



Wither

ACADEMIC PUBLISHING?

By: Prof. Dato' Dr. Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed

In an opinion piece to The Guardian dated July 16, 2024, Aras Abizadeh, Angus Professor of Political Science at McGill University, Canada, wrote: "The annual revenues of ... commercial publishers are each in the billions, and some have staggering profit margins approaching 40%, surpassing even the likes of Google. Meanwhile, academics do almost all of the substantive work to produce these articles free of charge: we do the research, write the articles, vet them for quality and edit the journals." [1]

He further opined, "The commercial stranglehold on academic publishing is doing considerable damage to our intellectual and scientific culture. As disinformation and propaganda spread freely online, genuine research and scholarship remains gated and prohibitively expensive." [1]

In an article published in The Conversation on March 24, 2025, entitled "Academic publishing is a multibillion-dollar industry. It's not always good for science", Jo Adetunji stated, "the expansion of research, combined with an influx of commercial publishing players and the rise of the internet in the 1990s, have transformed journal publishing into a highly concentrated and competitive media business." [2]

A further contention against the profit-oriented intention of certain publishers was, "A key factor in their profitability is volunteer labour provided by researchers. Traditional models of peer review are a good example of this. Academics provide publishers with content, in the form of journal articles. They also review their peers' work for free. University libraries then pay for access to the final published journal on behalf of their research community." [2]

Academic publication in refereed journals is an important element of the academic world as a platform for sharing and disseminating knowledge [3]. It is also a major requirement for postgraduate students to complete their studies. Many, if not all, universities place publication as one of the key performance indicators (KPI) in the annual performance assessment of academic staff. Academic publication highlights the research strength of a country and contributes to the World Competitiveness Index, indirectly attracting foreign investors.

Some lecturers opt for Open Access publication to quickly achieve the set KPIs. [4] However, it has been suggested that several Open Access journals are partly predatory, too multidisciplinary, profit-driven, lack quality control, have questionable refereeing processes, and very short publication times [5].

Universities and grant providers have allocated large funds to pay Article Processing Charges (APC) for journal publications. To date, over 17,000 predatory journals have been detected based on the Cabells' Predatory Reports. [6]



This situation is unhealthy and may affect public trust, the scholarship of researchers, the credibility of institutions, and the image of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) at both national and international levels.

A one-year project themed 'A study on the Practice of Publishing Scientific Articles by Malaysian Academics' was commissioned to researchers from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in 2024-2025. The aims of the study were to:

- review the involvement of Malaysian academics in predatory journal and conference publishing activities
- identify the experiences and effects of poor-quality publishing practices on academics who have been involved including the influence of peers
- formulate a policy, and propose guidelines and strategies on good governance practices to prevent publications in predatory journals

Both the quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group discussion, FGD) methods were applied. A total of 935 academics responded to the online survey, constituting researchers from public and private universities. The survey examined respondents' personal publication practice, perceptions of predatory journals, involvement with predatory publications, challenges in avoiding them, and solutions to minimise such publications.

Eighteen (18) prolific researchers identified by their respective universities participated in the FGD using the Nominal Group Technique. Three main focus areas were discussed, namely issues contributing to predatory publication practices, solutions to curb or overcome these practices, and good governance practices that can be implemented across universities in Malaysia.

The results of the study have been submitted to MOHE for further action. In addition, policies, guidelines and the do's and don'ts of academic publishing are proposed as good practices.

The policy aims to explain the philosophy of journal publications among academic researchers in Malaysia, develop a structured implementation plan, including institutional support mechanisms and monitoring systems, and recommend capacity-building initiatives, such as training and mentorship programs, to enhance researchers' understanding of ethical publishing practices.

Guidelines on publishing high impact and credible journal articles establish clear criteria and standards for selecting credible indexed journals to prevent engagement with predatory publishers. They also outline best practices for writing and structuring high-quality research articles that meet the standards of reputable journals.

Finally, a self-assessment tool for researchers to determine the credibility of journals is proposed. This tool will help researchers evaluate the credibility and legitimacy of journals before submitting their work, based on key indicators, and provide red flags to identify predatory journals and unethical publication practices. It will also serve as an educational resource to enhance researchers' awareness of ethical publishing and journal selection best practices.

To conclude, this study has investigated the challenges surrounding quality research publication and the need to be wary of predatory journals. By identifying key gaps and proposing targeted recommendations, it aims to support researchers, institutions, funding agencies and policymakers in strengthening academic publishing standards, thus avoiding the withering of academic publishing.

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