

Building researchers' capacity to publish in high-impact journals



An AgShare.Today mentor working with Dr Richard Echodu to support his writing of a series of manuscripts on the challenges facing sweet potato production in East Africa

Overview

One of the ways that AgShare.Today is helping projects to manage and share results and data more efficiently is by building the capacity of researchers to more quickly produce journal articles of the quality required by international peer-reviewed journals. By early 2018, the team had supported researchers from nine BMGF-funded partner projects in the production of over 60 manuscripts.

The impact of slow publishing

For research projects to have maximum impact, results need to be shared as widely and quickly as possible – so that others can build on the work.

Slow production of journal articles is therefore a real threat to the wide-scale dissemination of research. Key results (such as the discovery of a gene that breaks resistance to a specific disease) can remain buried in a project for years while busy researchers struggle to find the time to publish.

The reasons for slow publishing

There are a range of (often interrelated) reasons that some researchers are slow to publish. One is simply that, as untrained writers, many find the production of journal articles a painful and time-consuming process which they tend to put off.

Related to this is the fact that journal articles are important to recognition and promotion. Researchers often therefore won't simply release publishable results so that they can be shared quickly for the general good – even if they are finding it hard to find the time to publish them. Rather they will hold on to them until they have

time to publish them so that they can gain credit.

Because the publication of journal articles increases the kudos of organizations as well as individuals, universities in regions such as Europe and the USA offer support to their researchers in order to help them publish. Examples of such support range from providing science-writing training courses, to retaining statisticians on staff.

In under-resourced regions such as Africa, however, such institutional support is lacking – another major reason for the slower publication rates.

Another reason for low publication rates in Africa (related to the lack of institutional support) is the fact that the organizational drivers in the West that create a “culture of publishing in high end journals” are not as strongly seen in many organizations in Africa. In Europe and the USA, for example, universities put considerable pressure on their teams to publish as quickly as possible in international journals. Assessment mechanisms like the UK's Research Excellence Framework (which in part uses the quality of staff publications to rank universities) contribute strongly to this.

Vision for the future

AgShare.Today is working to overcome these issues by providing comprehensive publications support to researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa. The aim is to level the playing field and increase the chances of their science being published.

Comprehensive expert support

One-to-one mentoring

One way that AgShare.Today is providing support to increase publishing rates is by providing mentoring services – where experienced writers with PhDs work one-to-one with authors to help them develop their articles.

Such mentoring services are often provided via Skype (for screen sharing and face-to-face interactions) and through AgShare’s online platform (which allows collaborative online writing and editing of documents). In many cases early in the programme this approach required the AgShare Team to give training in the use of key software, including installing Skype on partners’ computers and encouraging them to use the screen-sharing function.

One-to-one mentoring support ranges from helping researchers to apply statistics to their data rigorously (to meet the requirements of international journals), to guiding the writing process by questioning assertions, facilitating communication between the author and co-authors, and ensuring good, grammatical text.

Formal training courses

Mentoring isn’t the only form of capacity building provided by the programme to improve science writing. In fact, since 2016, AgShare has regularly been providing formal group training courses and write-shops in African research organizations to build the skills required for the rapid publishing of results.

Chronos

The AgShare.Today team also encourages researchers to submit to open access journals through the Gates Foundation’s Chronos portal – which pays open access fees and ensures that

papers are submitted to high-quality academic journals.

Pop-up services

Now, as the programme enters a new phase in 2018, AgShare has also introduced the “pop-up” office approach to capacity building. This innovative approach places AgShare teams in country for an extended period (as long as two to three months) in a temporary office that local researchers can visit, base themselves in, and receive intensive support. Staff in the office provide a range of services, including advice on statistics, support for data analysis, and iterative reviews of manuscripts as the researchers write them.

As far as we know, this approach has not been attempted before and the feedback from the first office (set up in Tanzania) has been exceptionally strong – with calls from researchers from other countries for the service to be repeated near them.

Impact

Impacts to date include over 60 articles raised to the standards required for submission to international journals, a special edition of a journal commissioned by Elsevier for publication in 2019, and 10 formal courses and write-shops run for African scientists.

Lessons learned

- Authors require both formal group teaching and one-to-one mentoring to properly build science-writing capacity.
- Difficulty handling statistics is a major stumbling block for many authors.
- Production of publication plans greatly speeds up results dissemination.
- Using document-sharing software like OneDrive improves collaboration between authors, co-authors and editors.

Find out more: [Email enquiries@agshare.today](mailto:Email.enquiries@agshare.today)