Top Chinese university to consider social-media posts in researcher evaluations

Controversial policy means social-media output will be considered for academic promotion in some universities in China

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One of China's most prestigious universities plans to give social-media articles and posts on major social-media platforms the same weight as peer-reviewed studies when evaluating academics for promotion.

The policy is expected to be a case of scientific edification among Chinese academics. Proponents say it will encourage researchers to engage with the public, while critics question whether this approach can offer the same level of quality assurance as peer review.

The policy is expected to impact a wide number of researchers. A.Z. Lin, a researcher at Zhejiang University, said the policy is expected to impact about 1 million Chinese researchers.

"If you do not get the weightings right, then incentives could be perverted and lead to bad outcomes," said one environment scientist who did not want to be named.

"You do not need to be a good scientist, you do not need to publish papers," said another biologist who expressed concern.

The policy sets specific criteria for articles to be included: articles must be original, written by the researcher, and at least 1,000 words. They must also have been viewed more than 100,000 times on WeChat, China's most popular instant-messaging service, or 400,000 times on news aggregators such as Toutiao.

"Articles have been seen by a large number of people," said one biologist. "The policy requires an article to be viewed more than 100,000 times on WeChat, China's most popular instant-messaging service, or 400,000 times on news aggregators such as Toutiao. In this case, there is no consideration for quality, only views per post, so there is no merit and no quality assurance."