

Plagiarism, data manipulation hurting India's research, govt panel raises alarm

Govt-appointed panel, headed by former IISC director P. Balram, calls for overhaul of research process, says state of PhDs 'far from satisfactory'.

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Representative image (pixabay.com)

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New Delhi: Indian academics have contributed 35 per cent of all articles published in various kinds of fake journals between 2010 and 2014, a government-appointed committee has highlighted, raising serious concerns about the quality of research in India's academic institutions.

The committee, headed by P. Balram, the former director of IISC Bangalore, has also flagged plagiarism and data manipulation as issues of greater concern that damage the credibility of institutions. It has also pointed out that there is a lack of qualified human resource for research guidance, poor infrastructure.

The committee has now suggested a slew of measures to improve research in the country including reviewing the current practices in recruitment of faculty members, providing seed grant for new faculty, and reviewing the mechanism by which vice-chancellors are appointed with good academic leadership being vital for improving research culture, including the quality of PhD/MPhil degrees.

“Indian academics have contributed 35 per cent of all articles published in various kinds of fake journals between 2010 and 2014. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists has identified over 11,000 fake journals during the five-year period (2010-2015),” reads the committee’s report submitted to the Human Resource Development (HRD) ministry. “Plagiarism and data manipulation are issues of great concern, which damage the credibility of research emanating from our institutions.”

The report has further highlighted the proliferation of predatory journals and conferences. It has blamed the trend on the mandatory requirement of publications in journals/conference proceedings for the award of doctoral degrees and as a metric in evaluating faculty under the API (Academic Performance Indicator) score has resulted in

the proliferation of predatory journals that have “abandoned classical peer review as a method of quality control”.

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PhD admissions have doubled since 2010-11

The committee has noted that the number of admissions to **PhD/MPhil courses have doubled** to over 1.61 lakh in 2017-18 from around 78,000 in 2010-11, but has expressed concern over the state of PhDs in the country, which it termed as “far from satisfactory”.

“The primary reason for this surge is mainly due to making PhD as one of the pre-requisites for entry for faculty positions in universities and also for career advancement,” it states.

It further states that the percentage of PhD enrolments has shown a declining trend in the state public universities, institutes of national importance and central universities whereas it is on the rise in deemed private universities. “This may have a reflection on the quality of research produced at the doctoral degree level,” it said.

It also says that the number of women opting for PhD course increased at a higher pace than men during this period, even though their absolute number remains less than men for all these years.

Some of the panel's recommendations

CARE reference list of quality journals should be released at the earliest replacing existing UGC approved list of journals: Any publications in predatory journals or presentations in predatory conferences should not be considered for academic credit for selection, confirmation, promotion, performance appraisal, award of scholarship or academic degrees of credits in any form, the committee has said.

Seed grant for new faculty: The panel has called for the University Grants Commission (UGC) to initiate a new scheme that will provide seed grants for newly appointed faculty in universities and colleges on a competitive basis.

Sabbatical leaves: The panel wants UGC to encourage and support state universities and affiliated colleges to put in place a “rigorous but generous programme that would offer sabbatical leave to mid-career teachers” for pursuing research and writing books or monographs that “consolidate original research knowledge”. The committee has recommended providing 50-100 faculty members such sabbatical leave for a year.

Travel grant for faculty and students: The committee has called for the increase in the number of grants for travel by PhD scholars/faculty members to present their research work in reputed international conferences. It says there are currently extremely limited international travel grants for science/humanities/social sciences.

Academic leadership and appointment of vice-chancellors: The UGC/MHRD as well as state government must “seriously review the mechanism by which vice-chancellors are appointed”, reads the report. It further states that good academic leadership is essential for improving the research culture, including the quality of PhD/MPhil degrees.

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