JUTLP
Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Unpacking Your Case: The Case Study as a Research Methodology

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Abstract

Case study research is widely used in higher education scholarship yet remains a misunderstood and inconsistently applied research methodology. Many manuscripts labelled as case studies are more accurately characterised as reflective accounts, practice examples, or descriptive vignettes, risking a limitation of methodological rigour and scholarly contribution. This editorial examines the characteristics of case study methodology and the distinctions between research case studies and other forms of educational inquiry. Drawing on established methodological literature, we outline the hallmarks of rigorous case study research, including alignment between research questions and methods, clearly bounded cases, transparent analytical pathways, and the use of multiple sources of evidence. We consider common methodological challenges, including overreliance on description, misunderstanding of transferability and generalisability, weak theoretical integration, and insufficient methodological transparency. We explore how educators can move from local practice-based observations to scholarly contributions through analytic generalisation and contextualised interpretation. We present a practical self-diagnostic scorecard supporting pre-submission readiness of case study manuscripts. By clarifying expectations and promoting rigour, this editorial seeks to strengthen the quality, credibility, and impact of higher education case study research.

Editors

Section: Editorial
Editor-in-Chief: Rachel Fitzgerald

Publication

Submission: 23 Jul 2026
Revised: 11 Nov 2026
Accepted: 13 Nov 2026
Published: 16 Nov 2026

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Practitioner Notes

1. Robust case studies require a clearly bounded unit of analysis linked to explicit research questions.
2. Case studies should move beyond description by demonstrating transparent analytical pathways and evidential support.
3. Transferability depends on contextual detail and analytic insight rather than claims of statistical generalisability.
4. Case selection should be purposeful and explicitly justified rather than based solely on convenience or proximity.
5. Authors should demonstrate how insights from their case contribute to broader educational questions, concepts, or theory beyond the immediate context.

Keywords

research methods, case study research, methodological rigour, analytic generalisation, transferability

Citation:
Purvis, A. J., Kim, V., Linden, K., & Nicholas, V. (2026). Unpacking your case: The case study as a research methodology. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 23*(4). https://doi.org/10.53761/xq512k08

Introduction

The case study is widely used in educational research yet often misunderstood with many claimed case studies not fitting the criteria for a case study (Greenhalgh, 2025). Despite many authors exploring case study methodology over recent decades, it remains a topic of debate which continues to evade clarity and understanding (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). A lack of clarity limits the methodological rigour and quality, but it also undermines the potential contribution and credibility of case studies as legitimate research. Although case studies are fraught with research methodological issues, they play an important role in providing rich contextual detail. Case study methodology provides an approach to exploring complexity, capturing lived experiences, and is grounded in reality. Case studies allow us to examine a specific subject, event, or phenomenon in detail over a defined period of time.

A central tension lies in the conflation of practice-based case examples with methodologically rigorous research case studies. A practice case study approach to enquiry is often used in smaller scale scholarship activities, where educators are curious about the impact of their own practice, or the experiences of their own students. These, often early, scholarship practices may then lay a foundation for more formal evaluation and research activities by scholars and researchers. While the practice case study can be a stepping stone from informal evaluation and curiosity, there are expectations of quality and robustness of published case study research. In our role as editors, we observe recurring patterns in submissions. Many submitted papers are labelled as case studies but lack the methodological foundations of genuine case study research and would be desk rejected from a journal like the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice (JUTLP) where research and quality standards require robust applications of case study methodology. Therefore, we will use a methodological lens grounded in alignment, transparency, and analytic depth as core principles of robust case study research.

We begin by defining case study methodology and clarifying its boundaries. We then outline the hallmarks of rigorous case study research and address common methodological challenges. Finally, we demonstrate how case studies can contribute meaningfully to educational practice and provide practical guidance for authors. The aim is to support authors in distinguishing their robust research case studies from other forms of case study, and to guide authors toward stronger methodological choices for higher quality articles. With this practical aim we support authors in producing case studies that are more likely to reach publication, and which can then generate greater impact on practice. We will foreground the legitimacy of the case study, especially in educational contexts, where complexity and context are central to the research design.

Unpacking the Case Study

Case studies have been published in almost every discipline; however, they are defined in a variety of ways depending on the discipline (Baron & McNeal, 2019; Meyer, 2001). A case study is not simply a description of a setting; it is a systematic investigation of a bounded case conducted to answer a research question. Many papers that are labelled as “case studies” are in fact practice examples, vignettes, or illustrations. While this editorial focuses specifically on research case study methodology, other forms of case-based scholarly communication remain important contributions to the broader scholarship of teaching and learning (Goode & Nahar, 2026). While providing value to developing practice and understanding, they are not grounded in the case study methodology. To add to the confusion, “case study” is often used as an umbrella

term and it is not always clear what counts as a case, what counts as a study and where the boundaries lie. In higher education research, case study research methodology can be defined as a "methodological technique with an individual, group, program, event or activity as the unit of analysis" (Baron & McNeal, 2019, p. 4). Case study research provides a methodological framework for enquiry that allows the researcher to capture and describe the complexity of real-life events with in-depth analysis (Stake, 1995). A key requirement of all case study research is the scientific process, which involves development of a research question and research design, collection and analysis of data and drawing conclusions. Other methodologies often require specific formats for data collection and analysis. In contrast, case study methodology can (and should) incorporate a broad range of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, selected according to the research question and the nature of the case. This methodological freedom can often be appealing to authors if they are reporting on data and observations which were not originally planned as a research project and have arisen more organically. A case study investigates a bounded system: a situation, cohort, programme, practice, event, person, or issue that is clearly delineated. In this sense, case studies work best when the phenomenon and the context are intertwined and need to be understood together. A strength of this approach lies in depth, contextual detail, and insight rather than generalisability in the statistical sense.

Typologies and Scope

Case study methodology encompasses a range of types which can be divided into three categories based on the size and purpose of the case being investigated; pilot or exploratory case studies, descriptive case studies, and explanatory case studies (Tardi, 2019; Stake, 1995). A case may be bounded at different levels, from a single unit or programme to wider faculty-level initiatives (Table 1). Case study research is methodologically flexible: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches can be employed across different time points (Table 2). The duration of data collection shapes the types of insights that can be generated (Table 3). There is no single model of case study research; methodological choices should be driven by the research question, the nature of the case, and the purpose of the investigation.

Table 1

Scope of the Case Study

Program Level	Element Level	Student Level	Benefits	Scope
1 unit or program	Examine adaptive lessons in one unit	A small number of student interviews	Take a very detailed view	Micro
A few units or programs	Examine assessment redesign across a Faculty	Many survey responses	Can compare and contrast (but cannot generalise)	Macro

Note. Adapted from Baron & McNeal (2019) and Meyer (2001).

Table 2

Extent of Data Collection and Methodology

Time Point	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed Methods
One time point	End of semester survey and focus groups One survey or interview (thematic analysis)	Assessment result or end of semester grade (statistical analysis)	End of semester interview and grade analysis
Two or three time points	Pre and post survey and focus groups	Weekly Learning Management System access or all assessment marks	Interview and grade analysis across three offerings of a unit

Note. Adapted from Baron & McNeal (2019) and Meyer (2001).

Table 3

Sampling Duration

Duration	What This Allows
1 activity	Can take a detailed view
1 semester	Can reflect on impact across other activities across the semester
Multiple semesters	Can compare and contrast (although should still avoid generalisation)

Note. Adapted from Baron & McNeal (2019) and Meyer (2001).

Exploratory Case Studies

Pilot studies that may lead to a larger scale investigation can be described as exploratory case studies. A benefit of this approach is the ability to refine the research question and evaluate available evidence before committing to a full study. This approach is useful to share evidence of exemplary practice within a unit without the commitment of a larger scale study and is a great option for academics new to higher education research. As an example, the first journal article written by one of the authors of this editorial was an exploratory case study investigating the impact of adaptive lessons to teach first-year anatomy. The case study took a mixed methods approach of survey responses and learning analytics in one unit over several years (Linden & Teakel, 2024).

Descriptive Case Studies

Descriptive case studies explain a real-life situation using one or two examples, providing more depth than an explorative approach. Their primary purpose is to provide a rich and contextualised account of a phenomenon within its natural setting. For example, a regional Australian university replaced a traditional 13-week semester model with a 6-week block model of teaching. Roche et al. (2024) evaluated the change through a mixed methods approach with interviews and a review of policy. The findings provided detailed evidence of the business processes, principles, and policies that supported implementation of a whole-of-university change to block model teaching.

While studies of this kind may generate questions for future investigation, their principal contribution lies in documenting and contextualising complex educational change.

Explanatory Case Studies

Explanatory case studies go one step further and critically analyse a case to understand why outcomes occur or how particular mechanisms operate. There are fewer examples of explanatory case studies, at least in the higher education literature which may reflect the greater analytical depth required. One example is the study by Melewar et al. (2018) which examined the concept of corporate identity at a major university in the United Kingdom through 20 in-depth interviews with senior managers, seeking to understand the factors shaping institutional identity.

The Hallmarks of Rigorous Case Study Research

Alignment with Research Questions

The first indicator of the appropriateness of a case study design is how the choice of methods is connected to answering fundamental ‘how’ or ‘why’ research questions (Burnard, 2024; Yin, 2018). Case study approaches are not the only way of answering these types of questions. Situating the case study as answering specific research questions is the first practical step that researchers can take in ensuring the approach is correct and will deliver quality data for analysis and subsequent interpretation. The critical role of research questions in developing quality research and quality research papers is explored in detail in the JUTLP editorial from Purvis et al. (2024). When developing methods to match research questions, the value of a proposed method should be compared to other methods with the advantages and disadvantages of each method considered carefully (Yin, 2018). If there is misalignment between questions and selected methods, the quality of the resulting data collection will be limited. Researchers should avoid manipulating research questions to fit preferred methods, but some iteration of research questions is necessary to ensure alignment and clarity throughout the research journey (Purvis et al., 2024).

Defining and Bounding the Case

The hallmarks of a robust case study are: a clear connection to the research questions posed, purposeful design, a defined entity of interest, bounded by a clear scope, studied in the real setting, explored in depth, sampled in line with the research purpose and questions, interpretations sense checked with participants, focus on contemporary events, and theory is applied as appropriate (Greenhalgh, 2025; Yin, 2018). The case study should not manipulate the participants or their behaviour, and should observe and interpret in context (Yin, 2018). Transparency in methods is a key aspect of demonstrating robustness in the methods used. Authors often cite well respected methodological sources as evidence that they are taking a robust and recognised approach to their research. However, simply citing another source is not evidence alone of robustness. Replicable clarity is needed in describing methods so that readers can scrutinise the approach taken and add to the research body with the same or similar methods in a new context. Authors need to ensure that when good practice guidelines are cited, that they are fully implemented. Authors should thus avoid the ‘rhetorical’ citing of a robust case study method without using the method as intended (Massaro et al., 2019). Indeed, in a similar way, Braun and Clarke (2019) have commented on how their own work on thematic analysis is often misquoted or conceptually ‘mismatched’. Perhaps these errors are mistakes and

misunderstandings, but they may also be evidence of a lack of robust understanding of the implementation of this specific methodological approach.

Analysis Pathway

Similar to other methodological approaches, well-designed case studies should have explicit and well described method sections, transparent data sources, and clear analysis pathways. An example of a case study in JUTLP includes Roche et al. (2024, p. 6) who describe the role of a case study in enabling investigators to "provide in-depth understanding of specific elements of a phenomenon (Stake, 1995)." Roche et al. (2024, p. 6) also describe that there are limitations to the case study: "We acknowledge that the findings reported here, in the described context, may not be readily generalisable to other HE contexts (Gerring, 2007) with differing legislative frameworks, cultures of education, and student populations."

The systematic literature review of Burnard (2024) proposes creating a data collection schedule and case study database as part of a case study protocol which would increase validity and reliability of published case studies. Construct validity will be provided through clear operational definitions, internal validity through confirming relationships, and external validity through determining the generalisability for results (Burnard, 2024).

Triangulation, Data Sources and Evidence

Case studies remain undervalued or misinterpreted in some academic fields, despite being widely used in practice-focused and applied research. However, this is likely to be due to the very mixed nature of published papers claiming to be case studies when they are not, or where the methods are not well explained and it is unclear why the approach is actually a case study.

Over-reliance on a single data source combined with under-acknowledgement of that limitation is a common methodological error. This is distinct from the absence of triangulation discussed in 'What your manuscript must show' subsection; the issue here is not merely that triangulation is missing, but that authors sometimes present a single-source study as though it were evidentially complete, without flagging what that constraint means for the scope and credibility of the claims. Single-source case studies can still make a valuable contribution, but their limitations should be clearly acknowledged and discussed. Readers and reviewers will notice; authors should get there first.

Case studies are often hierarchically positioned below other types of research methodology. This is likely due to the variable quality of published case studies, a lack of understanding of what a high-quality case study can offer, and the confusion between practice case studies and research case studies. It is our constructive challenge that we reposition case studies as rigorous, reflective, and impactful - when they follow 'good' methodological practice.

Core Methodological Challenges

Case Study vs Reflection or Vignette

A common methodological pitfall is mistaking a reflective account or teaching vignette for a case study. This is not a failure of intent (practitioners reflecting honestly on their own teaching are doing something valuable) but a failure of framing that undermines the submission's credibility. A reflective account becomes a case study when it is anchored in a research question, supported

by systematic evidence, and subjected to analytic rigour. As Greenhalgh (2025) notes, the hallmarks of a research case study are not interchangeable with the hallmarks of reflective practice.

Transferability and Generalisability

Findings from case studies cannot represent the whole population in the same way as findings derived from suitably designed studies using representative samples, and this often causes the value of case studies to be called into question. Conclusions from case studies are rarely able to establish cause or effect between variables as the conclusions are usually context specific. This means that it can be harder for case study authors to demonstrate generalisability for their work, and subsequently for readers to demonstrate that the work has transferability. Statistical generalisability refers to the extent to which findings from an appropriately selected sample can be extended to the wider population. In contrast, transferability is the extent to which readers can apply the findings from a case study environment to their own situation, context or research subject. Transferability does not mean that the exact research conditions must be used, but rather that concepts, mechanisms or patterns may resonate in other environments. The value of a case study therefore lies less in statistical generalisation and more in the provision of sufficiently rich contextual and analytical detail to allow readers to judge whether insights may be relevant elsewhere. Case studies can hold their own position without necessarily having to provide statistical generalisability or broad transferability. Finally, authors should resist the temptation to claim transferability without doing the analytical work it requires. Stating that findings "may have implications for similar contexts" in a closing paragraph, without specifying what those contexts are or why the insights travel, is a formulaic gesture rather than a genuine contribution. Transferability must be earned through the analysis, not appended to it.

Integration of Existing Theory

A common methodological challenge is that authors describe a case in considerable detail but fail to connect their findings to existing theoretical understanding. Without this connection, even a well-executed case study can struggle to demonstrate its contribution beyond the immediate context. Authors can suggest further questions or hypotheses and show insights beyond their immediate context which can allow readers to see the transferability of the work. Additionally, existing theories in literature should be carefully integrated into work. As Harland (2014) suggests, existing theory should be seen as an integral part of the case. Theory should not be added retrospectively as a discussion point or justification for the study; rather, it should help shape interpretation and situate findings within wider scholarly conversations. Theory can help researchers move beyond describing what happened toward explanation, situating findings within broader scholarly debates and supporting analytic generalisation (Yin, 2009). In this way, theoretical integration is part of the work of connecting local practice to broader scholarly contribution, helping authors demonstrate why their case matters beyond the immediate setting. Case studies can therefore contribute to understanding, theory development, theory testing, or theory building beyond the immediate context of the case (Ridder, 2017).

Replicability and Validity

Case studies are not designed for exact replicability in the laboratory sense, but transparency enables others to follow the reasoning and judge applicability. Transparency and delineation of

the methods used support the credibility, trustworthiness, and integrity of the work. Honesty and openness about research limitations also strengthens the credibility of the study. Many cumulative case studies contain an element of replication through the examination of similar phenomena across different cases, allowing researchers to compare patterns and strengthen analytical claims. However, in qualitative case study research, the goal is rarely exact replication. Instead, researchers should provide sufficient methodological detail and reflexive transparency to enable readers to understand how interpretations were reached and to assess their plausibility. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, the value of case study research lies less in reproducibility in a positive sense and more in the depth of understanding that can be generated through careful engagement with context. The context-dependent and interpretive nature of qualitative case study research means that different researchers may reasonably have different observations and interpretations of the same phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, chapter 6).

Description vs Analysis

Even when authors understand what a case study requires in principle, certain patterns of error recur with enough consistency in submissions to JUTLP to warrant naming directly. The most consequential is treating description as analysis. A manuscript that narrates what happened (sequence of events, structure of the intervention, profile of participants) without interpretive lifting does not constitute a case study in the research sense, however detailed the account. Description is the raw material of analysis, not its product. This does not mean that descriptive case studies are limited to description alone. As discussed earlier, descriptive case studies provide rich and contextualised accounts of a phenomenon, but they still require interpretation and analysis if they are to contribute to scholarly understanding beyond the local context. Authors should be able to point to a moment in their manuscript where they move from reporting what occurred to explaining what it means and why it matters beyond this case. For example, although Roche et al. (2024) present a descriptive case study, they move beyond describing institutional reform to analysing the organisational principles, systems, and leadership practices that enabled implementation, thereby generating insights that extend beyond the immediate case. Case studies that remain descriptive struggle to realise their full scholarly contribution; analytical and theoretical interpretation is what enables findings to contribute beyond the local context (Harland, 2014).

From Local Practice to Scholarly Contribution

From Practice to Research

Many case studies submitted to JUTLP originate in exactly the right place: a genuine question arising from practice. An educator notices something unexpected in their classroom, a programme coordinator observes a pattern across cohorts, or a curriculum team identifies a challenge that resists easy explanation. These are precisely the conditions under which case study methodology thrives. The challenge for authors is not usually the quality of their observation, but the work of connecting it outward, from the local and particular to the conceptually significant. Integrating existing theory, discussed above as a core methodological challenge, is a central part of that work.

Analytic Generalisation

This movement is not merely rhetorical; it is a methodological requirement. A publishable case study must demonstrate not only what happened in a specific context, but what that context can teach us about broader questions of teaching, learning, curriculum, or assessment in higher education. As Yin (2018) distinguishes, the goal is not statistical generalisation but analytic generalisation, in which findings illuminate, extend, or interrogate theoretical propositions. Authors who begin with a well-formed research question are better placed to make this move, since the question itself signals the conceptual territory the case is designed to address (Purvis et al., 2024). Where the research question is anchored in practice but framed around a wider problem (why does this happen, how does this work, what does this reveal), the case is already doing the analytical lifting required for publication.

Making the Case Relevant

Transferability, properly understood as resonance rather than replication, is part of this analytical lifting. As discussed in the preceding section, authors need not claim that their findings apply universally, but they must show where and why their insights may contribute to understanding in other settings (Baron & McNeal, 2019; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Both analytic generalisation and honest transferability are strengthened when authors ask, early in the writing process rather than at the point of revision, how their case speaks to debates beyond their immediate institution or programme (Ridder, 2017). Being explicit about this contribution does not require overclaiming; it requires intellectual honesty about what the case does and does not show, and deliberate framing of the analytical work that gives local experience its broader significance (Yin, 2009).

Writing a Strong Case Study

What Your Manuscript Must Show

Translating the principles outlined above into a manuscript requires authors to be explicit about several methodological decisions that are frequently underdeveloped in submissions to JUTLP. Conceptual clarity about what a case study is does not automatically produce a transparent manuscript; that transparency must be deliberately constructed, decision by decision, on the page. The first and most fundamental decision is the unit of analysis. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 38) note, it is the unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation, that characterises a case study and distinguishes it from other forms of qualitative inquiry. Authors must state clearly what their case is and, equally, what it is not: where the boundaries were drawn and why. This act of delimitation is not procedural formality; it is the foundational move that makes everything else in the study legible.

The second decision, equally important and often underreported, is the rationale for case selection, and its absence is among the most common reasons a case study manuscript does not survive initial editorial review. Yin (2018) is explicit that case selection must be purposeful, driven by what the researcher needs to learn rather than by convenience or proximity. In practice, many authors study their own programme or cohort and treat that proximity as self-evidently sufficient justification. However, proximity alone does not provide a methodological rationale for case selection. A brief, direct statement (why this case, for this question) transforms an assumed justification into a methodological argument. As noted in ‘Defining and bounding the case’, this

problem is compounded when authors cite canonical sources without demonstrating genuine implementation; Massaro et al. (2019) found this pattern of rhetorical citation to be widespread in published case study research, and it remains visible in submissions to JUTLP.

A third area requiring explicit treatment is the analytic pathway, distinct from the documentation of data sources and contextual constraints addressed elsewhere in this editorial. What is at issue here is the interpretive logic: how patterns, themes, or propositions were derived from evidence, and how competing interpretations were considered and evaluated. Even in small-scale studies this reasoning can and should be made visible; a manuscript that describes findings without explaining how the researcher arrived at them leaves readers unable to assess their credibility. Finally, authors should describe their evidence sources and address triangulation. Where multiple sources of evidence are available, even modest triangulation (e.g. combining interview data with documentary evidence or observational notes) demonstrates that interpretive claims are not artefacts of a single perspective, and acknowledging where full triangulation was not achievable is itself a mark of integrity. Together, these four decisions (bounding the case, justifying its selection, tracing the analytic pathway, and evidencing the claims) are what allow a reader to trust the analytical lift described in the preceding section.

A Self-Diagnostic Scorecard for Authors

To support authors in assessing their own work before submission, this editorial translates the key characteristics and expectations identified across the literature cited in this paper into a practical, threshold-based self-diagnostic scorecard (Table 4). The scorecard organises twelve reflective questions across the three pillars that underpin rigorous case study research: defining the case, evidencing the case, and contributing beyond the case. It distinguishes between non-negotiable criteria, marked with a star (★) symbol, and context-dependent considerations, marked with a dot (●) symbol. The questions draw on this literature; the weighting of ★ and ● criteria and the pillar thresholds reflect our editorial judgement, as JUTLP editors, of what a case study submission must minimally demonstrate. Authors are encouraged to use the scorecard during the writing process, not only at the point of submission; ideally when a full draft exists but revision is still genuinely possible.

The scorecard is not a guarantee of acceptance, nor a substitute for peer review. It is a structured prompt for the kind of methodological self-scrutiny that strengthens submissions and that is most often underdeveloped in manuscripts that do not progress beyond initial editorial review. A manuscript that meets the threshold across all three pillars is methodologically grounded as a case study submission; one that does not will find the scorecard a useful guide to where revision is needed before submission is appropriate.

Table 4

A threshold-based self-diagnostic scorecard

★ Must answer Yes (non-negotiable)
● Should answer Yes (context-dependent)

Pillar 1 – Defining the case

Type	No.	Question	Yes/No	Notes
★ Must	**Q1**	Can you name and bound your case? (Who or what is it? Where does it begin and end?)	☐ Yes ☐ No	
★ Must	**Q2**	Does your research question require depth and contextual understanding to answer – rather than breadth or statistical generalisation?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
● Should	**Q3**	Are you studying the phenomenon through the context – not using the context merely as a backdrop?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
● Should	**Q4**	Can you explain why this case was selected, and not another? Is the selection rationale stated in your manuscript?	☐ Yes ☐ No	

Threshold: Both ★ (Q1 and Q2) must be Yes. At least 1 of 2 ● (Q3, Q4) must also be Yes.

Pillar 2 – Evidencing the case

Type	No.	Question	Yes/No	Notes
● Should	**Q5**	Do you draw on more than one source of evidence? (e.g. documents, interviews, observations, artefacts)	☐ Yes ☐ No	
★ Must	**Q6**	Can you describe the analytic steps that moved you from raw data to interpretive claims?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
● Should	**Q7**	Does your manuscript show how you weighed competing interpretations, so that a reader can judge the credibility of your claims?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
● Should	**Q8**	Have you acknowledged your positionality as a researcher and its potential influence on the study?	☐ Yes ☐ No	

Threshold: ★ (Q6) must be Yes. At least 2 of 3 ● (Q5, Q7, Q8) must also be Yes.

Pillar 3 – Contributing beyond the case

Type	No.	Question	Yes/No	Notes
★ Must	**Q9**	Does your case connect to a broader conceptual or theoretical frame that links it to existing literature?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
★ Must	**Q10**	Have you stated explicitly what your case reveals that was not already known, or known differently?	☐ Yes ☐ No	

● Should	**Q11**	Have you addressed where and why your insights may resonate in contexts beyond this immediate case?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
● Should	**Q12**	Have you avoided overclaiming transferability – framing it as resonance or analytic generalisation rather than replication?	☐ Yes ☐ No	
Threshold: Both ★ (Q9 and Q10) must be Yes. At least 1 of 2 ● (Q11, Q12) must also be Yes.				
Note: A 'No' answer to a ★ question does not mean your work lacks value. A reflective account, illustrative vignette, or practice report can be a rigorous and publishable contribution – framed accurately. Accurate framing strengthens, not weakens, a submission.				

Outcome guide

✓ Ready to submit	⚠ Revise before submitting	✗ Reconsider framing
All ★ questions answered 'Yes' AND meet threshold in every pillar.	All ★ questions answered 'Yes' BUT the ● threshold is not met in one or more pillars. Strengthen before submitting.	One or more ★ questions answered 'No'. The study may not be a case study as described. Reframe accurately.

Conclusion

This editorial set out to address a problem we observe regularly in our role as editors at JUTLP: the case study label is applied generously, but the methodology it names is applied unevenly. We began by clarifying what a case study is and where its boundaries lie, distinguishing it from the practice reflections, vignettes, and illustrative examples with which it is so often conflated. We then set out the hallmarks of rigorous case study research (alignment between research questions and methods, a clearly bounded unit of analysis, a visible analytic pathway, and triangulated evidence) and considered why, despite meeting these hallmarks in practice, case studies remain undervalued relative to other research designs. From there we turned to the methodological challenges that case study researchers most often face: mistaking reflective accounts for case studies, the proper relationship between transferability and generalisability, the integration of existing theory, the kind of transparency that substitutes for replicability in qualitative work, and the gap between description and analysis. Finally, we offered practical guidance for authors, showing how a genuine question arising from local practice can be developed into a scholarly contribution, what a manuscript must make explicit to earn its claim to rigour, and a self-diagnostic scorecard authors can use to test their own work before it reaches review.

Taken together, these sections make a single argument. A case study is not defined by its scale, nor by the informality of its origins, but by the discipline brought to its design and reporting. The same small, practice-based observation that might otherwise remain an unexamined reflection becomes a contribution to the field when its boundaries are stated, its selection justified, its evidence triangulated, its limits acknowledged, and its significance argued rather than assumed. Stenhouse made a related point as early as the late 1970s, arguing that case study research had to be verifiable to earn its place in education research (Stenhouse, 1978, 1979, as cited in

Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). That expectation has not changed; what has changed is the volume of submissions claiming the case study label without yet meeting it.

Our aim here has been practical. We do not intend to discourage practitioners from bringing their own classrooms, programmes, and cohorts into the scholarly conversation. Case study research remains one of the most valuable tools available for understanding what happens in higher education, precisely because it can hold context and complexity together rather than abstracting them away. What we hope to have offered is a clearer account of what that holding together requires, so that more of the genuinely rich, well-observed work already taking place in classrooms and programmes can be written up in a form that survives scrutiny and earns the influence it deserves.

Acknowledgements

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. The authors confirm that they have considered and met the ethical standards expected as per Purvis & Crawford (2024). The authors have used the secure M365 Copilot (Enterprise), built on the GPT-5 chat model to provide feedback on this manuscript and confirm that the expected principles are met as per Crawford et al. (2026).

The authors list the following CRediT contributions: Purvis: conceptualisation, methodology, writing – initial, writing – revision and editing. Kim: visualisation, writing – initial, writing – revision and editing. Linden: visualisation, writing – initial, writing – revision and editing. Nicholas: visualisation, writing – initial, writing – revision and editing.

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