Professor Jennifer Rowley, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, interviewed by Ian White, Publisher, Routledge Education Journals at Manchester Metropolitan University, 19th February 2013.

Q1. The *Journal of Further and Higher Education* is the official journal of the University and College Union (UCU); where did the idea for the journal originate from and how did it arrive at its current Aims and Scope?

Well, the journal started as the Professional Practice Journal of NATFHE [National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education], which was a union that was one of the predecessors of the UCU. It’s now in its thirty-seventh annual volume, so it’s been going for quite a long time and its aim has always been to encourage dialogue, investigation and reflection on policy, management and practice in the context of Further and Higher Education.

Q2. How would you describe the readership of the journal?

Well, the journal has a community and that community comprises the members of its Editorial Boards, the considerable panel of reviewers and referees, authors and most importantly, the readers of the journal. Those groups, those audiences, include managers, lecturers, teachers and researchers working in Further Education, Vocational Education and in a variety of different subject disciplines in universities, as well as people involved in staff development and teacher training. So it’s quite a wide collection of different constituencies in the Education sector.

Q3. Would you seek to widen the journal’s audience appeal?

The audience that we’ve already got – the community around the journal – it’s important to retain that and also, it’s important that for the journal going forward that it retains its focus on the factors that affect the learning experience and excellence in research and practice in Further and Higher Education. But recently we’ve made quite significant progress with increasing the appeal of the journal to a more international audience. For the future, I perceive it as being important that we will continue that process.

We have quite significant participation for the journal, both in terms of submissions, authors and also in terms of engagement with the refereeing process in Australasia, in Australia and New Zealand. But apart from that, there are contributors and participants in various ways with the journal, in the United States, in Canada, in some of the Scandinavian countries, also quite a strong constituency in Far Eastern areas such as Hong Kong, Malaysia and the like.

Q4. How has the journal evolved over time? For example, what did the journal set out to cover and what does it aim to cover now?

I think, in principle, the coverage of the journal hasn’t really changed over time. Obviously, the specific topics that come up now might be somewhat different to some of the specifics that might’ve been in existence back, sort of perhaps, some thirty years ago. But the focus of the journal was, and still is, on areas such as management, policy, curriculum development, staff development and teacher training and teaching and learning approaches, strategies and processes. So those are things which are, all areas, which continue to be of interest and persist in their interest of the Education
sector. I look forward to the journal continuing to make a contribution to the Further, Higher and Vocational Education communities, both within the UK and Internationally.

Q5. As Editor-in-Chief, can you identify any current ‘hot topic’ areas?

In recent years, the journal’s carried quite a few articles on the transition between – student transition – between schools and Further and Higher Education; if you like, the movement between one part of the sector and another. There has been quite a lot of interest in student motivation and retention, also in things such as ‘bridging’ courses that bridge different kinds of student experiences and different kinds of institutions and on foundation courses. Also another area which is a persistent area of interest is looking into the student experience, of delivering and studying Higher Education courses in colleges in the Further and Vocational Education sector.

Overall, I’d say that the scope of the journal’s very wide, that’s one of its strengths but one of its challenges but that means that specific topics for articles evolve really as the Education sector changes. So hence, within the sort of broader portfolio of areas that we’re looking at, we will have in different issues, a different sort of collection of different kinds of topics. So for example, in the most recent issue of the journal, carried articles on, for example, the performance of MBA students, work-based learning, students with learning disabilities in Further Education, student satisfaction and the career aspirations of doctoral students and, generally, a study of perceptions of teaching and learning from the teachers’ and the students’ perspectives.

Q6. Who conducts the Peer Review for the journal?

Reviews are conducted by members of the Editorial Boards and by members of our international refereeing panel. All of the members of those boards, and indeed all reviewers, are experienced researchers and teachers or other people with significant and relevant experience in Further and Higher Education. So what happens is that when an article is submitted to the journal, two reviewers are chosen who have the appropriate subject expertise.

That’s a blind review process, so neither the authors know who the reviewers are and the reviewers don’t know who the authors are.

Q7. In addition to reviewing for the journal, what other role do the Editorial Boards play?

Well, the journal’s got two Editorial Boards; the Editorial Board and the Editorial Advisory Board. The members of those boards are listed on the journal website and in the printed issues of the journal, if you want to consult those lists and see who the people are that are involved with the journal. The Editorial Board is responsible for receiving reports from the Editor and the Publisher and advising on the development of the journal, so it takes some role in pro-actively commenting on how the journal might develop and what its future might be. The Editorial Advisory Board tend to be more focused on refereeing and supporting us in the referee process. The Editorial Advisory board is more of an international board.

Q8. What’s the journal’s policy regarding Special Issues? Is there a commissioning procedure?

We have, on occasions, commissioned Special Issues for the journal but we don’t tend to do this on a regular basis. However, I’m always happy to have conversations with potential Special Issue editors.
and to explore with them whether their proposed topic aligns with the journal’s Aims and Scope. So we’re always prepared to have conversations and consider Special Issues but we don’t necessarily go looking for them.

Q9. What advice would you give to a prospective author who would like to be published in the journal?

Well first and foremost, I think it’s important that the prospective authors read the statement of the journal’s scope and the notes for contributors – both of these are to be found, again, either on the journal website or in printed issues of the journal. It’s also important, I think, for authors to look at recent issues of the journal and to get a sense of the debates and topics that are of interest to the journal community and to the journal audiences and also to learn from looking at those articles, the kinds of approaches that the authors take to debate and to research processes. Finally, on that point, I would say that any articles that are not within the scope or do not adhere to the conventions of the journal, in terms of the format, will be desk rejected. So it really is quite important for authors to look very carefully at the notes for contributors.

One other point is that sometimes, authors may find it difficult to decide whether their particular proposed manuscript is within the scope of the journal. If you do have any doubts about whether your article’s in scope for the journal, or of potential interest to readers of the journal, I’m very happy to receive an abstract of your article by email and to offer advice accordingly.

Q10. What do you look for when you’re considering article submissions?

Good articles have four key features: contribution, rigour, readability and relevance and these are really quite important to reflect on and I think it’s important to stand back from any manuscript you’re about to submit and check. They’re standard criteria that most journals will use when they’re considering whether or not to publish a particular manuscript, so it’s useful to think about these things.

So, ‘contribution’ is arguably the most important. All articles need to add something; they need to add to existing debate, or they need to add to theory or knowledge. They must have something new to offer and they must demonstrate this and they demonstrate it typically through the way they distil and identify the gaps in the previous literature and explain how their particular arguments or research fills those gaps or seeks to fill some of those gaps.

The second point is ‘rigour’ and that’s also important. Rigour’s mainly demonstrated through the research design and methodology, or in the case of theoretical or issue-based articles, the quality of the argumentation. For empirical studies it is really important to have a robust research design and, equally important, to explain carefully the sources of data on which the findings, recommendations and conclusions are based.

Moving on to ‘readability’, we think that it’s very important that all articles that are published in the journal must be a pleasure to read. So this means that articles must not be overladen with complex arguments, or too many tables and graphs and they must be clearly structured according to the format normally expected for an academic article.
Finally, for the things that you would usefully consider when you are thinking about submission is the issues, perhaps, of ‘relevance’ and again, this goes back to the issue of the scope of the journal but now we’re really thinking of the audience – what will the audience actually be interested in. So a key question that referees are asked to give their opinion on is: will this article be of interest to the readership of the journal? So, for example, will this article assist lecturers, tutors, teachers, researchers and trainers to reflect on their professional roles and activities and to improve their practice?

Q11. Could you explain the process of Peer Review? I.e. what happens to an author’s paper and what kind of decisions are made.

Well, first of all, once you’ve submitted your manuscript into the manuscript submission system, we’ll acknowledge that we’ve received it and you’ll get an automatic email fairly soon after you’ve submitted. Following on from that, very soon after that we will allocate reviewers to your manuscript – I think the important thing to remember at that particular point, is that reviewers are all volunteers and they can all choose not to review something that doesn’t interest them, so you need to do some work, looking at your title and your abstract, to make sure that it actually grabs the reviewers interest and attention. If it doesn’t, then they’re quite likely to decline the invitation to review your particular manuscript, then we will go into a circle where we’ll try to allocate another reviewer, but there’s a fair chance, if the title and abstract didn’t attract one reviewer, it won’t attract the next one, and, if you’re not careful, you can enter a circle of looking for a reviewer, which will inevitably mean there is quite a bit of delay in your manuscript being reviewed.

I think the priority is to make sure, when we get to the stage where the article has been accepted then, at that point, the article will be going into electronic databases, where it will be important that when somebody’s doing a search they can actually retrieve your article and the keywords, need not only to be identified as ‘key’ words but they also need to appear in the title and there are also instances where it will be a good idea if you think about which keywords you have got in the abstract as well.

So, there are four standard outcomes which are sort of prescribed in the system and we usually, more or less, work within these. The standard outcomes are; accept, minor amendments or revisions, major revisions or reject. Let’s start with the two either end to start with: ‘Accept’ – you celebrate! If you’ve got an ‘accept’ without any other revision processes before your acceptance, in other words, you’ve got an ‘accept’ on your first submission, then you’re in the 1% of authors that have managed to achieve this, so you’ve done extremely well. Let’s move to ‘reject’; ‘reject’ usually means a seriously flaw with the article. It is likely to mean that maybe the manuscript is regarded as out of scope, it may mean that the methodological basis for the research, if it’s an empirical piece of research, is seen to be flawed, fundamentally flawed, or it may be that the arguments are not sufficiently grounded on previous research and the fact that there’s not a clear contribution coming through. Basically, we reject articles where we’ve not got enough evidence to feel confident that after further revision they would be potentially acceptable.

All the decisions are made by me as editor, on the basis of the referee’s recommendations and should I have some concerns, sometimes I’ll get – it’s not unknown – to get an ‘accept’ from one referee and a ‘reject’ from another, then I will send the manuscript out for a third referee, as well as looking at the comments myself and that again, however, will delay the refereeing process a little bit
because we've had the first round of decisions and then we've had to ask for somebody else to look at things. Usually that third referee will be a very experienced member of the editorial board who are in a strong position to, if you like, ‘mediate’ the situation.

Minor and major amendments are much more interesting; you should, especially if you’re a new author, regard either minor or major amendments as the door opening. In other words, a success but it’s moderated success. What you very much need to do with minor and major amendments is you need to read the referee’s comments very carefully and you need to go through them point by point and address all those points as well as you are able. There may be one or two that you can’t address, and you can maybe explain why you can’t address them, but you should be addressing virtually all of the comments that are being offered to you in one way or another. If you have minor amendments, if you do a careful job of responding to what the referees are asking of you to do, there is no reason whatsoever why you shouldn’t have that second submission accepted.

Major amendments are a bit more challenging and sometimes it does involve quite a bit of significant re-writing of parts of the article or perhaps restructuring. Major amendments are usually awarded where we think that there’s some evidence to suggest there’s some good arguments there, some useful contribution lying there somewhere, some good research has been conducted but it’s really nor presented sufficiently in terms of perhaps positioning the contribution, or perhaps in terms of the crafting or the writing of the article. So major amendments usually means that there is something we would like to see published but there is quite a big task to do. So, generally speaking, you should not think that you can do major amendments overnight, you need to go away and think about them, come back with a revised manuscript. You will find, particularly if you’ve got a minor or major amendment, particularly if you’ve got a major amendment, you’ll find that the referees comments from the journal are often quite extensive. This is because the journal has a culture of being fairly supportive and helpful and certainly, if you get two sets of referee’s comments, which are quite elaborate, it can look quite intimidating to start with but actually working through them point by point, you’ll find that at the end of the day you’ve got an extremely, significantly improved submission and often then moved then to an acceptance.

Q12. Is there anything you would advise authors specifically to do before they even consider submitting a paper to the journal?

Going back to the point about reading the notes for contributors, is important. I would also make the comment that there are a collection of resources on the Taylor and Francis website, which can assist you in thinking about these processes. What can often be very useful for new authors, if they’ve not written before, is to actually write with somebody else, to work with somebody else. Another option of course is to get somebody, a colleague, to review your manuscript and give you some advice on that, but I think it’s better actually if you’re working collaboratively with them because that involves them and they actually know what, what you’re trying to say and what the research is about, rather better than, if you like, a sort of reviewer on the side, but certainly, it’s very useful to have looked/to get somebody else to look at these things carefully. I think the other point as well, if you’re an author who first language is not English it’s very important to try and find somebody who will proofread that or help you with that to get it into a standard which, if not completely perfect, is very close to being perfect at the first submission.