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HOW TO CITE:

Soodyall H. A bird's eye view of the SAJS through the lens of the ASSAf Executive Officer. *S Afr J Sci.* 2024;120(Special issue: Celebrating 120 years), Art. #20277. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/20277>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

multidisciplinary, evidence-based public policy, scholarship support, *South African Journal of Science*

PUBLISHED:

07 November 2024

A bird's eye view of the SAJS through the lens of the ASSAf Executive Officer

It is a great privilege for me to serve as the third Executive Officer of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) after Professor Wieland Gevers, and then Professor Roseanne Diab. I took on this role in November 2018, have served one term, and am now into the second term of my appointment with endorsement from the ASSAf Council. While many things change in the national landscape due to local and global challenges, one constant is the timeous bimonthly publication of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)*. It happens so smoothly, by a well-organised team led by the Editor-in-Chief, with support from the Associate Editors, the Managing Editor and her support team, collectively overseen by the SAJS Editorial Advisory Board.

During my tenure as Executive Officer, it was necessary to conduct interviews to appoint two Editors-in-Chief of the SAJS. The first resulted in the appointment of Professor Jane Carruthers in February 2019, who served as editor from 1 April 2019 to 29 January 2021, and the second of Professor Leslie Swartz, now in his second term, having started in January 2021. Both are remarkable individuals and they each have brought their unique skills and perspectives to enhance the SAJS.

While I do not contribute much to the day-to-day activities of the SAJS, I am reassured by the professionalism and dedication of the Managing Editor, Dr Linda Fick, whose superb skills in editing and publication ensures high-quality articles in the Journal. I look forward to receiving the 'Highlights' from selected articles for the forthcoming volume; not only does it show the diversity in the scope of publication, but it whets one's appetite for the full publication. Having it available electronically has made access easy, quick, and available at anytime from anywhere.

A multidisciplinary publication with relevance to society – and in many instances to the making of evidence-based public policy

Professor Gevers' article in this issue, entitled 'Some reflections on the SAJS – an unbroken thread in our national life since 1905', gives more background into the past 120 years of the SAJS. As a multidisciplinary journal, its impact factor has grown steadily. Figure 1 shows the Clarivate Web of Science Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and quartile from 2019 to 2022, with a slight drop in JIF for 2023; Clarivate's methodology changed in 2023 to include integration of the Emerging Sources Citation Index.

The SAJS received 420 submissions for peer review in 2023/2024, and about 38% of submitting authors were based in South Africa. The rejection rate was 95%. Of a total of 133 articles, including (guest) leaders, 57 were peer-reviewed articles: 1 Research Letter, 50 Research Articles and 6 Review Articles. The number of articles per category varies from year to year; in 2023, these articles were distributed into the categories shown in Figure 2.

Of the 22 discipline-specific categories featured in the Journal between 2019 and 2023, articles on Human Society and Environmental Sciences featured prominently, followed by Biological Sciences, Earth Science and Agricultural, Veterinary and Food Sciences. Creative Arts and Writing and Mathematical Sciences featured at frequencies less than 1% (Figure 2). It must be emphasised that a significant proportion of the articles contains findings and recommendations that have a direct bearing on public policy and the possible solution of problems in society.

Given that South Africa and other nations have committed to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the SAJS has been tracking publications in the Journal that address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Figure 3). Articles were recorded for 16 out of the 17 SDGs at varying frequencies, with no articles featuring on SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. More articles on SDG 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing – were published in 2023/2024, but articles related to poverty (SDG 1), reduced inequalities (SDG 10) and gender-related issues (SDG 5) featured less prominently in SAJS in 2023/2024.

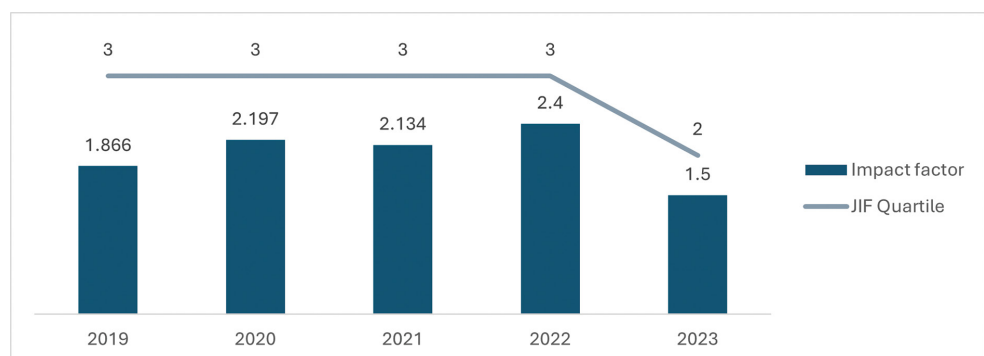
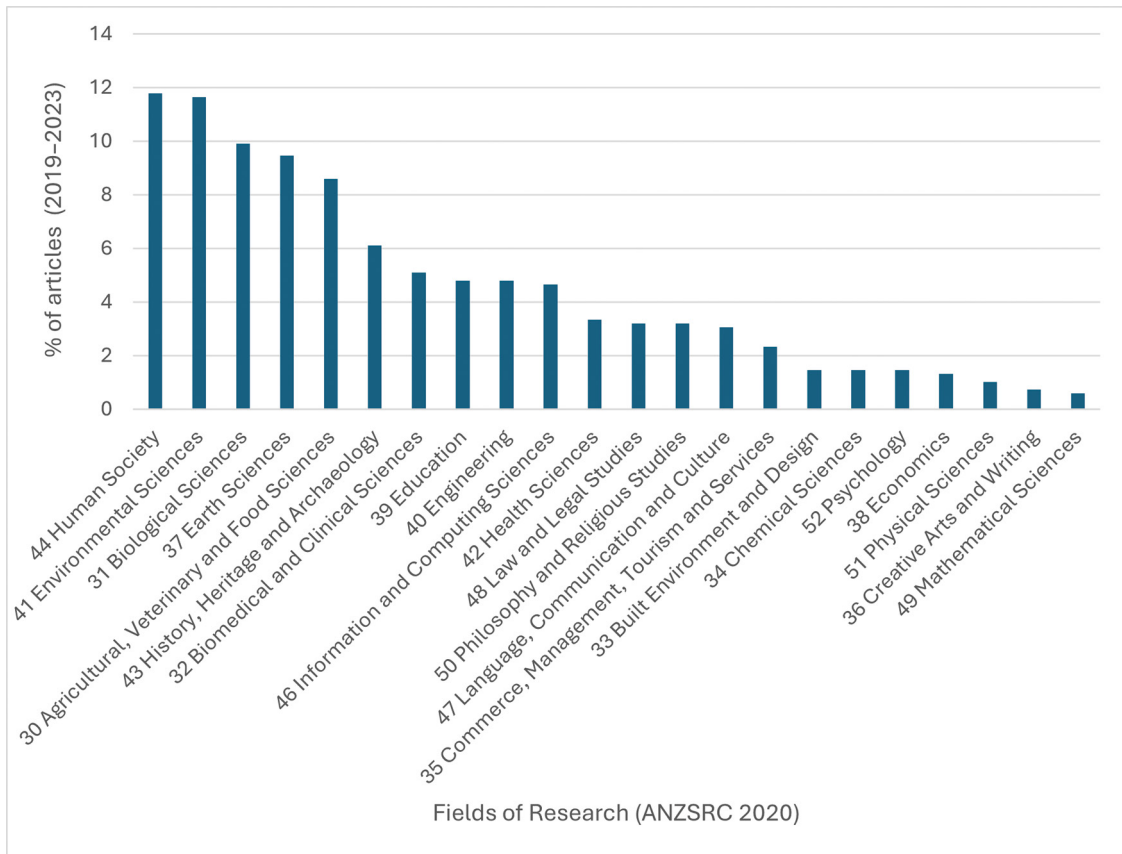


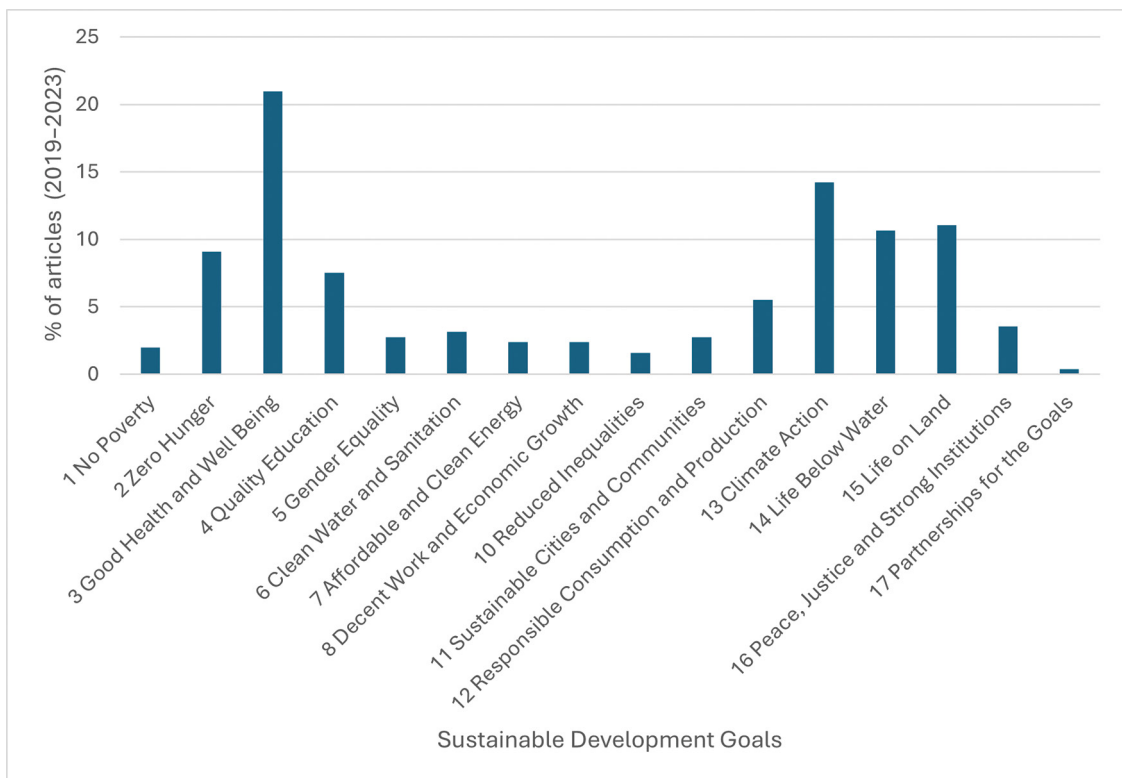
Figure 1: Journal Impact Factor (JIF) of SAJS for the years 2019–2023.

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Source: Dimensions

Figure 2: Percentage of published articles, by discipline, in 2019–2023.



Source: Dimensions

Figure 3: Number of SAJS articles published per Sustainable Development Goal (2019–2023).

Advancing the ASSAf Five-year Strategic Plan (2020/21–2024/25)

ASSAf's Five-year Strategic Plan is built around profiling and strengthening the ASSAf brand and mandate within the landscape of the National System of Innovation by orientating its strategic objectives towards outcomes, outputs and services, including: (1) Independent, authoritative and influential scientific advice, (2) Science engagement, (3) Mobilising knowledge, (4) Facilitating partnerships, (5) Scholarship support, and (6) Supporting transformation.

Activities within the SAJS contribute in various ways to objectives 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 that support the ASSAf Transformation Strategy as well as the Science Engagement Strategy.

In 2023, the SAJS hosted two workshops. The first, entitled 'Writing for a Scholarly Journal', was held on 8 June 2023, and was aimed at postgraduate students and emerging researchers with little or no experience of writing and publishing journal articles. Over 1000 participants were engaged, with the majority of participants from South Africa (81%). Among the participants, 40% were students or early career researchers (45%). Most of the participants were female (68%) and black (66%); 2% of participants were disabled. The feedback was overall positive, with 84% of respondents rating the workshop as excellent and 16% rating it as good.

The second workshop, entitled 'Peer Reviewing for a Scholarly Journal', was held on 13 September 2023, and was aimed at early-career researchers with little or no experience in peer reviewing journal articles. The workshop was presented by editors of the SAJS and a special guest presenter, Dr Martin Bekker from Wits University, who presented on AI in peer review. There were 765 registrants and 340 participants. Of the participants, most (66%) were early career researchers; most (65%) were women; 43% of the participants were black and 1% were disabled. Almost all (90%) participants were from South Africa, with 9% from other African countries.

In response to a growing need for capacity building in peer review, the SAJS introduced [guidelines on peer review mentoring](#) in 2023 and encourages invited reviewers to mentor emerging researchers when reviewing for the SAJS.

The SAJS has been hosting a monthly Journal Writing and Peer Review Forum since 2021. The monthly meeting is an open forum for emerging researchers in all disciplines to discuss related issues and receive support and guidance from the SAJS editorial team. This forum has since been growing in number – as of March 2024, there were 300 members.

The Associate Editor Mentorship Programme was expanded in 2023 and applications were invited for all portfolios for which Associate Editors agreed to mentor, that is, for four portfolios rather than the usual two.

Dr Amanda-Lee Manicum (Department of Chemistry, Tshwane University of Technology [TUT]) completed a two-year mentorship in 2023 and Dr Adriaan van der Walt (Department of Geography, University of the Free State [UFS]) completed a one-year mentorship in 2023. Dr Nkosinathi Madondo from Mangosuthu University of Technology, MUT (Social Sciences & Education Mentee) represented the SAJS and SciELO SA at the SciELO 25th anniversary conference in Brazil in 2023. The theme of the conference was Open Science with IDEIA (impact, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility), and Dr Madondo presented the Journal's Inclusive Language Policy.

SAJS Annual Awards

In 2021, SAJS introduced the SAJS Annual Awards, in which Associate Editors submit their nominations for the Outstanding Article and Outstanding Reviewer awards. Having served on the Selection Committee in 2024 for articles published in 2023, I can attest to the rigour of the review process and the criteria used, including a demonstration by the authors of promoting transdisciplinary work while using science to address societal issues.

There were seven nominations for Outstanding Article and four nominations for Outstanding Reviewer for 2023. The Outstanding Reviewer awardee was Jonathan Davy from Rhodes University. The Outstanding Article was awarded to 'A lifecycle-based evaluation of greenhouse gas emissions from the plastics industry in South Africa' by Taahira Goga, Kevin Harding, Valentina Russo and Harro von Blottnitz. The runner-up for the Outstanding Article award was 'Advancing ecosystem accounting in estuaries: Swartkops Estuary case study' by Susan Taljaard, Lara van Niekerk, Janine B. Adams and Taryn Riddin.

SAJS and social media

SAJS has used the media quite effectively in disseminating information. The mainstream media published 92 news reports on SAJS articles in 2023/2024, with an online reach of about 3.5 million. The advertising value equivalent (i.e. what it would cost to place an equivalent 'sized' advertisement) based on this coverage of SAJS articles was about ZAR2.15 million. Traffic to the SAJS website consistently increased on days on which media reports were published. In 2023/2024, there were just over 100 000 views of the SAJS website – an average of about 8000 views monthly. Articles published in 2023 were downloaded from the SAJS website over 133 000 times.

In addition to the social media posts on X (Twitter), Facebook and LinkedIn for each new article published, an Instagram account was created in November 2023 to further disseminate the published articles. To extend the reach and accessibility of the social media posts, they were translated into two other languages – predominantly Zulu and Afrikaans – from September 2023 onwards.

Conclusion

Few national academies have the privilege of hosting their own journal. It is with pride that ASSAf hosts the SAJS, offering a service to authors at no cost. The success of the Journal is due to the behind-the-scenes activities anchored by the Managing Editor around whom the Editor-in-Chief, Associate Editors and supporting staff operate. The process of finding reviewers, and then chasing them up for reviews is a challenging process, but one that is part and parcel of the publication process. ASSAf is indebted to all who participate during the various stages of the publication process and to the editors, past and present, who contribute unstintingly to ensure that the publication hub turns with all spokes in unison.

Heartiest congratulations to the Journal on its 120th anniversary, and I wish it well into the future.

Declarations

H.S. is the Executive Officer of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the publisher of the *South African Journal of Science*. There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.