# Robust assessment of publishing quality and practices welcomed by Southern journal editors

## Initiative started in Africa now providing international standards for publishing quality across Global South

Journals in the developing world face challenges in becoming known and respected in the international research landscape. Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS), established and managed by African Journals Online (AJOL) and INASP, provides detailed assessment criteria for the quality of publishing practices of Southern journals and is initially being used to assess the journals hosted on Journals Online (JOL) platforms.

The assigned JPPS levels serve a dual purpose. For readers, they provide assurance that the journals meet an internationally recognized set of criteria at a particular level. For journal editors, the detailed feedback from the JPPS assessment helps them identify ways to improve their publishing practices and standards with a view to achieving a higher level at the next assessment.



Discussions about the JPPS framework during the JOL Managers' Meeting in Nepal in September 2017

Locally generated research and knowledge is key to addressing local issues in a contextually relevant way. But historical and current bias against journals from the Global South[1] mean that these journals are often not included in the lists of titles for consideration in promotion decisions and are significantly under-represented in official international metrics. This includes the journal impact factor, which is widely used to judge journal quality, despite some concerns about its value for this measure.[2] Journals in the Global South also face challenges because of differences in human and financial resources compared with those in the Global North. In Europe and North America, scholarly communication is dominated by large, commercial,

international publishing houses. These companies publish hundreds or even thousands of journals and may employ a large number of people to manage, edit, produce and market journals.

In contrast, most developing-country journals are stand-alone titles, published by research societies or by universities. The editors and editorial boards, usually active researchers themselves, oversee the activities of the journal, including the normal functions of a publisher, frequently doing this work themselves after-hours and without payment. They may not be fully aware of all the standards, processes, and best practices involved in publishing high-quality research journals.

Recognizing these issues and in response to repeated requests from journal editors, African Journals Online (AJOL) realized the need for a mechanism to recognize the many credible journals published in the Global South that are often missed in other metrics.

The idea for Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS)[3] was conceived in 2014 and AJOL began discussing with African journal editors about appropriate criteria for their contexts. At the same time AJOL started discussing the idea with long-term partner INASP, which was running five Journals Online platforms (handover to local management completed at the end of March 2018; see box: the Journals Online project).

The JPPS framework criteria, processes and implementation plan were then jointly developed by INASP and AJOL. The JPPS framework assesses journals against a detailed and transparent set of criteria. The framework is intended to give researchers a greater feeling of trust that they are submitting their work to quality publications and will, hopefully,

Mr I.P. Adhikari from NepJOL and AJOL's Susan Murray discuss the JPPS framework

encourage them to submit their work to regional journals. This will ensure that Southern research is easily available to those that need it most.

INASP trialled and then implemented the assessments with the journals on several of the largest JOLs during 2016/17 and the results of the assessments began to be displayed on the JPPS website and the relevant JOLs platforms in early 2018.

## The development process

Developing such a system is not quick or simple. AJOL and INASP recognized that it needed to be aligned with the concerns and requests from the journal editors in many different countries across three continents. It also needed to align with international assessment processes already in existence in a way that is relevant to the journals.

## The Journals Online project

The Journals Online (JOL) project was established by INASP in the late 1990s. The Journals Online platforms aim to provide increased visibility, accessibility and quality of peer-reviewed journals published in developing countries so that the research outputs that are produced in these countries can be found, shared and used more effectively.

The JOL project involves embedding an online journal hosting platform in existing institutions in developing countries or regions. It then provides training in publishing best practices, and various other supporting services to the participating research journals hosted on the platforms. The project strengthens the capacity in the local hosting organization to eventually sustainably undertake this ongoing work themselves. In many cases, the JOL platform provides a first opportunity for the research in a journal to be made available online.

The first JOL platform was African Journals Online (AJOL), established as a pilot in 1998 and formally launched in 2000. Since 2005, AJOL has been managed independently by a team in South Africa and the platform now hosts over 500 journals. JOL platforms in Vietnam and the Philippines are also now managed locally. The JOLs in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Central America and Mongolia are also in the process of moving to local management.

More information about INASP Journals Online project can be found at **www.inasp.info/journals-online**.

More information about AJOL can be found at www.ajol.info.

To ensure relevance to journals publishing from developing countries, INASP and AJOL compiled the framework on the basis of decades of experience of contexts, norms and practices in developing-country journal publishing, and also on feedback from journal editors in Africa.

The inclusion criteria and standards set out by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), SciELO South Africa, Clarivate (formerly Thomson Reuters), Scopus, the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), the Forum of African Medical Editors (FAME), and the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing were used as part of the development of the framework.

This should aid comparison and interoperability of the frameworks internationally, as well as making sure they are attainable and relevant for journals from the South. Inclusion on other internationally recognized journal lists is neither a requirement nor a guarantee of a journal gaining a particular JPPS star level although this inclusion is noted as part of the assessment.

Initially five categories of journals were created – one-, two- and three-star, new journal and inactive - and their criteria were drafted. These were shared with three of AJOL's publishing partners for peer review and then refined according to feedback. They were then shared with all of AJOL journal partners and were greeted positively. After feedback, a sixth category of no stars – or 'Working towards' –  was added for journals that have been on the JOL platforms for some years but do not yet meet the requirements for a JPPS badge.

In total, the JPPS process assesses against 108 detailed criteria. A summary of the expectations at each level is provided in the JPPS framework and complements the training that has been provided to journal editors throughout the lifetime of the Journals Online project and is now detailed in a new Handbook for Journal Editors.[4] To prevent misuse and to ensure the robustness and long-term

> "Thank you very much for your e-mail and the attached document. Your evaluation report will certainly help us to enhance the quality of our journal. We will address all issues raised during the assessment and take necessary measures to resolve the problems."

## Purpose of JPPS

- An educational tool for journals publishing from developing countries towards raised awareness, understanding and implementation of internationally accepted best practice publishing standards

- A more detailed and formal process for deciding on the inclusion or otherwise of new titles to the JOLs platforms

- A clear process by which each journal can improve their practices for improved publishing quality

- Public acknowledgement for JOL journal partners that are already attaining internationally recognized high standards of publishing and editorial best practice

- Clear guidance for researchers using the JOL platforms that partner journals vary in degrees of attaining publishing best practice, and information of the standards attained by each journal

- A means for authors to select trusted titles published in and relevant to their own country context, rather than submitting manuscripts to overseas journals. This could make relevant content more easily available to other researchers in that country and region, as well as strengthening the local knowledge sharing system

- A potential tool for developing country university administrators and research offices to ascertain the publication record of their academic staff for job application and promotion purposes.

JOL managers read through the JPPS framework during the 2017 JOLs Managers' Meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal

sustainability of the JPPS system, the detailed spreadsheets used by assessors during the process are not made public.

However, the editors of each assessed journal receive detailed reports of their assessments, customized for each journal to provide guidance about strengths and areas for improvement. The Handbook for Journal Editors, and a new online course that is being piloted at the time of writing, have been developed as resources to help journal editors in their journal development.

## First assessment results announced

Reports have now been sent to journal editors in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Mongolia and Central America and the JPPS site and

JOLs platforms now display badges for all these journals (almost 300 journals in total). In this first assessment, 30 of these journals have been awarded two-star status and over 50 have been awarded one star.

In addition, INASP has received scores of positive responses. Most editors not only thank us for the assessments and reports but also detail plans to improve their journal processes and receive higher rankings. Some of these changes required are simple. For example, the JPPS criteria are very strict about prompt uploading of content. This can be a challenge with a journal run by volunteers who are also busy with their research and teaching commitments. In response to the JPPS assessments, several journals that had got behind with populating their latest issues were

prompted to catch up, resulting in their JPPS ranking changing from 'inactive' to one-star or two-star status depending on the other criteria met.

## Challenges encountered

Conducting a detailed assessment process with an emphasis on support to journal editors is a lengthy process. The basic assessment takes about 30-45 minutes per journal, but the verification of the email addresses can take much longer and may

"We have had an extensive discussion in our editorial board meeting with regard to the JPPS form that you had sent. We are very delighted to get a two-star ranking. We will definitely work on the suggestions made by you to get even higher rankings."

"Thank you for the mail conveying of our award. I personally share my joy with you. I firmly believe that this award has increased our responsibility and hope to go forward."

## The JPPS criteria in brief

Criteria that journals are assessed against include:

- Publication of original research
- A functional or well-working editorial board, with members who have been verified as being actively involved with the journal by an assessor; and the majority of whom are based primarily in the area served by each JOL
- Accurate and verified involvement of the editorial board, advisory board and any other committees associated with the journal
- Verification and assessment of an active and accurate description of the peer-review process and quality-control processes, including journal plagiarism checks
- Availability of authors' guidelines, and how well these are implemented, particularly with regard to the information appearing on the first page of each article, and quality of language and layout
- Reviewers' guidelines
- The display of editorial and publishing policies

**One star** - has met the basic requirements for at least two years

**Two stars** - compliant with additional publishing practice quality criteria

**Three stars** - consistently excellent in all the technical and editorial publishing best practices set out in the assessment criteria of the Journal Publishing Practices & Standards (JPPS) framework

**New title** - has been publishing for less than two years but meets basic requirements

**Inactive** - has not added new content to the JOL platform in over one year

**No stars** - not currently meeting the basic criteria for inclusion on a JOL platform

require frequent follow-up. Assessments for new journals applying to join the JOL platforms can also take longer as information tends to be harder to find when journals are not yet following the standard structure on the sites. Across the JOLs being assessed, there are now more than 900 journals.

A related challenge is ensuring that the badges are displayed consistently on each journal page across all the JOL platforms. All the JOLs are based on Open Journals System (OJS). However, OJS has been implemented differently across the JOL platforms by several different technology partners, which adds technical complexity.

Ensuring clear, consistent and secure display of badges is vital to demonstrate official JPPS status of journals and reduce the risk of fraudulent claims of having JPPS badges where no assessment has been carried out. All communication about JPPS makes clear that the only official sources of JPPS information are the JPPS site and the official JOLs platforms.

"I firmly believe that your invaluable suggestions and continuous support you have provided me throughout this time has played an impeccable role in developing myself in the field of journal management. Thank you for your continuous help and support that has enabled me to come this far."

Susan Murray of African Journals Online speaking at the 2017 JOLs Managers' Meeting

Another challenge with so many journals is keeping assessments up to date – especially as editors are keen to improve their journals as a result of their initial assessment. This mirrors the challenges faced by other organizations carrying out assessments of journals.

There are also challenges faced by the journal editors in meeting the JPPS levels, which are very stringent. One key challenge is that meeting the three-star level requires robust, long-term archiving on an external platform. Currently, none of the JOLs platforms have an agreement in place with an external archiving platform, although it could be argued that the JOLs platforms themselves provide an archival function where journals also have their own website. Nonetheless, this is a major factor in none of the journals having yet been awarded a three-star badge.

Feedback also demonstrated the challenging situations that many journal editors in the Global South work in, especially where the pressures of work on the journal falls on one or two volunteers who are running the journal in addition to their research, teaching and other university commitments:

*"There is no assigned person/ assisting hand for my journal to do official activities. I've to do all by myself … I'll try to do as per your instructions but I need some time."*

In addition, there is a need to ensure continued alignment with initiatives in the countries involved and ensure that the JPPS initiative remains Southern-led and relevant to Southern needs. In Bangladesh, for example, a parallel and complementary initiative has emerged to develop

*"On behalf of the Editorial team of [our journal] , I would like to thank you for letting us know about the JPPS assessment of our journal. All the comments are genuine and we take them seriously. We will be addressing those issues in a few days' time. We look forward for such constructive comments in the days to come and would again like to thank you and your team for writing to us."*

a roadmap for improving journal quality in the country.[5,6] Aligning multiple initiatives inevitably adds to the complexity of the process. However, it also is an encouraging

*"Thank you for your extensive feedback. We are very encouraged with this outcome. I will definitely work together with my editorial team members and improve on those area that warrants change. I look forward to receiving continuous support in days to come."*

sign of the need for such activities and an opportunity to work more closely with strong Southern advocates of journal publishing quality.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the National Science Foundation, which manages the Sri Lanka Journals Online platform, has now instituted a series of grants to improve the quality of journals.

## Looking ahead

AJOL and INASP have been grateful for funding from Sida and DFID over many years to support the development of the JOLs platforms and, more recently, the JPPS initiative. INASP's Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems (SRKS) programme, under which INASP's part of this work fell, comes to an end at the end of March. We are pleased to have continued support from Sida for this work over the next year but are also keen to discuss other funding opportunities to extend this work.

On the technical side, we are working towards an online form (and database) to streamline the assessment process. This would be a tool that new journals could use in applying to join a JOL platform and also that journals already on the platforms could use in their applications for reassessment.

Extensions to JPPS might also include going beyond the JOLs platforms in partnership with other Southern journal platforms. In addition, we hope to roll out a full online course in journal quality following feedback and refinement from the current pilot.

> "Thanks once again for your continuous work for upgrading the publishing practice and standard of journals of Bangladesh."

### References

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## Lessons learnt:

- **The importance of Southern leadership** - It was important that JPPS was Southern-led and in response to Southern needs; the idea originated with African journal editors and aligned with similar activities going on amongst editors in Bangladesh.

- **Clear communication is vital** – Detailed reports and clear communication of the purpose, process and expectations meant that editors welcomed the initiative and understood what their badges meant. Similarly, the wider international publishing community has welcomed JPPS.

- **Significant time commitment is needed** – The process of developing JPPS and then carrying out and checking detailed journal assessments on around 900 journals requires considerable amounts of time and long-term commitment.

- **Trust and good working relationships are vital** – JPPS was developed by two organizations, in South Africa and the UK, each with different working contexts and different pressures on staff time and few opportunities for face-to-face meetings. It also involved JOL managers and editors on three continents. However, AJOL and INASP, and the JOL management partners in Asia and Central America, have worked together for many years and have built up strong partnerships and mutual trust.

## JPPS team

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