How Chinese universities are tackling plagiarism - and is it working?

- Tertiary institutions are setting limits on the amount of material that students can duplicate in dissertations
- Some academics have doubts, saying there should be a zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism

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Tsinghua University in Beijing is one of the first universities in China to expand plagiarism detection to daily assignments. Photo: Imaginechina

Students at Hunan University of Technology in central China get two chances.

From May, each undergraduate has two opportunities to check their final dissertation with an online database to see how much of each paper's content is copied from existing publications.

The service is free and the checks are offered before the papers are formally submitted. After that, a thesis will automatically fail if more than 35 per cent of its content is deemed duplicated, according to a notice issued in early May.

The university is one of a growing number around the country introducing such tools to clamp down on plagiarism on campus. The drive has spawned an online industry in checking services and follows a number of high-profile cases of copied dissertations.

But some academics have doubts about allowing a fixed percentage of copied material, saying there should be a zero-tolerance policy towards content duplication.

Beijing Film Academy's Performing Arts School rescinded Chinese actor Zhai Tianlin's doctorate in February. Photo: Thepaper.cn

Chinese actor Zhai Tianlin found himself at the centre of a plagiarism storm earlier this year when internet users determined that over 40 per cent of an essay he published in August 2018 was copied from an article published 12 years ago.

The Beijing Film Academy's Performing Arts School rescinded Zhai's doctorate in February and Peking University expelled him from a two-year research programme.

And in April, Huang Liuyu, a former director of the People's Liberation Army's Institute for Disease Control and Prevention, was stripped of his doctorate after being found guilty of cheating 12 years after receiving it, Caixin.com reported. Huang was found to have plagiarised the work of another PhD student in his final thesis.

To prevent such cases, many Chinese colleges like Hunan University of Technology have set limits on the amount of material that can be copied.

For example, undergraduate students at the College of Information Science and Technology at Beijing Normal University are allowed no more than 30 per cent, according to a notice on its website.

The criteria for graduate students tend to be stricter, usually between 10 and 20 per cent, according to directives published by various universities.

Eddy Zheng, a doctoral student from the department of materials science and engineering at Zhejiang University, said his university started checking for copied content in dissertations a year ago.

Zheng said that while there was no explicit directive on acceptable levels, the rate of repetition allowed for graduate students majoring in science and engineering was normally below 10 per cent.

"Compared with those majoring in arts and humanities, science students are usually better [in terms of original content]," he said.

"Sometimes we may use others' ideas, but we always try to work from a new angle. And because our papers are usually based on experimental data, the chance of repeated content is lower."

Such limits have fostered a new industry of online plagiarism checks.

"If you really have borrowed something from others and not sure whether it can pass, then you can check it yourself before handing in your thesis," Zheng said.

"[A friend] paid for a checking service from [online shopping website] Taobao and decreased the similarity rate by rewriting the problematic parts flagged by the system."

Taobao is owned by Alibaba, which also owns the *South China Morning Post*.

The price for such checks can vary from 40 yuan (US$5.80) to several hundred, depending on the length and purpose of the paper. Many of those service providers say they use the same system as CNKI, China's biggest online library which is used by most Chinese universities.

The business is also thriving on social media platforms. On WeChat, a user named Kuaiwuyou Thesis Writing said he could "defeat" any of the detection tools used in China, including the VIP Paper Check System used in academia and publishing. His service flagged duplicated areas and helped students rework problematic content.

Peking University in Beijing applies plagiarism detection to regular assignments – not just dissertations. Photo: Xinhua

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But Ma Liang, associate professor at Renmin University's school of public administration and policy, said copied content should not be allowed at all at tertiary institutions.

"Such standards should not ever exist. It should be zero, shouldn't it?" Ma said.

"Isn't it ridiculous that a person fails if 10 per cent of his dissertation is copied from others, but he won't when it's 9.9 per cent, as if he hasn't plagiarised?

"This is so bad in that it leads the general public to believe that plagiarism is something negotiable."

In the United States, Emery Berger, professor at the College of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said plagiarism was completely unacceptable in American culture.

"The idea of a graduate student, say a doctoral student, plagiarising anything is horrifying … It's clearly defined what plagiarism is. Certainly there is no percentage of tolerance," Berger said.

For his students, "it's OK to discuss ideas and the approaches, but they are not allowed to share any actual code", he said.

Students would face academic charges for violating academic honesty rules, although this depended on their professors, he said.

"Most of my peers have a zero-tolerance policy," he added.

Nancy Zhou, who has a bachelor's degree from the University of Nottingham Ningbo and a master's from the University of Warwick, said the British universities she studied at used Turnitin to detect plagiarism. However, all daily assignments – not just dissertations – were checked. "Academic honesty is emphasised in everyday study, not just when you are graduating or preparing your dissertation," she said.

Chinese universities are taking steps in this direction, with Peking and Tsinghua, the two top universities in Beijing, the first Chinese colleges to expand plagiarism detection to daily assignments.

But Ma, the Renmin University professor, said he doubted the plagiarism issue could be solved by colleges alone.

"Plagiarism is more an issue of the overall Chinese community than that of Chinese education institutions," he said.

"It's rooted in our obsession with academic degrees, which is shared by students, companies and public organisations as well.

"For example, if you don't have a master's degree, it's hard for you to become a civil servant. And if you are hired by a company, your degree will decide your starting salary."

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3012741/how-chinese-universities-are-trapping-academic-copycats