



Higher Education Commission (HEC) and Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PM&DC) Journal Evaluation Policies and Future Directions for New Journals

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Research productivity and scholarly rigor are demonstrated through academic journals. In Pakistan, two organizations, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC), play pivotal roles in maintaining the research ecosystem such as evaluation, recognition, and monitoring. Publication of a research paper in a reputed and accredited medical journal in turn credits the promotion of faculty, the award of a degree, or fulfills the eligibility for an exit examination and enhances institutional prestige. It is arguably understood that both HEC and PMDC have made significant strides forward in setting standards. Although their role is essential to keep a check and enhance standards, however, certain weaknesses in these enforcements have limited the growth of smaller journals. This editorial will focus on current ecosystem for research journals and recommendations for new journals.

The HEC has well defined eligibility and categorization criteria for a medical journal. Starting from bearing an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), it should have title and registered non profitable publisher or owner organization. The journal must have a working website with open access to its content (via online journal system (OJS) or any other online system). Other criteria include the presence of a standard policy document, preferably displayed on its website, a clear peer review policy, contact details and use of the English language in titles and article abstracts. The journal must be published regularly on time. Publication volume, i.e. minimum number of original articles per issue and frequency of publication are also defined.

There is a separate criteria for editorial and advisory boards. None of the editorial board members are allowed to publish their articles and a maximum of 20% of the faculty of the same institution is allowed to publish. Similarly, the criteria for 3 categories (w, x, y) has also been defined.¹

While overlapping up to some extent, PMDC has its own criteria for recognition of journals. These include quality assurance, frequency and regularity, review procedure, and more weightage to international indexing bodies. Other parameters include the minimum number of original articles, and printed copies. Similarly, it stresses on full time appointment of an editorial staff member or officer, publication ethics, and award of authorship according to ICMJE guidelines.²

HEC is striving to enhance academic and publication standards through financial support and capacity building to various journals owned by registered research entities in different categories, which has allowed them to invest in editorial staff, digital platforms, and indexing applications. Nonetheless stringent policies such as Scopus and Web of Science indexation has proved to be a double-edged sword for resource limited journals to attain W-category.³ Evolving and inconsistent policies have affected



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smaller journals adversely. In most instances, they find themselves vulnerable to restrictions before they can stabilize and hence lose the resources already invested to meet the criteria. This scenario further weakens resource-limited journals, where opportunities for attaining impact factors are already scarce.

PMDC has adopted the criteria for evaluation of medical journal based on peer review by two experts, retaining peer review report and ethical approval of the research proposals and declaration conflict of interest (COI). Such criteria safeguards baseline editorial standards and ensure transparency. Journals that fail to fulfill the criteria laid down by the publication committee may face suspension or rejection.

Enforcement remains uneven despite such efforts where some journals have retained recognition notwithstanding peer review or insufficient editorial procedures. PMDC does not differentiate between journals of higher versus lower quality, which moderates incentives for continuous improvement.² Delayed evaluation process and long feedback cycles further impede the progress of aspirant journals.

Current policies are encouraging in terms of standardization of editorial and ethical practices^{1,3} and financial grants from HEC² and enhanced visibility of local journal through indexation efforts.¹ Lack of sustained mentorship and appropriate capacity building programs, overemphasis on impact factor and indexation at the cost of local relevance, financial barriers for small new journals and fragmented policies between PMDC and HEC causes confusion and duplication.

Challenges regarding the launch of a new journal is a huge undertaking in terms of its establishment and sustainability such as sufficient institutional expertise in the field of research and publications and ample financial resources. Challenges other than following stringent guidelines by HEC and PMDC include handling the submission in a professional and ethical way and maintaining number of publications by the owner institution to a specified limit.¹ Similarly, ICMJE Guidelines on Authorship must be followed.⁴

HEC and PMDC both deserve recognition for raising awareness of quality standards in scholarly publishing. Yet, frequent policy shifts, overemphasis on impact factor metrics, and lack of capacity building provides little opportunities for new journals. Consistency in policies, provision of realistic support, and nurturing journals progressively will ensure sustainability. National policies need to be aligned with international frameworks preserving the local relevance is crucial to building a robust and credible publishing ecosystem in Pakistan.

Policies should be formulated through inclusive consultation with all relevant stakeholders. For clarity, these stakeholders can be categorized into three tiers: regulatory bodies, advisory institutions, and end users. The first tier includes the HEC and the PMDC, which

function as the primary regulatory authorities. The second tier consists of advisory stakeholders such as the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (CPSP) and major research and development organizations, including the Health Research Institute (formerly the Pakistan Medical Research Council). The third tier represents the end users, specifically, the reputed national journals that ultimately implement and are affected by these policies.

In light of the research ecosystem of the country, there need to be a uniform and inclusive national guidelines accommodating and allowing the new journals to flourish while maintaining the ethical standards and credibility of the research data to advance evidence based practice.

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