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Research in ODeL: Guidelines for Peer Review

Issue at-hand

The AVU has recently launched the *Journal of Research in Open, Distance and ELearning (JRODeL)* that seeks to attract and publish research of high quality that is useful to scholars, policy makers and practitioners alike, and with the additional objective of building research capacity within its network. A key component to ensure quality has been building a database of peer reviewers. The journal places its confidence in the peer reviewers as the arbiters of quality of submitted manuscripts and hence the role of the reviewer is a very important one. Essentially, the reviewers serve two major functions: (i) to judge whether the manuscript merits publication; (ii) to provide constructive criticisms for the authors, regardless of whether the manuscript is deemed acceptable for eventual publication. To support reviewers in providing useful reviews it is important for reviewers to abide by certain guidelines. The AVU has found these useful in working with peer-reviewers.

Review guidelines for JRODeL

- **Provide constructive reviews:** Avoid doing superficial reviews. Reviewers are expected to provide substantive and constructive comments and can be extremely helpful, especially to beginning authors when they fully engage with the manuscript. To help with this, the AVU (2014) has developed the *Manuscript Review Assessment Form and Guidelines*, which both reviewers and editors have deemed extremely useful.
- **Timeline:** Reviews should be conducted in a timely manner. The expected duration for JRODeL is 4-6 weeks. If a reviewer is not able to complete the review in the time period allocated, then they should notify the editor immediately so that the manuscript can be to reassigned without delay.

- **Tone and language**: Reviewers should observe appropriate tone and language. They should treat the manuscripts they review as they would like their own to be treated, with respect and criticisms given in a polite manner. Avoid statements that are demeaning, insulting or sarcastic. Criticism should be directed at issues with the manuscript (e.g., "This manuscript suffers from a lack of attention to detail") rather than about the authors (e.g., "The authors should have paid more attention to detail") (Provenzale & Stanley 2005).
- **Reviewer bias:** the potential of bias is an issue with which the reviewer must deal. Bias can be either positive (i.e., unfairly favoring the manuscript for publication) or negative (i.e., unfairly favoring rejection).
- **Reviewer competence/confidence:** an issue which reviewers must deal with is whether they have sufficient scientific background to perform a substantive review. If the reviewer believes that the topic of the manuscript is outside his or her area of expertise, then the prospective reviewer should decline to review the manuscript.
- **Conflicts of interest policy:** Reviewers are expected to adhere to conflicts of interest policy and notify the Editor if they are unable to review a submission so that the submission can be reassigned.
- **Confidentiality:** Reviewers are expected to adhere to confidentiality rules and not discuss information about submissions beyond with those involved in the review process.
- **Compensation:** There is no compensation for peer-reviewing manuscripts submitted to JRODeL. Reviewers are expected to willingly volunteer in the service of research and scholarship.

Policy recommendations

i) Find opportunities to be a peer reviewer. Authors who have benefited from the peer review process should consider becoming peer reviewers as a part of their professional responsibilities. Some journals require a formal process of appointment to the review panel, while others like JRODeL look for specific expertise.

ii) Agree to review only if you have the necessary expertise to assess the manuscript and be unbiased in your assessment. Editors strive to match reviewers with the scope of the content in a manuscript to get the best reviews possible. Effective reviewing is important for the publication quality of a journal as well as strengthening the capacity of researchers whether published or not.

iii) Institutions should provide the needed support including a culture of research and collegiality that supports activities like peer-reviewing.

Conclusion

Peer-reviewing is a key activity in research and publication and should be nurtured an institutional context that seeks to support research capacity building. The AVU is developing experience in this area and working across its network of partner universities to support building capacity in such processes and activities. It has developed resources to support peer reviewers in their task that have been applied to reviewing journal and conference submissions. There are a number of resources available online. One in particular is the Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers develop by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) (Hames 2013). An online community of practice may be a beneficial forum for reviewers to share knowledge, skills and resources.

References

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Provenzale, J.M. & Stanley, R.J. (2005). A Systematic Guide to Reviewing a Manuscript. American Journal of Radiology pp 1-7.

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