

# Self-Plagiarism or Appropriate Textual Re-use?

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**Abstract** Self-plagiarism requires clear definition within an environment that places integrity at the heart of the research enterprise. This paper explores the whole notion of self-plagiarism by academics and distinguishes between appropriate and inappropriate textual re-use in academic publications, while considering research on other forms of plagiarism such as student plagiarism. Based on the practical experience of the authors in identifying academics' self-plagiarism using both electronic detection and manual analysis, a simple model is proposed for identifying self-plagiarism by academics.

**Keywords** Self-plagiarism · Textual re-use · Electronic detection · *Turnitin*

## Introduction

While substantial research exists on student plagiarism (Bretag 2005, 2007; Carroll 2003; Devlin 2003; Howard 1999; Howard and Robillard 2008; McCabe 2005; Twomey et al. 2009) only a few writers have explored the issue of self-plagiarism by academics (Bretag and Carapiet 2007a; Collberg and Kobourov 2005; Scanlon 2007), perhaps because the topic is considered to be taboo (Green 2005). As we have stated elsewhere (Bretag and Carapiet 2007a), there is no clear consensus on what constitutes original research. On the one hand there are those who would argue that not citing your own work when you have used large sections of text from one or more previously published papers in a paper presented as 'original', is almost fraudulent. For example, Errami et al (2008) state that duplicate publication (which they define as the reproduction of previous work "with virtually identical results and conclusions") is unethical, and a practice which

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threatens to undermine the community's confidence in scientific integrity. On the other hand, there are those who would argue that "it is perfectly acceptable...to write up research for two or three conferences...and to get at least a couple of journal articles out of it as well" (see Monash University 2006, 'Citing your own work' for video vignettes describing these two extreme views). The limited research to date has demonstrated that many academics do recycle their previously published work without appropriate acknowledgement of the original work. There needs to be agreement and guidelines which clearly differentiate between legitimate textual re-use and inappropriate textual re-use, or as we refer to it in this paper, 'self-plagiarism'.

### Making the Case for Textual Re-Use

Whenever the topic of academics' self-plagiarism arises, there are invariably a range of reasons that academics give for why textual re-use may be appropriate in certain circumstances.<sup>1</sup> For example, even in the case where an author has submitted the same paper to two different journals on the same day, it might be argued that the author could justify publishing the paper twice, if the two journals to which the paper has been submitted are in very different disciplines (and therefore have different audiences), *and* if the recommendations from the Editor/reviewers results in substantial changes to the manuscript. It might also be acceptable if the author states that the paper has been submitted to another journal at the time of submission, and therefore clearly has no intention to deceive the Editor about the originality of the work.<sup>2</sup> Without this statement up front, there is the possibility that the paper will be accepted for publishing by both journals. The author would then need to determine which journal should publish the paper, having wasted the time of at least one Editor, and two or more reviewers.

Would it be self-plagiarism if the paper was published in two different journals simultaneously or even consecutively? This might be considered acceptable practice if each publication had a statement such as 'This paper is also published as "Title of paper" in the *Title of Journal*, Vol x(x), pp. x.' This sort of approach is already used in the submission process for many medical journals, in light of the relatively high percentage of dual publications in that discipline (7.6% according to Schein and Paladugu 2001). The *New England Journal of Medicine*, insists that:

Authors should submit to the Editor copies of any published papers or other manuscripts in preparation or submitted elsewhere that are related to the manuscript to be considered by the journal. (Kassirer and Angell 1995)

However, it is clearly *unacceptable* to submit the same paper to two different journals with the intention of the paper being perceived as two separate, original pieces. The issue here is not with the paper being published twice, but with the author's intention to deceive (the Editor, reviewers, readers, and perhaps in the longer term, other stakeholders such as supervisors, funding bodies, grant committees) that each paper is an original work. Boisvert and Irwin (2006) state that while it is quite acceptable for authors to re-use

<sup>1</sup> An extensive discussion on this topic can be found on the Discussion List of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME 2007).

<sup>2</sup> These guidelines adhere to those provided by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE 2008) and also recommended by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE 2006).

any portion of their copyrighted works in other works of their own, “what is not ethical is the practice of reusing one’s own work in a way that portrays it as new when, in fact, it is not” (p. 24).

While there are those who would argue that the submission of two very similar articles to two different journals at around the same time or perhaps some time later (with just minor differences in, for example, the title and abstract) *is* acceptable, once again the issue relates to the intention to deceive. For this to be acceptable, the author would need to indicate that the paper had been submitted elsewhere, and for the published version of the paper to have a statement that it also appears in another journal.

It would seem that the issue of deception is easily dealt with. Transparency can be achieved if submitting to two separate journals/media by simply stating up front that it has been (or will be) submitted to another forum. However, the situation is more complex than such an obvious solution suggests. The question arises: Who is the responsible party for ensuring originality in academic research publications? Is it the author, editor, publisher, reviewer/s, assessors (eg funding bodies), higher education government framework/s, or individual institutions and the decision-makers residing there (eg Head of School, promotions committee, performance management, appointments committees)? Langdon-Neuner (2008, p.2) maintains that the omission of a clear cross-citation is “the hallmark of dishonest authors”. However, other researchers and commentators on student plagiarism often make the case that preventing plagiarism is a multi-stakeholder enterprise, with the student just one element in a complex and inter-related endeavour (see for example, Rees and Emerson 2009; Davis et al. 2009). We would similarly argue that preventing self-plagiarism is a responsibility that extends beyond the individual author; however, at the submission stage, it is the author who needs to take primary responsibility for both the paper’s originality and its academic integrity.

But the complexity does not end there. Dual or duplicate publications are relatively easy to identify, particularly with text-matching software such as *Turnitin*<sup>3</sup> or eTBlast (Errami et al. 2007, 2008). The more complicated issue of determining appropriate textual re-use in academic publishing occurs where authors are seeking to refine or revise previously published work. It is not uncommon for authors to submit a so-called ‘new’ paper to a journal using data from an experiment previously described and analysed in an earlier published paper. The new paper may contain genuine new insights, but up to 50% of the text may be exactly the same as the previously published paper. It is our contention that it *would be acceptable* to submit a significantly revised version of a previously published paper to a new journal, only if there is some clear acknowledgement of the previously published work. While the new analysis arguably results in an original paper, the fact that 50% of the paper has already been published requires at the very least some form of acknowledgement, although not necessarily the standard academic convention of using “quotation marks” to indicate that the words come from a previously published source.

But the issue of using quotation marks to quote your own work is another contentious point. Griffin (1991 cited in Langdon-Neuner 2008) exhorts authors to use traditional conventions: “Even short quotes from a previously published article should be

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<sup>3</sup> *Turnitin* is an electronic text-matching program used as a plagiarism detection tool. Electronic copies of text are submitted to the program’s ever-expanding database of electronic articles and students’ assignments. The program produces an ‘Overall Similarity Index’ with a percentage score and links to identified copied sources.

set in quotation marks and referenced back to the original". Roig (2006), while generally agreeing on the importance of quotation marks, suggests that a more liberal approach can be taken to re-using highly technical text, such as that in the methodology section of a scientific paper.

Putting the issue of quotation marks aside, 50% is a very high proportion, and we would argue, based on advice generally given to students,<sup>4</sup> that the author is being somewhat lazy not to have attempted to rephrase/rethink previously written passages. Even literature reviews and methodology sections can be improved upon, and surely the author should consider doing this in a 'new' publication. The dilemma becomes how to determine if this is an issue of academic integrity, or one of intellectual laziness (clearly not the same thing). Having said that, in most cases of student plagiarism, intellectual laziness is not considered an acceptable defence for poor/no referencing, or the omission of "quotation marks". Again, we need to determine an acceptable percentage of textual re-use, and there is little in the literature which provides explicit guidance on this issue.

Ireland's (2009) editorial guidance to authors whose work has been initially rejected by reviewers, may be useful in this context. Ireland states that for a paper to be considered a 'new submission', it must meet all three of the following criteria: "(1) address modified or new research questions, (2) use new theoretical arguments, and (3) use additional or new data to test the proposed relationships (Ireland 2009, p. 10)."

Further confusion about what constitutes 'self-plagiarism' arises because of the common (and usually encouraged) academic practice of presenting a paper at a conference and then later submitting this paper to a journal. In theory, the journal submission would be a substantially revised version of the conference presentation (as per Ireland's guidelines), having benefitted from extensive peer review and feedback at the conference. However, it is not uncommon for conference papers and journal articles to be virtually identical. Collberg and Kobourov (2005) examined the publications found on computer science web sites from 50 university departments in the United States and found substantial evidence of self-plagiarism, particularly between conference papers and published journal articles.

This might be argued to be legitimate academic practice if the conference paper was only published in a limited circulation format, such as a book of proceedings available only to conference delegates. Authors might make the case that the textual re-use is legitimate because publishing the paper in a journal makes it more accessible to a broader audience. However, just as the literature on student plagiarism focuses on the student's "intention to deceive" (Carroll 2003; Devlin 2003; Hiller and Peters 2005), the potential ethical issue here again relates to the author's intention to deceive. If the author neglects to mention the original conference paper and therefore implies that the journal article is original, this could arguably be described as self-plagiarism. The same argument applies to conference papers already published electronically. In both cases, in addition to acknowledging the original conference paper, the author may need to seek permission from the Editor of the conference proceedings to ensure that no copyright has been infringed.

Only where a conference paper has been orally presented but never published in any format do we believe it would be legitimate academic practice to then publish it as a journal article with no reference to the former presentation. However, it might be argued that it would be polite (if not obligatory) to acknowledge that the paper had

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Cheah and Bretag (2008).

previously been presented at the particular Conference, and perhaps acknowledge any contribution made by reviewers or audience participants. It is our contention that as no formal credit has been received (eg university funding, reputation through publication) there is no breach of academic integrity in this instance. The first paper could reasonably be considered to be a ‘draft’ or a ‘work in progress’.

The same argument applies to journal papers that are subsequently published in one or more edited anthologies. Any suggestion of inappropriate practice can be ameliorated by standard acknowledgements and citations. What makes textual re-use unacceptable (and therefore self-plagiarism) is when the author claims benefit for two closely aligned papers, whether they be conference papers, journal articles or book chapters. The central issue is with the author’s intention to deceive (the Editor, reviewers, readers, and perhaps in the long-term other stakeholders such as supervisors, funding bodies, grant committees, etc) that each paper is an original work.

It is evident from the discussion so far that confusion exists, not least because academics have traditionally been rewarded for their publication output, and there has been little attempt in the past to gauge the quality or originality of that output. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the literature and guidance on self-plagiarism can be found in biomedicine/sciences, fields with excessive pressures to publish.

### Defining Self-Plagiarism

In seeking a definition of self-plagiarism for our Australian pilot study, there was little in the literature which provided explicit textual re-use guidelines, except for what Samuelson (1994) referred to as the “rule of thumb” of 30% textual re-use being acceptable. Lack of clear guidelines led us to rely on the concept of ‘fair use’ according to the Australian Copyright Act<sup>5</sup> which considers 10% textual re-use as acceptable. The *British Medical Journal* also uses a baseline of 10%, by requiring authors to send previous publications that overlap by more than 10% with the article being submitted for review (BMJ n.d.). We defined self-plagiarism for our study as “10% or more textual re-use of any one previous publication by the author without attribution” (Bretag and Carapiet 2007a) and collected evidence of textual re-use from 269 electronically available published journal articles using the text-matching software program, *Turnitin*. Preliminary findings indicated that 60% of the authors in the stratified random sample from the Social Sciences and Humanities Database (Web of Science) had self-plagiarised in at least one of their published papers in the period 2003–2006.

Our findings are not surprising in light of other research, conducted on what is referred to as dual or duplicate publication. Schein and Paladugu (2001) examined 660 articles published in three surgical journals in 1998, using the online search engine PUBMED, and found that 3% were dual publications and 7.6% were virtually identical. In medicine and health sciences a number of studies have looked at dual publication

<sup>5</sup> As our original research on academics’ self-plagiarism was based on a sample of published work by Australian authors, it was appropriate to refer to Australian Copyright Law for guidance. We recognise that Copyright Law in other countries does not necessarily provide such specific guidelines. In the United States, for example, the Copyright Act gives four non-exclusive factors to consider in a fair use analysis, including the need to take into account “the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole”. The Act does not however, provide specific guidance on how to interpret what a substantial amount might equal in percentage terms (Copyright Law of the United States 2008).

**Table 1** Terms used to describe forms of self-plagiarism

Author	Types of self-plagiarism
Samuelson 1994; Lowe 2003	Self-plagiarism Textual re-use
Fulda 1998; Hinz 1997; Horowitz 1997	Multiple submission Multiple publication
Hauptman 1997	Simultaneous submission Republishing
Schein and Paladugu 2001	Redundant publication Dual publication
Broome 2004; Blancett et al. 1995	Duplicate publication 'Self-plagiarism' (re-using text from previous published papers)
Gwilym et al. 2004	Duplicate publication Fragmented publication
Collberg and Kobourov 2005	Textual re-use
Jawaid 2005 Roig 2006	Duplicate publication Self-plagiarism Redundant publication Duplicate publication Salami-slicing (data fragmentation) Breach of Copyright Law Text recycling
Bretag and Carapiet 2007a, 2007b	Chain of textual re-use self-plagiarism (piecing together 10% or more of any one previously published paper without attribution to create an 'original' paper) Dual publication
Errami et al. 2007, 2008	Dual or duplicate publication Covert multiple publication 'meat extenders' (building on a previous publication with new data that would not be publishable alone)
Scanlon 2007	Self-plagiarism Self-copying Text recycling
Langdon-Neuner 2008	Republishing Multiple publication Duplicate publication Covert duplication Salami or divided publication Redundant publication Repetitive publication Overlapping data/publication Self-plagiarism (recycling ideas or re-using previously published text)

(Bailey 2002; Barnard and Overbeke 1993; Blancett et al. 1995; Bloemenkamp et al. 1999), and reported similar findings. Errami et al (2007) developed an automated text-matching tool, eTBLAST to investigate more than 7 million scientific abstracts in the online database Medline. Their results were similar to previous research, with 3% of the abstracts being duplicates. Table 1 provides an overview of the terms used to describe various forms of self-plagiarism as identified by researchers.

In our pilot study we found that ‘cut and paste’ textual re-use, used by 70% of the authors in the sample, entailed piecing together small sections of previously published material without appropriate attribution, but because each text-match was less than 10% we did not define this as ‘self-plagiarism’. However, ‘cut and paste textual re-use’ is arguably another form of writing which undermines research originality, particularly when the new material comprises less than 50% of the paper. There is a need for further research and the provision of clear guidelines on the issue of self-plagiarism by academics (see Bretag and Carapiet 2007b for recommendations for a *Code of Ethical Conduct: Practices in Research Publication*).

### Identifying Self-Plagiarism

While most journals explicitly give instructions aimed at ensuring originality and preventing multiple submissions of papers, it is noteworthy that no explicit guidance is provided to academics on university websites regarding this issue (Bretag and Carapiet 2007b).

However, as we have noted elsewhere (Bretag and Carapiet 2007b, p. 6), many university websites provide strict warnings to *students* on inappropriate textual re-use. For example, the University of Adelaide (2007) states that “no student will submit the same piece of work for assessment in two different courses, except in accordance with approved study and assessment schemes”; Murdoch University (2007) maintains that ‘re-submission of previously marked work—the submission of the same piece of work for assessment in two different units by the student author—is not acceptable practice if it is not acknowledged’; and the University of Western Australia (2007) asserts that “submitting the same work, or substantially the same work, for more than one assessment...is a form of self-plagiarism and is unacceptable unless the subsequent use is cited in the usual way”. Students are also provided with precise information about the penalties for this type of academic misconduct, which for example, “may include revising and resubmitting assessment work, receiving a result of zero for the assessment task, failing the course, expulsion and/or the imposition of a financial penalty” (University of Adelaide 2007).

In looking at plagiarism more generally, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (James et al. 2002) presents three aspects that need to be considered in determining cases of potential academic misconduct. The first is the writer’s “intent to cheat”, the second aspect is “the extent of plagiarism” and the third consideration is the “possible responses to plagiarism” that involve the first two aspects, and take either the form of educative or punitive strategies.

It is worth noting that no similar framework exists for ensuring that academics receive adequate education and training in ethical research writing practices. As we have stated previously, perhaps “ethical guidelines on university websites do not specifically mention self-plagiarism by academics because it is assumed that researchers are already fully conversant with university standards from their own undergraduate study” (Bretag and Carapiet 2007b, p. 7).

## Determining Self-Plagiarism by Academics

Of the wide variety of self-plagiarisms identified in Table 1, and as is the case for identifying student plagiarism, the text-matching facility in electronic plagiarism detection software is only suited to detect ‘word-for-word’ or direct plagiarism and then only in electronic form. The more subtle forms of plagiarism (such as ideas or structure plagiarism), plus all types of plagiarism from paper-based sources, are not able to be detected at present. Furthermore, electronic detection software cannot, at present, identify dual/duplicate submissions to journals as a means of preventing duplicate publication (arguably the most extreme form of self-plagiarism by academics).

## The Need for Manual Analysis in Combination with Electronic Detection

Educators and researchers working in the field of academic integrity agree that electronic detection is not the solution to eliminating plagiarism. As early as 2001, Carroll and Appleton (2001) argued that “electronic detection can only be an adjunct to the normal exercise of academic judgement”. Purdy (2005) insisted that “As with any technology, plagiarism detection technology requires human application and interpretation” (p. 286). Barrett and Malcolm (2006) also maintained that the software indicates *possible* plagiarism rather than providing complete certainty. Errami et al. (2007, 2008) in describing their use of their own text similarity search engine eTBLAST, also mentioned the importance of “manual verification” in determining if text matches represent unethical or legitimate duplication.

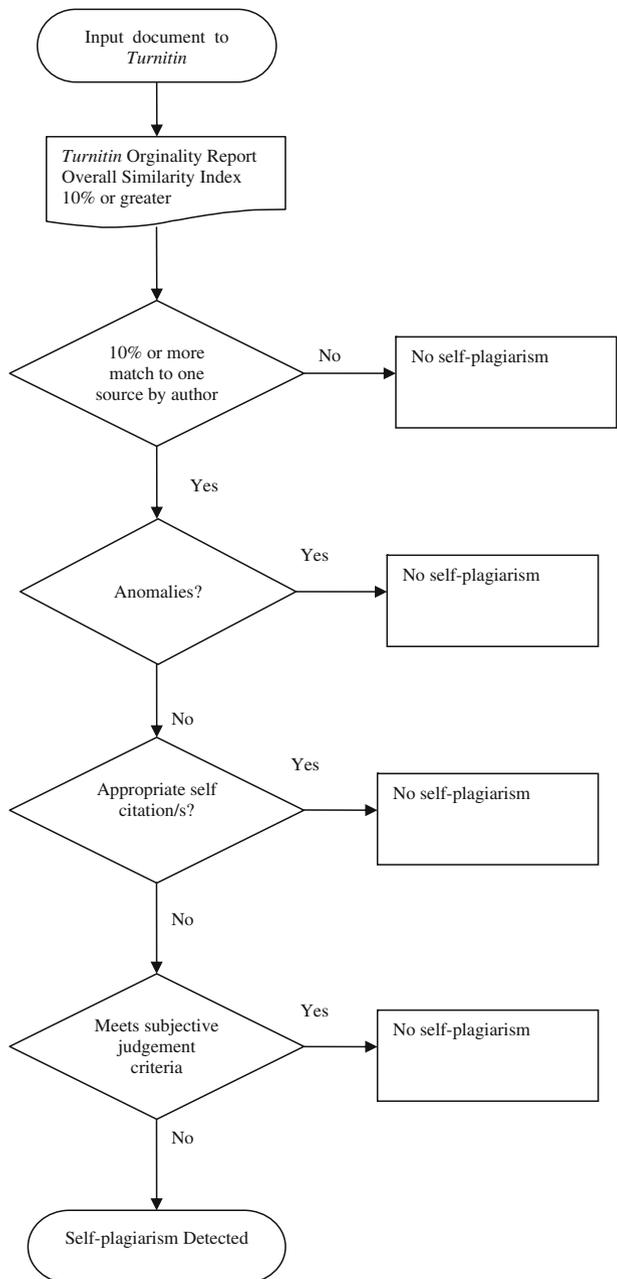
Prior to discussing our use of electronic detection software to assist in the identification of self-plagiarism, it would be remiss of us not to briefly mention some of the ongoing controversy surrounding its usefulness in academia. While scholars in the U.K. and Australia have generally been receptive to the use of electronic detection software as one tool in an holistic and educative approach to dealing with plagiarism (see for example, Carroll and Appleton 2001; Keuskamp and Sliuzas 2007; McKeever 2006) some scholars in North America have expressed concerns regarding potential ethical, legal and pedagogic issues particularly in relation to the commercial software program *Turnitin* (see for example, Donnelly et al. 2006). Recently concerns have been expressed regarding the ready access to *Turnitin*’s extensive database by Homeland Security in the U.S. under the terms of the U.S. Patriot Act.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, at least one university in Canada has recently banned the use of *Turnitin* (Amarnath 2006).

As Australian researchers, without the same concerns about government access to articles in the database, we have found *Turnitin* to be a useful starting point in our investigations. However, what ultimately led us to determinations of self-plagiarism was considerable manual analysis and subjective judgement. See Fig. 1 which provides a diagrammatic illustration of the manual process we used in conjunction with an electronic detection software program (in this case, *Turnitin*), to detect self-plagiarism by academics.

Manual analysis was needed at every stage of the process when attempting to identify self-plagiarism. When using *Turnitin* as a means of detecting student plagiarism, the instructor has to first create a ‘class’. *Turnitin* ignores a submission by the same author for the same class when cross-checking text. To enable detection of self-

<sup>6</sup> The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this issue.

**Fig. 1** Determining self-plagiarism by academics using *Turnitin*



plagiarism, the records for each author therefore needed to be entered into two separate classes. This led to a 100% match for the identical articles in each class. Manual analysis was then needed, with the result that the 100% match was ignored.

In addition to this immediate need for manual checking, the Overall Similarity Index (the cumulative percentage of all the different sources which have been

matched to the text under investigation) can potentially be deceptive. For example, anomalies occurred (see Fig. 1) during our analysis where a large text match was indicated (eg 68%), but when we went to the original source we found that in fact, it was exactly the same paper, not a multiple publication, but the same paper listed on a different database. We were unable to determine why the match indicated only 68%, rather than 100% as this was one and the same paper (Author 1, Record 68 in Bretag and Carapiet 2007a).

In another example from Author 1 (Record 60), there was a 72% match to an Internet source, but unfortunately the web link was no longer live. In this case, it was not possible to determine if self-plagiarism was evident, or if another unexplained anomaly had occurred. For this reason, this text-match was excluded from the data set.

An overall high percentage of text-match is not necessarily an indicator of any form of plagiarism. For example, in one case (Author 2, Record 44) from the pilot study, there was an overall similarity index of 49%, but this text match was comprised of 39 separate items, the first six of which accounted for a 16% text-match, and the rest of the 33 items were just 1% matches each. The highest match was only 4%. In this case, after manual analysis, it was determined that no plagiarism (including self-plagiarism) had occurred.

In another example (Author Record 4, Record 6), the overall similarity index was 56% but a manual check of the sources showed that the author had appropriately cited previously published papers and therefore, no self-plagiarism was determined to have occurred. In other cases, subjective judgements needed to be applied about what were acceptable text matches. For example, where a paper showed an apparently high Overall Similarity Index, self-plagiarism was often determined not to have occurred when the matches were in the methodology sections. According to Roig (2006):

Programmatic research often involves publishing papers describing empirical investigations that use nearly identical or identical methodologies. Similarly, the background literature reviewed in one paper may be similar or exactly the same as that of related author/s. Therefore, it is possible to have two or more papers describing legitimately different observations that contain almost identical methodology, literature reviews, discussions, and other very similar or even identical textual material. (p. 22)

Our analysis was arguably less lenient than Roig's suggestions. In our view, if a paper contained an identical methodology, literature review and discussion, this left almost no room for any new material. In the case of Author Record 7, we provided the following analysis to justify our claim that self-plagiarism had occurred.

Article 29 was found to have a 55% text match with Article 30. These two articles were published within one day of each other, by two separate international peer-reviewed journals in the same field. Close analysis showed the following:

- Both papers contained the same abstract, with the exception of a few words.
- The Introduction of Article 29 was a piecing together of text from a number of different sources, including large sections from Article 30. In one sentence towards the end of the Introduction, the authors included one self-citation to Article 30, stating that it was 'in press'.

- The Method section of Article 29 was a complete match with Article 30, with the exception of two words. No self-citation was given in this section.
- The Procedure section of Article 29 matched Article 30, with the exception of the last paragraph (this paragraph matched another paper [Article 24] by the authors which was published 6 months later). No self-citation was provided in this section.
- The entire section entitled ‘Statistical Analysis’ was later used in Article 24 without self-citation. (Bretag and Carapiet 2007a, pp. 6–7)

Clearly, when attempting to identify any form of plagiarism, careful analysis based on pre-determined criteria is important. For example, in the pilot study on self-plagiarism, while we heeded Roig’s suggestion that it is acceptable for some parts of a research paper to match another, we determined that it was not appropriate if the resultant final paper was nothing more than a piecing together of a number of previous publications, with little original material. We referred to this process as ‘chain of textual re-use self-plagiarism’ (Bretag and Carapiet 2007a).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the difference between appropriate and inappropriate textual re-use and provided a simple model for identifying self-plagiarism in academic publications. Based on our pilot study of self-plagiarism by Australian academics, we have found that electronic detection is a potentially useful instrument, but cannot be used in isolation. Combined with manual analysis, nuanced academic judgement and clear processes, it may be useful to determine if plagiarism, in any form, has occurred.

In the same way that we have recommended students should be encouraged to use electronic detection software as a tool for crafting and redrafting their work (see Cheah and Bretag 2008; Bretag and Mahmud 2009 forthcoming), so too, we would suggest that academics could use software such as *Turnitin* (or eTBLAST) to ensure that they have appropriately cited all previously published work.<sup>7</sup> Students are advised that a high text match (for example, 50% regardless of referencing) indicates that there is insufficient original material. Academics who use a ‘cut and paste textual re-use’ strategy, regardless of whether or not this is regarded as self-plagiarism (see Bretag and Carapiet 2007a), should also question the ‘originality’ of their work, keeping in mind disciplinary norms and broader academic conventions.

There has been considerable progress made in recent years to establish consistent responses to student plagiarism (including penalties for clear cases of academic misconduct). We hope that this paper generates similar dialogue about appropriate ramifications for those academics who choose to engage in unethical publication practices, including but not limited to self-plagiarism.

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<sup>7</sup> Please refer to earlier comments regarding ongoing controversy in the United States about the use of *Turnitin*.

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