**India creates unique tiered system to punish plagiarism / By [Pallava Bagla](https://www.sciencemag.org/author/pallava-bagla) Apr. 9, 2018**

**[[[**<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/04/india-creates-unique-tiered-system-punish-plagiarism>]]]

**NEW DELHI—**The Indian government has adopted its first regulations on academic plagiarism—rules that some researchers say are too lenient and others fear go too far and will be difficult to implement.

The rules take a unique approach to a problem that Indian authorities say has become widespread. They declare that a small amount of plagiarism—10% of a thesis, article, book, research paper, or other document—is acceptable, but that more extensive copying will result in increasingly severe punishments. The rules were accepted last month by the University Grants Commission of India (UGC India), which oversees higher education, and are binding for all universities.

The new policy creates four tiers for addressing plagiarism, which is defined by UGC India as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or idea and passing them as one’s own.” The first tier, for what it calls “similarities up to 10%,” would carry no penalty. The second tier, in which 10% to 40% of a document is plagiarized, would require students to submit a revised manuscript and force faculty members to withdraw the plagiarized paper. In cases where 40% to 60% of the document is plagiarized, a student would be suspended for a year and the faculty member would forfeit an annual pay raise and be prohibited from supervising students for 2 years. Students who plagiarize more than 60% of their thesis would be kicked out of the program, while the penalties for faculty members would be extended to a loss of 2 years of pay increases and a 3-year ban on supervising students.

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The penalties would presumably be applied to each offense, although faculty members found to be repeat offenders “at the highest level” would also be subject to disciplinary action, including suspension or termination.

The regulations “are a much-needed step in the right direction,” says Virander Singh Chauhan, a malaria researcher who drove their development as executive head of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council in Bengaluru, which is part of  UGC India. Another senior official, P. K. Thakur, says, “The objective is to promote academic research and deterrence from plagiarism by developing systems to detect plagiarism.”

But some scientists disagree. “Is this a joke?” asks Valangiman Subramanian Ramamurthy, a nuclear physicist and former director of the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bengaluru. A sliding scale “is not acceptable, since plagiarism is plagiarism,” Ramamurthy says, calling on UGC India to reconsider its decision.

Other researchers have taken the opposite stance, saying UGC India should recognize that large amounts of plagiarism are unavoidable in portions of documents that do not require creativity or novel expression. “There are only N number of ways that centrifugation or a Western blot can be defined, and if you leave it to all researchers to paraphrase these it only leads to more confusion,” says Nandula Raghuram, a biotechnology professor at Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University here.

Raghuram is also vice president of the Society for Scientific Values here, which argued in a comment to a draft regulation posted last fall that “similarities can be as high as 90%” in the materials and methods section of a manuscript. The eight-page document appears to allow for such distinctions by declaring that the abstract, summary, hypothesis, results, conclusions, and recommendations of a document shall “not have any similarities.” The society called the multitier system “dangerous, as it may empower mischievous leaders at higher education institutions to harass their upright but outspoken faculty on trivial grounds.”

The regulations also require universities to create an “academic integrity” panel at the departmental level to investigate any allegations of plagiarism, and an institution-wide panel to review every decision and handle any appeal. At the same time, India still lacks any formal definition of scientific misconduct or any mechanism for dealing with it other than on an ad hoc basis.

“What India needs is a comprehensive, government mandated regulation that defines and penalizes misconduct in all of academics, not just science,” Raghuram says. Chauhan agrees that more is needed, saying the next step could be holding workshops on what constitutes scientific misconduct. “Until now,” he says, “naming and shaming” was the only option to discourage plagiarism