

Open Rebuttal to Nature Article: "Why Sky-High Pay for AI Researchers is Bad for the Future of Science"

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Date: 18 Feb 2026

To the Editors of Nature,

I write to respond to the article "Why sky-high pay for AI researchers is bad for the future of science" published on 17 Feb 2026 ([Sanders & Schneier, 2026](#)). The piece raises timely concerns about the economic transformation of artificial-intelligence research and its implications for academic institutions. However, its central framing – that high compensation for AI researchers poses a systemic threat to scientific progress – overlooks deeper structural realities in the contemporary political economy of knowledge production.

In other words, to emphasize meritocracy, the article includes personal biases and preconceptions about the changing economics and institutional dynamics of artificial-intelligence research. However, its framing of researcher compensation and academic-industry relationships risks mischaracterizing the structural realities of contemporary knowledge production. In particular, the article appears to treat rising compensation and mobility among AI researchers as a systemic problem, when in fact these developments are rational responses to deep imbalances in how intellectual labor is valued and rewarded.

Compensation reflects value creation, not distortion

AI researchers today generate extraordinary scientific, technological, and economic value. Their work produces patentable innovations, commercializable systems, licensed intellectual property, and high-impact industry partnerships. Universities and research institutions frequently retain substantial ownership stakes in these outcomes through technology-transfer arrangements, licensing agreements, and equity in spin-off ventures.

In such an environment, elevated compensation is not a distortion but a rational adjustment to measurable value creation. When institutions capture significant downstream economic returns from research output, it

is both predictable and justified that highly skilled researchers seek compensation commensurate with their contributions. Framing increased pay primarily as a systemic risk misidentifies a market response as a structural problem.

Institutional benefit and individual burden

Academic AI research is conducted under conditions of intensifying professional pressure while struggling with reports regarding rising academic bullying culture ([Levy, 2023](#)) and ([Hollis, 2024](#)). Researchers face expanding expectations to publish frequently, secure competitive funding, maintain teaching and administrative commitments, and operate at the frontier of rapidly evolving technical fields. These demands impose sustained cognitive, temporal, and psychological strain ([Saatchi, 2026](#)).

At the same time, institutions derive durable benefits from these efforts: 70%–90% ownership of patent portfolios developed by underpaid researchers, institutional prestige, rankings, and expanded funding streams. This creates an asymmetry in which organizational gains accumulate while individual researchers bear the ongoing labor intensity required to produce them. Discussions of compensation that ignore this imbalance risk presenting an incomplete account of academic labor dynamics.

Industry collaboration as structural necessity

Concerns about industry funding and partnerships warrant careful governance, particularly regarding research independence and agenda setting. Yet advanced AI research requires computational infrastructure, engineering capacity, and data resources that universities alone often cannot sustain. Industry collaboration is therefore not merely a source of distortion but a structural condition of contemporary large-scale research.

The central policy question is not whether such collaboration should occur, but how it should be governed to preserve intellectual autonomy while enabling scientific progress.

A transition in the economics of knowledge

The most significant development is the transformation of knowledge from primarily a public good into a high-value economic asset. Universities increasingly function as innovation platforms generating proprietary technologies with direct commercial impact. However, many academic labor

structures still reflect earlier institutional models designed for lower levels of market translation.

This institutional lag produces tension. Compensation patterns are adjusting to a new economic reality, while governance frameworks and professional norms remain rooted in older assumptions about the nature of scientific work. Rising researcher compensation is therefore better understood as a symptom of systemic transition rather than a cause of instability.

Conclusion

The article correctly identifies that artificial intelligence is reshaping the research ecosystem. However, interpreting high compensation as a threat to science risks obscuring the more fundamental issue: the distribution of value generated by advanced intellectual labor. If research institutions benefit substantially from AI-driven innovation, then increased compensation and mobility among researchers should be understood not as distortions to be restrained but as necessary adjustments toward fairness, sustainability, and alignment with the modern knowledge economy. A more productive debate would therefore focus on institutional design: how to distribute value equitably, protect intellectual independence, and sustain the human conditions required for long-term scientific creativity.

Written by,
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