

WHAT CHANGES WOULD RESEARCHERS LIKE TO SEE IN ACADEMIC PUBLISHING?

Views of researchers who participated in
the Editage Global Author Survey

BACKGROUND

The scholarly publishing industry has evolved in the last couple of decades through changes brought about by a combination of technology, new publishing models, and measures of evaluation of both journals and researchers.

Some systems have endured, despite being the subject of much debate, and new developments and solutions are regularly discussed or proposed as measures to fix what are perceived to be problems.

What is often missing in these discussions on what needs to change in the industry is a systematic compilation of the views of those at the heart of the system—researchers themselves.

In an effort to bring the views of researchers worldwide to the attention of the

industry, in October 2018, Editage released a [Global Author Survey Report](#) that represented the views of almost 7,000 researchers worldwide on different aspects of scholarly publishing. The majority of the survey participants belonged to non-Western, non-English-speaking countries.

The last question in the survey was “Is there something you would like to change about the academic publishing system?” Over 5,800 researchers responded to this question, with many qualifying their responses with comments. This was one of the questions that offered the richest and most detailed insights into what authors want.

In this report, we present an analysis of all the responses and qualifying comments received for this question.



KEY FINDINGS

Slightly more than half of the respondents said that they would like to change something about the academic publishing system (Fig. 1).

Is there something you would like to change about the academic publishing system?
n = 5843

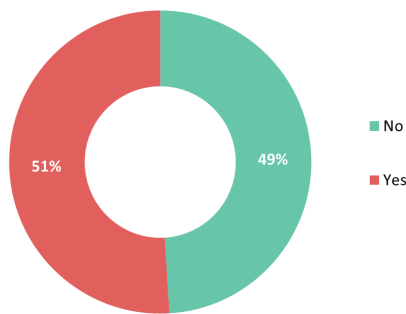


Fig. 1. Responses of researchers to the survey question on whether they want any changes in the academic publishing system

A staggering 92% of those who said “Yes” provided qualifying comments about what changes they want. In addition, a few

respondents who said “No” had also shared comments; these were likely researchers who were satisfied with the system overall, but still wanted changes in specific areas. We therefore categorized and analyzed all the supporting comments received.

We analyzed each respondent’s comment to determine which themes were mentioned, and counted the number of comments that mentioned each theme. The details of the categorization and analysis are provided in the “Methods” section at the end of the article.

A total of 2,515 comments were analyzed, which highlighted 16 broad themes (see Fig. 2 for the demographic distribution of those whose supporting comments were analyzed).

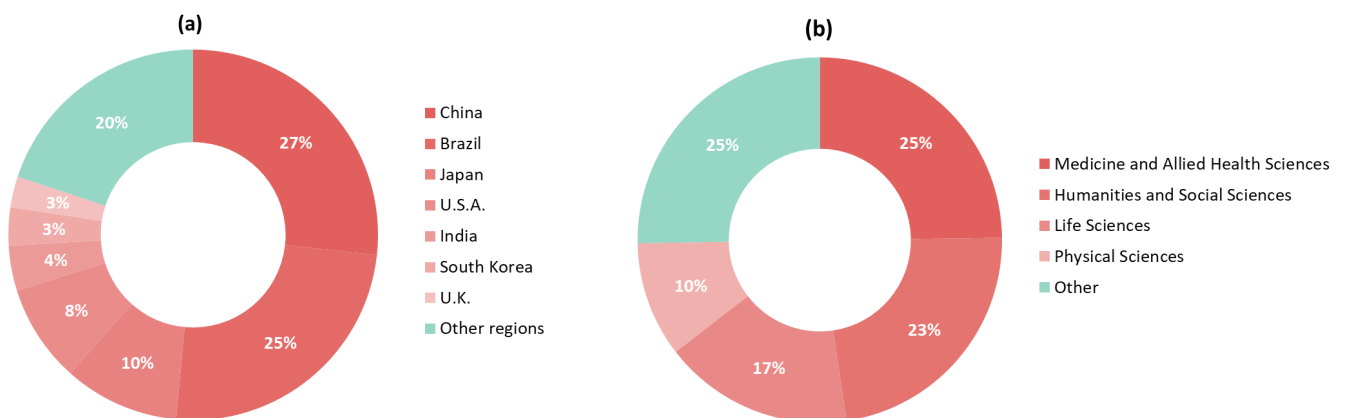


Fig. 2. Demographic distribution of the 2,515 respondents whose comments were analyzed (a) Distribution by region, (b) Distribution by discipline

The five most frequently mentioned themes were publication delay, poor peer review quality/processes, high publication costs, complex journal systems and guidelines, and insufficient adoption of open access (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Top five themes emerging from the analysis of supporting comments provided for the question “Is there something you would like to change about the academic publishing system?” (n = 2,515)



Publication delay

It is not surprising that publication delay emerged as the most common area that most authors wanted to see changes in. In the Editage Global Survey Report, we had already highlighted the gap between what authors reported as the typical time taken to have their papers published and what they believe should be the ideal time.

Further, in another question from the same

survey, authors ranked publication delay as the second most urgent problem that needed to be addressed from among a list of eight.

It should be noted that in their comments, many respondents mentioned the long time peer review typically takes; we categorized these comments under publication delay and not peer review since time rather than quality was the focus of these comments.



"I am a researcher and doing clinical activity on medical field. In such position, the net time for reserach is limited and the time for review is becoming a big burden. As a result, there is a vicious circle that review work is postponed and publication is delayed."

"There should be a better system to encourage reviewers to complete reviews in a timely manner. I find that editor procrastination, reviewer procrastination, and the inability to convince suitable people to agree to review are the main things that hold a manuscript from being published in a timely manner."

"There should be a maximum turnaround time fixed for all journals. It should not be more than 3 months."

"The decison process of the journal takes too long to the point that authors of papers lose the enthusiasm to revise and publish due to long period of waiting."

"The time to provide publication decisions needs to be shortened. For young researchers, especially, the change of status from 'under review' to 'accepted'/'accepted with minor/major revisions' makes a lot of differences in their prospective careers and profiles, thereby opening up doors for jobs/academic positions. Delayed decisions can wreak havoc in the careers of junior academics and this should be addressed seriously by every journal worth its salt."

Poor peer review quality & processes

That peer review was the second most frequently mentioned area requiring change is also not unexpected. The responses to peer-review-specific questions in the survey had shown mixed opinions on how useful authors found this stage.

Many of the suggestions were about improving peer review quality and accountability. For example, respondents said that reviewers should be selected more strictly and that their subject backgrounds should appropriately

match the author's study topic.

Many said that reviewers' comments should be evaluated and reviewers given feedback on the quality of their output, or that reviewers should be recognized or rewarded for their contributions.

Some respondents said that reviewer identity should be disclosed and that review comments on a paper be published along with the paper.

"If authors could evaluate the qualities of journals for their editing and review, and if it could be open to the public, it may improve a quality of review and shorten the time of editing process."


"The peer review system is flawed in part because referees do not receive training for this, assuming it is an obvious job, and also because many journals do not present rules and a clear direction of points to observe during the opinion."

"Clearer instructions from journal editors to reviewers about what constitutes a constructive review; journal editors being prepared to write to a reviewer to say their review was not acceptable; more incentives for reviewers to engage in the reviewing process."

"Recently reviewers are easily require additional experiments that is too challenging compared to a journal level, and that needs expensive fee, special technique or genetically modified animals. Therefore, getting accept for the research that is affordable for small laboratory in local area is becoming difficult, even in middle level journals."

High article-processing charges, paywalls, other costs

Many of the comments on high publication and subscription costs (APCs, paywalls, etc.) discussed how this problem has been disadvantaging those with inadequate funding, especially early career researchers or researchers from developing countries.



"The exorbitant cost for publishing and accessing papers is de facto forcing researchers and students from poor backgrounds and developing countries out of the academic space."

"Soaring of journal subscription fee is putting pressure on the management of universities. I doubt if such high-price is really valid or necessary."

"The APC is often very expensive for young researchers who do not have permanent post to publish their research outputs."

"Often the system is too expensive: either to publish in a way you can be sure your work will be seen and followed or to get access to important papers about the study you are undertaken."

"Costs for publishing a paper is too expensive. Although most review works are served by scientists without compensation, major publishers request authors or readers for an expensive charge."

Complex journal systems & guidelines

Dissatisfaction with journal processes, guidelines, and systems emerged as the fourth most common area needing change. What was especially remarkable was that many respondents asked for standardization of journal guidelines and systems, to save authors the trouble of having to spend days on simply

re-formatting a manuscript for submission to a new journal after rejection, or having to learn how to navigate a completely new system. Some respondents even felt that adherence to journal formatting requirements should not be mandatory at the time of submission.

"It is time consuming to revise format (especially adjusting word limits) when sending the rejected manuscript to another journal even if the contents remains unchanged. I suggest 1) the format is integrated some extent, and 2) we do not need to strictly follow the defined format at first submission."

"Submission guideline is too detailed. Formatting reference lists and adjusting tables & figures to guidelines are not essential for papers and those are publishers' work."

"An universal editorial system and account management should be helpful for authors."

"It is necessary to standardize the publishing standards themselves; the standards for publication do not need to be identical for all journals, but they are so different that if you prepared a manuscript to publish in a magazine [journal], you need to practically redo if you submit to some other."

"The formatting of the manuscript is demotivating because it requires a lot of time and details that are exhausting. Example references, typeface, American English or British, passive or active form. I think this should be applied once the manuscript is accepted for publication. What matters is the content."

Not enough open access

The Editage global author survey report had already highlighted that many respondents had positive attitudes toward open access as a publishing model, and this follow-up analysis supports that pattern. The need for greater adoption of open access was another common theme in many respondent comments. These comments had a range of suggestions, such as

reducing embargo periods, selectively making at least high-importance research papers open access, and more adoption of green open access/publication of preprints. Some respondents even cited the importance of open access in ensuring that the general public has access to research relevant to them.



"Open access should be everyone's commitment, the democratization of knowledge should be a universal movement. Expanding funding policies for magazines [journals] that work with open access may be the way to break the logic of privatizing knowledge."

"The opportunity to access the paper should be extended to the general public."

"If a journal is not full OA, then it should permit green OA without payment or embargo."

"Most research articles especially from high impact journals are not accessible unless you are a subscriber or you put it in your shopping basket . Consequently, important reference materials are missed out on manuscript preparation reducing its effectiveness and quality. Open access publication or permission to researchers from developing countries should be adopted."

"Ideally, increase the availability of articles in open access, whether via journals or institutional or thematic repositories. There are ongoing initiatives such as post-publication peer-review and preprints that could greatly increase the speed of dissemination of results to the benefit of the scientific community and society."

Other noteworthy themes

Respondents commented on 10 other noteworthy themes and on topics that could not be classified under any one theme (see Fig. 4 for list of themes and page 10 for representative comments).

Some mentioned different inherent biases in scholarly publishing that need to be addressed, for example, geographic bias, bias against negative results, preference for only novel results, and bias in favor of renowned researchers or institutions.

Some early career researchers had specific suggestions, such as introducing systematic/structured training on academic publishing, providing better financial support, having different platforms for students/early career researchers to publish their research (either separate journals or separate journal sections that focus on the work of early career researchers).

A call for greater transparency was another important theme. This embodied suggestions such as disclosing detailed information about journals' manuscript-processing steps, the peer review process, and publication charges. Many respondents also noted the need for researchers to share/publish raw data.

About 3% of the respondents discussed the burden of having to write manuscripts in English, and some mentioned the need to have multilingual journals.



Fig. 4. Ten other noteworthy themes from the analysis of supporting comments provided for the question “Is there something you would like to change about the academic publishing system?” (n = 2,515)

"Publish also failed results. Stop accepting only 'world-saving' or 'record-breaking' papers. Mostly it is not reproducible and all authors have always to act as if they [sic] research is mind-blowing."

"Many magazines [journals] give preference to authors already renowned, making it difficult for young researchers."

"It seems that explanations about the procedure for the beginning researchers to submit the manuscript are insufficient. It is also one of the reasons why it takes a long time to contribute to the article."

"Publication process should be more transparent. I hope all journals to crealy state the acceptance rate, the average turn around time, and the days from receipt to online publication."

"I suggest to make a submission of data and reproductivity [reproducibility] to be mandatory during review."

"I think it would be very important to have magazines [journals] aimed at the beginning researchers, because the publication system is very competitive and unequal if in its work there is one of the authors already renowned in that area of research."

Considering that the majority of survey respondents belonged to non-English-speaking regions, this percentage is perhaps surprisingly small, especially since we had earlier found that the majority of respondents faced moderate to extreme difficulty when preparing a manuscript for an English-language journal. Possibly, the respondents considered other problems they face as academics more severe and worthy of urgent attention and commented less on language-related challenges.

Similarly, although the survey responses ranked

the pressure to publish as the most urgent issue that needs to be resolved, very few respondents directly addressed this in their comments. We speculate that this may be because the pressure to publish is an all-pervading problem, with no obvious solution, whereas most respondents were very specific about the aspects they wanted to see changes in.

About 16% of all comments mentioned topics that did not fall under any of the themes shown in Figs. 3 and 4. These themes were categorized as "Miscellaneous."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many existing problems in the scholarly publishing industry are highly interconnected, which is probably why they are not very easy to address promptly.

In such a scenario, systematic attempts to improve the system may seem challenging. What is essential, among other things, is understanding what different stakeholders, especially researchers themselves, feel most strongly about and want prioritized.

At 2,515, the sample in this analysis is one of the largest populations of researchers worldwide whose open-ended responses have been analyzed to determine which problems they want to see addressed in the system.

It is noteworthy that these 2,515 respondents include around 92% of those who said that they would like to change something about

the industry. Such a high response rate for the last question of an exhaustive survey in itself indicates how strongly researchers felt about various problems and hoped to have their opinions known.

This report shows not only which problems are topmost on authors' minds but also how closely linked they are. For instance, to reduce publication delay, it will not be enough to simply have individual journals streamline internal workflows. As many of the author comments indicate, achieving this will require that peer review quality and processes be universally standardized, all journal systems/guidelines be simplified and harmonized, and greater transparency (and thus accountability) established.

Therefore, we believe that this report can help readers form a view on which changes may be the keystone of large-scale improvements in the industry.



METHODS

Over 2,700 supporting comments were received in response to the survey question “Is there something you would like to change about the academic publishing industry?” The survey was administered in five languages (English, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, and Korean); all non-English comments were translated into English for the purpose of the analysis. The sample of researcher comments presented in this report are either exact quotes (if respondents wrote them in English) or translations.

First, a list of expected themes was created, based on responses to preceding questions in the survey. During the analysis, new themes were added as required.

The supporting comments varied in size from just one word to long paragraphs. Each comment was read in its entirety to determine which themes the respondent had mentioned. Many comments discussed more than one problem that needed to be addressed.

We excluded comments that comprised random text (e.g., “xyz”) or those that did not provide any valid supporting answer (e.g., “I don’t know”). We also excluded comments that were unclear. Finally, a total of 2,515 comments were analyzed.

At the end of the analysis, some highly similar themes were combined under a single one, for example, APCs and paywalls were combined under one category, as were confusing journal guidelines and multiple/complex journal requirements.

Those that were categorized as “Miscellaneous” were further examined to determine if any new common themes emerged. Finally, the total number of themes was restricted to 15, and the other minor themes were allowed to remain in the “Miscellaneous” category since most of these were mentioned by less than 1% of the respondents.

After the comments were categorized, we counted the number of those mentioning each theme. All analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel 2010.

Limitations: Since a massive number of comments had to be carefully read and the themes were manually assigned, there might be some inherent biases in the interpretation of the comments.

A report like this could never suffice to capture all the diverse ideas, emotions, and opinions that researchers expressed in their survey responses, so we intend to release some of the most interesting and insightful comments through a series on various Editage properties.



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