Why scientist rankings should be ignored

By Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky

Have you heard of Research.com's "best scientists" ranking? Its 2024 list included 19 scientists from Vietnam – an increase of five from 2023. Something the country should be proud of, no doubt.

Except the ranking is no honor. As Vietnamese media have painstakingly reported, Research.com's list is chaotic, riddled with errors and oversights. So why is anyone paying attention to it, or to other much-ballyhooed rankings such as one from Stanford University – also shot through with problems?

The answer is simple: Money. Highly ranked scientists earn better jobs, more grants, and bigger prizes. And universities that hire those scientists – sometimes just to game the rankings – win more government grants and attract more students. The allure is obvious. Looking at a list of scientists is easier than analyzing their work. But like many shortcuts, such rankings are fatally flawed – and easily gamed, as *Thanh Niên* has reported.

Global science is gripped by a metrics obsession. China has gamed them to earn "scientific superpower" status from *The Economist* because it "tops the Nature Index, created by the publisher of the same name, which counts the contributions to articles that appear in a set of prestigious journals."

China, however, is responsible for more than half of the world's more than 50,000 retractions (a tally that grows daily). Perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, researchers in China were – and perhaps still are – eligible for large cash bonuses for publishing in highly ranked journals. And publishing papers was a requirement for clinical faculty at medical schools, for whom neither their jobs nor training involve research.

Not surprisingly, a recent survey of researchers in China found pressure to commit fraud, whether through creating citation rings or turning to paper mills. Nor are such problems unique to that country. As we have reported, a dental college in India came up with what one critic called a "nasty scheme" involving self-citation to boost its rankings. In Saudi Arabia, some universities came up with a different scheme to hire prominent mathematicians as honorary faculty and scoop up their citations.

Research.com contacted us recently, saying the website we co-founded, Retraction Watch, "aligns with our mission to provide high-quality educational resources" and that they were "open to various options to improve and expand this content and to other forms of content collaboration."

Great, we thought: An opportunity to ask them about the Vietnamese media's revelations. "We acknowledge that there have been issues in our rankings," they responded. "We are taking the scientists' concerns seriously and are taking steps to actively address them."

Then they went back to their real interest, which was "a guest post exchange between our domains." That's the sort of spammy approach to gaming Google rankings you'd expect from a site using a flawed scientist ranking system to gain attention. And not surprisingly, this time they

introduced us to their colleague, an employee of [Intercorp Media](#), "a lead generation agency that focuses on driving growth for B2B SaaS companies."

In other words, a marketing company. We asked what their relationship with Intercorp was.

They didn't respond to that question.

This ranking system is not one to take seriously. Frankly, [none of them is worthy of attention](#). If you want to judge the quality of research – or more importantly, the reliability of the work – close the rankings pages, pull up the PDFs of a researchers' work, and read it.

Adam Marcus, editorial director for primary care at Medscape, and Ivan Oransky, editor in chief of the Transmitter and a journalism professor at New York University, are the co-founders of [Retraction Watch](#).