

## Editorial

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This issue begins with a conversation between Suriamurthee Maistry and Lesley le Grange on quality in scholarly publishing along with judgment and critique of the publishing industry. It is not often that the publishing timeframes of a journal allow for this kind of published conversation, which is, arguably, a hallmark of what academics do: we enter into debate and dialogue with colleagues about the key contentious issues and the competing claims in a particular field.

Maistry uses the methodology of self-study and critical autoethnography to reflect on his own experience of publishing five articles with the Kamla-Raj Enterprises (KRE) publishers, which are now blacklisted by the Department of Higher Education and Training as predatory publishers. His stance is to take full responsibility for his choices and poor judgement, while also locating the practice of predatory publishing clearly within the managerial and neoliberal policies that shape higher education. Maistry engages with the issue of judgement in two ways. First, he argues that the work of academics is such that they put their work into the public domain and thus must expect to be judged and critiqued by peers, and second, that academics should use their own judgement when making decisions about where to publish. This point was also made in the 2019 Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) report.

Le Grange's reply to Maistry is challenging and robust. Clearly, he does not buy Maistry's need to confess nor does he accept that Maistry's academic reputation has been irreparably damaged. In his response, he recounts a non-confession that he, too, published in a KRE journal. However, he feels that the peer-review process was robust; he provided the journal with names of reviewers (who may or may not have been used). He argues that KRE journals are not really predatory since they have recently entered into a partnership with Taylor and Francis. Given the huge profits that the big academic publishers make, one could argue that they are also predatory in the sense of making profits off the free labour of academics by selling their own work back to them in journals!

Le Grange's argument is that we should not be confused by the container (the journal) and must, rather, judge the contents of an article for quality and authority apart from the journal in which it is published. While I agree completely that academics need to have knowledge to make judgements about the quality of every article they read, this does not mean that the journals should not be governed by rules of good practice that can assist academics in making

these judgements, such as not publishing one author more than once in an issue, and not publishing authors only from one higher education institution.

Le Grange goes on to problematise the practice of peer review and notes that it is not the fixed and sacrosanct system that Maistry appears to think it is. Le Grange notes that we need to strengthen the practice of peer review, and one way of doing this could be to do away with the anonymity of reviewers. I agree (writing as an editor who recently received a one-line response from a reviewer: “This should not be published”), that this would, most probably, make them more accountable for the rigour of their reviewing reports.

Maistry was then afforded the right to respond to le Grange.<sup>1</sup> He points out that he and le Grange occupy different epistemological and methodological spaces, but both are committed to positive action that will create a robust and just publishing system of good quality.

One of the lessons that we learn from this dialogue is that academics use a range of different theories and discourses to critique each other’s arguments, and that we have different ways of defining what counts as ethical behaviour. What is vital is that as academics we do not take the academic publishing business at face value, but, instead, engage with it critically. In South Africa, much of this work about who publishes where is led by Johan Mouton from the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology at Stellenbosch University, and published by ASSAf. Both le Grange and Maistry urge us to engage with their reports and recommendations because it is vital that we engage with the question of how to create a more rigorous and trustworthy publishing system, as well as a fairer one. This means reflecting on our own practices as well as on systemic publishing ones.

Moving away from academic publishing, the next article in this issue, by Sfiso Mabizela and Lionel Green-Thompson, deals with the enduring issue of student achievement in higher education, and particularly in the ways in which National Benchmark Test (NBT) scores predict success. These authors focus on a medical school cohort whose members completed the degree in the minimum six years of study. It tracks the Wits MBChB class of 2011, which was comprised of 183 students in the first year of study of whom 121 completed in 2016. The majority of these successful students attended Quintile 5 schools. In the mathematics NBT test all the Quintile 5 school learners achieved proficiency, while none of the students from lower resourced schools (Quintiles 1 and 2) did so. What the study shows is that there is a clearly defined relationship between NBT scores and academic performance in medical school and that this mirrors the relationship between NBT scores and the school attended. Crudely put, if a student attends a Quintile 5 school, he or she is likely to achieve good NTB scores and is thus more likely to complete a medical degree in six years. In Gauteng, Quintile 5 schools charged fees of around R45,000 per annum in 2019. When the average salary in the formal non-agricultural sector is R21,000 per month (Statistics South Africa, 2018), such fees are, quite clearly, out of reach of many employed South Africans let alone those who are unemployed. The findings of the study reinforce the evidence that socioeconomic status is in

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<sup>1</sup> This reply was not peer reviewed because of time constraints; we wanted to publish the entire dialogue in the same issue.

fact the best predictor of achieving success in higher education since it is usually coupled with family support and financial stability.

The next article, by Nonhlanha Mthiyane, Jacqueline Naidoo, and Carol Bertram, also adds to the evidence of enduring inequalities between schools in different quintiles, this time on how this has an impact on the work of Heads of Departments (HODs). The study focuses on *Jika iMfundo*, a project supported by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and the Project to Improve Learning Outcomes (PILO). This initiative aims to support teachers' coverage of the curriculum by training HODs to monitor and support the teachers in their subject department. The authors interviewed 29 HODs from 15 KwaZulu-Natal schools that had been part of the *Jika iMfundo* intervention from 2015 to 2017. *Jika iMfundo*'s aim is to shift HODs' leadership practices from a merely technical compliance with departmental requirements to providing more developmental support for the teachers in their department. Many said that the programme was very helpful in giving guidance regarding the role of an HoD and providing tools and training to do this work. However, the study also shows that the majority of HODs were not able to do this because of their heavy workloads and overwhelming administrative responsibilities. It was only the HODs in Quintile 5 schools who had the administrative resources, flat organisational structures, and collegial relationships that enabled them to support the teachers in their departments in meaningful ways. This focus on the work of HODs throws more light on just how privileged these Quintile 5 schools are.

The final article in this issue engages with recognition of prior learning (RPL) in higher education, particularly in the context of library and information sciences (LIS) schools in South African universities. RPL is also an issue closely related to equity since it aims to provide people who have developed competence but who do not have access to higher education because they lack formal qualifications. For people working in library and information services, RPL could enable them to move from paraprofessional to professional roles. Ike Hlongwane surveyed the 10 universities that offer courses in LIS to establish the extent to which RPL, in compliance with the legislation, features. While all the official policies in these universities are supportive of RPL, not all of them in fact provide supportive environments to potential students who would benefit if RPL were firmly in place. To rectify this not unexpected policy–practice gap, Hlongwane recommends greater monitoring by the Council for Higher Education to ensure compliance. However, this may not be a very productive response if we do not first engage with the question of why many LIS Schools do not offer RPL opportunities to potential students.

The issue closes with a review by Sherran Clarence of *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans* (2018) by Jennifer M. Case, Delia Marshall, Sioux McKenna, and Disaapele Mogashana. These authors used narrative methodology to interview 73 young people six years after they started a bachelor's degree at one of three well-resourced urban universities in South Africa.

## References

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