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Implementation of promotion standards to discourage publishing in questionable journals: the role of the library

Tove Faber Frandsen^{a,*}, Richard Bruce Lamptey^b, Edward Mensah Borteye^b, Victor Teye^b,
Anna A. Owusu-Ansah^b

^a University of Southern Denmark, Department of Design and Communication, Universitetsparken 1, 6000 Kolding, Denmark

^b KNUST Library, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

To discourage faculty members from publishing in questionable journals, tenure and promotion standards in which the librarians play an active role can be developed. These standards have been effective in terms of identifying publications in questionable outlets. However, we need to explore how these systems are perceived by the main actors in research, which are the researchers. This study explores the perception of the researchers at a university in Ghana who have been evaluated by a system implemented to discourage publishing in questionable publication outlets. We collected data using an online, largely qualitative questionnaire distributed to all faculty members that had applied for promotion since the implementation of the verification process. The results show that the majority of the faculty members are satisfied or very satisfied with the new tenure and promotion standards. There are differences across faculties, and this seems to be tied to concerns about the choice of publication outlets. Furthermore, the dissatisfied faculty members are concerned with the role of the library in the verification process whereas the satisfied trust the judgement of the librarians. We discuss implications of the results as well as future development of the standards.

Introduction

Scholars are judged on their publication records. The publications form the backbone when climbing the career ladder, securing funding for their institutions, and protecting their jobs. Faculty members are thus constantly under pressure to publish, and the primary source of this pressure is themselves being motivated by the prospects of enhancing their professional reputation, leaving a permanent mark on their profession, and increasing their salary and job mobility (Miller, Taylor, & Bedeian, 2011). According to Eshchanov, Abduraimov, Ibragimova, and Eshchanov (2021), the increasing use of indicators and pressure on researchers to publish in international journals has led researchers to shift their focus away from performing high-quality research that contributes to science or to society onto publishing research to remain competitive in academia. The pressure to publish is believed to be associated with publishing in substandard publication outlets (Eshchanov et al., 2021; Grančay, Vveinhardt, & Šumilo, 2018; Kudaibergenova et al., 2021; Kurt, 2018).

As a result, approaches to encourage publications in high-quality

journals have been explored. Examples include models to encourage researchers to publish in prestigious journals (Lambovska & Todorova, 2021) and monetary reward systems (Quan, Chen, & Shu, 2017). Recently, Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, and Teye (in press) presented a case study of the implementation of promotion guidelines in a university in Ghana to discourage the use of questionable publication outlets. The promotion guidelines state that all publications submitted for promotion are verified by members of the library staff using specified lists of publishers and indexing services. The list does not provide a detailed listing of publication outlets at the journal level. Instead, it contains a list of publishers, bibliographic databases and journal characteristics (e.g. institutional journals). Faculty members are recommended to choose publication outlets on the list and when applying for promotion a report is compiled that describes how many publications that could be verified. The study shows that the verification process is effective in terms of identifying publications in questionable outlets. Among the publications that could not be verified by the librarians, 66% were published in publication outlets that can be found in either Cabell's predatory reports or Cabell's list of journals under review for Predatory Reports. Another

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: t.faber@sdu.dk (T.F. Frandsen).

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27% are open access but not indexed in DOAJ, which gives reason for concern as DOAJ applies a set of quality criteria before indexing a journal.

Evaluation systems succeed in influencing the publication practices, however as argued by Hammarfelt, Nelhans, Eklund, and Åström (2016), these systems are hardly ever systematically evaluated themselves, despite being a distinctive component of late-modern organizations. Furthermore, Ávila-Robinson, Mejia, and Sengoku (2021) argue that studies are needed to investigate the consistency between bibliometric indicators from the perspectives of the main actors in research, namely the researchers. The evaluation system to discourage publishing in questionable journals implemented at a university in Ghana is found to be effective in terms of identifying publications in questionable outlets, however, to provide a richer picture, it should also be evaluated by the researchers being assessed using the verification process.

This study aims to explore the perception of the researchers evaluated by the evaluation system implemented to discourage publishing in questionable publication outlets at a university in Ghana. The main data collection tool is an online questionnaire asking the researchers how they perceive the verification process and if they are satisfied with it.

Related literature

Publishing is essential and tied to academic career outcomes (Sinclair, Barnacle, & Cuthbert, 2014; Zhang & Yu, 2020), but it is not just a question of the number of publications. Choosing the right publication outlet enables the researchers to showcase their research (Vaishya, Vaish, & Haleem, 2020), and the publication outlet is often taken into account in performance-based research evaluation systems that can be used to distribute research funding to universities but also to evaluate individuals (Hicks, 2012). Deciding on a journal is complex and involves a number of factors (Hardman & Serginson, 2017; Lee, Yang, & Oh, 2020; Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2020) that are typically tied to the perception of journal quality (Regazzi & Aytac, 2008). Among the factors considered are metrics such as the Journal Impact Factor and indicators based on curated national or institutional lists of academic journals and publishers (Deutz, Drachen, Drongstrup, Opstrup, & Wien, 2021; Nicholas et al., 2017; Niles, Schimanski, McKiernan, & Alperin, 2020).

Numerous studies have explored the impact of indicator use, and in the following a few of the recent studies is mentioned. Using humanities research as an example Rowlands and Wright (2020) explore the ways in which research assessment governs the production of academic knowledge. Spiewanowski and Talavera (2021) argue that you get what you incentivize and find that researchers adjust their publication strategies to meet the criteria of the evaluation system. Feenstra and López-Cózar (2021) find a deep, multi-layered impact of the Spanish research evaluation system on academic work in philosophy. They conclude that their findings show that researchers are aware of the impact metrics are having and that philosophers discuss bibliometric rankings, impact factors and journal quartiles. Surveys of German higher education researchers from 1992, 2007 and 2018 show that a strong research performance orientation is positively correlated with journal articles, peer-reviewed publications, and co-publications with international co-authors (Schneijderberg, Götz, & Müller, 2022). According to the authors, ranking and the quest for excellence are driving change in publication behaviour. Similarly, Korytkowski and Kulczycki (2019) argue that the effects of research policy on publication practices can take a decade to be visible. They conclude that clear and stable incentives influence the publication behaviour of Polish researchers. Heckman and Muktan (2020) demonstrated that in the field of economics excessive importance placed on an academic's top five publications to determine tenure and recruitment incentivizes scholars to pursue follow-up and replication work at the expense of more innovative work. Kudaibergenova et al. (2021) show how the publication management system at a university in Kazakhstan changes the publication strategies of faculty

members. They find that lacking clear criteria for evaluating the quality of publications and publishing outlets, journals of dubious reputation and dishonest practices among faculty members flourished. The indicators may thus impact individual and institutional behaviour although we know relatively little about the actual effects of indicator use (Rijcke, Wouters, Rushforth, Franssen, & Hammarfelt, 2016). The existing research on the impact of indicator use shows that little attention is paid to the global south whose universities rarely feature in international rankings (Hossain & Ahmed, 2020). We find very few universities from the global south in global rankings and consequently, evaluations of these often rely on publications in Scopus or Web of Science (Hossain & Ahmed, 2020; Kudaibergenova et al., 2021; Lambovska & Todorova, 2021).

Academic libraries increasingly have research support duties in the production, dissemination and evaluation of research (González-Alcaide & Poveda-Pastor, 2018). Librarians have extensive knowledge of publication databases, documents and metadata, as well as experience with bibliographic tools in general (Åström & Hansson, 2013). Consequently, academic libraries can play a key role in creating higher awareness of questionable publication outlets. Furthermore, librarians have been found to have a higher degree of awareness than researchers (Grgić & Guskić, 2019). Boufarss and Harviainen (2021) argue that librarians are aware of questionable journals, and that they are reinventing their role as gate-openers with the advent of open access. Also, investing in training can increase the capacity of librarians for effective scholarly communication guidance (White & King, 2020). Libraries need to shift their strategic emphasis from collections to services (Koltay, 2019).

The verification process at KNUST

The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) is a large state university in Ghana with 50,000+ students and app. 4000 staff members. The university consists of six colleges: College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR), College of Art and Built Environment (CABE), College of Engineering (CoE), College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CoHSS), College of Health Sciences (CoHS) and College of Science (CoS). In 2019, KNUST implemented a verification process in for all publications submitted for promotion to discourage faculty members from publishing in questionable journals. The verification process at KNUST began as a result of comments received by colleges within the university from external assessors about the credibility of the journals submitted to them for assessment. To help mitigate this, the appointments and promotion committees in the various colleges started using librarians to verify the publication sources of the research works submitted for promotion and tenure. For that purpose, a list was created by the librarians in collaboration with the appointments and promotion committees. There is one list for everyone captured in the criteria for appointments and promotions of senior members. A draft of the list of publishers and databases was supplied to the committee by the library. The verification process was implemented as part of all academic promotions at KNUST when the criteria for the promotion of senior members, academic was reviewed by the Senior Members Appointment and Promotion Review Committee and approved by the Academic Board of the University.

The promotion guidelines state that applicants are encouraged to publish in publication outlets indexed in a specified list of databases or published by a specified list of publishers. Additionally, the promotion guidelines emphasize that applicants are not limited to these lists. The lists contains publishers, bibliographic databases, and journal characteristics (e.g. institutional journals). Journals published by publishers, indexed in databases, or with the characteristics designated on the safe list are included on the university's list. Applicants are thus encouraged to publish in the following publication outlets:

- Publication outlets indexed in a specified list of databases
- Publication outlets published by a specified list of publishers

The researchers are consequently encouraged to publish in journals indexed in e.g. Web of Science or published by Taylor and Francis. Should publishers and databases on the list add or remove journals the verification list is automatically updated. This means that there is no detailed list of publication outlets at the journal level, and the university therefore does not have to maintain the list on a detailed level.

The verification process and the list are part of the Criteria for appointments and promotions of senior members academic reviewed by the Senior Members Appointment and Promotion Review Committee and therefore, revisions of the evaluation process and the list follows the revisions of the promotion guidelines.

Methods

The main data collection tool was an online questionnaire distributed to all faculty members that had applied for promotion and received a report compiled by the librarians since the implementation of the verification process. The librarians use a verification form designed by the Human Resources Department to verify the publications an applicant submits for promotion. The librarians then verify the publications submitted by the applicant and describe the publication outlets in terms of database indexing and publishers. Before processing the application, the assessment committee and the applicant are presented with a report compiled by the librarians. See Frandsen et al. (in press) for more details on the verification process. From the implementation of the guidelines in October 2019 until the data collection took place 221 researchers applied for promotion. These faculty members took part in our study in December 2021.

The questionnaire contained a series of questions regarding the respondents' experience with applying for promotion after the implementation of the verification process. The participants responded with the expectation that this task would take no longer than 20 min to complete. The questions were grouped into two sections: I. general information about the applicant and their application and II. perception of the verification process and the role of the librarians. The survey was largely qualitative, although it did include some questions aimed at collecting descriptive statistics. The answers provided by faculty members were self-reported, and the respondents answered anonymously, which means there is no way of verifying the accuracy of their reports.

The questionnaire invited the faculty members to comment on the application process and the implementation of the verification process. Some of the applicants had received news regarding their application at the time of data collection, while others did not know the status of their application. The respondents remained anonymous during the data collection and in our analysis to encourage them to provide honest opinions without fearing the applied promotion.

We analysed the data using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data provided by the respondents serve to elaborate and provide further understandings of the perception of the verification process by faculty members.

Results

This section begin with an overview of survey respondents. The collected data contains 57 completed questionnaires, which corresponds to a response rate of 26%. The respondents were affiliated with the following colleges: College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (14%), College of Art and Built Environment (19%), College of Engineering (14%), College of Health Sciences (23%), College of Humanities and Social Sciences (12%), College of Science (18%). The respondents on average submitted 12.6 publications for verification. The overwhelming majority of respondents were male (86%). The majority of the respondents submitted the publications for verifications themselves (70%), whereas the college registrar submitted publications for 10%, and 19% were submitted by college appointment and promotion committees. The promotion application was not successful for a few of the

applicants (7%), some were not processed yet (43%) and the rest were successful (49%). Finally, the ranks applied for were associate professor (46%), senior Lecturer (40%), professor (14%) and lecturer (2%).

Fig. 1 shows the response rate along two dimensions, the number of publication submitted for verification and the colleges of KNUST. From the figure, we see that the response rate was approximately 30% for researchers who submitted up to 10 publication, falling to slightly less than 20% for researchers who submitted 15 or more publications. Researchers from the College of Art and Built Environment and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources had response rate of 40–50% while from the other colleges only 20–30% responded. Hence, some groups of researchers were slightly over- or underrepresented in or sample, but all groups were present.

The overall satisfaction with the verification process is shown in Table 1. More than 75% of the faculty members, who submitted publications, were satisfied or very satisfied. Only around 12% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. The rest (14%) remained neutral.

The comments made by the faculty members can give us a richer picture of how the researchers perceive the verification process. The satisfied faculty members emphasized integrity and speed as we can see in the following examples:

The process of verification must not be abandon[ed] (sic) as it contributes to the integrity of the promotion process

I think the verification helps shortens (sic) the processing time.

The dissatisfied faculty members questioned the use of a list of publication outlets to evaluate research and the composition of the list. The following examples illustrate these arguments:

I think the school should develop its own system of classing the journals instead of just picking what others are doing. Other good journals that are coming up should be supported by us to also become great! And the quality of material published should determine its use and not necessarily the journal that published it.

The recommended journals and publishing outlets appear to be the only basis for accepting a paper. These lists do not account for most of the local journals which also need to grow. Essentially, nobody wants to publish in them because they will not be accepted and these journals cannot grow.

Next, we turn to how the faculty members perceived the publication outlets on the list. Table 2 shows how the faculty members perceived the curated list of journals and publishers. More specifically, the questionnaire contained the following question: "The revised publication guidelines recommend publishing with certain journals and publishers. Does the list represent the publication outlets you perceive as high quality within your field?". For a clearer overview of the data Table 2 shows the totals for the categories "strongly agree" and "agree" as well as for "strongly disagree" and "disagree".

In the College of Engineering, College of Health Sciences, College of Science and College of Art and Built Environment more than two-thirds of the respondents thought the list represents publication outlets they perceived as high quality within their field. Among the respondents from the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, half or less than half thought of the list as representing high-quality publication outlets within their field. The comments from the respondents can help further our understanding of these differences:

Many of the recommended publication outlets are skewed towards the sciences and do not favour those within the Art, Education and at times social sciences.

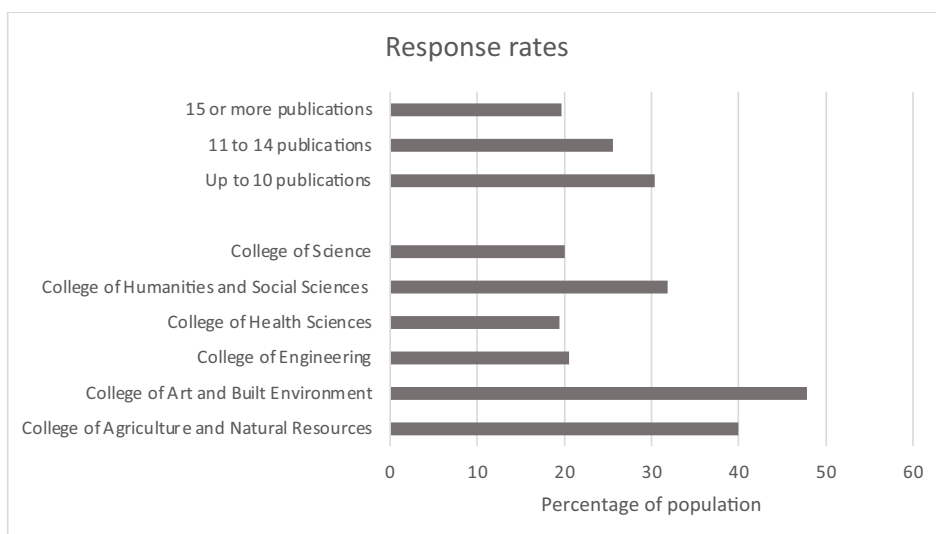


Fig. 1. Breakdown response rates by colleges and number of submitted publications, percent.

Table 1
Are you satisfied with the exercise of the verification of publications?

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Number of respondents	3	4	8	20	23
Percent	5	7	14	35	40

Table 2
Does the list represent the publication outlets you perceive as high quality within your field?. Responses are shown as percentages.

	Disagree or strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree or strongly agree	Total
College of Science	10	10	80	100
College of Engineering	0	25	75	100
College of Art and Built Environment	18	9	73	100
College of Health Sciences	8	23	69	100
College of Agriculture and Natural Resources	25	25	50	100
College of Humanities and Social Sciences	43	14	43	100

The recommended journals and publishers are of high quality; however, they do not cover art and design fields.

Consequently, some faculty members disapproved of the verification due to the composition of the list and possible missing publication outlets. Another possible explanation for the disapproval of the process is the role of the librarians in the verification process. Table 3 provides

Table 3
“Are you satisfied with the exercise of the verification of publications” and “Do you trust the judgement of the library in doing this verification exercise?”. Responses are shown in percentages

	No	Not sure	Yes	Total
Very dissatisfied	100	0	0	100
Dissatisfied	50	50	0	100
Neutral	0	63	38	100
Satisfied	0	0	100	100
Very satisfied	5	0	95	100

an overview of the relationship between the satisfaction with the verification of publications and the trust in the judgement of the library in performing this verification.

We can see from Table 3 that the dissatisfied faculty members were concerned with the role of the library in the promotion application process. In the open answers, they suggested different approaches:

The verification should not be at the sole discretion of the library/librarian. In fact, College appointment Committee members should be responsible for the verification. The committee should be the body to conclude whether a paper should be accepted or rejected.

Overall, 74% of the respondents trusted the judgement of the library in doing the verification exercise and a few examples of their comments regarding this question illustrate their perception of the role of the librarians:

Where the Librarian was not sure, I was consulted to make input.

I think they are professional with it

Furthermore, we examined relationship between the satisfaction with the verification process and the rank applied for. Table 4 provides an overview of the three position most applied for and the satisfaction with the verification exercise. Due to the small number of respondents, the numbers in the table do not reveal any differences in satisfaction according to rank applied for. It seems that respondent who applied for a professorship were slightly less satisfied with the verification process than other respondents. However, we only received responses from eight applicants applying for the rank of professor, and therefore need to be careful to draw any firm conclusions.

Finally, some of the respondents gave recommendations for further development of the verification process. They emphasized openness,

Table 4
“Are you satisfied with the exercise of the verification of publications” and “rank applied for”. Responses are shown in percentages

	Disagree or strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree or strongly agree	Total
Senior lecturer	13	13	74	100
Associate professor	8	12	80	100
professor	25	13	63	100

applicant involvement and a flexible use of the list:

Staff should be allowed to do their own verification at the library before applying for promotion or anytime they plan on doing so.

The report should not be treated as a secret since the essence of the exercise is to promote excellence and not to punish

The recommended list should be used with flexibility as new credible publishing outlets and journals come on board which may not be in the list.

Summing up, more than 75% of the faculty members were satisfied or very satisfied with the verification process tied to the promotion application. The data shows differences across faculties, and this seems to be tied to concerns about the choice of publication outlets. Furthermore, the faculty members dissatisfied with the verification process implemented were concerned with the role of the library in the verification process, whereas the satisfied trusted the judgement of the librarians. Future development could involve openness, applicant involvement and a flexible use of the list.

Discussion and conclusion

Before discussing the implications of this study, we need to consider the limitations. First, due to the small sample size, we could not perform extensive crosstabulations, and a deeper analysis of the different variables were not possible. At KNUST, the promotion process could be time-consuming and therefore, the verification process was welcomed as it saves much time in the total promotion process. However, if the promotion process is much faster at other universities the verification process may be received differently by the faculty members. Another aspect that needs further investigation is the perception of the verification process by librarians. Some of the librarians do not feel comfortable with having their names in the report because they feel they are made target for criticism and may not be comfortable with this role. Furthermore, the questionnaire had a response rate of about 26%, which is acceptable, but as the population is only 221 researchers, that implies only 57 responses were available for the analysis. Consequently, this study can primarily be used as inspiration for how universities can discourage publishing in questionable outlets. Finally, we conducted this study at KNUST by an author team including three KNUST faculty members involved with the verification process. Consequently, it may be a concern if the faculty members at KNUST feared that their participation in the study could affect their promotion application, which in many cases was not concluded at the time of the data collection. However, the questionnaire was fully anonymous, and the faculty members did not respond to questions that could identify of the respondent.

The results of the study show that there were differences across faculties in the perception of the verification process and the verification lists underlying it. In particular, faculty members from social sciences and humanities were concerned with the composition of the list. Numerous studies have explored the humanities and its differences and similarities in comparison with other scientific domains. The social and cognitive structures and publication practices of the humanities have been studied throughout the history of bibliometrics (Franssen & Wouters, 2019). Petr et al. (2021) even find differences in publication patterns between SSH disciplines and the practices may be evolving (Lewandowska & Kulczycki, 2022; Savage & Olejniczak, 2022).

Furthermore, this study can further our understanding of how researchers can be discouraged from publishing in questionable outlets. Incentives, pressures and expectations are crucial factors in the publishing decisions (Mills & Inouye, 2021) and in the case of promotions and grant applications, scholars can consider publishing in questionable outlets as an advantage. It is therefore often argued that universities should be more proactive when it comes to directing their faculty

members to appropriate and legitimate publication outlets (McQuarrie, Kondra, & Lamertz, 2020; Rifai et al., 2019).

In a previous study it was shown that implementing a verification process is effective in order to identify publications in questionable outlets submitted in promotion applications (Frandsen et al., in press). However, more in-depth studies of the institutional and departmental factors encouraging and discouraging questionable publishing is called for (Mertkan, Onurkan Aliusta, & Suphi, 2021). The same goes for studies exploring the long-term changes to publication practices after the implementation of promotion guidelines that discourage questionable publishing (Frandsen et al., in press).

In addition, this study shows how the academic library can play an active role in discouraging researchers from publishing in questionable journals. In the study we find that more than 75% of the faculty members were satisfied or very satisfied with the verification process undertaken by the librarians. However, it is striking that the faculty members dissatisfied with the verification process it seemed to be concerned that the librarians were doing the verification. The concerns about the role of the librarians in the assessment of applicants for appointments and promotions may be tied to promotions traditionally being based on peer review alone at KNUST. Bibliometric analyses are not typically part of the assessment of applicants. Therefore, involving the librarians in the processing of applications may concern some researchers as they worry that librarians were going to be involved with reviewing or assessing their research. On the other hand, we find that some researchers appreciate the involvement of the library as it speeds the process up. Applying for promotion requires patience as the processing of the applications can be time consuming and it takes months and sometimes years to process the application. Publication databases, documents and metadata, and experience with bibliographic tools in general are core librarian competencies (Åström & Hansson, 2013). Consequently, this service builds on existing librarian competencies in combination with specific knowledge of questionable publishing (Boufars & Harviainen, 2021) although further training may strengthen their work (White & King, 2020). This reinvention of the role of academic libraries is a shift in strategic emphasis that seeks to provide more comprehensive scholarly communication-related services and enhance library visibility and status.

Finally, the verification process for publications submitted for promotion implemented KNUST entails a strong focus on publications in evaluations. However, as argued by Fernandez-Cano (2021) the overabundance of publications is not justified and not even necessary when it comes to promoting one's career for higher education and even a lot of publishing might lead to perishing. This discussion is however, beyond the scope of the current paper.

Summing up, two-thirds of the faculty members in this case study were satisfied or very satisfied with the verification process implemented at KNUST in connection to promotion application, albeit with some differences across faculties. The dissatisfied faculty members were concerned with the role of the library in the verification process, whereas the satisfied trusted the judgement of the librarians. Future development could involve openness, applicant involvement and a flexible use of the list. This study also suggests several directions for future research and opportunities for developing services. It would further our understanding to analyse the perceptions of faculty members in further detail. Any differences in the perception of the verification process among librarians and researchers are also worth exploring. Finally, further development of initiatives to support faculty in choosing where to publish is also welcomed.

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Tove Faber Frandsen: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Project administration; Roles/Writing - original

draft.

Richard Bruce Lamptey: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Project administration; Writing - review & editing.

Edward Mensah Borteye: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Project administration; Writing - review & editing.

Victor Teye: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Project administration; Writing - review & editing.

Anna A. Owusu-Ansah: Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Project administration; Writing - review & editing.

All authors approved the final version to be published.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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