



Challenges of Research and Publication Ethiopian Public Universities Context

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1. Introduction

All public universities in Ethiopia involve in teaching, research, and community engagement with varying degrees of emphasis and areas of focus. Higher education institutions need to play a leading role as excellence in research and development is one of the pillars that indicate the performance of Ethiopian public universities. In line with this, the Government's Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009 bestows a legal duty upon academic staffs to conduct research. Also, the policy of higher education institutions of Ethiopia on teaching and research load article No 5.5.1/2003:99 states that academic staff members are expected to devote 25% of their time to research, and research staff members are expected to have a home base in an academic faculty or department where they are expected to devote 75% of their time to research. It is difficult to imagine how universities can meet the mission of being 'the bedrocks of social and economic transformation of the country' set out for them in the Higher Education Policy and Strategy (2020). It is also evident that completion of a typical research alone is not an end per se, but the output of the research has to be communicated with the desired scientific community, policy makers, and stakeholders. Hence, publishing research outputs on reputable national and international journals is necessary.

Publishing scientific articles is an important activity of academic life. It is a vital and integral part of academics (Gilmore et al. 2006, cited in Ligthelm and Koekemoer, 2009). Most importantly, academic publishing is the primary vehicle for the advancement of scientific knowledge (Ligthelm and Koekemoer, 2009). Furthermore, scientific publication can serve as documentation of work performed, fostering of exchange (feedback, discussion and debate) and sustainment of support and competitive funding (Luttge, 2011). Scholarly articles are also decisive to indicate societal problems and to fill knowledge gaps. Besides, they can serve as tools for measuring performance in the academic world.

Due to the expansion of higher education and improved standards of promotion that require publishing on reputable journals, academic publishing seems to be increasing in the Ethiopian context. Both public and private higher education institutes organize conferences and publish conference proceedings. These higher education institutions have also started their own journals. Besides the requirements of publishing for promotion and as part of PhD education are enabling more and more research outputs to get published. It is believed that these publications have served for disseminating research outputs and sharing knowledge to the scientific community and practitioners both at home and abroad. They have also been used for teaching and reference materials and are contributing to the development of the country. Getting published in reputable



journals has also helped increase the visibility and credibility of the researchers and furthered their career opportunities.

The “Harmonized Standard for Academic Staff Promotion in Public Universities” issued by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on October 16, 2020, requires all university staff to produce reputable and peer reviewed publications in order to get promotion. As of September 2019, staff at AAU is required by the Senate Legislation to publish at least one article every two years that is produced with at least five co-authors. According to Arba Minch University (AMU) senate legislation article 55/4/4.3a, publication of an article or articles in reputable journal(s) is a mandatory requirement for promotion. Besides, the revised AMU Research Guideline (2021) makes it an obligation for researchers to publish articles on reputable journals from their research projects sponsored by the university and encourages this by providing incentive payments. Pursuant to this many academic staffs in the university have so far published articles on different scientific journals and have got promoted to the next academic rank. However, it seems very important to see how much completed research in the universities was published in reputable journals. Also, the universities should have a checking mechanism on whether the research outputs resulted in publication or not.

Research and academic publication are interrelated professional practices which have been done for the same goal. It is through publication that the research, including its scientific and practical contributions, is disseminated to others in a particular field. However, it is very rare to find studies that compare completed research projects funded by Ethiopian public universities and how many of them resulted in reputable academic publication. Besides, comparative studies of current research and publication trends and challenges of Ethiopian public universities across generations and across university categories are non-existent. This study, therefore, attempts to assess challenges of research and academic publishing in Jinka University.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To find out the major challenges of research practice in Jinka University
- To identify the major challenges of academic publishing in Jinka University

3. Research Questions

The current study aims to answer the following research questions.

- 3.1. What are the major challenges of research practices in Jinka University?
- 3.2. What are challenges of academic publishing in Jinka University

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

Mixed-methods approach (i.e., combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches) will be employed in this study. This approach helps to broaden understanding by incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to better explain or build on the results from each



approach. Regarding this approach, Creswell (2007) described mixed-method approach study as one that contains both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

4.2. Research Setting and Participants

The number participants were determined by Yamane's formula when the population size is known. Yamane (1967) formula for determining the sample size is given by: $n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$. Where n = corrected sample size, N = population size and e = Margin of error (MoE), $e = 0.05$ based on the research condition. The number of participants of the interview was limited at the beginning of the study and representatives of academic and research staff, graduate/postgraduate students, research and publication officers were interviewed in different rounds from the college.

4.3. Instruments of Data Collection

To gather data for the study, four different instruments were employed. These are questionnaire, interview, and focus group discussions. The purpose of the questionnaires is to gather the responses of these subjects regarding current trends and challenges of research and academic publishing at the college. In order to validate and support the data gathered through the questionnaire with detailed qualitative data the researchers used separate interviews with academic and research staff. All these were validated by cross-reference to the results of the document analysis.

4.4. Method of Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were carried out in the study. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were employed to analyze the quantitative data. Finally, the results was interpreted and discussed in relation to the research questions and relevant literature in order to interpret quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics was applied using SPSS version 20. On the other hand, the data gathered by means of interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, open-ended items was analyzed thematically. Then, discussions were made by comparing and contrasting the data obtained by means of all the tools and narrating theoretical issues from literature review.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

The researchers asked permission from the participants to collect the necessary information for this study. The anonymity of the participants intended to save them from any potential risk that their participation may have on their lives will be kept. Regarding the privacy of the information, the researchers guaranteed them that the information they provided will be kept confidential and that their personal information will not be publicized without their consent. Undertaking the above ethical consideration as part of the research integrity contributed to the credibility of this research finding.



5. Results

5.1. Results of Challenges of Research Activities

Table 5.1: Participants response on challenges of research activities

Note: N=35: NA= Not at all: LE= lesser extent: UN= Uncertain: SE= some extent: GE= Great extent

	In our college, there is research challenges related to...	1	2	3	4	5	Total %
		NA	LE	UN	SE	GE	
1.	the university research guideline	4 (11.4)	2 (5.7)	1 (2.9)	5 (14.3)	23 (65.7)	35 (100%)
2.	insufficient research skills and experience of staff	1 (2.9)	3 (8.6)	3 (8.6)	11 (31.4)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)
3.	attrition of experienced researchers from the college	2 (5.7)	1 (2.9)	7 (20)	13 (37.1)	12 (34.3)	35 (100%)
4	management of research projects	4 (11.4)	-	2 (5.7)	12 (43.3)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)
5	research logistics and facilities	15 (24.9)	3 (8.6)	-	12 (43.3)	5 (14.3)	35 (100%)
6	catchment area delimitations	1 (2.9)	6 (17.7)	-	19 (63.3)	9 (25.7)	35 (100%)
7	thematic area prioritizations	-	5 (14.3)	3 (8.6)	14 (40)	13 (37.1)	35 (100%)
8	financial withdrawal and settlement	-	1 (2.9)	1 (2.9)	8 (22.9)	25 (71.5)	35 (100%)
9	incentive for research engagements	6 (17.7)	8 (22.9)	-	10 (28.6)	11 (31.4)	35 (100%)
10	insufficient allocation of research budget and funding	5 (14.3)	16 (45.8)	1 (2.9)	10 (28.6)	3 (8.6)	35 (100%)



11	staff workload	11 (31.4)	12 (43.3)	2 (5.7)	8 (22.9)	5 (14.3)	35 (100%)
12	lack of provision of enough time for field stay days	2 (5.7)	5 (14.3)	-	11 (31.4)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)

The data analysis shows that majority, 23 (65.7%) of the respondents appeared to agree that there are great extent guideline related challenges of research activities in the college. Some of the respondents, 5 (14.3%) also agree that there are guideline related challenges of research activities in the college to some extent. In contrast, the data analysis further indicates below one fourth, 6 (17.7) of the respondents think that the guideline related challenges are insignificant. In addition to this, majority of the respondents, (between 25 (80.4% - 33 (94.4 %) responded that there are challenges of research activities in the college relating to attrition of experienced researchers from the college), insufficient research skills and experience of staff, financial withdrawal and settlement, and management of research projects, and catchment area delimitations. However, the data analysis discloses that the university has a very good research trend in allocation of research budget and funding, considering staff workload involving in the research activities, and providing research logistics and facilities.

5.2 Results of Challenges of Academic Publication in College

Table 5.2: Participants response on challenges of academic publication

Note: N=35; NA= Not at all; LE= lesser extent; UN= Uncertain; SE= some extent; GE= Great extent

	In our college, there is publication challenge related to...	1	2	3	4	5	Total %
		NA	LE	UN	SE	GE	
1.	publication guidelines	1 (2.9)	2 (5.7)	4 (11.4)	8 (22.9)	20 (57.2)	35 (100%)
2.	monitoring and evaluation of academic publishing	3 (8.6)	3 (8.6)	1 (2.9)	11 (31.4)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)
3.	Recognition and incentives for academic publishing	7 (20)	1 (2.9)	2 (5.7)	13 (37.1)	12 (43.3)	35 (100%)
4	lack of awareness on how to identify predatory journals	2 (5.7)	-	4 (11.4)	12 (43.3)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)



5	Absence of budget for academic publication	15 (24.9)	3 (8.6)	-	12 (43.3)	5 (14.3)	35 (100%)
6	Lack of journal article writing skills	-	6 (17.7)	1 (2.9)	19 (63.3)	9 (25.7)	35 (100%)
7	Research type preferences and prioritizations of journals	3 (8.6)	5 (14.3)	-	14 (40)	13 (37.1)	35 (100%)
8	Lack of access to the latest reputable journals	1 (2.9)	1 (2.9)	-	8 (22.9)	25 (71.5)	35 (100%)
9	Challenges pertaining to English language writing proficiency	-	8 (22.9)	6 (17.7)	10 (28.6)	11 (31.4)	35 (100%)
10	Time taking peer-review process from submitting to decision	1 (2.9)	16 (45.8)	5 (14.3)	10 (28.6)	3 (8.6)	35 (100%)
11	Costly article processing charges/ publication fees	5 (14.3)	1 (2.9)	-	12 (43.3)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)
12	Lack of experience on responding to peer review comments	6 (17.7)	5 (14.3)	2 (5.7)	5 (14.3)	17 (48.6)	35 (100%)

The data analysis shows that majority of the respondents came to think that there is publication challenge related to publication guideline, monitoring, incentives, and lack of awareness on how to identify predatory journals in the college. There are academic publishing challenges in lack of awareness on how to identify predatory journals, journal article writing skills, access to the latest reputable journals, and experience on responding to peer review comments. Time taking peer-review process from submitting to decision and costly article processing charges/ publication fees are leveled challenges of academic publishing to some and great extents. From the total of 35 respondents 11 (31.4%) of them think that there is challenges pertaining to English language writing proficiency to great extent while 10 (28.6%) rating the challenge to some extent. The data analysis further shows that 15 (24.9%) of the respondents agreed that there was no challenge with the absence of budget for academic publication in the college.

5.3. Interview and FGD Results

Regarding the challenges to research in the college, the respondents all agree that the staff's lack of research experience, over-engagement in teaching, poor follow-up or monitoring and evaluation, lack of enough resources, facilities and training together with the university's highly



centralized and bureaucratic research activity management system and the staff's duplication of similar research and exploitation of research mainly for commercial gain were the major challenges.

Most of the respondents except for the vice president complained that the highly centralized planning and management has alienated college deans and research and community engagement vice deans from the research planning, reporting and management activities. They are not involved in planning and reporting of research activities, nor do they have a research budget of their own. The college vice dean's tasks are limited to collecting proposals/final reports, running their review process and sending the final versions for authorization or second round review, and being the first signatories on withdrawal request and settlement forms. Many complained of the long process of getting withdrawal and settlement forms signed by a long list of signatories from college vice dean to the university vice president level. Some staff members reported that externally funded research projects done with the request of the Zonal, Regional or Federal government or NGO's are conducted without open calls and competition and without the knowledge of the concerned college deans and college research and community engagement vice deans. Some reported of university funded community engagement projects done without the knowledge of college research and community engagement vice deans. One staff member went to the extent of declaring that "college research and community engagement deans' existence in our university is symbolic as they are not called to college AC meetings, do not participate in planning and decision making, and are often by-passed by the research directorate and vice president". There is generally lack of decentralization of research planning and management.

Duplication of similar research proposals by only changing the setting (mostly of their MA Thesis), false reports, data cooking, and plagiarism problems were identified as some of the challenges posed by the staff by all the respondents. In addition to this, there are sometimes tit-for-tat evaluations of proposals among staffs though this is limited to 50% and is often checked by the 50% evaluation of the committee and research officer. All respondents agree that monitoring and evaluation is weak for ongoing research and very few proposals fail to pass. All respondents agreed that ongoing research projects are not reviewed in the annual research review workshop. Staff members of the college interviewed highlighted that there is little or no pressure on staff members with ongoing projects to complete the projects in time. Though it is said that a staff member with uncompleted delayed research project cannot submit a new proposal, there are irregularities in the execution of this rule. Some members even mentioned their own cases of winning funds despite having ongoing delayed projects from 3 to four years ago. This raises questions about the credibility of the data given to us by the college vice deans office. Generally, the staff blame the research officers starting from vice president to directors and vice deans for lacking commitment to solve duplication, plagiarism, and delay issues while the officers blame the staff for prioritizing monetary gains over research ethics and quality for the same problems.

Regarding the provision of resources and facilities, the main challenge is vehicle for transportation and the bureaucracy of too many signatories on withdrawal and settlement forms. Most of the University's cars are rentals and only the vice presidents' offices and some directors have cars at their disposal. College deans and college research vice deans do not have cars. Most respondents agree that these cars will be assigned for researchers upon request, but they will



leave researchers stranded in the field and return to the university if required by middle and top management. Cars and drivers rarely stay in the field with researchers during data collection time, take them from site to site, and bring them back upon completion of their task. Mostly only the taking to the field part happens as they are often called back immediately. Free research related software and free access to journal articles and other publications are unavailable according to most respondents. Regarding training provision to staff, all respondents agree that the one annually given training at the whole university level organized by the vice president's office is not enough as many of the staff are young and inexperienced when it comes to research.

The college research and community engagement vice dean reported to us that all the completed research works of the college are presented on the University's Annual Research Symposium and published on Proceedings of the Symposium. They are also presented on annual research review workshop. The university does not have its own journal and the vice dean's office was unable to provide us with publication data on nationally accredited or internationally reputable journals. None of the staffs interviewed could provide us with this data either. Though additional data needs to be collected to clearly describe the current status of publishing in the college, all of the staff and officers interviewed agree that publishing is currently low and is at a young stage in the college. The College Vice Dean for Research and Community Engagement pointed out that publishing decreased immediately after the coming into effect of the "Harmonized Standard for Academic Staff Promotion in Public Universities" on October 16, 2020 which required national accreditation for national journals and Scopus, Web of Science and PubMed indexing for foreign journals. Before that, many have published and got promoted to the assistant professor level according to him. A department head with many years of experience since the university's establishment agreed with the college dean on this point. They both agreed with all the respondents that the main challenge is lack of experience publishing articles, book chapters or books. Most of the staff we interviewed including some research officers do not know how to differentiate between reputable and predatory journals and could not even identify whether a given journal is indexed on Scopus, Web of Science or PubMed. Due to this, the university even officially offered to the staff to submit their articles and provided it will seek appropriate journals for them and get them published paying for the publication cost. Most of the respondents also agreed that research outputs do not develop into community engagement projects and end up on office shelves or proceedings. Another reason for low publication identified by some respondents is high attrition of experienced staff. Some respondents and office holders interviewed reported that many employees use the university only to get some university experience on their CV and then transfer to another university. This led to the problem of always dealing with young and inexperienced staff. The staff, according to some respondents is also not well-motivated and enabled through training to publish. Accredited and reputable journals are not communicated to the staff and training is not given on journal article writing, publishing, avoiding predatory journals etc. The focus of the college and university seems to be on teaching-learning only and research and publishing is neglected according to most respondents.



6. Conclusions and Recommendations

There are challenges of research activities relating to the research guideline, attrition of experienced researchers from the college, insufficient research skills and experience of staff, financial withdrawal and settlement, and management of research projects. Moreover, there are challenges like lack of awareness on how to identify predatory journals in the college. There are academic publishing challenges in lack of awareness on how to identify predatory journals, journal article writing skills, access to the latest reputable journals, and experience on responding to peer review comments. We therefore, recommend the university to make research budget withdrawal and a system simple. Also, the university should maintain the research and publication trends facilitate trainings on improving research and publication skills of its academic and research staff.

7. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest relating to this research work.

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