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Reflective Perspective

From advocacy to scholarly professionalisation: A reflective case study of the evolution and strategic repositioning of *World Nutrition* (2010–2025)

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Highlights/Key Messages

- *World Nutrition* evolved from advocacy to a peer-reviewed, global journal.
- Production infrastructure boosted research submissions significantly.
- Editorial leadership expansion strengthened peer review and operational efficiency.
- Diversified article types can increase citations and global visibility.
- Article structural layout rebranding positions the journal for indexing and international competitiveness.

Background
Association-owned journals often navigate tensions between mission-driven advocacy and the demands of scholarly publishing, including formalising peer review, meeting production standards, and fulfilling indexing requirements.

Objective
This article presents a reflective case study of the evolution of *World Nutrition*, the journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association, from 2010 to 2025. It examines how editorial governance, peer-review processes, production infrastructure, and content strategy evolved during this period.

Methods
A retrospective institutional review was conducted using archival publication records, editorial documentation, and descriptive publication data. Key phases of development were identified and analysed, with attention to internal drivers (leadership transitions, resource constraints, governance reforms) and external influences (publishing standards, indexing criteria, and open-access competition).

Results
The journal evolved from an advocacy-oriented platform dominated by commentaries and editorials into a peer-reviewed publication with a broader range of article types and standardised production processes. Leadership restructuring, formalised peer review, adoption of online manuscript management, and the progressive professionalisation of production were temporally associated with increased research output and operational stability. However, limitations in historical submission data constrain causal inference.

Conclusion
The experience of *World Nutrition* shows how mission-driven journals can advance scholarly professionalisation while upholding normative commitments. Although based on a single case, the analysis highlights governance reform, process transparency, and production standardisation as interdependent elements that strengthen institutional resilience and readiness for indexing.

Keywords: association-owned journals, scholarly professionalization, editorial governance, peer review reform, open access publishing, journal indexing, public health nutrition, case study.



Graphical Abstract

Introduction

Scholarly journals serve not only as repositories of disciplinary discovery and knowledge, but also as institutional expressions of the organisations that sustain them. Changes in the governance structures, editorial practices, production standards, and ethical commitments of a journal reflect broader shifts in scholarly communication and academic accountability. In recent decades, academic publishing has undergone a profound transformation, driven by digitalisation, the expansion of open-access models, intensifying competition for visibility, and the growing importance of indexing and citation metrics as markers of legitimacy (Ware & Mabe, 2015; Engwall, 2024). The scientific literature in English has experienced an explosion of publications from non-English speaking countries, especially from East Asia. These changes have placed particular pressure on association- and society-owned journals, most of which operate with limited resources and administrative infrastructure, relying on volunteer editorial labour and balancing disciplinary rigour with normative or advocacy-oriented missions (Resnik & Master, 2013; Spezi et al., 2017).

The concept of "professionalisation" has become central to understanding how journals adapt to this evolving environment. Across the scholarly publishing literature, professionalisation generally refers to the formalisation and standardisation of editorial processes, adherence to internationally recognised ethical guidelines, and the development of structured production systems aligned with indexing requirements (COPE, 2021a; COPE, 2021b; Elsevier, 2024). It may also encompass the institutionalisation of peer review, clarification of editorial roles, documentation of governance procedures, and the adoption of digital manuscript management systems (Horbach & Halffman, 2020; Wahyudi et al., 2025). It further includes production-related reforms such as consistent typesetting, DOI assignment, structured metadata, and interoperability with citation databases (Falagas et al., 2008; Huh, 2017). For smaller or mission-driven journals, these reforms are often gradual and resource-dependent, unfolding in response to both internal pressures and external expectations.

Association-owned journals face distinctive challenges in this process. Unlike commercially managed titles, they often operate under governance models shaped by professional societies whose primary mission may be advocacy, education, or policy engagement rather than bibliometric competitiveness. Open access commitments can further complicate sustainability models when publication charges are subsidised or waived (Laakso et al., 2016; Kankam et al., 2024). At the same time, open access has been shown to broaden readership and increase dissemination beyond traditional academic audiences, including policymakers and practitioners (Bernius et al., 2013; Sánchez-Pita et al., 2025), often via social media. The tension between maintaining normative commitments and achieving scholarly visibility is therefore a recurring theme in the evolution of many society-led publications (Romero, 2023; Wakeling et al., 2019).

In public health nutrition, these dynamics are particularly salient. Nutrition scholarship intersects with policy debates, corporate accountability, food system governance, and social justice concerns, areas where advocacy and empirical research often overlap (Fanzo, 2015; Musolino et al., 2020; Hanson, 2023). Journals in this domain may therefore adopt hybrid identities, serving both as forums for critical commentary and outlets for peer-reviewed research. Over time, however, the growing

centrality of indexing systems such as Scopus and Web of Science has intensified expectations for transparent peer review, regular publication schedules, international editorial diversity, and compliance with structured metadata standards (Elsevier, 2024; Huh, 2017).

This article presents a reflective case study of the evolution of World Nutrition, the official journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA), from 2010 to 2025. Established during a period of heightened global attention to food systems reform and nutrition equity (Varzakas & Smaoui, 2024), the journal initially prioritised editorials, commentaries, and policy critiques (Anon, 2010; Anon, 2011). Its early orientation aligned with traditions of activist scholarship that link evidence generation to social accountability and policy transformation (Musolino et al., 2020; Sykes et al., 2023). Over time, however, the journal underwent a series of institutional reforms, including leadership restructuring, adoption of formal peer review aligned with Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) principles, implementation of an online manuscript management system, diversification of article types, and progressive standardisation of production design and metadata practices, as is widely recommended (COPE, 2021a; Horbach & Halffman, 2020; Elsevier, 2024).

In this analysis, scholarly professionalisation is conceptualised as a multidimensional process spanning the editorial, production, and governance domains. Editorial professionalisation comprises the formalisation of peer review procedures, clarification of decision-making roles, documentation of ethical standards, and the establishment of reviewer accountability mechanisms (COPE, 2021b; Resnik & Master, 2013). Production professionalisation involves consistent typesetting, DOI integration, structured XML metadata, and technical interoperability, which enhance discoverability and indexing compatibility (Falagas et al., 2008; Huh, 2017). Governance professionalisation entails distributed leadership, succession planning, institutional documentation, and reduced dependence on single individuals—factors widely recognised as essential for journal sustainability (Ware & Mabe, 2015; Wahyudi et al., 2025).

The case of World Nutrition offers an opportunity to examine how these dimensions interact over time in a resource-constrained, mission-driven publishing environment. Drawing on archival publication records, editorial documentation, and descriptive output data, this article identifies major developmental phases shaped by internal drivers—including leadership transitions, volunteer capacity, and strategic governance reforms—and by external influences such as evolving publishing norms, the expansion of open access, and indexing criteria, all of which commonly have an impact on the evolution of smaller journals (Laakso et al., 2016; Romero, 2023; Elsevier, 2024). Rather than asserting direct causal relationships between specific reforms and publication outcomes, the analysis examines temporal associations and institutional trajectories, while acknowledging limitations in historical submission data.

Although grounded in a single journal, this case study aims to inform editors, editorial boards, and professional associations navigating similar transitions. The experience of World Nutrition suggests that mission-driven journals can pursue scholarly competitiveness without abandoning normative commitments, but that sustained visibility requires deliberate attention to governance structures, transparent editorial processes, and production infrastructure. By situating this institutional narrative within broader scholarship on academic publishing reform, the article contributes to ongoing discussions about how society-owned journals may adapt responsibly in an increasingly metrics-oriented scholarly ecosystem (Engwall, 2024; Ware & Mabe, 2015).

Methods

This Perspective article provides a retrospective and analytical overview of World Nutrition's development across sixteen volumes (2010–2025), as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1. Submission data prior to 2017 were not consistently archived because manuscripts were handled by email. As a result, this analysis relies primarily on published output as a proxy for journal productivity. Future institutional reviews should incorporate submission-to-publication ratios to better assess competitiveness and editorial selectivity. Drawing on archival publication data, editorial records, and bibliometric trends, the present article examines how shifts in leadership, article mix, peer-review processes, and production standards have influenced the journal's scholarly impact and institutional stability.

Early Formation, Disruption, Institutional Reset, and Scientific Acceleration (2010–2019)

The establishment of World Nutrition in 2010 represented WPHNA's effort to create an independent forum for critical engagement with global nutrition governance (Anon, 2010). Emerging during a period of heightened attention to food systems reform, nutrition equity, and corporate accountability, the journal was conceived less as a conventional research outlet and more as a platform for advocacy-informed scholarship (Anon, 2011). Its first commentary, The Great Vitamin A Fiasco (Latham, 2010) would prove to occasion the most letters to the editor that it ever received, and foreground the ethical concerns, social justice, and structural determinants of malnutrition that would dominate its editorials, commentaries, and policy critiques. This orientation, exclusive during the early years before it included research, was retained as a "red thread" throughout its life as a journal. This reflects broader traditions of activist scholarship in global health, in which knowledge production is explicitly linked to accountability and policy reform (Musolino et al., 2020; Hanson, 2023).



Figure 1. Fifteen-year trajectory overview of *World Nutrition*

Table 1. The key eras in the evolution of *World Nutrition*

Era	Focus	Key Figures
The Foundation (2010–2012)	The "Commentary" Era: heavy focus on philosophy and the critique of "Nutritionism"	Geoffrey Cannon, Carlos Monteiro
The NOVA Peak (2013–2015)	Definition and global push for the Ultra-Processed Food Theory	Cannon, Monteiro, Jean-Claude Moubarac
The Transition (2016–2017)	A period of near-collapse and relaunch under new leadership	Ted Greiner
Scholarly Acceleration (2018-2019)	Introduction of formal peer review and the publication of original research, utilising the "Diamond Open Access" model	Greiner
Professionalisation (2020–Present)	Improvements reflecting the need to attain indexing, digital dissemination, and the use of social media	Stanley Okoduwa, Greiner

Between 2010 and 2014, the journal's early growth was substantial in quantitative terms, with publication output rising steadily and peaking in 2014 (Figure 2). The monthly publication schedule enabled responsiveness to global policy debates and rapid dissemination of opinion-based content. At this stage, however, editorial processes were relatively informal, manuscript handling was conducted primarily via email, and peer review was limited and not "blind". While such flexibility supported community engagement, it also constrained the journal's capacity for long-term institutional stability and eligibility for indexing. Similar patterns have been observed in other society-led journals that initially prioritise mission alignment over formalised editorial infrastructure (Spezi et al., 2017; Romero, 2023).

By the mid-2010s, the structural vulnerabilities of this model were increasingly evident. The journal relied heavily on a small editorial collective, particularly the sustained involvement of the Editor-in-Chief. Without distributed governance mechanisms or codified succession planning, leadership transitions pose significant operational risk (Casadevall et al., 2024). The Editor-in-Chief's departure in 2016 marked a critical disruption: publication frequency declined sharply, peer-review pipelines stalled, and only a single issue was released that year (Table 2). The episode underscored the dependence of small association-owned journals on individual leadership and echoed findings in the broader literature emphasising the importance of institutionalised governance frameworks for sustainability (Ware & Mabe, 2015; Wahyudi et al., 2025).

The appointment of a new Editor-in-Chief in 2017 marked a period of institutional reset and gradual reform. One of the earliest structural changes was the transition from email-based submissions to the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform (Greiner, 2017), introducing a web-based manuscript management system that enabled more transparent tracking, reviewer assignment, and documentation of editorial decisions (Horbach & Halffman, 2020). A "diamond" open-access model was agreed to within the WPHNA, with no charges to be levied on readers or authors. In parallel, the journal recalibrated its publication schedule from monthly to biannual, aligning output expectations with limited initial submissions. This pragmatic adjustment reflected a broader recognition within scholarly publishing that regularity and reliability are central criteria for journal credibility and eventual indexing (Elsevier, 2024; Huh, 2017).

As submissions increased, three issues were published in 2018, and in 2019, the journal shifted to a quarterly publication schedule. A pivotal milestone in 2018 was the formal introduction of original research articles and the adoption of peer-review procedures aligned with Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) principles (COPE, 2021a; COPE, 2021b). This transition signalled a shift from a predominantly commentary-based platform towards a hybrid model that integrates advocacy discourse with empirical scholarship (Figure 2). The inclusion of original research diversified the journal's intellectual profile and broadened its appeal to academic authors seeking peer-reviewed outlets in public health nutrition (Pan, 2025). Although early research articles were published without full production standardisation, their publication marked an important step towards aligning the journal with international scholarly norms. The restoration of predictable issue schedules and the gradual rise in research output suggested renewed author confidence and improved operational stability.

Taken together, the period from 2010 to 2019 illustrates a trajectory common among many mission-driven association journals: rapid formative expansion grounded in an advocacy identity; exposure of structural fragilities during a leadership transition; and a subsequent institutional reset through incremental professionalisation. Internal drivers—including leadership renewal, governance adjustments, and technological adoption—interacted with external pressures such as evolving publishing standards and indexing expectations. This experience underscores that editorial legitimacy in contemporary scholarly ecosystems depends not only on intellectual coherence but also on distributed governance, procedural transparency, and infrastructural alignment with international norms (Laakso et al., 2016; Engwall, 2024).

Figure 2 provides a quantitative overview of publication output across these phases, showing fluctuations in article types and overall volume during periods of expansion and disruption. The structural shifts described above are summarised in Table 1, which outlines the defining characteristics of each developmental phase, including editorial configuration, publication format, and operational stability indicators. The strategic value of article categories, which may have informed the choice of World Nutrition flexibility, is evident from the perceived potential citation impact presented in Table 3. The expansion in original research output during this period is summarised in Figure 3.

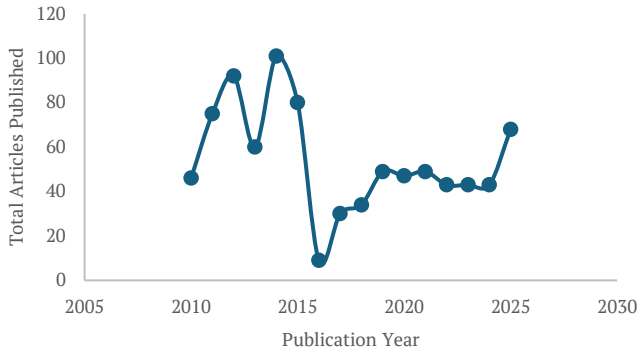


Figure 2. Trend in annual total publication output of *World Nutrition* by volume (2010–2025)

Note:

Volume	Year	Key Notes
1	2010	Journal launched as a monthly; editorials and commentaries dominated
2	2011	Expansion of commentary-based content
3	2012	Introduction of Policy and Perspectives articles
4	2013	Consolidation phase
5	2014	Peak publication volume
6	2015	Sustained high output
7	2016	Editorial disruption following EiC exit; only one issue published
8	2017	New EiC appointed; shift to biannual publication. Upgraded from manuscript submission via email to online platform via Open Journal System
9	2018	Introduction of original research articles
10	2019	Adoption of the quarterly publication model
11	2020	Growth in original research submissions
12	2021	Stable output across article types
13	2022	Introduction of basic typesetting (two-column, no logo)
14	2023	Continued consolidation
15	2024	Full professional production infrastructure was introduced with the inclusion of the logo.
16	2025	Significant growth in research articles and total output

Table 2. Developmental phases of *World Nutrition*: Editorial structure, publication format, and operational characteristics

Year / Volume	Milestone	Significance
2010 (Vol. 1)	The Journal was inaugurated as a monthly publication	Established advocacy-oriented platform
2012 (Vol. 3)	Policy and Perspectives articles introduced	Broadened analytical and policy relevance
2016 (Vol. 7)	Exit of Editor-in-Chief	Severe reduction in output
2017 (Vol. 8)	New Editor-in-Chief appointed	Institutional stabilization
2017 (Vol. 8)	Shift to biannual publication	Alignment with types and frequency of submissions
2018 (Vol. 9)	Introduction of original research articles	Transition to peer-reviewed scholarship
2018 (Vol. 9)	Adoption of COPE-aligned peer review	Strengthened ethical standards
2019 (Vol. 10)	Quarterly publication model adopted	Improved regularity and planning
2022 (Vol. 13)	Basic typesetting for research articles	First step toward a professional presentation
2024 (Vol. 15)	Full professional production infrastructure across all articles	Enhanced author appeal and journal identity

Table 3. Strategic value of article types in *World Nutrition*

Article Type	Contribution to Journal Mission	Citation and Visibility Potential
Editorials	Sets agenda and advocacy tone	Moderate
Commentaries	Policy critique and debate	Moderate
Original Research	Empirical evidence-based	Variable
Review Articles	Knowledge synthesis	High
Policy & Perspectives	Global and regional policy relevance	High
Opinions / Special Issues	Thought leadership	High

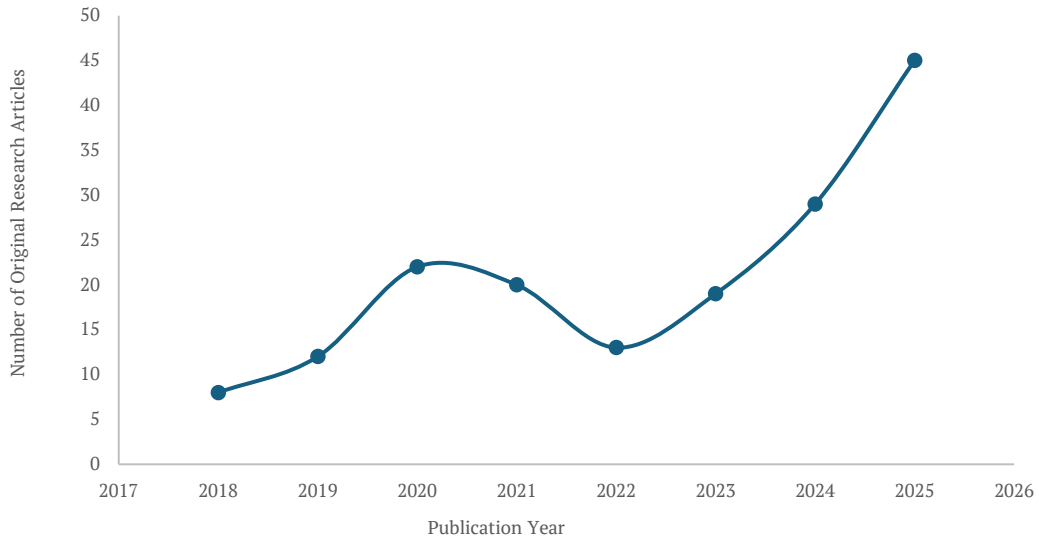


Figure 3. Trends in original research articles published in World Nutrition (2018–2025)

Production Professionalisation and Output Expansion (2020–2025)

Following the institutional reset of 2017–2019, the period from 2020 to 2025 was characterised by the progressive professionalisation of production and the consolidation of research output. In the early years of this phase, the journal maintained a stable quarterly publication schedule and published an increasing number of original research articles (Figure 3). This growth coincided with the maturation of the peer-review system and strengthened editorial coordination, reflecting patterns observed in other association-owned journals where procedural clarity and regularity contribute to author confidence and submission stability (Wakeling et al., 2019; Wahyudi et al., 2025).

Despite improvements in editorial workflow, production design during 2020–2021 remained relatively basic. Articles were assigned DOIs and published online, but layout standardisation and branding were limited (Table 3). In 2022, the journal introduced a structured two-column format for research articles, marking an initial step towards production standardisation. However, the lack of fully integrated visual identity elements and uniform formatting across all article categories meant that production professionalisation remained partial. Research in scholarly communication suggests that authors often interpret consistent design, structured metadata, and professional layout as signals of institutional stability and credibility, particularly in journals without established impact factors (Falagas et al., 2008; Romero, 2023).

The professionalisation of content and design between 2020 and 2023 positioned World Nutrition at a crossroads between foundational maturity and global competitiveness (Greiner & Okoduwa, 2025). While ethical and editorial standards were firmly in place, the lack of full professionalisation in production constrained further growth. These years provided critical institutional learning, confirming that in modern scholarly publishing, production quality serves as both a signal of legitimacy and a catalyst for visibility (Romero, 2023; Wakeling et al., 2019).

A more comprehensive reform was implemented in 2024, with full professional typesetting and standardised branding applied across all article categories (Tables 4 and 5). This reform included consistent typography, a unified title-page structure, integration of the journal logo, and more systematic metadata formatting. In parallel, DOI assignment procedures and cross-platform indexing compatibility were strengthened to align with widely recognised criteria for database inclusion (Elsevier, 2024; Huh, 2017). These changes were not merely aesthetic adjustments but reflected alignment with technical norms that facilitate discoverability, citation traceability, and interoperability within digital publishing ecosystems.

Key elements of production professionalisation implemented between 2022 and 2024 are outlined in Table 4, including formatting standardisation, inclusion of author's ORCID number, DOI integration, metadata alignment, and branding consolidation. The outcome of the full implementation of the production infrastructure is presented in Table 5.

Table 4. Impact of production infrastructure on research output (2018-2025)

Period	Production Infrastructure Status	Research Output Pattern
2018–2021	No formal typesetting; DOI and journal name only	Moderate growth, limited author appeal
2022–2023	Basic two-column layout; no logo	Decline in research submissions
2024–2025	Full professional typesetting with logo and uniform layout	Significant increase in research publications

Table 5. Effects of full professional production infrastructure on research output in *World Nutrition* (2024–2025)

Year / Volume	Production and Design Upgrade	Total Articles Published	Original Research Articles	Observed Outcome
2024 (Vol. 15)	Full professional production infrastructure introduced; logo and layout standardised	43	29	Sharp rise in research submissions following design upgrade
2025 (Vol. 16)	Consolidation of professional production; uniform application across all article types	68	45	Highest recorded output; strengthened author confidence and visibility

During 2024 and 2025, the journal saw a marked rise in the number of published original research articles and overall output (Figure 3). Editorial capacity became a limiting factor in the number of manuscripts that could be published in each issue. Although this growth coincided with production reform, it should be interpreted with caution. Multiple factors likely contributed to the increase in submissions, including the maturation of the peer-review system, expansion of the editorial team, broader visibility within academic networks (in particular, the possibility it offered researchers in low-income settings to publish in English at no cost), and global growth in open-access publishing. The temporal convergence of production standardisation and output expansion suggests that infrastructural investment may also have reinforced author perceptions of credibility. Similar trends have been documented for other journals (Laakso et al., 2016; Engwall, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital dissemination of research and intensified reliance on open-access platforms, while increasing competition among journals for manuscript submissions (Elsevier, 2024; Ware & Mabe, 2015). In this context, smaller association-owned journals often face pressure to demonstrate reliability, transparency, and technical interoperability to remain competitive.

Thus, the broader publishing environment during this period also shaped the journal's trajectory. The alignment of World Nutrition with structured metadata standards, a regular publication schedule, and clearly documented editorial procedures positioned it more closely alongside internationally indexed journals in public health and nutrition.

Importantly, production professionalisation during this period occurred alongside a continued commitment to advocacy-oriented discourse. Editorials, commentaries, and policy-focused articles remained central to the journal's identity, even as empirical research output expanded.

This coexistence of normative engagement and methodological formalisation reflects a hybrid model increasingly observed in open-access and society-led publications that seek to balance disciplinary rigour with social relevance (Sánchez-Pita et al., 2025; Spezi et al., 2017). The experience suggests that production standardisation need not entail abandoning a mission-driven orientation but can instead serve as infrastructural support for the broader dissemination of such work.

Overall, the period from 2020 to 2025 illustrates how production infrastructure, editorial process stability, and external publishing expectations interact to shape journal development. Rather than a sudden transformation, the expansion in research output appears to be the cumulative outcome of growing awareness of the journal, undoubtedly coupled with incremental reforms in governance, peer review, and technical production. This aligns with the view that professionalisation in scholarly publishing is multidimensional and iterative, particularly for association-owned journals operating under resource constraints (Ware & Mabe, 2015; Engwall, 2024).

Governance Reform, Capacity Building, and Strategic Visibility

As production and editorial processes stabilised, attention increasingly shifted towards expanding editorial capacity, governance reform, and long-term institutional resilience. The earlier disruption following the leadership transition had exposed the vulnerability of highly centralised editorial models. In response, the period between 2024 and 2025 was marked by deliberate efforts to distribute leadership responsibilities, formalise roles, and reduce dependence on single individuals. This restructuring aligns with broader findings in the scholarly publishing literature, which emphasise distributed governance, documented workflows, and succession planning as prerequisites for journal sustainability (Ware & Mabe, 2015; Wahyudi et al., 2025). The appointment of additional editorial roles, including a new Deputy Editor-in-Chief and expanded Associate Editorships, provided clearer delineation of responsibilities across peer-review coordination, quality assurance, and manuscript oversight.

Formal role definitions enhance accountability and transparency, which are central to best-practice publishing frameworks (COPE, 2021b; Resnik & Master, 2013). By institutionalising decision-making processes rather than relying primarily on individual discretion, the journal reduced operational fragility and strengthened continuity mechanisms in anticipation of future leadership transitions.

The restructuring of editorial governance and role distribution during 2024–2025 is summarised in Table 6. The expanded and formalised governance architecture implemented during 2024–2025 is summarised in Table 7, which illustrates the distribution of responsibilities across the strategic leadership, editorial oversight, quality assurance, and production domains. This governance structure adopted by *World Nutrition* is synonymous with the model that reflects internationally recognised best practices recommended by global editorial governance organisations such as COPE, ICMJE and WAME (Figure 4). It is commonly used by Elsevier, Springer Nature, MDPI, Hindawi, and BMC and often serves as a scalable governance template for new and developing journals seeking inclusion in reputable indexing databases.

Table 6. Editorial roles, capacity-building initiatives, and visibility outcomes (2024–2025)

Initiative	Description / Role	Year Introduced	Immediate Outcome	Visibility Impact
Associate Editor Development Program	Recruitment, training and mentorship for early-career AEs	2024	Expanded AE base	Enhanced capacity for handling the review process
Appointment of new Deputy Editor-in-Chief	Assisting the Editor-in-Chief in all editorial processes and indexation.	2025	Streamlined editorial decisions; reduced review times	Increased the journal's global visibility and reputation.
Editorial Workflow Audit	Internal capacity review and policy documentation	2025	Defined governance and role clarity	Improved journal transparency and citation traceability
Inclusion of Senior Associate Editorship	Oversight of peer review and quality assurance	2025	Enhanced editorial decisions; reduced review times	Increased author satisfaction and submission growth

Table 7. Editorial governance structure and role delineation, 2024–2025

Governance Tier	Role	Core Responsibilities	Functional Domain	Institutional Purpose
Strategic Leadership	Editor-in-Chief	Overall strategic direction; final editorial decisions; policy formulation; representation to the association and external bodies	Executive Governance	Ensures mission alignment, editorial independence, and long-term institutional continuity
	Deputy Editor-in-Chief	Oversight of editorial workflow; coordination across editorial units; decision support; succession continuity	Executive Coordination	Reduces leadership centralisation and strengthens operational resilience
Senior Editorial Oversight	Associate Senior Editors	Oversight of thematic or disciplinary domains; supervision of Associate Editors; quality monitoring of peer-review recommendations	Scholarly Governance	Strengthens subject-matter depth and consistency in editorial standards
	Associate Editors	Management of peer review within assigned subject areas; reviewer selection; recommendation of editorial decisions	Peer-Review Management	Enhances methodological rigour and disciplinary expertise coverage
Editorial Operations	Assistant Editors	Preliminary manuscript screening; author communication; reviewer follow-up; workflow monitoring	Editorial Administration	Improves efficiency, reduces processing delays
	Editorial Assistants	Manuscript tracking; database updates; documentation of decisions; coordination with production	Administrative Support	Ensures procedural documentation and continuity
Production and Technical Infrastructure	Typesetting Editors	Layout formatting, application of journal design templates, integration of figures and tables	Production Professionalisation	Enhances visual coherence and standardisation
	Layout Editors	Final formatting refinement; branding integration; issue compilation	Production Consolidation	Ensures consistent journal identity and structural uniformity
Advisory Governance	Editorial Board Members	Strategic advice; reviewer recruitment; subject-area representation; policy consultation	Advisory Oversight	Broadens disciplinary and geographic legitimacy
Scholarly Quality Contributors	Peer Reviewers	Independent manuscript evaluation; methodological assessment; constructive feedback	Academic Quality Control	Sustains scholarly credibility and research integrity

Capacity-building initiatives were introduced alongside governance reform. These included structured recruitment of reviewers and informal mentoring for early-career scholars participating in the peer-review process (Table 6). Expanding the reviewer pool served both operational and epistemic objectives: it reduced turnaround times and diversified disciplinary and geographic representation. The importance of reviewer development and community engagement in enhancing journal credibility has been noted in studies of open-access and society-led publications (Wakeling et al., 2019; Spezi et al., 2017). Qualitative assessment of reviewer performance has always been integral to the peer review system. Associate Editors see the overall rating for each reviewer, as well as the number of papers reviewed so far, the number of review requests ignored, and the time since they were last contacted.

Alongside internal restructuring, strategic attention focused on visibility and indexing readiness. In contemporary publishing ecosystems, inclusion in bibliographic databases depends on factors such as regular publication schedules, editorial scholarly leadership, international diversity, transparent peer-review policies, structured metadata, and citation traceability (Elsevier, 2024; Huh, 2017).

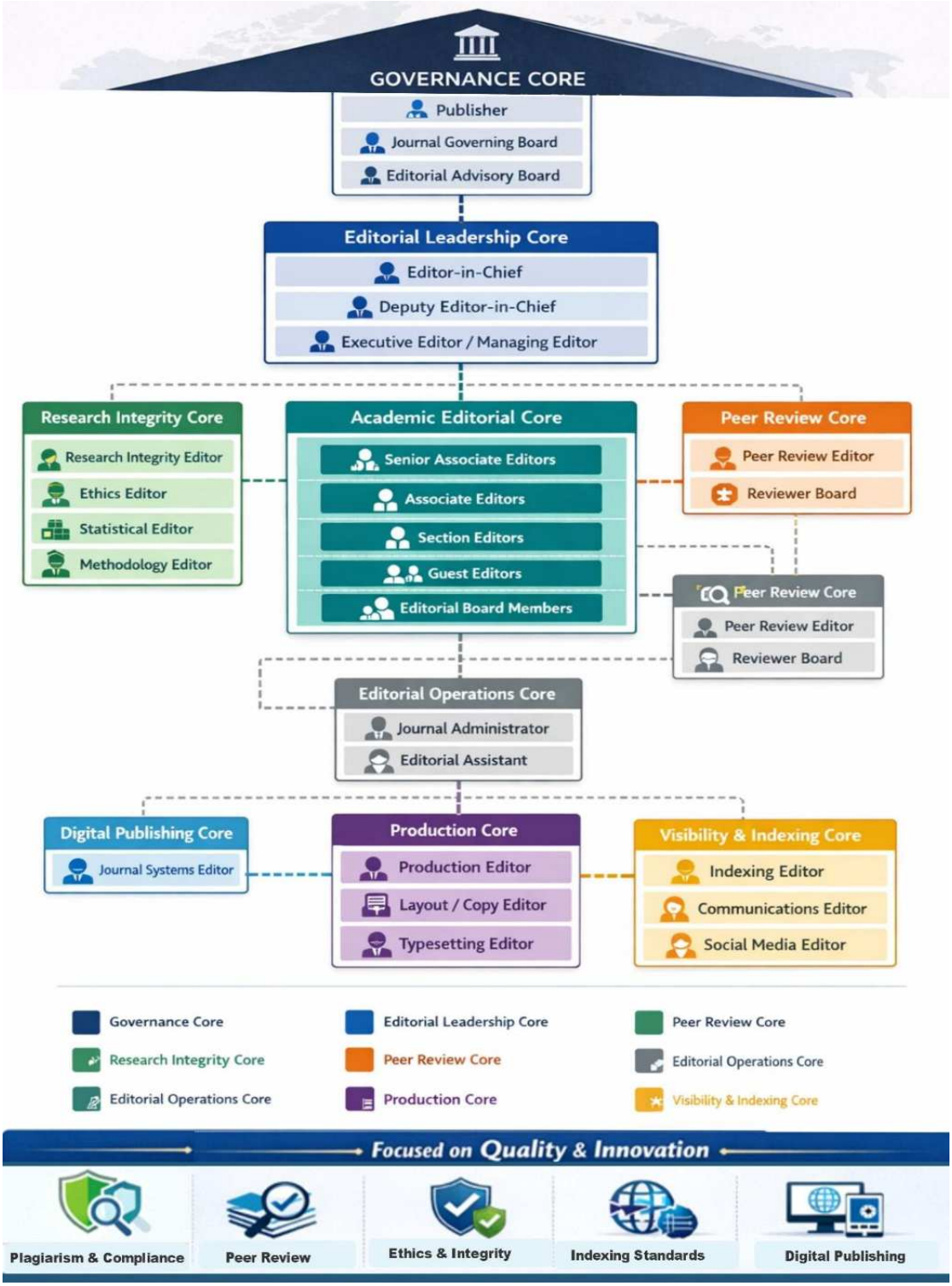


Figure 4. Global structure and governance framework for a journal editorial team

During this period, efforts were made to standardise metadata practices, ensure consistent DOI assignment, and align formatting with widely recognised indexing expectations. These measures were intended not to guarantee indexing, which remains subject to external evaluation, but to align the journal more closely with established eligibility criteria.

The pursuit of visibility also intersected with broader debates about equity in scholarly communication. By maintaining open access and continuing to publish contributions that address underrepresented regions and perspectives, the journal sought to balance technical alignment with global publishing norms and its foundational commitment to inclusivity. Open-access dissemination has been shown to broaden readership and enhance accessibility beyond traditional academic institutions, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts (Laakso et al., 2016; Kankam et al., 2024). At the same time, indexing remains a

powerful gatekeeping mechanism within academic evaluation systems, influencing author submission decisions and institutional recognition (Engwall, 2024; Romero, 2023). Navigating this dual landscape—between normative commitments and metric-oriented incentives—constitutes an ongoing strategic challenge for association-owned journals. Table 8 maps the journal's alignment with commonly referenced indexing criteria, highlighting areas of compliance and those requiring further development.

Table 8. Alignment with selected indexing criteria (status as of 2025)

Indexing Domain	Representative Scopus / DOAJ Criterion*	Current Status	Evidence of Alignment	Developmental Considerations
Journal Policy Transparency	Clearly stated aims and scope; publicly available peer-review process; publication ethics statement	Substantially aligned	Aims and scope publicly accessible; peer-review process described; COPE-aligned ethics and COI statements included	Periodic policy review and formal documentation updates are recommended
Peer Review Integrity	Evidence of external peer review; transparent editorial decision process	Aligned	Structured peer-review workflow via OJS; documented reviewer assignments and decision records	Continued monitoring of reviewer diversity and turnaround time
Editorial Board Governance	Public listing of editorial board with institutional affiliations; diversity in geographic representation	Partially aligned	Editorial board publicly listed; international representation present	Expansion of geographic and disciplinary diversity desirable
Publication Regularity	Consistent publication schedule; clearly defined frequency	Aligned	Quarterly publication has been maintained since 2019	Sustained long-term regularity is required for evaluation
Content Quality and Relevance	Academic contribution to the field; clarity of abstracts; structured references	Developing–Aligned	Increasing proportion of original research articles; structured abstracts and reference formatting standardised	Continued strengthening of methodological reporting standards
Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs)	Persistent identifiers assigned to articles	Aligned	DOI integration for published articles	Ongoing cross-platform verification
Metadata and Archiving	Machine-readable metadata; long-term digital accessibility	Substantially aligned	Structured metadata embedded in a publication platform; complete online issue archive	Formal long-term preservation arrangement (e.g., digital archiving registry) may be considered
Open Access Compliance (DOAJ-specific)	Immediate open access; clear licensing information; no undisclosed APCs	Aligned	Articles are publicly accessible; licensing information is stated; transparency regarding fees	Continued clarity in licensing documentation
Citation Performance (Scopus consideration)	Demonstrated citation activity within scholarly literature	Emerging	Increasing citation activity observed	Formal bibliometric indicators have not yet been established

Note: *Criteria synthesised from publicly available Scopus Content Selection & Advisory Board guidelines and DOAJ Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing. Final inclusion decisions are made independently by indexing bodies.

It is important to acknowledge that visibility outcomes during this period cannot be attributed solely to governance reform or metadata alignment. Increased citation activity and broader dissemination likely reflect cumulative effects of earlier editorial reforms, expanded research output, strengthened peer review, greater use of social media by the journal, and broader global trends in digital scholarship. As with earlier phases of development, observed improvements reflect temporal associations rather than demonstrable causal effects.

Overall, the governance and visibility initiatives undertaken between 2024 and 2025 mark the final stage of institutional consolidation in the period analysed. Editorial professionalisation, production infrastructure, and governance reform became mutually reinforcing components of journal development. Rather than signalling the completion of transformation, these reforms positioned the journal within a more stable organisational framework, from which future strategic decisions—including potential indexing applications—can be pursued.

Lessons for Association-Owned Journals

Although this analysis focuses on a single journal, several broader lessons emerge that may be relevant to other association-owned, mission-driven publications operating in resource-constrained environments. These lessons are not prescriptive rules; rather, they are empirically grounded observations drawn from a fifteen-year institutional trajectory shaped by internal reform and external publishing pressures.

First, mission clarity alone is insufficient for institutional sustainability. In its formative years, the journal benefited from a strong normative identity centred on advocating equity and structural reform in global nutrition. This clarity fostered community engagement and intellectual cohesion. However, without formalised editorial procedures, documented governance mechanisms, and technological infrastructure, the journal remained vulnerable to leadership disruption. The experience reinforces broader findings that intellectual legitimacy and operational resilience must develop in parallel for association-owned journals to achieve long-term stability (Ware & Mabe, 2015; Wahyudi et al., 2025).

Second, leadership concentration creates structural fragility. The operational decline following the editorial transition in 2016 highlighted the risks of highly centralised

editorial models. Recovery and the broadening of its mission required the redistribution of responsibilities, the formalisation of roles, and the implementation of transparent workflows. Studies of scholarly publishing governance emphasise that distributed decision-making and clear succession planning reduce dependence on individual actors and improve continuity (Resnik & Master, 2013; COPE, 2021b). For small society journals, incremental institutionalisation of roles may therefore be a critical sustainability strategy.

Third, professionalisation is multidimensional and iterative rather than singular or cosmetic. Across the journal's trajectory, professionalisation encompassed several interrelated domains: formal peer review, online manuscript management systems, production standardisation, metadata alignment, governance restructuring, and the development and training of editors and other staff. No single reform produced an immediate transformation. Instead, improvements in output stability and research volume appear to have emerged cumulatively. This pattern aligns with scholarship suggesting that journal credibility develops through the convergence of procedural transparency, technical infrastructure, and community trust (Horbach & Halffman, 2020; Wakeling et al., 2019).

Fourth, production standardisation serves as infrastructural signalling rather than mere aesthetic enhancement. The introduction of consistent layout, branding, and metadata formatting coincided with increased research submissions and broader dissemination. Although causal attribution cannot be established, research indicates that authors interpret structured design and DOI integration as markers of editorial maturity, particularly in open-access contexts without impact factors (Falagas et al., 2008; Romero, 2023). For emerging journals, investment in production systems may therefore serve both practical and reputational functions.

Fifth, indexing readiness requires alignment rather than aspiration. The experience of this journal shows that database inclusion depends on meeting externally defined technical and governance standards, including publication regularity, peer-review documentation, editorial excellence in scholarship and diversity, and metadata consistency (Elsevier, 2024; Huh, 2017). Strategic reforms implemented between 2024 and 2025 were framed not as guarantees of indexation but as steps towards eligibility. For association-owned journals, treating indexing as a compliance process rather than a symbolic milestone may enable more realistic planning.

Sixth, advocacy orientation and scholarly formalisation are not mutually exclusive. A persistent concern in mission-driven journals is that aligning with formal publishing norms may dilute normative commitments. The journal's trajectory suggests that the professionalisation of empirical research publication and production can coexist with ongoing policy engagement and critical commentary. Similar hybrid models have been observed in other open-access and society-led publications that seek to integrate academic rigour with social relevance (Spezi et al., 2017; Sánchez-Pita et al., 2025). Maintaining this balance, however, requires deliberate articulation of editorial policy.

Finally, growth metrics should be interpreted with caution. Although publication counts increased after governance and production reforms, incomplete submission data make it difficult to determine the trade-off between increased competitiveness and increased selectivity in the manuscripts accepted for processing. For small journals transitioning from informal to structured workflows, gaps in historical data are common. Transparent acknowledgement of these limitations may strengthen credibility rather than undermine it.

Taken together, these lessons suggest that the evolution of association-owned journals is best understood as an incremental process of institutionalisation, shaped by both internal reform and external expectations. The case presented here does not claim universal applicability. Rather, it offers an analytically grounded account of how governance restructuring, formalisation of peer review, production infrastructure, and strategic visibility efforts interacted over time within a single organisational context. Editors and managing boards of similar journals may find resonance in these patterns as they adapt strategies to their own institutional realities. For clarity, the principal lessons derived from this case study and their corresponding institutional mechanisms are synthesised in Table 9.

Table 9. Lessons for association-owned journals: Institutional challenges, mechanisms, and outcomes

Institutional Challenge	Reform Mechanism Implemented	Observed Institutional Outcome	Broader Lesson
Leadership centralisation	Introduction of Deputy Editor-in-Chief and expanded Associate Editorship	Reduced dependency on a single individual	Distributed governance enhances resilience
Informal editorial workflows	Adoption of the OJS manuscript system	Improved tracking and transparency	Technological infrastructure supports credibility
Limited research output	Formalised peer review; diversification of article types	Increased publication of original research	Methodological formalisation expands author appeal
Production inconsistency	Standardised formatting, branding, and DOI integration	Greater design coherence and discoverability	Production professionalisation functions as reputational signalling
Vulnerability to disruption	Role documentation and workflow codification	Increased operational continuity	Institutionalisation mitigates transition shocks
Indexing ambition without alignment	Metadata standardisation; policy transparency	Improved eligibility positioning	Indexing requires structural compliance, not aspiration
Tension between advocacy and scholarship	Hybrid editorial policy maintains commentaries alongside research	Preservation of mission identity during reform	Normative commitments and scholarly rigour can coexist

Conclusions

The fifteen-year trajectory examined in this case study illustrates how an association-owned journal can evolve through successive phases of formation, disruption, recovery, and consolidation. Rather than following a linear path of continuous growth, the journal's development was shaped by leadership transitions, resource constraints, technological adaptation, and shifting expectations in global scholarly publishing. Periods of instability were followed by incremental institutionalisation across editorial governance, peer-review procedures, and production infrastructure. These cumulative reforms gradually repositioned the journal within a more structured and technically aligned publishing environment.

This analysis underscores that professionalisation in scholarly publishing is not a single event but a layered, multidimensional process. Editorial formalisation, governance restructuring, metadata integration, and production standardisation each contributed to institutional resilience, yet none alone was sufficient. Improvements in output volume and visibility appear to reflect the interaction of these domains over time rather than discrete interventions. Importantly, the case shows that advocacy-oriented mission commitments need not be abandoned in the pursuit of procedural rigour. Instead, normative engagement and methodological formalisation can coexist when editorial policies are explicitly articulated, and governance mechanisms are transparent.

At the same time, this case study is subject to important limitations. It reflects the experience of a single journal operating within a specific disciplinary and organisational context. Incomplete longitudinal submission data limit the assessment of competitiveness trends, and observed improvements reflect temporal associations rather than demonstrable causal relationships. As such, the findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded insights rather than universally generalisable conclusions.

Looking ahead, the journal's trajectory suggests that continued sustainability will depend less on isolated technical reforms and more on maintaining alignment across mission, governance stability, production infrastructure, and external evaluation criteria. Future priorities are likely to include further strengthening of reviewer networks, continued optimisation of metadata, and cautious engagement with indexing processes where eligibility criteria are met. However, these strategic considerations should be understood as extensions of the institutional consolidation already underway, rather than departures from the journal's foundational commitments.

Ultimately, the evolution examined here contributes to broader conversations about how society-owned journals navigate the demands of contemporary scholarly communication. As academic publishing becomes increasingly metric-driven and technologically standardised, association-owned journals face the dual challenge of maintaining intellectual independence while meeting externally defined expectations for credibility and interoperability. The experience analysed in this study suggests that incremental institutionalisation—grounded in transparency, distributed leadership, and infrastructural investment—may be a viable pathway for sustaining mission-driven publications in a competitive global environment.

Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for all aspects of the work—including the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; drafting and critical revision of the manuscript; and approval of the final version for submission and publication.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in Scientific Writing

The author declares that Grammarly and QuillBot were used for language editing, grammar corrections, and improvement of clarity. These tools did not contribute to the scientific content, study design, data analysis, or conclusions. The concept and intellectual content of this work are entirely those of the author, who takes full responsibility for the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The author currently serves as Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *World Nutrition*. This role may provide privileged insight into the journal's internal processes while introducing potential bias in interpretation. To mitigate this, the analysis relies on documented archival records, publication data, and publicly verifiable milestones. It was subjected to peer review and subsequently edited. The manuscript presents a scholarly, reflective assessment and does not represent an official institutional position of WPHNA.

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