

New horizons in participation

Strengthening research in low- and middle-income countries

Insights from researchers and institutional leaders

ELSEVIER

research4life 25 YEARS

Strengthening research in low- and middle-income countries.

ELSEVIER

Contents

Foreword 4

Research4Life Foreword — Prof. Tandi Lwoga 4

Elsevier Foreword — Laura Hassink 5

Executive summary 6

The methodology 7

Discovery: Mapping the research landscape 8

What next? Turning evidence into action 10

Introduction 12

From access to participation: Research4Life at 25 13

Research4Life and Elsevier: a long-term partnership 13

About the research: methodology 14

About this report 14

Discovery: Mapping the research landscape 15

Chapter 1: Resourcing research 16

Introduction: a competitive funding landscape 17

Funding today: frequent applications with limited success 18

Strengthening pathways to research funding 20

Key implications 22

Chapter 2: Conducting research 23

Introduction: imbalances in collaboration 24

International collaboration: widespread but challenging 24

Smoothing the path to collaboration: networking 27

Enabling access through language support 32

Strengthening the conditions for collaboration 33

Key implications 35

Chapter 3: Sharing research 36

Introduction: access and authorship 37

Publishing: a largely global endeavor 38

Perception of opportunities to publish in international journals is mixed 39

Authorship: room for improvement 40

Open Access: valued but costly 41

Use of APC waivers is limited 41

Peer review: willing but not invited 42

Improving access: peer review 43

Editorial roles: scope to develop tomorrow's contributors 44

Broad interest in a mentorship program 45

Accessing published research: regional preferences 46

Research4Life: awareness is the bottleneck 47

Key implications 49

Chapter 4: Defining success 50

Introduction: research excellence lacks consensus 51

Research excellence: rigor and impact 51

Research integrity: AI and the evolving landscape 53

Key implications 54

What next? Turning evidence into action 55

Conclusion 56

Recommendations: what makes the biggest difference? 57

Appendices 61

Methodology 62

Acknowledgments 65

References 66

Foreword

Research4Life Foreword — Prof. Tandi Lwoga



Prof. Tandi Lwoga

Chair,
Research4Life Executive Council

Research4Life was founded in 2001 to tackle a very specific problem: researchers in low- and middle-income countries had little to no access to the research shaping global science. And for the first two decades, that was Research4Life's mission, working with UN agencies, STM Association and hundreds of publishers and committed organizations to bridge the digital divide, one journal and institution at a time.

Over the past five years, two key paradigm shifts have impacted the community that Research4Life supports: the acceleration of research from low- and middle-income countries and the revolution brought about by AI, which brings both challenges and opportunities. In particular, there is a growing AI divide and therefore an increasing need to ensure that researchers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) also have access to high-quality, research-grade AI tools, AI literacy and responsible AI training.

We have pivoted our partnership towards supporting our Research4Life community by fostering independent interconnected communities. Looking forward, we will continue to enable them not only as consumers of research, but as producers of knowledge to tackle the big global challenges of our time. And while building research capacity has become a core part of this mission, it is just the starting point for ensuring full participation and leadership in what gets researched, funded, published and implemented.

During our 25th anniversary year, this report on barriers to inclusion and opportunities for progress builds on the evidence base, identifying what's needed and how to get there. The Researcher Survey conducted by Elsevier and the institutional leaders study by ITOCA,[i] both longstanding Research4Life partners, point to the need to move beyond access and authorship training. As research undergoes its next transformation, real impact can be made through genuine institutional strengthening, as well as engagement that reaches beyond libraries to research leadership and policymakers, while offering local country support and trusted guidance on AI tools and processes.

This is the evolution our next Research4Life strategic plan must reflect: from access, to capacity, to full and equal collaboration and participation. Twenty-five years after our founding, the measure of our partnership's success is no longer how many researchers we reach, but how many of those researchers now lead and shape the research ecosystem.

i Information Training & Outreach Centre for Africa (ITOCA) is a capacity building organization aimed at enhancing information and communications technology (ICT) skills. https://www.itoca.org/.

Elsevier Foreword — Laura Hassink



Laura Hassink

President,
Elsevier Journals

Twenty-five years ago, Elsevier was one of six founding publishers to join the World Health Organization in creating Research4Life. We have stayed committed to that partnership ever since, using our data, research and partnerships to understand the experiences and priorities of researchers in low- and middle-income countries, the conditions that help them succeed, and the ways they shape and lead global research.

Today, Research4Life spans content from over 200 publishers reaching more than 12,000 institutions in over 120 countries. Elsevier's contribution has grown beyond content to supporting capacity development, leadership, engagement and funding. Through the Elsevier Foundation, for example, we have invested nearly $1 million into Research4Life training, including the Country Connectors program, which has built ambassador networks and local leadership across 16 countries since 2022.

For this report, we were proud to work with the Research4Life Equity Committee to design and deliver the Researcher Survey, complementing ITOCA's institutional leaders study. Together, these studies bring the perspectives of both researchers and institutional leaders. That combined understanding is essential if we are to make genuine progress toward full participation, inclusive authorship and leadership in global research.

Our report, *New horizons in participation: Strengthening research in low- and middle-income countries*, offers an evidence base for identifying concrete next steps. The findings show that researchers in low- and middle-income countries still meet barriers at almost every stage of the research journey, despite their evident drive, productivity and international engagement. This report points to practical ways to turn that ambition into opportunity, through stronger funding pathways, greater awareness of publishing support, clearer routes into editorial positions, peer review panels and equitable access to AI tools as research enters its next transformation.

Twenty-five years after helping to establish this partnership, Elsevier remains committed to working with Research4Life to provide researchers everywhere the opportunity to access knowledge, create, shape and lead it.



Executive summary

This report brings together the findings of two complementary Research4Life studies exploring the views of researchers and institutional leaders in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs): the leaders identify the strategic direction, and researchers show where that strategy meets reality, identifying the barriers they face.

The methodology

- **The Researcher Survey** (designed by Research4Life's Equity Committee and Elsevier and conducted by Elsevier).
  How researchers in LMICs experience the barriers identified by institutional leaders and what support would make the greatest difference.
  - Survey was open in May–June 2026; the primary source was the Scopus author database and most participants are published authors.
  - 1,122 survey responses from researchers (includes respondents who have a leadership role) from Research4Life-eligible countries, with representation across regions, disciplines, career stages and experience levels. Please note we have used World Bank fiscal year 2027 for income groupings for countries, and this is not an exact match to R4L groupings.
- **The Institutional Leaders Study** (led by Research4Life in partnership with ITOCA).
  What research leaders believe are the strategic barriers and opportunities for research in LMICs. The study engaged 101 institutional leaders and stakeholders from more than 35 countries in two phases:
  - Phase 1: 80 representatives of a range of institutions took part in seven regional focus groups.
  - Phase 2: 21 senior institutional leaders shared their insights through in-depth interviews.

See the appendices on page 61 for the full detailed methodology.

The findings

Together, the findings show a committed, globally engaged research community whose ambitions are outpacing the systems that support them. The institutional leaders highlight that research ambitions are growing faster than institutional capacity. They point out the game-changing effects of AI in the research landscape, including that researchers in LMICs are at risk of lagging even further due to lack of access to high-quality AI research tools. Researchers' responses identify the structural and practical constraints shaping each stage of the research journey and set out priorities for action by institutions, funders, publishers and Research4Life.

For various stakeholders, funders, government and Research4Life, the evidence points beyond a program centered primarily on access towards a broader role: strengthening institutional capabilities, enabling trusted connections and participation pathways that enable researchers in LMICs to shape and be leaders in global research.

Discovery: Mapping the research landscape

Chapter 1: Resourcing research

Leaders interviewed in the Institutional Study describe funding and institutional capacity as the biggest constraints on their institutions' ambitions. Researchers agree: their survey responses reveal a picture of a highly competitive funding landscape and uncover institutional and eligibility-related barriers, providing opportunities for change.



52% of researchers have applied for funding in the last three years; 56% of these have done so two to three times.



On average, 32% of applications have been successful, while 13% of researchers report a success rate of just 1–10% of their funding applications, and 27% saying that none were successful.



48% of all respondents say limited international support and partnerships are hindering their access to funding.

Chapter 2: Conducting research

Institutional leaders see Research4Life as infrastructure that underpins institutional research systems, including as a collaboration enabler. Researchers offer valuable insights into the realities: how much they are collaborating, how they initiate collaboration and what obstacles they face, providing insights on how to close the collaboration gaps.



59% have been involved in international collaboration in the last three years.



Finding opportunities or platforms to connect (54%) and identifying suitable collaborators (54%) are top obstacles to starting, while overcoming financial barriers (42%) is the biggest challenge during collaboration.



A quarter of researchers report difficulties gaining recognition for their work, including being given a lower authorship status than expected (15%) or not being listed as corresponding author despite contributing significantly (8%).

Chapter 3: Sharing research

Institutional leaders identified continuing barriers to sharing their research globally. Researchers think similarly: despite many publishing, some feel they have not had an equal opportunity to do so. Researchers share their experiences and recommendations related to publishing their research and participating in the peer review process.



86% have published in a global or international journal but only 51% feel they have equal opportunity to publish.



88% say publishing open access is important; APC costs are perceived as the main influence on whether they decide to publish open access (73%).



38% of respondents are somewhat familiar or very familiar with Research4Life, and 82% of those who have heard of it find it useful for their work.

Chapter 4: Defining success

Leaders highlight a role for Research4Life in supporting institutions as they navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of research integrity, scholarly quality assurance and responsible AI use. Researchers add context to this, focusing on what research excellence looks like and whether definitions reflect their national realities.



61% say methodological rigor and quality indicates research excellence.



53% think publishing in high-impact journals is a research excellence indicator.



41% believe that the way research excellence is currently defined globally reflects the priorities and realities of researchers in their country.



Institutional leaders say AI is their biggest capacity challenge; researchers use AI but would value training, as seen from their open-ended survey comments.

What next? Turning evidence into action

Conclusion

Over the last 25 years, Research4Life has evolved to continue meeting the needs of the researchers it supports in LMICs. As institutional leaders highlight in their interviews, Research4Life has become critical research infrastructure. Researchers support this picture: their experiences and behavior show that the big challenge today is no longer access but awareness and engagement.

Taking the views of institutional leaders and researchers as evidence, we have outlined 10 recommendations for various stakeholders, including governments, funders, non-government organizations, universities, colleges and publishers, to listen to the needs and advice of our LMIC partners and users, and take concrete steps to improve participation.

Recommendations: What makes the biggest difference?

Open doors to funding

Recommendation 1
Build researchers' grant-writing capabilities through practical support and mentoring to increase funding success.

Funders | Institutions | Publishers

Recommendation 2
Broker and support international partnerships to boost funding opportunities.

Funders | Governments | Institutions

Level the publishing field

Recommendation 3
Broaden APC waiver availability and improve guidance on open-access publishing options.

Institutions | Publishers

Recommendation 4
Enable contribution-based authorship by promoting the use of the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) author system.[1]

Institutions | Publishers



Strengthen peer review

Recommendation 5
Turn willingness into roles: Build reviewer and editorial pipelines with recognition, training and proactive invitations.

Publishers

Close the Research4Life awareness gap

Recommendation 6
Keep libraries at the heart of Research4Life, empower them to continuously build researcher awareness, drive engagement and participation, while extending outreach across the broader research ecosystem.

Research4Life

Design conferences for inclusion

Recommendation 7
Make remote participation and translation support standard, not optional, and budget more travel grants and discounts for researchers in LMICs.

Institutions Publishers

Activate networks

Recommendation 8
Enable participation in professional societies and conferences by helping researchers identify the most relevant societies to join, providing guidance on memberships and benefits and offering discounted membership and registration waivers.

Professional networks Research4Life

Recommendation 9
Recruit more LMIC researchers for key governing and committee roles.

Professional networks

Equalize access to responsible AI

Recommendation 10
Develop AI literacy initiatives for researchers in LMICs — training in ethical AI use, including AI integrity tools.

Institutions Publishers Research4Life

For further information:

tinyurl.com/r4l2026-report
research4life.org/
facebook.com/R4Lpartnership
linkedin.com/company/research4life

Introduction



From *access to participation*: Research4Life at 25

Now in its 25th year, Research4Life is embedded in an increasingly digital context, in which AI is changing research workflows and rapidly accelerating output, and open access continues to expand.

With research evaluation that is often focused on output and visibility, access and participation are more important than ever. Meanwhile, research institutions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face significant obstacles to participation, including financial, infrastructural, linguistic and policy barriers. These barriers matter more as the center of gravity in research shifts: in 2024, 56% of the 7.5 million authors publishing in journals indexed in Scopus were affiliated to institutions in LMICs, up from 13% in 1994.[2]

This is a fundamentally different landscape than the environment in which Research4Life was founded. In the intervening years, research systems have evolved, and most recently are going through a transformation with the rise of AI. Research4Life too has evolved with the needs of its users, moving beyond its original remit of providing access to content, and becoming a critical component of research infrastructure.

The experiences and priorities of institutional leaders and researchers provide an evidence base for the Research4Life 2030 Strategic Framework, helping to shape a future direction grounded in the diverse contexts of participating countries.

Research4Life's Institutional Leaders Study, involving interviews with leaders across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), identifies strategic priorities for Research4Life. One key finding is that Research4Life has become critical research infrastructure, with a vital role in international collaboration, publication support, research planning and more. It has also been developing a powerful voice of advocacy for research in LMICs.

This report presents the views of researchers in LMICs alongside those of institutional leaders, highlighting where perspectives align and where each group contributes distinct insights that enrich the overall findings.

Research4Life and Elsevier: a long-term *partnership*

Research4Life is a public-private partnership with five UN agencies (WHO, FAO, UNEP, WIPO and ILO), two universities (Yale and Cornell), STM Association and more than 200 publishers, including Elsevier. Access to Research4Life is free for Group A countries and $1,500 per institution in Group B countries (see Research4Life for more detail of countries by group). Launched in 2001, Research4Life makes peer-reviewed resources available at over 12,000 institutions in 120 countries and territories.

As a founding partner, Elsevier makes ScienceDirect, Scopus, Embase, Mendeley and ClinicalKey available, contributing around 14% of the material available in Research4Life; this includes approximately 5,500 journals and 35,000 e-books. In 2025, there were over 942,000 Research4Life downloads from ScienceDirect. Through the Elsevier Foundation, Elsevier has provided nearly $1m in training funds since launch. Elsevier has also provided strategic leadership, communications and technical support, serving on the Executive Council for the past 25 years.

About the research: methodology

This report brings together the strategic priorities identified in the Research4Life Program Review 2025–2026 Institutional Access, Participation and Collaboration Study (the Institutional Leaders Study) and researchers' voices, gathered through a quantitative Researcher Survey. The leaders identify the strategic direction, and researchers show where that vision meets reality.

Research4Life Researcher Survey

Research4Life's Equity Committee, in partnership with Elsevier, undertook quantitative research to better understand the needs and experiences of researchers in LMICs.

- Survey was open in May–June 2026.
- 1,122 survey responses from researchers from LMICs.
- Representation spans regions, disciplines, career stages and experience levels. Scopus was the primary source for participant recruitment, supplemented by researchers who had participated in ITOCA programs. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of published researchers with outputs in indexed global, national and regional journals and books.

Institutional Access, Participation and Collaboration Study

The Institutional Leaders Study, led by Research4Life in partnership with ITOCA, aimed to understand how institutions access, participate in and collaborate through research; identify the structural barriers affecting research access and production; and explore the future role and sustainability of Research4Life.

The study engaged 101 institutional leaders and stakeholders from more than 35 countries in two phases:

- Phase 1: 80 representatives of a range of institutions took part in seven regional focus groups.
- Phase 2: 21 senior institutional leaders shared their insights through in-depth interviews.

Together the findings provide the most comprehensive leadership-level assessment of Research4Life undertaken since it was established in 2001.

The results will inform Research4Life's next strategic plan, helping researchers in participating countries thrive in the fast-changing global research ecosystem.

See the appendices on page 61 for the full detailed methodology, including countries covered.

About this report

This report, accompanied by a databook with a full breakdown of the results, highlights the key challenges faced by researchers in LMICs and identifies how they can be better supported in the future.

Discovery: Mapping the research landscape (pages 15–54)

This part sets out researchers' views and experiences across the topics of funding, collaboration, publishing and research excellence, positioned in the context of institutional leaders' strategic priorities.

What next? Turning evidence into action (pages 55–60)

Bringing the findings together, this part makes recommendations for institutions, publishers, professional organizations, governments and Research4Life.

Discovery: Mapping the research landscape



Chapter 1

Resourcing research

Research institutions are facing a persistent gap between their ambitions and the resources available to achieve them. Leaders interviewed in the Institutional Study describe funding and institutional capacity as the biggest constraints on their organizations' ambitions.

Researchers agree: their survey responses, about their funding experience and success rates, reveal a picture of a highly competitive funding landscape, particularly in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. They also share insights into the barriers they are facing, both institutional and eligibility-related, providing opportunities for change.

Key findings



52%

of researchers have applied for funding in the last three years; 56% of these have done so two to three times.



32%

of applications have been successful on average, while 13% of researchers report a success rate of just 1–10% of their funding applications, and 27% saying that none were successful.



48%

say limited international support and partnerships are hindering their access to funding.



Introduction: a competitive funding landscape

A lack of funding has been highlighted as a major barrier to research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).[3] For example, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), just 0.2% of research grants from major international health-research funders went to low-income countries in 2020.[4]

Funding is a challenge many institutions face. Indeed, in the 2024 report *View from the Top*, 84% of academic leaders globally said securing financing for research is a high priority, while only 49% felt well prepared to address the challenge.[5]

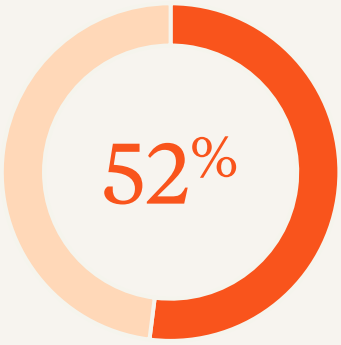
This appears to be a challenge that isn't likely to change soon: two-thirds of leaders who participated in Elsevier's *View from the Top* study expect funding challenges to increase for their institutions in the coming years.[5]

Similarly, in another large-scale global study researchers are not optimistic about their future funding, with only 33% expecting an increase in the next few years.[6]

The funding outlook is significantly influenced by governments, which have a critical role in creating enabling environments for research through policy support, budgetary allocations and national research priorities. Scopus analysis points to the value of strong national funders: of the 38 government funders acknowledged in more than 10,000 publications targeting the Sustainable Development Goals in 2020–2024, 20 are in LMICs.[2]

Funding today: frequent applications with limited success

Applied for research funding in the last 3 years



Question: In the last 3 years, have you applied for research funding (as a principal or primary investigator or co-applicant/co-investigator)?

Base: n = 1122

Average number of funding applications in last 3 years (of those who submitted applications)

3 funding applications

Question: How many funding applications have you submitted in the last 3 years?

Base: n = 609

Proportion of funding applications successful

32% successful applications

Question: Approximately what proportion of your research funding applications were successful in the last 3 years?

Base: n = 609



Researchers are actively applying for funding opportunities, with over half (52%) saying they have applied for funding in the last three years. Application rates vary considerably by region: researchers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are by far the least likely to have applied for research funding (35%), while those in Latin America are most likely (66%). At the country level, this ranges from 22% in Iraq to 74% in Colombia.

Despite leaving plenty of opportunity for increased participation, it is worth noting that the overall proportion of successful applications is comparable to global rates. For example, NSF's funding rate is about 27% agency-wide.[7]

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Of those who have applied for funding, more than half (56%) have done so two to three times in the last three years. Despite the high rates of application, funding success is mixed, the estimated average success rate is 32% of applications; with 13% of researchers reporting a success rate of just 1–10% of their applications, and 27% saying that none were successful. Only 15% of researchers say more than three-quarters of their funding applications are successful.

Men are more likely than women to have submitted 2–3 funding applications (62% vs. 42%), while women are twice as likely to have submitted just one (31% vs. 15% of men).

Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing the most challenges getting funding. 21% say that 1–10% of their applications are successful (compared to 13% of all surveyed). Their average success rate is 20% of applications compared to 32% of applications from all respondents. In Nigeria, the average success rate is 19% of applications.

Country income level is a factor when it comes to funding: researchers in low-income countries report the lowest funding success: the average success rate is 19% of applications (vs. 37% for upper-middle income countries).

Funding spotlight: life sciences

Life sciences researchers are the most likely to have applied for research funding (58% vs. 52% overall) and are the least likely to have submitted just one funding application (14%, vs. 23% in physical and 25% in health sciences).

Their applications are also less likely to get funded, with 11% of life sciences researchers saying more than three-quarters of their applications succeed (compared to 19% in physical sciences).

Strengthening pathways to research funding

Across all regions, researchers identify opportunities to strengthen the systems that support access to funding. International support and partnerships emerge as the leading priority: almost half (48%) say that limited access to these connections affects their ability to secure funding, rising to 54% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 71% in Ethiopia and 62% in Nigeria. The issue is also particularly significant for health researchers, at 57% compared with 42% in the physical sciences.

Nearly half of the researchers surveyed say limited funding opportunities (45%) and limited institutional support (45%) are barriers. The latter is a bigger issue for women (49%) than men (43%).

The most frequently cited eligibility barrier is restrictions around international collaborators as partners (44%); this is a more significant barrier for health researchers (53%).

The regional picture highlights certain barriers for researchers in different areas:

- Limited proposal writing skills are a far bigger barrier in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (37%) and Eastern Europe (33%) than in MENA (15%).
- Researchers in SSA are least likely to cite language requirements (12% vs. 20% of all surveyed).
- By country, some differences emerge, notably those in Cameroon rarely cite limited time due to workload (6% vs. 36% overall).
- Researchers in low-income countries are the most likely to cite a limited experience or track record (38% vs. 26% overall); upper-middle-income countries stand out on language requirements or barriers (29% vs. 20%).
- Men are more likely than women to cite limited funding opportunities in their field (48% vs. 41%).

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.



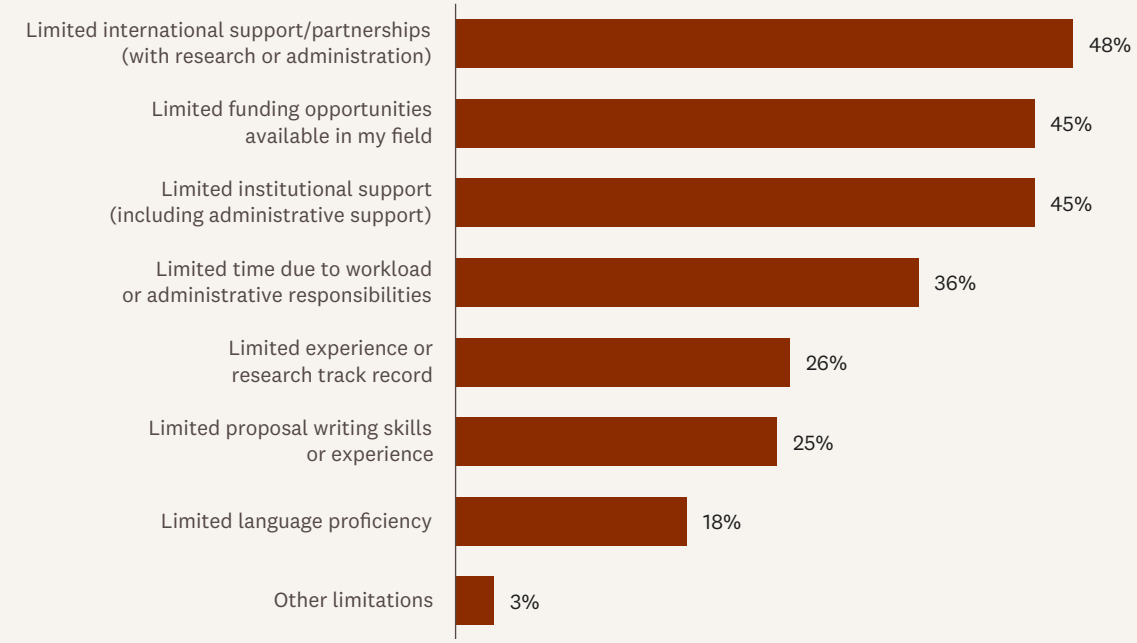
Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"Access to research funding, modern laboratory facilities, training opportunities, and international collaboration programs would greatly help [...]."

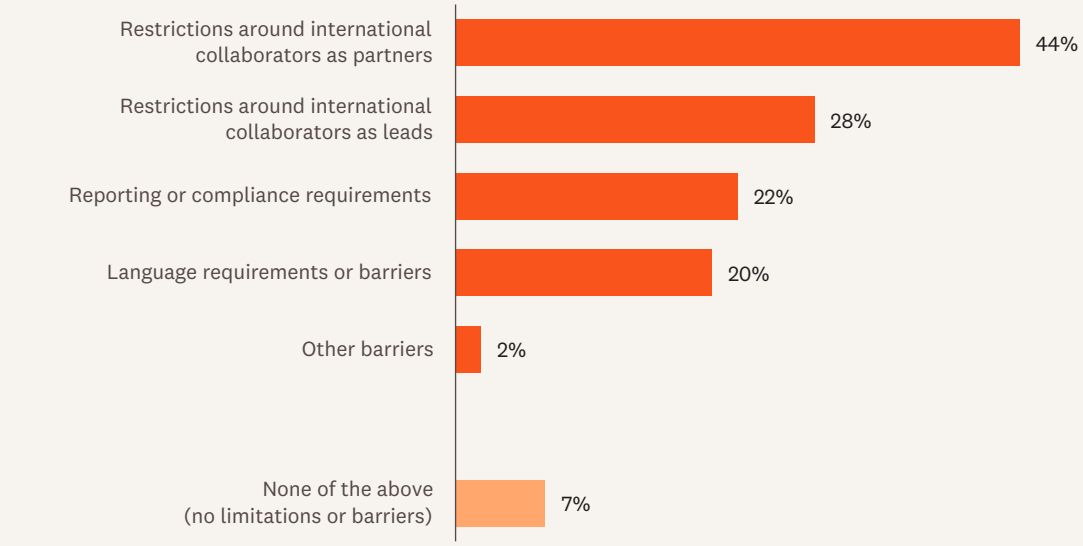
Research Services, Leader, Bangladesh

What limitations or barriers, if any, have affected your ability to obtain research funding?

Personal or institutional limitations



Funding application or eligibility barriers



Question: What limitations or barriers, if any, have affected your ability to obtain research funding?

Base: n = 1122

Key implications

- Funding effort is high, but returns are modest. Over half of researchers (52%) have applied for funding in the last three years, and most of them more than once, yet only 32% of applications are reported as successful. A considerable amount of time and effort is therefore going into applications that are not funded. While this is not an issue limited to researchers in LMICs, this is time that could be otherwise spent on research itself, so work may progress more slowly than institutions and researchers intend.
- Barriers are felt most where inequalities already exist. Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa and low-income countries report the lowest success rates, and women are more likely to have submitted only one application and to cite limited institutional support. If these patterns continue, the gap in opportunity could also widen, shaping not only who is able to carry out research, but also which questions are studied and how relevant and impactful the outcomes are.
- The barriers are largely structural. Limited international support and partnerships (48%), limited funding opportunities (45%), limited institutional support (45%) and restrictions around international collaborators as partners (44%) sit largely beyond the control of individual researchers. As such, individual effort alone is unlikely to resolve them.

Chapter 2

Conducting research

International collaboration has long been a core element of research but is even more critical to success today. Significantly, the interviews with institutional leaders revealed that Research4Life is no longer viewed as a library service, but as infrastructure that underpins institutional research systems. Specifically, the Institutional Study reveals that leaders view Research4Life as a collaboration enabler, highlighting how the program has expanded beyond content access.

Researchers offer valuable insights into the realities: how much they are collaborating, what sparks that cooperation and what obstacles they face when working with research partners internationally.

Key findings



59%

have been involved in international collaboration in the last three years, led by enhancing research quality (66%) and initiated through existing personal or professional networks (28%) and introductions by colleagues or mentors (28%).



51%

of researchers are not members of any professional organizations.



54%

Finding opportunities or platforms to connect (54%) and identifying suitable collaborators (54%) are top obstacles to starting to collaborate, while overcoming financial barriers (42%) is the biggest challenge during collaboration.



32%

of researchers say they have had to manage expectations around publishing when collaborating with other researchers.



25%

A quarter of researchers report difficulties gaining recognition for their work, including being given a lower authorship position than expected (15%) or not being listed as corresponding author despite contributing significantly (8%).



87%

consider it important for academic events to offer remote participation options.

Introduction: imbalances in collaboration

Researchers say that international collaboration is increasing: in Elsevier's *Researcher of the Future* report, 63% of researchers globally said there is more collaboration in their discipline than previously, and 53% of these are collaborating with institutions in other countries.[6]

Authorship practices can be an indicator of balance in these collaborations, particularly looking at whether research partners in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are credited through authorship. Research suggests that, despite the increase in international collaboration, representation is lagging.[8, 9]

One study revealed an imbalance in oncology research involving LMICs, with first and last authorship usually going to high-income countries, leading to the conclusion that there are disparities in professional recognition.[8] Another study showed only modest improvements in LMIC author representation in the published output since 2008.[9] Further studies have shown similar results in maternal health,[10] pediatric research[11] and global emergency medicine.[12]

This lag in recognition sits alongside growing LMIC research impact. In 2024, articles with LMIC authors accounted for 6.5% of the top 5% most-cited articles, compared with 5.5% for articles with high-income country (HIC) authors, and LMIC-authored articles addressing the Sustainable Development Goals outnumbered those from HIC authors.[2] Understanding how collaborations are initiated and how they develop through to publication can inform more effective support at each stage of the research process.

International collaboration: widespread but challenging

Most researchers (59%) have been involved in an international collaboration in the last three years, with rates highest in Latin America (70%) and Asia Pacific (63%) and lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa (52%). At the country level, researchers in Ethiopia (40%) and Iraq (45%) are less likely than average to have collaborated, while Vietnam is more likely than average (75%). Overall, this reflects previous global findings, 64% of researchers in 2019 said they expected the majority of research projects to be conducted across international boundaries.[13]

Researchers with more than 10 years' experience are more likely to have collaborated (65%–67% vs 52%). Health sciences researchers are the most likely to have collaborated internationally (65%), ahead of physical sciences (57%) and social sciences (55%). Bibliometric data show a similar gap. In 2020–2024, 24% of publications with LMIC authors were co-authored with international authors, compared to 35% for publications with high-income country-affiliated authors. The analysis also suggests that learning can be faster when researchers work with regions facing similar development challenges, and that agreements between LMIC funders could foster more collaboration between LMICs.[2]

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

The reasons for participating in international collaboration align with some of the challenges researchers face, including access to funding (see page 21).

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"[...] stronger mechanisms to ensure that researchers from developing countries are recognized not only as data providers or local facilitators, but as equal intellectual contributors.[...]"

Senior Researcher, Colombia

"Equity is not achieved through courtesy; it is achieved through clear rules and the recognition that local knowledge and fieldwork have the same scientific value [...]."

Research Services, Ecuador

Top 3 reasons for international collaboration



66%
Enhancing research quality



60%
Expanding network



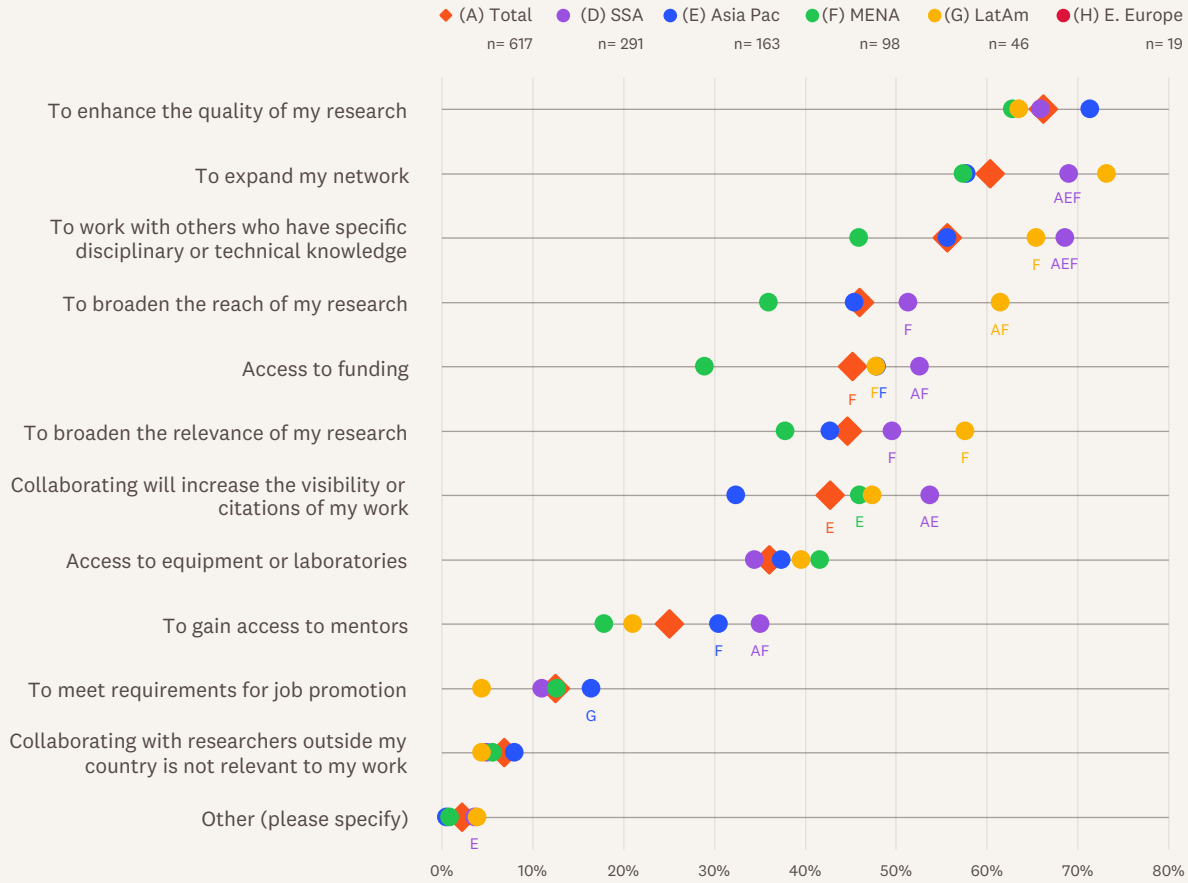
56%
Accessing specific disciplinary or technical knowledge

Broadly, researchers in low-income countries are more likely than average to collaborate to access specific expertise (73%) and access mentors (38%).

Beyond the overall LMIC picture, researchers' reasons for collaborating vary significantly by region. Notably Sub-Saharan African researchers stand out for collaborating to access specific expertise, as well as to expand their network (69%), to increase the visibility or citations of their work (54%), to access funding (53%; highest in Ethiopia at 68%) and to access mentors (35%).

Access to funding is less of a motivation for collaboration for researchers in MENA (29%; lowest in Iraq at 18%), while researchers in Asia Pacific (APAC) are least likely to collaborate to increase the visibility or citations of their work (32% vs 43% overall).

What are the reasons for collaborating with researchers outside your country?



Question: What are the reasons for collaborating with researchers outside your country?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total). E. Europe not plotted due to low base.

Base: n = 617

SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia Pac = Asia Pacific, MENA = Middle East and North Africa, LatAm = Latin America and Caribbean, E. Europe = Eastern Europe

Networking in health sciences

Health sciences researchers are the most likely to collaborate to expand their network (78% vs. 60% overall). They are also most likely to belong to a research organization — just 40% are members of none (vs. 58% in physical sciences and 51% overall). As a group, they get the most from their memberships: 54% cite professional development courses (vs. 27% in physical sciences and 38% overall) and 50% high-quality learning or training (vs. 36% overall).

Smoothing the path to collaboration: networking

Existing networks are key to initiating international collaboration, whether that's through existing personal or professional networks (28%), introductions by colleagues or mentors (28%) or at conferences (13%).

For researchers in low-income countries (18%) and those with 16+ years' experience (18%), funding calls are more likely than average (12%) to lead to collaboration.

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Professional organizations

Despite existing networks being the initiators of collaboration for over a quarter (28%) of those who have collaborated, more than half (51%) of all respondents are not members of any professional organizations.

Membership is most commonly of a local or national body — membership of global bodies is generally low. Latin American researchers are by far the most likely to belong to global (30% vs. 15% overall) or regional (29% vs. 15% overall) membership organizations.

Professional associations are seen to create value, with only 7% indicating membership has been no help. However, lack of awareness of such organizations and costs limit participation.

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"[…] Access to databases, software, laboratories, and mentorship would also be important. Support for English academic writing, conference participation, and networking with global research groups would help local researchers contribute not only as data providers, but as active scientific partners."

Research Services, Leader, Bolivia

Benefits of joining a professional organization

Expertise



45%
Access to resources or specialized knowledge



38%
Professional development courses



36%
High-quality learning or training

Networking



44%
Strong community and networking



38%
Visibility for the researcher or their work



35%
A supportive environment

Researchers in MENA report they receive fewer benefits from their memberships — fewer cite strong community and networking (29% vs 44% overall), professional development courses (23% vs 38% overall) and are less likely to think they provide a supportive environment (22% vs 35% overall). Members in Latin America are more likely to value getting visibility for their work (54%).

Women are notably more likely than men to say their memberships provide professional development courses (47% vs. 34%).

Researchers who are not members see the value of professional organizations: only 16% say they do not see clear benefits to joining, falling to just 6% in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Instead, non-members mainly cite lack of awareness of relevant organizations (45%) and membership fees (44%) as the reasons for not joining professional organizations. Membership fees are the biggest barrier for researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa and those with less than 10 years' experience (52% in both groups, vs 49% citing lack of awareness).

The third most common factor is a lack of institutional support, with 37% saying their institution does not support or reimburse membership. This is more significant for researchers than research leaders (at 39% vs. 30%).

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"More balanced research partnerships and mentoring schemes at local and international levels would help to reduce disparities and strengthen researchers' capacities."

Researcher, Social Sciences, Benin

Conferences

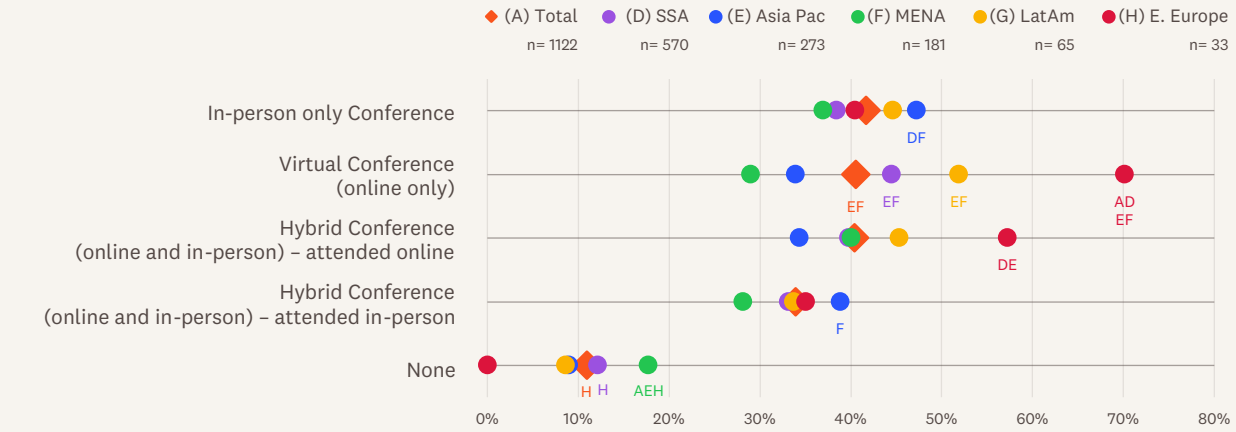
Conferences account for 13% of reported collaboration starts, placing them a distant third, but conference attendance remains widespread. Overall, researchers most commonly attend in-person conferences (42%), ranging from 37% in MENA to 47% in APAC.

Most likely to have attended in-person only conferences are social sciences (50%) and health sciences (46%) researchers, those with 16+ years' (48%) and 11–15 years' experience (45%) and men (44%).

However, remote participation is now considered essential: 87% of researchers consider it important for academic events to offer remote participation options, with 60% rating it very important. Researchers in low-income countries place the greatest importance on remote participation options, with 94% rating them important (vs. 87% overall).

This is reflected in attendance patterns, with virtual (41%) and hybrid conferences attended online (40%) almost as common as in-person events.

In the last 3 years, which of the following types of academic conference have you attended?



Question: In the last 3 years, which of the following types of academic conference have you attended?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)

Base: n = 1122

Alongside in-person and virtual conferences, hybrid conferences offer researchers the option of attending in-person or online, and there are some clear preferences among different groups.

Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa place particularly high importance on remote participation (91%), and they are more likely than average to attend virtual events (44%). Nigerian researchers place the greatest importance on remote participation, with 95% rating it important and 77% very important.

Researchers in MENA and APAC are less likely to have attended virtual-only conferences (29% and 34% respectively) and researchers in APAC are also less likely than others to have attended hybrid conferences online (34% vs. 40% of all surveyed).

What would improve virtual access to conferences?

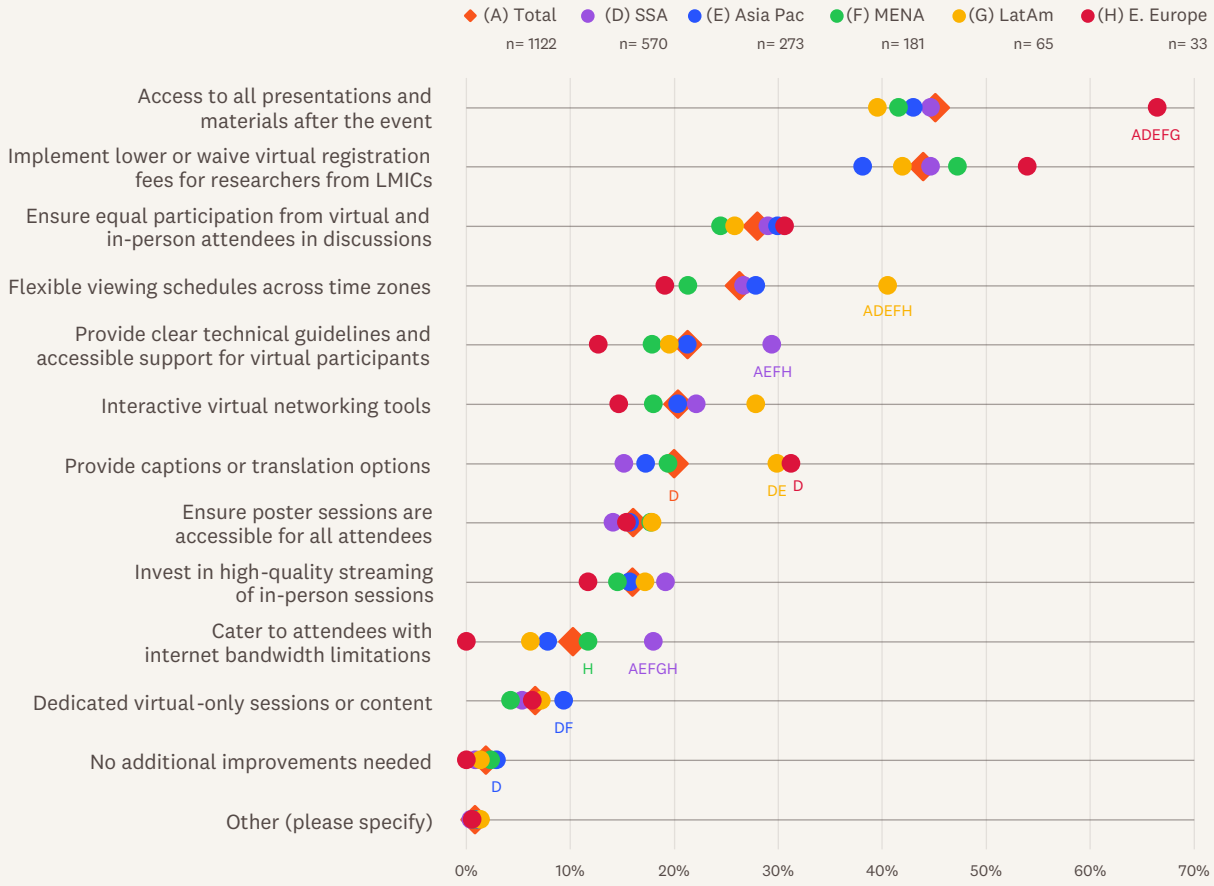
While online conference attendance is popular, researchers note a number of restrictions to that access, such as registration fees and internet bandwidth. They pinpoint several ways to improve the experience, most notably access to all presentations and materials after the event (45%) and lower or waived virtual registration fees for attendees from LMICs (44%).

Lower or waived registration fees are most important for researchers in Eastern Europe (54%) and MENA (47%).

In Latin America, researchers are more likely than average to want flexible viewing schedules across time zones (41% vs. 26% overall), particularly in Colombia (45%).

For researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa, clear technical guidelines and accessible support for virtual participants (29%) and catering to attendees with internet bandwidth limitations (18%) are particularly important considerations. They also want conferences to invest in high-quality streaming of in-person sessions (19%).

What could conference organizers do that would most improve the virtual element of hybrid events?



Question: What could conference organizers do that would most improve the virtual element of hybrid events?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)

Base: n = 1122

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"Adequate mentorship on grant applications and securing necessary funding to attend international conferences. Personally, I was unable to attend an international conference this year due to limited funding. The topics covered are timely and relevant."

Faculty Member, Nigeria

Conference attendance (last 3 years)

In-person only	42%
Virtual (online only)	**41%**
Hybrid — online	**40%**
Hybrid — in-person	34%
None	11%

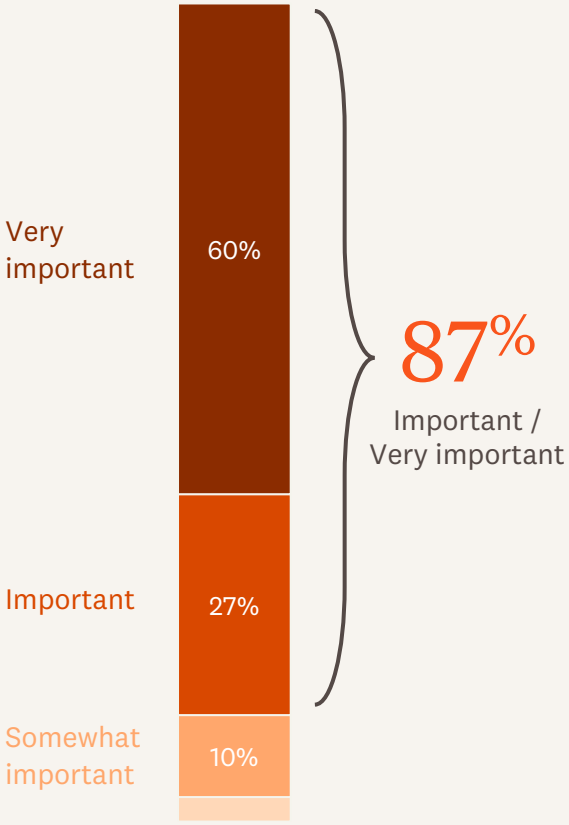


Question: In the last 3 years, which of the following types of academic conference have you attended?

Base: total = 1122

The total exceeds 100% as some respondents attended more than one type of academic conference. The donut chart counts each respondent once and shows those who attended at least one conference online (an online-only conference or a hybrid conference where they joined online), whether or not they also attended in person.

Importance of remote participation



Question: How important is it for academic events to offer remote participation options?

Base: total = 1108



Enabling access through language support

For some researchers, language support is critical for equitable participation: language barriers are mentioned in relation to funding, collaboration, professional organization membership, conferences and publishing.

Funding
Researchers cite language requirements (20%) and limited language proficiency (18%) as barriers to funding. Agreement is highest in Eastern Europe (at 35% and 33% respectively).

Collaboration
Over a quarter (27%) face challenges related to managing language differences or communication barriers when collaborating, and for 30% this is a challenge when seeking collaborators.

Networking
Language barriers are a reason for not joining a professional research organization for 14% of researchers; this is highest in MENA (17%), especially Iraq (30%). Researchers in upper-middle-income countries are also more likely to cite language barriers as a reason for not joining a membership association (33% vs. 14% overall).

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

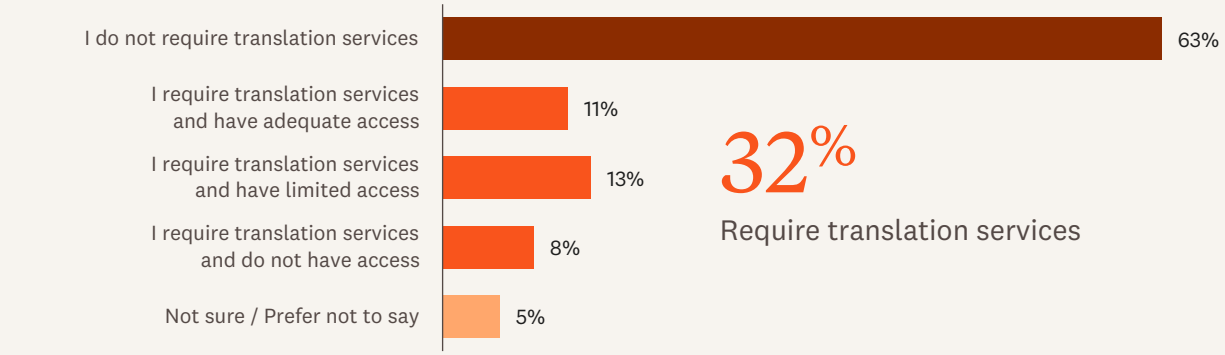
"Expanding translation capabilities or providing the ability to communicate in a language other than one's own in work situations (possibly with the help of AI agents and/or professional translators). Ability to provide consulting support that is accessible and unlimited."

Researcher, Ukraine

Virtual conferences
Providing captions or translation options would improve the conference experience for 20% of researchers. This is highest in Eastern Europe (31%) and Latin America (30%), particularly Colombia (35%).

Publishing
Almost a third (32%) require translation support, 13% have limited access to such services and 8% no access. The need is greatest in Eastern Europe and Latin America, where only 31% and 43% say they do not require translation services, compared with 73% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 72% in APAC.

Access to translation services when submitting manuscripts



Question: Do you require translation services when submitting manuscripts to journals, and do you have access to them?
Base: n = 1122

Strengthening the conditions for collaboration

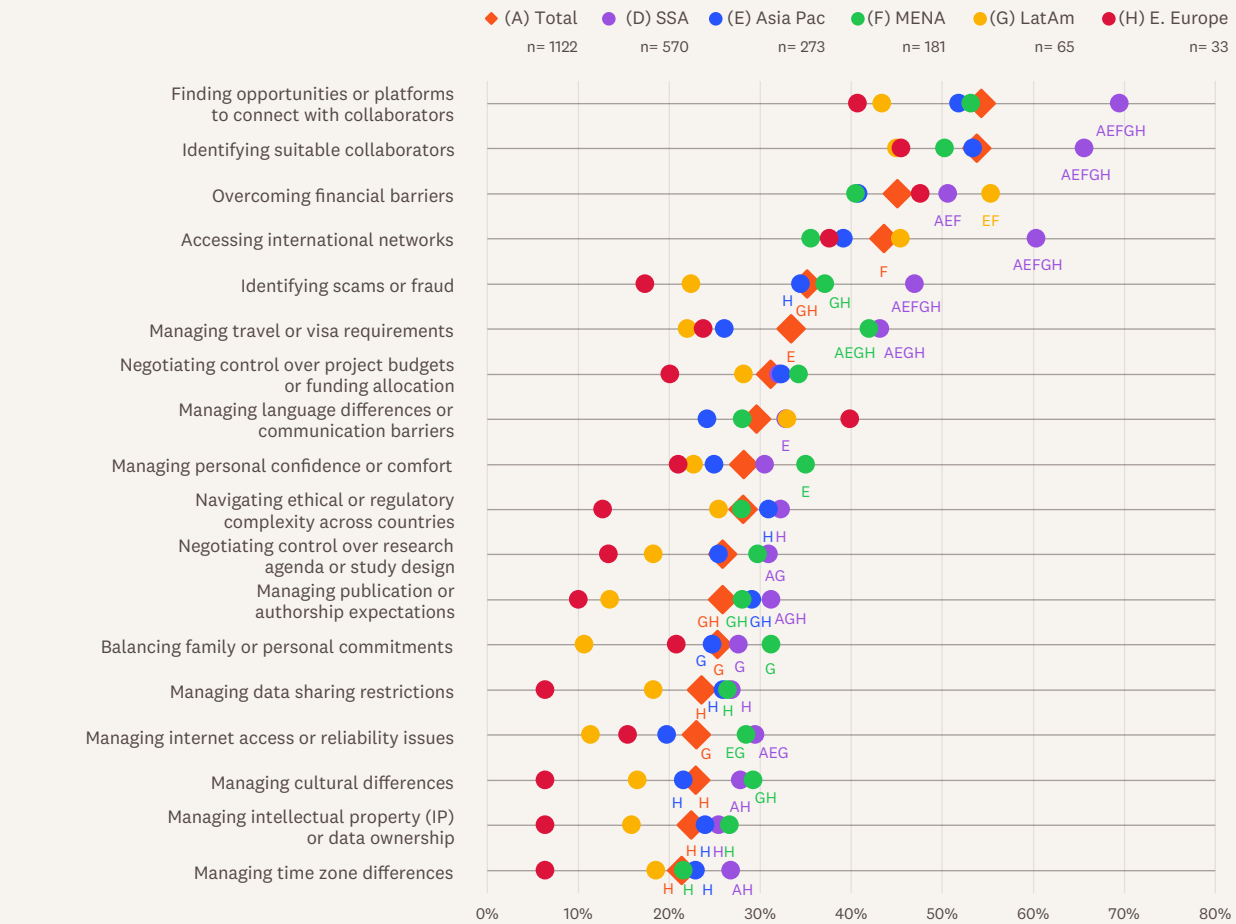
Researchers identify several areas where stronger support could expand international collaboration. The leading priorities are access to opportunities or platforms for connection (54%), help identifying suitable collaborators (54%), financial support (45%) and access to international networks (44%). Two of these priorities are particularly pronounced in low-income countries, where 63% cite access to opportunities or platforms, and 61% identifying suitable collaborators.

The picture differs at the regional level: in Sub-Saharan Africa, researchers are consistently most likely to cite challenges, notably with finding opportunities or platforms to connect (69% vs. 54% overall), identifying scams or fraud (47% vs. 35% overall), accessing international networks (60% vs 44%) and identifying suitable collaborators (66% vs 54%). In Latin America, overcoming financial barriers is the biggest challenge (55%).

The challenges appear to decrease with time, the longer-serving researchers report fewer challenges overall than those who have been working for 10 years or less. For example, researchers with up to 10 years' experience are the most concerned about identifying scams or fraud (42% vs. 35% overall); those with 16+ years struggle least to find opportunities to connect (46% vs. 54%).

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

What challenges, if any, do you face when seeking researchers outside your country?



Question: What challenges, if any, do you face when seeking researchers outside your country?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)

Base: n = 1122

Sustaining effective collaboration

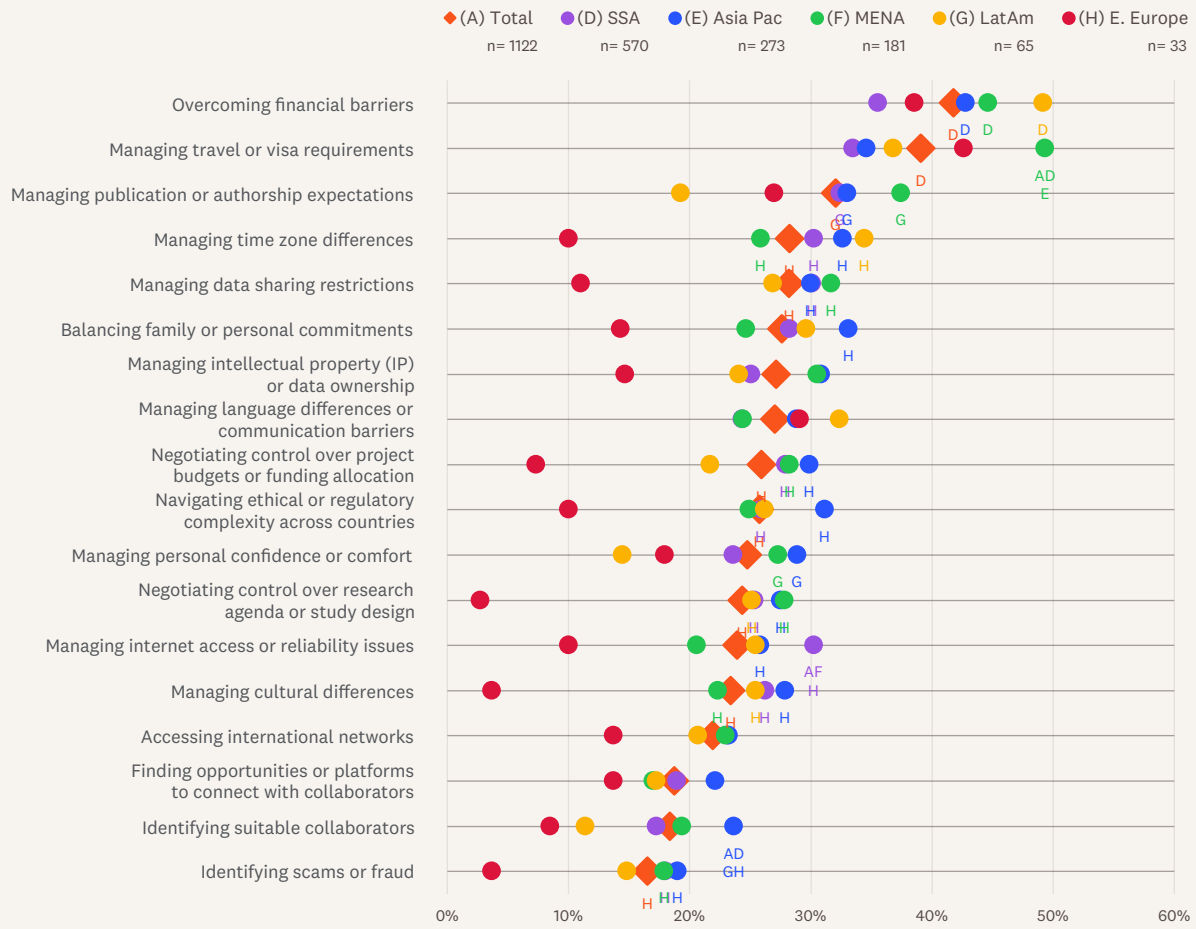
Once a collaboration has started, researchers face a number of challenges, related to resourcing, logistics and administration, and relationship management and personal factors. Overcoming financial barriers (42%) and managing travel or visa requirements (39%) are the biggest challenges overall.

Eastern European researchers report the fewest challenges, being the least likely to cite negotiating control over project budgets or funding allocation (7% vs. 26% overall) or negotiating control over the research agenda (3% vs. 24% overall).

While researchers in low-income countries are less likely to report problems with managing travel or visa requirements (29%, vs. 43% in upper-middle-income countries) and overcoming financial barriers (32%, vs. 42% in upper-middle-income countries), they are more likely to cite challenges with internet access or reliability (31% vs. 18% upper-middle-income countries) and managing cultural differences (30% vs. 15% upper-middle-income countries).

Financial barriers are greatest for those researchers with 11–15 years' experience (49%), while managing travel or visa requirements is more significant for researchers in MENA (49%).

What challenges, if any, do you face when collaborating with researchers outside your country?



Question: What challenges, if any, do you face when collaborating with researchers outside your country?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)

Base: n = 1122

Key implications

- Collaboration and funding are closely linked, so the barriers compound. Collaboration is a route to funding, expertise, equipment and mentors, and just over half of Sub-Saharan African researchers who collaborate internationally do so to access funding. Without partnerships, funding is harder to reach, and without funding, partnerships are harder to sustain: financial barriers are the biggest challenge once collaboration has started.
- Networks open the door, but not everyone has easy access to a network. Most collaborations begin through existing personal or professional networks or introductions from colleagues or mentors. The barriers ease with experience and seniority, so those researchers without established networks, such as those early in their careers, start at a disadvantage.
- Professional organizations can help address some of these barriers, but their potential is not being reached. Members see benefits across expertise, community and visibility and only a very small proportion say membership has not helped. Yet many researchers are not members of any organization, mainly because of awareness, membership fees and a lack of institutional support.
- Participation in critical aspects of global research, from collaboration to conferences, is being hindered by structural issues. Remote participation is seen as essential, but fees, bandwidth, and the lack of captions or translation limit its value. Language challenges run through funding, collaboration, conferences and publishing. These issues can close the door to participation at the very outset of research.
- Participation in collaboration does not automatically bring about equal or appropriate recognition of a researcher's contribution. Most authors report no authorship issues, but a quarter report difficulties gaining recognition for their work, including a lower authorship position than expected and decisions made without their input. Researchers in low-income countries are more likely to say they were not credited as an author despite their contribution and less likely to have led a submission. This echoes wider evidence of imbalance in authorship in research involving LMICs.

Chapter 3

Sharing research

Institutional leaders describe the shift from access to knowledge production, seeing Research4Life as providing three interconnected benefits: access to trusted scholarly content; helping navigate publishing support, including APC waiver guidance; and trust and quality, including related to AI misuse, with Research4Life seen as a mark of legitimacy for resources. They identify awareness as a greater challenge than access.

Researchers agree: the biggest issue related to engagement with Research4Life is awareness — for those who know about Research4Life, the benefits are clear. Researchers share their experiences related to publishing their research, their involvement in the peer review process and their editorial aspirations.

Key findings



86%

have published in a global or international journal but only 51% feel they have an equal opportunity to publish in international journals.



88%

say publishing open access is important; APC costs are perceived as the main influence on whether they decide to publish open access (73%)



48%

have benefited from an APC waiver or discount.



87%

of researchers are interested in reviewing and 75% in joining an editorial board, but interest outpaces invitations.



Formal recognition (61%), mentorship, training or guidance (59%) and clear instructions and review templates (44%) would improve reviewing experience.



22%

Open institutional repositories (41%), shadow repositories (39%) and author requests (38%) are the top three sources of published content; 22% use Research4Life.



38%

of researchers surveyed are somewhat familiar or very familiar with Research4Life, and 82% of those who have heard of it find it useful for their work.



Introduction: access and authorship

Publishing is a vital step in the research cycle, and in Elsevier's *Researcher of the Future* survey, 68% of researchers globally said the pressure to publish their research is greater than it was two to three years ago.[6]

Indeed, the number of papers from researchers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has increased over the last few years: according to Scopus data, 56% of the 7.5 million authors who published in 2024 were affiliated to research institutions in LMICs.[2]

Yet researchers in LMICs report facing disproportionately higher barriers to publication, which limit publication rates. According to one study that reported less than 10% of neurosurgical reviews coming from Africa and South-East Asia, compared to over two-thirds from North America and Europe, authors face financial limitations, weak infrastructure and limited access to mentors.[14]

On the other side of the cycle, researchers need access to publications in order to generate ideas, advance their own research and develop the field. In turn, this increases their productivity: a 2020 study showed that free access to published research increased publication output by 29%.[15] Similarly, for health research, published output increased by 41% and clinical trials by 21%, according to a 2025 study.[16]

Publishing: a largely global endeavor

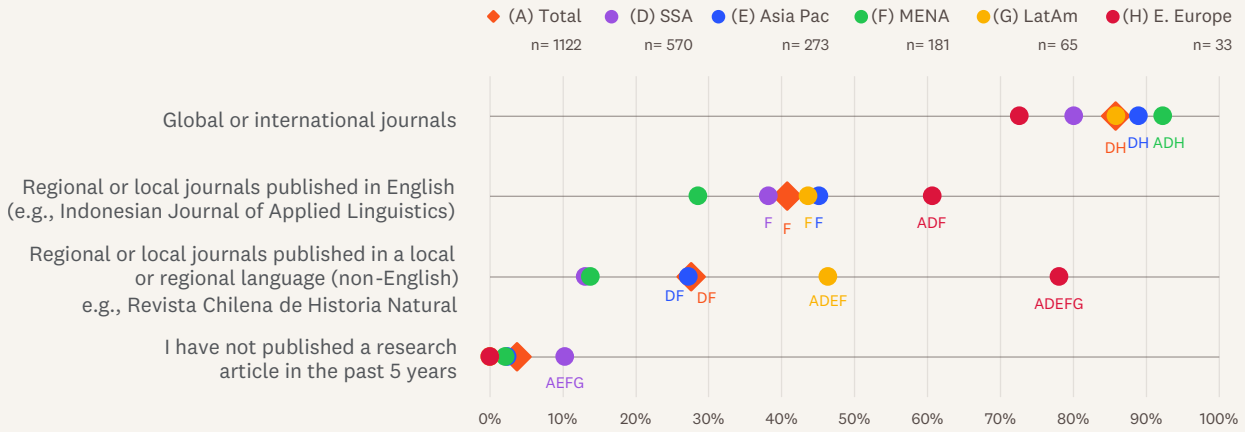
Nearly all respondents (96%) have published in the past five years.ii Those in low-income countries (18%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (10%) are most likely to say they haven't published in the last five years. The high rate of publication is likely due to the source of survey participants: the list came from a Scopus search of published authors in LMICs, including those who published in local and regional journals. See the methodology section on page 63 for details.

The vast majority (86%) have published in a global or international journal, with rates ranging from 73% in Eastern Europe to 92% in MENA. Four in five researchers (80%) submitted their most recent manuscript to a global or international journal. You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Regional or local journals published in English, such as the Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, are the second most popular avenue, with 41% of researchers having published in them in the last five years. Rates range from 29% in MENA to 61% in Eastern Europe.

When it comes to publication in a local or regional language (non-English) journal, such as Revista Chilena de Historia Natural, 28% of researchers overall have published in the last five years, with rates highest in Eastern Europe (78%) and Latin America (46%). This journal type accounts for just 7% of the most recent submissions, most likely in Latin America (10%) and among health and social sciences researchers (10%).

In the past 5 years, have you published research articles in any of the following types of journals?



Question: In the past 5 years, have you published research articles in any of the following types of journals?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)

Base: n = 1122

ii It is worth noting that the survey participants are sourced from a list of researchers who have published in the last three years in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and this is likely reflected in the findings.

Perception of opportunities to publish in international journals is mixed

Overall, 51% of researchers feel they have equal opportunity to publish in international journals, while 32% feel they do not, suggesting that the opportunity for international publishing is not available to all.

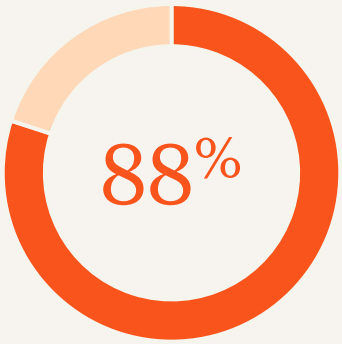
Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa and APAC are the most likely to say they have equal opportunity (both 57%), while those in Latin America are by far the least likely to say so (26%).

Women (39%, vs. 56% of men), researchers in health (43%) and social sciences (44%), and more experienced researchers (45%, vs. 55% of those with up to 10 years' experience) are less likely to feel they have equal opportunities to publish internationally.

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

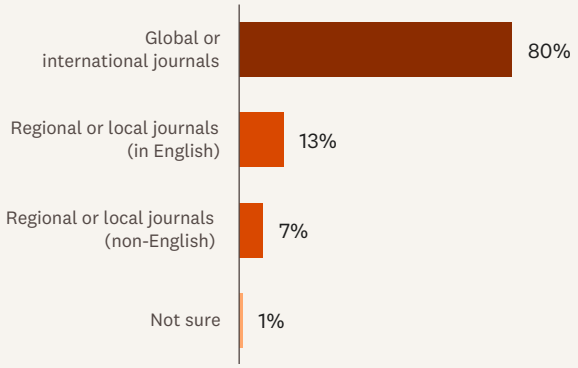
Submissions are generally successful, with 64% of most recent manuscripts being accepted by the journal they were first submitted to, and a further 17% later accepted or published elsewhere. While 13% are still under review, only 6% were rejected but not accepted elsewhere. This is higher than would be expected from reported journal acceptance rates, suggesting the results may overstate typical first-submission success. This likely reflects the sample, which predominantly comprises published authors identified through Scopus. Researchers with successful recent publishing experiences are therefore more likely to be represented.

Ever submitted a manuscript as lead author



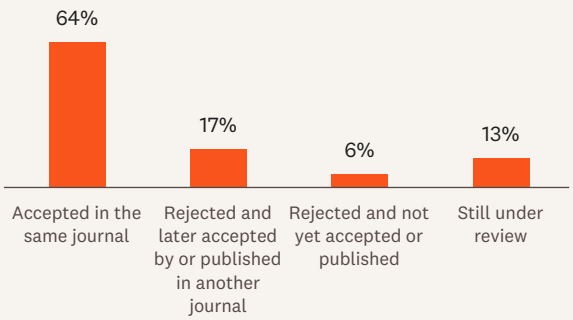
Question: Have you ever submitted a manuscript to a journal where you were the lead author or corresponding author? *Base: n = 1122*

Where last manuscript first submitted



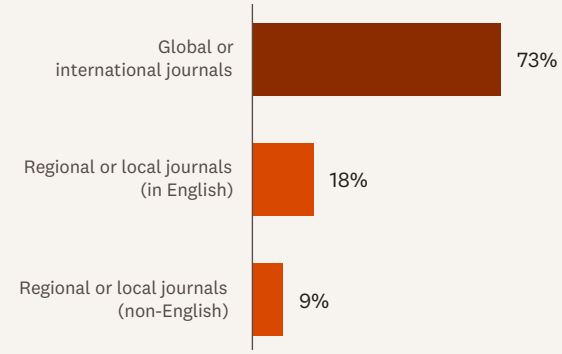
Question: Please think about the most recent research manuscript you submitted to a journal where you were the lead or corresponding author. To what type of journal was this manuscript first submitted? *Base: n = 1008*

Outcome of the submission



Question: What was the outcome of this submission? *Base: n = 1008*

Where rejected manuscripts were later published



Question: If the manuscript was later published in another journal, what type of journal was it accepted by or published in? *Base: manuscript later published in another journal, n =162*

Authorship: room for improvement

Almost one-third (32%) of researchers say they have had to manage publication expectations when collaborating, though 66% have not experienced authorship-related issues in the last three years. Most researchers in every region report no authorship issues, ranging from 62% in APAC and MENA to 77% in Eastern Europe.

Those who have experienced a problem report:

- Being included but in a lower authorship position than expected — 15%
- Publication decisions being made without their input — 9%. *Highest in MENA (12%) and for health researchers (14%).*
- Being unable to be listed as corresponding author despite contributing significantly — 8%. *Lowest in upper-middle-income countries (4%).*
- Not being included as an author despite substantial contribution — 7%. *Highest among researchers in Latin America and in low-income researchers (11%).*

Most researchers (88%) have submitted a manuscript to a journal as lead or corresponding author, as expected given published researchers were the target audience. The regional and discipline picture is even, but researchers in low-income countries are less likely to have submitted a manuscript as lead or corresponding author (81% vs. 88% overall).

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"Authorship should reflect genuine intellectual contribution, not hierarchy, nationality, or funding status."

Researcher, Bangladesh

"[…] agreeing on authorship rules from the start, recognizing all forms of contribution, and reforming academic systems that reward publication counts over genuine collaboration."

Faculty Member, Bangladesh

Open Access: valued but costly

Open Access is highly valued, with the vast majority of researchers (88%) saying publishing open access is important.

Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa (96%), those in low-income countries (94%), health sciences researchers (93%) and early-career researchers (91%) are more likely than average to say publishing open access is important or very important. Conversely, least likely are those in the physical sciences (83%).

It is noteworthy, though, that variation is low, numbers are generally high, for example APAC at 81% is the least likely to prioritize publishing open access indicating global agreement that publishing open access is important.

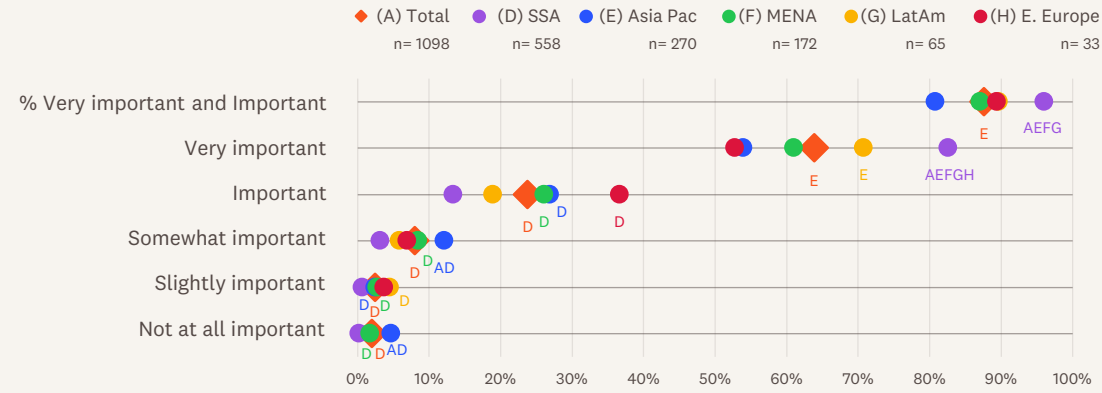
You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Despite open access being widely valued, publication costs continue to shape publishing decisions, with researchers citing APC costs as the main influence on open access publishing choices (73%). This is the top factor in every region (from 63% in Eastern Europe to 78% in Latin America and APAC). Researchers in lower-middle-income countries are the most likely to cite APC costs as a factor (76% vs. 66% in low-income and 68% in upper-middle-income countries).

The second most influential factor is the availability of suitable open access journals in their field, at 38% which is much less of an issue in Latin America (22%).

The third most common influence on open access publication decisions is journal quality concerns (36%), which is fairly even at all levels.

To what extent is publishing your research open access important? Don't know / not sure answers are excluded from the base.



Question: To what extent is publishing your research open access important? Don't know / not sure answers are excluded from the base.
Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)
Base: n = 1098

Use of APC waivers is limited

Adding to the significance of APC costs and the perception of them in the open access publishing decision, only half of researchers (48%) have ever benefited from an APC waiver or discount. Fewer, about a third (35%) of researchers in upper-middle-income countries have received an APC waiver or discount, compared to over half in low-income (54%) countries.

Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa (54%; highest in Ethiopia, at 77%) are the most likely to have received an APC waiver or discount, while those in MENA (41%; lowest in Iraq at 21%) are least likely.

Those in social sciences are the least likely (36%) to have received an APC waiver. Men are more likely than women to have received an APC waiver or discount (at 53% vs. 38%).

Peer review: willing but not invited

Respondents are very keen to peer review: 87% of researchers are interested in becoming or continuing to serve as a reviewer, and most (63%) have been invited to peer review three or more times in the last five years. Yet gaps emerge when it comes to appetite versus opportunity.

Region

Interest is highest in Sub-Saharan Africa (93%) but researchers here are less likely to have been invited three or more times (59%). Eastern European researchers are less likely than average to be interested in peer reviewing (69%).

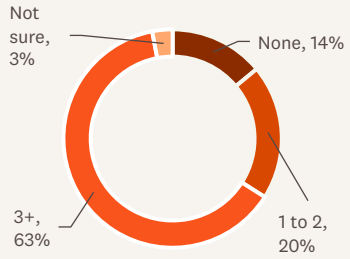
Country income

Researchers in upper-middle-income countries (78%) are the least interested in peer reviewing, compared to those in lower-middle-income (91%) and low-income (90%) countries. But researchers in low-income countries have been invited to review the least often, with 50% invited three or more times (vs. 66% in lower-middle-income countries).

Experience

The most experienced researchers are slightly less interested in peer reviewing: 83% of those with 16+ years' experience are interested (vs. 89% with up to 10 years'). Yet peer review invitations rise with seniority: 73% of researchers with 16+ years' and 71% with 11–15 years' experience have been invited three or more times, vs. 54% of those with up to 10 years' experience. This presents an opportunity for networking to close the gap: eager early career researchers could take on more peer reviewing responsibilities from less available senior researchers.

Percentage of invitations to peer review in past 5 years



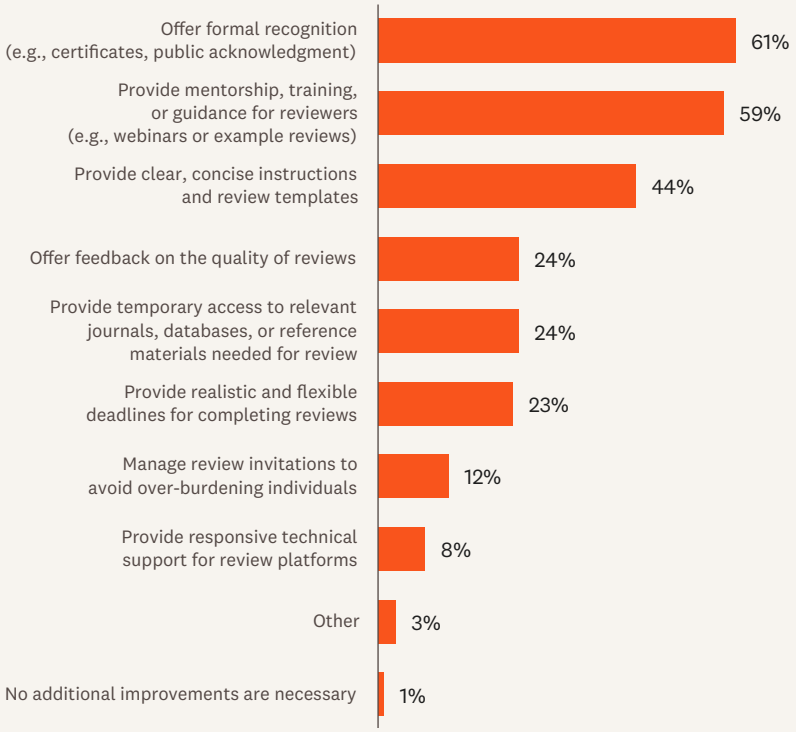
Question: How many times have you been invited to peer review a manuscript in the last 5 years? *Base: total = 1122*

Percentage interested in serving as a peer reviewer in the future



Question: Are you interested in becoming or continuing to serve as a peer reviewer in the future? *Base: total = 1122*

How journals could improve the peer review experience



Question: What could journals do that would most improve your experience as a reviewer?
Base: Those interested in becoming a peer reviewer, n = 1001

Improving access: peer review

Researchers say the main opportunities to improve their experience of peer review are formal recognition (61%) and mentorship, training or guidance (59%), followed by clear instructions and review templates (44%).

Regional agreement that formal recognition would improve their experience is fairly even, ranging from 57% in Latin America to 66% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Physical sciences reviewers are the least likely to want formal recognition (53% vs. 68% for health reviewers), and men are more likely than women to want formal recognition (at 63% vs. 56%).

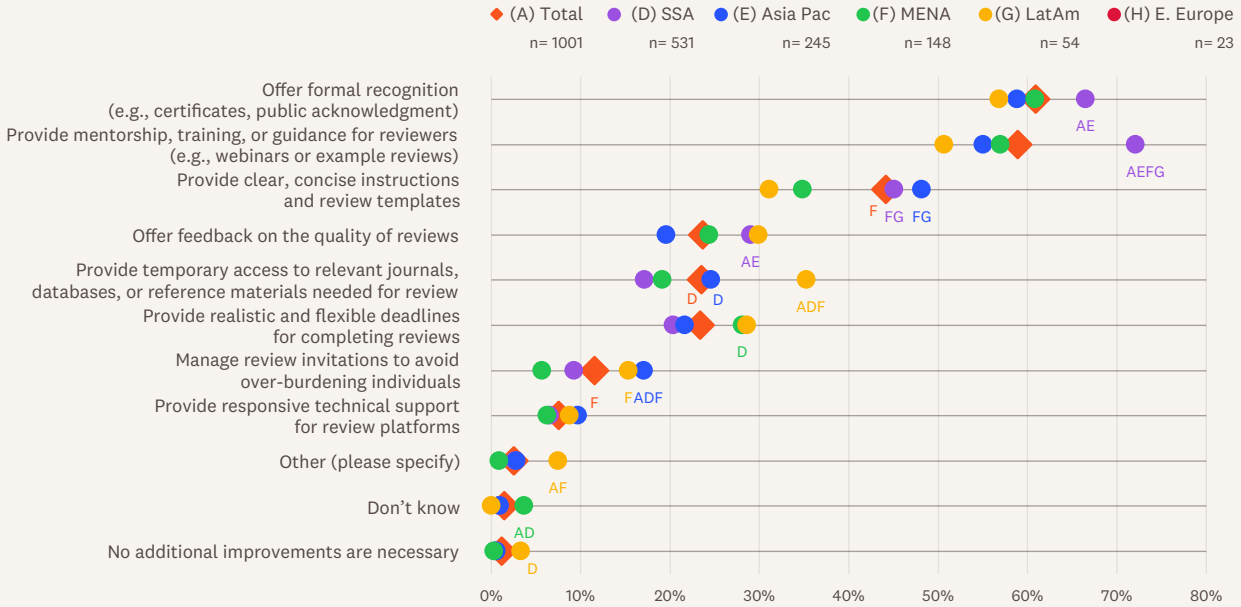
Although at least half of researchers across every region say that mentorship would improve their experience, researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa are particularly clear on this, at 72%. Reviewers in low-income countries are the most likely to want mentorship, training or guidance (79%), while those in upper-middle-income countries are the least likely (49%). At the discipline level, health (69%) and social sciences (66%) researchers are the most likely to want mentorship and training.

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Supporting early career reviewers

Researchers with up to 10 years' experience are highly likely to be interested in reviewing (89%), providing an opportunity for journals. This group is the most likely to want mentorship, training or guidance (71% vs. 59% overall), which would help them develop in this role as they progress in their career.

What could journals do that would most improve your experience as a reviewer?



Question: What could journals do that would most improve your experience as a reviewer?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total). E. Europe not plotted due to low base.

Base: n = 1001

Editorial roles: scope to develop tomorrow's contributors

Strong interest in mentoring (both as mentors and mentees) suggests an opportunity to develop the future editorial community. Echoing the situation for the reviewer role, interest in editorial roles exceeds current participation. Three-quarters (75%) of researchers express an interest in serving on an editorial board, yet only 37% have been invited to serve on an editorial board in the last five years (59% have not and 4% are not sure).

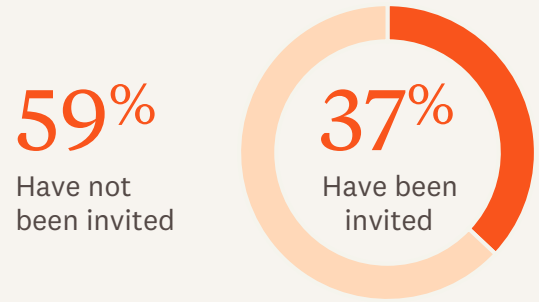
Numbers are fairly consistent regionally when it comes to invitations, but there is regional variation in interest, from 85% in Sub-Saharan Africa to 53% in Eastern Europe and 62% in Latin America. Researchers in low-income (82%) and lower-middle-income (79%) countries are the most interested in editorial board service.

Research leaders are much more likely to have been invited than researchers (47% vs. 33%), though they have a similar appetite to serve on an editorial board (at 76% and 74% respectively). Editorial board invitations rise sharply with seniority: 73% of researchers with up to 10 years' experience have never been invited (vs. 59% overall), compared with just 39% of those with 16+ years' experience.

Men are more likely than women to be interested in serving on an editorial board (78% vs. 67%), and women are more likely than men never to have been invited to an editorial board (65% vs. 55%).

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Percentage invited to serve on an editorial board (past 5 years)



Question: Have you been invited to serve on a journal editorial board in any capacity in the last 5 years? *Base: n = 1122, Does not add up to 100% as 4% are not sure.*

Percentage interested in continuing or serving on an editorial board



Question: Are you interested in becoming or continuing to serve on a journal editorial board (e.g. as associate editor) in the future? *Base: n = 1122*

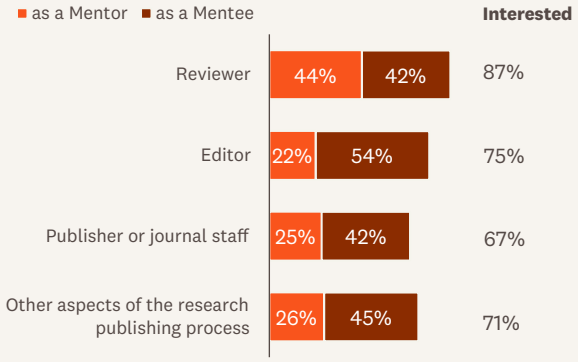


Broad interest in a mentorship program

Respondents are interested in taking part in a mentorship program for various roles in the publishing process. Across all roles, researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa are most likely to want a mentee role, while those in MENA would be more interested in a mentor role. Early career researchers and women are most likely to want a mentee role in general, while more senior researchers and men are more likely to say they want to be a mentor.

- **Editor —** 54% would take part as mentees (highest in Sub-Saharan Africa at 71%) and only 25% are not interested at all (highest in Eastern Europe at 56%).
- **Reviewer —** 44% overall want to mentor (highest in MENA at 57%) and 42% to be mentees. Sub-Saharan Africa shows the broadest engagement, with just 4% not interested in either being a mentor or mentee (vs. 13% overall).
- **Publisher/journal staff —** 42% overall want to be mentees (61% in Sub-Saharan Africa) and 33% are not interested (highest in Eastern Europe, at 66%).
- **Other publishing role —** 45% would take part as mentees (59% in Sub-Saharan Africa), while more than half of Eastern Europe (55%) is not interested (vs. 29% overall).

Interest in participating in a facilitated mentoring program



Question: Would you be interested in participating in a facilitated mentoring program for any of the following roles? If yes, in what capacity? *Base: total =1122*

Accessing published research: regional preferences

Researchers rely on multiple channels when accessing published research. They most commonly use open institutional repositories (41%), shadow repositories (39%) and author requests (38%). About one in five (22%) report using Research4Life to access research.

The top-three access points to published research vary regionally.

Latin America:
1. Open institutional repositories
2. Institutional subscription
3. Institutional repositories

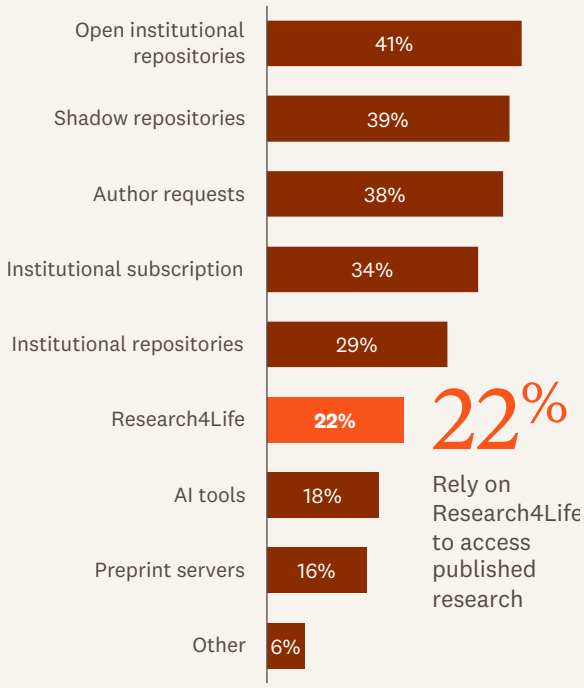
Sub-Saharan Africa:
1. Open institutional repositories
2. Author requests
3. Shadow repositories

MENA:
1. Open institutional repositories
2. Author requests
3. Institutional subscription

Eastern Europe:
1. Open institutional repositories
2. Institutional repositories
3. Author requests

APAC:
1. Shadow repositories
2. Author requests
3. Institutional subscription

Typical sources for accessing published research



Question: How do you typically access published research for your work?
Base: total = 1122

Researcher voice: improving equitable participation

"We do not have that service [paid access], so we have to request from friends overseas… Usually we are working already with people from other countries that they have the possibility to get those papers… in less than one minute, we are connected by WhatsApp… and they send us the paper. That is how it works. And it's easy."

Researcher, Paraguay

Research4Life: awareness is the bottleneck

Institutional leaders conclude that awareness is now a greater barrier than access when it comes to Research4Life usage. The *Institutional Leaders* report shares that institutions are unaware of Research4Life or their eligibility to participate, don't understand the benefits or lack leadership visibility. As such, they identify improving awareness and engagement, rather than expanding eligibility, as the greatest opportunity for growth.

The researcher view supports this: awareness is the bottleneck, not value. Only 38% of researchers are somewhat familiar or very familiar with Research4Life, and a further 19% have heard of it. 38% had never heard of it (before this survey) and 4% are not sure. Yet the value is clear: 82% of those who are aware of Research4Life find it useful for their work.

Current usage patterns reflect familiarity, showing the direct impact of awareness on usage. Researchers in low-income countries are the most likely to access research via Research4Life (39% vs. 22% overall), and also most likely to be familiar with it (59% vs. 38% overall).

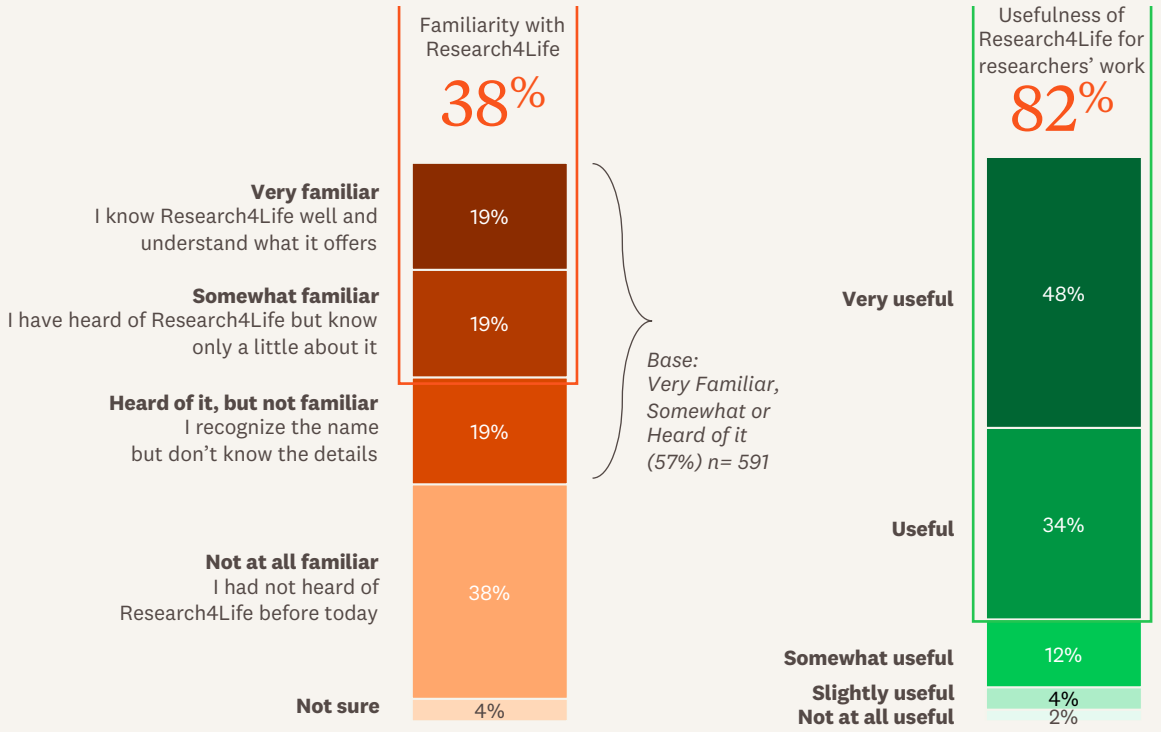
Conversely, those in upper-middle-income countries are the least likely to use Research4Life to access research (13%) and also the least familiar (24%).

Regionally, researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa are by far the most familiar with Research4Life (56%) and also most likely to use it to access research (33%). Familiarity is lowest in Latin America (21%; 58% not at all familiar) and MENA (23%), where usage is also lowest (at 11% and 13% respectively).

Physical sciences researchers are the least familiar with Research4Life (29% very or somewhat familiar, vs. 46% in health sciences and 44% in life sciences; 38% overall).

Women are less likely than men to access research via Research4Life (16% vs. 24%; 22% overall). Men are more familiar with Research4Life than women (42% vs. 31% very or somewhat familiar).

Research4Life is highly valued by those who are aware of it: 82% find it useful or very useful for their work, including 48% who say very useful. Users in Sub-Saharan Africa (54%) and particularly in Ethiopia (75%) are the most likely to rate Research4Life very useful.



Question: Before today, how familiar were you with Research4Life? *Base: n = 1122*

Question: How useful is Research4Life for your work? *Base: excl. Not sure n = 591*

Research leader voice: Research4Life

"… after our ongoing crisis and war, [Research4Life] is the only one gate… one international gate in Sudan… If you take in account the damage of the traditional libraries, damage of electronic infrastructure… all our subscriptions now are stopped. Just we have Research4Life. It is only one gate of research, or peer review, in Sudan."

Director, Sudan

Related to Research4Life's role in access is the impact of AI-mediated access to information. Although this topic emerges in many of the institutional leader interviews, none say that AI search limits their need for Research4Life; in fact, the consensus is that the increased use of AI strengthens Research4Life's role in signaling quality and credibility in published research.

Institutional leaders identify a shift in Research4Life's role in the broader ecosystem, from access to knowledge production, and the researcher findings suggest that greater awareness could have an impact beyond just improving access to published research. In particular, institutional leaders highlight a role for Research4Life in supporting trust and quality, as a mark of legitimacy for resources. This is especially applicable in the context of increasing AI use and the risks related to misuse.

Research leader voice: Research4Life

"Research4Life has packaged resources that can be trusted. It is a body that is intentional, unlike open access. Open access does not have ownership… Research4Life has got identity, it has got a role, it has got sponsors who are known. Therefore the intentionality of it happens to be attributable to the quality of the resources that it will provide."

Senior Librarian, Botswana

Key implications

- Publishing is global, but the sense of equal opportunity is not. Most researchers publish internationally, yet only around half feel they have an equal opportunity to do so, and approximately one third feel they do not. Perceptions are least positive among women and in Latin America.
- Open access commitments are strong, but cost limits what is possible. The vast majority say publishing open access is important, and a similar majority say APC costs most influence their choice of publishing venue. Waivers and discounts only partly close this gap, and low awareness of waivers and discounts may compound this: where researchers do not know that such support exists, or that they are eligible for it, the cost barrier is likely to weigh more heavily on their publishing decisions.
- Interest in reviewing and editorial roles exceeds invitations. The gap is widest for early career researchers, women and low-income countries, where invitations to review are least frequent. This means a pool of willing and capable contributors is not being drawn on in the peer review system. The strong appetite for mentoring in relation to these activities suggests that researchers are keen to take proactive steps to make this desire come to pass. This also reflects a broader need for networking and expanded community, which would in turn distribute the opportunities and workload that go along with participating in the peer review system.
- Awareness, rather than value, limits the impact of Research4Life. Around two in five researchers (38%) have never heard of it, yet a large majority of those who know it find it useful.
- Research4Life's role is widening beyond access. Institutional leaders describe it as supporting trust and quality as well as content, and none say AI search reduces the need for it. Instead, they see growing AI use as strengthening its role as a mark of legitimacy for published research.

Chapter 4

Defining success

Institutional leaders discuss institutional ambitions, visibility and participation in global scholarship, highlighting a role for Research4Life in supporting institutions as they navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of research integrity, scholarly quality assurance and responsible AI use.

Examining the concept of research excellence, researchers share their views on the most important factors in defining excellence and whether global definitions reflect local realities.

Key findings



61%

say methodological rigor and quality indicates research excellence.



53%

say publishing in high-impact journals is a research excellence indicator.



51%

Impact is key for about half agreeing that producing research with real-world, economic or societal impact is an indicator of excellence, and 49% highlighting the importance of conducting research ethically.



41%

agree that the way research excellence is currently defined globally reflects the priorities and realities of researchers in their country, and 32% disagree.



Institutional leaders identify AI as their greatest capacity-related challenge. Researchers share the benefits of using AI tools, but there is a growing divide in quality. Research4Life has a potential role in supporting AI literacy and capacity.

Introduction: research excellence lacks consensus

Research excellence is complex and has no internationally agreed definition,[17] yet it is central to decisions about funding and strategy at the individual, institutional and national levels.

Previous research with academic leaders and funders revealed that research excellence is a critical consideration: 93% of leaders said they put a high priority on ensuring research excellence, and all funders agreed that "Ensuring research excellence (e.g. advances human knowledge)" is a high priority.[5] However, only 56% of leaders said they felt well prepared to meet this challenge.

Given the importance and ubiquity of international collaboration in research today, defining research excellence should be a global endeavor. Here we look at the views of researchers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and the extent to which they feel global definitions reflect their realities.

Research excellence: rigor and impact

Researchers believe excellence is multi-factorial, and they value rigor and quality over prestige. Methodological rigor and quality (61%) tops the list of excellence indicators, followed by publishing in high-impact journals (53%), producing research with real-world, economic or societal impact (51%) and ethically done research (49%).

Latin America stands out on seeing methodological rigor and quality (81%) and reproducibility (63% vs. 37% overall) as indicators of research excellence.

Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa place the greatest weight on real-world impact (62% vs 51% overall). Those in upper-middle-income countries are the least likely to cite real-world impact (42%), while researchers in low-income countries place more importance on ethically done research (59% vs 49% overall).

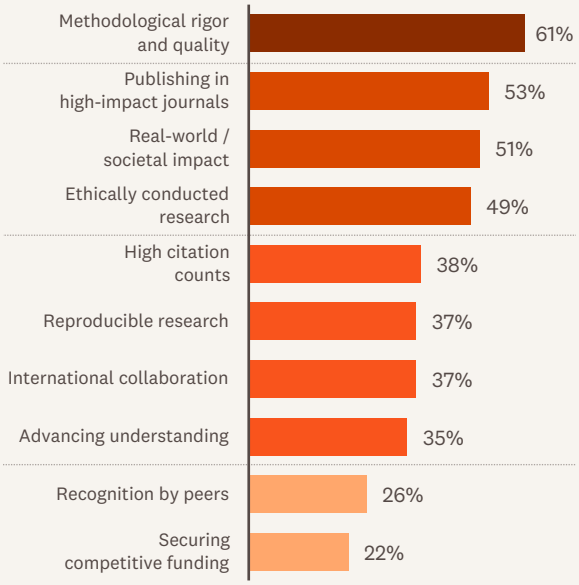
Physical sciences researchers are the least likely to cite ethically done research (39% vs. 49% overall), while social sciences give the least weight to reproducibility (26% vs. 37% overall).

You can explore the full results in the accompanying databook released with this report.

Researchers are divided on whether global definitions of excellence remain relevant to local research contexts. Only 41% agree that the way research excellence is currently defined globally reflects the priorities and realities of researchers in their country, while nearly a third (32%) disagree.

Researchers in Latin America are the most skeptical: just 27% agree. Agreement is highest among social sciences researchers (47%) and lowest in life sciences (36%).

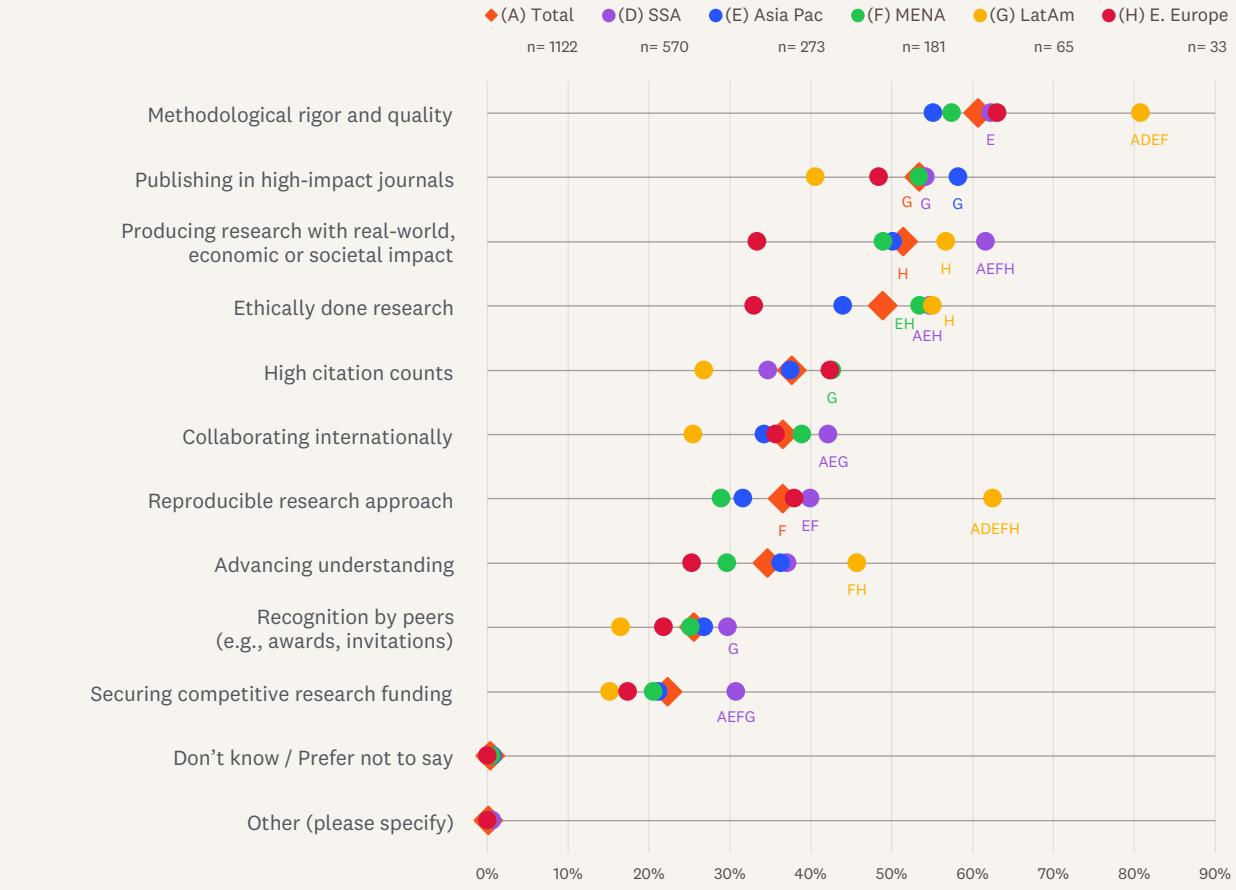
In your view, what are the most important indicators of research excellence?



Question: In your view, what are the most important indicators of research excellence?

Base: n = 1122

In your view, what are the most important indicators of research excellence?

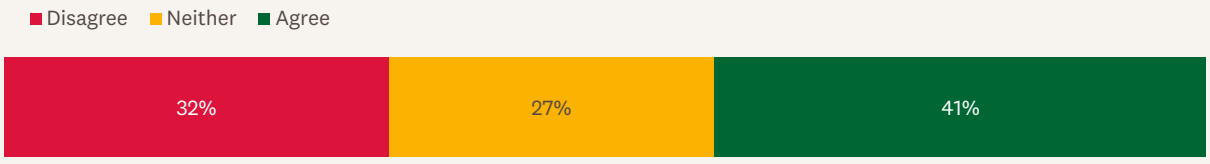


Question: In your view, what are the most important indicators of research excellence?

Significantly higher between groups (indicated by letter, e.g. A = Total)

Base: n = 1122

Do global definitions of excellence reflect local realities?



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The way research excellence is currently defined globally reflects the priorities and realities of researchers in my country".

Base: total = 1122

Research integrity: AI and the evolving landscape

The impact of AI on the research ecosystem is undeniable: it is changing research workflows and providing new opportunities for breakthroughs: in the *Researcher of the Future* study, 61% of researchers globally said AI will be the creative force driving new knowledge in the next two to three years.[6] AI is likely accelerating output, as many publishers have reported increases in submissions. Elsevier received 48% more submissions in 2025 compared to 2023 (Elsevier internal data), the first full year after ChatGPT launched (November 2022).

Alongside this are risks related to AI-generated misinformation and its potential impact on research integrity, as well as concerns about the ethical development and use of AI tools. To tackle this, institutions need to think about capacity and governance — gaps identified in the *Researcher of the Future* study, with 45% of respondents feeling undertrained in AI and only 32% saying their institutional AI governance is good.[6]

As AI continues to change the culture of research, institutions in LMICs face significant capacity challenges in order to keep up with developing technologies and approaches. This comes through strongly in the institutional leader interviews: every interviewee discusses AI, and many are feeling the pressure around setting up robust guidelines, infrastructure and governance. Institutions are in the process of understanding the opportunities offered by AI as well as mitigating the risks it brings, including risks to research integrity and excellence.

Access — a growing divide

In their open-ended survey comments, several researchers in LMICs share insights into the benefits of using AI in their day-to-day work, particularly when it comes to tasks like language translation. On the surface, AI tools appear to be a leveler, enabling participation in the form of publishing in international journals and applying for funding, for example. However, the tools being used in LMICs can often be low-quality and not research-specific, widening the divide compared to the high-quality tools used by researchers in high-income countries.

Institutional leaders also point out regional challenges related to AI use. For example, AI-detection tools are known to classify AI-generated translations as content generation. As one institutional leader in Peru explains, researchers in non-English-speaking countries often use AI “to correct their English text,” yet detection tools may wrongly assume AI was used “to write the whole paper.”

Ethical AI use through literacy support

Institutional leaders share their challenges in developing AI policies and guidance, which they consider important for research integrity. For many, Research4Life is already part of the quality-control infrastructure for research output. For example, one institutional leader in Bangladesh running plagiarism and AI-integrity screening services connected to Research4Life access.

From the institutional perspective, Research4Life has two main roles in supporting them in maintaining research integrity related to AI use: strengthening capacity through AI literacy training and acting as a trust filter against the increase in AI-generated content and predatory publishing.

Institutions and researchers are looking for guidance on which AI tools are credible and how to disclose their use of those tools. A consistent recommendation across regions is for Research4Life to develop training in ethical AI use, including AI integrity tools.

Key implications

- Researchers value rigor and quality, yet the signals that carry weight in funding and career decisions are shaped globally and only partly reflect local priorities. Researchers are being judged by measures they do not fully endorse, which raises questions about whether current definitions of excellence are fit for purpose in LMIC contexts — a particularly important consideration, given the research being done towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in these countries.
- Excellence is a high priority for institutional leaders, but the capacity to deliver it is under strain. AI sharpens this gap, adding new pressure on institutions to build the guidelines, infrastructure and governance they need. While AI has the potential to democratize access to research support, access to institutionally licensed, research-specific and enterprise-grade tools is uneven, particularly in resource-constrained settings. As a result, researchers may rely more heavily on free consumer AI tools, which can offer fewer safeguards, less transparency and more variable performance. At the same time detection tools meant to protect integrity can penalize the researchers who rely on AI for translation. In this environment, Research4Life could play a valuable intermediary role by helping institutions identify trustworthy tools, build AI literacy and share good practice.
- Integrity, quality and trust are becoming bound together. As AI-generated content increases, institutions and researchers look for credible tools and trusted sources, connecting how excellence is defined with who has access and capacity, and whose work is seen as credible. This positions Research4Life as a potential trust filter and as a trainer and intermediary, already part of the quality-control infrastructure for some institutions and well placed to meet demand for AI literacy and support for evidence-based evaluation of tools and outputs.
- The findings present an opportunity for Research4Life to strengthen its role as a trust filter and capacity builder.

What next? Turning evidence into action

In addition to asking institutional leaders and researchers about their experiences and barriers to participation, we also asked them what would help. This section brings the findings together for an **evidence-based agenda for action**.



Conclusion

Research4Life is operating in a vastly different research landscape today than when it was established in 2001. Today, institutional leaders and researchers talk about the challenges of resourcing, with research ambitions outpacing available resources and funding competition tight.

Digital technology is enabling researchers to attend conferences virtually and collaborate across oceans and time zones, but this can be hampered by issues like connectivity. As institutional leaders point out, artificial intelligence represents the next major capacity development challenge.

Over the last 25 years, Research4Life has evolved to continue meeting the needs of the researchers it supports in low- and middle-income countries. As institutional leaders highlight in their interviews, Research4Life has become critical research infrastructure, moving far beyond its original remit. Institutions increasingly expect Research4Life to support knowledge production, and given their evolving needs, a library-only engagement model is no longer enough on its own.

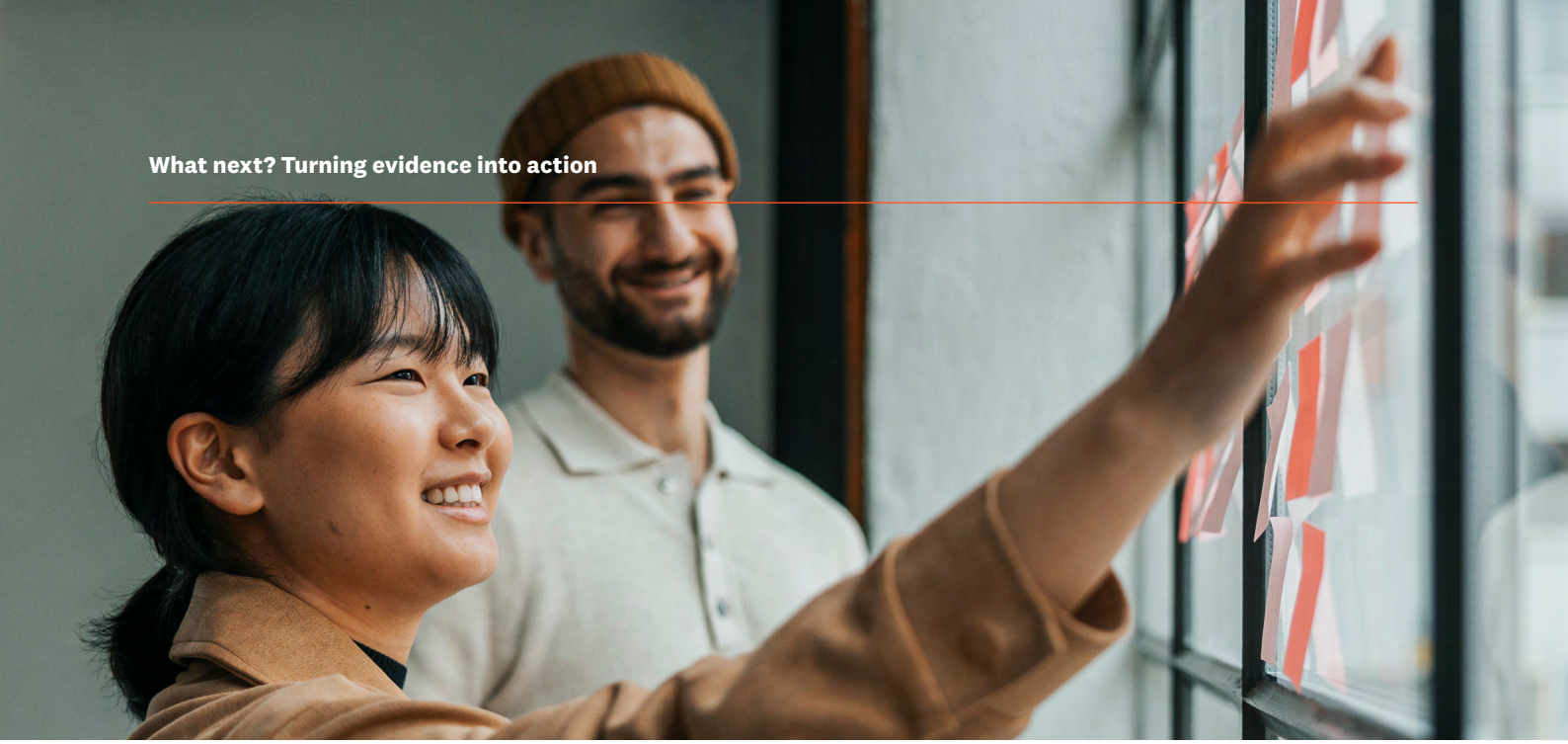
This view is reinforced by the wider shift in global research: with most of the world's research authors now based in LMICs, research is becoming multipolar, and international governance and inclusion initiatives are only beginning to reflect this.[2] Researchers support this view: their experiences and behavior show that the biggest challenge today is no longer access but awareness and engagement. They also reveal the importance of supporting training and deeper participation in the research ecosystem as authors, reviewers, editors and publishers of knowledge that is relevant to their local, national and regional needs.

The next phase of Research4Life's development is not only to broaden awareness and participation, but to do so in ways that reflect significant regional needs and priorities. This requires tailored approaches rather than a single standard model. Entering this new phase also means adapting to technological evolution: AI is radically and rapidly changing the culture of research, and it will be increasingly important to keep pace.

The next steps: evidence-based action

In order to move forward with a sustainable vision for the future, Research4Life will need to continue to evolve into the embedded research participation enabler that institutions increasingly consider it to be.

Taking the views of institutional leaders and researchers as evidence, we have outlined 10 recommendations for various actors to listen to the needs and advice of our LMIC partners and users, and take concrete steps to improve participation.



Recommendations: what makes the biggest difference?

Open doors to funding

- Institutional leaders say funding and institutional capacity are the biggest constraints on their institutions' ambitions.
- Applications are high and success rates low: 52% of researchers have applied for funding in the last three years; 13% of researchers surveyed report a success rate of just 1–10%.
- Funding and collaboration go hand in hand: barriers to funding include limited international support and partnerships (48%); 42% say overcoming financial barriers is a challenge during collaboration.
- *"Ensure funding opportunities for authors from least developed or developing countries so that they can be the corresponding author and ensure fair recognition and equitable authorship — financial barriers directly limit authorship position."* PhD candidate, Social Sciences, Bangladesh
- *"Please provide us free access to Africans until we can afford to pay APC. Additionally, support us to get funding collaborations. We are very professional but lack access."* Research Services in Business, Social Sciences, Ethiopia

Recommendation 1

Build researchers' grant-writing capabilities through practical support and mentoring to increase funding success.

Funders | Institutions | Publishers

Recommendation 2

Broker and support international partnerships to boost funding opportunities.

Funders | Governments | Institutions

Level the publishing field

- Publishing open access is important to 88% of researchers, yet APC costs and access to funding continue to shape publishing choices, despite the availability of waivers and discounts. Only 48% have benefited from an APC waiver or discount.
- 32% of researchers have had to manage publication expectations when collaborating; many report authorship issues, such as lack of recognition.
- Only 51% of researchers feel they have equal opportunity to publish in international journals.
- *"Establish formal authorship agreements at project inception rather than at the publication stage. Utilize the CRediT framework [Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) author system] to explicitly value field implementation and data curation alongside writing. Share high-impact slots, [...], with local partners."* Senior Academic in Chemical Engineering, Physical Sciences, Ethiopia
- *"Transparent commitments before the collaboration begins, with a clear publication and authorship agenda and plan. Collaborators should discuss roles, expectations, and authorship criteria at the beginning [...]."* Faculty Member, Physical Sciences, Bangladesh
- *"Fair recognition requires transparent authorship policies, structured reflexivity statements, and active inclusion of local researchers to prevent 'parachute science.' Journals and institutions are increasingly adopting guidelines to ensure equity and accountability — but adoption needs to be universal."* Researcher in Medicine and Allied Health, Bangladesh
- *"It requires clear policies, mutual respect, transparency, and institutional accountability. All partners should be involved [...]. It needs a mediation institution that can settle disputes over authorship."* Researcher in Biological, Life Sciences, Bangladesh

Recommendation 3

Broaden APC waiver availability and improve guidance on open-access publishing options.

Institutions | Publishers

Recommendation 4

Enable contribution-based authorship by promoting the use of the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) author system.[1]

Institutions | Publishers

Strengthen peer review

- Interest outpaces opportunity in peer review: 87% are willing to serve as a reviewer, while 63% have been invited three or more times in the last five years.
- A similar situation emerges for editorial positions: 75% are interested, but only 37% have been invited to serve in the last five years.
- Formal recognition (61%) and mentorship, training or guidance (59%) would improve researchers' experience as reviewers.
- Many researchers are interested in taking part in a mentorship program for various roles in the publishing process.

Recommendation 5
Turn willingness into roles: Build reviewer and editorial pipelines with recognition, training and proactive invitations.

Publishers

Close the Research4Life awareness gap

- Institutional leaders view Research4Life as infrastructure that underpins institutional research systems.
- 82% of researchers who have heard of Research4Life see the value of it but only 38% are familiar with it.

Recommendation 6
Keep libraries at the heart of Research4Life, empower them to continuously build researcher awareness, drive engagement and participation, while extending outreach across the broader research ecosystem.

Research4Life

Design conferences for inclusion

- Ensuring conferences are online will enable many researchers to attend more events (61% attended at least one conference online in the last 3 years).
- Providing captions or translation options would improve the conference experience for 20% of researchers.

Recommendation 7
Make remote participation and translation support standard, not optional, and budget more travel grants and discounts for researchers in LMICs.

Institutions Publishers

Activate networks

- Institutional leaders view Research4Life as a collaboration enabler.
- 60% of researchers who collaborate internationally do so to expand their networks, and networking is key to initiating international collaboration.
- 51% of researchers are not members of any research organizations.

Recommendation 8
Enable participation in professional societies and conferences by helping researchers identify the most relevant societies to join, providing guidance on memberships and benefits and offering discounted membership and registration waivers.

Professional networks | Research4Life

Recommendation 9
Recruit more LMIC researchers for key governing and committee roles.

Professional networks

Equalize access to responsible AI

- Institutional leaders say their biggest capacity challenge is related to AI.
- AI tools can help equalize access and participation, but there is a growing divide when it comes to quality of the tools and reliability of the outputs.
- Researchers use AI tools already, but many talk about the benefits of AI literacy training.
- *"Access to funding is usually the biggest equalizer… better access to journals, datasets and paid software tools makes a real difference in day-to-day work… Training in research methods, AI tools, and scientific writing can further reduce the gap in output quality."* Researcher, Pakistan
- *"It would be valuable to strengthen a more inclusive and balanced approach to global scientific research, particularly by […] thoughtfully integrating artificial intelligence as a supportive tool to enhance research efficiency, accessibility and innovation while maintaining fairness and ethical standards."* Researcher, Morocco

Recommendation 10
Develop AI literacy initiatives for researchers in LMICs — training in ethical AI use, including AI integrity tools.

- Access to reliable, research-appropriate AI tools should not be determined by geography or resources. Publishers and the wider research community have an opportunity to expand access for researchers in low- and middle-income countries, with Research4Life well positioned to support this effort.

Institutions | Publishers | Research4Life

Appendices



Methodology

The research comprises three phases: the first two, part of the Institutional Access, Participation and Collaboration Study, were conducted by Research4Life in partnership with the Information Training and Outreach Centre for Africa (ITOCA) and the results were published in a report in June 2026. The final phase, the Researcher Survey, was conducted in partnership with Elsevier, with fieldwork in May-June 2026.

The Institutional Study

Objective: to understand how institutions access, participate in and collaborate through research; identify the structural barriers affecting research access and production; and explore the future role and sustainability of Research4Life.

Phase 1: focus groups
A total of 80 participants from more than 35 countries contributed to this phase. They took part in seven focus groups across six regions. Participants represented:

- Public universities
- Private universities
- Research organizations
- Health institutions
- Government agencies
- National library consortia
- Research councils

Phase 2: senior leadership interviews
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 institutional leaders across 18 countries in six regions, providing deeper insights into institutional strategy, sustainability, governance and research priorities. Participants included:

- Rectors and Vice-Chancellors
- Deputy Vice-Chancellors
- Research Directors
- Deans
- Heads of Departments
- Library Directors
- Senior Researchers

The findings, shared in the report Research4Life Institutional Leaders Study: Institutional Access, Participation and Collaboration Study, provide the most comprehensive leadership-level assessment of Research4Life undertaken since it was established in 2001. You can download the report here.

The Researcher Survey

Objective: to better understand the needs and experiences of researchers in low- and middle-income countries and compare these to the strategic priorities identified by research leaders.

Quantitative survey

Research4Life's Equity Committee, in partnership with Elsevier, conducted a large-scale quantitative survey of researchers across 73 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) covering the full research arc. The Elsevier Foundation played an important convening role in bringing together stakeholders and enabling the collaboration. Research4Life's Equity Committee and Elsevier partnered to design the research instrument with the survey implemented by Elsevier. The research was conducted from May-June 2026.

The survey covered all Group A and Group B countries eligible for Research4Life at the time of fielding (see research4life.org/access/eligibility). The Scopus author database for these countries was the primary source for participant recruitment, supplemented by researchers who had participated in ITOCA programs. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of published researchers with outputs in indexed global, national and regional journals and books. Participants were recruited using an email invitation containing a link to the online survey in English. The 1,122 survey responses from researchers in LMICs include representation across:

- Regions
- Disciplines
- Career stages
- Experience levels
- Gender

The country income bands used in the databook and referenced in this report are the World Bank classifications for the 2027 fiscal year (1 July 2026 to 30 June 2027).

The researcher and research leader groupings used in the databook consider leaders respondents whose job title is one of Academic Affairs Director/Deputy Director, Faculty Head (e.g. Dean/Associate Dean), Head of Department, Head of Institute (e.g. Chancellor/President/Rector), Research Services/Office (Head/Director/Deputy Director) or Senior Executive (e.g. Provost/Vice President/Vice Rector/Vice Chancellor).

Throughout this report we show statistical differences between groups at the 90% confidence level. Results at the 'Total level' have an error margin of approximately ±2.5%, assuming maximum variance in the response.

We weighted the results based on the number of researchers within the Scopus database for participating Research4Life countries; results are weighted by region and country where the country population was sufficiently large in the response set. Weighted region mix: Asia Pacific 32%, MENA 25%, Sub-Saharan Africa 23%, Latin America 10%, Eastern Europe 10%. Base sizes shown in the report are unweighted.

Despite the weighting, the study is not without limitations due to self-selection, non-response biases and the lower response rates typical for online surveys of this nature (~2%). Therefore, there will be some non-sampling error associated with this study, as we cannot be sure responses accurately represent the views of the population for a given country or region. Please note that Latin America and Eastern Europe are relatively small bases at 65 and 33 respectively. Significant differences in this report should be interpreted within this context, and while showing notable difference between groups, results are not necessarily generalizable to a whole country. Given the non-probability sampling methods, these tests are indicative.

The results, anonymized and published openly in this report, inform Research4Life's next strategic plan, helping researchers in participating countries thrive in the fast-changing global research ecosystem.

Sample bases by region/country

Sub-Saharan Africa	570
Angola	1
Benin	6
Botswana	6
Burkina Faso	13
Cameroon	34
Congo, Democratic Republic of the	5
Côte d'Ivoire	11
Eswatini	1
Ethiopia	111
Gambia	1
Ghana	48
Guinea	1
Kenya	32
Lesotho	2
Liberia	5
Madagascar	1
Malawi	7
Mali	1
Mauritania	1
Mauritius	1
Mozambique	10
Namibia	4
Niger	4
Nigeria	167
Rwanda	12
Senegal	5
Sierra Leone	3
Sudan	11
Tanzania	25
Uganda	22
Zambia	6
Zimbabwe	13

Asia Pacific	273
Afghanistan	2
Bangladesh	81
Bhutan	4
Cambodia	1
Fiji	2
Mongolia	8
Nepal	22
Pakistan	70
Papua New Guinea	2
Sri Lanka	20
Timor-Leste	1
Uzbekistan	5
Vietnam	55

Middle East and North Africa	181
Algeria	37
Egypt	18
Iraq	73
Jordan	6
Lebanon	9
Morocco	16
Palestine	5
Syria	4
Tunisia	11
Yemen	2

Latin America and Caribbean	65
Bolivia	2
Colombia	31
Cuba	5
Ecuador	9
El Salvador	4
Guatemala	1
Guyana	1
Honduras	2
Jamaica	5
Venezuela	5

E. Europe	33
Albania	2
Armenia	2
Azerbaijan	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5
Kosovo	1
Montenegro	2
North Macedonia	2
Ukraine	18

Grand Total	1122

Acknowledgments

Our sincere thanks to the 1,122 researchers who completed the survey and the 101 institutional leaders who gave their time to the focus groups and interviews. Your voices shaped this report.

Program Team and Report Authors

Adrian Mulligan

Domiziana Francescon

Gracian Chimwaza

Lucy Goodchild (lead author), Tell Lucy

Maha Rhannam

Matthew Giampoala

Nasra Gathoni

Nicola Mansell

Rachel Herbert

Sarah Phibbs

Ylann Schemm

Report Communications

Domiziana Francescon

Report Design

Craig Unsworth

Eimear D'Arcy



References

1. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT). https://credit.niso.org/
2. Cruz, Carlos H Brito. 2025. Are we ready for a multipolar world of research? LSE Impact. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2025/11/11/are-we-ready-for-a-multipolar-world-of-research/
3. Sharma S, Verhagen AP, Elkins M, Brismée JM, Fulk GD, Taradaj J, Steen L, Jette A, Moore A, Stewart AV, Hoogenboom BJ, Soderland A, Harms M, Pinto RZ. Research from low-income and middle-income countries will benefit global health and the physiotherapy profession, but it requires support. S Afr J Physiother. 2023 Sep 22;79(1):1957. doi: 10.4102/sajp.v79i1.1957. PMID: 38077264; PMCID: PMC10699205.
4. Adam, T., Ralaidovy, A.H., Ross, A.L. et al. Tracking global resources and capacity for health research: time to reassess strategies and investment decisions. Health Res Policy Sys 21, 93 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-023-00979-7
5. View From the Top: Academic Leaders' and Funders' Insights on the Challenges Ahead. 2024. Elsevier. Available at: https://www.elsevier.com/academic-and-government/academic-leader-challenges-report-2024
6. Elsevier. Researcher of the Future: a Confidence in Research report. 2025. Available at: https://www.elsevier.com/insights/confidence-in-research/researcher-of-the-future
7. CASRAI Editorial Board. 2026. NSF Grant Success Rates: How Hard Is It Actually to Get Funded? CASRAI. https://casrai.org/guides/nsf-grant-success-rates
8. Payedimarri AB, Mouhssine S, Aljadeeah S, Nkubito BM, Gaidano G, Ravinetto R. Assessing patterns of authorship of low- and middle-income countries in global commercial clinical trials in oncology. Global Health. 2025 Nov 22;22(1):3. doi: 10.1186/s12992-025-01167-8.
9. Marwah, Harleen K., Pearl, Abarna, Kotanidis, Christos P., Gorey, Sarah, Taichman, Darren & Hamel, Mary Beth. 2026. Limited representation of authors from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in trials with participants from LMICs across 15 years (2008–2023). Journal of Clinical Epidemiology 196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2026.112336.
10. Chersich, Matthew F. et al. 2016. Local and foreign authorship of maternal health interventional research in low- and middle-income countries: systematic mapping of publications 2000–2012. Globalization and Health 12:35. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-016-0172-x
11. Rees, Chris A. et al. 2017. Authorship in paediatric research conducted in low- and middle-income countries: parity or parasitism? Tropical Medicine & International Health 22:11. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/tmi.12966
12. Chow Garbern, Stephanie et al. 2022. Authorship representation in global emergency medicine: a bibliometric analysis from 2016 to 2020. BMJ Global Health. https://gh.bmj.com/content/7/6/e009538
13. Research futures: Drivers and scenarios for the next decade. 2019. Elsevier. Available at: https://assets.ctfassets.net/zlnfaxb2lcqx/5MrZldN9bDGJK8mhKrb9zJ/85b4f21897944b4477fff8fc4bb2c1d3/Research_Futures_full_report_Feb2019.pdf
14. Patel T, Ahmad N, Hussain A, Faraz B, Naeem AB, Sheraz U, Noor L, Khan S, Ali MS, Siddiqui HT, Iqbal T, Patel BD, Anand N. Global disparities in neurosurgical literature: a narrative review of underrepresentation of low- and middle-income countries and pathways to research equity. Ann Med Surg (Lond). 2026 Jul 15;88(8):5101-5110. doi: 10.1097/MS9.0000000000005061.
15. Mueller-Langer, Frank, Scheufen, Marc & Waelbroeck, Patrick. 2020. Does online access promote research in developing countries? Empirical evidence from article-level data. Research Policy 49:2. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2019.103886.
16. Cuntz, Alexander, Mueller-Langer, Frank, Muscarnera, Alessio, Oguguo, Prince C. & Scheufen, Marc. 2025. Access to science and innovation in the developing world. Research Policy 54:3. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2024.105153.
17. CASRAI Editorial Board. 2026. What Is Research Excellence? How Institutions and Funders Define and Assess It. https://casrai.org/guides/research-excellence

ELSEVIER



© 2026 Elsevier. This report is published by Research4Life and Elsevier and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0): https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/. Third-party content, including photographs licensed from Getty Images and data credited to other sources, is not covered by this licence.