

Academic Integrity: Policy and Regulations

The draft regulations issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) on September 1, to curb plagiarism in the country are most welcome and a timely step, in view of the rising plagiarism and ubiquity of other kinds of unethical academic practices. An elaborate academic integrity policy at university level, coupled with the aforesaid stern regulations at the national level, as issued recently by the UGC, can well curb the menace of all kinds of ongoing academic dishonesty, including plagiarism. The aim of these regulations is also to create requisite academic awareness among the scholars and faculty members. The UGC has revealed its concern towards plagiarism and is also endeavouring to invoke responsible conduct in all researches, and prevent misconduct, including plagiarism, in the academic writings. Penal provisions have also been proposed in these proposed regulations. The draft, indeed also seeks to establish institutional mechanism for the promotion of academic integrity and develop systems to detect and prevent plagiarism. The draft proposes to direct every Higher Education Institute (HEI) to instruct students, faculty, and staff about proper attribution, seeking permission of the author wherever necessary, acknowledgement of source, compatible with the needs and specificities of disciplines and in accordance with rules and regulations governing the source.” Stern punishments are proposed in the regulations for the candidates as well as for their supervisors for acts of plagiarism. However, certain other forms of academic dishonesty also need to be covered in the regulations and be curbed sternly. Some such dishonest policies are-data fabrication, contract cheating, availing of paid services, professional misconduct, false and non-confirmable experimental or trial results, frivolous or fraudulent reports, sabotage, dry-labbing and bribed reports.

The quality deficit syndrome, infesting dimensions of academic performance in the country, including the teaching, examinations, research, publications, faculty recruitment & development, poor employability of passouts, poor intellectual property creation, mediocrity and poor world ranking of Indian universities as well as of the elite institutes, can largely be remedied by combating the academic dishonesty, prevalent in various forms in certain quarters. Recently, some persons, holding high positions in some of the Indian Universities, including the Central Universities, too have faced charges of plagiarism, and have invited stern action for plagiarism, even including dismissals from job. Still, the growing incidents of plagiarism are very unfortunate and disappointing for the current educational scenario and the standards in the country. Plagiarism is considered as an academic sin by the universities all over the world. So, stern law and regulations are needed in India as well in this regard. A large majority of Euro-American and Australian universities already have elaborate Academic Integrity Policies and Copyrights Policies for the purpose.

Growing Menace:

Plagiarism, whether wittingly or unwittingly, is spreading across all academic pursuits, viz, course work assignments, summer internship reports, project dissertation for PG or Ph. D programmes, articles, research papers, books being authored and so on. Complaints against plagiarism are on the rise. But, due to lack of formal norms and provisions of penalty or punishment against plagiarism being proven beyond doubt also used to go unpenalised, leading to decline in the quality of research and publications in the country. Therefore, “The institutes have also been instructed through these new and proposed regulations to implement adequate software and other mechanisms which would ensure that thesis, dissertation or any other such documents submitted are free of plagiarism.”

Reflection on Quality

Rapid spread of this sinister termite of plagiarism has been eating the quality of our academics and has been perpetuating unabated for want of any formal norms, penalties or punishments for incidents of such rising academic dishonesty. For stealing a petty sum or any material property or on kidnapping, the culprit is liable to be penalized and imprisoned. But, on stealing or kidnapping another person’s intellectual property, comprising ideas, inventions, original work, authorships or findings etc largely the culprit goes unscathed and unpenalised, for want of any relevant law. Further, the students, scholars and even faculty members using other person’s work as their own work for self enhancement, extinguish real work and scuttle quality. Plagiarism has not been confined to students and fresh scholars alone but, many high profile academic luminaries, have also attracted prosecutions. Today, the quality deficit in academics is so severe, that India ranks at 60th rank in the Global Innovations Index (GII) and has hardly 20 universities in the top 959 QS World University Rankings, and only towards the tail end. In the Global Research citations frequency India has 3.1% share, inspite of being home to 17.8% of world population and 20% of global youth, wherein 3.5 crore students pursuing higher education in India, are almost equal to the entire population of Canada. To the contrary, UK has only 1% of the world population. Yet, it has 15.8% share of the world’s most highly-cited articles⁹. International research citations.

Need to Broaden the Scope

The scope of the regulations on promotion of academic integrity need to be further broad based to cover other forms of academic dishonesty. The regulations must take care of certain other acts of commission, stated henceforth:

- (i) **Fabrication:** Another major act of academic dishonesty, quite prevalent in the country is fabrication which means concoction or falsification of data, information and citations. It is nonetheless then a grave fraud to give false empirical data in support of unsustainable and false claims responsible for misleading conclusions, away from any reality. All such claims of so called fake researches can play havoc, if used in reality in the area of healthcare, agrochemicals etc. as they would be totally misleading. Fabrication predominates in the natural sciences, but not alien to social sciences as well, where students sometimes falsify data to make experiments work.

Bibliographical references are often fabricated or copied or imported from other works, especially when a certain minimum number of references is required or considered sufficient for the particular kind of paper. This type of fabrication can range from referring to works whose titles look relevant or whose titles are quoted by other researchers, but which the student concerned did not read.

The most sinister category of fabrication is signing of reports, provided by the companies sponsoring trials of their pharma or agrochemical molecule(s) by the academic fraternity, without actual trail or without regard to their own real trail results.

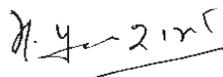
- (ii) **Dry Labbing:** There is also a growing tendency of dry-labbing in physical sciences and other lab related technical courses or experiments, in which the teacher expects that the student's experiments, should yield results, which confirm the established law or principle. 'In the most benign sense, a "dry lab" refers to a facility in which computer simulations of scientific hypotheses are performed. This term is in contrast to a "wet lab," a facility in which equipment and personnel exist to perform hands-on scientific research and experimentation. However, most of the time, "dry lab" is used as a verb, and means that supposed lab data was actually created on paper only, usually to conform to some desired result. In other words, to dry lab is to cheat, plain and simple.

- (iii) **Other Kinds of Dishonesty:** There are several other dishonest copycat project reports by replacing the academic practices like contract cheating and engaging or hiring third party commercial agencies to complete a project or write a dissertation. Deception, bribery, impersonation, sabotage of others work are also quite frequent these days. Professional misconduct, including harassment of feminine scholars all need to be curbed.

Legal Position and Action Required

There has been no law, regulations or policy to curb academic dishonesty in the country hitherto. Whereas, in several countries majority of the universities have their own elaborate Academic Integrity Policies. In view of the rising incidents of all kinds of dishonest practices, need was being felt for a national law or regulations to be invoked. So, the draft regulations of the UGC would go in a being way to deal with the situation. As on date, there is no such defined right for the creator of any intellectual property to be protected against plagiarisation, as it is not recognised by any law in India. Though, the section 57 of the Indian Copyright Act, 1957 gives authors inter alia, the right to claim authorship. Section 63 of the same Act considers infringement of copyright as a criminal offence and awards punishment. On conviction, the infringers may be awarded imprisonment. They have also to compensate the aggrieved party in monetary terms for the act of infringing. But, ordinarily, Plagiarism is not dealt under copyright laws. So, culprits go unscathed.

So, it is most appropriate, when the UGC has already took the initiative to come up with a comprehensive Draft Academic Integrity Policy and Regulations, with suitable preventive, remedial and penal measures. At a time when, plagiarism and other dishonest practices are acquiring alarming proportions, a national law to amend the existing copyright law, to curb such practices, with elaborate rules would also be a most welcome step. To remedy the present quality deficit syndrome from higher education, including research, publications and innovations, vis a vis global standards, the scope of regulations may be broad based to cover data fabrication, contract cheating, availing of paid services, professional misconduct, false and non-confirmable experimental or trial results, frivolous or fraudulent reports, sabotage dry-labbing and bribed reports.



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