

NTU ethics case requires clarity

Written by Bih Herng-dar 何永德

Saturday, 31 March 2018 07:16

The controversy over the selection of National Taiwan University's (NTU) president has continued for two or three months, with no resolution in sight. In the study methodology course that I teach at the university, students keep asking whether the paper that NTU president-elect Kuan Chung-ming (關中明) presented at an academic seminar on May 6 last year really contains any improper citations or plagiarism, as some people have claimed.

The media have reported that, although the paper coauthored by Kuan and the master's thesis of a student surnamed Chang (張) were written by different authors, a number of diagrams in the two contain the same information. However, both papers say that the diagrams were compiled and drawn by the researchers separately.

When considered logically, there are several ways in which this could have happened. One possibility is that the authors of the seminar paper plagiarized or improperly credited the student's master's thesis.

Another possibility is that the master's thesis plagiarized Kuan's draft paper. In this case, even though the master's thesis lists Kuan's draft paper as a source in its bibliography, the main body of the thesis should not say that the author compiled the diagrams themselves.

Yet another possibility is that one or both of the papers were coauthored by all of those involved, but the other researcher or researchers were not listed as coauthors.

The university convened an academic ethics committee meeting specifically to discuss this matter, so that Kuan's reputation would be cleared if he was found not to have been involved in plagiarism.

However, the committee ruled that there was no case, on the grounds that the seminar paper had not been peer-reviewed — even though a review date was announced in the call for papers — and that it had not been officially published and its authors had not applied for an international standard book number.

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That means the committee decided that the paper was not an item that should be subject to the university's guidelines for handling academic ethics cases.

This decision conveys two messages. The first is that papers presented at academic seminars can be exempt from the requirements of academic ethics.

The second is that neither the committee nor the university wants to pursue the truth of the matter.

Consequently, the committee has not dispelled doubts about plagiarism. Furthermore, its decision blurs academia's usual understanding of academic ethics.

The forum at which Kuan's paper was presented was clearly an academic seminar organized by Academia Sinica and the MTI Department of Economics, for which there was an open call for papers.

It might therefore come as a surprise that papers could be presented that did not even have a bibliography and that the page numbers of the symposium proceedings, in which the papers were published, are out of sequence.

To pose this fact as evidence that papers presented at the seminar were "informal papers" is really getting things backward.

There are indeed big differences between seminars and how rigorous they are. Many papers presented at seminars are just preliminary drafts of ones that are later submitted for publication in periodicals.

However, even though the papers presented might need to have their arguments strengthened or further data added, the basic standards for writing academic papers, including verifying sources and not plagiarizing, cannot be set aside just because it is a seminar.

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Former NTU president Yang Pan-chyr (楊潘啟) decided of his own accord not to seek a second term because of a controversy concerning academic ethics. Furthermore, the university has a rule that all postgraduate students who serve as research assistants for the first time must take an online course in academic ethics.

This controversy over possible plagiarism is quite straightforward. All that the public wants to know is what went wrong to create a situation in which two academic papers contain the same diagrams, but say they were compiled by different authors.

If we could establish how the problem arose, it would help to prevent the same thing from happening again. Only then would the energy that has been spent on this issue somehow be worthwhile.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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