**Cover Page**

**Title of the paper**: Some Reflections on the UGC Regulations on Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism

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**Introduction**

The UGC regulations 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, comprehensive regulations on the matter are for the first time. Besides, the regulations emphasise 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 class 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.

The ICAI suggests the following steps for establishing a climate of integrity in educational institutions:

* Develop and publicize clear, fair, academic integrity policies, procedures, and statements that can be effectively understood and consistently implemented.
* Promote positive aspects of academic integrity amongst all segments of the campus community. Promotional activities should include discussions of the fundamental values, development of ethical decision-making capacities, and highlighting the link between academic integrity and broader ethical concerns.
* Educate all members of the community about academic integrity standards so that expectations are well understood as integral components of the community culture.
* Practice the actions described in campus policies consistently and fairly. Provide support to those who follow the policies and uphold standards.
* Develop, explain, and administer equitable, transparent systems for adjudicating integrity violations.
* Stay abreast of current developments in technology and educational practices in order to anticipate increased risks and address potential problems.
* Regularly assess the effectiveness of academic integrity policies, procedures, and practices. Revise and revitalize as necessary to update and improve. (Fishman, 2012, pp 30-31).

**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:

* Organise 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.
* Constitute 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 Literacy(IL)activities. 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 they are involved in conducting training programmes and workshops on various IL topics including those prescribed in the UGC Regulations 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 educate their faculty, staff and students on matters related to IL including academic integrity. Also, the HEIs must adequately plan and incorporate the 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 at the Institutional level for preventing plagiarism as suggested by the UGC is the need of the day in the country. The primary concern in this regard is the selection of an appropriate tool for detecting plagiarism from among the 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  (a US-based commercial software tool used by thousands of organizations in hundreds of countries across the world) 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 Departmental Academic Integrity Panels (DAIP) to investigate the allegation of plagiarism at the level of the individual [teaching] department and Institutional Academic Integrity Panel (IAIP) to act on the recommendations of the DAIPs as well as the directly reported cases of plagiarism at the Institutional level. The DAIP shall be constituted of three members with the Head of the Department as the Chairman of the panel, a senior academician from any other department and a person well-versed with anti-plagiarism tools as members. The IAIP should have four members with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor/ Dean / Senior Academician of the Institution as the Chairman of the panel, and one senior academician other than the Chairman, one from another organization and a person well-versed with anti-plagiarism tools as members. 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 as an invited member either in the DAIP or IAIP will make the decision making more objective and accurate.

The broad categories of research works that need to be subjected to scrutiny for plagiarism as per the UGC Regulations are Theses and Dissertations and Research Papers for Publication. It exempts assignments, term papers, course works, essays and answer scripts from scrutiny which will be a relief for the students. Another notable type of scholarly work exempted from plagiarism checking is project reports. It is not clear whether the exemption is applicable only for the student project reports or not. Because there are hundreds of funded projects worth crores of rupees going on in Universities and other institutions across the country sponsored by various government and non-government agencies. In order to make such project works authentic, the reports must be subjected to plagiarism checking. A clarification on the matter from the UGC will be helpful to avoid confusion.

The Regulations exclude the following types of content in a research work from similarity check for plagiarism: Quoted portions with permission and attribution; table of contents, preface, acknowledgements, references, and bibliography; generic terms, laws, standard symbols and standard equations; common knowledge up to fourteen consecutive words. The matching text, existing in the research work, after making all the exclusions, should be considered as plagiarised and penalty imposed depending on the severity of the case. For deciding the penalty, the plagiarised content must be quantified into any one of the four levels ranging from Level 0 with similarities up to 10% to Level 4 with similarities above 60%. No penalty should be imposed for Level 0 similarity of up to 10%.

The exclusion of relatively unimportant portions of the research work such as table of contents, preface, and acknowledgements, those which are more likely to be matching with the published literature covered by the anti-plagiarism tool used such as references, bibliography, generic terms, laws, standard symbols and equations, and the common knowledge will help in reducing the similarity rate. The HEIs can instruct the researcher herself to omit preface, table of contents, acknowledgements, references and bibliography before submitting the work for plagiarism (similarity) checking. However, it is important to note that only a subject expert can determine and decide on the exclusion of generic terms, laws, standard symbols and equations as well as the common knowledge contained in the research work by screening the similarity report generated by the anti-plagiarism tool. On the contrary, as pointed out earlier, there is no provision in the Regulations for accommodating a subject expert in the Academic Integrity Panels.

Another matter of concern is the quantification and categorisation of the plagiarised text, based on the percentage of similarity generated by the anti-plagiarism tool and impose penalty accordingly. An anti-plagiarism tool generally calculates the percentage of similarity by the amount of matching text compared to the total number of words in the research work. Thus, the percentage of similarity will vary significantly among the research works depending on the number of words in the work. E.g., the percentage of similarity caused by the presence of a block of 10-15 continuous words in a 3-page work will be much higher than the one caused by a lengthy paragraph in a 200-page work. Thus, the allowable percentage of similarity must be decided on a case to case basis. That said, in case the matching text is detected as plagiarised, it should not be left unpenalized even if the percentage is below 10%. As mentioned earlier, literature coverage of the anti-plagiarism tool used also is a determining factor in the rate of similarity.

The penalty clauses for plagiarism in the Regulations are different for ‘Theses and Dissertations’ and ‘Academic and Research Publications’. Here, the notable point is that the Regulations consider researchers committing plagiarism in ‘Theses and Dissertations’ as only students and those in ‘Academic and Research Publications’ as only employees such as faculty and staff, and the penalties are decided accordingly. Consequently, the penalty for plagiarism in ‘Theses and Dissertations’ ranges from resubmission of the script within a stipulated period to the cancellation of registration of the programme, and the penalty for plagiarism in ‘Academic and Research Publications’ ranges from the withdrawal of the manuscript from publication to denial of permission for research supervision for three years and termination from the service for repeated offence. However, there is no provision for penalising the postgraduate and doctoral students committing plagiarism in academic and research publications.

**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 regulations on curbing the menace. It will undoubtedly help in creating and maintaining a new culture that upholds the values of academic integrity in our higher education institutions.

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