



Academic and research misconduct in the PhD: Issues for students and supervisors

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Summary There are many pressures upon PhD students not least the requirement to make an original or significant contribution to knowledge. Some students, confronted with complex research processes, might adopt practices that compromise standards that are unacceptable within a research community. These practices challenge the PhD student–supervisor relationship and have implication for the individual, the supervisory team, the institution, the awarding body and the wider research context.

Discussion relating to misconduct within the PhD is of international importance if the aim is to encourage and facilitate rigorous research practice.

Cases involving academic and research misconduct, especially those occurring at PhD level, are likely to become more frequent as numbers of PhD students increase and will demand appropriate, defensible responses from supervisors. Misconduct during PhD study can be difficult to resolve because of lack of clarity in definitions, supervisor naïveté and failure to acknowledge students' decision making limitations.

Using scenarios from the first author's supervisory practice to illustrate issues of concern for students and supervisors during PhD supervision, the authors aim to illuminate the importance of engagement with regulatory bodies; problems of knowledge and understanding transfer; culturally specific issues and meanings of academic theft.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to illuminate the issues that present everyday quandaries during supervision of PhD students as they and their supervisors

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negotiate research processes. It highlights the need to anticipate such events and notes with concern the absence of international standards to deter students from academic misconduct which are tailored to the specific needs of the PhD research student and their supervisor.

There are many pressures upon PhD students, not least the requirement to make 'original' or 'significant' contributions, and to produce research that reflects the researcher's originality. This is often demonstrated through theory development, presenting new perspectives upon accepted theories, and developing new knowledge. Some students, confronted with these perhaps daunting tasks, might take short-cuts or otherwise adopt practices that compromise standards during the research process. The literature confirms that short-cuts, corner-cutting and unacceptable practices are especially likely when PhD students worldwide are pressured by time, funding worries, and the need to attain high levels of personal and professional success in relation to academic longevity and respect (Chop and Silva, 1991; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995; Harman, 2003; Bennett, 2005).

Decisions by students that lead to misconduct also arise when requirements are misunderstood (Park, 2003), when students lack the skills necessary to comply with requirements (Pennycook, 1998; Robinson and Kuin, 1999; Angellil-Carter, 2000) and when the student's goals are in conflict with those of the assessor or regulator (Saltmarsh, 2004).

There is ample evidence to justify concerns about rising levels of academic misconduct in general (Fly et al., 1997; Park, 2003; Sheard et al., 2003; Carroll, 2004) but less about breaches of Governance especially during research conducted by health-related professionals (DH, 2001; 2005). Hansen and Hansen (1995) state that the incidence of research misconduct is likely to be grossly under reported particularly where instances involve graduate students or post doctoral students. Although in the British medical community, research misconduct has historically been associated with the medical profession (Smith, 1998), we think it is likely that similar misbehaviour to that found amongst medics and medical students (Coverdale and Henning, 2000) will emerge as nurses and other professionals allied to medicine develop research profiles themselves and as more students pass through the expanding UK doctoral provision.

Data obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2006) in the UK indicate a 3.5% increase in doctorate research qualifiers between 2003/4 and 2004/5 (14,995 and 15,520, respec-

tively). Despite decreases in enrolment in engineering, mathematics and technology disciplines in Europe, PhDs in social and behavioural sciences are steadily increasing (Yavuz, 2004). China and Japan have seen incredible increases of up to 578% in doctoral enrolment (Moguerou, 2005).

Concern about the possible increase in unacceptable behaviours within research degree programmes may be one reason why the Higher Education Funding Council for England authored *'Improving Standards in Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes'* (HEFCE, 2002). The document identifies a general increase in the number of doctorates awarded between 1996 and 2000 and notes that those who undertake research degrees in the emerging disciplines do not have a tradition of PhD training to build upon (p7). These new and sometimes naïve doctoral researchers must rely heavily on the skill and expertise of their supervisor(s) who may, given the context outlined above, be equally recently accredited researchers.

Lack of supervisor familiarity with the rules and culture of research may be one explanation for the sometimes reactionary and mechanistic methods employed when confronted with research and/or academic misconduct. If, as the literature predicts, such encounters are likely to occur more frequently in future, there is an acute need for supervisors to prepare for dealing with events such as falsification of data, fabrication of data, deception and misrepresentation and to anticipate dealing with misconduct such as plagiarism. Supervisors should anticipate the possibility of students they supervise may make decisions, intentionally or unintentionally, that transgress Governance issues and fail to comply with accepted research conduct requirements.

This paper considers issues of misconduct illustrated in four scenarios developed from the first author's supervisory practice in a UK Higher Education Institution. These scenarios (a) illuminate the importance of engagement with regulatory processes, (b) identify problems of knowledge or understanding transfer, (c) raise awareness of culturally specific issues that might arise during study for a PhD and (d) explore meanings of academic theft. These scenarios have been useful as a focus for reflection for us as authors and, because they are examples from everyday supervisory practice, are likely to resonate with other supervisors. The scenarios prompted a literature search using search terms 'academic', 'research', 'misconduct', 'plagiarism', 'PhD' and 'supervision' in the following databases: CINAHL, EMBASE, Ovid Online and THES.

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