Chapter 5
Impact of Ethical Dilemmas on the Dignity of Higher Education and Research

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ABSTRACT

Higher education broadens the mind, promotes ethicality, and ensures dignity. It can escalate a nation to new heights of progress and growth. However, there is an ethical debate going on. A massive young population is knocking at the doors of higher education while the society is crying "foul" for lack of emphasis on academic ethics. There is a need to re-orient, re-create, and enrich the systems of learning and to safeguard the dignity of higher education. This is the rationale behind this chapter, and the objective is to take an investigative look at the ethical dilemmas in higher education and research and the need for reforms. The study is based on a review of literature, discussion with experts, and an online survey probing the respondents' thoughts and feelings on the ethical conduct in the higher education sector. Responses show optimism that ethical culture can be altered and the dignity of higher education can be restored.

INTRODUCTION

It is higher education that makes a difference in a country's overall development. Higher education can take a nation to new heights of progress and leadership and can cause a big revolution in the knowledge-based growth of a country, especially when the world is full of young population waiting at the doors of higher education. However, there is also a lot of concern on the lack of emphasis on academic ethics.

It is generally felt that there is a need for good governance, reforms in regulations, accountability and transparency in the higher education sector. Society expects practical ethics in higher education and the need of the hour is to re-orient and re-create higher education by re-vitalising the systems of learning, making it more professional and vocational-driven, expanding its reach, and, eventually making it more relevant, fruitful and ethical.

Ethics in education is the application of our understanding of what is good and right to the activities and pursuits in the field of education. However, ethics is difficult to define. An action may be legal, but still not ethical, and, it depends on one's thinking and background. Therefore, a universal definition of what is ethically right and what is morally wrong cannot be finalised. It may be defined with reference to the values established by a particular society or culture. Ethical reasoning is the process of sorting out the principles that help determine what is ethical when faced with ethical dilemmas (Cook & Hunsaker, 2001).

Nevertheless, major ethical issues in education, like, the social and cultural harms of unethical practices, harm to the dignity of education, the manipulative influences, false promises etc have become targets of serious social criticism, and, in the present day higher education scenario, there is a strong need to safeguard the rights of education and to create an ethically healthy climate.

As such, there are no exclusive ethical guidelines for institutions offering higher education, and, there are wide spread criticisms on unethical behaviour of the academic community. There is an on-going debate on whether higher educational institutions ensure equality with regard to cast, colour, gender, religion, or disability; whether the human and educational rights are protected; and, whether there is respect and regard for educational norms.

These ethical dilemmas make us realise that there is a strong need to seriously view the ethical issues in higher education and higher educational institutions should come out with vision statements that emphasise on value-based education. Many argue that teachers should take the lead and set examples as ethical models to students. Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne (1997) stated that the interaction between students and teachers is also a factor affecting students cheating.

It is believed that ethical habits and value systems are formed at early years of life starting from the childhood, and, therefore, higher educational institutions and universities are not responsible for ethical developments. However, no one can deny that moral and ethical developments occur throughout life, and, we keep seeing ethical disputes and issues in our society. In spite of having certain common ethical norms, different people interpret and apply these norms differently based on their own individual values and experiences.

In higher education, there are complex ethical issues in almost all academic disciplines. Hence, higher education should be based on appropriate research and critical analysis. Students of higher education, like, PhD students, have important ethical responsibilities towards their discipline, their research subjects and their universities. All their research activities should be done in an ethical manner, following all the norms, rules and regulations of the government, university and professional guidelines. Misconduct in research, like, fabrication of data, falsification of data, violation of the prescribed guidelines of the university, plagiarism etc are unacceptable and should be treated seriously.

The ethical environment of higher education and research has been a matter of great concern, and, the misconduct in university-based research, ethical behaviour of doctoral students and faculty, is being widely debated. Whether the behaviour of the faculty members have influence on the value systems and ethical standards of students and whether it leads both students and faculty to indulge in questionable research practices, religion and gender based discriminations, sexual harassment, cheating in course work etc are now openly discussed. This is making people talk more openly on ethical issues and the ethical dilemmas faced in higher education and research. Such endless ethical debate on the quality and dignity of higher education keeps going on, emphasising the need to address certain important issues. To meet the highest ethical and scientific standards all teachers, researchers, and members of ethics committees should be fully conversant with the relevant ethical principles and requirements (Aarons, 2003).

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