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Viewpoint

Text recycling and dissertation overlap in the era of open access

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Abstract

As doctoral theses become increasingly accessible through open repositories and similarity-checking software is applied more widely, many early-career researchers encounter the rejection of manuscripts that are legitimately derived from their theses. This viewpoint examines the complexities of text recycling (often inaccurately labelled 'self-plagiarism'), reviews how publisher policies and editorial practices have evolved in the past decade, and argues for transparent communication among authors, supervisors, and editors. Drawing on the Text Recycling Research Project Best Practices for Researchers and a model policy for publishers, this article proposes measures such as author disclosures, clear repository embargo policies, and submission-system prompts to reconcile the principles of open science with fair publication practices. A more harmonised approach would serve not only authors but also the integrity of the scholarly record.

Keywords:

Early career researchers, editorial policy, open access, publication ethics, self-plagiarism, similarity checking, text recycling, thesis

Introduction

Text similarity-detection software is now a standard feature of manuscript screening. While such tools can identify potential plagiarism, they also frequently flag overlap between journal submissions and publicly archived doctoral theses. For many early-career authors, this results in confusion and sometimes rejection: the underlying research is original, yet the textual similarity to an institutional repository entry raises concerns about duplication and thus text recycling.[1]

This viewpoint focuses specifically on the reuse of doctoral theses when authors later prepare journal articles derived from that work. Other forms of text recycling, such as reusing text from project deliverables, conference proceedings, or preprints, raise distinct disciplinary and contractual issues and are not the main focus here.

Two principles are in tension. 'Open science' encourages full and early dissemination of research outputs, including dissertations, through open repositories. Publication originality, meanwhile, demands that journals publish work perceived as novel and unduplicated. The challenge is not misconduct but misalignment between evolving open-access mandates and editorial policies that have not fully adapted to this new environment.

Although no comprehensive global statistics exist for dissertation overlaps, text similarity detection is a common cause of editorial queries. According to some questioned journal editors, up to one-fifth of submissions require clarification about overlap, and text-recycling studies indicate that roughly 10%–20% of published papers include some self-reused text,[2] most often in Methods or Background sections. The issue therefore affects a substantial minority of early-career authors.

Defining text recycling in light of recent scholarship

Earlier discussions often referred to text overlap as self-plagiarism,[3,4] implying ethical misconduct. However, recent scholarship, especially from the Text Recycling Research Project (TRRP), reframes the phenomenon in neutral, descriptive terms.

According to TRRP's 'Best Practices for Researchers' (2021),[5] text recycling is:

'the reuse of textual material (prose, visuals, or equations) in a new document where (1) the reused material is identical or substantively equivalent in both form and content, (2) the reused material is not presented as a quotation, and (3) at least one author of the new document is also an author of the prior document'.

This definition distinguishes text recycling from plagiarism (reusing another's words without attribution). TRRP also proposes a taxonomy[6]: (a) 'Developmental recycling': reuse of unpublished materials such as proposals or internal reports; (b) 'Generative recycling': reuse from previously published work to support a new, distinct study; (c) 'Adaptive publication': republication of the same content for a different audience or context; (d) 'Duplicate publication': republication

of substantially the same work, which is ethically unacceptable.

Doctoral theses occupy a special case between unpublished and published status. They are typically publicly accessible but not peer-reviewed journal publications. Reuse of material from an author's own thesis is therefore considered developmental recycling, generally legitimate if transparent.[7]

Policy and editorial change over the past decade

A decade ago, journal guidance on text recycling was inconsistent. Today, many publishers have adopted or endorsed policies inspired by the TRRP model.[1,8] *European Science Editing* published a 'Model Text Recycling Policy for Publishers' in 2022,[1] offering clear criteria for acceptable reuse and transparency statements. The Council of Science Editors (CSE) and Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) now both recognise that limited reuse of text, especially in Methods, is acceptable when disclosed.[7,8,10]

The TRRP's 'How to Be Transparent about Text Recycling' (2022)[9] encourages authors to include a brief disclosure such as:

'This article includes text recycled from the author's doctoral dissertation (Title, Year, Repository, digital object identifier (DOI))'.

Some publishers (for example Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) have already implemented this practice. Others are gradually updating their author guidelines. Nonetheless, adoption remains uneven, and text similarity-detection software rarely differentiates between recycled thesis text and plagiarised material. Continued outreach and harmonisation are therefore essential.

The open science context and doctoral regulations

Most European universities now require digital archiving of doctoral theses, often with assignment of DOIs and Creative Commons licences. Embargo options vary widely: some institutions permit one-year embargoes, others encourage immediate open access, and many provide limited guidance on the implications for later journal publication.

For instance, Wageningen University (Netherlands) allows an initial one-year embargo, extendable on request.[11] Similar flexibility exists at some French and UK institutions, while others automatically release theses upon defence. Libraries and repositories thus enhance visibility but also feed similarity-detection databases, increasing the chance of overlap being flagged during manuscript screening.

This situation reveals an irony: theses certify research competence but are not the main vehicle of scholarly communication, while journal articles remain the recognised currency of research credit. Overlap between these two dissemination systems is therefore inevitable.

Ethics and legality of dissertation recycling

From an ethical and legal standpoint, the key issue is copyright ownership. In most cases, the doctoral author retains copyright of the thesis; reusing their own text is lawful.[3]

Complications arise when parts of the thesis have been published as journal articles or when the thesis is released under a restrictive licence.

Ethically, transparency is paramount. The TRRP and COPE recommend disclosure to editors and readers, distinguishing acceptable recycling (e.g., introduction, methods, context) from problematic duplication (e.g., results, discussion, or verbatim republication).[5,9,10] Editors are urged to evaluate overlap in context, not solely by similarity score.

Recommendations by stakeholder

To support responsible and transparent reuse of dissertation material in scholarly publications, practical, role-specific recommendations for authors, supervisors, and publishers were outlined. These actions help align expectations, reduce ambiguity, and ensure that legitimate thesis-derived text recycling is managed consistently across the publication workflow.

For authors

- Plan repository strategy. Before depositing your thesis, review institutional options for embargo or delayed release to allow initial journal submissions.[11,12]
- Disclose openly. In the submission cover letter, state that the manuscript derives from your doctoral dissertation and cite the repository version (with DOI).
- Be transparent in the paper. Include a footnote or note in the acknowledgements: 'This article includes text recycled from the author's doctoral dissertation (Title, Year, Repository)'.[9]
- Cite your thesis. Add a formal reference to the dissertation in the bibliography.
- Rephrase judiciously. Reuse is most appropriate in background and methods; substantial repetition in results or discussion should be avoided.[5,6]

For supervisors and mentors

- Advise early. Discuss with students how thesis deposit timing interacts with planned journal submissions.
- Guide transparency. Help authors craft appropriate disclosure statements and decide which parts of the thesis can be safely recycled.[9]
- Support authorship decisions. When supervisors are co-authors, ensure that responsibilities and reuse decisions are shared and documented.

For editors and publishers

- Update submission systems. Add a checkbox: 'Does this manuscript derive from a publicly available thesis/dissertation?'[1,8]
- Provide clear policy language. Reference the TRRP 'Model Text Recycling Policy for Publishers' and specify acceptable contexts of reuse.
- Interpret text similarity reports critically. Recognise that overlap with a student's own thesis is not equivalent to duplication or plagiarism.[10]
- Encourage transparency statements. Allow or require authors to note thesis overlap in the manuscript or acknowledgements.[7]
- Train editorial staff. Incorporate text-recycling scenarios into integrity and reviewer training sessions.

A call for harmonization

Dissertation-related text recycling is not a marginal issue but a systemic intersection of open-access mandates, doctoral regulation, and editorial policy. Fragmented practices leave early-career researchers exposed to inconsistent decisions. What is needed is coordinated action:

1. Institutional clarity on embargo options and thesis licensing;[12]
2. Publisher transparency on how overlap with theses is treated;[1,7,8]
3. Training for editors and reviewers to interpret similarity reports;[8]
4. Shared best practices across universities, publishers, and professional associations such as EASE, COPE, or CSE.[7]

While the past decade's work, particularly by the TRRP, has brought much-needed clarity, many publishers and institutions have yet to update their systems fully. Harmonisation would prevent unnecessary rejections and promote fairness.

Conclusion

As open science accelerates, the tension between transparency and originality will only intensify. Doctoral theses are vital scholarly contributions and should not disadvantage early-career researchers when seeking to publish derivative articles. Through clear disclosure, reasonable embargoes, and consistent editorial judgement, the community can maintain both integrity and equity. Continued alignment of institutional, editorial, and publisher policies, guided by the TRRP's best practices,[5,6,9] will ensure openness and originality coexist rather than conflict.

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