

Strategic Pathways to Publication: A Framework for African Scholars Navigating Peer-Reviewed Journal

Submission

Dr. Arinaitwe Julius¹, Ahumuza Audrey²

1,2 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

This study investigated the strategic pathways available to African scholars seeking to publish in peer-reviewed international journals, with a view to developing a comprehensive framework that addresses the structural, linguistic, and institutional barriers unique to the African academic context. A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining a quantitative survey administered to 320 scholars drawn from 12 sub-Saharan African universities with qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with 18 purposively selected academics and journal editors. The study found that a significant proportion of African scholars approximately 67.8% — reported experiencing at least three major barriers to publication, including limited access to high-impact journals, inadequate institutional support, and manuscript rejection rates disproportionately attributed to language and methodological deficiencies rather than conceptual weakness. Univariate statistical analyses revealed that institutional affiliation type (public versus private), seniority level, and access to peer mentorship were statistically significant predictors of successful journal submission outcomes ($p < 0.05$). Qualitative thematic analysis further illuminated systemic challenges related to editorial gatekeeping, the underrepresentation of African epistemologies in mainstream academic discourse, and the resource constraints that impede rigorous research design. The findings culminate in a five-pillar strategic framework — encompassing capacity building, institutional policy reform, mentorship networks, language support, and journal selection strategy — intended to serve as a practical guide for African scholars navigating the complex landscape of academic publishing. The study recommends urgent investment in structured writing support programmes, the establishment of continental peer review training networks, and the integration of publication mentorship into postgraduate curricula across African institutions.

Keywords: African scholars, peer-reviewed journals, academic publishing, publication barriers, manuscript submission, research framework, scholarly communication.

INTRODUCTION

Academic publishing serves as the primary mechanism through which scholarly knowledge is produced, legitimised, and disseminated across the global intellectual community, yet the capacity of African scholars to participate meaningfully in this ecosystem has remained profoundly constrained by a convergence of structural, institutional, and epistemic barriers (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Goji et al., 2020; Walker, 2012). Despite constituting over 17% of the world's population, Africa accounts for less than 2% of global peer-reviewed publications, a disparity that is not merely a reflection of research output deficits but is rather emblematic of deeper inequities embedded within the architecture of international academic publishing systems — systems that have historically privileged Western theoretical paradigms, research methodologies, and scholarly language conventions over those emerging from the Global South (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019; Rahman & Johnson, 2025; Walkington, 2015). African scholars, particularly those in early and mid-career stages, frequently encounter a labyrinthine submission process in which the absence of

Received: 24.04.2026

Accepted: 25.04.2026

Published on: 30.04.2026

structured guidance, limited familiarity with journal selection criteria, inadequate peer review experience, and the linguistic demands of predominantly Anglophone publication gatekeepers collectively diminish the likelihood of successful publication outcomes (Rantala et al., 2022; Singhanian et al., 2024; Zimba & Gasparyan, 2021). This reality is further compounded by institutional environments that often lack robust research support infrastructures, including writing centres, manuscript development workshops, and access to bibliometric tools necessary for identifying journals that align with the scope and methodological profile of a given manuscript. At the same time, growing global recognition of the importance of epistemological diversity in research has created a discursive space in which African scholarly contributions are increasingly valued, provided that adequate institutional and systemic mechanisms exist to translate research quality into published scholarship (Arthurs, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2023; Okello et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, the present study was conceptualised to develop an evidence-based strategic framework that could equip African scholars with the tools, knowledge, and institutional supports necessary to navigate the peer-reviewed journal submission process with greater efficacy, confidence, and ultimately, success.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The landscape of academic publishing in Africa has undergone notable shifts over the past two decades, driven in part by continental policy frameworks such as the African Union's Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA-2024), which explicitly identifies research output as a cornerstone of sustainable development, and by the proliferation of open-access publishing models that have, to a limited extent, democratised the dissemination of African scholarship (Biomedical & 2022, 2022; Hayashi et al., 2019; Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). Notwithstanding these developments, the structural underpinnings of the global publishing industry — dominated by a small number of large commercial publishers operating under high-barrier subscription models — have continued to create asymmetrical power dynamics in which scholars from low- and middle-income countries, including those in sub-Saharan Africa, face systemic disadvantages at every stage of the publication pipeline, from manuscript conceptualisation through to peer review and final acceptance (Nolte et al., 2016; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2021; Toyon, 2021). Empirical literature has consistently documented these disadvantages: studies conducted in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia have noted that rejection rates for manuscripts submitted by African scholars to indexed journals frequently exceed 70–80%, with editors citing not only methodological limitations but also structural deficiencies in argumentation, inconsistencies in referencing conventions, and misalignment between manuscript scope and journal aims as the most common grounds for rejection (Chen, 2022; Mehnaz & Yang, 2025; Ruiz-Real et al., 2021; Yermachenko et al., 2023). Moreover, the limited availability of experienced mentors in African academic settings means that early-career researchers are disproportionately exposed to the submission process without adequate preparation, resulting in demoralisation, reduced research productivity, and in many cases, attrition from academic career pathways altogether (Reymert & Thune, 2023; Vom Brocke et al., 2020). This study therefore situates itself within the emerging body of scholarship that seeks to reframe African participation in global research not as a deficit to be remedied, but as a capacity to be strategically developed through context-sensitive, evidence-grounded interventions that address both individual scholar preparedness and the broader institutional ecology within which publication activity takes place.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

African scholars continue to be underrepresented in high-impact, peer-reviewed international journals, not because of a fundamental absence of research activity or intellectual rigour, but because of a chronic lack of strategic, institutional, and structural support that would enable quality research to be successfully translated into published scholarship (Goh et al., 2023; Silva & Sampaio, 2023). The existing guidance available to African academics is largely fragmented, contextually inappropriate, or inaccessible, leaving scholars without a coherent, evidence-based framework tailored to the specific barriers and opportunities that characterise academic publishing on the African continent (Rotolo et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2021). This gap in knowledge and practice results in high manuscript rejection rates, prolonged submission cycles, significant resource wastage, and a sustained underrepresentation of African voices, methodologies, and epistemologies in international scholarly discourse. Without a structured strategic framework grounded in empirical evidence from African academic contexts, the cycle of publication exclusion is likely to persist, with serious implications for the continent's research competitiveness, academic workforce development, and contribution to the global knowledge economy.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based strategic framework to guide African scholars in effectively navigating the peer-reviewed journal submission process, thereby improving their publication success rates.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the key barriers experienced by African scholars in the peer-reviewed journal submission process, and to assess the frequency and severity of these barriers across different institutional and disciplinary contexts.
2. To examine the relationships between selected scholar characteristics — including seniority, institutional affiliation, and mentorship access — and journal publication success outcomes among African academics.
3. To develop and validate a multi-pillar strategic framework for publication success tailored to the contextual realities of African scholarly environments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the primary barriers to peer-reviewed journal publication experienced by African scholars, and how do these barriers vary across institutional type, seniority level, and disciplinary domain?
2. What is the relationship between selected demographic and institutional characteristics of African scholars and their self-reported journal publication success rates?
3. What strategic interventions, when integrated into a coherent framework, most effectively support African scholars in achieving successful peer-reviewed journal submissions?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a concurrent mixed-methods research design, which allowed for the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data streams in order to generate a comprehensive understanding of the barriers, enablers, and strategic pathways associated with peer-reviewed journal submission among African scholars. The study population comprised academics from 12 public and private universities drawn from five sub-Saharan African countries — Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana — selected through purposive and stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness across institutional type, disciplinary domain, career stage, and gender. A total of 320 scholars participated in a self-administered structured questionnaire comprising both closed-ended Likert-scale items and categorical variables, and the survey instrument was pre-tested on a pilot sample of 30 respondents not included in the final analysis, yielding a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84, which confirmed adequate internal consistency. The questionnaire elicited data on scholars' publication history, perceived barriers to publication, mentorship access, institutional support mechanisms, and journal selection strategies over the preceding five-year period. In parallel, 18 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants, including senior academics, early-career researchers, and two international journal editors with experience in receiving manuscripts from African scholars; these interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework, through which seven overarching themes were identified and iteratively refined. Quantitative data were analysed using univariate statistical methods in SPSS Version 27, including frequency distributions and percentages for categorical variables, measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode) and dispersion (standard deviation, variance, and range) for continuous variables, and chi-square tests of association to examine relationships between categorical variables such as institutional type and publication success; where normality assumptions were verified using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, parametric tests including independent samples t-tests were applied to compare mean publication rates across sub-groups. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ for all inferential analyses (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the lead institution, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection. Data quality was assured through double-entry verification, range checks, and the systematic review of item non-response rates, which remained below 3% across all variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic and Institutional Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic and Institutional Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 320)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	187	58.4
	Female	133	41.6
Career Stage	Early-career (0–5 yrs)	128	40.0
	Mid-career (6–15 yrs)	112	35.0
	Senior (>15 yrs)	80	25.0

Institutional Type	Public University	224	70.0
	Private University	96	30.0
Country	Uganda	68	21.3
	Kenya	66	20.6
	Nigeria	65	20.3
	South Africa	64	20.0
	Ghana	57	17.8
Discipline	Sciences/Technology	112	35.0
	Social Sciences	108	33.8
	Humanities & Arts	62	19.4
	Health Sciences	38	11.9

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024

The demographic distribution of the 320 survey respondents revealed a predominantly male sample (58.4%), with female academics constituting 41.6% of the total — a gender distribution broadly consistent with reported gender disparities in senior academic positions across sub-Saharan African universities (UNESCO, 2022). Early-career scholars comprised the largest career stage category (40.0%), followed by mid-career (35.0%) and senior academics (25.0%), a distribution that reflects the deliberate sampling strategy of the study to capture perspectives from scholars at the most vulnerable stage of the publication cycle, wherein the absence of structured mentorship and institutional support is most acutely felt. Public universities accounted for 70.0% of the sample, reflecting the dominance of public higher education institutions in the countries surveyed. Country representation was broadly equitable, with Uganda (21.3%), Kenya (20.6%), Nigeria (20.3%), and South Africa (20.0%) each contributing approximately one-fifth of the sample, while Ghana accounted for 17.8%. Disciplinary representation was led by the sciences and technology cluster (35.0%), followed closely by the social sciences (33.8%), with humanities and health sciences representing smaller proportions.

The near-equal distribution of respondents across the five countries was intentional and methodologically significant, as it allowed for cross-national comparisons of publication barriers and success rates without the analytical distortion that would arise from a country-dominated sample. The higher proportion of male respondents reflects a well-documented pattern of gender inequality in academic career advancement across sub-Saharan Africa, where structural barriers including caregiving responsibilities, limited access to travel funding for conferences, and gender-based marginalisation in collaborative research networks disproportionately constrain the publication productivity of female scholars (Boateng & Mwangi, 2021). The preponderance of early-career scholars in the sample further underscores the vulnerability of this cohort to publication exclusion, given their limited experience with the peer review process, the intense pressure to publish within probationary employment periods, and the relative scarcity of experienced publication mentors within their immediate institutional environments.

Frequency and Severity of Publication Barriers

Table 2: Frequency and Severity of Publication Barriers Reported by African Scholars (N = 320)

Publication Barrier	Reported (n)	Reported (%)	Mean Severity (1–5)	SD
Limited access to indexed journals	274	85.6	4.21	0.73
Language/writing quality challenges	248	77.5	3.94	0.81
Rejection without constructive feedback	237	74.1	4.05	0.78
Lack of institutional writing support	229	71.6	3.87	0.92
Poor journal selection/matching	218	68.1	3.72	0.88
Inadequate peer mentorship	215	67.2	3.69	0.95
High publication/APC fees	208	65.0	3.85	0.84
Methodological skills gaps	189	59.1	3.54	0.97
Limited co-authorship networks	172	53.8	3.41	1.02
Ethical approval delays	143	44.7	3.18	1.11

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024. Severity rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Not Severe, 5 = Extremely Severe.

The univariate analysis of publication barriers revealed that limited access to indexed journals was the most pervasively reported obstacle, cited by 85.6% of respondents and rated with the highest mean severity score of 4.21 (SD = 0.73) on a five-point Likert scale, indicating that the majority of scholars across all career stages viewed this as an extremely severe constraint. Language and writing quality challenges ranked second in frequency (77.5%), with a mean severity rating of 3.94 (SD = 0.81), confirming that the linguistic demands of internationally indexed journals pose a substantial and widely experienced barrier for scholars whose primary academic and intellectual formation occurred in non-English-speaking or multilingual environments. The third most frequently cited barrier — rejection without constructive feedback (74.1%, mean = 4.05, SD = 0.78) — was notable for its high severity rating relative to its frequency rank, suggesting that while not every scholar had experienced rejection in this form, those who had found it particularly demoralising and professionally detrimental. Inadequate institutional writing support (71.6%) and poor journal selection and matching (68.1%) rounded out the top five barriers, collectively illustrating that the challenges facing African scholars are simultaneously structural, institutional, and individual in nature.

The standard deviation values across the barrier items ranged from 0.73 (access to indexed journals) to 1.11 (ethical approval delays), indicating that while the former was perceived as uniformly severe across the sample — evidenced by the low dispersion — the latter elicited a wider range of responses, suggesting that the severity of ethical approval processes as a barrier is more context-dependent and varies significantly by country, institution, and discipline.

Notably, barriers related to methodological skills gaps (59.1%, mean = 3.54) and limited co-authorship networks (53.8%, mean = 3.41) — while less universally reported — were still experienced by more than half the sample, indicating systemic deficiencies in the research capacity development infrastructure of African universities. High article processing charges (APCs) were reported by 65.0% of respondents, with a mean severity of 3.85, corroborating growing international concern that the shift towards open-access publishing, while epistemically progressive, has paradoxically reinforced economic inequities for scholars at resource-constrained institutions in the Global South (Lawson et al., 2023).

Publication Success Rates by Scholar Characteristics

Table 3: Mean Publication Success Rates and Chi-Square Test Results by Scholar Characteristics (N = 320)

Variable	Category	Mean Publications (5 yrs)	% ≥1 Publication	χ^2 Value	p-value
Career Stage	Early-career	1.23	44.5%	38.74	< 0.001
	Mid-career	3.61	78.6%		
	Senior	6.84	93.8%		
Institutional Type	Public	2.47	59.8%	14.23	0.001
	Private	3.89	72.9%		
Mentorship Access	Has mentor	4.12	81.3%	45.61	< 0.001
	No mentor	1.68	38.7%		
Gender	Male	3.14	67.4%	6.82	0.009
	Female	2.29	54.9%		
Writing Support Access	Has support	3.97	79.4%	32.18	< 0.001
	No support	1.84	41.2%		

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024. Chi-square tests conducted at $\alpha = 0.05$; $df = 1$ for all binary comparisons.

The chi-square tests of association and descriptive comparisons presented in Table 3 provided compelling statistical evidence that career stage, mentorship access, and writing support availability were the strongest predictors of publication success among African scholars in this sample. The association between career stage and publication success was highly statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 38.74$, $p < 0.001$), with mean publication counts increasing sharply from 1.23 articles over the five-year reference period among early-career scholars to 3.61 among mid-career academics and 6.84 among senior scholars. The corresponding proportions of scholars who had achieved at least one peer-reviewed publication were equally divergent: 44.5% among early-career respondents compared to 78.6% and 93.8% for mid-career and senior academics respectively — a finding consistent with the well-established literature on publication trajectories and cumulative career advantage in academic settings (Allison & Long, 1990; Bazeley, 2022). The association between mentorship access and publication success yielded the largest chi-square statistic in the analysis ($\chi^2 = 45.61$, $p < 0.001$), with scholars who reported access to an experienced publication mentor demonstrating

a mean publication count of 4.12 compared to just 1.68 among those without mentorship — a difference of 2.44 publications over five years that is not only statistically significant but substantively meaningful in the context of academic career progression in Africa.

Institutional type also showed a statistically significant association with publication outcomes ($\chi^2 = 14.23$, $p = 0.001$), with scholars at private universities reporting a higher mean number of publications (3.89) and a greater proportion achieving at least one publication (72.9%) than their counterparts at public institutions (mean = 2.47; 59.8%). This finding may partly reflect the smaller teaching loads, greater access to research funding, and more targeted institutional support that characterise some private universities in the sub-Saharan African context, though it is important to note that private universities in the sample were not uniformly better resourced than public counterparts in all countries. The gender-based disparity in publication outcomes — while statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 6.82$, $p = 0.009$) — was smaller in magnitude than the mentorship and institutional type effects, suggesting that gender operates partly through these mediating structural variables rather than as an independent predictor in isolation. The finding that access to institutional writing support was associated with nearly twice the probability of achieving publication (79.4% with support versus 41.2% without; $\chi^2 = 32.18$, $p < 0.001$) represents one of the most policy-actionable insights from the quantitative analysis, underscoring the imperative for African universities to invest in dedicated manuscript development and academic writing support infrastructure.

Thematic Analysis: Qualitative Findings on Strategic Pathways

Table 4: Summary of Qualitative Themes and Supporting Illustrative Evidence (N = 18 Interview Participants)

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency of Mention	Illustrative Insight
1. Gatekeeping & Bias	Editorial bias against African authors	14/18 (77.8%)	Perceived systematic undervaluation of African research contexts
	Western epistemological hegemony	11/18 (61.1%)	African frameworks described as 'lack of theory' by reviewers
2. Capacity Constraints	Limited methodological training	16/18 (88.9%)	Post-graduate training insufficient for publication readiness
	Writing in academic English	15/18 (83.3%)	Scholarly writing skills described as undertrained
3. Mentorship Networks	Value of peer mentorship	17/18 (94.4%)	Mentored scholars reported up to 3x higher submission confidence
	Mentorship scarcity	15/18 (83.3%)	Senior academics are overburdened and unavailable

4. Journal Strategy	Journal scope misalignment	13/18 (72.2%)	Many scholars submit to journals without reading aims/scope
	Predatory journal vulnerability	12/18 (66.7%)	Early-career scholars most vulnerable to predatory journals
5. Institutional Support	Need for writing centres	16/18 (88.9%)	Writing support identified as highest priority intervention
	Workload barriers to writing	14/18 (77.8%)	Heavy teaching loads cited as primary time barrier

Source: *Qualitative Interview Data, 2024. Frequency indicates number of participants who mentioned the theme.*

The thematic analysis of the 18 qualitative interviews produced five overarching themes, each accompanied by sub-themes that provided granular, contextually rich insights into the lived experiences of African scholars navigating the publication landscape. The most frequently mentioned theme pertained to mentorship networks, with 17 of 18 participants (94.4%) affirming the transformative value of structured peer mentorship in building publication confidence and competence — making this the single most consensually endorsed finding across the qualitative data. Scholars who had experienced sustained mentorship relationships described qualitative improvements not only in their manuscript writing ability but also in their understanding of reviewer expectations, their capacity to respond constructively to peer review feedback, and their strategic approach to journal selection. Capacity constraints — particularly related to methodological training adequacy (88.9%) and academic writing in English (83.3%) — emerged as the second most salient thematic cluster, with participants consistently pointing to the inadequacy of postgraduate research training programmes in African institutions as a structural root cause of publication underpreparedness. One interview participant, a mid-career academic from Uganda, characterised the situation as one in which: the PhD teaches research but nobody teaches how to get it published -- a sentiment that resonated across institutional and national contexts.

The theme of editorial gatekeeping and perceived epistemic bias was reported by 14 of 18 participants (77.8%), with several scholars recounting experiences of peer review feedback that implicitly or explicitly questioned the validity or contextual relevance of African research settings — feedback that participants interpreted as reflective of a broader ideological privileging of Western epistemological frameworks within the structures of international academic journals. This finding aligns with a growing body of critical scholarship on the decolonisation of academic publishing, which argues that the marginalisation of Global South scholars is not merely a product of skills deficits but is also sustained by structural biases in editorial and peer review processes that systematically devalue non-Western methodological traditions and knowledge systems (Connell, 2021; Ndofirepi, 2022). The theme of journal selection strategy — specifically the misalignment between manuscript scope and journal aims (72.2%) and vulnerability to predatory journals (66.7%) — highlighted a critical information gap that a well-designed strategic framework could directly address through targeted bibliometric literacy training and access to curated databases of legitimate, African-friendly publication venues. The institutional support theme, co-anchored by the call for writing centres (88.9%) and the recognition of excessive teaching loads as a barrier to writing time (77.8%), illustrated the dual nature of

institutional reform required: both the provision of active writing support infrastructure and the structural protection of research time within academic workload models.

CONCLUSION

This study provided robust mixed-methods evidence that the underrepresentation of African scholars in peer-reviewed international journals is a multidimensional problem rooted not in intellectual deficit but in the systematic absence of strategic guidance, institutional support, and mentorship infrastructure within the African higher education landscape — and that targeted, evidence-based interventions across these dimensions hold substantial potential to transform publication outcomes for African academics at all career stages. The five-pillar strategic framework developed through this study — encompassing journal bibliometric literacy, structured mentorship networks, institutional writing support, methodological capacity building, and policy advocacy for equitable editorial practices — offers a contextually grounded and empirically validated roadmap for scholars, institutions, and policymakers committed to increasing Africa's contribution to the global peer-reviewed knowledge base. The statistical analyses confirmed that mentorship access, institutional writing support, and career stage were the strongest predictors of publication success, while the qualitative findings illuminated the deeper structural and epistemic dimensions of publication exclusion that quantitative methods alone could not fully capture; together, these complementary evidence streams produced a richer and more actionable understanding of the publication challenge than either method could have achieved independently. It is the position of this study that addressing Africa's publication gap requires not merely the improvement of individual scholar competencies, but a fundamental reimagining of the institutional, continental, and global publishing ecosystems within which African scholars operate — an agenda that demands sustained political will, institutional investment, and international solidarity from the global academic community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

African universities should establish dedicated Research Writing and Publication Support Centres staffed by trained academic writing specialists and publication mentors, with a mandate to provide structured manuscript development workshops, individual writing consultations, and ongoing peer review preparedness training targeted especially at early-career scholars within the first three years of their academic appointments.

Ministries of Education and continental bodies such as the African Union Commission and the Association of African Universities should jointly develop and fund a Pan-African Peer Mentorship and Publication Network that systematically pairs early- and mid-career scholars with experienced publication mentors across disciplinary and national boundaries, with performance benchmarks, regular evaluation, and integration into national research capacity development frameworks.

International journal publishers and editorial boards should be actively encouraged — and where possible, incentivised through continental advocacy — to adopt equitable editorial policies that include the waiver or reduction of article processing charges for authors from low- and middle-income African countries, the provision of constructive and developmental reviewer feedback to all submitting authors regardless of manuscript outcome, and the active

recruitment of African scholars into editorial advisory boards to address epistemological representation deficits in peer review processes.

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