

Troubled Times for Ethics in Science and in the Use of Metrics

What a paradox that the publication of the new Scimago (Scopus) SJR 2022 has appeared precisely on 1st May, Workers' Day. Undoubtedly, in order to establish these metrics, tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of articles and cross-citations are needed to establish which journals are the most powerful, the most cited, and surely thousands of academics will be working on this theoretical day off to place one of their articles in one of the journals in the first quartile or, better, in the first decile of the SJR or JCR.

Education XX1 is one of these prized journals. It remains in the first quartile and increases its SJR impact index from 0.86 to 0.96. The CiteScore also reports good data: if in 2021 it was 5.7, the CiteSore Tracker for 2022, dated 5 April, already points to a value of 6.5. It is to be expected, therefore, that the current percentile in which it finds itself with the 2021 data (93rd percentile) may also improve and who knows if it can be placed in the top 5% of the world's scientific journals in education, a milestone, for which we must congratulate our Editor-in-Chief, Esther López-Martín, her entire team and, by extension, the Faculty of Education of the UNED.

Many other academics took advantage of the time off on 1st May to act as referees or to advance their work as scientific editors, both of which are unpaid. The work of editorial teams in our country is poorly recognized, requires great dedication and is not professionalized. Most national journals do not have financial resources, do not charge APCs and rarely have a stable budget and institutional support. Despite all this, the positioning of Spanish scientific journals in education continues to be excellent, especially if we are aware that we compete with large multinational publishing groups. In this scenario, it is not unusual for Spanish journals to begin to hand over their management to these large publishers, even if this means the appearance of an APC for publication. However, this situation is also a warning to our scientific community: publishing is not free, and someone has to pay the many production costs of a journal, despite the fact that editorial teams and

How to reference this editorial

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reviewers continue to work without remuneration and almost without recognition. It is understandable, therefore, that teaching-research staff (junior and senior) who perform the functions of editors want to devote themselves to thankless and unworthy tasks such as typesetting, proofreading, article tracking, conversion to search engine languages (XML, etc.), reviewing citations in databases and so many other things necessary for a journal to function.

During the tension of having top scientific journals and surviving with this workload, there is the satisfaction of providing a quality service to colleagues and the academic world, as well as promoting Ibero-American scientific production and science in Spanish. However, in recent months there has also been discouraging news that affects the entire editorial world of scientific journals and, therefore, all academic and research staff who nourish the journals with our work and our reviews. The press has reported that highly cited researchers have been paid to change or add their byline affiliation to that of other universities (for example, changing the Spanish affiliation to that of an Arab or Russian university), with the intention that these universities will climb the world university rankings.

We have also read in the press that a researcher from Cordoba has been suspended from his job and salary for this reason. Is this possible, even though he dedicates himself 24x7 to research and even has a large team behind him? What is leading us to this behavior, to this ambition? Can we consider such behavior appropriate in the scientific world, does it raise ethical questions or are we turning a blind eye to it in a pact of indifference?

Navarro (2023) deals with these questions in a wry and humorous way in a newspaper article entitled *Méteme en tu "peiper", quillo*. The author rightly reminds us of Albert Einstein's words, referring to Marie Curie: "probably the only scientist who was not corrupted by fame".

On another note, Dr. Quaderi (2023), editor-in-chief and vice-president of Web of Science, surprised us on 20th March by announcing the de-listing of a group of 50 journals from their catalogue for no longer meeting their quality criteria. Quaderi explains that they have used IA to help them look for journals with extreme characteristics (*outliers*) that are indications that they no longer meet their quality requirements.

Analyzing these journals and the commotion generated in the networks, it seems that, among the reasons that have led WoS to take this decision, some reprehensible editorial practices stand out, such as certain strategies to receive citations in order to increase the journal's impact factor or the systems for generating special issues and carrying out peer review. It is increasingly common to find journals and publishing groups with "aggressive" publishing practices, offering reviews and rapid publication in exchange for high APCs. It seems that the exploitation of scientific production as a business is on the rise and, if we are

not careful, the ideal of science as a search for truth will be mortally wounded. But researchers, as we see, also seek to maximize their productive effort, either through journals where it is easier to publish, or by increasing the number of authors in articles excessively. The latter, which is difficult to control, is also being regulated by agencies such as ANECA.

The world rankings of university quality, basically focused on research, journal metrics and citation indexes of researchers to measure their impact or prestige (such as the h-index), have led to policies of selection, incentives and recruitment of faculty that are perverting the system. We are thousands of academics, we all want to publish a lot and in the best journals in order to receive incentives and get promotions, it is understandable. What if we create a journal or a group of journals that publishes many issues and an unlimited number of articles, we reduce review times as much as possible and publish very fast, and for this we ask for a good amount of Swiss francs, about 2000 or 3000 per article? Well, indeed, someone came up with the idea and several are following it. Analyzing one of these journals that has been *de-listed* from the WoS, in which quite a few Spanish academics in the field of education publish, we observe that it publishes 24 issues per year, with about 1000 articles per issue. It does not take a mathematician to calculate the income involved (a very profitable business) and the number of reviewers needed to evaluate such many articles, to which must be added the even more numerous rejected papers.

Authors such as Delgado López-Cózar & Martín-Martín (2022) have described these anomalous patterns of behavior in the publications of publishers such as MDPI and Frontiers (followed by others such as Heliyon, Plos One or Hindawi), and precisely show a significant mass of publications with Spanish authorship. Sánchez-Santamaría & Aliaga (2023) state that, to a large extent, this mass of Spanish publications is motivated by ANECA's teaching staff accreditation and six-year assessment criteria.

Logically, the teaching-research staff want to respond to the publication requirements of the Ministry of Universities, ANECA and the universities and their own departments: publish or perish. The publication costs will already be financed by some public body... And of course, the number of published articles multiplies, and the accreditation agencies begin to ask for more and better indexed articles because the vast majority already meet the above criteria (and of course, not everyone can be accredited and rewarded). So, faced with this global demand, some of these large new publishers offer the opportunity to publish quickly and sometimes easily, even giving authors various options to publish their work in journals in different quartiles depending on the amount of APC they are willing to pay. It may be a legal system, it may meet formal peer review criteria, but do we really believe that, with this system, we are creating quality science, that all that

glitters is gold? Becerra (2023), also analyzing some episodes of scientific corruption in the press, reflects on how the current obsession with reducing reality to metrics and rankings not only encourages mediocrity, but also ends up corrupting the reality it is intended to measure.

The temptation to stand out at any price can affect individual academics, but also journal editorial teams. Thus, criticism of questionable practices also affects some Spanish journals. In fact, in this latest publication of the SJR ranking, two Spanish education journals have been removed from the ranking. It seems, therefore, that the same two big companies responsible for the JCR and SJR rankings are aware of this drift and want to try to cut certain editorial practices that do not conform to their quality criteria and that devalue their own rankings. Although we publishers can also complain about the lack of transparency of these big companies about the criteria for the entry and exit of journals, at least we see here a concern for fair play.

However, within this pact of indifference to which we referred, it seems that we all look the other way as we achieve our goals. We know that all this deserves critical reflection, that university life is being degraded, that we do not have the necessary time to devote to our students, to teaching and to disciplinary study, but this does not seem to matter if people, departments, universities, and countries increase their positions in rankings that respond to indicators created by certain companies. The managers of ministries, agencies and universities got into the mechanics of comparing themselves in these rankings decades ago, possibly willingly and perhaps also too uncritically. These indicators, more typical of rich Anglo-Saxon countries, do not necessarily respond to all university models; moreover, it is healthy that there is diversity in the definition of the mission and vision of these large institutions.

I would hazard a guess that *impactfactormania* is beginning to crumble with the increasing advent of fraudulent practices. Perhaps a crisis is beginning to emerge that will force us to rethink what the university is, what its primary purpose is, what we expect from the relationship with our students, what the value of teaching is, how staff and institutions should be evaluated, where our value lies beyond the h-index (an index that defines no one as a teacher, nor as a researcher, let alone as a person).

We began this editorial by congratulating ourselves on the impact factor of our journal *Educación XX1* and ended by criticizing the indiscriminate use of this factor. In short, in my opinion, the impact factor is just one more factor, among many others, to estimate the quality of an academic or an institution. We will see where the next decade will take us in science evaluation policies. I agree with Becerra (2023) when he warns of the enormous risks of turning metrics into a religion and of the feeling that metrics construct a world of lies. In other words, we surrender the true value of academics and universities to the “hyper-valuation of rankings” (Galán, 2020).

For there to be a deep, critical and academic reflection, it is necessary that, from the personal responsibility of each one of us, we leave this pact of indifference and debate once again about what the university really is and what we expect from it and its teaching staff.

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