

REVIEWING THE REVIEW: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Noel Hyndman

University of Ulster at Jordanstown

Keith Warnock

University College Galway

ABSTRACT

This paper summarises the development of the Irish Accounting Review from the first publication in 1990 of the Proceedings of the Irish Accounting and Finance Association's Annual Conference to the present. It discusses the role of the Review in fulfilling the objectives of the Association, outlines the editorial and refereeing procedures in place, and offers advice to authors on steps to take to increase the chances of publication. It presents some comparisons of the activities of the Association with those of the British Accounting Association, in the context of possible increased circulation of the Review in the future. The paper concludes with comment on the support which has been received in the development of the Irish Accounting Review.

INTRODUCTION

The first publication of the Irish Accounting Association (as it was then called) was the *Proceedings* of the Annual Conference 1990. This was followed by two further volumes of *Proceedings*, covering the 1991 and 1992 Conferences. The decision was then made to undertake the publication of the *Irish Accounting Review*, and the first issue of the *Review* appeared in Spring 1994; as might have been anticipated, it was based entirely on papers presented at the Association's 1993 Conference. A

further single issue of the *Review* appeared for 1995, and in 1996 two issues were published for the first time, establishing the present pattern.

This paper presents some data on the contents of the issues of the *Proceedings* and the *Review* to date, discusses the editorial policy and the approach which the editors have taken to the editorial and refereeing process, and summarises experience in terms of the number of papers submitted and the results of the refereeing and editorial processes. It also raises some questions about the circulation of the *Review*. The editors hope that the publication of the paper will give members of the Association a chance to comment and criticise, and provide an insight for existing and potential contributors into the editorial and refereeing processes. The venture is inherently a co-operative one. The editors rely heavily on voluntary referees, and a major aspect of the role is seen as mediating between the aspirations of contributors, the requirements of readers, and the (allegedly objective) criterion of scholarly value.

EDITORIAL AND REFEREEING PROCEDURES

Any discussion of editorial and refereeing procedures must take place against a background of the editorial policy. Reproduced in every issue of the *Review*, this states:

The *Irish Accounting Review* is published by the Irish Accounting and Finance Association as part of the process of fulfilling its objective to advance accounting and related disciplines in the education and research fields in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The *Review's* policy is to publish suitable papers in any of the areas of accounting, finance and their related disciplines. Papers in all categories of scholarly activity will be considered, including (but not limited to) reports on empirical research, analytical papers, review articles, papers dealing with pedagogical issues, and critical essays.

All submissions which pass an initial editorial scrutiny will be subject to double-blind refereeing. Referees will be asked to assess papers on the basis of their relevance, originality, readability and quality (including, for empirical work, research design and execution). In determining

relevance, the editors will be influenced by the Association's objectives; thus, papers reporting on empirical work will be viewed more favourably if they deal with data relevant to those working in Ireland. Similarly, papers that have previously formed the basis of a presentation at the Association's annual conference will be particularly welcomed.

The wording has been carefully chosen. If scholarly value were the only criterion, the editors might conceivably find themselves at some date in the future publishing technically flawless studies of increasing statistical sophistication on topics of very little relevance to the average Irish accounting academic. If relevance to an Irish audience were the only criterion, they might find themselves excluding interesting and outstanding papers by scholars who had visited the Annual Conference and decided to leave a permanent monument to their visit. As often, the answer would seem to be to attempt to strike an appropriate balance. The degree to which the Association's activities have taken on an international dimension is explored at greater length later in this paper, but it seems appropriate at this stage to note (in **Table 1**) the origins of the papers published (with origins measured simply by reference to the country of institutional affiliation of the author(s) at the time of publication):

Table 1: Papers published by origin

Date of publication	Publication	Ireland	Britain	Other
1991	1990 Proceedings	9	0	0
1992	1991 Proceedings	11	0	0
1993	1992 Proceedings	7.5	1	0.5
1994	1994 Review	11	1	2
1995	1995 Review	6	1	1
1996	1996 Review, No.1	4	1	2
1996	1996 Review, No.2	2	1	2
1997	1997 Review, No.1	5	0.5	0.5
Totals		55.5	5.5	8

As editors, clearly we know who submits each paper. To ensure a degree of objectivity, our practice is not to review any of the papers ourselves, but to send them to referees who are asked to submit an independent assessment. Referees are chosen on the basis of expertise in the subject matter (interpreted broadly) and to avoid conflict of interest (as might arise if we chose as a referee someone from the same institution as the author). Independent review is not always appropriate; for instance, when Gary Sundem agreed to submit a version of his plenary presentation in Belfast in 1995, this was subject only to editorial review. The ability of the Association (aided and abetted by its supporters in the professional accounting bodies) to attract top class speakers to our regular seminars (recent years have seen such names as George Foster, Ken Merchant and Robert Kaplan) raises the possibility that invited contributions of this nature may be a more frequent feature of the *Review*.

The role of the referees is a vital one. We have avoided the idea of an editorial board of well-known names from around the world. We call on members of the Irish academic accounting community, and those in overseas institutions who have participated in our activities or are in some way connected to the Association. Generally, we choose referees who have themselves successfully passed through the reviewing process of the *Irish Accounting Review* or some other refereed journal. Referees are not told the name or details of the author(s), and we as editors will interpret reports in the light of our knowledge of the different stages of academic and personal development of those who submit. Our overall objective is to assist in raising the standards of the Irish academic accounting community, but without closing off avenues for improvement. For this reason, we encourage our reviewers to make constructive comments, and we take considerable comfort from the fact that so many authors have stated that the comments of the referees have improved their papers.

Some referees are new to the task and approach it with apprehension. Our ideal is a report of between one and four pages, setting out suggestions on how the paper might be improved and commenting on shortcomings in structure, argument or presentation. The length of the report is a factor of whether the reviewer chooses to annotate and return a copy of the paper. Of course, it is also strongly influenced by the standard of the paper concerned. Some papers are presented with an apparent lack of concern for the importance of making the reviewer's task as simple

as possible. In this context, it is worth suggesting that novice writers (and some that are not, indeed) might refer to a paper such as Zimmerman (1989), which sets out clearly many of the pitfalls into which writers may fall. These include such mistakes as submitting a paper without asking any colleague to read it over and presenting the paper as a history of the research process, rather than in a form calculated to facilitate the understanding and enjoyment of the reader. It may be tempting for authors to believe that the details of presentation may be postponed for consideration until after acceptance in principle; this ignores the clear possibility that poor presentation will inevitably tend to prejudice a reviewer or editor towards rejection.

Partly in an attempt to foster a development towards a uniformly high standard of reviewing, we generally circulate to each referee the comments of the other. In some cases, this reveals a major conflict, which can be as blunt as the difference between unambiguous advice to reject from one reviewer and unambiguous advice to accept from the other. In the face of differences, our aim is to be as generous as possible in the light of our overall objective.

One of our difficulties with referees is the problem of delay. Having inherited a system based on the edited conference proceedings, we still tend to have a mass review of papers taking place between the end of June and the middle of September. We favour moving towards a tighter system, where referees are asked to provide their comments within six weeks of receipt of the paper. Our feeling is that the task of reviewing is difficult but not overwhelming; exactly the sort of task that we all tend to leave until (or slightly after) the deadline. Good performance, in terms of a prompt response, will not be punished; except in unusual circumstances, we want no referee to have to look at more than two papers a year. In most cases, we have avoided returning papers to reviewers for a second look after revision, preferring to read the papers ourselves in the light of the reviewer's comments and the responses which we seek from authors as to how these comments have been dealt with. As we move further from an annual cycle with its simple alternative of acceptance or rejection, we will probably be returning to referees for a second opinion more frequently. A second review is often considerably less demanding of time than the initial task.

As some acknowledgement of the vital role they play, we provide in an Appendix to this paper a list of those who have acted as reviewers since

we undertook the task of editors. We are very grateful for their co-operation.

Although as editors we do not review the papers, the detailed work of editing is still significant. The physical processing of papers, the selection of and correspondence with referees, the responses to and ongoing discussions with authors all take time. Frequently, we meet to discuss the papers and the referees' reports, since each paper is handled initially by one of the editors only. Our task is not made easier by the failure of authors to adhere to guidelines. The notes to contributors, reproduced in each issue, set out in detail how papers should be presented (the notes are kept under review and we expect to issue a revised version in either the next or the following edition). Detailed illustrations are given of, for example, the practice to be adopted in relation to references; despite this, it is not uncommon for as many as 100 errors to require correction in the references alone. These may be for matters as trivial as using a comma where the guide requires a full-stop, or using italics where the guide requires a normal font and vice versa; but it requires significant time from editors, those who assist us in preparing the text for printing, or both. On balance, our impression is that for authors who have published extensively elsewhere the error rate in presentation is low; for authors who have not, it is high. The objective of raising the standards of scholarship in Ireland requires action on even this detailed level, so no doubt there will be a steady tightening of standards in the future as the realisation dawns that reviewers and editors are less inclined to favour the submissions of authors who have not bothered to ensure a reasonable level of compliance with the guidelines.

To conclude this section, we show in **Table 2** what our overall experience has been in terms of acceptance and rejection since we undertook the role of editors in 1994. The data relate to *Reviews* published after 1994.

Table 2: Papers received May 1994 to July 1997

	Total	Ireland	Britain	Other
Papers received	64	48	7.5	8.5
Rejected for publication	21	17	2	2
Accepted outright	1	0	0	1
Accepted subject to minor revisions	11	9	2	0
Accepted subject to major revisions	15	9	1.5	4.5
Pending as at July 1997	16	13	2	1

This indicates an acceptance rate of 56 per cent for the period, on the basis that a paper is counted as having being 'accepted' if it is eventually published regardless of whether a major rewrite has been required, or several rounds of revision have occurred. Acceptance rates for the *British Accounting Review* have recently been lower (BAA, 1996), with the figure for 1994 to 1995 being 29 per cent. Direct comparisons of these figures may be inappropriate because of different bases of calculation. Notwithstanding this, higher acceptance rates for the *Irish Accounting Review* may reflect the success of the practice of encouraging authors to revise or rewrite if at all possible. Furthermore, the lower acceptance rates of the *British Accounting Review* may, at least in part, reflect the extent to which it receives a large number of non-UK papers which have possibly been rejected elsewhere; this is suggested by the fact that only 18 per cent of non-UK papers were accepted for publication during the period. The circulation policy of the *Irish Accounting Review* may have avoided the difficulties of such a scenario. This is discussed further in a later section of the paper.

One important addendum to this table is that, in some cases, authors have been too inclined to accept the initial response as a rejection, when in fact it could be read as leaving open the possibility of re-submission after revision. The protocol of this delicate situation suggests that an unambiguous invitation to resubmit is an implied promise to publish the result if the major points of the reviewers are dealt with. Where the editors are unsure how the paper will emerge from the re-writing process, they may stop short of an explicit invitation to resubmit for this

reason. Authors are free to improve the paper and send it in again in these circumstances.

INTERNATIONALISING THE REVIEW

In the discussion of our editorial and refereeing procedures, we raised the dilemma of balancing the international dimension with the objective of fostering the development of academic accounting within Ireland. Our experience to date has been that very few submissions have given the impression of being sent to the *Irish Accounting Review* as one more journal on the list of many possible outlets to be tried. The majority of the papers published from British and other overseas contributors have been based on papers presented at our Conferences. This reinforces the strength of the publication, particularly when it can be seen that many of those who have contributed to the *Proceedings* and the *Review* (including Irish contributors) have also published in other major refereed journals. Recently these have included:

- Accounting and Business Research
- Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal
- Accounting Education
- Advances in Public Interest Accounting
- British Accounting Review
- European Accounting Review
- Financial Accountability and Management
- Journal of Applied Accounting Research
- Journal of Business Finance and Accounting
- Journal of Information Technology

Circulation of the *Review* has so far been restricted almost exclusively to members of the Association. Thus, it was not surprising that our existence was undiscovered (or ignored) by the 12 libraries used by Zeff (1996) as a basis for his assessment of the burgeoning accounting literature; indeed, given our reticence, one has to admire his diligence in discovering our existence for himself. As editors, we have suggested to the Association's Council that we should ensure that the *Review* is found in the libraries of all Irish third-level institutions where accounting is taught. More problematic is the question of whether we should promote ourselves more widely overseas, particularly in Britain. In fa-

your is the argument that we have developed a journal of quality which would be of relevance to academics outside this island. Against is the difficult, but nevertheless valid, argument that to publicise the *Review* more widely would open up the possibility of more submissions from the thousands of accounting academics outside Ireland, which might militate against our success in achieving the objective of fostering scholarship and research here. Furthermore, it could put considerable strain on the editing and refereeing process.

In discussing matters from this perspective we are not, we feel, being unnecessarily insular in our approach. Our lack of insularity has already been indicated by the attractions of our conference and the fact that some overseas authors are published in the *Review*. We had expected, however, that there would be a period for assessment before we developed to the stage of internationalisation reached by the British Accounting Association (BAA). Although we have avoided many of the difficulties which beset the BAA for most of the early period of its 50-year existence (Mauders, 1997; Parker, 1997; Zeff, 1997), we felt that we were inevitably still far from developing the international dimensions of their conference and *Review* and therefore still far from confronting the choice between internationalisation and local support at its most difficult. That was before we prepared the statistics which are presented in the following paragraphs.

Looking first at the source of papers presented at the 1997 Annual Conference of the Irish Accounting and Finance Association, the figures in **Table 3** show that, whether the results are arrived at by counting the number of authors presenting at the conference or the number of papers, approximately 40 per cent of the content originates outside the island. The corresponding figures for the BAA Annual Conference, presented in **Table 4**, are around 35 per cent. Comparisons are, of course, difficult – the BAA also holds regional conferences and special interest conferences, which allow local members another forum for the presentation of papers which we do not provide.

In **Table 5**, we look at the contents of the *Irish Accounting Review* for 1995 and 1996; **Table 6** covers the contents of the *British Accounting Review* for the same period. The figures for the origins of papers published show a very similar balance between local and overseas authors. In all of these tables, ANZ stands for Australia and New Zealand and

NA for North America; numbers and percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer.

Table 3: Authors and Papers presented at IAFA Conference 1997

	Total	Ireland	Britain	ANZ	NA	Other
Authors	58	34	13	5	4	2
	100%	59%	22%	9%	7%	3%
Papers	40	24	10	2	3	1
	100%	60%	25%	5%	7%	3%

Table 4: Authors and Papers presented at BAA Conference 1997

	Total	Britain	Ireland	ANZ	NA	Other
Authors	290	189	11	48	22	20
	100%	65%	4%	16%	8%	7%
Papers	180	118	8	30	14	10
	100%	65%	4%	17%	8%	6%

Table 5: Origin of Papers in the *Irish Accounting Review*, 1995 and 1996

	Total	Ireland	Britain	ANZ	NA	Other
Authors	33	20	5	2	5	1
	100%	61%	15%	6%	15%	3%
Papers	20	12	3	.67	4	.33
	100%	60%	15%	3%	20%	2%

Table 6: Origin of Papers in the *British Accounting Review*, 1995 and 1996

	Total	Britain	Ireland	ANZ	NA	Other
Authors	54	33	2	11	3	5
	100%	61%	4%	20%	6%	9%
Papers	32	20	2	5	2	3
	100%	63%	6%	16%	5%	10%

This analysis suggests that we have already travelled far down the path towards internationalisation. If this has been achieved in a short time without significant publicity, and without the *Irish Accounting Review* being widely available, there is clearly a risk that in the future the work of Irish accounting academics might quickly be subjected to disproportionate competition from overseas. This may to some degree be offset by the growing tendency for Irish academics to publish in journals outside Ireland, and the ideal solution would obviously be for a cross-cultural interchange that left no academic community worse off than its numbers and its efforts justified. While there remains the possibility of further increases in the volume of material published annually, and the continuing exercise of discretion in favour of material that is clearly relevant to an Irish audience, it seems that there is no immediate cause for concern.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We have already referred to the contribution made by the referees. There are others without whom the task of the present editors would have been impossible or at least very difficult. Previous editors of the *Proceedings* and the *Review* established a firm basis for our activities. Particular credit should go to Donal Keating and Anthony Walsh, who set a high standard with the first issue of the *Proceedings* in 1990. They were ably followed by George and Michael Pogue, Seamus Collins and Peter Clarke.

The Irish Accountancy Educational Trust has been an integral part of the operation in providing the crucial finance. The finance provided by

the Trust was sufficient to fund in full all issues up to and including the Spring 1996 issue; for the second issue of 1996 we added a small contribution from our own resources. From 1997, the Trust, if it is willing to continue contributing at the same rate as in the past, will be providing about 75 per cent of the total cost of the two issues a year, the Association 25 per cent. The Association's contribution has been secured by the increase in members' subscriptions which was accepted at the 1995 Annual Conference.

But there is no more important element in the success of a journal than its authors. When we referred in the introduction to the fact that this undertaking was a co-operative one, we should never forget that the authors are central; whatever directions the *Review* may take in the future, this will continue to be the case.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have been fortunate in having Derek Snow as the efficient and courteous conduit for the funds provided by the Irish Accountancy Educational Trust, and we wish him well in his retirement.

Oak Tree Press became involved with the publication of the 1994 *Review*, and has looked after the production of each issue of the *Review* since then. Their professionalism is of great assistance in ensuring a journal whose appearance is as convincing as its content. We are continuing to work with Brian O'Kane to improve the journal's consistency and appearance.

We have been fortunate that on the many occasions when we have met in Dublin, accommodation has been provided by either the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland or Griffith College Dublin.

APPENDIX: REVIEWERS

Don Arnold	Union College, New York
Patricia Barker	Dublin City University
Richard Barnett	University of Ulster at Jordanstown
Dick Bernardi	State University of New York at Plattsburgh
Mary Bowerman	Sheffield University
Tony Brabazon	University College Dublin

Marann Byrne	Dublin City University
Niamh Brennan	University College Dublin
Edward Cahill	University College Cork
Peter Clarke	University College Dublin
Seamus Collins	University College Galway
Pierce Colbert	University College Dublin
Derry Cotter	University College Cork
Tat Choi	University College Dublin
John Currie	University College Galway
Ray Donnelly	University College Cork
Martin Fahy	University College Galway
John Forker	Queen's University Belfast
Colin Glass	University of Ulster at Coleraine
Jackie Granleese	University of Ulster at Coleraine
Peter Green	University of Ulster at Jordanstown
Jim Haslam	University of Waikato
Robert Hutchinson	University of Ulster at Coleraine
Margaret Jones	University College Galway
Donal Keating	Dublin City University
Ray Kinsella	University College Dublin
Robert Kirk	University of Ulster at Jordanstown
Sue Llewellyn	University of Edinburgh
Brian Lucey	Trinity College Dublin
Jill Lyttle	Queen's University Belfast
Gerry McHugh	Trinity College Dublin
Donal McKillop	Queen's University Belfast
John Meagher	University College Cork
Falconer Mitchell	University of Edinburgh
Stephen Morrow	Heriot-Watt University
Ciaran Murphy	University College Cork
Louis Murray	University College Dublin
Frank O'Brien	University College Dublin
Vincent O'Connell	University College Cork
Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh	Dublin City University
Kwaku Opong	University of Ulster at Jordanstown
Philip O'Regan	University of Limerick
Maurice Pendlebury	University of Wales
Aileen Pierce	University College Dublin
Bernard Pierce	Dublin City University
Michael Pogue	Queen's University Belfast
Paul Ryan	University College Dublin

George Radcliffe	Queen's University Belfast
Alan Sangster	Queen's University Belfast
Andy Stark	Manchester Business School
Anthony Walsh	Dublin City University
Eamonn Walsh	University of Limerick
John Ward	University of Ulster at Magee

REFERENCES

- British Accounting Association (1996). British Accounting Association Annual Report 1995. *Joint Editors' Report*, BAA.
- Maunder, K. (1997). 'The AUTA/BAA 1971-1996: Living in interesting times', *British Accounting Review*, Vol. 29, Special Issue, June, pp. 63-79.
- Parker, R. H. (1997). 'Flickering at the margin of existence: the Association of University Teachers of Accounting, 1960-1971', *British Accounting Review*, Vol. 29, Special Issue, June, pp. 41-61.
- Zeff, S. A. (1996). 'A study of academic research journals in accounting', *Accounting Horizons*, Vol. 10, No. 3, September, pp. 158-177.
- Zeff, S. A. (1997). 'The early years of the Association of University Teachers of Accounting: 1947-1959', *British Accounting Review*, Vol. 29, Special Issue, June, pp. 3-39.
- Zimmerman, J. L. (1989). 'Improving a manuscript's readability and likelihood of publication', *Issues in Accounting Education*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall, pp. 458-466.