



WHY SHOULD HEC IMPROVE JOURNAL ACCREDITATION SYSTEM?

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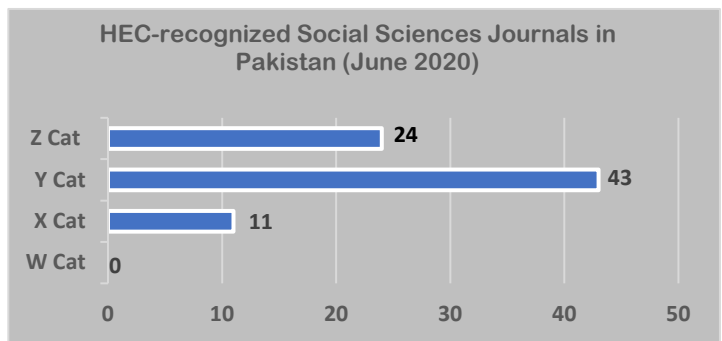
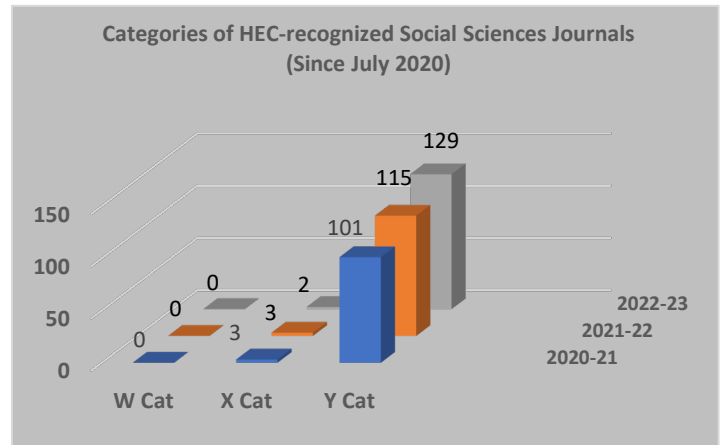
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HEC, during its 34th meeting held on August 30-31, 2019, revisited its research journal policy to raise their quality and bring them to par with international standards. It was a significant policy shift. The revised criteria for the accreditation of research journals in the W, X, and Y categories were applicable from July 1, 2020. Accordingly, HEC introduced the Journal Recognition System (HJRS) that started listing national and international journals yearly to validate their acceptance at the national level based on Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) parameters. Resultantly, most high-category social sciences journals in the country were downgraded or not even recognized in any category. It was a watershed moment for the credibility of national journals, which had been published regularly for decades and had noticeable impact factors, thus raising concerns and objections.

Today, research journals in Pakistan strive to meet the minimum criteria of HJRS accreditation while seeking affiliation with HEC-prescribed indices despite their negligible resources. HEC has set other standards for faculty appointments, promotions, and acquisition of research degrees, which are directly related to publications, thus putting pressure on local research journals to meet the threshold of categorization without requisite support. Academia is also facing challenges in publishing research work locally due to the non-availability of X-category social sciences journals. Consequently, publishing a research paper in a high-category international journal is considered more valuable despite its financial cost (in US dollars) than a free-of-cost journal in Pakistan. It is compromising own intellectual property rights, enticing intellectual colonisation, and affecting the input quality of local research journals, thus diametrically harming knowledge production and reducing the support for promoting the national narrative while seeking its strategic space at home and abroad. In the era of fifth-generation warfare, kinetic and non-kinetic approaches are equally essential to ensure comprehensive national security. Supporting the national narrative through research publications is, in fact, an acknowledgment of academia and intelligentsia of their research work for all-inclusive policy input.



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Over the years, the trajectory of students' enrolment at higher education levels has been remarkable. However, efforts to nurture research culture and regulate related policies across the country are not much harmonized. Previously, academia had ample opportunities to get their research published in local journals to meet the criteria for appointments, promotions, and acquisition of research degrees.¹ Today, research publication space is shrinking relatively due to accreditation limitations as many local journals have been downgraded (not falling in the Thomson Reuters list or JCR). Since 2020, none of the Pakistani journals in social sciences has made it up to category W, and only two out of 2144 HJRS-recognised journals in the X category (2022).² Pakistani researchers are not much toned with Journal Prestige Index and Emerging Sources Citation Index measurements.

Similarly, despite efforts, a negligible number of Pakistani social sciences journals have recently been indexed by Scopus and WoS. On one hand, these indices demand high-quality work and, on the other, approve specific narratives only. Their commercial approach and selectivity in indexing open-access journals are noticeable.

HEC should have a balanced approach in its strategy towards choosing indexing and abstracting agencies.

Although HEC has launched several initiatives to improve the quality and standards of research, pursuing a narrow approach towards journal accreditation is becoming a predicament. It limits choices for indexing and abstracting local journals, diminishes chances for developing an indigenous research culture, and causes difficulties in faculty promotions and awards of research degrees. Universities and research institutions have also raised their concerns and offered various remedies. Some of these are:

First, as a short-term measure, HEC should revisit its policy for journal accreditation while taking all stakeholders on board and striking a balance between best practices worldwide. Since the world is witnessing strategic alignments and realignments, it is imperative to broaden our scope and prioritise our own strategic choices. We should not be part of one side to lose the other. There are high-quality indices for social sciences journals besides Scopus and WoS. HEC should add more indexing/

abstracting agencies from technologically/ academically advanced countries, such as China, Russia, Turkey, Middle East, Africa, Far East, etc., to its list. It will increase the probability of getting indexed globally for local research journals and help them foster an independent national perspective.

Second, frequent downgrading or delisting of local research journals (yearly) is not productive as it puts more pressure on journal accreditation and discourages researchers from contributing locally. Research journals should be given sufficient time (3–5 years) and support to adhere to accreditation criteria.

Third, HEC should work on a home-grown research database. Although it is a long-term strategy, it helps to promote the indigenous research system. Pakistani scholars abroad publish their research in international journals by compulsion, thus reducing support and contribution to local journals. Their intellectual prowess must be acknowledged and rewarded as the nation's asset. Millions are spent on PhD scholars abroad by HEC; therefore, the maximum quality output should be extracted from them by recognising and incentivising their work at home.

Fourth, due to meagre financial resources, most journals lack substructures and staff, and HEC has already reduced its financial assistance. Resultantly, they are being pushed to commercial plans and left with no choice but to seek affiliation with prescribed indices on payment. Faculty and students also pay hefty fees to find a place in higher-category journals to meet HEC criteria. Commercialising research journals, especially privately owned ones, would only end up in an intellectual rift, which should be avoided. Research journals published by universities and research organizations/ institutions should be given more weightage and due recognition.

Research Journals are premium products of universities worldwide. They promote their research and national narratives to a vast readership through various databases, thus opening new vistas of research on similar grounds while supporting their national objectives. It is high time to give a chance to academicians to become a productive workforce coping with modern-day challenges. Today's need is to put collective efforts into addressing strategic issues; otherwise, its repercussions would reverberate across knowledge corridors. The indigenous research culture would be more beneficial than depending on others.

References

¹ In 2020, there were 78 HEC-recognized social sciences journals in Pakistan (11 in the X category, 43 in the Y category, and 24 in the Z category). HEC Social Sciences Research Journals List up to June 30, 2020. Available at <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/faculty/journals/Documents/Social%20Sciences/Social%20Sciences%20Journals%20List%20upto%20June%2030%2c%202020.pdf> (Accessed November 2022).

² According to the yearly database of HJRS, HEC-recognized national social sciences research journals (post-June 30, 2020) are: 2020-21 (Category X=3 and Category Y=101), 2021-22 (Category X=3 and Category Y=115) and 2022-23 (Category X=2 and Category Y=129). Extracted from <https://hjrs.hec.gov.pk/> (Accessed November 2022).