

## Case study 1. Can't they let bygones be bygones?

### A hypothetical case about plagiarism

Ten years after receiving his PhD, Dr Cory received a letter from the Research Ethics Committee in his alma mater. It came out of the blue and Dr Cory felt insulted. When he got home from work, he had overcome the shock and regained his calm. He convinced himself that the Committee must be under an unfortunate misapprehension. After all, he has upheld a high ethical standard for years. His research integrity has never been questioned by his colleagues and collaborators.

The Research Ethics Committee received an anonymous complaint against Dr Cory, accusing him of committing plagiarism in his PhD thesis, which he completed more than a decade ago. To Dr Cory, the thesis was his own work and he was ready to defend himself against any accusation. At the same time, he knew too well that back then he was trying to finish his thesis as early as possible so that he could commence his post-doctoral fellowship. He was desperately trying to fill the gaps and raise his thesis to a higher standard, and also his awareness of plagiarism was not as advanced as it is now. Dr Cory searched his mind time and again and could not tell for sure whether or not he had copied any tiny bits from someone's work. He couldn't help but ask, "Even if I did make a mistake, what does it matter after so many years?"

### Reflection corner

1. Is there any time limit for filing a complaint about academic plagiarism?
2. What would the consequences be if the allegation is sustained?
3. How can we avoid this kind of situation?

### Analysis: What is plagiarism?

The HKU Policy on Research Integrity defines plagiarism as "the use of another person's work (including but not limited to any materials, creations, ideas and data) as if one's own without due acknowledgment, whether or not such work has been published and regardless of the intent to deceive". This applies to all forms of assessment including theses and dissertations, take-home examinations, assignments, projects, and any other forms of coursework. Students involved in plagiarism may be subject to disciplinary action, such as reprimand, fine, withdrawal and suspension. Disciplinary action may be taken even after the person's graduation and may result in the deprivation of the degree awarded. Contributory factors such as negligence are not taken into account when determining whether a case of plagiarism is substantiated. Thus, the lack of intent to deceive is not a valid defence. Students should be aware that it is their responsibility to familiarise themselves with proper academic practice of writing, citation, and referencing. When in doubt, make sure to seek guidance from your supervisors and teachers.

See more:

1. HKU Policy on Research Integrity:  
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/integrity/rcr/policy#Research%20Misconduct>
2. HKU website on plagiarism:  
<https://tl.hku.hk/plagiarism/>
3. Information on research integrity, HKU Graduate School:  
[https://gradsch.hku.hk/current\\_students/research\\_integrity](https://gradsch.hku.hk/current_students/research_integrity)