Ramesh C. Gaur: Provide access to plagiarism detection software to researchers to use it as a research assisting tool than a fault finding tool

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Professor Ramesh C. Gaur is one of the globally renowned library and information professionals with nearly three decades of experience. Having served in prestigious organisations such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, CRRI-CSIR, RISDC, Management Development Institute, and IMT Ghaziabad, Prof. Gaur has rich experience in librarianship and archival science of different verticals.

He is presently Dean, Professor and Head of Kala Nidhi Division at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi. A Fulbright scholar and having visited more than two dozen countries on high-profile professional assignments, Prof. Gaur's global professional network has immensely helped him contribute to the Indian library and information professional community in myriad ways. He is associated with UNESCO, NDLTD, IFLA, International Centre for Documentary Heritage, CSIR, National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources, INFLIBNET, etc. on various key capacities.

Prof. Gaur has been working relentlessly, for almost a decade, on creating awareness about the perils of plagiarism and its avoidance and also ethical research practices on global and national platforms. As Dean of IGNCA, he is also directing a specially designed certificate course on Research Methodology besides conducting seven PG Diploma Courses and four Certificate courses at IGNCA. Being a Member of UGC's Draft Committee on Plagiarism Prevention Regulation and National Committee for Implementation of Submission and Access to Electronic Theses and Dissertations in Universities in India, he has great ideas and solutions to offer to curb the menace of plagiarism. In this interview for Open Interview, Santosh C. Hulagabali raises those questions that often intrigue many researchers on understanding plagiarism. Prof. Gaur shares amazing insights and solutions to collectively fight against the unethical practices.

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Your contribution in creating awareness about ethical writing and avoiding plagiarism is phenomenal. On behalf of the entire research community and our Open Interview readers, we appreciate you for the splendid work.

Thanks so much Open Interview team and its valued readers.

How did all this happen?

My first close encounter with the term plagiarism was when I joined JNU as University Librarian in 2011. In fact, the Executive Council of JNU had passed a resolution to provide plagiarism detection software (PDS) to the faculty, researchers and students in 2010. Prof. S. K. Sopory, the then Vice-Chancellor, asked me to look into the matter and prepare a proposal to comply the resolution. I began studying plagiarism, its theory, practices, misconceptions, etc. and also policies adopted by the leading universities like Harvard, Cambridge and other international universities. I prepared a proposal to subscribe a PDS. In the meantime, I arranged for free trial access to software. That was the beginning of my work and the rest is history.

I prepared guidelines to avoid plagiarism for the doctoral research students and made it mandatory to check their research works using PDS before final submission. Initially, there was resistance from academic fraternity but I could convince them of the benefits of using such tools for enhancing the quality of research. Later, it was made mandatory that Central Library of JNU would only accept the digital copies of the research works both for checking and digitisation. In the beginning, there were higher similarities and my initial research on this found that most of the research scholars and even some faculty members were not fully aware of the various plagiarism detection tools or software and the reference styles/standards and reference management tools like Mendeley and Endnote too.

To bridge the gap, Central Library of JNU started organizing series of highly practical-driven workshops on the use and benefits of plagiarism detection software. Besides, Author Workshops were also organised to guide students and faculty as to how to get their research work/s published in reputed journals.   Later, I realised that many students also needed help in effective writing (especially in English) and hence we subscribed to Grammarly software . During the summer break, with the help of Linguistic Empowerment Cell, English Remedial Course was started. I also started delivering talks on plagiarism detection and its avoidance and benefits of citation. To take this to next level, I organised various short-term training programmes for the academic and research community of JNU. During my tenure at JNU, a thesis tracking system was also developed for online submission of theses and dissertation.

To create awareness at the national level, I organised a national-level workshop on plagiarism at JNU. I believe that the workshop was the first its kind in the country that too only on 'plagiarism'. I also started updating all such programmes and policies regularly on social networking sites. Later I was happy to find that many other university libraries and librarians also started organising such training and awareness workshops. During

the same period, I contributed significantly creating awareness among other institutions as well. Later, as a member, I was part of the Plagiarism Committee constituted by CSIR. I engaged myself very much in the training activities. Noticing this, in 2017, Turnitin awarded me for my contributions.

The UGC passed regulation on *Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions* in 2018 (mentioned as 'Regulation' hereafter). As one of the members of the drafting committee of this Regulation, please share with us why this Regulation was deemed crucial and how it came in force?

In 2015, there were a number of cases on plagiarism where people from high positions, such as VCs, Directors, etc., were alleged for plagiarising. During that time, the Ministry of HRD, Government of India decided to form a Committee to draft plagiarism regulations for higher educational institutions in India. Initially, I was not part of that Committee. It was in 2016 the then Chairman of UGC, Prof. V.S. Chauhan called me up and requested my help in drafting the regulations to curb plagiarism. So formally I became a part of the Committee which also had Director, IIT Delhi, Director General of ICMR and three Vice-Chancellors of central and state universities as members. After series of meetings and revising many drafts, finally, the Committee submitted the regulations to the UGC in 2017 which was then forwarded to the Ministry of HRD for consideration. Thereafter, the draft regulations were further revised with the suggestions of the Ministry, and finally the regulation was notified by the UGC on 31st July, 2018. Let me tell you that the UGC (Promotion of Academic Integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2018 are the basic minimum guidelines. Based on this all the higher educational institutes need to draft the plagiarism policy for their faculty and students.

The UGC's Regulation is applicable to its recognised educational institutions across India. What about the educational institutes that are recognized by the other apex bodies like ICSSR, AICTE, ICHR, etc.? Doesn't this seem that academic regulatory bodies have varying policies and approaches in dealing with plagiarism? Isn't it possible to adopt one model plagiarism regulation pan India irrespective of any educational institute of any jurisdiction? What is your take on this?

 Yes, you are right. The Regulation is mandatory for all UGC recognised higher educational institutions and is not mandatory for non-UGC recognised institutions. However, many institutions like IITs, IIMs and some institutes under AICTE and CSIR have adopted these regulations. So in my opinion, the Government of India should make it mandatory for all the academic institutions to adopt the UGC Regulation, 2018 irrespective of any academic regulatory body (like CSIR, AICTE, etc.). It's a fact that

India is the first country to have such a national Regulation in place. I must share you this that during one of the international meetings, I got appreciation from the President of Academic Integrity Association, USA for India having the Regulation in place!

Is the Regulation obligatory for all UGC's recognised educational institutes to follow or is it optional? Because some universities have set different similarity index slabs. Should all the UGC recognised universities follow the same level of similarity index (as specified in the Regulation) or are they free to have differing similarity indices?

Yes, it is mandatory for all UGC recognised educational institutions. However, my suggestion is that all research and higher educational institutions in India must adopt this (UGC plagiarism) Regulation as model and should draft their plagiarism regulation/policies accordingly.

The Regulation mandates to have "technology based mechanism using appropriate software". But many of the Indian educational institutes especially the undergraduate colleges can't comply this as they are not equipped with 'propriety plagiarism detection software (PDS)'? How to address this issue?

Yes, it is true that many of the academic and research institutions in India do not have good quality PDS. It is really unfortunate that while millions of rupees are being spent on research work, academic institutes still hesitate to spend a few lakhs on PDS. It is a huge concern that even many top universities and do not pay heed to have quality PDS in place.

There is another issue with the PDS. Each software gives different similarity index. Many institutes are using different software as the Regulation just specifies to use (technology based mechanism) 'appropriate software'. How do you view this serious issue and bring uniformity?

I believe that there is a lot of confusion over good quality PDS. Basically, we should understand that the quality of PDS depends on two parameters. Firstly, the coverage of online content through similarities are checked and secondly, number of languages it covers. So, when you check your contents through different PDS, the similarity indices are going to be different. For instance, when you check your research work using Turnitin and also Urkund, you will certainly find two different similarity indices.   The difference is mainly due to the 'coverage'. So, to achieve uniformed similarity index, the software having greater 'coverage' needs to be used in all the universities. This seems a distant dream, but I am hopeful of seeing that day.

It is noticed that the theses checking process has become mechanical since they are checked by the clerical staff or those who are not fully into academics or research. Even the rules have not specified as to who should check. How do you

observe this?

In JNU, when I introduced the Turnitin software, its accounts were provided to all the faculty members, researchers and students. It was made mandatory for the research supervisors to use their accounts and even some faculty members were also provided login credentials of Turnitin. So the best person in my opinion is the researcher and to some extent the supervisory to check their research and academic writings. No software will tell you what plagiarism is? You have only similarity reports and on the basis of international convention, common practice and various citations rules you need analyse these similarities. One has to edit the contents to minimise the similarities.

The responsibility should be given to the Librarian and/or some persons in the Computer Centre to check the content using PDS for final submission only. Many a times, these people are not aware of setting up various parameters such as exclusions, common knowledge, coincidental terms and other issues.   So my humble submission to the Vice-Chancellors and head of departments is to provide access to plagiarism detection software to every researcher so that they use it as a research assisting tool than a fault finding tool.

Many institutes, research cells and research supervisors are sharing the responsibility of checking the document to the librarians. This is indeed a good trend. However, in this process, are the experts ignoring the actual review process (of the duly PDS checked document)? An expert can interpret well on the research document (of his/her field) both pre or post plagiarism check of the document. What do you say about this practice?

I agree that the responsibilities of checking final report for ensuring 10% similarity index as per the Regulation may be assigned to the Libraries/Librarians. This does not mean that research supervisors/educators should only limit their observation to the similarity index, within or beyond the limit. Therefore thorough initial checking and corrections should be done by the supervisors themselves. However, unfortunately, people who are managing research in our country are not well-versed with the tools and technologies required for research and data management.

In the broader perspective, is peer review process coming down- because in the name of PDS/software and its auto-generated similarity index, the actual review process has taken back seat. 'Similarity index' is grossly considered as yardstick to measure the quality of the research work. Even a document having less than 10% similarity index may not be a well-written work. What is your take on valuing 'review system' at the same time using software just as 'aid to help in the review process'?

Let me explain to you what do we mean by similarities to the contents. The software provides you the similarities to your content from online content available over the internet. So quality of a research paper is not necessarily decided on the basis of similarities. However, similarities of the contents are one of the important criteria. So the norm of 10% similarity as laid down by UGC is to restrict incessant copying and pasting. Yes, I am for the review system despite the PDS is in place. The review and use of PDS may go hand in hand but nothing should be skipped in overall review process whether to use any tool for improving the quality of the work or expert reviewing the work word by word.

Sometimes, the text/quantitative data can't be paraphrased or removed or reinterpreted. For instance, in the case of law and literature, the researcher uses a lot of verbatim text to interpret a judgment or a poem/dialogue since his/her works demands that. In such situation, when the document is checked for plagiarism, the PDS flags high similarity index. The researcher is in a fix. He/she can't bring it down to 10% as he can't paraphrase or remove or rewrite a 'highlighted/marked' judgment or a poem by PDS. What should be the solution to this?

As you know, 10% similarity index is permissible after removing all similar text/content based on necessary exclusions, such as in-text quotes, bibliography, in-text citations, common knowledge, and also co-incidental term up to fourteen consecutive words. All such terms mentioned in your question are part of common knowledge, so these are excluded from 10% similarity. Even similarities based on research paper contributed by Ph.D. students during the period of their research on the topic of research are also excluded from these 10% similarities. One should understand that whenever you need to use others' contents, it should be either in quotation marks or paraphrased and may be in summarised form only.

Many researchers, educational institutes, publication firms and academics are using free plagiarism checking tools online (as they can't afford proprietary software). Even those institutes who have the luxury of buying /proprietary PDS use it. How fair this practice is?

Yes, what you asked is the reality and it is not a fair practice. I never recommend use of open access /free PDS/tools because free software may misuse research document and also fail in checking the content with which is either in commercial domains or behind a firewall. So my suggestion and also advice to all institutions in India that they should go for authentic PDS that navigates widely to check major chunk of literature online. Yes, to make uniformed check with a single authentic PDS, government only can come in picture and provide such facility.

Most of the universities check the research work at the time of researcher submitting the final project to the university. It is because most of them don't have access to the PDS to check (multiple times/periodically) before submitting. In

result, researcher has to rework on the project at the last moment if software flags high similarity index (even 11%). Why can't we streamline this checking process? What solutions do you propose?

I agree with you. In JNU, all Ph.D. and M. Phil. students are provided an account to use Turnitin the day she/he joins the university. They are then advised to check their research papers/ projects on regular basis. Many of them have been using Grammarly also. They are also advised to get their content checked through their supervisors whenever they complete writing one chapter or two chapters. This is very crucial to follow and one should not bypass this peer-evaluation. Such things should be prevalent in other education institutes too.

Yes, the practice of checking thesis at the time of final submission is totally wrong and we should do away with such hurried approach. So the possible solution is to facilitate researchers and their supervisors with their registered account in the PDS.

The Regulation states that the penalties will be imposed in case the document has above 10% similarity index. How serious the universities are about imposing penalties? Because some are of the view that naming and shaming is the only option or penalty to discourage plagiarism.

As said before, the Regulation has minimum mandatory guidelines for all the UGC recognised higher educational institutes and are effective from the date of notification of the Regulation i.e. 31st July, 2018. None of the stakeholder should neglect this Regulation. The researcher community should also understand that it is in their interest to follow the Regulation in black and white. The Ph.D. is not a permanent title and it can be revoked or cancelled at any time if the research work is found plagiarised. There are number of cases where the research topics/ titles are changed but the content of the work is deliberately copied verbatim from different sources . The revoking of degree is not just enough. All institutes should create and provide necessary infrastructure by providing good quality PDS and also organizing various awareness programmes to create a good research

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India is producing research works in recognised regional languages too. Even the top level PDS are helpless in mining the regional language text and matching it? How do you view this status?

This is really unfortunate that till date no quality PDS is available to check the literature in recognized Indian languages. This is matter of great concern. However, no steps have been taken by any institute or Government in this direction.   When I was in JNU, I requested the developers of Turnitin for checking the contents of at least some Indian languages through Turnitin. Currently, both Turnitin and Urkund are widely used in India. So concerned authorities should take up the matter with their organisations to

include checking literature in Indian languages too. I would like to suggest that libraries and universities and institutions subscribing to these software may form a user forum and have dialogues with these companies.

Over the period of time, there may be different suggestions or issues that are cropped up in response to the Regulation. Some we have discussed in this interview. What changes or improvements do you still expect in the Regulation? Can we expect Regulation 2.0?

Yes, there is always room for improvement. Based on the feedback received from different stakeholders of all corners of India to relook the Regulation keeping some limitations and clarifications are in view. I would be happy to contribute if invited to revise these regulations. I am also keen to set up a Centre of Excellence for Academic Integrity at IGNCA. Currently, I am working as Dean at IGNCA, which is having eight PG Diploma Courses in Digital Library and Data Management; Cultural Informatics; Preventive Conservation; Buddhist Studies; South East Asian Studies, Cultural Management; Manuscriptology and Palaeography; and Tribal Studies. We also have five Certificate Courses on Research Methodology; Folklore; Screen Writing; Ethnography Documentary making; and Indian Knowledge Traditional System.

Our Research Methodology course is very popular and even some teachers from far off institutes have also enrolled. I am looking for a collaborative partner for this course from universities and other research institutes for further research work. I am also open to collaborative partnership to explore further avenues in these research areas.

What role the library and information professionals in specific can play in curbing the menace of plagiarism?

The issues of plagiarism, copyright, citation management, referencing, research and data management are some of the core ingredients of Library and Information Science (LIS) domain. Therefore, I see a great opportunity wide open for the LIS professionals for creating awareness of these segments. In 2015, when I had been to Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, i could see two credit pre-PhD coursework in place where the issues concerning plagiarism, its detection and avoidance was a significant part of it. Not only this, even data analytics, citation management, deep web search, open access, research data management, etc. were taught as per the curriculum. Since then, I have been fighting for such course in India. I have raised this issue to advocate similar initiative in the meetings of the Draft Committee of the Regulation.

I am glad that recently UGC introduced a credit-based course, i.e., Research Publication Ethics (RPE) as a mandatory paper for researchers. The majority of the course contents are related to library and information science which we have been teaching and training

from several years. So the LIS schools, university and college libraries should take the lead in conducting this course. This is how the library community can enhance research quality in India.

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