90th Is Not Enough – Hyperprolific Suspicious Publishing at King Saud University.

by Adso of Melk

Numbers matter. **More** papers, more citations, more rankings. More money too. Yet, also – more fraud, more concerns about research integrity, more questionable publishing practices.

Anomalous spikes in research output are happening more often. **King Saud University** (KSU), the oldest public university in Saudi Arabia, seems to be a striking example of what some researchers are calling a crisis of credibility in scientific publishing.

From Slow Growth to Publication Explosion

Founded in 1957, King Saud University had relatively modest academic output for decades. Actually, in the years 1998-2008 very modest – there was not more than 500 research papers published with KUS affiliation yearly according to Web of Science and Scopus. But over the past 15 years, especially from 2019 to 2024, something dramatically changed. The number of research papers affiliated with KSU exploded – from roughly 4000 in 2014 to over **16000** in 2024 [1]. An epidemic of papers.

Out of the abyss, in 2009, King Saud University entered the Shanghai Ranking. In 2020, KSU was ranked in the 151–200 range. A few years later, in 2024, it climbed to the **90th** spot [2]. KSU's research output can increase nearly 200% in a single year, while **the global average is a few percent**. Although progress is always welcome, the rapid and massive growth in KSU's publication output should raise serious concerns.

Enter the "Hyperprolific" Authors

In 2018, **hyperprolific authors** were defined [3] as those who publish more than 72 full research articles in a single calendar year. More recent studies consider those who exceed 60 publications annually to fall under the category of "extreme publishing" [4]. Authors who publish one research paper every 7 days (so roughly 50 a year) should be considered too prolific and such a high publication outcome should warrant attention, especially when the author published few papers beforehand.

At KSU, this trend is in turbo mode. A 2025 study [5] reported that the university went from having 4 hyperprolific authors in 2019 to 63 in 2023 – a staggering **1475% increase**. That's not just unusual; it's quite unprecedented in the international academic community.

However, one may think that it is completely normal that hard-working, successful, and awarded scientists can publish 100 papers a year. Since those too prolific KSU researchers are interested mostly in material sciences – let's have a look at the publishing profile of Nobel prize winners - Andre Geim and Moungi Bawendi:

<table>
<tr>
<td>Geim, Andre K.
Nobel prize for graphene in 2010
The University of Manchester, UK (never affiliated with Saudi university)
0 PUBPEER records</td>
<td>Bawendi, Moungi G.
Nobel prize for quantum dots in 2023
The MIT, USA (never affiliated with Saudi university)
0 PUBPEER records</td>
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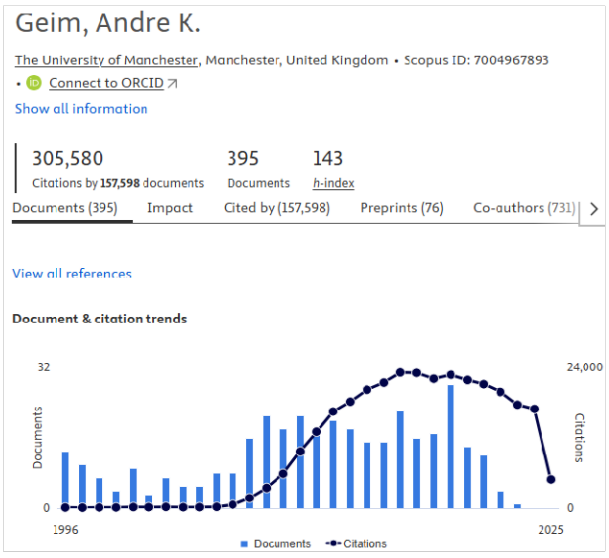
<td> 
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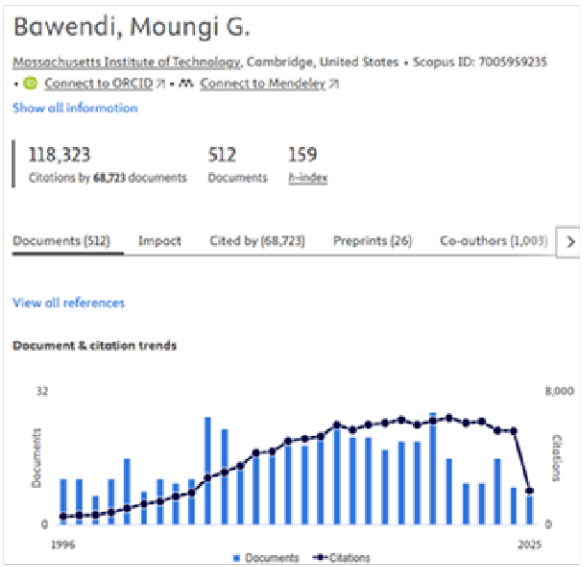
<td> 
</td>
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</table>

Those are top-tier world scientists, and they **don't** (because it is barely feasible) publish more than 30 papers a year. Even Gregg Semenza, the true king in retractions when it comes to Nobel prize winners (albeit in medicine, so a bit different league) is publishing not more than 20-30 papers per year, and moreover, never listed Saudi university affiliation either.

Thus, yes – publishing 50, 72 or 141 papers per year is completely normal and every researcher does it!

Hyperprolific Authors at KSU in Detail

If it is so simple to publish an enormous number of genuine scientific papers (over 50 per year), take a closer look at the hyperproductive authors from King Saud University – who are they? Hard to say. Most of them appeared only a few years ago and seem to be working intensively to boost KSU's statistics. Below is a table listing the top 10 KSU authors and their publishing accomplishments in 2024 (according to SCOPUS, accessed on 24.04.2025):

	No. of papers published in 2024 (Scopus)	AU Scopus profile
Ullah, Riaz Q.	162	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=35748224100
Elshikh, Mohamed S.	141	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57827291600
Ansari, Mohammad J.	141	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=56908045300
Mohammad, Saikh	125	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=58590025800
Alharbi, Sulaiman A.	120	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=59157644200
Bourhia, Mohamed	118	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57207244684
Syed, Asad S.	111	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=7102981889
Iqbal, Rashid	94	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57205928539
Batoo, Khalid M.	89	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=23972283600
Alodhayb, Abdullah N.	87	https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=55638415500

And if the numbers don’t say much, here are the figures: publication profiles of the top 10 King Saud University authors in 2024 (according to SCOPUS, accessed on 24.04.2025):

This author profile is generated by Scopus

Ullah, R. Q.

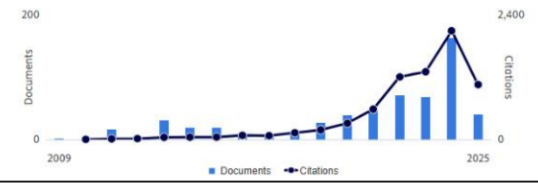
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia • Scopus ID: 35748224100
• 0000-0002-2860-467X • Connect to Mendeley
Show all information

7,173	580	40
Citations by 6,136 documents	Documents	h-index

Documents (580) Impact Cited by (6,136) Preprints (10) Co-authors (1,902)

View all references

Document & citation trends



This author profile is generated by Scopus

Elshikh, Mohamed Soliman

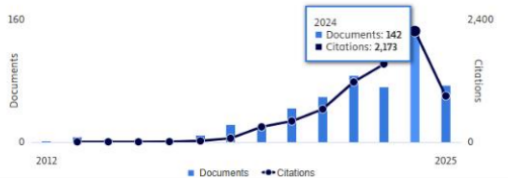
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia • Scopus ID: 57827291600
• Connect to ORCID • Connect to Mendeley
Show all information

7,252	549	42
Citations by 6,435 documents	Documents	h-index

Documents (549) Impact Cited by (6,435) Preprints (8) Co-authors (2,067)

View all references

Document & citation trends



This author profile is generated by Scopus

Ansari, Mohammad Javed

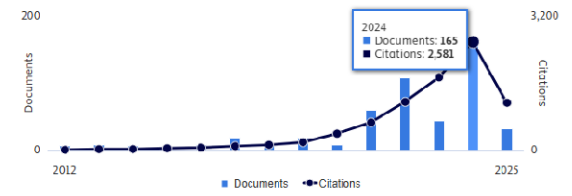
Hindu College, Moradabad, Moradabad, India • Scopus ID: 56908045300
• 0000-0002-8718-3078 • Connect to Mendeley
Show all information

8,141	490	42
Citations by 7,038 documents	Documents	h-index

Documents (490) Impact Cited by (7,038) Preprints (6) Co-authors (2,144)

View all references

Document & citation trends



This author profile is generated by Scopus

Mohammad, Saikh

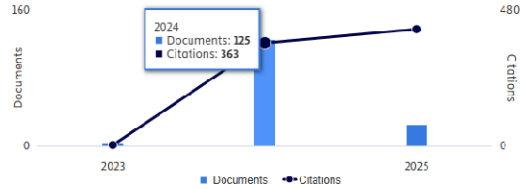
College of Sciences, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia • Scopus ID: 58590025800
• Connect to ORCID • Connect to Mendeley
Show all information

778	154	13
Citations by 694 documents	Documents	h-index

Documents (154) Impact Cited by (694) Preprints (3) Co-authors (561)

View all references

Document & citation trends



This author profile is generated by Scopus

Alharbi, Sulaiman Ali

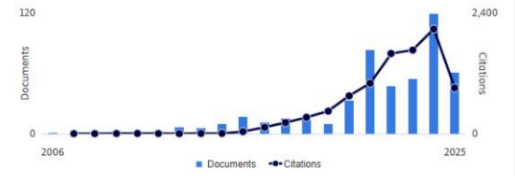
College of Sciences, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia • Scopus ID: 59157644200 • Connect to ORCID
• Connect to Mendeley
Show all information

9,189	500	44
Citations by 7,679 documents	Documents	h-index

Documents (500) Impact Cited by (7,679) Preprints (6) Co-authors (1,979)

View all references

Document & citation trends



This author profile is generated by Scopus

Bourhia, Mohamed

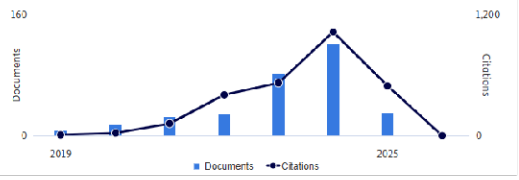
National Energy Center of Nuclear Science and Technology, Rabat, Morocco
• Scopus ID: 57207244684 • 0000-0003-3707-8461 • Connect to Mendeley
Show all information

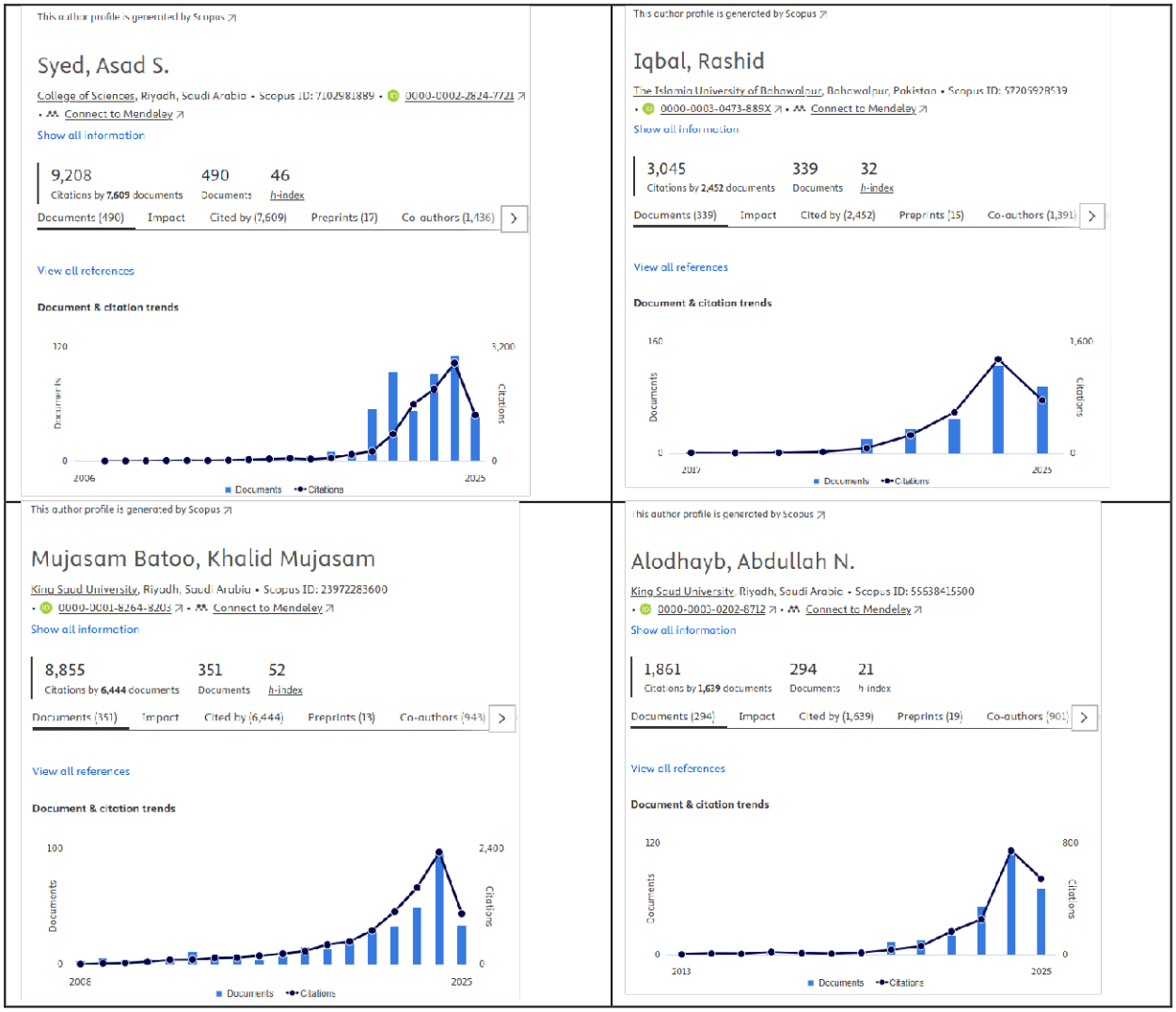
2,603	308	26
Citations by 1,970 documents	Documents	h-index

Documents (308) Impact Cited by (1,970) Preprints (11) Co-authors (1,166)

View all references

Document & citation trends





The main story about those best King Saud University authors from the year 2024 resembles the same model as the one described many times in *For Better Science,* but especially a year ago in "Karimipour Saga", and can be summarized as: they appeared out of nowhere around 2019 and began churning out materials-themed papers [6].

Questionable Authorship Practices

An analysis of the authorship of papers published in 2024 reveals the same anomalous pattern: all KSU's top-publishing researchers:

- Rarely serve as first or corresponding authors – roles typically associated with leading, coordinating, and conceptualizing the work
- Always co-author with long lists of multi-affiliated individuals – a common sign of papermill authorship

- Are usually the only Saudi-affiliated name on the long author list – another red flag for papermill activity
- Invariably acknowledge Saudi grant funding, which is regularly the only grant number mentioned
- Have no visible research groups, no personal websites, and minimal institutional web presence. If they have any scientific profiles, these typically lack contact information or any sign of active research – traits we would normally expect from genuine scientists. And yet – miraculously - their scientific collaboration appears to be outstanding.

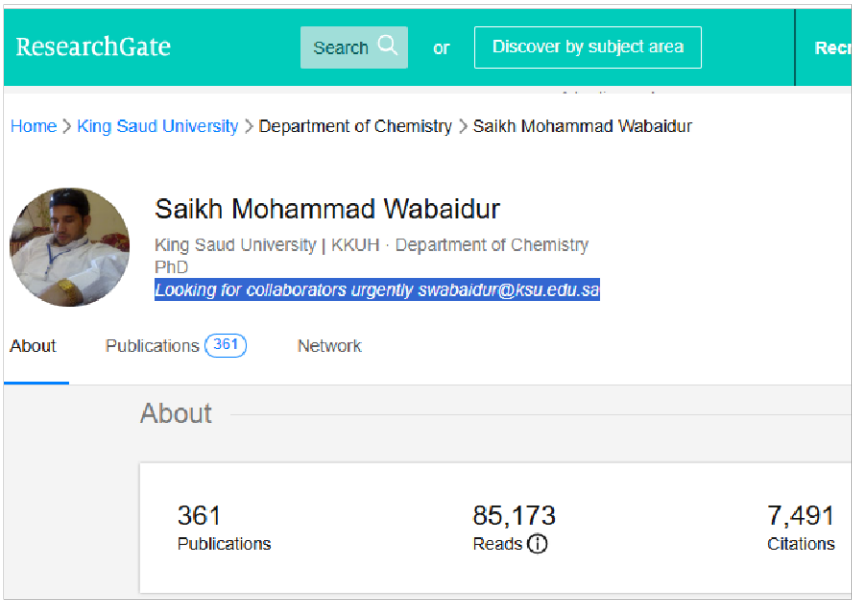
Some of the top KSU authors manage to publish (or rather, put their names on) as many as **162** papers in 2024 alone - more than three papers per week. Others jump from **4 publications** in 2023 to **125** in 2024. Such anomalies are the norm among top King Saud University's top authors.

What should be truly concerning is the visibility of KSU authors – no personal web pages, no defined research topics, no conference talks… but somehow, their papers feature extremely long author lists, and those authorships are highly international. Maybe they meet their **papermill** collaborators on Tinder? (For those scientists who've never heard of Tinder, I'll explain: it's an online dating app). As soon as I thought of Tinder, I realized it wasn't a joke. If Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram have already been used for papermills' advertisements purposes, then Tinder is probably just a matter of time… or "creativity."

And we're not done yet. Since we're still talking about top authorship anomalies at King Saud University, I can't resist announcing the absolute gold medalist in "visibility." And the winner is – the "flower author." Hard to beat. Below is a profile picture from a quite recent paper by this author. It's impossible to imagine how any journal could accept that. Somehow, it seems to matter even less that this author has co-authored few papers with Mika Sillanpää (who is the king of affiliations – in 2025 he is affiliated with no fewer than 18 affiliations according to Scopus accessed on 20.05.2025).

Source: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.snb.2024.135464 accessed on 20.05.2025

Side note: there is another author at KSU with the same first and middle name, but this one also has a surname, and he is desperately looking for collaborators:



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Saikh-Wabaidur accessed on 20.05.2025

Whether or not this author and the "flower author" are the same person, they have published over 200 papers together for King Saud Uni in 2024. Do they think that over 200 is too many, so they publish under two different names? Sure – publishing 125 papers in a single calendar year is totally fine, especially when the author had only 4 publications the year before! No worries – no one will ever notice.

Retractions/Pubpeer Records

But there is a toll for this questionable publishing practices - Saudi Arabia has the highest publication retraction rate [7]. All of the top King Saud University authors have **numerous comments on PubPeer**, all have papers retracted or corrected. (For those scientists who've never heard of PubPeer, I will not explain, they are not reading this anyway). Here are examples of the wide range of fraudulent activities these authors are involved in, their PubPeer comments numbers and numbers of retractions (as on 24.04.2025):

	No. of papers published in 2024 (Scopus)	No. of PUBPEER records	No. of retractions (Scopus)	Fraud example
Ullah, R.	162	21	7	such retraction: https://doi.org/10.2147/IJN.S454938 – for image duplication
Elshikh, M.S.	141	18	6	retraction: doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0273537 – for peer review proces manipulation
Ansari, M.J.	141	48	29	retraction: doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e34741 – for substantial authorship changes between the original submission and the revised version of the article
Mohammad, S.	125	13	1	https://pubpeer.com/publications/6D538D8E2688FA4C86D7EBD9EF365E flagged for data manipulation - corrected even with a worse figure
Alharbi, S.A.	120	38	7	http://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2023.115421 - retracted for data manipulation, raw data manipulation, peer review proces manipulation
Bourhia, M.	118	4	0	publishes on quite various topics – from SARS-CoV-2, food safety concerns in Pakistan to nanoparticles
Syed, A.	111	22	8	https://pubpeer.com/publications/50918885DAE47776CBA88C8F985549#0 flagged overlaping images
Iqbal, R.	94	6	2	7 years published with 1400 different co-authors

Batoo, K.M.	89	33	1	Retraction https://doi.org/10.1007/s00339-025-08413-1 because it overlaps significantly with a previously published article
Alodhayb, A.N.	87	9	1	https://pubpeer.com/publications/4EE3F3CF02B778A934AE886E802C0C published with Poke Bowl, ups, Pau Loke Show

All of these prolific KSU-affiliated authors (along with those ranked below the top 10) have a history of retractions, corrections, or questionable data. Their publications contain duplicated images, manipulated figures, non-reproducible results, and co-authorships which can be linked to papermills. These are serious red flags for **scientific integrity**.

Questionable Practices at Saudi Universities

This massive and rapid increase in the number of publications at King Saud University doesn't appear to be entirely organic. The surge in research output seems artificially driven or manipulated, rather than the result of normal academic growth.

Reports dating back over a decade have documented cases where Saudi universities offered lucrative contracts for prominent foreign researchers to list Saudi affiliation – sometimes without any actual research commitments in the country [8].

In 2023, *El País* reported that Saudi institutions were paying Highly Cited Researchers, such as Rafael Luque (found to be called "king of papermilling citation-trading cheaters" [9]), to list their names under Saudi university banners in databases like Clarivate and Scopus – an approach dubbed "affiliation for hire." These fake or superficial affiliations help boost a university's global ranking metrics without necessarily improving its real academic environment [10].

A detailed 2023 report by SIRIS [11] also referred to this as "the affiliation game" – where affiliation, rather than genuine contribution, becomes the metric of success.

Since those tricks are already well known or already discredited and may no longer help Saudi universities climb the rankings, the invention of new tactics was only a matter of time… or "creativity." And here we are, witnessing the emergence of King Saud University's hyperprolific authors.

Final Thoughts

Scientific integrity researchers are wondering whether the rapid rise in number of scientific papers published, rise and growth of papermills, appearance of hyperprolific authors, decrease of credibility in scientific publishing is a byproduct of "publish or perish" culture. Whether high demands are pushing researchers towards unethical behavior? Maybe it is a symptom of something deeper – a system that rewards volume over values? Whatever a reason is, Saudi universities, eager to establish themselves on the global academic map, appear to have taken this to the extreme. More of everything.

No Give Up

We would like to hope that unethical academic practices at Saudi universities are over [12]. Unfortunately, from the data and facts shown above, the forecast is not so optimistic, at least for King Saud university. When KSU got to 90th place in the Shanghai Ranking, the fact was vastly celebrated not only in universities media but also in general audience Saudi newspapers… and the goal is higher – the goal is to get to the very top.

Saudi Gazette

Saudi Gazette report

RIYADH — King Saud University in Riyadh has been ranked 90th in the Shanghai Ranking of Universities for 2024, which is one of the most important global rankings and is based on precise criteria, including research and educational outputs, and the efficiency of faculty members. This accomplishment exceeds the target of the Human Capacity Development Program Index in "Saudi Vision 2030."

Yousef Al-Bunyan, Minister of Education and chairman of the University's Board of Directors, described this achievement as a result of the strategic vision of the Saudi leadership in the fields of education, research, development and innovation, and its continuous support for everything that serves the goals of the educational system, noting that it is in line with the goals and aspirations of Prince Mohammed bin Salman for "King Saud" to be among the top 10 universities in the world.

Source: https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/644878, accessed on 20.05.2025

I am certain that those who cheat will cheat, and on top of that, their tactics will evolve and become more sophisticated. Bad scientific publishing practices are far from over. However, some nobodies are here to make fraudsters' dreams a little less grand.

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References:

[1] https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/summary/7be07198-cb0e-411f-9438-74472a77f006-015e8355b7/relevance/1

OR/AND

https://www.scopus.com/results/results.uri?st1=King+Saud+University&st2=&s=AFFIL%28King+Saud+University%29&limit=10&origin=resultslist&sort=plf-f&src=s&sot=b&sdt=cl&sessionSearchId=d0fe68b41eb487469590a61997c0de57&yearFrom=2024&yearTo=2024

[2] https://www.shanghairanking.com/institution/king-saud-university

[3] http://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-06185-8

[4] https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-024-05117-w

[5] https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00339

[6] https://forbetterscience.com/2024/04/02/karimipour-saga-i-setting-boundaries/

[7] https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-03974-8

[8] DOI: 10.1126/science.334.6061.1344

[9] https://forbetterscience.com/2023/10/24/elsevier-choses-papermills-and-patriarchy-chief-editor-resigns/

[10] https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-04-18/saudi-arabia-pays-spanish-scientists-to-pump-up-global-university-rankings.html

[11] https://www.sirisacademic.com/blog/the-affiliation-game-of-saudi-arabian-higher-education-research-institutions

[12] https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2024-12-05/dozens-of-the-worlds-most-cited-scientists-stop-falsely-claiming-to-work-in-saudi-arabia.html