

Plagiarism in Higher Education: Navigating a Perfect Storm

Stephen J. Brown and Kay Hammond

ABSTRACT

Student plagiarism is the reproduction of material from sources such as journal articles or books, without adequate acknowledgement of the source. It can be a deliberate, intentional act, and is considered a breach of academic integrity. The increasing ubiquity of internet use within higher education and shift to remote learning practices has heightened academic concerns over the prevalence of online plagiarism and ‘cyber-cheating’. Academic integrity now requires a system-wide involvement in understanding, defining, and addressing academic integrity. In this perspective article, we present a possible perfect storm scenario for growth in the incidence of breaches of academic integrity through plagiarism. We suggest this perfect storm culminates from: increasing internet use in higher education; the necessity for remote learning environments during and following the COVID-19 pandemic; and students feeling increasingly disconnected from their institution. Further, we suggest a vision of how the establishment of an ‘Academic Integrity Unit’ may be a means to navigate through such a storm.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Higher Education, Plagiarism, Remote Learning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Student plagiarism traditionally included the reproduction of material from sources such as journal articles or books, without adequate acknowledgment of the source, copying other students’ assignments, and even having assignments ‘ghost-written’ by other authors. The increasing ubiquity of internet use within higher education has heightened academic concerns over the prevalence of online plagiarism and ‘cyber-cheating’ (Eaton, 2022; Selwyn, 2008). Academic integrity now requires a system-wide involvement in understanding, defining, and addressing academic integrity (Fudge et al., 2022). In this perspective article, we present a possible perfect storm scenario for growth in the incidence of breaches of academic integrity through plagiarism. We suggest this perfect storm culminates from: increasing internet use in higher education; the necessity for remote learning environments during and following the COVID-19 pandemic; and students feeling increasingly disconnected from their institution. Further, we suggest a vision of how the establishment of an ‘Academic Integrity Unit’ may be a means to navigate through such a storm.

II. A PERFECT STORM?

Plagiarism can be the deliberate, intentional (or unintentional) act of obtaining credit or value for a piece of work without declaring the source appropriately and adequately (Wijaya & Gruber, 2018). It is the act of taking

someone else’s work and passing it off as one’s own, or the use of another author’s language, ideas, or expressions, and claiming them as one’s original work without crediting the original author (Selwyn, 2008).

In Fig. 1, we present a quadrant model of plagiarism where originality, expressed as either ‘Plagiarised’ or ‘Own work’, is considered regarding the intent to plagiarise. The top right quadrant is the ideal location in which a student’s work is authentic and original, and any errors in the work represent genuine gaps in the student’s understanding. The lower left quadrant represents the punitive arena where both intent and act of plagiarism is dealt with through the appropriate legislative frameworks.

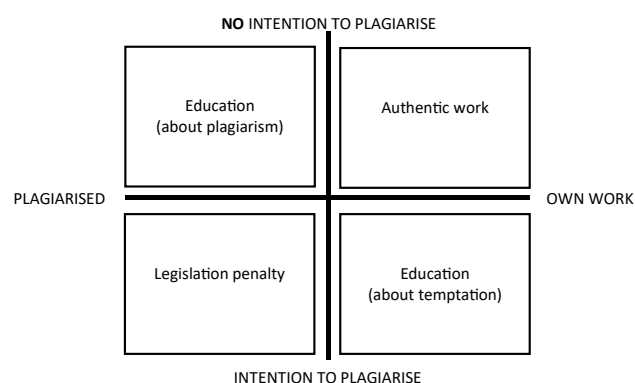


Fig. 1. Quadrant model of the originality of a piece of student’s work in relation to the intent to plagiarise the piece of work.

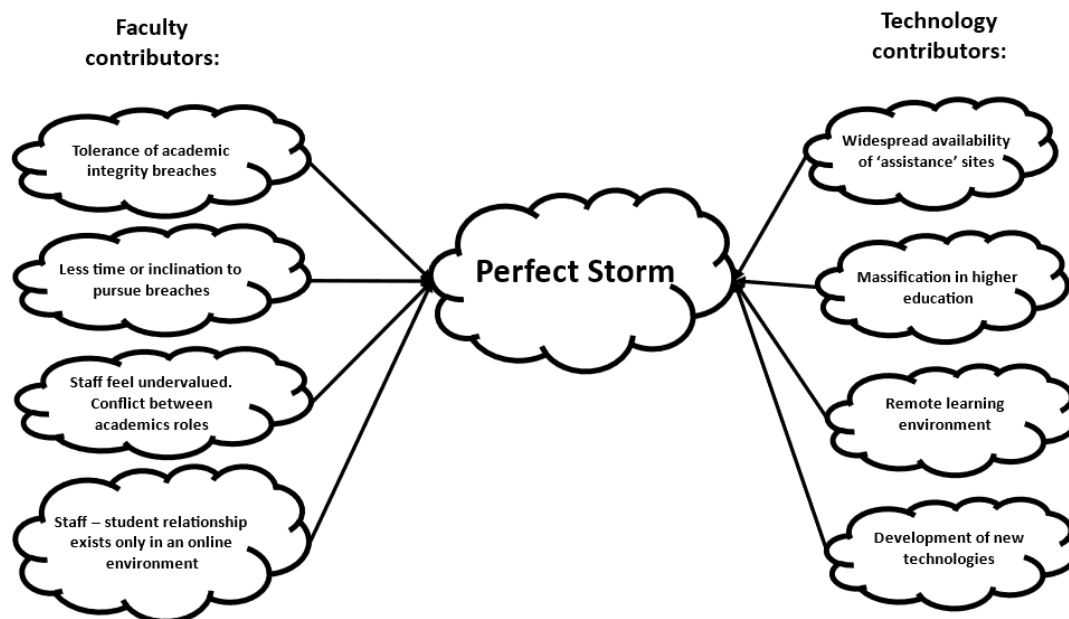


Fig 2. Faculty and technology contributors to a perfect storm of increasing incidences of breaches of academic integrity.

Rapid, continuous advancement of technologies that offer convenient, instant access to information has made plagiarising easier than ever, while concurrently, technology has also been developed that both impedes the detection of academic plagiarism, and uncovers it (Foltýnek *et al.*, 2019). The widespread accessibility of literature available on the internet and the growth of online, remote learning have resulted in an increased incidence of plagiarism among students in higher education (Burgason *et al.*, 2019; Jambi *et al.*, 2022; San Jose, 2022), and this has been exacerbated by the necessity for remote learning during population lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During remote learning, online assessment practices which do not have adequate control systems and breaches of academic integrity by students who feel disconnected from their university (Mendez-Ortega *et al.*, 2021) have also perpetuated the growth in plagiarism. Breaches of academic integrity are more likely to occur in virtual classes because students may be more experienced in using novel online plagiarism tools which currently are undetected by either faculty or traditional learning management system software platforms (Vučković *et al.*, 2020). Also, myriad free, online paraphrasing tools are now available that claim to legitimise the re-writing of text such that it appears unique, and thus avoids the plagiarism detection software typically used in higher education institutions. These ongoing changes in the higher education environment require a systematic response from institutions to ensure the quality of work assessed. Furthermore, this response must be sustainable rather than adding to the burden of overworked academic staff.

Most higher education institutions have academic integrity policies and procedures which outline the ‘official’ steps taken in response to student plagiarism. These policies favour an educative rather than a punitive approach to student plagiarism (de Maio *et al.*, 2020), despite them being usually prepared by legal or administrative staff and having minimal input from academic staff at the coalface dealing with issues of student plagiarism (Havilland & Mullin, 2008). More serious incidences of plagiarism can be dealt with through this legislation, although it is unlikely that national legislative

frameworks are implemented routinely by any higher education institution (Green, 2002). Furthermore, Institutional policies on academic integrity are not consistently followed by academic staff who regularly respond to student plagiarism in varied and inconsistent ways (de Maio *et al.*, 2020). Some of the reasons for these inconsistencies are that academics fear being unsupported by their institution when reporting student plagiarism, the time commitment required to be consistent with institutional policy, and anxiety about the academic’s own reputation and their position within the institution (MacLeod & Eaton, 2020). Faculty members reported feeling unsupported by their administration and were reluctant to formally report incidences of academic dishonesty due to the excessive burdens of dealing with paperwork and providing proof (MacLeod & Eaton, 2020). Also, in recent years in higher education, there has been an erosion of academic autonomy and devolution of academic responsibility through the reliance on the now ubiquitous learning management system -this has potentially contributed to the inconsistency in the implementation of institutional policies regarding breaches of academic integrity.

In Fig. 2 we present both faculty and technology contributors to a perfect storm of increasing incidences of breaches of academic integrity. The faculty contributors to the perfect storm include the staff-student relationship existing predominantly in an online environment as this lack of personal connection may increase the disconnectedness a student feels with their institution. Another faculty contributor is the potential conflicting roles experienced by academics who feel under pressure to report successful metrics on courses (e.g., pass rates) while being expected to identify and investigate potential cases of plagiarism. This model focusses on the faculty and technological aspects, but there are other considerations such as student factors. For example, students may be underprepared before embarking on higher education study, experience a competitive environment in courses, and be confused between what is considered acceptable and what is considered unethical.

III. AN ACADEMIC INTEGRITY UNIT TO NAVIGATE THROUGH THE STORM

An environment to support academic integrity will involve many levels and stakeholders. In higher education, we suggest that there is a need to develop a structure that includes within each provider, an Academic Integrity Unit. Further, we suggest that this unit is largely populated by staff not directly involved in the delivery of courses, and the unit should keep appropriate records of all confirmed cases of plagiarism. An educational approach to avoid plagiarism is usually part of an introduction to studying in higher education, and this approach is consistent with the functioning of the unit. We suggest that this education should be delivered by such a unit, and information about the institutional policies regarding plagiarism are developed and distributed by the unit.

In Fig. 3, we present a flow diagram that potentially enables navigation through the plagiarism experienced in higher education. It proposes the possible functions of an Academic Integrity Unit to initially screen, and then investigate potential cases of plagiarism, and to implement institutional policies regarding plagiarism with improved consistency. We suggest the unit is responsible for investigating breaches of academic integrity for an entire institution, rather than a fragmented and dispersed approach where incidences are dealt with at the department level or by individual academics. This centralised approach has the potential to benefit from both economies of scale, and the ability to develop streamlined procedures which avoid inconsistencies in policy implementation (Green 2002). Furthermore, those working in the unit would be highly skilled in investigating plagiarism detection rather than relying on individual educators with varying levels of ability. They would also hold extensive knowledge of how academic integrity considerations vary across disciplines.

The initial screening can be electronic (e.g., Turnitin), and the suspicion of plagiarism can be based on originality scores. Alternatively, submitted work is manually screened and items suspected of plagiarism are identified. The Academic Integrity Unit is supportive of academics in several ways. Firstly, the burdensome nature of identifying and pursuing plagiarism cases is removed from the academic's workload (de Maio *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, the conflicting judge, jury, and advocate roles which accompany plagiarism cases are devolved from the academic, as these roles can potentially lead to ongoing awkward relations between students and academics. Support can also be delivered through academic staff development, as this could also be a part of the work of an AIU. We suggest that academic staff should have an opportunity to engage with the functioning of the unit, and if appropriate, spend time working in the unit as part of professional development. The unit would also be responsible for adequate and appropriate record-keeping, thus allowing the identification of repeating occurrences and the administration of suitable policies in such cases.

IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, both technology and faculty contributions to a potential perfect storm in the increasing incidence of plagiarism may need to be addressed with a novel strategy. Such a strategy may include the establishment of an academic integrity unit with independence from the delivery of courses and largely populated by support staff. The unit has the potential to streamline the screening and investigation of plagiarism and ensure consistency in institutional policies on plagiarism. The unit would ensure plagiarism would be appropriately managed in both an educative and legislative way.

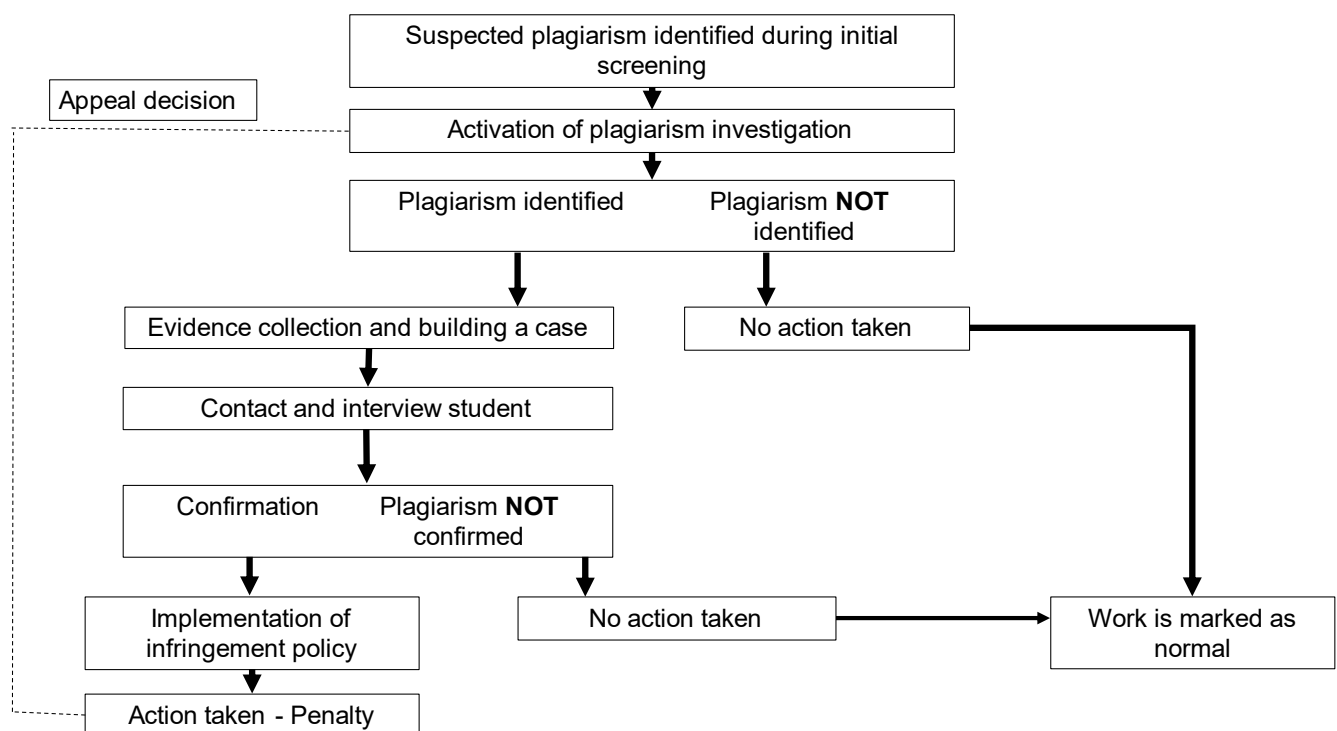


Fig 3. Suggested pathway for identifying and processing student plagiarism by an Academic Integrity Unit.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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