

Research Misconduct in University Research and Development Cells and the Fight against Predatory Publishing

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Abstract

The integrity of academic research underpins both university reputations and social advancement. Nevertheless, the demand to publish is commonly described as “publish or perish” and has established conditions that encourage unethical conduct, especially in university Research and Development (R&D) Cells. This paper investigates serious misconduct involving senior research leaders, including Research and Development Directors, Deans and research supervisors, who enable or fail to prevent the use of fraudulent articles and publications in non-indexed or predatory journals to secure thesis approval. Such conduct undermines the standard of doctoral training and also damages institutional credibility. The study synthesises existing guidance issued by international organisations that promote academic integrity, including the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). It evaluates the legal and institutional penalties that may be imposed under both Indian and international legal frameworks to discourage this type of fraud in Research and Development Cells of Universities. The paper highlights the penalties for academic fraud, explicit institutional policies, and strict compliance with indexing standards, all of which are indispensable for protecting research integrity. By combining punitive measures with educational initiatives, universities can cultivate a culture grounded in honesty and accountability to safeguard academic integrity. The findings indicate that restoring confidence in the academic system and ensuring that only original, high-quality research is authorised for thesis submission depends critically on a clear definition of misconduct alongside transparent investigation procedures.

Keywords: Research Misconduct, Predatory Journals, Academic Integrity, University Policy, Research and Development.

Introduction

University systems rest on a foundation of trust. Society assumes that the research conducted within their institutions is honest, genuinely original, and makes a substantive contribution to human knowledge. However, in recent years, this confidence has been weakened by an increase in questionable research practices. Academics and doctoral candidates face overwhelming pressure to publish. Publishing output is the dominant measure for career progression, funding, and institutional rankings. In this context, academia has unintentionally fostered a harmful dimension: predatory publishing and research fraud. The issue is particularly acute within universities' Research and Development (R&D) sections. These departments are tasked with overseeing the quality and integrity of research, especially at the doctoral level. The approval of a thesis for submission is a final and critical gatekeeping step. When Research and Development Cell Directors, Deans, and research supervisors fail in this duty or, worse, actively participate in fraud and the consequences are severe. They compromise the education of future scholars and devalue the currency of a

doctoral degree. This paper examines the penalties that should be imposed on these senior figures for misconduct related to the selection of fraudulent articles and the use of predatory journals for thesis acceptance. This issue spans a far-reaching domain. Predatory journals—frequently absent from reputable indexing platforms such as Scopus and the Web of Science (WOS) by Clarivate Analytics impose publication charges while offering neither peer review nor editorial support. Their operation exists primarily to extract value from the academic system's pressure to publish. When supervisors and higher officials of research and development approve or actively promote publication in these outlets, they contribute to and share responsibility for a broader, systemic breakdown. This paper examines the contours of this misconduct, specifies the functions and duties of key stakeholders, and describes the sanctions available under both Indian and international law. It will further rely on the ethical guidance issued by prominent organisations like COPE, WAME, and DOAJ to recommend a comprehensive framework that universities can implement to address this problem.

Understanding Research Misconduct

Research misconduct is not a single act but a spectrum of illegal behaviours in academic publishing. It includes fabrication of data, falsification of results, plagiarism and AI writing. However, in the context of thesis submission, a more subtle form of misconduct occurs when articles are selected and accepted from predatory journals or non-indexed sources. This practice undermines the very purpose of a doctoral thesis: to contribute original and significant research to a field. A key problem is the “publish or perish” culture in academia. Many Indian universities and international institutions require PhD candidates to publish research before submitting their thesis. This requirement is a well-intentioned effort to ensure research productivity. However, the pressure it creates can prompt candidates and their supervisors to take the path of least resistance, often leading to predatory journals. These journals mimic legitimate publications but lack the rigorous peer review process that validates scientific work. The problem is compounded when R&D Directors and Deans, who are responsible for enforcing quality standards, look the other way or, in some cases, actively endorse these practices to inflate the university's publication numbers. The significance of this issue extends beyond the individual case. When fraudulent research enters the public domain, it can mislead future researchers and waste public funds. It can even have serious implications in fields like medicine or engineering, where flawed research can lead to dangerous practices. Therefore, the penalty for these actions must be severe enough to deter both the individual supervisor and the institution as a whole.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

To appropriately assign penalties, it is essential to define the roles of the individuals involved clearly.

The Research and Development Cell Directors and Deans are the senior administrators and the custodians of research quality. Their responsibilities include establishing clear policies for thesis submission, verifying the legitimacy of journals, and ensuring that all research complies with ethical standards. They are the final authority on whether a thesis is acceptable for submission and evaluation. Their primary duty is to protect the university's academic reputation. Therefore, when they fail to implement robust verification mechanisms or knowingly approve theses containing low-quality or fraudulent work, their negligence constitutes administrative malpractice.

The Associate and Assistant Directors often serve as the operational arm of the research and development department. They manage the day-to-day processes of thesis review and journal verification. They are responsible for screening journals against

recognised indices like Scopus, WOS, and the DOAJ list. When they are complicit in approving publications from non-indexed or predatory sources, they directly facilitate the misconduct. Their penalty must reflect their role in the system's operational failure.

The Research Supervisors are the primary mentor and guide for a doctoral candidate. Their role is to ensure the scientific validity and ethical integrity of the student's work. They are the first line of defence against poor-quality research. A supervisor who encourages a student to publish in a predatory journal, or who fails to exercise due diligence in reviewing the quality of the student's publications, is guilty of a fundamental breach of their academic duty. Their actions compromise their student's education and future career.

Legal and Ethical Frameworks for Penalties

The penalties for such misconduct can be drawn from several sources, creating a comprehensive framework for accountability.

International Ethical Guidelines

Organisations like COPE and WAME provide clear and globally recognised standards. COPE's core principles emphasise transparency and integrity in all aspects of publication. Their guidelines require institutions to have clear policies for handling allegations of misconduct. A key penalty suggested by these bodies is the retraction of published articles and the issuance of formal sanctions against the individuals involved. WAME specifically addresses predatory journals, advising editors and institutions to be vigilant and avoid any association with them. Adhering to the DOAJ's list of legitimate open-access journals is a primary step in ensuring journal quality. These guidelines are not laws, but they are the professional standards to which all reputable universities and researchers are expected to adhere. Failure to follow them is a professional failing that justifies penalties such as loss of membership in professional societies or removal from editorial boards (COPE 2023; WAME 2024).

Indian Legal and Regulatory Framework

In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is the primary regulatory body. It has issued regulations, such as the UGC (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2018. This regulation mandates that universities establish an Academic Integrity Panel (AIP) to handle cases of plagiarism and other forms of misconduct. The UGC also provides a list of approved journals (the UGC-CARE list), which is a powerful tool for universities to verify journal legitimacy. Penalties under the UGC framework can include the cancellation of the degree awarded, the withdrawal of the supervisor's eligibility to guide future research for a specified period, and the dismissal of the faculty member from their post. The UGC regulations are legally binding for all Indian universities and provide a strong foundation for punitive action against R&D leaders and supervisors (UGC 2018).

International Legal Precedents

Globally, legal action is more common in cases of medical or scientific fraud that directly harm the public. However, universities in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have robust internal policies that carry severe penalties. These penalties can range from termination of employment and a permanent bar from holding academic positions to the forfeiture of research grants. The key difference is that while criminal liability is rare, professional and administrative penalties are common and severe. These international institutions serve as a model for Indian universities, demonstrating that a strong stance against misconduct is not only possible but expected of a world-class educational institution (Meyer et al. 2022).

Specific Penalties for Misconduct

A tiered system of penalties is the most effective approach, as it allows the punishment to fit the severity of the misconduct.

For Research and Development Directors and Deans, the penalties should be administrative and reputational. A proven failure to ensure the quality of the articles published and the originality of the submitted theses should lead to a formal censure from the university's governing body. They should be removed from their administrative position and barred from holding any similar leadership role for a significant period (e.g., five years). Furthermore, the university should issue a public statement acknowledging the failure to maintain transparency and protect the integrity of future graduates.

For Associate and Assistant Directors, The penalties should focus on their operational failures. This could include demotion to a non-administrative faculty role, a permanent black mark on their service record and a mandatory period of retraining on research ethics and journal verification. If their misconduct was proven to be intentional, more severe penalties, such as termination of employment, are justified.

For Research Supervisors, the penalties must be severe. The UGC regulations suggest that a supervisor found guilty of facilitating misconduct should be barred from supervising any new PhD candidates for 3 to 5 years. In egregious cases, they should permanently lose their eligibility to serve as a supervisor. Their name should be placed on a public list of supervisors barred from guiding research, which is a strong deterrent (Ali and Shah 2024). Furthermore, any article they have published that is linked to the fraudulent thesis should be subject to retraction, as per COPE guidelines.

If misconduct is being done for money as bribe for accepting non-indexed papers from discontinued list of journals from SCOPUS, WOS or from UGC CARE List after its dissolution, it should be considered as an academic crime and legal and administrative penalties ought to be taken by the HEI against whoever involved in the mean act.

Institutional Penalties

The university itself must face consequences. If a pattern of misconduct is discovered, the university's accreditation could be at risk. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in India could downgrade the university's rating, which has significant financial and reputational consequences. This institutional pressure is crucial, as it incentivises the university leadership to enforce policies that prevent misconduct at the source (Duke 2023).

Role of COPE, WAME, and DOAJ in Prevention of Academic Fraud

While penalties are a reactive measure, prevention is far more effective. The guidelines from COPE, WAME, and DOAJ provide the tools for a proactive strategy. The DOAJ is an essential resource. It is a curated list of high-quality, peer-reviewed open-access journals. Universities should mandate that all publications submitted for thesis consideration must be from journals listed in the DOAJ or in established indexes like Scopus or WOS. This simple step eliminates the problem of predatory journals at the source. COPE's flowcharts for handling misconduct allegations provide a structured, fair process for investigations. These flowcharts ensure that due process is followed, protecting both the accused and the complainant. WAME's recommendations stress the importance of educating editors, reviewers, and researchers about predatory journals. They recommend that universities host regular workshops and seminars to raise awareness about these threats. In India, the UGC-CARE list is a national equivalent of these international resources. By aligning university

policy with these international guidelines, institutions can create a strong, defensible, and ethical framework for research oversight (Wager and Kleinert 2021).

Recommended Policy Framework for Universities

On the above analysis, universities should implement a comprehensive policy with the following core elements such as Mandatory Journal Verification, Clear and Public Policy on Misconduct, Mandatory Training and Transparent Investigation Process.

While doing the mandatory journal verification, the research and development department must create a checklist for verifying the legitimacy of any journal submitted for a thesis. This includes checking the journal against the DOAJ, WOS, Scopus, and the UGC-CARE list (For reference only). The verification must be documented and signed off by the Associate Director. Then, the university must have a publicly available clear and public policy on misconduct that clearly defines what constitutes research misconduct. It must explicitly state that publishing in predatory journals constitutes misconduct. The policy must also detail the investigation process and the penalties for each offender category. All faculty members, especially research supervisors and research and development staff, must undergo mandatory, annual training on research ethics. This training should cover topics like detecting predatory journals, understanding plagiarism, and reporting misconduct. The University must establish an independent research integrity committee, as mandated by the UGC to conduct a transparent investigation process at the times of discrepancies at the lower to the higher levels. This committee should be composed of members from within and, ideally, outside the university to ensure impartiality. Its findings and decisions should be transparent.

Conclusion

The integrity of the doctoral degree is a cornerstone of the academic enterprise. When R&D Directors, Deans, and research supervisors fail to uphold this integrity by allowing or encouraging the use of fraudulent articles and predatory journals, they are committing a profound betrayal of academic values. The penalties for such actions must be clear, consistent, and severe enough to deter. A multi-layered approach that combines administrative sanctions, professional disqualification, and institutional consequences is necessary. The framework for this approach already exists. The guidelines from COPE, WAME, and the DOAJ provide a clear ethical roadmap. The UGC regulations provide the legal teeth in India, while international precedents show what is possible when institutions take a firm stand. The solution is not merely punitive but also preventative. By mandating journal verification, providing comprehensive training, and fostering a culture of transparency, universities can protect their reputations and the value of the degrees they award. The future of research depends on the willingness of academic leaders to say “no” to the shortcuts of predatory publishing and to invest in the slow, rigorous work of genuine scholarship. The price of prestige is not worth the cost of integrity.

Checklist for Finding Original Journals for Publication at R&D Cells

This checklist is designed for Research and Development staff to verify the originality of a journal before accepting it for thesis submission.

Table 1: Criteria for Finding Original Journals

S. No.	Criteria	Action / Verification Step	Status (Pass / Fail / Not Applicable)	Remarks
1.	Indexing in	Check if the journal is indexed		

S. No.	Criteria	Action / Verification Step	Status (Pass / Fail / Not Applicable)	Remarks
	Major Databases	in Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), or the UGC-CARE list. Visit the official websites of these databases and search for the journal title or ISSN.		
2.	DOAJ Listing	Verify if the journal is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). A legitimate open-access journal should appear in this curated list.		
3.	Publisher Legitimacy	Examine the journal's website. It must display a clear physical address, a genuine editorial board with recognised experts, and a transparent peer-review policy.		
4.	Peer-Review Policy	Read the journal's peer-review policy. It should specify the type of review (e.g., single-blind, double-blind) and the approximate timeline for the review process.		
5.	Article Processing Charges (APCs)	Check if the publication fees are clearly stated on the website. The fees should be reasonable and proportional to the journal's scope. Avoid journals with unusually low or excessively high charges. If fees are predatory and hidden avoid or bar these journals from the white list of the university.		
6.	Publication Timeline	Assess the promised publication timeline. Very short turnaround times (e.g.,		

S. No.	Criteria	Action / Verification Step	Status (Pass / Fail / Not Applicable)	Remarks
		1–2 weeks from submission to acceptance) are a major red flag for predatory journals.		
7.	Editorial Board Authenticity	Verify the credentials of the editors and board members. Check their institutional affiliations and publication records to ensure they are recognised scholars in the field.		
8	Check National ISSN Centre and International Portal ISSN and Archiving Status	Confirm that the journal has a valid ISSN (International Standard Serial Number). Also, check if the journal is archived in reputable digital repositories like Portico or CLOCKSS, Internet Archive.		
9	Plagiarism, AI, Retraction and Correction Policy/ Suggestive Parameters for Peer-Reviewed Journals UGC 2025 Guidelines	Ensure the journal has a clear, publicly available policy on Plagiarism and AI screening, corrections, errata, and retractions. This policy should align with the guidelines set by COPE. The R & D should ensure the parameters for the Peer-Reviewed Journals as indicated by the UGC for the preparation of the white list of journals for the University.		
10	Archival Access to Past Articles	Check whether previously published articles from the journal are accessible online. They should be professionally formatted, have clear metadata, and be available in full text.		

Instructions for Research and Development Staff:

The check list has to be followed by the staff to ensure the credibility of the journals. To make them sure the R & D staff ought to follow the following steps.

1. Every column under "Status" must be filled before approving any journal for thesis submission.
2. If any criterion is marked "Fail", the journal must be rejected, and the candidate or supervisor should be informed in writing with the reason.
3. The "Remarks" column should be used for additional notes, such as the date of verification or any observed discrepancies.
4. This checklist must be signed by the Associate Director or the designated R&D officer, and the signed copy must be kept on record for future audits.

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