

Plagiarism: A menace in the academic world



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

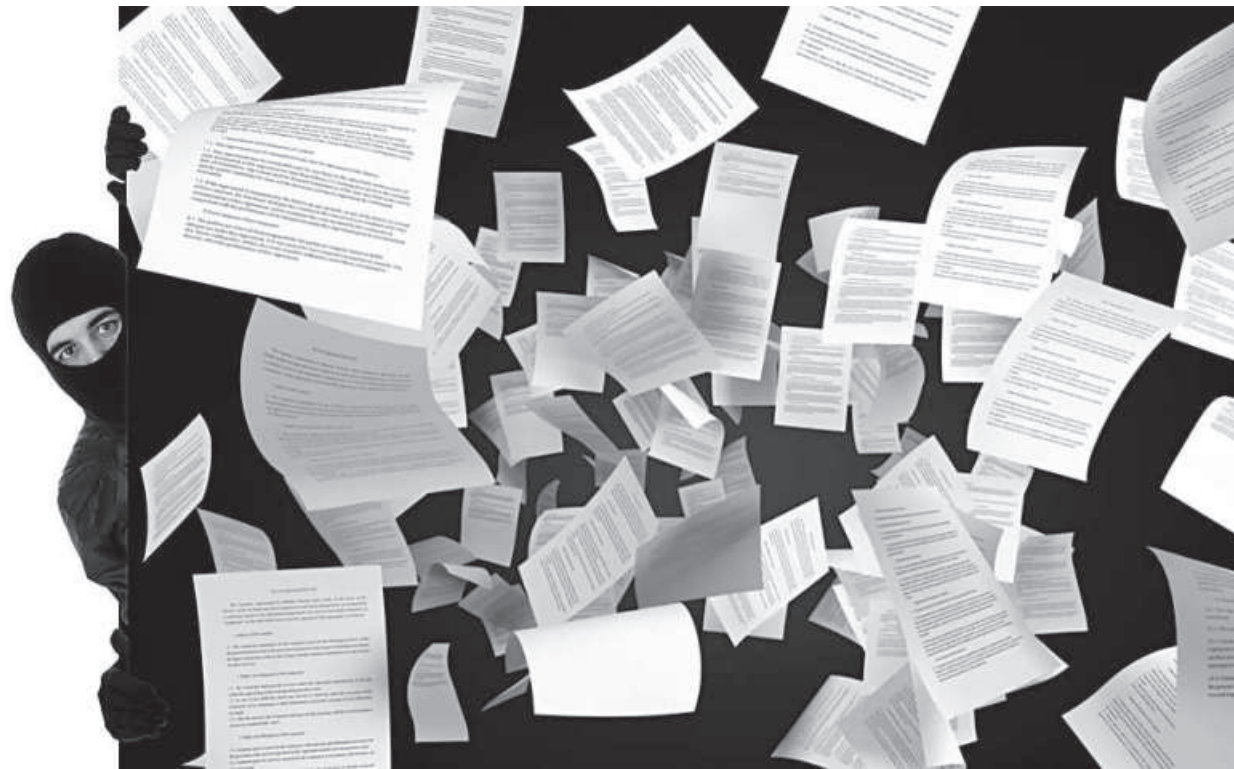
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A Dhaka University teacher has been stripped of his degree and demoted to a lower rank as his doctoral dissertation is 98 percent plagiarised. Here's an educated guess: the title and acknowledgements account for the remaining two percent. News of "professorial plagiarism" pops up every once in a while. In such cases, the institutions concerned investigate and punish the perpetrators. In a few instances, the incidents make headlines. When they do, the accused play victim and shift the blame. They either find faults in the "poor citations" and

lies when researchers or teachers are incapable of thinking critically, testing their ideas on their own or giving creative expressions to their thoughts in a coherent fashion. Why do most public universities avoid this course on research methodology, or include a thesis component in their master's programmes? One ready answer lies in the class size: if you have 120 students in a class and 20 odd teachers in the entire department running 8-10 concurrent batches, teachers can't supervise everyone. Even when they tried, they found that it was impossible to stop them

When this student is recruited as a lecturer, the old habit of using others' ideas and expressions remains. In private universities, where a collaborative model of knowledge production is pursued, followed by the outcome-based education prescription, we have a problem of a different nature. We credit students if they present their shared knowledge. Recent theories on the social construction of knowledge decry "originality." The notion that a writer is a singular, distinct creative entity is no longer recognised. American education expert Darsie Bowden famously points out, "Plagiarism is perhaps one of the foremost and richest of postmodern dilemmas." One joke that circulates in academia goes like this: If you copy from one book, that's plagiarism; if you copy from many books, that's research. The first thing about any research is to offer a mapping of the critical mass of your relevant topic. Researchers begin by surveying what knowledge is out



Our universities are consistently failing to address the problem of plagiarism.

VISUAL: STAR

"sloppy oversights" of a co-author, if available, or they blame the "vicious, motivated political coterie" of colleagues who have allegedly been holding grudges against the accused for a host of reasons. The problem lies deeper than that. A Facebook friend, who completed his PhD in Malaysia and now is teaching at a university in Chattogram, recently posted about his experience of struggling as a graduate student. When he went abroad for his master's degree leading to a PhD, his university refused to offer him a degree-by-research option as his undergraduate syllabi did not have any course on research methodology. He was already teaching at a university in Bangladesh and had the required number of publications to become an assistant professor. When he submitted those papers as his writing samples, his Malaysian faculty member discarded most of those papers as they did not meet the research requirements. In a powerful plea, the teacher, who has now returned with a doctoral degree after going through rigorous training in research, asked his former teachers of the public system, "Why did they not have any course on research methodology? What rights do they have to spoil the future of their students?" In an op-ed recently published in this newspaper, a writer accused universities in Bangladesh of smoothening the publication hurdle by creating what he called "trash journals" with no impact whatsoever. The peer-reviewing process is either faulty or relaxed, which allows many teachers to meet the bare minimum requirements for their promotion. With no research orientation, most of our colleagues struggle to publish or teach their students to write academic papers. The mechanics of writing can be easily offered through an institutionalised support service under the teaching and learning centres or quality assurance cells of a university. Many international journals have in-built editing services that can take care of these issues. But the problem

from copying from already published materials. In response, some chopped off the heads to cure headaches. Instead of offering support services through mentorship, teaching assistants, and writing labs, many of these programmes stopped offering thesis as a graduation requirement. Consequently, their testing tools include mostly written exams where

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students can reproduce what they have memorised from their books or other sources. From a student's perspective, the benefit of writing exam scripts is that, in most cases, nobody challenges you for verbatim reproduction of the textbooks. A student can become a topper in their class simply through rote learning,

there on the topic on which they are conducting research. The outcome of the research can be a publication where researchers are expected to add voices to the ongoing scholarly conversation. Plagiarism can be intentional or unintentional. Often, researchers are guilty of being lazy in giving references or citing sources. Sometimes, they do not have the confidence to reproduce someone else's ideas in their summaries with appropriate referencing. But the teacher I mentioned at the beginning of my essay has knowingly violated the ethical standard. And there cannot be any excuses. With such a stigma, how will he face his students or judge them for adopting spurious means in examinations? Our universities were mostly designed as teaching universities. Even many of our iconic professors are not good researchers. Even if they are, they are not cited or considered international scholars as a) they published in local journals and often in Bangla; b) the data they used is not validated; c) they lack updated library and laboratory resources and other support services; and d) they do not get enough research incentives. A politically blessed administrative post offers more perks than getting published in a recognised journal. Of course, many exceptional scholars are making their marks in research. Their efforts, however, are not enough to elevate our institutions to the desired level. Research needs to be promoted as a culture. It requires partnerships – both at home and abroad. For instance, if supervisors can produce joint research work with their students, they won't deem supervising as an extra load. Then again, only the students who want to pursue academic or research careers should be enrolled in the thesis programmes, so that the number of students remains manageable. The use of originality checker software can alert the researcher to plagiarism. To bring such changes, we need to change our mindset.



The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), enacted in 1979, established domestic legal authorisation in the US to conduct unofficial relations with Taiwan.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Peace in the Taiwan Strait balanced on a razor's edge



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ON August 2, Nancy Pelosi, a close ally of US President Joe Biden and the speaker of the United States House of Representatives, published an article in *The Washington Post* titled "Why I'm leading a congressional delegation to Taiwan." Her message was quite clear, and there was no scope for ambiguity. In her words, "we take this trip at a time when the world faces a choice between autocracy and democracy. As Russia wages its premeditated, illegal war against Ukraine, killing thousands of innocents – even children – it is essential that America and our allies make clear that we never give in to autocrats." She would carry out her visit on the same day, despite repeated warnings from China. In response, China launched numerous missiles into Taiwanese seas and began a series of massive military exercises around the island. China would also terminate cooperation with the US on crucial subjects such as the climate crisis, anti-drug measures, and military negotiations. Bilateral relations between China and the US have soured profusely as a result of this visit and the subsequent visits by multiple US lawmakers to Taiwan. And as the potential decoupling between these two geopolitical giants now seems even more inevitable, nations downstream of a possible fallout are understandably anxious. The question that's on everyone's mind is: Why would the US, which has built a geopolitical play of strategic ambiguity around Taiwan, suddenly become so unambiguous in their messaging surrounding Taiwan and China? And a follow-up question is: If the drums of war begin to rage due to this provocation, what could the US do to stop China from carrying out its own "special military operation" in Taiwan? To adequately answer these questions, one must consider two important factors. The first is the current democratic backsliding around the world. The second is the somewhat unintuitive nature of US-Taiwan relations concerning China. Due to several key historical events, the US has positioned itself as a champion of democratisation worldwide. This kind of championing of democracies indeed forms the backbone of US geopolitics. The development of strategic relations between the US and Ukraine has become intimate since the Orange Revolution of 2004. Since then, Ukraine has become one of US' largest defence partners and a primary recipient of US agricultural FSA assistance. Therefore, one can understand how big a blow it might have been when Russia invaded Ukraine. However, the US never had any written treatise with the Ukrainian government that would have given them a just cause to intervene when the invasion happened. In the game of geopolitics, the penalty for warmongering is dire. There is no scenario where a direct conflict between two nuclear powers benefits any nation. Russia had the initiative, however dubious and unethical, to conduct a military campaign thinly veiled with the excuse of fighting Nazis. The US had no counterplay other than to begin World War III. The story of the US' relationship with Taiwan in relation to China, on the other hand, is quite different. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), enacted by US President Jimmy Carter in 1979, established domestic legal authorisation to conduct unofficial relations with Taiwan. The TRA continues to provide the legal foundation for the US-Taiwan unofficial relationship and enshrines the US commitment to help Taiwan retain its defence capabilities. The other seminal treatise between Taiwan and the US is the "Six Assurances": six key foreign policy principles of the US regarding its relations with Taiwan. These two diplomatic documents comprise one of US' most intricate and long-running foreign policy plays. The language of the Six Assurances and the TRA remains ambiguous on purpose as to the scope of the US' level of commitment to defending Taiwan. It is understood that this strategically ambiguous policy was intended to discourage both a unilateral declaration of independence by the ROC leaders and

an invasion of Taiwan by the PRC. Though somewhat unintuitive, this ambiguity has played a large part in maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait for decades. More importantly, this policy directly aligns with the general opinion of the people of Taiwan. The current government of Taiwan is a vibrant democracy, and a significant portion of the population has formed a sense of national identity that is uniquely Taiwanese. Contemporary public opinion in Taiwan, demonstrated through nationwide polls, finds very little of the post-civil war desire of the then exiled Republic of China government to reclaim their position as the true leaders of China. The Taiwanese public's desire for political union with China fell further to a near-record low in the first half of 2022. In a biannual update to its surveys on core political attitudes in Taiwan, National Chengchi University's Election Study Center (ESC) found that only 1.3 percent of respondents wanted unification with mainland China "as soon as possible." A similarly low 5.1 percent desired formal Taiwanese independence at the earliest possibility. For the past two decades, most respondents have favoured some form of the "status quo." A status quo has only been possible due to the US' relentless efforts to maintain strategic ambiguity. The level of investment the US has in Taiwan is far more significant than its investment in Ukraine. Now, this brings us back to the first question. Why would the US, which has spent so much time and effort creating this intricate strategic ambiguity, suddenly become so unambiguous in its support for Taiwan? Why risk the status quo that has provided stability for such a long time? One reason for this is, of course, the reason Pelosi stated in her article. Democracies are backsliding, and the US feels the need to step up and reclaim its role as the global defender of democracy. And another reason is perhaps a key lesson learned from the escalation that led to the invasion of Ukraine. When it comes to geopolitics, rival nations have a strategic imperative to take the initiative. The US' Democratic visits to Taiwan do not stray from any established foreign policy positions. Expensive military drills conducted in retaliation can always be countered with even more diplomatic visits. Clearly, one act is more resource-draining than the other. Since the US speaker's visit, groups from the US, Japan, and Lithuania have arrived in Taipei, vowing Beijing won't bully them. The onus is on China to respond. Unfortunately for China, the only real response might lead to World War III. This is the calculated gamble the US has seemed to have played. They will rely on China's economic acumen and trust it won't plunge the world into the darkness to satisfy imperialistic ideals. It can be argued that it is reckless to try to balance everything on the razor's edge. However, in this situation, perhaps balance can only exist on the razor's edge.

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