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Prolific Conferences and Publications: Are They Distracting from the Quality and Focus of Scientific Research?

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Abstract

While well-structured conferences and rigorous publications are vital for scientific exchange, their rapid proliferation, if left unchecked, appears to dilute their impact. Increasingly, the sheer volume of outputs overshadows the depth of scientific contribution, risking an undesirable shift away from sustained, problem-focused investigation. Using agricultural sciences as a primary context, this article examines the concerns surrounding excessive conferencing, fragmented publishing, and metric-driven evaluations. It proposes certain strategic recommendations that include renewed emphasis on goal-oriented research, responsible publishing, and thematically focused conferences. These recommendations are intended to stimulate constructive reflection to improve the quality, relevance, and impact of research, conferences and publications.

Keywords: Scientific Conferences, Scientific Publishing, Research Productivity, Research Quality, Agricultural Research, Publication Ethics, Scholarly Communication

Introduction

Scientific research, conferences, and publications are interconnected pillars that generate, refine, and disseminate knowledge. Professional excellence is best achieved when these elements complement one another effectively.

Peer-reviewed publications and well-structured conferences facilitate the exchange of ideas, stimulate critical thinking, and foster vital collaborations. There are many examples of positive outcomes. In recent years, however, the numerical expansion of these platforms has, in some cases, seemed to dilute their intended purpose and impact. In many cases, sheer quantity may undermine the quality and depth of scientific contribution. The extensive bibliometric study conducted in India revealed that Indian researchers published from 24,000 to 26,000 articles and proceedings annually in the agricultural and biological Sciences [1]. It is also estimated that India hosts 300 to 400 national and international agricultural conferences, symposia, and seminars per year. These are organized by various ICAR institutions, state universities, private colleges, and event managers specializing in commercialized scientific events. Scientometric data reveal that while the country produces high volumes of print, the global scientific community frequently ignores it because it lacks depth. This is a great concern, suggesting that greater emphasis should be laid on quality parameters to have greater impact. Using agricultural sciences as a primary framework, this article examines emerging trends and their impact, and proposes certain strategic recommendations to strengthen the quality, relevance, and impact of research, conferences, and publications.

Challenges in Contemporary Scientific Conferences

Generally, the emergence of new scientific challenges - such as a novel pest or disease - throws open a challenge and provides opportunities for scientists to find suitable solutions. The ideal initial step would be to organize focused

brainstorming sessions among small groups of concerned experts to analyze the issue and chalk out a proper plan of action. However, while it is still being practiced, in several instances, such opportunities are seized to organize a series of large-scale conferences at various levels – local, state, national, and international – often with an eagerness to be among the first to champion the cause and to gain visibility. Such conferences are not limited to new challenges alone, but extend to many prevailing problems as well. Thus, there is an ever-increasing number of conferences, some of which may be more opportunistic than need-based. These are usually followed by a number of publications and conference proceedings, often even before a solution is found! We must assess whether participating in or contributing to these venues yields tangible benefits.

Organizing or attending frequent conferences consumes considerable time, energy, and financial resources - travel, hospitality, logistics, printing, and ceremonial arrangements – and one has to see whether it is worthwhile in terms of tangible academic benefits.

Digital and Traditional Formats

The rise of virtual platforms, especially in the post-Covid-19 era, has significantly reduced logistical requirements including costs. However, while it offers several unique benefits, it has also triggered an ever-increasing proliferation of webinars that vary in scientific depth and clarity of objectives.

Similarly, traditional conferences have become increasingly monotonous and predictable. To start with, an organizing committee is formed which boasts of a long list of officials in a top-down hierarchy, some of whom may not even be aware of their inclusion. The dignitaries invited to the events - largely based on their positions - are frequently the same individuals across different conferences and tend to deliver familiar speeches. Of course, there are exceptions with highly informative and inspiring speeches.

In the case of national and international conferences, fervent efforts are made to attract as many participants and presentations as possible – a perceived measure of grand success. Sometimes, the response is so overwhelming that the conference is extended to 2 or 3 days and presentations are split into several concurrent sessions. Generally, these lack impact.

Conferences commonly begin late as all the guests may not arrive on time, and are often overloaded with dignitaries, prolonged inaugurations, and ceremonial formalities. By the time technical sessions commence, both time and audience attention are already diminished. Thus, the effectiveness of the conference may be diminished during the inaugural session itself. There are often too many technical presentations, with almost every participant also serving as a speaker. As conferences generally run far behind schedule, presentations are rushed, details and depth are sacrificed, and there is no place for meaningful scientific discussion. Several presentations may be recycled versions of earlier talks, often with only cosmetic changes in the title and text.

Taking an overview, the increasing frequency of conferences/webinars appears to be a distraction from the quality and focus of scientific research. Institutions may introspect and benefit from balancing event-related activities with adequate time for laboratory and field research.

Trends in Modern Scientific Publishing

In contemporary publishing, there is an observable trend toward producing multiple fragmented papers rather than a comprehensive in-depth studies. This is often a response to metric-driven evaluation systems which, while rightly intended to track productivity, can sometimes prioritize quantity over scientific significance.

Practices such as writing syndicates, gift authorship, and coercive authorship are also aimed at increasing publication counts. These practices merit careful discouragement.

Literature review and citation practices also sometimes show biases. At times, undue preference is given to foreign references in the belief that it imparts an "international flavor," while relevant local publications, though consulted, are often not acknowledged to claim priority. Excessive self-citation may also weaken scholarly objectivity.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) places paramount importance on research publications and conferences for academic recognition and career advancement. They strictly mandate ethical research and primarily give academic weight only to papers published in Listed or indexed journals [2]. These are well-intended and most scientists prefer such peer-reviewed journals. However, they are often deterred by unresponsive editors, unacknowledged submissions, and agonizing delays. This frustrating lack of communication drives researchers toward faster, more accommodating alternatives. The general institutional pressure to 'publish or perish' culture, often linked to promotions, performance evaluations, and recognition, is one of the main reasons that may encourage hurried or less comprehensive research outputs. However, authors must carefully navigate these choices to avoid predatory journals and dubious award practices that compromise academic integrity. Although most of the institutions now enforce strict ethical standards to prioritize quality over quantity, the explosion of substandard publications continues unchecked.

Strategic Recommendations

Bearing in mind the prevailing limitations, the following advisory measures are suggested, hoping that these would stimulate further thoughts for improvement.

Adopt Goal-Oriented Research Frameworks

Research serves as the fundamental engine for scientific advancement. To maximize impact, the scientific ecosystem must transition toward a highly accountable, goal-oriented, and problem-driven model. Every research institution should establish structured, transparent goal frameworks divided into two operational tiers:

- **Institutional goals:**

These Institutional Development Plans (IDPs) map out long-term, multi-year strategic visions. They establish team-based, time-bound milestones to sustain structural continuity, monitor systemic growth, and maintain operational accountability. When tied directly to high-impact discoveries, commercial products, or tier-one publications, IDPs build a strong culture of collective ownership and institutional pride.

- **Individual goals:**

These are short-term (one- to two-year) research milestones tailored to each investigator and are aligned to broader institutional priorities. By prioritizing deep domain expertise and rigorous peer-reviewed dissemination, individual goals help researchers optimize their daily schedules, isolate high-value tasks, and eliminate effort spent on non-essential activities. Ultimately, this framework empowers researchers to independently track their own milestones, self-correct roadblocks, and maintain strong alignment with organizational benchmarks.

Goal documents would be a great motivating factor. Once scrutinized and approved (mid-course corrections may be made if necessary), these goals should become the shared responsibility of institutional heads, department heads, and individual researchers – in other words, they become accountable. If performance assessments are linked to achieving such goals, it may motivate deeper research engagement. University Grant Commission has given very useful guidelines, but these need to be implemented more effectively to derive the intended benefits [2,3].

Refine Evaluation Metrics

Transitioning from purely metric-driven assessments to qualitative evaluations can better reflect a researcher's true impact. Metrics should ideally weigh the relevance and scientific rigor of a work more heavily than the sheer fragmented publications or 'salami slicing.'

Rationalize Conference Protocols

Scientific community should encourage fewer, but more meaningful conferences that are clearly need-based and can motivate researchers to contribute more. Efficacy and impact can be improved through:

- **Theme-based:** The conference should be need-based and thematically focused.
- **Streamlined ceremonials:** Limit the number of dignitaries on the dais as far as possible. Minimize guest introductions, routine speeches, and felicitations.
- **Standardized stage protocols:** Scientific events often lose valuable time in prolonged ceremonial formalities, repeated acknowledgements, and extended introductions of dignitaries. Conferences may benefit from adopting simple and time-conscious protocols, limiting elaborate formalities and ensuring that the primary focus remains on scientific exchange and informed discussion. Streamlined proceedings would improve efficiency, audience engagement, and overall impact.
- **Limited presentations:** Over-crowding of presentations should be avoided. Only selected, highly relevant presentations should be allowed.
- **Time management:** Time-bound agenda and allocating adequate time for Q&A and informed debate.

Cricket as a Time Management Model

For efficient time-management, we should emulate cricket and other high-level sporting events. In these tournaments, every phase is so meticulously planned and executed. For example, in cricket, arrival of the teams at the venue, the toss, entry of umpires and players to the field, commencing and closing the match and also the scheduled breaks in between, post-match interviews and award presentations, handing over the trophy to the winning team, etc. are carried out in a highly organized manner with clock-like precision. It is highly focused, precise and impactful. There are minimal ceremonial distractions, prolonged introductions, or indulgent speeches. VIPs are treated with respects, but not at the cost of any extra time. The focus remains entirely on the event.

Adopting these guidelines would instill discipline, ensure a smoother flow, and respect the audience's time.

Several academic and research institutions invite prominent speakers to address their staff and students. It is an

excellent move. Well-articulated lectures would be very impactful and inspiring, and may be prioritized over routine conferences.

Strengthen Publication Ethics

Quality scientific output is characterized by novelty and clarity. Institutions and professional societies can continue to strengthen the ecosystem by promoting ethical authorship and discouraging segmented publishing ("salami slicing"). Emphasizing comprehensive, high-rigor studies will naturally reduce information redundancy.

Conclusion

According to bibliometric studies, Indian researchers published from 24,000 to 26,000 articles in the agricultural and biological sciences and also conducted 300 to 400 national and international agricultural conferences annually [1]. The scientometric data reveal that while this quantity is impressive and reflects vibrant scientific activities, the global scientific community frequently ignores it because it lacks depth. It is a serious concern and, therefore, there is a need for greater emphasis on quality parameters to have greater impact. To ensure this output translates into tangible utility, there is a need to further rationalize research, conferences, and publication practices. The recommendations proposed in this article are intended as a basis for constructive reflection to improve the quality, relevance and impact of scientific outputs. Conferences and publications are means, not ends. Encouragingly, many high-quality conferences and impactful publications continue to uphold strong scientific values. These can serve as models for broader improvement, supported by appropriate institutional frameworks.

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