Foreword

“There is nothing new under the sun,” wrote the author of Ecclesiastes. Whilst he doubtless had other things in mind when he wrote it, the quote applies equally well to the re-use of other people’s words, expressions or ideas. Even a decade ago plagiarism in higher education was very much a minority interest, and few of us paid much real attention to it. We trusted our students to play fair, and to attribute material properly, using established academic conventions and protocols. But there now is a growing evidence base that shows student plagiarism to be on the increase. It is matched by a growing body of research and published literature that deconstructs a phenomenon which at first glance seems simple—students cheat, deliberately, by copying words, phrases, or even large chunks of text from other (usually published) sources—but which in reality is complex, as the chapters in this book amply demonstrate.

Of course, students didn’t invent plagiarism, nor are they the only group to engage in it. History is replete with examples of alleged plagiarism. Famous writers accused of borrowing or stealing words or ideas from others include William Shakespeare and Mark Twain. Other famous alleged plagiarists include song writers such as Celine Dion and Michael Jackson, film director Stephen Spielberg, scientists such as Pythagoras and Einstein, philosophers such as Descartes and Wittgenstein, and church men such as John Wesley and Martin Luther King. Students who plagiarise are in good company!

There must always have been students who decided to play Russian Roulette with their coursework, by copying chunks of text from published sources, either to save time (writing the essay the night before it’s due in is an age-old practice) and/or effort (why bother to look at multiple sources if you have one conveniently sitting on the desk in front of you), or for other reasons. Such practices have always been regarded as cheating, but in the past the likelihood of catching students cheating in this way was small, certainly when compared with being caught cheating in exams. Motive (efficiency gain) and lack of deterrent (being caught) were often enough to incubate plagiarism behaviours, and institutions largely appealed (often implicitly) to students’ consciences and sense of fair play to keep such behaviours in proportion.

Add means to motive, and you have a potent mix. In the past, although copying text from published sources was a much more efficient use of a student’s time than spending multiple hours digging about in the library, it still took time. But even the drudgery of sitting and writing or typing out copies of other people’s words is now a thing of the past, thanks to digital technologies which have brought us such things as word processors, the Internet, and digital archives. As various chapters in this collection illustrate, students now have access to an unrivalled wealth of material in digital format which can be readily downloaded, cut-and-pasted into essays, and passed off as their own work. And the Internet is accessible 24x7, from the student’s own room, thus removing even the need to pop along to the library to find a printed source to copy from.

Yet this new digital technology is very much a double-edged sword, because whilst it does offer students a treasure trove of digital sources which are easy to access and use, it also provides the means
by which plagiarism can be detected. At first sight, plagiarism detection software appears to offer a convenient and consistent means by which student’s work can be checked for plagiarism, by comparing it with other textual material available on the Internet. The speed of this comparison and the breadth of material it is checked against are impressive. But such software does not offer the magic-bullet solution that some would like, because inevitably it has constraints (for example, it cannot compare against text that is not available online). There are operational issues to take into account too, such as agreeing thresholds (how much text, or how many words in sequence, would be needed to trigger a “plagiarism” case, for example?).

The broader literature and the chapters in this book indicate that we are entering a new phase in the understanding of student plagiarism. Hallmarks of this new phase include much better awareness of the multiple factors which give rise to plagiarism by students and the significant differences between deliberate and accidental plagiarism, and greater sensitivity to understanding how important it is to help students to develop appropriate study skills (particularly note-taking, essay-planning and writing skills) which minimise the risk of inadvertent plagiarism. Other hallmarks include much more informed understanding of the different practices, assumptions and skills of different groups of students (particularly international students) and the impact of such factors on apparent plagiarism behaviours, more grounded appreciation of the need to minimise the risk of plagiarism at source by setting appropriate assignments, and more sophisticated development of approaches to tackling student plagiarism within institutions.

Taken together, the chapters in this book bring the student plagiarism story up-to-date set it into context, and illustrate the more nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon that is now emerging. As with most things, the more we learn about student plagiarism, the more we realise we don’t know and the more clearly we see the need for further research and inquiry. But already there are clear implications emerging, about how we teach, how students study and learn, how we assess students’ work, and even about what sort of work is most appropriate to expect from our students. Even if “there is nothing new under the sun”, we owe it to our students—and indeed to the future credibility of the academy—to help them develop ways of writing and expressing themselves which are informed by the work of others, but avoid the risk of deliberate or accidental plagiarism.

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