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[GUEST EDITORIAL]

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Taking stock and charting the way forward – Where to next for the SAJOT?

The 80th anniversary of the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA) gave opportunity to reflect on the development of the South African Journal of Occupational Therapy (SAJOT) from its early beginnings to what it is today. Key developments in the SAJOT's publishing journey have been captured to highlight their contribution to raising its quality and visibility[1, 2, 3]. With this growth trajectory in mind and considering the approaching leadership change of the OTASA Publications Committee, it is timely to take stock of the SAJOT's current standing and consider where it needs to go.

Quality and Visibility

The SAJOT holds a distinctive position as the *only* occupational therapy journal published in Africa. Although its primary focus is occupational therapy research that has relevance for 'service delivery in Africa'[4], growth in both readership and author submissions outside South Africa and Africa indicate that its scholarly contribution extends far beyond our continent[5].This is largely due to the open access model along with successful listing on international platforms. Journal visibility goes hand-in-hand with quality; if a journal meets best practice standards for scholarly publishing, applications for indexing on other platforms are more likely to have a positive outcome.

In line with the global movement to make information available to all who want to access it, a bold decision was taken in 2023 to adopt a diamond open access model. Diamond open access 'is an equitable approach to scholarly publishing that supports free sharing of information and knowledge as a 'public good'[6]. This means that articles are freely available to readers and authors do not have to pay publishing fees[6]. By taking this stand, the SAJOT is contributing to a broader agenda to democratise access to occupational therapy knowledge generated in and for Africa. Importantly, research published in diamond open access journals reaches a much wider audience locally and globally[7] than would otherwise be possible. As a result, this model increases the visibility of research and supports broader participation in scholarly communication particularly for researchers and readers who would usually be excluded by paywalls or article processing fees. However, this model is only feasible if there is funding for the costs associated with producing a journal. In the case of the SAJOT, diamond open access is only possible due to the ongoing financial support of the OTASA.

A further important development has been the decision to publish the SAJOT on the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) platform. The ASSAf has strict criteria that journals must meet before they can be hosted on their platform. These include rigorous peer review process, a diverse editorial board with recognised expertise, high quality original content and adoption of their best practice guidelines for publishers[8]. Publishing on this platform thus indicates the quality and standing of the SAJOT.

Indexing the SAJOT on the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) [9] and African Journals Online (AJOL)[10] have further increased journal's profile. The DOAJ hosts 'open access scholarly journals' that meet specific quality criteria[9], while the AJOL platform was specifically developed to increase the 'visibility, access and use of African published research output in support of quality African research'[11:134] Both platforms enhance the visibility, discoverability, credibility, and global reach of occupational therapy research published within the African continent[12]. Furthermore, listing on these platforms assures authors of the SAJOT's credibility, and meets institutional research requirements, and thus, supporting career progression.

The sustainability of the journal relies on the involvement of a range of role players, notably authors, peer reviewers, editors, readers and publishers. To encourage submissions, the editorial team strives to keep turnaround times as short as possible. Based on the increase in manuscripts received from South Africa and further afield, it seems that the SAJOT is an attractive option for authors. Our pool of reviewers is critical to ensuring the quality of articles accepted for publication. It is, however, becoming increasingly difficult to recruit reliable reviewers who submit their reviews on time. One incentive is awarding continuing education units (CEUs) for completing reviews. A further incentive that has been introduced is a reviewer of the year award to publicly recognise and show appreciation for the essential role reviewers play. Lastly, the editorial board, an appointed panel of local and international experts in occupational therapy research and publishing, has been invaluable in promoting the journal, reviewing policies, assessing quality and offering guidance and advice. Their input has contributed directly to the successful listing of the journal on the DOAJ and AJOL.

While the number of articles per issue has increased along with the range of article formats and fields of practice represented, analysis of the SAJOT from 2018 to 2024 has revealed the dominance of quantitative descriptive and qualitative designs[3]. While all types of study designs are important to support evidence-based practice, the paucity of articles providing level I and II evidence has been noted as a concern[13]. Furthermore, analysis of the OTASA research database listing all published and unpublished research conducted at the eight universities with occupational therapy programmes in South Africa has shown that two areas dominate - occupational therapy education (58% of studies) and mental health (49% of studies). A possible reason for this is that universities have autonomy over their research and there is no formalised structure for researchers to meet to discuss the research that is being done and explore how cross-university collaborative projects could be undertaken to ensure coverage across practice areas.

A Capacity-Building Culture

Capacity building in writing and publishing is essential to strengthen occupational therapy research dissemination in South Africa and Africa, and thus to the sustainability of the SAJOT into the future. Substantial attention has been, and continues to be, given to building editorial and peer review skills as well as academic writing. The trainee editor programme that was launched two years ago provides training in the editorial process to therapists with an interest in academic publishing. Successful applicants are involved incrementally in editorial activities with guidance and mentorship from an experienced editorial team member with the possibility of appointment to the editorial team once training is complete. This is one way in which the Publications Standing Committee is contributing to OTASA's strategic plan to develop future leaders.

Peer review is a core scholarly skill for clinicians and academics; webinars and workshops in reviewing skills are thus presented regularly to train therapists who would like to become reviewers. Adding reviewers to the existing pool is critical in ensuring adequate representation of the diverse areas and methodologies involved in occupational therapy research. Similar capacity-building training is offered to prospective authors. In addition, mentoring is available to support new authors in strengthening their manuscripts so that they meet publishing standards.

Where to Next?

Ongoing attention must be given to further improving the quality, visibility and impact of the SAJOT with the goal of becoming listed on the Scopus and Web of Science databases. These databases are the most popular and cover a vast number of journals: Scopus leans more towards the humanities and social sciences, while Web of Science covers mainly natural, technical and medical sciences. The main benefit of inclusion on these databases is their credibility; articles available through these platforms are more likely to be cited which increases their impact.

We have already started increasing our social media presence with the support of the OTASA marketing administrator. Posting information on social media to promote articles as they are published is a quick win for making research more visible; this is an avenue that needs to be developed further. Authors will also be encouraged and supported to promote their articles on social media as soon as they are published. In combination, these initiatives will raise the visibility of articles published in the SAJOT.

A strategy needs to be developed to 'elevate the level of evidence, broaden the methodological repertoire, and continue addressing both local needs and global trends'[3:4]. This requires collaboration between university education programmes and OTASA standing committees (education, research, publications and practice development) to identify and address the most pressing research priority areas for South Africa and Africa. The research priorities for occupational therapy in South Africa have been identified as intervention efficacy and contextually relevant measurement[13]. By working together, we can pool the resources we have to engage in larger cross-university studies that have greater impact and that can start to fill the gaps. In this way, we will not only be able to produce the evidence needed to shape our practice, education and research, we will also support the continued growth of the SAJOT.

Thinking about the future requires a realistic approach to balance the challenges and opportunities to ensure that finite resources are managed carefully. For example, the time commitment to develop writing skills in novice researchers must be balanced with the editorial tasks associated with the increasing number of manuscripts being received. Inviting experienced researchers to assist with capacity development initiatives could reduce the load on the editorial team enabling them to focus on their core responsibility as journal editors. In response to long-term financial sustainability challenges, the editorial committee is investigating appropriate advertising and continuing professional development activities as ways to support the costs of producing the journal.

Without the collective generosity, diligence and commitment of the editorial team, peer reviewers, editorial board members and the broader occupational therapy community, the SAJOT would not be able to continue publishing and disseminating scholarly research. Reflecting on its publishing journey and current standing, the SAJOT has clearly come a long way and there is so much possibility for its trajectory into the future. The responsibility for ensuring that the SAJOT lives up to being 'a leading publication for occupational therapy research in Africa'[4] is in our hands; together we need to chart a way forward to ensure that we conduct and publish the research that is needed to meet occupational needs in Africa.

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