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SINGAPORE – Universities must focus less on metrics such as citations and rankings and more on the societal benefits of their research, said Singapore Management University president Lily Kong.

A culture of “publish or perish” and a fixation on university rankings means it has become easy for them to chase “misplaced goals”, she said in a speech on Nov 27 at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House at the National University of Singapore.

This in turn has resulted in a range of research malpractice, creating an urgent need for universities to reflect on the way such work is evaluated, Prof Kong said.

She was delivering her third and final lecture in a series on the future of universities as part of her role as the 15th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore at the Institute for Policy Studies.

Her first lecture covered the historical evolution of universities, while her second focused on rethinking key dimensions of university education, such as the traditional emphasis on cognitive development alone.

Research by universities has created many benefits for the public, Prof Kong said.

It has informed and shaped public policy, and created innovation and enterprise, she added, citing examples of breakthroughs in clean energy and healthcare which are reshaping economies and improving lives.

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Universities' research has also served the public good by countering misinformation and pseudoscience, she said.

But the "publish or perish" culture – referring to the pressure on academics to publish in top-tier academic journals in order to progress in their careers – and the rise of university rankings have made it easy for universities to chase "misplaced goals" in the absence of purpose, Prof Kong said.

"The reality for academics is that individual career progression is heavily influenced by these metrics, impacting tenure decisions, promotions and funding opportunities."

Journal impact factors, which measure the importance of a journal by calculating the number of times articles inside it are cited, are used as proxies for how important an article is.

"Yet this logic is clearly flawed," Prof Kong said.

"At its most meaningful, academic impact comes when research shifts understanding by advancing theory and method or when it changes received wisdom about something. Where we publish and how many cite us, are imperfect proxy indicators, helpful but imperfect."

University rankings, such as the Times Higher Education (THE) and QS, privilege research and standardised metrics of research such as citations, Prof Kong noted.

She raised the example of the THE ranking system, which allocates more than 60 per cent of its score to research – where publications and citations play a crucial role.

She said: "In the race for rankings, institutions have been willing to justify – preposterous in my view – the imbalance in attention to teaching and research."

These two factors have led to a range of malpractice, Prof Kong said.

She listed five ways such malpractice plays out: misconduct, manipulation, magniloquence (using high-flown or bombastic language), mistreatment and misalignment.

In the case of misconduct and manipulation, the focus on research metrics has led to instances of academics faking research results.

Academics have also manipulated citation statistics, even engaging in "citation cartels" where groups of academics collude to disproportionately cite each other's work to inflate their numbers, she said.

To combat these problems, universities must rethink how research is evaluated, citing efforts by various academic groups to broaden such thinking, Prof Kong said.

She said: "We need to reconsider who we want our research to speak to. Far too often, academics focus solely on communicating with their peers, particularly those in the Global North, through journals and conferences."

Prof Kong added that universities should also need to develop a clear and coherent vision and strategic focus – this includes having clarity on what constitutes societal impact and public value, and how they are to be assessed.

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She said: “Finally, to truly effect change, universities have a vital role in advocating for policies, based on evidence-based research.

“By working to effect systemic changes, universities can influence broader societal shifts.”