

MANAGING AN ACADEMIC JOURNAL: REFLECTIONS FROM OUTGOING JONAS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The University of Zambia (UNZA) Journal of Natural and Applied Sciences (JONAS) has reached an editorial-board transition point in 2024, following the expiry of tenure of the current Editorial Board. This JONAS Vol. 6 Issue No. 2 is my last effort as Editor-in-Chief, having assumed office 10 years ago, in 2014. At that time JONAS had just been established by the Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies (DRGS) (now renamed as Directorate of Research, Innovation and Development (DRID) in 2023) to promote a culture of publishing research outputs by the University of Zambia postgraduate students, therein completing the research cycle as is known in the academic community. I am sure we are all familiar with the aphorism “Publish or Perish”. When I took up the position of Editor-in-Chief for JONAS, I was tasked with two objectives; (i) to ensure that JONAS published high quality articles, and (ii) to enhance JONAS visibility. The first objective required us to do three things: change how editorial team members were appointed from functional position-based to expertise-based, open up submissions to any researcher willing to share their research outputs within the journal scope rather than just from postgraduate students, and using competent peer reviewers. The second objective needed us to go online and ensure that the journal articles were deposited in internationally-known database (s), and to have the journal indexed.

I am happy that we have made significant progress on the two objectives, considering that JONAS was a newly-established academic journal. I want to thank the many scholars who submitted manuscripts to JONAS, and the reviewers who ensured the quality in our publications. As of June 2024, we had published six (6) volumes of JONAS under my editorship. The papers from these volumes are visible on Google Scholar. Admittedly, we could have done better than this had it not been for some challenges we faced which had continued in the last ten years. Understandably, scholars are reluctant to submit their works to new journals and also prefer to see their works in high impact journals. Such preferences may have contributed to the low volume of submissions for JONAS. One of the strategies we used to address this was to commission special issues: in our tenure, two (2) special Issues were published. Clearly, the editorial team members have their work cut out to go flat out in promoting JONAS. The other persistent challenge we faced was the publication lags. In as much as the editorial policy was to attain a turnaround cycle from submission to acceptance for publication of up to six weeks, this was heavily dependent on the responsiveness of identified peer reviewers for the manuscript. Although the Online Journal System (OJS) made it easy for us to handle submissions promptly, including sending an acknowledgement to the author that the manuscript has been received, assigning a manuscript handling editor, and sending the manuscript out for reviewing as soon as possible, in practice the review process tended to take longer than anticipated. It turned out that the OJS emailing system was problematic, and this was compounded by the absence of a dedicated Editorial Office to

help with the administrative matters of the review process. It is my view that the issues relating to the journal management system and editorial office pertain to the broader issue of resources.

It must be understood that we now live in an age of rapid communication brought about by technology evolution and the internet. Scholarly publishing has rightly embraced electronic distribution of research outputs. Journals are at the end of the research cycle. There are numerous processes involved in getting a journal issue published. To entirely depend on part-time personnel, mostly offering free service, is self-defeating on the part of the journal sponsors. To ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the journal management, an editorial office is of essence. This editorial office must be treated like all other components of knowledge production and distribution, that is to say there must be full-time editorial assistant(s) to manage various aspects of the publishing process as needed. I strongly believe that, with a well-resourced editorial office in place, JONAS will become one of the popular academic journals.

To conclude, let me acknowledge that it has been a privilege to have served as Editor-in-Chief for JONAS, and to have had the opportunity to establish a strong foundation upon which the next editorial team can build on. My success could not have been possible without the support I received from countless individuals. I, therefore, wish to end by thanking the many people who have contributed to the progress made thus far, particularly: the Director (DRID), the dedicated JONAS editorial board members, the authors, and the reviewers for assuring the quality of the published papers.

Prof Levy Siaminwe

JONAS Editor-in-Chief, 2014-2024