AuthorAID – supporting early career researchers in developing countries

Getting your research published is a major milestone in any researcher's career, but it's also a journey fraught with challenges and questions from the beginning: How do you analyse and present the data? How do you write up your results into something meaningful and readable? How do you choose the right journal? How do you make sure your paper has impact? And of course, how do you make sure your paper doesn't end up in the rejection pile?

In many lower and middle-income countries, researchers face the same intense pressures to publish as their counterparts in developed nations, but they often don't have the access to resources, information, training in research writing, and well-established support networks that we take for granted in the US and Europe. As a result a lot of important research goes unpublished, is rejected, or even worse, ends up in questionable 'predatory' journals, which can damage the reputation of the researcher and their work.

In order to address some of these problems, the AuthorAID project was established in 2007 by INASP (www.inasp.info/en/), an Oxford-based international development charity working with a global network of partners to improve access, production and use of research information and knowledge. Over the years, AuthorAID has developed a number of different ways to help early career researchers in developing countries to publish and communicate their work. One of the ways we do this is to help embed research writing skills training in curricula and professional development schemes of universities and research institutes. We are currently working with 10 institutes across four countries, namely Ghana, Tanzania, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

Support through training, resources, small grants and online discussion

Our other initiatives have a wider reach. We offer small grants twice yearly to researchers in all lower and middle income countries. Travel grants provide early career researchers the chance to present their research at international conferences, network with other researchers and learn from the leaders in their field. Our workshop grants provide opportunities for experienced researchers to run research writing and grant proposal writing training at their own institution or organisation.

Even for researchers who do not win one of our grants, we provide all of our training materials and other resources free of charge to website visitors. Resources are available in English, Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish: http://www.authoraid.info/en/resources/.

What are the biggest challenges for developing country researchers?

The AuthorAID discussion forum has over 2000 members from around the world. In July this year, we invited an informal straw poll of members to ask what is their biggest challenge in publishing or communicating their research. The top ten answers were as follows:

- Lack of research funding
- Writing in the English language
- Identifying the most suitable, genuine journals
- Delays with peer review
- Getting their papers accepted though peer review
- Publication costs (such as Article Processing Charges)
- Lack of mentors, or people to check and review their manuscripts
- Academic writing style
- Poor or insufficient laboratory equipment
- Difficulty communicating academic research to policy makers and the public

The AuthorAID discussion group is hosted on Dgroups and everybody is welcome to join the conversation – please register at https://dgroups.org/groups/authoraiddiscussion.

Free online courses and MOOCs

In recent years AuthorAID has also developed free online courses in research writing and grant proposal writing. In November 2015, we ran our very first MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) in research writing, attracting

Andy Nobes

(Programme Officer for Research Development and Support at INASP)

Guinean researcher Alexandre Delamou (white shirt, fourth from right, front row) won an AuthorAID grant to run a recent medical writing workshop in Conakry, Guinea in July. Alexandre is currently researching the effects of the Ebola virus in rural Guinea, but he has also found the time to register as an AuthorAID mentor.

over 1,200 researchers from 59 countries. The six-week course was hosted on the free open source learning platform Moodle, and covered basics such as literature reviews, publishing ethics, writing your paper and getting published in a journal. The course was run again in April–May 2016 and attracted over 1,600 researchers from 79 countries from as far afield as El Salvador, the Philippines, Somalia as well as refugee researchers from Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Over 900 completed the course and received certificates and a digital badge.

The course benefited greatly from an international team of volunteer 'guest facilitators', who were on hand to answer questions in the lively discussion forums, on popular topics such as how to avoid plagiarising, how to spot predatory journals, accessing research behind paywalls, best citation practices, and the meaning of the Impact Factor.

The next Research Writing MOOC runs in October/ November 2016. If you would you like to be involved as a guest facilitator, email us at authoraid@inasp.info

AuthorAID online mentoring - making a difference for medical researchers

One of the main challenges that early career researchers face is the shortage of mentors – senior researchers and more experienced peers who can provide them with advice on getting their research written up and published. AuthorAID provides an online mentoring system which allows volunteer mentors to use their crucial skills and experience to guide less experienced researchers through the challenges of publishing and communicating their research. The AuthorAID mentoring system was set up in 2008 and over the years we have seen a growing demand for mentoring assistance from developing country researchers. We are continually looking to increase the number of mentors on the system to help meet this growing demand.

15 most common types of support needed by new mentees in 2016:

- Writing
- Article planning
- Proofreading
- Grant proposal development
- Language editing or proofreading support
- Career mentoring
- Thesis and dissertation writing
- Dealing with the publishing process
- Literature reviews
- Study design
- Statistics
- Presentation planning
- Responding to peer review
- Publication ethics
- Technical reports

The mentor's view

"…being an AuthorAID mentor goes beyond a conventional teacher-student relationship - it is a really stimulating and worthwhile learning process for both mentee and mentor."
Dan Korbel, UK

The mentee's view:

"My experience with AuthorAID has been great! Through the AuthorAID website, I met my mentor– a PhD student at the University of Michigan. She has been very dedicated in offering me guidance on how to improve my writing skills. "
Rhoune Ochako, Kenya

Indonesian researchers discuss grant proposal writing at an AuthorAID-funded workshop. Finding funding is often identified as one of the main challenges for researchers in developing countries

Our platform is open to researchers from all subject areas, but our key shortage is in medical sciences – over a third of mentees looking for mentoring supporting on the AuthorAID website are researchers in medicine, healthcare or biological sciences.

Who can be a mentor?

Many AuthorAID mentors are senior researchers with years of experience and long lists of publications behind them, but we also have a growing number of postdocs and mid-career researchers who are also keen to put their knowledge and skills into action. We usually ask that mentors have successfully published at least two or three papers in high-quality journals, or have won at least two grant applications. Alternatively, if you have substantial editorial experience we would also like to hear from you.

All mentor applications are reviewed to ensure that we have mentors with the appropriate attitude, skills and experience to support others. A large number of our mentors come from developed countries, but increasingly mentors from developing countries are also signing up. It's nice to note that many mentors are motivated to volunteer their time and expertise because they themselves have benefited from having such support in the past. You can read the inspiring stories of AuthorAID mentors Joshua Okonya from Uganda[1] and Dr. Farooq Rathore from Pakistan[2] on the INASP website.

How does online mentoring work?

The mentoring system helps pair together experienced mentors with researchers who need support at any stage of their writing project. Mentoring relationships can be short or long-term, and mentors and mentees have the option of signing a mentoring agreement to set out clear objectives for both parties.

Mentees can request help with a wide range of tasks, from specific tasks such as planning the structure of an article, language editing and interpreting data; to longer term help such as developing a grant proposal, or career mentoring.

It's easy to make contact with mentors or mentees – you can use our 'find a researcher' search facility, and our mentoring dashboard will automatically suggest suitable 'matches' for you based on subject and skills, rather like a dating website for researchers!

The benefits for mentors

So what are the benefits for mentors? Not only are you doing your bit for global development and research, but we believe that mentoring is also a worthwhile personal development process that can widen your perspective and add valuable skills to your CV such as mentoring experience, editing skills, and reviewing manuscripts.

The Researcher Development Framework[3] developed by Vitae recognises the importance of not only developing mentoring skills, but also that of global citizenship – engaging and understanding other cultures and international research issue, and developing international contacts and networks. ■

Please visit the AuthorAID website (http://www.authoraid.info) for more information. Whether you want to be a mentor, a mentee, or just be part of our community, why not sign up as a member today?

References

1. Ugandan entomologist overcame barriers to publication with help from the AuthorAID network http://www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/210/
2. A researcher's story: Using AuthorAID resources to support my research http://www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/125/
3. Vitae Researcher Development Framework https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rdf-related/introducing-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework-rdf-to-employers-2011.pdf