

# The AuthorAID project at INASP: building on a holistic approach to research communication

The AuthorAID project at the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) is a pilot project which aims to increase the success rate of developing-country researchers in obtaining publication and, ultimately, to increase the visibility and influence of research undertaken within the developing world. Through providing mentoring, training, resources and networking, the project supports early career researchers with writing up and disseminating their work. As part of INASP's PERii programme, the project both links and complements the other components of INASP's work. This paper outlines the AuthorAID project and explores its symbiotic relationship with INASP and its holistic approach to supporting research communication in developing countries.



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Achieving publication is one of the key challenges in an academic's career. For first-time authors this is particularly difficult and even more so for authors in settings where resources and additional support are limited. In 1998, the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (WECARD)<sup>1</sup> identified lack of skills in scientific writing as one of the main barriers to publication for developing-country authors. Anthony Robbins and Phyllis Freeman of the *Journal of Public Health Policy* also recognized this problem<sup>2</sup> and, building on the work of other precedents, such as the China Medical Board Program in Biomedical Writing and Editing<sup>3</sup>, they developed a proposal for a project to address this issue. The project became known as AuthorAID and in 2005 the proposal was taken to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for funding, and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) was identified as the implementation partner.

INASP had long focused on supporting the research communication cycle, so AuthorAID was a natural fit, providing another essential dimension to the activities it supported. Until that point, under its Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (now in its second phase, PERii<sup>4</sup>), INASP focused on improving access to

scholarly information for its partner countries through providing affordable access to international scholarly literature, strengthening libraries and ICTs and supporting national publishing and journals. AuthorAID links and complements these activities, enabling developing-country researchers to develop the writing skills needed to get their research published in both national and international journals.

In 2007, AuthorAID began at INASP as a three-year pilot project working with two partner networks: The International Foundation for Science, and the World Health Organization's TDR (a Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases). Two key aims were identified:

- to support developing-country researchers in achieving publication of their research findings
- ultimately, to increase the visibility and influence of research undertaken within the developing world.

To reach these goals, three main project components were identified: mentoring, the creation of a global knowledge community and research writing workshops.

In order to create the AuthorAID global knowledge community, an AuthorAID website was developed by the Institute for Learning and Research Technology (ILRT)<sup>5</sup> and Pure Usability

Ltd<sup>6</sup>, both based in Bristol in the UK. In consultation with the AuthorAID project team, it was decided that an iterative approach would be used, based on user needs and feedback. This iterative approach means that the website is able to evolve to better meet user needs by incorporating new features or removing less successful elements and to effectively embrace new technologies or social networking trends. The site has been designed to be low-bandwidth, taking into account the particular needs and challenges for researchers in settings where connectivity is poor and internet access is limited or expensive.

Engaging a global audience has been made possible through regular blog postings which direct community members to useful resources and further reading. Website members complete profiles which highlight their research interests and can be searched by visitors and other members of the AuthorAID community. Members can then choose to contact other members to establish mentoring relationships using the online mentoring system, or they can simply use the site to establish contact and conduct mentoring relationships offline. An integrated e-mailing system allows for less formal contact to share ideas or ask research questions. News and events pages keep members informed and a searchable library has resources in five languages in a variety of different formats, covering topics from writing a proposal through to giving a good colloquium. It is recognized that there are many researchers who will not be able to access these resources online, so they are also available on CD to those who need them.

Of course, engaging any web community can be challenging and time-consuming. An intern from Ghana is focusing on this aspect of AuthorAID, working at Texas A&M University with the Knowledge Community Editor and main workshop facilitator, Barbara Gastel. The role of the intern is to encourage dialogue, to steer the AuthorAID community to develop its own direction and to explore the hidden, human stories behind the technological interface.

Many of those human stories will come from the mentoring component of AuthorAID, an integral part of the project, providing researchers with the opportunity to receive expert support and advice in contexts where it would otherwise not be possible. Mentors can be approached at any stage of the publication process – from the initial research through to the final editing – and the level

of involvement and expectations are set out in a learning agreement created and signed by both parties. Initially, mentors and mentees came from the AuthorAID partner networks and communication was mainly conducted through e-mail or by telephone. Matching was a time-consuming, manual process done by the Publishing Support team at INASP. With the development of the online mentoring system, matching could be done online and the process was expanded beyond the project partners to the global research community.

To date, there are approximately 90 mentoring pairs and a target of 200 pairs has been set for the end of 2009. Although initial contact is generally through the e-mailing system, pairs are encouraged to contact each other by phone or face-to-face to establish rapport in the relationship. Face-to-face contact is of course challenging for pairs working in different parts of the globe, but cheap messaging systems with video capabilities such as Skype are helping to break down barriers.

Although face-to-face contact with other researchers and experts is a challenge for the mentoring pairs, this type of personal contact coupled with learning valuable research and proposal writing skills is one of the strengths of the research writing workshops, which are perhaps the most successful element of the AuthorAID project. The workshops have both presentation-based and practical sessions, covering a wide range of topics from applying for a grant proposal to choosing the right journal. Where possible, guest speakers are invited, such as a panel of journal editors to advise and critique the researchers' work or a science journalist to speak about how to get

*Researchers at the AuthorAID Scientific Writing Skills Workshop held in conjunction with AHRI in Ethiopia, 2008*



research into the media. The workshops are held in Asia, Africa and Latin America and from 2010 will be held in the AuthorAID focus countries: Bolivia, Nepal, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. We have noticed a direct correlation between attendance at the workshops and visits to the AuthorAID website, as according to Google Analytics statistics, all of the countries we have had workshops in feature in the list of top 20 visits to the website.

Professor Barbara Gastel, the main facilitator and designer of the AuthorAID workshops, is instrumental to their success and is one of the project's most valuable assets. However, in recognition of the need to disseminate the workshops further, to reach new audiences and to ensure their sustainability, AuthorAID has adopted the INASP cascading methodology. This involves each workshop having a co-facilitator from the country the workshop is held in. This co-facilitator will then become the lead facilitator for future workshops and will have a new co-facilitator who will be expected to go on to conduct further workshops. This approach has been very successful so far, with facilitators and observers going on to conduct further workshops in Cuba, Bolivia and Bangladesh. 'Train the Trainer' workshops are being developed and the first one will take place in Colombia in November 2009 in partnership with IFS and Agua 2009, further building capacity and ensuring that AuthorAID reaches the widest audience possible. Teaching packs are also being created in order to encourage more self-funded workshops to take place.

*Participants of the AuthorAID Scientific Writing Skills Workshop (with Professor Barbara Gastel, centre) held in conjunction with the Consejo Nacional de Universidades in Nicaragua, 2008*



As capacity building and knowledge sharing are at the heart of INASP's work, it has always been part of the project's aims that it would be thoroughly monitored and evaluated so that outcomes and lessons learnt can be shared with others. A consultant was commissioned in 2007 and the evaluation process began with the aim of evaluating the three components and looking at efficiency, sustainability and implications for the future. Evaluation methods include user surveys, telephone calls, e-mail contact with participants and wherever possible, face-to-face contact. A mid-term review was published in October 2008 and is publicly available through the INASP website<sup>7</sup>. A final review of the pilot is being carried out and will be published early in 2010.

The future of AuthorAID beyond the pilot project will reflect the outcomes of the end of pilot review and activities will continue to be funded as part of INASP's PERii programme<sup>8</sup>.

An AuthorAID project team meeting in February 2009 identified a number of future developments, some short term, some longer term. In particular, it was acknowledged that the project now needs to scale up and the reach needs to be extended further. Steps are being taken towards this: promotion is increasing and it is recognized that librarians and INASP's country co-ordinators have a key role to play in this; AuthorAID plug-ins are being developed for other websites; more AuthorAID workshop trainers are being trained and finally, but perhaps most importantly, new partnerships and networks are being formed.

There has also been a recognition that AuthorAID needs to embrace appropriate new technologies and social media, so the website is being made more mobile-friendly and steps are being taken to integrate it with social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.

The site will also have closer links with the INASP website and its resources in particular. This link extends to using the INASP Learning Object Repository as a place to store the output of the AuthorAID programme: published papers, presentations and any other outputs.

The basic principles behind the AuthorAID project are not unique and other mentoring systems, research communities and writing skills projects do exist. However, AuthorAID at INASP is unique in that it combines all three of these elements. Furthermore, being based at INASP, this particular AuthorAID project has been able to take advantage



*Enjoying networking at the joint AuthorAID, IFS and Maji Na Ufanisi Revision of Applications and Manuscript Writing Workshop held in Kenya, 2008*

of the organization's networks, experience and strengths, attaining a reach which may not have been possible had it been based at an institution or a more narrowly focused organization. INASP has also gained from having the project under its holistic umbrella, by being able to support all the key components of the research cycle. However, INASP acts as a guardian for its projects and not a keeper, so the aim has always been to find AuthorAID a permanent, sustainable home with a developing- or emerging-country partner once it has been firmly established and its effectiveness has been determined. Only when this partner is found and AuthorAID activities continue in INASP's partner countries without additional funding, will the project have achieved the status of 'success'. However, wider success will have been achieved when the visibility and influence of research undertaken within the developing world equals that of the developed world.

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