

Unified Scholars and Publishers.

Editorial Policies

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Introduction

All research articles published by the Unified Scholars and Publishers will first undergo peer review on the Unified Scholars Platform. The typical process involves critical evaluation by at least three vetted experts in the field, who work to a very high standard as set out in the guide for editors and peer reviewers document. Accepted papers would be published in our e-journals and print journals, if any.

The policies contained herein serves as a framework for the peer review process on the USP; for the conduct of editors and peer reviewers on the USP; for the conduct of authors in certain circumstances; for the payment of service fees; and for the actions of publishers and the published materials.

Section A

Peer Review Policy

All submissions to USP are first reviewed for completeness by an editor. Submissions are assessed by that editor who decides whether a submission is suitable for peer review. When an editor is on the author list of a submitted script or has a competing interest, he must not accept to evaluate that paper. The same applies to peer reviewers. Editors and peer reviewers submit their feedbacks and select an option (revise, decline, approve) for the manuscript. The final decision is made by the USP, but an

editor has the power to outrightly reject a manuscript.

USP requests all reviewers to abide by the following:

- Conduct reviews objectively.
- Do not personally criticize an author. Such comments are inappropriate, as are defamatory remarks.
- Express views clearly with supporting arguments and references.
- Decline to review scripts for which they believe they have a competing interest resulting from competitive, collaborative, or other relationships or connections with any of the authors, companies, or institutions connected to the papers.
- Communicate with the USP team about any aspects of a script (e.g. data or analyses) that they feel is outside the scope of their expertise.
- Communicate with the USP team about any aspects of a script that they are unable to assess fully.
- Complete their reviews within the number of days agreed. If a reviewer anticipates a delay, they should let the USP team know so that the authors are informed and, where necessary, an alternative reviewer can be found.
- Check if authors have followed the Sex and Gender in Research (SAGER) Guidelines.
- Respect the confidentiality of material supplied to them and not discuss unpublished scripts with colleagues or use the information in their own work.
- Alert the USP team if they wish to pass a peer review invitation onto a colleague.
- Alert the USP team if they wish to make an allegation of publication or research misconduct (e.g., plagiarism or image manipulation) about a script they are reviewing.
- Communicate with the USP team about any concerns relating to these points, or any aspect of the review process.

- Reviewer selection and responsibilities

Reviewer selection is critical to the publication process. The primary purpose of expert review is to improve the quality of manuscripts that are worthy of publication.

USP onboards peer reviewers who have verified credentials and field-specific expertise. USP allows field-specific experts to commit to evaluate a manuscript that they are competent to evaluate, provided no conflict of interest exists. The platform considers previous performance of reviewers, eliminating those who have been flagged for poor quality reviews or other reasons. Two reviewers and one editor would commit to evaluate a manuscript. USP uses double-blind (i.e., double-anonymized)

peer review and personal information is encrypted. The names and identities of authors, reviewers, and editors are not revealed at any time during the entire peer review process. Once three experts have committed to reviewing and editing a submission, they are given a timeline of 25 days to complete the review process.

Each reviewer is tasked to provide well-explained, constructive reviews in English and to report concerns to the assigned editor. Each reviewer is requested to adhere to the principles of COPE's Ethical Guidelines. Reviews must include evaluation of the following: 1) appropriateness and rigor of the methods, 2) critical evaluation of the results, and 3) agreement between the results and conclusions, 4) an assessment of references, data, figures, etc. The USP makes a final decision according to peer reviewer comments and the editor's own final discretion. Confidential comments to the editor are welcome but must not contradict the main points in the reviews given to the authors.

Editors and peer reviewers must not commit to or evaluate a manuscript that have an interest in. This could be identified, flagged, with potential negative consequences for those involved.

- Review questions

USP asks reviewers the following questions when evaluating every script:

- Key results: Summarize what you consider to be the outstanding findings and features.
- Validity: Does the manuscript have flaws which should prohibit its publication? If so, provide details.
- Originality and significance: If the conclusions are not original, please provide relevant references. Is the research question significant?
- Data & methodology: Comment on the validity of the approach, quality of the data, and quality of presentation. We expect our reviewers to review all data, including extended data and supplementary information. Is the reporting of data and methodology sufficiently detailed and transparent to enable reproducing the results?
- Appropriate use of statistics and treatment of uncertainties: All error bars should be defined in the corresponding figure legends. Include a specific comment on the appropriateness of any statistical tests, and the accuracy of the description of any error bars and probability values.
- Conclusions: Are the conclusions and data interpretation robust, valid and reliable?
- Inflammatory material: Does the manuscript contain any language that is inappropriate or potentially libelous?

- Suggested improvements: List suggestions that could help strengthen the work in a revision.
- References: Does the script reference previous literature appropriately? If not, what references should be included or excluded? Attempts at reviewer-coerced citation will be noted against your record in the **USP** database.
- Clarity and context: Are all sections clear and accessible?

All statements should be justified and argued in detail. Reviewers are asked to name facts and cite supporting references, commenting on all aspects that are relevant to the script and that the reviewers feel qualified commenting on. However, due to discipline-specific standards, not all the above aspects may apply to every paper.

- Reviewer misconduct

USP has features to track reviewers and editors whose conduct on the platform is inappropriate. Verified reviewers and editors who provide erroneous or inappropriate content will be flagged and, where appropriate, banned. Any form of misconduct, listed here or not, that we know is unacceptable, should be avoided. The USP is founded on fairness, equity, integrity, and other key principles.

- Reviewer diversity

USP is committed to diversity, equity and inclusion and we strive for diverse demographic representation of peer reviewers. The platform will automatically ensure that editors and peer reviewers are from different geographical regions, different institutions, different gender identities, racial/ethnic groups, and other groups when onboarding and promoting peer reviewers. Further, authors may now opt for a regional or global peer review of their manuscript, which we think would allow the less developed regions share their research, no matter how relevant or irrelevant it might be to be much developed regions.

Section B

Code of Conduct for Editors and Peer Reviewers.

We expect our editors and peer reviewers to abide by the following:

Protect all Intellectual property on the USP, including the workings of the USP, and

the research content of submitted manuscripts on the platform.

Ensure no bias or partiality of any sort in peer review and/or editorial works.

Editors and peer reviewers must adhere to time and submit their reports within the allowed timeframe. Delays have a knock-on effect and are completely unacceptable.

Ensure that the research is novel and adds value to the field of study. Editors and peer reviewers must make sure that similar research has not been published and the results are new which add value to the research.

The editor and peer reviewers have the responsibility of rejecting every low quality manuscript that does not deserve peer review, or that constitutes a waste of reviewers time.

The editor has the responsibility of deleting inappropriate submissions to the platform.

The editor must ensure that there is no fabrication/falsification. If such evidence is found during the review process and/or after the article has been published, the article needs to be retracted

Retraction will be based on the guidelines provided by COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) as well as our own internal guidelines.

Editors and peer reviewers must check to ensure that all the relevant references are cited, and the citation follows the right format.

If an editor or a peer reviewer comes across any instance of potential citation manipulation, it is the duty of the editor to inform Unified Scholars of any suspicion of such event. Any relevant competing interests which may influence the editorial or the peer-review decision.

Conflict of interest- The editor and the peer reviewers should not take of any articles for review in case there is or might be conflicting interest which might be a factor to influence your decision.

Ensure that the authors disclose the funding resources and any related sources that were used in the study. If any animal or human sample is used, appropriate resources and provide “ethics statement”

Editor must ensure confidentiality while reviewing an article and must not disclose any information that might interfere with the decision regarding the article. Any image/graphic and or content should not be shared on any platform that does not ensure guarantee.

Must use only approved software to detect potential plagiarism, if necessary; and follow COPE guidelines where there is a significant level of similarity with other

works.

Ensure that the comments whether in favor or in disagreement should be fair and balanced and not derogatory and/or defamatory.

All the comments provided by the editor and the peer reviewers with respect to the work should be respectful.

Unconstructive criticism should be avoided. In case of any correction to any image/graphics/data and or interpretation of image/graphics/data, the corrected articles will be published mentioning that it is the “corrected version”.

Editors and peer reviewers cannot accept any payments or non-financial incentives in relation to manuscripts, journal or the publications except for those specifically authorized by Unified Scholars.

Editors and peer reviewers must immediately report to Unified Scholars any potential payments or non-financial incentives offered in relation to the journal or the publications to Unified Scholars.

Section C

Complaints and Appeal Policy

1. General concerns or complaints

Anybody wishing to raise a concern or make a complaint about any aspect of a review (done on the Unified Scholars Platform, USP) should email Unified Scholars via the official email [admin@unifiedscholars.org]. Please note that USP staff do not comment on editorial decision. Please quote your user id and script id in your correspondence.

USP aims to acknowledge receipt of an email within 5 business days. Our staff will then lead an investigation following the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Ethical Guidelines. The investigation will establish whether the concern or complaint is valid, and then dig deeper into the issues. The investigator would check whether the correct procedures have been followed during peer review and whether our policies have been adhered to. USP will review the submission history and any correspondences. It may also contact the parties involved to obtain further information where necessary while respecting personal data privacy.

The complainant will be advised of the outcome in writing. USP aims to resolve issues within six weeks.

Note that investigations can take several weeks or more depending on the nature of the concern or complaint, the availability of relevant data and information, whether multiple authors and scripts are involved, and possible involvement of the author's institution or other external parties.

In the interest of due process, and in order to allow the investigation to proceed without prejudice, we respectfully request that anyone raising a concern or complaint should allow the process to conclude before publicly commenting on the case.

If the author wishes to pursue their complaint further, they may contact COPE directly. Information can be found on the COPE website: <https://publicationethics.org/facilitation-and-integrity-subcommittee>

2. Appealing an editorial decision

Editors have very broad discretion in determining whether a submission is worthy of peer review. Many submissions are desk rejected by the editor, without the need for peer review. In this situation, the author would get a feedback which explains the bases for such decision. These decisions are not eligible for formal appeal, except in the very rare situations where the bases of desk rejection can be challenged with evidence. Or if there was a procedural flaw or a breach of company policy involved in the desk rejection. Else, we strongly advise against appealing desk rejections outside the bases mentioned above.

If after peer review, a manuscript is rejected. The author can only appeal against the decision IF the rejection was not in accordance with company policy and procedures. This is the only bases for appeal in this situation.

If an author disagrees with a reviewer/editor feedback, the author may report that feedback, and follow up by sending us an email which provides a detailed point-by-point response to the feedback you disagree with. The editor or, if his comments are in contention, another editor will review the feedback and advise appropriately. The decision made following this complaint review is final.

Please note that in accordance with our policy to uphold editorial independence, USP staff does not adjudicate between an author and editor when there is a difference of opinion on the final decision. It is a scholars affair. However, if there is a solid bases to disagree with reviewer feedback, we would assign the case to another expert in the field to review and advise appropriately. Our staff are not directly involved.

3. Complaints about publications

All concerns raised about a published paper are investigated confidentially and in

accordance with COPE guidelines. We aim to provide a feedback within four to six weeks.

The nature of investigation would depend on the specific complaint that was made. It would be led by a senior publisher within Unified Scholars, and may involve the publishing contractor that published the paper.

Unified Scholars would preserve the anonymity of the complainant as best as possible. However, we recognize that certain complaints may reveal the identity of the person raising the concern.

Unified Scholars will update the complainant once the investigation is complete and an appropriate action has been determined.

4. Appealing corrective action taken post-publication

If concerns are raised on a published article, the will consult the COPE guidelines (including retraction guidelines), consult with the contracting publisher, and determine whether a published article needs to be retracted or that other corrective action or notification needs to be made to the published article.

Unified Scholars and the contracted publisher reserve the right to take corrective action as they deem necessary, in keeping with their responsibility to maintain a transparent and accurate academic record.

If new evidence impacting the underlying decision comes to light prior to the specified deadline for comment, we would consider such evidence. Authors would be notified and kept abreast of events regarding his/her publication; and they reserve the right to appeal any decision that is being considered. Appeals will be considered by Unified Scholars and the contracting publisher

Decisions taken after an appeal by the author are final. There is no opportunity for further appeal.

Section D

Corrections and Retraction Policy

Unified Scholars might issue correction, retraction statements and/or other post-publication updates, including but not limited to editorial notes expressing concerns on published content which may include images/data analysis and/or data interpretation.

Significant errors in the supplemental or supporting data are corrected in the same manner as the corrections in the main article.

Addendum: An addendum is notification of an addition of information to the article after it has been approved by peer-reviewers. Addenda do not contradict the original article; it adds information to the original article in case when the authors inadvertently omits significant piece of information that may help the reader understand the publication.

Addenda are rarely published and only when the editors decide that it adds significantly to the understanding of the publication and that it benefits the readers.

Errata: An erratum will be published describing the corrections. A significant error in a figure and/or in a table will be published as an erratum, if necessary. This is under the discretion of Unifed Scholars and the publishing contractor.

The article is retained with the journal; however, a notice of erratum is given to the authors.

Corrigenda: A corrigendum notifies of an important error made by the authors in the article. Corrigenda are published after discussion among editors and peer-reviewers. All co-authors must achieve a consensus on the wording and must sign corrigenda submitted for publication.

Retraction: It a notice that the published article cannot be a part of the scientific literature owing to unreliability of the data and/or the interpretations from the data. A retraction will be issued if the findings in the article are found to be unreliable or tampered with; and/or if there is data fabrication and/or falsification.

Retraction might also take place if:

i) The findings have been previously published elsewhere without appropriate citations and references; and the article lacks novelty

ii) If the work is plagiarized

iii) If unethical means have been used to obtain, analyze and/or interpret the data

Retraction will follow the COPE guidelines. Retracted articles will bear a "retracted" watermark throughout.

This policy is updated on a continuous basis. Please check back later.