



# Examining a university's promotion policy: The rewarding of quantity over quality as a research integrity dilemma

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## INTRODUCTION

South African universities receive an annual subsidy from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) which is directly tied to the amount of research outputs the university produces during that cycle. In return, to receive maximum state subsidy, universities often reward those researchers who produce high volumes of research outputs. This is supported through the university's promotion policy and the university's performance management system. This reward system has resulted in researchers practicing unethical and questionable publication practices which has resulted in an increase in predatory publishing just to meet promotion and performance requirements.

This study focuses on one South African university. The study aims to determine whether the university's promotion policy and performance management system contribute to the ongoing predatory publishing and questionable research practices experienced by the university.

## PUBLICATIONS SUBMITTED VERSUS OUTCOME

In May 2023 the University submitted a claim of 216.68 credit units for the 2022 publications for subsidy. In December 2023 DHET approved 181.88 credit units for the 2022 publications (against an institutional target 205 credit units).

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| DHET 2022 (n-1) Research Publication Outcome |                                |                                |                            |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Type of Publication                          | Number of Credit Units Claimed | Number of Credit Units Awarded | Difference in Credit Units |
| Journal Articles                             | 167.95                         | 148.21                         | -19.74                     |
| Conference Proceedings                       | 40.24                          | 28.68                          | -11.56                     |
| Book Chapters                                | 8.49                           | 4.98                           | -3.51                      |
| Appeals - Journal Articles                   | 0.25                           | 0.25                           | 0.00                       |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>316.68</b>                  | <b>181.88</b>                  | <b>-34.81</b>              |

For 2023 the institution submitted a claim for 167.95 units but accrued 148.21 for publications in accredited journals (88.25% success rate). A total of 19.73 units were declined due to the journals being predatory by DHET, resulting in the university experiencing a total loss of subsidy to the amount of R2.2 million (\$117 761).

## RESULTS

| RESULTS  |                         |
|--|-------------------------|
| Applied for promotion  | 65%                     |
| Promotion: Lecturer to Senior and Associate Prof to Full Professor                       | 72%                     |
| Selection of Journal influenced by DHET accredited list                                  | 65%                     |
| Publish Voluntarily or to meet Promotional requirements                                  | 43% / 57%               |
| Ability to differentiate between predatory Journals and non-predatory                    | Yes: 66% / No: 34%      |
| Institutional and Faculty Pressure to Publish  | Yes: 76% / No: 24%      |
| Fairness of only DHET accredited published work for promotion and performance management | Fair: 47% / Unfair: 53% |
| Paid Page Fees   | 50%                     |
| DHET list contributes to Predatory Publishing  | 60%                     |
| Is there recognition of other research contributions in promotion and performance?       | No Recognition: 77%     |

## METHODS

The study was approved by the Central University of Technology Human Ethics Committee (CUT/REIC 2024/000290). A quantitative approach was used for analysis and data collection. The 2021, 2022 and 2023 DHET reports were used to identify researchers who had their publications declined or rejected due to predatory publishing or unethical/questionable research practices. 18 researchers were identified, and questionnaires were distributed to them to determine:

- (1) Has the promotion and performance management system forced researchers to compromise the quality of their research?
- (2) Does the "DHET accredited journals list" influence the researcher's choice of journal?
- (3) Is it fair that the promotion policy and the Performance management system only give recognition to the "DHET accredited journals"?
- (4) Can open access improve predatory publishing (5) Whether researchers believe the university adequately recognizes its other research contributions.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the results, there is a clear indication that predatory publishing is influenced by institutional pressure to publish. There is a clear pattern that those who paid for page fees were most likely exposed to publishing in predatory journals. Although one expected junior researchers to be more vulnerable to publishing in predatory journals, the results show that it is the more experienced researchers, who are trying to move up the academic ladder who are publishing in predatory journals. It is also clear that DHET needs to ensure that all journals on their list are of high quality as 65% of the researcher's choice of journal is influenced by the DHET list.

## RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends a more "scholarly contribution" approach when it comes to considering researchers for promotion and reviewing their performance management. The study recommends the recognition of other research-related outputs like the disciplinary Community Research Uptake Activities (Presenting to promote the uptake of one's research in relevant communities).

Seeing that most promotions are applied for by senior researchers including Associate Professor promotion, a recommendation of at least an H-Index of 6 plus or 100 plus citations (as per one of these platforms: ResearchGate/Google scholar/Scopus/Clarivate) should be considered, as this is the global standard.

A further recommendation is made that when reapplying for a new academic portfolio promotion, applicants must start from zero, and move away from the cumulative approach use. Lastly, researchers must be encouraged to publish in high-quantile open-access journals to avoid publishing in predatory journals.

## REFERENCES

Nel, P., Nel, EP, van Vuuren, J. (2023). The New World Kirkpatrick Model as an evaluation tool for a research writing retreat program. Research Outputs Policy, 2015. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.