

# Individual and Institutional Responses to Staff Plagiarism

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## INTRODUCTION

The ‘publish or perish’ syndrome is often mentioned. However, we are now seeing cases of ‘publish and perish’, speaking from an ethical standpoint. The pressures on academics to increase their research publications come from within universities and also externally from government higher education funding bodies. There are also pressures on universities to portray their own academic staff as being scrupulously honest, and this can lead to the protection of academics who plagiarize.

The glossary defines plagiarism as the act of passing off the work of others (in particular, the writing of others) as one’s own. The History News Network (2002) posted three different definitions of plagiarism provided by the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, and the American Psychological Association, thus covering several discipline areas. All definitions reinforce the concept that plagiarism involves an intentional act of using the work of others, and all discuss the obligation of scholars to be meticulous in their use of source material. In addition, the history and language definitions stress that plagiarism is unethical. This article is concerned with incidents of plagiarism involving university academic staff who might be expected to know about, and rigorously adhere to, established norms of academic publication. In this article the term plagiarism will be used to mean intentionally taking credit for work that should not be claimed as fresh work of one’s own. This implies more than editorial oversight and can be construed as academic misconduct.

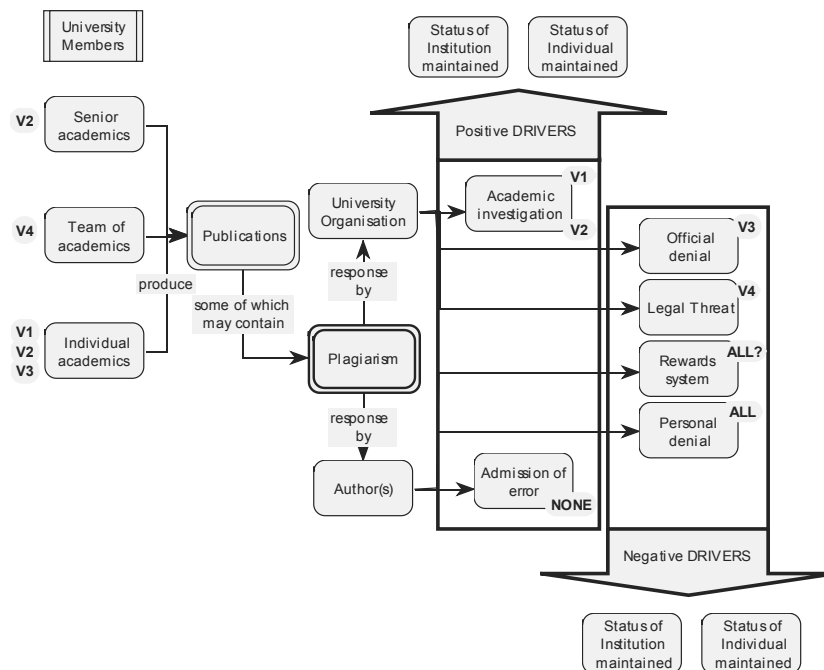
The majority of the published literature is about student plagiarism (e.g., Stoeger, 2005, describes 28 articles on staff plagiarism and 39 on student plagiarism). This article does not address student plagiarism where the questions of training and intentionality are much grayer. For example, there are different cultural interpretations to ownership of knowledge. Students from Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures may

need more support in negotiating the norms of Western scholarly discourse (Sweda, 2004). However, there is evidence (Kember, Ma, McNaught, & 18 Exemplary Teachers, 2006) that academic staff worldwide share common educational values and principles.

The article centers around four vignettes. These are stories from my personal experiences since 2002. Only the essential elements of each story are included, and the narratives are disguised to protect the innocent and not-so-innocent. The nationality of the four universities and the gender of the participants have been withheld; however, the overall thread of each story is close to the actual facts. My own university is *not* involved in any of these cases. The first vignette focuses on plagiarism from colleagues; the second concerns multiple publication of the same work—self-plagiarism (Hexham, 2005). In the third and fourth vignettes, the locus of attention shifts to cultural and policy issues in the province of university administration. Key questions are posed and discussed after each vignette. No clear-cut answers are given, but it is hoped that a brief exploration of the ethical issues around the questions will stimulate critical thought.

Figure 1 portrays the ‘plagiarism drivers’ operating in modern universities that drive individuals and the institutions to respond to situations where plagiarism has occurred. V1 to V4 refer to the vignettes in the article. Positive drivers are those that address the matter—either by the academic concerned acting to correct the error or by the university investigating the allegations. In this article no individuals admitted plagiarism even though this might be seen as the ethical thing to do. Only two of the four universities enacted formal academic misconduct investigations. Negative drivers are those that result in the plagiarism not being resolved and status being maintained by denial and cover-up. In Figure 1 there are two positive drivers, but only one that appears to be functional. In contrast there are four negative drivers, all of which operate. Note that the current rewards systems in higher education encourage academics to play the publications

Figure 1. Positive and negative drivers on individuals' and institutions' responses to plagiarism



numbers game; this can be a negative driver towards plagiarism.

## VIGNETTE 1: THE EDITOR WHO IS A PLAGIARIST

Imagine a packed room at a large international conference. After the presentation two people stand up in the audience. Both accuse the authors of plagiarism. Emotions are high—denial from the authors, anger and dismay on the part of the complainants, and an atmosphere of embarrassed fascination emanating from the audience. What makes the situation more emotionally charged is that the first author is a journal editor. An editor plagiarizing from two sources in the one paper! The follow-up from these public accusations was protracted, despite the documentary evidence that existed. There was careful scrutiny by an independent panel of the publications that the complainants had previously published; the panel verified the significant amount of word-for-word copying found in the conference paper. Almost a year elapsed before disciplinary investigations by the editor's university were complete. Disciplinary action was taken within the university on a confidential basis. While the editor paid some price

within the university, there was little knowledge about the plagiarism incident beyond a few key university staff, the complainants, and a number of associated colleagues. The dust settled and the editor remains as a journal editor.

## Questions

There are two sets of questions that can be posed from this case. One set relates to the rights of the journal publishers; the other to the amount of 'punishment' an academic plagiarist should receive.

1. *Should the publishers of the journal be told that its editor is a confirmed plagiarist? Do the publishing company managers deserve to know so they can decide for themselves if this semi-public transgression will damage the reputation of the company?*

The relationship between commercial publishers and academic editors is built on mutual benefit and trust. Publishers obtain the services of experienced academics for little or no cost. In return, the academic builds a reputation and has an enhanced CV to use for career advancement. This relationship is predicated on

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