



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EDITORIAL PROCESSES OF ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS

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Abstract

With the rapid spread of Covid-19 in March 2020, societies were abruptly forced to change their daily activities. The educational process was one of the most affected activities, given that, due to the crowded conditions in the classrooms, they had to migrate to the development of academic activities assisted by ICT resources. The purpose of this research article was to determine the effects of Covid-19 on the editorial processes carried out by higher education institutions in their periodical publications. The methodology used is framed within the postulates of the qualitative approach using the semi-structured interview as a technique for collecting information. The main results of the research reveal the increase in scientific publications derived from the analysis of the impact generated by Covid-19 in different areas such as health, economy and education, the latter being one of the most frequent due to the imperative need to digitalize academic contents.

Keywords: Covid-19, editorial process, academic publications.

Resumen

Con la rápida propagación del Covid-19 en marzo del 2020, las sociedades se vieron avocadas de forma abrupta a cambiar sus actividades diarias. El proceso educativo fue una de las actividades con mayor afectación, dado

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que, por las condiciones de aglomeración en las aulas, se tuvo que migrar al desarrollo de actividades académicas asistidas por recursos TIC. El presente artículo de investigación pretendió determinar las afectaciones derivadas del Covid-19 en los procesos editoriales que se adelantan al interior de las instituciones de educación superior en sus publicaciones periódicas. La metodología utilizada se enmarca en los postulados del enfoque cualitativo utilizando como técnica de recolección de la información la entrevista semiestructurada. Los principales resultados de la investigación revelan el aumento en publicaciones científicas derivadas del análisis del impacto que ha generado el Covid-19 en diferentes áreas como la salud, la economía y en la educación, siendo esta última una de las más frecuentes por la imperiosa necesidad de digitalizar los contenidos académicos.

Palabras clave: Covid-19, proceso editorial, publicaciones académicas.

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, a phenomenon emerged in China that became a global problem: Covid-19 (Enriquez & Saenz, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) ruled in March 2020, a serious situation that afflicted the entire world due to the rapid spread of a virus originating in Wuhan, China and that was taking the lives of thousands of inhabitants in an accelerated way, so the pandemic caused by the infection of the so-called Covid-19 was decreed (Gamboa Suárez et al., 2020). Many sectors of the economy were affected due to the measures adopted by the world governments when decreeing the mandatory quarantine to reduce the accelerated percentage of contagions, to which education was not alien and from one moment to another, it began to think about the necessary strategies to give continuity to the academic training processes adopting the measures of social distancing without violating the right to education (Inter-American Development Bank, 2020).

This global situation impacted society and people's activities in such a way, it has almost completely changed the lifestyle collapsing systems that have implied restructuring and adaptation not known (Hernández Vergel et al., 2021) (Medina Romero et al, 2021). The pandemic has generated associated factors such as fear of contracting the virus, frustration, lack of contact with family, friends and co-workers, lack of personal space, economic and family losses, with a psychological impact, so the pandemic will have profound and lasting social and economic consequences (International Labor Organization - ILO, 2020).

Within these human activities that have been affected by the presence of Covid-19 are those related to the scientific publication processes (Schonhaut et al., 2020; Repiso, 2020), which has always represented a pillar for the academic world, and which is in a complex situation due to the reduction of the budget for this activity in the distribution of economic resources (Peña, 2021). On the one hand, the drastic changes in the development of academic and administrative activities of universities, especially related to funding, endanger the editorial process of open access journals, and the affectation that associated personnel such as editors, assistants and peer reviewers and their families may be suffering, either by the virus itself and/or its collateral effects, are causes that have surely hindered the management of editorial processes such as peer review and evaluation.

On the other hand, it is undeniable the role that scientific research has played in decision making during this crisis, but this same need has generated an increase in the volume of research and in the excess of publications, called infodemia, so that those in charge of editorial processes have significantly reduced the time between the

submission and publication of an article, as Torres-Salinas (2020) argues: “The first immediate problem that the publishing universe has had to face is the avalanche of articles and preprints and the need for these to be accessible” (p. 2).

It is important to mention that preprints are versions of manuscripts prior to peer review and publication in a scientific journal and are an affordable way for researchers seeking to more easily disseminate their results and have prompt feedback in order to subsequently adhere to the formal publication process, but, although this work has strengthened the scientific research processes related to Covid-19 and its collateral effects in the human spheres in a short time, it is also necessary to mention the risks that it would imply if this research is not being carried out under the highest quality rigor as well as in the editorial processes, since some publications may be published without previous filters such as poor peer review and uncertain sources leading to poor external validity (Díaz-Guecha, Carrillo-Guecha & Guecha-Oliveros, 2020; Chaparro Rodríguez, Jaimes Márquez & Prada Núñez, 2018).

It is probable in the editorial management, the delay in the publication of new editions, not only because of the delays in the peer review processes caused by the difficulty in finding reviewers, since this process is voluntary and is not remunerated, but also because many of them are researchers who have less time for this work because they are developing their own research, which leads to looking for people without the required expertise, causing this process not to be rigorous and of high quality. Finally, there is the low reception of new quality articles.

Another problem that arises is related to the competition to publish, since articles that do not meet the editorial standards of quality will end up being published in pseudoreviews that will not guarantee an interest for scientific communities (Aguilar Barreto, 2018). The aforementioned, poses a risk to scientific credibility, since it means that the quality (Gamboa, 2016) of the final result is limited and not verified or does not pass any control, especially in exceptional situations such as the current one, which is still detrimental to science in the face of the need for information and solutions for society (Angelelli et al., 2020).

It is in this contextual framework where the research was carried out with the purpose of identifying the effects that have been derived in the editorial processes of academic periodical publications during the presence of Covid-19 in present times.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview as a data collection technique, which was conducted with the coordinator of scientific publications of a public university in northeastern Colombia. This institution of higher education has eleven journals distributed in the areas of knowledge of Education and Social Sciences, Engineering, Basic Sciences, Medical and Health Sciences, Administrative and Economic Sciences, International Commerce, Business Administration, Public Accounting, among others.

For the execution of the interview, two central axes of conversation were defined: 1) Description of the editorial process followed in the institution for its academic publications; and, 2) Affectations due to Covid-19 with the editorial process. These topics are defined as a starting point and, based on the answers given by the interviewee, the interview progresses by delving into aspects of interest, as defined by Peláez et al. (2013), in the semi-structured interview, open questions are asked, allowing the interviewee to contribute various nuances from his answers with the purpose of interweaving the topics of interest.

To answer these questions, the interviewee is asked to consider as a window of observation what has happened since the declaration of the pandemic in the country (March 2020) to date (November 2021), and if there are differences in what has happened depending on the year, to report what happened in each year or if the situations have remained constant, then to make a comment at a general level. For each question, the interviewee had a free period of time without pressure.

3. Results and discussion

The most relevant aspects derived from the interview with the Coordinator of Scientific Publications, who was considered a key informant in this qualitative research, are presented below.

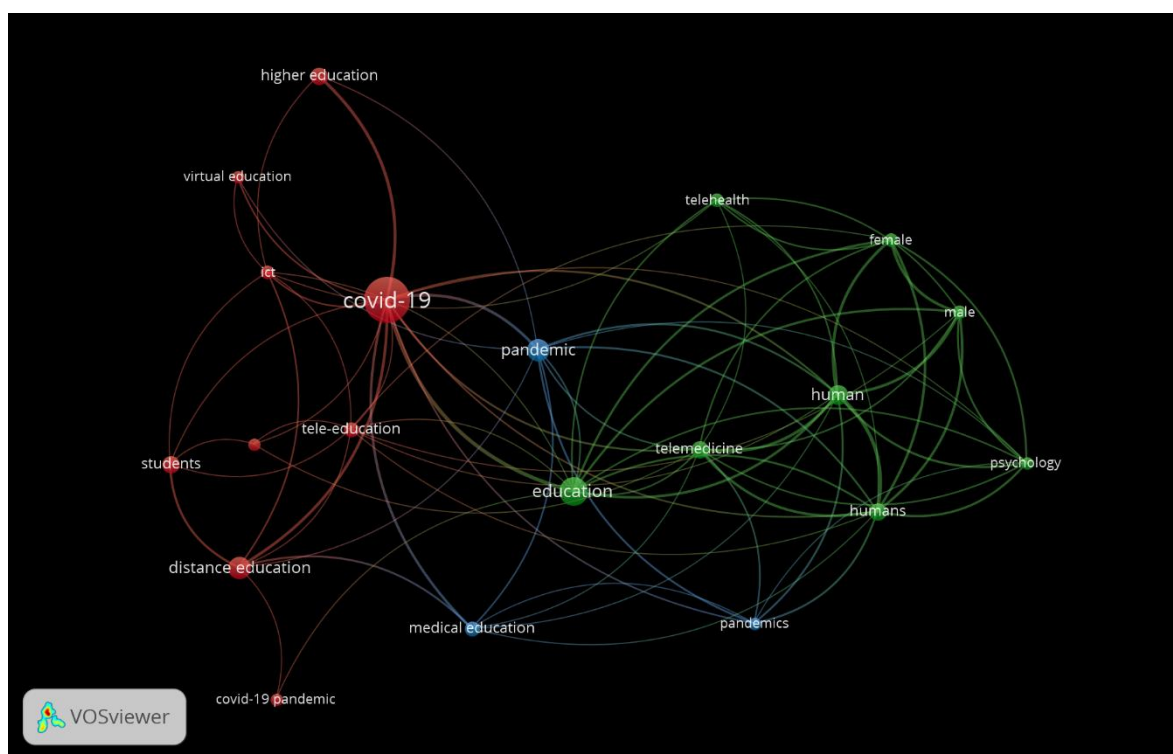
3.1. General Aspects

The educational institution where the interviewee works is a public institution with more than five decades of operation. Its academic offerings are presented in five faculties: Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Basic Sciences, Business Sciences, Health Sciences, Education, Arts and Humanities, and Engineering. There are 26 undergraduate academic programs, eight of which are recognized by the Ministry of National Education as being of high quality, two technological programs and three distance learning programs. At the postgraduate level, there are fourteen programs, half of them at the Specialization level, six master's programs, one of which has High Quality recognition, and one Doctorate program. The impact that this educational institution generates in the community is measured in terms of the population served, which is close to 17,000 students at the general level.

The educational institution has a Vice Rector's Office for Research, which is the unit responsible for endorsing and financing the research projects carried out by teachers from the various research groups and research seedlings. In the last decade, the development of research and scientific communication skills has been strengthened among the members of the community, through the implementation of training in the management of scientific publishing resources, guidance on editorial processes and others; at the same time, the library has subscribed to various databases such as Scopus, ACM, EBSCO host, IEEEExplore, among others.

It should be noted that the educational institution has prioritized the generation of academic communities (Hernández Suárez et al., 2021; Hernández-Suarez et al., 2020; Hernández-Suarez et al., 2020), which is why the need arises to have a Publications Coordinator whose main function is to support the editorial processes in order to achieve the indexing of journals, for which compliance with editorial policies is required, among which the quality of the peer review process, compliance in the periodicity and visibility of publications through the linkage to various databases, among many other aspects, stand out.

It is important to know the scope of the research that has been carried out within the framework of Covid-19 in the education sector, since this information makes it possible to identify the affinity of the researchers with certain topics of interest and the main variables that are taken into account at the time of executing a research project. Figure 1 shows the co-occurrence of keywords within a group of articles identified through the Scopus database and whose study variables were Covid-19 and Education in Latin America.

Figure 1. Word co-occurrence

Source: Own elaboration (2022); based on data provided by Scopus.

The variable Education is mentioned with great frequency in studies focused on health education through digital media, from keywords such as Telemedicine, Medical Education, Telehealth, Human, Pandemic, which allows inferring that, in the health care of people, Education is essential to know not only the characteristics of the virus but also its treatment and management. Similarly, the technological component is mentioned for the academic training of students in all areas of knowledge.

3.2. Editorial Process

As an institutional policy, the topics and scope have been defined for each journal according to the nature of the faculty it represents, the typology of the articles, the criteria for acceptance of the articles were established, among which the originality of the articles is highlighted as a characteristic element. The structure that each article must have was defined, together with the guidelines for the presentation of images, tables, graphs, references and other complementary elements that support the understanding of the proposed content.

Once the author or authors decide to submit their article to any of the journals, they must use the Open Journal System - OJS platform to create a user, through which they must channel the entire editorial flow. Additionally, they must submit some complementary documents where the article is presented, the author's rights are assigned and a data sheet of the authors is filled out.

After an initial approval by the editor of each journal, the articles advance to the double-blind peer review process. This process is not remunerated and is intended to locate professionals with expertise in the subject

associated with the publication. Based on the peer's judgment, an editorial decision is made, which varies from the option of being accepted without changes, through those that require adjustments prior to approval, to those that are rejected.

Approved articles go to the stage of preparation for publication, where the quality of the figures and images and compliance with the form required for each article are reviewed. Some articles are translated into English, since approximately 30% to 50% of the articles in each issue are presented in a second language. As can be seen, this editorial process requires a whole team of people behind each journal and the disinterested support of peer reviewers, in order to guarantee the publication of an issue.

3.3. Impact of Covid-19 on the editorial process

When the interviewee is asked about the effects or difficulties that the journals of his educational institution have experienced during the presence of Covid-19 in society, the following aspects are mentioned as having the greatest impact on the journals of the institution where he works:

- During this time of pandemic, there have been excessive delays in the response time of peer reviewers. This has always been a problem that has affected the institution's journals since this activity is not remunerated financially, "normally the peer review and approval process took between three and six months", but at this time it has been extended from six to eight months, due in some cases to the fact that the peer reviewer or a close relative has been a victim of Covid-19, leaving them with physical and/or emotional consequences. As a domino effect of this situation, nowadays the list of peer evaluators has been reduced by more than 50%, so today there are fewer professionals available for the development of this academic activity.
- In the case of the institution under study and as a response to the critical economic situation that was being experienced in the city as outlined by CEPAL (2020), the University Superior Council in support of some governmental entities of the departmental and national order, granted the zero tuition program, that is to say, that students would only pay a value equivalent to less than 5% of the normal value of their tuition, as an example of the connection that should exist between the social context and the educational institution, i.e., that these two spaces cannot function in isolation (Eslava-Zapata et al., 2018). This situation brought as an effect a reduction of personnel due to budgetary issues of the publishing entities given that, in this institution, approximately 60% of the money that guarantees the operation of the institution is collected from enrollments. This cutback led to a job role supporting up to four journals simultaneously, causing work overload for the few employees hired.
- During this time of pandemic there has been a low number of articles entering the editorial flow, with the exception of those articles related to the effects of Covid-19 in various fields of human activity (Repiso, 2020). This situation has led some journals to generate monographic issues on this topic, as they have seen it as a strategic opportunity to contribute to the metrics of the journal from a current topic.
- The editorial flow has been affected in other ways, only associated with the authors, who have required more time than allowed for the incorporation of adjustments or suggestions for improvement, derived from the peer evaluation process. This situation is also generated by the work overload that teachers are experiencing in the exercise of their profession through the use of various ICT resources that previously under the scheme of face-to-face education, were of little use, so it has generated stress and some emotional affectations, as outlined in the

research findings of Hernandez, Prada and Mariño (2021), Gamboa, Hernandez and Prada (2020), Ayala-Garcia, Hernandez-Suarez and Prada-Nunez (2020), Salazar et al. (2016), among many others.

4. Conclusions

This paper presents a synthesis of the effects referred to by a professional responsible for coordinating the publications of eleven journals of a higher education institution in Colombia. A list of effects derived from the presence of Covid-19 in society and how they have affected the editorial processes in academic journals is reviewed. The increase in scientific publications derived from the analysis of the impact generated by Covid-19 in different areas such as health, economy and education is highlighted, the latter being one of the most frequent due to the imperative need to digitalize academic contents by resorting to technological resources that allow teachers and students to recreate the academic environment by means of technological platforms. This represented a challenge for all stakeholders involved in the training process, which led researchers to measure the impact of the new teaching methodologies adopted in response to the restrictive measures imposed by governmental actors to reduce the number of infections caused by this disease. The authors hope that this information will be expanded in the future with a good number of publishers in order to identify common situations or particular situations specific to each social context in which these publishing institutions are located.

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