

50 years of Compare: editors' reflections on the life course of the journal

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Compare reaches its 50th birthday at a time of tremendous flux in academic publishing. While the old order still stands, and is being reinforced by a growing homogenisation of global academia, its foundations are being shaken by changes in technology, knowledge production, business practices, as well as new political movements. In its place is emerging a new model of presenting, sharing and validating research and scholarship, with innovations including the growth of open peer review, mega-journals and open access publications. It is an opportune moment, in this short editorial, to reflect on the place of the journal in contemporary academic publishing in the field of international and comparative education, what it has achieved to date, the challenges facing it and possible ways forward.

The journal has in many ways benefited from trends in global higher education in recent decades. More and more countries are adopting evaluation systems that encourage academics to publish regularly, particularly in English language journals, and preferably ones listed in the Web of Science. *Compare* has seen a substantial increase in submissions over the last 10 years, particularly from countries like China and Turkey which had only a minor representation in previous decades. The journal's strong impact factor has been enticing for those based in countries in which citation metrics play a prominent role in career progression. Finally, the broad remit of *Compare* – covering comparative education, educational development and international education – has made it possible for researchers in a wide range of different areas to find a home for their work.

While the journal is innovative and experimental in the content it publishes, and has a strong global social justice orientation, it is a traditional or conventional journal in its format. It operates a standard double-blind peer review system, and publishes mostly articles of a standard length and format (though in the 'Forum' section it does provide an alternative space for dialogue on topical issues). While it was founded and continues to be owned by a scholarly association (the British Association of International and Comparative Education – BAICE), it is published by a commercial publisher, and is available only to readers paying the subscription, or affiliated to universities that do so.

In recent years there has been a crescendo of critique of the paywall model of academic publishing, which operates as a form of enclosure of the world's scientific knowledge, barring access to those outside of privileged higher education institutions. In practice, there are many ways in which scholars do gain access to these journals, both legal (through 'green access' in which the author versions of articles are made openly available through repositories) and illegal, through file sharing websites. Nevertheless, calls for an end to paywall publishing continue, and have been accompanied by some institutional or national boycotts of commercial publishers, as well as a growth in new open access journals.

There are also trends and challenges in relation to validation of knowledge. The internet has brought a new wave of democratisation of knowledge through which validation occurs not through expert approval, but through popular endorsement. If Wikipedia has replaced traditional encyclopedias, why can the same not happen to academic journals? There has been a further epistemic challenge associated with calls for the decolonisation of the academy, given prominence by the *Rhodes must fall* movement in South Africa, and knock-on protests elsewhere. There have been growing demands for universities to reform their curricula to make them more responsive to the diversity of scholars and epistemic perspectives, and these demands will certainly move towards academic journals.

Are some of these trends reflected in the papers published in Compare? The study that we commissioned to celebrate Compare's 50th birthday provides some useful answers (see the first article published in this volume, together with the full study on the BAICE website). Using the full potential of Compare's long history, it examines trends on a whole range of characteristics regarding both the published papers themselves as well as their authors. It showed, encouragingly, that Compare has not only attracted ever more submissions from the Global South, as mentioned earlier, but that papers submitted by authors from lower income countries also increasingly make their way into the journal.

Over the last five decades the share of articles written by authors affiliated to institutions in the Global South has risen by 10 percentage points from 7.6% in the 1970s to 17.6 % in the past decade. Although 17.6% still falls way short of the share of the Global South in the world's population, it does show that Compare has been successful in diversifying its published outputs in terms of giving a greater voice to marginalised academic communities, which has been a key objective of the journal from the start. In terms of countries focused on by the published papers, this shift towards the Global South is even more pronounced: while only 9.5% of papers addressed topics in lower income countries in the 1970s, this percentage has risen to 41.1% in the 2010s, surpassing the share of articles about countries in the Global North (22.9%) by a wide margin. Thus, both in terms of authors' affiliations and countries covered, Compare has become more inclusive vis-à-vis the Global South.

Yet, perhaps the starkest and most surprising finding of the study is the change that it detected in the kind of articles published in Compare. While 'review' articles, understood by the study as more discursive papers "without an explicit research method or strategy", still made up more than 80% of all published papers in the 1980s, today its share has fallen to a mere 22%. These articles have largely been replaced by papers using qualitative methods (from less than 10% to more than 50%). At the same time the share of quantitative papers has risen from 4.3% to 12.9%. The strong increase in the share of papers with explicit research methods, irrespective of the nature of the data they are using (qualitative or quantitative), suggests that norms of systematic analysis and replicability of research, which are mainly associated with the natural sciences, have come to prevail in comparative education as well. The study labels this trend "the increasing scientisation of the social sciences". It would be interesting to monitor the consequences of this trend. Is scholarly activity in comparative and international education increasingly able to explore educational phenomena in a focused and rigorous way but losing its ability to discuss these phenomena more discursively and critically in relation to broader societal trends?

Taking account of the 50th anniversary study and the aforementioned important trends towards greater democratisation of knowledge, a crucial question to ask is ‘Where does Compare go from here?’ Currently, we are, once again, reviewing the focus of the journal, not only to strive to distinguish it from others in the field but also to reflect more strongly on one of the aims of BAICE which is to ‘encourage theoretical and methodological innovations leading to knowledge that is relevant to policy and practice in international contexts’. Submissions to Compare continue to rise and, in 2020, the number of issues per year was increased to 8 in order to enable us to publish more high quality articles that speak to our international audience. At the same time, it is important to dissuade authors from submitting articles that are not related to our focus and that would be better suited elsewhere. Specifying that we are looking for freshness and originality – in approach, in theoretical framing – may also simplify the desk rejection of articles that, although they are reporting on soundly conducted empirical research, are not adding anything new to what is known already on the topic.

As outlined above, we are also facing a situation in which much of the world’s population –even those based in universities – may not have access to the content of the journal. This is something of an intractable problem, as access to the articles at the current time requires either a payment from the reader or the author, neither of which is equitable. To move the journal entirely open access, and to continue to support high-quality editorial and publishing processes, would require significant public or institutional funding, neither of which are likely in the current climate. Major changes to the publishing industry may make these decisions immaterial in the coming years, but in the meantime our editorial board continues to grapple with the problem of how within these significant constraints we can ensure scholars in low-income countries and poorly resourced institutions can get access to the journal’s content.

At this point it is politic to look back to 2010 when Compare celebrated its 40th anniversary. That anniversary was marked by a Special Issue of the journal, introduced by an Editorial by the then editors, Karen Evans and Anna Robinson-Pant. Their Editorial included interviews with several former editors of Compare together with critical reflection on how the journal positioned itself within the fields of comparative and international education and education development. The Special Issue included six reflective contributions from authors who positioned themselves in different ways within these fields of scholarship. These reflective accounts were the forerunner of the Forum, mentioned earlier. We continue to receive a healthy number of Forum submissions and it is clear to us, as current editors, that it provides a valuable space for a range of perspectives on current issues. The Covid-19 pandemic is, for example, at the moment, generating several Fora.

Many of the issues foregrounded, discussed and critiqued in the 40th anniversary Editorial and the Special Issue’s articles are visible in the study that we commissioned for Compare’s 50th anniversary. These include how Compare positions itself with regard to other journals in the field, critical discussion about its focus and scope and ‘the need continuously to question the export of western assumptions’ (Evans and Robinson-Pant, 2010, 706). In 2010, Compare was faced with the decision as to whether to move to online submission and management of articles, with the then editors musing on whether this move would mean that persuading people to review articles would become more problematic. As editors, we have only ever worked with the online submission system but, throughout our terms of office, have not found it

easy to locate suitable reviewers for articles and to persuade them to review. The extent to which this problem can be laid at the door of online submission is doubtful, given its near universal prevalence, but, in an effort to address it, in 2019, we initiated a College of Reviewers system. This involved us identifying and subsequently inviting those people who reviewed regularly, promptly and to a high standard, to join our College of Reviewers. Drawing on people who have committed themselves to the journal by agreeing to review at least 4 papers each year has helped to streamline, significantly, the review process.

In their 2010 Editorial, the editors highlighted the new writers' programme that had been developed to support early career researchers and academics in the Global South to publish in Compare. That programme of workshops, together with the subsequent mentoring of participants, continues and has now been conducted successfully in a range of contexts. In 2017, to complement this programme, we introduced an annual fellowship to support academic publishing in low-income countries. As editors we have also made explicit our commitment to engender greater equality and democracy in academic publishing by placing, in 2017, a statement to that effect on the Compare and BAICE websites, adding that Compare is 'striving to be inclusive of a range of writing genres', a commitment mooted in the 2010 Editorial in its reference to 'innovative writing in terms of form and approach' (p.707). We are now considering whether we need to emphasise that we are looking, not only for theoretical and methodological innovations and a variety of writing genres, but also articles reporting on research that has questioned the relevance and continued dominance of Eurocentric epistemological thinking. Such articles would be positioning a study within conceptual frameworks that are more congruent with and therefore more relevant to local, contextual knowledges – whatever the context - thus supporting local research more appositely. In addition, given the impact on education of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global anti-racism movement, it is even more imperative, as the journal of a professional association committed to social justice, that we revisit, consistently, how inequalities are perpetuated. Publishing rigorous research into such issues will be especially important in a post pandemic future in which there is a danger of those inequalities being amplified. Further, the Black Lives Matter movement has renewed calls for decolonisation of the curricula across all education sectors and in all contexts, and it may, therefore, be even more important to encourage more submissions to Compare that engage critically with southern and decolonial theories.

As we stated at the beginning of this Editorial, there is a tremendous flux in academic publishing, and it is therefore timely to challenge what has often been an undervaluing and even silencing of research that falls outside of the powerful publishing houses of the Global North. In celebrating its 40 years of publication in 2010, the then editors reminded readers that Compare was a journal seeking to illuminate the role of education in contributing to greater equity and social justice. As we look forward, we believe that it can, therefore, be at the forefront of engendering greater equality and democracy in academic writing and publishing and continue to question the social order by challenging hierarchies that can be exclusionary.

Reference

Evans, K and Robinson-Pant, A. 2010 "EDITORIAL *Compare*: Exploring a 40-year Journey Through Comparative Education and International Development." *Compare* 40(6): 693-710.