Why Kenyan academics do not publish in international refereed journals

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An examination of most of the highly ranked journals reveals that few, if any, articles are published by academics from sub-Saharan African universities. This is the case even when the article’s main topic directly relates to issues relevant to sub-Saharan Africa. The study outlined here aimed at explaining why African, and specifically Kenyan, academics do not publish in international refereed journals, and at taking into account academics’ own viewpoints on how to increase their number of publications in such journals.

Although publishing in international peer-reviewed journals can be viewed as a source of credibility and authority in an area of specialization, an examination of most of the highly ranked journals reveals that few, if any, articles are published by academics from sub-Saharan African universities. This is the case even when the article’s main topic directly relates to issues relevant to sub-Saharan Africa. So it seemed appropriate to investigate this matter. Kenya was chosen as the country for our investigation. The study aimed at explaining why Kenyan academics do not publish in international refereed journals, taking into account academics’ own viewpoints on how to increase their number of publications in international refereed journals.

The study site was one of Kenya’s main public universities, located in Nairobi. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were organized to collect data from faculty members who had not yet published a journal article or who had only published one article in the past three years. There were five focus group discussions which brought together twenty-five faculty members teaching in five different university departments. Each focus group discussion consisted of five individuals, ranging in rank from tutorial fellow to professor. Interviews were also conducted with the five chairpersons of the five university departments. The notes made during the interviews were transcribed and transferred on to a document summary sheet. This information was then analysed according to themes.

Factors involved in limited publications
The following factors stand out in the data:
- lack of time and low salaries
- difficulties in obtaining recent and relevant books and journal articles
- negative reviews of submissions to journals
- the attitude of the university’s administrative services
- the attitude of faculty.

Participants noted that the lack of time was a major contributing factor to the limited number of publications. Overcrowded lecture halls, an excessive number of exams to grade, numerous university meetings, and serving on various university committees were all cited as taking up any extra time that could otherwise have been used to write journal articles. Furthermore, senior faculty members complained about having to supervise up to twenty Masters’ and doctoral students’ projects and theses. Little time was left for research and publishing. In addition, those interviewed stated that if they did find some extra time, it was spent on teaching extra classes in private universities or colleges to supplement their incomes. Low faculty wages were therefore seen as a major hindrance to research and publication.

Low salaries were also mentioned in connection with research and fieldwork. In the absence of research funding and grants, academics use their own personal resources, which often results in less research time and thus fewer research findings to publish. Low salaries also mean that academics cannot afford journal access fees. They accused some journals of charging such exorbitant publishing fees – including for online access – that they could not keep up to date with current literature and research findings. A number of academics were unsure whether their research areas had already been covered, or of the latest research findings in their field.

In addition, the interviewed academics related the discouraging comments that they received from journal reviewers. In certain cases, reviewers suggested such major changes on the submitted articles that their authors simply did not take the trouble to resubmit them. Reviewers also called on the authors to read further and include more current literature, and as we have just seen, limited resources made it particularly difficult to do so. Certain participants also felt that the underlying reasons behind these reviews lay in a negative attitude towards sub-
Saharan-based scholars and their research, and a disregard for the issues that were addressed in the articles that were submitted. This is particularly interesting in view of the supposedly anonymous nature of articles when they are presented to reviewers.

University administrative services were accused of not doing enough to encourage publishing by faculty members. Academics who published in international journals, for instance, were not rewarded. Academics also felt that the administration did not place enough emphasis on the importance of publishing. Individuals needed to have published only three articles within a space of three years to be eligible for promotion from lecturer to senior lecturer. Many faculty members did not feel the need to do the extra work involved in publishing, and therefore stopped writing articles from the moment that they had published the necessary number of articles for promotion. A few of them argued that they were content and were not really interested in promotion, since the university employed them on a permanent basis. This air of resignation or fatalism could also be witnessed among junior faculty members, who pointed out that they had never been taught or guided on how to write journal articles.

How to increase the number of publications

A number of those interviewed felt that the university administration could support the effort needed for publishing by moderating class sizes as well as teaching and non-teaching assignments. Two suggestions were made in order to increase the quality and quantity of output: greater recognition for prolific academics, and a requirement that all faculty members publish at least one journal article per academic year.

Salary increases and the provision of research funds were regarded as potentially positive measures. They would mean that academics would no longer have to teach extra classes to increase their income. They could then spend a greater amount of time on research and publication. In addition, higher salaries would allow them to afford the publication fees demanded by certain journals. Differentiated journal access fees were also mentioned as a way of supporting and encouraging African and developing-country scholars, improving their access to current literature and existing research. Junior faculty members who gained greater access to peer-reviewed articles would get a clearer picture of what a ‘well-written’ journal article looks like. Junior faculty members also pointed out that they needed better guidance from their superiors on how to write for scientific journals, notably by getting them involved in research projects and writing up research findings.

Concluding remarks

Several measures need to be taken in order for the number of publications to increase. The creation of a positive climate for research (as mentioned by Proctor, 1996) is one of them. Research has to be valued, and greater time and effort must be devoted to it. Universities in sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya, ought to provide greater support to their faculty staff. Although many universities in resource-poor countries such as Kenya might not possess the necessary funds to subscribe to international journals, they could support their faculty by identifying and subscribing to a few key journals.

Research funding also represents a critical factor. It has been widely acknowledged that without funding, research cannot proceed adequately (Proctor, 1996). However, in the current context of global recession, academics in developing countries are not always able to rely on developed countries in order to gain access to the funds they need. Perhaps it is time for sub-Saharan-based scholars to seek alternative sources of funding for their research. Faculty members also need to take steps to help themselves and each other, for instance through self-help groups in which they can exchange advice and guidance, including feedback on drafts of articles. This could also reduce the number of harsh reports they receive from reviewers. Self-help groups have been found to increase scholarly outputs in countries such as the USA (Pottick, Adams and Faulkner, 1986).

If Kenya, and sub-Saharan Africa more generally, are to become active members of the global intellectual or scholarly community, they will have to take note of the findings reported here. I would therefore insist on the need to encourage more research and publications by academics from developing countries by outlining the positive and lasting impacts their research findings could have on society. Senior faculty members must fulfil their responsibilities as role models to their junior colleagues and students. In other words, they have to produce quality research and publish their findings in international, peer-reviewed journals.

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