

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Do Tenure and Promotion Policies Discourage Publications in Predatory Journals?

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** Predatory journals are a concern in academia because they lack meaningful peer review; additionally, many engage in unethical business practices. Nevertheless, predatory journals continue to flourish, in part because of increasing expectations that researchers demonstrate productivity in visible and quantifiable forms.

We examined tenure and promotion policies at 19 Canadian universities, and did not find any language that explicitly discourages publications in predatory journals. Subjective terms such as "quality" describe the evaluation of journals. At nearly every institution the only information on avoiding predatory journals was on the library's website.

Institutions should clearly state the criteria used to classify a journal as predatory. Institutions should also reconsider practices that might pressure researchers to publish in predatory journals, such as requiring specified numbers of journal publications. Academic units should be more proactive in assisting their own researchers to avoid predatory journals. Finally, universities could sanction researchers who publish in predatory journals.

**Paper:** Predatory journals, defined as primarily online journals operated for profit by non-academic entrepreneurs (Butler, 2013), have become a major concern in academia (Pyne, 2017), primarily because of their lack of quality control and because of the excessive publication fees charged to authors. It has been estimated that more than 8,000 predatory journals publish over 40,000 articles annually (Shen & Björk, 2015). These journals have capitalized on the ease of publication and information distribution offered by the Internet, and have also benefited from the increasing prominence of "open access" to knowledge as a key component of research (Willinsky, 2005). However, because of their lack of meaningful peer review and editorial oversight, predatory journals may disseminate questionable research outcomes (Haug, 2015). Many of these journals also engage in business practices that are at best unethical and at worst illegal.

Nevertheless, the predatory journal publishing industry continues to flourish, in part due to increasing expectations that researchers demonstrate productivity in visible and quantifiable forms. The rationale for these expectations is rooted in the policies of key higher education stakeholders such as governments, accreditation bodies, ranking agencies, and university administrators. These stakeholders should have a vested interest in discouraging researchers from publishing in predatory journals because of the risk of stigma from association with these journals, and because research grants are generally not intended to generate profits for shady entrepreneurs. While the principle of academic freedom gives researchers the autonomy to choose the outlets most suitable for disseminating their research findings, it is also reasonable to expect that research results are disseminated legitimately and appropriately, and that universities encourage responsible spending of the research funds they provide or manage.

We examined tenure and promotion policies at 19 Canadian universities to assess whether these policies act to discourage researchers from publishing in predatory journals. Because of the significance of tenure and promotion in academic careers, such policies would be a logical place to find guidance for researchers about the types of publications that would advance their careers. Thus, we reviewed at least two tenure and promotion policies at each university to determine how or whether these policies addressed the issue of publications in predatory journals.

Our investigation did not find any policy language that explicitly defined or mentioned predatory journals. Highly subjective terms, such as “quality” and “reputation”, are generally used to describe how the journals in which researchers publish will be evaluated. We then investigated what other forms of guidance these universities offer to help researchers distinguish between legitimate and predatory journals. At 16 of the 19 institutions, guidance on choosing an appropriate journal – intended for researchers as well as for students - was located on the website of the institution’s library. One institution also had information for researchers on predatory journals on the website of its Scholarly Communication office.

These results lead us to several conclusions. First, universities seem unwilling or unable to clearly state in tenure and promotion policies their standards for determining acceptable journals. Vague descriptors do not provide a reliable explanation of how a journal is determined to be “low quality” or “poor reputation”. This is particularly concerning when many predatory journals mimic the signifiers of legitimate journals in their emails soliciting manuscript submissions (Lamertz, McQuarrie & Kondra, 2019). There is considerable overlap between the fields of predatory journal publishing and of open-access journal publishing, and it is a reality that publishing for profit is already accepted in academic publishing. Thus, it may be problematic to make overarching declarations such as excluding publications in open-access journals or in journals that charge publication fees from counting toward tenure or promotion. However, institutions could clearly state in their policies the specific criteria they will use to classify a journal as adequately peer-reviewed and published by a legitimate academic source.

Second, institutions should also reconsider practices that might inadvertently pressure researchers to seek publication opportunities in predatory journals. For example, requiring or suggesting desired numbers of journal publications for performance reviews, tenure or promotion applications, or assessments for accreditation may pressure researchers to prioritize quantity over quality, or to seek quick publication opportunities as evaluation deadlines approach.

Third, academic units within universities should be much more proactive in assisting their own researchers or faculty members to identify or avoid predatory journals. It is highly unlikely that researchers would seek suggestions from their university's library on where to publish their work. This statement is not meant to devalue academic libraries' expertise, but is intended as an observation that when tenure and promotion policies are governed by disciplinary, faculty/school, or institution-wide processes, researchers will likely rely on those academic areas for guidance on where they should disseminate their research.

Finally, we propose that universities and granting councils consider sanctions against researchers who knowingly publish in predatory journals, or who publish in journals that could easily be identified as predatory. It has been proposed, for example, that grant recipients who knowingly publish in predatory journals should be excluded from subsequent grant competitions (Spears, 2018). Universities could refuse to grant tenure or promotion to applicants with predatory publications, or permit such applicants to reapply only after they have obtained more publications in legitimate academic journals. Such actions would have potentially widespread and significant consequences, but they may be necessary to counteract the very serious threats that predatory journals pose to the dissemination of accurate and reliable knowledge. They would also signify to external stakeholders that universities intend to be transparent and accountable in their management of publicly-supported research funding.

## References

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