

FROM CENTRAL LIST TO INSTITUTIONAL JUDGEMENT: A POLICY ANALYSIS OF THE DISCONTINUATION OF UGC-CARE AND INDIA'S DECENTRALISED JOURNAL QUALITY REGIME

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Abstract: In February 2025 the University Grants Commission discontinued the UGC-CARE Reference List of Quality Journals, and in July 2025 it substituted a set of Suggestive Parameters for Peer-Reviewed Journals to be applied by individual higher education institutions. India thereby abandoned centralised ex ante whitelisting of scholarly journals in favour of decentralised institutional judgement, a shift of regulatory form that has attracted extensive news coverage but almost no scholarly analysis. This paper provides that analysis. It applies principal-agent theory, supplemented by the literature on the gaming of performance measures, to treat the change as an act of regulatory delegation, and asks whether the agents to whom judgement has been transferred possess the capacity and the incentives to exercise it. The method is documentary policy analysis conducted through a transparent selection protocol yielding a corpus of 68 documents, coded deductively and appraised for authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. A structural analysis of the official Annexure-I is presented: the notice contains 35 discrete parameters across eight criteria, not the thirty-six widely reported, and it prescribes no thresholds, no weights, no minimum compliance set and no verification procedure. Classifying each parameter by the kind of evidence it demands shows that 24 of the 35, approximately 69 per cent, are formal or administrative attributes that a competently operated predatory journal can satisfy in full, and that only five require the substantive scholarly judgement that would actually distinguish a reputable source from a dubious one. The paper argues that the reform correctly diagnosed the failure of the central list but mistook exit for redesign, and that the Nordic model, in which curation is relocated from the regulator to the scholarly community rather than dissolved, represents the alternative India did not consider. Twelve recommendations follow, several of which place the academic library at the centre of the new institutional obligation.

Index Terms: UGC-CARE; journal quality; predatory publishing; research assessment; regulatory delegation; principal-agent theory; publication ethics; academic libraries; India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every system of research assessment must answer a deceptively simple question: which publications count? The answer determines appointments, promotions, doctoral awards and the allocation of research funding, and in a system as large as India's it determines them for several million people. For nearly two decades India answered the question with a list. A central regulator determined which journals were acceptable, institutions applied that determination, and individual academic judgement was neither required nor invited.

That arrangement has now been dismantled. In its 584th meeting on 3 October 2024 the University Grants Commission decided to discontinue the UGC-CARE listing of journals; a public notice to that effect was issued on 11 February 2025; and following a period of stakeholder feedback the Commission approved, in its 591st meeting of 24 June 2025, a set of Suggestive Parameters for Peer-Reviewed Journals, notified on 16 July 2025. The legacy list of 1,474 journals as recorded on 10 February 2025 was uploaded to the Commission's website for reference only, with the explicit statement that inclusion or exclusion does not imply validation or endorsement.

The reasons offered are substantial and, in the main, correct. The Commission's chairman stated that the expert committee had found the UGC-CARE model to introduce varying levels of subjectivity into assessment, and that it had been particularly criticised for its handling of journals in non-STEM disciplines. The criticisms reported were over-centralisation, delay in the addition and removal of journals, a lack of transparency in decision-making, the omission of respected journals published in Indian languages, and the presence of predatory journals on the list itself. Academics reported pressure to publish in listed titles, uncertainty arising from the sudden removal of journals, and a restricted choice of outlets. The Commission located the change within the decentralising orientation of the National Education Policy 2020.

The diagnosis is not in dispute in this paper. What is in dispute is the remedy. Discontinuing a list is a decision about who exercises judgement, and a decision of that kind cannot be assessed by examining the defects of the previous arrangement alone. It must be assessed by asking whether the parties to whom judgement has been transferred are able and willing to exercise it. India has approximately 1,168 universities and over 45,000 colleges. The Commission has asked each of them, in effect, to constitute the expertise that a single national committee was previously unable to sustain.

This paper examines that transfer. It treats the reform as an act of regulatory delegation and analyses it accordingly: what was delegated, to whom, with what instruments, under what incentives, and with what safeguards. It also undertakes what the existing commentary has not, namely a structural reading of the official Annexure-I itself, asking what the thirty-five parameters actually measure and whether an outlet of the kind the reform is intended to exclude could satisfy them.

2. PRIOR LITERATURE AND THE RESEARCH GAP

2.1 The predatory publishing problem in India

India occupies an unusually prominent position in the literature on predatory publishing. Seethapathy, Santhosh Kumar and Hareesha (2016) documented the scale of Indian output in predatory journals and argued for regulation of quality in Indian science and education. Lakhota (2015, 2017) argued in a series of editorials that mis-conceived and mis-implemented academic assessment rules were themselves the cause of the phenomenon, an argument of direct relevance to the present analysis because it locates the problem in the incentive structure rather than in the journals. The Indian National Science Academy attributed the proliferation of such journals to the Commission's own rules. International reporting in 2018 noted that thousands of journals were removed from the earlier UGC approved list on grounds of poor quality or inadequate information, and that the journals in question had in many cases been recommended by universities themselves, a detail that anticipates the central concern of this paper.

2.2 The UGC-CARE initiative and its assessment

The authoritative account of the CARE initiative is that of Patwardhan and Nagarkar (2021), written by the former Vice-Chairman of the Commission who oversaw its establishment and by a library and information science academic who coordinated the Centre for Publication Ethics at Savitribai Phule Pune University. Their account sets out the structure and objectives of the consortium and acknowledges the challenges it faced, including inadequate information on peer review and editorial policies, and the difficulty of assessing journals in regional languages. Patwardhan and Thakur (2019) had earlier set out the initiative's rationale. The subsequent literature is largely evaluative and, in the LIS journals, largely descriptive.

2.3 The gap

The discontinuation itself has generated a very large volume of writing of a particular kind. It is dominated by news reportage, by institutional circulars transmitting the notice, and by commercial content published by journals and publishing services with a direct interest in how the new regime is understood. Peer-reviewed analysis is almost absent. Four gaps follow.

First, no published study analyses the content of the Suggestive Parameters as a regulatory instrument, examining what they require, what they omit and what an outlet would have to do to satisfy them. Second, no study applies a theoretical framework to the delegation itself; the commentary treats the change as an administrative announcement rather than as a redistribution of regulatory authority. Third, the international comparison has not been made: several countries operate national journal quality registers, and the question of where such registers should be housed has an established literature that the Indian debate has not engaged. Fourth, the implications for the academic library have not been explored, although the new regime creates an institutional obligation that falls most naturally to library and information professionals.

This paper addresses those four gaps. Its contribution lies in combining a structural analysis of the official instrument, an explicit delegation framework and a comparison organised around the custody of scholarly judgement, together with the specification of the professional obligation that follows.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Delegation and the principal-agent problem

A regulator that ceases to perform a function does not thereby abolish it. It delegates it. Principal-agent theory, developed in economics and widely applied in public administration, addresses arrangements of exactly this kind: a principal requires an outcome, cannot secure it directly for want of capacity or information, and engages agents to secure it on its behalf. The framework directs attention to three recurrent difficulties. Information asymmetry arises where the agent knows more about its own conduct than the principal is able to observe. Moral hazard arises where the agent bears none of the cost of its own laxity. Adverse selection arises where the agent's incentives favour precisely the outcome the principal wishes to avoid.

All three appear here in acute form. An institution that assesses the journals in which its own faculty publish is not a disinterested assessor: a lenient assessment yields promotions, favourable accreditation returns and a healthier publication record, while a strict one yields aggrieved colleagues and a weaker record. The Commission itself recognised the danger, warning that institutions which fail to put effective mechanisms in place would end up promoting faculty whose publications appear in questionable journals, to the detriment of their own reputation. The warning identifies the danger correctly; it supplies no means of addressing it. The delegation structure and its anticipated consequences are set out in Figure 1.

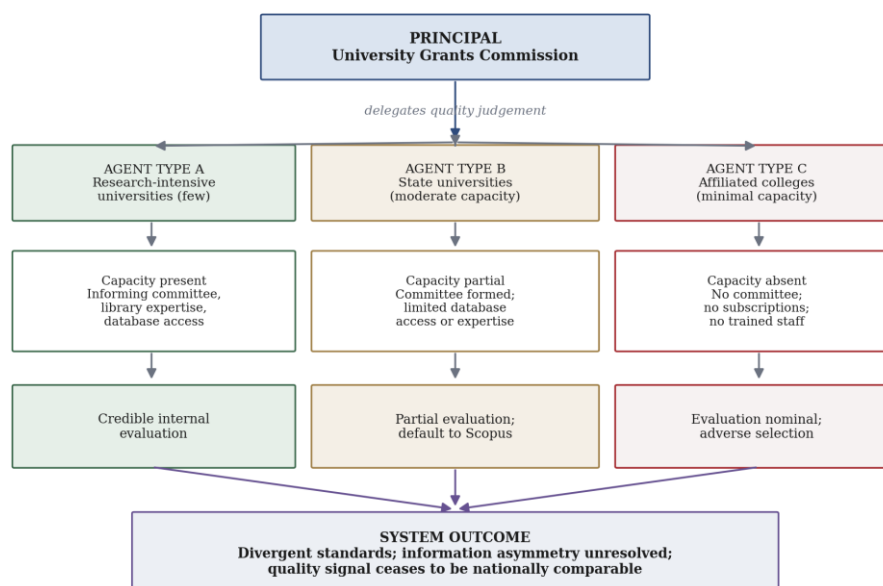


Figure 1. The delegation of journal quality judgement under the 2025 reform, analysed as a principal-agent structure.

3.2 Why the central list failed: measures that become targets

The framework must also account for the failure that the reform replaces, and here the relevant literature is that on the gaming of performance measures. Goodhart's proposition is that a measure ceases to be a good measure once it becomes a target, because effort shifts towards the measure itself rather than towards the quality it was intended to capture. The UGC-CARE list is a textbook case. Once inclusion on the list determined promotion and doctoral eligibility, the list became the object of activity rather than the indicator of quality it was intended to signal: publishers worked to have their journals listed, universities nominated journals with which their own staff were associated, and researchers selected outlets by listing status rather than by fit.

This diagnosis matters because it bears directly on the remedy. If a central list fails because centralisation is itself misconceived, abolition is the appropriate response. If it fails because a binding target attracts gaming, the gaming will follow the target wherever it is relocated, and decentralisation will transfer the vulnerability rather than remove it. The analysis in Section 8 supports the second reading.

3.3 Analytical questions

The framework yields four questions that organise the analysis: what precisely was delegated; whether the instrument supplied to the agents is adequate to the task; whether the agents possess the capacity to apply it; and whether their incentives align with the principal's objective.

4. OBJECTIVES, METHOD AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

4.1 Objectives

The study pursues six objectives:

1. To reconstruct the regulatory history of journal quality assessment in India from the UGC approved list through UGC-CARE to the 2025 discontinuation;
2. To establish precisely what the Commission decided and notified, distinguishing the official record from its secondary reporting;
3. To analyse the Suggestive Parameters structurally, classifying each parameter by the kind of evidence required to assess it;
4. To assess the delegation against the capacity and incentives of the institutions to which judgement has been transferred;
5. To compare India's approach with national journal quality regimes elsewhere, organised by the custody of scholarly judgement;
6. To identify the structural risks of the new regime and to specify the resulting obligations, particularly for the academic library.

4.2 Research design

The study employs qualitative documentary policy analysis. No primary data were collected. The object of enquiry is a regulatory instrument and its institutional context, for which the authoritative evidence resides in official documents. The procedures below are adopted to address the criticisms customarily directed at document-based policy scholarship.

4.3 Document selection protocol

Searches were conducted between June and August 2026 across three source classes. Official sources comprised the Commission's public notices of 11 February and 16 July 2025 including Annexure-I, the legacy list of 1,474 journals, earlier notices establishing the consortium, and related Ministry of Education material. Peer-reviewed literature was retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar using the terms 'UGC-CARE', 'predatory publishing India', 'journal quality list', 'research assessment India', 'national journal register' and 'publication ethics India', restricted to 2015 to 2026. The third class comprised

institutional circulars issued by universities transmitting or interpreting the notice, national reportage, and statements published by journals and publishing service providers regarding their own status under the new regime. This third class was admitted for a specific analytical purpose set out in Section 8.4: such statements are treated as evidence of regime response rather than as sources of fact.

Screening proceeded on title and abstract and thereafter in full text. Exclusions were applied where a document was unrelated to journal quality regulation, duplicated an included source, was purely derivative, or was not retrievable. Figure 2 sets out the procedure, which yielded a corpus of 68 documents.

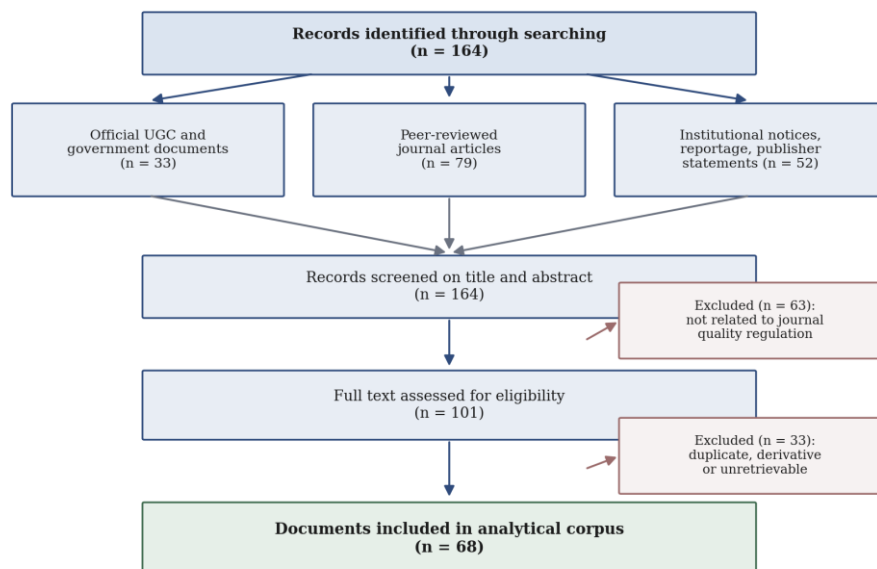


Figure 2. Document identification, screening and inclusion procedure.

4.4 Coding

Coding was deductive against categories derived from the framework. Table 1 presents the scheme. A separate and more granular classification was applied to the thirty-five parameters of Annexure-I, described in Section 7.2, in which each parameter was assigned to one of three evidence classes according to what an assessor would need in order to verify it.

Table 1. Deductive coding scheme.

Code	Category	Indicative content coded
HIS	Regulatory history	Prior instruments, their rationale, documented failures and withdrawal
DEC	The decision	Meeting resolutions, notices, dates, approved provisions, legacy list status
INS	The instrument	Content of Annexure-I; parameters, criteria, thresholds, guidance to HEIs
CAP	Agent capacity	Institutional resources, committees, expertise, database access, staffing
INC	Incentives	Promotion, accreditation, doctoral eligibility, institutional reputation
RES	Regime response	Conduct of journals and publishers following the change
CMP	Comparative	National journal quality registers and their governance in other jurisdictions
JUS	Justification	Official rationale and arguments in defence of decentralisation

4.5 Validity and source appraisal

Documents were appraised against Scott's (1990) criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. The full text of Annexure-I was obtained and analysed directly rather than through secondary description, a step that proved consequential. Widely circulated secondary accounts state that the Commission introduced thirty-six parameters under eight criteria. Enumeration

of the notice as published yields thirty-five discrete parameters across the eight criteria, distributed as set out in Section 7.1. Secondary sources also diverge on the meeting number associated with the June 2025 approval, which the notice records as the 591st. These discrepancies are reported rather than resolved, and they illustrate why the primary document was necessary.

Claims of compliance made by journals or publishing service providers about themselves are treated throughout as evidence of behaviour rather than as evidence of quality. The paper draws no inference about the status of any individual outlet.

4.6 Positionality

The first author is a doctoral researcher in library and information science at an Indian state university and is himself subject to the publication norms this paper examines. That position affords first-hand experience of how early-career researchers choose journals in practice, under constraints of time and supervision, and it also creates an evident interest in the usability and predictability of the rules. Readers should weigh Sections 8 and 10 accordingly.

4.7 Limitations

- No primary data were gathered and no survey of institutional practice was conducted; the assessment of agent capacity in Section 8.2 is therefore inferential rather than observed.
- The reform is recent, and the regime response reported in Section 8.4 relates to an early and possibly unrepresentative period.
- The classification of the parameters in Section 7.2 is the authors' own analytical construction; it is presented together with its reasoning so that a reader may contest it, but it has not been validated by a second coder.
- The comparative material rests on published accounts of foreign registers rather than on internal accounts of their governance.

5. THE REGULATORY HISTORY

The 2025 decision is the third in a sequence, and its rationale cannot be understood without the first two. The sequence is shown in Figure 3.

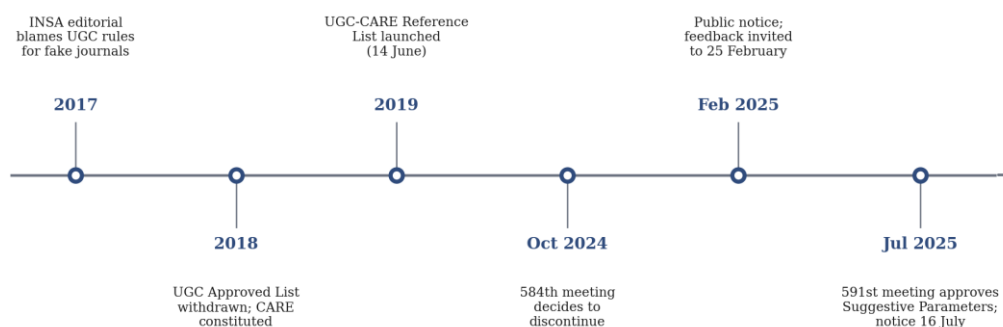


Figure 3. The regulatory sequence in Indian journal quality assessment, 2017–2025.

5.1 The approved list and its collapse

The earlier UGC-approved list was compiled both from the international indexing databases and from titles nominated by the universities themselves. The nomination mechanism proved fatal to it. Journals of very low quality entered the list through institutional nomination, a fact the Commission recognised only later. In 2018 several thousand titles were removed for poor quality or for incorrect or inadequate information. The episode set a precedent that bears directly on the 2025 reform: the one occasion on which Indian institutions were entrusted with nominating acceptable journals ended in the contamination of the national list.

The academic reaction was severe. The Indian National Science Academy attributed the proliferation of substandard journals to the Commission's own assessment rules, and Lakhotia argued that the incentive structure created by publication-count-based promotion criteria was the proximate cause of the phenomenon.

5.2 UGC-CARE and its difficulties

The Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics was constituted in 2018 and the Reference List of Quality Journals was launched in June 2019, with the analytical work located at Savitribai Phule Pune University. The list was organised in two groups: journals qualified through the Commission's own methodology, and journals included automatically by virtue of indexing in Scopus or Web of Science.

The design carried two consequences that shaped its later reception. First, the automatic inclusion of Scopus and Web of Science titles imported the coverage biases of those databases, which under-represent the humanities, the social sciences and non-English scholarship. Second, the discretionary group required expert assessment of a very large and continuously changing population of journals, a task whose volume exceeded what the available expert capacity could sustain. The delays, opacity and inconsistency subsequently complained of are, in substantial part, symptoms of that volume problem rather than of centralisation as such. This distinction is central to the argument of the present paper.

5.3 The 2024–25 decision

The Commission constituted an expert committee in December 2023 to review the CARE scheme. On the committee's recommendation the Commission decided in October 2024 to discontinue the list, notified the decision in February 2025 with feedback invited until 25 February, and approved the Suggestive Parameters in June 2025, notifying them on 16 July 2025 together with the archival legacy list. Table 2 records the sequence.

Table 2. Documented sequence of the discontinuation.

Date	Event
2018	Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics constituted; earlier approved list withdrawn
14 June 2019	UGC-CARE Reference List of Quality Journals launched
December 2023	Expert committee constituted to review the UGC-CARE scheme
3 October 2024	584th meeting of the Commission decides to discontinue UGC-CARE listing
11 February 2025	Public notice of discontinuation; draft suggestive parameters circulated for feedback
25 February 2025	Closing date for stakeholder feedback
24 June 2025	591st meeting approves the Suggestive Parameters and the archival publication of the legacy list
16 July 2025	Public notice F. No. 1-1/2018(CARE/JOURNAL) issued with Annexure-I; legacy list of 1,474 journals uploaded for reference only

6. THE CASE FOR DECENTRALISATION

Before the instrument is examined it is necessary to state the case for the decision, which is stronger than critics have generally allowed.

The criticisms of the central list were well founded. Over-centralisation, delay, opacity and the exclusion of respected Indian-language journals were real defects, and the presence of low-quality journals on a list whose purpose was to exclude them was a fundamental failure of the instrument on its own terms. Researchers experienced the list as a constraint that pushed them towards listed outlets regardless of fit and exposed them to sudden loss of standing when a journal was removed after publication.

The positive case is that disciplines differ. The signals of quality in mathematics, in Sanskrit studies and in clinical medicine are not the same, and a single national list applying uniform methodology across all of them will necessarily serve some fields poorly. The Commission's observation that the model handled non-STEM disciplines badly is well supported by the wider literature on research assessment. Devolving judgement to institutions permits discipline-sensitive standards that a central list cannot accommodate, and it aligns with the general orientation of the National Education Policy 2020 towards institutional autonomy.

A further defensible argument is that abandoning a binding list restores a professional responsibility that ought never to have been surrendered. On this reading, outsourcing journal evaluation to a regulator deskilled the academic community, and returning the task, however uncomfortable, is remedial. The view is reflected in the Commission's encouragement of senior faculty to mentor younger researchers in the choice of journals.

The analysis that follows accepts all of these propositions. It contends, however, that they justify reforming the custody of judgement rather than dissolving the instrument.

7. THE INSTRUMENT: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF ANNEXURE-I

7.1 What the notice contains

Annexure-I is titled Suggestive Parameters for Peer-Reviewed Journals. It states that higher education institutions are encouraged to use the parameters as suited to their needs and to the disciplines in which their faculty work, and that the parameters are provided as general guidelines to ensure quality, transparency and relevance. Two paragraphs of suggestions to institutions follow, advising that faculty and students may choose journals using the parameters and that institutions may establish internal committees to fine-tune them.

The parameters are organised under eight criteria. Enumeration of the notice as published yields thirty-five discrete parameters, distributed as shown in Figure 4. This differs from the figure of thirty-six that appears throughout the secondary literature, and the discrepancy is noted here because it indicates how little of the commentary has been written from the primary document.

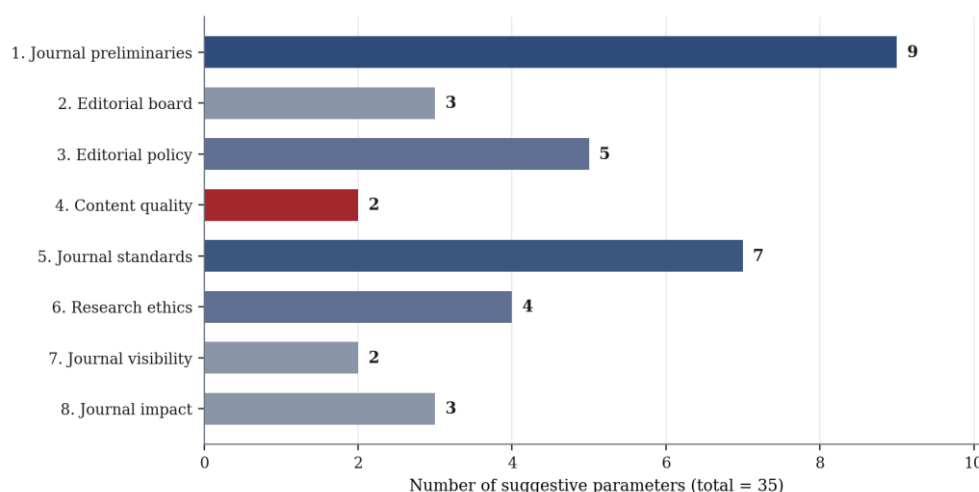


Figure 4. Distribution of the thirty-five suggestive parameters across the eight criteria of Annexure-I.

Table 3 reproduces the structure of the instrument in summary form.

Table 3. Structure of the Suggestive Parameters, Annexure-I to the notice of 16 July 2025.

Criterion	Parameters	Coverage
1. Journal preliminary criteria	9	Title; ISSN; periodicity and continuity; contact and publication details; transparent review policy; website on a certified domain; access and fee policy; integration with national or international repositories; archival policy
2. Editorial board criteria	3	Board details; board composition and subject expertise; efficiency and rigour of the editorial and review process
3. Journal editorial policy	5	Aims, objectives and scope; subject areas; article processing charges; publishing timeline; acceptance rate
4. Journal quality criteria – content	2	Academic contribution of articles; conformity of articles to the journal's stated scope
5. Journal standards	7	Bibliographic data and citation; font and design; infographics and exhibits; citation record; print continuum; website quality; multilingual availability
6. Research ethics	4	Ethical guidelines for authors; plagiarism prevention; conflict of interest disclosure; policy on AI-generated content
7. Journal visibility	2	Impact factor or similar; indexation in reputed databases
8. Journal impact criteria	3	Self-citation score; total citation rate; CiteScore

Several features of the instrument deserve notice before its content is assessed. It prescribes no thresholds: no parameter carries a value that a journal must attain. It assigns no weights: the archival policy and the rigour of peer review carry equal formal status. It specifies no minimum compliance set: an institution is not told how many parameters a journal must satisfy. It prescribes no verification procedure: nothing indicates how an assessor should establish that a stated policy is actually operated. And it is, by its own terms, suggestive: institutions are encouraged, not required, to apply it, and are invited to fine-tune it. The instrument is therefore advisory in status and open in content.

One provision is worth recording for its coherence with wider policy. Parameter 1.8 asks whether a journal is integrated with national or international repositories, referring expressly to inclusion under the One Nation One Subscription scheme or similar umbrellas. This links journal quality assessment to the national access architecture, and is among the few parameters that a dubious outlet cannot readily arrange.

7.2 What the parameters actually require: a classification

The central analytical question is not how many parameters exist but what kind of evidence each demands. Each of the thirty-five was therefore assigned to one of three classes. Class A comprises formal and administrative attributes verifiable from the journal's own website within minutes, requiring no subject expertise and no subscription. Class B comprises attributes requiring access to a commercial citation database. Class C comprises attributes requiring substantive scholarly judgement about the content or conduct of the journal. Figure 5 presents the distribution.

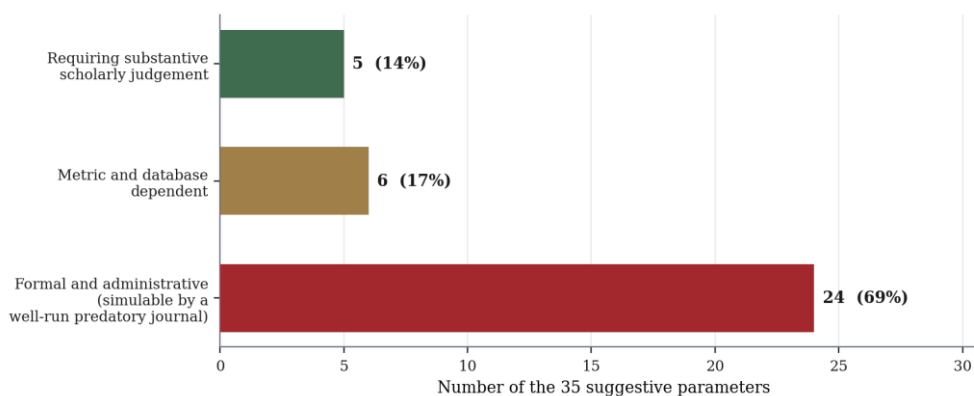


Figure 5. Classification of the thirty-five suggestive parameters by the kind of evidence required for assessment.

Twenty-four parameters, approximately 69 per cent of the instrument, fall in Class A. These include the journal title, ISSN, periodicity, contact details, the existence of a stated review policy, a website on a certified domain, the access and fee policy, the archival policy, the listing of editorial board details, the stated aims and scope, the disclosure of article processing charges, the stated publishing timeline and acceptance rate, referencing style, layout, use of exhibits, print continuity, website quality, multilingual availability, ethical guidelines for authors, conflict of interest disclosure and the policy on AI-generated content.

The difficulty is immediate. Every one of these attributes lies within the unilateral control of the journal, and a competently operated predatory outlet supplies them all as a matter of course. Such outlets hold valid ISSNs, publish to a schedule, maintain professional websites on secure domains, declare transparent peer review policies, display their charges openly, publish ethics statements and, since 2023, carry policies on artificial intelligence. The predatory publishing literature has long established that the business model of these publishers rests on the simulation of formal legitimacy: titles that imitate respectable ones, fabricated impact factors, editorial boards listing scholars who were never consulted, and claims of indexing by bodies of no standing. An instrument composed largely of formal attributes cannot distinguish a journal that possesses them because it is serious from a journal that possesses them because it is designed to appear serious.

Six parameters fall in Class B: citation record, impact factor or similar, indexation in reputed databases, self-citation score, total citation rate and CiteScore. These are considerably more discriminating, and the inclusion of self-citation and total citation rate is a genuine strength of the instrument, since these are among the few indicators that predatory outlets find difficult to fabricate convincingly. But they require access to Scopus or Web of Science. Under the previous arrangement the Commission absorbed that cost centrally on behalf of the system; under the new arrangement it falls on each institution, and it falls hardest on precisely those institutions least able to bear it.

Five parameters fall in Class C: the composition and eminence of the editorial board, the rigour and efficiency of the actual review process, the academic contribution of published articles, their conformity to the journal's scope, and effective plagiarism prevention. These are the parameters that would in fact discriminate between a credible and a dubious journal. They are also the parameters that require exactly the sustained expert attention which the central consortium was unable to supply at national scale, and which the reform now asks every institution to supply independently.

The structural conclusion is therefore precise. The discriminating power of the instrument is concentrated in eleven of its thirty-five parameters, six of which require a paid database and five of which require expert judgement. The remaining twenty-four can be satisfied in full by exactly the kind of outlet the reform exists to exclude. An under-resourced institution applying the instrument in good faith as a checklist will work through the parameters in the order presented and encounter twenty-four satisfiable items before reaching any substantive test.

8. THE DELEGATION ASSESSED

8.1 What was delegated

The Commission transferred to individual higher education institutions the determination of publication acceptability, which is an input to appointment, promotion, doctoral award and accreditation, and supplied an advisory instrument carrying no thresholds, no weights and no verification procedure, unaccompanied by any resource, training programme, model policy or reporting requirement. No mechanism exists to establish whether institutions have constituted the committees the notice envisages, what criteria they have adopted, or how those criteria compare with one another across the system.

8.2 Whether the agents can perform

The Indian higher education system comprises approximately 1,168 universities and more than 45,000 colleges, and its capacity is very unevenly distributed. A research-intensive institution holds subscriptions to citation databases, maintains a professionally staffed library, employs faculty who publish in international journals and already operates a research committee; in such an institution the delegation is workable and may even be beneficial. The average affiliated college stands in a quite different position. It commonly has no institutional subscription to Scopus or Web of Science, a library staff of one or two carrying heavy circulation duties, few faculty with recent international publications, and no standing committee capable of assessing journal quality across the range of disciplines it teaches.

For institutions of the second kind the Class B parameters are inaccessible and the Class C parameters are unassessable. What remains available is Class A, which is precisely the portion of the instrument that does not discriminate. The delegation thus produces a predictable stratification: the institutions best equipped to evaluate journals are those whose faculty were least likely to

publish in dubious ones, and the institutions least equipped are those where the risk is concentrated. This is the outcome represented in Figure 1.

A second consequence follows for institutions in the middle. Faced with an instrument they cannot fully apply, many will adopt the one criterion that is externally verifiable and defensible in an audit, namely indexation in Scopus or Web of Science. Anecdotal accounts of universities tightening their thesis and promotion requirements to Scopus-indexed journals following the discontinuation are consistent with this expectation. If this becomes the general institutional response, the reform will have produced an outcome opposite to its stated intention: a regime justified by the exclusion of respected Indian-language journals from a central list will have delegated authority to institutions which, lacking capacity to judge, adopt a criterion that excludes Indian-language journals still more comprehensively. The Commission removed a list it considered biased against non-STEM and Indian-language scholarship, and created conditions under which many institutions will substitute two commercial databases with the same bias and no Indian accountability whatever.

8.3 Whether their incentives align

They do not, and the misalignment is structural rather than a matter of institutional bad faith. An institution that judges strictly reduces its own publication count, disadvantages its faculty in promotion, and weakens its accreditation returns; an institution that judges leniently improves all three. The costs of leniency are diffuse, delayed and borne by the national research system, while its benefits are immediate, concentrated and internal. The Commission's warning that institutions failing to establish credible mechanisms risk promoting faculty with dubious publications assumes that reputational damage will discipline this calculation. For an elite institution competing internationally that assumption is plausible. For a college whose reputation rests on placement and enrolment rather than research standing, it is not.

The historical record supplies direct evidence on this point. When Indian institutions last held the power to determine which journals counted, through the nomination mechanism of the earlier approved list, the aggregate result was the entry of large numbers of substandard journals and the eventual removal of several thousand titles. The 2025 reform returns a comparable power to the same population of institutions, with weaker central oversight than existed then, and without any of the intervening capacity-building that would justify expecting a different outcome.

8.4 Early evidence of regime response

The conduct of publishers following the change is instructive and is treated here as evidence of behaviour rather than of quality. Within months of the notice, journals and publishing service providers began publishing material asserting their own compliance with the new arrangements, describing themselves as valid under the new UGC framework, as transparent peer-reviewed journals within the meaning of the notice, or as continuing to follow UGC-CARE quality parameters notwithstanding the list's discontinuation. Search results for the discontinuation are dominated by such material, much of it published by outlets with a direct commercial interest in how the change is understood.

Two observations follow. First, the informational environment in which institutions must now exercise judgement is being actively shaped by the parties whose products they are meant to assess, and the material most readily encountered by a researcher searching for guidance is frequently promotional. Second, the ease with which an outlet can assert compliance follows directly from the structure identified in Section 7.2. Where an instrument is composed predominantly of formal attributes, and prescribes no thresholds and no verification, a claim of compliance is inexpensive to make and difficult to refute. This is the gaming dynamic described in Section 3.2 reappearing at the new locus of the target, which is what the framework predicts.

9. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE CUSTODY OF JUDGEMENT

The Indian debate has been conducted as a choice between a central list and no central list. Internationally the question has been posed differently, as a question about where the curation of scholarly quality should be housed. Several countries operate national registers, and they are instructive precisely because they are neither regulator-run in the Indian manner nor abolished.

The Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers is operated by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data with the National Board of Scholarly Publishing on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Research. It covers around thirty thousand source titles and classifies publication channels by level, with entry-level recognition resting on a valid ISSN, a scientific editorial board and a peer review process, and a higher level reserved for the most prestigious channels. Finland's Publication Forum, established in 2010 and maintained by the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, classifies channels into four classes through the work of some 250 experts organised in twenty-three panels covering all fields, and has been used within the Ministry's performance-based funding model since 2015. Denmark operates a comparable arrangement, and the Nordic countries have cooperated on a shared bibliographic dataset for these lists.

Three features of the Nordic model bear on the Indian case. The curation is performed by the scholarly community, through learned societies and disciplinary expert panels, rather than by the regulator or by individual employing institutions; disciplinary breadth is achieved by constituting many panels rather than by applying one methodology across all fields, which addresses precisely the non-STEM problem the Commission identified; and the designers of these systems state explicitly that the classifications are suited to assessing large publication volumes and are too arbitrary for evaluating individual researchers, a caution that the Indian use of a list for individual promotion decisions never observed.

Other jurisdictions occupy different positions. Turkey's higher education council has acted directly against named categories of outlet, retaining regulatory custody while placing the burden of application on institutions. China's policy reform of 2020 moved away from the mechanical counting of indexed publications without substituting an approved list, addressing the incentive rather than the instrument. Figure 6 positions these arrangements along two axes: the custody of judgement, and the strength of the binding effect on individual careers.

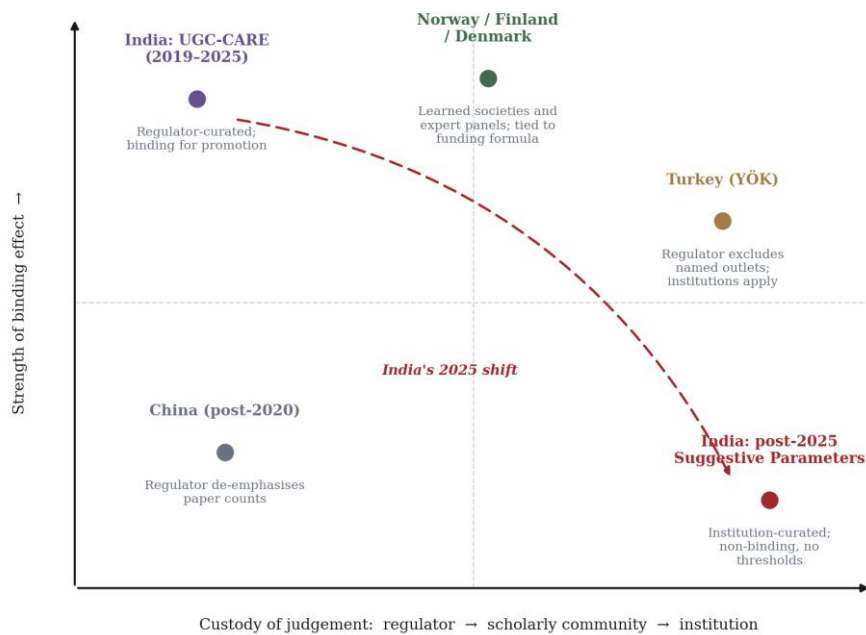


Figure 6. National journal quality regimes positioned by custody of judgement and strength of binding effect.

Table 4. Comparison of national approaches to journal quality assessment.

Jurisdiction	Instrument	Custody of judgement	Binding effect	Disciplinary breadth
India, 2019–2025	UGC-CARE Reference List	Regulator, with analytical work at one university	Strong; determined promotion and doctoral eligibility	Single methodology; non-STEM handling criticised
India, from 2025	Suggestive Parameters (35 items, advisory)	Individual institutions	None prescribed; institution-dependent	Delegated to institutions; capacity-dependent
Norway	Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers	Scholarly community bodies on behalf of the ministry	Operates through the research funding model	Broad; covers minority fields
Finland	Publication Forum (JUFO)	Federation of Finnish Learned Societies; 250 experts in 23 panels	Ministry funding model since 2015	Panels constituted for all fields
Denmark	Bibliometric Research Indicator	Expert panels on the Nordic model	Research funding indicator	Multi-level, field-specific
Turkey	Regulatory exclusion of named outlet categories	Higher education council	Applied by institutions in appointments	Uniform
China, from 2020	Policy against mechanical publication counting	Ministries; no approved list	Redirects incentives rather than listing outlets	Not list-based

The comparison locates the Indian decision precisely. Every one of the defects the Commission identified in UGC-CARE, over-centralisation, disciplinary insensitivity, delay and opacity, is a defect that the Nordic arrangement addresses by relocating curation to the scholarly community and constituting disciplinary panels. India moved instead along the other axis, dissolving the instrument and transferring the task to employing institutions with an interest in the outcome. The reform is best characterised as exit rather than redesign, and the alternative was available.

10. STRUCTURAL RISKS OF THE NEW REGIME

Seven risks follow from the analysis. Each is structural, arising from the design of the delegation rather than from any failure to implement it.

10.1 An instrument weighted towards simulable attributes

Twenty-four of thirty-five parameters can be satisfied by an outlet designed to appear legitimate. An institution applying the instrument as a checklist will find most items satisfied before reaching anything substantive.

10.2 Absence of thresholds, weights and verification

Without a minimum compliance set, differential weighting or any procedure for testing whether a stated policy is operated, two institutions applying the same instrument in good faith may reach opposite conclusions about the same journal, and neither can be shown to have applied it incorrectly.

10.3 Capacity asymmetry across the system

The parameters with real discriminating power require paid database access or subject expertise. Institutions possessing neither are left with the non-discriminating remainder, and these are the institutions where the risk is greatest.

10.4 Misaligned incentives

Institutions assess the journals in which their own faculty publish, and bear the internal costs of stringency while the costs of leniency fall on the national system.

10.5 Displacement onto commercial databases

The rational institutional response to an unassessable instrument is to substitute an externally defensible proxy, most probably Scopus or Web of Science indexation. This risks reproducing, in a more severe form and without Indian oversight, the bias against Indian-language and humanities scholarship that the reform was partly intended to correct.

10.6 Loss of national comparability

Where each institution sets its own standard, the publication record ceases to carry a common meaning across the system. Selection committees, funding bodies and doctoral examiners lose a shared reference point, and mobility between institutions becomes harder to assess. The scholar whose publication is acceptable at one institution and inadmissible at another bears the cost of this directly, and early-career researchers bear it most.

10.7 An unmanaged transition

No transitional provision addresses work published in reliance on the previous regime. The legacy list is expressly stated to imply neither validation nor endorsement, which leaves publications made in good faith under the prior rules without any defined status. No model institutional policy, training programme or funded support accompanied the change. Table 5 summarises the risks and the corresponding responses.

Table 5. Structural risks and indicative responses.

No.	Risk	Mechanism	Indicative response
1	Instrument weighted towards simulable attributes	24 of 35 parameters within the unilateral control of the journal	Designate a discriminating core subset as mandatory
2	No thresholds, weights or verification	Advisory instrument with no minimum compliance set	Publish a model policy with minimum standards and a verification protocol
3	Capacity asymmetry	Discriminating parameters require paid databases or expertise	Provide central database access and a shared national advisory service
4	Misaligned incentives	Institutions assess their own faculty's publication venues	External audit of a sample of institutional determinations
5	Displacement onto commercial databases	Scopus or Web of Science adopted as a defensible proxy	Maintain a community-curated register of Indian and Indian-language journals
6	Loss of national comparability	Divergent institutional standards	Require publication of institutional journal policies in a common format
7	Unmanaged transition	No status defined for work published under the prior regime	Issue transitional guidance protecting good-faith prior publication

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 For the Commission

1. Designate a discriminating core within the Suggestive Parameters, comprising the editorial board composition, the operation of peer review, the academic contribution of published articles, plagiarism control and the citation and self-citation indicators, and state that these are to be treated as necessary rather than merely suggestive.
2. Publish a model institutional journal policy, including minimum compliance standards, a verification protocol for stated policies, and a documented procedure for handling contested cases, so that institutions are not required to design a regulatory instrument from first principles.
3. Constitute a community-curated national register of Indian and Indian-language journals on the Nordic model, housed in learned societies and disciplinary expert panels rather than in the Commission, so that the disciplinary sensitivity sought by the reform is achieved without abandoning collective curation.
4. Extend central access to at least one major citation database to all eligible institutions, since six of the discriminating parameters cannot otherwise be applied and the resulting asymmetry falls on the institutions least able to absorb it.
5. Institute an external audit of a sample of institutional determinations, so that the delegation is accompanied by the monitoring that principal-agent arrangements require.

6. Issue transitional guidance defining the status of work published in good faith under the previous regime.

11.2 For higher education institutions

7. Constitute the internal committee the notice suggests, and include the librarian as a standing member rather than as an occasional invitee, since the expertise required is bibliographic before it is disciplinary.
8. Publish the institutional journal policy openly, so that faculty and research scholars know the standard before they submit rather than after, and so that determinations can be compared across institutions.
9. Assess the journal at the point of submission rather than at the point of promotion, since a determination made after publication imposes an irrecoverable cost on the author.

11.3 For the library and information science profession

10. Accept journal quality assessment as core professional work, since the competencies the new regime demands, source verification, indexing and database expertise, bibliometric literacy and the evaluation of publication ethics, are those of the academic librarian rather than of any other institutional actor.
11. Deliver structured guidance to research scholars on applying the parameters, with particular attention to the distinction between attributes a journal can assert about itself and attributes that can be independently verified.
12. Conduct and publish institutional studies of how the parameters are being applied in practice, since the empirical base required to evaluate this reform does not exist and will not be generated centrally.

12. CONCLUSION

The Commission was right about the UGC-CARE list. It was slow, opaque, insensitive to disciplinary difference, unjust to Indian-language scholarship, and it contained journals it existed to exclude. A regulator that maintains a binding national whitelist assumes an obligation it cannot discharge at Indian scale, and the accumulated evidence of six years supported ending the arrangement.

It does not follow that the arrangement should have been ended in this way. Discontinuation transferred the determination of publication acceptability to more than forty-six thousand institutions, most of which lack the database access, the staffing and the disciplinary breadth to make it, and all of which have an institutional interest in making it permissively. The instrument supplied is advisory, prescribes no thresholds and no verification, and is composed to the extent of roughly two-thirds of attributes that any competent predatory publisher supplies as a matter of routine. Within months of the notice, outlets of exactly that description were publicly asserting their compliance with it.

The deeper error is one of diagnosis. The central list failed not because curation is inherently misguided but because a binding target attracts gaming and because one committee could not sustain expert judgement across the entire scholarly output of a country. Neither cause is addressed by moving the task to bodies with less expertise and stronger reasons for leniency. The Nordic registers show that curation can be relocated to the scholarly community, organised through disciplinary panels, and kept deliberately away from decisions about individual careers. India chose exit where redesign was available.

For the library and information science profession the consequence is immediate and, in one respect, an opportunity. The obligation to determine whether a journal is credible now falls on the institution, and within the institution it falls most naturally on the person trained in source evaluation, indexing, bibliometrics and publication ethics. Whether Indian academic libraries are staffed and equipped to assume that obligation is an empirical question, and it is the question this analysis identifies as most urgently in need of study. Two investigations follow directly: a survey of whether institutions have in fact constituted the suggested committees and what standards they have adopted, and an assessment of the bibliometric and database capacity available to the libraries that must now advise them. Neither has been undertaken. Both should be, and soon, because the costs of this transition are being borne in the interval by research scholars who have no means of knowing, at the moment they submit, whether their work will later be found to count.

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