

Higher education needs more improvement: The case of Pakistan

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Madam, Misconduct and fraud in academia have always been a big problem for developing country researchers, and organizations like the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan have been struggling to block this dark side of science by blacklisting the academics involved in these unethical practices.¹ Moreover, recent papers highlighting the issue of scholarly black market and fake graduates draw our attention to address this issue more seriously.^{2,3} These papers have highlighted a major concern of selling and purchase of theses and dissertations which is indeed, damaging not only to the institutions but to a country's reputation and progress. Unfortunately, unlike the developed nations, there are no or very few research repositories in the institutions from the developing countries like Pakistan. There are only 3 repositories on the Directory of Open Access Repositories (DOAR) from Pakistan⁴ and the Pakistan Research Repository (<http://www.eprints.hec.gov.pk/>) is the largest collection of theses and dissertations of the three listed in DOAR however, it does not include undergraduate and MPhil theses, and this shortcoming has also been highlighted in a recent paper.⁵ Keeping in view the recent developments on these topics, and also considering the inclusion of a research project in undergraduate education programmes duly endorsed by the Higher Education Commission Pakistan,⁶ it is necessary to bring this issue into note that there is a maximum probability of theft of unpublished undergraduate and MPhil theses and dissertations. The Higher Education Commission Pakistan should take this issue seriously and should allow inclusion of undergraduate and MPhil research in its repository so as to improve the research dissemination and avoid scientific misconduct and fraud. It is worthwhile to mention that the HEC is also struggling to improve faculty and student training in information technology through initiatives like "Microsoft Office Specialist" Certification,⁷ another considerable alternative may be to instruct or force the higher education institutions to establish their respective research repositories

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since the institutions draw funds from the HEC and they must be used to improve this area as well. It is also noticeable that the HEC provides a detailed policy regarding the consequences and penalties of plagiarism however, it is unclear as to how the audit and monitoring of these cases is done.⁸ Moreover, the HEC also directs the universities to deal the cases by establishing a "Plagiarism Standing Committee" of subject experts but the criteria of such experts in their field is still not clearly defined.⁸ To conclude, it is of utmost importance to help undergraduate and masters' students disseminate their work and get its due credit without getting it stolen or hijacked by anyone else and this could only be possible if they are facilitated either by their institutions or the HEC to display their work online. It is also necessary to ensure the availability and access to the services provided by the HEC in order to improve the quality of higher education and to reduce the likelihood of any sort of misconduct and fraud.

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