

# False Institutional Affiliations and Gaming University Metrics

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Last year, the Sixth World Conference on Research Integrity was held in Hong Kong in the first days of June, just before the 9 June 2019 mass demonstrations. The conference was hosted by the University of Hong Kong and gathered academics, researchers, advocates, journalists, editors, university research integrity officers, government officials, and so on, from all around the world. There was a sizable participation of Chinese delegates, as well as keynote talks by top representatives of the People's Republic of China.

One of the main plenary sessions was devoted to the role that funding agencies play in shaping responsible research practices. One of the speakers was Qikun Xue from Tsinghua University, who gave an overview of the research integrity policies and practices of her institution, ranked number one in China and Asia by the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. After her talk, a delegate very bluntly questioned her on the Chinese university policy of paying researchers for papers published in high-impact journals. His tone was hostile, and underlying his question was the assumption that paying scientists a fee for papers published is contrary to research integrity. Qikun Xue laconically replied that her university has not been paying scientists for academic publications for over a decade.

## Monetary Rewards for Papers Published

Is there a problem with paying academics or scientists a monetary incentive for each paper published in a high-impact journal or for papers published in journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science (WoS)? This practice, very extensive in China until recently, when it was banned, occurs not only there—it is, in effect, pervasive in many countries. In Chile, nearly all universities pay monetary rewards for papers published, and cash incentives are scaled according to the ranking of the journal or the indexing service (WoS-indexed articles are paid more than Scopus articles).

The driver behind this policy is to incentivize academics who only teach to begin conducting research and publishing. In many emerging countries with higher education systems that are still struggling to consolidate a research culture, this seems an easy way to raise their productivity and, accordingly, to gain positions in university ranking systems, most of which rely heavily on outputs as informed by WoS or Scopus. While this practice seems to be frowned upon by Western science culture—and some may consider it a breach of research integrity, others see this widespread policy as a way of driving up the productivity of their scientists, and, consequently, the prestige and reputation of the institution. Whatever the take on this reward system, the underlying objective component is the *reporting of the institutional affiliation*.

## Are Universities Purchasing Publications?

Cash rewards to stimulate a research culture could have mutated into a different way of gaming the system for those universities that are interested in advancing their positions in the international ranking systems. A lot is to be gained by improving a university's standing, as a higher rank may lead to more student enrollments and revenues.

Universities in Chile are using many mechanisms to game the system, such as encouraging naïve authors to include the university affiliation in the author byline of a manuscript submission, without having contributed to the research or to the academic's salary. There are cases of Chilean private, for-profit universities that reach out to foreign researchers, offering cash incentives to include the university affiliation in their next submission to a high-impact journal, even when these authors have no connection at all with that university. Cash incentives offered by universities can also attract interest

## Abstract

Publications are used by ranking houses to build their indicators on university quality. Many universities worldwide pay their academics and scientists cash rewards for publishing in high-impact or indexed journals, as a way of increasing their productivity. However, universities may be using other mechanisms to increase the numbers of publications that are credited to their account, gaming the metrics used to rank universities.

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of independent clinical researchers in, say, teaching hospitals. While the real affiliation of the author is the hospital where he or she works, an institutional affiliation may pop up in the publication of the results as a result of the cash offer. Likewise, casual tutors who teach courses in numerous universities might shop around for the highest fee-for-paper or, better yet, collect them all; at submission, this author will appear as having multiple institutional affiliations. In other parts of the world, universities offer honorary positions to prestigious academics from Western universities, sometimes on a contractual basis, with the expectation that these academics' publications will include the institutions as affiliations as well.

### **Impact on Rankings**

Hence, much is riding on affiliations, but much more is at stake on *institutional affiliations*. Ranking and quality accreditation systems and competition between universities have led to a rank-or-wither culture. Many of the indicators used by ranking houses (e.g., Nobel prizes) are not easy to tweak within a short timeframe, while productivity (output) is. Multiple affiliations are becoming increasingly common—one might even say, standard—due to the internationalization of universities and the growth of collaborative research projects.

It is no surprise, therefore, that most papers, especially in the biomedical field, have many authors, and a proportion of them may report multiple institutional affiliations. When a corresponding author submits a manuscript for publication, all the affiliations in the author byline are self-reported. Astonishingly, there are no known recommendations for correctly reporting affiliations, and authors rely on their own best judgment to include one, or more, affiliations, depending on what is at stake. However, do we know that the reported affiliations are real? To what extent do stakeholders verify whether affiliations are correct? In a study examining and verifying the affiliations of authors who report multiple affiliations, with at least one of them belonging to a Chilean higher education institution, we were unable to validate 38 percent of the reported affiliations using publicly available means.

When metrics become the driving force underpinning many important higher education policy definitions, the validity of the data used to build these metrics is essential. Apart from our study, there seems to be little or no interest in the research integrity and publication ethics community to see the elephant in the room. If the global higher education system is to continue using academic publications as a way of gauging institutional quality, it must ensure that gaming is not going on. The implications are far-reaching, and the solutions must engage many stakeholders, including universities, ranking houses, journals, funders, and research integrity and publication ethics organizations. ▲

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