Toxic Behavior in Academia

Almost 315,000 years have passed 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, developing the most in the past few hundred years. The growth of universities, designed to develop the human intellect is also a relatively recent phenomenon. For instance, current Oxford University's early predecessor began in around 1096 AD and Harvard University was founded in around 1636. The idea that graduate level scholarship should attempt to create novel knowledge or 'contributions' to the literature is also a relatively recent innovation.

While as humans, we must be proud of the worldwide academic progress in the last few hundred years, there obviously is a lot more to learn, even more so in developing economies. I want to focus on the relationship between academics and students in universities worldwide but especially 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, train students in their disciplines, along with inspiring young minds to become better thinkers and potentially researchers. For smooth implementation in practice, certain rules of the game must be followed by 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 references lies with the professors and rightly so.

However, this power must not be misused to serve personal/organizational agendas by the faculty. For instance, personal biases or random outbursts of anger against specific students, independent of their academic performance should not interfere with the grading process. Similarly, graduate school placements should not be manipulated to serve departmental agendas, especially when they contradict with the student’s career objectives. In practice, we sometimes observe violations of these rules of the game. Some professors in Pakistan and worldwide misuse their power.

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 based on a real incident and was an ethical violation. Such behavior interferes with the humane and civilized interaction between two adults, who are at different stages of their life and career, purely due to a matter of chance.

Other examples would be misbehaving with students, humiliating them, explicitly making fun of their grades, and abusing or shouting loud at them in rage, especially when such behavior is not a reaction to the ethical violation of the students themselves. Even when students have made a mistake, a disproportionate reaction from the faculty is an ethical violation. For instance, if a younger adult forgets to write "Respected Sir" in formal emails, then the reaction of an older adult professor should not be to curse the student by using extremely inappropriate language. Of course, 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. However, in our ageist cultural context, students are penalized when they fail to comply with these social norms.

While the students should certainly respect the knowledge and contribution of senior faculty, they should not tolerate ethical violations and must report them. Unfortunately, even when reported, rarely if at all are they punished or taken seriously. The power dynamics in universities led by faculty makes justice an unlikely proposition in many cases, since such cases are internally dealt with by colleagues of the professors. On the other hand, any ethical violations of students are almost always punished by reporting to disciplinary committees, which is why my focus is not on these cases, which also occur and are “equally” audacious.

The conventional justification of such behavior is that exceptionally talented academics are national and global assets, which justifies a greater tolerance to admittedly inappropriate behaviors. While this is true in rare cases and a case in point was that of John Nash who was a genius in game theory and mathematics but had schizophrenia induced behavioral problems. However, in most cases, the problem is merely driven by pure misuse of power due to lack of incentives to deviate from convention.

To end on a positive note, there is a lot of individual variation in behavior across professors within a university. Moreover, in some institutions of Pakistan, a smaller proportion of professors behave in ageist, manipulative, hierarchical and unethical manner due to prevalence of more inclusive social norms.

*The writer is a Research Fellow at PIDE, Islamabad and has a MPhil in Economics from the University of Oxford.*