

Junior academics too often plagiarised

Professors are taking advantage of young researchers' hard work

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WHEN I was very young, the father of the neighbour's family, a young academic, suddenly disappeared. The young academic was working, I was later told, on original research on which he had pinned the hopes for his career. Nearing the completion of his work, however, a professor he had been working with published the young academic's original work under the professor's own name.

There was a complaint, but the professor prevailed. This was, and often still is, the case in such unequal power relationships.

This young academic's one piece of career-making work was stolen and, not finding justice through the academic process, he ended his life.

It was an extreme response, but one that illustrated the absolute seriousness of intellectual property. It also illustrated the intellectual dishonesty that pervaded academia.

Having heard past complaints by more junior researchers that senior academics regularly publish researcher's work under the academic's name, it was easy to consider this as a serious but uncommon issue. Yet the examples continued and it is now difficult to not believe there is a continuing

problem. In short, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that intellectual dishonesty remains common.

It is a bedrock academic proposition that plagiarism is not tolerated.

Students are regularly failed, or worse, for plagiarising the work of others. Plagiarism scandals have also claimed the professional scalps of a small number of high-profile academics. Yet the incidence of senior academics claiming the researchers' or PhD students' work as their own is, it seems, widespread.

In one recent case, a young researcher left her position when, after more than a year of writing up research, she had a senior academic give it a light edit, append his own name and publish it as his own work. This is not just lifting some material from another source and claiming it as one's own, it is effectively lifting the whole of another body of work and claiming it as one's own.

Some academics might argue that researchers only provide raw data which then requires theorising and analysis. But too often more junior academics are applying theories and undertaking analysis, which is then claimed by their supervisor.

Recently, a PhD student complained his supervisor had requested a large body of written work on his thesis topic at short notice.

Then, having made minor editorial changes, the supervisor presented it elsewhere as the supervisor's own work. Another case of a PhD student's

work forming the project description of an Australia Research Council Discovery grant application was discovered by the university's research office and, thankfully, stopped from proceeding.

I encourage my PhD students to publish as they research their theses. Last year, one of my own PhD students asked if my name should be with his on an article he had researched and written. He had learned of this requirement, it seems, from his peers.

I explained that it was his original work and that he should claim full credit for it. The small amount of guidance I had offered was part of my job as his supervisor; it did not warrant including my name on a paper I had not substantively contributed to.

In an era of unprecedented flows of information, in which what passes before our eyes can so easily become part of our undifferentiated intellectual fabric, the perils of plagiarism are great. Sometimes the boundaries are blurry and sometimes academics slip. But we know we should attribute ideas and information where we know it has come from another source. This is not so, however, for research assistants, at least in some – too many – cases.

More junior researchers often do not have the well developed analytical skills that come with time and practice. Similarly, raw data is the start of the research process, not its conclusion.

But there are many advanced young researchers and these are often the ones who pick up jobs with senior aca-



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demics as their early steps towards their own academic careers. Commissioning research from them does not attribute intellectual ownership.

It is time that the insidious practice of placing one's own name over what is substantively someone else's work was

recognised for what it is. It is plagiarism and it needs to be ended.

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