**[Academic relevance](https://www.dawn.com/news/1669531/academic-relevance)**

[Zehra Waheed](https://www.dawn.com/authors/9164/zehra-waheed)Published January 15, 2022 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is an academic with an interest in renewable energy and project management.

SPURRED on by the need for visibility and impact in the global academic community, the higher education sector in Pakistan (and beyond) appears to be driven by the number of publications in esteemed journals and outlets while the way this knowledge is generated has become less important. Poor ethics in this critical knowledge-generation and value-creating profession is metaphorically the ‘silent thief' (as we say in Urdu) who will come stealthily and rob all semblance of the scientific community’s dignity and the world’s trust in it.

Covid-19, its impact (and the fight against it) has been a prime example of how trust in the integrity of the scientific community (both social and pure scientists) has been the one true thing that has made the fight possible. If there had been any ambiguity earlier regarding the importance of the reputation and integrity of the scientific and academic community, this has been the litmus test.

I came across some rather profound words recently spoken by Jeremy Farrar, Director of the Wellcome Charitable Foundation in the United Kingdom. He said: “You can’t just build… science when you think you need it: investment in people, teams, and infrastructure over years provides the bedrock that is so important in a crisis.”

While Jeremy made that observation in the context of how the Covid-19 crisis itself spurred major (policy and practice-based) reforms, what struck me was what his statement had implied — the fact that policymakers and relevant stakeholders truly believed in what the scientific community had to say. That comes through reputation. It is the outcome of a system-level trust — one that must be maintained, monitored, and fought for! Integrity and reputation are at the very heart of what it is that we do, and stand for.

A scholar without integrity is no scholar.

As an emerging economy, there is understandably a need to move fast and create our own postcolonial academic space (and narrative). There is, even more importantly, a need to generate original, useful, ethically disseminated knowledge that engages not just specialists but a much wider set of stakeholders.

The work coming out of the country needs to represent our problems, our reality — and be conducted with the motivation to contribute to our overall good reputation within the global community. However, if we are not mindful of unethical conduct within our communities there are instances of malpractice that will tarnish our reputation (as a country, as institutions of repute and as individual Pakistani academics). Academic relevance cannot exist without academic reputation.

A recent anecdote would help. Lately I reached out to a Pakistani academic proposing to jointly develop a critique of the research design through which they had approached a piece of research. I was pleased to get a quick response: fantastic! I was excited by the prospect that an author would want to actively participate in the critique of something they had developed themselves (for those unfamiliar with this territory, critiques tend to be one-sided: a paper is published, a critique is offered as a counter-narrative, and then the response comes from the original contributors).

Anyway, we exchanged numbers over email and said we would Zoom shortly. Soon after that, I received from this academic — who does have a formidable track record of international publications — ‘options’ of joining various publications (papers) as first author and second author with a price tag attached for both! These options were for excellent journals, no less, and with reasonable price tags (reminded me of ‘bohni’ — the enticing offer for a first-time client). But what astonished me was the casual way in which it was offered. The normality of it. The unassuming manner that said: this was the norm, and this was okay.

I responded with a politely stern reply that this was not how we undertook academic work at our institution. The reply was another casual remark essentially saying, NP — you can always revert! It is also pertinent to note that the same academic appears to have been developing fake profiles on LinkedIn — making connections with unsuspecting colleagues — claiming to be professor of something they clearly are not.

And this is just one story.

The casual manner in which we have accepted the identity of ‘chor’ as a nation appears now to be seeping into our conduct within one of the most sacred professions around. Academia is about knowledge, about scholarship, and about integrity — and frankly nothing more. A scholar without integrity is no scholar. For now, the few dirty fish in the pond contaminate it all, rendering our findings and our opinions worthless.

Whether we are at the periphery of academic dishonesty or part of a system that allows it to take place, we must speak out – fight it! For without a soul, we remain a lifeless body of no beauty or utility.

*The writer is an academic with an interest in renewable energy and project management.*

[**zehra.waheed@lums.edu.pk**](http://mailto:zehra.waheed@lums.edu.pk)

*Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2022*