

HEC chalks out a lesson for plagiarists

By Mansoor Malik

LAHORE, Sept 25: Clearing the mist of uncertainty that had clouded the plagiarism issue, the Higher Education Commission has finally come up with a policy that calls for highlighting the menace of literary theft and curbing it through exemplary punitive actions.

It also emphasises the need to guard against bogus or false complaints in order to prevent victimisation which may make researchers and scholars shy away from work simply because of the fear of prosecution.

The HEC has circulated the policy document among respective universities as well as the Academic Staff Associations' office-bearers for their information. In order to facilitate the institutions and organisations in creating awareness about the issue, the commission has also sent a modified version of "Little Book of Plagiarism", a publication of the Leeds Metropolitan University, to all concerned.

The commission says any university or degree-awarding institution, which does not adopt and implement this policy, will have its degree de-recognised by it.

Says the HEC: "A formal plagiarism policy is being sent to all concerned to create awareness, define various forms in which plagiarism exhibits itself, present a methodology of investigation, cater for punitive action proportional to the extent of the offence and even address the issue of false or spurious complaints".

It has defined plagiarism in the words of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, which says: "Taking and using the thoughts, writings, and inventions of another person as one's own". It also says there are various similar definitions found in recognised publications/documents which are very broad and can be used to create awareness about plagiarism but are not practical enough to apply in order to ascertain guilt or innocence in specific cases.

In order to establish the violation of ethical norms, or academ-

ic or intellectual dishonesty resulting from plagiarism and to take punitive actions in this regard, the HEC has also explained the variety of forms in which the curse manifests itself.

The aim of this policy, says the commission, is to inform students, teachers, researchers and staff about plagiarism and how it can be avoided. It is also aimed at discouraging plagiarism by regulating and authorising punitive actions against those found *guilty of the offence*.

The HEC says the policy is applicable to students, teachers, researchers and staff of all institutions and organisations in Pakistan, who are involved in writing or publishing their work.

Any person listing his CV on the website or any current publication or applying for any benefit on the basis of published or presented work that is plagiarised will be liable to be punished according to the prescribed rules.

The HEC has stressed that all institutions and organisations must acquaint their students, teachers, researchers and staff with this policy and ensure that they are fully aware that all authors are deemed to be individually and collectively responsible for the contents of papers published by journals/publishers, etc. Hence, it is the responsibility of each author, including the co-authors, to ensure that the papers submitted for publication should attain the highest ethical standards with respect to plagiarism.

It says a complaint about plagiarism must be provided to the commission in detail as well as with authenticity. Upon receipt of an allegation of plagiarism, the HEC Quality Assurance Division will request the respective vice-chancellor/rector/head of the organisation to carry out investigation.

To investigate a plagiarism case, the VC/rector/head of organisation will be required to constitute a "Plagiarism Standing Committee" comprising three senior faculty members, a subject specialist in that particular field is to be co-opted, a senior student (only if a student is being investigated upon), and a nominee of the HEC. The seniority of the members of the PSC should be of a level keeping in view the seniority of the indi-

vidual being investigated upon and the nature and gravity of the offence.

They will also be required to provide guideline as well as terms of reference for investigation, prepared by the HEC for the functioning of the PSC, to all members of the committee.

The commission says the PSC members will be required to sign a confidentiality statement that during the investigation they will, under no circumstances, disclose any individual author's name, paper titles, referees, or any other personal or specific information concerning the plagiarism complaint under investigation. Nor shall they reveal the names of the committee members.

The PSC members will also provide opportunity to the author(s) under investigation to justify the originality of their concepts and research work. Similar opportunity will also be provided to the author whose ~~paper is deemed to have been~~ plagiarised and/or the complainant to justify the complaint.

The PSC will be required to submit its report with clear-cut findings and recommendations to the VC/rector/head of the organisation within a specified period not exceeding 60 days. The authorities concerned will have the discretion to implement the recommendations after approval through the statutory process and take punitive action against the offender in the light of the penalties prescribed under this policy or to forward the report to the HEC or his/her parent organisation for further action, if outside their purview/jurisdiction.

PENALTIES: Prescribing penalties, the HEC says plagiarism is an intellectual crime so the penalties should not only take into account the severity and recurrence of the offence but also the intellectual standing of the offender. This entails a gradual increase in punitive action with minimum punishment for a first-time offence by a student who copies a homework assignment to a maximum punishment for a teacher/researcher/staff who attempts to present/publish, or actually presents/publishes

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plagiarised material as his own in a conference/journal.

Therefore, it says, the punishments for plagiarism have been divided into two separate categories — those for teachers, researchers and staff, and those for the students.

TEACHERS, RESEARCHERS AND STAFF: When an act of plagiarism is found to have occurred, the PSC in its recommendations, depending upon the seriousness of the proven offence, will advise the competent authority of the organisation to take any one or a combination of the disciplinary action(s) against the teacher, researcher and/or staff found guilty of the offence:

MAJOR PENALTY: In cases where most of the paper (or key results) have been exactly copied from any published work of other people without giving the reference to the original work, a major penalty of dismissal from service needs to be prescribed, along with 'blacklisting' of the offender who may not be eligible for employment in any academic/research organisation. And the notification of blacklisting of the author(s) may be published in the print media or may be publicised on different websites at the discretion of the VC/rector/head of the organisation.

MODERATE PENALTY: In case where some paragraphs, including some key results, have been copied without citation, a moderate penalty involving any one or both of the following needs to be imposed: demotion to the next lower grade; the notification of blacklisting of the author(s) which may be published in the print media or may be publicised on different websites at the discretion of the VC/rector/head of the organisation.

MINOR PENALTY: In case a few paragraphs have been copied from an external source without giving reference to that work, minor penalties need to be prescribed for a specified period involving any one or more of the following: warning; freezing of all research grants; the promotions/annual increments of the offender may be stopped for a specified period; and the HEC or the university/organisation may debar the offender from sponsorship of research funding, travel grant, supervision of PhD students, scholarship, fellowship or any other funded programme for a period as deemed appropriate by the PSC.

STUDENTS: When an act of plagiarism is found in a thesis, the responsibility of plagiarism will be of the student and not of the supervisor or members of the supervisory committee.

The policy says the offender may be expelled/rusticated from the university and from joining

any institution of higher education in Pakistan for a period as deemed appropriate by the PSC. A notice may be circulated among all academic institutions and research organisation to the effect.

The offender may also be relegated to a lower class; given a failure grade in the subject; fined an amount as deemed appropriate; given a written warning if the offence is minor and is committed for the first time.

The policy also says the degree of a student may be withdrawn if at any time it is proven that he or she has presented plagiarised work in his/her MS, MPhil or PhD dissertation, if the extent of plagiarism comes under the category of major penalty.

The notification of the plagiarism by the author(s) may be published in the print media or may be publicised on different websites at the discretion of the VC/rector/head of the organisation. The HEC or the university/organisation may also debar the offender from sponsorship of research funding, travel grant, scholarship, fellowship or any other funded programme for a period as deemed appropriate and any other penalty deemed fit by the PSC.

The HEC has also recommended some additional actions, if the offence of plagiarism is established. These include: removal of plagiarised paper's access from the web page but kept in its database for future research or legal purposes; the author(s) will be asked to write a formal letter of apology to the authors of the original paper that was plagiarised. It will include an admission of plagiarism. Should the author(s) refuse to comply, additional punishments as deemed fit may be recommended by the PSC.

If the paper is submitted but not published yet, the paper will be rejected by the editor-in-chief or the programme chair without further revisions and without any further plagiarism investigation conducted. However, warning may be issued to the author/co-author.

APPEAL: As the penalties are severe, the affected person(s) will have the right to appeal to the HEC chairman/VC/rector/head of the organisation for a review of the findings or may submit a mercy petition within 30 days from the date of notification. Such appeals/petitions will be disposed of within 60 days of receipt, by following the laid down procedures.

MISREPORTING/FALSE ALLEGATION: If the case of plagiarism is not proved and it is confirmed that a false allegation has been lodged, the VC/rector/head of the organisation will inform the complainant's organisation and recommend disciplinary action against the complainant.