

Evolving landscape of publishing in South Asia

Economists like Adam Smith had long established a relationship between scientific research and economic growth. The core ethos of a publishing company also makes a difference in how it functions on a broader platform and how it translates research to and from the research community. We need to acknowledge that the original purpose of research is to have a real-world impact, which goes beyond citation counts. It is about communities coming together to find solutions that result in positive change and to recognise the researchers behind it. Within Emerald Publishing, we refer to impact as the provable effects of research in the real world.

In the last 20 years, the definition of quality publications has evolved even further. With indexing bodies like Scopus, Web of Science, and ABDC, among others, that have set parameters on the quality of publication, the challenge for journal editors and publishing houses is not publishing content but keeping a conscious focus on what content to publish. With that in mind, the more recent years have seen more cohesive efforts and conversations between institutes and publishers to support researchers. We are now discussing Open Access,

research trends, UN SDGs, Real Impact, to name a few, besides conducting sessions explaining the publishing process.

For many decades the publishing industry has been inching towards a more Open Access world. Unfortunately, research continues to be stuck in a vicious cycle of the need to make it freely available, capture downloads and citations information, maintain quality for indexing, and the expenses that these processes garner. In general, governments, institutes, and publishers have been predicting research and publishing trends to make the best decisions. However, if determining trends was not difficult enough, the pandemic has thrown a curveball that changed the way we accessed and disseminated education, research, and knowledge.



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With the outbreak of Covid-19, we have been able to witness firsthand the importance of access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and digital resources. Educational institutions and teachers across the world's educational systems transferred their work from classrooms and lecture halls to digital platforms almost overnight. These rapid moves from classroom to online teaching have set aside the more profound questions related to national educational policies and theoretical grounds and premises.

The amount of time spent online by people has been more than ever before and has enhanced their online presence leading to another development during the pandemic, which is author engagement. In the pre-pandemic time, in-person training sessions on various aspects of publishing and in-person attendance in conferences were the norm and preferred. However, participation behaviours have changed for both customers and providers. The pandemic has compelled businesses to shift their approach to make way for a more remote inclusive strategy. Now, webinars are the norm, with geographical, time, and budget limitations gone or reduced significantly; researchers can now join sessions that they find at a click of a button and from the comfort of their homes. Pre-pandemic, our engagement was restricted by the physical availability of speakers and attendees, among other factors. The sessions had to be planned months in advance and required a lot of planning but during the pandemic, our audience engagement has grown to an average of 1 to 2 webinars per week attended by over a hundred attendees on an average. The reach of our faculty and Library development programs has also increased by 300%.

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About research publication itself, 2020 saw a sharp increase in articles on all subjects submitted to scientific journals — an outcome, it is believed, of researchers forced to stay at home and focus on writing papers rather than researching in labs and fields.

If we look at the article submissions data from the South Asia region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives), 2019 saw a total of 161,043 submissions that rose to 205,777 in 2020 and now, in mid-2021, we have already reached 139,257 as per the Dimensions reports. While the spurt in publications is applaudable, it is not necessarily leading to the other important aspect of publishing – researcher recognition. Limited funding has often forced researchers in South Asian countries to choose closed access option for their journals, which contributes to the lower discoverability of research and citations. In India alone, 42% of publications in 2020 were behind paywalls. Inevitably, the pandemic has ushered in greater competition to getting published in prestigious journals.

We need to ensure that the impact of the research matches the increasing number of publications for better citations and better recognition of South Asian researchers. With that common goal, institutes and publishers must support each other to raise the quality of publications by developing and supporting the researcher community. You may recognise Emerald Publishing's efforts in this direction in Sri Lanka where we are supporting an ongoing, free 16-week webinar series, "Writing impactful

articles" with Sabaragamuwa University in Sri Lanka in partnership with Gulf Medical University. We also have a Regional Brand Ambassador, Dr. Jayantha N. Dewasiri, senior lecturer, attached to the Faculty of Management Studies, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, who acts as a voice of researchers in Sri Lanka. We have and will continue to work toward building a robust research infrastructure with like-minded universities within Sri Lanka.

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Constant innovation is crucial within publishing companies as well. Emerald Publishing is trying to close this gap between industry, academia, and policymakers by innovating and modifying our products to present research in a more practitioner-friendly manner. Also, we are working closely with governments and guiding institutes to bring research to the attention of policymakers. We also actively take up awareness-building measures to improve the inclination in young researchers towards doing qualitative, socially impactful research and guide them towards getting it published.

We at Emerald Publishing, as advocates for Real Impact, are encouraging research for societal impact is through our focus on publishing research that aligned with UN SDGs in different countries. Another area of priority for Emerald is equity, diversity, and inclusion. Our editorial boards and commissioning editors of journals are receiving training on diversity and inclusion to improve gender and regional representation. We constantly analyse submission to acceptance by gender and region to assess any bias.

Researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and publishers are all stakeholders who share a common goal, which is to highlight South Asia as a global research hub. Our purpose and vision must entail a resolute commitment to the goal of helping research to have an impact that makes positive difference to lives beyond the walls of academia. All stakeholders have made contributions in the recent past in enhancing the quality of research output from South Asia but it is now time to shift gears and accelerate this momentum to the next level – coming together and bringing South Asia's research and researchers to the forefront.



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