

STATUS OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN PAKISTAN: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: It is believed that due credit should be given to the authors of new ideas, innovations and revolutionary inventions. Still, Plagiarism and cheating have become serious concerns with the exponential growth of ICTs around the globe. It is affecting scholarship in various ways. In Pakistan, at present, the campaign against plagiarism is at its infant stage. The current paper discusses the reasons for plagiarism and cheating explored by Pakistani researchers. Furthermore, it highlights the glimpses of an awareness campaign against academic dishonesty, with an insight into the challenges in this regard. The paper is an effort to suggest the way forward. Indigenous literature has been critically reviewed, and practical implications have been suggested. Some content in this paper draws on unpublished works by the authors.

Key words: Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, Pakistan

1 Introduction

Academic integrity is a commitment which enhances the fidelity of an intellectual output. It rests upon the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility while contributing towards the existing body of knowledge. Academic dishonesty limits critical ability, creativity, and self-contemplation of scholars. The Center for Academic Integrity Duke University, USA (1999) asserts on the need for academic integrity in the universities and higher education institutions as it provides a base for a vibrant and healthy academic culture, promotes the scientific progress and nurtures students by instilling in them the responsible citizenship. University of Illinois (2013) defines academic integrity as

“[H]onesty and responsibility in scholarship. Students and faculty alike must obey rules of honest scholarship, which means that all academic work should result from an individual’s own efforts. Intellectual contributions from others must be consistently and responsibly acknowledged. Academic work completed in any other way is fraudulent (University of Illinois, 2013).”

Plagiarism is a huge impediment in the way to attain academic integrity. Stevenson (2010) describes plagiarism as an unethical practice of unauthorized use of others work or if not then the close imitation of one’s work, idea or the language without due credit, representation or acknowledgment, as one’s own. Pennycook (1996) defines plagiarism as borrowing others’ words; text ownership, memory without due credit Plagiarism erodes trust and fairness in the process of generating an academic output and is akin to intellectual theft. Plagiarism is unethical and is an offense; an author must avoid it. “In most of the studies, the researchers discussed plagiarism and cheating as the main aspects of academic dishonesty. However, plagiarism has been considered an independent research area in most studies (Davis, 1993; Drake, 1941; Hinman, 2002; McCabe & Trevino, 1993)” (Soroya, 2016).

“A wide range of factors, which are causing lapses in academic integrity, has been found. The most generally quoted justifications given by the students for cheating include: time pressure to complete tasks, the apparent assistances of cheating, lack of knowledge of the course material and suitable approaches to quote the source, a whole culture which does not see cheating as a serious problem, the lack of motivation, lack of preparation, pressure of grade and material that is too difficult (Harding, Carpenter, Finelli, & Passow 2004)” (Soroya, 2016).

2 Status of Plagiarism and Cheating in Pakistan

After the transformation of University Grants Commission (UGC) to Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan, the HEC has been more centered on innovative work through “offering impetuses to understudies getting confirmations in graduate and postgraduate projects in Pakistan and abroad. A considerable measure of awards, grants, and rewards are being given to understudies, analysts and staff for doing and distributing research (Higher Education Commission, 2013). The level of concentrate on research and grant, be that as it may, has been changing with the adjustments in needs of the occupant governments.”

Research in any field is dependent on getting access to readily available information, especially scholarly knowledge. As an individual or an organization, prompt access to most recent academic data has turned out to be urgent to keeping pace with the most recent patterns, developments and research in a specific field. “The HEC National Digital Library Program has contributed a considerable measure to the advancement of the exploration culture in Pakistan. This program made it workable for analysts openly and private segment advanced education foundations to get too exorbitant online diaries and databases utilizing a solitary stage. In the meantime, the online get to urged some of them to duplicate other’s work and distribute it as their own. HEC encourages critical thinking and is against any practice of unoriginality/cheating. With keen altering one can without much of a stretch by-pass programming identification. Curiously, Pakistani colleges’ worldwide positioning is not going up, despite the fact that, scholarly community has been encouraged and urged to deliver significant research” (Soroya, 2016).

Studies conducted at a local level clearly reported the conduct of plagiarism and cheating among the majority of the university students (Shirazi, Jafarey & Moazam, 2010; Ramzan, Munir, Siddique, & Asif, 2012; Nazir & Aslam, 2010; Soroya, 2014).

3 Why Authors Plagiarize?

There could be a number of reasons for which students involve in plagiarism and cheating. However, here are the few reasons which were reported at the national level.

First of all, Journals with fake editorial boards in different academic institutions are a big reason of producing plagiarized work. “Such cases were reported to high officials in the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan” (Daudpota, 2011). “People are engaged in the conduct of plagiarism knowingly and unknowingly. In 2010, Shirazi, Jafarey & Moazam conducted a research and found that medical students and faculty were

involved in plagiarism because they were not aware of the subject of plagiarism. The researchers argued that even those who have some knowledge of the subject admit having plagiarized their work at one time or another” (Soroya, Hashmi, & Soroya, 2016).

“Ramzan, Munir, Siddique, & Asif, (2012) highlighted another reason of this misconduct. They reported that ‘in Pakistani universities students were involved in plagiarism due to family and social pressures to get higher grades, as it is considered important for employment and status in Pakistani society. It was also revealed in the study that many students were unaware of the plagiarism policy of the university and that these policies are not visible, disseminated and posted to the extent that they are available to all university students’. The majority of the participants admitted that they intentionally plagiarize and the researchers concluded that in Pakistani institutions plagiarism is rising” (Soroya, Hashmi, & Soroya, 2016).

“Another important reason for doing cheating is explored by Nazir and Aslam (2010). They used a well-structured questionnaire and collected data from 958 students of undergraduate and graduate levels in different universities of Pakistan, and found that more than half of the students studied were involved in dishonest acts such as helping other students, copying homework assignments, exam papers, or graded project reports. These students believed that cheating and copying were not serious offenses and that there was no penalty for such behavior” (Soroya, 2016).

Recently, Soroya (2014) investigated “the level of Academic Integrity among students of Pakistani universities with the help of data gathered through a survey on the basis of statements covered two factors i.e. cheating and plagiarism”. It was a part of researcher’s doctoral dissertation. The researcher distributed 900 questionnaires and received back 818 using multilevel sampling strategy in universities of Pakistan. The findings clearly indicate that respondents reported their involvement in cheating. However, the results clarify that they were not involved in unpermitted cheating, but still, they were habitual of taking help from others even for their individual assignments. “Responding students showed their positive behavior towards cheating in Academic Integrity, however in the aspect of cheating the respondents have exhibited a lesser degree of hesitation as compared to plagiarism”. In an aspect of Plagiarism, it was found that students do plagiarize by not citing the resources properly, as the statements related to citation of information resources received a lesser degree of agreement as compare to other statements.

“It was revealed that the majority of the students have expressed that they have been positive towards Academic Integrity with respect to both cheating and plagiarism factors; however, it should be kept in mind that there is a reasonable percentage of respondents who admitted that they had indulged in plagiarism and cheating one way or the other” (Soroya, 2016).

The questionnaire was self-reporting and in such cases, the percentage clearly indicates that the number of students who are involved in cheating and plagiarism could not be ignored. It was found that in Academic Integrity, the majority of the students take plagiarism as more serious unethical behavior compared to cheating. The reason could be that Higher Education Commission had more focus was on awareness about plagiarism.

Rehman & Waheed (2014) reported that “time limits and relationship preferences lead students to accept an attitude of task completion, even by unfair means, such as academic misconduct. They also found that generally, students in earlier stages of research (age 21–25 years) were more involved in academic misconduct due to lack of knowledge of the research areas; consequently, they resorted to copying the contents of another author without giving the proper references and citations” (Rehman & Waheed as cited in Soroya, Hashmi, & Soroya, 2016).

Another important factor was explored by Soroya (2014) that the act of doing plagiarism and cheating has a significant relationship with the student teacher relationship. The researcher conducted a national-level study of graduate students and came up with the findings that the better relationship among the students and teachers leads to a better level of academic integrity. Thus it can be concluded that teachers can play important role in developing academic integrity among students.

4 Curbing Academic Dishonesty & Cheating

In Pakistan, the institutes and organizations are working to create awareness regarding the act of plagiarism and cheating, and to prevent the same from creating a good academic environment. First of all, the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan (HEC) quality assurance division has taken few steps in this regard (HEC Pakistan, n.d.). They published a “little book of plagiarism” to aware people that what actually is plagiarism and how they can avoid it. HEC devised a clear policy to prevent the plagiarism and even the self-plagiarism. The role of institutes and the nature of penalties for plagiarism has been clearly mentioned in that piece of paper i.e. Plagiarism Policy.

Furthermore, to regularize the procedures and to avoid unnecessary delays HEC has given “Time bound Standard Operating Procedures for Plagiarism Cases”. The HEC has also made it compulsory for all HEC recognized universities to use anti-plagiarism software for dissertations and research papers before publications, and the institute has been organizing workshops to train focal persons of all universities, furthermore, guidelines and training videos are also available on the official website of Higher Education Commission, Pakistan. A list of blacklisted faculty members also updated regularly. Suggestions/Queries/Complaints are received by HEC quality assurance division through an online form, which is another effort to improve the educational system.

The second remarkable effort has been carried out by Information Technology University, Lahore, where the principal researcher established the first National Centre for Academic Integrity (Facebook, n.d.). From this platform a series of awareness lectures/workshops has been organized for the students, researchers, faculty members, and the librarians. Different topics of academic integrity have been addressed in these lectures, and workshops including, how to write an article, avoid plagiarism, how to publish research ethically, use of citation management soft wares to avoid plagiarism and so on.

The third platform for creating awareness regarding academic integrity is Pakistan Librarians Welfare Organization (PLWO). The said organization has been conduction

training and seminars for writing research ethically, and for citing and referencing properly since 2011 (IJIMS, 2013).

5 Challenges

The first challenge which hampers academic integrity is the lack of awareness about plagiarism. Most of the scholars regard plagiarism as a technical problem and use online tools to judge the creativity of their work. They must have taught that plagiarism is not a technical issue; it's a behavioral problem. Online software tools only address the syntactical (text matching and grammatical) issues of the text, they do not account for the semantic dimension (creativity) of a submitted work. This creativity can only be judged by the naked eye by reading between the lines and ascertaining the self-contemplation and synthesis of ideas. The aim to avoid plagiarism is to develop a critical mass of scholars who could integrate their own ideas with the findings of other scholars, giving them due to credit, so to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in a responsible, honest and acceptable way. That's why academia and scholars are needed to be socialized and sensitized to respect the intellectual output of other authors and get respected for their own work.

The second big challenge is a lack of awareness about the use of the online text matching tools. There are a number of tools available online such as Turnitin, iThenticate, Viper etc. which facilitate authors to check the originality of their own work. In Pakistan, 'Turnitin' is officially recommended by Higher Education Commission (HEC) for this purpose. However, there are misconceptions about these online tools both among the students and teachers. It has been observed that many of the authors consider these online software tools suffice to counter plagiarism issues, without further evaluating the submitted work. They put over-reliance on the similarity score generated by these tools. It is the prime responsibility of universities and Degree Awarding Institutions (DAIs) to organize workshops and training sessions on academic integrity to dispel these misconceptions in the understanding of these online 'anti-plagiarism' tools. The authors need to be sensitized about the working and output report of 'Turnitin' and other tools. Making them sensitized about 'taken for granted' use of these online tools could prove helpful in establishing academic integrity.

Third, there is a misconception or sometimes inadvertent attitude towards these software tools. 'Turnitin' and other such software programs are often exaggerated as 'anti-plagiarism' tools; in fact, they do not detect plagiarism: rather they are just text-matching software programs which provide an "originality report" to what proportion of a submitted work matches with other sources. This originality score should not be taken as face value in the interrogation of submitted work. The same score on similarity index generated by two different software programs can have different plagiarism issues. Taking 'originality report' for granted can create serious issues. Often students cheat by employing 'unique' synonyms or grammatical techniques of 'active to passive voice' to show that their work is plagiarism-free. It is the duty of a teacher to interrogate the submitted work thoroughly and decide with the 'naked eye' whether or not, the work is original, claims made or ideas borrowed are cited properly and the write-up really enhances the skills of the student.

Moreover, 'Turnitin' and similar software tools flag subject jargons and common phrases, besides the work of original authors. A careful interrogation of such common-use phrases such as "the finding of the study infers. . .", or, "researchers contend that . . .", is necessary to decide whether and to what extent the work is plagiarized, as these phrases are inevitable and cannot be qualified as plagiarized. A careful post-evaluation of each flagged phrase must be done by the teachers to exclude these kinds of phrases and jargons from plagiarism.

6 Way Forward

To ensure academic integrity, different academic governing institutions, around the globe, have established various standards and issued guidelines for the authors. These guidelines not only protect the scholarly work of authors from unauthorized use but also intend to produce the necessary critical and analytical skills in scholars to help synthesize their own novel argument on the corpus of previous inquiries. Doing this enables them to carry out a rigorous and systematic approach towards problems.

Authors need to make understand that Turnitin and other online tools are not any yardsticks to determine the genuineness of a scholarly output; rather they are mere facilitators in ensuring the academic integrity. In Pakistan, the originality score generated by 'Turnitin' has so widely been taken for granted that in the recent years the quantity of research output has increased, however, their quality has worsened. This implicates that understanding of the tool is not sought properly which is hindering authors in achieving critical skills and creativity. Such a surge in substandard scholarly work can be attributed to a number of reasons, for instance, hastily academic promotion, job requirement or funding but there is no justification, in any case, of violating the academic integrity and ethics in the production of scholarly knowledge. Not having the proper understanding of these online text matching tools results in such kind of academic cheating.

Second 'Turnitin' is a commercially available tool like many others, which facilitates the students and teachers in their work; it's no way a decisive tool to establish the authenticity of a submitted work. Since plagiarism is a behavioral issue, authors need to consult the plagiarism policy of respective academic institutions to bring the creativity into their work. The aim of this is to create a critical mass of scholars who could address the local problems effectively and able to suggest viable solutions.

Adding to this, it is a big challenge for universities to afford the subscription fee of text matching software. Secondly, text matching software is not the solution, as there are numerous ways to bypass the text matching software. Although, gradually with the initiatives taken by different organizations and academic institutions an awareness campaign has been started, still it is required to take it on a serious note and to train the faculty members first as they can play an important role to develop a research culture and to modify the researchers' behavior accordingly. One reason explored by the researchers is family and social pressure, time pressure could be another reason. These could be removed by mutual cooperation and good student-teacher relationship. There is need to clarify the different aspects of academic integrity i.e. plagiarism and cheating.

It is essential that an awareness campaign is initiated for university teachers pertaining to Academic Integrity with special emphasis placed on plagiarism and cheating. Furthermore, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should in addition to its plagiarism policy add a policy with reference to avoiding academic cheating for the guidance of universities. It is recommended that every university should design an Academic Integrity policy in order to clarify the concept of academic ethics to students and faculty members so as to eradicate cheating and plagiarism. It is also recommended that every university should establish a center for Academic Integrity to implement the Academic Integrity policy and to deal with such cases. This center can also be part of the university library. In this regard, the first initiative has been taken at Information Technology University, Lahore where the principal researcher initiated first national center for academic integrity.

Federal Higher Education Commission, as well as universities, should add active programming of lectures, seminars, workshops, for the awareness of Academic Integrity and ensure avoidance of academic dishonesty.

In nutshell, it is more important to understand academic integrity, rather merely focusing upon the text-matching reports of these online tools. Honesty, fairness, and self-contemplation should be the ultimate yardstick for evaluation of the work. "Students and faculty alike must obey rules of honest scholarship, which means that all academic work should result from an individual's own efforts. Intellectual contributions from others must be consistently and responsibly acknowledged. Discrediting other's work in any way is fraudulent" (Soroya, Hashmi, & Soroya, 2016). A text-matching software is just a tool, a facilitator; it must be used carefully and not be taken its results for granted.

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