

## Article

# Predatory journals and their impacts on research quality at the Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone

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## Abstract

The quality and legitimacy of scholarly research are seriously threatened by the emergence of predatory publications, especially in poor nations like Sierra Leone. This study looks at how Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETUSL) research quality is affected by predatory publishing. The study evaluates faculty awareness, the frequency of predatory publishing, and its effects on academic integrity, institutional reputation, and research funding using a mixed-methods methodology. The results show that although researchers are generally aware of predatory journals, there are still information gaps that cause them to unintentionally engage in these publishing activities. Financial limitations, publishing pressure, and unclear institutional journal selection procedures are some of the main motivators. The study emphasizes how important it is to raise awareness, strengthen institutional policies, and provide funding for ethical publishing procedures. Implementing training initiatives, changing policies, and creating institutional incentives to encourage research in respectable journals are some of the recommendations. To preserve the legitimacy of ETUSL's scholarly output and advance Sierra Leone's contributions to international research, these problems must be resolved.

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## Introduction

Knowledge advancement, policy formation, and socioeconomic progress are all greatly aided by academic study. Through stringent peer review and publication in respectable publications, universities and research institutes around the world work to uphold high standards for their research. However, research quality has been severely weakened by the emergence of predatory journals, especially in poor nations where researchers frequently lack institutional support and resources (Beall, 2016). By charging authors publication fees with little to no peer review, editorial oversight, or quality control, predatory journals take advantage of the open-access publishing paradigm (Shen & Björk, 2015). They thereby aid in the spread of faulty, unconfirmed, and occasionally fraudulent research. Institutions like the Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETUSL), where academic production is crucial for faculty promotions, institutional ranking, and national development, should be especially concerned about this occurrence. High publication costs, a lack of financing for research, and ignorance of predatory publishing make it difficult for researchers in Sierra Leone to obtain respectable publications. These predatory publications, which promise rapid publication but lack the strict

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requirements required for scientific validation, prey on many scholars, especially those in their early careers (Macháček & Srholec, 2021). As a result, both domestic and international acceptance of research from organizations such as ETUSL is threatened.

Furthermore, the growth of predatory publication has been made possible by the lack of stringent institutional regulations and guidelines for academic publishing. Many researchers unwittingly contribute to this escalating dilemma in the absence of clear tools to differentiate between legitimate and dishonest journals (Moher et al., 2017). Examining the degree to which predatory journals undermine ETUSL research quality and suggesting ways to lessen their effects are crucial given the importance of research in higher education.

## Review of Literature

### *Understanding Predatory Journals*

Exploitative publishing companies known as predatory journals charge authors fees without offering proper editorial oversight, peer review, or quality control (Beall, 2016). By promising speedy publication dates and ignoring crucial academic publishing standards, these journals exploit the open-access paradigm (Shen & Björk, 2015). Predatory journals accept papers with little to no examination, which results in the distribution of faulty and misleading research, in contrast to respectable journals that go through stringent peer review procedures to guarantee research quality (Grudniewicz et al., 2019).

After compiling a list of journals and publishers involved in these exploitative behaviors, Jeffrey Beall popularized the term "predatory publishing" (Beall, 2016). The problem still exists, though, in that many researchers—especially those from developing nations—do not know what predatory journals are like, which makes them easy prey (Moher et al., 2017). According to Cobey et al. (2018), predatory journals can be identified by their aggressive submission soliciting, high publication fees, lack of peer review, and opaque editorial boards. Predatory journals can also be noticed, in my opinion, by their hasty demands for payment of publication materials which are sent to them for review. Reputable publishing institutions often require more than two to three months to assess your work before publishing it. One- or two-day review processes are more likely to be predatory journals.

### *Prevalence of Predatory Publishing in Higher Education*

Researchers from a wide range of fields are impacted by the global issue of predatory publication. According to studies, the lack of financing for research, pressure to publish, and ignorance of predatory journals disproportionately affect researchers from developing nations (Macháček & Srholec, 2021). Because of the perceived ease of acceptance and affordability, authors from low- and middle-income countries were more inclined to publish in predatory journals, according to a study on worldwide academic publishing (Shamseer et al., 2017). Due to the lack of financing for research at many African colleges, scholars choose journals with quicker response times and less publication fees, even at the sacrifice of quality (Kurt, 2018). Furthermore, predatory publication is not adequately addressed by the institutional practices of many African universities, which permits these journals to flourish (Mouton & Valentine, 2017). According to a Nigerian survey, more than 30% of researchers had unknowingly published in dubious journals, underscoring the pervasive ignorance (Ezema, 2013).

### *The Impact of Predatory Journals on Research Quality*

The decline of academic integrity is one of the most important effects of predatory publication. Research findings are less reliable because these journals permit the publication of poor or even fraudulent studies because they do not enforce appropriate peer review (Moher et al., 2017). Such unconfirmed studies can result in inaccurate information and poor decision-making when researchers, decision-makers, and students depend on them (Shamseer et al., 2017). Furthermore, universities and other research institutes lose credibility when predatory publications are present. High publishing counts in predatory journals can harm an institution's reputation, which can impact its international rankings and partnerships with respectable academic institutions (Grudniewicz et al., 2019).

Research funding and academic promotions are frequently based on the quantity of articles published. Researchers may, nevertheless, advance in their careers based on material that has not undergone thorough review or validation when they publish in predatory journals (Cobey et al., 2018). Because of this, an unjust system is created in which academics who publish in predatory venues receive the same reputation as those who publish in respectable journals, even when their research is of far lower quality (Manca et al., 2017). Additionally, organizations with a high rate of predatory publishing may lose the trust of funding agencies. An institution may have trouble obtaining research grants and worldwide collaborations if it has a reputation for producing subpar research output (Mouton & Valentine, 2017). In the end, this has an impact on the institution's capacity to support national and international research initiatives in addition to individual researchers.

Predatory journals help spread false or deceptive scientific knowledge since they publish without thorough peer review (Shen & Björk, 2015). A cycle of false information and subpar research could result from future researchers unintentionally building on studies that have flaws (Beall, 2016). In disciplines like environmental science, engineering, and medicine, where erroneous research can lead to potentially fatal judgments, this can have major repercussions (Moher et al., 2017).

### *Factors Contributing to Predatory Publishing in Sierra Leone*

Lack of knowledge about ethical publishing standards is one of the main causes of researchers becoming victims of predatory journals (Kurt, 2018). There is little instruction on how to recognize reputable publications at many colleges, including the Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETUSL). Due to their inexperience with academic publishing, postgraduate students and early-career researchers are especially at risk (Manca et al., 2017). To be eligible for promotions or tenure, academic members at many universities, including ETUSL, must produce a specific number of research publications (Macháček & Srholec, 2021). Because of this pressure, researchers frequently put quantity before quality, which leaves them vulnerable to predatory publishing (Moher et al., 2017).

Some researchers choose predatory journals in order to publish their work more quickly because respectable journals have stringent acceptance criteria and lengthy review periods (Cobey et al., 2018). Reputable journals can be expensive to access, and researchers must pay hefty processing costs in order to get published (Shen & Björk, 2015). Like researchers in other developing nations, many ETUSL researchers lack the institutional financing necessary to pay for these expenses, which increases their likelihood of choosing less expensive, predatory

options (Ezema, 2013). Furthermore, scholars are further cut off from high-impact publishing possibilities due to restricted access to international academic networks (Mouton & Valentine, 2017).

### Method

In order to investigate and evaluate the effects of predatory journals on the calibre of research at the Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETUSL), this study employs a descriptive research approach. Because it enables a thorough analysis of the issue and records the opinions, experiences, and difficulties that researchers encounter with regard to predatory publication, a descriptive study design is suitable (Creswell, 2018). To guarantee a thorough grasp of the problem, the study combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

### Sample Size

A sample size of 20 respondents will be selected for this study. The respondents will include:

- 10 faculty members (lecturers).
- 10 academic administrators (heads of departments and research coordinators).

### Primary Data Collection

**Structured Questionnaires:** A set of structured questions were distributed to faculty members and postgraduate students to assess their experiences with predatory journals, awareness levels, and perceptions of research quality at ETUSL.

**Semi-Structured Interviews:** Interviews were conducted with academic administrators to gain deeper insights into institutional policies and challenges related to predatory publishing. These interviews helped uncover gaps in research quality assurance and potential strategies to mitigate predatory publishing.

### Secondary Data Collection

**Document Analysis:** The study analysed existing institutional reports, research policies, and previously published studies to identify trends and statistics related to research output at ETUSL.

**Review of Journal Publications:** Selected research papers published by ETUSL faculty members were examined to determine the proportion of articles published in predatory journals and their potential impact.

### Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Data from the structured questionnaires were analyzed using statistical tools such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and Microsoft Excel to generate percentages, frequencies, and charts. This helped in identifying patterns in the responses related to predatory publishing at ETUSL. A comparison was made between faculty members and postgraduate students regarding their experiences and awareness of predatory journals.

Data from interviews and document analysis were subjected to thematic analysis, where

common themes, patterns, and key insights were identified. This approach is useful for understanding the perceptions, challenges, and recommendations from respondents regarding predatory publishing (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The research papers reviewed were analyzed to determine the impact of predatory publishing on research credibility and knowledge dissemination at ETUSL.

Findings and Discussion

This study looks at how Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETUSL) research quality is affected by predatory publishing. The data below indicates that 70% of respondents have heard about predatory journals, while 20% are unaware, and 10% are unsure. This suggests that awareness is relatively high, though some gaps remain.

Table 1. Awareness of predatory journals

Response	Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)
Yes	14	70.0%
No	4	20.0%
Not sure	2	10.0%
Total	20	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

According to the study's findings, 70% of respondents admitted to having heard about predatory journals, indicating a high level of knowledge among them. Though general awareness is pretty high, there are still some knowledge gaps that need to be filled, as seen by the minority of 20% who were unaware of the concept and 10% who were unsure. The majority of respondents (60%) properly defined predatory journals as those that publish items rapidly without adequate peer review. Nonetheless, 15% of researchers were wrong to link all open-access journals to predatory behaviour, suggesting that some researchers are still unable to distinguish between open-access publications that are ethical and those that are not. This emphasizes the necessity of more thorough instruction regarding the actual nature of open-access publishing.

Additionally, respondents listed a number of crucial traits of predatory publications. Lack of peer review (80%), high publication costs with rapid approval (75%), and phony impact factors (60%) were the most often identified characteristics. 25% of respondents, however, were under the impression that trustworthy databases like Web of Science and Scopus index predatory publications. This implies that some respondents were unclear or misinformed about the reliability and indexing of journals. Furthermore, 35% of respondents said they learned about predatory journals through own study, 30% from university workshops or training, and 25% from coworkers or superiors. Despite the usefulness of these resources, 10% of respondents said they were still ignorant of predatory journals, indicating the need for more organized institutional awareness campaigns to fill the knowledge gap.

80% of those surveyed said they or their colleagues had not participated in predatory journal publishing, indicating the frequency of predatory publishing. Merely 20% of respondents said they had either published in a predatory journal themselves or knew someone who had. The primary motivations for publishing in these journals were high rejection rates from respectable journals (30%), lack of knowledge regarding journal trustworthiness (40%), lower publication

costs (45%), and pressure to publish soon (60%). These results show that researchers are under more pressure to publish more often, which may cause them to look at less respectable journals, particularly if they provide quicker and easier publication chances. Researchers who might not have access to financing for higher-quality publications are drawn to these journals because of their inexpensive publication fees. The fact that 65% of respondents said they have received unsolicited emails from predatory journals—30% often and 35% occasionally—is concerning. This implies that researchers are being singled out by predatory journals, which could result in their being victims of unethical publication practices. This emphasizes the importance of exercising caution and knowledge while choosing which journals to publish in.

The survey discovered that half of the participants thought that the loss of academic credibility was the most significant effect of publishing in predatory journals. This emphasizes the importance of exercising caution and knowledge while choosing which journals to publish in. The survey discovered that half of the participants thought that the loss of academic credibility was the most significant effect of publishing in predatory journals. This suggests a keen understanding of the long-term effects of affiliation with journals that do not follow ethical publishing standards. Furthermore, 20% of respondents said that predatory publication degrades the caliber of scientific information, and 25% thought that the lost research funds were a significant result. Just 5% of respondents said there was no discernible impact, indicating that most people were aware of the negative consequences of predatory publication.

When asked how predatory publishing affects ETUSL's reputation, the majority of respondents (45%) said that it has a minor negative effect on the university's position, while 35% said it was a major problem. Five percent were undecided, and fifteen percent did not think it had any effect. Even if not everyone currently views predatory journals as a serious issue, these replies show that people are becoming more conscious of how they can damage an institution's reputation. Respondents' views on academic funding and promotions were divided; 45% thought that predatory publication undermines merit-based academic careers by unfairly promoting unqualified academics. According to 35% of respondents, the temptation to publish rapidly may cause academics to compromise on the rigor and integrity of their work, discouraging high-quality research efforts. Only 15% of respondents believed that funding and promotions were unaffected by predatory publication, and 5% were not sure.

The majority of respondents (80%) said that training and awareness initiatives were the best way to stop the growth of predatory publishing. The necessity of institutional actions was strongly believed by 60% of respondents, who suggested university policies to stop publication in predatory journals. Additionally, 40% favoured offering financial assistance for publishing in respectable journals, and 50% recommended urging scholars to do so. These results highlight how crucial institutional action is in preventing predatory publishing and safeguarding the integrity of academic research.

The study's overall findings highlight the necessity of increased institutional regulations, education, and awareness in order to address the problem of predatory publishing, especially at universities in Sierra Leone like ETUSL. According to the results, even though people are generally aware of predatory journals, systematic interventions and additional training are still crucial to preserving academic integrity.

## Conclusion

With most responders acknowledging the dangers of predatory journals, this study shows that researchers at ETUSL are becoming more conscious of these publications. There are still knowledge gaps, nonetheless, especially with regard to the definition and traits of predatory journals and the ambiguity surrounding indexing in reliable databases. According to the findings, researchers may turn to predatory journals due to pressure to publish rapidly and low publication costs. This can have a detrimental effect on academic credibility, research quality, and institutional reputation. Even though most respondents think that predatory publishing is a problem at ETUSL, more attention and action are desperately needed to lessen its effects. The report also emphasizes how crucial awareness and training campaigns are in the fight against predatory publishing practices. A large number of respondents supported the establishment of university regulations to control journal selection and encourage publication in respectable journals. Predatory publication is clearly a serious threat to the academic community as a whole as well as to individual scholars, and institutional solutions are essential to successfully tackling this issue.

## Recommendations

**Enhance Awareness and Training Programs:** To inform researchers, faculty, and students about the dangers and traits of predatory journals, ETUSL should put in place more thorough training and awareness initiatives. To make sure that everyone involved in research has the knowledge necessary to steer clear of such tactics, this might be accomplished through workshops, seminars, and internet resources.

**Create Institutional Journal Selection Policies:** The university needs to set precise guidelines for choosing and submitting to journals. These regulations ought to discourage the submission of articles to predatory journals and give preference to respectable, trustworthy journals. The policies might cover topics like the value of peer review and how to recognize reputable journals.

**Encourage the Use of High-Impact publications:** Scholars ought to be urged to submit their work to reputable, high-impact publications. By offering rewards for publishing in respectable journals, including money for publication fees or mention in evaluations of promotions, the institution can encourage this.

**Offer Financial Support for Reputable Publications:** Since it can be expensive to publish in reputable journals, ETUSL ought to think about providing financial aid to researchers, especially those working in low-resource fields, to make sure they aren't compelled to select predatory journals because of budgetary limitations.

**Encourage a Collaborative Approach:** To exchange resources and experiences in the fight against predatory publication, cooperation between academic institutions, researchers, and universities worldwide might be promoted. This can entail collaborations with publishing houses to raise awareness and offer easily available resources for journal evaluation.

**Track and Assess the Impact:** To determine how well the tactics put in place are working, publication practices should be continuously monitored. The frequency of predatory publication as well as the effectiveness of policy and training initiatives can be evaluated with the aid of routine surveys or evaluations.



Raise Student Awareness: To help students comprehend the dangers of publishing in predatory journals at an early stage in their academic careers, awareness campaigns should be specifically designed for them. Students' education will aid in keeping scholars of the future from engaging in similar behaviour.

By implementing these suggestions, ETUSL can improve its academic integrity and help combat the spread of predatory journals, protecting the school's standing and the caliber of research it produces.

## Declarations

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