



Revisiting Plagiarism among Staff Members in Higher Education: The Case of the National University of Lesotho

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Abstract

This study analysed the responses of two lecturers (respondents) who were suspected of plagiarism to determine their perception and understanding of the concept. The case of analysis was their response to the allegations. The respondents were accused of making reference to the complainant's work, which had never existed. The complainants argued that they had never published the work referred to by the respondents and their action was tantamount to fabrication or manufacturing of references. From the analysis of the responses, it emerged that the respondents did not regard the fabrication of references as plagiarism. They further contended that because they used the complainants' names, they complied with the academic rules of referencing. The overall conclusion that could be drawn was that the respondents did not understand the concept of plagiarism, confirming what is emerging from the literature, that lecturers also plagiarise and sometimes lack understanding of plagiarism. The study recommends that professional development programmes be introduced to capacitate lecturers on the understanding of plagiarism. In addition a comprehensive anti-plagiarism policy be developed, clearly defining acts of plagiarism to be known by staff members.

Subject Areas

Economics

Keywords

Plagiarism, Plagiarism Policy, Referencing, National University of Lesotho

1. Introduction

Plagiarism is a worldwide problem haunting higher education institutions (HEIs), in both developed and developing countries [1]-[6]. There is a general consensus that it affects HEIs academic integrity [6]. The pandemic nature of plagiarism has necessitated HEIs to develop anti-plagiarism policies intended to curb it [7] [8]. Such policies provide institutional frameworks through which HEIs conceptualise plagiarism and communicate with stakeholders how it should be dealt with [7]. However such policies tend to portray students as the main culprits, ignoring members of staff [9]. A growing research worldwide indicates that staff members are equally capable of committing plagiarism [10]-[13]. Nonetheless, it is generally observed that there is a plethora of research on plagiarism by students while limited research relates to teachers' plagiarism [14].

This paper intends to contribute to the body of research related to plagiarism by members of staff by undertaking a discourse analysis of lecturers' perceptions and understanding of plagiarism. The case of analysis was a complaint the author registered against two senior lecturers related to plagiarism at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). The analysis was guided by the question: How do members of staff perceive plagiarism?

2. The Case

The case arose from a complaint against two members of staff who had published a paper in a journal in 2014. The journal claims to provide the best platform for researchers and scholars worldwide to exchange their latest findings and results. Despite the fact that it showed the list of the reviewers, there was no explicit statement indicating whether it was a peer-review journal. The journal was published in the US. The journal in which the paper was published will be referred to a *Journal 1* (the name of the journal is concealed for confidentiality purposes). The paper extensively made reference to the paper written by the author of this paper. The paper being referred to was co-authored by two authors and was published in 2008. However, the paper being referred to in *Journal 1* made reference to a work purportedly published in 2004. This came as a surprise since no such work had been published in 2004. Surprisingly, the referenced work in *Journal 1*, under the reference list indicated the journal that had published the authors work in 2008 (the name of the journal is concealed for confidentiality purposes). This is referred to as *Journal 2*. The title of the work that was published in *Journal 2* was dated 2008, in volume 2 and number 2, with DOI address. On the other hand the referenced work in *Journal 1* appeared to have been published in 2004, the journal title being the same with that of *Journal 2*, the same extent, volume and number. The article title was different from the 2008 in *Journal 2*. On closer analysis the respondents' work might have been based on one of the co-authors' work (single author) that was an unpublished internal report written in 2004. This report was not referenced, neither within the text nor under the reference list.

The bone of contention was that the article (2004) in *Journal 1* was not the au-

thors' work as purported. It could be observed that the two titles were different and also the years of publication were different. What seemed to be the same was the *journal*, *volume*, *issue* and *the extent*. Technically, this was not possible. The complaint raised was that this constituted plagiarism and needed to be addressed by the University leadership as this appeared to have been the fabrication and manufacturing of references.

The complaint was lodged in June 2015 to the relevant Dean, who through various letters promised to address the matter but could not. In February 2021 the complaint was lodged with the Secretary of the University Academic Staff Appointment Committee (ASAC). The Chairperson requested the parties to make submissions in lieu of the complaint, which they duly submitted. At time of writing there was no response from ASAC.

Thus, this paper analysed the narratives that emerged from the responses related to the complaint to understand their perceptions and understanding of plagiarism. Even though the analysis was based on the views of the two lecturers that were not representative of the university's staff, this analysis would provide rich insights into issues of plagiarism given that these were members of the academic staff who have published in different journals. The study would also contribute to the understanding that academic staff members could also commit plagiarism. This would also contribute to the raising of awareness on plagiarism among faculty members and necessitate the need for the development of plagiarism policy addressing academic staff members, hence contributing to the comprehensive understanding of plagiarism against the current view which only sees students as the culprits at the NUL [9]. It will further contribute to the scarce research related to academic staff plagiarism globally.

3. Plagiarism within HEIs

3.1. Definition of Plagiarism

Plagiarism has attracted a great deal of attention within the education sector, in particular the higher education sector [5]. It is being regarded as a public menace [15] [16] representing a moral and ethical crisis affecting higher education [17] [18]. The recent plagiarism charges against Harvard President, the highly prestigious institution globally, have sent shock waves across the world. This further demonstrates how bad plagiarism is not only in HEIs but across different sectors of the society. In portraying its horrific nature, plagiarism demolishes rewarding the ethic of hard work, eroding the moral value of honesty, whilst devaluing the role of assessment-items, within our educational establishments [16]. It has further been observed to undermine the knowledge generation, creativity and innovation which form the basis of university education [19] [20]. This notion introduces the perspective of academic fraud, dishonesty or misconduct [13] [21]. It breaches academic honesty and integrity, copyright law, and publication ethics [17]. This has been observed to undermine the quality of higher education [14].

While its negative effects on the education system are widely acknowledged,

there is a diversity of understanding by researchers in the field, devoid of standard definitions [21] [22]. There has been a warning against developing standard definitions as this may run the risk of failing to capture diverse practices, perceptions and different understanding [22]. It has further been observed that definitions which may be suggested are too brief to provide any clarity to the concept, since they depend on individual's preferences [23]. From literature plagiarism emerges as a multi-dimensional phenomenon with different interpretations which cannot be subjected to standard definitions that may appear simplistic and overly idealistic [22]. Definitions are often abstract and technically oriented demonstrated by actions such as "cut & paste" [24]. It has further been observed that a number of factors obscure the understanding of plagiarism and adds to its complexity [15] [16]. Thus, it has demonstrably been associated with culture [23] [25] [26], morality and ethical position [17] [18] [27]. While it is regarded as bad, it is further complicated by a qualification that it might either be intentional or unintentional [5] [14] [24].

There has been a view that the definitional crisis can be addressed by institutional policies [21] [22]. Such policies should be coached in broad terms to reflect the nature of plagiarism [22]. However, in other parts of the globe such as Asia, research indicates that students and lecturers have limited understanding of plagiarism policies [28] and in Africa there are no effective policies and lack of enforcement [26]. Attempts have been made to provide a broader framework for plagiarism. Six elements which define plagiarism have been suggested, comprising the following elements [24]:

- object (language, words, text);
- which has been taken (or borrowed, stolen etc.);
- from a particular source (books, journals, Internet);
- by an agent (student, person, academic);
- without (adequate) acknowledgement;
- and with or without intention to deceive.

In addition to these, it has further been suggested that all techniques of plagiarism should be articulated so that perpetrators understand in concrete terms [23]. The authors refer to the Pennsylvania Public University views on plagiarism is regarded as exemplary since it demonstrate actions characterising it [23]. They argue that by reflecting plagiarism through specific actions facilitate clear understanding of the concept [23]. The policy reflects the following actions, indicating that one has committed plagiarism is he or she:

- presents the work, which is not written by you;
- copies answers or text from other student and present them as of your own;
- quotes or paraphrases other works not indicating the original author;
- quotes data without references to original sources;
- presents the ideas of other authors as of your own;
- fakes references or use improper references;
- provides presentation, programme or other work of another person with

minimal changes [23].

3.2. Plagiarism by Lecturers or Faculty Members

Lecturers are seen as central in promoting understanding and good behaviour against cheating and plagiarism among students [22] [29]. However, the emerging research reflects that lecturers lack a clear understanding of plagiarism and are reluctant to engage in anti-plagiarism pedagogy [18] [22] [29]. Regrettably, lecturers' lack of understanding affects the teaching enterprise and its fundamental values, such as knowledge creation and scholarship [29]. There is an emerging literature that documents lecturers as also perpetrators of plagiarism [11]-[13] [30]. However, plagiarism by university academic staff is under-researched [18] [24] [31]. The growing instances of plagiarism among academic staff have also been reflected by the growing number of paper retractions from journals [32]-[35]. It has further been observed that research related to academic staff is underrepresented as opposed to students' plagiarism and there are inconsistent responses to cases of staff plagiarism [18]. Such inconsistency may be exacerbated by the way universities recognise and promote academic staff, which relies on publication [27].

While there is an acknowledgment of staff committing plagiarism, the growing research is focusing on staff's understanding, perceptions, attitudes and their handling of students' plagiarism behaviour [22]. We can extrapolate why perhaps staff members engage in plagiarism by inferring from factors emerging from research. In a survey on student academic plagiarism conducted at four Australian universities, there was an observed underestimation of the prevalence of plagiarism despite its existence [36]. In a Swedish university lecturers knowledge and attitudes toward plagiarism were examined assessing how lecturers capacitated their students with skills related to avoiding plagiarism [37]. The study revealed that the lecturers were unsure of the definitions of plagiarism. The study further revealed that lecturers held varied attitudes toward different types of plagiarism, and failed to effectively teach how to work with a text to avoid plagiarism. A research involving the examination of disciplinary cases related to plagiarism and a survey among academic staff revealed a reluctance on the part of academic staff to take action against instances of potential plagiarism through established institutional policies and procedures [38]. A study involving English language lecturers in China related lecturers' knowledge of and stance on two inappropriate inter-textual practices, that is, unacknowledged copying and unattributed paraphrasing, found divergent and ambivalent understandings of unattributed paraphrasing [39]. A number of studies related to English language have been undertaken in China and do reflect some understanding of the need to comply with the Western standards of scholarship [22] [25] [40].

4. Methodological Framework

The overall research paradigm was situated within narrative inquiry. Narratives

are types of discursive scholarship along with discourse analysis, rhetoric, conversation analysis, and metaphor [41]. A narrative approach rooted in post-structuralist, post-modernist, social constructionist inquiry [42]. It argues that realities are socially constructed', 'constituted through language' and 'organised and maintained through narratives [42]. It leads the audience to focus on the events in the story rather than make counter arguments [43]. The employment of narrative encourages individuals to engage in well grafted stories of their experiences, reducing motivation for counter arguing [43]. Narratives have been successfully employed in research in various areas of study [44]. Thus, the narratives emerging from lecturers' responses to the complaint was analysed through qualitative methodological research techniques of content analysis. Content analysis focused on analysing the responses related to the complaints as sources of narratives.

5. The Results of Analysis

The fundamental complaint which guided this paper centred around the following issues:

- 1) the respondents had made reference, both in text and under the reference list, to the work of the complainants which never existed, and 2) that the respondents referred to the Journal title, volume, number and the extent, similar to the work that was published in 2008, while their referenced work appeared to have been published in 2004. The title of their referenced work was different from the actual title published in 2008.

The respondents denied any wrong doing. They contended that they did not commit any acts of plagiarism. They contended that they correctly acknowledged the referenced work of the complainant. They put it as follows:

We, as the authors, do note our error in the citation... (*the names of authors concealed for confidentiality*). This was not by any stretch of imagination, an act of plagiarism nor any academic dishonesty in our academic parlance/jargon as... (*referring to the respondent*) alleges. We note that this was simply an editorial cut and paste error and an oversight on our part given that:

- The authors of the cited article are correctly mentioned as well as;
- The correct journal name, volume, issue and pages of the cited article are stated in the manuscript by (*reference to their paper*).

The respondents overlooked the fact that the title of the paper under the reference list was materially different from the one they alluded to in their response (2008). They further argued that the 2008 paper could still be retrieved and cited correctly. They admitted that what was wrong was only the year of publication (2004) which they had erroneously referred to. They noted:

Thus, if need be, the cited article by (*reference to the complainant, 2008*) could be retrievable and accessed using both the authors' names, journal name, volume, issue and pages even with the wrongly cited year of publication as was the case in our article forming the subject of controversy. ...The so called plagiarism as argued by our colleague lacks merit in as much as the error relates to the year of publica-

tion and article title.

The respondents also noted the importance of making reference to authors names. To them, this was important even if the work never existed. They argued:

We also note that in every instance where the work of (*reference to the complainant, 2008*) was referred to, we did not omit to cite the article accordingly. By citing (*reference to the complainant*) work intensively (our colleagues) we were acknowledging that the information relied on was not ours but that of (*reference to the complainant*), as such, there was no way the reader of (*reference to the complainant*) article could be misled into thinking that the views acknowledged as those of (*reference to the complainant, 2008*) actually belonged to (*respondents*). It is a common occurrence that authors inadvertently cite a source as being published in a wrong year. That said it is well known that the duty of the publishers and authors is to double check any such mistakes.

The respondents argued that the accusations against them would stand only if they had not acknowledged the complainant's work. They stated "We believe that this would have amounted to plagiarism or dishonesty if the 2004 or 2008 article had not been acknowledged at all."

In further justifying that they did not commit any act of plagiarism, the respondents went further to compare their paper with the complainants' paper (2008) in *Journal 2*. They stated as followed:

In further justifying that they did not commit any act of plagiarism, the respondents went further to compare their paper with the complainants' paper (2008) in *Journal 2*, using three criteria, namely, *study themes, research questions* and *research methodology*. Their arguments are highlighted below.

Study Themes

The themes of the two respective articles are different. The (respondents) article focuses on the challenges faced by (subject) teachers in Lesotho. The study is by its very nature descriptive, whereas the (complainants') (2008) article is an exploratory study focusing on... the entrepreneurship education... in Lesotho... A descriptive study often follows an explorative study which is the case here. The (complainants') article's main focus is on the teaching/implementation of the entrepreneurial aspect of business education whereas the (respondents) article focuses on the teaching of the subject as a whole (which includes entrepreneurship, but entrepreneurship is not necessarily the main focus).

The Research Questions

The research questions of the two studies are completely different.

Research Methodology

The (complainants) article uses observational methods (video footage observing the interaction of teachers and students); focus group interviews and "secondary sources" (which they define as their interpretation of the primary sources). On the contrary, the (respondents) article only used structured questionnaires and interviews. Thus, the conclusions drawn from the (complainants) article are mainly inductive in nature as they used the observation method to form a para-

digm whereas that of (respondents) is deductive in nature.

What has been noted was that the respondents never referred to the article being compared in their response, was never referred to in their work, neither in text nor under the reference list. Further, the respondents made no comment on the unpublished report of 2004 which was mentioned by the complainant to have formed the basis of the respondents work.

6. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

From the analysis, it has emerged that the respondents did not regard their referenced work as an act of plagiarism. They concluded that the 2004 dates used were an error and did not constitute plagiarism. To them, the different titles they used to reference the work of the complainants appeared not to be an issue. Both the date and title in dispute were different from the published paper of 2008 in *Journal 2*. If the date was the only element that was wrong, then their argument would stand and would be regarded as an error. This would qualify as unintentional or “negligent plagiarism” [45]. Lack of correct referencing is considered plagiarism as well, despite the fact that it is not necessarily intentional [46]. The issue of intentionality further complicates the understanding of plagiarism given that it is often the outcome of a conscious process [47]. Lack of correct referencing would logically be expected from students not lecturers. On the other hand it could be concluded that the use of the wrong date in-text referencing and wrong title under the list of references may be construed as intentional plagiarism.

It has emerged that the respondents relied on the 2008 paper that was published in *Journal 2* when justifying their innocence. The main argument was that they had manufactured the reference by citing the complainants’ work wrongly both in the text and under the list of references. The complainants had stated categorically that they had never published such work in any journal. They had argued that the work they had published was that of 2008. What the respondents had done fell within Pennsylvania Public University definition of plagiarism.

It has been observed that the respondents had attempted to refute the claim of plagiarism by comparing their article and the complainants’ 2008 article in terms of themes, research questions and research methodology. This attitude may be indicative of a lack of understanding of the concept of plagiarism. They might have a faint conception of plagiarism as acknowledging the source of an idea irrespective of whether the references are correct or not. Adequate acknowledgement is fundamental in circumventing plagiarism [24].

The overall conclusion that can be drawn is the lack of understanding of the concept of plagiarism by the respondents. Lecturers, as both researchers and disseminators of knowledge, are expected to be conversant with plagiarism as they are supposed to guide students in research and academic writing in pursuing scientific knowledge.

Even though this paper is of limited scope in that it focuses on a very specific case limiting the generalizability of the work, it provides rich insights into how

lecturers may justify their plagiarism acts. It provides some perspectives from the lecturer's position related to plagiarism. It is thus recommended that a study involving more participants (lecturers) within the NUL be undertaken to establish lecturers' perceptions and understanding of plagiarism within higher education. The findings might be the tip of the ice. The observed lack of understanding and experience drawn from the literature suggests that the NUL needs to develop a policy that clearly defines actions that constitute plagiarism by both lecturers and students. It would also be helpful since it will provide guidelines on resolving such cases since it has been indicated that cases of plagiarism have been proven challenging to resolve [12]. Furthermore, continuing education on plagiarism should be provided to lecturers.

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Data Availability Statement

The study is based on documentary analysis of respondents' responses. Even though these documents are not in a public domain they can be made accessible if so requested. What has been reported here are issues and principles, while other information has been withheld to maintain confidentiality.

Ethics Statement

This study did not involve human participants. However, the identity of the respondents has been concealed.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the work in this manuscript.

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