

Intentional or unintentional, it is never alright to plagiarize: A note on how Indian universities are advised to handle plagiarism

Sir,

We mentioned about accidental or unintentional plagiarism in our earlier article.^[1] Not all cases of plagiarism are done with an intention to cheat the reader about the source of information and to indicate that the idea is original. Sometimes, during the process of writing an article, the writers or the authors, as the case may be, may omit taking down citation details when taking notes. In other cases, they may genuinely be unaware of referencing and citation principles or standards and may not cite references adequately and appropriately.

These excuses, however, should not be used as a protection against a charge of plagiarism. Whether intentional or unintentional, such acts do amount to plagiarism. Writers and authors can check their article for any unintentional plagiarism before submitting the article. In cases of intentional plagiarism, they are of course trying to push it across as original when it is not.

When instances of plagiarism are detected during the review process, irrespective of the intention of the authors, the reviewers and editors should suggest corrections. If the plagiarism goes unnoticed and the article is published, it could affect the repute of the authors, the institutions they are affiliated to, the editors, and the journal. Plagiarism is a serious breach of ethics.

Some new writers or authors may insist that they are not guilty of plagiarism as they have rephrased each sentence and written it in their own words. In many cases, unintentional plagiarism occurs because of lack of knowledge about what amounts to plagiarism. It may be helpful to educate all stakeholders including students about what amounts to plagiarism citing a few suitable examples, how plagiarism-detection screening is done, and what the institutional policies are for penalties against plagiarism.

India's University Grants Commission (UGC) mandates all State and Central universities to screen all "theses, dissertations, term papers, publications, or any such documents" using anti-plagiarism software.^[2] While each student must submit an undertaking that the document

reports original work, each supervisor or guide in turn needs to certify that the work has been checked and found to be plagiarism free. This makes both the student and the guide accountable.

UGC has asked universities to follow a Zero Tolerance Policy on Plagiarism, wherein if any amount of plagiarism is detected in the core work, the Plagiarism Detection Authority of the institution shall impose maximum penalty. Core work includes the abstract, summary, hypothesis, observations, results, conclusions, and recommendations.

In other areas (noncore areas), plagiarism is quantified into four different levels. If there are up to 10% similarities with other sources, the overlap may be overlooked. Level 1 plagiarism is when the similarities are 10%–40% and level 2 plagiarism refers to 40%–60% similarities. Any similarity of more than 60% is quantified as level 3 plagiarism.

The penalties for plagiarism vary depending on who the plagiarist is – a student (undergraduate, postgraduate, MPhil, PhD) or a faculty, staff, or researcher at the higher educational institute. Students guilty of plagiarism of levels 1 and 2 shall not be given any mark or credit for the plagiarized script. They shall have to submit a revised script. The students who are found guilty of level 3 plagiarism shall lose their registration for the course.

The UGC also recommends strict action against any faculty, staff, or researcher found guilty of plagiarism. The plagiarists shall be asked to withdraw the manuscript submitted by them and barred from authoring any publication for at least 1 year in case of level 1, 2 years in case of level 2, and 3 years in case of level 3 plagiarism. They shall be denied one annual increment in case of level 2 plagiarism and two annual increments in case of level 3 plagiarism. In addition, they shall not be allowed to be a guide to any undergraduate, postgraduate, M Phil, or PhD scholar for minimum of 2 years in case of level 2 plagiarism and 3 years in case of level 3 plagiarism.

For both students and faculty of higher education institutes, UGC mandates enhanced penalty against repeated plagiarism.

Such a strong policy by UGC is a welcome move and is expected to improve the quality of scientific publications from India.

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