

Scopus

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An Introduction to the Scopus Content Selection and Advisory Board (CSAB)

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Why Scopus?

Scopus is Elsevier's abstract and citation database launched in 2004. It is designed to simplify the access of researchers, students, teachers and general users to world-wide, quality-assessed peer reviewed academic publications in all Sciences and Arts and Humanities. The academic publishing industry is in continuous flux, and recent years have brought further challenges in respect of the evaluation of the proliferation of open access journals, online-only publication and a proliferation of new publishers, publishing strategies and commercial models.

Academic cataloguing has an illustrious history, which includes the exhaustive pioneering work of Ulrich's catalogue and of Thomson ISI, whose printed publication library catalogues were well known to former generations of researchers, and which subsequently migrated on line as the "Web of Science".

Thomson's Impact Factor, derived from data within the Web of Science, has long had a major impact upon the science of bibliometrics and the quantitation of academic output. Competition drives innovation and progress and in its first decade, Scopus expanded such that by November 2015 it includes some 22,000+ titles from 5,000 publishers worldwide.

Since 2009, every applicant journal for accession into Scopus has been through a formal qualitative and quantitative appraised and evaluation process, which itself is continually evolving as we gain more experience of the system and of the academic journal environment.

We recognise the value inherent in the accession and listing of a journal in Scopus. It brings an academic credibility which is enhanced by Scopus' reputation for quality control. Also, it brings the content of the journal and the work of listed authors to a worldwide audience through the international reach of Scopus.

The Scopus Content Selection Advisory Board

In order to address the complex challenges in the development of the citation system, Elsevier appointed an independent, international Board of experienced Journal Editors, Librarians and Bibliometricians to advise on the technical and academic development of the system, and to debate the complexities.

In 2009, the Content Selection and Advisory Board (CSAB) as we know it today was formed to develop an objective system of evaluation and validation of peer reviewed journals for inclusion or exclusion in Scopus against transparent and fair criteria. The board felt that a system that was open and transparent to public scrutiny would be more acceptable to the world at large than would be a system where decisions were taken behind closed doors; and that public debate would help over time to improve the assessment system and iron out imperfections.

The first challenge in 2009 for the new CSAB was to ensure that fair, measurable, auditable and testable standards were set for the increase of all new applicant journals to the Scopus database, of which there was a substantial backlog. The platform of this agile and iterative process was the Scopus Title Evaluation Platform (STEP) for Academic serial titles, which continues to evolve.

Since 2009, the CSAB has taken on a progressively wider role in debating and advising the Elsevier Scopus management and development team on a range of issues around the scope and direction of travel of the system.

One major and influential achievement of the Board was the implementation of a transparent Publication Ethics and Malpractice Policy for all applicant journals in Scopus in 2010-2011.

The board is increasingly exercised with issues around the recognition and definition of predatory journals, and the appropriate professional responses to them.

The Scopus Title Evaluation Platform (STEP) for the review of journals

The Scopus Title Evaluation Platform, (STEP) is a software based system, which collates key information about applicant journals and which simplifies many aspects of the journal appraisal process for the Subject Chairs and their designated reviewers.

The application process for accession of a journal to Scopus:

1. Pre-population with key information about the journal

STEP asks applicant journals to provide detailed and structured information on the journal, its aims, its publishers, editors and editorial systems, its publication history, its policies on publication ethics and malpractice, and other matters.

2. Further processing against standard criteria

From the information supplied, the Scopus team undertake a range of checks and technical evaluations, which may lead to requests for further information from the publisher.

3. Evaluation by the Subject Chair and/or nominated reviewers

Once the process of assimilating core information is complete, the details of the applicant journal are forwarded to the relevant Subject Chair, who will conduct a structured evaluation, combining objective data with a subjective assessment against a range of criteria. The Subject Chair also has the option of referring the Journal on for further specialist review.

Once a decision has been reached on the suitability for acceptance of the journal to Scopus, it will be communicated directly to the publisher, editor and/or any other suggestor(s) of the title.

Delegation of Evaluation Work to Regional Content Advisory Boards

The Scopus CSAB recognises the huge value that local expertise and knowledge can bring to the journal evaluation process; and the reciprocal value in using local experts to educate local and regional journal editors and publishers to advance quality standards on a regional basis.

Since 2009, we have therefore engaged with a progressive expansion of regional boards, originally for Thailand and South Korea, and now also including the Russian Federation and China.

Regional Board members work with an adapted version of the STEP system, which feeds their advice and recommendations to the general CSAB Subject Chairs. Regional Boards are supported by a programme of seminars and education days for regional editors.

The overarching principle has been to help raise all journals which wish to follow this route to a standard where they can compete openly for readers, authors and citations in a unitary international system; rather than to create local citation systems which may in time come to be seen as blind alleys to international competitiveness.

We recognise that this will require a considerable amount of work over a considerable period of time in some regions and jurisdictions for these gains to be secured, but we believe that they are well worth the effort over short term commercial advantage in the longer term.

How do we define Quality in the peer reviewed literature?

Quality in the academic literature is of course difficult to define both in qualitative and quantitative terms, in ways which satisfies everyone. Comparisons of quality are very difficult to make between specialist and generalist journals; between those in different subject areas; and between different institutions and language groups.

The ultimate test of the utility of an article and a journal is the use to which its content is put by society. This utility is measured only very indirectly by peer citations. Many publications which have huge influence on society, for example daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, make no public use of impact metrics, their quality and effectiveness being measured by factors such as profitability and readership numbers.

Nevertheless, bibliometric measurements have grown to be fundamental indices of success for authors, editors, publishers and institutions. While they may in time become included or overtaken by “big data” directories of societal impact, such as measures of social media activity, we are bound for the time being to work within the bibliometric “straightjacket”.

Publication Ethics and Publication Malpractice.

Publication malpractice is unfortunately widespread in the world literature, in all subject areas and in all jurisdictions, and no journal is immune. Malpractice ranges from innocent transgression to deliberate and willful fraud, and most journal editors have experience and can cite examples of fraudulent practice.

Malpractice reduces confidence in the reliability of the published literature, and substantially increases the costs to society as a whole, to the publishing industry and to the scientific and arts community. In some disciplines, malpractice and fraud can have serious consequences, where undetected but misleading and fraudulently published material leads others into actions which are founded in misplaced trust in that material.

The prevention of publication malpractice is the responsibility of every author, editor, publisher and institution, and there are advisory codes in all major jurisdictions as to how to deal with it.

In order to start to address this endemic problem, the Scopus CSAB has taken the unanimous view that Scopus will in future require that:

- Each and every journal which is added to the system must publish a clear and consistent statement of Publication Ethics and Policies in respect of Malpractice, and that
- Each and every publisher will be held to account for the performance and compliance with this policy of every journal in its portfolio.

The Scopus CSAB mandates no specific wording of such statements, but notes that:

- i. major publishers already publish comprehensive statements of compliance on their websites
- ii. A number of reputable institutions, notably the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), publish comprehensive guidelines and advice which can be readily adopted by all journals and publishers.

The Scopus CSAB recognizes that this action in itself will not be sufficient to eliminate publication fraud. However, it will ensure that at least within the boundaries of influence of Scopus, no author, editor or publisher will be able to claim ignorance of best practice as an excuse for condoning or executing publication malpractice.

The Scopus CSAB will audit the results of this policy and to assist in the development of robust, industry wide strategies for the marginalization, profiling and elimination of publication malpractice.

Publication Malpractice by Authors

The Board keeps under continuous review the development of plagiarism detection systems such as iThenticate, and their utility in improving both the appraisal of individual journals and the quality of Scopus content. While there are no specific plans in 2015 to adopt such technologies within Scopus, it seems likely that testing and experimentation with these systems will progress to adoption in due course.

Malpractice by Publishers

The Scopus CSAB is well aware of the pressures upon early career researchers to secure publication of a paper in Web of Science and Scopus listed journals. We are also well aware of the commercial value to predatory publishers of this print on demand, and of the various tricks and tools used to derive large profit streams from this demand. We keep a careful watch on such activities and are continually adapting our strategies to identify and exclude predatory publishers and publications from Scopus. However, in the absence of international agreements and the engagement of governments and law enforcement agencies, our work is necessarily reactive and educational in these matters. We are open to all reports of concerns about predatory publication practice in respect of journals which are already within Scopus or which are seeking accession. In the light of some recent quite scandalous experiences, we are also increasing the technological surveillance of journal activity within Scopus.

Principles and Factors influencing the Subject Chair Decision Process

There are many factors which will influence the decision of the Subject Chair and Scopus Board in respect of any one journal.

The Scopus Board has debated at length the merits of an uncritical, universal acceptance policy for all applicant journals, versus the selective policy of quality thresholds which it has adopted.

In adopting the quality threshold strategy, the Board recognizes:

- That Scopus is an international system, with applicant journals from publishers and institutions across the world
- That the search for quality is a continuous and dynamic process
- That the drive for quality can be harnessed to improve the prospects and international impact of applicant journals
- And that specialist and regional journals can find a worldwide audience by editorial strategies which focus both on quality and global reach.

Thus, implicit in the application process is the assumption that the Publisher, Editor and Editorial Board of the applicant journal wish to reach and influence the widest possible international audience, rather than a parochial and local audience.

Board members approach the evaluation of all applicant journals in a fair manner regardless of the source, publishing model, institutional or regional origin, source language or other factors. However, there are a number of key factors which will be taken into account.

English Language Usage

English has become de facto the world language of scientific communication. Scopus carries and is happy to accrue journals and articles in a wide variety of languages, so long as:

- a. articles carry a structured abstract in the English language, thus making the content of that paper visible and understandable to the widest possible community of international users.
- b. all references are in Roman script and preferably in English, as Scopus is not able to handle non-Roman scripts.

The Scopus CSAB believes that such a policy will open up the content of regional and specialist journals to new and sometimes unexpected communities of users and thus optimize the citation rates and visibility of all content.

Evidence of Robust Peer Review Processes

We recognize the breadth of debate on the various forms of Peer Review. However, regardless of the specific methodology, the key principle of any effective peer review process is to bring independent and objective assessment of manuscripts and by implication, of the journal itself. High quality peer review takes time, effort and thought.

The STEP Decision on Accession of a Journal to Scopus

The preparatory process within STEP ensures that Subject Chairs have a wide range of information on which to base their decisions, and with which to compare the applicant journal with related journals in Scopus.

Acceptance:

At this point, the Scopus administrative team is authorised to liaise with the publisher to deal with the technical aspects of loading content on Scopus.

Non-Acceptance (Rejection):

For a number of reasons, the Subject Chair may consider that a journal is unsuitable for accession to Scopus at the present time. The decisions may be minor, technical and easily correctable, in which case short term rejection of up to two years may be recommended, so as to provide time for the recommended improvements to be addressed. The decision may be based on critical or strategic matters, such as concerns about the viability of the journal, or insufficient publication history to allow a confident judgement. We ask the Editors and Publishers of journals which have not been accepted for accession to Scopus on the first application round to reflect upon the advisory comments provided.

Absolute Rejection:

Absolute rejection will be very rare. It is reserved for applicant journals where there is serious concern about publication methodology or systematic malpractice, which does not seem to be amenable to simple measures, or where there is persuasive evidence of “predatory” behaviour.

Support for Rejected Journals: The CSAB intends that weaker journals and those which fail to meet the standards set by the CSAB are given fair opportunities to adopt and adapt to Scopus requirements in the fullness of time. CSAB Members and Reviewers are encouraged to offer as much constructive feedback as possible to editors and Publishers.

These journals are given the opportunity to reapply after the recommended period has elapsed, subject to submission of a covering letter stating how previous concerns have been addressed, and how measurable progress has been secured.

The Scopus CSAB takes an independent and long term view of its role in helping raise standards in the world literature; and in helping editors and publishers secure accession to Scopus and hence to maximise the reach and impact of their journals.

Board members seek to provide useful, constructive and informative feedback to all applicant journals, and to explore means of working with individual editors, editorial boards and publishers to help develop high quality journals for listing in Scopus, either

- Directly
- Through the Regional Boards.
- and through a rolling programme of education seminars on a regional basis

Re-evaluation of journals within Scopus

Many journals were accrued to Scopus before the implementation in 2009 of the STEP system. The Scopus US Board recognises that this has created some inequities and inconsistencies, in that since 2009 applicant journals have had to cross a more demanding quality threshold to secure accession.

We are now engaged in the next major challenge to the Scopus CSAB, in developing a system for the review and revalidation of journals which acceded to Scopus before 2009. The process is again intended to be supportive rather than punitive. Using a range of technical measures of journal activity, including output, citations, self-citations and usage (including the cessation of regular publication), we have identified a cohort of journals in each subject area which by any reasonable criteria would be judged as struggling, failing or failed when compared with other journals in the same and similar fields.

After one year, Scopus will measure journal performance again against all criteria. Subject to the nature of the Editor's and Publisher's responses, we will submit the journal for formal re-evaluation within the STEP Process. If the outcome of this process is non-acceptance or absolute rejection, then we will discontinue forward flow of the content of the journal.

We will continue to audit, examine and debate the mechanics and consequences of this process.

Concurrently, where serious concerns are raised about the predatory or other unsatisfactory behaviour or performance of a journal, of which we are aware of some startling examples, we will fast track an investigation and re-evaluation.