

India targets universities in predatory-journal crackdown

But academics say government incentives to publish are part of the problem.

Subhra Priyadarshini



Prakash Javadekar, the minister responsible for higher education, says universities must help the government thwart predatory publishing. Credit: Vipin Kumar/Hindustan Times/Getty

Most academics regard predatory journals as an irritant – if not a threat – to science. But in India, some universities have recommended the inclusion of such publications in the country’s ‘white list’ of approved journals. Now the government is cracking down on this practice, which scientists say came about as a result of perverse government incentives.

“We will end this menace of predatory journals,” Prakash Javadekar, the minister responsible for higher education, told parliament last month. Universities now have until the end of August to revise their recommendations for the journal white list to avoid predatory publications, which actively solicit manuscripts and charge authors hefty fees without providing the services they advertise, such as editing and peer review.

Predatory journals are a problem because research funding is wasted on deceptive publishers who don't deliver what they promised. A major international journalistic investigation, published in multiple media outlets last month, estimated that the number of papers put out by five major predatory publishers has tripled since 2013 – to about 175,000 articles.

Performance link

Many publishers that host suspected predatory journals are based in India. And multiple studies have found that a high proportion of articles in such journals come from academics in the country^{1,2}.

Many Indian academics blame this situation on the nation's system for assessing academic performance. In 2010, India's higher-education regulatory and funding agency, the University Grants Commission (UGC), introduced a system to evaluate academics called the Academic Performance Indicator, which places considerable weight on the number of research publications. Universities must use the indicator to hire and promote faculty members. But scientists have complained that this encourages academics and universities to focus on the quantity of publications, rather than their quality.

To reduce the practice of publishing in sub-standard journals, the UGC released a white list in January 2017 of approved journals. The list contained approximately 32,000 publications indexed on science-citation databases such as Web of Science and Scopus, as well as more than 5,000 publications recommended by universities. But researchers quickly pointed out that it also included predatory journals.

Virander Singh Chauhan, who chairs the UGC committee that assesses and accredits higher-education institutions and who oversaw the list, says that the predatory journals had been recommended by some universities, and that the UGC had learnt of this only later. Unless universities stop doing this, "nothing can get rid of fake journals in India", says Chauhan. Currently, he says, universities can simply recommend journals, and make minimal effort to check a publication's quality.

Greater awareness

In May, the UGC removed 4,305 journals from the list on the grounds of poor quality, or because incorrect or insufficient information about the journal had been provided. (The group will update the list with universities' revised recommendations.) Chauhan says that introducing stricter criteria for registering journals on the UGC list would reduce the number of predatory publications.

Astrophysicist Ajit Kembhavi says the government's plan to crack down on university-proposed journals is a good first step, but that the bigger problem is how universities are evaluated and funded.

A more permanent solution would be to decouple academic assessments from a researcher's number of publications, says Kembhavi, from the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune, one of seven university consortia set up by the UGC to allow universities to share infrastructure and resources.

Kembhavi says that more also needs to be done to promote greater awareness of predatory journals among academics in India and to educate them about research ethics.

In China, where some universities reward academics based on the number of publications, the government is working on a blacklist of journals it deems to be of poor quality, or set up only for profit. Research published in these journals will not count towards promotion or grant applications, and the authors will also receive a warning.

Bhushan Patwardhan, a biologist at Savitribai Phule Pune University and a vocal critic of dubious publishing practices, says the Indian government should also show zero tolerance towards academics who publish in these journals. There are currently no repercussions for academics who do this. He says the government should introduce rules similar to regulations introduced to detect and punish plagiarism at universities, which came into effect in July. “If faculty members are allowed to get away with such practices, what would stop them from doing this again?” says Patwardhan.

Nature **560**, 537-538 (2018)

doi: 10.1038/d41586-018-06048-2

References

1. Xia, J. *et al.* *J. Assoc. Inform. Sci. Technol.* **66**, 1406–1417 (2015).
 2. Shamseer, L. *et al.* *BMC Med.* **15**, 28 (2017).
-

[show more](#) ▼

Nature ISSN 1476-4687 (online)

natureresearch

[About us](#)

[Press releases](#)

[Press office](#)

[Contact us](#)



SPRINGER NATURE

© 2020 Springer Nature Limited