

RIGID OVERSIGHT NOT THE WAY TO ENSURE RESEARCH QUALITY

SCHOLARLY publishing is a structured, yet diverse, system. While publishing research work in peer-reviewed journals, one should choose those journals that align with disciplinary variations. At the same time, journals must uphold academic rigour and ethical publishing practices by integrating peer review mechanisms and adherence to established scholarly norms.

Amid growing concerns over the proliferation of predatory journals that lacked rigorous quality control, the University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced the UGC-CARE (Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics) list in 2018. The purpose was to introduce a structured mechanism for validating journals so that prospective researchers can publish in them fully confident about their scholarly merit.

Soon, however, it became apparent that evaluating journal quality is a complex and dynamic process, shaped by diverse academic perspectives defining research engagement. Scholars interact with knowledge in unique ways. Defining journal quality in absolute terms is not a one-dimensional process. Besides, over-centralisation in curating a fixed list of journals by the UGC-CARE scheme has led to significant unintended consequences.

Issues associated with fairness and effectiveness will be central to any fixed list of journals when implemented across multiple disciplines. The UGC-CARE scheme, established to uphold research integrity, has encountered substantial criticism, particularly from scholars in non-STEM fields, who contend that its evaluation framework does not fully accommodate the distinct nature of their research.

While UGC-CARE sought to provide scholars with a curated list of journals, doubts were raised about its methodology and ability to recognise journals across disciplines equitably. A more dynamic and transparent approach to journal evaluation could mitigate these issues, but only if it is grounded in objective criteria and an evolving insight into disciplinary research needs. As policymakers, we operate in a toggle between intervention and autonomy—a framework of rule versus flexibility. Regulatory bodies should not enforce rigid processes that hinder progress. Effective regulation is about enabling institutions to evolve and innovate.

We should focus on building a scholar-driven, dynamic journal evaluation process



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ess that empowers researchers rather than enforcing top-down directives. A rigid, opaque system discourages innovation and undermines the capacity of scholars to publish their work in relevant journals.

Keeping this in view, in December 2023, the UGC set up an expert committee to review the UGC-CARE scheme, reflecting a shift towards a decentralised and flexible model that sustains academic freedom and institutional autonomy—a necessary step



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Effective regulation is about enabling institutions to evolve. We should focus on building a scholar-driven, dynamic journal evaluation process that empowers researchers rather than enforcing top-down directives. This is why UGC dropped the CARE list of journals

in building a globally competitive higher education system. The expert committee discovered that the UGC-CARE list was not just a centralised oversight; its drawback was its inability to adopt a responsive framework driven by scholarly input. The committee noticed this rigidity risks excluding high-quality emerging journals and Indian language journals, distorting scholarly communication's true state.

The effectiveness of journal indexing depends on timely and transparent journal inclusion and exclusion decisions, which the UGC-CARE lacked. Further, the committee detected delays, predatory journals' persistence, and opaque decision-making process caused troubles for scholars.

Oversight in academic publishing should

improve credibility and trust within well-defined quality parameters, and not impose rigidity. Accountability is not synonymous with excessive control. The expert committee felt journal selection could be compatible with a decentralised, scholar-driven approach even as bodies such as UGC can provide broader suggestive parameters for peer-reviewed journal selection. After carefully examining the expert committee's recommendations, UGC decided to no longer maintain or publish the UGC-CARE list of journals. Instead, UGC provided suggestive parameters for selecting peer-reviewed journals suitable for their specific needs.

Research fields are in constant flux, requiring journals that accommodate their dynamic nature. There is a clear link between the choice of journals to recognise academic merit and the broader epistemological question of how knowledge is structured and legitimised. Without a UGC-CARE list, journals can be evaluated not merely by their inclusion in a fixed index but by their relevance, rigour and contributions to their respective disciplines.

What is academic autonomy? Most often, the term refers to the ability of scholars to make independent decisions about their research and publication choices (for example, "Dr Lata chooses journals with high impact factors, while Dr Anand values open-access journals"). With the UGC discontinuing the UGC-CARE list, there are two implications of using UGC's suggestive parameters: scholars and institutions will be responsible for journal selection, and scholars can pick journals based on the needs of their specific research fields and disciplinary diversity.

With the end of UGC-CARE's hierarchical and centralised approach, scholars can now adopt context-sensitive peer-reviewed journal selection using UGC's suggestive parameters, integrating established academic benchmarks and emerging disciplinary considerations. Revising these UGC's suggestive parameters allows institutions to account for evolving research trends and best practices, leading to adaptive assessment models ensuring inclusivity in scholarly publishing.

(Views are personal)