Toward a values-driven research culture: passion, collaboration, and decency

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1 **Toward a Values-Driven Research Culture: Passion, Collaboration and**

2 **Decency**

3

4 **Abstract**

5 An overemphasis on publishing metrics often shifts attention away from the true purpose of

6 research, i.e., advancing knowledge and encouraging discovery. This piece explores the

7 potential for a values-driven approach to academia emphasizing i) passion, ii) collaboration,

8 and iii) decency as foundational principles. Given the growing pressure on early-career

9 researchers to meet publication demands, there is an opportunity to consider how academic

10 environments might better support meaningful contributions over sheer output. We reflect on

11 the importance of nurturing genuine curiosity, embracing open science, and fostering

12 collaborative, diverse teams to address complex global challenges relevant to tourism. By

13 contemplating a shift from metric-driven to values-driven priorities, we discuss how

14 academia might more closely align with its core mission of knowledge creation and

15 dissemination.

16

1   Introduction

2   In an academic world increasingly shaped by metrics, rankings, and the relentless pressure to

3   publish, the fundamental purpose of research — generating new knowledge, fostering

4   discovery, and advancing understanding — often risks being overshadowed (Trueblood et al.,

5   2025). While these metrics are designed to provide benchmarks for performance, they often

6   distort incentives, promoting a "publish or perish" culture that may compromise originality,

7   depth, and societal relevance (Moher et al., 2018; Fire and Guestrin, 2019). This dynamic

8   disproportionately affects early-career researchers, who may prioritize strategic publishing

9   over meaningful inquiry due to job market pressures (Wilsdon et al., 2015; Lee and

10   Benjamin, 2023). In tourism academia, this pressure has manifested in a surge of manuscript

11   submissions and a growing emphasis on high-impact publications, sometimes at the expense

12   of innovative or interdisciplinary research (Agarwal et al., 2024). Consequently, the broader

13   academic mission — advancing understanding, fostering discovery, and engaging with

14   societal challenges — risks being reduced to a numbers game.

15   The field has seen a significant growth in submissions over the past two decades. For

16   instance, the Journal of Travel Research has experienced a substantial rise in manuscript

17   submissions, from approximately 300 per year in 2008 (Perdue et al., 2009), to more than

18   1,300 in 2024 (personal communication with the editor, 2025). Similarly, Annals of Tourism

19   Research has surpassed 1,000 submissions annually—based on triangulated data available on

20   the journal's website and Scival analytics—which further confirms this trend. The same

21   pattern is evident across the tourism and hospitality, with an exponential and sustained

22   growth between 2019 and 2021, driven by the additional time scholars had during the

23   pandemic to engage in writing (Font et al., 2023). Unfortunately, this upward trend in output

24   is not linked to an increase in academic-industry collaborations and is only partially related to

25   an increase in international collaborations (Scival, 2025). Strengthening collaborations is

26   essential because the complex, multifaceted challenges faced by the tourism industry — such

27   as sustainability, technological disruption, and socio-cultural impacts — require

28   interdisciplinary approaches and practical insights (Okumus et al., 2018). Partnerships

29   between academics and industry practitioners enrich research relevance, enable knowledge

30   exchange, and foster innovation that can better respond to real-world needs (Scott et al.,

31   2017). Moreover, international collaborations broaden perspectives and promote diversity in

32   approaches, enhancing the global applicability of tourism research.

In light of these challenges, recent academic reform movements have gained momentum, advocating for more equitable, socially just, and impact-driven practices within scholarship. For instance, Benjamin et al. (2024) critically examine how systemic pressures and metric-driven cultures undermine inclusivity and quality in tourism research. Their critique focuses on three main issues: the overemphasis on publishing metrics, structural inequalities in academia, and systemic pressures that disadvantage marginalized scholars. Expanding on this, Gard-McGehee (2024) introduced the "Deep Scholarship Movement", proposing three key strategies for academic reform: mobilizing leadership, redistributing resources, and building consensus. This discussion has sparked global debate about academic success metrics, particularly visible in Tourism Research Information Network (TRINET) discussions and editorial debates.

While we support these structural reform calls, we argue that lasting change in academia requires more than systemic restructuring — it demands a shift in academic culture itself. Scholars have highlighted that traditional academic structures often prioritize managerial success over values-based leadership, which can hinder meaningful research and innovation (Whittaker and Montgomery, 2022). Embedding core values throughout academic practice ensures that curiosity-driven inquiry and ethical engagement remain central to scholarship. Additionally, research on cultural policies demonstrates how a value-driven framework can shape institutional transformations, promoting sustainability and collective progress (Mlitz and van den Hoogen, 2023). Our contribution is not intended as a definitive solution, but as a catalyst for dialogue and grassroots change. By articulating a clear vision for a values-based academic culture — centred on passion, collaboration, and decency — we aim to provide a shared language and moral foundation that early-career scholars and academic leaders alike can use to reimagine practices in their own institutions.

As a young research division lead and a seasoned professor with extensive editorial experience, we write from distinct but complementary standpoints within academia. This piece is grounded in a positionality statement, reflecting our lived experiences navigating institutional demands, mentoring early-career scholars, and shaping research agendas. Our reflections are informed by our respective roles in fostering academic communities and promoting inclusive, meaningful scholarship. By sharing this perspective, we aim to contribute to ongoing conversations about how academic environments might better support a values-driven research culture — one that prioritizes passion, collaboration, and decency over productivity metrics.

1 **The Problem: Metrics Over Meaning**

2 At its foundation, the publish-or-perish mindset emphasizes output quantity over the

3 substance of contributions. Indicators such as citation counts, h-indices, and journal rankings

4 have become dominant measures of academic achievement, influencing decisions on

5 promotions, funding allocations, and institutional standings (Moosa, 2024; Trueblood et al.,

6 2025). Although these metrics offer a quantitative framework for assessment, they often

7 promote behaviours that detract from the fundamental goals of research. For example, the

8 pressure to satisfy metric-based criteria can encourage practices like focusing on safe,

9 incremental studies that are easier to publish but contribute less to advancing knowledge

10 (Kozlov, 2023; Fire and Guestrin, 2019).

11 Moreover, researchers may feel obligated to chase "popular" topics rather than those

12 that truly resonate with their skills or intellectual interests, thereby diminishing the

13 uniqueness and depth of their work (Baum et al., 2020). A clear example of this phenomenon

14 was the surge in academic papers on COVID-19, where scholars across disciplines — often

15 beyond their primary areas — pivoted to pandemic-related topics in response to funding and

16 publication opportunities (Zenker and Kock, 2020). More recently, the explosion of interest

17 in Generative AI has prompted a similar wave of submissions, often prioritizing trend-driven

18 outputs — such as descriptive pieces on the dark side of Generative AI — over deep,

19 foundational inquiries (Van Dis et al., 2023). While engaging with pressing societal issues is

20 important, an overemphasis on short-term relevance can sometimes come at the expense of

21 sustained theoretical, practical and methodological depth. These dynamics are particularly

22 pronounced for early-career academics, who frequently face unstable job prospects and are

23 driven to "navigate" the system strategically to secure an academic position (Lim, 2025). This

24 cycle of metric-focused publishing not only perpetuates itself but also undermines the

25 enthusiasm and curiosity that should define academic exploration. Importantly, without real

26 societal or industry relevance, academic knowledge risks becoming insular, raising questions

27 among policymakers about the return on public investment in research (Martin, 2011).

28 To counteract the unintended consequences of a metric-dominated system, we argue

29 that academia must re-center itself around core human values that inspire genuine

30 scholarship. One such value — perhaps the most intrinsic to meaningful academic work — is

31 passion.

1 **The Role of Passion in Research**

2 Passion is a key driver of transformative research — that is, research that challenges

3 established norms, reshapes conceptual paradigms, or creates meaningful impact within and

4 beyond academia (National Science Board, 2007). While curiosity often sparks initial interest

5 in a topic, passion represents a deeper, enduring emotional and intellectual commitment that

6 sustains researchers through the long, often uncertain journey of inquiry (Kashdan and Silvia,

7 2009; Chen and Zhao, 2024). Passion is more than just an academic interest - it is the fire that

8 drives scholars to challenge conventional wisdom, push disciplinary boundaries, and persist

9 through setbacks. Passion is what makes researchers wake up in the middle of the night to jot

10 down an idea or spend years refining a theory despite repeated failures (Chen and Zhao,

11 2024). It is, in many ways, an uncontrollable force — an emotional and intellectual

12 commitment that gives purpose to the academic journey (Curran et al., 2015). Scholars who

13 are genuinely committed to their work are more inclined to address difficult questions, adopt

14 pioneering methodologies, and spend days and months deeply engaged with their subjects.

15 Research fuelled by passion achieves higher quality outcomes and motivates others,

16 cultivating an environment of curiosity and innovation.

17 Research passion shares striking similarities with entrepreneurial passion (Cardon et

18 al., 2009). Just as entrepreneurs take risks to bring innovative ideas to life, scholars navigate

19 the uncertainties of discovery, often without immediate rewards or guarantees of success.

20 Entrepreneurs are driven by a deep conviction in their vision, much like researchers who

21 dedicate years to a problem they believe is worth solving. Both fields require resilience,

22 adaptability, and a willingness to challenge established norms. Passion is not merely an

23 individual trait; it is a value that underpins a more meaningful and principled approach to

24 academic life. In the context of a values-driven research culture, passion represents a

25 commitment to intellectual integrity and long-term scholarly contribution (Cardon et al.,

26 2009; Curran et al., 2015). When passion is embraced as a core value, it guides researchers to

27 pursue work that matters — to themselves, their disciplines, and wider society — even when

28 that work may not immediately align with mainstream metrics or trends (Chen and Zhao,

29 2024). In this way, passion anchors research in authenticity and purpose, and supports

30 environments where intrinsic motivation can thrive (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

31 However, the current academic landscape often suppresses passion. The pressure to

32 align with institutional agendas discourages researchers from pursuing unconventional or

33 high-risk topics (Willmott, 2011). This challenge is particularly acute for young scholars,

who often face the dual pressure of producing high-quality publications while also competing for limited funding opportunities (Lee and Benjamin, 2023; Lim, 2025). The rising expectations for early-career academics to publish during doctoral studies — a requirement increasingly seen as essential for securing academic positions — exacerbates this tension.

The sheer volume of submissions to journals has also escalated, driven in part by institutional incentives that reward publication quantity over quality and a competitive academic job market that pressures early-career researchers to publish rapidly and frequently (Benjamin et al., 2024; Lee and Benjamin, 2023). This intensification of the publication race heightens competition and can crowd out more exploratory or high-risk intellectual work. For younger researchers, navigating this crowded landscape can feel overwhelming, as they are required to balance the demands of publishing, teaching, and securing funding, all while building a sustainable career trajectory (Benjamin et al., 2024). Institutions must create conditions where passion can thrive. This might involve granting researchers more freedom to choose topics, funding exploratory projects, or valuing contributions that do not fit neatly into traditional metric-based success measures.

Academics must also take responsibility for aligning their efforts with their personal interests. Instead of asking, "What will secure an output soon?", we should ask, "What excites me? What challenges me? What difference can I make through this work?" By grounding our research in passion, we can achieve both personal satisfaction and meaningful impact in the long run because we will be recognized as an expert in the field (or methodological approach) we are passionate about. While passion anchors the research process in authenticity and purpose, it is through collaboration that ideas are enriched, tested, and brought to fruition. In a values-driven academic culture, working with others becomes not just a means to an end but a core value in itself — one that fosters diversity, inclusivity, and mutual learning.

Collaboration Across Boundaries

Collaboration is fundamental to cultivating a values-based research culture (Bozeman and Boardman, 2014). Effective collaboration is not just about dividing tasks — it's about exchanging ideas, learning from one another, and fostering synergies grounded in empathy, fairness, and integrity. This is particularly critical for addressing complex, interdisciplinary issues that demand diverse expertise and complementary competences (Fyall and Garrod, 2005).

Collaboration is not without challenges. Power imbalances within teams can result in uneven workloads, often leaving junior researchers disproportionately burdened while receiving minimal acknowledgement (Benjamin et al., 2024; Kwiek, 2020). Moreover, institutional silos can hinder efforts to form partnerships that span disciplines or organizations (Cummings and Kiesler, 2007). To mitigate these challenges, it's essential to foster a collaborative environment where all voices are heard, and contributions are valued. This requires not only clear communication from the very outset but also a genuine commitment to building trust and respect among team members.

To make collaboration more inclusive, meaningful, and aligned with our core values, we offer the following strategies:

- **Promote diversity in research teams**: Invite varied perspectives across gender, geography, discipline, and career stage to enrich the intellectual and ethical quality of research.
- **Set clear expectations from the outset**: Clarify roles, responsibilities, and credit-sharing early to build trust and reduce potential conflict.
- **Build emotionally supportive teams**: Choose collaborators who energize you, celebrate your successes, and support you in failure. Research should be a shared, human experience.
- **Reflect on the broader impact of your work**: Prioritize projects with relevance beyond the academy, and write in ways that engage stakeholders and communities.
- **Foster inclusive, boundary-crossing collaborations**: Go beyond disciplines, institutions, and borders — not to chase prestige, but to co-create knowledge with those who bring complementary insights and commitments.

By embracing both the intellectual and emotional sides of collaboration — from cultivating diverse, supportive teams to pursuing broader societal impact — researchers can forge stronger relationships and generate more meaningful, enduring contributions.

Decency in Academic Publishing

With the term decency, we refer to some minimal standard of conduct expected within an academic setting. This goes beyond compliance with formal rules or ticking procedural boxes. Decency means acting with responsibility, fairness, and respect — not because external codes demand it, but because it reflects a deeper commitment to the values that

should guide scholarship (Chapman et al., 2022). A values-driven culture of decency prioritizes intellectual honesty over metrics, meaningful contributions over opportunistic authorship, and integrity over convenience.

This commitment can take many forms. Authorship should reflect genuine intellectual contribution — not simply strategic positioning. Decency also requires resisting citation manipulation — whether through excessive self-citation or citation cartels (Trueblood et al., 2025) — and instead, referencing work that meaningfully contributes to the argument at hand. Transparency in data collection and analysis, including sharing materials where possible and preregistering studies, reinforces trust and enables scrutiny (Deer et al., 2025).

In qualitative research, where interpretive flexibility and researcher reflexivity are central, decency involves particular commitments. Sharing interview protocols, codebooks, and analytic decision trails can enhance trustworthiness without compromising confidentiality. When full data sharing isn't possible, transparency can still be achieved through methodological appendices or reflexivity memos. Preregistration frameworks, even in qualitative settings, help document analytic decisions and reduce hindsight bias (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). With the increasing use of AI tools — such as transcription, sentiment analysis, or thematic clustering — researchers must transparently report what tools were used, how outputs were verified, and what biases may be introduced (e.g., ChatGPT for thematic summarization or automated coding in NVivo). These reflections ensure that technological assistance enhances, rather than compromises, ethical scholarship.

Integrity in data handling also extends to emerging practices, such as the use of synthetic data generated by large language models. While such data can support research under resource constraints, they must not replace rigorous, human-sourced data without proper validation. Clear documentation of data generation processes, model parameters, and limitations is essential to maintain credibility (Sarstedt et al., 2024; Viglia et al., 2024).

Decency, however, is not the responsibility of individual researchers alone. Journals and editorial boards share the duty to uphold values-based publishing norms. They should prioritize research that meaningfully advances theory and practice — not merely papers predicted to attract citations. Encouraging open data, methodological transparency, and preregistered studies can help build fairer, more credible scholarly ecosystems (Nosek et al., 2015).

While many of these practices are already known, they are not yet universally followed. Our goal is not to introduce new technical tools but to advocate for a cultural shift: where transparency, integrity, and fairness are not afterthoughts, but foundational

expectations. Upholding decency is not just about methodological rigor — it is about cultivating a research environment grounded in trust, mutual respect, and shared purpose.

Practical Recommendations

While transforming research culture is ultimately a systemic challenge, tangible progress can begin with individual, institutional, and editorial choices. The following practical recommendations are directly anchored in the core values discussed throughout this letter — passion, collaboration, and decency. These principles serve as a compass for making decisions that foster integrity, innovation, and inclusiveness in research. Whether through prioritizing meaningful work, building supportive networks, or upholding transparency, these actions contribute to shaping a more values-driven academic ecosystem.

1. For Academics

- **Communicate findings in accessible and engaging ways** *(Passion & Decency)*: Inspire broader audiences by writing clearly and with purpose, helping bridge the gap between academia and practice.
- **Leverage synthetic data ethically** *(Decency)*: Use synthetic data for exploratory phases, while validating findings with real-world data to maintain research integrity.
- **Seek international collaborations with complementary researchers** *(Collaboration)*: Build global teams that offer diverse perspectives, fostering cross-cultural learning and co-creation.

2. For Institutions

- **Support high-risk, high-reward projects** *(Passion)*: Encourage bold research by funding ideas that may not align with mainstream trends but have transformative potential.
- **Offer training on ethical data practices** *(Decency)*: Equip researchers to use emerging tools like AI-generated data responsibly and transparently.

3. For Journals

- **Promote transparency in peer review** *(Decency & Collaboration)*: Foster trust and accountability by making editorial decisions more open.

- **Curate special issues on unconventional themes** *(Passion & Collaboration)*: Encourage boundary-pushing research that addresses novel or interdisciplinary questions.

Looking at best practices in this domain, an award-winning interdisciplinary study published in the Journal of Travel Research, authored by a global team from Australia, Slovenia, and Austria, explored a sharing-based approach to encouraging environmentally friendly behaviour among tourists (Dolnicar, Knezevic Cvelbar, and Grün, 2019). This paper not only addresses a substantive issue in tourism but also exemplifies how research with a global team can have a meaningful impact, further reinforcing the relevance and potential of tourism research in driving real-world change. Additionally, another interdisciplinary study published in this same outlet, authored by a diverse team of authors, explored the representation of the online tourism domain in search engines. The research combines insights from tourism studies, information science, and digital marketing to address the challenges and opportunities in effectively marketing travel destinations (Xiang, Wöber, and Fesenmaier, 2008). This paper not only tackles a critical issue in the tourism industry but also exemplifies how a multi-disciplinary approach can have a meaningful impact, further highlighting the relevance of tourism research in addressing real-world challenges.
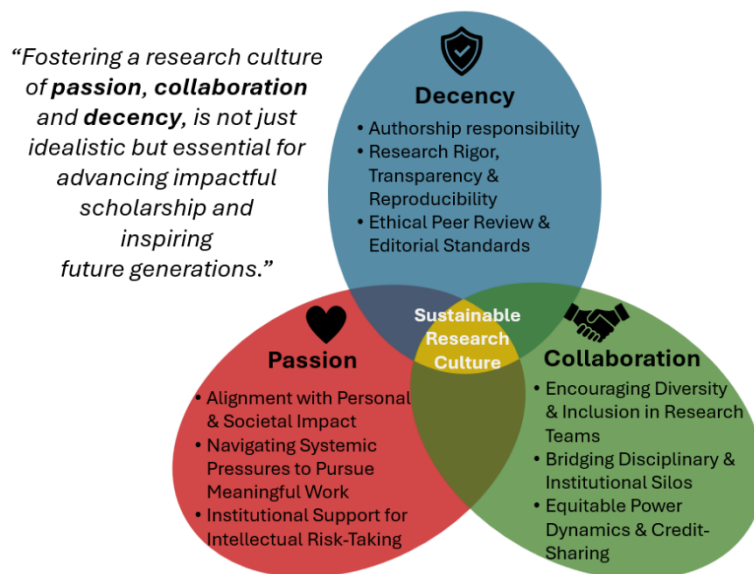
Conclusion

Academic culture stands at a turning point. While metrics offer one lens for recognizing contributions, they must not obscure the deeper purpose of scholarship: generating meaningful, transformative knowledge that contributes to society (Dolnicar, 2025; Kozlov, 2023; Lim, 2025). The systemic pressures identified by Benjamin et al. (2024) and Gard-McGehee (2024) are real, but responding to them requires more than structural reform — it calls for a cultural shift grounded in values.

A value-driven research culture places passion, collaboration, and decency at the centre of scholarly life. Passion fuels inquiry driven by curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Collaboration connects diverse minds to co-create knowledge that transcends disciplinary or geographic boundaries. Decency grounds research in ethical practices, humility, and a shared responsibility to contribute honestly and transparently. These values are not idealistic add-ons — they are foundational to the integrity, sustainability, and relevance of academic work. Our letter contributes to the ongoing debate not by offering a new metric or policy tool, but by reframing the conversation: from performance to purpose, from competition to community.

We aim to inspire early-career researchers and institutional leaders alike to rethink academic success in more human, values-based terms.

For early-career researchers, the stakes are especially high. As Lee and Benjamin (2023) note, the expectation to publish extensively and secure funding early on can make academia feel exclusionary and unforgiving. Institutions must respond with value-aligned structures: mentoring, flexibility, realistic evaluation criteria, and funding mechanisms that support experimentation and well-being. Without these supports, even the most passionate and ethical researchers can burn out or drop out. However, there are still limitations to the proposed approach. For instance, differences in fundings between teaching-intensive and research-intensive universities, as well as between institutions in different regions of the world, can affect the fairness of the system. Integrating open research practices — from data sharing to pre-registration — is one way to embed values like decency and transparency into the academic workflow (Nosek et al., 2015; Deer et al., 2025). But openness alone is not enough. We must also humanize our research relationships.

A final thought. Collaborate with co-authors who challenge and inspire you. Look for people who are smarter than you, bring energy to the table, and complement your skills — whether that is the write-up (e.g., the "story" of the paper) or the method. These kinds of partnerships push your research forward. The best learning comes through writing. We can't edit a blank page, and it's through writing that ideas and solutions start to take shape.

"Fostering a research culture of **passion, collaboration** and **decency**, is not just idealistic but essential for advancing impactful scholarship and inspiring future generations."

Decency
• Authorship responsibility
• Research Rigor, Transparency & Reproducibility
• Ethical Peer Review & Editorial Standards

Sustainable Research Culture

Passion
• Alignment with Personal & Societal Impact
• Navigating Systemic Pressures to Pursue Meaningful Work
• Institutional Support for Intellectual Risk-Taking

Collaboration
• Encouraging Diversity & Inclusion in Research Teams
• Bridging Disciplinary & Institutional Silos
• Equitable Power Dynamics & Credit-Sharing

Figure 1: A conceptual overview of the core values underpinning a sustainable research culture.

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