

Publishing Research on African Economics in Academic Journals: Pitfalls and Opportunities



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PRESENTATION

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John Hoddinott

By way of introduction, my name is John Hoddinott, I am the new chief editor of the Journal of African Economies. I have a long history both at the Journal and at the Centre [for the Study of African Economies]. I'm not going to tell you how old I am, but I will say that the Journal has 33 or 34 volumes at the moment. I went back to the 1990s. I was there for a meeting for the first summer of the first volume launch. I've been a managing editor of the journal, and I've also served as an associate editor. The purpose of this presentation is actually the same one, which I gave two days ago. Is this. Some of you may have had the experience where you send a paper off to a journal, it comes back and you get rejected. And you don't really get a whole lot of information, right? We spend like, six or nine months working on this thing and you got three or four sentences saying, "thank you very much for what you did". If you come from an institution where there are a lot of people in publishing, there are many people you can talk to. But if you come from an institution that doesn't have that background of resources, the whole thing ends up, essentially, miswritten.

And so really the purposes of this presentation is just to walk you through a series of aspects of the publishing houses, which really aims to give legs to people who do work on African economic issues, to try and demystify this on the one hand, and at the same time also give you guys some ideas about things, for example, editors and referees are looking for, so tips that are really helpful. I'll talk for about 20 minutes or so and then we'll just open up for Q&A. Just so you guys know, the Centre is actually, according to specification, we'll put this up on our website for the Journal, to make this widely available. But just want to make sure everybody's cool with that. Okay.

So with all those things sorted, let's start off a bit of discussion about how the editorial process generally works. There are some variation across journals, but by and large it goes something like this. As you guys know, when you submit a paper, you submit it on an online portal. And pretty much all journals will ask you for the following things. The first is obviously the paper itself, the manuscript. You'll be asked to provide an abstract, which is a typically a short summary paper. Varies in length somewhere between 100 to 250 words. You're asked to provide keywords. And essentially these are words that people can use to search on when they come to do research on the topic that you've written on. So you want to be mindful about what those should be. Some of them are going to be straightforward. If I'm writing a paper on Ethiopia, for

example, I'll make one of my keywords 'Ethiopia'. So when someone is searching for papers on Ethiopia, they'll come across it. So that's what the keywords do.

You're asked to provide information on your authors, who they are, their email addresses and so on. This is partly so journals can track who is submitting to the journal. It's also because we want to make sure in fact everybody who is on the paper as an author, really is an author on the paper. So that's why they do that.

And then finally, you're required to make a series of declarations along the lines of, honestly, this really is my work. We've researched it ourselves. I may be asked to indicate whether or not you have conflicts of interest. You can only submit a paper to one journal at a time, so there's a declaration about that, and so on. So those items are all pretty much standard across all journals.

Other journals will sometimes allow you or require you to do some other material. One of which is maybe supplementary appendices. As you guys know, journals oftentimes have restrictions on the length of the paper. You may have more results that you can't fit into that. It's perfectly appropriate to have an appendix where you actually, provide those results. Some journals request a cover letter. Some don't. Some make it optional. At the Journal of African Economies (JAE) it's optional. Sometimes people are asked to input Journal of Economic Literature codes (JEL codes). Again, these are codes people use to search on papers. Some journals will ask you for your figures and tables into the manuscript itself. Some people will actually ask them to upload it to somewhere. So essentially when you go on to submit the paper, this is basically the list of material you need to provide.

So it can be a question for you guys to say, well, what happens next? And generally what happens is there is an editor within the journal who does an initial assessment. In the case of the Journal of African Economies, that's me. And what I do is I actually read or scan every single paper that comes in. We get somewhere between 400 and 500 papers a year. That's a lot of papers to look at. But I do a quick read checking for suitability concepts. Okay. What I mean by this. Not that long ago, I got a paper submitted to the Journal that talked about the chemical properties of sodium bicarbonate. I have no idea why those authors submitted a science paper to our journal (JAE). Probably somebody made a mistake that was just a very straightforward one that would not be appropriate. Another example – a paper not long ago, someone wanted to estimate the relationship between inflation and unemployment in a country. You know, the kind of a Phillips curve type of relationship. They had observations for ten years, annual observations. They had four regressors in the equations they were estimating. Clearly, badly under identified, underpowered. The paper was never really completed, had to be redone totally from scratch. Again, you can guess what I did with that one.

I then send the papers in one of our managing editors. So at JAE at the moment we have about 9 or 10. Most of all the journals of somewhere between 9 and 10 and 15. And the managing editors are the people who handle the papers. They are assigned based on their expertise. So for example we have several people at JAE who work on labour, they deal with the labour papers, we have editors who work on trade, and so on and so forth. And this first review that you're going to see is really, really important. They read the full paper but they focus on three questions. Is the research interesting, novel, important? I read your introduction and say this is something new that we haven't seen before. Is the research likely of interest to the readers of our journal? Okay. People who will actually want to know about this? And does the paper appear to be competently executed, which really means, in terms of the writing, the methods, the

econometrics. At this point, the managing editor might decide to do something called a 'desk rejection', which means they reject the paper without having it go to reviewers. In our case, we'd like to provide a brief explanation as to why we're doing that. Or they send it out to reviewers. And normally journals send it to either two referees, or sometimes three. It's important to note that median desk rejection rates are very, very high. Across all development economics journals, it's currently around 75%. In other words, three quarters of the papers that get submitted don't make it past the managing editors. Now we'll come back in a little while to a couple of things that you guys can focus on in your own papers, to be aware of this. But it's also important to recognise that basically this is what happens very generally. And there are two main reasons, one of which is if I ask a managing editor to look at the paper and I think "I can already see three or four flaws in the paper, which mean the paper really can't get published in its current form". It makes no sense to send the paper out to reviewers to wait three or four months for those reviewers to come back and tell me what I already know. Okay, it just means you're left hanging around for four months before getting a decision rather than getting one straight away. So on the one hand it's kind of crummy to actually get a rejection back so fast after the paper is submitted. But it's better to have that happen then to be forced to hang on for months and months waiting for the decision.

The second reason for this is, to be honest, that there is only a limited pool of qualified referees. All journals, including ours, find it difficult at times to actually get people to willingly agree to act as referees, which means we have to use our pool of referees, very judiciously. And so that's the other reason why, in fact, desk rejections are so high. I've had papers desk rejected. I'm sure there are people in this room who've had papers desk rejected. I think many of you guys will know the work of Angus Deaton, famous development economist, Nobel Prize laureate. Not only do I know for a fact that he has had papers that have been desk rejected. He once got a desk rejection 15 minutes after he submitted a paper. And his rejection came so fast, he actually wrote back to the journal and said, I'm sorry, there must be something wrong with your software, you just rejected my paper. And the journal wrote back and said, "oh no, there is no mistake. We are rejecting your paper." The paper was on the United States, called 'Depths of despair'. It was this incredibly powerful, important paper in public health. It has around 4000 citations, so they clearly ended up having to print it. All of which is to say, is that if you've ever felt pain having a desk reject, you are not alone, definitely not alone.

So the managing editor decides to desk reject or to send it to reviewers. If they send it to reviewers, some journals just say "take a look at this paper". Other journals are more specific. In our case, we'll ask our reviewers for much more detail about what we're looking for in the reports. Essentially, we're looking for three things. First of all, what is the contribution of the paper? How does it advance knowledge? What are we learning from this paper that we didn't know before? And importantly, are there people who are interested in this? Is it going to be a broad audience, a narrow audience? Maybe it's a narrow audience, but they are intellectual. Tell us, in some sense, what is that contribution and who is interested.

The second part is what we described as essential points. What are the features of the paper? Is there a bit that is going to prevent it from being publishable now, or potentially ever published? To put it kind of more colloquially, what we're asking for here is to say, are there serious flaws in the paper or are there fatal flaws. Flaws which are so bad that the paper has to be desk rejected. Or are there serious problems with the paper but we think those problems can be addressed? And we think the paper makes an important contribution. So that's what we mean by the essential points. And then the suggestions are essentially everything else. Are there other ideas

of thoughts you have which could make the paper better? Maybe those suggestions are actually asking authors for additional work, but we're all mindful that the papers are getting very long in Economics. So we're also going to tell our reviewers going forward that they can also say, you know, there are things that the authors could take out, for sure. Paper goes to reviewers, the reviewers write back. And at this point what happens next? There are a few possibilities, one of which is that reviewers might write back and say, "this is an awesome paper, you should publish it". That would be great. Honestly, it doesn't happen very often. What happens more often is the managing editors can say, "well, I can see this paper has potential. I can see where it has some problems. I think those problems can be addressed. So I can allow the authors to revise and resubmit the paper." Or instead, the editor might say, "this paper's insufficiencies are so severe. I can't see how it can be fixed, reject." If the revisions are requested, what the managing editor does is they send the authors a letter, they attach the referee reports, but they also should be clear about what it is that the journal needs. But a good editor will actually give you guidance at this point about what are essential points. What are some one more optional ones. When you then revise the manuscript and send it back in, this is something that I can't emphasise enough, you need to provide a point by point response to what the comments or the concerns of the referees have been. And there are a couple of reasons for this. Imagine you're asked to referee a paper that you spent six hours on the report and you got the paper back to look at it the second time, and you have no idea if the authors have actually taken it seriously. If that happens to me, I'm really mad at it. I don't mind doing all the referee work, but I tend to get annoyed if it's thrown out. Okay, so part is kind of just basically professional courtesy.

The other part of it is that if you do a proper point by point response, you're going to increase the likelihood that the paper gets accepted. And the reason for that is the managing editor and also the reviewers can see, okay, this was what was identified as a problem. This is how I solved it. This is where in the paper you're going to find the solutions. So you can think at this point, it's almost as if you're having a conversation with the editor and the reviewers. And the better you make that conversation, the more persuasive your solutions are. The paper might go back to reviewers after you've done this. The editor might make a decision. It depends a little bit on the status of the paper, and also on the journal. So that's how the editorial process generally works.

Now we're going to talk about, in particular, how you could actually structure your papers to maximize the likelihood that at least, the very least, you can get it past the desk reject, ideally, you're going to get it accepted. In my mind, the structure of a good applied paper looks something like this.

You have an introduction. You may have a model or conceptual frame. I mean depending on the topic. If it's an applied paper, you definitely have a section on context on data and methods. You have one section where you describe your results. Let's say descriptive statistics, core results in the paper, maybe some robustness work. You then maybe have another section on extensions and then conclusion, references, supplementary methods. So for example, when I've reported on the results of randomised control trials (RCTs) that I've run, the context data methods are describing the RCT. My results, my core results are like my basic idea and then here is the core result of what I was asking my RCT to address. And maybe, for example, in my extension section, that's where I talk about the mechanisms that I'm applying to my results. That type of structure. But what I want to emphasize, if we go back for a sec, within this, is to go back to my description of what the managing editors are doing when they're looking at papers. They too are getting all the papers, they're reading them, but they're focusing in particular on whether or not

this is a novel or interesting question. Have the authors been reasonably rigorous in terms of their methodology and results?

So in other words, that's telling you it's really, really important to get the interaction right. It's really, really important to get this context data reference right. But if those things are unsatisfactory when managing editors are reading those, that's the sort of thing you're going to pick up on and increase the likelihood of desk rejection.

So let's just talk a little bit more about what we want to see in those sections. And the way in which I think about the introduction and how we or you all can write these is the following. Think about an economics seminar you've gone to fairly recently. Maybe think about some of the presentations that you guys were hearing here at the CSAE Conference. When people begin their presentations, they typically begin by saying, I'm going to tell you a story. There is this big issue that I think many other people perceive as really critical. Here is something we know about this issue. But what we know isn't fully worked out. It's not convincing. Maybe people have done the best that they can with the data they have. Maybe they've done this with their methods and so on and so forth. So given that, I'm going to use the following tools, data model econometrics to provide you with new information on this question or issue. And by doing so, I'm going to tell you this is what we learned. So you guys think about that in terms of the way in which people structure their introductions to their seminars or their conference talks. And convert that into a structure for your introduction. And it looks something like this.

Motivate your paper with a description of the “big issue” that your paper addresses. What is the important question? What is known? What is not known? Say one to two paragraphs on that. Then clearly state what your research question is. Describe your empirical approach. Tell your readers what your key results are in one or two paragraphs, and then explain how your results are adding to the knowledge that we already have. Sometimes people also put things in about policy relevance or robustness checks, limitations that could go in the introduction or not. Sometimes people put a roadmap in saying “in section two we do this, in section three, we do that.” So again, that's kind of more up to you. But these first five points are ones which I would emphasise you rebalance, to actually really try and follow in order to basically make your introductions the best. It takes a lot of time to get this right. You have to do it over. Oftentimes people do a monthly draft and they do some work on the paper and then go back to the introduction, and so on. In my case, it's not unusual for me to rewrite my introductions five or seven times. The real reason is if you want to get past this desk reject part, it's really important to get that in good shape.

One question that arises from this is do you need a separate literature review section? And I think the answer increasingly, not only in development economics, but in economics in general is no. To be clear, you need to know the literature. You need to know the literature because that's how you're going to be writing those first two paragraphs. You don't need an eight or ten page literature review in the paper itself. Providing the key references in your introduction works fine, but mostly long literature reviews are just taking up a lot of space that could otherwise go into results, robustness checks, and so on and so forth. In the paper I described earlier, unfortunately, where the author was looking at the relationship between inflation and unemployment, the literature review begins in the 1930s and it went on for eight or nine pages. And to be honest, I felt really sorry for the author because they've clearly put a lot of effort into writing this, but honestly, it really wasn't adding anything to the paper that they couldn't put into the first two paragraphs. So unless the journal is telling you specifically you need to do this, I would not do that.

The next one I want to emphasise is your methods section. And here I'll just work through all the bullet points. First of all, tell us about the context in which you're doing this study. If you have done a series of surveys on Western Uganda, the first thing you want to do is tell your readers where did you do the surveys in Western Uganda. Tell us a little bit about the place. Give us some context. If it's a study about agricultural issues, tell us about what are the cropping patterns, what are the livelihoods people are living on? What are income or consumption of poverty levels like. So all of which allows your readers to get a picture in their mind of the place in which you've done the study. So that's what I mean by the context.

Then explain your data. What are the sources? How did you obtain it? If you did a survey yourself or your partner started doing a survey? You should say so. You should always explain how that survey is implemented. If you are downloading data from world government indicators from the World Bank, explain which indicators you used, how you access them, how you then use those data. Be clear on your outcome variables, explain how it's defined, explain how it's constructed. Do the same with your key covariates, how you're defining them, how are you constructing them? And then tell us what is the model that you are estimating. To be clear on this point, if you're using a standard econometric model, you just have to say so and then maybe you provide one or two references. If you're using, let's say, a Heckman two stage career sample selection regression model, you don't have to rederive Heckman's results from the paper a long time ago, right? You just say we're using this model.

Be clear about how you construct your standard errors. This is particularly important if you're using microdata, and the survey comes from a cluster design. That was important to understand errors. If you're using or feel you would need to provide specification tests and for example people submit papers using time series data that is often very important, tell us what they are. But again, you don't have to derive what the actual test is, just give the reference. All of which is to say is that one of our managing editors and our referees are reading your paper, understanding your methods is really important. If you have done a really good job on the methods section, the results section, by definition, are going to be plausible. If you don't, it becomes very difficult for us to work out whether or not you've got some really real results, or whether or not the results have come out in a way which is kind of messed up.

And then the final part of this is a note about tables. Poorly laid out tables significantly detract from your paper, making reviewers and editors less receptive to your work. I was looking at a paper not that long ago. The paper said my key regressor is a variable which I can call GRX3. I had really kind of no idea what the GRX3 was. Every time I looked at the table I saw GRX3, I had to flip back from the paper and find what GRX3 was, then went back to the table again, and by the time I did this three or four times in the space of 10 minutes, I was getting really annoyed. Okay, why couldn't the author just written out the name of the variable in the introduction?

So think about what makes for a good table and a really good table in an applied paper is self-explanatory. In other words, without reading anything in your text, I could be able to understand everything you do just from the table itself. So what does that mean? Well, first of all, important things like sample size, R-squared, other key regression diagnostics which may vary depending on, what type of estimate you're using. The table having the notes should make it clear how the outcome variable was estimated. So I said earlier use self-explanatory labels for your explanatory variables, symbols, cryptic deviations just don't work. Choose sensible units for your variables. So you don't have coefficients like 13,576 which is quite hard to interpret or 0.00453 which is also not so intuitive. And the one which I intensely dislike is the coefficient of 0.000. Okay. I have no idea what that means. Yeah. Adjust your units so your coefficients make

sense. I have a strong preference for people reporting standard errors. Standard errors give me a very quick intuitive grasp of how precise your estimates are. It also allows me to make up my mind about whether I think it's using appropriate levels of statistics.

And finally I would encourage you to include the mean of your dependent variable. For example, I'm looking at results on labour supply. I'm doing an RCT where I'm trying to encourage people to work more hours. The labour supply in my control group is 20 hours a week. The coefficient of my treatment is 3.2. That tells me right away that basically the effects of the treatment is to raise labour supply by 3.2 hours per week. And that's a roughly 15% improvement. And I get all of that just by looking at the table. So that's why that mean dependent variable is really helpful.

A couple of other things to end on. It's just talk a little bit more in generally about the state of development economics journals and how this might influence your submission strategies. So there are ten main development economics journals, I've put them up on the slide. Across these ten, as of 2023, the last year that we fully have data. Across those ten journals, it was something like 10,000 submissions. Acceptance rates varies across journals. So you can see on the right hand side, the average across all of those ten is 8%. So take your pick. That is like 800 papers getting accepted per year. That sounded promising. It also means at least for first submissions that's something like 9200 are getting rejected. With variations across different journals.

You then might say to yourself, looking at this table, how should or could that influence in terms of where I should or should not submit. I would encourage you to do the following. First of all, just ask yourself, is the paper relevant to the aims of the journal? I've been the chief editor for a number of months at JAE, I've rejected three papers already that were papers written about manufacturing firms in China. For example, one is estimating the company's production margin for like 200 Chinese enterprises somewhere in western China. That obviously has nothing to do with African economies. If the authors had actually read out guidelines correctly and looked at the aims of the Journal, they would have known this is going to be a poor fit. So that's what we mean about looking at what the journal says it's interested in, and making sure your paper matches up.

The second is to say, does the journal have a record of publishing papers in your area? And this speaks to the point about audience. So, for example, you're writing a paper on macro issues, let's say in one of the CFA's groups in West Africa. You are thinking of submitting it to the Journal of Development Economics. There has been nothing ever published in the Journal of Development Economics on that type of topic. That gives you a signal, in fact, this may be poor fit for your paper. On the other hand, as you finish writing your paper, and you're looking for references and you say, you know what? I've cited four or five papers from the JAE which have been published in the past five or six years. That's giving you some indication that it might actually be a good fit and that the journal is generally interested in papers in that type of area. And so the last point on this is that oftentimes people worry about relative prestige journals. There are a gazillion different ways in which this gets measured, some of which are unsatisfactory. Honestly, if I were you guys, I would worry less about the prestige part and more about the fit. Is this a journal where the editors are going to be interested in what you are doing. I would use that as a link to guide where you actually submit things.

Final point, what are the things that are currently keeping at least some journal editors up at night? I think there are two older issues and one newer one, which are worth mentioning. One of which is plagiarism, which at least in economics and public economics, it's not particularly a big issue, largely because our journal and most other journals basically have software that

checks for plagiarism in papers. We do worry about replication. Again, there's some variations across journals in how they handle this. The important thing for you guys to bear in mind is when you submit your paper is to go back and check all your code one more time, make sure the code is actually generating results. And then heavily annotate your code. So in other words, if you're writing in R or you're writing in Stata, you're uploading your data and you do some variables and then you produce table one, okay. In your code it should say "run this to produce table one." Similarly table two, three, supplementary material, and so on. So in other words, when the paper gets accepted, they ask you to upload the data you used or files you used to generate results. You actually have all that information. The way things stand right now it varies a lot by journal. The journals of the American Economic Association are incredibly particular about what you have to submit for publication purposes. My most recent paper accepted in one of those journals, it took us three months to get the replication package right to make them happy. There are other journals that are really nice and say make your data available at application. We are somewhere in between them because we asked people to submit those materials, if the paper gets accepted. The final point, one which I'm sure you guys are very familiar with right now are issues around generative artificial intelligence, and that how that might affect paper preparation and publication. And to be clear on this issue, one of the or maybe the complicating factor which makes this a hard issue to address is generative artificial intelligence encompasses a very wide range of uses. So for example, if after you've written a paper, you put it into a grammar checker, either in Word or in commercial programs like Grammarly and others, let's say to check your grammar and really help your writing. Technically that's AI, okay? It's using algorithms to actually generate suggestions, for improving your grammar, checking your spelling. As far as we're concerned, at the Journal of African Economies, that is totally fine. But what is not fine is you using ChatGPT to write your introduction. Okay, the introduction really has to come from you. And so what we're moving towards and what other journals are moving towards, is adding to declarations that authors make when they submit their papers to clarify their use of these technologies. As I say, where a lot of this seems to be writing is stuff is around like improving grammar, spelling, sentence structures that sounds generally okay, but that all comes in at the very end. Actually, after you've written the paper yourself. And so part of the declaration is to say, no, honestly, it was really us who actually wrote this paper, and not some of these algorithms.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

I've been talking for about 25 minutes. Why don't we just open it up for questions or thoughts people might have.

Questions

Thank you, John. This is extremely interesting. I have a couple of questions. The first one is around the potential of gatekeeping. Are reviewers allowed to make decisions on manuscripts, such that the editor does not even care. I mean, the sense that you send the paper out to a reviewer and the reviewer says "I don't think this is a good paper," and then the editor just tells you that the reviewer doesn't think it's a good paper without the editor taking a position. I think that is something I see a lot. If you ask why did you give us all the editors? When editors actually spend some time with the reviewers comments and they tell you this is what you could fix. I

appreciate that. They tell you, this is what you should do, this is what you should not do. But if you just take everything from the reviewer, what is your opinion on that?

The second comment is related to the first, so one thing I always worry about when I submit a paper to a journal, and then it passes desk rejection, and then it goes for reviewers, and then it comes back and is rejected, and the key comment is that it is a poor fit. It makes me wonder, what does it get you? Think of the details. How does it bypass the editors and go to reviewers if it isn't a good fit?

And then the third point is related to, I like your guide on reviewers on what it's like to review a paper. So my question here is, so if you are the editor, you think the paper is good to go for review. Can the reviewer challenge the contribution of that paper? I just want you to look that up, because I feel like if it gets to the editor, it means that it's good enough to go for reviews, but it comes back and the reviews says "I don't see any contribution of the paper," I ask myself what is the function of the editor for that first step for sending it out for review?

John Hoddinott

I'm going to be just kind of perfectly frank and open when answering these questions. And if I miss a part of it, please let me know and I'll go back to it. So in our case, when I assign papers to managing editors, I do as much as I can to get the editor who's got expertise in the topic, to actually be the person who reads it. There's a lot of whole reasons for that, one of which is this point has to be the best fit. Because they've got the expertise they can and they can actually judge that much better than I can. So a consequence of that is they also should be reasonably adept at actually finding the right reviewers for the paper. And if it's gotten past the desk rejects, ideally you don't get a rejection subsequently based on the poor fit. If that's going to happen, that should happen at the initial point when it's submitted.

On the other hand, to be honest, sometimes you make mistakes. And particularly if the paper is at the edge of our area of expertise. We might think this is a solid paper. It's got potential. But then the reviewers write back and essentially tell us it's not. So we try and minimize that, obviously we're not going to be able to guarantee that. In terms of gatekeeping. Let's be very clear. We take our reviewers work within it very seriously, but in our case, certainly the managing editors are ones who have discretion and decision making power, about whether or not to accept, reject, ask to revise and resubmit. And so what that means is that sometimes reviewers will come back and if nothing else, they just kind of feel sorry for the authors. They honestly think really the paper should be rejected. But they say, well, I'll do a revise and resubmit as my recommendation. And maybe both reviewers do that. And then the managing editor looks at it and says, honestly, I look at all the concerns that my reviewers have. They're kind of trying to be nice to the authors, but I think it's just too much to ask in terms of revising, so they actually do a reject, even though the recommendation to revise and resubmit.

But it also works the other way that we've had papers where the editor thinks the reviewer was harsh in their assessment. Sometimes, to be honest, the reviewers can be wrong. And so we've certainly had cases where we've sent the paper back when someone said reject, maybe somebody else has said revise and resubmit. And we actually sent the papers back to them.

So the key part here is that we absolutely take the reviewing report very seriously. But the reviewer reports are designed to guide the decision making. So I think your first question again about your second question, I'm not sure if I got the third one.

Questions

So mostly you've covered it, then I'm just looking at the schema of what you expect from reviewers, that they should give you a comment on what the contribution is, because you can also say that if that passes your eyes, if it doesn't make a contribution, that should be clear. I mean, you've mentioned that sometimes you're not an expert.

John Hoddinott

And so for example, what happens on that one is that I might have knowledge of a particular subject. But obviously my knowledge is seven years old. So I think this paper is has a novel contribution, but the reviewer comes back and says, oh, in fact there's all these other papers published recently which basically supersede them. I say we try and get it right. We don't always.

Questions

I would like to ask you first about the reject as a meter option. How often do you use it? How useful do you see it? How can you use it and what is the success rate? And the second one that is, regarding the case in which you get the conflicting efforts from reviewers, what is the most important factor in this case for you to decide if you contact a certain reviewer, or if you will, if your experience equals the experience of the two reviewers or whatever.

John Hoddinott

So, your first question, what is the likelihood of getting accepted if the paper goes out and gets past the desk reject? I knew somebody was going to ask this. I mean, I'm guessing the numbers are because I can't remember for certain off the top of my head. I think at the moment we accept about 6% of submissions, of all submissions, we desk reject about 75%. So kind of six divided by 25% is roughly 1 in 4 will get accepted. But that includes papers that go out for review but the recommendation is reject and not revise and resubmit. So the 25% is probably the lower bound, but you don't want to go into the more important question is what do we do when we get conflicting reports from reviews?

And they're basically there is not one single thing to do. It's a combination of following, one of which is we look at the quality of the reviews we have. The vast majority of our reviewers are conscientious. They do a good job on the reports. You know I've done a lot of editorial work at a lot of the journals and what we see at the Journal of African Economies is often much better than what I've seen in other journals, but that's not always the case. So you might get a basically a very good, thoughtful review that says one thing, and to be honest, a really crummy review that makes a different recommendation. So that's the first part. The second part is if you get these two really good reviews. But they come with biometrically opposite conclusions. Either the managing editors can decide or they can bring in one of our associate editors. And essentially, in this case, we're very transparent, we say this paper has come in, we have conflicting reports, could you give us a basically a third opinion to help us come to a decision? So that's how we

ended up with those, I wish I could get the numbers that are off the top of my head, but I don't have them.

Questions

My question is about publishing in general interest journals. And I guess there's two parts. One of them is, I guess some development, research can be general interest because it's so novel and everybody should go about it. Or, might actually be studying topics that aren't development economics, but it happens to be in Africa. So really it should not go to a development journal but to a journal of general interests.

My experience with the second point where if you did the same project, let's say, a lab experiment. If you do it with American students, it's of interest. If you do it in Africa it is somehow development economics about the same experiments. So any recommendations on both of these parts.

John Hoddinott

So I think this is the question where you've got a paper in some sense, particularly when you've done kind of the first really great version that you're sending to journals, where should we send it to? You send it directly to a development economics journal, you send it maybe to a journal, which is a wide or general interest, or an economic journal. And to be honest, here, I'll just kind of talk about my personal experience, which has been all over the place. I've had papers which I thought were good, that were sent to general interest journals and they just got rejected outright. And I've had one or two papers which honestly weren't very good, economics was a long shot, we submitted it and it went through. Because I think what I would say to you guys is a lot of it depends on kind of your realistic clear eyed assessment of what the paper really is about. And also, to be honest, what is the timeframe over which you're working. What I mean by that is, if you're looking at a particular issue that economists have been curious about for a long time but nobody's updating it. And done work on let's say Zambia. And in fact, you actually have really novel results. And so some people would send it to a general economics journal. On the other hand, if you're doing an RCT about improving learning in primary schools or something like that, unless it truly something novel that's unlikely to fly with us. So, in terms of your first question, a part of the answer to your question is be really clear about what your contribution of knowledge is. And what that might justify in terms of what types of journals you send to.

And then the second part is to recognise that basically submitting papers to journals and getting rejected. And then resubmitting and getting rejected. It might be for you is that you're working in a field which is moving very fast. So if you go down that process, basically someone else might publish in the meantime. If you're doing something where you actually trying to get a promotion or tenure, that may also work against you.

So I think my key message here is, from time to time, it's a really good idea to see what happens. But it's also a useful idea as you're looking at your paper is it think really carefully about where its contribution is and use that notion of the contribution to guide where you submit.

Questions

How to convince reviewers that something done in Africa is not automatically developed? Just because it is Africa it doesn't have to be development economics. If it was about the US it would be economics, just because it's Africa it's development economics, even though it's really not development economics, in general there are behavioural issues. How do we convince people that Africans are, you know, people like everybody else?

John Hoddinott

I think some people, unfortunately, are just close minded about that. I think the other part, though, is this is where your introduction is really important. Because that's the place where you can convince somebody about that. Why this is an important issue. Why this is novel important work. So I think that addresses your question.

Questions

So I have two questions. You highlighted that the rejection rates for top journals are high. This is fuelling the growth of the predatory journals. Because when you reject people that's fuelling predatory journals. How do we bypass that? Is there a global standard for these journals, because they keep rejecting when other journals are accepting?

Second. What kind of papers to do you accept more?

John Hoddinott

Okay, I can answer those. So the first one was this question of the issue of predatory journals. Is everyone familiar with what these are? Essentially, they often require a payment for publishing. They claim to be peer reviewed. But they're really not. And they'll do things like, I got a solicitation for one not that long ago that said, publish in our peer reviewed journal, we promise a turnaround, acceptance within 24 hours, which is telling me something already. It's a \$200 submission fee. But we have a special right now. So for \$250, you could get two papers in at the same time. Okay. It is difficult to understate my dislike of these journals. Because they really are predatory. They're saying "pay me money and you can put a line in your CV for publishing". I would strongly encourage you guys to avoid these as much as you can. In the sense that they really don't actually add credibility to your CV. I must do a caveat. So but also the papers that people just generally don't cite. So in terms of you reaching people with your knowledge and ideas, which is something that researchers want to do, it's not going to work out well that way.

If you're uncertain on a journal, there are a number of places online where you can actually look up a list of predatory journals, and I would encourage you to do that. I also recognise that some of you may be stuck in places where you have, let's say, a department head who is not terribly switched on about these types of issues, essentially says to you "get a paper published anywhere, if you want to get promotion or pay rise". And honestly, I'm really sorry that some of you get stuck in that situation. The more you can resist, the better. It's not going particularly painful in the short term, but they're not going to generally help you very much in the long term. So that's the predatory terms.

In terms of topics. One of the things we've featured in the Journal of Economies is obviously targeting African economy issues. We're very broad on what we consider. So we consider both micro and macro papers. Within micro, they can be RCTs, they can be panel studies. They could be even interesting cross-section studies, if the study is going really well. So we don't have a strong initial screen in terms of topics. Having said that, within some of those broad areas, there are some parts where in fact there's quite a big body of knowledge already. So one example is many of you guys will be familiar with trade theory is the notion for gravity model of trade.

There are hundreds of these gravity model estimations for every country in the world. Okay. So a paper that you write that says I'm going to write a gravity model about trade between Ghana and Nigeria. Honestly, it's been done or it's been done so many times or something similar, it's very hard to meet that criteria of novel contribution. So topics can be wide, but we want to actually see people do something new and not substantially something which other people have already one.

Questions

I have two questions. Firstly I wonder to what extent do journals like the JAE consider descriptive of papers where there is no causal research in the paper but still show interesting findings.

My second question is, what to what extent do you consider global comparison papers like, for each continent there would be two countries, maybe only one is on the African continent, but still they compare their findings.

John Hoddinott

So the first question is about purely descriptive papers. And I want to start with some initial thoughts and examples. I believe that there's almost no one in this room who smokes cigarettes. I'm not going to a poll or anything like that, but I'm willing to believe that the vast majority of you don't smoke, and you don't smoke because you believe cigarettes are unhealthy. The basis of our belief on that is a paper published in the mid-1950s, a non-randomised, non-RCT study where the result essentially is a series of histograms looking at the dose response between people smoking and ...

That has been an incredibly powerful paper in terms of public health. It is the ultimate descriptive paper with the most rudimentary statistics. Second example. Some of you guys may have come across a 19th century doctor named John Snow, who was the guy who was the first person to find a potential link between contaminated water and cholera. If you go back and look at his book and he doesn't even have a histogram, is a table, that makes this comparison, but then in the rest of the passage is where you work out why he makes that compelling take. So the first point of this is to say is that descriptive papers can actually be incredibly informative, you wouldn't reject a paper solely because it was descriptive, on the other hand, the bar for these things is actually really high. Yeah. So the paper that just says we did this survey and I'm going to tell you what the characteristics of 200 departments are, that's not a sufficient novel contribution to actually justify publication. So I would certainly consider a descriptive paper, but my bar for accepting is very high.

But the second part in terms of comparative studies. We certainly have papers where people said, I'm going to look at six countries in South Asia and Senegal. And then I'm going to say this makes it a paper on African economies. And honestly it's not really a paper on African economies. It's hard for me to be strict or have a hard and fast rule. But the key part of this paper really has to be about Africa. And that's kind of the guiding point whether or not we look at them.

Questions

As editors, you have an incentive to react back to our papers, but as reviewers you have no incentive. And when I review a paper, I get nothing from it. But I always feel strange with tracking systems, where you submit a paper, and then you can see that it's going for review. And you can see it is back from review, and then it stays with the editor for about three months. Don't think that is something you could do better. Sometimes editors sit on a paper and this frustrates authors because they are candidates on the job market, some authors are at institutions where they need papers to get a promotion. What are your thoughts on that?

My second question, it's more contextual to the JAE. What is your strategy direction? Do you have like a strategic direction, now I know you are new, but do you have like a direction. I understand you want to go for the effectiveness and efficiency. I mean process, but I'm asking because I think somebody asked what kind of papers you publish, do you have a strategy, should we focus on this big picture in Africa? Agriculture, maybe health, but that's something you never consider.

John Hoddinott

So, I can answer both of those. I think on the first point, your remarks are very well taken. I think many journal editors are acutely aware of the issues you're describing. It's the solving which is really hard. It is one of the reasons why the desk rejection rates are now much higher than they were in the past, because it's this consensus that, honestly, if you don't think the paper is going to work, you should just simply tell them. It is generally very hard to get reviewers of papers. There are people who we write to ask would you want to review this paper? And they simply never respond. And then we follow up, follow up, and then eventually try to find somebody else. One of my colleagues has a paper now where she's had seven people turn down in the last few years.

And then once they got the paper, typically people are asked to submit their reports between a month and two months. Although, oftentimes that spreads to three. But then you have to chase up people to just forget about that. They are ill, maybe something happens and they can't go through the paper after all, and that strings things out a little. At JAE what we're trying to do is we're trying to do a better job of tracking those processes and intervening ruthlessly. We're also going to make better use of our associate editors to come in and provide reports. I've told our managing editors that if they get one really good report and it's very clear what the reports suggests, they can make a decision based on that and not wait for a second report. But to be very clear, the problem you're describing is one which is clearly a problem across economics. There's this really, really long process between papers going out to reviewers and there being editorial decisions. The fundamental problem is there's just a shortage of good qualified

reviewers. And so people are trying to make changes where they can, but honestly that's where they are at the moment.

In terms of our strategic direction, we've never actually written this down. So I'm essentially making this up. I would see our strategic mission of the Journal [of African Economies] being two things, one of which is to publish very good work on African economic issues. African issues defined in a very broad way. We are one of the few journals, for example, that still publishes papers on macroeconomics. A lot of the other development journals actually do very, very little of that now. The second part is we want to create a venue where African scholars feel comfortable submitting new papers. We hold them to the same standard as everyone else because that's just the right thing to do. But we're very conscious that we have people coming from environments where they don't necessarily have a lot of resources and support. So even, for example, as much as I can, I get my managing editors when they're desk rejecting papers to actually give a number of suggestions. So I had an example a couple of days ago where they said, look the papers not going to fly, but they wrote to the author and said "we can't take your paper, but here about five things you could think about doing in the future." So there's kind of dual focus. The Journal of African Economies, it's generally a venue for African scholars to submit to get good feedback. Those are, I think, our overarching mission.

Questions

I want to take you back to this question you talked about on the one side causality and on the other side descriptive. That's because in the middle you're interested in causality but can't find a good instrument. You do apply the composition but you're still describing. Where does that fit?

John Hoddinott

I think this is where can you do as good a job as possible to convince me that this is a causal relationship? In terms of, for example, if you're using an instrumental variable strategy, do you have plausible instruments?... We definitely publish these types of papers. But again the bar is high. You're going to have to do a good job of this causality.

Questions

Do you have a sense of who reads the papers? At the Journal.

John Hoddinott

Can you be a bit more specific?

Questions

It's broad in purpose because whenever we see those tables. Yeah. Always see them from the perspective of people submitting. Yeah. So it seems like the end goal is to be published, but the end goal is to be read. So is it policymakers? Is that people who live in Africa? Is it people from all the world?

John Hoddinott

I can't give you a perfect answer, I can give you a partial answer. We have a series of agreements with Oxford University Press to ensure the dissemination of journals within African universities and that becomes an important part of our readership.

Second part is we do track citation metrics. So not necessarily who is reading but how much papers are being read. And like many journals, what we find, basically, there's a lot of papers that don't get very many citations, and then a few papers that go huge numbers. And that's what we observe in our journals and that's not atypical at journals in general.

Questions

To what extent does the editor's decision depend on the other papers that the Journal has already published. Are you at a disadvantage in submitting something that's already been written on

John Hoddinott

Honestly, it can go one of two ways. One of which is when two or three people put papers in on a similar topic and we think, oh, this is great, people are really interested in this right now. On the other hand, this is where my valuable trade model comes in. There are lots of papers that concentrate on this and you say I'm doing it for one more country. And in that case it's going to depend on how novel the contribution is.

Questions

I just was wondering, as the chief editor, is there any research questions you're eager to have at your paper. Or that no one has submitted work on?

John Hoddinott

I'm going to be very clear that we look at all papers. If I was to just off the top of my head, pick up a couple things. One of which is if you look at how Africa is changing over time, what struck me, is actually how rapidly the continent is urbanising. I can't remember statistics for any of the

countries, but it's clear urbanization is happening at faster rates in Africa than it has historically in South Asia, and certain parts of Europe. That's creating a whole series of new questions. How are people making a living? What are the factors which allow some people to migrate to cities and be successful? Why aren't others? How are labour markets changing? Are there aspects of labour markets which we can improve? To be clear, I'm not advocating that you guys should do RCTs on labour markets, right? It's more saying that I see in my life that this is an age. Urbanization is happening. It's got lots of economic drivers and consequences. I'm not sure we understand those as well as we should.

Second, we all know this, there are significant issues around climate change. How would those factors have a changing effect on a whole range of economic outcomes. And what are some of consequences of that. ... The environmental questions, how that relates to things like production in agriculture, but maybe impacts the health or schooling.. But again, it's also the case that people are already starting to work on this. So for example, if you work on the area of education or learning. A lot of people are writing about writing papers where they basically get lots of information on schooling, they get lots of information on climates, temperature shocks as well, stick the two together and get some progressions. So I see that big general topics are really important, but to recognize that people are already starting to do a lot of thinking.

I just want to end by saying this session was an experiment, we weren't sure how it was going to end up. Thank you all for your questions, they've been really helpful and I hope you guys have found this session helpful too.