

EDITORIAL**EVALUATION OF SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS: PRACTICE AND PROSPECTS FOR ETHIOPIA**Sileshi Lulseged, MD^{1*}, MMd, Rawleigh Howe, PhD²

Scholarly journals constitute the main publication channel in many domains, and the international scientific community has developed through peer review a quality control system for the content of these journals (1). Although not always watertight, peer reviewing in general constitutes an external evaluation of the quality of a manuscript before it is published. Reviewers assess submitted manuscripts for originality, validity and significance to help editors determine whether a manuscript should be published in their journal. Although there is much effort being exerted in developing settings, it is an uphill struggle for journals to become known and respected in the international research landscape largely due to concerns associated with perceived quality and transparency of publication processes.

The international scientific community is paying much attention to quantitative data evaluation of scholarly journals. The most common method uses bibliometric citation analysis, which involves the “Impact Factor (IF)” calculated and published by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), now part of Thomson Reuters (2). Impact factor is determined by averaging the number of citations a journal receives and the average number of times that articles within the journal are referred to by other articles during the previous two years. Simply put, the more often a journal’s articles are cited, the higher its impact factor, and most citations come from research institutes in the developed world (3). Scientists have justifiably complained for years about the inherent flaws and practical limitations of using impact factors for years as an assessment tool to gauge the quality of scholarly publications (4) and it has long been debated whether this citation-linked method is of much relevance for judging the merit of publications in the developing world.

In any case, evaluators should be aware of the necessity to try to obtain themselves some expert evaluation of the quality of the journal content. The Journal Quality List (JQL) (5), a widely used collation of journal rankings from a variety of sources may help to differentiate journals based on their quality standards. The basic assumption that only journals with high IF could feature high caliber research may be flawed as it is entirely plausible for good quality research to also appear in journals with low IF. Hence it does not appear to be justified to categorically conclude that all journals with low IF are of poor quality. Factors such as the editorial policy, frequency, timeliness and regularity of publication, language, proficiency, breadth of readership, extent of circulation, and quality of publication each contribute to the reputation of a journal. In recent years many new indices have been proposed to evaluate the research worthiness of authors, which have their own merits and demerits. The Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) framework, established and managed by African Journals Online (AJOL), and the International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP), provide detailed assessment criteria for the quality of publishing practices of journals in developing settings (6).

The full evaluation of the quality of a journal can, of course, only be performed by experts in the field. The most important dimensions to be considered during an independent evaluation of a journal’s quality includes scientific quality, relevance, and availability, visibility of the journal. The scientific quality of a journal depends, of course, on the quality of the individual articles, which in turn depends on the intrinsic quality of the research that is reported, and the writing ability of the authors, the composition of the editorial committee, and the rigor of peer-reviewing,

The relevance of a journal is the extent to which it is appropriate for its intended use. The most important aspects include the Journal’s relevance to development, relevance of content scope for the subject it treats, and journal appropriateness, including language and level of complexity for the intended audience. Availability and visibility of a journal are also critically important, including its availability in important libraries, on the Internet, bibliographic or indexing in databases, its geographical coverage, language of publication, regularity of publication, open access, and copyright provisions.

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In Ethiopia, the higher education landscape is transforming rapidly, research output has increased in volume and the number of journals published by institutions of higher education and research and professional associations has increased (7). These developments warrant establishment of quality standards and sustainability of the journals. The standardization of journal quality will promote improved teaching and learning in various institutions engaged in education and research in the country. Thus, the initiatives recently taken by the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences (EAS) and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE) to introduce a system of evaluating and accrediting scholarly journals are highly commendable. This, we believe, will pave the way to work towards achieving internationally comparable standards. It will draw attention to improvements, which are necessary so that Ethiopian scholarly journals, in addition to continuing to disseminate credible scientific information, mainly locally, can aspire to become a medium of choice for a much broader range of researchers to publish their research findings while working towards developing international stature.

A recent study report by the EAS (8) has indicated that one of the well-established means of assuring high quality research and outputs thereof is to conduct periodic and sustained evaluation of research dissemination platforms, notably scientific journals, using objective criteria. The report, integrating critical analysis of survey data and international benchmarking, has proposed a journal evaluation and accreditation system for Ethiopia. This has been well received by MoSHE, the Ministry leading the evaluation and accreditation initiative. The report suggests ranking of the journals into four grades based on aggregate total scores earned. It is believed that the relevant lead institutions in consultation with institutions of higher education and professional societies, could use the results of the accreditation and ranking of journals for standardizing the rating of the scholarly merit of academics for purposes of recruitment, mobility and promotion.

We believe that the accrediting agency should put in place mechanisms for strengthening emerging journals, motivating their editors and building research capacity, as well as a mechanism for rewarding best performing journals that serve as role models for other journals, eventually leading to excellence in scholarly research publication in the country. The Guidelines for Academic Publishing and Promotion issued recently by MoSHE (9), we believe, is a huge initial step in the effort to establish a uniform system across institutions of higher education, which currently is done in a very haphazard manner. It should be taken as a process that will benefit from cycles of assessment and continuous improvement with the active participation of its multiple stakeholders. Since the national evaluation and accreditation of journals as well as the systematic approach to academic publishing and promotion, is just starting in earnest, it is imperative that the lead institution and partners work towards creating awareness and ensuring efficient implementation of the system.

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