

Ethics Committee as A Tool to Improve the Management of Psychological and Pedagogical Research

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Abstract. The article considers the problem of low quality pedagogical and psychological/pedagogical research in the Russian academic context, closely interconnected with bad academic practices in conducting this kind of research. The authors identified the most common ethical violations, including imitation of scientific research, compiling scientific texts, falsification of results, incorrect borrowing, etc. The paper contains a pre-project analysis of the management model of psychological and pedagogical research common in modern Russian universities and conclusions on its failure in the conditions of transition to the global standards for assessing the quality of education and research. The authors present an approach to the development of a model for managing psychological and pedagogical research at the university level. The proposed model is based on international standards of scientific ethics and principles of evidence-based science, and the committee on the ethics of psychological and pedagogical research is its key element. The paper determines the status, structure, functions of the ethics committee, as well as specific features and possible risks of implementing the proposed alternative model in universities with serious problems in the field of good academic practice.

1 Introduction

The Russian system of higher professional education is gradually moving along the path of internationalization and the adoption of global standards for assessing the quality of education and scientific research. In these conditions, the requirements for the organization, implementation, results of scientific work, in particular, in terms of observing the principles and norms of scientific ethics, are seriously raised. According to D. Citron and P. Ginsparg, approximately every sixteenth scholar excessively borrows other researchers' results for their papers [1]. Many researchers note that plagiarism is more often found in articles by authors from low- and middle-income countries [2, 3].

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As in other countries, in Russia, one can note several problems associated with observing the ethical principles of scientific research [4 – 11]. This is especially true and evident in the field of humanitarian research, in particular, in pedagogy and pedagogical psychology.

The prevailing university model for managing research in these areas does not reach the objectives it sets for itself. Based on this, we determined the purpose of our work, to describe the existing university model for managing psychological and pedagogical research, and to develop an alternative model aimed at improving the quality of management.

2 Methods

In course of our study, we used the following methods: theoretical analysis of the literature, aimed at identifying the main problematic zones in psychological and pedagogical research; pre-project analysis which allowed to outline the typical management model of psychological and pedagogical research common in modern Russian universities; modeling which made it possible to develop an alternative management model. For theoretical analysis, we selected works on the quality of dissertation research in pedagogical and psychological sciences, standards for assessing the quality of humanitarian research, problems of academic integrity, scientific and publication ethics, the axiological component of research.

3 Results and discussion

Based on a theoretical analysis of literature from the 1990s to the present day, we have revealed a general decline in the quality of pedagogical and psychological/pedagogical research in Russian science [12-15].

The low quality of research is inseparable from the problem of bad academic practices. Errors in the design of the experiment, unrepresentative samples, and lack of scientific novelty of the research results, methodological incompetence and academic illiteracy of the authors are often combined with the advancement of deliberately unverifiable hypotheses, falsification or fabrication of results, compiling scientific text, general imitation of the study [8]. Touching upon plagiarism, N. Rushby also draws attention to such aspects of bad academic practices as publication pressure and cultural differences in ethical principles shared by scholars from different countries [16]. For Russia as a whole, a tolerant attitude towards the manifestations of bad academic practices is typical [17, 18].

The roots of the problem of bad practices in conducting research, in our opinion, originate in the organization of the educational process of students; in particular, the organization of research which in most cases is viewed formally. This applies, first of all, to schools, and then higher education institutions where students enroll with already established ethical ideas about learning. In addition to such factors of bad academic practices as procrastination and personal students' characteristics, the educational environment of a particular educational organization plays a significant role [17, 18].

In the course of the pre-project analysis, we outlined the model of management of psychological and pedagogical research common for modern Russian universities that can be considered typical. The core of the model is (1) the joint activity of the student and the supervisor, which results in the preparation of the graduation thesis (GT) presenting the results of the student's research. Research management is almost entirely concentrated in the hands of the supervisor, who, in the framework of the interaction of these subjects of the educational process, is entrusted with numerous functions: teaching the student the technology of scientific research, stimulating the student's scientific search, checking the intermediate results of the research, etc.

Other elements play a much smaller role in this model: (2) the pre-defense procedure, during which the commission of a particular university department checks the level of readiness of the GT and decides on its admission to defense; (3) peer review, during which an analysis of the finished GT is carried out for its compliance with the requirements, including the scientific novelty, the theoretical and practical significance of the study, etc.; (4) the procedure for defending the GT before the certification committee.

As the practice of applying this model in Russian universities shows, its effectiveness is mainly determined by the competence of the supervisor, their integrity, and responsibility for the final result. In the absence of a policy of tough struggle against bad academic practices at the university management level, with a low research competence of teachers, a low level of academic freedom and self-government in Russian higher educational institutions, this model shows its failure.

Academic supervisors are often deceived by unscrupulous students who do not conduct scientific research on their own but order a GT from specialized organizations. In some cases, supervisors turn a blind eye to the obvious facts of violation of ethical standards and principles of scientific research by their students, since expelling a student under the conditions of per capita funding in Russian educational organizations means a loss of teaching hours for the teacher and money for the university. University administrations, adopting the prevailing rules of the game, often prefer to allow the student to complete their studies, thereby stimulating bad academic practices and a drop in the quality of scientific research.

The practice of compulsory verification of the originality of the texts of research papers in special computer programs is being actively introduced into the practice of Russian universities. However, this check for plagiarism is not enough, because it is technically not perfect and does not allow us to identify other ethical violations.

As one of the solutions to the problem, we propose an alternative model for managing psychological and pedagogical research at universities. The key element of this model is the committee on the ethics of psychological and pedagogical research (further called the EC — ethics committee), embedded in the above model. The EC has the following functions:

- creating guidelines on research ethics in the fields of pedagogy and educational psychology;
- administration of scientific-pedagogical and psychological research in the aspect of ensuring good academic practices;
- educating and advising researchers on professional regulation of research in the fields of pedagogy and psychology;
- ethical review of planned empirical research programs and scientific texts;
- prevention and resolution of ethical conflicts related to scientific research in the fields of pedagogy and educational psychology.

The EC is assigned the status of a consultative body that unites experts from among teachers who do not carry out managerial functions in the university departments. The EC consists of a permanent chairman of the committee and two permanent experts. When performing ethical expertise, experts from among the teaching staff are additionally involved. For objectivity of the results of the examination, the work performed in one department is checked by EC representatives who are members of another department, which excludes corporate interest and the desire to improve the rating and performance of their structural unit. The educational and advisory activities of EC allow purposefully establishing methodological and ethical standards of scientific research, and the need for mandatory examination of research programs and finished scientific texts is a serious obstacle to bad academic practices and falsification of scientific data.

4 Conclusion

The establishment of ECs in universities is a global practice. However, the model we offer has its specifics.

First, unlike similar committees that focus on a specific group of ethical violations, our model covers three key groups: violations related to non-compliance with the rights and freedoms of subjects, violations related to non-compliance with ethical standards in the organization and conduct of scientific research, and violations related to non-compliance with ethical standards in the preparation and publication of scientific papers.

Secondly, a common ethical violation in psychological and pedagogical research is associated with a general imitation of research, the substitution of research with pedagogical design, which most often results from a lack of competence of researchers. Therefore, in its educational, advisory, and expert activities, the EC combines the promotion of ethical standards of research with modern methodological standards of evidence-based science.

Thirdly, the obligation of ethical expertise, both at the stage of research planning and the stage of production of scientific texts ready for publication allows performing the function of preventive control and management of ethical risks.

Fourthly, standardization of the examination methodology (protocol examination) reduces the time for researchers to receive feedback and provides high throughput of the materials being examined.

Of course, a significant factor affecting the effectiveness of the EC as a tool for improving the quality of management of psychological and pedagogical research at universities with serious problems of academic integrity is the possible conflict of interests between certain groups of university management and the EC, as well as the readiness and motivation of the teaching staff to adopt high research and ethical standards.

As a prospect for further work, we see an empirical justification of the effectiveness of the model developed by us, as well as a quantitative analysis of the identified ethical risks and violations in psychological and pedagogical research.

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