

Attribution of words versus attribution of responsibilities: Academic plagiarism and university practice

Organization

19(6) 881–889

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1350508412448857

org.sagepub.com



Belinda Luke

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Kate Kearins

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Abstract

This article examines a case of academic plagiarism and the subsequent treatment of the issues across several academic institutions. It calls for academic leaders in universities to act on what constitutes a serious breach of standards, engendered in part by broader institutional norms and values promoting the need for publications in a ‘publish or perish’ environment. While universities often promote high-sounding ideals and would generally wish to be seen to uphold high academic standards, it is argued that silence and complicity surround the way in which instances of plagiarism in academic publications are often dealt with. Actions (and inaction) by academic leaders in universities in dealing with cases of academic plagiarism speak volumes in terms of the values academic institutions profess, and those they actually uphold. The article prompts readers to consider the need for a more consistent and proactive stance on the part of their own institutions to exercise ethical leadership in identifying and addressing academic plagiarism when it occurs.

Keywords

academia, academics, plagiarism, university practice and responsibilities

Academic plagiarism—the act of academics taking others’ ideas or words and presenting them as their own without attribution—is unfortunately more prevalent than previously thought (see Lewis et al., 2011). Moreover, as these and other authors report, academic plagiarism even when discovered, often goes unsanctioned (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004; Kock, 1999). This situation

Corresponding author:

Belinda Luke, QUT, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, 4001, Australia

Email: b.luke@qut.edu.au

implicates both academics themselves and the academic institutions of which they are a part—extending the situation beyond one of attribution of words, to attribution of responsibility.

Academic plagiarism is, at one level, a problem of individual ignorance or wrongdoing. However, it is also an institutional level issue which, we argue, should be proactively addressed, lest it become an unfortunate new norm. A review of business literature indicates leadership ethics is a topic academics often take ownership of (Garten, 2005; Mackness, 2010). Corporate scandals and fraud resulting in widespread financial loss have often led some academics to reflect on what business schools could do better to ensure a strong ethical stance within graduates, impacting on business and society through the professions they join (Goshal, 2005; Mitroff, 2004). It is also important to acknowledge and reflect on the relevance of ethical issues in our own context of academia, and how such issues are dealt with in academic institutional systems.

Values such as the promotion of independent thought and respect for intellectual property are fundamental to academia and academic institutions. Yet, actions (or inaction) by some universities on the issue of plagiarism by academics appear to risk undermining these values. For some individuals, the pressure to perform and continually publish ‘original’ research, risks loss, oversight, or compromise of fundamental values, such as quality and integrity within the research process and ensuing publications. Similarly, for universities, an emphasis on performance measures based on research and other outputs (again in terms of quantity), can often overshadow the need to ensure that the implied quality standards have been upheld. In some universities, education and training to prevent plagiarism on the part of students, the use of software to detect student plagiarism, and committees to deal with student breaches are well established. However, what universities do to uphold academic standards in relation to plagiarism on the part of academics themselves appears less well resolved (see Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004).

Competing norms and values at an institutional level present a delicate balance, where individuals and institutions are judged on their performance. However, incidences where academic leaders and institutions have not appropriately managed cases involving plagiarism by academics indicate a distinct need for an explicit conversation and a deliberate re-assessment of how such a balance can be managed. Reflecting on Chomsky’s (1967) broader criticism of academics lacking a moral stance, Dunne et al. (2008) note an association between silence and complicity. **We consider the existence of a similar silence and complicity among academic institutions, universities in particular, in the context of a case of academic plagiarism.**

We argue that universities, while having laudable goals and often very comprehensive policies for plagiarism by students, appear less equipped to deal with plagiarism involving academics. We present a recent plagiarism case where academic leaders and institutions in several countries appear to have lacked a moral script for action. A review of the literature on academic plagiarism follows, together with our reflections on what needs to be done within universities to uphold the standards expected and values professed. The purpose of this article is to increase awareness about academic plagiarism in the context of broader institutional systems and values. It is intended to prompt members of the academic community including university leaders, to consider the question ‘*what are we to do with universities?*’ in order to uphold an ethical stance in relation to breaches of academic standards.

A case of academic plagiarism, apathy and wavering academic standards

Plagiarism identified and authors contacted

When an Australian academic, *A*, read with interest a new journal article in her field of research, she was surprised to find her own words and paragraphs, published under the name of two

strangers—university academics based in the United Kingdom and Greece. She contacted both academics. The UK co-author promptly replied and apologized, expressing shock and frustration, advising the duplicated sections were prepared by his co-author. He also contacted the journal publisher, requesting the article be retracted. The Greek co-author, *K*, had written the duplicated sections of the article, which were reportedly based on her PhD thesis. Her reply was less prompt, but equally apologetic.

I would like to let you know that I am very very sorry for all this situation. By no means do I have the intention to duplicate your work without referencing you and this was done unintentionally. You have my word on this. I will do whatever I have to in order to make up for this situation. (*K*, email correspondence, April 2010)

K's PhD thesis and related conference papers were requested and subsequently received from *K*'s former supervisor, *Associate Professor S*, at the Athens-based university from which *K* had graduated.

Thanks for your message, which unfortunately raises a very critical issue that also has taken me by total surprise. I see with stupefaction that in *K*'s thesis there are some additional parts that are copy paste. (*Associate Professor S*, email correspondence, April 2010)

The plagiarism extended to at least three documents including the published journal article, an Academy of Management Meeting paper and *K*'s PhD thesis—which included more than 50 pages of material (including text, tables and figures) copied directly from *A*'s Masters' thesis.

I feel also cheated to some extent as a supervisor, although I also have part of the responsibility in the sense that this duplication ... escaped my attention. Just for your info and not as an excuse, my field of research expertise is not entrepreneurship ... I supervised the particular thesis due to internal university procedures that unfortunately now I see the negative effects of. (*Associate Professor S*, email correspondence, April 2010)

The Athens-based university agreed to review the case, and subsequently advised that *K* would be required to change and delete duplicated content, and reference properly. There would be a reconsideration of the PhD thesis after the appropriate corrections.

We see very seriously on this, and hope that the above actions will contribute to resolving the situation amicably. (*Associate Professor S*, email correspondence, April 2010)

Editorial licence

A also contacted the journal editor and publisher, who reached similar conclusions in relation to text which had been copied by *K*.

It is evident that there is a lack of attribution to your work ... I believe the action required is to add a detailed corrigendum outlining how the work has failed to reference your own. An alternative course of action would be to formally retract the article, but I have a feeling that would be too harsh. We see several of these cases, and they tend to fall into two camps: naivety and deliberate intent to deceive. In my view, having spoken at length with *K*, this is a case of the former. Please can you let me know your thoughts? (Publisher, email correspondence, April 2010)

A did not see it as a mere referencing issue, nor an act of naivety. In her view, *K* had shown little remorse, obtaining legal representation to protect her status as a Doctor of Philosophy, researcher and published author. *A* felt her concerns were not being taken seriously.

Whose role is it to assist?

Concerned about the lack of institutional ethics in evidence on the part of the Athens-based university and the publisher, *A* contacted various people within the university where she worked including her Head of Department, Assistant Research Director, University Research Director and Vice Chancellor. She also inquired about university legal services. While nobody disputed the plagiarism, no-one seemed willing to get actively involved. It was repeatedly suggested that this was an issue for the overseas university which *A* had graduated from, rather than the Australian university where *A* currently worked.

The only time assistance was offered was if I was a student who had been accused of plagiarism. In that case, legal representation and counselling was on hand. When I advised that I was a staff member whose work had been plagiarised rather than a student who had plagiarised, the response was 'we don't have services for that' (*A*, diary note, April 2010).

Similarly, when *A* approached her former supervisor from the New Zealand university where she had graduated, it was suggested this was a matter for the university where *A* now worked. Eventually *A* found support from her former supervisor, despite contrary advice from the New Zealand university. *A*, together with her former supervisor, sent monthly emails to the Athens-based university requesting appropriate action be taken. While responses were received, progress was slow.

With a growing awareness that she could not rely on the systems within academia to produce a just outcome, *A* then turned to the former Assistant Dean Research (internationally recognized in the research field) based at the university where *A* worked, requesting advice. His response was strong endorsement for retraction of the offending journal article, followed by emails sent to various colleagues and journal editors throughout Europe, alerting them to the plagiarism. *A* also contacted the regional Greek university where *K* now worked to try and progress the matter, requesting assistance in obtaining outstanding documents from *K*, without success.

Upholding standards?

While the Athens-based university initially indicated it would be acting to address the issue of plagiarism, viewing it 'very seriously', six months to resolve the issue by management at a 'leading' Greek university was apparently not long enough. The university website promoted the institution as having a 'high sense of responsibility—educating tomorrow's leaders'. Yet, polite monthly emails requesting updates were subsequently referred to as 'bombarding' (Academic Rector, email correspondence, September 2010). Further correspondence between *A* and management at the university where she worked reinforced the Australian university's position that managers there considered they should not become involved. Its actions, too, seemed somewhat different to some of the higher ideals it publicly professed. And the regional Greek university expressed interest in being updated on the case, but documents requested were not received.

After 12 months, a decision was made by the Athens-based university to allow the PhD award with the plagiarised sections removed. Reference was made to the intellectual contribution of the

non-plagiarised sections satisfying the requirements of a PhD. The publisher had indicated a similar stand in relation to the plagiarised article, but not yet reached any formal conclusion. The article remained accessible via online databases, without amendment.

The occurrence of plagiarism among those who should know better

Keeping it quiet

Our review of the literature on plagiarism within academia indicates the practice is neither new (see Martin, 1984), nor isolated (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004; Clarke, 2006; Kock, 1999; Lewis et al., 2011), yet is often viewed more broadly as isolated cases. While plagiarism by undergraduate students is comprehensively examined (Ashworth et al., 1997; Park 2003, 2004), plagiarism by academics has gained comparatively little attention. Arguably, as an issue central to academic work, what constitutes plagiarism (and what does not) should be something academics are acutely aware of.

Varying interpretations of plagiarism exist, ranging from borrowing (Pennycook, 1996), to bad manners (Twain in Spender, 2004), theft (Cosgrove, 1989), piracy and stealing (Shon, 1995). Plagiarism has also been viewed as homage, imitation (and thus supposedly a form of flattery), a problem of technique (Zhao Jinghua in Custer, 2010), moral shortcoming (Custer, 2010), apathy and misunderstanding (McCormick, 1989). Clarke (2006) likens plagiarism to pornography: 'you know it when you see it'. Hoffer (in Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004) compares plagiarism to cockroaches: 'for every one you see on the kitchen floor there are a hundred behind the stove'. Irrespective of the interpretation, attribution (or lack thereof) remains the central issue (Ebert, 2010).

Approaches for dealing with plagiarism also vary, from condemnation to toleration, accommodation and implicit acceptance (ChinaGeeks, 2010; Larkham and Manns, 2002; Lewis et al., 2011). Cultural differences and lack of education have each been identified as factors relevant to plagiarism (Larkham and Manns, 2002)—and may be considered relevant to both its occurrence and the way it is addressed by academic institutions such as universities and journal publishers. Essentially, however, what seems to be increasingly overlooked is that standards surrounding plagiarism exist and are fairly explicit within the academic and publishing community. One might rightfully ask, 'what is there to be confused about?'

While understandings and interpretations of plagiarism may be seen in terms of varying shades of gray, lack of attribution (which lies at the heart of plagiarism) is far more black and white. In cases of substantive plagiarism, there is often little dispute as to its occurrence. Conflicting interests of those involved or drawn into cases of plagiarism, however, give rise to a number of complexities (Lewis et al., 2011). It is in plagiarists' interests to keep quiet about their practices. Victims and academic institutions affected by plagiarism may not be aware of the incident until it is brought to their attention by others. Yet when plagiarism is discovered, for the individuals and academic institutions involved, response (or lack thereof) is an important insight into the values they prioritize versus those around which they are prepared to compromise. The situation can, as the above case shows, result in protracted and frustrating interactions sometimes occurring long after a work has been published (see also Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004). For publishers and universities who have inadvertently endorsed plagiarised work, addressing the problem often requires acknowledgement of oversights within their own processes. Yet, for the broader academic community, it is important to understand similarities and variations in the treatment of academic plagiarism by academic institutions, so that they are aware of the issue and can make an informed choice as to where they stand.

As noted in the literature on cases of academic plagiarism (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004; ChinaGeeks, 2010; Lewis et al., 2011), a key source of confusion seems to be the inconsistent, often invisible stand taken on plagiarism by academic institutions. Interestingly, it seems such incidences are resulting in emerging agreement on the need for academic plagiarism to be more comprehensively and systematically addressed (Clarke, 2006), such that penalties are consistently applied, rather than overlooking or excusing cases as isolated or unintended and not requiring action. Publications documenting academic plagiarism cases (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004; Kock, 1999) reveal no systematic processes on the part of institutions in dealing with the issue. Lewis et al. (2011) highlight increasing rates of retractions from journals, often without explanation. Bartlett and Smallwood (2004) examine the various ways plagiarism has been identified, and the various means used to overlook it. Further, they note the increasing range of disciplines in which academic plagiarism occurs (spanning information systems, geography, history and management), despite the notion held by some that it wouldn't happen in 'their discipline'. Increasingly noticeable, however, is the assessment of academic plagiarism as a complex issue which requires a holistic approach, and acknowledgement of a shared responsibility between individuals and academic institutions to act upon and address it (Clarke, 2006; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006).

Incidences of plagiarism among academics may seem isolated cases, but in a world of ready access to others' publications [facilitating what Auer and Krupar (2001) refer to as 'mouse-click' plagiarism], coupled with an academic environment where publications appear to be one of the most readily measured bases of academic performance, it is perhaps not surprising that such cases continue to emerge. Increasingly, academics are part of an environment in which the 'publish or perish' mantra has become an accepted reality of academic career progression, and growth in research output quantity and 'quality' are standardized goals for many academic institutions. This environment has created systemic pressures for both individuals and institutions. Quality in terms of academic outcomes is implied. Pressures and expectations with respect to measurable short-term outputs are often express. Yet how these pressures are dealt with, impacts significantly on the resulting quality standards and values within academia.

Roles and responsibilities

Systemic pressures aside, what responsibility should academic institutions assume once academic plagiarism has been identified? Martin (1984) highlighted the reluctance of individuals and institutions to openly accept responsibility in cases of plagiarism. Twenty-eight years later, has much changed? Based on the case examined in this article, acting decisively on plagiarism may involve acknowledging oversight of or inadequate quality controls. The alternative of doing nothing presents an option which is less time-consuming and costly in terms of reputation or 'brand', particularly for repeated oversights (Lewis et al., 2011). It is also far less expensive if the alternative of taking action results in the matter becoming a legal one.

The rules are clear within academia regarding plagiarism as unacceptable—universities and journals generally have clear policies in this regard. Yet the rules are less clear regarding the obligations on academic institutions and leaders to uphold values and norms violated by acts of plagiarism. While individual stances in relation to plagiarism differ, ranging from pious to pragmatic, institutional stances in responding to plagiarism also vary in practice. A review of publicly available information from university websites suggests universities are united in rejecting plagiarism. However, variation is noted both in the case study within this article, and in other academic literature (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004; Lewis et al., 2011), where universities and publishers have done little to address cases of plagiarism.

A recurring motivation for raising academic plagiarism as an issue within the literature, is being a victim of plagiarism oneself (Clarke, 2006; Kock, 1999; Larkham and Manns, 2002). Notably, in cases of academic plagiarism in the literature, where the need for action was overlooked by plagiarists and publishers, universities drawn into the issue (often as employers of the 'victim'), took steps to assist or represent the staff member whose work had been plagiarised (Kock, 1999). In the case examined in this article, however, of the four universities made aware of the problem, three chose not to take action, and one continued to grant the PhD award (albeit downgraded from a high pass to a pass).

Given the persistence of plagiarism—referred to as an 'academic growth industry' (Larkham and Manns, 2002: 339), and the lack of systematic rejection, plagiarism seems likely to continue. Individually, situations of plagiarism may appear as isolated cases involving inadequate moral stances, poor moral judgement or oversights by the individuals and academic institutions involved. Collectively, however, these situations suggest a pattern of behaviour around which academics and academic institutions are surprisingly silent in more public forums (Lewis et al., 2011), such as journal publishers withdrawing articles without explanation, universities continuing to award degrees despite plagiarism which is acknowledged privately rather than publicly. Whether this silence is primarily directed towards protecting individual peers or to uphold an aura of academic standards being met is not well understood. Efforts are perhaps better directed to ensuring that academic standards do not risk being compromised through such acquiescence.

So what should universities do about academic plagiarism?

As a foundation of academia, arguably universities are well placed to play a determining role in the issue of academic plagiarism. Moreover, as educators of tomorrow's business leaders, it is imperative universities can not only teach ethical leadership in theory, but also demonstrate ethical leadership in practice. As noted by Spender (2004), plagiarism is not only a legal issue, but also a pedagogical one, and rests in the hands of academics and academic institutions.

The circumstances which might inadvertently serve to encourage academic plagiarism require some attention. The case in this article points to the importance of universities and academic leaders not overemphasizing performance metrics at the expense of quality education, research and standards. It also shows the importance of research supervisory staff having familiarity with the areas their research students are working in, and encouraging the use of plagiarism detection software. Co-authors need to be vigilant too. Moreover, the importance of ethical leadership by universities in acting on cases of academic plagiarism, standing up for what is right, and investing time and resources to uphold academic standards is underscored. Unless there is a visible commitment to acting on academic plagiarism and administering appropriate penalties, there is little to discourage perpetrators.

Identifying and then acting upon instances of plagiarism clearly presents a challenge for academic institutions. While developments in technology have resulted in software which aids in identifying plagiarism, similar developments have resulted in wide-ranging access to academic research, both past and present, for a global audience. Taken together, the information age, the urge for academics to publish and the systemic issue of publications as currency in the increasingly competitive marketplace of academia, present a number of risks. Failure to appreciate and manage these risks by upholding espoused values and acting consistently and decisively upon breaches threatens to jeopardize the foundations of academia. We contend that academic leaders and institutions such as universities wanting to be seen as fair, but acting with caution and leniency, may well serve to engender lower academic standards. In the words of Dunne et al. (2008),

'neutrality is political too' (p. 275), such that inaction, a link between silence and a lack of response, suggests complicity.

It would seem unfortunate that academic leaders may have become too busy with the 'business' of education and performance measures to wish to prioritize dealing with breaches of standards through academic plagiarism. The case in this article points to a distinct lack of ethical leadership from academic institutions when confronted with plagiarism. Similar to the arguments raised by Chomsky (1967), we maintain that the situation of plagiarism within academic research publications seems to have resulted through a combination of blind faith in the system of academic institutions, and blindness to flaws in the system itself, that complicity exists, and is inconsistent with many institutions' high-sounding ideals.

Returning to the question of 'what are we to do with universities', we identify two main options. If the answer is 'do nothing', then silence will continue to indicate complicity and contribute to a decline in standards. More research articles may be published, but of potentially more dubious quality. If, however, a more proactive stance is sought, then this article can perhaps be part of a platform for change within universities, and a basis for academics involved with quality in research publications to prompt universities (and publishers) to uphold academic standards in accordance with their publicized institutional values.

References

- Ashworth, Peter, Bannister, Philip and Thorne, Pauline (1997) 'Guilty in Whose Eyes? University Students' Perceptions of Cheating and Plagiarism in Academic Work and Assessment', *Studies in Higher Education* 22: 187–203.
- Auer, Nicole J. and Krupar Ellen M. (2001) 'Mouse Click Plagiarism: The Role of Technology in Plagiarism and the Librarian's Role in Combating It', *Library Trends* 49(3): 415–32.
- Bartlett, Thomas and Smallwood, Scott (2004) 'Four Academic Plagiarists You've Never Heard Of: How Many More Are Out There?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 15(17): A8.
- ChinaGeeks (2010) 'Wang Hui and Plagiarism in Chinese Academia', Retrieved 24 March, 2011, from <http://chinageeks.org/2010/04/wang-hui-plagiarism-chinese-academia/>
- Chomsky, Noam. (1967) 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', Retrieved 24 March, 2011, from <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/19670223.htm>
- Clarke, Roger (2006) 'Plagiarism by Academics: More Complex Than It Seems', *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 7(2): 91–121.
- Cosgrove, Stuart (1989) 'In Praise of Plagiarism', *New Statesman and Society*, September 1, 38–39.
- Custer, C. (2010) 'Wang Hui and Plagiarism in Chinese Academia', Retrieved 24 March, 2011, from <http://www.peopleforum.cn/viewthread.php?tid=27405>
- Dunne, Stephen, Harney, Stefano and Parker, Martin (2008) 'The Responsibilities of Management Intellectuals: A Survey', *Organization* 15(2): 271–82.
- Ebert, Lawrence B. (2010) 'Anatomy of an Academic Plagiarism Case: Kinavey in Pittsburgh', *Intellectual Property News Affecting Business And Everyday Life*. Retrieved 24 March 2011, from <http://ipbiz.blogspot.com/2010/06/anatomy-of-academic-plagiarism-case.html>
- Garten, Jeffrey E. (2005) 'B-Schools: Only a C+ in Ethics', *Business Week*, 5 September, Retrieved 24 March, 2011, from http://www.businessweek.com/print/magazine/content/05_36/b3949138.htm?chan=gl
- Goshal, Sumantra (2005) 'Bad Management Theories are Destroying Good Management Education' *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 3(1): 75–91.
- Kock, Ned (1999) 'A Case of Academic Plagiarism', *Communications of the ACM* 42(7): 96–104.
- Larkham, Peter J. and Manns, Susan (2002) 'Plagiarism and Its Treatment in Higher Education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 26(4): 339–49.
- Lewis, Bruce, Duchac, Jonathan and Beets, S. Douglas (2011) 'An Academic Publisher's Response to Plagiarism', *Journal of Business Ethics* 102(3): 489–506.

- Macdonald, Randal and Carroll, Jude (2006) 'Plagiarism—A Complex Issue Requiring a Holistic Institutional Approach' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(2): 233–45.
- Mackness, Jo (2010) 'Are Business Schools to Blame for the Financial Crisis?' *Business Ethics*, 7 May.
- Martin, Brian (1984) 'Plagiarism and Responsibility', *Journal of Tertiary Educational Administration* 6(2): 83–90.
- Mitroff, Ian (2004) 'An Open Letter to the Deans and Faculties of American Business Schools', *Journal of Business Ethics* 54: 185–89.
- Park, Chris (2003) 'In Other (People's) Words: Plagiarism by Students—Literature and Lessons', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 28(5): 471–88.
- Park, Chris (2004) 'Rebels Without a Clause: Towards an Institutional Framework for Dealing with Plagiarism by Students', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28(3): 291–306.
- Pennycook, Alastair (1996) 'Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism', *Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Quarterly* 30(2): 201–30.
- Scollon, Ron (1995) 'Plagiarism and Ideology: Identity in Intellectual Discourse', *Language in Society* 24: 1–28.
- Spender, Dale (2004) *Plagiarism and Plausibility*. Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney.

Biographies

Belinda Luke is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Accountancy at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include accountability, public sector management, and entrepreneurship. *Address:* QUT, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, 4001, Australia. Email: b.luke@qut.edu.au

Kate Kearins is a Professor in Management and Associate Dean Research in the Faculty of Business and Law at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests include business and sustainability, stakeholder engagement and organisational change. *Address:* AUT, Private Bag 92006, Auckland, 2010, New Zealand. Email: kate.kearins@aut.ac.nz