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Title	Publish or Perish: Barriers faced by Early Career Academics trying to find an outlet for their voice
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/51446/
DOI	
Date	2024
Citation	Ross, Amanda Louise, Colthup, Rebecca and Jenkins, Rebecca (2024) Publish or Perish: Barriers faced by Early Career Academics trying to find an outlet for their voice. Innovative Practice in Higher Education, 6 (1). ISSN 2044-3315
Creators	Ross, Amanda Louise, Colthup, Rebecca and Jenkins, Rebecca

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.

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Publish or Perish: Barriers faced by Early Career Academics trying to find an outlet for their voice.

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Abstract

Within academia a culture of 'publish or perish' can place pressure on lecturers, often resulting in poor research practices, as an emphasis of 'quantity over quality' presides (Richards et al., 2021, p.8). As Kelly (2022) argues, this has resulted in a surge in competition, exacerbated by the increasing number of early career academics (ECAs) and early career researchers (ECRs) entering Higher Education (HE). As the arena to disseminate research widens, the opportunities for ECAs to share their ideas should become more accessible. However, this is not always the case.

This short piece explores why disseminating research is so important in the context of HE, as well as identifying some of the barriers faced, with a particular focus on those working as ECAs in post-92 universities. The aim in this piece is to empower new academics to contribute to this ever-growing wealth of knowledge, with some practical guidance and words of support.

Keywords

Early Career Researchers; Academics; Dissemination; Barriers; Imposter Syndrome; Professional Identity

Introduction: 'Publish or Perish' why publish at all?

Professor Whitty (2019) argues that if research findings do not reach the people who need to use it, it renders the results of little use. Conducting and disseminating research is a key responsibility of the academic professional (Advance HE, 2020; Ravinetto and Singh, 2022). It provides a wealth of new ideas to enhance teaching and learning, and encourages a culture of continuous improvement, inspiring new pedagogical approaches (Atkins and Brown, 2002).

It is through the sharing of current research that learning development strategies and subsequent policies can be influenced, leading to more effective learning environments (Lea, 2015). It is somewhat surprising then to discover that according to the National Institute of Health and Care Research (2019), dissemination is often an afterthought and yet, it is a vital aspect of the process. If research is not disseminated, there is no vehicle for change. Newly tested ideas and resulting findings are not passed out to the wider target audience, thus new thinking and consideration of evidence-based change is stifled (McNiff, 2014).

The benefits of disseminating research are clearly obvious, and yet for many professionals working in Higher Education (HE) this appears to be beyond their capabilities, or outside of their role. This is particularly evident for Early Career Academics (ECAs) and for those working in Post 92 universities where the priorities are more aligned with being teaching intensive, rather than research focussed. To have a well-balanced body of knowledge it is imperative that **all** voices can be shared within the HE community. Many barriers exist and the rest of this reflective paper aims to explore some of these barriers and to de-mystify what can appear as a complex world of disseminating research.

Building Professional Identity

Having a strong professional academic identity is important in HE and yet is often something that ECAs struggle with. Disseminating research can help to establish this professional identity, which may be made up of multiple identities, across many

disciplines. Barrow and Xu (2021) argue that when an individual with a strong professional practice identity moves into academia, a dual identity begins to form. This happens as the professional practice identity is refined and reconstructed into an academic professional identity. This is a fluid and shifting process where one enhances the other. According to Fitzgerald (2020), the more recognition of your knowledge, the stronger your professional identity, enabling greater job satisfaction, and continual building of your area of expertise, developing a high reputation in your field. Continually enhancing your research profile will consequently advance your career in HE. Smith and Boyd (2012) recognise that this transition to an academic professional identity is a challenge, and teaching can often be prioritised at the detriment to research, particularly in a post-92 university.

From our personal experience, it can take many years to build a professional practice identity and the transition into HE and the subsequent development of an academic professional identity becomes a huge challenge, often compounded by the realisation that you are essentially, starting from scratch.

Barriers for Early Career Academics

ECAs face barriers when considering disseminating their research. Time management, a fear of rejection and a belief that their work will not contribute anything to the evidence base, conspire to compound the issue (Aydin et al., 2023). ECAs often experience high workloads and demanding roles. According to Byrom et al., (2020) ECAs also experience other issues around low academic and social support, job insecurities as well as poor work-life balance. These intersect, resulting negatively on wellbeing and subsequently their ability to actively conduct, and share research (da Silva, 2021). Stiles, et al. (2020) highlights that the unfamiliarity of the publishing process and poor knowledge of the available outlets can also create barriers to successful submissions. ECAs are also often hindered as they have smaller networks to draw from (Towler, 2022).

Many of these challenges have been realised by the co-authors of this reflective piece, and a great deal of trepidation was experienced due to the uncertainty of the publication process, resulting in a degree of apprehension.

ECAs attempting to step into research may also experience feelings of imposter syndrome. This results in the academic feeling as if they are not competent, doubting their abilities and fearing being viewed as a fraud, not worthy of research dissemination. The co-authors have first-hand experience of how steep the learning curve can be as an ECA and when surrounded by confident, experienced colleagues, there are overwhelming feelings of self-doubt. This has resulted in not feeling able or willing to submit an article for publication.

Bravata, et al. (2019) states this is a normal phenomenon, and upon successful dissemination of research, confidence will build. Conversely, there is the fear of success which can lead to procrastination and self-sabotage, as the ECA is not ready for extra responsibility, or potential consequences that come with success (Tsatisis, 2021).

Do I actually have the time?

The time it takes to conduct and disseminate research can act as a major hurdle. Consideration could be given to breaking the work up into smaller, more manageable pieces, or looking at collaboration with peers with similar projects, or peers that have disseminated research before; thus, making the project more manageable, alongside your obligated teaching workload. Collaboration with a research supervisor to gain advice, and constructive criticism, is also beneficial to the inexperienced academic when writing for dissemination purposes (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). We acted on this information, drawing from an experienced academic with a number of publications, who was able to pull our ideas together into a piece suitable for publication. Although this may be the norm in some universities, in a

post-92 HEI, this is not always on offer, and we recognise the frustrations that this may cause.

It is imperative that due consideration is given to the sense of urgency for dissemination, as you do not want to miss your opportunity to be current and innovative in your field (Edwards, 2015). Draft articles and papers may need to be submitted several times and to different journals, if the work is rejected. This can be a slow process as each journal will require the draft work to be rewritten to fit differing criteria. This process can take several months from first submission, especially as you can only submit to one journal at a time. It is important throughout this process that you seek support from a more 'knowledgeable other' as many new to the world of publishing can fall at this first hurdle, as rejection exacerbates feelings of imposter syndrome.

It is suggested that the creation of a dissemination plan, will help map out the route to writing and final dissemination, helping to consider factors such as collaborators job roles, timeframes, and any publication costs (Harvey, Barker and Tynan, 2020).

Where to disseminate?

Wilkinson (2014) argues that research and publications are a currency that is influential around the academic world. Academics are compared against the quality of their research, with quality rating over quantity. However, it is important to consider the purpose of disseminating the research. You may not necessarily want to raise awareness of your research amongst the academic audiences, through formal journal publications. You might want to invite feedback, or ask for participation in discussion around your research, so other dissemination routes may be more appropriate to your work and with the rapid development of the digital age, there has never been more opportunities for the dissemination of research (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020). Journals and books are now available online thus widening access and

blogs, wikis and social networks are becoming popular, less formal methods of publication and valuable platforms for dissemination (Devitt, 2016).

According to Musselin (2020) it is important that an ECA devises an early publication strategy, taking into account the impact of the research, the target audience and their objectives, when selecting the most effective dissemination outlet (Table One).

Suggested questions when deciding about the best place to disseminate your research
What have you got already that you would like to disseminate?
What are you hoping to achieve from publishing this work?
What are your time scales?
What type of support do you have? • Financial • Time • Academic

Table 1

Journals

Refereed journals are considered as the gold standard of publication, with a peer review process by academics in that field, ensuring validity, quality and usefulness of articles (Tight, 2017). Wilkinson (2014) agrees that research is more likely to be cited and widely recognised when published in a major journal, which leads to credible opportunities for networking, can help develop professional identity, and career advancement. However, expensive publishing costs and all too often a lengthy process of review, amendments and resubmission can be challenging for the ECA during what can often feel like a period of negative criticism.

There are several things to consider when choosing a journal (table 2) and the impact factor is often one of the main considerations. However, journals must be

tracked for two years, before being awarded an impact factor which is problematic for new journals, yet they could be influential and innovative in their field (Saha, Saint and Christakis, 2003). Therefore, according to Buela-Casal and Zych (2012) new journals should not be ruled out and can often be more accessible and the review process more supportive than long-established journals, which is a positive factor for consideration by the ECA.

Criteria to consider when choosing to disseminate in a journal
How long has the journal been running?
Who is on the editorial board? (are they credible academics?)
Who is the target audience?
What are the aims and scope of the journal?
What sort of written submissions does it publish? (size and type of publications)
What is the main subject area?
Are the instructions clear?
Is it peer reviewed? (do they offer support?)
How often do they publish a journal? (do they run special editions?)
What is the impact factor?
Is there a cost involved?
What is the average time from submission to decision?
Do they also hold conferences? (or other online outlets, such as blogs)
Do you know anyone who has published in this journal?
Have you used articles published in this journal for your own research?
Is it open access?

Table 2

Conferences

Conferences provide a dynamic and innovative platform for dissemination of research, providing a broad audience and usually attended by current leaders and those with an active interest in the field (Edwards, 2015). According to Becker

(2014), conferences can be daunting to an ECA as response is unpredictable and having the confidence to stand in front of an audience can be challenging. However, with practice, this can help to develop your professional voice and professional identity (Jackson, 2015).

Conferences provide opportunities for networking and collaborating on new ideas and potential future research (Oester et al., 2017). This personal approach is not always replicated through a journal and provides an excellent starting point for ECAs. Initially we presented our research, individually, at the internal conference held at our HEI which was a supportive experience, before considering presenting at an external conference. This enabled us to develop our own confidence and draw support in familiar surroundings.

Online outlets

Scholarly research has recently shifted more towards online dissemination (Ross-Hellauer et al, 2020). There is a higher perceived accessibility with online research publications as it is quick to access and easy to share with a wide audience (Austin, 2021). Sabosik (2016) describes how young academics with a rapidly expanding level of digital competence are the driving force behind the development of the variety of online platforms.

Using social media accounts such as LinkedIn or Twitter, or academic researcher identifiers, such as ORCID, and academic social media platforms, such as ResearchGate, keeps your researcher identity prominent. In turn, positive interest in your work alongside inevitable criticism is encouraged, thus inspiring participation and potentially reaching larger audiences. Additionally, creating a blog or vlog to give relevant updates of your work, helps keep it current (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020).

Taneja et al. (2021) report how, during the Covid 19 pandemic, social media was an effective platform for the dissemination of research, and this has continued with researchers choosing to publish their research on free platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn. Abdias et al., (2022) urge caution, highlighting that social media is a public platform which is not always suitable to publish research. It raises several ethical issues including consent and privacy, as well as questions surrounding the validity and reliability of the research and can be daunting for ECAs.

Conclusion

Although it is universally acknowledged that disseminating research in Higher Education is worthwhile and essential, this is not without its challenges, particularly for those who are new to academia. It is not an equal playing field, as HEI's have different priorities, not all are research focussed, which results in barriers to disseminating research. Depending on the type of HEI that the ECA is based in will determine the type of contract and levels of support they have access to.

As more ECAs enter HE it is imperative that experienced academics offer their support and guidance and that the HEI also recognises the importance of disseminating research, regardless of their scope and priorities. What can feel like a niche marketplace where new academics are not always made to feel welcome, more can be done to remove some of the barriers, thus providing a voice for all working in the context of HE.

Once you have chosen your outlet, it is important that any negative feedback is not taken as direct criticism of your work, but as an opportunity to learn and reflect. It can be a long and tiring journey to publication, so according to Fong et al. (2016), try not to react negatively towards those that criticise, but evaluate their perspective. It is wise to thank people for their contribution, and then decide if it is useful to you or not. And don't forget that you are not on your own!

Final thoughts from ECAs working in a post-92 HEI:

With the development of blogs and social media, there has never been a greater opportunity for an early career researcher to publish their research to a vast, possibly worldwide audience.

When disseminating research within a journal, it is imperative that you aim for the most relevant journal for your work, where you offer a relevant and current contribution to the field. It is important that even as an early researcher your voice is heard, and research does not go to waste.

Disclosure Statement

All materials included in this article represent the authors own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it is being considered for publication elsewhere. There are no potential conflicts of interest.

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