

The essence of scholarship: Charting a path through the thickets of scholarly publishing

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The history of scholarly journal publishing is generally dated from the appearance of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* in 1665.¹ The notable features of this publication are that it is the property of a learned society, and at the time of its inception reflected the deliberations of the scholars of the day from across Europe. It gained its stature from contributions by members of the learned society and the esteem of a broader scholarly community that used it as a vehicle to exchange ideas. Since the inception of the notion of the ‘scholarly journal’, the number of journals, and the range of subjects covered, has proliferated dramatically. In addition, the model for journal publishing has moved from the historical learned society publisher through to the emergence of large commercial publishers who dominate the market. The rise of electronic publishing has made it possible for predatory publishers with no pretensions of quality to join the fray. The various journal databases currently list in excess of 30 000 reputable titles and with the emergence of open-access online journals, the number is being proliferated extravagantly and with little regard for the quality of what is published. For an aspiring scholar who is looking for a credible vehicle in which to publish his or her work, the choices are bewildering. But informed choices are crucial for establishing a scholarly reputation. Thankfully, help is at hand in the form of the work that has been done in South Africa to enhance the reputation of local scholarly journals.

In South Africa, a variety of initiatives has been launched in the past by groups of academics and learned societies to establish journals as vehicles for scholarly communication. Indeed, there was even a government initiative that started in the 1970s to provide an infrastructure to support selected South African journals and enhance their impact in the global scholarly community.² With the demise of these initiatives in the 1990s, the local scholarly publishing landscape appeared drought-stricken until the turn of the 21st century.

However, two local interventions have played a crucial role in the lives of scholars who are intent on having their work published and establishing their reputations. The first of these was the introduction by the Foundation for Research Development (ancestor of the current National Research Foundation (NRF)) of a rating system for individual scholars in 1985. The rating of individuals was based on peer review of their scholarly contributions to their disciplines. The ratings essentially assessed whether they were recognised by their peers as falling in the broad categories of being international leaders in their fields, being recognised internationally for their contributions, or being recognised nationally. This assessment was based on the evaluation of the significance of a person’s particular contributions to the scholarly literature and was influenced by the quality of journals in which the work appeared. The ratings given to scholars became an important factor in the development of academic careers, particularly when scholars in the humanities and the social sciences were included in these ratings.

The second intervention was the change to a funding framework for universities in 2003³ that provided an output subsidy for scholarly publications in journals, conference proceedings and books. For universities, maximising the number of these outputs was an important source of income, while for the government department providing the funding, this was meant as an incentive to enhance research performance, but with quality criteria built into the recognition of these outputs.

An aspiring scholar in 2004 was confronted with competing demands of the NRF for quality of scholarly work related to high ratings, and their institution’s demands, both for an NRF rating and a greater number of outputs to enhance income through the research output subsidy. This latter problem of numbers could be partially finessed using South African journals that had a special position as

recognised journals for subsidy purposes. The use of ‘in-house’ journals for this purpose was clearly an attractive option to pursue if the level of NRF rating could be traded off against income generation.

First report on scholarly publishing in South Africa

Into this conflicted terrain of scholarly publishing politics stepped the then newly established [Academy of Science of South Africa](#) that was asked by the then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) to initiate a study of research publishing in South Africa. The impetus for this request came from the understanding at the time that roughly half of the research outputs from South Africa came from publications that were in Web of Science listed journals and the other half were in journals that were not listed by Web of Science but recognised by the Department of Education. Indeed, 219 South African journals were recognised by the Department of Education in 2004. The journals were diverse and it appeared that ‘their primary purpose may not be communication and documentation of original research in a global knowledge system.’⁴ In view of these reservations about the quality of local journals, the DACST requested that the Academy carefully examine the evidence available regarding South African research journals and develop a new strategic framework that would be comparable with the situation prevailing elsewhere in the global academic environment. This DACST contract was to be a profound test of the young Academy’s ability to undertake a thorough investigation that would lead to implementable policy recommendations.

The [report](#) took as its starting point the identification of key properties of a research journal that would provide a reliable record of new knowledge being added to the global corpus of scholarly knowledge. The authors of the report identified three essential characteristics that all credible research journals needed to exhibit. The first was that readers should be able to place an absolute reliance on the integrity of the research results being presented, in terms of both methodology and interpretation. The second was the core role of the editor in managing the evaluation of submitted manuscripts and the peer-review system associated with their evaluation. Finally, the authors of the report recognised that the nature of scholarly publishing was changing radically and that the electronic dissemination of research information was changing the nature of the scholarly enterprise in ways that were evolving rapidly and needed to be assessed. In this latter respect, the report was particularly prescient when it was initiated in 2001.

The work required for careful examination of the evidence was concluded in 2005 and the report was published in 2006. This report provided an incisive analysis of scholarly publishing and remains an extremely useful source of information to guide both authors and journal publishers in carrying out their respective roles responsibly. For example, there is a very useful definition of a South African journal^{1(p.2)} in order to avoid arguments about what ‘South African’ journals are. In addition, the analysis of South African journals at that time provided a unique insight into the state of local scholarly publishing, not all of it very flattering. As with all reports of this kind, it provided a range of recommendations for the appropriate government departments to consider in the development of their policies and for the sector to consider as journals and their editors grappled with the findings.

Impact of the report

In the decade since the report was published, what impacts have the recommendations had?

All ten of the recommendations have been largely implemented with the Department of Science and Technology and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) partnering with the Academy to achieve the vision set out in the original report, of establishing a vibrant local scholarly publishing environment that engages globally in making South African knowledge generation visible. In addition, there has been an attempt to ensure that knowledge generated locally is made accessible to learners in schools so that they appreciate that knowledge generation is an indigenous activity in which they can become active participants.

In taking on the task of implementing the recommendations of the report¹, the Academy:

- Undertook a study of scholarly book publishing⁵ to complement the work on journal publishing. This report made a number of recommendations, some of which have recently been incorporated into the new guidelines⁶ of the DHET for research output recognition that apply from 2016. This study was also definitive in dealing with the elements of what constitutes a scholarly book and how these should be evaluated for the purposes of the output subsidy.
- Established the Committee on Scholarly Publishing in South Africa that advises the Council of the Academy on matters related to scholarly publishing and oversees the activities of the administrative unit within the secretariat of the Academy that is known as the Scholarly Publishing Programme.
- Established the open-access journal platform SciELO SA that is designed to be the premier collection of research journals from South Africa. From its establishment with the *South Africa Journal of Science* as its first journal to the current time with a collection of 60 titles, it has proved to be an excellent platform for enhancing the global visibility of research reported in these titles. Site visits have gone from 5000 in 2009 to 1.3 million in 2015. In addition, the SciELO SA platform has been included in the Web of Science Portal to allow for enhanced searching of the material in the collection.
- Transformed the *South African Journal of Science* into a fully open-access journal and the first to be available on the SciELO SA platform. The Academy took the bold step of pioneering the publication of this fully open-access journal to serve as a model to be emulated by other South African journals in the future.
- Publishes the magazine *Quest* as a means of making South African research activities accessible to a broader audience with the intention of luring young learners into research careers.
- Established and maintains the National Scholarly Editors' Forum that provides a platform for the editors of scholarly journals to get together and consider matters that need to be addressed in relation to the publishing environment in South Africa.
- Established and maintains the National Scholarly Book Publishers' Forum that provides a site for local book publishers to deal with matters of common interest.
- Established and continues to undertake a systematic discipline-based peer review of journals that are published in South Africa. Journals that are approved by this peer-review process may be asked to join the SciELO SA platform and the articles published in them are eligible for the output subsidy.
- Established and undertook a review of submissions from higher education institutions of books, chapters in books and conference proceedings in order to make recommendations to the DHET regarding awarding of subsidies. In this respect the Academy ensured that the assessment of submissions was undertaken by specialists within the disciplines of the authors and established what is considered to be a credible process of assessment.

This constellation of initiatives by the Academy provides for a rich environment in which scholarly publishing in a variety of modes can be pursued. The key elements of these initiatives are to ensure that scholars locally have a variety of vehicles through which to make their work known, to ensure that the quality of the work that is published is maintained at a high standard, both through the peer-review process for individual submissions as well as through the discipline-based peer review of groups of journals themselves, and to provide a platform for global visibility.

For the aspiring scholar of 2016, the demands that they face to obtain ratings from the NRF and to publish regularly as required by their institutions remain the same as for their predecessors at the turn of the century. However, the milieu in which they undertake their work has changed almost beyond recognition through the pervasive use of electronic means to communicate information and ideas, and the changing nature of publishing. They are beneficiaries of comprehensive interventions by the Academy to try to ensure that the quality of scholarly publication is maintained, but they have also been provided with an internationally recognised platform for the dissemination of work published in local journals. Apart from Brazil, South Africa is probably one of the few countries in which such a comprehensive set of interventions has been attempted in support of its scholarly community.

The other lesson of particular significance for the Academy is that the methodology employed to produce the two reports on scholarly publishing^{1,6} has been singularly successful in showing what can be produced by studies that have insightful analyses of the evidence, coupled with practical guides

to policy development and implementation. The Academy has shown itself to be particularly adept at the implementation of the recommendations of the reports with the provision of a set of interventions that support scholarly activities.

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