The onset of the REF means that developing an academic publishing strategy is vital

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*In a rush to publish papers before the forthcoming cut-off point for the Research Excellence Framework, academics and publishers might find themselves facing a long publishing back-log. **Alex Hope** finds that the only way to cope is to develop an academic publishing strategy.*

Recently I tweeted the fact that I had received a rejection email from a high ranking journal less than 24 hours after I had submitted. The email stated that "We now have many more submissions for our refereeing process than we can cope with". This annoyed me, not so much the rejection, more that it had taken me the best part of an afternoon to format the paper for this particular journals submission requirements and comply with rather exacting requirements – when there was little or no chance of being accepted. Fellow twitter users suggested that such a situation may be due to a backlog of paper submissions as researchers seek to publish in time for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment in the UK.

Others joined in and shared their arguably worse experiences of long delays – sometimes months – before ultimate rejection in some of the top journals, presumably again due to a backlog of papers for consideration. Eventually the conversation turned to the difficulties for early career researchers seeking to publish in the run-up to the REF and possible publication strategies. You an view the entire twitter discussion on my Storify page here.

So what have I learnt from this experience now I have had some time to reflect?

Getting a paper through to publication can take a long time – Firstly an article has to be screened for acceptance/rejection. Should your paper get to review stage, it can take many more months to receive feedback, redraft and resubmit. If rejected you need to find the time to reformat for submission in a different journal before the cycle begins again. All in all it can be years before your article sees the light of day, in fact in a recent post on the LSE Impact Blog, Aimee Morrison told of her horror of receiving a publication date 2 years in the future. Some fields, mine included, move fast. An article or idea expressed today can be out of date in a few months. I want to get my ideas out there now so the debate can be useful today.

Identifying the true scope of a journal is tricky – I have had two rejections recently which identified the scope of my paper as not fitting that of the journal. I had researched the journals carefully and was sure that my work did in fact meet the published scope. I guess this is something that I need to think more carefully about in the future and/or consider sending an abstract to the editor first to check.

Open Source or Subscription Journal – This is a big one for me. One of the reasons I pursued an academic career is that I believe that good research can change the world. I believe that my work has a contribution to make to society and as such it is my duty to disseminate it as widely as possible. In fact I believe that every academic has an obligation to do this. As such the idea of my work sitting in a journal archive where it can only be read by paying subscribers is abhorrent to me. The catch 22 is that if I need to publish in the top journals to build a successful career – I need to lock my work up in the big publication houses repositories. I guess it depends on what kind of academic career I want….

There is no 'one way' – Developing a research strategy is dependent on many factors. Your field of study. Your academic discipline. Your personal goals and aspirations. Your research institutions goals and aspirations. Many people give have given me advice over the last year or so on this. Nearly all of it conflicts. Academia at the moment is a moving target. There are big changes coming to publishing following the Finch

Report (I am not going enter the debate on this here). There are also big changes going on in universities (in the UK at least) who are at the beginning of probably the biggest shake up of the industry in many years.

Keep at it – I love working as an academic and will continue to write and disseminate my work. I have yet to settle on any one particular strategy, and maybe never will. For now I am going to enjoy the process of research, enjoy writing those papers and presenting at those conferences and probably continue to submit to each and every journal in my field. However I suspect I will make more use of alternative forms or publishing such as this blog and others as well as open source research repositories such as that provided by my institution or the Social Science Research Network (SSRN). Maybe I'll even engage in a little Guerrilla Self Publishing…

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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