

Scientific journals in education and the academic-administrative context. Some proposals for change

Las revistas científicas en educación y el contexto académico-administrativo. Algunas propuestas de cambio

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Abstract:

This piece argues that the *Revista de Educación*, and the other academic journals on education in Spain, are in general fully integrated into the academic-administrative system and that the rules that shape university life also affect academic journals.

Two types of measure are proposed to maximise the benefit from these journals' contribution to university life: measures relating to the academic career path, which would maximise the importance of published research, and measures relating to the evaluation of academic publications, in which the need to improve awareness of evaluation criteria and their quality is emphasised.

With regards to the academic career, it is argued that this should have a better model for progression and feature more incentives linked to six-year periods of research activity (*sexenios*), and that a more objective and automatic process for attaining a chair is necessary, one which is linked to individual merits

and not to the specific circumstances of the universities.

To this end, it is proposed that: the number of pay grades on the academic career path should be increased, increasing the distinction in pay and standing between the entry level and top level; the number of steps on the academic career should be increased; and that the system should be more objective. This would result in a professional career that would go from having two steps (*profesor titular* and *catedrático*) to having six, linked to *sexenios*.

This whole design is based on recognition of *sexenios* and so it would be necessary to make changes to them. A system for evaluating research activity is proposed in which the evaluation criteria for academic journals are more transparent, more objective, more automatic, and, importantly, consistent over time.

This piece concludes that to optimize evaluation of academic activity, its subjects should receive feedback. If neither journals

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nor researchers know in detail the criteria on which they will be evaluated or the detailed results of this evaluation, this judgement becomes a summary trial and so its chances of influencing the system are severely reduced.

Keywords: evaluation of academic journals, evaluation of research activity, university career path, professional incentives.

Resumen:

Este artículo argumenta que la *Revista de Educación*, y en general, todas las revistas científicas de educación en España, están completamente integradas en el sistema académico administrativo y que las normas que rigen la vida universitaria afectan a las revistas científicas de educación en nuestro país.

Para obtener el máximo provecho de la aportación de las revistas científicas en la vida universitaria se proponen dos tipos de medidas: unas relacionadas con la carrera profesional universitaria, en las que se potenciaría al máximo la importancia de la investigación publicada, y otras relacionadas con la evaluación de las publicaciones científicas, en las que se insiste en la necesidad de mejorar la publicidad y la objetividad de los criterios de evaluación.

Respecto de la carrera académica se argumenta que esta debería ser más graduada y con más incentivos ligados a los tramos de investigación, y que es necesario un procedimiento más objetivo y automático de acceso a

la *cátedra* que estuviese ligado a los méritos individuales y no a las circunstancias específicas de las universidades

Para ello se propone: aumentar el gradiente de la carrera académica, incrementando las diferencias económicas y de estatus entre los niveles de entrada y de salida; aumentar la gradualidad de la carrera académica; hacer más objetivo el sistema. Se crearía una carrera profesional que pasaría de tener dos escalones (profesor titular y catedrático) a un sistema con seis escalones, ligados a los tramos de investigación.

Todo este diseño descansa sobre el reconocimiento de los tramos de investigación y, por ello, sería necesario hacer cambios en él. Se propone un sistema de evaluación de la actividad investigadora en el que los criterios de valoración de las revistas científicas fuesen más transparentes, más objetivos y más automáticos, y de modo importante, constantes en el tiempo.

Se concluye que, para que la evaluación de la actividad científica sea óptima, debe haber retroalimentación a los sujetos de la misma. Si ni las revistas ni los investigadores conocen con detalle los criterios con los que serán evaluados ni los resultados en detalle de esa evaluación, esta se convierte en un juicio sumario, y por tanto, sus posibilidades de influir en el sistema quedan seriamente mermadas.

Descriptor: evaluación de las revistas científicas, evaluación actividad investigadora, carrera profesional en la universidad, incentivos profesionales.

1. Introduction

The seventy-fifth anniversary of an academic journal, especially one in the

field of education, is a notable event and one that should not just be commemorated, but also celebrated. Con-

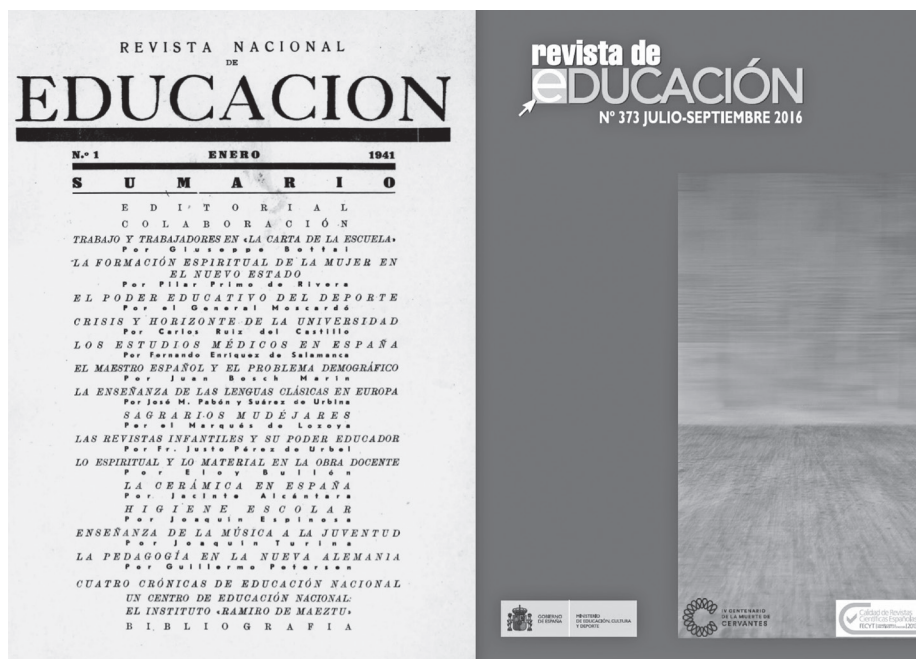
sequently, I would like to take part in this celebration by offering some reflections from my position as editor in chief of another journal that recently celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of its foundation.

The *Revista de Educación* was founded as the *Revista Nacional de Educación* by what was then called the National Ministry of Education (8 March 1940, BOE 24 March 1940), when José Ibáñez Martín –the father of Professor Ibáñez-Martín

who is the director of the *revista española de pedagogía* – was the minister.

In this work we argue that academic journals in Spain in general, and education ones in particular, are part of the academic-administrative context of the university and that changes to this context are needed, both to improve university life and to ensure that journals appropriately fulfil their role in this context. To support these arguments interesting data from the *Revista de Educación* are presented.

GRAPH 1. The first issue of the *Revista Nacional de Educación* and a recent issue of the *Revista de Educación*



Source: *Revista de Educación* archive. Own elaboration.

2. The changing role of the *Revista de Educación*

Graph 1 shows two covers belonging to the first issue of the then *Revista*

Nacional de Educación and, alongside it, the *Revista de Educación*, its direct successor. Over those 75 years (78 now), much has happened in Spain and in our

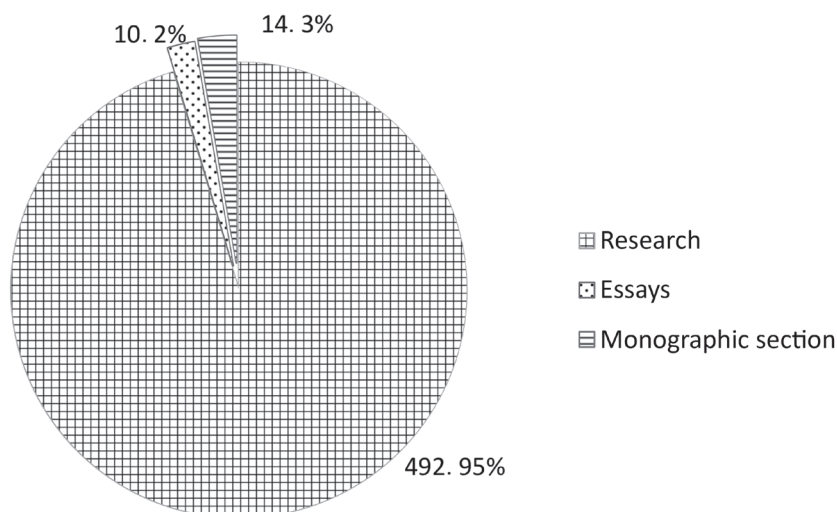
journal. If the *Revista de Educación* was a tool for social engineering at that time, its function nowadays is completely different. The website says, among other things:

The *Revista de Educación* is an academic publication by Spain's Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport. [...] It has been a privileged witness to changes in education over recent decades, and

has also been a recognised means of disseminating advances in research and innovation in this field, from national and international perspectives (*Revista de Educación*, 2018).

Since 2015 the *Revista de Educación* has been a bilingual open-access publication and is published digitally or in hard copy on request.

GRAPH 2. Articles received in 2017 by the *Revista de Educación*, by sections.



Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from the *Revista de Educación*, 2018.

For anyone interested in a detailed description of the journal's development, its issues are all available on its website (*Revista de Educación*, 2018) and a concise analysis of the different eras it has passed through can be found in the introduction Alejandro Tiana published in 1996 to commemorate the journal's three-hundredth issue (Tiana, 1996).

Moving on to the present day, the journal received a total of 516 submissions for

articles in 2017 (Table 1), an increase of approximately 5% over 2016. The distribution by sectors is shown in Graph 2. This is clearly a large number, and it suggests that the academic community in education regards the *Revista de Educación* as an important medium for disseminating research activity.

In fact, the research section continues to receive the highest percentage of original submissions, at 95%. Sadly, fewer and

fewer essays are submitted. Two hypotheses can be suggested to explain this imbalance:

Firstly, that works of reflection and speculation might have other academic spheres where they can be expressed. And secondly, that the pressure university lecturers feel to publish might be closely

linked to the time periods set by research funding calls and calls for the accreditation and evaluation of research activity more than the reflection and synthesis that are a necessary feature of the essay as a genre. This is just another piece of information to support the main argument of this article, as shown below.

TABLE 1. Original works received and published in the *Revista de Educación*, by year.

Year	Received	Published	% published in the year
2010	313	89	28.4%
2011	360	147	40.8%
2012	382	128	33.5%
2013	472	107	22.7%
2014	405	41	10.1%
2015	448	33	7.4%
2016	492	27	5.5%
2017	516	31	6.0%

Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from the *Revista de Educación*, 2018.

3. Journals and the administrative context

It is our view that academic journals on education in Spain are fully integrated into the academic administrative system and that while the *Revista de Educación* was originally an ideological instrument of the ministry on which it depended, the life of the *Revista de Educación*, and by extension, probably that of the other academic education journals in Spain, is now largely shaped by the legal regulations that govern university life.

Examination of numerical data supports this idea. For example, research-active

university staff's need to present objective indicators of research output in processes of official accreditation has increased the need for them to publish. As a result of this pressure, the *Revista de Educación* went from receiving 313 original submissions in 2010 to 516 in 2017 (Table 1).

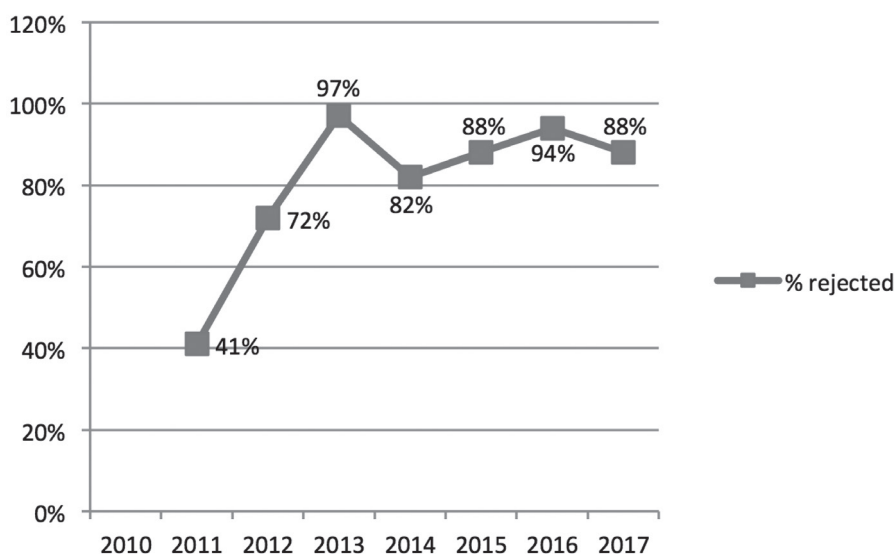
For its part, the journal, integrated in the academic publishing system, faces pressure to improve its quality indicators, and this in turn leads it to pursue excellence in the works it publishes and try to improve its position in bibliometric indexes. This has, for example, led to a major variation in the number of articles. In previous

years, the most articles published was 147 in 2011, while 31 were published in 2017. The ratio between pieces published and submissions received fell from a high of 41% in 2011 to 6% in 2017 (Graph 3).

The trend is, therefore, only to publish articles of the highest quality. That has

the effect that the articles published are the ones cited most often and, at the same time, it reduces the number of citable articles, thus improving the impact index (we should recall that this is calculated by dividing the number of citations received by the number of citable articles).

GRAPH 3. Percentage of original works rejected by the *Revista de Educación*, by years.



Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from the *Revista de Educación*, 2018.

This explains why the rejection rate went from 41% in 2011 to 88% in 2017.

This editorial policy has, for now, produced the desired results. In June 2017, Thomson-Reuters (Clarivate Analytics since 2017) published the 2016 impact factor for the journals indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). The *Revista de Educación* has an impact factor of 1.185 in JCR, making it 108th

of the 235 journals in the Education and Educational Research discipline. This index corresponds with the evaluation of the articles published in 2015 and 2014.

In the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) lists published in June 2017, the *Revista de Educación* had improved noticeably compared with the previous year (2016); its impact factor for 2016 was 1.185 while in 2015 it was 0.845. The journal has

gone from being indexed in the impact factor distribution's third quartile for the Education and Educational Research subject area to the second quartile and its position has improved from 124th of 231 to 108th of 235.

We should, however, note that while these indicators are a good indicator of the general quality of the journal, there are many factors that affect their stability. Consequently, if the numbers corre-

sponding to the indicators for the prestigious journals with which the journal compares itself are analysed, it is apparent that there is a relatively high level of variability and that it is not advisable to concentrate solely on these indexes, despite them being very positive (Table 2). It is a best to maintain a stable editorial line that ensures a good position for the journal in the estimation of the academic and educational community it serves.

TABLE 2. Evolution of JIF for some important journals.

Journal	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Harvard Educational Review	0.841		0.458	1.08	0.607	0.786	2.674
Educational Review	0.42	0.66	0.579	0.544	0.648	0.873	1.464
Educational Philosophy and Theory		0.316	0.434	0.428	0.314	0.415	0.566
Educational Studies	0.721						
Revista de Educación	0.612	0.409	0.309	0.201	0.241	0.845	1.185
Edu. Sciences Theory and Practice						0.402	0.41

Source: Own elaboration based on data published in Journal Citation Reports (JCR), 2017.

TABLE 3. Position of the *Revista de Educación* in Journal Citation Reports (Web of Science, Thomson Reuters-Clarivate Analytics) in the 2016 edition (published in June 2017) and previous years.

Year	JIF	Citable items	Citations	Published
2016	1.185	27	32	27
2015	0.845	33	28	33
2014	0.241	48	12	45
2013	0.201	73	15	107
2012	0.309	95	29	128
2011	0.409	54	22	147
2010	0.622	58	36	89

Source: Own elaboration based on data published in Journal Citation Reports (JCR), 2017.

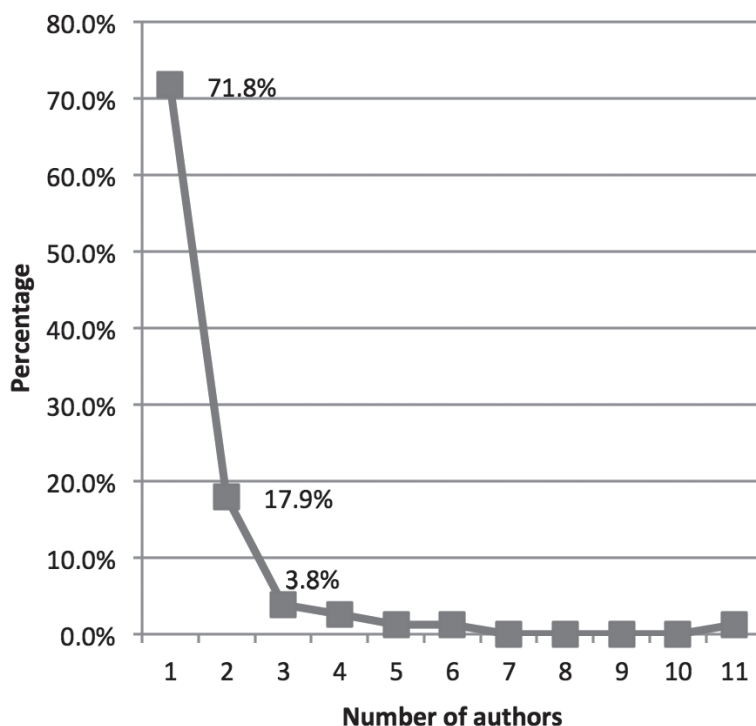
Table 3 shows the development of the JIF, from 2010, the first year it applied to the *Revista de Educación*, to the present day, including the number of articles published and the citable items identified by ISI-Thompson. It should be noted that the impact index is calculated based on the data from the previous two years. For example, the JIF for 2016 was published in 2017 and was calculated based on articles published in 2014 and 2015. As can also be seen, there is a falling discrepancy between the number of articles ISI-Thompson recognises as citable and the articles actually published, especially in the early

years of application of the index. From 2014 these figures started to coincide with the articles actually published.

4. The regulatory context and the *Revista de Educación*

As noted above, argue that there is a close relationship in Spain between the editorial life of an academic journal in education and the administrative-academic context in which it functions. However, this relationship is much closer than what is shown by the data presented up to now with regards to the *Revista de Educación*.

GRAPH 4. Number of authors per article in 2000.



Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from the *Revista de Educación*, 2018.

For example, if we consider the number of authors per article and how this has changed since 2000, a curious phenomenon is apparent. In 2000 (Graph 4), 72% of the articles published by the *Revista de Educación* had a single author. Around 18% of the articles had two authors and under four per cent had three authors.

In 1994, evaluation of university lecturers' research activity began (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1994). The number of authors of each publication was first mentioned in 2005. For example, the Ruling by the Chair of the Comisión Evaluadora de la Actividad Investigadora (CNEAI-research activity evaluation committee) of November 2005, when it published the additional criteria that would govern this evaluation, expressly mentions the number of authors for what it calls «ordinary submissions». It states that «the number of authors will not be open to evaluation as such, but it must be justified by the topic and its complexity and scope» (CNEAI resolution, 2005).

Similar resolutions have been published every November since then, all of which make the same statement. In 2007, it specifically stated that an excessive number of authors could reduce the rating of a work: «Unless fully justified by the complexity of the topic and/or the length of the work, a large number of authors can reduce the rating awarded to a submission» (CNEAI resolution, 2007). This was the first time it had clearly been stated that a large number of authors could be prejudicial.

The same also applies to the ANECA criteria for the accreditation of university lecturers.

In 2007 Royal Decree 1312/2007, of 5 October, establishing national accreditation for accessing university teaching bodies was published. When the guidelines regarding the items that can be evaluated for the ACADEMIA programme were published, it was made very clear that the number of authors of each article was important. For example, point D16 referring to Educational Sciences states: «Number of authors per publication (no more than 4 as a general principle. From 4 authors a reduction factor will be applied)»¹. In addition, information now circulates informally online regarding what the maximum advisable number of authors is for an article.

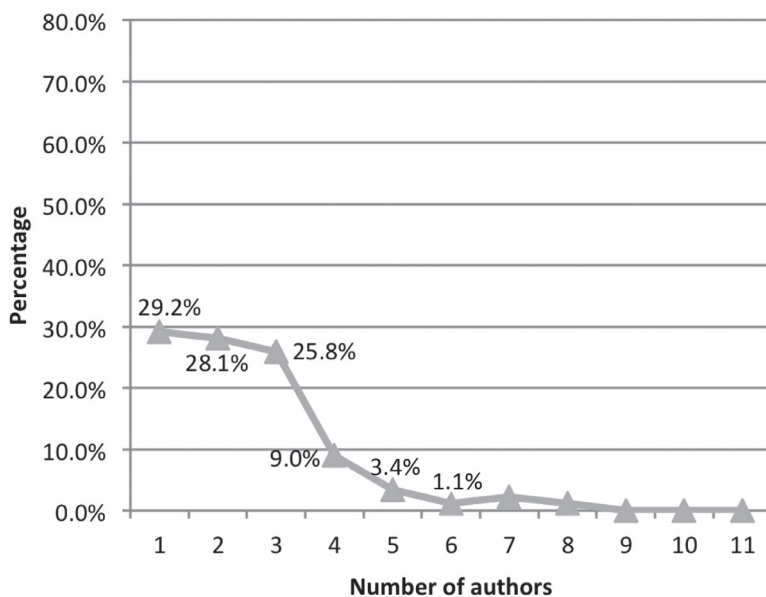
Having a large number of authors reduces the grade; penalization starts from 3 authors; it is better to be the lead author (but with some caveats: being second or third author in a publication with a high JCR impact index is better than being lead author in DICE [the Dissemination and Editorial Quality of Spanish Humanities and Social and Legal Science Journals database])² (Juan María Prieto Lobato, 2014).

This text is taken from a blog about accreditation and evaluation of *sexenios* published in 2014.

The effect of the appearance of these criteria is that we have gone from the situation in 2000, shown in Graph 4, in which approximately 72% of articles had

a single author to the situation in 2010 (Figure 5), when this percentage fell to 29%, with 71% of articles having two or more authors.

GRAPH 5. Number of authors per article in 2010.

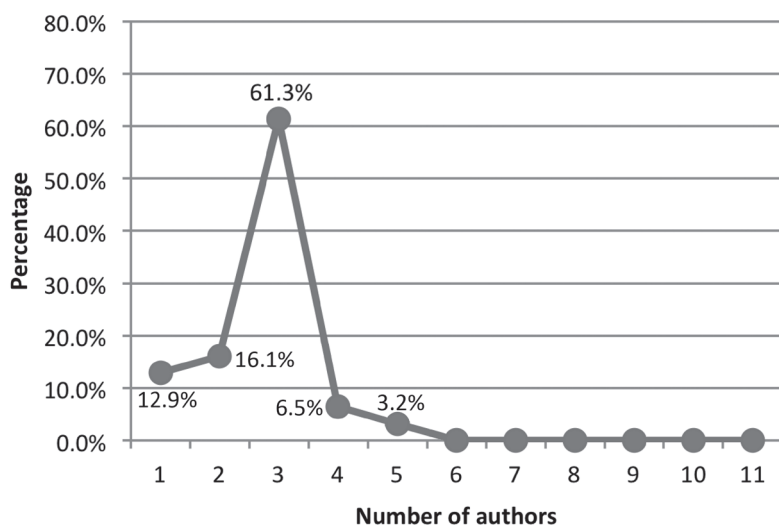


Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from the *Revista de educación*, 2018.

And to this situation in 2017 (Graph 6). As can be seen, most of the articles (61.3%) are used by the authors to exploit the possibilities of appearing in a

JCR publication by trying to maximise the effect of this publication for their own CVs.

GRAPH 6. Number of authors per article in 2017.



Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from the *Revista de educación*, 2018.

A similar trend can be seen with regards to the background of the authors of the articles published in our journal. For example, of the 120 articles published in 2000, 85% of the 123 authors involved were university lecturers or similar, with most being from public universities. Eighty-nine articles were published in 2010 with a total of 226 authors, of whom 93% were university lecturers. And in 2017, with 31 articles published, 98% of the 84 authors were university lecturers. Going further back in time, we find that at a given moment the *Revista de Educación* was not an organ exclusively for university staff to publish in, but that the authors' backgrounds included other levels of the educational system and that it was an instrument for sharing particular teaching experiences and innovations. This move towards ac-

ademic specialization has also happened in many other Spanish journals in the field of education. And the requirements established by inclusion in indexes such as JCR or SJR is especially significant in this direction. Analysing any other journal included in these indexes would basically give the same results. A JCR journal will receive more submissions the closer it is to Q1. At the same time, it will receive more citations, which will help it stay in JCR. But this effect has a very negative counterpart for journals that are still not in this group. A journal that is not in this group will have a very significant barrier to overcome to get into JCR as it will always be a second choice for authors.

These details all support the argument we propose here, namely that aca-

demographic journals in general and education ones in particular are part of Spain's academic-administrative context. Just as evaluation and accreditation regulations affect the life of journals, what happens to journals has an effect on the setting in which the regulations are applied and so the regulations shape the results of this application. For example, it is impossible to reflect on systems for evaluating research activity without considering the central role academic journals play in this system. For the same reason, academic journals are entitled to make suggestions for changes in university life based on their experience, and the next two sections of this article will focus on this. We will start by briefly analysing some characteristics of the academic career in Spain, we will make some proposals for change, and finally, we will see how this might affect academic journals, especially in the field of education.

5. The context of academic-university life in Spain

The career of an academic in Spanish universities is part of an institutional framework shaped by features described in the paragraphs below.

First, we should note that the system is predominantly public. In it, the professional horizon that shapes teaching-research staff is their position as functionaries of the state. It is also an essentially egalitarian system in which academic, professional and even social status, and also pay, depend almost exclusively on the body of functionaries to which academics belong. In fact, when differences

in pay have been introduced, these have been linked more to the administrative context than to academic output. As a result, to establish how an academic's pay varies in comparison with that of peers at other universities, knowing which autonomous region his or her university is in is more important than knowing his or her status as a researcher. This system, which is deeply endogamic, does not encourage excellence through its means of access but rather membership. Indeed, the most difficult step in a university career is the initial entry. It is more important to attain an entry position as an *ayudante* (a doctoral student working as a teaching assistant) or an *ayudante doctor* (a slightly more senior position that requires a PhD) than any other subsequent consideration. It is only a small exaggeration to say that this is like getting on the first step of an escalator. The current system for accessing the university career path and subsequent progress along it assume that the most important step in practice for someone who wishes to be a university lecturer is the very first one. Entering a given department as a *becario* (someone with a scholarship) significantly increases the chances of this candidate becoming a teaching functionary with a place in the very department he or she initially enters. This is something we could call the escalator effect. The first step is the most important one. After that, it is enough to let yourself be carried along by the system without losing your balance.

However, unlike a real escalator, this metaphorical one suffers from a lack of real steps. What normally happens is

that someone who aspires to be a lecturer and has recently become a *becario*, passes through different types of employment at the end of the scholarship that could be described as a sort of parallel career. The candidate might follow a straight path, progressing from being a *becario* to an *ayudante doctor*, and finally to a *contratado doctor* before attaining the position of *profesor titular* (a tenured civil service position equivalent to associate professor), or he or she might stray through some of the administrative situations universities have invented to counterbalance the effects of budget cuts.

In any case, the first step with real stability is the one that gives access to the university's body of *profesores titulares*. From here, if the contender is lucky, the only remaining step is to enter the group of *catedráticos de universidad* (full professors, a tenured civil service position).

One consequence of this system is that research, or rather the results of research evaluation, is the only possible way to establish a minimal level of differentiation. And it is precisely because of this that it could be said that the system of *sexenios* has consolidated the central role of indexed journals as a way of providing proof of academic output. In some branches of research in education this role is shared with the publication of monographs and essays, but the role of academic journals is still vital.

There is a very close link between the processes for recognition of *sexenios* and the evolution of the ranking of journals. The fundamental objective for academics is to publish in JCR Q1 or Q2 journals,

and for the journals it is to form part of this select group.

In this sense, one could argue that the appearance of evaluation of research activity has been a significant change. Before the introduction of the research evaluation system, when academics were considering publishing something, they would think about what the peers they read were reading and what they themselves were reading. Nowadays, the concern with the impact index is what shapes the decision about where to try to publish. And this has occurred almost uniformly across all subject areas, regardless of their levels of internationalization. Indeed, for several reasons, before the implementation of the current research evaluation method, there were subject areas that were to a greater or lesser extent integrated into the international scientific-academic communities. This new procedure, which started several decades ago, did no more than consolidate a trend that already existed, to some extent boosting this way of working. In other subject areas, such as education, this procedure was implanted in a situation that was very far from fitting naturally with the process. And the need and drive for internationalisation were superimposed on the range of journals published by the various scientific-academic societies. This movement which started then, is still at an uncertain stage of consolidation. There are already several journals from the field of education listed in JCR, and there are various others that are making intense and praiseworthy efforts to reach this goal. Journals such as *Bordón*, the *Revista Complutense de Educación*, the *Revista*

de Investigación Educativa, Teoría de la Educación, ESE, etc., to name just a few, are examples of this. But in general, for all of the reasons mentioned here, the position of the academic community in education is somewhat delicate compared with other disciplines. This is reflected in the fact that the criteria for research activity evaluations or accreditation processes are not as strict with regards to the quality indicator requirements for the items submitted by the academics. This does not mean that in the long term the levels of these requirements will not become equivalent, but there are some academic-administrative measures that would help boost the processes of putting the academic community in the field of the education on an equal footing with its counterparts from other subject areas, specifically, boosting the stimuli and incentives for research and their impact on the academic career.

6. A reflection on the structure of the university career in Spain

The feeling that Spanish universities need reform has, on more than one occasion, led to documents prepared by groups of experts at the request of the authorities. This is the case, for example, with the document prepared at the request of the minister Wert by a commission chaired by Miras Portugal (Miras Portugal, et al., 2013). This document, on similar lines to what is proposed in this article, argues for a greater weight for research and for evidence-based proof of it in the staff selection processes for universities. Without straying from the essence of what the report proposes, we will now reflect briefly

on the current structure of the university career in Spain and on how it could be improved by considering the results of candidates' research.

The document mentioned above suggests maintaining the two bodies of university teaching functionaries that currently exist: the *profesores titulares* and the *catedráticos de universidad*. Nonetheless, here we will argue for a more graded university career with more steps and which is simultaneously more direct and simpler.

The figure of the *catedrático de universidad*, with the administrative structure that supports it, made sense in a university with an operational structure that was completely different from the current one. In it, the basic operational unit, both for teaching and research, was the chair. Academic life centred around the chair. The chair was run by its incumbent, accompanied by the *profesores agregados* (assistant professors) or the *adjuntos de la cátedra* (adjunct professors). The leadership exercised by the professor was supported administratively, and this position of formal leadership was reached through a long and complicated process of competitive exams. Accordingly, it was more a formal leadership than a real one, existing more in theory than in practice. It could be said that the chair conferred *potestas* but not necessarily *auctoritas*, although critics of this system, which was sometimes described as feudal, felt that what the *catedrático* really exercised was *imperium*.

The appearance of departments in the university structure changed this situa-

tion radically. While this was a step forward in modernising the structure of universities, it did not achieve this without also introducing a certain degree of confusion and ambiguity that continues to this day. One of our arguments here is that with this modification the figure of the *catedrático* lost much of its operational justification. And it is precisely this loss that introduces elements of ambiguity and uncertainty, as we will argue below. The suggested change allows for a major role for academic journals.

The creation of departments involved a separation of the administrative and managerial functions of teacher-researchers. Indeed, many of the functions that the incumbent of the chair used to perform passed over to the head of department, who no longer had to be hold a chair. The organisation of teaching is the responsibility of the department, led by the head, and so the *catedrático* now has an equivalent role to any other lecturer, with the sole difference of priority for some decisions granted by the status of *catedrático*. This unbundling and disconnection of the exclusivity of some functions was further accentuated with the creation of research groups. If heads of department are responsible for the administration of teaching in departments, the creation of research groups meant that the head of the research group, or *investigador principal* (lead researcher) in the new terminology, is responsible for leadership of the research activity of the research groups.

From having academic responsibility for the university's basic administrative teaching and research unit, the chair has

come to be a position that is more closely linked to there being available funds at the given university where the academic works.

None of the three aspects of university life is shaped entirely by belonging to the body of *catedráticos de universidad*, with the sole exception that to be the rector of a public university it is necessary to be a *catedrático de universidad*. Other than that, there are no management positions or teaching or research activities that a *profesor titular* is not legally authorised to perform the same as a professor.

Why keep this separate body?

It could be argued that it is essentially to express recognition of the level of academic excellence of a particular individual, and that while the economic effects are not especially large, the social status still has its appeal. This is confirmed when we see that there is something of a race in Spain's universities for internal promotion among accredited academics as they near retirement age. Retiring as a *catedrático* is a certain recognition of a life spent working in universities. But beyond this, the step of the chair does not act as the general incentive in a career with sufficient opportunities for progression. In effect, promotion to a chair does not depend on individual merits, at least not exclusively, but instead on the available budgetary resources of a given university and whether or not the circumstances benefit an academic. Nor is this access entirely free from paradoxes and contradictions. Since, although there is now a prior process of accreditation, it is still possible to find *catedráticos* with fewer research

items than some less fortunate *profesores titulares*.

The argument underlying the regulations and criteria that govern the ANECA's processes of accreditation assume that the candidate to be a *catedrático* must show academic leadership skills by providing proof of the research he or she has managed as *investigador principal* or the doctoral theses he or she has supervised. But what does accreditation as a professor add if the candidate is already an academic leader recognised by their peers? It does no more than provide recognition of a situation that already exists. This recognition does not qualify them to be academic leaders but it is an accolade given to people who can show they are already established researchers. The absurdity of this system is even more apparent when effective access to a chair subsequently depends on contingent circumstances such as the university's available budget or how good an academic's contacts are within it.

Does this mean that the figure of the professor should disappear? In this author's opinion, the answer is no. And although here we discuss the chair, it would be possible to make a very similar argument regarding the body of *profesores titulares* as a group of functionaries. None of this means we oppose a professional pathway with a tenure track. However, it would be possible to introduce some reforms that would boost research activity and how it is valued. Regarding the chair, two things are required:

1. A much more progressive career path in universities with more steps

and more incentives, especially economic ones, linked to it.

2. A more objective and automatic means of accessing a «chair», linked to individual merits and not to the specific circumstances of the universities.

There is no need for a reform that turns the university on its head to achieve these aims. It is possible to enhance a system that is in place and well established, making the necessary improvements. This is the system commonly known as *sexenios*. Here we will propose some changes that, as will become clear, will ultimately have significant consequences for academic journals.

The foundations on which this proposal is based are:

1. Increasing the number of grades in the academic career path, in its administrative and financial aspects. This would lead to an increase in the differences between the entry and exit levels.

2. Increasing the progressiveness of the academic career.

3. Making the system more objective, more related to individual merits, and less dependent on the specific circumstances of each university.

In a system like this, the pay and category of academics would essentially, if not solely, depend on the number of *sexenios*. The body of *catedráticos* as it is would be declared extinct and the position of *catedrático* would be created. This would be achieved automatically when a set number of *sexenios* is reached, three or four, for example. All of the prerogatives

and preferential treatment currently associated with the body to which an academic belongs would be associated with his or her number of *sexenios* (level). A level 5 academic, or one with 5 recognised *sexenios*, would have all of the priorities over the academics of a lower level that are currently associated with being in a higher-level body.

This would immediately create a career path with six steps instead of the current one with two steps (*profesor titular* and *catedrático*). Although the continuation of the title *catedrático* would no longer be necessary, for reasons of aesthetics or to honour tradition it would be kept for those academics who reach the fourth step or higher, or whatever predefined threshold is set. There would no longer be the paradox of *profesores titulares* with more *sexenios* than the *catedráticos* who decide on their access to a chair.

Naturally, if the criterion of category is currently based on *sexenios*, it is clear that this would also apply for current *profesores contratados doctores* (tenured, non-civil service associate professors). The differences in pay between these and *profesores titulares* are minimal. The only difference between these two types of academic is the supposed better job security of *profesores titulares* and the source of the funding that pays for this sort of position. However, for the purposes of the academic career path, everything could be combined by categorisation according to the number of recognised *sexenios*. Clearly we are not considering the problem of the method of selection for entering the profession, as this falls outside the scope of this article.

As for pay depending on *sexenios*, this should go from being a small part of the salary as it currently is, to be a significant part to clearly differentiate salaries on the different career steps: a system that is not linear but one which, for example, has an increase in pay for each *sexenio* completed. The expert report mentioned above made the same points (Miras-Portugal, 2013).

7. Evaluating research activity and academic journals

This whole system relies on recognition of *sexenios*, and so it would also be necessary to make major changes to this system, albeit not radical ones. To this end, it should be made more *transparent*, more *objective*, and more *automatic*. This is where the evaluation of academic journals starts to play a significant role.

Regarding academic journals, at least in the field of education, all of these elements have been demands that learned societies have made to the CNEAI on various occasions³.

Firstly, the paradoxical situation currently exists that for a researcher who is good enough or lucky enough never to have been rejected by the CNEAI or turned down for a *sexenio*, there is no way of knowing how the contributions subjected for evaluation have been graded individually. Only people who have received a negative evaluation can discover the individual scores for each of them, if they request it. And it is in this case that we can uncover inconsistencies in evaluation such as the one that is the basis of Prada García's article (2018)⁴. This is why we

describe the current system as opaque. Academic journals in education, like any other academic journal, must comply with a demanding list of conditions to be evaluated in the most important indexes of journals. This is especially true in the case of JCR, but also for Scimago Lab's SJR. A journal's quartile is an objective, external indicator of the average level of the articles it publishes and their impact on the academic community it serves. Clearly an article published in a Q1 journal will be of more value than one published in a Q2 or Q3 journal. It is possible to be even more precise by using a scale that directly transforms the impact index into a 0 to 10 scale, like the one CNEAI uses.

Given that the impact index can vary from one year to another, it would be enough to establish in advance what value it would take. The value of the year in which the article was published, that of the year in which it was submitted for evaluation and the two previous ones, or the previous one and the one after if available, or many other options that could be devised. What is important about this is that it is not the specific evaluation method that matters but rather the fact that it is public, objective, consistent over time, and consequently predictable. Researchers and journals have to be sure that the goalposts will not move during the game. This is something that some researchers who have received negative evaluations in one of the recent calls for sexenios⁵ have complained about.

Indeed, there is no need for the rating of the journals that would be produced in this way to be fixed; consistent does

not mean unchanging. It is possible to conceive of a rule, like the one described above, which is applied automatically and provides the rating a journal will have each year in a given sexenio. It is also possible to envisage a procedure in which the CNEAI studies the list of journals every two or three years and publishes the rating they would have for the period about to begin. Any procedure can be valid if it appropriately guides the activity of researchers and journals. For this purpose, consistency and, therefore, predictability are vital.

In view of these proposals, the CNEAI's answer is usually that the evaluating committees are independent and prime, that they are experts and have been appointed to use their experience, and that the fact their judgement is the basic element introduces an element of discretion that is not arbitrary.

None of this, of course, is at odds with the proposed publicity, transparency and objectivity. It is true that two articles published in the same journal can vary in their quality. And this is when the committee's discretion must come into play. But this case-by-case judgement has to be the exception, not the rule. It must be properly justified, and this requires the existence of strong arguments to support any judgement that reduces a rating. The vital condition to ensure the exercise of discretion does not become arbitrary is transparency, and this means notifying candidates on record of the reasons why the evaluation of their contribution differs from the average for the journal, and with regards to journals, publishing the

general rating criteria for the original pieces they publish.

This information would be vital for the editorial, scientific and academic development of research journals. In areas of knowledge with academic communities that were already integrated into the system of rating internationally accepted as standard, the system of *sexenios* did not really involve major changes in their functioning. However, in other areas such as education, which depend much more on the national and sometimes local context, this inclusion has involved a genuinely major effort to adapt. We have seen this in the changes in academics' behaviour regarding the authorship of articles published. As a result, journals would benefit greatly if we knew what criteria the CNEAI uses to evaluate the works published in them. Because if the evaluation is to have optimising effects, feedback to its subjects is an essential condition. If neither the journals nor the researchers know in advance and in detail the criteria they will be evaluated on, the evaluation becomes a summary trial, and so its chances of having an influence on the system are severely limited.

This need for information is directly linked with the barrier effect we mentioned above. Indeed, all editors of academic journals in education know how important it is to be in JCR and know the fear that comes just from considering the possibility of being excluded from this prestigious club. But just as the academic career path should have greater progression in its steps, academic journals in education should also be able to pursue

a more gradual system of improvement. The current system establishes two clearly different levels where journals that are in JCR become the first option for the authors and the others are really only regarded as a second choice for publications. This reduces the number of options for where to publish. But why is it important for there to be a large enough number of places to publish?

Given the criteria we use at academic journals, a submission can be of sufficient quality but still not be published at a given moment for various reasons. For example, it might coincide with other articles that were more relevant to the journal, it might have been submitted at the same time as other similar pieces, reducing its novelty in the context of the journal, or for other reasons that by no means imply a lack of quality in the piece. In these cases it is important that authors have the chance to turn to other alternatives for their work. As editors of journals, we are not surprised to see a work published elsewhere that was first submitted to our journal but rejected for one of these reasons. Consequently, it is important for a given community to have sufficient options. This is where a problem appears in the field of education that is shared with some other fields of knowledge. This is the importance of context in the development of knowledge in this field. Unlike what happens with other related fields such as psychology, the importance of context means that the desired internationalisation of research and academic creation are more complicated and difficult. Therefore, even though it is appropriate and probably inevitable

that a journal which is in JCR will have a higher rating in the evaluation processes than another which is not, the availability of clear, public rating criteria could be a way of ensuring a gradation in the score that publication in a journal might provide, and for the journals it could be a way of evaluating whether their editorial policy is leading the journal in the desired direction.

8. Conclusion

The scientific-academic community in education, which essentially comprises the possible authors and readers of academic journals in education, has an academic status we could describe as somewhat delicate. It does not have the same level of participation in an international community as other academic fields do. Consequently, it is important to take into account how this community is affected by the possible administrative measures taken regarding the evaluation of research activity or accreditation processes.

To take maximum advantage of the contribution academic journals make to university life, we have proposed two types of measure: measures that relate to the university career, which would maximise the importance of published research, and other measures relating to the evaluation of academic publications, which insist on the need to improve awareness of and the quality of evaluation criteria. All of this would help create an academic community that is internationally better integrated and evaluation processes that would not only fulfil a *summative* function, linking merits to incentives more fairly, but also a

formative function, producing in the long term a better adjustment to the criteria for excellence both of the researchers who publish and the journals that support this publication.

Notes

- ¹ Merits eligible for evaluation for national accreditation to access university teaching bodies <http://www.mecd.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano-mecd/dms/mecd/servicios-al-ciudadano-mecd/catalogo/general/educacion/academia/ficha/academia/criterios-sociales-juridicas.pdf>
- ² <http://juanmariaprieto.blogs.uva.es/2014/11/28/sobre-los-sexenios-de-investigacion-a-publicar-pero-bien/>
- ³ See for example Galán, A. (2016).
- ⁴ Prada García, A. (2018) Sombras en la evaluación de la actividad investigadora. *Claves de razón práctica*, 256, p. 90-99.
- ⁵ For example, Delgado López-Cózar, E. (2017).

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