

Inside the academic publishing pressure cooker: Challenges and possibilities within the ecosystem

An invited guest editorial

Marg Rogers

University of New England; Manna Institute, Australia

Margaret Sims

Macquarie University, Australia

Einar Thorsteinsson

University of New England; Manna Institute, Australia

The academic pressure cooker

Academics research and publish within a highly pressured ecosystem, much like being in a pressure cooker (Figure 1).

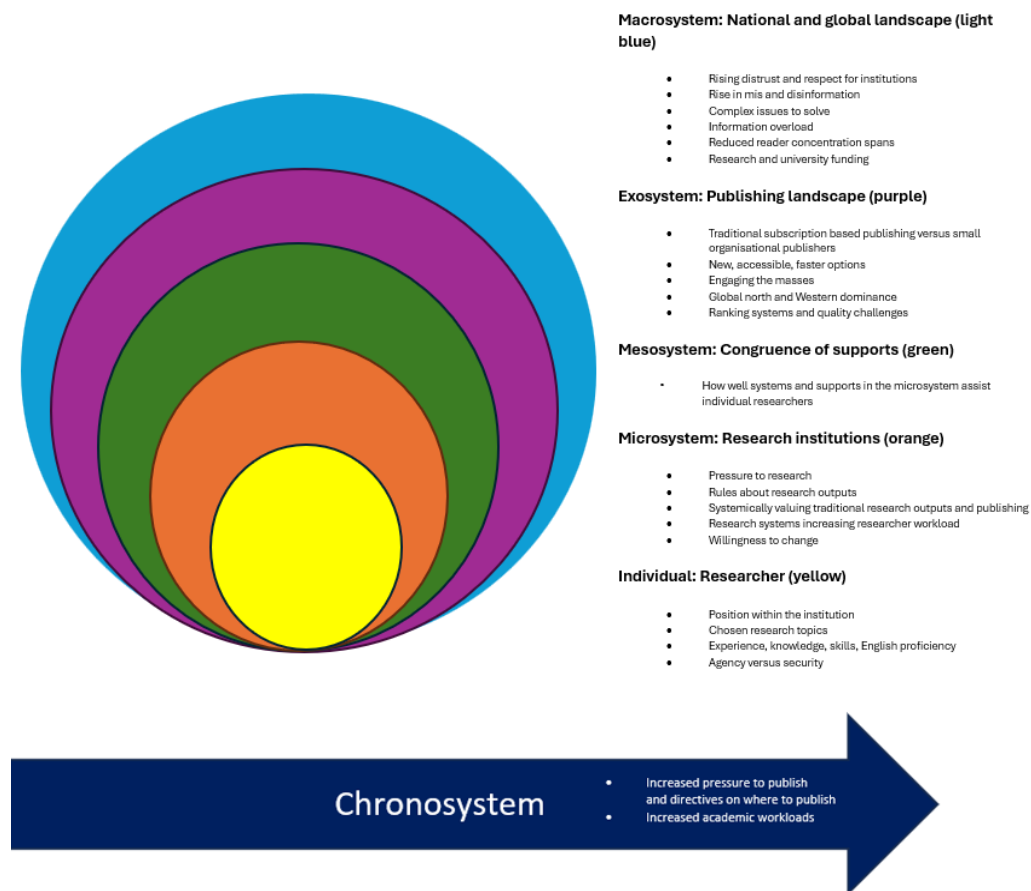


Figure 1: An academic's publishing ecosystem within the pressure cooker (use web or PDF reader 'zoom in' function to read)

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model, a researcher's ecosystem as shown in Figure 1 has nested systems of influence, starting with the individual researcher, their microsystem, and the extent to which the microsystem supports the researcher's work in the mesosystem. The publishing landscape is the exosystem, directly impacting the microsystem. Additionally, the macrosystem is the global landscape in which all elements operate. Each layer affects the others, and all systems are affected by changes over time within the chronosystem. While there are many enablers within the system, this article focuses on the challenges and possibilities.

Individual: Researcher

At the individual level, each researcher has a different set of skills, knowledge, experience, and level of English proficiency, which can change over time (chronosystem). English proficiency and data analysis are increasingly supported by AI tools (Soodmand Afshar & Ranjbar, 2025). Their position, or the position they aspire to, will also influence where, what, and how much they try to publish. Again, this will change over time (chronosystem) as their academic career progresses. A researcher's need for security versus their desire for agency can also vary throughout their career. It will also be influenced by the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

An individual's topic of research can be a source of frustration for researchers, with some topics being well received by journals and others less so. Indeed, the *Issues in Educational Research* (IIER) editorial team use the criteria of whether the article's topic has been covered in recent issues to help filter the increasing number of submissions (Atkinson & McBeath, 2024). Researchers who explore hybrid theories and methodologies to move the profession forward, as well as interdisciplinary researchers, can find it particularly difficult to find a home for their research, as editors often say their work does not fit in the journal. Interdisciplinary research is particularly vital, given the complex macrosystem challenges and wicked problems (Crilly, 2025; Stanton & Oliver, 2026) the world faces. Zang and Whang (2024) pointed out that interdisciplinary research often takes longer to publish. Refreshingly, IIER has published articles on interdisciplinary research approaches (e.g., Rogers et al., 2024) and interdisciplinary teaching (e.g., Hains-Wesson & Ji, 2021). However, finding a way to filter a high number of publications remains an enormous administrative and emotional burden for editors, leading to many desktop rejections (see Atkinson & McBeath, 2025a). In turn, each rejection carries an emotional cost that can dent a researcher's confidence, especially for newer researchers. It also creates more work, as reformatting, re-editing references, reshaping ideas, and resubmitting are cumbersome tasks that are often completed outside of work hours. This also translates into less available time for service to the academic community through reviewing and volunteering on journal boards, thereby creating more pressure in the ecosystem.

Microsystem (research institutions) and mesosystem (congruence of support)

Despite this pressure, some research institutions are becoming more prescriptive in their demand for publications. Such demands go beyond numbers, with added specifications about the metrics of the journals they use. The resources to set up and enforce such a

system could be better spent supporting academics in their research and providing time for academics to review and volunteer to support smaller, non-profit journals. At the same time, some institutions have increased the hurdles researchers face by introducing multiple, expensive software packages for grant and ethics applications. This has effectively given researchers additional data entry and administrative tasks, eating into their research and publishing time. This is an example of the mesosystem impacting the researcher, with the microsystem elements failing to adequately support them in their attempts to digitise their systems.

Pressures to maintain expected research and scholarship outputs are an integral part of academic workload pressure. It has long been recognised that workload pressure is a significant risk factor for mental health problems (World Health Organisation, 2024). Australian research details that two-thirds of university staff reported very high levels of workload pressure resulting in an imbalance in their work/family lives (Neser et al., 2023). The Australian study by Zentveld et al. (2025) reported that academics, on average, worked nearly double the annual hours for which they were paid, and that a quarter reported moderate to severe levels of depression and anxiety. Even though nearly a third did not seek support from mental health services, actual utilisation of these services was three times higher than in the general population. The study showed a direct relationship between increases in working hours beyond the expected with increases in anxiety and depression scores and increased risk of moderate to severe mental health issues.

This is particularly a problem for female academics who tend to be assigned more teaching and pastoral duties than male academics (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2025). In addition, despite a growing trend towards gender equality in family roles (Eira Nunes et al., 2025), women still tend to carry more of the family and household responsibilities (Mehta et al., 2025; Social Work Institute, 2025). This results in a significant imbalance in women's overall wellbeing, with consequences that often manifest as limited career development and lower lifetime earnings (Tin et al., 2025).

Exosystem (publishing landscape) and chronosystem (change over time)

In this context, we examine academic publishing. Submissions to journals have increased (Atkinson & McBeath, 2025a; Wang & Gong, 2026), partly due to pressure on academics to publish or perish, and partly to the growing popularity of higher degrees by publication and the increasing number of students accessing higher degrees. As such, IIER stated they are only able to send about one sixth of submissions received out for review, publishing about 80 articles a year (Atkinson & McBeath, 2024). The use of publications as a measure of academic research performance puts journals under pressure to quickly turn around an increasing number of submissions. The requirement for peer review, at a time when increasing workload pressure makes many academics unable to perform this important task, can significantly increase the time from submission to publication. To address this, many journals now integrate AI into their peer review process (Wang & Gong, 2026), but they face concerns about the tension between this and the need to foreground critical human judgment.

New alternative publishing sources

In other attempts to address these publishing dilemmas, many journals are increasingly offering a range of quicker turnaround options, including preprint (Chena et al., 2025). In competition are several platforms that offer open and online reviews of material, for example, Qeios, ‘Research you can trust’ (Qeios, n.d.). Such open access platforms tend not to attract the high-status rankings imposed by university managements, but for academics, they offer a quick turnaround and a way to make their work openly available. This may be beneficial for academics who need their findings published before applying for the next grant, position or promotion or surviving the next performance review.

Further, so-called grey area journals have increased their presence in the publishing landscape, issuing many invitations to researchers and promising quick turnaround for a hefty fee (Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, 2024). This cost is waived for some authors, depending on the quality of the paper, and some give discounts for academics from locations identified by the journal as disadvantaged. These fees allow the journals to employ staff to handle the heavy administrative workload. This is one reason the turnover is significantly reduced. Many traditional journals rely on overworked volunteers (current and retired academics, higher degree research students, and others) to do these tasks on top of their normal workload. To save more time, they often issue many invitations to academics to review a single article, then go with the first returned reviews. Again, this significantly increases publication speed, but some research organisations worry about the robustness of this approach (Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, 2024). For pressured academics and higher degree research students with limited candidature, these journals can be very alluring. Still, research institutions cling to traditional journals to gain favourable rankings with research councils as a path to more funding. They offer little support to smaller, free, open-access journals like IIER. This exacerbates the imbalance of large, subscription-based publication houses concentrated in the global north (Connell, 2014). This sets up inequities in the exosystem, because institutions in the global south are unlikely to be able to fund their researcher’s publishing costs.

Engaging the general public

Alternative, innovative and impactful research outputs, called non-traditional research outputs (NTROs), are also recognised by some research councils and research institutions (Australian Research Council, 2023). However, despite often using the words ‘innovative’ and ‘impactful’ in many of their key organisational narratives and mottos, institutions’ recognition for such time-consuming, innovative research outputs can be ethereal (Rogers et al., 2025). Applying for recognition of these outputs is complex, laborious and slow. This is because such innovation has not been embedded in their traditional systems, which recognise and reward more of the same.

Likewise, research-based news articles have become more popular, allowing many more members of the general public to access and engage with research (Rogers, 2024). These bite-sized articles are freely available online and facilitate impact on a scale rarely seen before (*The Conversation*, 2026). Podcasts have also facilitated increased impact, as new audiences engage with the practical parts of research (Naff, 2020).

Clinging to the old ways

Journal metrics are another factor that both researchers and journal personnel need to consider. Despite research indicating the inherent flaws in measuring journal quality (Rushforth, 2025), there remains pressure for academics to publish in high status journals (Kumar & Nirangihana, 2025). For many, this demand creates a conflict between the need to disseminate information through channels accessible to those in the profession versus the barriers erected by subscription-only access to high status academic journals (Trueblood et al., 2025). In a scathing review, Liu (2025) argued that the very mechanisms designed to ensure quality, journal impact factors and peer review, fail to achieve this. In a second article, Liu and Liu (2025, p. 1) claimed: “prestigious journals have become primary sources of high-quality ‘garbage’, technically competent but scientifically vacuous research that meets formal requirements while contributing minimal advancement to knowledge”. They also stated that this system creates a false impression of quality control whilst dampening innovation in academic publishing. Whilst many academics might agree with this perspective, university systems continue to require publication in paywall limited, higher status journals, and the resulting competition for space continues to slow publication time. That said, some things are changing, for example with ‘read and publish agreements’, though if they are to be a long term solution or not remains to be seen (Machovec, 2019; Olsson et al., 2020).

Macrosystem (national and global landscape) and chronosystem (change over time)

The macrosystem, or global landscape, includes the increasing distrust and respect for institutions such as universities, the rise in misinformation and disinformation and the number of complex issues facing the world (Yu & Shen, 2024). In this post-truth era, in which information saturation is widespread, cutting through the noise can be problematic (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In a time of information overload, the way we read has changed, as well as our ability to concentrate, according to studies such as Lui et al. (2023). Despite this, the need for research is heightened, with complex issues facing our world and environment.

What next?

Academics have been speculating about the future of academic publishing for decades (for example, Schramme, 2019; Sweeney, 1997), and whilst there seems to be some agreement on the challenges faced (Meijer & Webster, 2022), individual journals are still attempting to wade their way through the competing tensions they are experiencing. Bristow (2021, p. 23) posited that a “radical reimagining” is required, supporting the call by IIER for Australia to become a bolder and more significant player in the academic journal world (Atkinson & McBeath, 2025b). What that new, bold reimage might look like is yet to be clarified.

In this challenging landscape, and with many submissions to IIER coming from Southeast Asia, one idea might be to replicate the IIER model of a ‘generalist’ educational journal, fully international, open access, with no article processing charges, and high-quality editorial support. How this might be staffed sustainably is yet to be imagined, but for

Australian universities with campuses in Southeast Asia, this might be a welcome move. The initiative could potentially support more academics to benefit from IIER's work in supporting academic publishing in the global south. If Australia is to continue to push its position as a place for overseas students to flourish from Southeast Asia, more support is needed for journals where they can potentially publish.

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Associate Professor Marg Rogers is in the Early Childhood Education team at the University of New England, Australia, and a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Manna Institute. Her research interests are in families, military families, educational professionalism and wellbeing.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8407-7256>

Email: marg.rogers@une.edu.au

Professor Margaret Sims is an Honorary Professor at Macquarie University. She is an early childhood, professionalism and family researcher. She has worked in family support and disabilities for many years.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4686-4245>

Email: margaret.sims@mq.edu.au

Professor Einar B. Thorsteinsson is a Professor in Psychology at the University of New England, Australia. He is a Senior Researcher with the Manna Institute. His research focus is in the area of health psychology, including adolescent mental health and coping.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2065-1989>

Email: ethorste@une.edu.au

Please cite as: Rogers, M., Sims, M. & Thorsteinsson, E. B. (2026). Inside the academic publishing pressure cooker: Challenges and possibilities within the ecosystem. *Issues in Educational Research*, 36(1) invited guest editorial, ix-xvii.
<http://www.iier.org.au/iier36/rogers.pdf>