

Plagiarism, Less External Supervision, No Public Scrutiny At Viva Voce Lower Standards of PhD Violations, bureaucracy hit research at 158-year-old University of Madras

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In the past five years, more allegations of corruption seem to have come out of the University of Madras than quality research papers. From plagiarism to appointment of junior professors for conducting viva voce, violations have become a norm at the institution, say professors and alumni.

These issues were raised in the senate meeting at the university last Saturday when head of Journalism department G Ravindran pointed out that the university was bypassing regulations by not getting external supervisors for monitoring progress of candidates. It was also allowing inexperienced professors to conduct viva-voce. "Only insiders evaluate the candidates. This spoils the quality and academic rigour of the research," said Ravindran at the meeting.

"There is also an acute shortage of guides. Many professors have more than 10 candidates each under them, though UGC norms allow only eight," said a head of a department at the university.

In an era of open access to information, the university is yet to implement compulsory use of anti-plagiarism software, despite the Centre providing it for free, said professor Ramu Manivannan, head of the department of political science. "The university must frame anti-plagiarism guidelines," he insisted.

REGULATIONS BYPASSED

Then there are agents offering to write theses for a fee. The academic convention of keeping the examined thesis in the library

for three weeks before a public viva-voce is rarely followed. "There have been instances where the viva was held within three days," said a member of the university syndicate. Guides do not insist on research scholars attending conferences, publishing papers in journals or holding presentations — practices which are internationally accepted, said an administrator.

Bypassing these regulations has meant that professors are able to dole out an immoderate number of PhDs. A well-known academic-cum-administrator of the university, who was in the news till January, is said to have guided more than 100 PhDs, which his colleagues say could never have been accomplished without bypassing regulations. "In a professor's career it's an achievement if he/she can guide 50 PhDs. During this administrator's reign, it was a PhD mela in the absence of rigorous quality check," said a former member of the university syndicate on condition of anonymity.

Though registrar David Jawahar accepted there were discrepancies in the appointment of foreign examiners, he denied allegations of dilution in the university standards, and said choosing examiners and supervisors was in the hands of the guide.

"If there is any dilution in the quality, the doctoral committee is to be blamed, not the university," he said and promised to put in place the anti-plagiarism software by December. Jawahar, however, questioned why the professors were not discussing academic reforms in the council meets, which he said were used to settle personal battles.

FOLLOWING THE PAPER TRAIL

Officials involved in handling paper work for research thesis tend to delay the process considerably

Illustration:
Shinod
Akkaraparambil



Registrations
per year
2,000

Awarded
600

PhD programmes in
Madras University
departments
72

PROCEDURE FOR GETTING A PhD

DURATION | Minimum three years and maximum five years from registration to submission of thesis for full time. In case of part-time, it's a minimum of four years and maximum six years from provisional registration to submission of thesis

> Application can be made four times a year in January, April, July and October

> Registration at university departments, affiliated colleges, research institutions

> Course examination: 3 papers + viva

> Progress to be monitored by doctoral

panel consisting head of department, supervisor and a member from a neighbouring institution

> Thesis submission to guide, a foreign examiner and an Indian examiner

> If examiners certify the thesis, then a public viva-voce is conducted by Indian examiner
> After completion of viva-voce, a PhD is awarded

IDEALLY, AFTER THESIS SUBMISSION PhD PROCESS SHOULD BE OVER IN SIX MONTHS BUT DELAYS IN EVERY STEP PUSHES BACK PhD COMPLETION BY AT LEAST A YEAR OR MORE

CHANGES FOR THE BETTER

> Making system transparent by introducing tracking technology

> Time-bound evaluation to cut down delays

> Making anti-

plagiarism software mandatory

> Appointment of foreign examiner and external member for doctoral panel

> Placing the thesis in the university library for public scrutiny before the viva-voce

PhD theses gather dust at section office

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

While it is the professors who guide and shape quality of research of a PhD student, at University of Madras it is the bureaucracy which dictates when the candidate gets the final degree.

Many professors and students with whom TOI interacted said the PhD section, which is responsible for moving files, slows down the process considerably. If palms are greased, or one knows the right 'agent', there can be a guarantee of getting the doctoral tag in a jiffy, say professors.

After a student submits the thesis to his/her guide, it is sent to the section in-charge of mailing it to the two external examiners, one of whom is a foreigner, and the guide who is the third examiner. The examined thesis returns to the university, goes through

the guide after which a viva-voce is conducted. The entire process should ideally take around six months, but the process drags on indefinitely; absence of a vice-chancellor is also cited as a reason for the delay by administrators.

Sample this: A PhD scholar in the criminology department submitted his thesis on June 15 which was forwarded by his guide, head of department professor M Srinivasan, to the section concerned. Till date, the thesis has not been sent to the examiner. In the same department, it took the section six weeks to send the examined copies back to the guide, a process that should have taken half the time.

Students end up being victims of red-tapism, as unavailability of the final degree prevents them from applying for jobs. Recently, a Tamil film actor and script writer

was made to run from pillar to post by the officials for a year. The head of the department had to step in and help complete the procedures, said a source in the department. "What usually takes three years can continue for up to seven years. It took a year for me to get all the paperwork done before I could register. Every step takes at least a month due to the extent of paper work," said a humanities research scholar. A PhD scholar in Tamil said agents were always available at a price for those wanting to skip the arduous process of waiting for the final degree.

The section also dictates the selection of external supervisors. A syndicate member was asked to pay for travel of the external professor. "Negotiating powers of the guides determines how fast things move," said university registrar David P Jawahar, when asked about the delays.