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Electronic network bolsters Southern science

Developing country scientists can boost the international profile of their work by publishing papers as part of a regional network of electronic publications that are freely available on-line, according to an analysis by two Latin American researchers.

Wladimir Alonso and Esteban Fernández-Juricic from the University of Oxford looked at the impact of the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), a publicly funded web-based network that provides free access to 93 journals from Brazil, Chile and Cuba.

Presenting their results in a letter published in this week's issue of *Nature*, the two scientists describe how they found that the impact factor of a set of these journals — a measure of the number of references to their papers in other journals worldwide — has more than doubled since joining SciELO.

"This indicates that such networks not only foster the availability of scientific information on a regional scale, but also generate international impact," they conclude. In turn, this "may entice researchers into publishing in the journals concerned", they say.

The findings indicate a path forward for Southern scientific journals, which are often sidelined in the international research literature and struggle to compete with developed country journals with higher impact ratings.

"Several factors interact to produce the higher impact after joining SciELO," says Alonso. "Researchers can reach such journals more easily, studies published there are read and cited more frequently, and in the end, since they are reaching a greater audience, researchers find it more attractive to publish in these journals."

SciELO, launched in 1997 by the Latin America and Caribbean Centre on Health Sciences Information (BIREME) and the São Paulo Science Foundation (FAPESP) is a "pioneering initiative", says Alonso, that benefits both researchers and the science journals that are linked to the site.

"The editors of some local journals believe that increasing their representation worldwide is a difficult task because their journals are not supported by powerful publishers," says Fernández-Juricic. "However, our results underscore that the Internet and the organisation of similar regional networks provide a new means of dissemination that can improve the situation of small journals substantially."

BIREME director Abel Packer says, "We are very happy with the findings, because they confirm SciELO's objectives of increasing the visibility, accessibility and credibility of science publications from Brazil and Latin America".

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