

Promoting Academic Integrity: Perspectives from the Context of the University Grants Commission Regulations for Higher Educational Institutions in India

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Abstract: *The University Grants Commission (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations were announced in 2018, with the intended goal of promoting academic integrity and preventing plagiarism across higher educational institutions in India. As a decade has passed since its enforcement, this study critically analyses the provisions of the regulations in achieving its objectives. The regulations mostly concentrate on putting measures in place to prevent plagiarism rather than addressing the problem of academic misconduct in a comprehensive manner. It advocates the use of software that generates a similarity index or score to determine the occurrence of plagiarism, disregarding the various limitations associated with such technologies. The regulations are silent on the application of human judgment, despite being crucial to identifying instances of plagiarism. Moreover, the regulations adopt a punitive approach by recommending various penalties for different levels of similarity. Drawing on the approaches of quality agencies in other countries, namely the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) of Australia and the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), this study highlights that the preferred approach to address plagiarism and other misconduct is through the promotion of academic integrity among students. Thus, determining academic misconduct requires mature and comprehensive strategies. Students, faculty, and institutions must work together to promote a culture of academic integrity.*

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, QAA, Similarity, Software, TEQSA, UGC Regulations

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental roles of higher educational institutions is the generation of new knowledge that benefits society collectively. Academic misconduct, however, is a major obstacle to this endeavour since it casts doubt on the credibility and uniqueness of the knowledge that is created, in turn questioning the purpose of the institutions involved. Upholding academic integrity is crucial because the credibility of the education provider as well as its degrees, qualifications, research findings, etc. depends on it. In the academic integrity charter for UK higher education, academic integrity is credited for the UK higher education sector's stellar reputation founded on high standards and exceptional quality. It further states that academic misconduct has far-reaching consequences beyond the educational sector. Possible consequences for public health and safety could result from graduates entering the workforce without the requisite knowledge, abilities, and expertise (QAA, 2020, Introduction). The problem of academic integrity breaches exists across educational institutions worldwide. While various actions have been taken to promote academic integrity across different countries and institutions, in this study, we discuss the measures taken from the context of the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations in India. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is a statutory organisation which is mandated to coordinate and determine the standards of higher education in India. The regulations were notified by the UGC in 2018 to promote academic integrity and to check plagiarism by recommending that institutional mechanisms be followed across the higher education system in the country. Regulations were to be enforced in universities and affiliated colleges in India. However, questions remain regarding whether these regulations have been effective in achieving their objectives.

METHODOLOGY

Using a case study approach, this study critically analyses the 2018 Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions (UGC) regulations. It conducts a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and policy documents with insights drawn from the approaches of the quality agencies of Australia and the United Kingdom to promote academic integrity.

PROMOTING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND PREVENTING PLAGIARISM

According to the UGC regulations, academic integrity is “the intellectual honesty in proposing, performing, and reporting any activity, which leads to the creation of intellectual property” (UGC, 2018, p. 8). Likewise, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2024 defines academic integrity as “a commitment to the fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility” (QAA, 2024, p. 16). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which is the quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education in Australia, defines academic integrity as “the expectation that teachers, students, researchers and all members of the academic community act with: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility” (TEQSA, 2026, Academic integrity section). It lists behaviours including plagiarism, recycling work, fabrication, collusion, exam cheating, contract cheating, and impersonation that are observed to undermine academic integrity (TEQSA, 2026). Clause 5 of the UGC regulations which pertains to “Awareness Programs and Trainings” focuses on specialised education programmes to promote academic integrity and ethics in education within the scholarly community. It directs Higher Educational Institutions to sensitise all students, faculty, researchers, and staff to proper citation and referencing practices (UGC, 2018, p. 9). However, the primary focus of the regulations is on implementing measures to combat plagiarism rather than addressing the issue of academic integrity in a broader context. It has a skewed focus on plagiarism while dealing little with other types of academic misconduct.

Critically, clause 6(a) of the regulation states “HEI shall declare and implement the technology-based mechanism using appropriate software so as to ensure that documents such as thesis, dissertation, publications or any other such documents are free of plagiarism at the time of their submission” (UGC, 2018, p. 9). The regulations therefore specify the use of plagiarism detection tools to ensure that documents are free of plagiarism. However, several studies have criticised the exclusive dependence on plagiarism detection tools/software for determining plagiarism in documents (Awasthi & Tripathi, 2021; Mansoor et al., 2024; Meo & Talha, 2019; Pandita & Singh, 2019; Satija & Martínez-Ávila, 2019; Youmans, 2011). It is fundamentally flawed to ascertain plagiarism based on the similarity index or scores provided by these programs. A high similarity index or score does not necessarily indicate plagiarism, whereas a 0% similarity index does not guarantee that a document is devoid of plagiarism. An explanation is that the similarity in plagiarised works may be grouped under the following categories: semantic and syntactic. While syntactic similarities can usually be detected by plagiarism tools, a paragraph with the same meaning as its original source may be shown as not copied due to no or minimal syntactic similarity (Satija & Martínez-Ávila, 2019). There are also more subtle forms of plagiarism which are difficult to detect using plagiarism detection tools. Bypass plagiarism is a form of plagiarism in which a readymade exegesis of a primary document is drawn from a secondary source without crediting it as the source of information regarding the primary document. Instead, it is passed off as the original exegesis of the primary document (Taylor, 2024). Cross-language plagiarism or translation plagiarism, where

the original and plagiarised documents are in different languages, is also difficult to detect, particularly when it comes to less-used languages. Many tools that assist with sentence restructuring and paraphrasing are now available owing to technological advancements. The abundance of such tools also makes it easy to rewrite the original content and evade similarity matches. These technologies are also ineffective against practices where academic work is outsourced to third parties, collectively referred to as “Contract cheating” as such works may be unique and personalised as per requirements. Works that are not digitised or indexed into the repository of documents of the plagiarism detection software or those that remain unpublished also remain outside the purview of similarity reports (Mansoor et al., 2024).

The regulations take a punitive approach to prevent plagiarism, with various penalties specified for different levels of similarity during submission of thesis/dissertations and in academic and research publications. Clause 8 of the regulations quantifies plagiarism into levels in ascending order of severity with no penalty for similarities up to 10 % (Level 0) (UGC, 2018, pp. 10-11). However, it is erroneous to exempt similarities below 10 %, especially in cases where there is a large match from a single source or if the match includes core findings or ideas. Ideally, there should be zero tolerance for plagiarism. Furthermore, a high similarity score may be due to false matches or positives. Such false matches must be excluded to arrive at the actual similarity score. Priority should be given to the analysis of the reports produced by the tools and their subsequent findings instead of the initial similarity indexes. For all such tools available, academics must discern whether the similarities between the two works are just coincidences or false positives, or if they constitute plagiarism. Strangely, the regulations are silent on crucial aspects of document analysis. No information is given as to who is to perform the analysis, whether it be the faculty or student. The regulations are also unclear on whether the removal of false positives to arrive at the actual similarity percentage can be undertaken at the faculty and student levels. While the regulations mention that investigations are to be undertaken by the Departmental Academic Integrity Panel (DAIP) and Institutional Academic Integrity Panel (IAIP) for suspected cases of plagiarism, it is unclear whether all similarities above 10 % are to be investigated or only those that exceed 10 % after removal of the false matches. It is therefore important to clearly define the formal and informal stages of the procedures to allow refining of the software results in the case of the UGC Regulations. Clause 7 of the regulations mentions certain exclusions from similarity checks for plagiarism (UGC, 2018). 10). These include sections of the document containing quoted work, references, bibliography, generic terms, common knowledge, etc. Although such exclusions are necessary to avoid false positives, the problem of falsification of bibliographies and references by authors and students remains undetected with such blank exclusions. Further, common knowledge has been defined in the regulations as ‘a well-known fact, quote, figure or information that is known to most of the people’ (UGC, 2018, p. 8). Nonetheless, what constitutes common knowledge may be difficult to determine. Hendricks and Quinn (2000) observed in their study that it is frequently challenging for students to distinguish between what is considered common knowledge and what should be

attributed to original sources. Clause 9 of the UGC Regulations which addresses “Detection/Reporting/Handling of Plagiarism,” states that a member of the academic community shall report a suspected case of plagiarism to the Departmental Academic Integrity Panel (DAIP) with the necessary evidence (UGC, 2018, p. 10). However, they may be apprehensive of reporting misconduct because of the fear of repercussions. Therefore, policies and processes must be in place to safeguard the identities of those who report suspected instances of academic misconduct, including plagiarism. Additionally, there may be instances of collusion between faculty and students during the submission of theses, articles, or other work. In such cases, the similarity results may not be reported despite the fact that they exceed the permissible limit. There may also be situations in which students are coerced to engage in academic dishonesty. As observed by Sivasubramaniam (2024) from previous studies, research indicates cases where Ph.D. students are subjected to institutional or supervisory pressure to engage in academic misconduct, such as plagiarism.

Clause 2(l) of the UGC regulations has defined plagiarism as ‘the practice of taking someone else’s work or idea and passing them as one’s own’ (UGC, 2018, p. 8). The University Grants Commission subsequently issued another notice in 2020 on self-plagiarism dealing with the reuse of one’s own previous work without proper citation to the earlier work (UGC, 2020). Therefore, the common element that identifies plagiarism is the failure to provide attribution to the original source, including one’s own prior work (Bretag & Mahmud, 2009). However, it is also possible for someone to unintentionally plagiarise due to poor referencing skills, lack of knowledge of academic writing conventions, ignorance of prior work, or simply due to carelessness. Therefore, plagiarism may be better understood as intentionally failing to give credit to earlier works, even though one is sufficiently aware of their existence and has the writing skills required for proper referencing. To ascertain whether plagiarism was done on purpose or accidentally, it is necessary to deduce the student’s intent. An instructor who closely examines a student’s work is more likely to find out the student’s intention, whereas software fails miserably in this regard. While using software and enforcing sanctions can serve as deterrents, they do not offer a comprehensive solution. Strict punitive measures also create an environment of fear for many people. What is more important for institutions is to ensure that students experience a positive academic culture and help them recognise the importance of quality education for both their careers and future academic pursuits.

Increasingly, the favoured way to combat plagiarism or other types of misconduct is to promote academic integrity in the student body. In TEQSA’s guidance note on academic and research integrity, academic integrity is described as “a provider’s responsibility to ensure its staff and students act with honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility as they engage in learning and teaching in courses and units of study”. Comparably, research integrity is described as ‘a provider’s responsibility to ensure research is conducted ethically and responsibly and to promote a culture of ethical and responsible research’ (TEQSA, 2024, p. 1). These definitions underscore an institution’s obligation to guarantee that all academic activities within its purview

are conducted with integrity and accountability. In its academic integrity charter, the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) shows how the strategy has evolved from a punitive focus on deterrence to one that is “educative and preventive” (Myer & Smith, 2024). The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 in Australia also places emphasis on preventive measures through the development of good practices and student guidance to ensure academic and research integrity (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Canberra, 2021). TEQSA, in its report on student academic integrity and allegations of contract cheating by university students, notes that the preferred approach to combating fraudulent activities by students of accessing and/or adapting someone else’s work to present as one’s own would be through the promotion of academic integrity in the student body (TEQSA, 2015, p. 2).

It is important to understand that upholding academic integrity will require collective effort from the entire academic community, including students, faculty, and institutions. Principle 1 of the academic integrity charter for UK higher education states that “All members of a higher education provider’s community are responsible for ensuring academic integrity is embedded and upheld” (QAA, 2020, Principles for Academic Integrity section). Students are ultimately responsible for maintaining academic integrity throughout their education, but wherever possible, educators and educational institutions should take proactive measures to promote a culture of academic integrity, whether in terms of support and guidance on integrity-related issues or through punitive measures to deter academic misconduct. Teachers and other academic staff members should act as role models to uphold academic integrity and proper academic conduct. McCabe (2005) found that the most significant factor in influencing academic dishonesty was peer culture, which refers to the students’ impressions of the attitudes and actions of their teachers and peers towards academic integrity. Teachers ought to exhibit high integrity in the performance of their duties, including research and teaching. They should act fairly and equitably in their dealings with students.

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Amendment (Prohibiting Academic Cheating Services) Act 2020 in Australia makes it illegal for anyone, whether in Australia or abroad, to offer or promote academic cheating services related to conferring an Australian higher education award. Similarly, essay mills have been banned in England as a result of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022. As observed by Gniel et al. (2024), although legislation on its own cannot address the problem of contract cheating, it conveys a strong message against the use of cheating services. Academic institutions can make it clear to students that availing such services is an illegal activity, citing such legislation.

CONCLUSION

The UGC (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2018 was notified with the intention of promoting academic integrity mainly by addressing the threat of plagiarism in the higher education system of India. It recommends the use of software to determine the occurrence of plagiarism and takes a punitive approach by imposing various penalties for different levels of similarity. However, as Warn (2006) noted, excessive

dependence on such software would likely result in a rapid decline in its efficacy as students adjust to its features and discover its limitations. This approach fails to recognise that students are incredibly ingenious in identifying loopholes and getting around detection systems. As a result, academic dishonesty has become increasingly commonplace. These regulations overlook the deeper issue of academic dishonesty with an overemphasis on plagiarism prevention and little mention of other forms of academic misconduct. Any action based on the plagiarism software's results must be supported by strong evidence and supporting data. Similarity detection tools may be used to flag work that appears to be plagiarised, but staff members must further analyse the software's reports to actually determine academic misconduct. These regulations give undue importance to the use of software tools for preventing plagiarism, ignoring the vital role of human judgement. There is no doubt that technology can be useful in detecting plagiarism; however, it must be used merely as a tool to complement the regular exercise of scholarly judgment. TEQSA, in its report on student academic integrity and allegations of contract cheating by university students, noted that purchased work can be recognised due to the markedly higher level of academic content and/or language compared to the student's typical classroom performance, or because the response exhibits a general nature rather than specifically addressing the assignment requirements (TEQSA, 2015, p. 8). It is only when the faculty gives attention to the individual student that they will be better placed to discern whether a piece of writing actually belongs to the student. Besides monitoring misconduct, such tools can also be employed for educational purposes by allowing students to run submissions through software to help them identify lapses in their writing. Information and guidance should be provided to students on the different types of academic misconduct, with refresher sessions conducted regularly. It is important to monitor the types of academic integrity breaches that occur so that their underlying causes are identified and remedial measures taken. In addition to investigating the various causes of these student behaviours, assistance and support should be provided wherever possible. Mature and comprehensive approaches are required to discourage academic dishonesty. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a connection between policy and practice. As noted by Mansoor et al. (2024) in their study, simply implementing policies and enforcing rules without establishing the necessary foundations to prevent plagiarism would yield only superficial and cosmetic outcomes. Academic misconduct affects the entire education system, and all parties involved must cooperate to advance the values of academic integrity. Training and education may lessen instances of inadvertent misconduct, while identifying instances of cheating and punishing offenders may work as a deterrent. However, fostering an environment of integrity within the academic community is crucial.

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