clearly suggests a large variety of weaknesses that may result in a manuscript being rejected for publication. Several reviewers also mentioned some general shortcomings that may be helpful to prospective *SABR* authors. The following are noted:

- Manuscript shows very little insight
- Lacks scientific credibility
- Merely a compilation of ideas – scientific articles need academic rigour
- Manuscript does not bear witness to deep thought
- Manuscript is based on dissertation/thesis converted to article format – it lacks depth and is disjointed
- Manuscript is based on opinions of author and cannot be classified as a research contribution
- Plagiarism is a serious academic offence.

Summary

The picture emerging from the discussion of common weaknesses of manuscripts submitted to the *SABR* is that they are fairly widespread – ranging from deficiencies in research design and academic rigour to mechanical aspects such as writing and referencing style. The weaknesses most often cited by reviewers relate to presentation and style; not being sufficiently grounded in theory; flaws in quantitative methodology; and a lack of contribution to the body of knowledge. This finding correlates closely with a comprehensive international multidisciplinary analysis conducted by Weller (2001: 50). She mentions that poor presentation or writing was identified by all the editors in a survey as one of the major reasons for rejecting a manuscript. This was followed by inadequate research and that the manuscript contributed no new knowledge to the discipline.

Correctable problems

Several of the weaknesses resulting in the rejection of manuscripts are potentially correctable problems, while others are not. Kassirer and Campion (as quoted by Weller 2001: 51) argue that there is a “rejection threshold – a point at which the cumulative weight of manuscripts’ faults tips the scale toward rejection”. Correctable problems include, *inter alia*, aspects such as change in title, usage of alternative statistical techniques or unjustified conclusions. Problems that cannot be corrected may include a sample that is too small or unrepresentative, inaccurate research and previous publication of the same study.

After the review process, the editor informs the author/s whether the manuscript has been accepted with or without revision, or whether it has been rejected. This communication is accompanied by the reviewers’ reports. In cases where authors have been given the opportunity to revise and resubmit, careful consideration should be given to the reviewers’ and editor’s comments. This always results in the improvement of manuscripts and should be interpreted as an integral part of the peer review process in academic publishing. Gilmore et al. (2006: 474) state that before a manuscript is accepted, authors should expect at least one round of revision, and often even two.

Proposed adjustments should be incorporated as far as possible. The editor should be fully informed of the revisions effected, with an indication of exactly where in the manuscript the changes have been made. If it is not possible to incorporate one or more of the proposed adjustments, the editor should be informed accordingly with reasons for omitting to attend to such proposals.

Conclusion

Academic writing forms a core ingredient of academic life. It holds benefits for the author and his/her institution and above all contributes to the body of global scientific knowledge. Journal editorship and peer review are fundamental to the ordered production, accumulation and use of scientific knowledge.

Academic journals, including the *Southern African Business Review*, have relatively high rejection rates. The maintenance of an extensive database on the editorial review process of the *SABR* allows an in-depth analysis of the reasons for rejecting manuscripts. These are multidimensional and range from weaknesses in the research design and the presentation of research findings, to a lack of contribution towards the body of scientific knowledge, and more mechanical problems such as language style and referencing. A proper understanding of shortcomings in academic writing will highlight the guidelines for compiling good scientific articles.

This study provides insight into the more common shortcomings of manuscripts rejected for publication in the *SABR*. It is proposed that future research should focus on a detailed exposition of the guidelines for, or characteristics of, a good manuscript. Such a study should be complemented with a review of interventions aimed at building academic writing capacity among unsuccessful and prospective authors.

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