

Pursuing knowledge creation, India needs a policy on ‘plagiarism cells’

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Actions on plagiarism in Indian science are currently dictated by social pressures. If one’s perception is slightly cynical, one will conclude that the social pressures are dictated by a crab mentality. This is because the social pressure increases with the perceived stature of the alleged perpetrator of plagiarism, and the victim whose work is plagiarized is not actively complaining. Further, the ethical watchdogs that put up all this social pressure remain silent when an Indian victim complains against an established foreign perpetrator (and here I am speaking from personal experience¹).

I am writing this note because I wish to argue that the present situation is not consistent with India’s attempts to enhance knowledge creation through research scholars in an expanding and growing university network. I will also argue that India’s university system is displaying a knee-jerk reaction to increasing reports of plagiarism from our country. The rules that are being speedily framed and implemented are likely to scare our young researchers. A young science reporter had attended a two-day workshop on ethics held at Chennai in July 2011, and her report in *Current Science* was titled ‘Publish and perish’². In the report, this reporter had stated ‘Should one’s career be ended or marked forever due to a few misdeeds?’². India needs to have a policy on plagiarism that will encourage young researchers to pursue out-of-the-box ideas.

Whenever a plagiarism allegation is debated under social pressures (as was the situation around March 2012), the debate ignores that there are levels of plagiarism. The worst plagiarism scenario, that is tantamount to fraud, is when a perpetrator puts his (or her) name on someone else’s research paper and attempts to get it published with some minor changes. Whenever an allegation of plagiarism is made without providing details, it is somehow imagined that the actual scenario is close to this. I will not discuss such fraudulent activity here. The other limiting level of plagiarism is when some text (that could be a string of even 15 words or so) in the introductory section of a research paper is found to have appeared in the same form in an earlier work of another author. I propose that

there are two charitable explanations for such an occurrence; this could be a reasonably commonplace statement that cannot be made with too many permutations with the authors’ (limited) knowledge of English or, that one of the current authors (alleged perpetrators) had actually read the earlier work of the other author (victim) and it had got stuck in the subconscious mind. What would really be perplexing to any active researcher is why would anyone risk his integrity by copying something in the introduction; after all no research paper is accepted by any journal for what is written in the introduction. I would thus recommend that this kind of alleged plagiarism calls for a correction of the record, and should probably be followed (only?) by a rap on the knuckles of the alleged perpetrator.

I find in my discussions with colleagues a reasonable ignorance of the fact that international journals do attempt to quantify the level of plagiarism, and also state (all this is in public domain) that corrective actions will depend on the level of misconduct. The statements made by the UGC in the context of Ph D thesis, and the rules posted on the sites of some universities, are innocent about the need for the corrective action being in accordance with the level of misconduct. You will hopefully concur that plagiarism of text in the introductory section is more due to carelessness than misconduct. Several articles, including some in *Nature*³, are extolling researchers to paraphrase. It is worrying that these articles are not restricting themselves to suggesting paraphrasing in the introductory section only. The benefit of this suggestion will be reaped by those who have good command over the language, and probably not by most of the young researchers in smaller towns of non-English speaking countries. I would have respected the ethics of those writing such articles if they would have extolled researchers to be generous and give credit wherever it is due, rather than to extolling them to paraphrase and implicitly suggesting that they can avoid giving credit!

Plagiarism is defined as ‘the appropriation of another person’s **ideas**, processes, results, or **words** without giving appropriate credit’. (This ‘definition’ is

available from so many sites, that it is not clear which reference I should put. I will take recourse to this definition being ‘common knowledge’, and give no reference.) I have put emphasis on ‘ideas’ and on ‘words’. All researchers would agree that between these two contents of a research paper, the ideas are the real claim to originality. Ideas being the first entry, and words the last, is because of the perceived importance and not because of the fortuitous alphabetical ordering. As we stress the need for knowledge creation from our universities, we are obviously looking for scientific ideas rather than words. Our political leadership is emphatically encouraging original thought, or the creation of new (and ‘out-of-the-box’) ideas. We must worry about our ideas being plagiarized. We need to establish bodies that will help protect our young researchers whenever their ideas are plagiarized, and their credit is usurped by established bylines. Patent cells in research institutions help file patents; they help institute members claim ownership. Ethic Committees or plagiarism cells will, by contrast, investigate complaints of plagiarism against institute members. I propose that plagiarism cells should help institute members who complain that their ideas, processes, results, or words have been appropriated without giving appropriate credit. The primary role should be to mentor and not to police. These cells should mentor young researchers on how to ensure credit for their ideas, processes and results. We do not yet have software packages to check for process-plagiarism or for result-plagiarism. We probably have no clue yet on how to evolve a software package that would detect the flow of ideas, let alone identify idea-plagiarism. We presently have to rely on the judgment of experts and plagiarism cells should help.

1. Chaddah, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **101**, 1261; On Indian research being plagiarized by foreign bylines, *SSV News and Views*, 2012, **10**, 25–27.
2. Malhotra, R., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **101**, 476–478.
3. Roig, M., *Nature*, 2012, **481**, 23.

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