

Plagiarism and the paper chase

A FEW days ago, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) announced that it would be using the QR (Quick Response) code on each of its certificates for its upcoming convocation.

Researchers from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) had also introduced a similar technology for their certificates in 2012.

Why is it necessary for the certificates to have these codes, one might ask. Well, not too long ago, Malaysians, especially those in the academic circle, were taken aback by reports of well-known public figures holding fake PhD degrees. The report triggered a nationwide check on the authenticity of PhD degrees conferred on all academics at public and private institutions, as well as all personnel in the public domain who claimed to have been conferred the degree by institutions locally or internationally.

What motivated these fake PhD holders to commit such an act?

One thing is certain: it is not easy to get a PhD locally or elsewhere. Years of independent study, planning and work have to be poured into it. Many who are now PhD holders had to sacrifice family time and savings to pursue their studies.

The current assumptions (not shared by many) that the level of recognition from the public and approval from the intended audience equals to the number of higher degrees a person has, and that it is compulsory to have at least a PhD in order to be successful in career and life do not help either.

Nevertheless, having a PhD definitely enhances the image and credentials of a person to a certain extent. So it's not surprising that many would resort to falsifying work or fabricating research results in a desperate attempt to shorten the time required to fulfil this objective. These might be the reasons some resort to plagiarism in research and publication.

Generally, people assume that plagiarism occurs when an author copies a paragraph, phrases or even sentences from a text word for word without acknowledging the original author. This is a classical case of outright plagiarism.

Copying a presentation, flow of ideas, parts of a design or sketch, parts of the music tunes or melodies or chorus of a song, using a copyrighted musical arrangement as soundtrack in one's own video footage, mixing and matching words or letters from an already registered trademark, sign, symbol or logo, adding and subtracting information to and from the original drafts and stealing manuscripts from unsuspecting authors (from their computers, drafts left unattended on the desk or thrown into dustbins, to name a few) and claiming the newly improved version as one's own original creation also constitute plagiarism. Some may even copy the entire article and deliberately misquote the original source in an effort to confuse the intended audience.

Then there is the deliberate act of "content scraping" or cutting

and pasting of certain statements from other people's blogs, Facebook posts or websites and reposting these opinions repeatedly elsewhere.

We are also familiar with "rogeting", a term used to describe the act of replacing words used in text with synonyms in an attempt to outsmart and outdo the plagiarism checker, hence eluding the suspicion of readers or the intended audience. In any case, it is very alarming to view this rampant practice as acceptable.

The word "plagiarism" is derived from Greek and Latin words which collectively mean "a kidnapping" or "kidnapper". At the tertiary education level, this behaviour not only compromises intellectual integrity but also constitutes academic misconduct which may result in disciplinary action, destroyed academic reputation, dismissal from the institution, and messy legal and financial ramifications.

According to Turnitin, an Internet-based plagiarism-prevention commercial service, and researchers in this field, the reasons given by plagiarists include the need to gain academic credit, chronic procrastination behaviour leading to working on specific tasks at the very last minute thereby creating pressure to produce an article or assignment in a short period of time, ignorance over what constitutes plagiarism and its consequences, having ample opportunity to plagiarise and not be penalised for doing so in the past, unfamiliar-

ity with English, practising memory-based learning as opposed to experiential or active learning, poor writing and summarising skills, lack of confidence in one's own work, plain laziness and indifference, and focusing too much on the outcome of learning and academic benefits like getting a diploma or PhD rather than the process of learning itself.

Research has also shown that unlike the Silent Generation, baby boomers or Gen X, millennials are likely to have the tendency to commit plagiarism due to the availability and accessibility of electronic articles or books on the web.

Among academics, the "publish or perish" culture imposes enormous pressure on them to publish, leading to the sprouting of duplicate publications and intellectual fraud. This is especially seen in authors who are new to the field and those who are competing against each other to publish the most.

Unfortunately, plagiarism of research results or findings in the veterinary, health and medical fields or even grant proposals may garner the recognition hoped for or desired funding but the outcome may be detrimental and often fatal to patients or animals, in addition to misuse and waste of public funds.

Ignorance is definitely not bliss.

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