

The new Capes' criteria for the classification of journals and the repercussion in the field of public health

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THE DISSEMINATION, BY THE COORDINATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), of the classification of journals based on the Qualis Único, which establishes a single reference classification for each journal, has generated concern, translated into several manifestations, both from institutions and graduated programs as well as among the scientific editors of journals in the field of public health.

In the case of national journals in the public health area, the result of the new classification, based on the combined use of bibliographic indicators from the Scopus (CiteScore), Web of Science (Impact Factor) and h5 (Google Scholar) databases, as a whole, downgraded the qualification of journals. The result of the classification ended up generating questionings about the criteria and the methodology used.

Under this condition, of demotion, is the 'Saúde em Debate' Journal (RSD), with more than 40 years of circulation, which publishes mainly Brazilian and Latin American authors, whose themes are directed to the interests of national readers, with significant contribution to the development of the health sector in the Country.

The Forum for Scientific Editors of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) journals published an open letter, with which the RSD editorial board and the Brazilian Center for Health Studies (Cebes) fully agree. That open letter states that

The adoption of similar criteria for the evaluation of scientific journals is questionable considering the profound differences between areas in the production and dissemination of knowledge [and points out that], the adoption of these indicators subordinates the science produced in Brazil to the dictates of journals from other countries (mainly USA and UK), favoring the prioritization of topics of interest of the scientific policy in the northern hemisphere [...], [apart from distancing] the science produced in Brazil from non-specialized readers¹. [free translation].

The letter highlights the role of journals in the training of health professionals at various levels of graduate courses and the social impact of this training, which cannot be evaluated by the metrics adopted by Capes¹.

It highlights, furthermore, a number of immediate problems in the implementation of the Capes' proposal and concludes by stating that

The consequences of the misconceptions of the proposal are perfectly foreseeable: draining articles

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to areas that have managed to place their journals in classes A1 and A2 (and whose publication rates are reasonable); reduction in the submission of articles from well-rated graduate programs, with more resources, to pay for publication in the journals of major international publishing houses; restriction on the funding of magazines, in a 'more for those who have more' process. Competition is encouraged rather than solidarity among peers¹. [free translation].

In the same direction, jointly, the Brazilian Association of Public Health (Abrasco), the Forum for Public Health Editors/Abrasco (in which RSD participates), the Coordination of the public health area of Capes and the Coordination of the Forum for Public Health Graduate Program Coordinators/Abrasco released a document entitled 'Criteria for classification of journals: appraisal of the Qualis Journal Reference'² proposal, identifying a set of problems relating to the criteria used for the classification of journals and their impact on public health.

In the list of problems identified for the public health field, would be the very identity of the area and its editorial policy. The document indicates that the criteria for classifying journals may produce

leakage of scientific articles to journals of other (related) areas with better qualification; migration of public health journals to others, whose parameters are more favorable to it; underfunding of national journals in the area². [free translation].

Another problem pointed out in the document starts with the analysis that

Concentrating the publication of Brazilian scientific production on English-language journals, dominant in the bases considered in the proposed Qualis Journal, restricts the access of this production to specialized readers. It limits, thus, the role of journals in the process of disseminating up-to-date scientific knowledge, indispensable for subsidizing training at the various levels and modalities of graduate courses, as well as the formulation and implementation of national public policies². [free translation].

Faced with the problems identified, the document presents as suggestions: (1) the constitution of a working group with the purpose of 'deepening the discussion and elaborating an alternative proposal that better portrays the current situation of the area in the Country'; (2) Broaden the discussion among the areas, in order to seek less heterogeneous criteria for the classification of journals; (3) Consider in the review process of the proposal by the WG mentioned the need to incorporate other indexing bases and, in particular, the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), as well as other indicators that better capture the internationalization profile of scientific production of the area and/or value the excellence of locally relevant research; (4) Identify or develop qualitative criteria that can be incorporated into the alternative proposal to be presented, which take into account, for example, relevance to the area, volume of articles/year, history and the editorial process².

Concerns over the use of bibliometric indicators are not recent and have already been highlighted by several authors who study the theme³⁻⁵, besides being questioned in public documents such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (Dora)⁶, December 2012, and the Leiden Manifesto⁷. Dora highlights weaknesses in the use of the Impact Factor (IF) as a tool for evaluating research and makes recommendations to researchers, academic institutions, funding agencies, organizations that provide metrics and journal editors, aiming at improving the practice of research evaluation.

The Leiden Manifesto⁷ gathers 10 principles of the best practices for metric-based research evaluation, which are: (1) Quantitative evaluation should support specialized qualitative evaluation; (2) Measure performance according to the mission of the institution, group or researcher; (3) Protect the excellence of locally relevant research; (4) Keep data collection and analytical processes open, transparent and simple; (5) Allow the evaluated to verify data and analysis; (6) Consider differences between areas in publication and citation practices; (7) Base the evaluation of individual researchers on the qualitative judgment of their career; (8) Avoid misplaced solidity and false precision; (9) Recognize the systemic effects of evaluation and indicators; (10) Review and update indicators on a regular basis.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the methodology for evaluating journals proposed by Capes, besides not meeting the needs of dissemination of knowledge on public health in Brazil, comes at a time of profound restriction of public funding for graduate courses and the journals themselves. How to meet more rigorous and unrelated criteria to the area while reducing Capes' budget by about 50%, as seems to be the government proposal for 2020?

We emphasize, finally, that Cebes, when creating the RSD, in 1976, aimed to disseminate results of studies and research, analysis, reflections and experience reports to contribute to the public health field and to the formulation, planning and policy evaluation for the Unified Health System (SUS). It is a journal known and read by health managers and workers and, for this reason, accumulates enormous contribution in the consolidation of the universal health policy. Even today, when econometrics directs the editorial projects of many academic journals, RSD remains firm in its purpose of contributing to the dissemination of scientific knowledge applicable to the health sector. In the case under analysis in this text – the new Capes' criteria for the classification of journals –, what could be considered a virtue of RSD becomes a factor of reduction or discrimination of its presence in the scenario of national scientific dissemination. This is not just a nonsense. It is even more serious, because it outlines a perverse future for RSD and other public health journals.

Collaborators

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