

**How to cite this article:**

Pacios-Dorado JL. Inclusion of Cuban student journals in SciELO Cuba: visibility, quality, and research training. MedEst. [Internet]. 2026 [cited Access date]; 6:e575. Available in: <https://revmedest.sld.cu/index.php/medest/article/view/575>

Palabras Clave: Revistas científicas; Acceso abierto; Educación médica; Investigación estudiantil.

Keywords: Scientific journals; Open access; Medical education; Student research.

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Received: 08/08/2026

Accepted: 07/09/2026

Published: 13/09/2026

Editor(s) in charge:

Dr. Yonathan Estrada Rodríguez.
Est. Shania Naranjo Lima.

Translator:

DrC. Deyanira Medelin Fausto.

Layout designer:

Carlos Luis Vinageras Hidalgo.

Inclusion of Cuban student journals in SciELO Cuba: visibility, quality, and research training

Inclusión de revistas estudiantiles cubanas en SciELO Cuba: visibilidad, calidad y formación investigativa

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RESUMEN

La inclusión de las revistas científicas estudiantiles cubanas en la Colección SciELO Cuba representa una oportunidad estratégica para potenciar la visibilidad, la calidad editorial y la formación investigativa en el país. Estas publicaciones, que divulgan investigaciones de estudiantes de pregrado, residentes y profesionales en formación, han tenido un desarrollo sostenido, pero su alcance continúa limitado por la escasa indexación en bases de datos de corriente principal. SciELO Cuba, con criterios actualizados en 2024, ofrece un marco riguroso que permitiría a estas revistas profesionalizar sus procesos editoriales y alinearse con los principios de la ciencia abierta. La visibilidad internacional, la interoperabilidad y la preservación digital son beneficios inmediatos de su incorporación, mientras que la exigencia de estándares como la revisión por pares, el uso de XML y la declaración de conflictos de interés fortalecería la credibilidad y la actualización bibliográfica. En el plano formativo, la indexación incentivaría la participación estudiantil en la investigación, reforzando competencias metodológicas y comunicativas, y otorgando reconocimiento institucional a la producción científica joven. No obstante, persisten riesgos de sostenibilidad, endogamia y baja productividad, que requieren acompañamiento docente y políticas de apoyo. El contexto nacional, marcado por iniciativas de ciencia abierta y reformas en el sistema científico, favorece esta propuesta, que debe asumirse de manera gradual y responsable. Más que un sello de prestigio, la inclusión en SciELO Cuba sería un salto de calidad para la ciencia estudiantil cubana, integrándola en el circuito global y consolidando su utilidad social.

ABSTRACT

The inclusion of Cuban student scientific journals in the SciELO Cuba collection represents a strategic opportunity to boost visibility, editorial quality, and research training within the country. These publications—which disseminate research by undergraduate students, medical residents, and professionals in training—have experienced steady growth, yet their reach remains limited by a lack of indexing in mainstream databases. SciELO Cuba, utilizing criteria updated in 2024, offers a rigorous framework that would enable these journals to professionalize their editorial processes and align with open science principles. International visibility, interoperability, and digital preservation are immediate benefits of such inclusion, while the requirement for standards—such as peer review, XML usage, and conflict-of-interest declarations—would strengthen credibility and ensure up-to-date bibliographic practices. From a training perspective, indexing would encourage student participation in research, reinforcing methodological and communication skills while granting institutional recognition to the scientific output of young researchers. However, risks regarding sustainability, insularity, and low productivity persist, necessitating faculty guidance and supportive policies. The national context—characterized by open science initiatives and reforms within the scientific system—favors this proposal, which should be implemented gradually and responsibly. More than merely a mark of prestige, inclusion in SciELO Cuba would represent a qualitative leap for Cuban student science, integrating it into the global circuit and consolidating its social value.

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Research training constitutes one of the pillars of higher medical education in Cuba, and its natural culmination is the communication of results through scientific publication. In this scenario, Cuban student scientific journals occupy a singular place: they are spaces aimed at disseminating research developed by undergraduate students, residents, and professionals in training, mostly in open access and without article processing charges. ⁽¹⁾

The journal 16 de Abril, a publication of the University of Medical Sciences of Havana, declares that it publishes research by undergraduate students, residents, and health sciences professionals. Today, more than a dozen of these publications coexist—UNIMED, Gaceta Médica Estudiantil, MedEst, Universidad Médica Pinareña, 2 de Diciembre, among others—linked to the country's universities of medical sciences. ⁽²⁾ However, despite their trajectory, their visibility and indexing in mainstream databases remain limited, and the debate about their eventual incorporation into the SciELO Cuba network continues to be pertinent.

The objective of this article is to argue that the inclusion of Cuban student scientific journals in the SciELO Cuba Collection would have a positive impact on the visibility, editorial quality, research culture, and internationalization of the country's young science, provided it is accompanied by a gradual route based on explicit criteria.

The SciELO Cuba Collection indexes, preserves, publishes, interoperates, and disseminates in open access the full texts of Cuban scientific journals from all areas of knowledge, and requires that the communicated publications be predominantly original research articles subjected to informed peer review. Its admission criteria, updated in 2024, require that the journal have at least two years of published issues, express its alignment with open science, have a manuscript management system, structure its articles in XML according to the SciELO Publishing Schema, and cite or report the availability of research data. ⁽³⁾

These requirements are not arbitrary barriers: they are conditions that distinguish a scientific publication from an academic bulletin and that, precisely, offer student journals a roadmap for professionalizing themselves. Indexing in SciELO Cuba, moreover, positions journals in the global flow of scientific information and communication and makes them discoverable by interoperability systems and regional directories such as Latindex. ⁽⁴⁾

The main argument in favor of inclusion is visibility; many Ibero-American journals are, in the global context, peripheral publications

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that frequently face difficulties in being recognized against commercial mega-publishers with almost infinite resources. For Cuban student journals, which are published in Spanish and English and distributed almost exclusively through institutional portals, invisibility is the rule, not the exception. ⁽⁵⁾

A metric study on the scientific production of the University of Medical Sciences of Havana in Cuban student journals analyzed 121 articles published between 2017 and 2021 in 12 journals and found that 100% were published in Spanish and 0 % in English, with scarce collaboration between faculties and poorly updated bibliographic references. The University of Medical Sciences of Havana had 20,246 undergraduate students in the 2020–2021 academic year, more than one-fifth of the country's national enrollment, and yet its scientific production was considered low, although with a tendency toward quantitative increase. Its inclusion in SciELO Cuba would increase the discoverability and retrieval capacity of those works, make them retrievable in academic search engines, and subject them to metadata standards they currently lack. ⁽⁶⁾

A second argument is the strengthening of editorial quality; informed peer review, continuous publication, the use of XML, and the declaration of conflicts of interest are not formal adornments: they are guarantees of credibility. The literature review on student scientific production in health sciences shows that student journals can offer a favorable environment for presenting work, developing research skills, becoming familiar with peer review, and gaining confidence to move toward larger-scale projects. ⁽⁷⁾ But it also warns that up to 70 % of some academic works never get published and remain archived in libraries or personal computers. Integrating these journals into SciELO Cuba would oblige and accompany them to professionalize their editorial processes, reducing endogamy and improving indicators such as the Price index, which in 7 of 10 student journals analyzed was below 0.70, evidencing deficient updating of references. ⁽⁸⁾

A third argument, perhaps the most important, is formative; research competence is an essential component of medical education, as it strengthens searching, critical analysis, hypothesis formulation, methodological design, and scientific communication. Early participation in research activities improves knowledge and skills related to research, stimulates interest in researching, and is associated with greater scientific productivity in the short and long term. ⁽⁹⁾

Membership in student scientific societies has been linked to greater

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publication, although evidence on its formative effect is still limited. However, studies agree that student scientific productivity is insufficient: an evaluation at the University of Medical Sciences of Havana, with 393 students surveyed, concluded that insufficient scientific productivity persists and proliferates, whose main motivation was the increase of knowledge (65,1 %) and whose main limitation was the lack of equipment (48,1 %).(10) The most extensive available review reports heterogeneous frequencies, between 2 % and 12 %, with a predominantly co-author student role. Having student journals indexed in SciELO Cuba would reinforce the formative circuit: the student would see his effort recognized on a visible and prestigious platform, which would strengthen motivation and the sense of social usefulness of research.

Nevertheless, it would be naive to maintain that inclusion is automatically beneficial; the lessons learned about Cuban student scientific publication identify concrete risks: the creation of new student journals generated debate about their feasibility and sustainability, and the quality of their publications depends on joint work and faculty advising. ⁽¹⁾ It has been pointed out that only 2 % of scientific publications had participation of at least one student, and that the rejection of manuscripts for including students can favor emigration toward foreign journals, the incorporation of graduates as authors without meeting authorship criteria, or abandonment of the researcher role. Furthermore, there is no Cuban repository that facilitates the identification and retrieval of data on student scientific production, a repeatedly noted limitation. Inclusion in SciELO Cuba will not by itself resolve these structural deficiencies, but it would offer the infrastructure and standards to address them. ⁽¹¹⁾

The national context is favorable; Cuba has approved in the last decade a dozen policies aimed at reorganizing its scientific system, among them Decree 40/2021 and Decree-Law 7/2021, and work is underway on the proposed Law on Science, Technology, and Innovation. The First Symposium on Open Science in Cuba, held in 2023, had among its purposes identifying initiatives to open science and generalize its practice in the country, with emphasis on the quality and credibility of the scientific publication system, ethics and integrity, and capacity building to publish according to open science principles. ⁽¹²⁾

However, an empirical study on open access in Cuba concluded that the country does not have a national infrastructure of open access repositories, that most of the few existing ones do not have policies that support their reliability and sustainability, and that the visibility of Cuban journals in open access portals and directories has evolved

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little. Paradoxically, the golden route has advanced: most Cuban scientific journals offer immediate free access without charging article processing fees, and several student journals fall under that model. Inclusion in SciELO Cuba would capitalize on that strength and compensate for the structural weakness of visibility. ⁽⁷⁾

The proposal, then, is not automatic or indiscriminate admission, but a gradual route. First, apply the already current SciELO Cuba criteria as a reference framework for student journals, without demanding from them from the outset the same performance as a consolidated journal, but without relaxing the principles: originality, peer review, open science, and digital preservation. ⁽¹³⁾ Second, accompany the evaluation with editorial training and scientific writing programs aimed at students and faculty, in line with what the literature recommends. Third, articulate these journals with institutional repositories and university registry systems, so that student production can be identified, periodically evaluated, and preserved, as authors in the field have suggested. Fourth, link indexing with institutional recognition, national student forums, and the Annual Health Award, consolidating the circuit that incentivizes early and quality publication. ⁽⁶⁾

Including Cuban student scientific journals in the SciELO Cuba network would have a positive and transformative impact: it would increase the visibility of a production currently relegated, professionalize the editorial management of publications that already operate in open access without charges, strengthen the formative circuit of research in medical sciences, and align the student scientific movement with national open science policies. The risks of exclusivity, sustainability, and quality are not arguments against inclusion, but conditions for it to be responsible. The question is not whether student journals deserve to be in SciELO Cuba, but what kind of accompaniment we are willing to offer them so that their inclusion is a leap in quality and not an empty seal.

This debate challenges editors, university directors, the Medical Sciences Publishing House, and the SciELO Cuba network itself, and calls for placing Cuban young science in the place of visibility that its trajectory and potential already deserve.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

FUNDING SOURCES

The author received no funding for the development of this article.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The author declares that no artificial intelligence was used in the drafting of this manuscript.