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Ranking and citation rat race is hurting India's academic reputation

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The rising obsession of Indian institutions with metrics and rankings is leading to a crisis in academia, with dire consequences for the credibility of research emanating from the country.

Academic contributions have been reduced to a numbers game, and institutions are being measured by their publication count or citation scores, not by the originality or real-world impact of their research. In this atmosphere, academic integrity is often the first casualty. Some universities have resorted to dubious practices, including manipulating publication metrics, to climb the Indian and global rankings ladder.

A recent article in the journal *Science* highlights the proliferation of “shoddy commentaries” designed solely to game the metrics system. Researchers demonstrated how some institutions artificially created citation networks to inflate their visibility.

The data accompanying the study reveals that some Indian institutions are producing hundreds of low-quality papers annually. This practice not only distorts the true quality of research but also diverts resources and attention away from meaningful academic pursuits.

Additionally, a study published by MIT Press uncovers troubling practices within Indian academia. Fourteen Indian universities appearing in global rankings were found to engage in questionable authorship and affiliation

tactics. These include honorary authorship, where researchers are listed as co-authors despite making no substantive contributions, and strategic collaborations designed to inflate the perceived research output.

This trend is further fuelled by a well-organised ecosystem of services. Companies openly advertise “solutions” for research scholars, offering services ranging from paper writing and publication to tailored plagiarism reduction. Some even promise guaranteed results within a fixed timeline. This ecosystem reduces academic publishing to a commercial transaction, undermining the very foundation of scholarly work.

While metrics such as the H-index, impact factor, and citation counts can provide useful insights, they should not be treated as ends in themselves. This trend is particularly damaging for young researchers who, instead of focusing on innovative and impactful research, are often forced to adopt unethical practices just to remain competitive.

This also puts the global reputation of Indian academia at stake. As more universities engage in these practices, international collaborators and funding agencies may become skeptical of research originating from India. This could jeopardise valuable partnerships and slow down the country's contributions to global scientific advancements.

To address this growing crisis, policymakers, regulatory bodies, academies, and academic leaders must come together to restore integrity and ensure sustainable practices.

1. Transparent and rigorous peer review: Journals, particularly those in the grey or predatory zones, must adopt stricter review processes. Indian institutions should encourage their researchers to publish in journals that adhere to globally accepted ethical and quality standards. Our Institutions of Eminence should publicly list reputable

journals to guide researchers in selecting high-quality platforms for publishing.

2. Regular audits and accountability: Regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission should enforce periodic audits of research publications to uphold academic integrity. India's esteemed science and engineering academies can collaborate with regulatory bodies to carry out these audits effectively. Institutions engaging in unethical practices should face stringent penalties, including withdrawal of funding or recognition. Additionally, faculty associated with publications in dubious journals should be disqualified from holding administrative or leadership roles within universities. Establishing a transparent and rigorous auditing mechanism will serve as a deterrent to unethical practices and foster accountability in academia.

3. Evolving new metrics, and creating awareness: India must commission studies to develop more holistic research metrics that account for factors such as research integrity, inter-disciplinarity, and societal impact rather than relying on outdated metrics like the H-index and impact factor. Institutions should also invest in training programs that educate faculty and students about research ethics and the long-term consequences of malpractice. Workshops and seminars can foster a culture of integrity and reduce the allure of shortcuts.

India's institutions have much to be proud of. Their contributions to high-impact research and their growing presence in global knowledge systems are commendable. From pioneering the Green Revolution to advancements in space exploration, biotechnology, atomic energy and renewable energy, Indian academia has consistently addressed critical global challenges. However, the race for rankings must not come at the cost of ethics and quality.

By prioritising genuine contributions and creating a supportive environment for ethical research, Indian institutions can uphold their legacy as beacons of knowledge and innovation. Failure to address this crisis will not only harm individual institutions but also tarnish the image of Indian academia on the global stage.

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