

Research Integrity Risk Index (RI²) and Iraqi Universities

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INTRODUCTION

The release of the Research Integrity Risk Index (RI²) report in June 2025 sparked widespread discussion among academics, policymakers, and media outlets in Iraq. Developed by Dr. Lokman Meho, a Lebanese information scientist and librarian at the American University of Beirut, RI² offers a novel and quantitative lens through which institutional commitment to research ethics can be evaluated.¹

The Research Integrity Risk Index (RI²) is a metric that shifts focus away from traditional bibliometric indicators such as publication counts or citations, and instead zeroes in on the integrity of research. It is built on two core parameters:

- Retraction Rate (R-Rate): The number of articles retracted for research misconduct per 1,000 publications over the last two years.
- Delisted Rate (D-Rate): The proportion of articles published in journals that were subsequently removed from the Scopus or Web of Science databases during the same period.²

Based on the combined RI² score, universities are categorized into five risk levels:

- Red Flag (≥ 0.251)
- High Risk ($0.176 - <0.251$)
- Watch List ($0.099 - <0.176$)
- Normal Variation ($0.049 - <0.099$)
- Low Risk (< 0.049)

This model enables early detection of systemic issues in institutional research governance.³

POSITION OF THE IRAQI UNIVERSITIES IN THE JUNE 2025 RI² INDEX

While countries such as India and Saudi Arabia each had several dozen universities flagged in the “Red” category, Iraq had five (Table 1).

While the retraction rate is relatively low, approximately 1 in every 570 papers, the delisted rate (averaging around 9%) is concerning. This not only reflects lost academic value but also represents a financial and reputational cost to institutions and researchers alike.²

It is important to note that many of these publications occurred while the journals were still indexed. Therefore,

the findings should not be interpreted as a blanket dismissal of the research quality itself.¹

Table 1: Research Integrity Metrics for Iraqi Universities Classified as 'Red Flag' in the 2025 RI² Index

University	Publications	Retractions No.	Delisted Journal Articles No. (%)
University of Babylon	2,440	4	248 (10.1)
University of Basrah	2,053	4	188 (9.1)
University of Baghdad	6,518	6	612 (9.4)
University of Mosul	2,423	10	174 (7.2)
University of Al-Mustansiriya	2,465	4	195 (7.9)

Underlying causes

The Iraqi academic environment faces several systemic issues contributing to its position in the RI² ranking:

1. Promotion policies that place disproportionate emphasis on publishing in Scopus or WoS indexed journals, often without stringent local peer review.⁴
2. Chronic underfunding and undervaluation of local journals, leaving them unable to compete with international platforms.⁵
3. Lack of meaningful incentives for researchers to publish locally, including bureaucratic delays, absence of career advancement rewards, and limited visibility.⁶

Recommendations

To enhance research integrity and improve future RI² scores, Iraqi academic institutions should consider the following steps:

1. Invest in national journals: Provide funding, training, and technical assistance to improve standards and visibility. Recognize them in promotion criteria.
2. Establish active research ethics committees at every university to oversee compliance and train faculty in responsible conduct of research.⁷
3. Develop reviewer and editor capacity: Train local experts in peer review best practices to elevate the quality of submissions and editorial decisions.
4. Adopt transparent editorial systems: Implement online platforms with double-blind peer review, anti-plagiarism tools, and editorial oversight mechanisms.

CONCLUSIONS

RI² serves as more than a ranking, it is a reflection of a university's internal research culture. For Iraq, the path forward lies not in denying the problem, but in embracing reforms that restore the integrity, credibility, and long-term sustainability of academic research. With deliberate investment and reform, Iraqi institutions can turn the tide elevating their global standing not just in output, but in ethical excellence.

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