



Citing Africa

Episode 1 - Why are acceptance rates falling and what can we do about it?

Syerramia Willoughby:

This is Citing Africa! Welcome to the first episode of this series from the LSE Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa. My name is Syerramia Willoughby.

For decades questions have been raised about the way knowledge about African countries is sourced, produced, disseminated and taught. In recent years, these debates have evolved into protests spreading from Cape Town to Oxford and beyond.

Through the Citing Africa podcast series, we will investigate the inequalities of the international educational research system, its impact on Africa based academics and current efforts to bring about change. In this first episode, we will be talking about the lack of representation by Africa based scholars in international journals.

To get to the bottom of this issue, we have invited individuals who have conducted quantitative studies to investigate. This dearth affects the reading list that university teachers put together, for African and Development Studies courses and in turn the knowledge that is transmitted to students all across the world.

A recent study has shown that, despite an increase in submission by Africa based academics to the top international African studies journals, acceptance rates are on the decline as researcher Sarah Cummings told us.

Sarah Cummings:

43% of the authors came from the USA and the UK, and about 43% came from other developed countries and only 14% from developing countries themselves.

Syerramia Willoughby:

And for those Africa-based scholars, who do get published in international journals, there is yet another stumbling block according to researcher Ryan Briggs.

Ryan Briggs:

Not only were Africa-based academics seeing lower acceptance rates but then when their work was published it was being cited less.



Syerramia Willoughby:

And publisher Elizabeth Walker has definite ideas on how we can change the current state of schools.

Elizabeth Walker:

We just need more integrated conversations with African voices, voices from the global science, and to think about different ways, tangible ways, that we can move away from this sort of western model.

Syerramia Willoughby:

The starting point of this series is to investigate why acceptance rates for Africa based academics in top international journals are falling, and what can be done to reverse that trend.

In recent years, there have been a number of studies investigating this. Sarah Cummings a social entrepreneur and a researcher, focusing on the role of knowledge in International Development, is one person who has been looking into this.

She has been investigating how many academics from developing countries feature authors in ten well known International Development Studies journals from 2012 to 2014.

Sarah Cummings:

What I found was really, I mean my view is quite shocking really, I think. Particularly in the field of development studies which really focused on development.

I found 43% of the authors came from the USA and the UK, and about 43% came from other developed countries and only 14% from developing countries themselves. And for Africa, this was obviously not very many authorships.

There was, for example, the most highly represented South African countries, with South Africa with 52 authorships and this encompass to the USA with 660 and the UK with 550. So you can see there is a huge difference.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Sarah and her co-author Paul Hoebink also investigated the make-up of the editorial board of these same journals.

Sarah Cummings:

The picture was actually even worse from the perspective of responsibility and inclusion in my view. So, I looked in the 10 journals and in total there were 329 editorial board members and 62% of this were from the USA and the UK; 31% were from other developed countries and only 9% were from the developing countries themselves. So, you had 4 editorial board members from South Africa, 3 from Ghana, 2 from Zimbabwe and 1 from Uganda. And actually, what was even



more shocking really from the perspective of diversity and equity, was that 70% of the editorial board members were men.

Syerramia Willoughby: There are very stark statistics there from the study conducted by Sarah Cummings and Paul Hoebink.

Our Citing Africa researchers have also been examining the editorial board of leading African and Development Studies journals and they have also found that there are surprisingly low numbers of them, feature scholars based within African countries.

The exceptions were the Agrarian South, based in Zimbabwe and the Journal of Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies based in Nairobi. Many journals feel the pressure to contribute more to the decolonisation agenda, by transforming the editorial board or increasing the number of Africa based reviewers. However, it has been moving very slowly. Let's hear now from Ryan Briggs, an assistant professor of the University of Guelph in Canada. Along with Scott Weathers he looks into how authorships for women and Africa-based authors in two African Studies journals changed over a period of 20 years from 1993 to 2013.

Ryan Briggs:

To start with the positive, we start seeing women in these two journals rise from about 15 % to 20% in the early 90s, to around half by 2013.

One negative news is over the same time period, the share of Africa-based academics publishing in these journals, fell from about 25% to 15%. You know this could be happening because of declining submission rates, you know it's possible that people just were sending their work elsewhere, or it could be declining acceptance rates. It's fairly difficult to test this, because it is not common to get data on article submissions, that includes like the institutions. But the Journal of Modern African Studies admirably tracks this data and they shared it.

From the period 1997 until 2012, the share of all submissions to JMAS by Africa based scholars grew from about 30% to about 40%. And so, if that results, generalises if that the same case for African Affairs or other journals, then this is fairly strong evidence that the decline in articles being published by Africa-based scholars is not happening because these scholars are trying to publish elsewhere, it's happening because acceptance rates are really low and falling.

Syerramia Willoughby:

So, is this phenomenon unique to the social sciences, or is there a similar trend in the fields of science and engineering? Sarah Cummings can shed some lights on this.



Sarah Cummings:

There was a paper by Dahdouh-Guebas and some colleagues from 2013 and he was looking at almost 3,000 articles from the current context database which were based on search in 48 developing countries.

And what he found was that actually 70% of these papers focusing on 48 developing countries didn't have authors from the country itself. And what was really interesting I think was that the life sciences were doing really a lot better than the social sciences where in which it would include political sciences. And this was a bit of conundrum to them and, actually, there are a couple of things they mentioned. One of them is they did a questionnaire survey of the social sciences, and all of the social sciences were talking about their research of these developing countries, these Development Corporations, so they saw it as contributing to development. And another interesting fact is that they reached the conclusion that the situation in the life sciences and in particularly health was a lot better because there was a formal collaboration between institutions. But also, there's a board of medical editors who are really concerned with these issues.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Routledge Taylor & Francis is one of the world's leading publishers of scholarly books and journals. I spoke to Elizabeth Walker, publisher of the African Studies portfolio at the company. She has been finding out whether the results of the studies, conducted by Sarah Cummings and Ryan Briggs, match what is going on within the Routledge Taylor and Francis table of journals.

Elizabeth Walker:

What we see from the Routledge Taylor & Francis data is a little bit of a mixed picture. To a certain extent yes and the data does corroborate what we have heard from Sarah and Ryan. However, there are some journals within our African Studies portfolio which are bucking the trend somewhat. For example, Review of African Political Economy which we publish has seen an increase not only in submissions from the region, but also in acceptances, major revisions and minor revisions. It's not a huge increase, but when looking at the period 2016 to 2018 the increase is about 2%. So, it has gone from 10% to 12%.

Syerramia Willoughby:

However, Elizabeth raised a concern about the scope of these studies.

Elizabeth Walker:

We do need to take a wider view on this question. And what I mean by that is that I think many of the studies that we see published and which you know we were discussing are looking at journals which are published, and managed, if you like, by editorial teams which are based in the North, so UK, North America and Europe and so on.



And one of the things that we are aware of within our African Studies team is that it's problematic to think in that way, about which journals are important, and which are the esteemed journals, and you know there's a certain amount to be said about the reality of publishing in academia there. But I think that is a problematic model. I haven't seen very many studies where Africa based, African Studies journals are part of the analysis. And of course, at Routledge we do publish many of those: African Studies for example, the Journal of Contemporary African Studies, Social Dynamics, and we also publish a portfolio of journals based in Africa across a variety of disciplines, so not just African Studies, but other Social Science and humanities disciplines and Scientific Technical Medical disciplines.

I read a very interesting article recently by Peace Medie and Alice Kang in the European Journal of Politics and Gender, it was called power “Knowledge and the Politics of Gender in the Global South”, and I think one of the interesting findings in that article was that Africa based Gender Politics Journals were more inclusive than their northern counterparts. And I think in summary that's really also what we see with the Routledge Taylor & Francis portfolio. Where we have been proactive and working with editorial boards to recruit editorial board members and peer-reviewers on the ground, we have seen better results in terms of diversity.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Sarah Cummings.

Sarah Cummings:

We shouldn't stop thinking that the journals based in the Global South are only for researchers from the Global South. Sorry I put that a bit bluntly. And that the Northern journals of Northern scholars, because many of these fields are international fields and we know that lots of the African scholars, also from Ryan's research, are trying to get into these journals too. So, it is a really important issue, and I also think we have to recognize, you know, we have to ask ourselves what is International Development? And International Development or 'development' is not something that people from outside can do to a society. It needs to have the full involvement of local academics too and, one of the things that Dahdouh-Guebas says, the importance of the local academic imagination so this should be key people involved in international publications too.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Elizabeth Walker.

Elizabeth Walker:

I certainly hope that I didn't imply that there was a sort of two-tier system of journal publishing, certainly not amongst the portfolio at Routledge. What I would say is that we are working with our editorial team, both the editors of the journals we publish and the editorial boards, to engage in that conversation to help build that social network, that you were referring to, in terms of running lots of workshops in the region which are a collaborative affair between the publisher, the boards themselves and local scholars.



Syerramia Willoughby:

And even when Africa based academics are published in international journals, there is no guarantee that their work is valued as it should be by peers in the Global North. Ryan Briggs explains.

Ryan Briggs:

What we saw in our citation analysis was that not only were Africa based academics seeing lower acceptance rates, but then when their work was published it was being cited less than the work by academics that are based outside of the continent.

It is a little bit tough to know why this is happening. One thing that we tried to do, to understand if authors were writing on different topics, was to look at titles and the words in titles and see if academics that were based in Africa and based outside of Africa were using different title words. And when we did this, we had a really stark result come out and it's that African academics were much more likely than academics based elsewhere to use country names in their titles, right, so specific countries. And a lot of the other words that were unique to that group focused on political parties, so like names of political parties.

And academics based outside of Africa were much more likely to use words that hinted at topics on the economy or governance or conflict. And the most unique word for academics outside of Africa was just Africa, which to us was a little disappointing, darkly humorous, and kind of relates back to that joke that, you know, academics outside of Africa will create titles that go "blablablabla in Africa".

Syerramia Willoughby:

Sarah Cummings.

Sarah Cummings:

Academia is a social network and one of the reasons possibly that the African scholars are not being cited as much is they're not in that network, and that would also explain why they're getting more rejections. So, I mean the idea that academia is based purely on quality, I think, is really something that we'll have to ask ourselves critical questions about.

Because, for example, when I get a paper to review when I look at the references, I really roughly know who's written it when it's in my field. So you know, let's remember it's a social network and ... African scholars need to have access not only to these publications, because it's really important for their prestige and for their employment opportunities, but they also need to be part of the social network which is discussing the development of their own countries.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Elizabeth Walker.



Elizabeth Walker:

I would agree that I think we need to do some more digging into the data with that, and I did have a quick look at citations to journals in areas studies as a category and with African co-authors. So where there was one or more authors who were based at an African institution that number is rising, but again it's not rising to the extent that I think we would all like to see. So, I think again more digging into that data because I think I'd like to do a comparison between those figures that I have and also to check, you know, because citations to area studies content is increasing generally and to see whether those numbers really are meaningful.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Through studies conducted by Ryan Breaks, Sarah Cummings and their research colleagues, we have established that there is a decline in acceptance rates, for African based authors in international journals. Even when they do get published, they are cited less by academics from other continents. What impact does this have for academics and the educational system in Africa? Let's hear from Sarah Cummings.

Sarah Cummings:

It does weaken African Studies and Development Studies as well. And what are the costs? I think if you think that the educational system in Africa, just like in other parts of the world, needs to also have scholars who are involved in research, I think there's a possibility that this is weakened too.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Elizabeth Walker.

Elizabeth Walker:

One of the things that we think about quite often is, you know, what sort of signal are we sending to the next generation of researchers both in the North and in Africa or in any other region of the world? And you know it's important to get the right messages to them if they can see that their peers, or their professors, their teachers are publishing in leading journals and they are being cited, that sends a positive message to them about knowledge production, and you know who has the right to be producing knowledge.

Syerramia Willoughby:

There is more and more awareness of these issues and, as Sarah Cummings told me, efforts are on the way to reverse the decline in acceptance rates among Africa based academics.

Sarah Cummings:

The European Association for Development Research and Training Institute, which is an important body in Europe for European Development Studies, partly as a reaction to my article which was published in their journal, they have started something called the journal mentoring programme called Jump where they're supporting young southern researchers to write articles for their journal. And the other thing that they are planning on doing is setting up an editor



committee, because I think the existence of an editor committee in the health field has shown that this can be really effective, and I think it's really important to look for these sorts of structural solutions.

Syerramia Willoughby:

This is just one initiative though. Surely there needs to be more change on a wider level for more impact. Let's hear from Elizabeth Walker.

Elizabeth Walker:

We need to gather more data on this and I think Ryan mentioned it is quite difficult to get data at the journal level. We find it easier for example within our program where journals are using an electronic submission system, because then you can track the number of articles coming in and you can track them through the peer-review process.

Again, as Ryan said it's quite important because we can see the submissions are increasing, but can we dig a little bit deeper into that peer review process and find out why are they being rejected perhaps at that stage?

And actually, we just need more integrated conversations with African voices, voices from the Global South and to think about different ways, tangible ways, to move away from these sort of Western models. Then I don't think it is always a problem, you know.

There are issues to do with access, but I don't think it's always a problem of access. A lot of it is a question of who is defining what quality is, who is defining what is rejected and what is a quality paper.

Syerramia Willoughby:

Ryan Briggs

Ryan Briggs:

It's resources, and it's resources on a lot of dimensions, but you can collapse a lot of them into money. And when I look around in Canada or the US and I see who is publishing it's pretty obvious that people who have access to large amounts of research funding, at the institutional level, people who have lower teaching loads and have more time – those are the people that are publishing the most in it and it is a little bit hard to figure out a cause and effect here.

But I would be shocked if access to more money and more time wasn't important and I imagine that this generalises across the world and across disciplines, and so inequalities in resources I think are just very likely to manifest themselves as inequalities in publishing.



Syerramia Willoughby:

So, more money, time, integrated social network and, of course, more digging into the journal submissions data. These are just some suggestions from our panelists to address the issue of low acceptance rates in international journals.

As the Citing Africa series progresses, we will be addressing some of these subjects in greater depth. Thanks to Ryan Briggs, Sarah Cummings and Elizabeth Walker for the insights in this episode.

In the next Citing Africa podcast, we will discuss how knowledge about Africa is consumed and valued in the Global North and South, by looking in particular at the Development Studies curriculum. Thank you for listening to Citing Africa.

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