

# APE January 2022: Inclusive research and the Global South

Ylann Schemm\*

*Elsevier, VP Corporate Responsibility, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

**Abstract.** This paper is based upon a presentation during a panel session on Inclusion, Diversity and Equity in Scholarly Communication at the 17th APE Conference. It highlights some of the initiatives on inclusive research that Elsevier has initiated or supports, such as the Joint commitment for action on inclusion and diversity in publishing, Research4Life, Elsevier’s Inclusion & Diversity Board, and the Elsevier Foundation. This paper stresses the importance of continuing and evolving these strong partnerships to create a more inclusive research culture for the Global South.

Keywords: Inclusion and diversity, SDGs, inclusive research, gender equity, Global South, Research4Life, Elsevier Foundation

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, great strides have been made in the publishing sector to create a more inclusive research ecosystem. More than 50 publishers have fully endorsed the critical work of the Joint commitment for action on inclusion and diversity in publishing [1] established in 2021 by the Royal Society of Chemistry. In addition to subscribing to the key principles, Elsevier was particularly proud to develop and share a new Gender, Race and Ethnicity schema with the Joint Commitment and see it adopted across the partnership [2]. This collaborative approach demonstrates that publishers can work together using a shared framework toward developing targeted Inclusion and Diversity (I&D) capabilities. At the 2022 Academic Publishers Europe Conference [3] panel, “Towards an IDEAL World: How to foster Inclusion, Diversity and Equity in Scholarly Communication” milestones such as these were celebrated and new realizations and challenges highlighted. One of these is that “Inclusive Research” needs to be a collaborative, cross-sectoral space where we come together to establish key principles and practises and address the many dimensions of diversity whether gender, race and ethnicity, disability, orientation or geographic location. In considering inclusion from a Global South perspective, there are many lessons we can learn from efforts to boost gender equity.

## 2. Gender

Like many of the publishers involved in the Joint Commitment, gender has been one of the primary points of departure for Elsevier’s I&D efforts [4] over the past decade. We established a grassroots Gender Equity Taskforce in 2015 to tackle our own role as publishers in the research ecosystem and began working with colleagues to identify issues and set up workstreams to tackle them—this included

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\*Corresponding author: Ylann Schemm, VP Corporate Responsibility of Elsevier, Director of the Elsevier Foundation, Immediate past Chair of the Research4Life Executive Council. E-mail: [Y.Schemm@elsevier.com](mailto:Y.Schemm@elsevier.com).

areas like editorial board diversity, speakers at our conferences, sex and gender analysis and bias in peer review. We worked closely with the Gender Summits [5], a platform to advance women in science and integrate the sex and gender dimension in research, to share our work and incorporate lessons learned. We also learned that for real system change, you need both grassroots and senior endorsement to make progress. In 2019 Kumsal Bayazit became Elsevier's CEO and rapidly embraced I&D [6] as a core part of Elsevier's culture and business. Critically, she urged us to tackle all dimensions of diversity to achieve real progress, "One cannot prioritize one dimension of diversity, we must make progress on all fronts. And in my experience, actions that focus on multiple aspects of diversity drive change more effectively by including everybody".

At the same time, Elsevier's 2020 Gender Report, *The researcher journey through a gender lens* [7] revealed that while the representation of women in research had increased, substantial inequality remained in terms of output, citations, awarded grants and collaborations—especially in the physical sciences and engineering. As part of our response to this clear call to action, Kumsal established Elsevier's Inclusion & Diversity Advisory Board [8], which convened experts from across our research and health communities to provide guidance on creating a more inclusive research ecosystem. Our advisors urged us to focus on 3 main areas: increasing participation in the research ecosystem, integrating sex and gender analysis in research, and accelerating career progression for underrepresented researchers. With the Board's support, we were able to accelerate I&D from a grassroots effort to an embedded and integrated approach across Elsevier. Our journey is reflected in our first I&D Advisory Board Report [9], published in March 2022 which provides a solid overview of ambitions and targets as well as gender data and analytics, new initiatives and expanding our efforts towards race and ethnicity.

### 3. The UN SDGs and inclusive research

The launch of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, an international, multi-stakeholder blueprint endorsed across all sectors of society, has underscored the need to think more broadly and holistically about I&D. Given the many dimensions of diversity, various SDGs play a key part in a concept such as "Inclusive Research": SDG 5 Gender, SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities as well as SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals. While Elsevier has had a very active corporate responsibility [10] program with deep investment in the Global South through the Elsevier Foundation [11], it has not been integrated or framed as part of our I&D efforts. Most importantly, the SDGs have given us a stronger framework to integrate different dimensions of diversity, think laterally, cross-pollinate, share lessons learned and accelerate action through global partnerships.

### 4. Research4Life

The evolution of Research4Life over the past 20 years is a great example of a powerful partnership for the goals supporting Inclusive Research. Research4Life [12] is a public-private UN publisher partnership working to bridge the digital research divide and provide access to critical research to doctors, researchers, policymakers and many other groups in lower income countries. It was launched in 2002 by the WHO during the early days of the print to electronic migration together with 6 publishers and featured a grand total of 1500 journals. Today, Research4Life provides researchers at more than 10,500 institutions in over 125 developing countries with free or low-cost online access to over 200,000 journals, books and databases [13] from over 160 publishers. Elsevier is a founding publisher and provides 20% of the content and access to products ranging from ScienceDirect, Scopus, Embase, Clinical Key and Mendeley.

Since 2008, the Elsevier Foundation [14] has also provided over \$500,000 in Research4Life capacity building funds to initiatives such as Research4Life's Country Connectors [15], MLA/Librarians without Borders [16], the FAO's MOOC [17], and universities in both the Global South and North. Elsevier was also an inaugural funder of Friends of Research4Life [18], the new non-profit established in 2021 to create a sustainable funding base [19] for the Partnership.

But with growth of Open Access (OA) and the launch of the UN SDGs, Research4Life and the publishing industry have witnessed a paradigm shift: researchers in developing countries moving from consumers of knowledge—receiving a corporate responsibility donation—to producers of research—enriching the global body of knowledge with new perspectives and research areas. To be truly inclusive, publishers must examine their own role and take measures to develop equitable OA policies, create editorial boards with geographic diversity, recruit peer reviewers from low and middle income countries and publish robust research from the South as well as the North.

To continue evolving in a rapidly changing scholarly landscape, Research4Life has regularly carried out in-depth user and partner evaluations over the past 20 years. The resulting 2022 Strategy Plan [20] (launching in June 2022) has an unusually strong evidence base going beyond traditional Infrastructure [21] and User reviews [22] to include a Landscape Analysis [23] providing more external context on changes within scholarly communication. Some of the key findings in this analysis point to the substantial growth in research from lower income countries due to increased funding invested in research and development as well as the growth of the number of researchers needing access to peer reviewed resources. As part of this cycle of growth, the demand for researcher training has also grown while a significant funding gap continues to persist in low vs high income countries. These changes have occurred at the same time as the exponential growth of OA over the last twenty years. This has created a double bind of making far more research openly available to researchers from lower income countries while throwing up new challenges for them in actually publishing their research in OA journals due, for example, to the cost of Author Processing Charges (APCs). This evolution, covered in the 2020 STM-Elsevier white paper, *Achieving an Equitable Transition to Open Access for Researchers in Lower and Medium Income Countries* [24] has created new possibilities and challenges to equitable access to publishing and to Research4Life's value to its stakeholders and users.

Research4Life has the potential to be a powerful catalyst for stronger inclusion of researchers from the Global South. But to realize this, it needs to evolve its value proposition beyond access to consider a number of factors: the need to increase its focus on equitable participation in the research ecosystem, actively advocate for developing country researchers, develop robust research capacity building programs, showcase researchers from developing countries as knowledge producers, evolve the Research4Life collection to include more content from the Global South and grow local champions and leaders.

## 5. Conclusions

The UN SDGs and the evolution in Research4Life's strategy point to a need to integrate geographic location as a critical dimension within Inclusion & Diversity policies. Just as we have with other aspects of I&D, we will need to work together as a publisher collective to develop consistent guidelines for more inclusive practises on editorial board recruitment, authorship and reviewer training, richer content, conference speakers, roadmaps for indexing journals from the Global South, APC waivers transparency and beyond. Fortunately, we don't need to start from scratch, our experience on moving the needle in gender equity can be leveraged with some of our robust, existing partnerships such as Research4Life [25], the SDG Publishers Compact [26] and the Joint Commitment for Action on I&D in Publishing [27] to create a more inclusive research culture for the Global South.

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