**Some Reflections on the UGC Regulation on Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism**

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**Introduction**

The UGC regulation titled *Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Education Institutions, Regulations 2018* dated 23rd July 2018 (UGC, 2018) can be considered as a revolutionary step towards ensuring truth and justice in the learning-teaching processes in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country. Though the UGC took a tough stand against plagiarism even before, a comprehensive regulation on the matter is for the first time. Besides, the regulation emphasises the promotion of **Academic Integrity,** a term which is not that familiar to our academic community, but which has an enormous influence on the academic life of faculty and students of HEIs abroad, especially, in developed countries like UK and USA.

**What is Academic Integrity?**

The term **Academic Integrity** denotes a set of core values that the members of an academic community, including the faculty, students, and administrators should practice while performing their respective duties. According to the International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI), a non-profit organisation that promotes academic integrity, it is a commitment to six fundamental values: Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, Responsibility and Courage (Fishman, 2012). In other words, in order to achieve and maintain academic integrity every member in the academic community should involve in scholarly activities with honesty, fairness, responsibility, mutual trust and respect, and they should have the courage to act on these values.

The violation or breaching of academic integrity is known as **Academic Dishonesty.** Plagiarism,anacademic menace widely discussed in India in recent times, is considered as the most heinous form of academic dishonesty. Other fraudulent practices such as copying during examinations, helping others for copying, giving proxy attendance for someone else, multiple submission of assignments and term papers, falsification of research data and fabrication of research findings, act of taking someone else's examination, preparing fake educational documents and certificates, stealing or destroying of other’s intellectual works, getting the research works and documents prepared by others and illegally availing educational benefits also come under the purview of academic dishonesty. Disciplinary actions against academic dishonesty in HEIs in the western countries range from a warning to expulsion/ termination from the organisation depending upon the nature and severity of the case.

**UGC Regulations**

According to the UGC regulations mentioned above, the actions that are to be taken by the HEIs in the country for promoting academic integrity and preventing plagiarism can be summarised as below:

* Organize awareness programmes on academic integrity and training classes on scholarly writing skills, and incorporate relevant topics on academic integrity including the responsible conduct of research and publication ethics in the syllabus of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programmes.
* Establish a technology-based mechanism for the prevention of plagiarism.
* Form expert panels to detect, report and handle plagiarism and act on the decisions taken by the panels.

Unawareness of the concept of academic integrity and the lack of academic writing skills are widely considered as the causes of academic dishonesty, especially those associated with plagiarism and associated issues (Bakhtiyari et al., 2014; Bethany, 2016; Das, 2018; MacLennan, 2018). In such a scenario, the UGC’s appeal to the HEIs to conduct awareness and training programmes on academic integrity and related topics deserves significance. In the HEIs in western countries, the Library and Information Centres of the respective organisations are responsible for conducting such programmes as a part of their Information Literacyactivities. Information literacy is a “set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (American Library Association, 1989). The information literacy has been receiving much attention in Indian academic libraries in the recent years, and training programmes and workshops are being conducted on various topics, including those suggested by the UGC in its regulation such as plagiarism detection and reference management. However, in most instances, the concerned library and information centres are conducting such programmes by inviting experts from other organisations. This situation must be changed, and the library and information professionals should themselves be empowered to train their faculty, staff and students on matters related to the academic integrity. Moreover, the HEIs must adequately plan and incorporate appropriate topics of academic integrity in their undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral level, based on the nature and type of programmes that they offer at each level.

Establishment of a technology-based mechanism for preventing plagiarism as suggested by the UGC is the need of the day for the HEIs in the country. The primary issue in this regard is the selection of an appropriate tool for detecting plagiarism as there are several free as well as commercial tools available. The efficiency of these tools in detecting plagiarism (*in a strict sense, the ability to find similarity with the already published literature*) vary widely depending on their coverage of the published literature. Hence, it is better if the UGC itself decides a standard tool for detecting plagiarism in HEIs across the country. In this regard, a recent announcement made by Shri. Prakash Javedkar, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development that Turnitin software will be made available for all the higher education institutions for plagiarism checking received much attention in the academic community (“Centre to use 'Turnitin' software,” 2018). However, the UGC has not yet issued any formal communication in this regard.

The UGC instructs the HEIs to constitute a 3-member Departmental Academic Integrity Panel (DAIP) to investigate the allegation of plagiarism at the level of the individual [teaching] department of the Institute and a 4-member Institutional Academic Integrity Panel (IAIP) to act on the recommendations of the DAIP as well as to act on the directly reported cases of plagiarism. Both the panels should have a person well-versed in anti-plagiarism software as a member. Constitution of such panels/ committees will undoubtedly facilitate an effective monitoring system to prevent plagiarism and ensure academic integrity. However, incorporating a subject expert in the area of the alleged plagiarised document either in the DAIP or IAIP as an invited member will make the decision making on plagiarism issues more objective and judicious.

The categories of research works that need to be subjected to scrutiny for plagiarism as per the UGC regulation are Theses and Dissertations and Research Papers for Publication. The exemption of assignments, term papers, course works and answer sheets from scrutiny will be a relief for the students. Another notable category of scholarly work exempted from plagiarism checking is project reports. The regulation is not clear is applicable only for the student project reports or not. Because, there are hundreds of funded projects worth crores of rupees going on in different Universities and other institutions across the country sponsored by various government and non-government agencies, and the authenticity of such project works will become questionable if the reports are excluded from plagiarism checking. A clarification on the matter from the UGC will be helpful and avoid confusion.

Another matter of concern is about the decision to penalise a person committing plagiarism solely based on the percentage of similarity of his research work with the already published literature as derived from an anti-plagiarism tool. The percentage of similarity will vary significantly among the research works depending on the length of the work. E.g., the percentage of similarity caused by four similar continuous sentences in a 3-page report will be much higher than that of a lengthy paragraph in a 200-page paper report. Moreover, the percentage of similarity will vary depending on the anti-plagiarism tool used. In short, it will not be appropriate to decide the amount of actual plagiarised content in a research work based on the autogenerated percentage of similarity obtained from the software tools. Human evaluation and judgement are essential for making such decisions objective and perfect.

**Conclusion**

Academic dishonesty has become more prevalent in Indian HEIs than ever before, and even some of our University Vice-chancellors came under suspicion of committing plagiarism. In this context, the UGC, the apex body mandated to coordinate and determine the standards of higher education in the country deserves appreciation in drafting and implementing the regulation on curbing the menace. It will help in creating and maintaining a new culture that upholds the values of academic integrity in our higher education institutions.

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