

Editorial

# The Sound of “Quaternary”

Jef Vandenberghe 

Department of Earth Sciences, Vrije Universiteit, De Boelelaan 1085, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; jef.vandenberghe@vu.nl

Received: 7 May 2020; Accepted: 15 May 2020; Published: 19 May 2020



**Abstract:** It is useful to re-consider at specific times the strategy of a journal. Some thoughts are expressed here at the occasion of the renewal of the editorship of “Quaternary”. No changes are envisaged in the multidisciplinary character of the journal. In addition, it is felt necessary to increasingly attract the creative input from underrepresented researchers in Quaternary science (e.g., young scientists, female scientists, scientists from weakly developed countries).

**Keywords:** multidisciplinary; Quaternary publications; underrepresented authors

---

## 1. The Identity of “Quaternary”

After a few years since its launch, the journal “Quaternary” has abandoned its phase of infancy. Now that the editorial chair has been renewed recently, it may be an appropriate moment of reflection on the status of the journal through considering the trajectory it has been following until now, and the prospect that we wish for in the future.

A new journal is as a newborn child. As a baby it should carve out its place in an already well-populated world. Under the pioneering leadership of the first chief-editor, Prof. Dr. Valenti Rull, and supported by the well-motivated editorial management, the journal was until now able to attract a sufficient number of papers for three volumes. Such numbers are not appropriate to present the complete picture while quality is set to be the principal objective. In that sense, the rejection rate of submitted papers appears to be a more revealing figure. The latter percentage for “Quaternary” is at present 43% [1], which is, to my experience, a very normal percentage for high-ranked journals in earth science.

After the period of childhood, an adolescent is looking for his/her own place in the surrounding world. Likewise, “Quaternary” has to look at what focus and strategy it wants to envisage in the next years. Should it only intend to increase the number of journals, publishing a rich diversity of Quaternary research studies from all over the world, or opt for its own sound in the world of Quaternary publishing. The former option seems to be attractive and is applied by several Quaternary journals. In contrast, other journals aim, for instance, for review papers, while others (mainly society journals) prefer a specific regional focus. A broad scope (the first option) does not require any other criteria than quality for selecting papers out of the bunch of supplied submissions, and it takes advantage of the typical multidisciplinary of Quaternary research and the global validity of processes in reconstructing the Quaternary environment. There are numerous examples of Quaternary environmental reconstruction where the application of a multidisciplinary approach was successful, or even necessary, e.g., [2], although precautions have to be kept in mind [3]. Looking at the “aims and scope” of our journal “Quaternary”, it shows clearly that we are also following that strategy by attracting papers from the rich diversity of disciplines that investigate the Quaternary period, going from stratigraphy to ecology, over geomorphology or geoarchaeology, to name only a few [4]. Without any restriction, integrative approaches are favoured for Quaternary reconstructions. The rationale behind this philosophy is “to provide a sound scientific basis for understanding the intrinsically complex world in which we

live” [3]. In that respect, it may be mentioned that we are, for instance, now formally considered as a “friendly journal of the ‘Peer Community in Archaeology’”.

Thus, there is nothing wrong with such a strategy, which should further be confirmed and supported. However, is it sufficiently distinctive in the competitive world of publishing Quaternary research? In an orchestra, different instruments can give the performance a peculiar colour or create an inherent atmosphere. Following our previous parallel, “Quaternary” is as the adolescent who is searching for its own ‘nest’ in the society without losing its intrinsic identity. That is the point where I want to arrive and that I want to suggest: starting from the present strategy and keeping what we have reached by now, adding some supplementary flavour that will be specific to, and enrich, our journal.

## 2. Suggested Specific Additional Sound for “Quaternary”

One particular characteristic of present-day publishing that strikes me is the following: analysing the authorship of published papers reveals immediately recognizable asymmetry in different senses. Every senior researcher knows from his/her own experience that there is an immense, presently underrepresented population of researchers who have less or no chance to arrive at publishing their results. At first, geographical distribution is hopelessly unequal. Of course, it is without doubt that the quality of research is not at the same level everywhere. In weakly developed countries, scientists are usually hampered by reduced research tradition and funds, divergent governmental priorities and, as a result, relatively poor research facilities. In addition, they often have no or only limited experience in setting up a scientific paper and miss a qualified supervisor assisting them. However, their regions offer frequently characteristic opportunities for research, especially in earth sciences including the Quaternary. For example, it is sad to see that scientists from (sub)tropical and (semi-)arid countries are largely missing in the publishing record.

Secondly, young researchers in general are relatively poorly represented as first authors. However, they frequently attend conferences, yes to learn, where they expose their often fresh and creative, sometimes even provocative, ideas. Equally striking is the gender inequality. Female (first) authors are clearly underrepresented in comparison with male authors without any obvious reason. Despite that the number of female Quaternary scientists is lower in general than the number of their male colleagues, their participation in publishing is disproportionately low. A quick scan of the authors in “Quaternary” reveals that the number of female authors until now is only slightly above 25%.

I am convinced that it is a missed chance by neglecting these groups of youngsters, people from weakly developed countries and female researchers. They have so much to contribute to our science and it would be an unpardonable failure to leave such a reservoir of potential creativity unexplored. These groups have in common that they may need help at several levels. Primarily, some guidance is required in preparing and finishing a research manuscript, a task for all involved senior researchers. In addition, for the members of the editorial board and advisory members of “Quaternary”, I suggest to pay special attention in the reviewing process. Certainly not by “facilitating” papers of mediocre quality, but by guiding them in the process of (sometimes repeated) revision. Ultimately, I cannot let apart one particular aspect at the level of the publisher, which is the adhered open access (OA) system of publishing. Honestly, I was never a fan of that system as it bears the risk of further discriminating the underrepresented groups as stated above by imposing an “authors publication fee”. This contrasts the obvious benefits for them of freely accessing peer-reviewed literature without price barriers. Fortunately, our publisher MDPI states on its website that “in fields with low levels of funding, where authors typically do not have funds available, authors [publication] fees are typically waived ...”. I was persuaded that when the OA is applied in such a way it indeed opens access not only for readers but also for authors “from low- and middle-income countries, [for whom] waivers or discounts may be granted on a case-by-case basis” [5]. This may establish a real, bi-directional OA for scientific communication.

I am convinced that opening perspectives and help to such as yet less favoured groups of scientists will provide a novel, characteristic sound in the world of reporting multi-disciplinary Quaternary research.

## References

1. Su, J. Quarterly report of the *Quaternary* journal, 16 April 2020.
2. Vandenberghe, J.; Coope, G.R.; Kasse, C. Quantitative reconstructions of palaeoclimates during the last interglacial-glacial in western and central Europe: An introduction. *J. Quat. Sci.* **1998**, *13*, 361–366. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Vandenberghe, J. Multi-proxy analysis: A reflection on essence and potential pitfalls. *Neth. J. Geosc.* **2012**, *91*, 263–269. [[CrossRef](#)]
4. Rull, V. Quaternary—A Multidisciplinary Integrative Journal to Cope with a Complex World. *Quaternary* **2018**, *1*, 1. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Article Processing Charges (APC) Information. Available online: <https://www.mdpi.com/apc> (accessed on 6 May 2020).



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).