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“Research Malpractices Among M.Phil. Scholars in Quetta: a Multiple case study”

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KEY WORDS

ABSTRACT

**Ethical;
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Academic research is considered as the cornerstone of postgraduate studies and uncountable research studies are done per year at M.Phil. level in Pakistan every year. However, how ethically and honestly these studies are conducted are worth exploring. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify the research malpractices from three public universities of Quetta City. The data were collected through interview and observation methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through purposive sampling from 40 participants (Supervisors and scholars) from all three public universities. The participant observation method was also employed. The transcribed interviews and field notes were analyzed through a thematic analysis approach. The data analysis revealed that variety of malpractices were being practiced by M.Phil. scholars such as getting purchased/prepared thesis or research papers, plagiarism, fake data, unethical friends and family support. On the other hand, laziness, lack of interest in research, lack of knowledge related to research and software, weak supervisory practices were the main reasons behind these malpractices. The recommendations provided a pathway for both researchers and supervisors to observe the malpractices and combated them.

Introduction

Academic research is considered as the cornerstone of postgraduate studies and uncountable research studies are conducted per year at (Master of Philosophy) M.Phil. level in Pakistan. Education research is based on some predefined and mandatory steps (Varia, 2011). Violating these basic steps and procedures can lead to generation of unreliable and inefficient results with limited scope and implications (Mills & Gay, 2009). Most importantly, according to Creswell (2003), researchers must engage with ethical standards in all of these steps of research in order to generate more authentic and ethically appropriate results. Therefore, The American Educational Research Association (AERA) has developed a set of ethical standards to ensure professionalism, integrity and responsibility in research (Mills & Gay, 2009). Similarly, Parveen and Showkat, (2017) claim that authentic and self-conducted research ensures professional recognition and validation of research.

Bassey and Owan (2019) define ethics in research as following all predefined rules and regulations, codes and conditions. Ethics is regarded as one of the primary considerations in research (Creswell, 2003). Ethics ensure the integrity of the research by making research practices transparent (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024). However, it has been reported that this consideration has been paid less attention by some researchers. For example, it has been noticed that many successful scientists had failed to produce professionally and ethically sound research studies such as in 1995 Vandervoort observed malpractices like damaging of research work plagiarized and false documentations, coping and pasting lack of awareness of the actual problem led to professional failure.

On the other hand, ethically appropriate and self-conducted research

contributes in production of professionally appropriate and valid results (Parveen & Showkat, 2017). They are also regarded as meaningful and useful research (Chowdhury et al., 2016). Therefore, The Academy of Australia recommends to bring more laborious efforts to bring improvements in research ethics (Lucas & Lidstone, 2000). Researchers also suggest to train university students to avoid research malpractices (Walliman, 2011). Based on the importance of ethics in research, it has been suggested that more research is required in order to identify the broader trends (Leblanc & Williams-jones, 2023).

Thus, the objectives of this study were to:

1. Explore the research malpractices among the M. Phil. scholars in higher educational institutions of Quetta city.
2. Identify the reasons behind research malpractices among the M.Phil. scholars in higher educational institutions of Quetta city.

Literature Review

Research Malpractice

Academic research aims at offering solutions to the problems in a systematic and scientific method (Walliman, 2011). This systematic method contains some ethical considerations and violations of which may affect the quality, rigor and implications of its results (Newby, 2010). Similarly, for David and Resnik, (2013) the worthiness of research highly depends how it is free from malpractice. Bassey and Owan (2019) identified various research malpractices in research related to education. Copyright violations, Fabrication, plagiarism, disclosure, falsification, and unfair authorship, weak data management and supervision, publication and referencing were the issues highlighted by them. While Haneef and Agrawal (2024), consider lack of technical proficiency —not having ability and skills to conduct research effectively—, lack of

integrity, lack of professional accountability and researchers prejudice and bias were some malpractices present in education research. In addition, according to Leblanc and Williams-jones (2023), the competitive environment in institutions for research grants and publications has led towards production of unethical and falsified research practices. Another issue highlighted by them was lack of proper supervision to the students or research team members as well as unclear ethical guidelines by the supervisors or institution research board. Pakistan Library and Information Sciences Research Center has observed the lack of guidance from the supervisor which compel the new researchers towards unethical research malpractices (Memon, 2007).

Parveen and Showkat (2017) declared that although advanced technology and research ethical boards or committees have made various rigid steps to minimize research malpractice in every department but still it seems to be unfollowed by the many researchers. On the other hand, David and Resnik (2013) found rare cases (less than 1%) of malpractices in experimental research in sciences. However, they warned that this percent may also have negative impacts on the science and society and therefore researcher should be trained and well aware of research ethics. Creswell, (2012) also recommended that scholars must have plenty of information and training regarding research work and publications.

In addition to training, the steps of research should be followed carefully and honestly in order to produce authentic and reliable results. Common malpractices are found in different steps of research work like citing, data collection and analysis in order to conclude with desired result (Dhanju, 2020). Moreover, Dhanju (2020) claimed that malpractices would vanish if the researcher carefully processes the research work with honesty and ethically. He further added that in order to get

transparent results, the malpractices such as plagiarism, fabrication, and distortion should be avoided.

According to Memon, (2007), some research opt malpractices in research because their topic for research and sample for data collection of that topic are not appropriately strong in order to get rich information. In addition to this McCulloch et al. (2022) considered plagiarism a major research malpractice and recommended that the supervisors must clarify the literature review writing paraphrasing, and citing so research work would be free of plagiarism and malpractice. Illegal publication and authorization of supervisors by force are some other research malpractices highlighted by Dhanju (2020).

Furthermore, another issue that leads to research malpractices is unethical use of software and Artificial Intelligence (AI) for rephrasing, literature review, data analysis and interpretation (Metcalf, 2026). AI applications even can help to generate a complete research paper or report. AI integration in research has caused various ethical issues such as “accountability, misinformation, explainability, clarity, privacy transparency, social manipulation and ownership” (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024, p. 35). Therefore, well known publishers such as Springer-Nature or Taylor & Francis are strictly forbidding use of AI in research (Calderon & Herrera, 2025). Similarly, Srivastava et al. (2025) considers AI has one of the main challenges to maintain ethical considerations in research. While, McCulloch et al. (2022) found that research scholars use some software unethically in order to write their review of literature. On the other hand, Walters and Wilder (2023) warned that text generated from AI usually contains errors and fabrications in referencing and citations.

Methodology:

The paper is qualitative multiple-case study research with an inductive paradigm to explore research malpractices among M. Phil. Scholars in Quetta City. Three public universities were selected by using purposive sampling. Though qualitative research is not very generalizable, it offers detailed and systematic information about the problem based on a systematic process of introduction, methodology, results, and discussion (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, a qualitative approach can be deemed the most appropriate in this research.

A multiple case-study design was chosen in this study to critically analyze three public universities (Yin, 2009). Observations and interviews were used to collect data and triangulate across various sources because of the sensitivity of malpractice. In this research, purposive sampling was used where M.Phil. scholars were selected with research experience in different faculties to make sure that the right respondents were selected in this multiple-case study. Table 1 below presents the details of sample:

Table 1.
Sample of the study

S #	Universities	Names of universities	Faculties / Dept:	No of scholars	No of supervisors
1	U1	SBKWU	All available faculties	7	7
2	U2	BU ITEMS	All available faculties	6	6
3	U3	UOB	All available faculties	7	7
	Total			20	20

Moreover, Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was used for data analysis through ATLAS.ti software.

On the other hand, laziness, lack of interest in research, lack of knowledge related to research and software, weak supervisory practices were the main reasons behind these malpractices. The recommendations

provided a pathway for both researchers and supervisors to observe the malpractices and combated them.

Findings

The data analysis revealed that variety of malpractices were being practiced by M.Phil. scholars such as getting purchased/prepared thesis or research papers, plagiarism, fake data, unethical friends and family support. The findings show that students treat research as merely a completion of a course or degree rather than an academic pursuit. As a result, they tend to seek "unethical" or even "illegal" help from their peers, family or research service providers. The data analysis revealed extensive cheating among M.Phil. students. One of the problems was the use of others to help complete research tasks, especially for those with professional careers. Students reported using paraphrasing software, report writing services and other types of help. Further, time-consuming tasks like interview transcription were commonly outsourced. There were clear breaches of research ethics, some even illegal.

Purchased/Prepared Thesis or Research Papers

Interestingly, the data analysis revealed that purchased or prepared thesis and research papers were available for submission and publications.

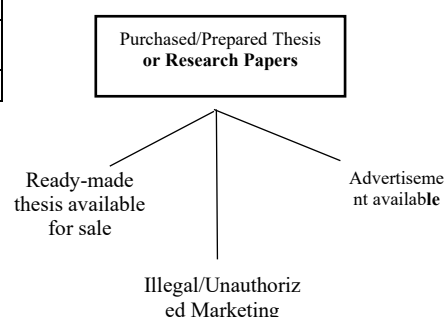


Figure 1: Purchased/Prepared Thesis or Research Papers

The data analysis revealed that a severe violation of research ethics was the sale of entire pre-written thesis or sections of work, such as literature reviews. Students after purchasing that would submit it as their own work. In this regard, a scholar said, “Yes, now there are many people who do your research even some are on job... so they continue their study and pay” (BUIITEMS P: 8)”. In some cases, M. Phil scholars would made minor alterations to purchased work or plagiarize parts of other's work. “I receive emails where I am offered to purchase ready made papers and the amount for first author, second other and third author are different” claimed a supervisor (UoB P:1). More interestingly, it also validated weak supervision as supervisors did not check their work properly to stop them at the start of thesis work as a supervisor, claimed:

I gave task to one of my students to write literature review. She brought some drafts in the beginning and gave my feedback. After few days, she brought a complete draft of her literature review chapter. After evaluating the draft, I found that neither written language nor content shows it is her work. At that time, we did not have any software to check AI. So, I copied and pasted the intext citations in google and found that literature review of a thesis from an American university was rephrased through a software and submitted. The student accepted that she paid Rs. 20000 for review of literature. So it is responsibility of the supervisor to check students work thoroughly (SBKWU P: 3).

During study period, the research was also offered to get her work done on payment (O-day 7). Thus, selling of theses and articles for academic purposes was common, allowing students to acquire degrees in unethical ways.

The findings also confirmed that some people especially researchers misuse

their expertise to offer illegal services to prepare work for other researchers. The research found that markets where people overtly offer their thesis writing services through social media. These encourage academic misconduct by providing paid services to write a complete thesis or part based on students' lack of skills and time. A scholar claimed, “Yes, I am hiring an expert to finish my thesis for pay. He has a space at [name] Plaza where anybody can come and meet him easily [UoB P: 6].”

This trade in thesis writing is advertised through social media and marketplaces; such Brazen and unethical publicity was being reflected through data analysis. A scholar shared, “Yes, many advertisements offer such services, and some students accept them if they are satisfied while others do not. Often, it's because students lack clarity or skills, leading them to these practices” (SBKWU P: 6). Another student testified to have her thesis done for her by her teacher”

Three or four girls in my class had their theses done for them and even offered to do mine for a fee of fifty thousand rupees, plus extra for any lab work involved. They told me to check formatting requirements with my supervisor and then referred me to them for guidance. The lab work, however, had to be paid extra owing to complexity (BUIITEMS P: 4).

Thus, there are many unethical marketing practices of research services for academic quick fixes. These activities are unethical and illegal, promoting the use of external help rather than independent research.

Plagiarism

The data analysis revealed that widespread instances of individuals "publishing" other people's work. The study reveals that respondents reported

cases where researcher’s plagiaries and publish work in their name, even with the prevention measures in place.

The study also shows the common practice of copying and making slight changes to others’ work for publication with new authors (especially when there was not any software to detect use of AI). There were instances where people published work with minor modifications of previously published content or submitted others’ work. Although researchers were aware of potential consequences (such as paper rejection or blacklisting), some continue such practices, suggesting ongoing violations of academic integrity. A supervisor from UoB said, “to achieve goals, they rephrasing others work (UoB P:9). Another teacher expressed, “those who rephrase others work and put their name is completely illegal work as researcher it is against research ethics”. (SBKWU P :10). A scholar added, “yes, sometimes people suggested to use spinbot so I went to spinbot and rephrase the passages from the other literatures (BUITEMS P:10).

Fake Data

Another interesting finding was using fake data in the research. The scholars mentioned that data collection was difficult and time consuming therefore they entered fake data in their thesis. There were different methods of using fake data. Some scholars entered fake data for analysis while others entered parts of their data wrongly in order to complete the propose number of respondents. A supervisor shared her experience as, “when I checked data of one of my scholars, I found lot of statistical issues in data.... The scholar claimed that one of her passed-out classmates have told her that she did not collect actual data and just entered false data in SPSS. So, the scholar did the same” (UoB P:5).. And other scholar claimed, “ I could only collect 50 questionnaires. The teachers were not

giving me any data. Therefore, after reviewing the collected data, I myself entered all data (BUITEMS P:3).. Other issues with the data were highlighted by a supervisor was handling with missing data, “no one does perfect work even instead of handling with missing data they enter fake data (BUITEMS P:5)..

Unethical Help from Friends and Family

A number of respondents claimed to seek help from friends and family members, violating the principle of working individually. Help was often provided for data analysis and technical issues because of a lack of expertise, especially in statistics and software. Although students regarded this help as beneficial, it was often unethical. Students reported they received illegal help from their senior students or peers in writing literature review, paraphrasing and referencing. This assistance often substituted for learning and led to academic dishonesty. “Yes, I took a lot of help from friends and senior friends I asked for many things they guide me before e hand about many difficulties” (BUITEMS P: 8).

Another student declared :

Most of the senior friends helped me guided me a lot I had no idea in all that so in literature review I mostly asks friends that how to rephrase the words and how to rephrase the sentences and they helped me while guiding me orally and they also told me how to give citations (SBKWU P:9)

The scholars also highlighted that they sometime get support of their family members as well. As a supervisor shared, “ you know her (a colleague’s) all thesis was written by her husband. Is it fair” (BUITEMS P: 2).. A scholar said, “ I was weak in English so my brother who is

studying in Multan wrote my thesis” (SBKWU P:8). A supervisor from UoB mentioned, “ you know both husband and wife are from same discipline so they add their names into their publications and therefore they have many publications as compared to us”.

Reasons Behind Research Malpractices

The data analysis revealed many reasons that lead scholars to be involved in research malpractices. These reasons were mainly because of scholars or because of their supervisors.

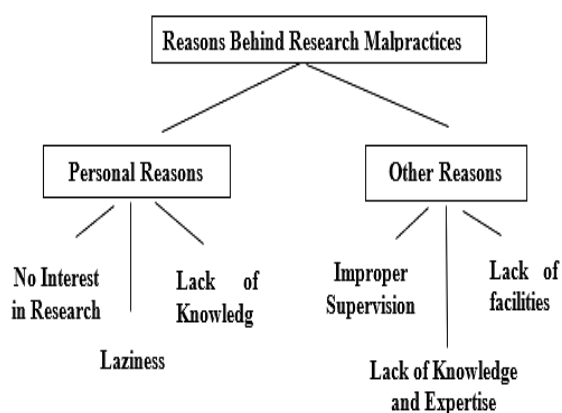


Figure 2: Reasons Behind Research Malpractices

The research found the personal and external factors that lead to research malpractices, such as interest, environment, resources and skills. Firstly, the data analysis revealed that the main reason was scholars’ lack of interest towards research. They relied on supervisors to choose their topics, rather than exploring their own research according to their interests. Secondly, scholars demonstrated a disinclination to conduct serious research, sometimes seeking to get degrees only. The time-consuming nature of research also provided an opportunity for the use of unethical methods. As a scholar claimed, “It is really getting rid of it ... and it is wrong practice people do so and due to the laziness people also go for the wrong practice and ask other and I think so it is

like a dishonesty with oneself and with others like institute (SBKWU P:12)

Thirdly, lack of resources, especially in science, limited research. Failing to get access to equipment’s, training opportunities and laboratories meant students had to change their topics or produce poor quality work. Along with resources, scholars also lacked required knowledge and expertise in research. They had inadequate knowledge of research methods, data analysis and technical knowledge. Low computer skills and lack of knowledge on research methods played a major role. In addition, the scholars had weak English reading, comprehension and academic writing skills and because this weakness they opted unethical practices to complete their research.

A scholar shared:

In lab work we had the issue of seasonal plant. They expired and got dried due to its duration after that we had to until another season. When there is less time after that we cannot get it so we work fast in lab work then vacations start due to this we got late. We had two options, to change the topic or copy past findings. due to this can’t be done so for this reason scholars go for the malpractice they ask other universities for the facilities by someone else such sort of help from others make misconduct easily (SBKWU P:7).

Another scholar added:

Look no one is complete help people require some may take because not everyone can do all the work, they may need at any of area in research and I think it is given and take process help other people will help you. Yes, there are some people it is their

level in this way a person cannot learn, learning will be lack If you put all the burden on others but yourself is unaware of all learning (BUTIEMS P:4).

About computer skills a scholar claimed:

Yes, I know and people do ask including me that due to the lack of skill in computer they give their data analyzation on payment and people who are having no knowledge in literature or their base was not made then they ask to do their literature review (UoB P:8).

Most importantly, research shows that some supervisors do not offer sufficient academic support. Especially in complex areas such as literature review and data analysis. Some supervisors did not help scholars in identify significant problems and gave hurried approval which makes scholars unable to complete their work and as a result they opt unethical means. Insufficient supervision was partially blamed on job demands, which had a negative impact on research quality and fostered unethical behaviors. “I keep waiting for my supervisor’s comments or reviews for weeks but no response,” said a scholar. A supervisor also argued, “actually we are over burdened due to administrative responsibilities and do not get proper time to guide them”.

Discussion

Research work is part of building the academic profile of scholars, and publications are key to advancing their careers. According to Gaber, (2016), in an effort to add to their curricula vitae, researchers sometimes get involved in malpractices. However, according to Dhanju (2020) research malpractices should be resisted, and that is possible if institutions like the HEC and publishers insist on maintaining standards. He further

believed that if other disciplines can have quality assurance effective enough, in the same vein should it be for educational research to prove utmost seriousness towards upholding standards for higher integrity. This has been distilled to the meaning that many scholars consider research as burdensome. Some do not pay maximum attention to the subject matter and therefore reduce its relevance to developing professionally. According to Memon, (2007), most researchers get confused as to the title of research and subtopics which may create more complications.

Research should be about finding solutions to the actual problems; however, it was proved that some researchers are trying to evade this responsibility by seeking to buy pre-written work. According to Burgess, (2005) some scholars with tight schedules opt to buy completed projects because of their busy schedules. (Harris, J. John, III; Carter, 1980) has defined different problems as ethical ones helping researchers know how malpractices can be fought back more efficiently. Sometimes, malpractices are halted because supervisors do not guide their scholars appropriately. (Dhanju, 2020) has stated that supervisors should train the scholars in ethical activity. In the third place, (Creswell, 2013) observes that sometimes students feel embarrassed to talk to their supervisors on minor issues and instead turn to colleagues or family for support. This failure to open up could seriously lead to publication problems on the issues of authorship.

Results point to the general conclusion by these scholars that they want to work on issues such as stress emanating from exams, poor care from students' welfare services, money, and time management problems, and communication skills. The problems may not necessarily be directly connected with the administration of a university but, the

respective institutions have to wake up and evolve with issues related to students.

Number of publications in research works shows ability and professions of a scholar. It upgrades the academics profile in publication. Gaber, (2016) found in researchers to promote their curriculum Vitae with help of publications in research and certainly the malpractices would also be present in their research work. In addition to this (Dhanju, 2020) expressed that the malpractice must be resist where it can be by the help of Higher Education commission and other members like publishers including this he further clarified that as the other disciplines needs effective assurance of quality in field same the management of educational research must also assure the effectiveness in quality of research process which emphasize on the improvement of quality in educational research. It has been seen in the data analysis that scholar and so [erosion combine not interested in the research work or about its quality both of them are trying to get rid of the burden. This multiple case study found some reasons as well which can be overcome with the passage of time as it was not. Study described that one in ten has no relation or any concentration with the research topic which would be further useful in the profession of educationists or in its process. Memon, (2007) while supporting that sometimes it also happened that researcher is in dilemma of their title and subtopics. Above discussion clarified that people are involving in malpractices. Research is work of researcher to disclosed any problem in depth to find out the solution but it is found that researcher is not taking interesting the real problem and they are purchasing the prepared work. Burgess, (2005) exposed that there are many issues like scholars take research as burden and due to short time period of submission they purchased prepared work. Jowell, (1982) identified many ethical issues and these identification helps to stop malpractices with more ease. This study

exposed that supervisors are also not assisting the scholar at every single point which do not make chance for malpractices as in literature of the study it was declared by the (Dhanju, 2020) all those researcher or scholars must be entertained with best training of research work. Being supervisor it is responsibility of them to train scholars regarding their need that, all individuals involved in research must be held to the highest levels of ethical conduct. Creswell, (2012) found that researcher or scholars may feel silly while talking on any point with their supervisors so they feel free to discuss it with their friends and others. Meanwhile this study also found that many scholars can't discuss their minor mistake or misunderstanding regarding any point in research so they indirectly ask from their friends or any senior member in family. This all issue creates a dilemmatic situation in time of publication that whose name should be mention.

Recommendations for Future Research

It recommended that future researchers should conduct comparative analysis among the universities of Pakistan. Involvement of higher authorities in the study would enhance the quality of research therefore future researchers are recommended to add the Director Quality Assurance, Director Postgraduate Studies, members of Departmental Research Committees as well as Board of Advance Studies. Future researchers are also recommended to compare the research malpractices of the public universities with the private universities of Pakistan. Similarly, quantitative and mixed methods research on research malpractices is also recommended. can improve the research practices and outcome.

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