



## Insiders and outsiders

Every week, the *South African Journal of Science* receives submissions which are clearly not within the scope of the Journal. As our mission statement says, as a multidisciplinary journal, we are interested in 'publishing high-quality original research from Africa or on African-relevant issues'. From an administrative point of view, dealing with these out-of-scope submissions is quite easy, if time-consuming. We can simply inform authors of the scope issue and suggest that they submit elsewhere.

Underlying this common occurrence, though, is information about the current global climate in academic publishing, and this is an issue of broader concern. Almost none of these submissions are from scholars in high-income countries. Another reasonably common occurrence for us is a pre-submission query in which there is inevitably a question about page fees payable to the Journal, also invariably from a scholar who is not in a high-income country. Our Journal is in the very lucky position of being a diamond/platinum open access journal, meaning that we do not have article-processing charges because we receive funding from the Department of Science and Innovation through ASSAf, so the query is easy to deal with, but is revealing in itself.

What is clear from our experiences, and these are far from unique to our Journal, is that there is a cohort of scientists and scholars based in low- and middle-income countries (and certainly not in Africa alone) who are trying to have their work published in journals which enjoy a good reputation (as measured, for example, by accredited impact factors), and read by a global audience. A further feature of these submissions, and not just of these submissions, is that many authors struggle to write in clear English. Where the quality of written English is good, though, there are many occasions where the authors do not appear to have thought adequately about the multidisciplinary audience of the Journal and write in ways which may exclude our potential readership from being able easily to engage with the research being presented.

We are certainly not alone in the science community in South Africa and further afield in grappling with the imperative to open science in any way that we can in terms of who produces knowledge and who has access to it. At the same time, though, every week we gain a glimpse into the worlds of those who continue to be excluded. Although we at the Journal do our best to assist all those who wish to publish with us and to suggest alternative outlets, the fact is that, generally speaking, submissions which come from institutions and groups with established strong research writing traditions get an easier path to actually getting to the point of being peer reviewed. Anonymous and fair peer review is central to our work, but it seems to be the case that authors who are well networked in the science community may have directly or indirectly received the support necessary to be able to present to a journal editor a document for review which is in the correct format, within the journal scope, and ready to be assigned for peer review. It is our impression that it is generally these authors as well who will be familiar with conventions around plagiarism, and who will be less likely to have manuscripts returned for changes on the basis of similarities to already published work. The odds, then, seem to be stacked in favour of those with a

degree of what may be termed academic social capital – linkages with those who understand the system and, indeed, may have the power to modify and enforce its rules.

The paradox in all of this is, of course, clear. On the one hand, our Journal is committed to practices of inclusion and openness, recognising that for science to be strong we need wide and diverse participation and to welcome a diversity of voices and approaches. On the other hand, despite the clear progress that the science community is making to diversify, we may be experienced by some who wish to publish with us as belying our commitment to inclusivity by not allowing them entrance, and not fully supporting them in becoming part of our or related networks. It is clearly beyond the resources of a Journal like ours to solve the global problems of unequal access to educational opportunities and research resources, the dominance of English as an international language of science, and, indeed, broader contributory questions linked to global poverty and inequality. But we do get a sense of the efforts excluded people are going to in order to try to be included.

Part of the problem, here, lies of course in the often-discussed commodification of research and research outputs, and the impact of metrics and audit culture on academic life globally. We believe that it is important for all scientists to engage with critiques of an output-driven system and with the debates concerning the limitations of metrics like impact factors and h-indices, for example, to create a universally applicable assessment of quality. But as a Journal, we see, possibly more than others may, some of the consequences of these factors for academic writing. It appears from some of those trying to gain access to the journal (and possibly for some of those who succeed to publish with us), that publications may be viewed as products in themselves, items to be counted and ticked off, used as materials to give access to jobs, grants, promotions and other opportunities. It is indeed the case that publications act as commodities in this way. But what may be being lost here is the role of writing as part of the research process itself.

One of the challenges and opportunities of writing for a multidisciplinary journal rests precisely in the fact that authors have to think about the audience, and to work at making their own knowledge accessible to those who may not share their assumptions or methodological training and expertise. The adage that the best way to learn is to teach has relevance here. We hope our authors gain from publishing with us more than just through racking up citations or burnishing curricula vitae (not that these are trivial issues in the lives of researchers and academics). We hope that in the process of doing the difficult work of writing for our diverse audience, authors also benefit from the rigour involved in trying to make complex ideas as broadly accessible as possible. This takes clarity and skill, and our Journal is very lucky to be able to publish work which demonstrates this clarity and skill. We have an extra ask of ourselves and of our readership, though. All those who are lucky enough, for a range of reasons, to be on the inside of the science community as it currently exists have a responsibility and an opportunity to broaden access to that community. Some of this, we suggest, is through the support of developing clear, accessible academic writing.

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### HOW TO CITE:

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