

# Nothing But Publishing: The Effect of Paid Service in Academic Publishing for Graduates With Weak Academic Ability

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## Abstract

Paid services in academic publishing provide easy access to those graduates with weak academic ability. This essay aims at investigating the underlying causes of paid services in academic publishing and their effects. The main data were obtained from semi-structured interviews and were quantitative analysed. A group of 76 graduates who were believed to be of weak academic ability were invited to the interview. The results show that graduates benefit from paid services, making graduation, promotion and further education possible. Because core journals cannot accept their low-quality essays, they have to ask help from literary agents at a high cost which is the result of lacking regulations on illegal ways of charging. A published paper was all that graduates needed to succeed and such an irrational requirement expedited the wild development of irresponsible literary agents. Marketisation of academic journals adds false value to the graduates. The university should review its assessment system and reduce paid services in academic publishing at the root.

**Keywords:** paid publication, literary agent, graduate publication

## 1. Introduction

It is controversial whether university students must publish papers. A paper embodies the research and creative ability of prospective postgraduate students while it is also the most efficient and fastest way to increase employment potential for graduates. However, when university students are required to publish papers as a prerequisite for graduation or further education, problems have arisen. For those students with weak academic ability, on the one hand, their work cannot meet the publishing threshold; on the other hand, they cannot afford the high page fees. In addition, a large number of agents emerge in response to the booming demands from graduates in China.

It is understandable that journals charge a fee to offset the costs of publishing, but agents still charge service fees and package it with 'page fee, graph fee, review fee and editing fee' when submitting, regardless of whether it is accepted or not. Supporters believe that paid publication is beneficial in motivating academic work and advancing scientific research. In the international market, it is common to charge for publication. Opponents have stressed that malpractice on the part of China's academics is related to paid publication, and such behaviour is a reversal of academic development. In fact, few graduation papers qualify for publication, so average graduates can only ask literary agents to publish for them. This essay will focus on graduates with weak academic ability and study how they publish papers through literary agents, and the effects of paid services in academic publishing. Data was obtained through 76 interviews.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *The Factors Influencing the Publication of Graduates' Work*

An exam is the most common method of assessing students' performance in Chinese higher education, while in Western countries, essay writing plays a significant role in the academic careers of the students. For most art students in China, a graduation thesis may be the only paper they write in their whole university life. Inadequate writing experience contributes to the poor quality of essay. The system would rather say students are poor at analysis and logical thinking than say they are not good at writing. Hence, Chinese graduates lack the advantage of essay writing. When applying for postgraduate programmes, those with published papers tend to stand out from other candidates. Although paper publication is not mandatory when applying for a degree course, it does bring distinct advantages. A previously published paper acts as strong evidence of your ability to write papers

that withstand peer review or a journal's censor. The quantity and frequency of publication vary according to the study field. Science subjects tend to publish more often compared to art subjects. Prospective supervisors expect to see candidates with the ability to become a researcher who can publish papers, which is competitive. Publishing makes your work known to your peers (Andronic, 2020). Whitley (1998) studied the factors influencing scholarly publication of graduates, but focused on nursing students and the results cannot be generalised. In addition, compared to the 21st century, the study in 1998 may have ignored socioeconomic factors. Even though it mentioned academic requirements for publication, economic factors were not considered in his study.

Feng's (2021) research pointed out that within the basic requirements for graduation or personal employment, students have to choose low-level or rapidly-published papers. The stereotypical 'paper-only' requirement seems to be the source of conflict. Oversupply of graduates and a dearth of high-level journals have created the embarrassing situation. Lu (2021) reports that behaviour of paper publication can be explained as a kind of extrinsic motivation, especially referring to the necessary requirement to pass the university assessment. Academic ability should be the decisive factor in whether students are eligible for a degree, not publishing ability (Wang, 2019). All in all, the pressure comes from university's desire to improve their rankings, heavily depending on indexes like SCI. Having work published in well-respected journals would be a ticket to work in academia, so the stress to graduate and for employment have prompted the rise of paid publishing. Another study from Wahid et al. (2021) demonstrated that publication at individual level is highly correlated to factors such as time and academic qualification, while situated factors such as funding have less influence. However, the samples in Wahid's study are professional researchers; the current study advances with the times, and showing a significant social phenomenon in academia: we aim at those graduates with weak academic ability.

### 3. Methodology and Results

Initially, this study intended to adopt quantitative research to ascertain the effect of paid publication on graduates with weak academic ability. The initial sample was taken from the local universities. Here, the participants are those who find it difficult to publish papers so they turn to agent for help. The initial design was to collect data via a questionnaire. But the pilot results had a low response because some questions were sensitive. Later, semi-structured interviews were conducted. We choose a convenient sample and ask about their paid-publishing experience in the university. We summarised the answers and made a table like following:

No.	Question	Yes	No
1	Have you ever paid to publish a paper through an agent?		
2	Was the publishing fee over 3000 RMB in your university?		
3	Was the publishing fee over 5000 RMB in your university?		
4	Did you give up trying to publish a paper because you could not afford the fee?		
5	Was the paper published in SCI, EI and core journals?		
6	Do you think your paper can meet publishing requirement of high academic standards?		
7	Are you satisfied with your academic paper and believe it has high reference value?		

It proposed three hypotheses to test questions about paid publication through the above seven questions:

1. Graduates cannot publish papers because they cannot afford the publishing fees.

2. Graduates can publish general papers in some core journals through agents.
3. Graduates can publish low-quality papers in journals with the help of agent.

Research journals were split into five categories: 1. core journal with high fees; 2. core journal with low or no fees; 3. ordinary journal with certain fees; 4. ordinary journal with low or no fees; 5. junk journal with inflated fees. Papers, can be categorised as high-level, low-level and bubble paper (no reference value). If a student's paper has been published in a core journal or a conference, and he believes his paper is of a high academic level, and he feels satisfied with his own academic progress in university, then we consider him as having academic ability.

A total of 76 people were interviewed. The results show that 54 graduates published papers in all kinds of journals—including domestic journals, conference journals, international journals and some unknown journals—with low influencing factors, through literary agents with high fees, while only 22 graduates published papers without any payment, or never published papers. In addition, 25 graduates (33%) gave up publishing because they could not afford the publishing fees. A total of 21 graduates published an ordinary paper to core journals with the help of agent, which stand up 38.8% (21/54), while 8 graduates (11%) chose to submit a low-quality paper to an agent who helped them beautify it and then publish it to some little-known journals.

#### **4. Channel of Paid Publication**

The easiest way is to contact journals directly via email, official website and even by telephone. Most modern publishers solicit manuscripts from authors in the open market. Students can contact an editor to initially agree on a price. Authors send their papers to a designated email or submission platform. The editor promises that the earliest they will receive an offer is about one week, followed by page fees. Graduates can search the paper on CNKI within three-to-six months.

For example, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) requires two-to-three pages for a submission and with a word count of 2000 to 8000. In this case the charge will be 3000~6000 RMB. Even if it is an educational journal, it also accept articles on art, film reviews, information technology and so on. =The whole process is simple: only the editor decides whether accept the article and there is no other peer review. Generally authors could get an offer within two weeks.

The most popular way is to publish a paper through a literary agent. Advertisements for paid publication are everywhere, including search engines, social media. At first, an agent will present themselves as an editor to confuse graduates. They introduce their service as polishing your article and helping you to submit work, but their business seems to be in a grey area, where it is difficult to identify it as legal or proper business. Their final purpose is to charge you. Because you cannot communicate with the editor directly, some graduates stop because of the high fees and possible academic misconduct. However, some graduates are willing to take a risk because they are in a rush for quick results.

#### **5. Analysis of Paid Publication**

Paid publication can be regarded as academic survival and identity. Maslow's theory, published in 1943, is represented by a pyramid to illustrate the hierarchy of human needs; individuals can attend to higher needs before lower needs are satisfied. As a result, students with weak research ability, but who want academic recognition, have to choose a literary agent and their associated high prices. Adam Smith's economic man theory is the thought that individuals make decisions based on maximising benefits. So when an individual makes investment, he will only be concerned about maximising his own value and will generally ignore public interest. Pursuing ego benefit is man's natural character. An economic person always tries his best to realize his maximum ego benefit with the least effort, and that can generally be understood as a rational choice. Taylor (1989) makes rational choice specific: a) The choice is limited to neither too many nor few; b) Motivation is clear and concrete; c) The choice is of great importance to individuals; d) People have made the choice in similar situations with success. It is rational for students to graduate or promote their academic survival.

An academic paper is a measurement tool of academic appraisal, and it is perceived as the most convincing and convenient, because it is equipped with features that are universally acknowledged, measurable and manageable. Publishing papers is the most common way to confirm one's academic level. Once the paper has been published, that means the work has won recognition from peers. As it is difficult and costly to determine the essay's quality, peers with various academic backgrounds also feel it difficult to reach an agreement on it. However, focusing on quantity makes it easier and therefore the criterion simply shows the more essays published, the better the student's academic level. Students also have to deal with the threshold set by journals when submitting manuscripts, because some journals are only open for experienced researchers. Young people will not be able to

publish in core journals if they do not find a high-charging literary agent. However, asking graduates to undertake page fees plus high agent fees will undoubtedly make them wary of paid publication, thus affecting their attitude towards academic publication in the future.

The advertisement of paid publication can be easily discovered in by checking websites. The market has developed a mature process, from ghostwriter to paid publication. At the beginning of the new semester, all students could receive emails from literary agents who advertise their services. Nowadays, students with weak research abilities publishing papers through agents has become a fact that cannot be ignored. The professionalisation of academic productivity has given it the characteristic of utilitarianism. When academia turns to business and essays turn to commodities, publishing evolves into utilitarianism. Hugo and Huan (2023) shared similar ideas and demonstrated that centrality of publishing commercialised the production of knowledge.

Paid publication intensifies the scholar hierarchy. Those who support paid publication are mostly straight-A students with research grants, while those who stand against paid publication are students with weak academic ability and thus have to pay expensive charges to search for journals which are able to accept their unsatisfactory papers. Open access (OA) introduces a new channel for students to publish articles, sometimes even free of paper submission and processing. But the article processing charge (APC) is still a huge cost for students. For example, Elsevier's APC ranges from \$150 to \$9900 (Elsevier, 2023).

In fact, due to the marketisation of paid publication, some core journals have high fees whether students submit papers through an official website or through agents. Average students cannot afford it with their limited living expenses. On the other hand, non-core journals, with their low charges are more acceptable to students. The Matthew effect can explain the phenomena in the field of education that the poor get poorer, the rich get richer (Merton, 1988). In this scenario, rather than making efforts to improve their academic ability, students play tricks to survive in university.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

For students with a weak academic background, it is confusing for them to publish papers. Market requirements have blossomed the literary agent. Weak students can publish papers through agents in order to realise their own purpose. Their behaviour is a rational choice to a certain degree and can be explained as the characteristic of an economic person. Under the orientation of paid publication, students weigh the costs and benefits. Payment for publication in the academic journals has recently become the focus of dispute or even the target of academic criticism, because overcharging makes it possible to buy a publishing opportunity. Some greedy students think a page fee is kind of investment, and that academic publication is market behaviour, made available to the highest bidders.

The reasons why students choose literary agents are for graduation, promotion or further education. Students with a weak academic background lack innovation and can only repeat the viewpoints of others. Obviously, core journals cannot accept such papers so they take a different tack, asking help from a literary agent or paying inflated page fees. Academic misconduct such as ghost writing and plagiarism are the results of poor regulation on illegal methods of charging.

Improper assessment urges weak students to blindly pursue paper quantity in order to deal with graduation, which creates demand in the market. Marketisation of academic journals promotes poor values within graduates. There is a correlation between inflated fees and shoddy papers, which suggests that universities should review the assessment system and relieve students' struggles with paid publication.

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