A NEW BREED OF GHOST-WRITERS: EXPLORING THE NEW THREAT TO THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY VIA INTERNATIONALISATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Shiva D Sivasubramaniam, Sharavan Ramachandran

Abstract:
Contract cheating (or ghost writing) is a growing problem in higher education that can only be handled with academic wisdom/experience. Signs such as using quotes from abstracts, verbosity, and perfection with technical word usage are good indicators of this offense. This is because the ghost writers are usually professionals with higher standards literacy than the students. However, as a result of internationalisation many students with Western post-graduate qualifications are returning to their native countries, where employability is restricted. Having studied the internationalised curricula and established global links via social media, some of these students have started new ghost writing services. These services are easily accessible, economical, and above all, provide realistic essays that resemble a genuine original student essay; with expected verbatim as well as common student mistakes. This interview based study confidentially investigated the attitudes and the justifications of these “ghost-writers” from a developing country.

This study has highlighted several high calibre post-graduates who have understood the Western ways of scientific writing, who have produced a network of “consultancies” with the ability to share field specific “contracts” amongst them. Since they advertise by social networking sites, this trade cannot be easily detected. Most interestingly, there are country specific consultancies with graduates from universities of that country. Since they themselves are past students, making contacts is easy for them. This paper will further discuss the wider issues arising from these interviews and discuss the possible ways to tackle this new threat to academia.

Key words: Plagiarism; Internationalisation; Social media, Ghost writers; Paper-mills

1 Introduction

The term ghost writing has several distinct meanings depending on the levels of involvement of the ghost writer (POGO, 2011; Bosch and Ross, 2012). It is often linked to contract writing in which the author who takes the credit often acknowledges the ghost writer as the “editor” of his article. In this case, the ghost writer does everything from start to finish including research, writing and editing but with constant supervision by the “author”. Also the former will be attributed by latter (e.g. in most biographies) and therefore it is ethically acceptable. The second form is where the ghost writer is only employed to edit and rewrite a draft (often misnamed as “proof-reading”). In the next form, the ghost writing only comes in after the research phase but the bulk of the article is written by the ghost writer. The final one is simply using (or paying) ghost writers to do the entire project from start to finish without any contacts with the authors (e.g. paper-mills).

While many universities are keen to deter, detect and discipline plagiarism practices, there is less focus on addressing the issue of ghost writing or buying essays from the...
paper-mills (Molinari, 2014). An article by Basken in the Chronicle of Higher education (2011) highlighted that ghost writing practices are prevalent even amongst academic communities. As Rothschild (2011) argued, although ghost writing is technically plagiarism under strict definition, many institutions fail to address this. The main reasons for this “negligence” are (a) the belief that a professionally ghost-written article can easily be identified either by plagiarism detection software or by its style and use of citation; and (b) the essays from most paper mills are too expensive for undergraduates to buy, when in fact it is only going to contribute a percentage of his/her final degree. However, it is astonishing to note how the internationalisation of education, coupled with utilisation of social media by the young generation made these assumptions wrong (or no longer valid). So what is the contribution of internationalised education and social media to ghost writing? Many of the students with post-graduate Western qualifications are returning to their native countries where they face restricted employment opportunities. Having studied the internationalised curricula and established global links via social media, some of these students have started new ghost writing services. These services are easily accessible, economical, and above all, provide realistic essays that resemble an original student essay; with expected verbatim as well as common student mistakes. This interview-based study confidentially investigated the attitudes and the justifications of these hired “ghost-writers” from a developing country.

2 Methodology

The idea of carrying out this explorative study was initiated after reading a face book post (advertisement) about “high quality help for writing assignments”. Following this, research on social media such as Face book©, Twitter©, and What’s-App© was carried out to establish the frequency of posts on the topic “academic writing services”. The contacts from these adverts were then followed up welcoming them to take part in this study. All responders were given details about the purpose of this study, its mode of investigation and the ethical aspects including maintaining confidentiality. The study included interviews with ten ghost writers/organisations (representing different subject area) who were all educated in Western countries and had returned to their country of origin. These interviews were conducted under UNESCO’s “Norms of Journalistic conduct” as described within the country in which these interviews were carried out. Since almost all of them considered their work as a “professional writing service” or “project”, the term “ghost writing” was avoided in the interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to assess (a) individual background/circumstances for starting or joining this service, (b) its popularity, (c) its reliability/affordability and (d) whether they consider their service as academic dishonesty. Some example (but not exclusive) questions under each category are given below:

A. The Background (reasons for starting/joining)

- What was the main reason for starting this service?
- Were you confident that you had the experience and/or expertise to start this project?
- When you started this "project" how many others were involved?
B. Popularity and accessibility
   - How many projects per month do you usually undertake?
   - How do you advertise? (Whether you advertise? or students contact you?)
   - How do you network? Do you share expertise? If so, how do you allocate/share projects? Are staff well trained to meet the International Standards?

C. Reliability and affordability
   - What is your price range? And why do you think it is appropriate?
   - Who decides on price? You or the customer?
   - Do you think your price range is affordable by the home/international students?

D. Views on academic dishonesty and plagiarism
   - Do you know about academic dishonesty? What is your view regarding plagiarism?
   - Do you think that your services contravene the code of practice in academic writing? If not, why?
   - Do you take steps to avoid plagiarism in your projects? If so, how?

3 Results:

Social media searches:

Initial social media searches have revealed several small to medium size advertisements, blogs and chatting strings about these “writing services”. They were embedded as tweets, or facebook entries, which are linked to a home page. Some of the example screen shots are given in figure 1.

As can be seen, almost all of them are openly offering “writing help” and appear to be addressing university students (both UG and PG). At least one of them has managed to post his advertisement on the common face book pages of a university. It is also interesting to note some of them are even assuring (or claiming) that the essays written by them would have less than 06% Turnitin© similarity matches (red circled in figure 1). This shows that these sites are aware of the use of plagiarism detection software in higher education. Some even offer thesis write-ups at PhD levels.

3.1 Qualitative data obtained from Interviews:

Authors found that the interviewees were extremely open and honest in their answers. They were clear in expressing their opinions without any fear. Interestingly they all have a range of post-graduate qualifications (MSc, MA, MPhil, MBA, PhD etc.) from Western countries. Majority of them (who were interviewed) are in jobs not entirely challenging for their graduate attributes. The interviews also revealed they were unable to find suitable jobs for their qualifications and therefore started this “service” in order to boost their income.
Figure 1. Example advertisements on common social media websites [These advertisements are taken as screen-shots from social media and anonymised]

3.1.1 The beginning:

As mentioned above, it looks like most of these services were started by the students who returned to their home country after finishing their post-graduate studies in another country. Some started this service as solos while others formed a consortium of four friends. At least one of them claimed that he never intended to start this as a business model but continued after realising his first couple of assignments were highly successful; because of this he became popular. He feels there is still a high demand for “writers”. Another writer holds a doctorate in bioinformatics and had worked as a lecturer for a short period. During this time, he has developed contacts with student communities. As for the incentive or the reasons for starting this, one replied “It was my own effort to start this service to our students studying overseas. I had utilized my
acquired analytical and vocabulary skills to address the needs of our students.” Another new writer said “one of my friends gives me projects to complete but I am planning to advertise through social networking sites”.

Although it appears these “writers” started ad-hoc, they have established a good network and are able to share projects and practices. As explained above, some of them advertise only in the social media as posts/tweets (not as advertisements). In contrast, others felt that advertising does not have an impact on their business (and it is a waste of money). One said “Advertising through main internet servers does not have any impact in our promotion; also main providers like Google have banned promotions for such report writing services”. In his opinion, media can be used as a bridge for creating awareness and also it can give the opportunity to know the market status. Another writer, who started his service recently, stated “I mainly get projects through my references and contacts. Perhaps, my outstanding performances in various projects speak a lot, which I feel (is) better than commercial advertising.” However, he did not deny the fact that social media played a part in his “popularity”. Interestingly, everyone agreed on the fact that the probability of students going to them via referrals and contacts (by word of mouth/social media) is higher than advertising.

The interviews also revealed that these writers are highly successful. One consortium of writers proudly claimed “the frequency of our writing is constant and we get projects more frequently by any other means; so, our work and our service will fetch us further projects”. Another one quoted “It depends upon the needs of the students and university. As I am handling the services to all degree students, irrespective of their level of study, it will be busy all the year around. For international dissertation services, it will be very busy during the months of June and January”. Due to this high demand, he is now recruiting and training MSc/PhD holders from his own country. Most of them admitted they have constant demand from students overseas and at home. As for expertise in a given subject, they share the projects by networking. They would ensure the project is handled by a subject expert in that field. For example, if a bioscience project is acquired by a provider with social science expertise, he would refer this on to an individual with bioscience specialism and vice versa.

3.1.2  Reliability:

With regards to the reliability of their service, they all have a clear understanding about academic writing and plagiarism avoidance. In fact some of them even use plagiarism detection software to perfect their essays (i.e. to reduce the percentage matches). An example email from a senior writer to his apprentice, highlighting the plagiarism issue with instructions to rephrase the essay and screen shots of a Turnitin© report, is given in figure 2.

After showing this example, the provider quoted “we train them (the apprentice) to meet the international standards and requirements. By doing this, we can deliver plagiarism-free services to our international clients and customers”. The following excerpt summarises the attitude and the understanding of these writers. “Although, the students from this (anonymised) country are highly focused on knowledge, they lack far behind when it comes to execution. This will mask their career growth. The main reason
is that, they are not taught the importance of writing at preliminary levels. They are not aware of plagiarism. This is mainly due to the design of our (anonymised) educational system. Consequently, their research is not recognized in the international platform. We (the writers) simply helping them to get recognised”. This clearly shows they are committed to their customers and promise to write better essays and avoid plagiarism. One writer even accused “the lack of support from the university tutors with their course work is the main reason for students to seek the assistance from us.”

Worryingly, all of them proudly claimed that none of their assignments had been identified as plagiarised. This claim cannot be verified by the authors. When prompted with the question about the morality of performing this service, their argument was that the process of “writing” usually involves the customer (the student). They have a constant dialogue with the student from the start, making them read their drafts and comment; by this way student would understand the essay and fulfil the learning outcome. In other words they are claiming their role as “editors” than “writers”.

3.1.3 Affordability:

Authors found that these services are substantially cheaper than Western paper-mills; especially for an under/post-graduate who could afford to pay the international tuition fees of the UK or USA. The charging practices differ from writer to writer. One claimed he charges 3 to 5 UK pence/word (their currency is anonymised to protect identity) and the minimum charge is 100 pounds. Others said their charges depend on the complexity of the project from 150 for a UG level assignment to 1000 for a PhD thesis.
4 Summary of findings:

Social networking has become a means of discussing course work and to support classroom work amongst students of higher education (Roblyer et al, 2010; Connell, 2009). These websites have several millions of unique users/visitors, and the number of visitors is growing each year. Businesses have noticed the potential of these websites as an advertising platform (Todi, 2008). As explained in the introduction, as a result of rapid globalisation of education many international students with Western post-graduate qualifications have returned to their native countries, where employability is restricted. Having studied the internationalised curricula and established global links via social media, some of these students have started new ghost writing services. These new professional ghost-writing services are becoming popular in the developing countries. This study investigated the attitudes of some ghost-writers, together with their justifications for starting up this venture. Since students are now using social networking sites to obtain support for their educational needs (Peluchette and Karl 2008; Roblyer et al 2010), these providers are directly and discretely approaching the students. The fact that they post/tweet these advertisements as an entry (not as proper advertisement) clearly shows their efficiency in targeting the students without creating a media outcry. Amongst those who were interviewed, some of them realise that their services are not legal and can be blocked by the service providers. In fact this is shown in the interview in which one admitted not using Google© advertisement to avoid such problems. Hence they use web-chatting, tweets and other form of social media to attract students from them. By this way they are efficient in attracting the target group. From the interview it is clear that the main reason to get involved in this service is the lack of job opportunities. This might be the direct result of internationalisation of education, without addressing core competency requirements of a global market (Teichler, 2004). This actually shows that a highly professionalised international education may not be suitable for their country of origin. In the authors’ point of view, a lack of suitable jobs may have been an important contributing factor for their decision to start this venture.

Another point to note is the price. As it is much cheaper than the paper-mills of developed countries like UK, students may opt for these written services. The most interesting (but worrying) finding is the fact that these providers are relatively new graduates who have just finished their education. Thus they understand the learning outcomes, marking criteria, and what is expected from the assignment. Upon scrutiny, some of their completed assignments (not shown to protect confidentiality), realistically resemble a genuine student essay; with expected verbatim as well as common student mistakes. It was impossible to identify any general tell-tale signs of a professionally written assignment. In addition, as can be seen in figure 2, at least some of them are using Turnitin© (or similar) websites to correct any potential sentence similarities and avoid detection. In that email (figure 2) he warns the apprentice to explain about plagiarism avoidance to the student customer (marked in red font). On confrontation, he admitted they clearly advise students how to address academic misconduct investigations. They are clever enough to use the student’s (customer) name and his respective university registration numbers for Turnitin© checks. So
if detected the student can claim that it was him who checked the assignment for accuracy before submission. Regarding the question of ethics in academic writing, their arguments were somewhat varied. By showing evidence, some tried to prove customer involvement throughout the project and therefore argued it is not unethical or immoral. Others justified their service is similar to English Language Editing (ELE) services offered by many journals. They pointed out that it has been a common practice to hire grant-writers by the Western academics and questioned how their service is dissimilar to this. Despite this, authors were astonished to hear about their claim of writing PhD thesis. Since PhD work should have an experimental component which needs constant interaction with respective supervisor, it should be impossible to employ ghost writing. Authors were not able to explore how ghost writing could effectively be carried out at PhD level. It should be noted that this study is reporting the claims by these ghost writing. Therefore it is virtually impossible to check the validity of all of their claims. As the title of this article clearly states (also mentioned in the methodology), this is an exploratory study to highlight this growing problem; checking the validity of all their claims is beyond the scope of this study. It is also worth noting the interviews were conducted in compliance with the directives of the press council of the country in which this study was conducted. In authors’ point of view, investigating the validity of these interviews would contravene this directive.

Overall, the authors found that these writers have a clear understanding about their work and above all know how to justify their existence. This new generation of ghost-writers are going to be a major challenge for the internationalised higher education system. Therefore it is necessary for institutions to focus and redesign their assessment strategies by removing the chances of ghost writing. This needs a holistic approach to change the strategies from assessment as a “measure of learning” to evaluate the “learning process” in the form of continuous assessments, which needs constant student engagement and input. In this way, academics can monitor student involvement and minimise the chances of them using ghost-written articles.

References:


Copyright statement

Copyright © 2015. Author(s) listed on the first page of article: The author(s) grants to the organizers of the conference “Plagiarism across Europe and beyond 2015” and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic, to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on flash memory drive and in printed form within the conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).

Authors

Shiva D Sivasubramaniam (shiva.sivasubramaniam@ntu.ac.uk), Sharavan Ramachandran, Bioscience Teaching research, School of Science and Technology, Clifton Campus, Nottingham NG11 8NS, UK