

Periodic Peer Review of South African Scholarly Journals: Approved Process Guidelines and Criteria

1.1 Background

During the launch meeting of the ASSAf-led National Scholarly Editors' Forum held on 25 July 2007, the 112 participants supported ASSAf and its Committee on Scholarly Publishing in South Africa (CSPiSA) in taking the lead in the implementation of Recommendation 5 of the 2006 ASSAf Report on 'A Strategic Approach to Research Publishing in South Africa'. This recommendation dealt specifically with the need for a system of quality assurance for over 260 of the country's journals that are accredited by the Department of Education:

Recommendation No 5: that ASSAf be mandated jointly by the Departments of Education and Science and Technology to carry out external peer review and associated quality audit of all South African research journals in 5-year cycles, probably best done in relation to groups of titles sharing a particular broad disciplinary focus, in order to make recommendations for improved functioning of each journal in the national and international system.

1.2 ASSAf Peer Review Panels (PRPs)

The quality assurance system for journals is conducted primarily through discipline-grouped peer reviews carried out by a series of purpose-appointed peer review panels (PRPs) drawn from the ranks of researchers and other experienced scholars in and around the fields concerned in each case, as well as persons with practical (technical) publishing experience. The proposed ASSAf PRPs are overseen by the CSPiSA, but appointed by the Academy Council. Their draft reports are sent to relevant stakeholders for comment and relevant inputs, before finalisation by the PRP concerned, and final consideration sequentially by the CSPiSA and the ASSAf Council.

The following quote from the ASSAf Report clarifies the approach to be followed in the review of the journals and some aspects of the approach proposed:

*"The periodic, grouped **quality assurance-directed peer review of South African research periodicals** would function analogously to the quality audits of the CHE/HEQC, would be developed as an outcome of the Editors' Forum, and would focus on: the quality of editorial and review process; fitness of, and for purpose; positioning in the global cycle of new and old journals listed and indexed in databases; financial sustainability; and scope and size issues. The **ASSAf Panels** carrying out the reviews would each comprise 6-8 experts, some of whom would not be directly drawn from the areas concerned, and would require data-gathering, interviews, and international comparisons, before reports with recommendations are prepared, approved, and released to stakeholders such as national associations, the Departments of Science and Technology and of Education, the CHE/HEQC, the NRF and HESA."*

It must be emphasised that the main purpose of the ASSAf review process of journals is to improve the *quality* of scholarly publication in the country in a manner that is consonant with traditional scholarly practices, primarily voluntary peer review; it is not an attempt to control these publications in any way. ASSAf respects the independence and freedom of researchers

and of the research process itself as important preconditions for the critical and innovative production of new knowledge. At the same time, the work of South African researchers has to be assessed, both qualitatively and quantitatively, as part of the global community of scholars and scientists, and in this respect ASSAf has an obligation to contribute to the improvement of quality of such work where possible.

1.3 Initial Criteria

A number of criteria were explored in the part (Chapter 4) of the ASSAf Report that dealt with the survey of the over 200 then-current editors of accredited South African scholarly journals. Other possible criteria were proposed in other sections of the Report, or have since been suggested by members of the CSPiSA or the National Scholarly Editors' Forum. These are grouped and listed below (they have been consolidated in the Questionnaire presented in Appendix A):

1.3.1 Editorial process-related criteria: generally based on the *National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review* developed by ASSAf:

- Longevity of the journal (continuous or discontinuous), in years?
- Number of original peer-reviewed papers published per year during the last 5 years, plus number of manuscripts submitted, plus number rejected out-of-hand or after peer review? Average length of published papers? "Author demography" of papers submitted and published?
- Number and nature of peer reviewers used per manuscript and the overall number per year, including institutional and national/international spread, plus quality (as per the *National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review*) and average length of peer review reports?
- Average delay before publication of submitted manuscripts? Frequency of publication?
- Professional stature and experience of the Editor? How selected? How long in service? Success or otherwise in addressing the major issues in the field, through commissioning of reviews/articles, editorial comment, etc?
- Number and professional stature/experience of Editorial Board members, plus selection processes, turnover, and nature of involvement in handling of manuscripts or in other functions? If international members serve on the Board (desirable), are they a mix from developed or developing countries?
- Existence and nature of Editorial Policy/Guidelines, plus how often revised/updated? Conflict-of-interest policy (e.g. how manuscripts are assessed when submitted by an editor or board member as author/co-author?)
- Errata published - how many per year?
- Value-adding features, such as editorials, news and views, correspondence on papers, reviews, policy/topical fora, etc. - how many, and how generated? What proportion of total pages in journal issues?
- Any peer review process of journal already in place (e.g. by professional association)

1.3.2 Business-related criteria

- Frequency and regularity ("on time") of publication?

- Print runs? (Redundant stock? Direct versus indirect distribution to readers?)
- Production model and service provider(s)?
- Paid and unpaid advertising?
- Sponsorship? What quid pro quos?
- Paid and unpaid subscription base? How marketed? Cost level of print and (if applicable) e-subscriptions?
- E-publication? If so, what website/portal, and access possibilities for users? What evaluation is done, especially in respect of tagging and searchability?
- Are there html/xml and pdf versions, or only pdf? Are multimedia used?
- What portals for Open Access, if provided? If not e-published, is this being considered, and how?
- Total income and expenditure per annum?
- Distribution to international destinations?
- Indexed in Thomson ISI and/or IBSS, or any other international database? If so, for how long and how continuous?
- Offers to purchase from multi-national publishers?
- Copyright arrangements?

1.3.3 Bibliometric assessments

- Citation practice – how many authors listed?
- If applicable, ISI-type impact factors (and various derivatives) over last 5 years?
- Are reviews a regular/increasing feature?
- If articles are not in English, are English abstracts mandatory?

1.4 Process Guidelines for Setting up the Panels, Peer Reviewers, Panel Meetings and Reports for the Subject Peer Review of Journals

Background to ASSAf Peer Review Panels (PRPs)

The quality assurance system for journals is conducted primarily through discipline-grouped peer reviews carried out by a series of purpose-appointed peer review panels (PRPs) drawn from the ranks of researchers and other experienced scholars in and around the fields concerned in each case, as well as persons with practical (technical) publishing experience. The proposed ASSAf PRPs are overseen by the CSPiSA, but appointed by the Academy Council. Their draft reports are sent to relevant stakeholders for comment and relevant inputs, before finalisation by the PRP concerned, and final consideration sequentially by the CSPiSA and the ASSAf Council.

Role of the Scholarly Publishing Unit

An ASSAf Projects Officer of the Scholarly Publications Unit is assigned to support each Panel Chair, but reports to the Director of the Scholarly Publishing Unit in terms of review logistics and the production of draft and final review reports. The Project Officer is responsible for the following issues and activities:

- selection and appointment of the Panel members;
- obtaining completed questionnaires from editors;

- organising Panel activities, including meetings; selecting independent peer reviewers for each journal or groups of titles;
- drafting consolidated version one (v1) reports;
- obtaining CSPiSA and ASSAf Council approval for final, publishable Panel Reports.

1.4.1 Setting up Panels

The proposed PRPs is chaired by an ASSAf Member, appointed by Council, who assumes accountability for the Panel's work in helping to developing a credible quality assurance mechanism for South African scholarly journals.

Selecting Panel Members

- The appointment process of PRPs members is managed by the Chair of the Committee on Scholarly Publishing in South Africa (CSPiSA) until the Panel and its Chair have been appointed.
- CSPiSA members are asked to assist in preparing a list of at least 12-13 names, of whom the last 4-5 shall be considered to be potential alternates to the first 7-8.
- A typical PRP consists of 6-8 members.
- Each name must be accompanied by critical personal and career detail, as well as by a brief motivation, to enable the CSPiSA, and later the ASSAf Council, to apply its mind to the question of constituting a best-possible, most-competent PRP.
- The draft list of potential members is published on the ASSAf website, and also circulated for comment to members of the National Scholarly Editors Forum, at least two weeks before the Council meeting where the appointments are to be made.
- All comments received will be noted in making the final decision.
- All provisionally listed persons are required to complete and submit conflict-of-interest forms prior to Council's consideration of the list in question.

Criteria for Membership

- The individuals selected to serve on a Panel should have experience and credibility in the disciplines under review, or in related disciplines, or must be senior scholars who may be from a completely different discipline. Generally, the composition should be a mix of disciplinary specialists, specialists in areas cognate to the broad disciplinary area concerned, and 'wise people' who are steeped in scholarly practices and are drawn from any broad disciplinary area (respectively in an approximate ratio of 3:3:2)
- The Panel members should have demonstrable expertise and experience in both the editing and peer review aspects of research journals.
- It is not necessary that all Panel members be experts in both editing and peer review aspects– a mix of senior academics and a few active editors (of journals not under review) is appropriate – but all should have some appreciation of both editing and peer review.
- At least one member should have direct practical (technical) experience of publishing.

Persons selected as Panel participants will typically be drawn from ASSAf members, academic institutions, science councils and consultants.

Conflict of Interest

- It will be necessary to take care to avoid real or perceived conflicts.
- Committee expertise, balance and conflict of interest are discussed at the first meeting (and may again be discussed at any later meeting) of PRPs, and recommendations to resolve problematic issues brought through the SPU (Secretariat) to the ASSAf Council for possible amendment of the composition of PRPs.
- Panel members are requested to submit written Conflict of Interest statements, and are bound to report any new potential sources of conflict of interest during the quality review process.

1.4.2 Setting up and organising the Panels

Organisation of the Panel is conducted by its Chair, supported by the assigned Projects Officer. The activities related to organisation typically include:

- Planning and costing the review and Panel activities.
- Obtaining completed questionnaires from each Editor/equivalent (publishing logistics focus).
- Identifying suitable peer reviewers for each journal or group of titles (content quality focus).
- Assembling hard copies of journals for use by the Panel.
- Establishing Panel meeting dates, assigning tasks, and collating materials.
- Preparing and distributing pre- and post-meeting materials (Draft 'Version 1' Reports, i.e. assembled peer reviews and editor's questionnaires, in template form).
- Taking responsibility for post-meeting activities, including draft 'Version 2' report preparation, circulation for comment to Panellists and editors, and preparation and processing of final Reports.
- Evaluation of Panel processes.

Selection of Peer Reviewers (See above)

- At least two, but preferably three independent peer reviewers, as well as alternative reviewers must be agreed upon by the Panel for each title or group of similar titles.
- Members of the CSPISA and the ASSAf Membership in general will be given an opportunity to volunteer through a specific written call;
- Other candidates will be sought from lists of NRF and MRC grant-holders and/or science council research-active staff.
- The process of selection is overseen by the Panel chair. The final agreed appointments of willing volunteer reviewers are made by the Panel itself.
- Conflicts of interest must be avoided – thus current or former editors cannot become peer reviewers of the journals concerned; this also applies to current members of editorial boards.
- The project officer must arrange access to hard or e-copies of the journals under review by independent experts.
- The core questions to be answered in each case must be provided to peer reviewers, who should be asked to ensure that these questions are all addressed in their reviews.

1.4.3 Panel meetings and procedures

Preparations

- The ASSAf project officer is responsible to draw up the Version 1 (V1) report of each journal. Each reviewer's answers should be consolidated under the standard headings of the draft; each input as a separate paragraph. The editor's questionnaire should also be inserted as a single item under "Business aspects".
- The documentation (editors' questionnaires, peer review reports) should be sent out by email to all Panellists at least 2 weeks prior to the Panel meeting.
- Conveners of sub-sets of journals should be alerted at this time to their role at the forthcoming Panel meeting - to present the journals in the set, and to make recommendations for discussion and elaboration. If unable to attend, they should be asked please to submit written notes for presentation to the Panel by the convener.
- Ideally, hard copies of issues of journals to be considered should be available at the meeting, but if logistically impossible, this can be dispensed with.
- A quorum of at least two-thirds of the members of PRPs must be guaranteed at any meeting, otherwise a new date must be sought.
- Panellists should be informed at the same time that hard copies of all documentation will be available at the meeting, in bundles containing the completed editor's questionnaire and reviewers' reports for each journal title, for pick up at the start of the meeting.
- The responsible project officer should ensure that at least two peer reviews, and preferably three, are in hand for each title by the time of the initial send-out of materials, or, by default, by the date of the meeting, for tabling on the day.

Meeting

- Journal titles should be considered in sub- sets, as per the above
- Consensus answers to each of the criteria should be agreed seriatim as per a convener's spoken summary, and noted by the project officer in attendance
- Particular attention should be paid to reaching agreement on recommendations in respect of:
 - (a) An invitation to the publisher/editor to join the SciELO South Africa platform (note the special criteria on frequency of publication and annual number of original peer-reviewed articles)
 - (b) A recommendation to the DHET on accreditation in its list of S A journals in which any article is considered as a valid research output
 - (c) If not recommended, suggestions for improvement that would make it possible to make an invitation and/or recommendation under 2 (iii) (a) or (b)
 - (d) Suggestions for improvement or enhanced function, generally.

1.4.4 Post-meeting procedures and Panel reports

- When producing Version 2 (V2) report the three paragraphs in each item has to be consolidated to produce a consensus version.
- A detailed and motivated draft 'Version 2' report of each Peer Review Panel's findings and recommendations is prepared by the assigned Projects Officer, working closely with the Panel chair.

- The project officer and convener should reach agreement on the record of the meeting in respect of all outcomes, within no more than 2 weeks.
- The meeting record should be sent for comment and ratification to all Panellists (including those who were not able to attend the meeting) and ask for replies within one week.
- The convener should prepare a final version of the meeting record, and submit a copy of each journal-specific item as a privileged communication to the editor concerned, for written comment within no more than two weeks.
- The convener should identify any editor's comment that might materially change the recommendations in the record, and submit these to the Panel for consideration and decision.
- The finally agreed record should be submitted to the CSPiSA for approval, before submission in turn to the ASSAf Council, and public release.