

## The bittersweetness of stepping down

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This editorial shares a recent conversation between the past and current editor-in-chief of the *African Journal of Health Professions Education (AJHPE)*. Prof Vanessa Burch, the founding editor-in-chief, reflected on her journey with the journal 16 years ago.

Despite her uncertainty about her capabilities to establish a new journal and the feasibility of the new venture, Vanessa took on the challenge. She highlighted the responsibility of leading a team of esteemed colleagues, without whom the journal would not be feasible. She reminisced about the challenges of starting and maintaining an academic journal, the perseverance required and the importance of teamwork. As a result, receiving the accreditation letter was a surreal moment, reinforcing the team's collective success.

However, ensuring long-term sustainability post-accreditation was a major concern. She questioned whether their original vision was achievable but believed taking risks was necessary. Vanessa described the journey as an adventure requiring determination. She credited the journal's success to a dedicated team, stating that while one person may initiate a project, it takes a collective effort to sustain and grow it. Reflecting on her initial self-doubt, she recalled her surprise at being asked to lead the journal but focused on assembling the right team to make it happen.

Mentoring editors remains crucial for the journal's longevity. Vanessa pointed out a global gap in editorial board training, as many editors lack exposure to this field. The notion of formal editorial board training is one of the tasks that the current editor-in-chief, Jacky van Wyk, can pursue. Over time, certain individuals emerged as strong candidates for leadership, and Vanessa recognised the importance of identifying and informally mentoring these 'tall trees' to sustain the journal's growth. Still, handing over leadership was difficult, though necessary. While protective of the journal, Vanessa understood the importance of entrusting its future to the next generation.

When Jacky asked Vanessa about the key ingredients for a successful editorial board, Vanessa stressed the importance of publishing experience, interdisciplinary representation and diversity. A well-rounded editorial board should include experts in both qualitative and



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quantitative research, with members from various healthcare professions. She highlighted the need for a mix of visionary leaders and hands-on contributors who can drive the journal.

Vanessa also reflected on the journal's African identity. Naming it the *African Journal of Health Professions Education* requires intentional efforts to include voices from across the continent. She encouraged the current editorial board to actively foster inclusion rather than assuming it will happen naturally. She expressed pride that the *AJHPE* attracts both high-quality submissions from internationally published authors and provides a platform for emerging scholarship. Vanessa and other founding editorial board members published some of their work in *AJHPE*, enhancing its credibility. Another milestone was the growth in submissions from across Africa, further reinforcing its continental identity.

For the next generation of editors, Vanessa stresses efficiency, warning against backlogs that can harm credibility. She encourages editors to 'walk the talk' by submitting their own research,

mentoring emerging scholars and encouraging them to publish. She urged the new board to recognise the journal's unique role as the only sub-Saharan African health professions education journal publishing across multiple countries, while also seizing opportunities to increase international engagement. Given that the Global South often struggles for inclusion in Global North-dominated discussions, Vanessa believes *AJHPE* is now well-positioned to push for greater international visibility. Writing bold editorials and participating in global debates can help amplify African voices. She suggested that under Jacky's leadership, the new board could expand the journal's reach through strategic participation in international conferences where African scholars are present. Vanessa further touched on improving accessibility through AI-supported language editing. Language barriers hinder many African and South American researchers from publishing internationally. Clear policies on AI-assisted translations could enable wider participation while preserving scientific integrity. Additionally, she proposed a dedicated journal section for Global South research, including original articles in local languages with translated abstracts.

Looking ahead, Vanessa highlighted emerging academic networks, particularly in East Africa, where multi-country postgraduate certification bodies are forming. These institutions host conferences featuring journal-worthy research, making them valuable opportunities for *AJHPE*. With the journal now sustainable, she views expansion as the next step, advocating for promoting the *AJHPE* at these African and international meetings and leveraging existing networks to strengthen its presence. She suggested cost-effective methods such as sharing conference booths with partner organisations. Expanding the journal's reach also includes embracing new media formats. AI-generated podcasts of published papers could make research more accessible, particularly for busy professionals. Vanessa believes that podcasting would significantly boost readership by allowing scholars to consume research on the go.

Vanessa acknowledged the sense of loss in moving from the centre of the journal's community to its periphery. However, she remains committed to maintaining professional

relationships and supporting the journal's growth. She continues her work in health professions education reform, particularly in assessment structures, and is considering documenting her experiences to share lessons learned from the rapid adoption of digital assessments in high-stakes examinations.

As the conversation concluded, Vanessa expressed appreciation for the collaborative effort behind the *AJHPE* and acknowledged the strong

community built through the process. While stepping down was bittersweet, she values the lasting professional relationships formed.

Looking to the future, Vanessa envisioned the *AJHPE* continuing to evolve to meet the needs of new health professions educators. She recalled a time when health professions education lacked recognition as a field, making career advancement difficult. While the landscape has improved, she stresses the need for continued advocacy.