

Toxic Behavior in Academia

It has been almost 315,000 years since Homo Sapiens first evolved, following the lineage of apes such as Australopithecus and other predecessors. Human speech evolved only roughly around 50,000 years ago and complex scientific progress is quite recent, accelerating the most in the past few hundred years. The growth of academic institutions, designed to develop the human intellect is also a relatively recent phenomenon. For instance, current Oxford university's early predecessor began in around 1096 and Harvard was founded in around 1636. The idea that graduate level scholarship should attempt to create novel knowledge or a new 'contribution' to the literature is also a relatively recent evolution.

While as humans, we must be proud of the scale, quality, and speed of academic progress in the last few hundred years, there obviously is a lot more to learn worldwide and even more so in developing economies such as ours.

I want to focus on the relationship between academics and students in universities worldwide but specially in Pakistan and South Asia.

It is important to re-emphasize the trivial yet in practice sometimes forgotten point that the main role of a professor at university is to do research and train students to acquire various technical skills in their disciplines along with inspiring young minds to become better thinkers and potentially future researchers. In order to smoothly implement this in practice, certain rules of the game must be followed by both the students and professors, who are 'both adults'. Due to the experience and prior training of the faculty as well as the maintenance of 'merit', the 'power' to evaluate student performance through grading and reference writing lies with the professors and rightly so.

However, this power must not be misused to serve personal or organizational agendas by the faculty or driven by biases against young 'adults', independent of their academic performance. While this may be obvious in theory, in practice we often observe violations of this rule of the game. Some professors in Pakistan and worldwide misuse their power. For instance, student grades are sometimes manipulated based on personal biases and irrational, extreme and misdirected outbursts of anger on an individual student.

One example would be distorting a student's grade in one course not due to his bad performance but due to mistakes committed as a RA (research assistant) in a completely different setting which infuriated the professor. This is an ethical violation and interferes with the humane and civilized interaction between two adults, who are at different stages of their life and career.

Another example would be misbehaving with students, humiliating them or abusing or shouting loud at them in rage due to irrational reasons rather than any reaction to the ethical violation of the students themselves. Even when students have made a mistake or misbehaved, a disproportionate reaction from the faculty is an ethical violation. For instance, if a young adult forgets to write "Respected Sir" in an email, then the reaction of an older adult professor should not be to curse the student by using

extremely inappropriate language. This is not to say that faculty members abroad based on my personal experience do not mind being called by their names at all. They like to be referred to either as "Michael" or "Professor" even by their undergraduate students.

While the students should certainly respect the knowledge and contribution of senior faculty in their disciplines, they should not tolerate ethical violations and must report them. Even when these violations are reported, I have observed that rarely if at all are they punished or taken seriously. Often the power dynamic in universities led by faculty makes justice an unlikely proposition. On the other hand, any small ethical violations by a student which also occurs obviously are almost always punished by reporting to disciplinary committees in our universities and abroad.