

## Introduction

In today's academic landscape, identity fraud (improper use of researcher's name) and the misuse of institutional affiliation poses an increasing threat, particularly due to the rise of journals using or allowing predatory practices and paper mills.

Several researchers have reported discovering their names listed as authors on articles they never contributed to, published in obscure journals [1] [2] [3] [4]. In other cases, institutional affiliations are misused, for example by attributing them to non-existent researchers to give an article status.

## Impact

The consequences of having your name or affiliation wrongly attributed to a manuscript can be far-reaching and affect multiple actors. In particular when this occurs on manuscripts of dubious quality or provenance.

For *researchers* this can lead to reputational damage and loss of trust in the quality and integrity of the other (own) work, in general but also among funders and collaboration partners. Because these practices are hard to correct and avoid, researchers can experience it as frustrating and get demotivated.

This also goes for their *affiliated institution*. It creates an unfair playing field as malicious parties thrive on the work and status of others.

*Journals* run the risk of publishing articles based on false credentials, which can affect their credibility.

For *science* as a whole, it undermines the reliability of the academic system, in which transparency and verifiability are crucial. Because the majority of the papers aren't indexed in the major indexing services, such as Web-of-Science, PubMed, ..., it allows them to stay unnoticed for longer periods [5]. 'Research results', of dubious quality, are thus 'laundered' and made available for reuse and application. This can lead to dangerous situations, e.g. (but not limited to) in the case of health research or policy-driven research.

Unfortunately, also Flemish universities and their researchers have become victims of such practices. At the moment, VUB, working together with the other Flemish universities is looking into manuscripts in journals published under the OMICS umbrella, such as these published by Longdom Publishing SL, Allied Academies, Hilaris, iMedPub and Prime Scholars. During this investigation, multiple papers were identified in which either the name of researchers, or the institutional affiliation was misused. Unfortunately, the problem does not seem to be limited to the OMICS group, with fraudulent papers being found with other publishers as well.

## How to respond

If you discover your name and university on a publication without your knowledge or permission, it is necessary to take action.

Fraudulent journals pop up and disappear. Make sure you collect all the necessary documentation. Download the PDF or save a copy of the online version of the article. Take screenshots, including the list of authors and affiliations. Write down all key information: the journal name, publisher, the DOI, the date of submission or publication, and the corresponding author's details.

Contact the dedicated university service at LEO@vub.be. This is important as it will allow to get a centralized overview on the extent of the problem. They can help explore next steps: this might include a formal complaint, a mediation attempt, or a request for correction or retraction. Don't hesitate to reach out, as reporting a problem is not a confession. It's part of protecting your name and that of your institution, your work, and the integrity of research.

Consider that the publication you found might not be the only one out there, search for more. Look up your name in Google Scholar, Scopus, ResearchGate, OpenAlex and/or Web of Science and check if more suspicious papers pop up. Do this on a regular basis. Tip: you can install an alert via <https://www.google.be/alerts>. Go through the same documentation step for additional publications that you find.

#### References

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[5] Wouter Van de Velde, 2025. Unpublished