

Dealing with academic integrity

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AT a recent education forum in Kuala Lumpur, former international trade and industry minister Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz was quoted as saying that it would be better for university academics to miss key performance indicators than to ride on their postgraduate students' work.

This has given rise to heated discussions about academic integrity in local universities, particularly on unethical practices like exploitation, plagiarism and stealing of students' work by academics.

If left unchecked, many opined that the integrity and reputation of the country's universities and education institutions might end up at stake.

Public universities had come forward by reiterating their commitment to uphold academic integrity by ensuring that their research publications were free of plagiarism and not exploited by free-loaders.

Malaysia Public Universities Vice-Chancellor/Rector Committee chairman Professor Datuk Dr Nor Aieni Mokhtar said all public universities took unethical practices seriously, in which all academicians were responsible for upholding the highest standard of honesty at all times.

"Any reports made to the management of the universities shall be thoroughly investigated according to the rules and procedures of the universities," she said, adding that public universities would not compromise on misconduct.

If academics were proven to be involved, stern action would be taken based on the Statutory Bodies [Discipline and Surcharge] Act 2000 (Act 605).

"These rules and regulations serve as guiding principles for academicians on the ethics of research and publication, including those concerning supervisor-student publications," said Nor Aieni, who is Universiti Malaysia Terengganu vice-chancellor.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) viewed such unethical practices seriously and it would not hesitate to take firm action against its staff and students involved.

Its vice-chancellor, Professor Datuk Dr Aini Ideris said UPM had a complaints channel — the U-Response System that could be accessed by everybody.

"The system is monitored on a daily basis, and every complaint is reviewed carefully and attended to promptly," she said.

Complaints could be mailed or emailed directly to the vice-chancellor or the appropriate university officer. Aini said cases received through these channels would be investigated, and action would be taken.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Wahid Omar said UTM had a reliable and proven system to ensure that its academic integrity was protected.

"Any complaints regarding integrity, including academic integrity, will be handled by a special committee called *Jawatankuasa Integriti dan Tadbir Urus* (JITU), which is now known as the *Jawatankuasa Anti-Rasuah* (JAR).

"JAR is given the power by the university to investigate independently and fairly based on international standards in integrity cases, including plagiarism and copyright infringement in magazines, journals or thesis," he said.



The research supervisor should inculcate a culture of academic honesty in students, which is paramount to success and credibility as a postgraduate student.



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Professor Datuk Dr Nor Aieni Mokhtar
Malaysia Public Universities Vice-Chancellor/Rector committee chairman

Through its Research Management Centre, UTM has provided a platform for academic staff and researchers to record their publication information, whether they are the main writer, co-writer or others, and this information may be referenced by staff and students.

Since 2012, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) has established a plagiarism policy under the purview of its Academic Affairs Division, which it defines as the forgery of individual contributions among members who collaborated in a group project.

It also made it compulsory for academics and students to use the Turnitin app to measure the plagiarism level in their writings to ensure that no reinterpretation activity/writing of students by other parties was done without consent.

"At the same time, students can come forward and report any academic offence committed at the faculty, university or top management," said UiTM vice-chancellor Professor Emeritus Dr Mohd Azraai Kassim.

Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) has its own process of regulating every research and publication activity on campus.

"From grant application to the final stage of research, the process is regulated. It includes respecting research subjects, using research funds prudently and recognising all parties involved," said its vice-chancellor Professor Dr Wahid Razzaly.

"In order to qualify in the author's list, researchers are required to give credit and recognition to individuals who contributed significantly in the project," he added.

Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) would be setting up a Special Committee on Academic Integrity to identify and investigate academic cases, whether they were related to plagiarism or document counterfeiting.

UniMAP vice-chancellor Professor Dr R. Badlishah Ahmad said the universities would not compromise on academicians who committed academic offences.

He said scholars and intellectuals must have a high level of integrity and, therefore, should not

violate ethics and the trust placed upon them.

"I will not hesitate to take decisive action if such an event occurs in the UniMAP environment as they (academicians) are community leaders, and should set a good example for students," he said.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's (UKM) Integrity Unit had been fully empowered to take action if there were reports of misconduct.

UKM vice-chancellor Professor Dr Mohd Hamdi Abd Shukor said every report submitted would be forwarded directly to the university senate to avoid unfairness or staff intervention.

"UKM has recently approved the Whistleblower Policy to protect those who provide information. It has a formal complaints channel (UKM Feedback and Complaint System — eFACT) for students and staff to report wrongdoings," he said.

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Mohamad Kadim Suaidi said the publication of papers in indexed or high-impact journals by postgraduates was fundamental as they represented a special population within the research and intellectual community.

"In universities, postgraduate students are required to publish papers with their supervisors as co-authors. Determining authorship credit can be difficult and it can complicate the supervisor-student relationship. Therefore, this issue deserves to be explored and students, indeed, should not be forced to co-author their papers with supervisors.

"The postgraduate study supervision process involves a thorough and systematic process, which signifies the contributions of the supervisor in the student's work. Thus, it is quite a misleading statement to claim that supervisors should not be considered in the authorship of the postgraduate students' research if all requirements have been substantially fulfilled.

"The determination of authorship credit should be based on relative contributions, taking into account each person's the involvement in the research process itself, including designing of research, data collection and analysis, and report writing," he said.