Organisation of dissertation mills in Russia

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Abstract

Over past decades, extensive evidence has emerged on thousands of cases of plagiarised dissertations that were prepared by dozens of dissertation mills in Russia. Their organisational structure, as well as the high tolerance of plagiarism in Russia, have allowed the mills to develop their dishonest business with impunity. Dissertations have become a step towards career promotion and a luxury good for politicians and top managers. An identification and understanding of the activity of the dissertation mills would allow us to evaluate the main participants and their structure, as well as the defence mechanisms necessary for developing policy and taking further action to eliminate plagiarism from research.

Introduction

Plagiarism has become a more common form of intellectual misconduct in academic works (Weber-Wulff, 2014). The problem of plagiarised dissertations is growing due to the increasing number of doctoral students from developing countries (OECD, 2016), where the academic ethics standards are lower and the tendency to plagiarise is higher than in developed countries (Honig and Bedi, 2012). Russia is not an exception. Osipian (2012) has estimated the black market for dissertations in Russia by analysing 169 firms that supply ready dissertations for sale.

Due the activity of Dissernet, a voluntary network of researchers and journalists who expose plagiarism in dissertations in Russia, since 2013 nearly 10000 doctoral theses with considerable plagiarism have been detected. All these dissertations contain dozens of pages copied from other texts and sometimes they are even totally plagiarised. Dissertations have become one of the status symbols for politicians, businessmen, etc. A fake academic degree can also pave the way to career promotion (Rostovtsev, 2017). Most of these dissertations were produced in one of numerous dissertation mills in Russia. The Dissernet's database contains information not only about the fraudulent author of the fake dissertation but also about the university, supervisor, and reviewers and allows us to examine the organisational structure of dissertations mills and the ties among their participants.

Methodology

The Dissernet's database of plagiarised dissertations is updated by several methods.

- *Automatic check* for plagiarism in the long abstracts (*avtoreferats*) of dissertations. If two texts of *avtoreferats* that are open source and available online have considerable text similarities, then the dissertations also have a high probability of containing identical phrases or paragraphs. In this case, the dissertation which was defended later than the other dissertation is analysed for plagiarism.
- *Snowball method (institutional).* This method is based on the hypothesis that if a professor has been noted as a supervisor or reviewer of fake dissertations, then there is a high probability that he/she also participated in the defence of other doctoral students with plagiarised dissertations. In this case, further checks of the dissertations of his/her doctorate students are performed. The snowball method is also applied in cases where several dissertations with considerable plagiarism are discovered to have been defended in front of the same dissertation council. The dissertations defended in front of the same dissertation council are inspected for plagiarism.
- *Snowball method (textual).* If a dissertation under inspection is a text donor for other dissertations defended later, then the subsequent dissertations are checked and added to the database.
- *Analysis of social groups.* This method includes the examination of the dissertations of different social groups (school directors, rectors, etc.).

As of 2019, the Dissernet's database contained nearly 10000 dissertations with considerable plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct.

Obtaining an academic degree in Russia

The academic attestation process in Russia is state regulated. There is a two-level degree system: the candidate of sciences degree that lies between the Western master's degree and Ph.D. degree and the doctor of sciences degree that is similar to the German habilitation. An ordinary dissertation defence involves reviews by the supervisor, two or three reviewers as well as a collective review by the university or research institute. The presentation of the research results of the dissertation is held at the session of the dissertation council of the university/research institute, which normally consists of 15-20 permanent members. The successful defence requires two third of the positive votes of the dissertation council members. The academic degree is then finally approved by the governmental Higher Attestation Commission, whereby the expert councils again review the attestation case of the degree applicant.
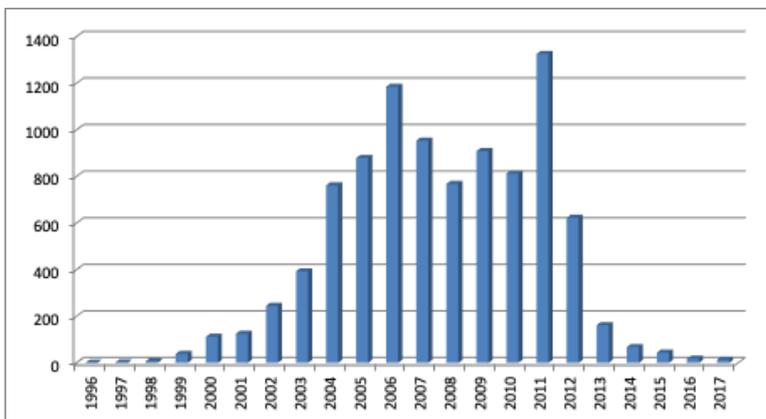
Despite the numerous mandatory reviews of a dissertation there is evidence of thousands of dissertations with considerable plagiarism and other types of academic misconduct. Such expansion of plagiarised dissertations can be explained by several factors.
- High tolerance of plagiarism. According to the survey, only 54.3% of university professors support the withdrawal of fake degrees in Russia (HSE, 2019).
- Lack of transparency. The detection of plagiarism by external scholars was limited due to restricted access to the long abstracts *(avtoreferats)* and manuscripts of dissertations before 2012 when the online publication of the long abstract became mandatory. In 2013

some amendments to the public regulation of the attestation process were made, according to which the text of the dissertation itself should be available online before the defence (The Russian Federation Government, 2013). Graph 1 demonstrates the frequency of fraudulent defences and their number decreases after the entry into force of the new regulation.

- Deliberate neglect of plagiarism in dissertations by the supervisor and reviewers due to corruption in higher education in Russia and participation in dissertation mills (Osipian, 2012).

- Withdrawal of fake academic degrees granted before 2011 being blocked due to the law and the limitation period for making a request to revoke a degree. More than 75% of dissertations with considerable plagiarism were defended before 2011 and are currently under the 'amnesty' of the law.

Graph 1: Frequency of plagiarism in dissertations in Russia (as of December 2019)

Source: Calculations based on data from the Dissernet database.

- Lack of independence. The presence of the same professors both on the dissertation councils and on the Higher Attestation Commission violates the independence principle and at the same time serves as protection for the author of a fake dissertation.
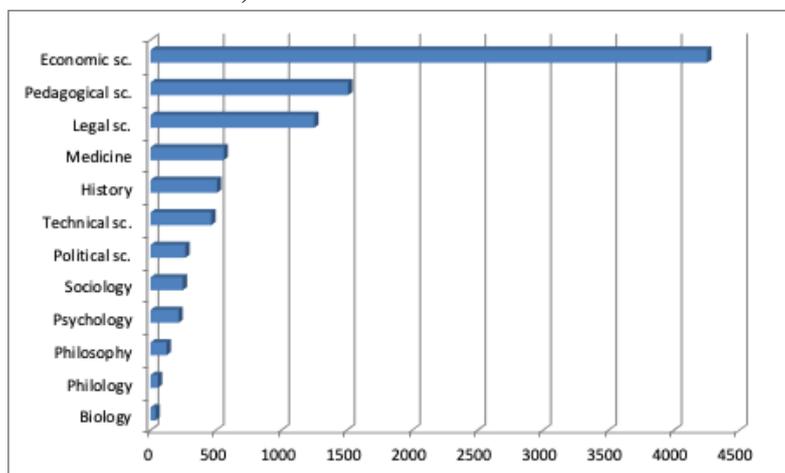
Results and discussion

Nearly 10000 dissertations with significant plagiarism were detected in Russia despite the fact that plagiarism is not allowed in dissertations in Russia (The Russian Federation Government, 2013) and that plagiarised dissertations should not be accepted for defence. The spread of plagiarised texts is associated with the lack of a system of checking dissertations for plagiarism during the 2000s, but members of the dissertation councils were also able to note cases of text recycling, especially when the reuse of the text happened on the same dissertation council. For example, this happens when text A was the source for dissertation B and dissertation B was in turn the source of dissertation C and all these dissertations were defended in front of the same dissertation council. Incorrect citations and plagiarism should certainly be noted by members of the dissertation council even in the absence of detailed plagiarism checks. For example, at one Russian university, we found at least 7 cases where

the dissertations in history had considerable text similarities with the dissertation of the supervisor without proper citations. The supervisor could not be unaware of the presence of his/her text in the dissertation of a doctoral student. In 9 other cases, the source of the dissertation was the scientific work of the reviewers.

The analysis of the network of plagiarised dissertations in Russia, especially in humanities and social sciences, which have a significant gap in accepted research methodologies in comparison with international science, gives evidence on numerous dissertations mills in the fields of economic, psychological, historical, legal, and pedagogical sciences. Economic, pedagogical, legal sciences represent more than 74% of all plagiarised dissertations as of December 2019 (Graph 2).

Graph 2: Distribution of plagiarised dissertations according to the scientific field (as of December 2019)
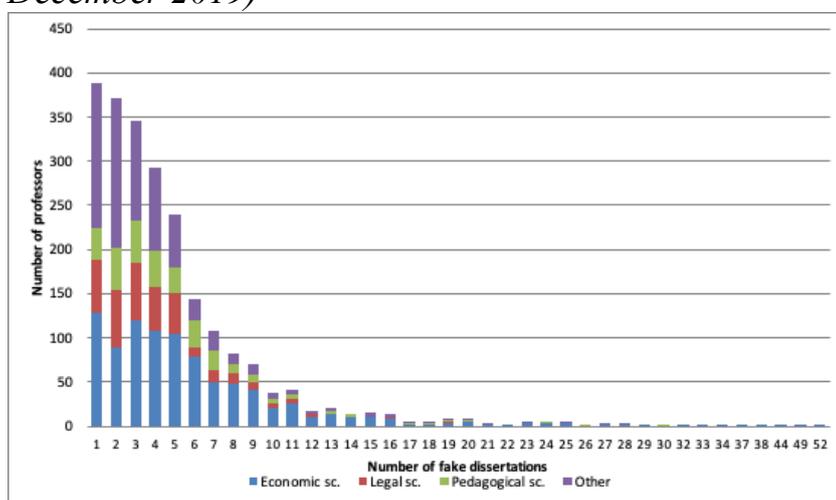

Source: Calculations based on data from the Dissernet database.

The six years of Dissernet activity and the collected data on academic misconduct in dissertations allow us to map the main methods of organisation of the dissertation mills'. We are interested not only in identifying the institutional structures of such an organisation but also the methods of protection (despite plagiarism being rampant, it is still a violation of both academic ethics and regulations) and the patterns of the activity of the mills, which would allow to identify and detect other cases of academic fraud.

Almost in every dissertation mill there is a leading organiser who attracts the greatest number of doctoral students. Such organisation of the network may not differ from the activity of a normal dissertation council, where there is a star scientist who attracts a large number of applicants for a doctoral degree (Abalkina, 2016). The difference is that the dissertation mill is characterised by the low quality of the doctoral theses, the presence of plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, a fraudulent process of defence and a lack of scientific discussion. Participation in dissertation mills creates specific ties among the mill's its members who jointly cover up the violation of scientific ethics.

As a rule, only a small circle of professors are accepted to supervise and review the fake dissertations. However, at the country level, the small circle of a dissertation mill turns into hundreds or even thousands of professors who participate in the defence of dissertations with considerable plagiarism. In Russia, 2264 professors in different scientific disciplines were supervisors or reviewers of at least one fake dissertation, more than 1800 professors supervised or reviewed 2 or more dissertations with considerable plagiarism (Graph 3). Most of the professors work in the economic, legal or pedagogical sciences. Economic sciences are the most corrupted, as at least 904 professors helped to defend from 1 to 52 dissertations with considerable plagiarism.

Graph 3: Participation of professors in the defence of plagiarised dissertations (as of December 2019)
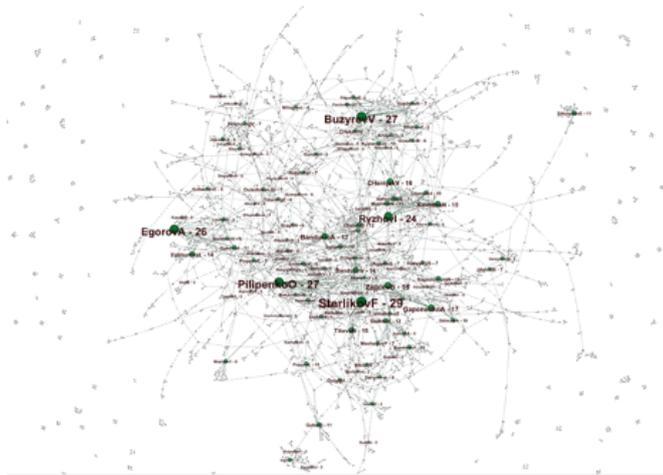

Source: Calculations based on data from the Disseropedia of Russian higher education institutions (https://rosvuz.dissernet.org/).

Another finding of this study is that professors from different dissertation mills collaborate and organise one extensive network of plagiarised dissertations throughout Russian science (Graph 4). The reason for the close ties between the professors from various dissertation mills can be explained by the necessity to respond to the requirements of legislation. Dissertation councils have to search for individual external reviewers and organise collective reviews of a dissertation by the university or research institute. The data analysis showed that each dissertation mill has a number of organisations which most often give false positive reviews. In many cases it turned out that these universities are also dissertation mills. Moreover, dissertation mills often collaborate with each other in a more specific way. Dissertation councils exchange dissertation manuscripts for further text re-cycling and to provide greater legitimacy to the fraudulent defences.

There are also some other methods of collaboration that lead to the diffusion of academic misconduct in dissertations. Dissertation councils promote not only their internal doctoral students but also attract applicants from other organisations to ensure a successful defence. One of the most famous cases is the Standartinform dissertation council in Moscow, where two third of defended dissertations were from external organisations (Abalkina, 2017).

Graph 4: The network of authors of plagiarised dissertations and their supervisors and reviewers in economic science in 2016

The number corresponds to the quantity of fake dissertations supervised or/and reviewed by a professor.
Source: Visualisation based on the Dissernet database.

Authors of dissertations with considerable plagiarism reproduce plagiarism themselves: a total of 389 holders of fake titles, of which 189 were in the economic sciences, subsequently participated as supervisors or reviewers in the defence of a dissertation with considerable plagiarism.

Despite the consensus that there is considerable plagiarism at the dissertation council level, the risk of it being detected is still possible during further checks and reviews. Further protection is provided by the experts from the expert council of the Higher Attestation Commission. The data analysis showed that in many scientific disciplines the key members of dishonest dissertation councils are also members of the expert council of the Higher Attestation Commission and editors on the board of a scientific journal to ensure fast and non-peer-reviewed publications by the applicants.

Conclusion

The study of the network of plagiarised dissertations allows us to identify the main participants of dissertations mills, the patterns of their activity and their safeguards to search for new cases of academic misconduct and to elaborate policy measures and advice. However, the fight against corruption in higher education is mainly upheld by civic activists and meets resistance from the state as well as from a part of the scientific community.

Dishonest academic practices are diffusing because there is no professional ban on participants in dissertation mills and because dishonest professors reproduce themselves. Many holders of fake degrees remain and work in the academic sphere and develop their own "scientific schools" based on methods of academic misconduct.

An alternate scientific community that tolerates plagiarism has been formed in Russia. There is no professional ban after the disclosure of plagiarism cases (both for authored dissertation with considerable plagiarism or for participation in dishonest defence activities). Even in the rare case of dismissal, the professor can find a job at another university. Despite a significant reduction in the number of defences of fake dissertations, dissertation councils still impede the withdrawal of inappropriately obtained degrees.

Acknowledgements

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