Research in an academic world is an unequivocal criterion for promotion. This being the situation, leaves little option for individuals; publish or perish is the law of the academic world. This is the reason there is such a concern regarding authorship, intellectual property rights and plagiarism. Recently, there was a lot of mudslinging, in public domain, regarding a ‘thesis theft’. Though this equates to washing dirt linen in public, there is a lesson for all individuals in academic positions.

In an academic world in Pakistan, one sees a flurry of publication just prior to a promotion. Subsequently, the pulse line or academic brain-waves seize to function beyond Beta waves – a state of somnolence.

Critical question is: why people do research besides this compulsion? Some do research for the sake of inquisitiveness, while other do it for the sake of discovering the mysteries of science. There might be less noble reasons like fame and recognition. Dictionary defines research as “diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories, and applications”. The logical next question is do we have the critical mass of individuals engaged in this systematic search?

Facts are contrary to claims. Worthwhile research output does not match with the number of professors in all the disciplines. Knowledge generated in academic centres of Pakistan is abysmally low; most of it is reproduction of facts, while some is blatant plagiarism. Others resort to more tactful means, like claiming other peoples’ work as their own, using their position and authority. At times, research-thesis meets the same fate as poacher’s ivory; supervisors utilize the literature-review, discussion or some other relevant component of the paper. This creates a culture of exploitation, rivalry and negative competition.

Individuals who do not have the knowledge, skills and perseverance to pursue academic path, resort to seeking power, in order to fulfill their ambitions. In this scenario, it makes sense to have connection in the echelon of powers. This is the legacy or mentorship people leave behind, rather than unceasing work, discipline and dedication to burning midnight oil.

Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) aptly said, “But to write well is as hard as to be good”. Everyone is not committed to such moral standards. Some drift into academic path purely for financial reasons. Academic path is never expected to generate high revenues, except in certain situations. There is a dire need to have an academic and non-academic path, where people can choose between two, knowingly. Those aspiring to go in academic paths would be expected to learn the skills of the trade.

To learn to dot all the i’s and cross all the t’s, to be able to think divergently, discern facts from perception, reason logically and work persistently towards the genuine uncertainty of not-knowing is an art as well as a science. While one can teach the science and its methods, art can only be acquired through commitment to the master, during the training years.

Our institutions continue to be plagued by malaise of academic misconduct. Academic councils and monitoring agencies continue to look the other way. It is only recently that higher education commission has begun to pay attention to these academic frauds. Some time ago, a professor in a University of Punjab was asked to step down from his academic position on account of plagiarism. This has served to create deterrence, though its nuisance value is yet to be determined. Academic centres in western countries have advanced to such an extent that they teach their students to scrutinize their papers in softwares, which can check chance plagiarism. Turn-it-in-dot-com is one such software, besides other useful resource softwares. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has also acquired a useful software that all journals recognized by HEC can utilize to detect plagiarism.

Another contentious issue in research publications is authorship. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has developed guidelines based on the principle that authorship should be based only on a substantial contribution to: (i) conception and design, or acquisition of data, or
analysis and interpretation of data, (ii) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content and (iii) final approval of the version to be published. Some guidelines have delineated a scoring system, awarding points for specific contribution, thereby delineating authorship. It specifically discourages gift authorship. It is best that issues related to authorship are discussed up-front, prior to undertaking the project. This would also help clarify the responsibilities. While the guidelines related to authorship are vivid, the power dynamics and its boundaries are quite blurred. This is most pronounced in case of research student-mentor relationship; while the former is acquiring necessary skills and competencies, the latter is expected to guide him/her through this pathway. Guidelines recommend that any person, who has two or more publications in peer-reviewed indexed journal, qualifies for being a mentor. Though publication history does make an individual research savvy, more is required to be a mentor. To facilitate a learning process, dealing with disappointments, overcoming the hurdles in research are some of the processes mentor is expected to take his or her mentee through. This requires considerable time and wisdom.

Ultimately, it is the question per se, which matters. There is no benefit in having a right answer for the wrong question. For those who dare to ask the right question, life is a continuous journey of growth and discovery. Academic councils like CPSP, journal editors and others at the helm of affairs need to take notice of the current situation, if this malaise of plagiarism and research misconduct is to be rooted out.

REFERENCES