

Tricky question on academic integrity

An expert provided an answer on a tricky question on academic integrity. It was previously published in the regular [ENAI newsletter](#) (February 11th, 2019).

What can I do if my work has been plagiarised?

In this newsletter we bring a word of advice for an extremely unpleasant situation: "What can I do when my work has been plagiarised by someone with higher authority (and I am being intimidated from within my institution)?" Unfortunately the question was inspired by a real story of a person who approached ENAI recently asking for a help.

*The answer on this very difficult question was prepared by **Tracey Bretag**, the Director of the UniSA Business School Office for Academic Integrity and Editor-in-Chief of the Handbook of Academic Integrity.*

When someone in authority takes advantage of a subordinate, it is very difficult to provide precise advice on how to respond. Presuming that attempts to discuss the matter informally and respectfully with the senior colleague have already occurred, the first step is to check your institution's policy on this issue. Is there a policy? Does it specify to whom you should speak in the first instance? Is there a fair and transparent process which respects both parties? Are you confident that the process protects your rights as an employee or a student?

If your institution does not have a policy, is there a national code of ethics which provides advice on how to deal with such a situation? For example, such behaviour would be considered to be in breach of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. In addition to stipulating individual researchers' responsibilities, this Code mandates 13 responsibilities of institutions, including to "Provide mechanisms to receive concerns or complaints about potential breaches of the Code. Investigate and resolve potential breaches of the Code". In the Australian context, institutions are expected to follow the Guide to Managing and Investigating Potential Breaches of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

However, even when such codes exist, some institutions may not always follow them. If that is the case, are you able to speak with your direct supervisor, manager, tutor or someone else in authority and seek their advice? Is there support within your department to ask your chosen representative to make confidential enquiries on your behalf, and ideally establish an impartial and qualified committee to investigate the issue?

Regardless of institutional policies and processes, if you have sufficient evidence of plagiarism, you have the option of approaching the journal editor so that the plagiarism can be investigated and if appropriate, the paper may be retracted. However, you should be aware that this process will necessarily identify you as the original author and there may be negative consequences for you from the senior colleague.

If your own institution is unsupportive (even intimidating), are you a member of a union or advocacy group who may be able to act on your behalf to seek redress? Will seeking such external intervention be likely to result in the outcome you are seeking? In the end, your course of action will be determined by the impact of the plagiarism on you professionally and personally, and this may depend on the extent of the plagiarism, the level of deception and/or intent on the part of the plagiariser.

Some useful resources to further consider this issue:

- [Committee on Publication Ethics](#) (which regularly features thorny issues around research and publication misconduct)
- [Plos Blogs](#) (many of which cover scientific misconduct)
- [Professor Brian Martin's website](#) (which covers issues of plagiarism, dissent, whistle-blowing and much more)