



# Reflections of an Editor-in-Chief: 2013–2019

## AUTHOR:

John Butler-Adam<sup>1</sup>

## AFFILIATION:

<sup>1</sup>Retired Consultant, Johannesburg, South Africa

## CORRESPONDENCE TO:

John Butler-Adam

## EMAIL:

j.butleradam@gmail.com

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In the last quarter of 2012, my appointment as Editor-in-Chief of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* was confirmed, with the January/February issue of 2013 being the first for which I was responsible. So began one of the most satisfying and fulfilling set of responsibilities of my 50 years of working life as an academic teacher/supervisor, researcher, and senior university manager.

The editorship was, however, an entirely new and demanding experience – as I was concurrently assistant to a Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Postgraduate Education.

I had a great deal to learn and was remarkably fortunate to have Susan Veldsman as my immediate manager, and a highly supportive two-person team: Managing Editor, Dr Linda Fick and Online Publishing Administrator, Ms Nadine Wubbeling. Their help and guidance were essential (then and for the next six or more years) to the continuing success of the Journal.

The year 2013 and those that followed were a time during which several important changes were made to the nature and operation of the Journal. The changes were the result of teamwork, of considerable discussion and, when needed, of research on the part of the team. Susan Veldsman was often consulted, and when required, some matters were referred to the Editorial Advisory Board. But in all cases, these developments were the result of thorough joint discussion.

The changes mentioned are not in any specific order. Important amongst them, however, is the issue of gender: over the almost seven years of my editorship, the number of women scholars who were Associate Editors increased from one of ten to seven of ten, while membership of the Editorial Advisory Board progressed from one woman amongst five to three amongst six. The position of Associate Editor Mentee was introduced in 2018, with three of the four mentees appointed in the first year (2018/2019) being young women.

Of equal importance to the Journal's stature and recognition, and equally important for the scholars submitting their research to the Journal, was the change in the measure of international impact, the so-called impact factor. In 2012, the impact factor was 0.84, and by 2020 it had increased to 2.2. This represented a significant shift in the way in which the Journal came to be recognised.

Amongst these seminal changes, the Journal became online-only from 2016. This was in line with a growing practice in academic journals as they adjusted to an increasingly digitised world, and the online platform served to make the Journal available to an even wider and more diverse audience. At the beginning of 2014, Dr Fick introduced a section in the announcements of each issue of the Journal's publication that included lay summaries of key articles in the issue. This section was titled 'Editors' Choice' and helped in raising the Journal's appeal.

Yet other changes included the acceptance of preprints (mostly in the primary natural sciences) as they had, strictly speaking, not been published previously, and authors often benefitted from the feedback they received. Linda Fick and Nadine Wubbeling developed an increasing number of successful ways of providing data regarding the nature of published papers to me, the Associate Editors, and members of the Editorial Advisory Board; these data included the home countries of authors, discipline ranges and variations over time, the time taken to review and then to publish papers, and related (useful) information such as readership metrics for the intended audiences.

One of the *specific* aims of my term was to place emphasis on recognising science as being of relevance to society more generally rather than only to the scientific community. In a 2015 leader (*SAJS* vol 111 no 9/10) I wrote:

*To make the most of science, it is now more important than ever to celebrate the contributions that it makes, across the spectrum of disciplines, whether individually or collectively. It is in this way that science contributes significantly to the well-being of ourselves, the environment on which we depend, and the richness of our world: genetics, agriculture, meteorology, music, literature, and so on. How might we possibly live without the benefits that they, and their fellow disciplines, all offer?*

To support this, many of my leaders focused on the ways in which scientific knowledge is received by the public at large and the issues and insights which it offers as far as understanding the quality of social life through the application of scientific insights. For example, one leader was an analysis of South Africa's National Development Plan's (NDP) Education, Science, and Innovation chapters – a Plan whose aim was to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030. (Sadly, within five years the NDP was hardly mentioned any longer, as I commented in my final leader in March/April 2019.)

One of the interesting benefits of this approach to the content of these 40 or so leaders, is that, over the years since 2013 (despite *not* being research papers), they have been cited over 1500 times in the research papers of authors from a wide range of nations.

Apart from the Editor-in-Chief's core work, two or three additional responsibilities added further interest: chairing meetings of the Associate Editors was always a source of great interest and engagement, as were meetings of the Board of the *Quest* magazine, published by ASSAf for Grade-11 and -12 school learners, and first year university students. That Board brought together a wide range of members whose views on the magazine were of considerable value.

Then, too, there were occasions when it fell to me to serve on one of the panels of the DHET-ASSAf process for assessing books submitted by university staff members to be considered for DHET subsidy awards. These



meetings allowed for debate and discussion among scholars from varied disciplines. Subsequently, my time with the Journal also created the privilege of interviewing seven eminent scholars and then writing chapters on each for the book *Legends of South African Science*.

In this reflection on my term as Editor-in-Chief of this remarkable Journal, now in its 120th year of publication, many colleagues made my years with the *SJS* rewarding and enriching. So my very sincere thanks and warmest good wishes go to Roseanne Diab, Susan Veldman,

Linda Fick, Nadine van der Merwe (née Wubbeling), Michael Cherry (my predecessor – and my honours student at UCT), Leslie Swartz (current Editor-in-Chief and amiable correspondent) and the many collegial authors of published papers who became friends.

## Declarations

There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.