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## Ensuring Research Ethics in Indian Universities: An Analysis of the Role of the University Grants Commission (UGC)

### Abstract

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*Research ethics is a fundamental aspect of maintaining integrity and credibility in academic research. However, this pursuit of knowledge requires adherence to stringent ethical principles to safeguard the welfare and rights of participants, serious researchers, the beneficiaries of the research output, funding agencies, the research community, and the nation as a whole. The University Grants Commission (UGC) plays a pivotal role in promoting and upholding research ethics in Indian universities. This research paper examines the significance of research ethics, the role of the UGC in regulating research activities, and the initiatives taken to ensure ethical practices in Indian academia. By addressing ethical challenges, recommendations of UGC and suggestions to reduce unethical practices, this paper aims to foster a culture of ethical and responsible research practices in the educational domain on the part of the researcher and the research community.*

**Keywords:** *Research ethics, UGC, Ethical Challenges, Indian Universities*

## **Introduction:**

Research ethics encompasses the principles of integrity, objectivity, confidentiality, and informed consent. It works on the policy of no harm and confidentiality. Various research papers and documents on ethical issues in the context of research have shown two important directions to ethical considerations in research. Primarily, research ethics is crucial for safeguarding the rights of the participants and secondarily ethical considerations are justifiably important to build up a positive research culture. Belmont Report (1979) has primarily included the physical and psychological concerns about the participants of the research program from whom the data is collected. Respect for persons, beneficence and justice have been laid as the three basic ethical principles for research involving human subjects. Thus, the report significantly talks about informed consent from the subjects pertaining to the amount and type of risk involved and their voluntariness to be a part of the research project.

BERA (British Educational Research Association) has suggested that in the case of social and educational research, the seriousness of ethical problems has been overemphasized. Although the research project must be dealt with ethical problems, the research report seems to have less effect on the lives of the participants. These researches are a normal day-to-day activity and are not very significant in the lives of the participants.

There is still another perspective for looking at the ethical issues of research. UGC in its guidance document on Good academic research practices (2020) has emphasized plagiarism, fabrication, falsification and misinterpretation of data in research. Plagiarism is the most common form of scientific misconduct, and it can involve copying text, ideas, or results without proper attribution. This will not only lead to the repetition of text in the form of research papers but indeed will affect the credibility of serious researchers. The UGC, as the apex regulatory body for higher education in India, holds the responsibility of fostering research excellence and upholding ethical standards across universities. It also highlights the ethical challenges faced by researchers and the importance of adhering to international ethical guidelines.

## **Ethical Challenges in Research:**

Researchers encounter various ethical challenges throughout their research endeavours, stemming from the complexities of the research

process, involvement of human participants, potential conflicts of interest, and technological advancements. Key ethical challenges include obtaining informed consent, especially with vulnerable populations on sensitive topics and protecting privacy and confidentiality in the era of big data. Researchers must strike a balance between the scientific significance of their work and participants' well-being, manage conflicts of interest transparently, and refrain from data manipulation and fabrication. Considering the dual-use implications of research findings and navigating ethical review processes are vital. Transparency in reporting and cultural sensitivity is crucial for research reproducibility and for conducting cross-cultural studies responsibly. Researchers also have post-research responsibilities, such as disseminating findings responsibly and addressing research misconduct. Addressing these challenges necessitates ongoing education, adherence to ethical guidelines, and fostering a culture of integrity in the research community, ensuring credibility and ethical conduct.

**Key principles and practices that align with the UGC's emphasis on promoting good academic research practices:**

1. **Research Ethics:** Researchers should adhere to high ethical standards when conducting research. This includes obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring data confidentiality and privacy, avoiding plagiarism and fraudulent practices and being transparent about conflicts of interest.
2. **Institutional Review Boards (IRBs):** Institutions are encouraged to establish and maintain Institutional Ethics Committees or IRBs to review research proposals involving human participants. These committees ensure that research projects comply with ethical guidelines and safeguard the rights and welfare of research participants.
3. **Rigorous Methodology:** Researchers should follow rigorous and appropriate research methodologies that align with the research objectives. Clear and well-defined research methodologies contribute to the reliability and validity of research findings, thus ensuring the confidence of the researcher in the results.
4. **Data Management:** Proper data management practices are essential to maintain the accuracy, integrity and security of research data. Researchers should document their data collection, storage, and analysis processes and make efforts to preserve research data for future verification and replication.

5. **Plagiarism Prevention:** Institutions should actively promote awareness and prevention of plagiarism. Researchers should attribute the work of others appropriately and give proper credit to previous research that informs their work.
6. **Publication Ethics:** Researchers should comply with publication ethics standards and guidelines, such as those outlined by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). This includes avoiding simultaneous submission, duplicate publication, and fabricating or falsifying data.
7. **Collaborative Research:** Encouraging collaborative research fosters interdisciplinary approaches and can lead to more comprehensive and impactful research outcomes.
8. **Funding and Grant Management:** Institutions and researchers should follow transparent practices regarding funding sources and grant management. This involves clear reporting on the utilization of research grants and funds.
9. **Responsible Authorship:** Authors should be listed appropriately based on their contributions to the research project, and authorship disputes should be resolved in a fair and transparent manner.
10. **Continuous Learning and Skill Development:** Institutions should provide opportunities for researchers to enhance their research skills, attend workshops, conferences, and seminars, and stay updated on the latest developments in their respective fields.

#### **UGC for Prevention of Unethical Conduct in Research:**

UGC in its regulations for Prevention of plagiarism in higher education institutions has defined plagiarism as taking someone else's work or idea and passing them as one's own. It has excluded the quoted work with required permission and attribution, bibliography, table of content, references, acknowledgements, and preface, and the use of generic terms and laws and standard symbols and equations from plagiarism checks. Four levels of plagiarism and the corresponding penalties have been defined in the UGC Regulations 2018 for the promotion of academic integrity and prevention of plagiarism in higher educational institutions and can be summed up as follows:

Levels	Percentage of Plagiarism (Similarity)	Penalty for Thesis/ Dissertation submission	Penalty for Academic/ Research publication
Level 0	Upto 10%,	No penalty	No penalty
Level 1	10% – 40%,	Submission of the revised script within six months	Withdrawal of the manuscript
Level 2	40% - 60%	Denial of the submission of the revised script up to one year	Withdrawal of the manuscript, Denial of one annual increment and debarred from supervising a new research scholar/ dissertation work for two years
Level 3	above 60%	Cancellation of registration for the programme	Withdrawal of the manuscript, Denial of two successive annual increments and debarred from supervising a new research scholar/ dissertation work for three years

INSA (Indian National Science Academy), 2018 advocates that the Impact factor and the number of research papers published should not be the deciding features for the contributions of the scholar. The pressure of publishing research papers has led to an increase in the number of published papers rather than emphasizing their quality. Fabrication and manipulation have been enhanced due to the easy availability of software also. The same concept has been mentioned in the Quality Mandate for Higher Education Institutions in India, the e-book published by UGC. As a result, according to the new regulations of UGC (2022), it is not mandatory to publish research papers for the award of Ph. D. degree.

### **Suggestions for Creating an Ethical Research Environment:**

Including ethics in research is more of a self-regulated process but certain extrinsic factors may motivate the research scholar for this self-discipline. They can be outlined as follows:

1. Reducing the pressure of published papers for professional growth as well as for academic enhancement. This will not only help in quality enhancement rather than quantity but also reduce the tendency of using unethical means for writing and publishing research papers.
2. Creating a conducive, energetic and motivated environment for research. This can be promoted by including research scholars with high aspirational levels and competent faculty to work with the best infrastructural facilities.
3. Helping the faculty members to spare more time for research by reducing their teaching load and enhancing their autonomy for conducting and documenting the research process.
4. Linking research and research institutions to Industry so the research findings may show their usefulness and in turn energize the research environment.
5. Constant monitoring by the Internal quality assessment cell or the research committees meant for the purpose.
6. Emphasis on timely completion of the research project as procrastination is usually the root cause for delay which eventually leads to the demotivated research environment.
7. Providing assistance from eminent personnel in each area during the time of topic selection itself.
8. Developing a more centralized collaborative platform in various fields of research.
9. Laying emphasis on writing the research project with greater objectivity rather than subjective writing.
10. Increasing the accessibility of the research workers to published research papers without paying or at a minimal cost.

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