When publication becomes the target: Consequences for research and academic publishing

An invited guest editorial

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Introduction

Academic publishing serves both knowledge dissemination and academic credentialing, and these functions can become misaligned when publication metrics are closely tied to careers and institutional performance (Trueblood et al., 2025). Publication metrics are widely used in academic promotion and career assessment (Lim et al., 2025), while in some systems publication requirements are also linked to doctoral completion, research funding or institutional income, making publication consequential in ways that extend beyond the communication of research. Under these conditions, the number, venue or indexation of publications can become key performance targets in their own right.

Recent IIER commentary has documented structural barriers to international publishing, particularly for researchers based in the Global South (Groenewald & Teise, 2024). A related concern is the incentive structure surrounding publication, such as the extent to which careers, funding and degree progression depend on producing particular kinds of outputs. This shifts attention from access to publishing towards the consequences of making publication itself a target.

Publication as a performance target

Bibliometric indicators are widely used in academic promotion, but their use varies across systems. Lim et al. (2025) analysed 532 promotion policies from 190 institutions and 58 government agencies across 121 countries. Quantitative criteria remained common, with stronger preferences for bibliometric indicators in upper-middle-income countries. The same study also showed that such indicators were not universal, underscoring substantial variation in how academic performance is judged.

Problems arise when an indicator moves from describing performance to determining the behaviour needed to succeed. Fire and Guestrin (2019), using data from more than 120 million papers, showed how publication and citation metrics can lose usefulness when researchers and institutions change their research attitudes to optimise the metrics. This reflects Goodhart's Law: when a measure becomes a target, its value as a measure can weaken (Strathern, 1997). The problem is therefore not publication measurement itself, but the transition from publication as an outcome of scholarly activity to publication as an institutional performance target. Once publication becomes the target, decisions about

what, where, when and how to research may increasingly be influenced by their anticipated publication value.

Publication can also become a target through different kinds of incentives, including financial incentives. Quan et al. (2017) analysed 168 policy documents from 100 Chinese universities and documented cash rewards for papers published in Web of Science journals. Institutional funding can create a different incentive. In South Africa, universities receive state research incentives for accredited publications, linking publication output to institutional income (Tomaselli, 2018). Although the mechanisms differ, both attach material consequences to research outputs. Publication requirements can also be built into doctoral training and career evaluation. In Indonesia, a 2015 policy required doctoral students to publish at least one paper in an international journal, while the later Science and Technology Index (SINTA) system ranked researchers using publication and citation measures (Fry et al., 2023). These examples show how publication can become a target through financial rewards, institutional funding, doctoral completion requirements and career evaluation.

These incentives matter because they can influence decisions made well before a manuscript is submitted. Researchers may prioritise questions perceived as more publishable, select topics likely to appeal to highly ranked journals, divide findings across multiple publications, or prioritise publication speed and volume over longer-term or locally relevant research. The concern is therefore not simply that academics are under pressure to publish, but that publication incentives may progressively shape what research is undertaken, how it is conducted, where it is communicated, and ultimately what knowledge enters the scholarly record.

Unequal consequences of publication pressure

Publication pressure does not affect all researchers in the same way. In a large survey of researchers in the Netherlands, higher publication pressure and being a PhD candidate or junior researcher were each associated with more frequent engagement in questionable research practices (Gopalakrishna et al., 2022). The study does not establish causality, but it shows that publication pressure and career stage can be linked to research behaviour.

Resource differences can intensify these pressures. Article processing charges can create a direct financial barrier when authors lack institutional support (Butler et al., 2023; Klebel & Ross-Hellauer, 2023). Researchers who use English as an additional language also spend more time reading and writing papers and are more often asked to improve their English during peer review (Amano et al., 2023). A separate concern is research relevance. Chavarro et al. (2017) showed that non-mainstream journals can support knowledge bridging and provide outlets for topics under-represented in mainstream journals. Strong incentives to publish only in a narrow set of indexed outlets can therefore disadvantage research that is locally relevant but less aligned with those venues.

Publishing choices can also be shaped by these pressures. Mertkan et al. (2021) identified research evaluation policies, publication pressure and limited capacity to publish in

legitimate journals among factors associated with publishing in so-called predatory journals. Their systematic review also showed that such publishing was not confined to researchers in developing countries. The relevant issue is the structure of incentives and constraints, rather than assumptions about the capability or integrity of researchers from any particular region.

AI may intensify existing incentives

Generative artificial intelligence does not create the incentives driving publication pressure, but it may amplify their effects by reducing some of the time and linguistic barriers associated with manuscript production. The implications of AI for academic publishing therefore cannot be understood independently of the incentive structures within which researchers use it. In a study of 105 academics who use English as an additional language, Gönülal et al. (2026) found that AI tools were used mainly for grammar improvement, writing-style enhancement and translation, with researchers reporting both benefits and concerns. Kobak et al. (2025) estimated that at least 13.5% of biomedical abstracts published in 2024 showed signs of language-model processing. In systems that reward publication volume, tools that make writing and editing easier may reinforce existing incentives.

Journals have responded by developing policies on generative AI. In an analysis of 100 highly ranked journals, Ganjavi et al. (2024) found that 87% provided guidance on generative AI; among journals with guidance, almost all prohibited AI authorship, although disclosure requirements varied. Detection-based responses also have limitations. Pratama (2025), testing three AI-detection tools on scholarly abstracts, found trade-offs between accuracy and fairness, with disproportionate effects on writers whose first language is not English and on some disciplines. Detection scores are therefore better treated as one input, alongside disclosure and human judgement, rather than as standalone evidence of misconduct.

Changing the incentives

Changing the incentives does not require abandoning quantitative indicators. Instead, metrics should inform rather than determine academic judgment. A review of research evaluation literature found that indicator-based systems can encourage gaming and strategic responses, showing that metrics can shape the practices they are meant to assess (de Rijcke et al., 2016). Quantitative indicators can still provide useful information, but they should support rather than replace judgments about the quality, relevance and contribution of research. Research evaluation could place greater emphasis on quality, relevance, methodological integrity, contribution to knowledge, and significance to the communities or contexts the research seeks to serve, recognising that these dimensions cannot always be reduced to publication counts, journal rankings or citation indicators.

This issue is directly relevant to IIER. Its editors reported 919 submissions in 2025, of which 80 were accepted, giving an acceptance rate of 8.7%. The journal published 84 articles during the calendar year, while average monthly submissions rose from 76.6 in

2025 to 99.6 during January-May 2026 (Atkinson & McBeath, 2026). IIER is considering special issues and possible additional journals in response to this growth. Expanding publishing capacity may reduce the queue, but it does not alter the external incentives that drive demand for publication. If publication functions primarily as a career or accountability target, expanding the number of outlets may increase capacity without changing the reasons academics are under pressure to publish. A more sustainable response is to reconsider the incentives attached to academic output.

Importantly, replacing one set of metrics with another would reproduce the same problem. Quality, relevance and contribution require contextualised professional judgement rather than simply new numerical indicators. A more sustainable research culture therefore requires pluralistic approaches to evaluation, recognising that valuable scholarship may contribute internationally, nationally, locally, professionally, or to particular communities in different ways. Publication should be the consequence of research worth sharing, rather than the target that determines what research is worth doing.

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Please cite as: Oo, C. Z. & Alonzo, D. (2026). When publication becomes the target: Consequences for research and academic publishing. *Issues in Educational Research*, 36(3) invited guest editorial, vii-xii. http://www.iier.org.au/iier36/oo.pdf