JRIHE
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Vol. 7, No. 2 (Autumn 2026)
ISSN: 2960-4419 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.48341/v2qt-zx11

Publish or Perish? Academic Publishing Pressure, Sustainability, and Institutional Research: A PRISMA-Based Systematic Review

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Suggested citation: Shi, Z. (2026). Publish or perish? Academic publishing pressure, sustainability, and institutional research: A PRISMA-based systematic review. *Journal of Research and Innovation in Higher Education*, *7*(2), 96–125.

The article is available online at: www.rihe-journal.com

Acknowledgement

This article contribution is based on course work the author submitted in the Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE), supported by the Erasmus Mundus programme of the European Commission.

Abstract

Academic publishing pressure has evolved into a defining feature of modern higher education, driven by a global shift toward metric-based evaluation regimes and performance-oriented governance. While the "publish or perish" culture is a frequent topic of debate, much of the existing research remains fragmented. Studies often treat academic publishing pressure as personal issues, separating from mechanisms of institution management, which makes it difficult to see how they truly interconnected. Thus, this review aims to address this gap by examining academic publishing pressure together with its impact on sustainability and Institutional Research (IR) in higher education.

Using a PRISMA-based review approach, this paper synthesizes 15 peer-reviewed and policy-oriented publications. Guided by three research questions, it analyzes how academic publishing pressure is described and measured, how it affects sustainability at individual, institutional, and knowledge-system levels, and how IR mediates these dynamics. The findings indicate that academic publishing pressure is the structural outcome of metric-driven evaluation and governance systems, and has impact on individual academics, institutional priorities, and knowledge production. Among these, IR functions as a key mediator that can either reinforce the status quo or help transform research evaluation toward more sustainable practices.

***Keywords**:* Academic Publishing Pressure, Sustainability in Higher Education, Institutional Research, Publish or Perish, PRISMA-Based Review.

Introduction

Background and Research Significance

Traditionally, academic publishing has functioned as the fundamental engine for the dissemination and accumulation of knowledge. Publications not only serve epistemic purposes but also operate as symbolic and institutional markers of academic legitimacy. Over the past decades, however, the logic governing this process has shifted significantly. Once a professional norm of scholarly sharing, publishing is now being increasingly reconfigured into a formalized performance audit widely known as the "publish or perish"

dictum (Merton, 1973; Muller, 2018).

This shift is closely related to broader changes in higher education governance and management. Driven by New Public Management (NPM), an approach that integrates market-oriented thinking and performance-based evaluation into public sector governance, higher education institutions (HEIs) are flawed with "a wider, longstanding, and intensifying trend towards academic marketization" (Bauwens et al., 2023, p. 1; Nygård, 2024). In this context, academic output tends to be treated as a commodity, and faculty performance is monitored through tightly standardized metrics and managerial controls (Shore & Wright, 2015), with quantifiable indicators, such as the number of publications, citation rates, and impact factors, becoming dominant tools for assessment at both individual and institutional levels (Hazelkorn, 2015). Such indicators, as Aksom (2018, p. 1196) points out, epitomize the coercive logic of publishing, meaning when they replace the genuine pursuit of scientific knowledge and progress, academic work risks be reduced to a mere act of symbolic compliance.

At the organizational level, this shift has considerably raised the profile of institutional research (IR). Typically within universities, IR units provide accurate and timely institutional data and analyses about universities, which cover various aspects of academic performance including publication output, citation patterns, and other research indicators, to the internal departments and external stakeholders, supporting their planning, assessment, and evidence-based decision-making processes. With the help of information systems like Current Research Information Systems (CRIS), IR translates the complexity of academic work into standardized datasets that can be compared, benchmarked, and audited. Despite often being portrayed as a technical or neutral administrative service, critical studies have suggested that IR actively shapes how institutions set priorities and how scholars understand what counts as valuable research (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015).

At the same time, critical scholars are questioning the sustainability of current academic publishing systems. Regarding higher education, sustainability extends well beyond environmental issues that are commonly talked about in daily life, such as carbon emissions, energy use, and campus resource management. It involves at least three more

closely-connected dimensions. The first one is human sustainability, referring to the well-being, motivation, and long-term career development of academic staff. Second is institutional sustainability which can be understood as the ability of universities to maintain a balanced research culture that does not become overly skewed towards short-term performance metric, but instead remains broadly balanced and genuinely aligned with the institution's core mission. The third one is knowledge sustainability that concerns the integrity, diversity, and long -term quality of academic knowledge production itself (Wilsdon et al., 2015).

Across these dimensions, publishing pressure has been linked to a wide range of negative effects. Studies show rising levels of stress and burnout, reduced teaching quality, ethical concerns, narrow research focus, and decreased productivity, and early-career researchers on short-term or precarious contracts are often hit the hardest (Fanelli, 2010; Yankholmes, 2014; Dani, 2018; Yudkevich, 2020; Jensen and Olsen, 2023, pp. 164, 168-170; Mutongoza, 2023, pp. 48, 51). At the institutional level, metric-driven evaluation systems can gradually narrow universities' missions and push them into paths shaped more by global rankings rather than by the needs of societies they are meant to serve (Belcher et al., 2024; Hazelkorn, 2015). On the epistemic side, when academics are forced to produce more papers, they are inclined to slice one study into several smaller papers, manage authorship in a strategic way, and choose safe, low-risk topics, which together may erode research integrity and slow down the cumulative growth of knowledge (Anderson et al., 2007).

Despite extensive debates on "publish or perish", research evaluation, and responsible metrics, existing literature is still limited to the disciplinary boundaries and certain analytical approaches, not systematic but fragmented. Research that focuses on how individual academics experience publishing pressure often neglect the institutional infrastructures through which evaluation frameworks are implemented. By contrast, studies analyzing institutional management and performance-based systems tend to overlook what these structures mean for personal sustainability and academic well-being. Policies and initiatives such as the Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics (Hicks et al., 2015) and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) set out guidelines for research evaluation, but they are rarely tested in empirical reviews.

Therefore, a systematic review is needed so that academic publishing pressure, higher education sustainability, and institutional research can be brought together within a single, coherent framework. By adopting a PRISMA-based review approach, this paper seeks to coordinate fragmented literature and offer a structure overview of how academic publishing pressure is generated, experienced, and potentially reshaped through institutional mechanisms, and of how it is related to the sustainability in higher education.

Research Questions

To address these gaps, this systematic review is guided by three research questions designed to organize existing literature in a clear and transparent way.

First, given the lack of a shared definition across studies, the review asks: **How does the literature describes and measures academic publishing pressure in higher education and research evaluation?** This question aims to clarify how publishing pressure is defined, framed, and made concrete during implementation, thus establishing a common starting point for later analysis.

Second, to explore the link between academic publishing pressure and sustainability in higher education, the review asks: **What effects does academic publishing pressure have on sustainability at the individual, institutional, and knowledge-system levels?** With this question, this paper probes into how publishing pressure shapes academics' well-being, influenced institutional governance and management, and affects the long-term quality and integrity of knowledge production. By coordinating these three connected levels, this review hopes to provide a broader understanding of sustainability that looks beyond isolated factors.

Third, considering that academic publishing pressure is, to some extent, produced by and transmitted though institutional evaluation frameworks, the review asks: **How is institutional research discussed as a tool that can reduce, maintain, or reshape publishing pressure toward more sustainable research evaluation?** Here the focus is institutional research as a key mediating infrastructure that translates evaluation criteria, performance indicators, and strategic priorities into everyday practices of academic life. It examines the role of institutional research: a mechanism that stabilizes and strengthens

metric-based control or a structure that enables research assessment that is more responsible and sustainability-oriented.

Taken together, these research questions provide a coherent frame for a PRISMA-based systematic review that integrates academic publishing pressure, sustainability concerns, and institutional practices. By doing so, this paper aims to clarify that "publish or perish" is not only an individual burden or a managerial tool, but a systematic challenge for the sustainable development of higher education.

Theoretical Framing: Publish or Perish, Sustainability, and Institutional Research

This section discusses the "filters" that guide how the literature is sorted, organized, and interpreted in this review. Rather than simply report results from previous literature, it explains how three key ideas, namely academic publishing pressure, sustainability in higher education, and institutional research, are understood here, and how these understandings shape the subsequent analysis and determine what counts as relevant evidence for tackling the research questions.

Academic Publishing Pressure as an Institutional Evaluation Instrument

In this review, academic publishing pressure is not simply seen as a personal feeling or a vague cultural norm. Instead, it is viewed as an institutionalized evaluation instrument formally built in governance structures of higher education, including hiring, promotion, and funding (Fielder, 1996; Moosa, 2018). This perspective draws on Robert Merton's (1973) classic sociological work, which reminds us that academic recognition and career growth are not just about "merit"—they are socially organized processes.

From this angle, metrics and indicators are never neutral tools; they are governance mechanisms that define what is deemed as good performance and shape how academics respond. When the number of publications, impact factors, and journal rankings are systematically linked to hiring, promotion, and funding (Fielder, 1996; Moosa, 2018), academic publishing pressure is no longer an individual psychological issue, but a structural requirement.

Sustainability as a Multidimensional Concept in Higher Education

Sustainability is treated here as a multidimensional concept that extends far beyond environmental concerns. At its core, it is about the long-term viability and health of academic systems. Following the work of Wilsdon et al. (2015), this paper distinguishes between three complementary dimensions - human, institutional, and knowledge sustainability in higher education.

Human sustainability concerns whether academics can have healthy and meaningful long-running careers, with topics including workload, well-being, and motivation being discussed. Institutional sustainability means whether the university is able to maintain a balanced research culture aligned with the institution's educational and social missions instead of being driven merely by short-term metrics. Knowledge sustainability focuses on the quality of output regarding integrity, diversity, and cumulative value of academic knowledge, ensuring that the "speed" of publishing does not undermine the "depth" of the science.

By adopting these different dimensions, this review approaches academic publishing pressure as a potential challenge to sustainability in higher education, specifically when evaluation regimes prioritize quantifiable numbers over genuine academic values.

Institutional Research as a Mediation Mechanism

Institutional Research (IR) in this paper is understood as a governance mechanism that plays a role in data collection and production, evaluation, and decision-making at the same time. The idea of IR as a purely technical or administrative tool is not valid anymore; instead, it is now viewed as a form of "epistemic governance" - the system through which knowledge about institutional performance is constructed and legitimized (Campbell & Carayannis, 2013).

In essence, IR acts as a mediator. It translates external evaluation pressures such as global rankings and funding benchmarks into internal institutional routines with the help of data systems, performance indicators, and regular reporting. This gives IR a dual role: it can reinforce academic publishing pressure by tightening and extending standardized metric-based evaluation, but it also has the power to redesign assessment by, for example,

integrating more qualitative and multidimensional forms of evaluation, as advocated by the Leiden Manifesto (Hicks et al., 2015) and DORA. Hopefully, IR can become a lever for reform.

Preview of the Paper

Following this introduction, the review paper proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the PRISMA-based methodology used to identify, screen, and select the relevant literature to ensure the selection process is both transparent and reproducible. The core of the paper then shifts to the analysis that brings together findings on the institutional drivers of academic publishing pressure, its sustainability implications, and the role of institutional research. This review paper closes with a discussion that places these findings in broader contexts of higher education governance and research management, and highlights implications for policy, institutional practice, and future research.

Methodology: PRISMA-Based Systematic Review Design

This paper uses a PRISMA-based systematic review to explore academic publishing pressure through the combined lenses of sustainability and institutional research. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses) offers a clear set of steps for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies, which makes the review process more transparent and easier to replicate. Since research on "publish or perish", sustainability, and institutional research is spread across different disciplines and features various definitions and methods, a systematic review is a good way to coordinate these diverse contributions in a more coherent way.

Review Scope and Research Design

This review focuses primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles that explicitly discuss academic publishing pressure, sustainability in higher education, or institutional research, complemented by selected policy-oriented academic publications that are widely recognized in related fields. The scope is intentionally interdisciplinary, drawing on work from higher education studies, science and technology studies, sustainability research, and research policy. No restrictions were placed on country or region, but only English-language publications are included so that the material remains comparable and analysis

more consistent.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive literature search was conducted in four major academic databases commonly used in higher education and research policy studies: Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen to include high-impact international journals, education-focused work, and broader interdisciplinary outputs.
The search strategy combined keyword blocks related to academic publishing pressure, sustainability, and institutional research. Core search terms included “publish or perish”, “academic publishing pressure”, “academic publishing”, “publishing pressure in higher education”, “sustainability” and “institutional research”, which were linked using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to generate different combinations and capture a broad set of potentially relevant studies.

Searches in Google Scholar returned a large number of results due to duplicate records and repeated indexing of the same publications. Therefore, Google Scholar was used mainly as a supplementary source to collect additional relevant studies that did not appear in the other databases, instead of as a basis for exhaustive counting.

Across all databases, the initial keyword searches yielded several hundred record. After consolidating repeated entries and removing duplicates and irrelevant categories, this paper retained 227 records for further screening.

Study Selection Process

The selection followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 process, consisting of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram summarizing the full selection process and is places at the end of the Methodology section.

Across Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar, the initial keyword searches returned several hundred potentially relevant records. Because there was a considerable overlap among databases and many duplicate entries, these records were consolidated and duplicates removed. Studies from clearly unrelated disciplines, such as bio-medicine,

engineering, and agriculture, were also excluded at the identification stage. After this process, 227 unique records were retained for title and abstract review.

Screening—In the screening stage, the titles and abstracts of the 227 records were checked for their relevance to academic publishing pressure in higher education. Studies were excluded if it was clear from the abstract that they focused only on quantitative analyses of publications and citations without an institutional governance perspective, approached sustainability issues unrelated to academic publishing, or analyzed publishing practices outside higher education. In the end, 192 records were excluded, leaving 35 articles for full-text assessment.

Eligibility—During the eligibility stage, the remaining 35 articles were reviewed in detail. Studies were excluded if, despite a seemingly relevant abstract, they did not intentionally analyze academic publishing pressure, sustainability implications, or institutional research mechanisms, or if these topics appeared only as background information, not a central focus. This process left 15 studies to be included in the qualitative synthesis.

Inclusion—The final sample consisted of 15 studies, which were included in the qualitative synthesis. Together, these studies form the basis for answering the review's research questions and were analyzed thematically in the subsequent sections.

Exclusion Criteria—Throughout the screening and eligibility checking process, the same set of exclusion criteria was used to keep the review focused and coherent. Studies were excluded if they (1) dealt only with quantitative analyses of publications and citations without an institutional governance perspective, (2) approached sustainability issues unrelated to academic publishing, (3) analyzed publishing practices outside higher education, or (4) mentioned relevant topics only as background information.

In addition, conference papers, working papers, dissertations, editorials, and opinion pieces were excluded because they had not been peer-reviewed, and non-English publications were left out to guarantee a comparable and consistent analysis.

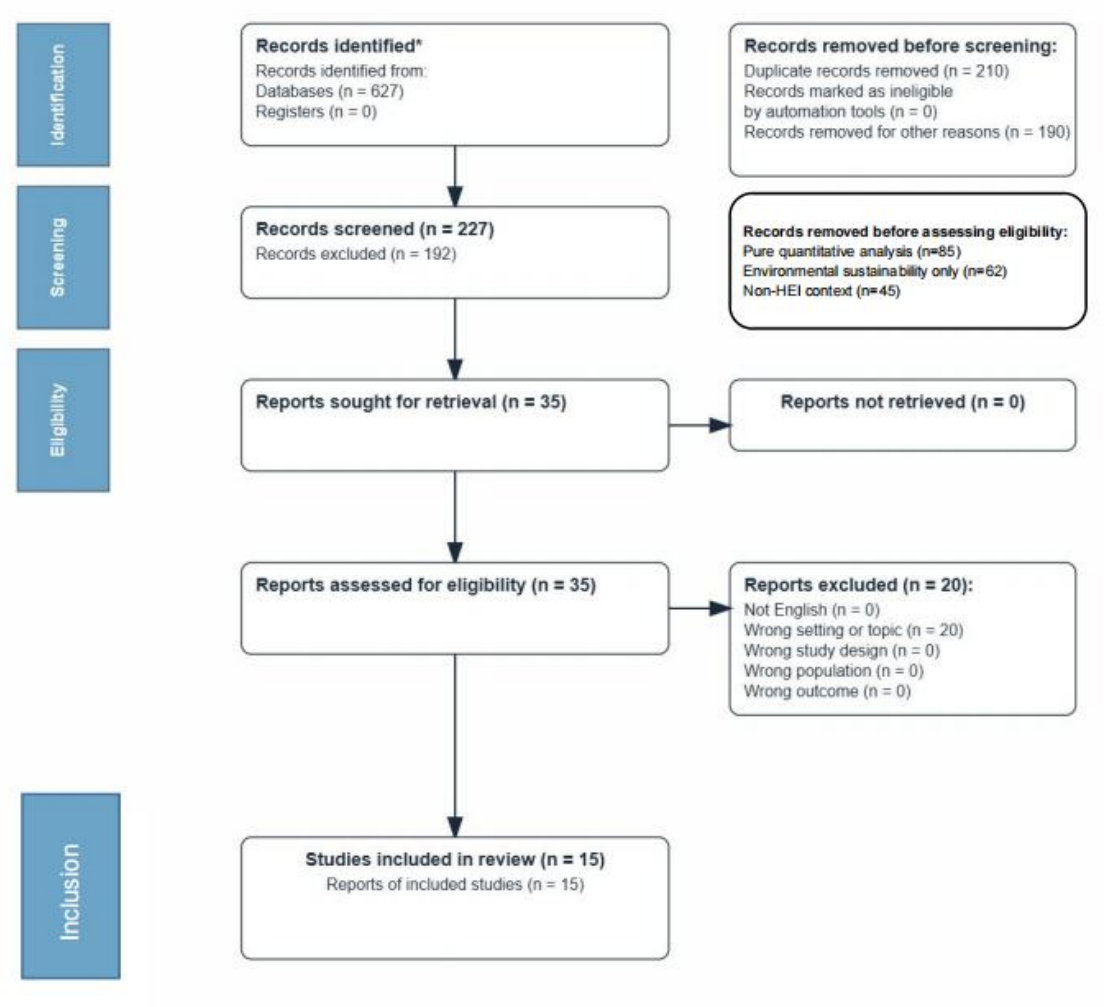
Data Extraction and Synthesis

For each included study, key information was extracted, including publication year, disciplinary context, main analytical focus, how publishing pressure was defined, which dimensions of sustainability were addressed, and whether institutional research mechanisms were discussed. A qualitative syntheses was then used to provide in-depth analysis to tackle the research questions posed in this review.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram that illustrates the study selection process, including the number of records identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the final review.

Figure 1: Flowchart of literature selection process following PRISMA 2020. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the literature selection process, which provides reporting guidance for systematic reviews. PRISMA, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis.



While the qualitative synthesis is based on the 15 studies included via the PRISMA process, additional literature is cited throughout the paper to provide theoretical context, policy background, and concept clarification. These sources are not part of the systematic sample but are used to interpret the review's findings.

Findings: Thematic Synthesis of Academic Publishing Pressure

This section presents the findings from the PRISMA-based qualitative synthesis of the 15 studies included in the final sample. In line with the three research questions, the analysis is structured by themes rather than article by article. Not all studies are discussed

separately, but each contributes to one or more of the themes identified across the review.

The discussion is organized around three interconnected themes that mirror the research questions: (1) how academic publishing pressure is described and put into practice in the literature, (2) what sustainability-related consequences are reported at different levels, and (3) how institutional research is portrayed as shaping and mediating publishing pressure.

How the Literature Describes and Measures Academic Publishing Pressure (RQ1)

Across the reviewed literature, academic publishing pressure is rarely seen as a temporary, personal issue. Instead, it is depicted as a permanent, built-in feature of contemporary higher education. Many studies have shown how formal evaluation systems, together with promotion and funding rules, increasingly tie academic recognition to publications and related metrics (Bayanbayeva, 2026; Dani, 2018; Madikizela-Madiya, 2023; Merton, 1973). In today's universities, "publish or perish" has evolved from a cultural slogan into a mandatory expectation embedded in the very machinery of hiring, promotion, and funding (Fielder, 1996; Moosa, 2018).

The most visible way in which academic publishing pressure is made concrete is through quantitative indicators, or the "tyranny of numbers". The literature shows how metrics—publication counts, impact factors, h-indices, and journal rankings—have become the primary targets academics are expected to attain. Interestingly, many of these tools were originally designed for library selection or general benchmarking, but they are now used to judge individual scientists (Dani, 2018; Hicks et al., 2015; Muller, 2018; Wilsdon et al., 2015). As these indicators are woven into annual appraisals and tenure reviews, an "audit culture" also rises (Power, 2003). Under such circumstances, numeric representations of output become the ultimate definition of quality and success (Hazelkorn, 2015; Power, 2003).

Beyond the metrics lies a more personal side to the story—academics' live experience of publishing pressure. Qualitative studies with early-career and mid-career academics describe the pressure to publish as continuous and escalating, especially when it is

expressed through informal norms, implicit thresholds, or opaque promotion rules (Bayanbayeva, 2026; Madikizela-Madiya, 2023; Mutongoza, 2023; Yankholmes, 2014). Narratives from different national contexts stress feelings of uncertainty, fear of falling behind, and the sense that it is never clear what counts as "enough" output to secure a stable position (Bayanbayeva, 2026; Miller et al., 2011; Mertkan et al., 2022). These accounts reveal a painful contradiction: institutions demand high-volume output but often fail to provide the time, support, or facilities needed to produce it, especially in systems undergoing rapid marketization (Shore & Wright, 2015; Watermeyer and Tomlinson, 2022).

Taken together, a significant gap is revealed in how academic publishing pressure has been studied. Quantitative and policy-oriented research concentrates on measurement systems, evaluation designs, and productivity patterns, whereas qualitative work mainly explores emotional, ethical, and career-related responses at the individual level (Butler, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2015; Muller, 2018; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Very few studies explicitly connect individual experiences of pressure to concrete organizational mechanisms such as national publication databases, institutional performance contracts, or departmental workload models (Sayab et al., 2025; Shore & Wright, 2015; Remisiewicz, 2024). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that academic publishing pressure is often described as either a technical question of metric design or a personal issue. What is missing is a truly integrated view of academic publishing pressure as a process that links governance, metrics, and human lives together.

Sustainability-related Consequences of Academic Publishing Pressure (RQ2)

Academic publishing pressure is increasingly described as a structural threat to sustainability in higher education across individual, institutional, and knowledge levels, not a driver of excellence (Bauwens et al., 2023; Jensen & Olsen, 2023; Mutongoza, 2023; Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023). The literature links intensified "publish or perish" regimes to deteriorating academic well-being, fragile organizational environments, and distorted research practices, raising doubts about whether current evaluation systems can support universities in the long run (Jensen & Olsen, 2023; Mutongoza, 2023).

Individual Level: The Human Cost

At the individual level, academic publishing pressure is closely associated with high stress, burnout, and mental health problems, especially among junior academics and doctoral researchers since they face escalating performance demands but with limited resources (Jensen & Olsen, 2023, pp. 164, 168-170; Mutongoza, 2023, pp. 48, 51, Zeinollakizi, 2026).

Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2014), research shows that when high expectations for publishing, funding, and teaching collide with declining autonomy and support, the result is chronic emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, and work-family conflicts (Jensen & Olsen, 2023, p. 166). Qualitative studies paint an even darker picture. Junior academics in a South African university described how constant injunctions to publish have led to "panic attacks", "anxiety", and "high-functioning but depressed" professional identities (Mutongoza, 2023, p. 50).

Institutional Level: Reshaping the Workplace

At the institutional level, academic publishing pressure works alongside market-oriented reforms to fundamentally reshape how universities are governed. This shift toward "managerialism" has transformed the workplace culture (Bauwens et al., 2023, p. 2).

Comparative evidence suggests a clear trend: systems that rely heavily on quantitative performance indicators report lover job satisfaction and a steady erosion of academic freedom. What's worse, traditional collegial systems are now moving toward such intensified control (Jensen & Olsen, 2023, pp. 172-174). In unprivileged environments, the stakes are even higher. "Publish or perish" mandates can foster academic bullying and exploitative mentorships, where junior staff are strategically manipulated to meet departmental targets (Mutongoza, 2023).

Knowledge Level: Quality vs. Quantity

At the level of knowledge system, critics warn that a metric-driven culture undermines the integrity of research by prioritizing quantity over quality (Bauwens et al., 2023). According to Han and Li (2018, p. 166), fake peer review appears due to "modern

metrics-based regimes of academic evaluation". In the Global South, where institutional support is often thin, some researchers feel forced to turn to predatory journals or unethical co-authorship just to survive. Ironically, while these practices help meet output quotas designed to ensure academic development, they ultimately weaken the credibility and integrity of science and knowledge, creating a cycle of "unsustainable" knowledge production (Mutongoza, 2023; Rawat & Meena, 2014).

To conclude, these findings suggest that sustainability in higher education is not a narrow technical issue, but a factor influencing human lives, governance, and knowledge system. Therefore, evaluation frameworks at institutional level should value diverse contributions and align research with long-term missions and goals rather than short-term statistics.

Institutional Research as a Governance Lever (RQ3)

Institutional Research (IR) is often portrayed as a "double-edged" infrastructure. For one thing, it can strengthen rigid, metric-based control; for another, it has the potential to be reoriented to reshape the "publish or perish" culture into a more sustainable one (Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023; Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Studies have shown that IR's mediating role is more visible when institutional data systems and evaluation routines are tied directly to either the "publish or perish" logic or to emerging frameworks of responsible assessment (Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023; Gaitán-Angulo et al., 2022; Wilsdon et al., 2015).

In practice, IR units act as translators. They take abstract evaluation criteria and turn them into the dashboards, ranking reports, and monitoring tools that structure daily academic life (Butler & McAllister, 2011; Nygård, 2024; Wilsdon et al., 2015). For example, in systems like Spain's *sexenios* or ANECA (National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation), IR makes bibliometric thresholds visible and actionable. By doing so, it turns journal lists and citation counts into concrete career requirements that intensify publishing pressure (Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023). However, these offices are also the same places where alternative indicators could be introduced. In principle, IR could give greater weight to book chapters, public engagement, or field-specific publication cultures, providing a much-needed buffer against narrow metrics (Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023; Wilsdon et al., 2015).

Despite this potential for reform, most empirical work suggests that IR currently tends to stabilize and amplify—rather than reduce—metric-based governance (Butler & McAllister, 2011; Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023). By embedding journal impact factors and ranking positions into routine institutional reporting, IR normalizes an extremely narrow definition of productivity, which encourages strategic behaviors: scholars may target a small set of high-impact publications while sidelining essential teaching and research (Butler & McAllister, 2011; Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023). In business schools, for instance, a heavy reliance on lists like Financial Times 50 (FT 50) aligns IR with a culture that prioritizes countable outputs over societal relevance or contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (Rodenburg et al., 2022; Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023).

However, there are also studies viewing IR as a potential lever for change (Gaitán-Angulo et al., 2022; Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Frameworks such as "responsible metrics" (Wilsdon et al., 2015, p. 134) show how institutional data could be redesigned to prioritize academic quality and diversity over sheer volume. In that case, IR supports rather tha replaces qualitative judgement (Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023; Wilsdon et al., 2015). When IR tracks environmental and social goals alongside publications, it can redirect institutional attention toward broader value (Gaitán-Angulo et al., 2022; Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023).

Taken together, this review indicates that IR is not a neutral bystander; it influences publishing pressure through specific design choices. It is about what is measured, how indicator are combines, and how results are used by management (Feenstra & Delgado López-Cózar, 2023; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Where IR remains tightly connected with mere rankings and numbers, it reproduces high-pressure audit cultures. By contrast, where it aligns with responsible metrics or SDG frameworks, it helps reshape what "success" looks like, opening up space for more sustainable academic practices (Gaitán-Angulo et al., 2022; Steingard & Rodenburg, 2023; Wilsdon et al., 2015).

Discussion and Conclusion

After the findings section synthesizes how existing literature describes publishing pressure, its impact on sustainability, and the role of institutional research, this section

aims to: (1) briefly summarize the core findings of this review, (2) reflect on what these findings collectively reveal about academic publishing pressure in contemporary higher education, and (3) situate them within the wider conversation on research evaluation, academic governance, and institutional sustainability, by revisiting the initial research questions and by bridging the gap between conceptual frameworks and empirical realities.

Summary

This article examine academic publishing pressure not as a series of isolated incidents, but integrated with long-term sustainability, research evaluation, and institutional governance of higher education. The study is motivated by increasing criticism of the "publish or perish" culture and seeks to address a persistent gap in relevant literature: while this pressure is widely acknowledged, it is too often dismissed as either a technical issue or a personal psychological burden, rather than a systemic outcome of evaluation metrics.

To explore this, this article focuses on three core questions. First, it asks how the literature describes and measures academic publishing pressure in higher education. Second, it investigates its "ripple effects" on sustainability at individual, institutional, and knowledge levels. Finally, it examines the role of Institutional research (IR) as a mediator: a tool that can either reinforce the status quo or help reshape more sustainable and responsible evaluation framework.

Using a PRISMA-based systematic review method, this study synthesizes findings from policy-oriented, quantitative, and qualitative research articles that have undergone peer reviews. The results show that academic publishing pressure has become a permanent feature of contemporary higher education institutions, fueled by metric-based systems that translate abstract ideas of "academic excellence" into a narrow set of measurable outputs. Thus, long-term sustainability is undermined with academics being stressed out, institutions suffering from audit culture, and the diversity and integrity of knowledge being damaged.

More importantly, this review identifies IR as a vital, yet overlooked, tool, where abstract data and policy analysis is turned into performance indicators, and then into daily

academic practices. While IR units are often seen as a stabilizer of metric-based control, they are also cradles of possible changes for more reasonable evaluation systems. Taken together, these findings suggest that the "publish or perish" culture is never merely an unfortunate side effect of evaluation, but a product of how academic value is currently defined, measured, and governed.

From Description to Mechanism: Rethinking Academic Publishing Pressure

The articles reviewed in this paper show that academic publishing pressure is usually portrayed as a structural, institutional fact of modern higher education, not as a short-term or purely personal issue. But to truly understand why this pressure is so widespread and persistent across higher education systems, deeper analyses is needed. When viewed as a whole, the studies discussed previously suggest that academic publishing pressure is far more than an incentive to push scholars; it functions as a governance mechanism—a way of reorganizing academic labor through the constant cycle of measurement, comparison, and accountability.

A key process in the literature is how evaluation metrics are transformed into behavioral targets. As Power (1997, 2003) argues, audit systems do more than just check performance; they actively shape how organizations behave by defining what can be seen, compared, and rewarded. In higher education, publication counts, impact factors, journal rankings, and the like serve as simplified representations of academic value, allowing institutions to govern complex scholarly work remotely (Hazelkorn, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015). Therefore, academic publishing pressure does not stem from the metrics themselves, but from the way those metrics are woven into promotion rules, funding frameworks, and institutional rankings.

The literature also shows that this pressure intensifies during implementation. While evaluation frameworks often appear neutral, how they are used in everyday university life turns them into rigid performance thresholds. Muller (2018, p. 29) describes this as the "tyranny of metrics", a shift where indicators originally meant to inform judgement eventually replace judgement altogether. The findings of this review confirm this trend: academic publishing pressure isn't simply something being measured, but is being actively produced through the routine use of data in academic decision-making.

At the same time, qualitative studies remind us that for individual academics, this pressure is often experienced as ambiguous and open-ended. Expectations are rarely clear, and the goalposts seem to be moving all the time (Aksom, 2018; Mutongoza, 2023). Such ambiguity is not an accident; rather, it reflects the conflicts between standardized metrics and the messy, diverse nature of research. By leaving benchmarks partially undefined, institutions maintain their own flexibility while forcing individual scholars to shoulder the risk. In this sense, academic publishing pressure becomes an internalized compass, shaping how academics spend their time and plan their careers even when there is no managerial intervention.

Seen from this angle, RQ1 can be answered with greater depth. Academic publishing pressure should be understood as the inevitable outcome of current higher education governance frameworks that are composed of but not limited to evaluation metrics, institutional rules, and personal interpretation. Thus, it cannot be tied to a single indicator or policy instrument. Instead, it emerges from the way those frameworks translate abstract ideas of excellence into the daily, high-stake reality of academic life.

Sustainability as a Multi-Level Crisis: The Interconnected Costs of Pressure

The second research question explores how academic publishing pressure ripples through individual scholars, institutions, and the wider knowledge system. The literature documents a range of negative effects, but a deeper look reveals more: these effects are not isolated, but are interconnected and are mutually reinforcing. In other words, what academic publishing pressure does extends far beyond stress; it fundamentally reshapes the basic conditions under which academic systems survive and reproduce themselves over time.

At the individual level, the link between publishing pressure and reduced well-being is well-established (Yankholmes, 2014; Mutongoza, 2023). However, from the perspective of sustainability, the real danger is not the pressure itself, but its chronic nature. When academic careers are organized around constantly maximizing output and managing tight timelines, there is less space for curiosity-driven work or long-term growth. Over time, this pattern fuels exhaustion, anxiety, and job insecurity, undermining the human

sustainability of academic work, especially for early-career researchers and those in more precarious positions.

These individual consequences are closely tied to institutional designs. Universities increasingly rely on publishing metrics to prove their value to governments, funders, and ranking agencies (Hazelkorn, 2015). Because external evaluations depends on short-term, countable outputs, institutions develop internal strategies that privilege what can be measured, such as publication counts, citations, and journal rankings, over broader educational or public roles. Shore and Wright (2015, p. 6) describes this as "governing by numbers", where the indicators eventually becomes more important than the quality they are meant to represent. Hence, institutional sustainability is compromised when universities become stuck in a competitive cycle where rankings and funding formulas dictate their every move.

When academics and institutions are locked in the publishing cycle, the long-term development of the knowledge system and research integrity is threatened. Unethical tactics like slicing one study into multiple papers, adding honorary authors, or avoiding risky and slow-moving topics become rational responses to systems that reward quantity and visibility above all else (Anderson et al., 2007; Dani, 2018). These practices fragment collective knowledge and discourage cumulative, interdisciplinary, or exploratory work. Thus, knowledge sustainability is challenged because evaluation systems consistently favor particular kinds of outputs, fields, and methods which also forces academics to adopt dishonorable methods.

Viewed together, these three levels form a dangerous feedback loop. Academic publishing pressure drives individual behavior, which reinforces current institutional evaluation framework and the reliance on metrics, which in turn further entrenches a culture that primarily values measurable outputs. This loop explains why academic publishing pressure persists even when everyone acknowledge its harm. In response to the second research question, this review suggests that these sustainability challenges cannot be solved only at one level at a time since the results of interventions aimed at individual well-being or research integrity will always be limited as long as the current underlying institutional structures and knowledge rules, which causes such pressure at the

very beginning, remain unchanged.

The Governance Pivot: Institutional Research Between Metrics and Sustainability

The third research question examines how IR functions as the mediating factor, the bridge that connects abstract evaluation rules to daily academic life. The findings suggest that IR is far more than a neutral data service; it is a central pillar in shaping academic publishing pressure—IR units do not just report data, but actively decide which parts of an academic career are worth counting.

IR units generate the numbers through which universities monitor themselves. They choose which indicators to collect, how to define categories, and how to present performance in dashboards, reports, and ranking overviews. In systems driven by performance-based funding and league tables, this works does more than describe reality: it helps stabilize and legitimize metric-based evaluation (Hazelkorn, 2015; Power, 1997). With tools such as CRIS, IR units translate complex academic activities into simplified and standardized records, making it easier to compare departments, track outputs, and feed audits and external reviews.

However, the literature also points to a structural tension within IR. While these units can reinforce the "publish or perish" culture and keep attention focused on metrics by implementing more narrow indicators, they also possess the technical skills and data access needed to support more diverse ways of assessment, including more contextual and mission-sensitive approaches. Global initiatives like the Leiden Manifesto and DORA explicitly call for combining quantitative information with expert judgement, disciplinary diversity, and qualitative evidence (Hicks et al., 2015). In principle, IR could help embed these ideas by designing dashboards that include narratives, field-specific benchmarks, and indicators of long-term contribution, not just short-term volume.

If IR has such a potential to transform the status quo, why does academic publishing pressure remain so strong and pervasive? The literature suggests the answer lies in the external governance environment. External evaluation frameworks and accountability regimes still reward simple, numeric progress above all else, which creates strong

incentives for IR units to focus on what can be easily measured (Shore & Wright, 2015; Wilsdon et al., 2015). As a result, frameworks designed even out of the best intentions like DORA and the Leiden Manifesto risk being translated into adjusted indicator sets, rather than prompting a deeper change in what good performance means. In answering RQ3, this review identifies IR as a mediating factor that can both constrain and facilitate reform. IR does not simply pass along external demands; it actively mediates how those demands are interpreted inside universities and how they shape academic publishing pressure. Recognizing its active role is essential for thinking about how evaluation regimes might be redirected toward forms of assessment that support, not erode, the long-term sustainability of academic work and knowledge production.

Reflections and Limitations of the Review

While this review offers a structured overview of academic publishing pressure, its impact on sustainability in higher education, and what role IR plays, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. These limitations do not weaken the findings; instead, they help clarify the scope of conclusions and point out the direction for future research.

One primary challenge is the fragmentation of the literature. As the findings show, academic publishing pressure lack a single, universal definition. It is described through a cloud of overlapping terms, from the phrase “publish or perish” and audit culture to metric-based evaluation (Merton, 1973; Power, 1997; Muller, 2018). This diversity makes synthesis difficult, as different scholars often describe the same phenomenon using entirely different expressions and vocabularies. As a result, to build a coherent narrative requires active interpretation, meaning that the story told here is one of the many possible understandings.

Furthermore, the broad definition of academic publishing pressure adopted in this review has both strengths and weaknesses. It takes institutional dimension into consideration, but it also sacrifices some precision. In the literature, the effects of journal rankings, national funding formulas, and promotion rules are often piled together, even though they happen at different levels of power (Hazelkorn, 2015). Future studies could develop sharper distinctions to separate these mechanisms and explore which ones causes the most friction.

Another limitation stems from methodological choices about where and how to search. Although this review consults several databases and the whole process is guided by the standard review method PRISMA, the final sample is relatively small. In addition, by prioritizing peer-reviewed journals and formal policy documents, this review inevitably mirrors the metric-oriented culture it seeks to analyze, risking downplaying informal practices, disciplinary nuances, and non-English publications that do not easily fit into standard databases or search strategies. However, those dismissed sources are often where the most vivid insights into local practices, the Global South in particular, are offered (Mutongoza, 2023).

Such a review that relies on published work can also cause biases. Analyses of academic publishing pressure, especially those focused on negative experiences, ethical dilemmas, or organizational failures, may cluster in certain fields, while other perspectives remain in internal reports, unpublished studies, or administrative datasets. Consequently, the review may only capture how academic publishing pressure is talked about in academic and policy discourse, instead of providing a complete picture of how it is framed and felt in all institutional contexts.

It is also worth reflecting on the critical standpoint of the review which highlights the unintended consequences of metric-driven evaluation and the tensions between performance-based regimes and academic values. This perspective is well supported by many of the articles included in this review, but it inevitably gives more weight to studies that emphasize problems than to those that stress potential benefits of such evaluation frameworks like greater transparency, clearer process, and better alignment between institutional strategies and research priorities. In other words, the review does not claim to be neutral since it treats academic publishing pressure as a systemic problem, based on which this paper unfolds.

These reflections point out several directions for future work. To begin with, there is an urgent need for studies explicitly linking individual experiences of academic publishing pressure to concrete institutional tools such as performance dashboards, workload allocation models, and evaluation algorithms. Also, comparative research across national systems and institutional types could also be conducted to clarify how similar metrics

lead to different outcomes depending on different governance traditions, funding regimes, and academic cultures. Finally, the role of IR should also be given more attention to, as an active mediator instead of as a pure technical tool. How data are collected, selected, coded, and presented inside universities can greatly influence how evaluation systems might evolve. Understanding these processes in more detail is essential if IR is to support more sustainable and responsible approached to assessing academic work.

Conclusion

By synthesizing a diverse body of literature, this review has approached academic publishing pressure as a structural outcome of institutional evaluation frameworks in contemporary higher education that feature metric-oriented assessing cultures. Regarding sustainability, this academic publishing pressure reshapes everything involved, from the career trajectories of individual scholars to the strategic priorities of institutions and the long-term health of knowledge itself. By including IR as a mediating tool instead of as a simple neutral data service, this review explores its dual roles of either reinforcing the "publish or perish" status quo or helping to foster more balanced, responsible, diverse, and sustainable assessment practices by including qualitative judgement and context-sensitive interpretations in governance decisions.

Overall, these points add to ongoing debates on the "publish or perish" culture by linking academic publishing pressure to sustainability across different levels and to institutional governance. They suggest an urgent need to move beyond metrics only and toward evaluation practices that do more than just measure performance, i.e. a system that actively supports sustainable academic work and protect the resilience of higher education institutions.

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