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## **Editorial : Equality, diversity and the challenges for ESPL**

Stuart N. Lane

Institute of Earth Surface Dynamics, University of Lausanne

It is an under-statement that this has been a very strange year indeed. At least in Europe, Covid crept up on us, took over, retreated and then came back again with an inevitability (even a predictability, certainly a vengeance) that is difficult to deny. At ESPL, and as across society, Covid stands out for the ways in which it has revealed elements of day-to-day life that should not have been as hidden as they were. Whilst the submission rate to the journal jumped dramatically (three-fold) between February and May 2020 so did the number of requests for extensions to review and to revision deadlines. I sense that these requests came disproportionately from Early Career Researchers and women. Some countries stopped submitting to us abruptly, others have submitted more than ever. The spatially-differentiated impacts of Covid have influenced all elements of the journal's activities. I wish I could put some figures on some of these patterns and compare them with historical data; but it is this sort of information on gender identity, ethnic identity, biological age and academic age that we have been remiss in not collecting.

Before Covid took over, we had started to reflect upon equality and diversity and the challenges it posed to us. Stephen Tooth and Heather Viles (Tooth and Viles, 2021) took the initiative of reflecting upon why geomorphology has to respond, drawing attention to some of the practices that might seem normal to us but which in fact reinforce existing divisions within society. I won't repeat their arguments but I do hope that you will read them. The question at ESPL is what are we going to do?

If I have got my figures right, since 2011, 40% of the Associate Editors of the journal have been women, and 60% have been men. Whether or not this is close to or better than the norm is a largely irrelevant question. More to the point is the fact that we have not routinely monitored gender identity, academic age or ethnic identity as a journal and so looking at where we are is challenge. Data protection laws also limit what we can do with existing data held in our manuscript management system. However, at the suggestion of a member of our Early Career Advisory Board (Alice Lefebvre, at the Marum Institute, University of Bremen), there are on-line services that can be used to classify gender (with uncertainty). Other dimensions of equality and diversity are much harder to determine, such as gender identity, ethnic origin or academic age. To allow us to look at these issues in the future, we are putting in place a more robust system of monitoring activities that respects data protection. At article submission, we can ask authors to volunteer additional information (e.g. on academic age, ethnic origin, gender identity) that will be treated confidentially at the level of individual articles and blinded from those of us involved in paper handling. Such data will allow calculation of aggregate statistics showing what the journal is doing and how this is changing through time, as the measures we develop take effect.

Second, we have begun to think about our peer review process. Wiley has a “Better Peer Review” initiative (<https://secure.wiley.com/better-peer-review>). We evaluated the journal against this initiative in the summer of 2020. As a result, we identified some minor changes to make, notably to improve feedback to reviewers. Two more substantial peer review changes will come into effect from January 2021. The first is to ask for author contributions to be defined qualitatively; whilst not allowing them to be defined quantitatively; and to ask that the lead author of a paper is also (normally) the only corresponding author. There may be occasions when the latter is not appropriate but these should be justified rather than taken as given. We are a discipline that largely publishes in small teams; only 3% of papers published in ESPL in 2019 were single author. In the journal’s founding year, the equivalent figure was 68%. We could spend time thinking about why this shift has happened. However, more important, is the need to think about what this means for how we ensure an equitable recognition of author contributions. I postulate this is an issue related to equality and diversity because it is about making visible the contributions made by *all* researchers involved in a paper. I came across an example recently where a male academic supervisor had insisted on being the corresponding author on a paper where the supervisor was not the first-named author. The paper had been written by a woman PhD student on the basis of her thesis results. The supervisor’s main contribution to the paper was securing the funding that supported it and providing guidance on the conception and analysis of field experimentation. Is this correct? The status of corresponding author is actually quite important. Readers who wish to follow up on a piece of work are most likely (by definition) to go to the corresponding author. Such exchanges matter for new collaborations, funding opportunities etc. Mapping the corresponding author onto the lead author, is a change that matters for giving maximizing opportunities for those who invest most time in a paper. There may be justifiable reasons for the lead author not to be the corresponding author. By asking for clearer identification of author contributions to a paper, such that who has done what is clearer, allows for such exceptions.

The second peer review change is more substantial. The Editorial Board of ESPL has decided that we will move to double blind review from January 2021, a review system widely used in the social sciences but also in some of the life sciences. At the moment we use single blind review, that is the identity of the authors is known to reviewers, but the identity of reviewers is only known to authors if they sign their review openly. In double blind review, the authors’ identities are not known to the reviewers. We are a large enough community now that “guessing” who an anonymized author is, which may happen, is difficult. We think that if a reviewer has a right to be anonymous, so should an author. But above all, we (and we are all reviewers as well as Editors of the journal) do not believe that a reviewer needs to know the identities of an author when they review the paper. We should be judging the science and not *who* wrote the science or *where* they come from. Reviewers will still be at liberty to sign their reviews if they so wish. They will see the identities of authors in published work, or if they sign a review openly, and an author decides to reach out to them. We recognize that this system makes it harder for a reviewer to know if they have a conflict of interest with the author(s); but the manuscript management system we use has a very sophisticated means of spotting potential conflicts of interest. The Editors, who appoint reviewers, will still be able to see author identities and also continue their normal and additional checks for conflicts

of interest. We think that this change may be one small but important contribution to reducing bias against certain people and places in our activities. It may appear to be going against the trend to more "open review" (e.g. where reviews are published on-line with the associated paper), but we have not changed our critical view of this approach to scientific publishing (Lane, 2014). There is also no reason why we might not allow "open review" to become an option for authors in the future, even if at present the Board has reservations about whether this is really in the interest of authors.

The third objective we have set is to render the work of less visible communities more visible. We will be starting with a special issue of the journal edited entirely by women. Ellen Wohl has agreed to lead this project as Managing Editor with the support of one of our other Associate Editors, Alison Anders. To allow the wider coverage of the discipline, Georgina King (University of Lausanne) and Estela Nadal Romero (Instituto Pirenaico de Ecología, IPE-CSIC, Zaragoza, Spain) will both join as Special Issue Editors. We would like to do the same with other communities and this is being developed actively.

Finally, as I have thought about equality and diversity I have also been reminded that we have a set of much more fundamental practices that we need to challenge. ESPL is a selective journal. We can modify the peer review process, such as through introducing double blind review, and this may help to guarantee that such selection is fair. But we cannot escape the fact that our journal practices have been shaped over many decades by white (and at least in majority terms) men. A good example of this is our practice regarding case studies of geomorphic systems. For some years now, and on the basis of author feedback, citation patterns and Editorial Board discussions and decision, we have only published case studies where their wider geomorphological relevance is clear. A small proportion of papers get rejected before review on this basis. But are we systematic and truly objective in what is effectively a highly qualitative judgement? Are our decisions completely blind to who the authors are and where the case study is based? If this policy remains, are we doing enough to support those authors who have not had the training that was historically dominant in our field up until relatively recently (commonly western, traditionally male-led)? Can we support such authors in a way that avoids reinforcing a particular set of values as to what constitutes a good geomorphological contribution (just another form of dominance)? Can we justify the policy itself or are there alternative and better criteria that might lead to a more enriched geomorphology? What we publish does not just reflect what geomorphologists do, it also influences it, and so our publication practices have very important impacts on the community. But are those practices fair? Answering this question requires us to think more deeply about the objectives of the journal and the practices that follow from these objectives. We need to broaden who is involved in setting journal policy. We need external advice from experts in equality and diversity to help to identify those practices that are not fair and to propose alternatives that are fair, as well as the support for authors that might make them fairer. We may even need a more fundamental rethink about what the journal is aiming to achieve. All of this is happening in a publishing system (and an academic system) that has been founded on a meritocracy that, notwithstanding initiatives like the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, still reinforces certain practices (e.g. journal impact factors; citations; impact) at the expense of others (e.g. collaborations; support). The complexity and constraints surrounding these

issues is going to set new challenges for some time to come; but they require us to begin now the work required to address them.

I would like to finish with one important note. As a result of the increase in submission to the journal this year, the Editorial Board has had to handle a substantial increase in workload, as have our reviewers. They themselves have also had additional constraints on their time due to Covid. I would like to thank warmly all those who have helped with the journal during these difficult times.

### **References**

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