



A Ladder of Publication : Scaffolding for emergent authors

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ABSTRACT :

Research and publication are the hallmarks of scholarship. They provide the evidence to inform our decision-making regarding the provision of a high-quality learning experience. However, in many institutions the proportion of academic staff who are regarded as *research active* – and publishing accounts of their work - is less than desirable. This article suggests that a **Ladder of Publication** may provide a framework by which emergent scholars can progress from modest documents, shared with colleagues in a safe environment, to authoritative peer-reviewed publications. The challenge is to support colleagues in the process of conducting the research and progressing with this to publication.

1. INTRODUCTION :

“... any idiot can do research . . . it’s getting that research published that’s difficult.”

The above comment was made by a senior colleague in a department meeting over 30 years ago. At the time I didn’t really appreciate what was being said. Surely, one had to study long and hard to become familiar with an academic area and to acquire the research skills required to undertake original research. One had to formulate and operationalise worthwhile research questions, decide the most appropriate style of research, collect, analyse and interpret data, relate the findings to published work, and so on. The culmination would be the written account sent to the publisher - an account published on its merits.

Well, this still happens - but not as often as you may think. In my own university, for example, only about one-quarter of the

academic staff are *research active*; the majority of staff had no publications, an insufficient number or were judged not to have sufficient high-quality publications to merit inclusion in the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2001. (The 2001 RAE was the third peer review exercise within UK Universities that graded each *Unit of Assessment*, or group of researchers in a particular academic area, on a six-point scale from 1 to 5 plus 5* in terms of an array of research activities in which published work was a major consideration.) What proportion of your department, faculty or institution would be classed as *research active*? What proportion would have, say, at least four high quality publications in the last 5 years?

There is certainly no shortage of talent in institutions like yours and mine, and no shortage of worthwhile questions to explore and of career incentives. Indeed, in many educational institutions research activities

are often highly regarded with promotion opportunities linked to research and publication rather than teaching excellence; although attempts are being made within the UK and elsewhere to redress this imbalance (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 2002 ; HEFCE, 2003).

But how do we encourage, support and assist our colleagues in the difficult task of completing their research and getting it published? In this article, I plan to avoid the whole area of conducting the research. There is no shortage of Research Methods Courses - many available at a distance. The International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL) [<http://icdl.open.ac.uk>] lists several and I would be surprised if your institution did not offer a research methods course or research training to post-graduate students. For example, my own institution, in collaboration with Indira Gandhi National Open University and the University of Central Queensland, is assembling a Research Methods Resource - an online and diagnostic set of materials to direct users to parts of existing Research Methods Courses so they can address specific research related questions.

This article will focus on the **Ladder of Publication** and those agencies that can support publication.

2. LADDER OF PUBLICATION :

I would suggest that for many academic staff, particularly at the start of their career, the prospect of publishing their first book is daunting. For many, with the ability to do so, it never happens. Why is this? I believe the step, for many, is simply too great. However, if we regard the various forms of publication as steps on a ladder (Figure 1), it is fairly easy to arrange them in some hierarchy and think of ways in which we can encourage colleagues to begin climbing that ladder.

If production of the single-authored book is seen as the top of the ladder (but many would argue that peer reviewed articles in high-quality journals are more prestigious) perhaps a department seminar or workshop is the other extreme. It is not unusual for colleagues to give accounts of *Work-in-*

Progress to their peers - especially if a department has contributed to the funding in either research funds or time to conduct the investigation. Indeed, in my own institution those Faculties that provide research funds make it a requirement that the recipient delivers a report to the faculty. At Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), this is either during informal faculty seminars or as part of larger Learning and Teaching Days. Does your institution provide research and development funds to staff? Are they required to provide an account of their study? and if so, in what way?

An informal setting, amongst colleagues, may be a suitable forum to disseminate any results and findings; but what about the much larger potential audience who are unable to attend? An in-house publication may not have the same kudos as an international journal but it does allow for the dissemination of material; albeit at a lower level of academic / presentational rigour. It allows colleagues to present their material in a supportive environment and to receive comment. It can also bring together colleagues who share a common interest and raise awareness of work-in-process. For example, within MMU the Learning + Teaching Unit has established the in-house publication *Learning + Teaching in Action* [<http://www.mmu.ac.uk/ltu/ltia/index.htm>] published three times each academic year with each edition focusing upon a particular theme or issue. For example, Widening Participation and Access. Information Technology, Assessment, and Student Support.

In terms of the **Ladder of Publication** it is noteworthy that a large number of contributions have been refined for presentation at conferences and publication in journals. Furthermore, several of these in-house publications have been instrumental in bringing colleagues together to form a cross-faculty Special Interest Group on Student Retention and Support. It is expected that other Special Interest Groups associated with Online Assessment and Collecting Student Feedback will be formed; there is evidence that the **Ladder of Publication** is working. Does your institution produce an

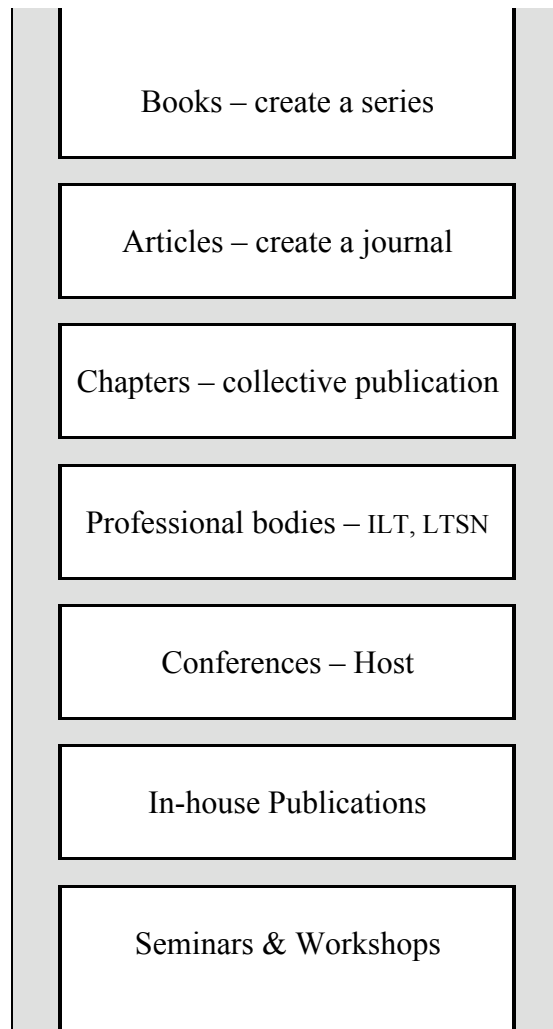


Figure 1: The Ladder of Publication

in-house publication - be it paper-based or online? Are these produced at regular intervals or in response to particular events or projects? Would an in-house publication offer a step up on the **Ladder of Publication**?

Attendance and presentation at national and international conferences offers a major opportunity to disseminate good practice, research findings and to obtain the comments from peers. There is certainly no shortage of conference opportunities with many national Open and Distance Learning Associations hosting their own conferences.

Table 1 lists four leading associations that arrange regular conference events that have an Asian, International, Commonwealth, and European focus, respectively.

Furthermore, it is increasing common for universities to host their own conferences. For example, my own university hosted a Learning and Teaching Conference in September 2003. Conferences do offer the opportunity to researchers to share their findings. However, the papers are unlikely to constitute *high-quality publications* of the kind that would be accepted as part of a research assessment exercise. This said,

Table 1 : Associations that arrange Conferences

<input type="checkbox"/>	Asian Association of Open Universities http://www.aaou.net
<input type="checkbox"/>	International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) http://www.icde.org
<input type="checkbox"/>	Commonwealth of Learning http://www.col.org
<input type="checkbox"/>	European Distance and E-Learning Network http://www.eden.bme.hu

some conference organisers are assembling collections of papers and publishing them in book form. For example, the AAOU Conference in New Delhi 21-23 February 2002 assembled the book *Access & Equity: Challenges for Open and Distance Learning* (Dikshit et al. Eds., 2002). What opportunities and support does your institution offer in terms of conference attendance? Do you host your own conference or could one be hosted?

Contributions to the publications produced by professional bodies, contributions that are often commissioned and peer reviewed, do constitute *high-quality publications*. Within the UK those produced by the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE), [<http://www.ilt.ac.uk>], the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) [<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk>] are typical. For example, an item on plagiarism that appeared in L+TiA (Johnston, 2003) was subsequently refined and published in the ILTHE Members Resource Area. The products of seminars and workshops on Supporting Portfolio Development have been published by the LTSN (Baume, 2003).

Other UK professional bodies publish, for example the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) also publish articles that contribute to the field [<http://www.seda.ac.uk>]. Within your discipline or country do professional bodies publish examples of good practice and

research findings? What is the academic standing of these publications?

The production of a single-authored text is a major undertaking. However, assembling a collection of chapters into an edited text may be less daunting. A dozen or more colleagues, working to a clear brief and drawing upon their own research / experience, with the co-ordination of an editor may be able to assemble an edited book in months rather than years. Furthermore, the combined input of a dozen or more colleagues may represent a breadth and depth of input that an individual is unable to match. Such a supportive environment may enable a contributor to move beyond seminar and conference papers to an authoritative work that is likely to represent a *high-quality publication*. There are examples of edited texts that have been produced within a single department or institution (Eisenstadt & Vincent, 1998) - permitting face-to-face discussion amongst contributors to refine the content. More commonly, an international collection of authors, working within a brief provided by the editor, have assembled an edited text without ever meeting to discuss their content; it was achieved via email with revised drafts posted on a closed web site (eg Littlejohn, 2003). Have you contributed to an edited text? Could you bring together a group of colleagues and edit their contributions in book form?

For many the publication of research findings in an international, peer-reviewed

Table 2 : Journals in the Fields

Journal and ISSN	
<input type="checkbox"/>	American Journal of Distance Education ISSN 0892-3647
<input type="checkbox"/>	Open Learning ISSN 0268-0513
<input type="checkbox"/>	Distance Education ISSN 0158-7919
<input type="checkbox"/>	British Journal of Educational Technology ISSN 0007-1013
<input type="checkbox"/>	Active Learning in Higher Education ISSN 1469-7874
<input type="checkbox"/>	The PRS-LTSN Journal ISSN 1474-2195

journal is the ultimate goal and indicator of *high-quality publication*. However, the dilemma is often - to which journal should I submit the article? My own university subscribes to 7000+ online journals and several hundred paper based journals - the scope is huge. Furthermore, such journals have cultivated a particular target audience and often make that audience clear in associated publicity material - either in print or online. Table 2 lists the four paper-based publications which are widely regarded as the premier journals in the field. It also lists the journals produced by the two professional bodies, noted above, the ILTHE and LTSN respectively.

Unfortunately, one of the problems in submitting an article to a premier journal is the time it can take to eventual publication. Online journals often claim that online submission, online review and online publication greatly reduce time to publication. What is more, the relative ease of online publication means that the opportunity to create and publish your own journal have increased dramatically. For example, the UK Open University not only publishes *Open Learning* but the online *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (JIME) [<http://www-jime.open.ac.uk>]. Does

your institution or professional body publish a journal? Could you consider creating your own journal?

It is common, in terms of professional recognition, for single-authored articles or books to be more highly regarded than joint publication. Depending upon the criteria adopted a book may be regarded as superior to a peer-reviewed journal article or not. However, published books remain indicative of *high-quality publication*. Any review of educational publishers will reveal a staggering list of potential publishers - many offering books in the field of open and distance learning. However, to date UK publishers dominate the field - Kogan Page and Routledge; Table 3 lists the titles of these two book-series and their web sites. An inspection of the web sites will reveal the titles of books and descriptions of them. The sites also provide guidelines for potential authors in assembling a book proposal.

Which publisher would be most sympathetic to your book proposal? Is there a perception in your discipline which publishers offer the strongest list? Might you consider creating a book series that would provide an outlet for you and your colleagues?

Table 3 : Book Series

□	Open and Distance Learning Series http://www.kogan-page.co.uk by December 2003, a total of 40 books published in this series
□	Routledge Studies in Distance Education Series http://www.routledge.co.uk by December 2003, a total of 10 books published

NOTE: In July 2003, Kogan Page sold their Education List, including the Kogan Page Open and Distance Learning Series to Taylor and Francis [<http://www.tandf.co.uk>] - owners of the publishers Routledge. At the time of writing, it is expected that both book series will continue.

3. CONCLUSION :

Providing a **Ladder of Publication** may be useful - but what other concrete steps can be taken to facilitate the publication process? Whilst many are possible I would like to suggest just three.

- Financial Support
- Advice and Assistance
- Nodal Points

3.1 Financial Support

What funds are available to support any research? Whilst large budgets may not be necessary to undertake worthwhile investigations some funds may help considerably. An obvious source is from ones own institutions. Indeed, within the UK universities it is not uncommon to find Research and Development Funds in place to provide modest funds. For many institutions it is regarded as a simple method to boost research and publication activity - with the goal to achieve a high rating in any national review of research excellence.

Within the UK many professional organisations make modest research funds available to their members. For example, the UK Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education also make funds available to members. More substantial funds are obviously available in national and international competitions. Do any of your professional organisations, societies or bodies make research funds available?

3.2 Advice and Assistance

The advice and assistance available can be divided into that associated with conducting the research - research methods / technical support - and that designed to support the writing process.

Conducting research as an individual, and producing single-authored work, can be extremely satisfying - it can be lonely and daunting. Many have found that working within a group, but not necessarily a research team, can be extremely rewarding. It can often provide a safe environment where work in progress can be presented, draft papers discussed, advice and assistance received and given. The operation of *Action Learning Sets* have proven to be extremely useful in providing mutual support and a constructive working atmosphere. Could you and your colleagues assemble a mutually supporting group; an *Action Learning Set*?

3.3 Nodal Points

You may be fortunate to be working in an institution that offers the supporting environment mentioned above. You may be

surrounded by colleagues who could constitute a self-help group. If not - what other nodal points may be available to you? Within the UK every university has some form of centre, department or unit associated with learning and teaching. Every university has a similar group devoted to research and development. They may be called different things, Learning and Teaching Department, Centres for Higher Education Practice, Learning Development Unit, Research and Development Unit. They will have somewhat different Terms of Reference, but are all likely to contain colleagues with an interest in research and publication. Indeed, you may be the person they have been looking for to join the team and create the synergy needed to initiate a programme of research and publication - no matter how modest. What nodal points can be identified in your institution?

The rewards associated with conducting research and subsequent publication are not just intrinsic. Many universities require that a candidate for promotion holds a sound publication record. Publishing the work you have completed may not only help you and your career but may contribute to enhanced teaching and learning amongst your students.

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