



Challenges to Journal Editorial Work in West - Africa: Lessons from the University of Ghana

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Abstract

Journals are the main outlets for accurate and quality research dissemination, but many in developing countries are fraught with peculiar challenges. This article outlines challenges faced by journal editors from the University of Ghana. Challenges include transitioning to digital platforms, understanding the review process, copyediting, website updates, production, indexing issues, proofreading, among others. Specific topics of interest included addressing plagiarism, utilizing AI in editorial work, effectively recruiting and managing reviewers, and insights on journal indexing. Additionally, they emphasized the dire need for institutional support in journal management towards the establishment of an editorial office, a university journal management policy, mentorship, increased opportunities for networking, continual professional training, and the availability of IT support staff etc. to ensure sustainability. This study brought out the prevalent hurdles that many editors within Ghana, and the sub-region daily encounter in their work and the need for support.

Keywords: Challenges, Editorial Staff, Journal Management, Journal Management Policy

Introduction

Scholarly journals are periodic publications that showcase research in specific disciplines. They provide a permanent and transparent peer reviewed platform for presenting, debating and refining research findings (Blake & Bly, 1993).

Academic journals are designed to serve as forums to present research articles, literature reviews, and foster academic discourse which are essential for scholarly communication (Obeagu et al., 2023). Peer-reviewed Journals are the main channel for scientific knowledge dissemination globally. In all African

Higher Educational Institutions (AHEIs), research publications are preferred in international peer reviewed sources that are indexed in globally accepted bibliometric databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Pubmed etc. (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2020; Mwaura & Balliah, 2024; Tarkang & Bain, 2019; Tillett, 2005).

Research output from Africa has risen significantly over the past 20 years, but country-level disparities remain. The reliance on the Global North-dominated publication databases and citation metrics, such as those used in the Times Higher Education

Africa rankings, is believed to overlook the diverse priorities and economies within Africa, and continues to depend solely on citation and research data from the Scopus publication database (Wilson et al., 2020).

Currently, a number of African Universities including the premier University of Ghana (UG), has a policy on promotion via metrics (University of Ghana, 2023). The question is what then happens to publications in the local unindexed journals? UG currently has fourteen journals (<https://journals.ug.edu.gh/>), of which two are Scopus indexed. These journals if properly managed, have the prospects of creating a viable ecosystem for indigenous scientific knowledge.

Academic journals play a crucial role in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) by facilitating knowledge dissemination, supporting research, and enhancing institutional reputation (Berchin et al., 2018). They are integral to various aspects of HEIs, including sustainability promotion, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), knowledge sharing, and quality assurance (Adhikariparajuli, Hassan, & Siboni, 2021; Al-Kurdi, El-Haddadeh, & Eldabi, 2018; Prakash, 2018). Institutional academic journals play a significant role in shaping national and international perceptions of universities and academic institutions, while highlighting their societal importance (Hamid, 2025).

Africa's journals are not only marginalized, but also fraught with many challenges (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024);(North, Hastie, & Hoyer, 2020; Ssentongo, 2020).

However, one advantage is that there exist multiple institutional journals in many public universities. It is well known that these HEIs could own several journals. As of May 1st, 2024, the University of Ghana (UG) had 14 (<https://journals.ug.edu.gh/>), similar situations exist in several other HEIs in Africa. University of Cape Coast (19) <https://journal.ucc.edu.gh/>, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (3) <https://journal.knust.edu.gh/>, and University of Education, Winneba (14) <https://journals.uew.edu.gh/>. The statistics for universities in Nigeria are as follows: University of Lagos (42), <http://journals.unilag.edu.ng/>, University of Ibadan (11), <https://journals.ui.edu.ng/> and Federal University of Technology Akure (13) <https://journals.futa.edu.ng/>. Many other journals from various universities exist on isolated platforms. This project therefore sought to interact with editorial staff to have an insight into the challenges faced while executing their jobs.

Approach

In September 2023, a round table discussion on editorial challenges of University of Ghana Journals saw the presence of 26 participants consisting of editorial staff, administrators with oversight responsibility for journal management, librarians, and academics. This was followed by questionnaires being administered to 14 editorial staff to solicit their opinions regarding the current management of the journals, the training and professional development required, succession planning for the journal management, and collaboration and networking.

Results and Discussion

Participants

Many respondents held the position of editor-in-chief for their respective journals, followed by editorial board members. Some attendees represented their journals but did not specify their exact positions. Notably, associate and section editors were conspicuously missing. The journals can be encouraged to make use of discipline specific experts in the positions of section or associate editor to provide support to the chief editors to improve accuracy and quality of the journal content.

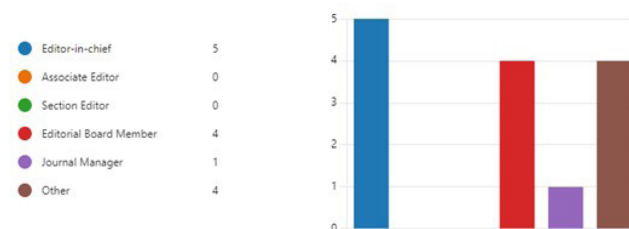


Figure 1. Survey Participants

Years of Experience in Academic Publishing

A significant majority of the respondents had fewer than 5 years of experience in working in the editorial role. This could be indicative of a high turnover rate of editorial staff, which could have a significant impact on the quality of editorial work. A considerable number of editorial staff were found to be non-permanent staff members.



Figure 2. Years of Experience in Academic Publishing

Primary Field or Subject Area of Journals

Most of the journals were within the fields of humanities followed by the sciences, social sciences, and medicine.

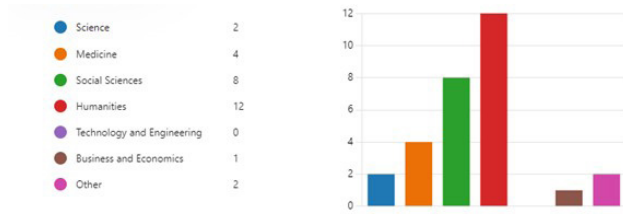


Figure 3. Subject Areas of Journals

Motivations for Becoming an Editor

The motivations for becoming an editor at UG was diverse, reflecting a mixture of personal, professional and institutional goals. Many respondents (57%) were motivated by a desire to advance knowledge and promote research. Forty-two percent were driven by the opportunity to collaborate with scholars globally. Many respondents (57%) aimed to develop their skills, gain experience, and influence science in Ghana. Some editors (42%) were also motivated by a desire to promote UG, enhance the status of Ghanaian journals and re-evaluate knowledge production in Africa.

Participation in professional editorial training programs

Majority of journal participants had participated in professional development programs. The data showed approximately 57%, thus indicating an interest in continuous professional enhancement within the editorial community. For a dynamic field of scientific publication, there is need to ensure continual professional development of editorial staff.

Preferred Training Opportunities

Approximately 86% indicated they still needed training. The survey highlights several key areas where the editorial staff indicated the need for additional training. The top four areas included digital tools, peer review workshops, publication ethics, and manuscript editing (refer to figure 4 for details of the responses). This suggested the need for targeted training programs to address this specific aspect of editorial work.

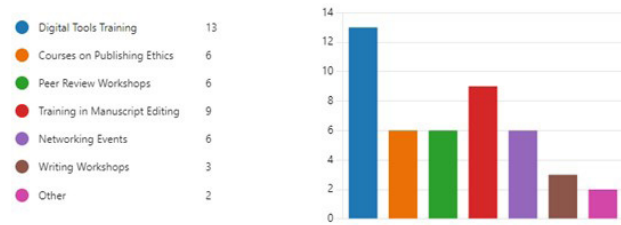


Figure 4. Preferred Training Opportunities

Familiarity with Latest Trends and Best Practices in Journal Publishing and Editorial processes

The answers to this question were evenly split. Indicating the need to ensure that editorial staff are abreast with latest trends in academic publishing. Most respondents indicated that they stayed updated through videos and in-person training programs (Figure 5). This suggests the need to improve training methods, including conference attendance, usage of online publishing academies etc. There are currently many free online publishing academies that could be exploited by editorial staff in this respect. These include The Public Knowledge Project (PKP), Elsevier etc.



Figure 5. Editorial staff staying updated through videos and in-person training programs.

Editorial Management Tools

Over 70% of the editorial staff reported they still manually processed their manuscripts. This highlights a considerable reliance on manual processes in the editorial management process suggesting potential areas for massive improvement, the need for editorial staff to adopt more advanced management tools and also increase proficiency in the use of the current online journal management system.



Figure 6. Online Journal Management Platforms

Satisfaction Level with Technical Support

The degree of satisfaction with technical support among the users of UG Journal Management System (UGJMS) varied. While some users appreciated the

assistance provided, others highlighted the need for a more comprehensive support. The users could benefit from more accessible and responsive technical support to address issues promptly. 42 % were either neutral or moderately satisfied, and 7% each were unsatisfied or satisfied with the technical support provided.

Common Pain Points Encountered During Editorial Process

Several common pain points identified by participants during the editorial process of the UGJMS included plagiarism checking, reviewer recruitment and turnaround time, system usability, technical issues, and manual submission preferences of author for mails.

Recommendations for improving UGJMS

Based on the user feedback, the recommendations for improvement of the UGJMS included the incorporation of plagiarism checker, broader marketing channels, regular consultative training, user-friendly redesign, resource sharing, central coordination of journal management, and support for tasks such as proofreading.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Collaboration among journal editors is crucial for enhancing the quality of academic publications. In this respect, the participants in the survey suggested organizing conferences, workshops, and webinars to share insights and best practices. Additionally, there is a need to create online forums to encourage collaborative research, mentorship programs, resources sharing, fund application, etc..

Initiative for Quality Editorial Work

The suggested strategies to ensure quality editorial work included regular training and development, the implementation of rigorous peer review processes, the incentivization of reviewers, regular editorial board meetings, and the establishment of systems for receiving and acting on feedback from authors, reviewers, and readers promptly.

Appointment of Key Editorial Staff

The processes for appointing key editorial staff was currently vague, an participants recommended that it be based on merit and made transparent. It was recommended that editors could be selected from among faculty members who have demonstrated expertise in the relevant field, or by open calls for

applications or upon recommendations by editorial boards. Potential candidates can be assessed based on their academic qualification, publication records and editorial experience.

Succession Recommendations

Effective succession planning ensure continuity and sustainability. On this issue, participants recommended the following measures: mentorship programs, structured integration of new editors, the need for documentation and knowledge transfer processes, and the establishment of succession planning committees.

Conclusion

The challenges to journal editorial work in West Africa are multifaceted, involving issues of key resource limitations. Addressing these challenges requires a shift towards more inclusive practices, better resource allocation, and the development of publishing models that are tailored to the African context through a strategic approach.

This study highlights the significant challenges faced by academic journals at UG, reflecting broader issues across West Africa. The editorial staff bemoaned the lack of institutional support in terms of administration, financial, structural and editorial assistance. The bemoaned the current cumbersome editorial processes. Key areas identified to help improve editorial work include the need for enhanced training in digital tools, manuscript editing, improved editorial management systems, and sustained professional development. Incentivizing journal editors and formalizing the engagement of editorial staff was also an issue.

Recommendations

Key recommendations to improve the journals included redesigning the current OJS to clearer and user-friendly layouts to meet indexing standards, incorporate plugins such as plagiarism checks, establishing an editorial or journal office, develop an institutional journal policy or regulations, coordinated efforts with other stakeholders such as the library, computer systems and faculty to improve journal management.

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