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Great moments in academic fraud

JOHN ROSS THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 05, 2012 12:00AM

PLAGIARISM cases may be mounting overseas. But Australia's sheet isn't squeaky clean either when it comes to plagiarism and other types of academic fraud. Here are some highlights.

Monash University boss David Robinson stood down 10 years ago, to the month, after admitting to plagiarism in books he'd published 20 years earlier in the UK. The university's council had initially passed a vote of confidence in their vice-chancellor, but changed its mind after new accusations emerged. Chancellor Jerry Ellis promised a review, but defended the university's recruiting procedures. "[One] would be most unlikely to ask a potential vice-chancellor, 'have you committed plagiarism?' – I just don't think that's a credible sort of question," Ellis told the ABC.

William McBride could have been remembered as the Australian who alerted the world to the birth deformities caused by the sedative thalidomide. Instead he's remembered as the Australian who faked experiments on another anti-morning sickness drug, Debendox. In 1993 a Sydney tribunal found him guilty of scientific fraud following a marathon inquiry, and after McBride had admitted to altering data about drug dosages given to rabbits. The case cost McBride his registration and whistleblower Phil Vardy his job and marriage, while earning ABC medical broadcaster Norman Swan a Gold Walkley. "The phrase 'inventing rabbits' has become shorthand for forms of extreme scientific misconduct," observed health professor Judith Lumley.

La Trobe University sociology professor Ron Wild had authored many books before publishers Allen and Unwin were forced to withdraw his 1985 tome, *An Introduction to Sociological Perspectives*. "It was not long before several academics noticed extensive passages were taken, without sufficient acknowledgement, directly from other sources," reported University of Wollongong social sciences professor Brian Martin. La Trobe set up an inquiry, but Wild resigned and took a job in a Port Hedland technical college – "a remote location many would consider to be academic Siberia", Martin observed.

British scientist Michael Briggs already had a string of publications behind him when Deakin University recruited him to head its science school in 1976. He went on to assemble an enormous body of work on the side effects of the contraceptive pill, and helped to encourage acceptance of triphasic pills – a contraceptive preparation developed by the pharmaceutical giant Schering, for whom Briggs had been UK research director in the 1960s. But by 1982 his star was in decline. His trials of contraceptives had never had any women recruited to them, and his experiments on beagles had been invented. Briggs quit in 1985 and two Deakin inquiries failed to prove scientific fraud. "This was not, however, the verdict of the international scientific community," reported *The Sunday Times* after tracking Briggs down to swanky Marbella on Spain's Costa de Sol.

Damaged, but not sunk. Queensland University of Technology economist Benno Torgler and a Swiss colleague, Bruno Frey, were excited by the findings of what they apparently believed to be the first ever study of passenger and crew behaviour on the sinking Titanic and Lusitania ocean liners. So excited that they used the research for four similar journal articles. Last year Frey and Torgler apologised "for not properly citing our related work and for not citing earlier work of others". Australian academic Wayne Hall, who'd published similar research way back in 1986, welcomed the correction. Meanwhile QUT reprimanded Torgler, finding the matter constituted misconduct but not the sort of "wilful and serious breach" that could have led to his dismissal. QUT's research policy outlaws self-plagiarism without full cross-referencing. "If significantly similar work is presented to more than one publisher, this must be disclosed to the publisher at the time of submission," it adds.



Monash University vice-chancellor David Robinson in his office in 2000. Picture: David Crosling Source: HWT Image Library

Acclaimed American-born bassoonist Kim Walker didn't inspire perfect harmony at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where she was appointed dean in 2004. She was credited with boosting the Con's profile and her supporters included NSW governor Marie Bashir and former premier Bob Carr. But her alleged opponents included fellow academic and Sydney Morning Herald music critic Peter McCallum. In 2007 anonymous claims emerged that she'd pinched large sections of a board report from her previous employer, Indiana University. The next year saw claims that she'd plagiarised lecture notes from award-winning historians, followed by 2009 claims that she'd fudged her academic qualifications. Three inquiries by the Con's parent institution, the University of Sydney, failed to dislodge her. But in May 2011 the university announced her term wouldn't be extended. Late last year Walker launched a Supreme Court action against the university, claiming the multiple investigations had ruined her reputation. Her claims included that the university had unfairly stood her down in July 2007 to investigate the initial allegations, and that while a confidential report found the claims baseless the university had waited until December to express confidence in her. The university's actions caused Walker's "humiliation, embarrassment and distress, heart fibrillation, depression and anxiety", according to court documents.

No account of alleged scientific fraud in Australia would be complete without reference to University of NSW medical researcher Bruce Hall. In 2002 he was accused of fabricating experiments to support some of his scientific theories. Professor Hall accused a laboratory staff member of fabricating the results to set him up. "It's been used to sabotage my reputation," he told the ABC. The matter has been in and out of court ever since. Before the allegations broke, Hall was world-renowned for his research into human tolerance of organ transplants. "In the field of rejection and intolerance, I'm credited with making most of the major discoveries," he told the ABC. He now lives a quiet life in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.