Can standardised courses in research ethics prevent publication misconduct?

The Indian University Grants Commission (UGC) has introduced a number of policies aimed at addressing issues around the robustness and quality of Indian research. One focus of these policies has been the introduction of mandatory publishing ethics training for Indian PhD students aimed at reducing unethical or predatory research and publishing practices. In this blogpost, **Santosh C. Hulagabali***, reflects on the successful development of this course in his own institution and how ethical training may influence scholarly communication more broadly in India.*

In recent years, the Indian University Grants Commission (UGC) has introduced several initiatives to revive and sustain research quality. In 2016, UGC introduced a compulsory course work and open defence system (to defend viva-voce) for PhD students. In 2018, it introduced UGC-CARE (Consortium for Academic Research and Ethics), comprising a curated whitelist of journals for publishing and availing credit for promotion and career advancement. In 2018, it passed a regulation on the Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism and in 2019, it issued a public notice inviting proposals for a study on the quality of PhD theses awarded by Indian universities over the past ten years. In its latest move in late 2019, UGC introduced a mandatory two-credit course on Research and Publication Ethics for all researchers in the 2020-21 year. Taken together, these initiatives represent a policy to address the widespread allegations and concerns being raised globally over the quality of papers published by Indian researchers.

This last initiative was specifically introduced to train researchers to avoid predatory research and publication practices. However, it has raised doubts, such as: should researchers learn research ethics as part of a 'compulsory' component in a research programme at PhD level irrespective of their field of study or subject? How impactful could this be, since it is not an elective paper, the scope of personal preference is limited? And, what indicators could there be that researchers would really learn research and publication ethics and religiously follow this learning in their research journey?

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Despite such concerns, the course has slowly but surely been rolled out by Indian Universities. This was the case in my own institution, Central University of Haryana, where the course was introduced to 177 PhD students, across science, engineering, technology, humanities and social science disciplines. As organisers i.e. Central Library of the university, we were anxious about how researchers would take up these classes, assignments and examinations (all of which were online). However, we would be pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic response from our students.

Assessing the impact of ethics training in 4As

Following the first cohort's completion of the course, as part of the team charged with running the course, we developed a framework based on 4As to assess its impact and potential for inculcating the ethical values among the researchers taking part. These comprised of:

1. **Attendance and active participation:** Almost all PhD students attended all the classes — perhaps unsurprising for a compulsory paper that was being conducted online! However, it is significant that students actively and enthusiastically participated in lectures and interacted with almost all the experts at length. Indeed, we were surprised to see students seriously engaging with often complex material. The course also led to continued engagement with both the experts and our library team, leading to wider discussions about publishing ethics within the university.
2. **Assignments:** Students were given assignments at the end of the lectures. The assignments were aimed at exploring the scholarly literature online, evaluating the sources, and deciding to use them appropriately in their research works. This exercise involved finding peer-reviewed journals, identifying fake journals, searching indexing databases, sites on ethics such as COPE, WAME, etc. for knowing cases of publication misconduct, etc. We found that almost all students were able to discern predatory practices and qualitative publication

standards.

3. **Answer papers:** We strongly believed that exam-scores should not be the sole parameter to check effectiveness of the course or teaching. However, it is equally important to know whether students have 'comprehended the basics' of the classroom teaching and course material. Post examination, the evaluators observed that majority of the researchers' answers (in descriptive-format) revealed a good understanding of the ethics of research and publication.

4. **Assessment of course delivery:** At the end of the course, we asked the students to share their critical feedback and comments, on the overall conduct of the course, based on five-point scale. These scores suggested students perceived the course to have contributed to their skills, to have had a favourable impression of the experts delivering the course. The majority of the experts were experienced library professionals. Perhaps most importantly, almost all of the course participants (99%) expressed that the course had highlighted the role that central library staff could play as a partner and facilitator of their future research. This was a big recognition and breakthrough for our entire Library team!

With this broad analysis, we sat down and further considered what these parameters could teach us about the course. This introspection coupled with researchers' overall feedback—broadly revealed the following three recommendations:

First, the curriculum was well designed by the UGC providing practical knowledge concerning research ethics, albeit some components were repetitive in nature.

Secondly, having professionals teach the course was highly beneficial. We specifically invited library and information science professionals from Indian universities and research organizations (viz. Delhi University, JNU, IGIDR, IGNCA, Goa University, Jamia Milia University, Pune University, SNDT Women's University, etc.), who brought with them a sound practical knowledge of scholarly communication as they deal with research and publication issues on regular basis. This worked well as every expert could share at least two or three practical cases they experienced while serving their clients in their libraries. Moreover, we also brought in publishers and database vendors to demonstrate certain products (that are mentioned in the curriculum), such as plagiarism detection tools (URKUND, Turnitin), indexing databases (Scopus and Web of Science), etc.

Thirdly, the type of assignments we devised made the students work practically. Class exercises in particular, allowed students to practically engage with the course material and acquire skills that were not necessarily taught within their own disciplines.

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To conclude, when part of a well-designed curriculum, delivered by relevant experts, using innovative pedagogies and continuous assessment, we found the course to be effective at teaching what ethical publication is. However, considering the growing trend and complexity of predatory publishing, there is arguably a need to extend such strategic ethical drives, beyond new PhD intakes. Further, it is equally important to have a long-term assessment of whether such initiatives translate into future ethical research conduct. Especially, as many of the drivers for publishing misconduct relate to academic life post-PhD. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of higher education institutions and academic statutory bodies to create structures and places of learning where ethical publishing practices are promoted and rewarded. Courses in publication ethics are a step in the right direction.

Santosh C. Hulagabali, *edits two blogs* [Open Commentaries](#) *and* [Open Interview](#). *For submissions or any leads/referrals, please write to* santoshlib24@gmail.com

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