

ADDRESSING PREDATORY PUBLISHING IN SRI LANKA: UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES

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INTRODUCTION

More than ten years ago, Jeffrey Beall claimed to be the creator of the term "predatory journal." It has grown in importance among the academic community. Many articles were presented regarding the issues caused by predatory journals, the impact of improperly evaluated manuscripts, and how to lessen them. An increase in predatory journals coincides with the expansion of the open access publishing paradigm (Beshyah et al., 2018). Rather than encouraging high-quality research or information dissemination, these predatory publishers prioritize their bottom line over peer review, often operating with little to none at all. Academic evaluation of research publications becomes crucial and is also a fundamental component. Publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals is the benchmark for academic excellence and the most important way to share research findings (Hebrang Grgić & Guskić, 2019).

The rise of predatory publishing is highly linked to the evolving landscape of academic publishing, especially in the context of the open-access movement. While open-access publishing was originally designed to facilitate access to scholarly content and promote knowledge dissemination without financial barriers, it inadvertently gave rise to predatory publishers who exploit this model (Björk, 2011). Predatory journals typically offer to publish papers quickly for a fee, without providing the rigorous peer review that is essential for maintaining academic standards. This practice creates an environment in which researchers, particularly those under pressure to publish for career advancement or funding purposes, may unknowingly or intentionally fall prey to unethical publishers (Beshyah et al., 2018).

In Sri Lanka, the issue of predatory publishing has become increasingly relevant as the country works to strengthen its research output and global standing. Sri Lankan universities are striving to boost their research capacity and contribute to the international academic community. However, with the increased emphasis on research productivity, scholars often face immense pressure to publish in reputed journals. This pressure, coupled with limited access to high-quality journals and a lack of awareness regarding the dangers of predatory publishers, has created a situation where researchers are vulnerable to falling victim to these exploitative practices. The consequences of publishing in predatory journals are severe, including the erosion of academic credibility, the potential retraction of publications, and the loss of opportunities for genuine scholarly impact.

One of the primary challenges in combating predatory publishing is the lack of awareness among researchers about the hallmarks of predatory journals. Many predatory publishers use sophisticated tactics to mimic legitimate academic journals, making it difficult for inexperienced researchers to distinguish between reputable and unethical publishers. In response, universities must prioritize education and training programs that equip researchers with the knowledge and tools to identify predatory journals. Workshops, seminars, and online resources can be valuable platforms for raising awareness about predatory publishing practices, providing researchers with the skills to evaluate the credibility of journals before submitting their work. Additionally, university libraries can play a pivotal role by offering resources and guidance on trusted databases and indexes, such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Scopus, and Web of Science, which help ensure the legitimacy of scholarly publications.

Beyond raising awareness, universities must also implement policies that address predatory publishing within their academic frameworks. These policies should include guidelines for assessing the

quality of publications submitted for academic evaluation, such as for tenure or promotion. By establishing clear criteria for what constitutes a legitimate publication, universities can create a culture of accountability and academic rigor. For instance, institutions can mandate that only articles published in journals indexed in recognized databases or those that adhere to rigorous peer review processes are considered for academic advancement. Furthermore, universities can require researchers to disclose the journals in which their work is published, enabling institutional oversight and reducing the risk of predatory publishing. This paper aims to discuss the policies and guidelines implemented at the respective universities to evaluate the authenticity of the academic publications.

1.1 Research Questions

- Q₁. What specific policies have Sri Lankan universities implemented to detect and prevent predatory publishing among their academic staff?
- Q₂. How effective are the current protective measures in Sri Lankan universities to prevent spread of predatory publications and preserving research integrity?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, a mixed-methods approach utilized, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach will enable a comprehensive understanding of both the policies and effectiveness of protective measures against predatory publishing in Sri Lankan Universities.

LITERATURE

The growth of open access publishing model allowed a path for the predatory publishers also. Majority of the open access journals are authentic, which are published by very reputed publishers, professional bodies and research institutions. But some of the journals are questionable in the quality. The appraisal of research publication is a major criterion considered for the academic promotions. Awareness about the predatory journals is very important for the researchers and academics to select suitable journals for their publication. A study was conducted among the young academics in Sri Lankan university sector using structured questionnaire, and concluded that only 15% of the respondents were aware about predatory journals. It shows that, there is a need to create awareness among academics about predatory journals (Marika, 2020).

The study measured the awareness of predatory open-access journals among academics. The population of the study was permanent academic staff members attached to the Faculty of Management and Business Studies, University of Jaffna. The results of this study revealed that 22.85% of the staff were fully knowledgeable about the open-access system and 40% knowledgeable. Faculty members prioritized the listed factors considered during the journal selection, such as duration of the publication process, impact factor, the peer review process, quality of the editorial board, publication costs, editorial support, and journal indexing. Weight score calculated based on the preference level and Journal Indexing (209) was highly prioritized by the respondents, followed by the Impact factor (179), publication cost (177), and peer review process (168) in journal selection. Nearly 70% of the study participants know about predatory publishing, and 28.5% of the respondents may have heard about it, but they were not sure about predatory publications. Among the respondents, all were aware of at least any systems to differentiate the predatory journal from the legitimate journal. The study suggests that there is a need to conduct more awareness programs to educate the predatory open-access publications (Janen et al., 2022).

Different countries have actively addressing predatory journals, evaluate awareness in academic communities, examine the effects of predatory publishing on research quality, and compile policies

designed to combat these unethical practices. This study summarizes that, Predatory publishing poses a global threat to research integrity, particularly in under-resourced regions. Addressing this requires enhanced education, awareness, and policies to ensure ethical publishing practices. The study highlights the need for concerted global efforts to strengthen scholarly standards and mitigate the risks of predatory journals (Martinino et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

4.1 What specific policies have Sri Lankan universities implemented to detect and prevent predatory publishing among their academic staff?

Sri Lanka's academic community have raised bells about the rising number of sub-standard publications by university academics in non-recognized and predatory journals originating from different parts of the world. A recent study by a team led by Prof. L. P. Jayatissa from the University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka makes the stating observation that open access fake journals have been brought to the attention of the university authorities in the country that many such publications were used by academics to claim points when they applied for academic positions and promotions. Some practices initiated by the Sri Lankan universities were discussed below.

4.1.1 Guideline for Identifying Predatory and Non-Predatory Publications – University of Peradeniya

The document titled "Guideline for Identifying Predatory and Non-Predatory Publications - FAHS" provides detailed guidelines for recognizing predatory journals and ensuring scholarly publications meet proper academic standards. Here's a summary of the key points:

(i) Identifying Predatory Publishing

Predatory publishing is defined as an exploitative open-access business model that charges fees to authors without ensuring proper editorial processes or scientific merit. Some key indicators include:

- 1) Poor website quality (spelling errors, distorted images)
- 2) Manuscripts submitted via email
- 3) Promises of rapid publication
- 4) Low publication fees (e.g., less than \$150 USD)
- 5) Lack of a clear manuscript handling process or retraction policy

(ii) Importance of Avoiding Predatory Publishing

Predatory journals undermine academic integrity. Institutions like the University Grants Commission (UGC) require applicants to verify that their work is not published in predatory journals when applying for promotions.

(iii) Recognized Non-Predatory Journals

To ensure publications are credible, journals listed in recognized directories like Web of Science, PubMed, Scopus, and DOAJ are recommended. Journals that are members of COPE, OASPA, or STM are also considered legitimate.

(iv) Screening for FAHS Research Awards

For research awards at FAHS, publications must be in non-predatory journals. The guidelines are used to screen and verify journal credentials, ensuring only reputable, non-predatory publications are considered for merit awards. This document emphasizes the importance of academic integrity by providing a structured approach to distinguishing between predatory and legitimate publications.

4.1.2 Publication Ethics for the Academic Staff- University of Jaffna

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jaffna, have initiated a set of processes to address this challenge within the University of Jaffna by raising awareness and creating appropriate mechanisms. As part of the process the publication ethics internal circular was approved by the Senate and adopted by the center for Quality Assurance at the University of Jaffna. University of Jaffna continuously request the academic staff to publish in journals that belong to the following category:

- 1) Journals which are published by the member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).
- 2) Journals which are published by the member of the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA).
- 3) Journals which are included in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).
- 4) Journals published by nationally and internationally acclaimed, established academic institutions, research centers and professional bodies.

Evaluating publications included in applications for academic positions or promotions, only those publications that belong to one or more of the following category will be considered as legitimate and publications that do not fall under any of the following category will be deemed as illegitimate and therefore won't be considered for rewards.

4.1.3 Checking Predatory Journals – University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka

This circular mention about how to identify the predatory journals. It follows two phases,

- (a) Elimination process
- (b) Verification process

Elimination process follow the dichotomous key and five steps to eliminate the journal as predatory. Initially checked for publisher (Local/Foreign) followed by check with Clarivate analytics Master journal list (Listed or Not listed), checked with Beall's list (Listed or not listed) and finally started year of the journals.

Verification process listed the features of predatory journals which are,

- (a) Time duration between the submission date and acceptance/ publication date is very short.
- (b) Differences in the format of the paper within the journal or within the same issue of the journal.
- (c) Obvious language error in the text of manuscript.
- (d) Differences in the format of the reference list of paper in the same journal or different papers within the same issue of the journal.
- (e) Subject discipline of the journal is excessively broad.
- (f) Name of the journal does not adequately reflect its origin.
- (g) There is no periodicity of issues/volumes of the journals
- (h) Very attractive home pages.

Other universities also practicing defined procedures to identifying the predatory publishing. University Grant Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka have started to verify the authenticity of the journals for the CVCD award applications through the procedure by the committee included all the university librarians or their nominees who have involved in this process at their respective universities.

4.2 How effective are the current protective measures in Sri Lankan universities to prevent spread of predatory publications and preserving research integrity?

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, predatory publications pose a significant challenge to research integrity. Sri Lankan universities and academic institutions have implemented several protective

measures to address these issues and maintain research integrity. However, the effectiveness of these measures varies based on the institution and the broader academic culture.

The current protective measures and their effectiveness in preventing predatory publications and preserving research integrity in Sri Lanka:

4.2.1 Increased Awareness and Education

Many Sri Lankan universities have started educating their faculty and students about the dangers of predatory journals. Workshops, seminars, and courses on academic publishing ethics are common, helping researchers identify predatory publishers and avoid submitting their work to dubious outlets.

Effectiveness: Moderate to High. This measure is generally effective in increasing awareness, particularly among early-career researchers. However, despite growing knowledge, some researchers may still be misled or pressured into publishing in predatory outlets, especially when under pressure to meet publication requirements for promotions or academic credit.

4.2.2 Publishing Guidelines and Policies

Universities and academic institutions have adopted publishing guidelines to ensure research quality and integrity. They often provide lists of recognized, high-quality journals or databases, such as those indexed in Web of Science or Scopus, and encourage researchers to publish in these outlets.

Effectiveness: High. Institutions that have clear policies and guidelines for publishing have a stronger defense against predatory publications. However, without enforcement mechanisms, these policies can be ignored or sidestepped by less scrupulous researchers.

4.3 Research Committees

Research Committees (RCs) at universities play a critical role in ensuring that research proposals are scrutinized for ethical considerations. These committees also often review publication venues as part of the research process.

Effectiveness: Moderate. While RCs ensure ethical research conduct, their direct involvement in publication selection is often limited. Researchers may still publish in predatory journals after obtaining ethical clearance if committees are not stringent about post-approval monitoring.

4.4 Promotion and Career Advancement Criteria

In some Sri Lankan universities, academic promotions and career advancements are tied to the number of publications in reputed journals. This acts as an incentive for researchers to publish in high-quality journals and avoid predatory ones. *Effectiveness:* High. When combined with strict criteria on journal quality (e.g., impact factor or indexing), this method can effectively discourage predatory publishing. However, in cases where sheer quantity of publications is prioritized over quality, researchers might resort to predatory outlets to meet these metrics.

4.5 Use of Databases and Predatory Journal Lists

Sri Lankan academic libraries and institutions are increasingly providing access to databases like DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) and Cabell's Whitelist and Blacklist, which help identify reputable journals and flag predatory ones. *Effectiveness:* High. These tools are useful for identifying legitimate outlets, but their success depends on how actively they are used by researchers. Some faculty or students may still overlook these resources in favor of quick publication options.

4.6 Collaboration with International Organizations

Sri Lankan universities collaborate with international organizations such as COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) and follow international best practices for research ethics. These partnerships enhance the country's efforts to combat predatory publishing and uphold research standards. Effectiveness: Moderate. Collaboration with international organizations helps raise standards, but these efforts are still nascent and require further institutionalization across the country to be fully effective.

4.7 Challenges Facing Protective Measures

- *Pressure to Publish:* Sri Lankan academics, especially early-career researchers, often face immense pressure to publish for career advancement, making them more susceptible to predatory journals.
- *Limited Resources and Awareness:* Despite increasing awareness, there remains a gap in knowledge about predatory journals, especially in smaller or less resourced institutions.
- *Weak Enforcement:* Even with policies in place, enforcement may be lax, and researchers may still bypass guidelines without consequences.

CONCLUSION

The protective measures implemented by Sri Lankan universities are improving but still face challenges. Universities have made strides in educating researchers, providing tools to detect predatory journals, and institutionalizing best practices. However, consistent enforcement, further education, and reducing the pressure to publish for career progression are areas that need attention to enhance research integrity and fully combat predatory publishing.

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