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Visible as Journals, Invisible as Publishers: Limitations of OpenAlex for Analysing University Publishing

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Received: 21 February 2025 | **Revised:** 20 March 2026 | **Accepted:** 21 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of an exploratory audit of publisher-affiliation metadata for a selected sample of university-published journals in OpenAlex. A corpus of 60 UJs from 10 countries, chosen to represent low-visibility publishing environments, was examined. Journal records retrieved from OpenAlex in January 2025 and January 2026 were manually verified against Ulrichsweb, the journals' websites, and the ISSN Portal, in order to assess the journals' indexing status and the presence of publisher-related metadata. While OpenAlex indexes a significant proportion of the sampled journals, including titles not covered by major commercial indexing systems, coverage remains incomplete, even for active journals. Furthermore, structured publisher affiliation was rarely found within the sample. In January 2025, only 9% of indexed journals were linked to a publisher entity via OpenAlex's publisher-affiliation fields. By January 2026, publisher names appeared more frequently as unstructured text, while the proportion of journals linked to a publisher entity remained largely unchanged. These results indicate that university journals are often visible in OpenAlex as sources, but are insufficiently represented at the publisher level, limiting the interpretability of institutional publishing activity and obscuring the role of university publishing in the broader scholarly landscape.

1 | Introduction

OpenAlex is an open platform for accessing global bibliographic data that offers significant potential for bibliometric analysis and institutional reporting (Priem et al. 2022). Historically, databases such as Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, which are subscription-based and have selective indexing policies, as well as the Directory of Open Access Journals, which is freely accessible but indexes only open access journals, have been widely used for studying academic journals. However, these databases face inherent limitations in their coverage, accessibility, or scope. OpenAlex, by contrast, provides a free, inclusive, and broader alternative ecosystem for supporting bibliodiversity. Its open approach eliminates barriers related to coverage, geographical, linguistic, and financial constraints, making it a promising tool for global academic research.

In late 2025, OpenAlex transitioned from its legacy data system to a newly rebuilt infrastructure, known as Walden (Jason 2025). This shift involved a comprehensive re-engineering of how scholarly records are ingested, linked, and represented, resulting in changes to the coverage and structure of metadata across the platform. Consequently, OpenAlex should be understood as an evolving data infrastructure rather than a static database.

To understand the opportunities offered by OpenAlex, researchers are studying the completeness and accuracy of its metadata. Delgado-Quirós and Ortega (2024) evaluated metadata completeness across eight free-access scholarly databases, observing higher metadata quality in OpenAlex compared to academic search engines, though challenges with data integration persist. Culbert et al. (2025) compared OpenAlex with WoS and Scopus, finding it competitive in reference coverage for shared publications but less consistent in internal coverage and metadata completeness. While OpenAlex excels in ORCID and Open Access data, its instability, limited metadata for funding and abstracts, and issues with reference matching algorithms pose challenges for reliable bibliometric

Key Points

- University journals are often visible in OpenAlex as sources but have incomplete or completely missing publisher metadata.
- This study audits publisher-affiliation metadata for 60 university journals in OpenAlex across two time points.
- OpenAlex indexes many sampled journals absent from commercial databases, but coverage remains incomplete, including for active titles.
- Structured publisher affiliation via linked publisher entities is rare for university journals.
- Consistent and complete publisher metadata are critical for making university publishing analytically visible in open infrastructures.

analysis. Céspedes et al. (2025) noted that OpenAlex achieves balanced linguistic coverage compared to WoS but faces challenges with language metadata quality. Zhang et al. (2024) identified that over 60% of journal articles in OpenAlex lack full institutional metadata, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, highlighting systemic gaps in metadata completeness. Haupka (2026) shows that OpenAlex tends to overestimate research output by misclassifying non-research journal items (such as editorials or paratext) as research articles. Additional evidence of metadata quality challenges in OpenAlex is provided by Hauschke and Nazarovets (2025), who demonstrate that retraction information was misrepresented due to an oversimplified Boolean implementation, despite correct source data being available. Consequently, OpenAlex's most recent research not only documents issues concerning the quality of metadata but also clearly focuses on identifying specific ways to improve the accuracy and reliability of the platform.

However, most of these studies have predominantly focused on the completeness and quality of OpenAlex metadata at the levels of publications, their authors, and the institutions to which these authors are affiliated. There is a notable lack of research examining metadata completeness at the journal and publisher levels. Pollock and Staines (2022) analysed market consolidation in scholarly publishing using OpenAlex, revealing the dominance of a few major publishers. Notably, their analysis excluded records without a stated publisher or year. This gap highlights the importance of understanding how journals are represented in OpenAlex, particularly in terms of their affiliations with publishers. Evaluating metadata at the publisher level can reveal systematic patterns and limitations, especially for university-published journals, which are often overlooked in large commercial databases despite their critical role in regional and disciplinary research dissemination (Mills and Branford 2022; Tutuncu 2023).

University journals (UJs) constitute a distinct type of academic publisher, alongside learned societies and commercial companies, as recognised in the publishing literature (Jamali et al. 2022; Late et al. 2020; Nazarovets 2025; Taşkın et al. 2025). A growing body of research shows that these journals play a central role in regional scholarly communication but face persistent challenges in visibility, indexing, and metadata standardisation, which directly affect their discoverability in global databases (Nazarovets 2025). This study aspires to explore the transformative potential of OpenAlex as a comprehensive platform for representing university-affiliated journals in the global scholarly communication landscape. By critically analysing the accuracy, completeness, and consistency of its metadata, this research seeks to illuminate systemic gaps affecting the representation of institutional academic publishing, particularly the relationship between journal-level visibility and publisher-level representation.

2 | Methodology

OpenAlex aggregates structured metadata primarily from open scholarly infrastructures such as Crossref, ORCID, ROR, and others (OpenAlex Support, n.d.-a). In OpenAlex, universities may appear in journal and publication metadata in two analytically distinct roles that should not be conflated: as *author affiliations* and as *journal publishers*. Author-university affiliations are derived at the level of individual publications and are inferred from affiliation strings provided in article-level metadata supplied by sources such as Crossref and publisher platforms, which OpenAlex parses and links to institutional entities. By contrast, a university's role as a journal publisher is represented at the source (journal) level. According to the OpenAlex Technical Documentation (n.d.), the catalogue indexes approximately 10,000 publishers, with data closely tied to the publisher information in Wikidata, which provides a Canonical External ID (used to reconcile publisher entities) for almost every publisher in OpenAlex. In the OpenAlex API, the *'host_organisation'* field in a journal record links to the corresponding OpenAlex publisher ID. The *'host_organisation_name'* field indicates the name of the publisher, and the *'host_organisation_lineage'* field allows displaying all of the OpenAlex IDs for the parent publisher and all of its children. These fields constitute the basis for assessing the presence, completeness, and correspondence of publisher-affiliation metadata for UJs in OpenAlex in this study.

2.1 | Sampling Strategy

This study uses an exploratory sampling design to evaluate the completeness and accuracy of publisher-level metadata in OpenAlex. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the sample is constructed as an international audit of UJs, the publisher affiliation of which can be manually verified through the ISSN portal, the official website of the journal, and other sources as needed. To avoid bias towards regions with mature commercial publishing infrastructures and well-curated metadata ecosystems, a random set of ***10 countries*** was selected (Afghanistan (4 UJs), Albania (6), Bahamas (2), Barbados (5), Cambodia (2), Cyprus (4), Dominican Republic (6), El Salvador (16), Tajikistan (3), and Yemen (12)). The purpose of random country selection in this context is not to claim global representativeness, but to reduce systematic selection bias and to test OpenAlex performance across heterogeneous and comparatively low-visibility publishing environments.

With the exception of two titles from Cyprus and El Salvador, journals from these countries are not represented in major commercial indexing systems such as Web of Science and Scopus.

Within each selected country, journals that are clearly published by universities were selected by searching among Academic/Scholarly periodicals in Ulrichsweb (http://ulrichsweb.serialssolutions.com) a commercial serials directory maintained by ProQuest. Among other things, this directory allows searching for journals by country and publisher's name, ISSN (a unique eight-digit identifier used internationally for serial publications), and enables the replication of the search process that was used in this study. It is widely used by libraries and information professionals as a reference source for identifying and describing serial publications and coverage analyses of bibliographic databases (e.g., Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016; Laakso et al. 2021; Oermann et al. 2021). Ulrichsweb is curated by editors and relies on information supplied by publishers and other sources. Although it aims to be comprehensive and up to date, the "last updated" timestamp for journal records is not uniform, and the records may lag behind current journal practices or contain inconsistencies. For this reason, Ulrichsweb was used in this study as an initial discovery and reference source rather than as a definitive authority on publisher identity. All publisher and status information were independently verified against official journal websites and the ISSN Portal (https://portal.issn.org/) – the public database of the international ISSN Network that provides authoritative ISSN records, official titles and publisher information for serials. As the ISSN Portal is structured around individual serial identifiers and format-specific records rather than around publisher entities, which makes it suitable for validation and disambiguation but not for constructing a list of UJs.

This procedure resulted in a corpus of ***60 UJs***. The sample size was chosen to remain analytically tractable for manual verification while being sufficiently large and diverse to reveal systematic patterns in publisher-level metadata.

2.2 | Data Sources and Verification

For each of the 60 journals, data were recorded in a structured table with the following columns: title in Ulrichsweb; ISSNs print and online; status in Ulrichsweb (*'Active'* or *'Ceased'*); name and country of publisher in Ulrichsweb; OpenAlex API URL; OpenAlex ID, *'host_organisation'*, *'host_organisation_name'* and *'host_organisation_lineage'* fields in OpenAlex; journal homepage URL; year of latest issue (from the journal's official website or other sources as necessary); and comments documenting ambiguities (e.g., alternative title or publisher). Data collection was conducted twice: on 22–23 January 2025 and on 19–20 January 2026. This made it possible to capture both metadata coverage and changes in OpenAlex, particularly those related to the transition to a newly rebuilt infrastructure, Walden.

2.3 | Operationalization

The assessment proceeded in two sequential steps:

1. *OpenAlex coverage*. Searches in OpenAlex sources were conducted by ISSNs and/or journal titles, a list of which was previously obtained using Ulrichsweb. Each journal was classified as indexed in OpenAlex if a corresponding OpenAlex source record was identified and recorded as a valid OpenAlex API URL and OpenAlex ID in the table. If no source record could be identified, the OpenAlex API column was recorded as 'Not *available*', and the journal was classified as 'Not indexed in OpenAlex'.
2. *Publisher-affiliation metadata for indexed in OpenAlex journals*. If 'host_organisation', 'host_organisation_name' and 'host_organisation_lineage' were null or empty, the journal was coded as 'No publisher metadata'. For journals with non-null publisher information in OpenAlex, the indicated publisher was compared with the validated publisher identity established from the journal website and/or the ISSN Portal. Based on this comparison, journals were classified into three categories: (1) *'Publisher metadata present (university)'*; (2) 'Publisher metadata present (not corresponding to validated university publisher)', where OpenAlex indicated a non-university organisation, although the journal is in fact published by a university; and (3) 'Publisher metadata present (non-university)', where both OpenAlex and external validation sources indicated a non-university publisher. For all journals, the year of the latest issue was primarily derived from the journal website (or another source), to distinguish inactive titles from currently active journals that are missing from OpenAlex coverage.

3 | Results

This subsection examines how a fixed corpus of 60 UJs is represented in OpenAlex at two points in time, based on data collected in January 2025 and January 2026. One additional active journal from the corpus was identified in OpenAlex in 2026 that had not been retrieved in 2025. In addition, for four journals in the corpus, a second OpenAlex ID was identified in 2026, reflecting the ingestion of metadata for the same journal from different sources.

The analysis revealed the following key findings:

- *Publication Status*: Of the 60 journals analysed, 55 (91.7%) were listed as active in Ulrichsweb. Five journals (8.3%) were explicitly marked as ceased. However, two of these five journals, whose print and online versions are listed by Ulrichsweb as ceased (print in 2018 and 2022, online without year), have the latest issues dated 2025 on their websites. Based on journal websites, 45 journals were active at the time of this study (41 journals published their latest issue in 2025, 4 in 2026).
- *Coverage in OpenAlex*: In January 2025, 43 of the 60 UJs (71.7%) were indexed in OpenAlex (Figure 1a). The indexed set was dominated by currently publishing titles: 37 journals had their latest issues in 2024/2025, while six indexed journals had not published since 2019–2023. The remaining 17 journals were not indexed: three of them were nevertheless active (latest issue in 2024), six had last published

between 1973 and 2023, and for eight UJs the year of the latest issue could not be identified.

In the data collection conducted in January 2026, 44 (73.3%) UJs from the same fixed corpus were identified as indexed (Figure 1b). Of these, 41 journals had their latest issues published in 2025 or 2026, while three indexed journals had most recently published between 2022 and 2024. A total of 16 UJs were not indexed, including four active journals (latest issue in 2025), five journals with older latest issues (1973–2012), and seven journals for which the year of the latest issue could not be identified.

Small differences were observed between the two data collection rounds in how journals from the fixed corpus were identified as indexed in OpenAlex.

- *Publisher data in OpenAlex*: In the January 2025 data collection only five of the 43 indexed journals (11.6%) contain complete and accurate metadata in all three *host_organisation* fields. Among them, four clearly identify their university affiliation, while one entry refers to a journal that is affiliated with a university in Ulrichsweb, but is linked to a non-university organisation in OpenAlex and on the journal's website. The remaining 38 journals had null in the *host_organisation* (and the *host_organisation_lineage*) and the *host_organisation_name* fields, indicating a lack of metadata specifying their affiliations (Figure 2a).

  In contrast, the January 2026 data collection revealed a substantially different distribution of publisher-affiliation metadata. While the number of UJs linked to a publisher entity remained unchanged (five journals with non-null values in the *host_organisation* and *host_organisation_lineage* fields), publisher names were present much more frequently. Specifically, 34 of the 60 journals had a non-null value in the *host_organisation_name* field.

  Among the 44 indexed journals, publisher-affiliation metadata were distributed as follows: four UJs were classified as *Publisher metadata present (university)* (Figure 2b); 19 UJs as *Publisher metadata present (university; only host_organisation_name)*; eight journals as *Publisher metadata present (not corresponding to validated university publisher)*; three journals as *Publisher metadata present (non-university)*. The remaining 10 journals had no publisher-affiliation metadata in OpenAlex (Figure 2b).

  Thus, between 2025 and 2026, OpenAlex observes a shift from a lack of publisher metadata to the mass appearance of unstructured publisher names, without a corresponding development in the level of related publishing entity data.

Figure 3 presents selected excerpts from OpenAlex API source records in JSON format (captured on 20 January 2026) to illustrate how publisher-affiliation metadata are represented at the journal level. The examples show only a subset of fields relevant to this study and do not constitute the complete OpenAlex source record. Fields not directly related to publisher affiliation (including update timestamps indicating when a record was last modified) were omitted for clarity. Panel (a) illustrates a UJ for

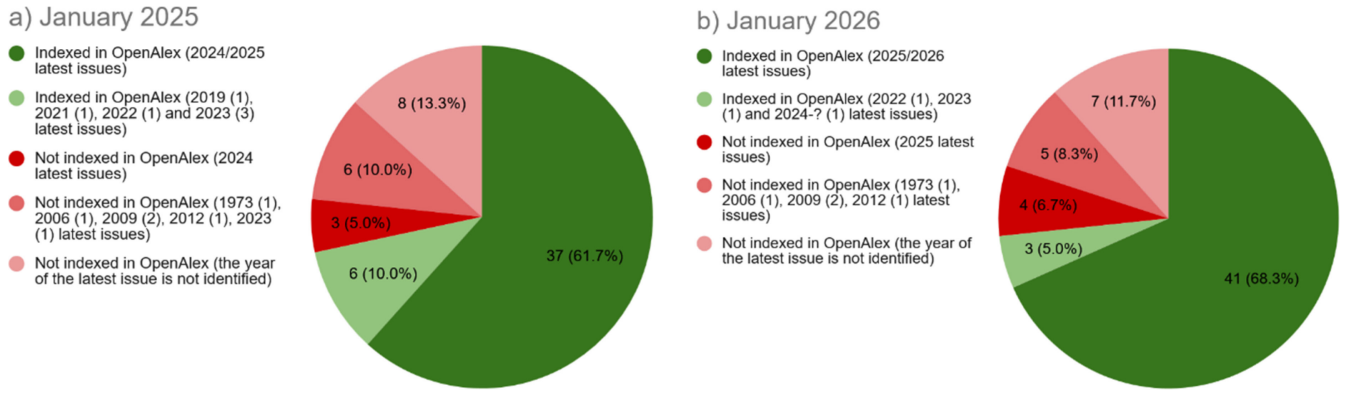

FIGURE 1 | Coverage of the selected UJs in OpenAlex: (a) January 2025; (b) January 2026.

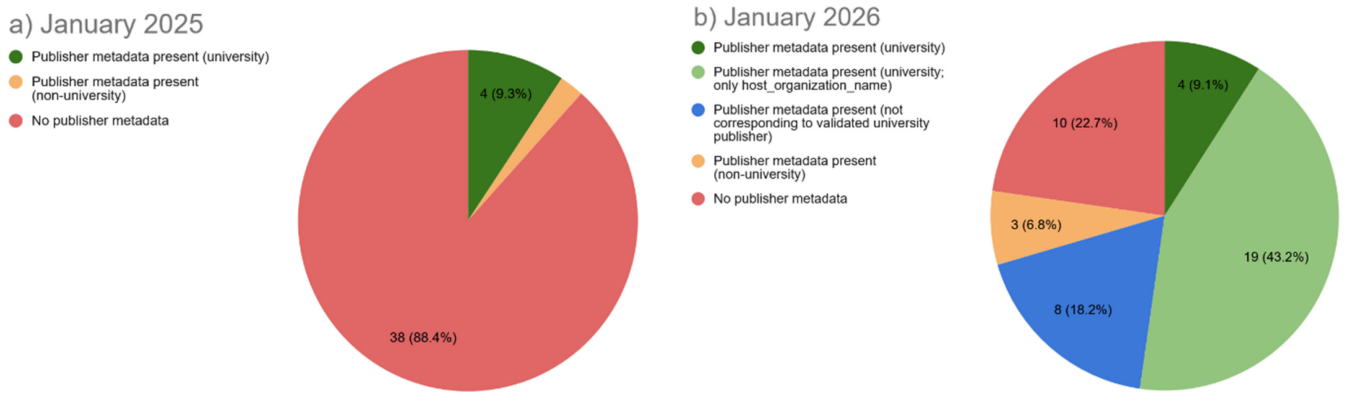

FIGURE 2 | Publisher-affiliation metadata for the selected UJs in OpenAlex: (a) January 2025; (b) January 2026.

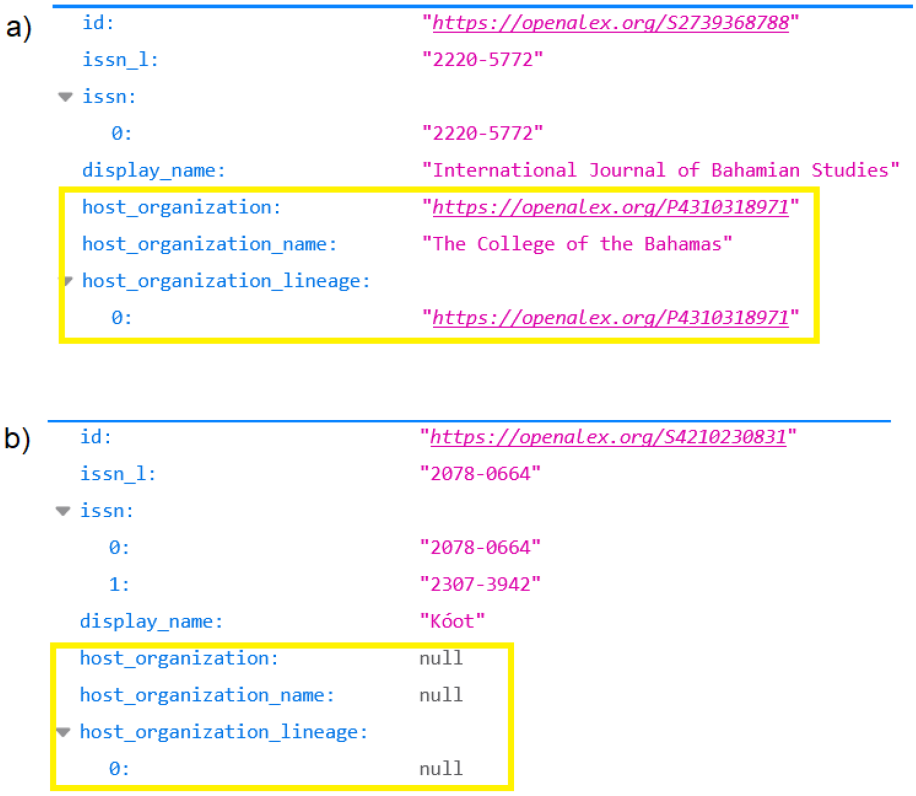

FIGURE 3 | Examples of OpenAlex API source records illustrating the presence and absence of publisher-affiliation metadata for journals from the study corpus: (a) journal record with publisher-affiliation metadata; (b) journal record with null values in publisher-affiliation fields.

which publisher-affiliation metadata are fully populated, including a filled *host_organisation_name* field and a linked publisher entity via the *host_organisation* and *host_organisation_lineage* fields. Panel (b) shows a UJ record without such a link, illustrating the more common cases observed in the dataset, where publisher information is entirely absent. These examples visually demonstrate the structural difference between complete and incomplete publisher-affiliation metadata discussed above, which in turn affects whether journals can be identified and aggregated at the publisher level in OpenAlex.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to assess whether OpenAlex can support publisher- and journal-level analyses of university journals (UJs) by examining (i) whether these journals are indexed at all and (ii) whether they are linked to a publisher entity through OpenAlex's publisher-affiliation fields. Two findings stand out.

First, OpenAlex provides substantial, but incomplete coverage of the study corpus: across the two collection points, a considerable number of UJs, including currently active titles, could not be identified in OpenAlex. At the same time, it is important to note that the journals examined here originate from countries that are largely absent from commercial indexing systems such as Web of Science and Scopus, and many of these titles are visible in OpenAlex precisely because of its broader and less selective indexing approach. The observed coverage gaps are therefore analytically significant not as a simple failure of inclusion, but because they delimit which journals from already low-visibility publishing environments can be examined at all using OpenAlex.

Second, OpenAlex's structured publisher affiliation for UJs remains sparse. In January 2025, only 6% of indexed UJs from the dataset (or 9% of indexed) were linked to a publisher entity via *host_organisation* and *host_organisation_lineage*. By January 2026, the dataset shows a marked shift: publisher names appear in half of the found records as unstructured text (*host_organisation_name*), while the number of journals linked to a publisher entity remains essentially unchanged. This divergence matters because it reflects two distinct modes of representation. While unstructured publisher names can support basic identification and name-based grouping, they do not enable reliable aggregation, disambiguation, or hierarchical mapping of publisher entities at scale.

This has direct consequences for how university publishing can be interpreted using OpenAlex, which is presented as an open and inclusive alternative to commercial bibliographic databases, offering the potential to enhance the visibility of underrepresented areas of scholarly output (OpenAlex Support, n.d.-b). In practice, however, the availability of structured, linkable metadata still gives major commercial publishers an advantage, while a substantial share of university publishing remains analytically invisible and undiscoverable.

Importantly, the observed gaps should not be attributed solely to OpenAlex as an indexing platform. They arise from a broader metadata pipeline in which journal- and publisher-level information enter OpenAlex through different routes. OpenAlex

builds its knowledge graph from records supplied by multiple upstream sources, including Crossref, DataCite, PubMed, the ISSN system, institutional repositories, and other public web sources (OpenAlex Support, n.d.-c). At the journal level, a source can become visible through identifiers such as ISSN and through linked works that allow OpenAlex to recognise it as a coherent source record. At the publisher level, however, visibility requires an additional step: the host organisation must be represented in the incoming metadata and successfully reconciled to a publisher entity in the OpenAlex data model. Accordingly, metadata from repositories and similar article-level sources can strengthen the visibility of UJs, yet such sources often do not supply standardised publisher information. As a result, a journal may be present and retrievable in OpenAlex while still lacking a structured publisher link.

When the lack of metadata prevents journals from connecting with identified publishers, it becomes impossible to systematically aggregate, compare or present them within the broader publishing landscape. This affects not only bibliometric research, but also the evidence base used in research policy, open access monitoring, and institutional reporting: university publishing becomes harder to detect as a coherent sector, while large commercial publishers remain fully visible. In practice, this can distort assessments of market concentration, underestimate the scale of institutional publishing, and weaken the basis for decisions about funding and support for smaller journals. As scholarly infrastructure becomes increasingly API-based and machine-readable, the consequences of such metadata gaps are likely to become even more pronounced.

In this context, the findings point to a broader infrastructural need: more consistent and standardised representation of publishers across metadata systems. While OpenAlex already performs entity reconciliation and metadata enrichment, the observed gaps suggest that the absence of stable and interoperable publisher identifiers limits the analytical visibility of many journals. Strengthening the standardisation of publisher information across upstream sources would therefore be essential for improving the representation of institutional publishing in open scholarly infrastructures.

Thus, universities are key actors in shaping whether and how their journals become analytically legible as part of institutional publishing infrastructures.

5 | Limitations

This study uses an exploratory audit design and is not intended for statistical extrapolation to the full population of OpenAlex publishers or sources. The random cross-national sampling strategy was chosen to reduce selection bias towards well-curated publishing ecosystems and to test OpenAlex under heterogeneous, comparatively low-visibility conditions. The sample size was deliberately set to enable manual verification against journal websites and the ISSN Portal, but this design necessarily prioritises diagnostic insight over representativeness. Finally, because OpenAlex is an evolving infrastructure, the results should be interpreted as time-specific snapshots corresponding to the two collection windows.

Author Contributions

The sole author contributed to all aspects of this manuscript.

Acknowledgements

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Funding

This work was supported by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – project number 541976107.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

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