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Publish and still perish? Learning to make the 'right' publishing choices in the Ghanaian academy

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ABSTRACT

Publication in 'reputable', peer-reviewed and indexed journals has become a key requirement for promotion and career advancement in African universities. There is little research into how bibliometric measures of journal reputation are shaping the publishing strategies and practices of Africa-based researchers. This study, drawing on 43 in-depth interviews, explored the publishing choices, tactics and discourses of early-career academics at two different public universities in Ghana. Most participants felt under constant pressure to publish, and more than half invoked the 'publish or perish' aphorism unprompted in conversation. They were also very aware that one could 'publish *and* perish' by choosing the 'wrong' journals, such as those not on university-approved lists or in the main global citation indexes. Some regretted the journal choices they had made at the start of their careers, and had since learnt to make every publication 'count'. Many invoked a moral and spatial dichotomy of low-quality 'local' journals versus reputable 'international' journals. Most participants felt that more training, supervision and mentorship would help them make the 'right' publishing choices. In a global research economy that sustains geographical inequalities and reputational hierarchies, journals published from Africa are increasingly viewed as the 'wrong' choice.

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Introduction

There is a growing awareness of the adverse consequences of the 'publish or perish' ethos for research cultures in the Global South (Amutuhaire, 2022; Lee & Lee, 2015; Moosa, 2018). As elsewhere, appointment and promotion committees in African universities now expect to see 'international' peer-reviewed publications on academic CVs (Adomi & Mordi, 2003; Archibong et al., 2010; Atolani et al., 2019; Ssentongo, 2020). Exploring the adverse consequences of this ethos, Moosa highlights an 'explosion' in journal publishing, its deteriorating quality, and the bias against researchers from the developing world (Moosa, 2018). He also points to 'exorbitant' journal fees, a growth in scientific misconduct and the adverse consequences for academic wellbeing. Whilst the 'publish or perish' aphorism was first coined by an American sociologist in the 1920s America

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(Case, 1927; Garfield, 1972), the ethos it describes has particularly damaging implications for researchers in under-resourced research systems, and based in universities seeking visibility within 'international' rankings (Atolani et al., 2019; Nymanjoh, 2004; Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020).

Institutional incentives and promotion expectations put pressure on African early career researchers to publish as fast and often as possible, sometimes with little guidance as to how choose or assess journal quality. Researchers in well-resourced Euro-American university systems have numerous opportunities to learn these skills from senior peers, to use seminars and conferences to build research networks, and to get guidance on key journals in their fields. Africa-based scholars often find it difficult to access journals, let alone international conferences or 'prestigious' disciplinary networks.

There is little empirical research into the career consequences for researchers of publishing in journals that their universities classify – sometimes retrospectively – as being of 'low-quality' because they are not indexed by the main citation indexes. We interviewed junior and senior academic staff in two Ghanaian public universities with different research profiles, asking them about their publication strategies and reflections, and institutional mentoring and supervision cultures. Our interviews explored their first publishing experiences, the implications of making the 'wrong' choices, and their use of the terms 'local' and 'international' as proxies for journal quality. The research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of Ghanian academics' publication strategies and experiences, approaches to assessing journal quality, and the mentoring of junior researchers. Is it really a case of publish *and* perish, as some put it? If so, who or what is really perishing? And how might this dynamic be changed?

Literature review

In 1963, Eugene Garfield, an American information scientist, launched his first citation index, aiming to help scholars understand the 'transmission of ideas and the intellectual structure of thought. Thus began scientometrics, the science of measuring and tracking the circulation and citation of scholarly knowledge. Garfield's first index was built on only 600 of what he saw as the most 'significant' and 'core' scientific journals, most of which were published in Europe and North America (Garfield, 1996). Geographical selectivity was built into the index from the very start. Today, the two main citation indexes – Scopus and Web of Science – retain this skewed geographical coverage (Asubiaro & Onaolapo, 2023). Whilst Garfield's initial aim was to facilitate information searching, inclusion in the indexes quickly became a pre-requisite for journals that aspired to be 'reputable' and respected.

Today the gatekeeping of journal reputation is carried out by these two indexes as well as subject-specific databases, including Medline, EMBase and BioMedCentral. Of the approximately 2300 unique African-published academic journals listed in Ulrichsweb, only 165 are indexed in the Web of Science, of which 75% are from South Africa (Asubiaro & Onaolapo, 2023). These two indexes thus tell us very little about the depth and richness of Africa's research ecosystems, debates and knowledges (Harsh et al., 2021). As a result of being excluded, 'local' African journals, even those with distinguished histories, are vulnerable to being categorized as low quality or even predatory by researchers (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2020). African journal editors describe the challenge of getting their

journals indexed in Scopus (Mills et al., 2023). They have to jump through demanding technical and statistical hoops, such as metrics on author and editorial diversity, a sustained publication record, levels of citations by indexed journals and compliance with the latest digital infrastructures (e.g., DOIs, archiving, etc.).

In the early 2000s, with the emergence and growing influence of global university rankings, African universities suffered because of the limited visibility of their research outputs. Nigerian and Ghanaian universities began requiring their staff to publish in 'international' journals, a trend that undermined the reputation of long-established national scientific journals (Adomi & Mordi, 2003; Omobowale et al., 2014). These universities linked promotion decisions to research 'outputs'. This incentivized academics to publish more, in turn opening up commercial opportunities for new online, open access academic journals.

The term 'predatory publishing' was coined by Beall, who led a decade-long campaign against what he saw as low-quality, profit-focused open-access publishing. He singled out publishers based in Nigeria, India and Pakistan for particular criticism. Beall's 'list' of purportedly 'predatory' publishers surpassed 1600 before it was finally taken down in 2017, partly because one commercial publisher, *Frontiers*, legally challenged its legitimacy. The list generated an emotive and dehumanizing discourse around 'predatory publishing' (Inouye & Mills, 2021; Mills & Inouye, 2020). Critics pointed out that Beall conflated fraudulence with low quality, and over-simplified the commercialization of the research ecosystem (Bell, 2017).

There are now a range of resources to help researchers assess journal quality, and some African universities continue to circulate gray lists of supposedly 'predatory' publishers to their staff. Grudniewicz et al. (2019) developed a 'consensus definition' of predatory journals and publishers as entities that 'prioritize self-interest', and are characterized by 'false or misleading information, deviation from best editing and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices'. This broad definition is of limited utility, given the many different types of journals in existence, a broad quality spectrum and different approaches to marketing, peer review and editorial work (Siler, 2020).

A number of researchers have explored African academics' perceptions of these supposedly 'predatory' journals (e.g., Atiso et al., 2019; Tarkang & Bain, 2019). In a survey of 25 Ghanaian researchers, most had heard of 'predatory' journals, but espoused very different understandings of their characteristics. Of the 130 articles published by these Ghanaian authors, 15 were published in what the researchers classified as 'low-quality' (by which they meant unindexed) journals (Atiso et al., 2019). Several talked about the pressure to publish (in any type of journal) to get promoted. Others have shown that journal choice is driven by the pragmatics of academic survival (Bagues et al., 2019; Ebadi & Zamani, 2018). Increasingly, some African universities require doctoral candidates to have published two or more articles in 'credible' journals in order to graduate. The prejudice against 'local' journals means many choose 'international' journals irrespective of quality or status (Atiso et al., 2019; Omobowale et al., 2014). There is also evidence that 'Southern' academics feel excluded from international publication networks, having experienced repeated rejections by Euro-American journals (Bagues et al., 2019; Ebadi & Zamani, 2018; Shehata & Elgllab, 2018).

The exponential growth of academic publishing makes it ever harder for academics to navigate this publishing landscape, or understand the different 'credibility cultures' that

exist across a global science system (Mills & Robinson, 2021). Increasingly journal reputation and quality are simply measured by citations. Universities in both Ghana and Nigeria define 'reputable' publications as those included in 'international' databases and citation indexes (Atiso et al., 2019; Omobowale et al., 2014).

According to Madikizela-Madiya the 'publish or perish' expectation placed on African researchers leads some to find 'shortcuts to publish for their professional survival'. Madikizela-Madiya argues that this rhetoric blames individual researchers and reinforces inequalities within and between institutions, especially those dependent on 'excellent' research outputs for academic survival (Madikizela-Madiya, 2022). Another study also highlighted the challenges that Nigerian scholars face in conforming to expectations about academic English, and how many rely on commercial copy-editing services (Omobowale & Akinsete, 2019).

Ssentongo (2020) calls out the dismissive rhetoric of 'which journal is that?' deployed by senior academics on African university promotion boards when journals published in 'local' outlets are submitted in promotion applications. He suggests that a complex intermingling of concerns about quality, Eurocentrism and 'malice' shape these judgements. This disparagement discourages African researchers from publishing in African journals, feeling that it is 'safer' to publish with 'Western' journals, as they are 'generally less carefully scrutinized and thereby come with more default prestige' (Ssentongo, 2020). In this research we set out to understand the journal perceptions and publishing experiences of Ghanaian academics, as well as their assessments of the credibility and reputation of Africa-based journals and publishers.

The Ghanaian context

Like other countries across sub-Saharan Africa, the Ghanaian university system is expanding rapidly. There are now 15 public universities, 10 technical universities, 9 professional institutes and seven chartered private universities, and several of the main public universities have many affiliated private colleges. More than 540,000 students were enrolled in 2020, a figure that has doubled in a decade, and the Ministry of Education now requires that all university lecturers be educated to doctoral level, leading to a doubling in doctoral enrollments over five years, to more than 3000 in 2020 (Alabi & Mohammed, 2018; Fosci et al., 2019). We decided to compare the research and publishing cultures at the University of Ghana, the most research-intensive of these universities, with that at the University of Development Studies, given its focus on community development, equity and public engagement.

The University of Ghana (UG) was established in 1948 in Accra as the nation's first university. In 2014 it set itself the ambition of becoming a 'world-class' research-intensive university. The UG promotion guidelines were revised in 2019. The guidelines set out precise requirements for the number of 'outputs' for promotion at each academic grade, with at least 50% of publications in 'reputable, peer-reviewed journals', along with the warning that 'in no circumstance will papers published in journals classified as "predatory" be considered for promotion'. For example, promotion from Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor requires a minimum of 12 publications, of which 6 must be first authored. The guidelines also spell out the process by which a list of 'reference journals' for all disciplines will be compiled by each of its six constituent colleges, and

updated at least once every two years through a 'rigorous review'. The promotion guidelines insist that the 'emphasis should be on the quality which encompasses originality, significance, rigor and impact in the discipline' and not just volume (UG, 2019).

The University for Development Studies (UDS), located in the Northern part of Ghana, was established in 1992 with four regional campuses, though two of these have since become independent universities. Its founding mandate was to promote equitable and socio-economic transformation of communities through practically oriented, community-based problem solving as well as interactive research, teaching, learning and outreach activities. It too has set out detailed promotion guidelines that require 'books and articles published in refereed journals', with professorial applicants requiring 21 refereed papers (UDS, 2018).

Methodology

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with early career academic staff and senior academic staff from both universities in Ghana. We wanted to know how publishing expectations had changed over time, but also to understand the value of publication mentorship, co-authorship and guidance for junior staff. We chose a qualitative research design to capture the feelings, experiences and views of individuals (Creswell, 2009).

We selected three comparable schools/faculties from each university: Public Health, Social Sciences and Agriculture at the University of Ghana and Applied Sciences, Agriculture and Allied Health Sciences at UDS. Our rationale was that these fields prioritize the application of scientific knowledge to policy and practice. With the support of faculty deans and heads of departments, we developed a sample that represented a diversity of staffing appointments, including early career academics (assistant lecturers, lecturers) and senior academics (senior lecturers, heads of department, associate professors and professors). A research associate (RA) with extensive experience in conducting qualitative interviews pre-tested the interview guide. The interview was designed to encourage respondents to talk about their academic career and their previous publication experiences, especially their first academic publications. We then asked them to explain their own publishing strategy, and to talk about the mentoring and training that they have received. We used the pilot transcripts to revise the interview guides, taking into consideration the nature and phrasing of the questions and the responses obtained. Interviews were conducted in participants' offices, after obtaining written informed consent. We conducted a total of 43 in-depth interviews (21 in UG and 22 in UDS), 16 with senior academic staff and 27 with early career academic staff. The UG sample included 10 women and 11 men, but in UDS, where women are under-represented at all grades, only five were women. On average, most of the participants were in their early 40s.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and edited for readability. We used a codebook informed by the study objectives and questions – with themes such as publication experience, publication challenges, predatory publishing etc., along with subthemes – to guide data coding and analysis. We then imported the interview transcripts into QSR Nvivo 12 software to help with analysis of emerging themes, such as the focus on 'inappropriate' journals. We generated memos in Nvivo software, allowing preliminary ideas and observations emerging from the data and patterns to be connected, compared or

contrasted between different groups of staff. A thematic analysis of the data underpinned the narrative presentation of the results, supported by relevant quotes (Guest et al., 2012). A second coding was carried out by another member of the research team to confirm key findings and conclusions.

Results

The interviews covered a wide range of themes. Researchers from both universities explored their early publishing experiences, their knowledge of journals in their fields, the experience of publishing in the wrong – journals, and their views on how to publish in the right – journals. Each of these is addressed in the sections that follow.

Learning the publication ropes

The interviews began by exploring participants' knowledge about academic publishing and peer review prior to their first publication. Although some participants reported that they had little knowledge of the publication process and of peer-reviewed journals, a number indicated that they received mentorship from their supervisors during their masters and PhD training, which had supported their publication journey. Several described their first experiences of publishing as part of collaborative research teams. In general, researchers at the University of Ghana described being trained in a stronger research culture, with more awareness and exposure to what they described as 'international' journals.

> *The first paper that I published, I had no idea on how to go about it and I was just going round and doing my own things and I must say that it actually took me a long time to put things together.* **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

> *I actually conceptualized and did a piece of work with support from my senior and my mentor. I collected the data myself, did the analysis and obviously wrote the first draft and it was very smooth because there were not so many surprises and I think is because I was lucky to have an experienced mentor or supervisor who kind of guided me through the process.* **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

One of the strategies Ghanaian researchers used to navigate the publication process was to start by publishing in 'low impact' journals, and then gradually to aspire to higher quality journals, as a way to build expertise and reputation. This was an implicit recognition of the challenges African authors repeatedly face in getting published 'internationally'.

> *I started from the journals that are not among the top-ranking ones, so, I would learn from scratch.* **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Many commented on the pressure not to publish 'locally', even though institutional and national journals such as those set up in the post-independence period, may have been the most appropriate journals for their work. Ghana, like other African countries, has long-established scientific associations that publish scholarly journals.

> *We are told to publish in internationally recognized journals and we have argued that if we don't publish in our own journals, then who would publish there? I have gone for meetings,*

people have looked at my CV, and say … you are doing well but you have to be mindful of where you are publishing. It looks like you are publishing in local journals **(Senior academic-UG)**

My preference is for international journals and not because I think they are better but that that is my inclination. You want to be good where you are, but you want to be internationally competitive as well … It is not that I don't like local journals … but then you have to take into account other considerations. **(Senior academic-UG)**

We wanted to know if initial publication experiences were pivotal in people's research careers. Some respondents admitted their first paper was rejected, but that the experience motivated them to develop and improve their subsequent publications.

Q: Would you say your first paper that was rejected negatively affected your publication career?

R: No, no, no, I don't think I have gotten to that point where that should happen unless you don't know why you are in that field. I know and from my interaction with other colleagues, I don't expect it to be easy all the time. I got one of my papers being rejected, which I was the lead author and another one where I was co-author but it did not disturb me at all. **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

R: It did not disturb me, I was still encouraged that this is something you can do and so with the rejection though I felt bad but I moved on quickly to submit other papers in peer review journals, which were published. **(Early career academic staff-UG)**

Knowledge of journal quality

Most participants in the two Ghanaian universities, both early career and senior academic staff, were aware that journals varied widely in reputation and 'international' visibility. Participants expressed varied views on the phenomenon. While participants from UDS were quick to describe 'un-indexed' journals as poor quality and 'predatory', participants from UG were more nuanced. Some participants branded 'un-indexed journals as 'substandard' journals, but more focused on the suspicions created by having to pay author processing charges than on the quality of work. In addition, a good number of participants criticized the quality of the peer-review processes in these journals. Others observed that editors of such journals usually searched or solicited for people to submit papers through email invitations.

I believe that predatory journals are the ones that do not do due diligence in their review processes before publishing papers. They are more focused on money then the quality, content and the veracity of manuscripts. So, they put monetary benefits and other benefits ahead of the impact of the society. A number of these journals become nuisance because they tend to bombard you with emails soliciting for papers. Most of them are fake journals. **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Predatory journals are journals that charge fees. These are substandard journals and they are not good journals so we have to avoid them. **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

The social science researchers we interviewed were either less familiar with the 'predatory' journal term or were critical of the concept. These comprised not only early career academics but also some senior academic staff who had published in a range of peer-reviewed journals.

M: In your field, are you aware that there are predatory journals?

R: What is a predatory journal, I do not really know. I know what the word predatory means but what does it mean in terms of publication or journals? I really do not have any idea about predatory journals. **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

Some participants perceived 'predatory' journals as all those that offered a rapid publication schedule. They believed that speed was itself a marker of low quality.

If you send a paper out and you see that within a very short time, they return to you and say that your paper has been accepted, you should know that the journal is predatory. **(Senior academic staff-UDS)**

The grammar of the article will make me know that the journal is predatory because they do not take their time to review papers before publication. **(Senior academic staff-UDS)**

Researchers' rationales for assessing quality were sometimes vague or even inappropriate. Some participants cited low publication fees or solicitation emails inviting them to submit papers as 'evidence' that such journals were predatory. Others relied on Scopus or similar indexes as a source through which to identify 'reputable' journals in their field: if they were not in these databases, the authors felt that the journals were likely to be predatory.

What I have learnt is that their publication fee is low and that is what they use to influence people to submit their papers to them for publication. **(Early career academic staff-UG)**

We have well known libraries like PubMed, Scopus and Medline and some of these journals (refers to so-called predatory) are not listed there. **(Senior academic staff-UDS)**

Some academic staff identified what they saw as 'reputable' journals by checking impact factors and the profile of editorial board members.

I use the impact factor of the journal and then the caliber of staff or editorial board members that they have and the kind of articles they publish. **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Publish and yet perish?

There was a general consensus that regular and high-quality publication was key to promotion and career development. Similar views were expressed by participants in the two study institutions:

In academia, to be very frank, what motivate people to publish, which is one and significant factor is the promotion because notwithstanding the effort that you put in, that is you can be turning out students, you can be contributing to community work and whatever, the significant factor that drives people to publish is promotion. **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Everybody at the University of Ghana would say, if they were to be very frank, that it is for promotion. We have publications tied to renewal of appointment, we have it tied to being promoted to the next rank, and I mean it is tied virtually to our work and career progress. **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

Some feared that their contracts could be terminated if they were not publishing, given the importance of research for the university's reputation, as well as being a requirement

of the job. Many could enumerate precisely how many publications they had, and how many they needed for their next promotion.

> *In academia, you are supposed to lecture and also provide certain services and publication is part of it. So, if you are in the University for a very long time without publishing, that can affect your promotion greatly. Even at a certain level, if you are still not publishing, the University can take a decision to release you because it means that you are not really contributing anything to the University and also to improve on your academic career.* **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

The adage 'if you don't publish, you perish' was mentioned by more than half of the study participants:

> *In academia, you either publish or you perish and we don't want to perish so if you don't want to perish you publish … If you do not publish you would not be promoted no matter how hard-working you are.* **(Senior academic staff-UDS)**

Participants recognized that an academic could publish and yet 'perish' if the 'right' journal choices were not made, such as publishing in 'unrecognized' journals.

> *I am sure you are familiar with the saying that you either publish or you perish, so that is one motivation that has been pushing people to publish. It is a good thing knowing that if you did not publish then you perish but that should not actually lead us to perishing when we are alive. However, if you publish so many papers in non-ethical portals, you actually are perishing although you are publishing. So, we should recognize that it is not only the quantity but the quality of your papers and where you publish them (that matter).* **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

> *The issue is that you can write papers and publish them but it depends on where you publish such papers. For instance, if you publish your papers in predatory journals, it does not count in academia when it comes to promotion. So, you will not progress in your career as a lecturer and when that happens you will perish even though you are publishing and that is the problem we face in academia.* **(Senior academic staff-UDS)**

Participants shared their experiences of publishing in what they later learnt had been classified as 'predatory' journals.

> *That was the first problem I had because when I applied for promotion, they said most of my papers were published in predatory journals. I was not the only one affected, most lecturers here were also affected.* **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

> *Oh, this is what comes back to haunt you, right? Now as head of department, I know colleagues who are not promoted because their papers are all published in predatory or unrecognized journals.* **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

Some admitted that journals they had published in had been subsequently classified as poor quality by their university, or by being listed by Beall. A few were not worried, but others admitted that they had to remove such papers from their CVs and publication records, often at a personal cost. Another had sought to raise awareness about them.

> *Personally, I have some of my papers published in these un-recognized journals. So, when I got to know, I became very much worried about them and I became an advocate against predatory journals.* **(Senior academic staff -UG)**

> *I have over 70 publications and four of these papers that have been published found in some of the journals that Beall identified as predatory. So, for me I do not add these papers in my papers since I got to know that they were published in unrecognized journals.* **(Senior academic staff-UG)**

My first work ended up in what I call predatory journal, and so, I have discounted it. I have never added it to my papers. **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Learning to publish in the 'right' places

Participants repeatedly highlighted the role of training and mentorship to improve identification of appropriate peer review journals and publication practices. Early career academics were particularly keen to be trained to write scientific papers and identify reputable peer review journals.

You are just in your corner doing it all by yourself. There are so many new journals and of course once you do not know, you keep doing things the same way. So, if there will be a training workshop, it will help some of us who do not have much knowledge on certain things and that would guide you to know reputable journals to submit your papers. **(Early career academic staff-UG)**

If we can get training on how to identify high-quality journals, we would like it. Also training on technical writing skills and how to meet journal requirements will also be very useful. **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Many early career participants said that they needed more guidance on how to identify what they called 'inappropriate' or 'predatory' journals, to avoid submitting their scientific papers to them.

What I will say is that if there is a way that we can identify what exactly predatory journal is, then, that will be good. **(Senior academic staff-UDS)**

Every now and then, as you are climbing the ladder, there is always that temptation for you to put one or two papers in these so-called predatory journals. So, if you have those workshops that are always reminding you that these are the dos and the don'ts, then you are always guided by that. **(Early career academic staff-UG)**

Mentorship was seen as one key strategy to improve publication practices and journal choices. UDS participants particularly called for formal mentorship schemes to help guide junior staff.

Another thing they can do to support us is to introduce compulsory mentorship system at the University where early career academics could be attached to senior academics to guide them in their publication practices. **(Early career academic staff-UDS)**

Participants also valued having access to lists of 'approved' peer-reviewed journals and advice on identifying reputable journals.

I think it would be good if the University could periodically update staff on peer review journals and also support us to identify appropriate peer review journals, it will help. It should not just be one time that you do it because these so-called predatory journals keep coming up all the time. So, if the University publishes these lists from time to time, it will guide us. **(Early career academic staff-UG)**

Discussion

The study explored the publication strategies and experiences of academic staff in two Ghanaian public universities, and their perceptions of journal quality. Despite the different histories of research at the two universities, there were more similarities than

differences in the responses. 'International' publication records were what mattered most. Across all disciplinary fields participants cited promotion as a key driver of their publishing practices. The pressure to have enough 'outputs' led some to admit they had submitted work to journals that were not recognized by their universities. Whilst both universities circulated guidance on the 'right' journals, few respondents found it easy to make sense of a complex and fast-moving publishing landscape. With publication key to an academic career, choosing the 'wrong' journal had put some careers on hold. At UDS, with a less developed research culture, academics were less likely to co-author work or benefit from the expertise of more experienced researchers. UDS staff were particularly vocal about the need for more formal support and mentoring.

More than a quarter of participants had published papers, sometimes unknowingly, in journals that had subsequently been judged as low quality, either because they were not included in university approved lists or had been gray-listed by Beall. This experience was most likely to happen to older researchers and to staff at UDS. Many had gone on to learn from the experience and become better able to assess journals. Their insights highlight the need for universities across the global South to support academic staff to make informed journal choices.

Concerns about 'predatory' journals have spawned a range of pedagogic and policy initiatives to raise awareness of 'good' academic publishing practices (Horn, 2013; Weston, 2017), such as the '*Think. Check. Submit*' campaign funded by a number of major publishers and organizations. The global organization COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) promotes publishing integrity, and activist journalist organizations such as *Retraction Watch* journal retractions and poor editorial standards.

Many of our participants called for early career academics to be given help with writing by experienced scholars and to be helped to choose 'reputable' and appropriate journals. This is supported in the literature on academic writing for publication (Xu & Grant, 2020). A few, especially those in the social sciences, pointed out the negative consequences of promotion guidelines and publication expectations for the fortunes of 'local' scholarly journals. For example, the Ghana Science Association was set up in 1959, and has been publishing its journal for many years, but like other Ghana-published serials, it has faced a slow decline in prestige and submissions. Failure to get included in the main global indexes only reinforces this situation.

Guidance and training need to be complemented with greater policy awareness of the inequalities of the global publishing economy, and the need for greater use of Africa-focused databases and approaches to assessing journal quality. As Madikizela-Madiya (2022) points out, the research systems and journals most at risk of 'perishing' from citation-based definitions of quality are those based in Africa. Over time, the choices made by individual researchers gradually undermined the reputation of locally published journals, as our related work on the struggles faced by African journals and publishers has shown (e.g., Mills et al., 2023). Publishing 'internationally' undermines the health of journals and national research ecosystems. It is not only individuals who 'perish'.

Conclusion

This research has identified the difficulties many early career Ghanaian researchers face in knowing the 'right' journals to publish in, and the importance of informal mentorship

and co-authorship, as well as formal training, in supporting publication choices. Our findings take the debate beyond well-meaning advice to 'Think. Check. Submit'. They show how many Ghanaian researchers rely primarily on highly selective, commercially-owned, citation indexes as their main guide to journal credibility. Many African universities warn their staff about publishing in 'deceptive' poor-quality journals. Yet this has a damaging impact on the fortunes of 'local', often long-established, African journals (Mills et al., 2023). As well as helping early career researchers think about these and the other ethical dilemmas that accompany publishing (Weston, 2017), more attention needs to be given to the consequences of an unequal – and some would say unfair – global research and publishing system. A few major commercial publishers – and their proprietary citation indexes and databases – define the rules of a global research economy in which African authors, researchers and publishers are forced to participate.

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