

Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa
Author Assist Programme

Programme overview and operational framework

Version date: 23 January 2025

Introduction	2
1) Purpose of this document:	2
2) Background	2
3) Objectives	3
Programme Overview	4
1) What is the author assist programme?.....	4
2) Programme Timeline	4
How It Works	6
1) Step-by-step process	6
2) Roles and Responsibilities	6
3) Flowchart of the Author Assist Programme Process	8
Accessing the programme	9
1) Eligibility Criteria	9
2) Application Process	9
3) Timelines	10
4) Communication and Support	10
Inputs and Resources	11
1) Technical Resources	11
2) Institutional Support	11
3) Financial and Logistical Resources	11
4) Key Partnerships	11
Outputs and Impact	12
1) Outputs	12
2) Impact.....	12
3) Indicators of Success.....	13
Appendix.....	14
1) Flowchart of author assist processes.....	14
2) Frequently asked questions (FAQs).....	15

Introduction

1) Purpose of this document:

The purpose of this document is to provide a guide to the Author Assist Program of the Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa (JCMSA). It serves as an operational and strategic reference for all stakeholders, including early-career authors, mentors, the editorial board, and academic institutions. Specifically, the document aims to:

- a) Define the Program's Objectives and Scope
 - i) Outline the goals of the Author Assist Program in addressing barriers faced by authors from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).
 - ii) Explain how the program supports the journal's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion in research by improving manuscript quality and building local capacity.
- b) Describe the Program Structure and Workflow
 - i) Provide a clear, step-by-step explanation of how the program operates, including the process for pairing mentors with authors, timelines for engagement, and key milestones.
 - ii) Distinguish the Author Assist Program from the journal's formal peer-review process to clarify that it is a preparatory, independent initiative.
- c) Facilitate Access and Participation
 - i) Offer practical guidance for authors and mentors to access and participate in the program, including eligibility criteria, application processes, and timelines.
 - ii) Include flowcharts and visual aids to ensure that the program's process is transparent and easy to follow.
- d) Outline Key Responsibilities and Roles
 - i) Clarify the expectations for mentors, authors, and the editorial team, ensuring all stakeholders understand their contributions to the program's success.
- e) Provide a Framework for Evaluation and Sustainability
 - i) Define the expected outputs and indicators of success, including enhanced manuscript quality, increased acceptance rates, and greater diversity in research publications.
 - ii) Present strategies for the program's ongoing evaluation, feedback integration, and scaling to ensure its long-term sustainability.
- f) Support Communication and Outreach Efforts
 - i) Act as a foundational document to promote the program to potential mentors, academic institutions, and authors.
 - ii) Highlight the program's value proposition to encourage participation and foster collaborations.

By creating this document, the JCMSA aims to establish the Author Assist Program as a formal, well-structured initiative that aligns with the journal's mission to amplify voices from LMICs, improve research standards, and enhance the visibility of high-quality, locally relevant research on the continent. This document will serve as a roadmap for implementing, managing, and scaling the program effectively.

2) Background

The Author Assist Program was established to address a critical need identified by the Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa (JCMSA). Since the journal's inception, submissions have highlighted a consistent challenge: while many manuscripts showcase significant potential, they often lack the polish and structure required for acceptance into a scientific journal. This is particularly evident among early-career researchers and authors from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), who face barriers such as limited mentorship, inadequate access to resources, and a lack of experience in academic writing.

Key challenges include:

- Limited Mentorship Opportunities: Early-career authors often lack access to experienced mentors who can guide them through the complexities of academic writing and publication.
- Barriers in LMICs: Researchers in LMICs frequently face additional challenges such as constrained funding, minimal research infrastructure, and fewer opportunities for capacity development.
- Equity in Academic Publishing: The global academic publishing landscape has historically been skewed, often limiting the visibility and impact of research conducted in LMICs.

To bridge this gap, the JCMSA launched the Author Assist Program in May 2024. The program is designed to provide structured mentorship to early-career authors and researchers, enabling them to prepare high-quality manuscripts for submission. By fostering collaboration between experienced mentors and junior authors, the program contributes to improving the quality of submissions, amplifying diverse voices, and promoting equity in research.

3) Objectives

The Author Assist Programme is guided by the following objectives:

- a) Improve Manuscript Quality
 - i) Assist authors in refining their manuscripts, ensuring clarity, coherence, and adherence to the journal's submission standards.
 - ii) Enhance the presentation of research to increase its likelihood of acceptance during the formal peer-review process.

- b) Build Research Capacity in LMICs
 - i) Equip junior researchers and early-career authors with the skills and knowledge required to produce high-quality academic publications.
 - ii) Develop sustainable mentorship networks to foster ongoing capacity-building efforts.

- c) Promote Equity in Research
 - i) Address systemic barriers faced by researchers in LMICs, providing them with opportunities to contribute to global academic discourse.
 - ii) Encourage the publication of locally relevant research that may otherwise be underrepresented in international journals.

- d) Enhance the Diversity of Published Research
 - i) Support the journal's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by amplifying voices from underrepresented regions and disciplines.
 - ii) Ensure that published research reflects a wide range of perspectives, experiences, and contexts.

- e) Foster Collaborative Networks
 - i) Create a platform where experienced researchers and academics can mentor early-career authors, fostering professional relationships and collaborations.
 - ii) Strengthen the academic community by connecting authors, mentors, and institutions.

- f) Align with the Journal's Mission and Vision
 - i) Support the JCMSA's mission to be a leading platform for high-quality research from LMICs, showcasing work that is impactful, relevant, and innovative.
 - ii) Uphold the journal's vision to advance scientific knowledge and capacity on the African continent and beyond.

The Author Assist Program aligns seamlessly with the journal's overarching goals, ensuring that it not only meets the immediate needs of authors but also contributes to the long-term development of equitable and inclusive academic publishing practices.

Programme Overview

1) What is the author assist programme?

The Author Assist Program is a structured mentorship initiative by the Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa (JCMSA). It is designed to support early-career authors, inexperienced researchers, and authors from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in preparing high-quality manuscripts for submission to the journal.

- a) Definition and Scope
 - i) The program pairs junior or inexperienced authors with established researchers or academics who act as mentors.
 - ii) Mentors guide authors in enhancing their manuscript's quality, including improving structure, coherence, clarity, and adherence to academic standards.
 - iii) The initiative focuses on manuscripts in the pre-submission phase, ensuring that authors receive support before entering the journal's formal peer-review process.
- b) Scope of Support:
 - i) Assistance is limited to refining and improving the manuscript; it does not include conducting additional research or generating new data.
 - ii) Mentorship spans a wide range of topics, including writing style, formatting, referencing, and data presentation.
- c) Independence from the Peer-Review Process
 - i) The Author Assist Program operates separately and independently from the formal peer-review process of the JCMSA.
 - ii) The program does not influence the journal's editorial decisions or the outcome of peer reviews.
 - iii) Key Distinctions:
 - (1) The mentorship process is offline and external to the AOSIS and JCMSA platforms.
 - (2) Mentors are not involved in any stage of the peer-review process.
 - (3) Participation in the Author Assist Program does not guarantee acceptance or publication of a manuscript.

By clearly separating the Author Assist Program from the peer-review process, the initiative ensures transparency and maintains the integrity of the journal's editorial standards.

2) Programme Timeline

General Timeframe for Mentorship

- a) The mentorship period is structured around a four-week timeframe for each manuscript.
- b) During this period:
 - i) Authors submit their draft manuscripts for consideration in the program.
 - ii) The editorial team pairs the author with a suitable mentor based on the manuscript's content and the mentor's expertise.
 - iii) Mentors and authors work collaboratively to refine the manuscript.
 - iv) The final draft is prepared for submission to the JCMSA's formal peer-review process.

Stages and Key Milestones

- a) Week 1:
 - i) Manuscript submission to the program by the author.
 - ii) Mentor assigned and initial contact established.
 - iii) Review of the manuscript by the mentor begins.
- b) Weeks 2–3:
 - i) Iterative feedback and revisions.
 - ii) Authors revise their manuscript based on the mentor's guidance.

- c) Week 4:
 - i) Final review by the mentor to ensure readiness for submission.
 - ii) Manuscript submission to the JCMSA's AOSIS platform for formal peer review.

Distinction from the Peer-Review Process

- a) The Author Assist Program ends once the manuscript is submitted to the JCMSA for peer review or when the 4-week period ends – whichever comes first.
- b) The peer-review process is a separate, independent phase that evaluates the manuscript's scientific validity and suitability for publication.
- c) Authors are reminded that participation in the Author Assist Program does not guarantee acceptance or positive peer-review outcomes.
- d) By adhering to this timeline and clearly distinguishing between mentorship and peer review, the Author Assist Program ensures efficient, transparent, and supportive engagement for all participants.

How It Works

The Author Assist Program provides a dual-entry pathway for authors: manuscripts can be submitted directly to the program, or authors may be referred after a peer-review rejection if the manuscript shows potential for improvement. Below is a detailed workflow, reflecting both entry points, along with the roles and responsibilities of participants and a flowchart.

1) Step-by-step process

a) Entry to the Programme

i) Direct entry

(a) Authors interested in the program email their draft manuscripts in a Word document with the subject header: "Request for Author Assist Service."

(b) All authors listed on the manuscript must agree to participate in the program.

ii) Referral from Peer-Review Process

(a) If a manuscript is rejected during the peer-review process, the Handling Editor (which may be an Associate Editor, a Deputy Associate Editor, or a Section Editor, as the case may be) may recommend the Author Assist Program if the manuscript is deemed *salvageable* with mentoring.

(b) Authors are contacted and invited to participate in the program. They must formally accept and agree to the mentorship process.

b) Editorial Review and Mentor Assignment

i) The Deputy Editor reviews the manuscript to determine suitability for the program.

ii) A mentor is selected based on:

(a) Content expertise.

(b) Relevant supervisory experience (e.g., MMed, PhD mentorship).

(c) Alignment with the author's needs.

c) Initial Contact and Planning

i) The mentor and author establish initial contact via email within 2-3 days of pairing.

ii) They agree on a communication plan, timelines, and deliverables within the four-week mentoring period.

iii) Key Deliverables:

(a) Mentor provides initial feedback on the manuscript's structure, coherence, and areas for improvement.

(b) Author revises the manuscript accordingly.

d) Mentorship Engagement

i) The mentor and author collaborate through:

(a) Iterative feedback cycles.

(b) Discussions about manuscript improvement (e.g., writing clarity, argument flow, and referencing).

ii) Authors are responsible for implementing the revisions, with the mentor acting as a guide rather than an editor.

e) Final Review and Submission Preparation

i) At the end of the mentorship period, the mentor conducts a final review to ensure the manuscript is ready for submission.

ii) The author prepares the manuscript for submission to the JCMSA through the AOSIS platform, marking the end of the mentorship process.

f) Post-Mentorship Submission

i) Once the manuscript is submitted to the JCMSA, it enters the formal peer-review process.

ii) The mentor has no involvement in this phase.

2) Roles and Responsibilities

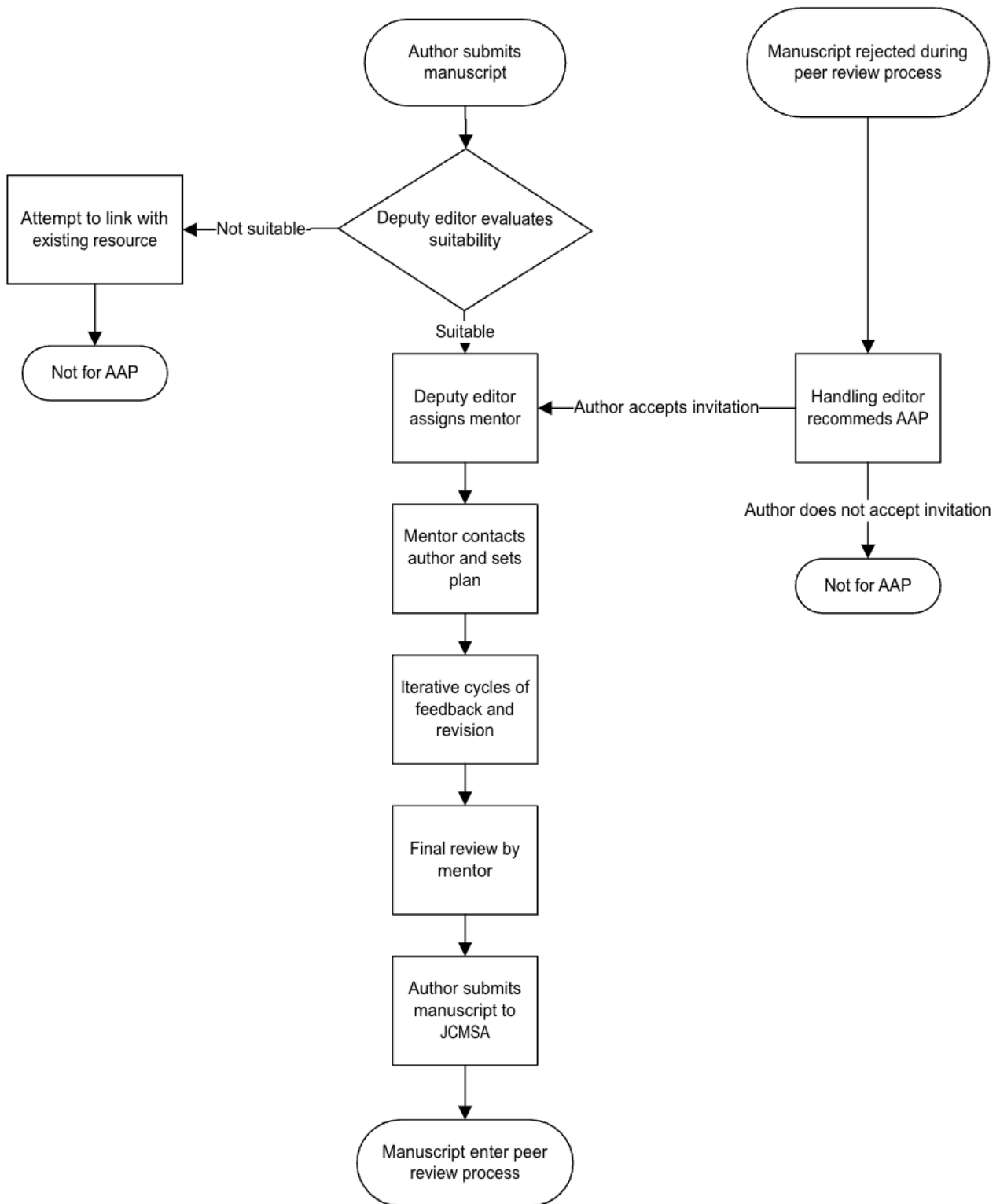
- a) Authors:
 - i) Submit draft manuscripts in the correct format.
 - ii) Actively engage with mentors, responding to feedback and revising their work.
 - iii) Ensure timely submission of the final manuscript after mentorship.
 - iv) Regarding manuscripts linked to research degrees:
 - (a) Whether the manuscript is part of a research degree (e.g., MMed, MPhil, MSc, PhD).
 - (b) The status of their degree submission (submitted vs. not yet submitted).
 - (c) Understanding that the program is supplementary and not a substitute for university supervision or institutional support.

- b) Mentors:
 - i) Provide constructive feedback on manuscript quality.
 - ii) Support authors in enhancing clarity, structure, and adherence to academic standards.
 - iii) Maintain independence from the formal peer-review process.
 - iv) Complete mentorship within the agreed four-week timeframe.

- c) Editorial team
 - i) Identify manuscripts from peer-review rejections that may benefit from the program.

- d) Deputy Editor:
 - i) Oversee the program and ensure smooth operation.
 - ii) Match authors with appropriate mentors.
 - iii) Provide guidance to mentors and authors when necessary.

3) Flowchart of the Author Assist Programme Process



Accessing the programme

1) Eligibility Criteria

- a) For direct entry
 - i) Be an early-career researcher, junior academic, or first-time author seeking guidance on manuscript preparation.
 - ii) Submit a draft manuscript that aligns with the focus areas of the JCMSA.
 - iii) Demonstrate willingness to actively participate in mentorship and complete revisions within the program's timeline.
- b) For peer-review referral
 - i) Have received a rejection from the JCMSA's peer-review process but with feedback indicating that the manuscript is salvageable.
 - ii) Accept the Handling Editor's invitation to join the program and commit to making necessary improvements.
- c) Manuscripts linked to research degrees
 - i) Authors must declare if their manuscript is part of a university research degree (e.g., MMed, MPhil, MSc or PhD)
 - ii) Submissions linked to research degrees must also state:
 - (a) Whether the manuscript has already been submitted for degree completion
 - (b) If the dissertation is yet to be submitted, authors are advised to seek support from their university supervisors before applying to the programme.
 - iii) The program does not replace or circumvent the role of academic supervision provided by the university.
- d) For mentors
 - i) Submit a two-page CV demonstrating experience in academic writing, publication, or supervision of MMed or PhD projects.
 - ii) Indicate areas of expertise and special interests.

2) Application Process

- a) For direct entry
 - i) Step 1: Prepare the manuscript in a Word document format.
 - ii) Step 2: Email the manuscript to the Deputy Editor with the subject header: "Request for Author Assist Service."
 - iii) Step 3: Include the following in the email:
 - (a) Full names of all authors and a statement of their consent to participate.
 - (b) A brief description of the research topic and challenges faced during manuscript preparation.
 - (c) A statement on whether the manuscript forms part of a university research degree and if so, the status of the degree submission.
- b) Referral from peer-review:
 - i) Step 1: After peer-review rejection, the Handling Editor evaluates the manuscript for potential improvements through mentorship.
 - ii) Step 2: Authors are contacted and invited to join the program.
 - iii) Step 3: Upon acceptance, authors confirm their participation by email and follow the AAP process.
- c) For mentors:
 - i) Step 1: Submit a two-page CV with the following details:
 - a. Academic qualifications.
 - b. MMed/PhD supervision experience.
 - c. Area(s) of expertise and publication history.

- ii. Step 2: Indicate availability and willingness to commit to the program's four-week timeline.

3) Timelines

- a) Application Review - Direct entry submissions and peer-review referrals are reviewed within 3-5 business days.
- b) Mentor Assignment - Authors are paired with mentors within 2-3 days of application approval.
- c) Mentorship Period - The mentorship process typically lasts four weeks from the time of pairing.
- d) Post-Mentorship - Once mentorship concludes, authors submit their revised manuscripts to the JCMSA's AOSIS platform for formal peer review.

4) Communication and Support

- a) Authors and mentors communicate primarily through email, with optional virtual meetings for detailed discussions.
- b) The Deputy Editor remains available for queries or assistance throughout the process.

Inputs and Resources

- 1) Technical Resources
 - a) Communication Tools
 - i) Email - Primary mode of communication between authors, mentors, and the editorial team.
 - ii) Optional Virtual Platforms: For detailed discussions or meetings (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams).
 - b) Document Management
 - i) Software: Microsoft Word or Google Docs for manuscript editing and sharing.
 - ii) File Sharing Platforms: Secure sharing of manuscripts and feedback (e.g., Dropbox, Google Drive).
 - c) Templates and Guidelines
 - i) Author Submission Guidelines: Instructions for preparing and submitting manuscripts to the program.
- 2) Institutional Support
 - a) Journal Support - Alignment with the Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa's (JCMSA) mission to promote diversity and equity in research.
 - b) Academic Partnerships
 - i) Collaboration with universities and institutions to identify potential mentors and mentees.
 - ii) Advocacy from Deans, Heads of Departments, and Faculty Members to promote the programme.
- 3) Financial and Logistical Resources
 - a) Volunteer-Based Model
 - i) The program primarily relies on mentors volunteering their time and expertise.
 - ii) Incentives
 - (1) Recognition in published articles.
 - (2) Certificates of acknowledgment for mentors.
 - b) Long-Term Funding (Potential Future Consideration)
- 4) Key Partnerships
 - a) Universities and Research Institutions - Collaboration to identify mentors and promote the program to early-career researchers.
 - b) Professional Networks - Leveraging networks to recruit mentors and expand the program's visibility.
 - c) Stakeholder Engagement - Outreach to professional organisations and societies to ensure diverse participation.

Outputs and Impact

The Author Assist Program is designed to achieve tangible outputs and long-term impacts, aligning with the journal's mission of promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in academic publishing. Below is a detailed description of the expected outputs and the program's broader impact.

1) Outputs

a) Enhanced Manuscript Quality

- i) Authors receive mentorship to refine and improve their manuscripts, resulting in submissions that meet high academic and editorial standards.
- ii) Improvements include:
 - (1) Clearer research questions and objectives.
 - (2) Enhanced writing clarity and coherence.
 - (3) Better organisation and adherence to journal submission guidelines.

b) Increased Submission Success Rates

- i) Manuscripts mentored through the program are expected to have a higher likelihood of acceptance after peer review due to pre-submission improvements.

c) Development of Mentorship Framework

- i) Establishing a structured mentorship process that can be scaled and replicated for future initiatives.
- ii) Creation of templates and tools (e.g., feedback forms, guidelines) that streamline the mentorship process.

d) Recognition for Mentors

- i) Mentors are acknowledged in publications and in the journal's official communications, motivating their continued participation and encouraging others to join.

e) Program Data and Metrics

- i) Collection of key performance indicators (KPIs), such as:
 - (1) Number of manuscripts mentored.
 - (2) Success rate of mentored manuscripts in the peer-review process.
 - (3) Feedback from mentors and authors on their experience.

f) Resources and Capacity Building

- i) Development of a knowledge base that includes case studies, best practices, and mentorship strategies.
- ii) Capacity building for early-career authors in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

2) Impact

a) Equity in Research

- i) The program addresses systemic inequities in academic publishing, ensuring that authors from LMICs and underrepresented groups have access to mentorship and support.
- ii) Amplifies the voices of diverse researchers, increasing representation in scientific discourse.

b) Building Research Capacity

- i) Early-career authors gain critical skills in academic writing, data presentation, and publication processes.
- ii) The mentorship model fosters sustainable growth by creating a pipeline of skilled researchers and future mentors.

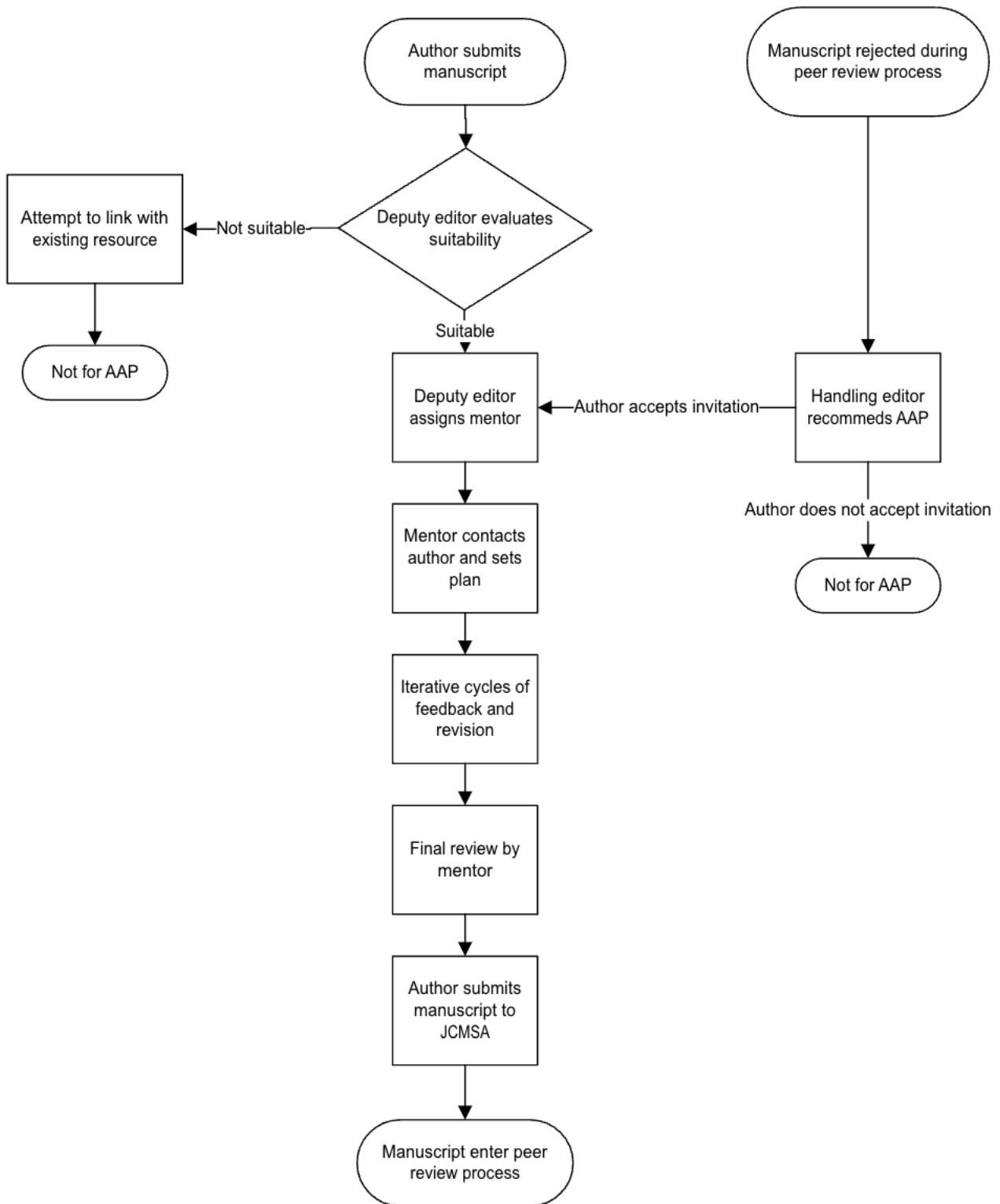
c) Increased Diversity in Publications

- i) Encourages the publication of research that is locally relevant to LMIC contexts, enriching global scientific literature with diverse perspectives.

- d) Strengthening Networks and Collaboration
 - i) Forges connections between experienced academics and early-career researchers, fostering long-term professional relationships.
 - ii) Promotes inter-institutional collaborations across different regions and disciplines.
 - e) Journal Reputation and Reach
 - i) Improved manuscript quality enhances the overall standard of the journal, attracting more high-quality submissions.
 - ii) Establishing the journal as a leader in mentorship and capacity-building initiatives within the global academic community.
 - f) Sustainable Development of Mentorship Culture
 - i) Embedding mentorship as a core value in academic publishing.
 - ii) Encouraging volunteerism and shared responsibility for nurturing emerging researchers.
- 3) Indicators of Success
- a) Quantitative Indicators:
 - i) Number of authors supported, and manuscripts mentored.
 - ii) Acceptance rates for manuscripts that went through the program.
 - iii) Increase in diversity of authorship, including representation from LMICs.
 - iv) Number of mentors recruited and actively engaged.
 - b) Qualitative Indicators:
 - i) Positive feedback from authors and mentors regarding the program's effectiveness.
 - ii) Testimonials highlighting improved confidence, skills, and professional growth.
 - iii) Recognition of the program by academic institutions and stakeholders as a model for equity in research.

Appendix

1) Flowchart of author assist processes



2) Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

General Questions

Q1: What is the Author Assist Program?

A: The Author Assist Program is a mentorship initiative by the Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa (JCMSA). It pairs early-career authors with experienced mentors to help improve the quality of manuscripts before formal submission for peer review.

Q2: How is the program different from the peer-review process?

A: The Author Assist Program is entirely separate from the journal's peer-review process. It focuses on pre-submission manuscript preparation and does not influence the editorial decision or peer-review outcome.

Q3: Is participation in the program mandatory for submission to the JCMSA?

A: No, the program is optional and intended to support authors who need additional guidance. Authors can still submit their manuscripts directly to the journal without participating in the program.

Q4: Does participation in the program guarantee publication?

A: No, participation in the program does not guarantee acceptance or publication. It aims to improve manuscript quality and increase the likelihood of acceptance during the peer-review process.

For Authors

Q5: Who is eligible to participate in the program?

A: The program is open to:

Early-career researchers or first-time authors.

Authors referred from the peer-review process after a manuscript rejection, where the Handling Editor identifies potential for improvement.

Q6: How can I apply to the program?

A: You can apply by emailing your draft manuscript in Word format to the Deputy Editor with the subject line "Request for Author Assist Service." Include a brief description of your research and challenges faced during manuscript preparation.

Q7: Can I participate if my manuscript has been rejected during peer review?

A: Yes, if your manuscript has been rejected but shows potential for improvement, the Handling Editor may invite you to participate in the program.

Q8: How long does the mentorship process take?

A: The mentorship process typically lasts four weeks from the time you are paired with a mentor.

Q9: What are my responsibilities as an author?

A: You are expected to:

Engage actively with your mentor.

Implement feedback and revisions in a timely manner.

Ensure the final manuscript is ready for submission to the journal.

Q10: Can I use the Author Assist Program to prepare a manuscript based on my master's dissertation?

A: Yes, but you must declare if your manuscript is part of a university research degree. If the dissertation has not yet been submitted for degree completion, you are encouraged to work with your university supervisors or institutional resources first. The program is designed to provide additional support after academic supervision is complete.

For Mentors

Q11: Who can become a mentor?

A: Experienced academics and researchers with a strong publication record, MMed or PhD supervision experience, and expertise in relevant fields are encouraged to apply.

Q12: How can I volunteer as a mentor?

A: Submit a two-page CV to the Deputy Editor, detailing your academic qualifications, publication history, supervision experience, and areas of expertise.

Q13: What is the time commitment for mentors?

A: Mentors are expected to work with authors over a four-week period, providing iterative feedback and guidance.

Q14: Will I receive recognition for mentoring?

A: Yes, mentors will be acknowledged in the final publication and in the journal's official communications.

Logistical Questions

Q15: Is there a cost to participate in the program?

A: No, the program is free for both authors and mentors.

Q16: How are mentors and authors matched?

A: The editorial team pairs authors with mentors based on the manuscript's topic and the mentor's area of expertise.

Q17: What happens if I cannot complete the mentorship process?

A: If unforeseen circumstances arise, please inform the Deputy Editor immediately. Alternative arrangements will be made to ensure continuity.

Q18: How is communication handled during the mentorship process?

A: Communication between authors and mentors is primarily conducted via email, with optional virtual meetings if both parties agree.

Program Outcomes

Q19: What happens after the mentorship process is complete?

A: Once the mentorship concludes, the author submits the revised manuscript to the JCMSA for formal peer review.

Q20: How will the program's success be measured?

A: Success will be evaluated based on metrics such as the number of manuscripts mentored, peer-review acceptance rates, and feedback from participants.

Q21: Will the program be expanded in the future?

A: Yes, the program is designed to scale, with plans to recruit more mentors and broaden its reach to support a larger number of authors.