

Intellectual dishonesty: can it be tackled?

The recent guest editorial graphically described the intellectual dishonesty in scientific world¹. The discussed topics ranged from doubtful academic credentials of politicians to bogus universities not recognized by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The extent of unethical practices associated with the academic field is chilling, as it involves fake certificates, purchased degrees, ghost writings, forged publications, questionable authorships and corrupt scholarships¹. An authentic and honest academician who reads the editorial will find the contents rather unpleasant as intellectual honesty forms the foundation for the academia. But I admire the courage of the writer in correctly pinpointing the shortcomings, somewhat bluntly. Without opening the can of worms plaguing the academia, problems cannot be understood, reviewed and eventually fixed.

When the *Foreign Policy Magazine* released the World's Top 100 Public Intellectuals in 2008, names of seven prominent people from India were on that list (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2008/06/27/the-top-100-public-intellectuals>). So, there appears to be no shortage of intellectuals in India. Regardless of this great potential, the academia still faces thorny issues involving scholarly dishonesty. Hence the editorial asks for a credible and reliable academic community and a zero-tolerance policy against fraudulent practices¹. These two opinions should be taken up seriously by both the academic community and the management authority, and then only the credibility of higher education and research institutions across the country can be fully achieved.

When the UGC declares the list of unrecognized universities, the central and state government agencies responsible for education must follow up on the issue and make sure to close the universities that do not comply with professional and ethical standards mandated by the system. Without closing the unrecognized universities, there is no way to maintain ethics and professionalism in the academia. So the government must scrutinize existing policies associated

with non-compliance of universities and make sure to take immediate disciplinary and/or legal action leading to the closure of such unrecognized entities. Then only the recurrence of such dishonourable paradigms can be minimized. Furthermore, if staff members are proven to be dishonest, the respective academic institutions must take immediate disciplinary action to relieve them from duty. Therefore, effective legally-binding ethical policies need to be put in place to maintain credibility in the government-owned and privately-funded academic institutions across the country.

The government has the overall moral and professional obligation to assign only qualified people to head political and administrative appointments related to education. This is crucial, as education is the key to maintain morality in society. Nevertheless, India being the largest democratic nation in the world, it is often difficult for the academic community to demand the government to appoint education ministers with higher education degrees. Therefore, the academic community has to proactively engage education ministers both at state and central levels so that proper advice can be given to them in terms of implementation of policies to promote efficiency in the educational system with zero tolerance to dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty is indeed universal and long-term research on cheating in academic institutions, in the United States, showed that the student perceptions of peers' behaviour had the most powerful influence². Similarly, a study from India shows that out of a sample of 166 medical students, 74% of them copied during theory exam and 54% of them had falsely documented clinical findings during practical exam³. The authors conclude that the prevalence of academic dishonesty is high, so academic integrity and ethics needs to be highlighted to make them honest doctors in society³. Hence it is essential for college teachers across the country to re-evaluate their methods of teaching courses dealing ethical values in education. Educating

the students about moral values and professionalism has to be done with perfection before the habitual dishonesty creeps in to cloud the young minds.

McCabe and Pavela⁴ have highlighted ten principles of academic integrity on how teachers can foster student honesty. Students should be taught to follow integrity as the core institutional value, which in turn will enhance student honesty. While teaching the course on academic ethics, the positive and negative roles of the internet in classroom studies and home assignments should be highlighted, as there is great potential to engage in plagiarism, fraud and deception. Students should be motivated to take responsibility to uphold academic integrity at all time⁴.

Teachers are the backbone of society to sustain moral values. Therefore, teachers from colleges and universities across India must do their duties enthusiastically both as guides and mentors; they should become examples in their lives based not only on what they teach, but also practice. Students may learn fast by observing the moral values adhered to by teachers, which in turn will enhance the moral-reasoning process. It is not all that difficult to sustain truthfulness and ethical values. The society is best aided when teachers play a role model of integrity to encourage students develop the right characters influenced by ethical virtues.

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