

Academic Phantoms

In recent months the academic credentials of some of our politicians have been publicly questioned, be it whether the degrees they have are real or not, or whether their claims of degrees are true or not, or even whether their degrees are from 'recognized' universities or not. In another news item, a large number of schoolteachers are reported to have resigned because they (knowingly) had fake degrees. In January this year, the Enforcement Directorate attached all properties of a large private university for selling fake degrees.

News of this type is a regrettably regular feature of our times, and the more cynical among us will smile sardonically and move on. But there is good reason for concern. Politicians' degrees are irrelevant for the most part, but what about the neighbourhood doctor's, or a college teacher's, or even one's own?

There are many types of phantoms in the academic world – fake degrees, fake publications, fake authorship and fake scholarship. And all these invite a general feeling of revulsion, mainly because the academic world is based on strong ethical principles that include integrity, honesty and mutual trust. Indeed, the credibility of institutions of learning depends upon upholding these principles, and more importantly, being seen to do so.

While the academic community has stringent guidelines for data falsification or fabrication and plagiarism, and civil law governs matters such as the faking of academic degrees, other kinds of fakery fall in a moral middleground. Indeed some, like academic ghostwriting, are not even illegal but there is only a thin line that separates them from academic fraud. And of course, there are other academic misdemeanors beyond the phantoms, but those are grist for other mills.

Fake degrees – one kind of academic phantom – come in many flavours. In as ineffectively regulated a country as ours, one can fake almost any type of document: birth and death certificates, driving licenses, and probably even Aadhaar cards; so some fake degrees are just that – degrees that are faked or forged. As a newspaper report put it, 'Educational consultancies can help you to get certificates for Class 10 and 12, degrees in Ph D, B Tech, LLB, MBA, MA, MD and MBBS from a range of universities[...] The cost depends on the degree one is keen to acquire. If needed they can even *organise* mark sheets for several examinations at the same time.'

The UGC lists a number of 'fake universities' that either never got the required permissions to operate or recognition from the appropriate bodies, or got it once but lost it over time. Degrees from such bodies are clearly also not valid, and using them for any formal purpose can be legally challenged. The fact that institutions can be 'de-recognized' by regulatory councils, possibly making invalid those degrees granted earlier is also a cause for worry. And this is not just in the case of small institutions in remote places: Delhi University recently reverted from a 4-year to the 3-year Bachelor's degree in order to not lose its recognition status. As regulations keep evolving, even established universities can suddenly find one or the other degree not being recognized by UGC or AICTE or any one of the other regulatory councils, leaving students in the lurch, with phantom degrees that are not worth the paper they are printed on.

Fake authorship is regrettably quite widespread, but this should be taken in context, especially when the nature of collaboration and authorship itself is changing. Recently, there was discussion in *Nature* regarding a paper on *Drosophila* genetics that had over a thousand authors, as to what authorship of such a paper is (*Nature*, 2015, **521**, 263); the all-time record of a mega-collaboration is held by the ATLAS collaboration with 2932 authors (*Phys. Lett. B*, 2012, **716**, 1). For the most part, though, there are norms that every community and discipline follows that are part of an evolved consensus: there is broad agreement as to what entitles one to be an author, and also and perhaps more importantly, what does not.

Complimentary authorship frequently happens when names of laboratory or institution heads are routinely added onto a paper even if they have made no intellectual contribution to the work. Another manifestation of this is when names are added for perceived value in getting papers accepted for publication. In rare cases this gets done without the knowledge or consent of the person being given the complimentary authorship (and it can be difficult to undo). In still rarer cases, some authors will add names for monetary considerations, selling co-authorship. Motivations for this practice – which is unprofessional and morally dubious, but not illegal – range from sycophancy to money or to other means of promoting some aspect of professional advancement, a conference

invitation or some other recognition. The quid pro quo is implicit.

There have been periodic exposés of all these forms of phantom authorship, but the academic community has not taken a serious stand on the practice. For one thing, lack of intellectual participation can be difficult to establish since even when journals ask for the role of each of the authors, there are ways of bypassing full disclosure.

To turn to another phantom – purchased degrees. This has been possible for a long time, and many companies will allow you to buy a Ph D degree online. The degree can be just for your ‘life and work experience’ without need for disciplinary specializations! One such site says, ‘Being called a doctor even if you are not a medical doctor by degree is such music in the ears. To buy a doctorate degree gives a level of competency. [...] If you **buy a Ph D** you will achieve promotions at your workplace without having to write complex projects and attending classes that will ruin your family or work life. If you **buy a Ph D** from our company you will get unlimited career opportunities and you will gain the respect of your employers and co workers.’ (The emphasis is theirs.)

Nearer home, a few months ago when a ‘sting operation’ revealed that a Ph D, M Phil or M Tech thesis could be had for the asking (and a fair amount of money) at a community market midway between IIT Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University, many were incredulous that this was possible, and regrettably, more were not surprised at all. It has been an open secret in some circles of Indian higher education that one can quite easily purchase a thesis, taking an existing thesis (that was submitted earlier to another university) and ‘changing the initial credits and the name of the university’. This type of blatant plagiarism at some levels is indeed fairly widespread and is clearly illegal. The resistance of some universities (particularly the better known ones) to making theses submitted to them open access is partly driven by the concern that they can be easily copied (or discovered to have been copied!).

Or one could have the thesis ghostwritten. Indeed, to get ‘original content written [...] It will cost you two rupees per word for the original content. For a 10,000 word thesis you will have to pay 20,000 rupees. It won’t be detected in any plagiarism software, that is our guarantee.’ (The quotes are from the newspaper article by Zaid, Q. and Lidhoo, P., *Firstpost*, 5 May 2015.) This is also a type of surrogate authorship, where one person does the work (of whatever kind) and writes material in the name of another. Apart from theses, such surrogacy also extends to articles, and since the service is not illegal, there are many agencies that offer the services upfront through their own websites, or other online marketing websites.

The argument that thesis ghostwriting is a legitimate service is specious since ultimately the work done by one and passed off as another’s has to be certified as an *original*

submission for an academic degree. It is besides the point to cite parallels with speech-writers or similar professionals who do the same for public figures. And the fact may well be that many theses submitted in the country could do with good editing and need language improvement, but when a company says ‘By opting for our service, over 90% of our clients have reported grades that were better than what they expected. Our service will increase the chances of approval of your academic documents. We have experience, having completed 2000 Ph Ds from 15 countries like USA, UK, Iran, China, Korea, Brazil, Russia, Africa, etc.’, it has said far too much.

Paradoxically, such practices have increased after the attempt by regulatory bodies to improve academic standards. The UGC introduced the academic performance index (API) to help make a fair and transparent assessment of faculty in universities and colleges. This numerical score integrates teaching and research, having points for each category, and in the latter, publications in journals ‘with an ISSN number’ can contribute to a larger score. There is now a proliferation of predatory, mainly online journals created for this purpose that disguise themselves cleverly, with Latin names or other such devices. Their main feature is that they have indifferent editorial boards that will more or less accept any paper and charge a publication or processing fee (Rs 1500 for Indian authors, US\$ 50 for others says one such ‘International’ journal’s website). This publishing model is similar to the ‘Gold Open Access’ followed by some of the leading and most respected journals in the world, where the author pays to make the work freely available online. In the best cases, the work is rigorously peer-reviewed, but less scrupulous journals will publish almost anything for money, making a travesty of the publication process and vitiating the principles of academic engagement. There is nothing illegal about this, but such publications contribute no new information, mean nothing, and merely conspire to create one more instance of phantom scholarship.

The fact that history will eventually forget all these phantoms is of little consolation since immediate benefits – financial and otherwise – accrue on the basis of such fraudulent practices. It will not be a simple matter to build up a workable set of safeguards against all these other forms of academic fraud, and the participation of both institutions and working scientists is necessary. Given the importance of having a credible and reliable academic community in the country, a zero-tolerance policy is essential.

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