Plagiarism and the Withdrawal of a Degree:

A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

This case study delves into a complex instance of plagiarism within academia, focusing on the withdrawal of a graduate's degree due to allegations of extensive copy-and-pasting in a mini-dissertation's literature review section. The study examines the broader implications of plagiarism for scholarly integrity, educational institutions, and the recommendations proposed to address such misconduct.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Misconduct, Academic integrity, Whistle-blower

1. Introduction

Academics are generally of the opinion that plagiarism is the act of falsely claiming the provenance of another individual's concepts, formulations, or productions as one's own. This is considered particularly odious in the academic world. It is an act that undermines the integrity of scholarly pursuits, hinders the advancement of knowledge, and erodes the trust placed in academic institutions. As a fundamental principle of academic ethics, plagiarism carries significant consequences that can – and should – impact a student's educational journey and future career prospects. In this case study, we delve into a specific instance of plagiarism and its repercussions.

The case centres around a whistle-blower's complaint regarding a mini-dissertation submitted to the University of X. The allegation of extensive copy-and-pasting in the literature review section raises profound questions about the student's academic integrity, the university's response to the complaint, and the appropriate measures to address such misconduct.

Throughout this case study, we will examine the background of the incident, the arguments put forth by various parties involved, and the recommendations proposed based on a careful analysis of the available information. By exploring the nuances of this case, we aim to shed light on the broader issue of plagiarism and its implications within the academic community.

The consequences of plagiarism can range from disciplinary actions, such as failing a course or academic probation, to more severe outcomes, including the withdrawal of degrees. It is imperative to strike a balance between holding individuals accountable for their actions and, concomitantly, considering mitigating factors that may have contributed to the transgression.

As we discuss this case study, we will explore the importance of plagiarism policies, the role of educational institutions in educating students about academic integrity, the responsibilities of supervisors in guiding and detecting plagiarism, and the appropriate measures to address instances of this particular form of academic misconduct. Ultimately, our goal is to provide thoughtful insights and recommendations that promote fairness, uphold academic standards, and encourage a culture of integrity and originality within the academic realm.

2. The Case

2.1 Background

In 2022 a whistle-blower filed a complaint regarding plagiarism in the mini-dissertation under discussion submitted to the University of X. The mini-dissertation had been passed and published in 2012, i.e. a decade ago. The university decided to act on the whistle-blower's complaint and solicited reports from an internal and external assessor on the degree of plagiarism in the mini-dissertation. Both assessors found evidence of extensive copy-and-pasting in the literature review from one specific source. As a result, one assessor recommended that the graduate's degree be withdrawn, and the other recommended the graduate should fail the mini-dissertation - in both cases because of extensive copying in the mini-dissertation's literature review (Chapter 2) section. Following the investigation, undoubtedly informed by the reports and recommendations from the assessors, the College

Dean of Research invited the graduate to make representations to the college on why the college should not forward a recommendation to the University's Senate Committee that the degree be withdrawn.

Y Attorneys (Note 1) [the name of the firm is removed to ensure the anonymity of the parties involved] requested us (the authors) to provide a comment on this case. The author's name was withheld from us, and parts of the title of the mini-dissertation were anonymized. The mini-dissertation - the source in which the copy-and-pasting occurred - and the reports from the assessors were provided to us, including the letter from the College Dean of Research. One of the authors of this paper has been a member of his College Research Ethics Committee for more than 10 years and has a professional interest in publication ethics, and particularly regarding contributors' rights to authorship of academic publications.

2.2 Our Reasons for not Withdrawing the Degree

Plagiarism is often defined as presenting another person's ideas as one's own. However, some policies at some universities also specify that this does not need to be a deliberate act, thus excluding ignorance as an excuse for plagiarism. Yet, it should be cautioned that some mortals make errors of judgement because of ignorance, and the policies should acknowledge, combat and control such acts.

Ignorance could be fought through knowledge. Most universities have plagiarism policies, and interested and diligent students can easily access these. This brings us to the first point of our reasoning: Apart from making policies available, were the policies formally discussed with the students (including the accused student) in the year the mini-dissertation was written? Were the policies discussed more than once with the student to reiterate their importance? From our recollection, plagiarism was always a serious concern where we worked, but that formal procedures to combat it were only introduced at our colleges in 2012. These questions are thus crucial to answer.

A huge concern is what measures did the university have in place in 2012 to eradicate this practice? Nowadays, similarity software is regularly used to assist "honest" students in preventing them from being found lacking when it comes to plagiarism. Was this type of software used by the university, and why was the candidate not alerted to his negligence if that was the case?

Still on the point of similarity software: What steps are taken when a high similarity percentage is detected? Students are encouraged to rephrase or paraphrase the original author's work to lower the similarity of the highlighted (identified) text. Does this result in new or novel ideas being presented? The answer is obviously not. The same ideas are presented, only worded differently.

One could presume that supervisors act in a university's best interest and are responsible for educating and guiding students on plagiarism. An experienced supervisor could detect copying relatively easily (particularly when the students are not writing in their first language). In these cases, elegant text (the copied text) is combined with less polished text from the student. Also, the referencing style in copied text often differs from that of the other

parts of the text. Such copied work is also reflected in the reference list, where submissions of copied references are presented in a different reference style than the rest of the text. The questions then arise: Why did the supervisor not pick up on, i.e. recognise, the copied work, and if so, why were no steps taken at that stage?

A mini-dissertation comprises many parts, including the literature review, often presented in Chapter 2. The literature consulted is foundational to the dissertation. Here the present state of the body of knowledge is presented. The primary argument is based on the results (Chapter 4) and the discussion part (Chapter 5) of the dissertation, where students present their ideas, arguments, and contributions to the body of knowledge. The main argument in the mini-dissertation under discussion, as captured in Chapter 4 and 5, was not copied, and the main argument was not that of another person. Importantly, the assessors reported no plagiarism in Chapters 4 and 5.

Along with the aforementioned, it should be noted that some parts of Chapter 2 were copied, and certainly not the entire Chapter 2. No copying of any work was detected in Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5. In sum, a relatively low percentage of the dissertation was deemed plagiarised. Thus, to put this in perspective, if half of Chapter 2 was copied (which it was not – it was far less), and if all the chapters are equal in length, then 10 per cent of the text in the mini-dissertation may be deemed to be suspect.

All the parties involved should be in agreement that only part of the MBA mini-dissertation was copied. But, the mini-dissertation forms part of a larger mass of assessments used in the MBA program. So, for example, let's say the mini-dissertation forms 20 per cent of the total MBA, and let's say 10 per cent of the mini-dissertation is flawed. Then the decision to withdraw the degree based on the allegation of plagiarism will be made on 2 per cent of the corpus of the graduate's work! Can this be justified? More about this later in our recommendation.

The graduate's work was cited only once (Note 2) in a thesis towards a PhD in Education submitted at Unisa in 2021. In this PhD thesis, the graduate's paper is incorrectly referred to as a 2016 doctoral dissertation completed at a different university to University X, and the work is cited twice. However, these citations in the PhD show no resemblance to the text of the mini-dissertation under discussion. Furthermore, none of the ideas in the copy-and-pasted section of the graduate are presented in the PhD as if it was the graduate's own work.

Apart from the Unisa PhD graduate referencing the work of this graduate (and misrepresenting it completely), seemingly no one else was exposed to the graduate representing another person's ideas as his own. Well, this is not completely true; one could assert, pedantically, that the examiners of the mini-dissertation clearly would have been exposed as well. Was the literature review of the text presented at any conferences or public forums? Not likely. It is also doubted that the work had a significant penetration into the public domain. The possible damage done by this mini-dissertation was thus minimal or insignificant, as the text has not impacted any part of science as, for all practical purposes, it was and will never be read.

Enter the whistle-blower. Whistle-blowing is encouraged to prevent academic misconduct, but ten-odd years have passed since the malfeasance occurred. Why was this exposed now and not earlier? Why was this particular graduate targeted? If the university's reputation is at stake, has the entire 2012 cohort been investigated? Will all acts of copying found in graduates from the same cohort be treated similarly? If that is the case, the university would be demonstrating impartiality and fairness. If not, it could well be argued that this is a reprehensibly devious act by the whistle-blower, entertained by a university management and that not all the parties are concerned about the university's reputation. The question that arises is whether the university intends to evaluate the mini-dissertations of the entire cohort and revoke the degrees of those who may be involved in academic misconduct. And, importantly, what percentage of copying will be deemed as misconduct?

2.3 Recommendations

The university should prevent plagiarism through diligent programmes addressing students' possible ignorance. Academic staff, particularly supervisors, should undergo the same training to alert them to this matter. Furthermore, similarity software should be applied to assist "honest" students from deviating unknowingly into the realm of committing plagiarism.

Clearly, the impact of the graduate copying someone else's work was minimal and, it appears, inconsequential. Nobody noticed his ideas or those he had copied from the source, apart from the whistle-blower, so, basically, nobody read these ideas. The motives of the whistle-blower should be exposed. Also, why is it proposed to punish this graduate and not any of the other graduates in the same cohort who may have transgressed similarly? Perhaps the only difference between this graduate and others who acted similarly is the whistle-blower's focus on the particular individual for some narrow motive.

Lastly, the extent of the copying should be viewed against the background of the complete degree. This claim of misconduct refers to approximately 2 per cent of the corpus. Would it be fair to retract a degree for misconduct in a tiny part of one module? Would it not be more reasonable to give the graduate a fail mark on the mini-dissertation, as one of the assessors recommended? Even a more lenient outcome for the graduate is possible. What will happen, for example, when copy-and-pasting is picked-up in 2022 when a dissertation is submitted to a supervisor? Most likely, the instruction will be to "revisit Chapter 2, rephrase, and make sure the similarity score is low".

Given the above and the possibility that the university did not apply due diligence in 2012, we propose the following in order of preference:

1). That the graduate be given a formal warning stipulating the misconduct. In the warning, the university should also acknowledge that not all measures were in place or applied to prevent the transgression and that such steps are now in place; or

2). That the graduate adds a corrigendum to this mini-dissertation, where he presents a reworked Chapter 2. This corrigendum could be in addition to the warning given under bullet 1 or,

3). That the "pass" mark awarded in 2012 be changed to "revise and resubmit", specifying the allegations of plagiarism, and that the graduate revises the document and resubmits it to the college for inspection of similarity; or,

4). In line with the arguments of one of the assessors, the mini-dissertation be given a fail mark.

Under no circumstances will we recommend that the degree be withdrawn. A withdrawal will amount to a microscopic focus on one aspect of a case (we suppose there is a legal term for that), heavy-handedness in the extreme, and an egregious example of whistle-blowing misapplication.

We trust that reason will prevail when these critical matters are addressed. But, following Jeremy Bentham's line of thought, we wonder if the pleasures of withdrawing this degree match the intense pain it will inflict on the graduate.

3. Questions to Students and Academics

a. What are your thoughts on the seriousness of plagiarism in academia based on this case study? How do you think plagiarism affects the integrity of scholarly work and the reputation of educational institutions?

b. Do you agree with the recommendation of one assessor to assign a fail mark to the mini-dissertation rather than withdrawing the degree? Why or why not? What factors should be considered when determining the appropriate consequences for plagiarism?

c. What measures do you believe should be in place to prevent plagiarism among students? How can educational institutions effectively educate and raise awareness about plagiarism to ensure students understand its implications?

d. In this case, the authors argue that the copying in the mini-dissertation was limited to a specific section and did not impact the main argument or the overall quality of the work. Do you think the extent of plagiarism should be a factor in determining the severity of consequences? How would you evaluate the significance of copying in relation to the overall body of work?

e. The case raises questions about the responsibilities of supervisors in detecting and addressing plagiarism. What role do you think supervisors should play in guiding students and preventing plagiarism? How can universities ensure that supervisors are equipped to identify instances of plagiarism?

f. How would you assess the impact of plagiarism on academic research and the broader scholarly community? Does the potential harm caused by plagiarized work justify strong consequences, or should the focus be on education and rehabilitation?

g. Considering the motives and timing of the whistle-blower in this case, what ethical considerations should be taken into account when evaluating the consequences of plagiarism? How should universities handle cases where whistle-blowing occurs long after the alleged misconduct took place?

h.   The authors emphasize the importance of fairness and proportionality when addressing plagiarism. How would you balance the need to maintain academic integrity with providing opportunities for growth and learning for students who have committed plagiarism?

i.   What steps do you think universities should take to prevent plagiarism, beyond having policies in place? How can technological tools such as similarity software be effectively utilized to assist both students and educators in identifying and addressing potential instances of plagiarism?

j.   Based on this case study, what recommendations would you propose to address plagiarism effectively while ensuring a fair and reasonable approach? How can universities create an environment that fosters academic integrity and encourages originality in research and writing?

k.   The introduction to this case, as well as the questions to students and academics (apart from this question) was generated with the assistance of artificial intelligence, on ChatGPT. Should the use of text generated by large language models be permitted in academic writing? Do you think this amounts to plagiarism?

References

The policies of University X served as the primary foundation for structuring this article; however, in order to maintain anonymity, these documents cannot be referenced here. Furthermore, the content of this case was primarily developed by the four authors, who bring extensive academic expertise to the table. It is worth noting that ChatGPT was responsible for crafting the introduction and most of the concluding questions, with the only exception being the last question.

Notes

Note 1. In order to preserve the anonymity of the involved parties, any mention of the law firm's name has been excluded.

Note 2. It was not difficult, even with the efforts to anonymize the work under discussion, to identify the graduate as well as the title of the mini-dissertation.

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