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Empowering scholarship: Young researcher-led journals as spaces for learning, envisioning, and experimenting with alternatives

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Please cite as: Privitera, E., Grabalov, P., Husár, M., Leccis, F., Madureira, M., Nath, S., Uğur, L., Mukhopadhyay, C., & Varış Husar, S. C. (2025). Empowering scholarship: Young researcher-led journals as spaces for learning, envisioning, and experimenting with alternatives. *plaNext – Next Generation Planning,* 15, 61–77. https://doi.org/10.24306/plnxt/111

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This paper presents reflections and experience-based perspectives on the potential of young researcher-led journals, such as *plaNext – Next Generation Planning*, to generate a space for learning from and networking with peers and senior scholars, as well as empowering young researchers and creating new ideas. Its original dialogue-based format is drawn from a two-hour online conversation that took place on March 7, 2025, between founding and current editorial members of *plaNext*. The discussion was recorded, then transcribed and polished, while leaving the main core of the discussion and tone intact. It was structured around a series of guiding questions prepared by the editors of this special issue, who adopted a qualitative research approach situated between focus groups and semi-structured interview formats. As such, the themes addressed were guided, while still allowing space for personal reflections and open expression.

The resulting article is organized into five main thematic sections. The first explores the motivations that led participants to found or join the editorial team of *plaNext*, detailing its genesis as a collective initiative led by early career academics seeking to resist and challenge the competitive and exclusionary practices of academic publishing by offering a more inclusive and supportive environment for young scholars. The second section examines the tension between creatively innovating within the publishing system while maintaining scientific credibility and appeal. The third addresses the ethical challenges of adopting a supportive yet rigorous editorial approach, as well as the complexities of navigating diverse editorial roles and responsibilities. The fourth focuses on lessons learned from previous editorial experiences and how they could shape the vision and future direction of the journal. It also touches upon how the cross-cutting skills developed through editorial work can support career pathways both within and beyond academia. The final section presents general reflections and concrete suggestions for recognizing and valuing the work of reviewers.

Keywords: early career researchers, open knowledge, plural knowledge, open peer review, technology and AI, publishing ethics

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Stories about founding, joining, publishing, and shaping *plaNext*

Lizzy Privitera:
I'm very happy to have all of you here. Thank you for participating in this dialogue. Today's conversation aims to reflect on key milestones from *plaNext*'s past 10 years, while also exploring a shared roadmap, vision, and the challenges ahead. I'm looking forward to today's discussion. I invite you to share how you got involved with the journal and what motivated you to join.

I can start with myself. I've been collaborating for many years with the AESOP Young Academic network (YAN), both as a part of the coordination team, and a couple of years ago, in 2023, I joined the editorial team of *plaNext*, where I was a guest editor of two volumes[1]. I witnessed the transition from the previous editorial board to the new one. We are in the middle of understanding and figuring out together the challenges of the coming years.

Sıla Ceren Varış Husar:
I have been much more active in the YAN Coordination Team. That's why I was invited to the editorial board in December 2023. The journal has been going through the transition period from the previous editorial board to the new one. I was invited to join the team despite having no prior experience in journal or editorial work. From the beginning, the group was very welcoming and supportive while gradually introducing me to tasks. They'd say, "You can do this, you can get involved in that," which helped a lot. As we began working on special issues and submissions, I took on more responsibility and started to develop my own role within the editorial board.

Subhashree Nath:
I joined *plaNext* last year, around July/August, as one of the board members. I think my key reason for joining *plaNext* was that it's something which has open access and there is no article processing charge (APC)[2], which is very critical for young researchers, especially from the Global South, who often cannot afford the APC[3].

Milan Husár:
I joined *plaNext* similarly to Ceren as a natural, or let's say typical, pathway of being a chair of YAN from late 2022. So, I was also working partially with the old editorial board and now with the new one.

Francesca Leccis:
I joined *plaNext* by applying for a position, and I've been collaborating since the end of 2022.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
I started by collaborating with AESOP in other projects on Global South planning[4], then, in 2016, I joined *plaNext*. For me, *plaNext* not only gives an opportunity to early career researchers to publish but also encourages them to think about how the discipline is advancing. I think that I would be more interested in making *plaNext* a **safe place for the young researchers to think more innovatively about the discipline**. *plaNext* is already attracting authors from different geographical areas, and I think that thinking about *plaNext*

[1] See Vol. 12 (2022): Governing the Unknown: Adaptive Spatial Planning in the Age of Uncertainty | plaNext–Next Generation Planning, Vol. 14 (2024): Social Mobilisations and Planning through Crises | plaNext–Next Generation Planning, as well as Privitera et al. (2022) and Rossini et al. (2024).

[2] APC refers to the fee charged to authors by most scientific journals to make their articles open access.

[3] Among others, Rodrigues et al. (2022) highlight that the APC system must change, as it restricts access to scientific knowledge in low- to middle-income regions, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities in science.

[4] For info, see Mukhopadhyay et al. (2021).

innovatively implies including the disciplinary evolution of planning theories and practices. At the end of the day, the name of *plaNext* comes from "planning for the next generation".

Mafalda Madureira:
I worked with *plaNext* for about three years during the COVID-19 phase. I got to know *plaNext* when I was a PhD student, and I really enjoyed that it was a space where PhD students could find a more **supportive** and constructive publishing environment. And I wanted to contribute to that type of experience also because I think that you grow as an academic when you engage in a **constructive dialogue with your colleagues and with your peers**. So that's what brought me to *plaNext*. Also, I thought that the journal might be a friendly place where you can **network** and connect with other peers. And that's what I found. I think it helps that *plaNext* is connected to a wider community of YAN, that it's, likewise, connected with AESOP.

Lauren Uğur:
I think I would like to speak a little bit about the initial days of *plaNext*, when it started. As a young academic involved with AESOP, I led the YAN for a couple of years—a really rewarding experience that connected me with amazing young people, who, just like myself, were starting to question their academic futures. As everyone at this stage in their life and career, we were thinking, "Am I going to get an academic position?" We all know that those are not hanging on trees! While navigating such uncertainty, we were feeling some frustration—but in a constructive way. Many of us were analyzing discourses for our own work and own PhDs, starting to teach, write, and get our papers rejected—sometimes harshly—by the more established voices in the field. We started having deep conversations about **what kind of future we wanted for planning research and discourse**. These discussions—both formal and informal—led to an idea: why not create our own journal? If I remember correctly, it was during a meeting in Sweden with Simone Tulumello, Ender Peker, and other members of the YAN organizing team that we were around a table and said, "Let's do it." That's how *plaNext* was born—out of a desire to **do things differently**, to offer an **inclusive platform for emerging voices**, and to shape discourse in new ways. We wanted something collaborative, meaningful, and lasting.

Pavel Grabalov:
I joined *plaNext* in August 2024. I think that there are several reasons why I wanted to join. Beyond the fact that *plaNext* is a safe space for younger career researchers like me, also, I do not like these big publishing houses that make a lot of money on us. I appreciate more those journals promoted by institutions or universities themselves, which are run without any financial profit from commercial companies. And *plaNext* is one of them. So I like the idea of being part of it. But of course, I also wanted to meet new people working in planning and related disciplines.

Subhashree Nath:
I would like to build on what Pavel said about having these big companies or big publishing houses. I think that *plaNext* can be a great option for young researchers, especially those who cannot afford an APC but have really good research and have something important to say. This is also a way to **resist the big publishing companies** that make money out of research and knowledge that should probably be otherwise common knowledge, and you cannot really advance science if all this knowledge is behind paywalls. So I think this was also one of the reasons that motivated me to join *plaNext*. Also, I see a lot of potential in *plaNext* because it comes from young researchers. So, in a way, we share our own struggles. Apart from just researchers who are part of institutes, I think *plaNext* could also be something for people who do not fall within institutional categories. There is so much knowledge that is out there, which we often call gray literature, and which then does not make up part of the systematic reviews, for example, because it's gray. I think *plaNex*t would also then become a space for not strictly

academic knowledge, or the **plural ways of knowing** things. I think this potential was also very important for me when I decided to apply.

Lizzy Privitera:
These are all excellent points and closely align with our thoughts while developing the special issue. You are bringing an important **equity lens** to *plaNext*. A more **accessible journal** can make a real difference for many researchers.

plaNext's evolution and challenges: Staying creative, open, inclusive, and grounded in the real-world, while scientifically recognized

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
I want to highlight that *plaNext* is an open access journal and has an open peer review process. And now it is also Scopus indexed, right? So *plaNext* has everything! From my experience and what mentors have told me, even if your article isn't published in a top-tier, high-impact journal, it can still make a difference if you actively promote it. Either publish in a well-regarded journal or help the journal by promoting it. Especially now, with social media, we have the tools to **amplify our work** and the platforms we publish in.

Lizzy Privitera:
I really like this topic because navigating the publication world can be a complex experience for young scholars. I have a critical view on publishing only in top-tier journals, however, while applying for academic positions, it became clear how much publishing in high-impact journals is a key selection criterion. Personally, I believe in the value of the article itself—the quality of the work and the process of creating it. That's where *plaNext* can be really special: it offers a supportive, **non-judgmental space for learning and publishing**, which is incredibly important for young researchers. At the same time, there's a challenge in promoting open-access journals like *plaNext* as valid and valuable places to publish—whether at the start, during, or after a PhD. There's pressure to aim for "high-level" journals, but what does that even mean? Impact factors and indexing don't always reflect the true quality of a paper. So it's a tricky process.

Mafalda Madureira:
One of the ongoing challenges has been publishing a cohesive set of papers from the YAN workshops. While the papers from the YAN initiatives often share a common theme, it's been difficult to gather them all in *plaNext*, partly because some supervisors encourage students to submit elsewhere. What's really valuable, though, is when papers that speak to each other are published together in a single issue—it allows the editorial team to **craft a narrative around a shared debate**. A great example was the Global South issue[5], which came together so well, partly thanks to Vanessa's involvement on the editorial board. This connection between *plaNext* and the YAN initiatives and PhD workshops is a key strength, and it would be great to consistently publish thematic clusters that reflect those workshop discussions

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
Every journal contributes to an ongoing debate by advancing specific knowledge or perspectives. High-impact journals, in particular, are often defined by their ability to engage a broad audience in these debates. One way to strengthen this in *plaNext* is by encouraging authors—especially when their papers are close to acceptance—to reflect on and connect

[5] For more info, see Mukhopadhyay et al. (2021) and the following link: Vol. 11 (2021): Planning Theories from the Global South | plaNext–Next Generation Planning

their work to the **journal's overarching themes or current debate**. Even if not all papers are directly related to each other, prompting authors to situate their contributions within a broader conversation can help build coherence across issues and foster deeper engagement with the journal's vision.

Lizzy Privitera:
This is a great point for the new editorial team to reflect on. In the coming years, it could be valuable to **define some thematic interests** that both reflect the team's vision and help push the boundaries of the planning debate. Young researchers often bring fresh, experimental ideas that differ from more established academic paths, so *plaNext* could serve as a **platform for** this **innovation**. It might be worth considering whether the new editorial team wants to develop a thematic roadmap—specific angles or perspectives on planning to explore over time.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
From the beginning, *plaNext* has been **open to new ideas**. For example, we were allowed to develop a thematic issue on the Global South and East, and Simone Tulumello later co-edited one with Patsy Healey that reinterpreted older concepts in a newer frame and light[6]. The journal has consistently welcomed innovation and invited leading scholars to guest-edit special issues, offering young academics a valuable opportunity for feedback and dialogue.

Looking ahead, one way *plaNext* could evolve is by **facilitating more direct interaction between contributors and guest editors**. Currently, most collaboration happens via email, but organizing online or face-to-face meetings—like those often held for edited book projects—could help authors better connect and create more cohesive issues. Creating these spaces for live exchange would strengthen the journal's collaborative and mentoring potential.

Mafalda Madureira:
I would like to confirm Chandrima's point about earlier special issues where well-known scholars were invited to join the editorial team. This is part of a broader effort to **increase *plaNext*'s visibility**—like the introduction of the **"Online First" feature**[7]. We put a lot of work into making the journal more recognized so that publishing in *plaNext* would also be valuable for early career researchers. I believe these efforts are starting to pay off.

Pavel Grabalov:
It sounds like open access was a really important issue. I'm not sure how it is elsewhere, but in Northern Europe now, there are often large budgets to cover the APCs, so PhD students might not face the same challenges. I'm curious—how important open access was for you at the time, and how important is it now?

Lauren Uğur:
Back when we started, our focus wasn't so much on open access, but rather on **open transparency in the review process**. We saw how younger academics—especially PhD students and postdocs—were often pushed aside or used to support the careers of senior academics. It wasn't uncommon to receive harsh reviews simply for not citing certain

[6] See Vol. 3 (2016): Questioning planning, connecting places and times | plaNext–Next Generation Planning.

[7] "Online First" refers to a publication status where an article is made available online before it is inserted into the journal issue. This allows readers to access peer-reviewed articles ahead of their scheduled print publication, enabling them to stay updated with the latest research. Authors benefit from reduced lead times between submission and publication. *plaNext*'s online first page is accessible on this link: OnlineFirst | plaNext–Next Generation Planning

"important" papers, even if they felt outdated or irrelevant. Blind reviews could be brutal, and fresh ideas were often dismissed if they didn't align with established narratives.

And we were saying, you know, what do we stand for? In the future, what we want in academia is **critical, open, and fair debate**. We want to show up and say, "Yes, I have a different opinion because diversity is what makes us powerful!". We believed that **diversity of thoughts and transparency** in how opinions shaped academic discourse were essential. If we were aiming for a global, inclusive platform, then **integrity, diversity, and fairness** had to be at the core. So while open access was—and still is—important, our real push was for **transparency and accountability in the academic process.**

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
Regarding the open review process, I think that you would like to see who is saying what and **from what position they are giving that feedback**. A single issue can be looked at from different perspectives, and people will have different views. And that's how your review would vary from one person to another. That also gives you a broader perspective of why you have certain comments on certain issues.

Lauren Uğur:
We were saying, "Don't hide behind anonymity, and don't shy away from different perspectives". Open, critical, and reflective debate is what makes us better—not just as academics, but also as practitioners. In regard to this latter aspect, in urban planning and development, we've always pushed **against the "ivory tower" mindset**. Yes, conceptually, theoretically, we have to be strong, but we were—and still are—interested in how those theories are applied and tested in **diverse real-world contexts**. That's how we understand the strength of a theory versus its contextual limits.

Lizzy Privitera:
My first experience with *plaNext* was years ago, and it was through the open review process of my first solo-authored paper[8]. I could even suggest potential reviewers. I remember indicating scholars whose work I admired and with whom I did not have the chance to collaborate yet. Two reviewers were assigned to my paper, and especially one of them was very familiar with the *plaNext* review system. With this scholar, **the review turned into more of a dialogue than a critique**. It felt like having a thoughtful conversation over a beer about my research. That experience really stayed with me—it was constructive, respectful, and personal. That said, in recent years, as part of the editorial team, I've noticed a shift. When we offer reviewers and authors the option between open and blind review, most tend to choose blind—often for reasons of privacy or impartiality. We don't force either option, but I still see open review as a real strength of *plaNext*, something worth preserving for the future.

Lauren Uğur:
This point brings me back to one of our original goals with the open review process. Beyond just improving a paper, it was about **creating meaningful connections**. Back then, we felt a real disconnect between senior academics and early career researchers trying to find their path. Outside of formal AESOP structures, there were few opportunities for real interaction. The open review process helped bridge that gap. It gave younger scholars a reason to reach out, start a conversation, and connect with more established academics. I remember cases where a review led to a real-life meeting and even new collaborations. That kind of **generational exchange** was something we truly wanted to foster, and it brought a lot of unexpected value.

[8] See Privitera (2020).

Lizzy Privitera:
I believe the journal can play this important role of an **intermediary between senior and young scholars**. If early career researchers often lack networks or feel too shy to approach senior academics, *plaNext* holds a unique and somewhat empowered position to help bridge that gap. We can actively engage senior scholars, especially during conferences, and invite them into conversations. I've noticed that those who've previously been involved within the YAN are often more receptive—they understand the spirit. Others may take more effort, but it's still possible. As an editorial team, we should be more conscious of this potential and take a more proactive role in facilitating these connections.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
Just to add a point—when I spoke about **creating a safe space for young researchers**, I also meant being mindful of their **diverse geographic and socio-economic backgrounds**. In planning, these differences shape the kinds of knowledge we produce. The journal could do more to support and encourage those unique perspectives. One way might be offering more space for **alternative formats**—like viewpoints or perspectives—where early career researchers can share emerging ideas, even before they have full empirical evidence. That flexibility could really empower more voices to be heard.

Lauren Uğur:
I'll be honest, in fields like planning or development—what really matters is application. That's what got me thinking: Do we always need to publish in journals? Of course, publishing remains essential—it's the backbone of academic discourse. But **accessibility** as well. Not everyone can easily access journal article formats. So why not **experiment with formats like podcasts, short videos, or visual explainers**—ways to share complex theoretical ideas in forms that are easier to access and understand? When we first started *plaNext*, we also struggled with this tension. There's still a lot of hesitation around doing things differently. Academia can be resistant to change—it values peer review, impact factors, and long-established processes. But younger academics need the courage to push these boundaries and ask: What counts as meaningful? How else can we create impact? We're academics, but we can also be academics in a different way, who move with the times and look into the future.

For me, **generating impact** means making ideas available to those outside academia—practitioners, communities, people on the ground. So, in rethinking the future of academic publishing—and the role of a journal like *plaNext*—I hope we can embrace **more creativity, more experimentation, and more ways to translate theory into action**. I really believe we need more of them in how we represent and present our ideas. Because in the end, that's where real change happens.

Mafalda Madureira:
I'd like to build on Lauren's point. I completely agree—there's a real need to connect our academic work more closely with global development agendas. For example, topics like localizing the Sustainable Development Goals, the role of planning in tracking progress toward frameworks like the Sendai Framework or the New Urban Agenda—these should be rooted in concrete, real-world cases. That way, we're **not just contributing to academic debates**, but also **reaching a broader audience**. Nowadays, people readily consume videos. So maybe we could invite authors to produce **short videos**—two or three minutes—explaining why their paper matters. These quick, accessible formats could help spark interest and make the content more approachable, especially for non-academic audiences. Open access is part of it, but diverse formats for sharing knowledge are just as important.

It might also be valuable to engage more with **practitioner networks** to bring in more action-oriented research. In my experience, a lot of what's published tends to be heavily literature-

based and often feels quite removed from practice. Since planning is inherently practice- and change-oriented, it would be great to see more work that reflects that side of the field and to strengthen the connection between research and real-world application.

Lauren Uğur:
Just a quick addition. It's not just about adapting to how people consume knowledge now, but also about encouraging them to value solid academic work and actually read journal articles. I think we mustn't lose sight of the foundation and importance of deep academic reading. It's really about striking a careful balance.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
p*laNext* doesn't have strict rules or boundaries, so there's room for innovation. If authors have photos or videos from their fieldwork, sharing those alongside their papers could really boost readers' interest. Visuals leave a strong impression—people might forget the text, but they rarely forget the visuals.

Lizzy Privitera:
I think one of our key challenges is to navigate the space between innovation and maintaining scientific credibility. We need to ensure that our creative formats—like podcasts, short videos, TED-style talks, or even graphic novels—align with our goal of being a respected academic journal. The aim is to be both "cool in format" and scientifically rigorous in content. I see this as a core challenge for the new editorial team moving forward: to experiment with new tools while still being seen as a valuable place to publish, or in other words, being innovative in what scientific knowledge we deliver and in how we deliver it.

Takeaways, lessons, and future challenges from being part of *plaNext*: About being a communicative and kind, and still rigorous, journal and reviewer

Lauren Uğur:
One of the biggest lessons was that **change takes time**—you can't go from zero to 100. As young and passionate academics, we were full of ideas and wanted to see immediate results, but we quickly realized that progress in academic publishing needs to happen step by step. Another key learning was the **importance of communication**. As much as diversity is our biggest strength, if there's no communication for that step-by-step incremental change process, even amongst ourselves as young academics, it becomes challenging. With such a diverse group, it was easy to focus on the technical and conceptual work and forget how crucial it is to stay connected and aligned. So, we pull it back, and we say "what is the impact we want? What is the change we want?". Good communication made a real difference in moving forward together and turning ideas into action.

Pavel Grabalov:
I'd like to add to what Lauren said about communication. From my experience with copy editing and publishing, the transition between editorial teams wasn't very smooth—many papers experienced long delays, which is the opposite of what we want. Surprisingly, authors were generally understanding, probably because, unlike big journals where communication can be minimal or formal, we kept an open and **supportive dialogue**. This close communication helps create a safe space for authors and is something we can continue to improve.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
Publication anyway is a very slow process and then when you are working as an editor, you set up the timeline, but there is a lot of going back and forth, not everything works out, so a lot of patience is needed.

Francesca Leccis:
For me, it was a big learning experience, realizing that things can be done differently. I'd always published through double-blind peer review—even in conference proceedings—characterized by strict deadlines and formal reviewer demands. *plaNext*'s more open and dialogue-based approach unlocked my mind towards new possibilities.

Subhashree Nath:
Beyond the reasons I mentioned earlier, I joined the journal to understand the publishing process from the other side. We've all encountered long waits without updates, which can be frustrating. I wanted to see what happened behind the scenes. Now, knowing that backlogs can happen due to editorial changes or life events, I've gained a more sympathetic perspective on the process. I also think we can improve how reviews are communicated. Since *plaNext* focuses on young researchers, reviewers adopting a more supportive, mentoring tone rather than harsh criticism would be hugely beneficial. Applying this approach more widely could boost morale, especially for early career scholars who might be discouraged by harsh feedback that's not about the content but the tone. Ultimately, I think we could be that **sympathetic safe journal** which doesn't put away rigorous scientific practice, but that **can be kind and still rigorous**: finding this balance would be a major achievement.

Lauren Uğur:
I love that sentence. Can you be kind and rigorous at the same time? Because that's exactly what matters. As a teacher, I constantly reflect on this. Unfortunately, academia often feels like a shark-eat-shark world. This was true 10 years ago, and it still is. So why, even anonymously, would someone be so unkind to a person trying to produce meaningful work? Personally, I believe we've lost the art of constructive critical debate, especially in education. People often take criticism as offense, get triggered, and avoid hard conversations. Yet, if we look around our cities and societies, we see pressing issues demanding tough discussions. Isn't that exactly what our discipline is for? So, you can be critical, and you can still be kind in the way that you communicate that 100%.

Pavel Grabalov:
I've been researching how planners learn and exploring different learning theories. We know from various fields that harsh critique, especially when someone is stressed or afraid, does not support learning. So, it's important to view **publishing and peer review as a learning experience—for both authors and reviewers.** It's also a chance for us to practice how to engage in constructive, respectful dialogue.

Mafalda Madureira:
Let me build on the point about being both critical and kind. I've been fortunate to have supervisors who embodied that balance, and it shaped how I give feedback—both to students and in peer reviews. But I've also worked with someone quite the opposite—their comments made even me uncomfortable, though they weren't directed at me. When I suggested they were too harsh, especially toward a student, they replied, "Well, they were harsh to me. Why shouldn't I be harsh to others?" That kind of mindset just perpetuates the cycle. I believe *plaNext* has a role to play in breaking that culture. As editors, we're responsible for ensuring feedback is constructive. If a review is unnecessarily harsh, it's on us to intervene. Criticism should never be personal—people don't make mistakes because they want to, but because they don't yet know better.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
I've heard PhD students express frustration about the visibility imbalance in academia. Those supervised by prominent "star" academics often receive more attention and recognition, while others feel overlooked—partly because they lack a platform to showcase their work. *plaNext*

can help address this. By inviting respected scholars as guest editors, the journal can create opportunities for more students to gain exposure. Similarly, when promoting the journal at sub-conferences or events, efforts can be made to highlight a wider range of contributors. Moreover, there's often tension between different academic schools of thought. Certain journals tend to favor specific theoretical or methodological perspectives, which can feel exclusionary. I hope *plaNext* will take a consciously inclusive approach: **welcoming diverse perspectives and giving space for different schools of thought** to coexist and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Lizzy Privitera:
I really appreciate the emphasis on plurality—creating a truly welcoming and inclusive space. I also value the discussion around equity. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have access to a top university, a supportive supervisor, or an ideal PhD experience. People come from different backgrounds and life stories. This journal can offer a platform for diverse voices, **helping bring more equity into an inherently unequal system**.

Lauren Uğur:
I want to reflect on the learning process and how it connects to many of the points raised. As a journal—especially one like *plaNext* that aims to be innovative and inclusive—we need clear **quality management frameworks**, particularly when exploring creative formats. However, when guiding reviewers and students, I often find that the "key performance indicators" used are wrong. For instance, there's too much emphasis on language sophistication rather than on the clarity of logic, conceptual framework, and academic rigor. Such measurements are based on the wrong criteria. If *plaNext* can clarify that we value **critical thinking, originality, and sound methodology over polished language**, we can shift toward more constructive, supportive feedback. Mistakes are part of learning—especially for early career researchers—and criticism should help people grow, not discourage them. What I care about is how you think. If *plaNext* is truly committed to inclusion and plurality, then we must promote thought itself—across different schools of thought—and provide a platform for diverse voices to be heard. My core point is—*plaNext* needs a reflective process and questioning: What do we value? What do we measure? And how do we communicate that to the people who are involved in the whole review process and everything that we're doing?

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
I know from editors of other journals that when they receive a submission from a non-native English speaker with strong ideas, they would help the author to rewrite and polish the paper, while fully preserving the author's original thinking. That kind of supportive editorial approach sets a powerful example. If leading journals can prioritize the value of ideas over language perfection, then we should adopt a similar attitude—recognizing that great research isn't always expressed in perfect English, and that thoughtful contributions deserve to be heard and supported.

Lauren Uğur:
Nowadays, there are tools like ChatGPT and other AI programs available, and many universities already use AI-driven systems for plagiarism detection and grammar correction. So while these tools are useful, language and grammar aren't the real issue—what matters is the concept, the idea, and how we communicate it.

One insight from this conversation is how *plaNext* could **use technology to promote inclusion and accessibility**. With just a few backend automations, the journal could be published in multiple languages. At the heart of it, the question is: What do we value, and how do we want to foster inclusion, access, and diversity? Once we align on those conceptual and ethical goals, implementing them—technically and practically—becomes much easier.

Lizzy Privitera:
It's also worth remembering that in Europe, only people from the UK speak English as a native language. So even the best scholars across Europe speak with an accent and make many mistakes. It helps you realize that perfection in language isn't the goal—being understood is. I really appreciate the discussion around language. A few years ago, proofreading was a serious issue, especially for PhD students who couldn't afford professional editing services. Now, with tools like ChatGPT and other AI, much of that burden has been lifted[9]. Still, language remains a broader topic. Some journals already accept articles in multiple languages. As far as I know, *plaNext* hasn't done this yet, but it's worth considering. While English dominates academic publishing in the Global North, in regions like South America, there's a huge body of work published in Spanish and Portuguese. We're missing out on a wealth of knowledge by limiting ourselves to English. Looking forward, AI could play a role in offering real-time or automated translation to bridge this gap—helping make publications more accessible across languages. It's definitely something to keep in mind as we think about inclusion and the future of academic publishing.

Lauren Uğur:
I'd suggest keeping things simple at the start. Personally, I wouldn't recommend accepting full papers in multiple languages—unless *plaNext* is prepared to restructure its editorial board accordingly, which can be complex. That said, accessibility is still key. Most authors are willing to write in English, as it's the dominant academic language—not necessarily by choice, but because that's the reality. The goal should be to create a safe and supportive space for those writing in English, especially non-native speakers. AI tools can help with grammar and clarity, so **the focus should shift from language perfection to idea quality**.

Where *plaNext* could innovate is in **dissemination**. While submissions remain in English, the journal could publish short-form summaries or abstracts in multiple languages. This would help readers access key ideas in their own language, without complicating the peer-review process. So in short: keep the "channel in" in English for now to maintain editorial consistency but explore multilingual "channels out" to broaden reach and visibility—especially in regions where English isn't dominant. Even small steps like this can increase *plaNext*'s impact and inclusivity. Speaking about visibility, today, with all the digital tools available, including social media and platforms like LinkedIn, it is a matter of mobilizing simple strategies to grow the journal's reach, even without a budget. There's real potential here to scale up and expand globally.

What did plaNext mean for your personal and professional development?

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
One of the most meaningful aspects of my *plaNext* experience was the opportunity to work with Vanessa Watson as a guest editor for the Global South issue. It significantly expanded my network and deepened my understanding of Southern theories and contexts. We received an immense number of abstracts from across the globe, and it was a very fruitful discussion. Following that, we have formed a thematic group on Global South and East within AESOP[10]. All these collaborations have been in a way an outcome of being involved in *plaNext*.

[9] We do not intend to oversimplify the current debate on the potential and limitations of incorporating AI into scientific production. While we are far from endorsing the replacement of paid human proofreaders with AI tools as a way forward, we recognize the ongoing and complex challenge of how to balance affordable AI-based proofreading solutions—particularly appealing to early-career scholars and universities with low budgets—with the continued professional support provided by expert human proofreaders.
[10] See AESOP - Global South & East

Lauren Uğur:
For me, the impact of *plaNext* has two sides—personal and professional. On the personal side, it's simply been fun. I formed meaningful connections as a young academic across the world. People with whom we share a commitment to the values behind *plaNext*. That sense of connection is powerful. That global network makes work travel and conferences much more enriching—and enjoyable. Professionally, the key takeaway for me was the value of **interdisciplinarity**. Working with people from different countries, academic backgrounds, and schools of thought exposed me to a wide range of planning and development frameworks. I truly believe that this interdisciplinary mindset helped me stand out in my field. When I connected those dots and showed how different approaches could lead not just to comparable outcomes, but better ones, it made an impact. It was AESOP, *plaNext*, and spaces like this that taught me how to think critically, cross boundaries, and embrace new ways of working. That interdisciplinarity has been transformative in both my personal and professional journey.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
Being part of *plaNext* means forming a great group of friends, and you also learn about each other's strengths, which can be incredibly useful on other occasions.

Lizzy Privitera:
I see how you refer to some **cross-cutting skills** that have been useful for future work experience. Do you want to expand on this?

Sıla Ceren Varış Husar:
I learned a great deal about the **internal dynamics of academic publishing**. For example, I now understand why some journals take four to six months to respond—still frustrating, especially during your PhD, but at least I see what might be the reasons behind those delays. This experience helped me better understand the system and showed me how we can support our peers. The **editorial knowledge** we've gained is **valuable and transferable** to other journals and publishing platforms. In this regard, one unexpected but valuable skill I've developed through being on the editorial board is communication, especially when reaching out to potential reviewers. At first, it felt like begging people to accept review requests, and I'd joke about how I had to become increasingly polite and persuasive each time. However, in all seriousness, this role has helped me **develop my soft skills**. Whether I'm contacting professors, PhD holders, or professionals working in research centers, I've become more confident and effective in how I connect, ask for feedback, and maintain those relationships. These soft skills, such as **clear communication, diplomacy and relationship-building**, have definitely been added to my skill set thanks to this experience.

Review dilemmas and ideas

Mafalda Madureira:
The review is challenging for everyone. My former boss keeps sending me papers to review simply because he can't find enough reviewers. There's just a huge volume of publications and very limited time for reviewing—so it's a widespread issue.

Lizzy Privitera:
Someone once told me a good rule of thumb: for every paper you submit, you should review two to three others. Since editors typically need 2–3 reviewers per submission, it's a fair way to give back to the academic community—and honestly, it's good karma. I think it's a helpful mindset to promote. Sometimes it's really hard to find reviewers, so reminding people of this practice in our journal could make a real difference.

I also think it would be helpful to introduce some form of **incentive for reviewers**. I've seen some journals publish a list of reviewers at the end of the year, or offer small symbolic gestures—like a thank-you note or a recognition award—as a way to show appreciation. Even something symbolic can go a long way in acknowledging the time and effort reviewers give. Maybe this is something we could implement in *plaNext*. Right now, it's more of an informal "thank you," but formalizing it, even in a small way, could make a difference. As reviewing becomes harder and people get busier, having some form of recognition or motivation might help. Especially as we move toward more creative formats—like graphic narratives, for example—the nature of reviewing may change, and new types of incentives could become even more important. Just an idea, but perhaps worth exploring.

Subhashree Nath:
I'd like to add to this, especially since some of you are further along in your academic careers and may have influence within institutions. I believe this is a systemic issue: **many academic institutions don't allocate time for anything beyond project-specific work**. For example, if I have a 75% or even 100% research contract, it's usually tied directly to a funded project. That means reviewing papers—or even writing new grant applications—often happens in my personal time, which is already limited and needed for both life and long-term career development. As long as reviewing remains considered "pro bono" and something we're expected to do outside of paid work, we'll keep facing this challenge. It's voluntary, yet essential, while large publishing houses profit from it. Reviewers don't get compensated, and authors may or may not benefit professionally—this imbalance needs to be addressed. If any of you can advocate within your institutions, that would help. At my institute, we've started discussions about allocating even 5 % of our contracts to peer-review work. It's not formalized yet, but it's a start. Maybe *plaNext* could publish a piece on this—highlighting **how systemic structures are undermining the peer-review process**, which is central to academic integrity and progress.

Chandrima Mukhopadhyay:
Maybe *plaNext* could introduce a basic "Reviewer Award" or something similar on an annual basis. I received one once, and I really appreciated the recognition—it felt like meaningful acknowledgment.

Lizzy Privitera:
Yes, I think that's a very good point. I really like the idea of including a dedicated 5 % of paid time in academic contracts for reviewing duties. We're all committed and passionate about making change, but academia can also be one of the most exploitative environments—many rights that are standard in other professions are often missing here, simply because we're expected to do it "for the love of it." That shouldn't be the norm. From an institutional perspective, one thing a journal like *plaNext* could do is **advocate for this kind of structural change**. Beyond that, publishing a list of contributors, for example, not only shows genuine appreciation, but also helps build a reviewer's academic profile. **Recognition** like that **strengthens careers** because it demonstrates that you are a good scholar also because you're a good reviewer. It's something we should definitely consider putting into practice.

Lauren Uğur:
As you were all speaking, I thought of one practical idea: the *plaNext* editorial board could create a simple template—a letter of appreciation or appointment—for reviewers, especially younger ones. That way, reviewing isn't just an invisible task, but something formally acknowledged. A letter could say, for instance: "Thank you for supporting the academic and planning community through your review work. We understand the effort this takes and deeply appreciate your contribution."

That kind of **formal recognition raises awareness and helps supervisors or institutions understand the time and value involved**. A small gesture like this helps **make the labor visible**. Many supervisors wouldn't even think about how much time reviewing takes unless it's actively discussed. A formal acknowledgment gives that work legitimacy.

And beyond that, we should be louder—positively loud. So my question is: what platforms are we using? For example, with AESOP or other conferences, we could be more present and better connected online. Not just demanding change, but showing up, being present, and **creating a visible culture around peer review**. That can build positive peer pressure, spotlight those who support early career scholars, and spark broader conversations about what it means to review and edit. Honestly, it's a bit like a marketing or advocacy campaign—a kind of "review lobby." But I think it could really shift the culture.

Lizzy Privitera:
I think it's a great point to mobilize more discourse and narrative strategies around this. On a related note, I was reminded of a journal where, right after I submitted a paper, the editorial team informed me of their policy: for every submission, the author is expected to review at least one paper. It wasn't strictly mandatory, but it was strongly encouraged—and I was immediately given a paper to review. This approach helps ensure a steady flow of reviewers and sets a tone of **shared responsibility**. We could do something similar with *plaNext*, but frame it more around **values**—like **solidarity, mutual support, and collective growth**. A message like: "Join our reviewer network as part of a community built on reciprocity and shared commitment!" might help reinforce that. We could definitely push this kind of narrative further.

Subhashree Nath:
I'd like to build on the marketing idea—young researchers need visibility. If *plaNext* strengthens its outreach and becomes more consistent with promotion, it could help authors gain more exposure for their work. Many journals already use social media to highlight new publications and engage broader audiences. We could do the same **to ensure that the work of young researchers is more visible and impactful**.

Lizzy Privitera:
This conversation was meant to create that space. With the new editorial team, we've met several times, but mostly to resolve practical problems like the publishing system. There was little space left to talk about ideas or future visions. So, for me, it's the first time hearing their opinions on bigger topics. I agree—we need more time for reflection and discussion to envision the change we want to see.

Let's wrap up by saying: thank you all for your time and for sharing your thoughts. This has been a rich and incredibly meaningful conversation.

Highlights

1. Motivations and origins

plaNext was born from a collective drive within the AESOP Young Academics network to challenge exclusionary norms in publishing. Founding members were motivated by a desire for openness, inclusivity, and support for early-career scholars, especially those from the Global South. The journal's open-access model and absence of article processing charges positioned it as a space for collaboration, empowerment, and the amplification of emerging voices often sidelined in traditional academic platforms.

2. Innovation vs. Scientific credibility

Editors discussed the tension between experimenting with new formats and maintaining scholarly credibility. While *plaNext* embraces creativity—like open peer review—it must also gain recognition in academic circles. Suggestions included thematic roadmaps, stronger editorial-academic links, and alternative media formats. The journal aims to legitimize experimental approaches from early career researchers while ensuring high-quality, credible contributions within a competitive publishing landscape.

3. Ethical editorial practice

Kindness and rigor emerged as guiding principles for ethical editorial practice. Editors stressed the importance of respectful, constructive feedback, particularly for early career authors. They criticized harsh, exclusionary review cultures and emphasized the role of editors in fostering dialogue over critique. *plaNext*'s open peer review system and flexible approach to knowledge were seen as essential to creating a supportive, high-quality publishing environment that values both empathy and academic standards.

4. Lessons and future visions

Editorial work at *plaNext* has helped editors develop professional skills and confidence in academic publishing. It has encouraged interdisciplinary thinking and global connections. Looking ahead, editors envisioned stronger author-reviewer interactions, more diverse contribution formats (e.g., field visuals), and deeper engagement with planning practices and global challenges. The journal's growth is shaped by its editors' reflections, learning processes, and their commitment to making publishing more accessible and meaningful.

5. Recognizing reviewer contributions

Participants emphasized the need to recognize and support peer reviewers, whose work often goes unpaid and unnoticed—especially in precarious academic contexts. Ideas included publishing acknowledgments, issuing appreciation letters, offering training, and even annual reviewer awards. The goal is to build a culture of mutual care and accountability. *plaNext* was seen as well-positioned to model equitable practices that formally value reviewer labor and foster a sustainable, community-oriented publishing culture.

Acknowledgment

The current text uses two combined sources: the automatic captions by Autotekst using OpenAI Whisper V3 and the Zoom automatic transcription. Such original texts have been compared, combined, compacted, and edited by Elisa (Lizzy) Privitera. The other authors have reviewed and modified it.

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