



Fifty years of local government studies: evolution, internationalisation, and the future of the field

Introduction

In the half-century since the founding of Local Government Studies (LGS), legislative, fiscal and policy churn have re-scaled and re-purposed the role of municipalities in the UK and elsewhere. In part reflecting this evolution, the field – both the journal specifically and the discipline more generally – has also undergone significant change. Many articles in the first few volumes of the journal were often authored by UK local government officers or councillors, who also often read their own personal copies of LGS. These articles were often focused on questions relating to the everyday practice of local authorities in the UK and did not usually seek to situate their findings at a broader scale or generate theory. In contrast, although the vast majority of more recently published articles originate from the Global North, academic authorship is now the norm and only a minority of journal submissions come from UK institutions. This internationalisation has required authors to engage much more with theory, to show how approaches to local governance in different countries address broader conceptual questions concerning issues such as central-local relations, power, democracy and the generation of public value. At the same time, scholars have adopted increasingly innovative methodologies to help broaden our understanding of the ways in which these issues play out in different local contexts.

In this anniversary special issue, we reflect upon these changes and ask where the future of the field lies. We do so through a bibliometric analysis of previous LGS articles, a reflection on the comment and analysis contributions that constitute this special issue, and a roundtable discussion held at the UK Political Studies Association annual conference in March 2024¹ with leading local government studies scholars. Each tease out the various ways in which LGS has evolved since its inception to become an international, theoretically informed academic journal at the forefront of scholarly debate on questions of how societies and communities are governed.

A 50-year journey

In recent decades, co-authorship has increased across the social sciences, including in political science and public administration, reflecting the increasingly diverse and technically complex nature of publications in these fields. By

examining the evolution of co-authorship in LGS, we can begin to ascertain whether and how the journal may have benefited from these methodological developments. As such, we analysed the changes in authorship (the average number of authors per manuscript, and the countries in which those authors are based) for articles published in the first 50 years of LGS.² We found that in its early decades, LGS was primarily a British publication that featured occasional studies of other English-speaking countries. At the turn of the century, however, the journal has sought to achieve a broader international reach. Notably, the geographical distribution of author affiliations has evolved substantially since then, indicating that LGS has successfully managed to increase its international focus and readership.

Furthermore, as [Figure 1](#) suggests, the vast majority of articles published in the first volumes of LGS were by a single author. Volume 6 (1980) has the lowest average number of authors, 1.04: of the 55 articles that appeared in the journal during this year, 53 were written by a single author, and only two had two co-authors each. The average number of authors has consistently grown from the second decade of the journal onwards. Initially, this growth followed a pattern quite similar to that found for the field of political science more broadly in [Henriksen \(2016, 463\)](#). However, the average number of co-authors in the last two decades has greatly increased, rising well above the field average. In the last decade, the average number of authors fluctuated around 2.2, after reaching a record high in 2019 of 2.54. Two factors may have contributed to this. First, an increase in the publication of articles related to public administration, which tends to have a higher rate of co-authorship ([Henriksen 2016](#)). Second, the increase in co-authorship could also relate to

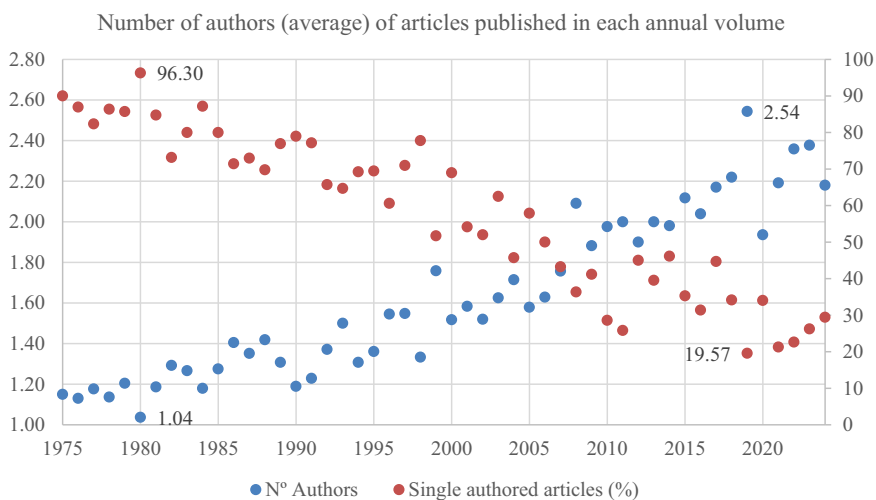


Figure 1. Evolution of co-authorship in LGS. Source: Authors.

the progressive internationalisation of authorship at LGS. As Henriksen (2016) argues, the increased mobility of researchers and the decrease in communication costs have facilitated collaboration within a single country, and also between countries, in a context where more complex methodological approaches and techniques have triggered an increase in co-authorship (see also the paper by Jing et al in this issue). In the last two decades (since 2005), the average number of authors of articles whose corresponding author was affiliated to a UK institution was 1.60, while the average for articles with corresponding authors from non-UK institutions was 2.15, the difference being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Next, we delve deeper into the internationalisation of the authorship of the journal.

Table 1 shows the proportion of each country that achieved at least 3% of the articles published in the journal over at least one five-year period. The countries in the table are listed in descending order according to their share of articles that feature in the most recent period (2020–2024). The first and most relevant observation is that LGS began as an eminently UK journal. Over 90% of articles in the first 15 years (1975–1989) were authored³ by authors affiliated with a UK institution, and almost all the remaining articles had authors from other Anglophone countries. The situation changed only slightly in the next 15 years (1990–2004), as UK authorship still exceeded 80% of the articles throughout the period, but authorship from non-Anglophone countries began to emerge, albeit modestly.

LGS has only become an eminently international journal in the last two decades. A notable increase in publications from authors based in the Netherlands, the Iberian Peninsula, and Scandinavia since the beginning of

Table 1. Countries⁴ share of articles published in LGS. Quinquennial periods. Source: Authors, with data from the LGS website.

Country	1975– 9	1980– 4	1985– 9	1990– 4	1995– 9	2000– 4	2005– 9	2010– 4	2015– 9	2020– 4 ⁵
UK	91.6	92.0	94.0	85.2	89.0	82.8	62.3	37.0	20.8	14.5
USA	3.1	2.8	2.5	3.8	1.3	2.8	2.5	2.4	12.0	13.7
Spain	0	0.4	0	1.1	0.6	0.7	5.0	6.3	8.3	6.8
Netherlands	0	0	0.5	1.6	1.3	3.4	0	8.7	10.2	5.6
Belgium	0	0.4	0	0	0	0	3.8	2.4	1.9	4.8
Australia	0.8	0.8	1.0	0.5	0.6	0.7	1.9	3.8	8.8	4.4
Portugal	0	0.4	0	0	0	0.7	1.3	2.9	1.4	4.4
Sweden	0	0.4	0	2.2	0.6	0	3.8	3.4	0	4.0
China	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.5	4.0
Poland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.4	2.3	3.6
Canada	2.3	0.4	0.5	0.5	0	0	0	0.5	1.9	3.2
Norway	0	0	0.5	0.5	1.9	3.4	3.1	2.9	6.5	3.2
Germany	1.5	0	0.5	0.5	0	0.7	0	4.8	5.6	2.8
Denmark	0	0	0	0	1.3	0.7	3.1	5.3	6.0	2.8
Italy	0	0	0	1.1	0	0	0.6	3.4	2.3	2.0
Israel	0.8	0	0	0	0.6	1.4	3.8	1.4	2.3	0.8
Other	0	2.4	0.5	2.7	2.6	2.8	8.6	12.5	9.3	18.3

the century was accompanied in the last decade by a large increase in US authorship. Also, to a lesser extent, new entrants to LGS have gained a significant presence. This is the case for Poland (which leads the increased publications from Central and Eastern European countries). Additionally, in the most recent years included in this analysis, China has gained more space in the journal (and so did South Korea, from where 2.8% of the articles were published in 2020–2024, a share that is notable but does not reach the threshold for inclusion in Table 1). Moreover, there was a remarkable increase in the number of countries with authorship in the journal, which went from 14 in the first decade of the journal (1975–1984) to 32 in the last decade.

Special issues (SIs) also provide valuable information about the journal's evolution in research interests and other characteristics. The frequency of special issues in LGS does not follow a regular pattern over time. Special issues had a relevant presence in LGS from the early years and were typically focused on specific policy topics in the first decade (1975–84) of the journal (e.g., leisure, housing, innovation, etc.). During the second and third decades, special issues featured less frequently; only nine SIs were published between 1985 and 2004, meaning an annual average below 0.5, and they had a strong focus on general local government management. This evolution ran somewhat counter to trends in other social science fields, and in spite of evidence of the higher number of citations of articles published in SIs compared to articles in regular issues (Khan et al. 2021; Olk and Griffith 2004).

Perhaps partly because of this, SIs have become more common in the last two decades of LGS: Figure 2 illustrates that a fifth of the issues over this period have been dedicated to special issues. Recent special issues in the journal have emphasised local government reforms for public service delivery (e.g., amalgamation, privatisation, intermunicipal

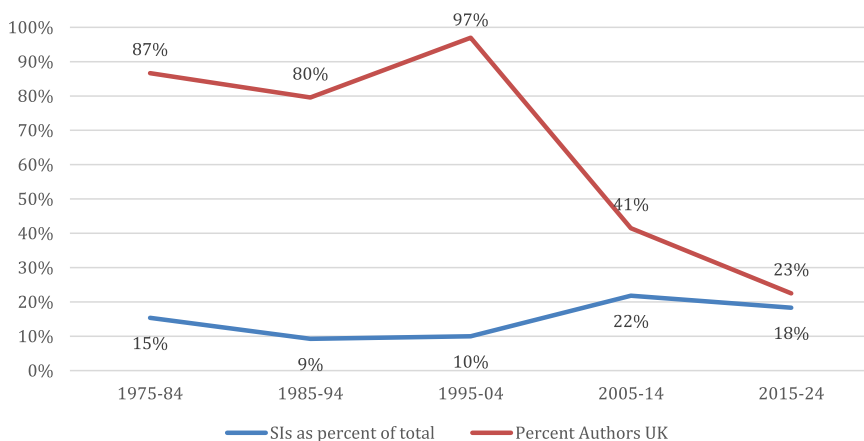


Figure 2. Special issues in LGS: frequency and authorship over time.⁶ Source: Authors.

cooperation, remunicipalisation), and elections and political participation. This reflects the growing emphasis that LGS places on analysing the dynamics of local politics and local public policies, rather than the previous focus on particular sectors. In addition, the territorial diversity of authorship within SIs reflects the broader evolution of the journal: British scholars dominated the first decades of the journal, but in the last twenty years LGS has achieved a wide international diversity. For example, scholars from the Netherlands and Scandinavia are responsible for 21% of the articles published in SIs in the last decade.⁷ Furthermore, it is interesting to note that French scholars have used SIs as a preferred way of contributing to the journal: in the last quinquennium, only one regular article had a French scholar as the corresponding author, while French scholars were responsible for five articles in special issues.

Past, present, and future of LGS: thoughts from local government experts

The above analysis shows how LGS has undergone profound changes since its launch five decades ago. These developments hold us in good stead for grappling with how (local) governments might seek to tackle a growing number of societal issues over the coming decades. Traditional policy approaches and structures were not designed to tackle contemporary complex issues such as the climate emergency or entrenched inequalities, and – as practice has adapted to this reality accordingly – the journal has published a growing number of papers on the use of novel policy approaches. Furthermore, given that recent municipal trends around marketisation, work-force pressures and fiscal austerity are only likely to increase the scale of these challenges, we anticipate that local government studies will remain a vibrant field of academic enquiry (and therefore continue to generate vital scholarly outputs) for many decades to come.

With this broader context in mind, we commissioned a series of comment and analysis pieces from UK-based and internationally-located members of the Editorial Board of Local Government Studies, other leading academics, early career researchers, independent scholars and practitioners. Edited by Catherine Durose and Peter Eckersley, they provide an accessible and engaging set of reflections on the past and future of the journal, the discipline and the local. We now introduce these contributions and highlight some of the connecting themes that feature within this special issue. This helps us to bring out many of the conceptual issues, theoretical approaches, methodologies and policy challenges that have been relevant for the journal (and the discipline more widely) in the past and the present, and which may become increasingly important in the future.

Several contributors address a fundamental question: what does 'local' mean? And what are the implications of this for the field of local government studies? Neil Barnett (2024) highlights the diverse disciplinary lineage of local government studies, which has simultaneously enriched the discipline but challenged the normative defences of local government itself. He calls for a 're-tooling' of local government studies' and its commitment to the local in order to re-lay the normative foundations for local government. Giovannini and Griggs (2024) adopt a similar perspective in positing that a failure to adequately address the issue of what 'the local' consists of – particularly in the era of governance and interdependence between policy actors – risks pushing the study of local government into a 'cul-de-sac', in which scholars focus solely on municipal institutions and neglect other processes of citizen participation and local politics. Relatedly, Madeleine Pill (2024) argues 'for a more plural, participatory conception of the local state, founded in an (intra-) relational understanding local capacity'. Whilst stressing the key role of municipal government in local governance, she emphasises how constructive partnerships between local governments and their constituent communities can generate greater capacities to care for places, shaped by a common understanding of the 'logic of the local'.

Such considerations could well have implications for local government studies as a discipline, which Mark Sandford's article argues has had a 'Cinderella' status within political science (in the UK at least) for many decades. According to Sandford, the pervading view that UK local government exists primarily as agents of the centre and should be less concerned with 'place-shaping' and acting as the democratic embodiment of local communities, has contributed to policymakers, the public and most academics perceiving it as a 'second order' concern. Given these considerations, perhaps we should not be surprised that local government scholars in UK universities are often found in business schools – in organisational studies, accounting or management departments – rather than political science. Nonetheless, Sandford retains some hope that the change of government in the UK may lead to a reappraisal of local authorities' role, which could help to invigorate scholarly debate and analysis of the local level.

Nils Stockman (2024) further asks how being a scholar of the 'local' can be navigated within the 'global' institutions that many of our universities are or aspire to be. How might we understand our positionality as researchers of the 'local'? How may we sustain our relationships with a given place, and is this in tension within our identities as academics within the priorities and ambitions of global universities? Stockman encourages us to engage reflexively with the 'local' of academic practice.

A number of articles examine some of the defining issues of our time – democracy, climate change, digital transformation and fiscal uncertainty – but through the lens of the local, and specifically, local government. Mila

Gasco-Hernandez address the digital transformation of local government and calls for research to better reflect the real-world situations faced by local government and as new technologies emerge. Peter Eckersley and Marta Olazabal consider the existential question of climate change adaptation and the crucial role for local government. Whilst recognising some progress, they argue that this issue has been a peripheral rather than defining concern for local governments internationally, and that more needs to be done to address this challenge. One increasingly common approach to climate justice involves facilitating greater citizen participation in decision-making through climate assemblies or mini-publics. Roberto Falanga (2024) touches on these topics in his piece on democratic innovations, by arguing that the local scale can (still) act as a democratic laboratory, as long as new approaches take account of contextual factors and seek to include under-represented groups. Nonetheless, as Ben Worthy and Megan Waugh caution, supposedly ‘democratic’ reforms do not always result in citizens being able to exert more influence over local decision-making and hold public servants to account. They stress that freedom of information and data transparency requirements are not guaranteed to increase political participation, and common exemptions (e.g., for external contractors) mean that government business often remains opaque – for both academics and private citizens.

Other contributions engage with questions of the future of local government. Some offer a perspective from the UK, reflecting the roots of LGS – and a continued key readership and source of contributions – but with international resonance. Catherine Needham, Catherine Mangan, Dave McKenna and Editorial Board member, Jason Lowther consider the future local government workforce. They ask if fiscal pressures – notably, the austerity that has led to unprecedented cuts in UK local government over the past fifteen years – will render local government less attractive to newer generations of public servants. ‘Millennials’ particularly are understood to be motivated by opportunities to engage in transformational and relational work, which fiscal uncertainty may inhibit. They conclude that local government needs to better articulate that it is a sector where people can make a difference in order to attract the best public servants. Relatedly, Steven Parker and Joyce Liddle highlight the tension between a strategic focus on public service outcomes and the goals that street-level bureaucrats seek to achieve in their daily interactions with service users. Stressing the multi-faceted nature of contemporary societal problems, they point out that front-line outcomes depend on qualitative and intangible factors such as trust. This makes it difficult for both academics and policymakers to capture how such relationships develop, but nonetheless suggests that existing approaches to evaluating co-produced social outcomes are inadequate.

A longstanding issue for local government across the world has been one of fiscal uncertainty and sustainability – particularly since the

financial crisis of 2008. Editorial Board members Pengju Zhang and David Guo set out the multiple ways in which articles in LGS have measured and applied the concept of fiscal uncertainty in different local government contexts in recent years. On a related topic, Tom Arnold and Matty McKenna discuss how resilience has become an increasingly important issue for English local government since 2010. As they explain, funding cuts have combined with substantial institutional re-design and the introduction of new mayoral and 'combined' authorities at the sub-national level. This has led to the removal of both resources and functions from longstanding councils and raised questions about legitimacy – and created a much more complex and fragmented institutional landscape of subnational government, which can be difficult to navigate. Bethany Rex and Clive Gray point out how the financial context has contributed towards changes in local government's role as a provider of cultural services in England, detailing changes in funding, delivery and scope over the last half-century. Their contribution raises an important question: how far is a local culture offer understood as part of the future role of local government?

A final set of contributions build upon and extend our Editorial bibliometric analysis, looking back on the development of the journal to inform its future. This has been approached thematically, methodologically and in terms of reach. LGS Editorial Board member Andre Aquino uses a bibliometric analysis to interrogate how the journal has engaged with a core concept of public administration and political science more broadly: accountability. Aquino finds, perhaps surprisingly, that accountability has been at the periphery of LGS and concentrated in practice-led accounts. He concludes that there is a valuable future opportunity in bringing questions of accountability in local government to the journal's centre. Also based on bibliometrics, and chiming with our own analysis set out earlier in this editorial, Yijia Jing, Wenxue Fan, Meijun Liu and Jingyuan Xu find that articles in LGS are increasingly written by co-authors based in different countries, in line with global trends towards international co-authorship in public administration journals. These papers are also more likely to be cited elsewhere. Focusing specifically on Asia, Qi Bian, Luning Xin, Luning and Yanwei Li examine the international reach of Local Government Studies. Acknowledging the growing presence of studies of countries such as China, Japan and South Korea, they challenge the journal and the discipline to both look more widely across Asia, and particularly to those countries which have received limited scholarly attention. But, perhaps more fundamentally, they call for future studies to move beyond an approach adopting Western frameworks to analyse Asian contexts, and instead encourage the establishment of frameworks and theories specific to Asia. Adopting a similar bibliometric approach, Amir Hefetz and Marianna Sebö present some interesting analysis of the methods that LGS papers have adopted over the last five decades. They identify

a notable growth in the share of quantitative and experimental approaches featuring in the journal, which has happened in parallel with an increase in the data that local governments make publicly available. As increasing numbers of public datasets are made freely available, and scholars become more familiar with methods that help them to interrogate large datasets, we might expect this trend to continue.

Indeed, the growth of publicly available data could also have major implications for policymaking. As Andrew Walker and Greg Stride highlight, local government practitioners are always keen to find 'evidence' (however defined) to support decision-making. Fiscal pressures over recent years, particularly in the UK, have weakened municipal capacities to collect relevant information, meaning that local governments may become increasingly reliant on academics and think tanks to analyse and make sense of these datasets on behalf of practitioners. Whilst 'evidence' remains a contested concept in politicised environments, there is nonetheless scope for greater collaboration between scholars and policymakers on this issue.

What's next for LGS?

As we reflect on the past fifty years of LGS, we can see how the issues and trends set out in this Editorial and the rest of this special issue might shape the future trajectory of the journal. Looking ahead, we anticipate that LGS will evolve further in terms of authorship, interdisciplinarity and methodological innovation, and focus more on the evolving nature of what constitutes 'local' governance, with an increasing emphasis on sustainability, social justice and collaboration.

We also expect the current trends of increasing contributions from scholars of varied gender and ethnicity, as well as from a wider array of countries and geographic regions, to continue. We have experienced an increase in submissions from the Global South, and hope and expect this trend to continue over the coming decades, further strengthening LGS's international outreach and appeal to international authors and readers. This ongoing diversification will enrich the journal's content, offering new insights and perspectives that reflect the global nature of local governance challenges, whilst also stimulating new thinking about how localities around the world might seek to address such issues in similar or different ways.

As our analysis of previous articles published over the last fifty years demonstrates, LGS has benefited from increasing co-authorship and diverse regional authorship. In 2023, for example, the countries with the highest number of submissions were China, Netherlands, the UK, Indonesia, and USA. Moreover, LGS's international profile continues to grow: in 2023 the highest number of readers were from the UK, USA, Netherlands, China and Australia. As this trend continues, we anticipate that the journal will also

benefit from greater collaboration between scholars from different disciplines and sectors, as well as from co-authorship with practitioners and policy-makers. By fostering interdisciplinary research, LGS will address complex local governance issues from multiple angles, providing sound, practical and theoretically holistic solutions. This collaborative spirit will also extend to international partnerships, bringing together expertise from diverse contexts to tackle shared challenges.

Like other journals in the field, LGS has embraced methodological pluralism (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018; McDonald et al. 2022; Hefetz & Sebö in this issue) and will likely see further methodological innovations in the future. In parallel, local governments have been increasingly adopting various innovative approaches to data analysis to enhance their decision-making processes, improve service delivery, and address complex societal challenges. These approaches include big data analytics, machine learning, artificial intelligence, blockchain technology, and citizen data science and crowdsourcing. This adoption will inspire researchers to employ innovative methodological approaches, which in turn promote methodological innovation in practice.

As Giovannini and Griggs (2024) and Pill (2024) suggest in this issue, the concept of what constitutes 'local' is continuously evolving. Local governments are increasingly taking active roles in addressing emerging public challenges that extend beyond their immediate territories. They are collaborating with other partner, provincial and federal/national governments (and even with municipalities in other countries) to tackle diverse issues such as climate change, economic development, and public health. The governance literature emphasises that public problems of this nature cannot be addressed by single entities, and they have therefore resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between governing institutions that raise questions around where the 'local' begins and ends in public administration scholarship (Giovannini and Griggs 2024). Future research published in LGS will likely explore these dynamics, examining how local authorities can effectively engage in multi-level governance and contribute to global solutions considering 'a more plural, participatory conception of the local state' (Pill 2024).

Relatedly, we expect that the pressing issue of sustainability will play a much more prominent role in future issues of LGS (Eckersley and Olazabal in this issue). As local governments grapple with climate change and justice, urban resilience, and the sustainable development goals, we hope that LGS will serve as a crucial platform for disseminating innovative research and policy analysis on these topics. Sustainability encompasses three pillars: social, economic, and environmental. We envision more articles addressing the intersections of local governance and sustainability (e.g., exploring how municipalities can lead in (a) fighting against climate change, (b) promoting sustainable practices; and (c) adopting inclusive policies that address disparities and foster equitable

development). Indeed, as societal inequities become increasingly apparent, LGS will play a pivotal role in highlighting issues of equity and social justice at the local level. We anticipate that future articles will delve into how local governments can promote inclusive policies and practices addressing systemic disparities, implementing equitable resource distribution, and fostering environments where marginalised and underserved populations can thrive. Additionally, the journal will explore the intersection of social justice with other critical issues such as housing, education, healthcare, and environmental justice. This emphasis will be critical in addressing the needs of marginalised and underserved populations, ensuring their full participation in societal progress and enhancing overall community resilience.

Underpinning many of the above trends is a shift towards greater collaborative governance and citizen participation, which will be essential in local governments' effort to address complex societal challenges, providing innovative solutions and enhancing public trust. Local governance often serves as a testing ground for innovative, citizen-participatory approaches, and a growing number of LGS articles have covered these issues in recent years. We hope and expect this trend to continue over the next fifty years, since they touch on core questions of governance, policymaking and societal inclusion. Indeed, such initiatives can provide valuable insights for the broader fields of public administration and political science, given that they address key issues of power, democracy, accountability and the quality of public services. By fostering debate around local governance approaches in different contexts, we hope that the journal will continue to provide a highly-regarded platform for these discussions.

Alongside authors, the role of LGS editors, editorial board members, and reviewers will be essential in driving and supporting the evolution of the journal. Together, they will guide the selection of relevant special issues, promote theoretical and methodological innovation, and ensure that the journal remains inclusive, with a strong focus on international participation, gender, and ethnic diversity. This will be a collaborative effort, as LGS continues to illuminate the complexities of local governance. Future volumes should continue to inform scholars and practitioners of the challenges, innovations, actors, and actions of local governments around the world. Editors, editorial board members, and reviewers are committed to fostering interdisciplinary research, encouraging underrepresented voices, and facilitating collaboration between academia and practice – efforts that will be key to producing and disseminating knowledge. By taking an active role in shaping the journal's trajectory, the LGS community will ensure that the journal remains a leading platform for thoughtful dialogue on local governance in the decades to come.

Conclusion

In the past fifty years, LGS has transitioned from a largely practitioner- and UK-focused publication into an internationally-renowned academic journal. This process has been facilitated by the growing diversity of its authorship and readership, as well as its methodological, empirical and theoretical approaches. LGS aims to keep informing policymakers and public managers by publishing rigorous methodological studies. As an editorial team, we are committed to ensuring that the insights and findings published remain relevant and accessible to both academics and practitioners in the field. Our vision is to inform and influence the practice of local governance, fostering a collaborative environment where scholarly research directly contributes to the improvement of public administration and community outcomes. We look forward to continuing this journey over the next fifty years and beyond.

Notes

1. We would like to thank the other contributors to this roundtable for offering their input at the conference: Arianna Giovannini, Janice Morphet, Liz Richardson, and Joanie Willett.
2. We only considered the pieces that were published as articles; we did not include editors' statements and book reviews. The last issue included in our sample was issue 5 of volume 50 (2024), meaning that all articles published prior to this special issue were considered. All data was obtained directly from the LGS website and searched further for completeness when the affiliation of the authors was not stated in the article (which was not uncommon in the early volumes of the journal).
3. Corresponding author, when more than one author.
4. The country is that of the institution where the corresponding author was affiliated.
5. Period 2020–2024 does not include the articles published in this special issue.
6. Not including the articles that feature in this special issue (Vol 50:6).
7. The analysis of the territorial diversity of authorship could not take into account the articles published in this special issue (50(6)), because its composition was not yet complete when this piece was finalised.

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