



SSPH+

SWISS SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC HEALTH

Ms. Sari Multala
Minister of Science and Culture
Meritullinkatu 10, Helsinki
PO Box 29. FI-00023 Government. Finland

A FOUNDATION OF
SWISS UNIVERSITIES

BFH
Berner Fachhochschule

EPFL
Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale
de Lausanne

ETHZ
Eidgenössische Technische
Hochschule

HES-SO
Haute école spécialisée
de Suisse occidentale

SUPSI
Scuola universitaria professionale
della Svizzera italiana

UNIBAS
Universität Basel

UNIFR
Université de Fribourg

UNIGE
Université de Genève

UNIL
Université de Lausanne

UNILU
Universität Luzern

UNINE
Université de Neuchâtel

USI
Università della Svizzera italiana

UZH
Universität Zürich

ZHAW
Zürcher Hochschule für
Angewandte Wissenschaften

CC:
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Chair of the Board of the Federation of Finnish
Learned Societies

Mr. Janne Pölönen
Secretary General of JUFO
Federation of Finnish Learned Societies
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Embassy of Switzerland
Ambassador Sabrina Dallafior Matter
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(all via email)

Zurich, 17 February 2025

Request to support the Open Access APC Waiver Program of the Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+) with € 350'000 to compensate the long-term damage caused by the JUFO defamation against the SSPH+ journals

Dear Minister of Science and Culture, Sari Multala

The Publication Forum (JUFO) operates under the auspice of the **Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, a recipient of funds from your Ministry. In frontal violation of its supposed purpose** to “support the quality assessment of research outputs”, the JUFO steering committee launched an aggressive defamation without evidence against the respected [journals](#) of the Swiss School of Public Health ([SSPH+](#)): the International Journal of Public Health (IJPH) and Public Health Reviews (PHR).

JUFO’s decision to downgrade IJPH and PHR to “grey area Level 0” – unambiguously portrayed as the JUFO’s “black list” of journals that “aim to increase the number of publications with a minimum of time spent on editorial work and quality assessment” – is an outrageous attack on the reputation of the SSPH+ Foundation and Directorate, the virtual SSPH+ faculty of public health sciences, spread across 14 Swiss universities, and the two SSPH+ journals led by a community of honest, independent scientists from all continents who are committed as editors, reviewers and authors to ensure a high-quality peer review process. As outlined below, JUFO’s defamation has drastic financial consequences for the SSPH+ journals.

As an urgent request for action, we ask you to put all pressure on the JUFO Secretary General to immediately upgrade the SSPH+ journals from the grey area “Level 0” to “Level 2”, congruent with the European Journal of Public Health, which is a “friendly competing” peer review journal that is no different from the SSPH+ journals in quality, respect, outreach or tradition. The irreparable damage of the JUFO defamation grows exponentially with each additional day that our journals remain on the “grey list” as untrustworthy journals. To offset some of these consequences, we ask you to support the SSPH+ APC Waiver Program with a grant of €350'000 (see section 4).



Before formulating the reasons for our advice to dissolve JUFO and our request for support (section 4), we will 1) summarize the publishing model of the SSPH+ journals, 2) discuss the incompetent journal classification of JUFO, and 3) summarize the disastrous long-term consequences of JUFO's defamation.

1) The ethical publishing model of SSPH+

- a) SSPH+ is a not-for-profit academic Foundation of 14 Swiss universities.
- b) SSPH+ took over the two journals from other academic societies (in 2010 and 2020 respectively) to secure the future of these old and well-established independent "society journals".
- c) SSPH+ shares the vision of Open Science and one of its pillars, namely Open Access (OA) publishing. Thus, both journals have been Gold OA since 2021, as SSPH+ rejects the unethical hybrid publishing model.
- d) As society-owned journals, IJPH and PHR must procure publishing services from an external publishing company.
- e) The SSPH+ Foundation Board decided not to subsidize the journals with tax money, but requires the journals to cover all costs through journal revenues, including publisher services, the fully independent Editorial Office (mandated to [Swiss TPH](#)), annual Editorial Board meetings, the honoraria of the fully independent editors, and all other costs incurred by the journals (i.e. a full cost model). Therefore:
 - From 2012, SSPH+ forced *Springer* to adapt the IJPH publisher contract in order to share revenues with SSPH+ as the owner of IJPH. This generated enough revenues for SSPH+ to cover related costs. However, the contract was based on a hybrid publishing model and was opaque. Springer never disclosed the intransparent subscriptions nor details of the revenues.
 - In 2021, SSPH+ contracted the Swiss-based publisher *Frontiers* to provide publishing services for IJPH, based on a very clear, transparent and fair publishing service fee (paid per published article).
 - In 2021, SSPH+ also contracted *Frontiers* to provide publishing services for PHR, identical to the model used by IJPH, ending the aggressive publisher contract PHR previously had with BMC (*Springer*).
- f) Additional revenues – if any – are invested into the SSPH+ APC Waiver Program for authors from low-income countries and training for SSPH+ PhD students, including the innovative Young Researchers Editorial program ([YRE](#)).
- g) The SSPH+ journals comply with highest international standards to provide top quality peer review. The journals also comply with all seven criteria listed by JUFO as a condition for "Level 1".
- h) As confirmed by independent constituencies such as Clarivate, SCOPUS, DOAJ and others, *Frontiers* meets all industry standards in its provision of ethical publishing services to SSPH+. In contrast to IJPH's previous publisher Springer, *Frontiers* cannot interfere in editorial decisions or strategies. The peer review process of the SSPH+ journals runs under the sole and independent responsibility and leadership of the internationally respected scientists who have agreed to act as editors of the SSPH+ journals. All final decisions (rejection or acceptance) on all peer reviewed manuscripts of the SSPH+ journals are made jointly by one handling editor and one co-editor-in-chief, i.e. by two recognized experts in the field of the peer-reviewed manuscripts. Thus, neither the SSPH+ Foundation nor the publisher have any influence on the editorial decisions or strategies of the two journals. Moreover, to omit any conflicts of interest, editors' honoraria are in no way dependent on editorial decisions.

2) The JUFO classification is dysfunctional

- a) As early as fall 2024, JUFO announced its plan to defame the SSPH+ journals in 2025 by downgrading them from “Level 1” to “grey area Level 0”. This plan was a clear message to scientists that they should no longer trust the SSPH+ journals. The occasional claim of JUFO that “Level 0” is not a “black list” is purely semantic and contradicted by the JUFO website, which states unequivocally that “...so-called predatory journals” would end up at Level 0 and that JUFO “...can not recommend publication in the channel without reservation” (see [here](#), last accessed 2.2.25). In other words: SSPH+ journals were classified in the same category as predatory journals – an outrageous defamation.
- b) JUFO never approached SSPH+ to discuss their new “reservations” about the SSPH+ journals, nor were the reasons for the change from Level 1 to 0 ever disclosed. Instead, the widespread sharing of the JUFO announcement reached SSPH+ by coincidence just before Christmas, via alarmed colleagues in Germany who had detected the smear campaign on LinkedIn, Retraction Watch and other social media channels.
- c) SSPH+ was forced to use the winter holidays to write a [letter](#), sent on 30.12.2024, asking JUFO to refrain from the ill-defined downgrading of the SSPH+ journals.
- d) Neither prior to the downgrading announcement (in fall 2024) nor after receiving our letter did JUFO assess the classification of the SSPH+ journals. Instead, JUFO refused to comply with the prime JUFO duty, namely to *classify journals based on the JUFO classification scheme*. JUFO did not assess whether the SSPH+ journals met the seven JUFO criteria required for the Level 1+ classification. A very quick search would prove to JUFO beyond any doubt that the SSPH+ journals meet all seven Level 1 criteria.
- e) JUFO decided instead to implement the defamation without any evidence: between January 6, 2025 (still listed as Level 1 journals) and January 13, JUFO moved the SSPH+ journals to “grey area Level 0”.
- f) On January 16, JUFO responded in an arrogant and insulting email that “the next evaluation rounds of proposals will take place in March and May 2025.” Thus, instead of correcting their misconduct immediately, JUFO decided to hold on to their unethical defamation for a few more months.
- g) Despite all the evidence and facts presented in our letter, the JUFO email included a false rationale: “*While JUFO is concerned about the standard operating models of MDPI and Frontiers journals, we are particularly willing to reconsider journals backed up by non-profit communities, such as Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+)*” (see [here](#)). As clearly outlined in many details, the SSPH+ journals are by no means “backed up by a non-profit community”. Instead, SSPH+ is the one and only owner of these journals and takes full responsibility and leadership for the entire publishing model of the two highly respected independent journals (see above). The SSPH+ journals are neither MDPI nor Frontiers journals, nor do these publishers have any influence on the SSPH+ publishing model or on decisions made by the independent editors, the Editorial Office, or the SSPH+ Directorate and Foundation Board. To call this model “backed up” is further evidence of JUFO’s fundamental ignorance of the scientific publishing business and its inability to assess the classification of journals.
- h) Outraged by this unethical violation of scientific standards, Nino Künzli sent a response to the JUFO board ([email](#) from 17.1.25).
- i) As of today, IJPH and PHR are still “black-listed”, meaning Finnish scientists still see the false claim on the JUFO portal that researchers cannot trust the SSPH+ journals.

3) Long-term consequences of JUFO’s attack on the integrity of SSPH+ journals

JUFO’s defamation has major long-term consequences for the reputation, and therefore survival, of the SSPH+ journals, summarized as follows:

- a) Finnish researchers and their PhD students depend on JUFO classifications when determining their publication strategies. Scientists assume that JUFO, as a publicly funded committee, is a “trustworthy authority” that makes transparent and evidence-based decisions. Scientists lack the time and expertise to qualify the work of JUFO and therefore will not recognize that JUFO launched a smear campaign based on conspiracy-like decisions, without any rational argument, evidence or objective classification criteria.

- b) Trust and reputation are in essence conditions for the success and survival of an independent open access journal. Building trust is a long-term investment, whereas destroying trust can be accomplished in a very short time through the spread of defamations, rumors and false claims, as practiced by JUFO.
- c) Rumors about a bad reputation spread very fast and persist for months and years after the “correction” of a downgrade. Thus, a mere upgrade will not repair the reputational damage. Instead, SSPH+ is forced to proactively adopt costly communication strategies in the coming years in order not to lose leading scientists. These include social media campaigns, promotional outlets and physical presence at scientific conferences, letters and editorials, additional work by editors to lead topical calls, and possibly lowering or waiving APC .
- d) The JUFO attack discourages credible scientists from submitting their work to an SSPH+ journal. Junior scientists, in particular PhD students, will make an effort to avoid the SSPH+ journals so as not to jeopardize their own careers. They will also remember in the years to come that SSPH+ journals “cannot be trusted”. In fact, it is well known from the literature that submissions to journals whose reputation is damaged – rightly or wrongly – can collapse over time.
- e) The consequences of the defamation go far beyond Finland and are particularly drastic in the highly multidisciplinary field of public health sciences. Finland has a long tradition of a very strong and internationally respected public health research community. Finnish scientists are extremely well rooted in international research consortia where international teams co-author and co-publish public health research findings. Finnish researchers regularly published in the SSPH+ journals. However, given the JUFO defamation, Finnish co-authors will be forced to discourage PhD students, colleagues and international (in particular European) research consortia from publishing in the SSPH+ journals. Given the dominance of authors from Europe, this poses a dramatic threat to both SSPH+ journals.
- f) The JUFO defamation causes a very high economic long-term risk for SSPH+. The SSPH+ journals do not receive any public funding, and must be fully self-supporting as Gold Open Access (OA) journals (see above). Thus, the journals rely on revenues from the publication of research papers that have passed the rigorous peer review process led by independent editors.
- g) The JUFO defamation came at a very critical time, as the difficult transition from an unethical hybrid model to a Gold Open Access model coincided with the pandemic. The latter has put enormous pressure and strains on editors and reviewers and led to a strong decline in the [Journal Impact Factor](#) of almost all public health sciences journals, including the SSPH+ journals.

4) We ask you for support and action

In light of this unprecedented threat from an authority acting under the umbrella of the Ministry of Science and Culture, we A) request adequate compensation for the long-term consequences of JUFO’s defamation, and B) advise you to immediately dissolve the JUFO panel and block the unprofessional JUFO portal and its poor classification scheme.

A) Rationale for requesting a grant from your Ministry (€350’000) to offset the losses

We hope you agree with us that the not-for-profit SSPH+ Foundation cannot accept this unprecedented and publicly funded defamation by JUFO and cannot bear the inevitable economic damage alone. The financial damage has three interrelated dimensions:

- To deal with the JUFO attack, SSPH+ must launch a range of activities led by the Editorial Office. These include all investigations into JUFO’s misconduct, and writing various letters and emails to inform editors, authors and reviewers and the wider science community about JUFO’s defamation. The costs of this related workload has already exceeded CHF 11’000 and there is no end in sight for the coming months.
- Inevitably, the JUFO defamation will adversely affect submissions to IJPH and PHR. First, the number of high-quality manuscripts will decrease given the “Level 0” attack. Second, submissions of poor-quality manuscripts will likely increase as scientists under pressure to publish may submit weaker manuscripts to the SSPH+ journals – especially those that have been repeatedly rejected in other journals. Third, our

editors will need to lead and launch targeted calls to ensure that leading research teams continue to consider the SSPH+ journals. These three consequences of JUFO's defamation will substantially increase the workload – thus, the costs – of the SSPH+ Editorial Management Office and the independent editors of the SSPH+ journals.

- In contrast to many other journals, SSPH+ decided to use part of the journals' revenues to pay editors a modest honorarium for handling the peer review process. The peer review of submissions with inadequate quality comes with a much larger workload given the complexity of peer reviews, the revision procedures and the higher rejection rates. The economic loss of this vicious circle not only leads to a higher number of manuscripts being handled, but also to a higher rejection rate and therefore a peer review service that ends up with no income, since APC fees are only charged if a paper has successfully passed peer review.
- The resulting loss of revenues forces SSPH+ to limit or even end the support for the SSPH+ APC Waiver Program, **launched in particular to provide authors from low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) the opportunity to publish articles with a successful peer review free of charge**. Losing the APC Waiver Program is a prime threat to the SSPH+ journals' strategy of providing a platform for high-quality research conducted in and by LMIC scientists who normally cannot afford APC fees. The SSPH+ journals have an excellent track record of regularly publishing work from LMIC research groups, which contrasts sharply with the record of JUFO "Level 3" journals, which are dominated by the global North.

Thus, we are requesting a grant of €350'000 to enable the Finnish Ministry for Science and Culture to become an official supporter of the innovative SSPH+ GLOBEQUITY Fee Waiver Program. SSPH+ launched this program with the support of the swissuniversities' [Open Science](#) program, but the funding cycle is coming to an end. GLOBEQUITY waived the APC publication fees for all accepted publications whose first-author is a scientist from an LMIC institution. Although SSPH+ embraces the OA move with enthusiasm, we share the major concern of LMIC scientists: the OA model amplifies global inequities in science. Without the grant from your Ministry, the SSPH+ journals can no longer sustain GLOBEQUITY. We strongly believe that your Ministry shares the vision of fostering public health research at academic institutions in LMICs. The proposed grant will provide the funding bridge for GLOBEQUITY for the next 2 to 3 years, a crucial period for SSPH+'s attempts to move its journals to a Diamond OA model and repair the enormous damage caused by JUFO's defamation.

As long as the GLOBEQUITY program is supported with funds from the Finnish Ministry of Science and Culture, the Ministry will be listed as a co-funder of the SSPH+ APC Waiver Program, both on the journals' website and on the GLOBEQUITY page of [SSPH+](#). Once a year, the SSPH+ Directorate office will provide a list of all manuscripts co-funded by your Ministry.

B) Please dissolve JUFO and its classification portal

We advise you to dissolve the incompetent and unprofessional JUFO panel, block the use of the opaque and unscientific JUFO classification scheme, and reevaluate the tasks and responsibilities of the next classification board. There are many reasons to do this quickly. Let us refer to just a few in order to illustrate the dysfunctionality of the JUFO classifications:

- a) Even a very brief look at the JUFO [classification](#) scheme (accessed 2.2.25) reveals a fundamental lack of conceptual rigor and competence in the field of scientific publishing. The absence of objective classification criteria opens the door to biased and unfounded (if not conspiracy-driven) grading decisions, ignoring conflicts of interest of panel members and the threat of interference from interest groups (such as publishers). Although the basic "Level 1" criteria are clear and objectively defined, there is neither transparency nor a reliable or clear rule for upgrading journals from Level 1 to Level 2 or Level 3. Thus, any efforts to replicate the JUFO upgrading decisions would immediately fail, given the inbuilt room to base decisions on "gut feelings", "personal opinions", "rumors" or undisclosed "lobbying efforts" among JUFO panel members or from peers who raise their voices the loudest, for better or worse.
- b) Despite the well-known fact that "black (or grey) lists" are destined to fail, the JUFO classification scheme persists in promoting its "grey area Level 0" for journals for which the panel claims (undefined) "concerns" exist. The only evidence-based approach would be a humble attempt to define criteria for a "white list". As mentioned above, "Level 0", although labeled as "grey area", is nothing more than a black list for journals

that “cannot be trusted”. Thus, as with other infamous “black lists” such as the anonymous “predatoryjournals.org”, JUFO’s promotion of a grey “black list” invites JUFO members to spread biased defamations and conspiracies instead of supporting scientists in quality assessment. Thus, JUFO contravenes its own official purpose, which is to act as “a classification system for scientific journals, book series, conferences and book publishers that supports the quality assessment of research output” (website accessed on 30.01.25). Instead, the JUFO classification scheme does not contribute in any way to the “assessment of research quality”.

c) Worst of all, the JUFO panel refuses to consider the few objectively defined criteria such as the seven basic “Level 1” classification criteria or the only “measurable” criterion listed as one of four conditions for upgrading to Level 3. Please note in particular:

- The SSPH+ journals are not the only “grey area Level 0” journals that are fully compliant with all seven “Level 1 criteria”. In fact, several other respected, independent journals in the field of public health sciences are also being defamed by JUFO. Instead of fulfilling its classification task, JUFO created a random, offensive and fundamentally biased “Level 0” list, with no disclosure of the rationale for the downgrading. JUFO instead outsources the task of classification to any scientists who have the time and willingness to do the assessment themselves and make a “request” to be removed from the black list.
- JUFO ignores its own Level 1 and Level 3 classification criteria when it comes to upgrading journals to the highest “Level 3”. JUFO Level 1 Criterion Nr. 4 states: “**Editorial board:** The publication channel’s editorial board constitutes of experts, who mainly include researchers working in universities or research institutes.” The only objective JUFO “Level 3” criterion reemphasizes this condition with the underscored statement: “The channels have international authors and readers *and the editorial boards are constituted by the leading researcher in the field.*” In fact, this criterion is fully in line with the **Guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors**. The 2024 update states, under 2. *Editorial Freedom, editors-in-chief have full authority over the entire editorial content of their journal and the timing of publication of that content. Journal owners should not interfere in the evaluation, selection, scheduling, or editing of individual articles either directly or by creating an environment that strongly influences decisions.* SSPH+ fully agrees that the independence and leading expertise of the editors are crucial conditions to guarantee the quality of peer review and omit business-driven conflicts of interest in editorial decisions.

However, ignorant of this criterion, JUFO lists several journals as “Level 3” that do not comply with the required editorial model at all. For example, several Elsevier and SpringerNature titles appear as “Level 3” journals, but neither the Editors-in-Chief nor the Handling Editors are experts in the field or even leading independent scientists. Instead, in the business model of many Gold OA journals of these hybrid publishers, Editors-in-Chief and Handling Editors are in fact staff of the publisher, with meager research or publication records. Thus, the central decision makers in the peer review process are neither experts nor outside the influential environment of the publisher.

In summary, within Level 2 and 3, JUFO promotes journals from hybrid publishers with serious conflicts-of-interest that violate the basic Level 1 criteria.

d) JUFO aggressively jeopardizes Open Access publishing despite the EU agreement on the OA publishing visions and the related Plan-S. The biased downgrade rationale claims to attack “Gold Open Access” publishing models. On one side, it collectively criticizes journals from the two largest Gold OA publishers. On the other side it lists as Level 2 and Level 3 Gold OA journals from publishers that a) continue to jeopardize the move to OA, b) defend the unethical hybrid/subscription business model, and c) charge extremely high APC fees (paid with taxpayer money) that are up to five times higher than the APC fees charged by the fully self-funded Gold OA journals of SSPH+ or those charged by the criticized Gold OA publishers. Thus, JUFO’s classification decisions endorses the shareholders of the extremely profitable hybrid publishers RELX (Elsevier) and SpringerNature, while raising “concerns” about Gold OA journals with

far lower revenue margins. This is particularly concerning given that the excessive profits of private hybrid publishers are largely funded by taxpayer money.

- e) The incompetence of the flawed JUFO classification scheme is also shown by a quick look at the public health journals listed as “Level 2”. In light of the mere absence of any objective criteria to distinguish between Level 2 and Level 1, the randomness of the Level 2 selection comes with little surprise. For example, whereas the International Journal of Public Health of SSPH+ was listed as Level 1 (until its recent downgrade to Level 0), the European Journal of Public Health appears as “Level 2”. The international public health science community would certainly agree that these “friendly competing” international journals are indistinguishable in terms of quality, rigor, interest, content and outreach. The sole explanation for putting these two international journals in different categories is the unprofessional, subjective and non-transparent classification procedure of JUFO.

In summary, the JUFO classification scheme lacks scientific rigor, professionalism and objectivity. Reliance on this scheme is a threat to science, the credibility of science, and the move to Open Access. JUFO is dysfunctional due to its inability to adhere to its own few objective classification criteria. Thus, JUFO jeopardizes not only the future of the SSPH+ journals, but also attacks European and national efforts to promote fair and transparent Open Access publications. Dissolving JUFO and its ill-defined classification scheme offers the Ministry of Science and Culture the opportunity to call for an evidence-based quality-assessment concept in support of Finnish scientists.

We are happy to provide our expertise and insights into the world of publishing to a new unbiased JUFO panel, and we are looking forward to the installment of the proposed APC Waiver Grant.

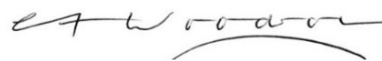
We look forward to your response.

With best regards,

Prof. em Nino Künzli, MD PhD
SSPH+ representative of the SSPH+ journals
Co-Editor in Chief IJPH



Dr. Christopher Woodrow
Managing Editor, SSPH+ Editorial Office



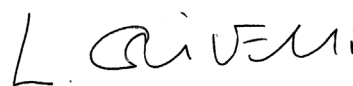
Prof. Milo Puhan, MD PhD
President of the SSPH+ Foundation Board
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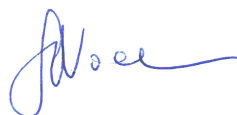
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The SSPH+ letter from 30.12.2024 and all related communications can be found on the [SSPH+ website](#).