

Challenges in Academic Publishing: Editors' Views

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish editors' views on why articles are normally not accepted for publication. A survey design was used. Three (3) editors participated in the study. The data were content analysed. The study revealed that inability to adhere to journal style, poorly organised content and structure of the paper, lack of language editing, poorly structured arguments, inattention to reviewers' comments are some of the keys factors contributing to lack of acceptance of journal articles for publishing. The editors suggested improved language proficiency and writing style, reading to write, adherence to journal requirements and themes, and mentoring by established researchers as ways to improve acceptance of written articles.

INTRODUCTION

The tri-focal functions of an academic in Higher Education Institutions are research, teaching and community engagement (Badat 2009; Waghid 2002). Research appears to be central to these functions. One's teaching is informed by one's research while one's community service activities are established through research and research addresses issues within communities (Chireshe 2010). Research capacity is demonstrated through publication of journal articles, books, book chapters and research reports (Chireshe 2010). Publication happens after the work goes through a peer review process by one or more referees in order to check that the work is suitable (Olanisimi and Amusan 2011). Similarly, Kapp et al. (2011) state that academics are required to disseminate new knowledge by publishing in scholarly journals. Publishing the knowledge in journals, books or book chapters ensures its availability to a wide audience.

Frey (2005) states that the number of publications determines the rankings of a university. Frey's idea is related to Kwan's (2010) observation that many university councils presently gauge performance of their Higher Education institutions against the number of publications produced. Shumba (2010) adds that the quality of a university is measured by its research out-

put. Miller et al. (2011) also states that journal publication is an important indicator of research productivity for academics and academic institutions. Similarly, Kapp et al. (2011) view publishing as being a key indicator of academic quality and worth. North et al. (2011) note that research output affects both the strength and funding of universities.

Survival in academia depends on publishing in refereed journals (Frey 2005). Along these lines, scholarly publication has become a major requirement for promotion and tenure purposes as it influences the career development of individual academics (Braine 2005; Peresuh 2006; Bedeian et al. 2009; Kwan 2010; Serebrin 2010; Shumba 2010).

Given the centrality of publication in academia, academics are under pressure to publish. Lucas (2006) states that pressure to publish is a fact of life within academia. Academics are under pressure to be active and productive in research (North et al. 2011). The 'publish or perish' dictum in many academic circles illustrate the pressure that academics face with regards to publishing (Kapp et al. 2011). However, Boyer et al. (1994) established that the pressure to publish reduced the quality of teaching in many universities. The effects of pressure to publish include heightened stress levels, marginalisation of teaching and research that may lack relevance, creativity and innovation (Miller et al. 2011). The above authors (Boyer et al. 1994; Miller et al. 2011) go on to state that the 'publish or perish' dictum encourages academics to devote less time to teaching and therefore constraints their efforts to disseminate knowledge. There is so much emphasis on research produc-

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tivity that many academics have to regard student contact as bothersome interruption from actual work (Miller et al. 2011). Serebrin (2010) established that academics believe research enhances one's reputation, respect and access to funds than teaching. As such, teaching suffers.

Despite the benefits of academic publishing, not all academics are publishing (North et al. 2011). As such, the research outputs for many universities are very low (Shumba 2010). In support of the above, Kapp et al. (2011) state that many academics experience obstacles in publishing. The academics are faced with external and internal barriers that prevent them from writing for publication.

The authors of the present study have come across very little published research on barriers to publication. The few researches include: Kapp et al. (2011), writing for publication: an intervention to overcome barriers to scholarly writing and Chireshe (2010), why articles are not accepted for publication. Kapp et al. (2011) cite literature that gives reasons why academics do not write for publication. For example, fearing of having work subjected to scrutiny of others (Murray and Moore 2006); lack of confidence (McGrail et al. 2006) and lack of skills in scholarly writing (Heinrich et al. 2004).

The acceptance rates of articles across journals are low, often less than 20% (MacDonald et al. 2006). The present study focuses on what editors view to be the reasons why papers are not usually accepted for publication in journals. The editors' views may provide insights for junior academics. Thus, the summarised advice from journal editors in this study will assist upcoming academics at achieve success in scholarly journal publication.

Goals of the Study

The study sought to establish the reasons why articles are not accepted for publication as perceived by journal editors. The study also aimed at establishing how article acceptance could be enhanced.

METHOD

Design

A survey among journal editors was employed in this study. Surveys are normally used

where participants' opinions or views on a particular phenomenon are sought (David and Sutton 2004). In this study, the views of editors on the reasons why articles are normally not accepted for publication were sought hence the suitability of the survey design.

Sample

Three editors of accredited academic journals participated in the study. Convenient sampling was used. The editors were chosen on the basis of their experience in reviewing, editing, accepting and rejecting articles.

Instrumentation

An open ended questionnaire was developed by the researchers. The questionnaire contained questions which focused on the reasons editors thought prevented articles from being accepted and what editors believe should be done to improve the acceptance rate of articles submitted for publication consideration. Two research professors were asked to check on the suitability of the questionnaire items.

Procedure

In August 2011, the researchers who were all employees of The University of South Africa (UNISA) then approached UNISA press to get a list of all accredited journals that the press manages together with the journal editors and their e-mail contact details. The researchers then e-mailed the questionnaire to the editors.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Emerging themes from the analysis were identified based on the reasons for non-acceptance of submitted articles as well as on what editors believed should be done to improve the acceptance rate of articles submitted for publication.

RESULTS

The following findings emerged with regards to non-acceptance of articles submitted for publication:

Lack of Adherence to Journal Style or Orientation

Editors pointed out that one reason for the rejection of articles submitted for publication was because authors did not familiarise themselves with the journal orientation or that the articles were misdirected. Lack of conformation to journal style and requirements or failure to address the current journal theme, debate or understanding were cited as problems. The following excerpts illustrate the above:

“... the papers submitted are often misdirected, the author did not familiarise him/herself with our orientation, previous articles published on the topic, or field.”

“...people tend NOT to read carefully, the requirements and FOCUS of the Journals they submit to.”

“Does not conform with in-house style”

Poor Writing Style

Most articles are rejected due to lack of attention to structure and content. Editors commented that some authors are not prepared to put in the work necessary for publication of an article. Rejected papers were usually not up to the journal standard, insufficiently scholarly, not properly edited and poorly structured. This is expressed in the excerpts below:

“Has not been properly edited.”

“... the paper was not up to our standard”

“The paper may be poorly structured and need more careful thought so it is well organised around central points that are put forward.”

It was highlighted that too many authors expect editors to do the work of writing for them. However, authors must take the responsibility for their own work since the responsibility of and credit to writing an article rests upon the author.

Lack of Argumentation

Most writers fail to support their research with adequate theorisation or citation of literature. As a result their articles are primarily based on opinion without supporting argument. Some submitted articles had either repetitive or contradictory in nature content. Other writers attempted to include too many points for consideration within the possible scope of the paper,

to the effect that the direction and strength of what was being said was lost or not clear enough or had no rigour. Another problem with some aspiring authors was a tendency to cite literature which is not contextually relevant or to provide arguments that were illogical. Some of the above aspects are captured in the following editors' excerpts:

“The argument was poorly structured and either repetitive or contradictory.”

“Lacks philosophical argument.”

“Insufficiently scholarly.”

“Writers may not support the research with adequate theorisation or citation of literature”

“Writers sometimes submit articles that are based on opinion without supporting argument, or counter argument”.

Inattention to Reviewers' Comments

The refusal of article contributors to heed reviewers' comments during revision or failure to adequately address the reviewers (referees)' comments were some reasons for the rejection of submitted articles. This is expressed in the following excerpts:

“Refusal of contributor to heed peer reviewers' comments in revision.”

“...the author failed to address the referees comments adequately.”

Focus on Research Output

Most authors were said to be impatient, careless and only seeking to get publication incentives or promotion. As a result they do not want to invest time, effort and commitment into their articles. Some authors were 'shopping about' for the first publishing slot available, irrespective of the impact of the journal. As a result some of the papers that are submitted are often misdirected due to lack of familiarisation of the author with the journal orientation and previous articles published on the topic or field. The above is expressed in the following excerpts from the editors:

“Authors are not prepared to do the necessary work to secure publication.”

“...authors are shopping about for the first publishing slot, irrespective of the impact of the journal.”

The following were given as approaches to enhance acceptance of submitted articles:

Language and Editing

Editors emphasised the need to improved language proficiency and to pay attention to editing prior to submission of articles. Proof reading and peer review processes were suggested as essential steps before articles were submitted for publication consideration.

Reading to Write

It was pointed out that reading published articles regularly and, more specifically, on the theme or journal to which the article is intended for publication was a prerequisite to successful publication. Reading will serve as reminder to contributors of what is required when publishing. In order to write authors need to read.

Writing Skills

Editors suggested that mastering writing skills was one of the key issues to successful publication. Authors were advised to follow an uncomplicated writing format: introduction, discussion of research method/s, reporting on finding, discussion and analysis of the findings, and conclusion. Rewriting drafts several times, accompanied by peer review was suggested. This will eventually lead to the development of a personal writing style as practice leads to perfection.

Mentoring

The importance of mentoring from established researchers to assist fledgling colleagues was emphasised. The use of departmental writing seminars as a good sounding board for papers was also proposed.

DISCUSSION

One priority in academic writing is that of being able to identify appropriate journals that discuss the theme or topic of one's article and decide on which journal to target (Fink 2010). During the writing process, the author identifies a list of prospective journals for which the manuscript is suitable (Knight and Steinbach 2008). It is therefore important to analyse available journals and establish which material is acceptable and/or not acceptable for a particular journal (Di Fabio and Maree 2012; Linger et al. 2005). This

can be done by beginning with articles cited in the reference list of the article the author is writing (Searing 2006). In analysing a journal one needs to ascertain the structure of the articles, the orientation (qualitative, quantitative or mixed method), style and themes covered. It is also important to look out for calls for journal articles, including special issue editions which focus on particular themes. Such selective identification of relevant journals to send one's article minimises the chances of such an article being rejected for publication.

It emerged from this study that academic articles were not being accepted for publication because of lack of adherence to journal style or orientation by the authors. Authors simply submitted articles without following a journal's focus area and/or guidelines for contributors. Such papers are rejected before even going into the review process. This finding concurs with Chireshe (2010) who established that articles were not accepted because they did not address the journal theme. It is therefore important for authors to relate their research and writing to the field of the journal (Linger et al. 2005). Related to the lack of focus on the journal orientation was the issue of not following the journal structure. Provenzale (2007) and Shoniregun (2010) argue that following the journal structure has a bearing on the acceptance of the paper. Journals usually follow the following structure: abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusion and recommendations (Chireshe 2010; Sternberg 1996). The abstract has to be clear beginning with the aim of the study while the introduction gives the rationale for the study which has to be backed by relevant literature. If the article's rationale is not clearly given, it is most likely to be rejected (Bodage 2001; Provenzale 2007). The method section has to clearly explain how data were collected and analysed to avoid rejection (Provenzale 2007).

It also emerged from the study that some articles were rejected because they were insufficiently scholarly, poorly language edited and did not have adequate supporting literature. This finding concurs with Chireshe (2010) who established that articles were rejected because of poor expression and incoherence. As a result of poor editing and unscholarliness, most journal editors require proof that the submitted article has been proof read. The unscholarliness of

some articles could relate to Chireshe's (2010) finding that some authors did not read scholarly articles and thus could not produce scholarly articles themselves. This assertion on lack of supporting literature is also supported by Linger et al. (2005) who argue that authors must familiarise themselves with the wider body of work in the relevant field before writing.

The study also revealed that some authors did not attend to the reviewers' comments. Chireshe (2010) had similar findings when he established that most authors were not able to effect the reviewers' comments. Lack of academic skills and an element of not being very serious may possibly explain the failure to implement reviewers' comments.

The issue of lack of adherence to journal orientation, poor writing style and inattention to reviewers' comments could all be linked to the finding that most authors focused more on research outputs and getting publication incentives. The authors do not worry about the state of their papers but just want them published. The drive for tenure, promotion or research incentives may actually force genuine scholars to adhere to the rules of publication. The drive may push them to learn academic writing skills to enhance the acceptance rate of their articles.

It is interesting to note that none of editors who participated in this study referred to the issue of politics of publishing where upcoming academics believe that established academics control access to publication in some journals (Bogopa 2009). The upcoming scholars believe that some articles are published because the authors are known to the reviewers or editors (Chireshe 2010). This belief seems to be supported by Shoniregun's (2010) argument that young researchers need to collaborate with seasoned scholars to enhance the acceptability of their papers. From the collaboration, the young scholars may learn the rules of the game in academic publishing.

The editors' recommendations on proof reading, reading to write, writing skills and mentoring as a way of enhancing acceptance rate of papers relates to earlier recommendations by Kapp et al. (2011) and Chireshe (2010). For budding writers, writing in in-house journals or even in undergraduate research journals for students (Weiner and Watkinson 2014) provides them with an opportunity to learn the scholarly publishing process.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that inability to identify the appropriate journals, lack of adherence to journal orientation, poor writing style, inattention to reviewers' comments and focus on research outputs are editors' views as to why papers are not normally accepted for publication. It can also be concluded that editors viewed proof reading, reading to write, mastering writing skills and mentoring as enhancers of acceptance of articles in journals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, it can be recommended that acceptance rates of articles would increase if authors were to: familiarise themselves with the selected journal's orientation, analyse copies of published articles in the journal they target to in order to know the expected structure or format, read scholarly articles in the area they are writing in, have their work proof read and critically read by peers and/or mentors, attend to all the reviewers' comments and receive mentoring in academic writing.

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