CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 105 Number 3 10 August 2013

GUEST EDITORIAL

‘National’ versus ‘International’ Journals

Almost all applications for academic jobs or promotions in different universities and research institutes in the country want the applicant to segregate information about his/her research publications in ‘Indian’ or ‘National’ and ‘Foreign’ or ‘International’ journals. Classification into ‘national’ and ‘international’ journals is mis-leading as it presupposes that the former group of journals publishes articles only from authors in India and/or are available only within the boundaries of the nation. However, the commonly understood implication of such bifurcation is to identify journals that are published in India and those published outside. Why make such distinction? The implied but not officially stated answer is that publications in ‘national’ journals are not as good as those in the so-called ‘international’ journals and, therefore, such a distinction is necessary to assess the merit/academic achievements of the candidate. They are considered to be not as ‘good’ because the impact factor (IF) of ‘national’ journals is generally less than that of the ‘international’ journals.

The IF provides a very convenient sword in the hands of experts, who are always short of time to actually read and assimilate an individual’s research contributions. Armed with the IF, the ‘experts’ rapidly cut out ‘good’ from ‘poor’ or ‘bad’ publications! Consequently, publications in ‘national’ journals are unceremoniously cut and thrown into the ‘poor’ or ‘bad’ basket. This rapid disposal, without actually learning anything about what was published, is unfortunate indeed. This discourages everyone from submitting their better manuscripts to the Indian journals. The editors of Indian journals are, therefore, left with an unenviable position to remain satisfied mostly with mediocre manuscripts and thus helplessly perpetuate the dictum that ‘national’ journals are poor[1]. In spite of the very involved discussions questioning the validity of IF, this ‘convenient’ numerical value is widely used by majority of the short-of-time experts in ‘objectively’ defining the level of ‘excellence’. Many of us, who have been questioning the belief that IF provides an ‘objective’ assessment of quality[1,2] find it very satisfying that leading scientists and journals, following the recent San-Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (http://am.ascb.org/dora/) have agreed to disregard the IF (also see ref. 3).

Notwithstanding the validity or otherwise of IF as an objective metric, the fact remains that a substantial part of research published in Indian journals remains substandard. Well known and widely discussed multiple factors contribute to this poor state of affairs[1]. The guidelines mandated by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to determine the Academic Performance Index (API) of an applicant has further added to lowering of the quality of Indian research journals. The scourge of mushrooming ‘open access’ and ‘e-journals’ needs to be seriously considered by the UGC and the universities/ research institutes while assessing the quality of applicant’s research contributions.

Two primary factors determine the quality of research published by a journal. First and foremost is the quality of research being reported in the submitted manuscript and second is the quality and rigour of the peer-review. Authors determine the quality of research submitted for publication while the editor controls the quality of peer-review. The peer-review can help to reject a substandard manuscript. However, if the editor does not have other quality manuscripts, publication of the journal may be delayed or altogether put off. With publication of research journals having become a commercial activity, the publisher would not want the journal to be delayed or shut down. Consequently, the helpless or a ‘willing’ editor/ publisher continues to bring out mediocre or even substandard material at regular intervals. In this age of wide commercialization of ‘open-access’ and a large number of authors who need to publish something to somehow fulfill the API requirements, the ‘willing’ editors of the mushrooming journals are not in short supply of manuscripts.

Several of the long-established journals published in India have a reasonably good system of peer-review. Yet, the average quality of research published in these journals is less than desired. The primary reason for this is the reluctance on the part of authors to submit their ‘better-quality’ manuscripts to these journals. Very often, the manuscripts are submitted to these journals after they have been rejected by several ‘international’ journals or because the authors are aware that the quality of research being reported in a given manuscript may not be acceptable in ‘good’ journals. Such papers then get published

because the peer-reviewers also take a 'soft' stand for manuscript from an Indian journal!

In an unsigned editorial in the 11th issue of the first volume of *Current Science* (1932), the then editor C. R. Narayana Rao[4] noted: 'It is true that individual scientific workers in India have by their indefatigable industry achieved great distinction for themselves, but the prestige of both official and non-official research is still slow in attaining that status of international importance reached by most European countries. This unsatisfactory position is in our opinion partly due to the tendency of many scientific men to export their more important contributions for publication in foreign journals, with a proportionate impoverishment of Indian archives. …Continuance of this practice will retard the process of building up a scientific tradition for India and keep her in a position of semi-dependence in the world of science.' It is indeed unfortunate that even 80 years after we continue to 'export (their) more important contributions for publication in foreign journals' and thus have failed to establish an independent scientific tradition!

Current Science was started as an Indian parallel to the British *Nature*. Commenting on the launch of *Current Science*, L. L. Fermor in his Presidential address at the 20th Indian Science Congress stated, 'An event of major importance to the development of science in India during the past year was the decision made by a group during the Indian Science Congress at Bangalore to publish a science journal on the lines of *Nature*.' In its early days, *Current Science* lived to that expectation. However, in spite of its continuation as a multi-disciplinary journal like *Nature*, its status has greatly suffered. Ramaseshan[5] while discussing quality of Indian science journals noted, 'Two classes of scientists have to patronize Indian journals – those who are working in the *forefront of science* and hence are *fighting for priority* and those who cannot get their papers published anywhere else.' Unfortunately, today, most of our 'forefront' scientists also do not like to publish in *Current Science* even for the sake of priority[2].

How do we bring journals published in India, especially those with a long history like *Current Science*, to an internationally respected status? Senior authors have to take the first step as the quality of a journal cannot improve unless established scientists submit some of their best papers to these journals. Seniors who sit in selection committees should not look down upon a young aspirant just because some of his/her papers were published in 'Indian' journals. The scornful attitude of many senior 'experts' and their blind faith in IF have contributed to enrichment of 'international' journals through the 'export' of quality publications, leaving our own journals in a poor state. If the more established scientists take the first step to primarily submit some of their good manuscripts to journals published in India and if the experts in selection committees begin to appreciate the nature of science rather than rely merely on the IF, the younger and up-coming scientists would indeed begin to follow suit. The earlier excuse of 'invisibility' of Indian journals at international level is no longer valid as the internet provides immediate access to publication anywhere in the world. The immediate global visibility together with the fact that most of the established Indian journals provide free 'open access', without levying page or colour charges on authors, is already a significant incentive. The next step is for the editor to ensure objective, transparent and rapid peer-review followed by timely online and hard copy publication. The Editor/Editorial Board should also take a proactive role in inviting good manuscripts, subject to the rigours of objective peer-review. Srinivasan in his maiden Editorial[6] states, 'It is the collective responsibility of the scientific community of the country to improve the standard, visibility and impact factor of the Indian journals.' The scientific community in India should ensure that any assessment need not distinguish between 'national' and 'international' journals.

1. Lakhotia, S. C., The vicious circle of poor science, poor journals and poor recognition. *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **85**, 20–22.
2. Lakhotia, S. C., 'Impact factor' and 'we also ran' syndromes. *Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **99**, 411.
3. Balaram, P., Research assessment: declaring war on the impact factor. *Curr. Sci.*, 2013, **104**, 1267–1268.
4. Editorial, An Indian Academy of Science. *Curr. Sci.*, 1932, **1**, 335–337.
5. Ramaseshan, S., The quality of scientific journals published in India – some random thoughts. *Curr. Sci.*, 1992, **63**, 529–534.
6. Srinivasan, R., Assuming charge as editor. *Curr. Sci.*, 2013, **105**, 6.

S. C. Lakhotia

Department of Zoology,
Banaras Hindu University,
Varanasi 221 005, India
e-mail: lakhotia@bhu.ac.in