

# Upholding the integrity of our varsities

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**LETTERS:** According to a recent investigation by Nature, Malaysia is ranked sixth among the "World's Top 10 Retraction Nations", with a retraction rate of 17.2 per 10,000 published research papers.

Other "top" countries include Saudi Arabia (30), Pakistan (28.1), Russia (24.9), China (23.5), and Egypt (18.8).

This is not the first time Malaysia has been ranked in the top 10 for such academic issues. In October 2018, the journal Science reported that Malaysia ranked fifth globally among countries with retractions, with 6.8 retractions per 10,000 papers.

From the data search, the Retraction Watch blog documented a total of 629 retracted academic articles in Malaysia, mainly due to academic misconduct, such as data fabrication, image falsification, plagiarism and duplicate publication.

Malaysia's "retractions per 10,000 papers" has steadily risen over the years: 2001-2005: 1; 2006-2010: 60; 2011-2015: 172; 2016-2020: 282 and 2021-2023 (incomplete data): 114.

These figures highlight several issues that demand serious attention from the Higher Education Ministry and the local academic community:

**ESCALATING RETRACTIONS:** Over the past decade, there has been a worsening trend of academic misconduct among researchers and professors, resulting in a decline in the academic integrity index.

**HINDERING THE NATION'S VISION AS AN EDUCATION HUB:** Such academic issues are inconsistent with the esteemed academic status of our prominent universities, significantly impacting their reputation.

**HEIGHTENED CONCERNS IN PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES:** Comparing data between public and private research universities, the retraction rates are 15.8 (362 retractions / 228,862 papers) for public universities and 9.0 (28 / 31,254) for private universities.

This disproportionality contradicts the traditionally advantageous position of public universities, which enjoy ample research funds, state-of-the-art equipment, substantial resource

s, etc., funded mainly by the taxpayers.

News of "world top 10" paper retractions in academia cannot be taken lightly as it may erode public confidence in science and research.

For instance, the success of large-scale Covid-19 vaccination in Malaysia is partly due to the public's confidence in scientific research and academic institutions.

Over time, this confidence may be compromised if such issues are not addressed seriously by the government, particularly the Higher Education Ministry.

There are four measures that the ministry and top management of universities can consider to address these issues.

First, implement reasonable key performance indicators (KPI) for publication and emphasise qualitative considerations in scientific publications.

Second, establish effective ethical guidelines. Prohibit gift authorship, ghostwriting or honorary authorship, and define criteria for authorship. Gift authorship is often found to be correlated with poor quality of papers and subsequent retractions.

Third, foster a culture of academic integrity in academia that values academic integrity and ethical behaviour.

Fourth, create a committee to monitor and evaluate paper publication. In addition to establishing ethical guidelines and promoting a culture of academic integrity, crucial aspects include monitoring and evaluating publications, along with the mandatory implementation of reward and penalty policies.

This includes academic ethics and morality as criteria for performance evaluation and promotion decisions. These measures will bring a positive transformation in our academic community.

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