

Is 'rapid response' a future alternative to 'letter to the editor'?

Majority of journals are now available in the electronic form on the internet and many on-line scientific journals now have reader 'rapid response section(s)' in the form of comments, discussion forums or blogs. Comments can be posted by any person registered on the site. Lately there has been a growing feeling that a 'rapid response' can possibly be a future alternative to the 'letter to the editor'¹.

A letter to the editor is often presumed to be a type of manuscript wherein only comments following a post-publication review are published by the readers. In fact, not all letters to the editor are written in response to articles published in the recent past. They can be of different varieties, e.g. an independent commentary or viewpoint submitted not necessarily in response to a previously published article. Case reports and even research are, at times, published as letters. The let-

ters may also discuss matters of general, scientific, ethical or professional interest to the readers of a journal and the scientific community at large.

More importantly, a rapid response is not peer-reviewed. A letter to the editor of a scientific journal is a type of scientific and professional publication that is published only after peer-review scrutiny. A rapid response that is not peer-reviewed cannot be quoted as a publication like a letter to the editor. It will neither be considered by the scientific citation index nor will it have any weightage, as it is not peer-reviewed. In our opinion, a rapid response is in no way analogous to a letter to the editor published in a scientific journal. The two should not be equated, and in no way should a rapid response be considered as the future alternative to a letter to the editor.

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1. Jain, A. and Jain, R., *Rural Remote Health*, 2008, **8**, 936 (on-line). Available at <http://www.rhu.org.au>, accessed 18 November 2008.
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In defence of the 3 + 2 years system of post-school education

I was shocked to read about the recommendations of the Joint Science Education Panel of the three Science Academies to abandon the present 3 + 2 years system of post-school science education in favour of an American-style, single-tier system of four years¹. It was even more shocking that there was no mention of the Bologna Process of European educational reform, which aims at establishing a pan-European Higher Education Area by 2010, based on this 3 + 2 years system of undergraduate-postgraduate education²⁻⁴. Its importance to our own educational reforms programme will be illustrated by the following lines from the Australian Education International⁵ – 'The Bologna Process represents the commitment by 45 European countries to undertake a series of reforms in order to achieve greater consistency and portability across their higher education systems. The process will most likely have a profound effect on the development of higher education globally, as observers from other continents are taking a close interest in the reform process and beginning to consider how their own systems might respond to "Bologna" thinking. Australia needs to consider how best to respond to these

global developments if its own higher education system is to continue to be seen as being of high quality and relevant to international standards and requirements.' I shall briefly discuss below some aspects of the Bologna Process, which will be relevant to our own educational reforms programme. I shall also try to bring out the incompatibility of the proposed four-year programme with the ground realities of our undergraduate education system.

During my visits to universities in the UK, Germany, Italy, France and Spain, I have seen the revolutionary changes brought about by the Bologna Process over the past decade. Of course, not all of this change is without pain. The British professors complain about the extra teaching load for the two-year MSc programme, where they had at most one and sometimes none before. But they concede that the absence of a regular MSc course after their three-year BSc puts the British PhDs at a disadvantage relative to the Germans in academic appointments.

The German professors complain, with good justification, that the two-tier system of 3 + 2 years is inferior to their old integrated five-year course in training for

an academic career. But they admit that the three-year BSc course feeds to an increasingly diverse job market besides the specialized MSc course, which the integrated five-year course could not. Moreover, it offers more flexibility to students for moving to universities of their choice for the specialized MSc course. (None-theless, I feel there may be room for at least a few integrated five-year programmes for academically motivated students.) Let me summarize below the main features of the Bologna Process of educational reforms²⁻⁴.

The Bologna Process of educational reforms and convergence is based on an intergovernmental agreement between both EU and non-EU countries. This is not a treaty, and there are no legal obligations for the signatory states. The participation and cooperation is completely voluntary. This 'bottom-up' approach of voluntary convergence maintains the sovereignty of the states and their educational institutions, while ensuring cooperation mainly through peer pressure of the academic community. The universities and other institutions of higher education are treated as actors, rather than objects of this reform process.