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Q1-Q4 Journals: Meaning, access, and relevance of global metrics in Nepali context

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Abstract

The stratification of academic journals into quartiles (Q1--Q4) based on citation metrics is a global benchmark that directly influences national higher education policy. This editorial examines how this framework intersects with the regulatory mechanisms of Nepal, where bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Nepal Medical Council (NMC) explicitly tie academic promotion, research funding, and institutional recognition to publication in indexed, high-quartile journals. We detail these policies, such as the UGC's Career Advancement Scheme, and critically evaluate the challenges they pose, including systemic bias against local journals and financial barriers for researchers. We argue for a strategic, balanced policy approach that leverages global metrics for quality assurance without stifling regionally relevant research, offering key considerations for policymakers and institutional leaders in Nepal and similar contexts.

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Introduction

In the competitive global landscape of academic research, the mantra "publish or perish" has evolved. It is no longer sufficient to simply publish; one must publish in the right venue. The classification of journals into Quartiles---Q1, Q2, Q3, and Q4---has become a critical heuristic for assessing quality, impact, and prestige.[1] For Nepal, where research output is growing and academic evaluation is becoming more formalized, understanding these rankings is essential for faculty promotion, postgraduate work, and institutional recognition. This editorial synthesizes the global framework of journal metrics with the specific policies and challenges facing the Nepali academic community.

What Are Q1-Q4 Journals?

The quartile system is a method of ranking journals within a specific subject category into four equal groups based on bibliometric indicators.[2] Databases such as Journal Citation Reports (JCR/Clarivate) and Scopus rank journals using metrics like Impact Factor (IF), CiteScore, or SCImago Journal Rank (SJR).[3,4]

Within each subject category, the Q1-Q4 represent journal placement[3], for example:

- **Q1:** The top 25% of journals with the highest citation metrics.
- **Q2:** The next 25%, ranking above the median but below Q1.
- **Q3:** The next 25%, ranking below the median.
- **Q4:** The bottom 25% of journals in the category.

It is crucial to understand that a Q1 journal in a small, specialized category may have a significantly lower absolute Impact Factor than a Q2 journal in a large, highly competitive field; the quartile is always relative to its category peers.[4] Another widely used system, the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), based on data from the Scopus database, also employs the Q1--Q4 quartile methodology.[5,6]

Where to find quartile rankings

Identifying a journal's quartile is a straightforward process once the correct tools are known. A journal may have different quartile rankings in JCR and Scopus due to different underlying calculations and category definitions.[5]

- **Journal Citation Reports (JCR):** The primary source for official Journal Impact Factors and quartiles for Web of Science-indexed journals.[2,5] Users can search for a specific journal or browse by category to see its rank and quartile.
- **Scopus:** Elsevier's database provides the CiteScore metric.[6] Users can find a journal's quartile designation (Q1, Q2, etc.) within its subject area via the "Sources" tab.
- **SCImago Journal Rank (SJR):** A free, publicly accessible portal that uses Scopus data to provide SJR indicators and quartile rankings, making metrics more accessible to researchers without institutional subscriptions.[7] This is particularly valuable for researchers in developing countries.[8]
- **Institutional & Regulatory Guides:** Many universities provide library guides. Crucially for Nepal, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has issued guidelines and a list for the classification of peer-reviewed journals published in Nepal, which carries official weight in academic evaluations.[9]

The Global importance and inherent limitations of the quartile system

The stratification of journals into quartiles serves several key functions in academia.[10] It acts as a proxy for quality and prestige, vital for securing tenure, promotions, and research funding.[11] It informs researchers, publication strategies and is used by universities and funding bodies for benchmarking and resource allocation.[12]

However, an over-reliance on these metrics is widely criticized.[13] A journal's high Impact

Factor does not guarantee the quality of any single article within it.[14] The system also exhibits significant field dependency, favouring disciplines with rapid publication cycles, and introduces a regional bias against journals from low- and middle-income countries.[8,15] This bias is evident in Nepal, where an analysis found very few medical journals are indexed in major international databases, immediately limiting their ability to compete in the quartile system despite publishing regionally relevant work.[8] This challenge often stems from the financial barriers of obtaining Web of Science or Scopus indexing, the complexity of technical submission requirements, and the need for persistent international visibility, which disproportionately affects journals from Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). Furthermore, the quest for high quartiles can incentivize undesirable practices like coercive citation and overshadow important values like audience relevance and open access, often while imposing substantial financial burdens through Article Processing Charges (APCs).[8]

Relevance and policy implications in Nepal

In Nepal, quartile rankings and journal indexing have direct, practical consequences for academic careers and institutional funding.

- For Researchers and Postgraduates

Postgraduate students across medicine, public health, and other fields are increasingly encouraged to publish in indexed journals. For academic promotion, recruitment, or scholarships, publications in higher quartile or indexed journals are often given preference.[16]

- For institutions and policymakers

Nepali universities benefit in international rankings when their faculty publish in high-quartile journals. Regulatory bodies like the UGC and universities place increasing emphasis on such publications for faculty promotions, hiring, and recognition. The UGC Regulation 2018 for Appointment of Teachers and Academic Staff (CAS), for example, assigns specific points for different types of research publications, linking career advancement directly to documented scholarly output.[17,18] Similarly, the Guidelines for the Minimum Standards and Classification of Peer-Reviewed Journals Published in Nepal, 2018, sets forth requirements that local journals must meet for recognition.[9]

Faculty promotion criteria in Nepalese universities and academies consider a combination of academic competency, experience, teaching, research/publications, service years, and yearly performance evaluation. Specific point systems and requirements vary by institution, but research publication in peer-reviewed journals is a critical component for promotion to the next level.

A critical tension exists, however, between the global metric and local utility. While publications in higher quartile journals (Q1/Q2) may carry greater prestige, in promotion profiles, these journals often require costly Article Processing Charges (APCs) which can financially burden local researchers and divert focus from regionally-specific public health or policy research. The challenge for academic bodies is quantifying the comparative value of a Q1 journal versus a top-tier, locally relevant, UGC-recognized journal to ensure academic freedom and relevance are not compromised by metrics alone.[17]

- Universities in Nepal

Tribhuvan University (TU): The Governing body, it has service commission is responsible for appointments and promotions. The process can involve written exams, practical exams, interviews and portfolio evaluations. Kathmandu University (KU): Its evaluation process strongly emphasizes research alongside teaching load and service. As an autonomous institution, it has its own set of guidelines. Purbanchal University (PU): Also has a service commission to manage faculty appointments and promotions. The general criteria align with other universities.

- Academies (health science academies in Nepal)

These autonomous health science academies in Nepal include National Academy of Medical Sciences (NAMS) in Kathmandu, B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (BPKIHS) in Dharan, Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS) in Patan, Karnali Academy of Health Sciences (KAHS) in Jumla, Pokhara Academy of Health Sciences (PoAHS) in Pokhara, Rapti Academy of Health Sciences (RAHS) in Ghorahi, and Madan Bhandari Academy of Health Sciences (MBAHS) in Hetauda, typically involve a combination of experience, academic qualifications, and a mandatory number of research publications align with TU and or KU.

Nepal's academic policies explicitly tie career advancement to publication output:

- The UGC Career Advancement Scheme (CAS):

Promotion from Associate Professor to Professor requires a minimum of 10 research publications in peer-reviewed or UGC-listed journals, with at least three published during the assessment period. A PhD and satisfactory performance are also mandated.[18]

- The UGC journal classification:

The UGC's Minimum Standards and Classification of Peer-Reviewed Journals Published in Nepal ensures local journals meet quality benchmarks, and publication in UGC-recognized journals is valued in evaluations.[9]

- Medical colleges:

Research publication is increasingly an obligatory criterion for promotion, with a preference for recognized/indexed journals.[18]

- Funding eligibility:

Grants from UGC, NAST, and NHRC in Nepal often require at least one original research article in a peer-reviewed journal as a baseline eligibility criterion.[19]

Table 1. Research publication requirements for faculty promotion, UGC Nepal Career Advancement Scheme (CAS), 2018

Academic level	Promotion requirement	Publication requirement	Notes
Assistant Professor (Level 11/12) Associate Professor (Level 13A)	Minimum years of teaching/service + performance assessment	At least 5 research papers in peer-reviewed/UGC-listed journals	PhD degree strongly preferred; non-PhD may require more publications.
Associate Professor (Level 13A) Professor (Level 14)	3-5 years at associate professor rank + satisfactory academic record	At least 10 research publications (peer-reviewed/UGC-listed), 3 of which must be during the assessment period	Must include publications in indexed/UGC-recognized journals; preference for Q1/Q2 where possible.
Professor (Level 14) Senior Professor (Level 15) (in some universities)	Long service + leadership in research	Additional publications beyond 10, showing significant contribution	Emphasis on international indexed journals (Scopus, Web of Science).

Policy recommendations for a balanced evaluation framework

The Q1--Q4 classification is a powerful heuristic for navigating academic publishing. For Nepal, it has transcended being a mere global metric and is now embedded in the structures of academic evaluation, directly impacting careers and funding. The challenge is to use this tool strategically without being subjugated by it. The ultimate goal of research is to advance knowledge, a contribution measured over the long term, not merely by the brand of its publication.[20] A healthy scholarly ecosystem requires a balanced approach from researchers---aiming for high-impact journals while supporting quality local publications---and from

institutions---providing support, resources, and recognition policies that acknowledge the diverse value of research output.[8,9,20]

To effectively balance global quality assurance with local research needs, Nepali institutions and regulatory bodies should consider incorporating globally recognized best practices for research assessment:

- Adopt DORA principles:

The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) advocates against using the Journal Impact Factor[21] as a primary measure for evaluating the quality of individual articles or researchers. Adopting DORA principles would shift the focus of promotion and hiring committees toward assessing the scientific content of the paper itself, such as rigor, reproducibility, and societal impact, rather than the brand of the journal.[11]

- Implement Leiden Manifesto metrics:

The UGC should integrate principles from The Leiden Manifesto for research metrics, such as "Assess research on its own merits" and "Keep data collection and analytical processes open, transparent and simple". This ensures that evaluation focuses on the societal and regional impact of work, the public health and policy-related research, regardless of the journal's quartile. The guidelines include 10 principles for measuring performance, including institution's research missions and practices, stressing regular scrutiny of indicators and metrics.[12]

- Create a tiered local incentive system:

The UGC should solidify a point system that provides substantial and competitive credit for publishing in UGC-listed journals that meet clear, rigorous quality standards. This directly addresses the systemic bias against local publications and provides a viable, domestically-relevant path for career advancement, ensuring that critical Nepali research is not neglected.[9,17]

- Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA):

Emphasis on qualitative judgment, responsible use of quantitative indicators for maximizing quality and impact of research. The coalition has >700 organizations for research funding, research performing, national/regional assessment authorities and agencies, learned societies, and relevant organizations.[21]

- Hong Kong Principles for research researchers (HKP):

Hong Kong Principles for assessing researchers (HKP), focus research integrity and trustworthiness with five principles, including Responsible research practices, Transparent reporting (including negative findings), Open science practices (e.g., data sharing), Valuing a diversity of research types and outputs, Recognizing all contributions to research.[22]

Conclusion

Quartile rankings (Q1-Q4) are more than just global metrics: in Nepal, they have real consequences for appointments, promotions, funding, and recognition. The UGC's regulations require faculty to publish in peer-reviewed and UGC-listed journals; medical colleges increasingly demand research publications for career progression; grants often require at least some indexed publication. Researchers, supervisors, and institutions should thus understand and strategize around these policies, balancing aspiration for high impact with the realities of access, field, and resources. Properly used, quartile information can help strengthen Nepal's research output and academic quality.

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