Failing the Academy: Low Written Output in an African University

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study investigated the publishing trends of academic staff at University of Zambia and doctors at University Teaching Hospital in order to highlight the trends and possible barriers to publishing by academic staff and doctors.

Method: The studied reviewed publication histories of academic staff at the university for the period 2000 to 2005 by examining university documents in three schools (engineering, medicine, and mines), by author searches on PubMed search engine, surveys by questionnaire, and focus group discussions with workshop participants. Twenty nine questionnaires, 58% response rate, were returned and 35 academic staff (70%) of the workshop attendants participated in the focus group discussions. The questionnaire respondents' profile was 1 full professor, 5 senior lecturers, 19 lecturers, 4 honorary lecturers. All participants had a minimum of a Masters degree.

Results: The publication trends were low at all academic ranks ranging from professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, and lecturers. Over 75% of respondents had between 0-3 publications, 10% had between 4-8 publications and another 10% had between 9-15 publications, while less than 3% reported having more than 15 publications. During the five-year period (2000-2005) the school of mines had 10 publications, engineering had 18 publications, and medicine had 40 publications (10 were by one individual). Six categories of barriers were identified: 1) lack of funding for research, 2) excessive teaching and administrative responsibilities, 3) lack of skills in scholarly writing, 4) unsupportive scholarly environment, 5) limited access to literature, and 6) limited access to journals.

Conclusions & Implications: The low trend in publications has implications for the university's aspiration to contribute to the body of knowledge through research and other scholarly activities. The low trend also has implications for evidence-based practice in medicine and other professions served by the university. The viability of local journals is also threatened by this low academic output.

BACKGROUND

Scholarly productivity, in the form of written output in peer-reviewed journals, is one of the key requirements for academic career advancement[1,2,3,4]. This is true for most universities, be it in the developed world or in the developing world such as Africa[5,6]. While academics differ in their ability and personal attitude toward publishing it is still expected of them. The expectation to publish can be daunting and, to some, unrealistic when academic writing skills are absent[7], reputable local scholarly outlets are absent and time is severely constrained by teaching and administrative demands[8]. There are many difficulties, obstacles, problems and challenges associated with academic writing. The study surveyed academic staff, at a university in Southern Africa, for levels of written output and resulting barriers to academic publishing. This paper describes the methodological approach and presents the findings from a qualitative and quantitative analysis of these data.

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METHODS

The methods used in following analysis involved review of publication histories of academic staff at the university for the period 2000 to 2005 by examining university documents in three schools (engineering, medicine, and mines), by author searches on PubMed search engine, surveys by questionnaire, and focus group discussions with workshop participants. The electronic search was done for only the school of medicine because of prior familiarity with PubMed. The three schools were selected for examination of records because records and personnel to assist in the exercise were readily available. The analysis of publication record by total number of publications did not take into account the quality of the publications. The workshop was specifically arranged as a situation analysis activity and was open to all academic staff. Fifty academic staff attended the workshop and all schools in the university were represented except for the law school. The questionnaire and focus group discussions also surveyed individual and institutional research capacity, publication trends, and training needs. Twenty nine questionnaires, 58% response rate, were returned and 35 academic staff (70%) of the workshop attendants participated in the focus group discussions. The questionnaire respondents' profile was 1 full professor, 5 senior lecturers, 19 lecturers, 4 honorary lecturers. All participants had a minimum of a Masters degree.

RESULTS

The written output in peer-reviewed journals was low. When asked about their total career publications seventy-seven per cent of respondents reported having between 0-3 publications, 10% had between 4-8 publications and another 10% had between 9-15 publications, while less than 3% reported having more than 15 publications. A review of university documentation for publications by academic staff over a period of five years (2000-2005) confirmed the low rates i.e. school of engineering totalled 18 publications, school of mines 10 publications, school of medicine 40 publications (10 were by one individual). The publication trends were low at all academic ranks ranging from professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, and lecturers.

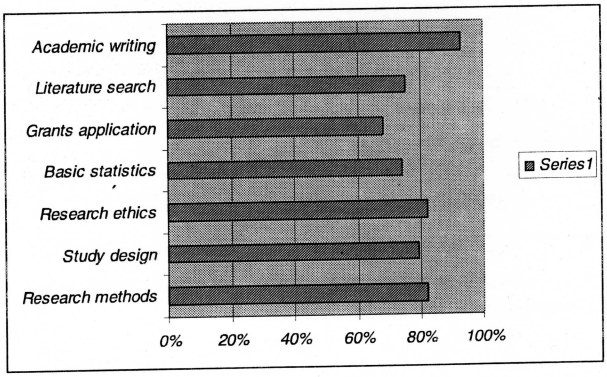
Table 1 shows the total number of publications cited in PubMed by professors (associate professor inclusive) and senior lecturers in the school of medicine.

	0 – 3 Publications	> 3 < 10	10
Professor	7	0	2
Senior Lecturer	5	1	1

Table 2 shows the factors identified as barriers to research and publishing by percentage of respondents.

Factor	Percentage of Respondents citing factor in the top- 2 list of barriers
Lack of financial resources to conduct research	96%
Teaching and administrative workload as barrier to conducting research	60%
Teaching and administrative workload as barrier to publishing	55%
Lack of supportive environment for publications	43%
Lack of access to journals as barrier to publishing	42%
Prohibitive cost of correspondence with journals	42%

Ninety per cent of the respondents endorsed the view that the university needed to build its capacity in research and publications. Figure 1 illustrates the extent of support for training requirements.



DISCUSSION

The level of publishing revealed above may suggest that scholarly productivity in terms of publications is not valued by academic staff and also that it could be irrelevant for continued stay in the academe. One workshop participant justified his continued attention to private practice rather than efforts to publish with this retort: "Survival is more important than glory." Given that the number of publications is important for academic progression in the university the results may also suggest an indifference to academic progression.

Nevertheless, further analysis of the data does illustrate that factors other than indifference may be involved in explaining these low scholarly productivity trends.

Factors that could have influenced the low productivity fell within a number of inter-related areas shown above (Table 2). These findings are similar to those reported by other workers[1,4]. Without awareness of these factors, academic staff and administrations run the risk of implementing unrealistic and irrelevant systems for addressing these issues.

Financial Constraints

Granted few academics can conduct research and subsequent publications without financial support and infrastructure. However, not every publication is a write up of original research; other kinds of publications include review articles, discussion papers, short reports, commentaries and even letters to the editor. As such one could argue that financial support is not the only factor associated with low written output. Individual frames of mind and collective mores that value academic writing could be useful in the face of financial constraint in seeking solutions.

Time Constraints

The time constraints caused by excessive teaching and workload are well known and recognised even in the developed world[8]. But is it justifiable to neglect academic writing on this account? Academic staff can make a conscious choice to attend to scholarly publishing no matter. Some avenues to consider include negotiating for 'protected' time for writing individually or collectively. In the prevailing academic climate written output is too important to neglect all together.

Supportive Environment and Mentorship

New entrants to the academe require career guidance[1,4] to complement their personal efforts. Other workers[1,9] consider support and mentorship as critical determinants of publication output for new academic staff. Without support and mentorship the academic career often takes the much known path of 'full-time teacher'. In our study 43% of the participants reported the absence of support systems, that is, opportunities to develop academic writing skills, learn about research, and provide support for accessing journals. Some of the survey participants observed that professors and senior lecturers did not involve junior staff in their research and writing activities. This, they noted left may new and junior staff isolated from these scholarly activities. Some participants recommended that it should be a university requirement for professors and senior lecturers to mentor junior staff in research and academic writing. A possible culprit for this state of affairs is the assumption that when one has attained a graduate qualification they are as a result competent to conduct research and write at the required academic standard. This circumstance is considerable in many African universities where individuals can join the academe with a master's degree. The participants in our study showed an overwhelming need for faculty development programmes in academic writing, literature search strategies, research methods, study design and research ethics (Figure 1). All the participants had a minimum of a masters degree by qualification. Henning et al.[10], with regard academic writing, alludes to the language backgrounds of African scholars as they enter the academe and further describes the lack of a publishing culture in their backgrounds. Faculty development in these kinds of settings should rightly be a fundamental component for programmes aimed at enhancing written output. Furthermore, collective rather than individual programmes were elected as suitable for faculty development. Individualist approaches can be frustrating and resultant in poor progress[11]. Participants in our study were of the view that networking among different academics and disciplines had to be strengthened because it was unlikely to have one person know everything from writing a proposal to collecting data, interpreting statistics and writing for publication for general and

specialist journals. For example, some participants reported having a lot of data but failed to submit their works for journals because they believed that it is not well arranged and they did not possess good writing skills. One respondent reported that: "In developed countries, researchers just do their projects and give the data to professional writers to do a publication. These professional writers know which journal is more likely to accept the paper." The interdisciplinary approach is reported in the literature[12,1].

Access to Literature and Journals

Forty-two percent of the participants cited both access to literature and access to journals as an important barrier to the scholastic efforts. Surprisingly, many where also not aware about international efforts such as the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI), and the World Health Organisation Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) that made available electronic editions of hundreds of selected journals at no cost. Even electronic databases such as National Institutes of Health (NIH) database PubMed, African Journals on Line (AJOL), Educational Resources Information Centre, and Electronic Management Research Library Database (Emerald) were little known and/or utilised. Slow Internet connections were blamed for poor utilisation of these facilities by those whom might have been aware about them. Optimal access to these resources for a developing academic cannot be overemphasized.

REMARKS

In Zambia, the issues raised in this paper are being addressed by the formation of the first academic society in the country, Foundation 50 Academic Society. The purpose of reporting this strategy is to share with other readers who might consider it a viable option for their circumstances.

The Society uses multiple approaches including faculty development workshops in research and writing, and focusing on creating opportunities where members can receive highly personalised academic publication support and expose their work to collaborative critique and development. Evidence exists to show that individuals can benefit tremendously from short-term intensive writing environments[13] although Boice[14] on the contrary reports about resistance to writing-intensive courses and offers alternative long-term supportive alternatives. Both approaches have been incorporated. Writers' retreats at which members initiate, formulate, outline and finalise drafts then expose them to pre-peer critique and review, and finally submit them to journals for publication is a key stratagem for the Society. The retreats can minimize on the normal distractions of work and life, and help initiate and accelerate writing[15,1,16]. Writing habits have to be sustained between the retreats by other supplementary methods, however[17].

In the first year of existence the Society organized and hosted six workshops which were attended by a total 235 participants (number totalled from workshop registers): 1) literature search strategies for electronic and Internet resources, 2) developing research proposals, 3) writing for scholarly publications, 4) introduction to basic statistics for research and scholarly writing, 5) research ethics and 6) Study design. It is recognized that to achieve a high standard in academic writing requires high standards in some core components of scholarship. The demand for these generic workshops continues to soar as evidenced by the request from the School of Medicine that requested the Society to organize workshops for its postgraduate students. One hundred and twenty postgraduate students attended a two-day workshop on 'developing research proposals and introduction to basic statistics." The Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies of UNZA has since requested the Society to organize more workshops for the School of Medicine and will now mount similar workshops for other schools within the University.

Recognizing that academics require supporting finances and infrastructure (space, consumables, equipment, etc) the Society will provide small grants to its members. It is also important for young academics to gain experience in applying for grants. Working towards receiving a grant can stimulate scholarly productivity. Ultimately these grants will help members develop the essential quality of obtaining independent funds as researchers. The Society is mobilizing funds from a variety of funding organizations. The Society successfully applied for a grant to support its activities through a Norwegian

Agency Aid (NUFU) supported project: Productive Learning Culture II to run from 2007 to 2011. Furthermore, the Society mobilized United States dollars $16,000 for its operations for year 1. The Society is still continuing to scout for further funding and has developed costed project plans.

Furthermore, the Society has developed an electronic platform where members can establish contacts with other academics and also have access to other electronic resources. The Society's website URL is Http://www.foundation50.org.zm.

The formation of an academic society to create a sustainable framework to bolster academic written output could be replicated in other universities in Africa. Foundation 50 Academic Society is helping academic staff at University of Zambia to survive and prosper in the academe.

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