UGC's Initiatives for Research Ethics:
Thinking beyond Awareness

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Abstract

Unethical practices in research are a major problem for research integrity, research originality, and society. Research ethics is the field that deals with what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the field of research. The researcher should be well-educated in research ethics. The originality of research should not be compromised at any cost. Every problem in the world is solved by research, but there are certain ethical considerations which a researcher should always follow. The research should not lose its credibility. In this paper, the UGC's initiatives for research ethics, publication ethics, plagiarism, etc., have been highlighted, and the issues related to these have been explicated. Endeavour has been made to highlight the current problems and issues which researchers are facing in the area of research. The present paper is focused on issues beyond awareness in academic research.

Key Words: Research Ethics, Research Integrity, Plagiarism, Awareness, UGC's Initiatives

Introduction

Research is a systematic endeavour to collect and decipher the obscurities of the universe. It is directly and indirectly related to human life and affects all aspects of human life. To improve life on Earth and even on other planets of this universe, to discover new knowledge, to uncover various mysteries, to decipher hidden realities of the world and to make the unknown known, we conduct research for all these purposes. *'Research is a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information (data) in order to increase our understanding of a phenomenon about which we are interested or concerned'* (Leedy &Omrod, 2010, p. 2). Research is conducted in every field of life. Whether it is Medical, Science, Technology, Education, Economy, Culture, etc. Every country spends a huge amount of money on conducting research with a prime motive to improve the existing system. The main aim of spending huge amounts of money on conducting research is to make Earth a better place for humans to live peacefully. Even research is being conducted to find life on the other planets of the universe. So, it is the research by which the researchers can improve the living conditions of human beings. When researchers are conducting research,

they should realize that every person in society can be affected by the particular study of research, and researchers should conduct it honestly by maintaining integrity, too. Unfortunately, every researcher does not realize the ethical aspects of conducting research because either a new researcher is unaware of the ethical aspects of conducting research or does not know how to conduct the research ethically. Or sometimes, researchers do it deliberately. There is a proper procedure to conduct research, and there are some set rules and regulations that a researcher should know and follow religiously while conducting research. These rules and regulations are called 'Research Ethics'. *'Ethics is the science that deals with conduct, in so far as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad' (*Dewey, 2013, para. 1*)*. In every organization, there are certain set rules which govern the action and behaviour of the personnel. These rules communicate to the individuals how to act and carry out the functions there. While as '*Research ethics is a set of principles developed to guide and assist researchers in conducting ethical studies'* (Johnson & Christensen, 2016, p. 125). The research ethics tell how to conduct the research. Keeping in view the moral duties. While conducting research, the researchers should be aware of the research ethics.

In every step of the research process, i.e. from planning to publication, there are ethical issues, and a researcher should be very careful about it. The researcher should also be aware of plagiarism, which is a buzzword nowadays. Plagiarism means someone *using someone else's intellectual product, such as texts, ideas, or results, thereby implying that it is their own* (Helgesson & Eriksson, 2015, p. 91). There are established bodies that set rules, decide what is ethically right and wrong, and communicate how to conduct the research. In different disciplines, there are different bodies that act to ensure research integrity. For that, the India University Grants Commission (UGC), the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) are famous governmental organizations that maintain research integrity. UGC regulates, provides funds, coordinates, determines and maintains standards of the higher education system in the country.

Much focus has been laid on spreading awareness about research ethics. Much has been written about research ethics by researchers. Many national and international committees have been proactive in educating about research ethics. Mention can be made of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), Council of Science Direct and Society for Scholarly Publishing, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), ICSSR, CSIR, etc. Reputed journals have been dedicated to this; some of them are Research Ethics, Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics (JERHRE), Ethics, The Journal of Ethics, Ethics and Human Research, Journal of Medical Ethics, Journal of Business Ethics, etc. and disseminate knowledge about different important aspects of ethics in research.

The history of research ethics goes back to World War II. The Axis Powers conducted several

human experiments throughout World War II. Humans were tortured by both Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany to gather information that could aid them in their war efforts. To put a stop to these acts, in 1947, the Nuremberg Military Tribunal issued the Nuremberg Code, with a prime aim to safeguard humans from these abuses. The document clearly states that no human should be forced to participate in research; his participation should be voluntary. This document serves as a foundation for later documents which are highly significant to research at present (Fischer, 2005). Many studies have been carried out on research ethics, and they speak about the meaning of research ethics and give detailed accounts of what research ethics is and why there are ethical issues. (Stockley & Balkwill, 2013) are of the opinion that research ethics is not a prime concern or is not a primary part of research design. It only comes into play when it is needed to fulfil the requirements. Rather, it is considered an obstacle. Another aspect of research ethics is dealing with participants, getting their consent, and ensuring their confidentiality and privacy. There are also issues pertaining to the analysis of data; a researcher should not misinterpret or over-interpret his data (Dooly et al., 2017). Ethics is a continuous responsibility which a researcher has to perform throughout his/her research, not just to put it on a 'to-do' list (Fujii, 2012). This makes ethics just a procedure to be followed for completing a study. This "procedural ethics" derelict the "ethics in practice" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, as cited in Fujii, 2012).In this paper, the researcher tries to highlight the UGC's initiatives regarding research ethics and tries to explore the issues beyond awareness.

Objectives

- To explore the UGC initiatives for ethical research.

- To highlight the issue pertaining to academic research.

UGC's Initiatives for Research Ethics

UGC has been proactive in educating and regulating the research community regarding ethical practices in the field of research. From time to time, guidelines have been developed to prevent unethical practices in research. A brief overview of some of UGC's important endeavours in this direction is enumerated. In 2018, UGC introduced strict regulations to control plagiarism. The regulations were entitled 'University Grants Commission (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2018'. The objectives of this regulation of the UGC document were:

1. "To create awareness about responsible conduct of research, thesis, dissertation, promotion of academic integrity and prevention of misconduct including plagiarism in academic writing among student, faculty, researcher and staff.

2. To establish institutional mechanisms through education and training to facilitate

responsible conduct of research, thesis, dissertation, promotion of academic integrity and deterrence from plagiarism.

3. To develop systems to detect plagiarism and to set up mechanisms to prevent plagiarism and punish a student, faculty, researcher or staff of HEI committing the act of plagiarism." (UGC, 2018).

In an effort to bolster its awareness campaign, UGC approved a two-credit course on publication ethics and publication misconduct called "Research and Publication Ethics RPE" at its 543rd meeting on August 9, 2019, and all PhD students were required to take it as part of their pre-registration coursework. Understanding the philosophy of science and ethics, as well as what is morally proper and incorrect when performing research, are the goals of this course(UGC, 2019a).

The second decisive action UGC took to enhance research quality and protect publication ethics was the "Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics" (CARE). The main function of the CARE is to regularly identify and monitor high-quality journals across various disciplines. The purpose of establishing CARE UGC is to improve research quality in Indian institutions and to create an environment that will lead to academic and research integrity, as well as promote publication ethics (UGC, 2019b).

Maintaining its efforts and adhering to international ethical publication standards set by eminent organizations and COPE, UGC, in April 2020, drafted a public notice for self-plagiarism. Self-plagiarism is producing one's own work previously published as new and original without proper citation and acknowledgement. The document mentions and clarifies that this kind of work will not be acceptable for any academic advantage (UGC, 2020a).

In order to provide guidance on good practices for high-quality, ethical, and impactful research, UGC released the "Good Academic Research Practices" (GARP) guidance document in September 2020. 'The document comes up with a general framework which enhances research integrity by focusing on potential threats and good practices at each stage in the research cycle' (UGC, 2020b). 'Research integrity means to conduct research honestly so that it could allow others to have trust in the methods used and the findings of the research' (The University of Edinburgh, n.d.). So, research integrity cannot be achieved without ethical conduct. The GARP document offers a structure for ethical research methods. This is not only for researchers but also for research institutions. The document speaks about how to plan the research. What are the areas to keep in consideration while planning the research? It gives a detailed account of precautions and measures to be applied from planning to conduct and from conducting to dissemination of the findings. The document also enlightens where to publish the research work. And how do you choose the right journal? Not only this, it also discusses the issues of authorship. In a nutshell, it can be said that the document is a proper guide for a researcher to conduct research activities

because it guides a researcher at every step of research, from planning to publishing. This document also recommends the creation of an Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at every institution. which would serve as an enforcer and coach and be an essential component of the institution. In its capacity as a coach, it will support and facilitate a culture of research integrity and offer training in this area. In its capacity as an enforcer, it will keep an eye on the research activity to look for any possible wrongdoing or malpractice. (UGC, 2020b).

Discussion

Research ethics are gaining paramount importance in the scientific world. Because public interest is involved in the research, public concern has increased regarding the research's integrity. Also, legislative changes in human rights and data protection. And also, with the abundant use of technology, more and more ethical issues are arising (Parveen & Showkat, 2017). The problem actually starts during the students' school days. He gets good grades for memorizing and writing in the exams and gets appreciation from his family and teachers for doing well in exams. Gradually, the child's focus stays on getting good marks in examinations. Whether we accept it or not, our education system is still examination-oriented, and good marks are valued more than good learning. Therefore, the creative aspect of the child gets marred. Paulo Freire has termed the Banking Concept of Education the same. (Freire, 2000). Thus, the child develops a habit of relying on cooked material. And when the same child comes into the field of research, he/she finds himself in the middle of nowhere.

To control ethical issues, UGC took some initiatives, which have already been mentioned above. The aim of these initiatives is to create awareness regarding research ethics among the research stakeholders and how to conduct research. What are the vulnerable areas to look for, and how do you plan, conduct and publish your research? Selecting proper research design, data collection, organizing, analyzing and interpreting data, plagiarism, consequences of the unethical conduct of research, etc.

So, it can be said that UGC is determined to check and control unethical practices in research. UGC has taken benchmark measures to promote originality and ensure the quality and credibility of research in India. But recently, news came in The Hindu (the leading newspaper of India) which was titled ‹UGC›s *draft curriculum for 4-year UG plagiarized, alleges faculty union'* The news further reads, 'The new four-year undergraduate (UG) program has been plagiarized word for word from guidelines published by the University of Michigan and the University of Arizona' *(*Hindu, 2022). Although the UGC committee who drafted the curriculum would be aware of the ethics and plagiarism, they still did it; what is the reason? This is not only the case with UGC but some vice-chancellors of universities were also caught plagiarizing. In 2014, Chandra Krishnamurthy, Abhijit Chakrabarti, and Deepak Pental, vice chancellors of Pondicherry, Jadavpur, and Delhi universities, respectively, were accused of plagiarism. A faculty member was also dismissed by Pondicherry University, who was found guilty of

plagiarism (Agarwal, 2014).

The paper (Research and Publication Ethics), which UGC has made mandatory for PhD students, has been taken by students as just another paper to pass, and they will apply the same method to pass it. So, there is a conscious misunderstanding of the things which directly or indirectly lead to research misconduct. These are the grave issues which highlight the condition of academic research in the country.

What the researcher wants to convey here is that mere awareness is not enough to inculcate research ethics among research scholars and all those who are related to it. Rather, it should come within. When the regulatory authority does not abide by regulations, what can we expect from the students? There is a breach of trust, and this breach will increase day by day. The scholars are looking to find an escaping window from this. The researchers want to be ethical, but at the same time, they want to do plagiarism. The researchers have taken it as a challenge and want a safe passage through it. The researchers at no point want to apply it. None of the researchers are alien to the ‹copy-paste› culture and are well aware that plagiarism can be checked, but there is no way to check falsification and fabrication. *"Even people unimpressed by postmodernism will recognize that the conclusions of a falsified or fabricated report could still be accurate"* (Pimple, 2002, p. 193). Awareness is not the solution, but it is the first step towards a solution; there is much more to be done to attain the desired solution. Another issue is that till getting admission to a Ph.D. program, a scholar is unaware of the research ethics. The researcher directly encounters it at a time when she/he is already going through a hell of things and a lot of stress.

Pimple (2002), in his study, provided a simple yet comprehensive organizing scheme for responsible conduct of research. The author has divided the concerns of any research product or project into three categories rather than three questions;

- Is it true?

- Is it fair?

- Is it wise?

The study further gives the six-domain framework (six domains of research ethics) (Pimple, 2002), which is based on these three questions. The whole research process is covered under the subcategories of these questions, and every issue regarding research ethics is enveloped in this. The researchers personally believe that every researcher should ask these questions to herself/himself while she/he is conducting research. When a researcher thinks, what am I doing, is it true? How have I done it? Is it fair? And what I have done, is it wise? Then, the researcher should not bother with unethical practices. The endeavour should be to make the researcher think and ask these questions to herself/himself. The approach should be introspective rather than retrospective. Mere having

awareness does not certify that the researcher would conduct research honestly and by following the guidelines. The researcher's endeavour should be to create a tendency for honesty among the researchers. Unless and until a researcher does not think it is her/his prime responsibility to be true towards the research, to be faithful to participants, to be honest in analyzing and interpreting the data, and to be trustworthy while giving her/his results, we cannot think of the research integrity.

Ethics of any kind cannot be enforced. Rather, an atmosphere should be created where ethics can be inculcated among researchers. The breach in the trust needs to be filled. There is a famous English proverb, 'Charity begins at home'. So, UGC should first strictly abide by the law. Just putting a fence around something doesn't mean we have controlled it. The researcher's focus should be on making the researcher ethical, not her/his work. Ethics should be in the researcher's conscience rather than in her/his certificate. Only ethical practices would be reflected in their work. A few suggestions are as follows:

Conclusion

In this paper, the researchers explored the UGC›s initiatives for ethical consideration in the field of research. The authors learned about various regulations and policies that UGC has framed from time to time. The commitment of UGC towards making research ethical and controlling unethical practices were discussed. The researchers also came to know about research ethics and what obligations a researcher has while conducting her/his research. Various issues regarding ethics prevalent in research were also highlighted. It was argued that unethical practices are still being practised in research. When there is so much awareness. UGC has done a lot to control research misconduct, and a lot has to be done. In the end, a few suggestions were put forward for making ethical practices in research a common approach.

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