

Now you can plagiarise anything from the Net

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Article

- Comment - New Sunday Times - 04/02/2006

ACADEME, it seems, is not what it used to be, with even Russian President Vladimir Putin being dragged into the controversy.

This column last month talked about the scandal in the stem cell research in Korea as well as other high-profile cases in Japan and Norway which seem to indicate that there is something unusual in how the research was conducted.

Perhaps these could have been just isolated cases where individuals were, according to the once-famed Dr Hwang Woo-suk of South Korea, in defending his action, "blinded by work and the drive for ambition".

Unfortunately, the recent spate of events seems to suggest that these were in fact the tip of a larger iceberg of academic scandals.

The latest revelation was in China when a report was made at the recent meeting of the top advisory body of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

According to a report by China Daily (March 15), plagiarism and fake research have been rampant in China.

It cited a case where one professor was dismissed for plagiarising 10 articles for his book.

Last year, a professor of biomedicine was accused of publishing fraudulent research in the journal Nature Biotechnology (Nov 2003).

However, plagiarism is not only limited to the academics. It has been also found to be prevalent among students doing their theses.

Based on a recent Chinese survey of 180 PhD degree holders, 60 per cent allegedly paid for their articles to be published in academic journals while about the same percentage copied indiscriminately the work of others.

The situation exists in almost every well-known Chinese university, according to He Weifang, a professor of law at Peking University.

In view of this, some 100 Chinese professors were said to be planning to publish an open letter calling for the establishment of a national mechanism to weed out academic corruption, including plagiarism, distortion of data and using the work of others without proper acknowledgement.

Academic corruption also broadly refers to the improper use of resources to gain power, prestige and income.

If China's institutions of higher learning are regarded as an academic bastion in a hurry to gain international recognition and repute at the expense of ethical consideration, the same cannot be said of Oxford University.

Yet the phenomenon of plagiarism does not seem to make such distinction.

For the first time last week, the university admitted that plagiarism is rife among its students.

Prof Alan Grafen, the senior proctor of the university, writing in Oxford Magazine, a house journal, said this would include word-for-word copying, cut-and-paste from the Internet, and submissions containing whole pages of this verbatim material.

"Plagiarism is becoming a serious problem at Oxford," he said.

Grafen, who is also the university's chief disciplinary officer, suggested that the number of students involved in plagiarism could threaten to undermine the worth of an Oxford degree.

Although only 10 cases out of a total of 17,660 students were detected last year, Grafen said there was evidence to suggest that "the incidence exceeds the observed events, perhaps by a considerable margin, perhaps by a considerable multiple".

To prevent plagiarism, it is suggested that students sign an affidavit for every piece of work they submit, although it may not be effective. Other actions include deducting marks, failing the students, suspension or even expulsion.

According to Grafen, "any six consecutive words identical with the source need to be acknowledged and an unacknowledged string of 10 consecutive identical words is pretty watertight evidence of malpractice".

Others would regard that ideas could be plagiarised in books, movies or songs.

While there are suggestions to stem this practice, there is no foolproof way of ensuring total success.

And this will be a serious threat to the world of scholarship and academe in the heat and rush to perform.

Often times this is at the expense of ethical consideration and integrity which is fast losing currency in the materialistic world of instant gratification.

Universities are not the only place faced with allegations of plagiarism.

The literary world too has been implicated.

Recently, one of the world's highest-paid authors was accused of having "hijacked and exploited" the work of other authors in constructing a novel that has sold more than 40 million copies worldwide.

Best-selling author Dan Brown is currently facing a plagiarism suit by the authors of *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* (1982) where he was accused of stealing ideas for his 2003 blockbuster, *The Da Vinci Code*.

In Putin's case, according to *The Moscow Times* (March 27), he was said to have committed the offence in the mid-1990s while doing his doctoral thesis on economics.

Researchers at the Brookings Institution in the US claimed that Putin "lifted in part verbatim from the Russian translation of a management study, 'Strategic Planning and Policy'" which was produced by University of Pittsburgh professors in 1978.

Allegedly, 16 of the 20 pages in a section of the thesis were a word-for-word copy or with some minor alterations.

The thesis, entitled "The Strategic Planning of Regional Resources Under the Formation of Market Relations", generally discusses how a state should manage its natural resources.

Regardless of who is involved, plagiarism is serious enough a blemish on anyone's standing.

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