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Academic Integrity Practice: The View from India

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Abstract

Academic integrity practice in India, unlike in the west and parts of the Asia Pacific region, is still in its infancy. A ready-to-handle countrywide database of academic integrity in terms of policy, planning, and implementation remains elusive. While the issue is of concern to sections of teachers, parents, policy makers, and academic administrators, organized efforts at the institutional level are yet to make an impact on the Indian educational scene. It must be admitted that though belated, the drive toward academic integrity in India, largely equated with anti-plagiarism practices, is a welcome development receiving increasing support among the different stakeholders. There is a realization that there is a need to move quickly on this front if Indian higher education is to play its rightful role at the global level.

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Introduction

The need to develop a system of academic integrity is both compelling and immediate in the context of globalized education. Perspectives from the developing nations would be an essential requisite if Indian higher education was not to have a top-down approach to policy framing and implementation in all areas, including academic integrity practices. While such approaches need to be country and culture specific, they must develop a set of criteria that are in accordance with the larger practices prevalent at the global level: movement of teachers, students, researchers, and pedagogic resources across national frontiers is a sine qua non for international education. Such goals are ill served by a higher education system that is not open to public scrutiny in terms of academic standards. Education in India, including the university system, happens to be in the “concurrent list” and is “owned” by both the governments of the state and that of the federal/central government. That is to say, most of the education in the country is public in character. At the same time, a good number of colleges and universities in India have recently emerged in the private sector and are serving the country’s needs. Given this fact, increasing instances of academic dishonesty, in recent years, have been a major source of concern for the policy makers.

Cases of Academic Dishonesty

On 11 October 2002, in an unprecedented move, a seven-member group of physicists from Stanford University’s Physics Department, three of whom were Nobel Laureates, wrote to the then president of India, regarding a plagiarism case in theoretical physics by an Indian scientist who was then the Vice-Chancellor of Kumaun University. The case involved several of his associates as well (Geocities n.d.).

Regretting the silence maintained by authorities in India, despite the presentation of incriminating evidence, the complainants asked for a thorough investigation to the charges leveled by them. They wrote:

During the last two decades, a new generation of extremely talented Indian Physicists has won a broad international respect and brought great recognition to Indian Physics. It would be a pity if the actions of a few plagiarists should damage the high international reputation of Indian Science. (Stanford n.d.)

While Kumaun Vice-Chancellor’s case was the most celebrated one that was taken to its logical end (the vice-chancellor resigned), there were other instances that received media coverage as well. For instance, on three occasions teachers of Rajasthan University were accused of plagiarizing the work of a former director of the Geological Survey of India (Mishra 2013).

Another case of alleged plagiarism involved a paper by two top Indian scientists

Letters on April 2010. Parts of this paper copied material allegedly verbatim from a paper published in *Applied Physics Letters* on April 2010. After the controversy, the paper was published with an apology (Jayaraman 2012). Similarly, *Times of India* reported that a “research paper by dental researchers from India” was “retracted for plagiarism” (Nagarajan 2014).

Academic Dishonesty in Medical Education

Realizing the widespread menace of plagiarism especially among students, some teachers have expressed grave concern. In an article “Academic dishonesty in Indian Medical Colleges,” a medical professor Gitanjali B raised questions which are at the heart of medical education. Unless resolved quickly, this problem, she argued, would gravely undermine the spirit of the health-care system, if not cripple it fatally in the long run. She wrote with a sense of indignation:

I recently found that some of my students had copied from each other during one of their assessment tests. It made me angry and I was left with a feeling of bad taste for several days. Why should medical students who are considered the *crème de la crème* of this country resort to systematic medical cheating? When I interviewed them the next day, they told me that this is routine and it happens in most tests. What is more distressing is that they said the practice started in school where they had the blessings of the Principal to copy during board examinations and it is done with the connivance of the teachers! . . .we are perhaps naïve to think that examinations provide a platform for students to pit their knowledge and skills against each other in an atmosphere of fairness. (Gitanjali 2004)

Gitanjali listed the “common acts of dishonesty” based on her observations. These, she claimed, are all encompassing and include all sections such as undergraduate and postgraduate students/residents and faculty and administrators. She argued that there are deep-seated “peer and parental” pressures to perform (Sheriff et al. 2000) and that “even exemplary students” cheat (Sheriff et al. 2000). Shockingly, while 88 % of “students of medical and para-medical branches revealed that cheating occurred at examinations, only 1–5 % accepted having indulged in it” (Sheriff et al. 2000).

Sheriff et al. (2000) concluded that dishonest methods in early life and in the medical school are bound to continue into patient care in later life and seriously affect a profession based on “trust and integrity.” In the face of the “institutionalized corruption,” it is up to “a handful of individuals” to “curtain the current rot that pervades the medical establishment in India” (Sheriff et al. 2000). While Gitanjali B considers the malaise of a lack of professional ethics in medical education endemic and calls for crusading efforts by conscientious teachers and administrators, others demand stricter action based on a set of institutional guidelines. For instance, in a paper entitled “Encouraging Academic Honesty, through Anti-Plagiarism Software” the authors outline a set of do’s and don’ts of plagiarism

Similarly, Richa Tripathy and S. Kumar, in their paper "Plagiarism: A Plague," record the many instances of academic dishonesty. This is a fairly comprehensive list and would be useful for student mentoring. The authors recommend: (a) "a compulsory submission of electronic copy in a data base of the University Grants Commission which should be open before the award," (b) "preparation of data bases of articles published in Conferences and Journals in India which are not covered in international data bases, and (c) taking an affidavit from the candidates regarding plagiarized material" (Tripathy and Kumar 2009).

Remedial Measures: Action Plan

Several leading universities and institutions in India have undertaken measures to devise anti-plagiarism statutes and build them into codes of professional ethics. These are prominently displayed on the university's web portals. For instance, *The Telegraph* reports that an expert panel in India's premier Jawaharlal Nehru University finds that "up to 28,000 researchers could be involved in unethical practices." The committee has recommended that all universities have been asked to "run every thesis paper through an anti-plagiarism package and authenticate their authenticity" (Mohanty 2013).

Similarly, *Current Science*, in their editorial dated 10 May 2005, lamented that "copying has become easier, given the power of modern search engines and the volume of digital information readily available on the internet" (Balaram 2005). Regrettably, the Ph.D. program "appears to be a private contract between students and research supervisors" (Balaram 2005). Many scientists are unaware of the distinction between "acceptable enhancements and scientific misconduct" (Balaram 2005).

The various Indian institutes of technologies in India and leading central universities like the University of Hyderabad have today an anti-plagiarism code of conduct in place for their research programs. The Madras University has "rejected a research scholar's thesis on charges of plagiarism and has banned the student from re-registering for the degree at the University" (Ramya 2012). The Indian Institute of Science has done very well by prominently displaying an academic integrity portal in the form of an online "students' corner." It records instances of plagiarism and lays down a set of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, the issue of conflict of interest, and, finally, individual and collective responsibility (Indian Institute of Science n.d.).

The plagiarism policy of the University of Pune, on the other hand, seems to be less stringent. It makes a distinction between "negligent plagiarism" ["innocently or carelessly presenting another person's work as one's own"] and "dishonest plagiarism" ["knowingly and deliberately presenting another person's work as one's own work"]. It lays down the institutional procedures and guidelines for handling alleged plagiarism as well as the need for counseling (University of Pune n.d.).

India's apex regulator of higher education and grants giving authority, the University Grants Commission, proposed on October 2012, "new legislation for

the awarding of M.Phil./Ph.D. degrees in the country." Among the requirements were that all schools must begin "using well-developed software" to detect plagiarism and other forms of "academic theft" and also provide access "to the UGC for inclusion in the organization Information and Library Network Centre (INFLIBNET) which is open to the public" (Bailey 2013).

Contentious Issues

There have been some issues in recent thinking on the notion of "original" vis-a-vis adaptations and reworking in the digital and visual media that have a bearing on anti-plagiarism policies. Writing in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, for instance, Dhanwanti Nayak argues that "contemporary culture is plagiaristic in many ways as culture itself is sustained through copying and imitation" (Nayak 2011). Some of these practices inevitably influence student plagiarism. There is the need to free Indian society from "the discourse of morality" and come up with "simple, pragmatic ways in which these can be overcome in the Indian context" (Nayak 2011). Likewise, P. Chaddah argues that there is a need to take a more nuanced view since "the rules that are being specially framed and implemented are likely to scare our young researchers." He contends that "international journals do attempt to quantify the level of plagiarism and also state...that corrective actions will depend on the level of misconduct" (Chaddah 2014; Thomas and Sassi 2011).

Other academics such as Prashant Iyengar (2011) and Manjari Katju (2011) have contributed to the debate. Iyengar, in particular, argues for "charting an alternative trajectory of plagiarism so that each successive instance does not amplify our sense of embarrassment and crisis in the academy" (Iyengar 2011).

Summary

It would thus be seen that the need for academic integrity practices in higher education in India has been well recognized; the anti-plagiarism drive in academia, in particular, is gathering momentum. There is a predictable resistance in some quarters to a code of conduct that entails a system of accountability for the students, the professoriate, and the administration. A beginning has been made. Much more needs to be done and done quickly if Indian higher education is to play its rightful role at the global level (Satyanarayana 2010).

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