

How Does the System Encourage Academic Dishonesty?

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In an education system which does little by way of developing a research atmosphere and mindset among students, where funds are rarely used to strengthen institutional infrastructure and subversion of procedural lapses are a norm, plagiarism and unethical research practices become a direct outcome of systemic failure. Thus, despite efforts by the University Grants Commission to introduce guidelines and regulations relating to academic performance of teachers in colleges and universities, the non-availability of academic resources and a hierarchical research structure have reduced the standards of research activity and further encouraged academic dishonesty.

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In 2006, a decision by the University Grants Commission (UGC), exempting MPhil and PhD degree holders from the National Eligibility Test (NET) for the appointment as lecturers, spearheaded a riot of researchers in Indian universities (Deshpande 2006). Hundreds of students enrolled themselves for MPhil degrees with a (vacant) hope of being able to bypass the NET and secure a decent teaching job in an easy manner. Five years later, the riot of researchers is anxious to get their PhD degrees. Since the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission to college teachers, the UGC, the government, and the public in general are deeply (and rightly) concerned about the deteriorating quality of higher education in the country. While these are relevant concerns, it is both unfortunate and inappropriate that “everyone getting a PhD” is looked upon as an easy solution to the problem.

PhD: The New Mantra?

In June 2010, the UGC put in place new regulations on the minimum qualifications for the appointment of teachers and other academic staff in colleges and universities, and measures for the maintenance of standards in higher education.¹ As per these regulations, in matters of recruitment, promotion and assessment of academic performance of teachers, a lot of emphasis is given to doctoral degrees and supervision of doctoral research. In some cases the emphasis is completely justified, as in the case of appointment of associate

professors and professors, since research constitutes an important part of their job. But mandating a PhD as an essential qualification even for the post of a principal of a college is a bit too much.² Five advance increments are admissible at the entry level of recruitment for assistant professors with PhD degrees and three increments will be awarded to those who complete their degrees while in service. Clearing the NET/State Level Eligibility Test (SLET) still remains an essential qualification at the entry level. However, candidates with PhD degrees are exempted from the requirement of clearing the NET.

Along with norms for the appointment of teaching staff, the UGC guidelines have put forward norms for performance-based assessment of teachers for their promotion to higher grades and related matters. As per these norms, every successful doctoral candidate supervised by a teacher/researcher will add a lot of useful points to her kitty as far as career advancement is concerned. A clear distinction is made between students who have been awarded degrees and those pursuing research. Recently, during a public lecture in Pune, the UGC chairman also spoke about plans to grant substantial scholarships to MPhil and PhD students in order to encourage quality research. Following the UGC's logic the Maharashtra government has made the doctorate degree mandatory for elections to important academic (and academics-related administrative) bodies in state universities. And to appreciate the concerns of the government, one of the influential political leader-turned-educationists in the state declared on his birthday that he would like to see the day when all the teachers in colleges run by his educational trust acquire doctorates and add to the pool of knowledge! In short, in some serious and not so serious ways, PhD has become a buzzword in our

collective efforts towards maintaining standards in higher education.

A Lacklustre Research Atmosphere

What has this got to do with the issue of plagiarism in Indian academics? In our collective efforts towards improvement of academic standards, we are perhaps imagining a somewhat crude, unsophisticated version of “doing research”, and this version encourages not only plagiarism but also several kinds of unethical practices in Indian academics. The issue of plagiarism thus needs to be contextualised as an aspect of our systemic failure in the field of higher education. There are two levels at which the “PhD centric” understanding of research often encourages academic dishonesty. The first is that PhDs in particular and research activities in general get linked to different kinds of material and symbolic benefits rather than to serious academic pursuit of knowledge. Doing research simply becomes a matter of acquiring a degree and that too because the degree comes handy in getting a job or a few increments, etc. And therefore, naturally, people try and adopt easy, unethical practices in putting together a research piece.

The problem gets even more serious at another level, linking academic dishonesty to overall systemic failures of the educational organisation. The sudden concerns about the quality of our education have forced many people into research. But does the overall design of our education system really encourage good research? Does it provide any congenial atmosphere for the pursuit of academic pleasures? Have we been able to develop adequate infrastructure for developing a research mindset among our students? Perhaps the obvious answer to all these questions is in the negative and unethical practices in research are linked to these systemic inadequacies at various levels. Obviously, these inadequacies cannot be a defence for practices of plagiarism. However, in the presence of these lapses, we also cannot look at the issue of plagiarism in isolation.

One of the basic issues is about availability of infrastructure. While there is no dearth of funds available for research in different fields by both public and private funding agencies, most of these grants go to the metropolitan and state-level research

centres, with regional centres remaining out of the loop. Second, even if grants are available, they are hardly used in strengthening institutional infrastructure and are instead spent callously. Scrutiny on behalf of the funding agencies is mostly limited to the utilisation of money and rarely about the academic quality of the output. With a few notable exceptions, most of the state-level universities and colleges do not have good libraries/laboratories – both in terms of collections of books/state of the art equipment and also in terms of encouraging research atmosphere. With the arrival of so many private and deemed universities the situation has worsened even further.

Who Is to Blame?

The new regulations of the UGC encourage college teachers to undertake doctoral and postdoctoral research in order to improve the quality of education. Therefore their career advancement is linked to their research output in a major way. However in most cases, college teachers do not have access to basic library and laboratory resources to undertake quality research. Moreover, since the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission, teachers in particular, and the teaching profession in general, have attracted a lot of criticism regarding being slack, unprofessional and

non-accountable. There is hardly a need to put up a case against these criticisms. And yet, the fact remains that non-performance of teachers needs to be viewed against the backdrop of a larger systemic failure. Besides, in spite of much heartburn about the revised fat pay packets of teachers, it remains a matter of serious investigation whether and what percentage of teachers in the country actually gets government recommended salaries. Many of the private colleges in Maharashtra, for example, try and avoid appointing qualified teachers on a regular basis. Instead, several kinds of patronage networks are put to use to recruit unqualified candidates who are willing to work on meagre salaries that the college management offers. Under these circumstances it becomes a difficult proposition to expect teachers to undertake quality research even for the sake of their own career advancement.

Non-availability of academic resources is perhaps a more serious and complicated issue in the process of doing research. If one goes by our experience in the social science departments at the University of Pune, most of the PhD dissertations are written in Marathi. The research takes place with near-complete absence of Marathi source material, of proper Marathi terminology for social sciences and of lack of skills to read

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references in English. It is definitely not a case confined to Marathi and Maharashtra and it is certainly not an inadequacy only on the part of the research students. It represents an overall failure of the academic community in generating resources in Indian languages, in encouraging translations and also in keeping alive bilingualism in academic activities. According to its new regulations for obtaining a PhD, the UGC expects research students to publish their research output in serious academic journals even before the submission of their dissertation. Unfortunately, for many social science disciplines there are hardly any academic/semi-academic journals available where research students and teacher-researchers can contribute. As for publications in Indian languages, the situation is even worse.

In the absence of these mechanisms the research map in Indian academics becomes very uneven and hierarchical. Select metropolitan centres emerge as privileged sites of research where a “bit too much of theory” is done. On the other hand the regional, “vernacular” centres of research remain too engaged in empirical investigations without proper access to the emerging theoretical insights. Research students and teacher-researchers in regional universities are always at the bottom of this hierarchy. Their location makes it difficult for them to access the necessary academic resources for research purposes. Besides, even at the so-called privileged sites of research we have not been able to develop a robust, contextual understanding of Indian realities or theorisations on the basis of such a comprehension. It becomes another crucial aspect of our collective failures as an academic community and adds to the overall slack nature of research.

Subverting Regulations

Finally, it is the lack of proper procedural norms that seriously affects the standard of research activities in academics. The UGC has attempted to put in place some such procedures through its new regulations for the conduct of PhD courses in universities. Prior to these regulations, PhD research had mostly become a private affair between the candidate and the research supervisor and lacked any transparency. Even now, in spite of the UGC’s

efforts to introduce some procedural discipline, a number of interested agencies have already become active towards subverting these norms. Research methodology courses are formally included in the PhD curriculum of every university; whether and how these courses are run merits investigation. The new regulations of the UGC make course work mandatory for PhD students and there is every kind of effort put in place to make the course work as notional and as minimum as possible. Research committees that scrutinise research proposals of candidates are selected carefully in order to avoid any uncomfortable questions regarding the research question and methods of research. Once the candidate gets through the initial technicalities, even the new regulations do not provide for serious systemic/collective checks on the quality of research, and doctoral research still largely remains a very opaque affair. As a result, we hardly come across cases where a PhD dissertation is rejected or where a candidate is asked to undertake major revisions in her thesis. As the career advancement of research supervisors gets linked to the number of successful doctoral candidates they produce, both the student and the supervisor become interested parties in the exercise of doing research and try to manipulate the procedural lapses as much as possible.

These kinds of systemic inadequacies surrounding research not only encourage

academic dishonesty and plagiarism but also point to severe lapses in our collective imagination in the field of higher education. The easy equation between the improvement of quality of higher education and the number of doctorates has resulted in all kinds of malpractices and arrival of “doctoral shops” (Radhakrishna 2010) in the name of universities where PhDs are openly sold or are carefully managed. While this may not be that widespread in many of the established universities, yet issues related to research ethics often get neglected as acquiring a doctoral degree becomes the main task for both the researcher and the supervisor. The need to maintain a fine balance between the quantity and quality has been a perennial dilemma for higher education in India. Unfortunately, in our bid to add to the quality via quantity we seem to have once again lost the delicate balance between the two.


NOTES

- 1 No F3-1/2009-30 June 2010.
- 2 In fact, this rule resulted in a controversy in Maharashtra, where the government refused to grant affiliations to those colleges which did not have qualified principals.

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