

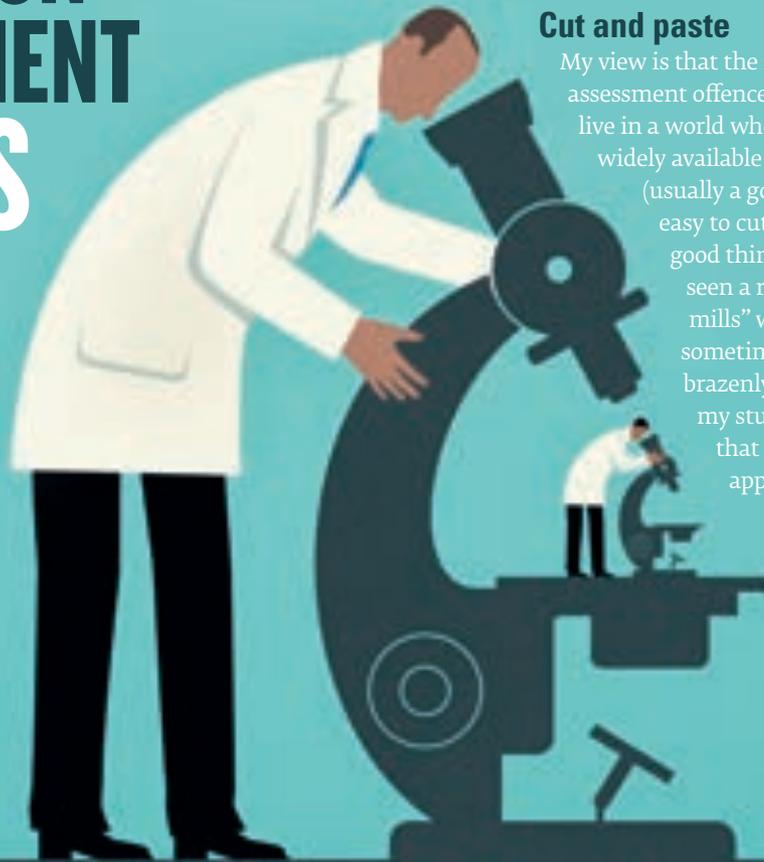
INTRODUCTION TO ASSESSMENT OFFENCES

The second instalment of an occasional column by Biomedical Science Programme Leader **Dr Lynne Lawrance**, aimed at training officers and others supporting students undertaking degrees.

In this column I will look at the issue of assessment offences. My own position on the topic is complex – sometimes I see students making brazen attempts to cheat (a minority). Other times I see students with under-developed skillsets making poor decisions, often under time pressure or at times of mental health challenges. At times I have been the one to report a student for an offence, but then I have been their advocate at the offence hearing. Sadly, I have also seen cases in the submissions for the IBMS HSD portfolio, which is a concern.

Cut and paste

My view is that the incidence of assessment offences is rising. We live in a world where information is widely available on the internet (usually a good thing) and easy to cut and paste (not a good thing). We also have seen a rise in “essay mills” who advertise, sometimes quite brazenly. Recently one of my students reported that they had been approached by



someone offering to write their essays. His response was to tell them he had come to learn academic skills not just get his degree (a truly wise student). But it is easy to see why those who are time-poor, or feel they cannot get good grades because of their skill level, or are in a mental health dip, might be tempted.

It may be that as training officers and mentors you are the first people to look at the academic work of a student. You may be the one to stop them ending up with an academic offence on their records. These are the main things to look out for.

Plagiarism

This is the most common assessment offence that I see. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines plagiarism as “The action or practice of taking someone else’s work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one’s own; literary theft.” It occurs when a writer does not identify their source with a citation if paraphrased, and a citation and quotation marks when verbatim. We are not talking about single sentences, or material that is such common knowledge they write from their own head (as I am doing today). There is only one logical way to say “*E. coli* is a Gram-negative rod”.

Plagiarism is chunks of text running for several sentences, with the same order, highly similar wording and without accurate citation. The level of rewording is important, and a common sign is that the order is maintained with odd words changed. This flags a concern, especially if the word change loses scientific accuracy. I have seen the “PROM” (premature rupture of membranes) replaced with “promenade”, and “EOS” (Early Onset Syndrome) become “Greek deity”.

The inaccurate rewording can raise suspicion that the essay may have been obtained from a ghost writer who does not have the subject background to know that their word changes don’t make any sense. Contract essay writing is much harder to spot and evidence, but I suspect it is rising. When essays are marked



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anonymously you cannot rely on your knowledge of a student’s language usage to raise a concern. However, where you have work that reads like sections were written by two different people, this could be a clue. Universities are currently developing approaches to deal with this type of offence.

Self-plagiarism

One area of plagiarism often overlooked is self-plagiarism, which is most commonly seen around student projects. If they have written a proposal or a progression report they may copy material over directly to their final thesis. This often gets flagged by text matching software and is considered an assessment offence, though lower on the scale of severity. Ideally, a student’s understanding of their project should improve as they progress, so they should be writing new material for the final thesis, if they do copy over text, they should reference their own previous work.

Fabrication

Fabrication is a less common offence but is seen occasionally. I remember a post-doc telling me how weird it was that a student who was never in the laboratory was turning up to meetings with

extensive data sets! The OED “in a bad sense” defines fabrication as “the action of fabricating” or “making up” or “forging”. Some also use it to refer to the over-inflation of the meaning of some results. In general, I find students undersell their results, but it is worth you being aware of the concept just in case.

Collusion

The final relatively common assessment offence is collusion, defined by the OED as a “secret agreement or understanding for the purposes of trickery or fraud; underhand scheming or working with another”. In my experience that is harsh, this is the one that is most easy to fall in to by accident if the line between acceptable collaboration and collusion is crossed. We want students to be team players, encourage them to support each other through peer learning and pair them up for practicals. So, we have to make it very clear where that line lies.

What looks like collusion is often one student plagiarising the other – this can be tricky to navigate unless the guilty party admits it. I once had a personal tutee, well on track academically, who got called in for a collusion investigation. They were worried they were not going to be able to prove their innocence. Fortunately, the other party admitted they were at fault, revealing it happened during a major life-trauma that had impaired their judgement.

Hopefully I have given an overview of the possible assessment offences to look out for. In my next column we will look at how to upskill your students so they know how to write for themselves. **BMS**