

Strengthening Research Ethics for Qualitative Enhancement of Higher Education

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Abstract:

In spite of continuous endeavour from different higher authorities dealing with Education and Research, such as - University Grants Commission (UGC), some researchers with ill-intentions often break the research ethics to complete the project in a hurry for materialistic gain. Sometimes the researchers do the same due to lack of awareness. They are consciously or unconsciously harming the humanity and making hindrance for welfare of the society in general. Indian Higher Education system is now standing at cross-road. Thorough research in various strata of higher education helps in qualitative enhancement of nation's education system which leads to speedy advancement of the citizens of the country. So ethical corruption in the field of research should be stopped through different ethical rules and guidelines made by higher authorities and rigorous legal action should be taken if it is necessary. To protect human subjects of research every possible and honest measures should be followed by the researchers. For this reason, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), UGC, different educational bodies under Central and State Governments and research wings of different Universities should be always cautious about the violation of the ethical norms and take proper action for strengthening research ethics for the sake of qualitative enhancement of Higher Education and as well as upliftment of educational scenario of the country. Recently UGC published a new regulation to prevent plagiarism.

Keywords: Research Ethics, Higher Education, Qualitative Enhancement;

1. Introduction:

Some researchers with ill-intentions often break the research ethics to complete the project in a hurry for materialistic gain. Sometimes the researchers do the same due to lack of awareness. They are consciously or unconsciously harming the humanity and making hindrance for welfare of the society in general. Thorough research in various strata of higher education helps in qualitative enhancement of nation's education system which leads to speedy advancement of the citizens of the country. So ethical corruption in the field of research should be stopped through different ethical rules and guidelines made by higher authorities and rigorous legal action should be taken if it is necessary. To protect human subjects of research every possible and honest measures should be followed by the researchers.

2. Literature Review:

Maintaining research ethics is an important criterion for quality research both national and international level. Following selected literatures on research ethics have been compiled for review.

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2.1 At International Level:

Kelman (1982)¹ provided an overview of the types of ethical issues that confront the different methods used in social research. Authors designed to highlight some of the problems that will be discussed clearly in their works and to suggest possible measures. Homan (1991)² argued that covert research may have a negative impact for the researchers and there is no need to conduct covert research. He further stated that covert research may disturb the privacy of the respondent. Holman also argued that using covert research makes social science research no different from journalism. Barai (2000)³ reported that the need for ethics in social science research is very important factor at present context and it has become stronger with the passing years. The new developments and changes in the areas of social science research have increased to meet the ethical needs and the related problems. From studies of peasant movements, agrarian social structure, industrial sociology, urban sociology in the 1970's to issues such as medical sociology in the 1980's, and studies on sexuality and reproductive health in the 1990's, sociological research, in India, has come a long way. Biber (2005)⁴ stated that social science research must concern itself with 'moral integrity' to ensure that research process and findings are 'trustworthy' and valid. He also stated that in research experience where the researcher also acts as a participant, then he/she must normally develop and maintain close relationships with other community members. On the other hand, he suggested that covert research is appropriate where it is necessary to achieve a better understanding of certain social phenomena, like as the investigation of the social life of drug dealers and drug users. SBREC, Flinders University (2007)⁵ suggested that "People must be respected, benefits must be maximized and harms minimized, harm shall not be done, and subjects in studies must be treated equally.

Madushani (2016)⁶ worked on the 'Ethical Issues in Social Science Research in Developing Countries'. He reviewed 20 various research studies from 1982 to 2014. He found that ethical issues are mostly occurred in the developing countries. His research findings indicated that Complex ethical issues developing countries need careful justification by social science researchers or scientist. Vilma (2018)⁷ focused on ethical principles in social research. He argued that the "essential ethical considerations in social research ethics remains professional competence, integrity, professional and scientific responsibility, respect for research participants' rights, dignity and diversity, and social responsibility of social researchers..." He also suggested that social researchers must be sensitive to cultural, individual, teaching, and

¹ Kelman, C. H. (1982). Ethical Issues in Different Social Science Methods. In T.L. Beauchamp, R.R. Faden, R.J. Wallace, Jr., & L. Walters (Ed.), *Ethical issues in social science & research* (pp. 40 - 98). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

² Homan, R. (1991). *The Ethics of Social Research*, London, Longman.

³ Barai, T (2000). Ethical guidelines in social science research – A Small Step: A Report. Retrieved From: <http://www.cehat.org/cehat/uploads/files/a128.pdf>

⁴ Biber, H. (2005). *The Ethics of Social Research*, Longman, London.

⁵ SBREC, Flinders University, (2007). *Ethical Guidelines for Social and Behavioural Research: Information for Researchers /Supervisors*. Adelaide: Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, Flinders University.

⁶ Madushani, H. D. P. (2016). Ethical Issues in Social Science Research: A Review. *Journal of Social Statistics*.

⁷ Vilma, Z. (2018). IMPLEMENTING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH: CHALLENGES, POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS. *Vocational Training: Research and Realities*, 29 (1), pp 19 – 43.

student groups of people with distinctive characteristics. He further said that the social researchers should be “aware of their professional and scientific responsibility to the social sciences communities and societies in which they live and work”.

2.2 National Level:

EPW (2000)⁸ reported that the ‘National Ethics Meeting (NEM)’ discussed on “The Draft Code of Ethics for Research in Social Sciences and Social Science Research” and it was held on the 29th to 30th May 2000, in Mumbai. The NEM was an attempt to address some of these issues of ethical consideration in the field of Social Sciences and Health Research. More than 50 researchers attended from all over the country. Kour (2014)⁹ examined the ethical and legal issues in behavioural research. He expected that human beings fully cooperate with the researcher but not at the cost of human rights and researchers have a clear responsibility to ensure that they recognize and protect the rights of the subjects. Investigator also highlighted that the ethical problems in behavioural researches particularly in the field of Psychology, Education and Sociology are a vital issues. Sen & Nagwanshee (2016)¹⁰ explained about the ethical issues in social science research. The study suggested various ethical norms in research process and that norms promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. UGC (2016)¹¹ has directed all the Universities offering M.Phil./Ph.D. programme to adhere strictly to the provision of the regulation that are mandatory in nature and has instructed the higher education institution to ensure compliance in letter and spirit.

In addition to eligibility, procedure for selection and restriction of number of candidate to be assigned to each supervisor, the regulations prescribe eligibility criteria for recognition of research supervisors according to which only regular faculty with requisite qualifications, experience and publications are eligible to be recognized as research supervisors. UGC (2019)¹² has issued a Public Notice dated 28.11.18, and decided to establish a Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (CARE). The good quality Research Journals in different disciplines under Social Sciences, Humanities, Languages, Art, Culture, Indian Knowledge System etc., will be maintained by CARE and referred to as ‘CARE Reference List of Quality Journals’. It came up with a list of recognized journals, called the CARE list, and suggested that only those research papers that are in the CARE list of journals should be used for academic purposes. UGC (2019)¹³ has

⁸ EPW (2000). Ethics in Social Sciences and Health Research – A Draft Code of Conduct. (2000, March 24). Economic and Political Weekly, p. 3 .

⁹ Kour, S. (2014). Ethical and Legal Issues in Educational Research. *INDIAN JOURNAL OF APPLIED RESEARCH* , 4 (6), pp 134 – 135.

¹⁰ Sen, Vinod and Nagwanshee, Raj Kumar (2016) . Ethical Issues in Social Science Research. *Research Journal of Management Sciences* , 5(10), pp 37 – 41.

¹¹ University Grant Commission (2016) . Minimum Standards and Procedure for Awards of M.Phil./Ph.D. degree) Regulation 2016. UGC, New Delhi. Retrieved From: [https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/4952604_UGC-\(M.PHIL.-PH.D-DEGREES\)REGULATIONS,-2016.pdf](https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/4952604_UGC-(M.PHIL.-PH.D-DEGREES)REGULATIONS,-2016.pdf)

¹² University Grant Commission (2019) . Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (CARE), PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU GOVERNMENT OF INDIA. UGC, New Delhi. Retrieved From: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1558929>

¹³ University Grant Commission (2019) . Improving the Quality of Research by Faculty and Creation of New Knowledge and Strategies for Improving Research Culture in Colleges/Universities Report 2019. UGC, New Delhi. Retrieved From: https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/5816125_Promoting-and-Improving.pdf

made a two-credit course compulsory at the PhD level on research ethics and publication misconducts for maintaining quality of research in Indian universities. The 30 hours course on 'Research and Publication Ethics' (RPE) is mandatory for all PhD students for pre-registration course work in the Indian Universities. The syllabus of 'RPE' is including philosophy and ethics, and scientific conduct, which teach students about intellectual honesty and help to avoid from falsification, fabrication and plagiarism. Above course will make them aware about copyright issues. Furthermore, a module on open access publishing will teach them ways to utilize open resources like data and how to interpret it in the right way. Anwar & Govil (2019)¹⁴ described the prevailing malpractices in educational research in India. They stated that all the developed countries have their own prescribed ethical code of conduct for educational research. Authors emphasized the need of having own guidelines, so that India may also carry out the research work in ethically sound environment. The guidelines help the researchers to conduct their research work smoothly. It is necessary that a researcher must abide by the principles, values, beliefs and norms of research, which are collectively termed as, 'Research Ethics'. NPE (2020)¹⁵ emphasized on academic research in all fields through a new National Research Foundation (NRF). Primary goal of the NRF will be to enable a progressive culture of research through Indian Universities by undertaking major initiatives to seed and grow research at different State Universities and other public institutions. The NRF will competitively fund research and peer-reviewed grant proposals for all disciplines. The NRF will also maintain the ethics and quality of research. Previous literatures have thrown light on significant characteristics of research ethics.

3. What is Research Ethics?

The ethics is closely related with moral values, it teaches the society what is wrong and what is right. Most of the social scientists define "ethics" as norms of conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour... (Sen & Nagwanshee, 2016)¹⁶. Therefore, Research Ethics (R.E.) is concerned with Rights, Dignity and Safety of Researchers and subjects. It helps the researchers to choose right way of research process. Research Ethics refers to a complex set of values, standards and institutional schemes that help, constitute and regulate scientific activities¹⁷.

Research Ethics concerns with the Responsibility of Researchers i.e., to be Honest and Respectful to all Stakeholders (Individual/s, Communities, Groups, Institution, and State etc.) who are affected by their Research Studies or their Reports of the Studies' Results. According to Catherine Dawson (2002)¹⁸, "Many people are willing to disclose a lot of personal information during research so it is needed to maintain the secrecy of identity of respondent and to make

¹⁴ Anwar, T., Govil, P. (2019). Ethics of Educational Research: An Indian Perspective. *International Journal of Research in Engineering, IT and Social Sciences*, 9 (5) , pp 156-158.

¹⁵ MHRD, (2020). National Education Policy 2020. New Delhi: MHRD. Retrieved from: https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

¹⁶ Sen, Vinod and Nagwanshee, Raj Kumar (2016). Research Journal of Management Sciences . *Research Journal of Management Sciences* . 5(10), pp 37 – 41.

¹⁷ <http://www.etikkom.no/English/NESH/guidelines>

¹⁸ Catherine Dawson (2002). *Practical Research Methods: A User-friendly Guide to Mastering Research Techniques and Projects*. United Kingdom, Oxford.

sure that we treat both the participants and the information they provide with honesty and respect. This is called research ethics.” Therefore, research ethics means: a set of norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in research;

4. Importance of Ethical Guidelines:

Research always tries to find out new things or to re-interpret an old one through a systematic and scientific manner. Harm to humanity has become an important question in the physical and natural sciences which may not hold the same importance for social or behavioural sciences. In these disciplines, many questions have been raised as how to treat human subjects in their researches. In the other side, some research is conducted on animals. In this context, ethical guidelines play a significant role in research process to protect any type of subjects.

Ethical guidelines for research do not serve the same function as laws. It is a tool for researchers themselves. They identify various relevant factors that researchers should not take into account previously. The guidelines for research ethics help the researchers and also research community to promote the ethical views, attitudes and judgement, to raise their awareness for conflicting standards. Various ethical standards embodied in the guidelines strengthen the research ethics.

5. Basic Ethical Guidelines for Considerations in Research:

The UGC has already taken several initiatives to maintain the standard and quality of research in higher education. There are number of reasons why it is important to follow to ethical guideline in research, especially in social sciences research. The ethical guidelines promote the aims of research and avoidance of huge error. After careful review of previous literatures, present investigators categorize the ‘Basic Ethical Guidelines’ into three (3) areas and each area is also sub-divided; which are given below-

- 1) Subjects Related Ethical Guidelines;
- 2) Researchers Related Ethical Guidelines;
- 3) Research Content Related Ethical Guidelines.

5.1 Subjects Related Ethical Guidelines:

i) Involvement of Subjects:

There are two types of harm to subjects which are of concern are the possibility of physical harm and psychological harm. Chance of psychological harm to subjects in social science research is high. The “people must be respected, benefits must be maximized and harms minimized, harm shall not be done, and subjects in studies must be treated equally” (SBREC, Flinders University, 2007)¹⁹.

ii) Informed Consent:

Subjects are made fully aware of the nature and purpose of the research. Sometimes due to age, illness and legal issues, the subjects become incompetent to give informed consent. Then the

¹⁹ SBREC Flinders University, (2007). ‘Ethical Guidelines for Social and Behavioural Research: Information for Researchers/Supervisors’, Adelaide, Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, Flinders University.

informed consent of the parents / responsible representative must be secured. Freedom to participate or decline to participate is fundamental right of the subjects.

iii) Privacy and Confidentiality:

Privacy refers to capacity of subjects to control when and what conditions others have access to their behaviours, beliefs, and values. Confidentiality refers to linking information to a person's identity. Researchers should hold all information about subjects, which he / she may gather, in strict confidence. No information should be disclosed without the permission of the subject. It was felt that though ensuring privacy at the time of data collection though a difficult in our country, was very essential and cannot be excluded from any ethical guidelines (Barai)²⁰.

iv) Protection from Stress:

Research in social and behavioural sciences might have potential for any type of physical and psychological stress to subjects. Investigators must be cautious about the matter from very beginning.

v) Exploitations of Subjects / Others:

Researchers have obligations to their subjects, co-investigators, assistants, colleagues and technical personnel, involved in the research project. They should be given appropriate credit and respect for their contribution in the research work.

5.2 Researchers Related Ethical Guidelines:

i) Maintaining Self-Respect:

Researchers must allow the subjects to maintain their self-respect. In many times, researchers forget about maintaining the dignity of the subject. Researchers always keep in mind not to violate the rights of subjects.

ii) Maintaining Code of Ethics:

Some code of ethics should be followed by the researchers during the study of the subjects for their own investigation. The institution or organization under study must have some code of their own and the researchers must conform to it. Mollet (2011)²¹ rightly stated that "In developing countries, where societies are often pluralistic, cultural background and security become important issues for social researchers in conducting fieldwork".

5.3 Research Content Related Ethical Guidelines:

i) Plagiarism:

It means using ideas, writings, or drawings of others as your own. In research, especially in social and behavioural sciences, ideas or data from other's work are borrowed without acknowledging the original investigators. 'Self-Plagiarism' is another type of plagiarism, where reuse of one's

²⁰ Barai, Tejal. Ethical guidelines in social science research – A Small Step: A Report. Retrieved From: <http://www.cehat.org/cehat/uploads/files/a128.pdf>

²¹ Mollet, Julius A. (2011). Ethical Issues in Social Science Research in Developing Countries: Useful or Symbolic. Retrieved From: <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/116956> Mollet, Julius A. (2011). Ethical Issues in Social Science Research in Developing Countries: Useful or Symbolic. Retrieved From: <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/116956>

own research is conducted. Both types of plagiarism are considered to be unacceptable practices in the research.

ii) Fabrication and Falsification of Data:

The fabrication is making up data and recording or reporting them without visiting to the field area. In survey research, field workers sometimes present data without surveying or interviewing the actual subjects. The falsification is manipulation of research materials, equipment or processes or changing data in such way that proper research process is not accurately followed in research. Such type of practices should be prohibited.

iii) Non-publication of Data:

Non-publication of data refers to 'not including' data because they do not support the hypothesis. It is also called "cooking data". This results in improper research outcome.

iv) Faulty Data Gathering:

This refers to 'wrong procedure of data collection'. Such as, Subject comes in with a hangover and collects data form anyway, inappropriate treatment of subjects, writing data incorrectly etc. To avoid faulty data collection, pre-planning should be needed.

v) Obfuscation:

Sometimes the researcher produces obscure research findings by reporting style without highlighting the results that are significant or those that are unfitting with his ideology. "The obfuscation also includes the display of data graph. The graph must be given appropriate titles, labelled axis and any transformation used such as classification the axis must be clear to the reader (Khan and Raesside, 2014)²².

6. New Notification of UGC regarding Research Ethics:

Recently UGC notified a new regulation i.e., UGC (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2018²³, dated 23rd July, 2018. Main objectives of the regulations are –

- i) *"To create awareness about responsible conduct of research, thesis, dissertation, promotion of academic integrity and prevention of misconduct including plagiarism in academic writing among student, faculty, researcher and staff."*
- ii) *"To establish institutional mechanism through education and training to facilitate responsible conduct of research, thesis, dissertation, promotion of academic integrity and deterrence from plagiarism."*
- iii) *"To develop systems to detect plagiarism and to set up mechanisms to prevent plagiarism and punish a student, faculty, researcher or staff of HEI committing the act of plagiarism."*

²² Khan, Adams and Raesside (2014). Research Method for Business and Social Science Students. New Delhi, Sage.

²³ UGC (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2018, dated 23rd July, 2018. Retrieved From- https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/7771545_academic-integrity-Regulation2018.pdf

To fulfil the objectives, the duties of every HEI (Higher Education Institution) have been clearly mentioned in this Regulation. These are given below-

- Awareness Programs and Trainings for students, faculty, researcher and staff about proper acknowledgement of sources of information according to specific rules, conventions and regulations.
- Seminars, Course Work, Orientation and Refresher Courses should be organized meticulously;
- Modern technologies like plagiarism detection tools, reference management tools should be incorporated in every HEI.
- Encouragement of the faculty, researcher and staff to register on international researcher's Registry systems.
- To curbing Plagiarism, implementations of technology-based mechanism using appropriate software should be done properly. soft copies of research works should be submitted to INFLIBNET for hosting in the digital repository under the "Shodh Ganga e-repository" in proper time;
- Institutional Repository on institute website should be created;
- Policy on plagiarism should be developed by HEI;
- Plagiarism would be quantified into different levels, ranging from 'Level 0 (Minor) to Level 3 (Severe) i.e., 10% to 60%;
- Both Departmental Academic Integrity Panel (DAIP) and Institutional Academic Integrity Panel (IAIP) should be organized for reporting, investigation, recommendations and handling of Plagiarism;
- According to the levels of Plagiarism, penalties should be imposed on researcher, faculty & staff;
- Higher level of punishment should be recommended for the repeated plagiarism by the researchers.

It is expected that the new UGC Regulations help to uphold research ethics in every aspect of higher educational research.

7. Conclusion:

To protect the basic ethical guidelines of research every possible step should be maintained by the stakeholders. For this reason, MHRD, UGC, Different Educational Bodies under Central and State Governments and Research Wings of different Universities should be always cautious about the violation of the ethical norms, guidelines and take proper action for strengthening research ethics for the sake of qualitative enhancement of higher education and as well as upliftment of educational scenario of the country. Simultaneously, there is a great need to educate the researchers about the research practices and basic ethical guidelines. Therefore, we hope that collaborative and comprehensive efforts of all stakeholders will strengthen the ethical aspect of research for qualitative enhancement of Indian higher education.

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