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# AN INQUIRY INTO MAJOR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY VIOLATIONS IN CANADA, 2010-2019

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the University of Calgary for providing me with the funds and resources to undertake research on academic integrity.

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This report highlights cases of academic misconduct in the Canadian post-secondary sector that were covered by the media between 2010 and 2019.

**Methods:** A qualitative document analysis was conducted of publicly available news stories covering cases of academic misconduct across Canadian higher education.

**Results:** Academic misconduct was reported by local and major news outlets about cases involving students, faculty, and administrators.

**Implications:** Taken together, these stories may point to academic integrity as a larger issue across Canadian higher education that merits deeper investigation.

**Additional materials:** 1 figure; 53 References

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## INTRODUCTION

This report highlights cases of academic misconduct in the Canadian post-secondary sector that were covered by the media between 2010 and 2019. A key message of this report is: although cases of major academic integrity violations in Canada appear to be individual and unrelated that may not be the case. Upon examination of cases that have made the news, seemingly unrelated cases that occurred over the course of the last decade may point to a larger problem.

The infographic below highlights major incidents of academic misconduct in Canada. In this report, I offer details of these cases in a chronological order.

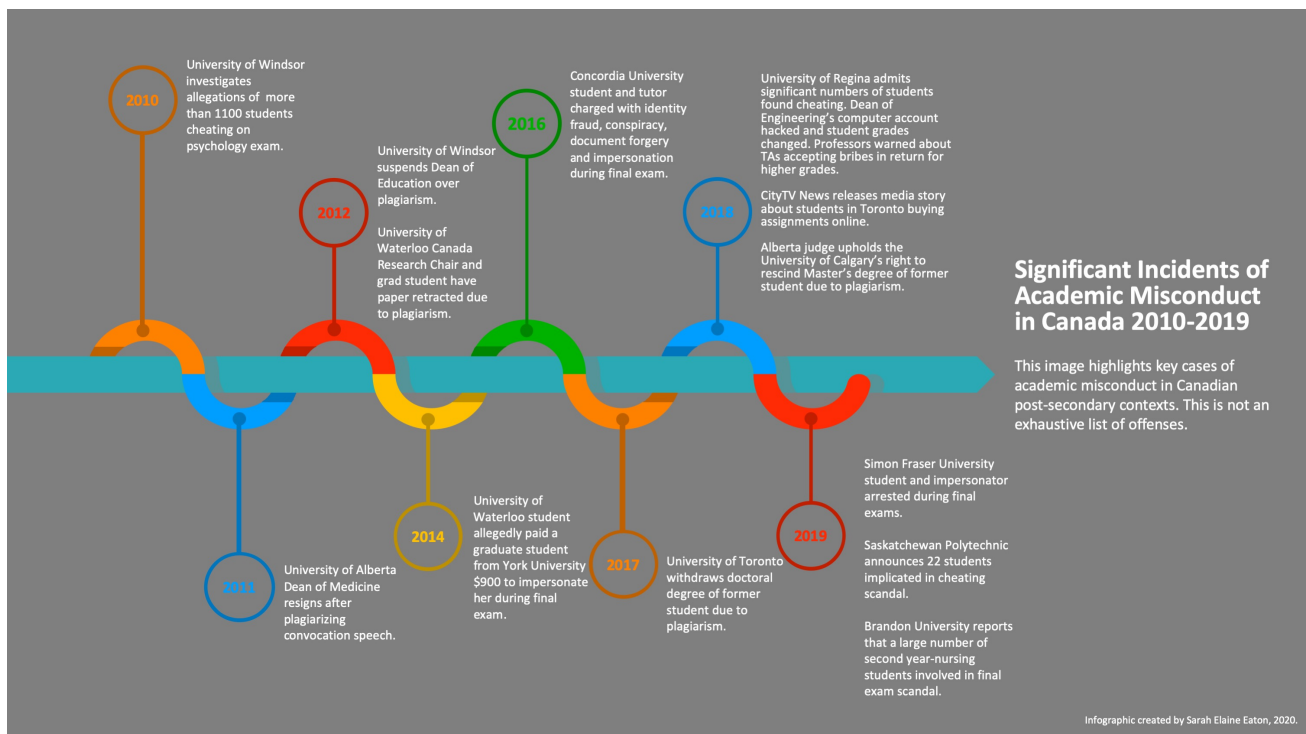


FIGURE 1: TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT EXAMPLES IN CANADA 2010-2019

It is important to emphasize that the cases discussed in this report do not represent **all** cases of academic misconduct in Canada. Nor are all stories by all reporters or media outlets included. For some of the cases, the number of media stories was extensive and so I have opted to curate what I considered to be among the most informative and reputable media stories. The examples presented in this report highlight cases of academic integrity violations that are publicly accessible as news stories covered by mainstream media. Considered together, they may be representative of a larger systemic problem.

## **SIGNIFICANT ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT CASES**

### **2019**

The decade ended with news stories about academic integrity breaches in three different provinces.

#### **Brandon University, Manitoba**

Students in a second-year nursing class at Brandon University faced disciplinary action after a final exam for the 2019 fall semester was deemed “compromised” (Klowak, 2020). The course in question was 71:250 Nursing Foundations II course, taught by Dr. Ali Salman (Slack, 2020). Although the total number of students implicated was not officially released, the media reported that between 46 and 48 students may have been involved (McKendrick, 2020; Slark, 2020). One news report printed a photo of a de-identified letter, signed by the Dean of the Faculty of Health Studies, Dr. John Moraros, indicating that the students would be offered the opportunity to re-take their final exam, with the caveat that the maximum they could earn on the rewritten exam would be 70% (Slack, 2020). Although the incident took place at the end of the fall 2019 term, details did not appear in the news until early 2020.

#### **Simon Fraser University, British Columbia**

On the west coast, the Burnaby RCMP investigated allegations of someone impersonating a student during a final exam (Bains, 2019). The Canadian Press (2019) reported that both the test writer and the student were arrested. The incident allegedly occurred on December 12 (Wadhwani, 2019), though details of the story did not appear the media for almost a week afterwards. Details about the individuals involved or the course the final exam related to were not released.

#### **Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Saskatchewan**

Twenty-two (22) construction electricians had their journeyperson certificates suspended or cancelled as a result of an investigation into exam cheating at Saskatchewan Polytechnic in Moosejaw (CBC, 2019). Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission (SATCC) and an unidentified third-party investigation firm found that apprentices had accessed unauthorized materials during their exams, which included Red Seal interprovincial certification exams, one of the highest credentials available to journeypeople in Canada.

The investigation reportedly began 18 months prior, with the cheating having been found to occur between 2015 and 2018 (Melnychuk, 2019). Two individuals were implicated in the scandal. CBC (2019) reported that an instructor who was found to have been giving out exam answers to students was fired following the investigation. In addition, an SATCC staff member was also found responsible and resigned (CBC, 2019).

As a result, Saskatchewan Polytechnic began conducting an internal audit on exam procedures (CBC, 2019).

## **2018**

### University of Regina, Saskatchewan

The University of Regina was the subject of several news stories in 2018. One explored how reports of academic misconduct had nearly doubled between the 2013-2014 academic year and the 2016-2017 academic year (Leo, 2018a). It is worth adding that increases of **reports** of academic misconduct do not necessarily equate to an increase in **incidence**, and vice versa, that an absence of reports does not necessarily equate to an absence of incidence (QAA, 2017).

Two additional media reports pointed to “a significant amount” of academic misconduct in a class on law and ethics for engineering students (Leo, 2018c). The report discussed cheating during a fourth-year law and ethics exam (Leo, 2018c) that led to changes in exam invigilation, including the use of cameras in exam rooms (Leo, 2018b).

### Contract cheating, Ontario

CityTV did a story on contract cheating (Sutherland, 2018). Although the University of Toronto is named in the story, Sutherland points out that contract cheating happens at campuses across the country. This was one of the first news reports in Canada about contract cheating. The next year, Sutherland (2019) conducted a follow up story.

### University of Calgary, Alberta

An Alberta judge upheld the University of Calgary’s right to rescind the Master of Arts degree it had awarded to a student in 2003 due to plagiarism (CBC, 2018). John Measor was named by the press as the individual involved (CBC, 2018; Graveland, 2018). According to news reports, Measor’s examination committee had raised a concern about plagiarism before the thesis defense (Graveland, 2018). Ten years later, Saint Mary’s University (SMU) in Halifax who employed Measor in an instructional role, requested a copy of this thesis (Graveland, 2018). It was reported that SMU ran Measor’s master’s thesis through text-matching software and reported the results to the University of Calgary.

The University of Calgary reportedly demanded that Measor return his degree and rescinded his Master’s credential. After a number of unsuccessful appeal attempts, the matter went to the courts, where Justice Richard Neufeld upheld the University of Calgary’s decision. The court documents publicly available online (Neufeld, 2018).

## **2017**

### **University of Toronto, Ontario**

A disciplinary tribunal at the University of Toronto found Chris Spence, the former director of the Toronto District School Board, had plagiarized portions of his 1996 doctoral thesis (Alphonso, 2017), the longest of which was nine pages long (Mandel, 2019). The panel recommended that Spence's degree be cancelled and recalled. In 2016, it was reported that Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) found him responsible of professional misconduct and revoked his teaching certificate, even though Spence had resigned three years earlier (Janus, 2016). Although the story first broke in 2013 (CBC, 2013; Rushowy, 2013), it was not until 2017 that a decision by the University of Toronto was reached. This was arguably one of the most high-profile cases of the decade, with the media covering the story from 2013 (CBC, 2013; Rushowy, 2013) through to the end of the decade (Alphonso, 2018; Mandel, 2019). Spence appealed the decision, and the case eventually went to the Ontario Divisional Court, with Justice David Corbett presiding (Mandel, 2019). The Ontario Divisional Court upheld the University of Toronto's decision to strip Spence of his doctoral degree (Mandel, 2019). The court documents are a matter of public record (Spence v. University of Toronto, 2019).

### **University of Regina, Saskatchewan**

A number of news stories about academic misconduct at the University of Regina in 2017. These included a story about engineering professors being warned about teaching assistants allegedly taking bribes from students to increase grades (Leo, 2017b) and a story about a dean's computer account or computer allegedly being hacked by students in order to change grades (Leo, 2017c). There was another story about an engineering professor, Shahid Azam, who was reportedly reprimanded by the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Saskatchewan (APEGS) for plagiarizing the work of one of his own master's students. (Leo, 2017a).

## **2016**

### **Concordia University, Quebec**

A 24-year old student, Abdullaziz Almuhadib, and, his tutor, John Karras after Almuhadib were named in the media as being involved in an exam impersonation case at Concordia University (Bernstien, 2016, Meagher, 2016)) Almuhadib allegedly hired Karras to impersonate him during a final exam. Both parties faced criminal charges as a result. Almuhadib was accused of conspiracy and personation at an examination (Meagher, 2016). Karras faced four charges including identity fraud, conspiracy, using a forged document and impersonating someone at an exam (Bernstein, 2016, Meagher, 2016).



## **2015**

No major incidents of academic misconduct were reported in this year by the Canadian media, to the best of my knowledge. This does not mean that no misconduct occurred at all that year, but rather that the media did not publish any stories on the topic, as far as I could determine during the course of writing this report.

## **2014**

### University of Waterloo, Ontario

Kaiwan Qian was named by the media as the University of Waterloo student who allegedly paid Longhua Wang \$900 and provided her with a fake ID to write her math exam at the end of the fall term (Caldwell, 2014; CBC News, 2014; Prisiajny, & Lai, 2015). Both parties faced criminal charges as a result (Caldwell, 2014, CBC News, 2014). The event in question allegedly took place on December 15, 2014. (Prisiajny, & Lai, 2015).

## **2013**

No major incidents of academic misconduct were reported in this year by the Canadian media, to the best of my knowledge. This does not mean that no misconduct occurred at all that year, but rather that the media did not publish any stories on the topic, as far as I could determine during the course of writing this report.

## **2012**

### University of Waterloo, Ontario

Dongqing Li, who held a Canada research chair at the University of Waterloo, and Yasaman Daghighi, PhD student, were found responsible of plagiarism in a published research paper (Brennan, 2012; CTV News, 2013; Postmedia News, 2012). The two were accused of plagiarism by Martin Bazant, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who provided evidence that material had been plagiarized from a pre-published version of an article 2010 for which Bezant was the lead author (Brennan, 2012). This prompted an internal investigation by the University of Waterloo.

Li was allegedly the editor-in-chief of the journal in which the plagiarized material was published (Brennan, 2012). The journal, *Microfluidics and Nanofluidics*, retracted the article and Li stepped down as its editor (Brennan, 2012). CTV (2013) news reported that Li was suspended from the university without pay for four months as a result.

### University of Windsor, Ontario

The University of Windsor suspended its Dean of Education at the time, Clinton Beckford, after he was found responsible of plagiarism, as a result of a formal investigation (CBC, 2012; Chen, 2012). The suspension came only a few months after Beckford had been appointed to his role as Dean (Chen, 2012). Few details were released about the case, except that Beckford was suspended without pay, until June 30, 2014, after which time he would be allowed to return to his duties as a faculty member, but not as Dean (CBC, 2012; Chen, 2012).

## **2011**

### **University of Alberta, Alberta**

In 2011, a major case of academic misconduct in Canada covered by the media did not relate to students, but to a faculty member. Philip Baker, Dean of Medicine at the University of Alberta at that time, was found to have plagiarized the speech he delivered at a convocation banquet. In that case, students were the ones who uncovered the plagiarism and were dismayed by the number of personal details shared, none of which were Baker's. The speech had been lifted almost verbatim from the 2010 Stanford University medical convocation, delivered by professor Atul Gawande at the (CBC 2011a, 2011c). The story garnered national media attention (CBC 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Although Baker apologized for his transgression (CBC 2011b), he reportedly resigned a few days later (CBC 2011c).

## **2010**

### **University of Windsor, Ontario**

The decade began with news that a case at the University of Windsor in which 1100 students were allegedly involved in misconduct relating to a mid-term exam (Jerema, 2010). The students who were allegedly involved were taking a first-year course called Introduction to Psychology as a Social Science (CBC News). The investigation revealed that a test bank of questions had been compromised (Canadian Press, 2010) although some students had near perfect scores on questions from a test bank associated with the course textbook, but those same students were unable to answer lecture-based questions (Jerema, 2010).

One news report stated that the matter was being handled internally (CBC News, 2010). I was unable to locate any follow-up reports in the media about the outcome of the case.

## **DISCUSSION**

The examples in this report highlight cases of academic misconduct at Canadian post-secondary institutions, as reported by the media from 2010 to 2019. The examples relate to both universities and colleges from across various provinces. The examples show that students were not the only ones misbehaving, but that professors were sometimes the ones responsible for violating academic integrity.

Of all the news stories from the past decade, one quotation in particular was particularly concerning. In the story about 22 construction electricians being implicated in a cheating scandal at Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Mark Melnychuk reported that John Lax, of the Construction Association of Saskatchewan called the situation a "one off" (Melnychuk, 2019). That comment was made after it had been shown that investigation showed that the cheating had *occurred over a three-year period*, from 2015 to 2018. It is profoundly irresponsible for educational and industry leaders to dismiss cases of academic misconduct as being "one offs". It is important for educational institutions and their partners to show they are taking these situations seriously and take steps to show how they are upholding integrity when there are breaches.

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Of particular note is that there were three cases in which individuals were arrested for exam impersonation: (1) a case at Simon Fraser university in 2019; (2); a case at Concordia University in 2016; and (3) a case at the University of Waterloo in 2014. After the initial news reports, I could find no further follow-up by the media about the what happened after the alleged cases were discovered. It would be for someone with more expertise in justice and law to follow up on those stories through legal documentation. In general, I found little follow up in the media after the initial stories were reported.

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There were three cases of exam impersonation in Canada reported in the media between 2010 and 2019 that resulted in arrests.

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I noted that news stories that covered the 2019 cases did not mention the previous two cases. There is a greater need for journalists and researchers not only to document major cases, but also *to connect the dots between them*. Establishing connections can demonstrate that such cases are not “one offs”, but rather inter-related events situated within a broader context. As this report has shown, a collection of individual cases may point to a larger issue that needs to be investigated more thoroughly.

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Synthesizing details of multiple individual accounts can help demonstrate that there is a larger issue around academic integrity that warrants attention.

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The case of Chris Spence’s plagiarism was arguably the most covered case of the decade. News stories started in 2013 and continued through the remainder of the decade. One of the final stories published on the case indicated that the case still might not be resolved (Mandel, 2019).

In addition, the case of John Measor, whose MA degree was rescinded by the University of Calgary in 2018 is also important. In the case of both Spence and Measor, the individuals involved went on to careers in education. This is important because educators are expected to be role models for their students. This includes upholding high standards of integrity.

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Two of the cases that appeared in the media in 2019 had connections to professional ethics. Stories relating to the nursing students at Brandon University and the construction electricians at Saskatchewan Polytechnic both discussed programs of study that are a *direct pathway into a profession*. There has been ample research to show there is a strong link between academic integrity and professional ethics (Austin et al, 2005, 2006; Blum, 2016). It is important for students and others to recognize that education is not just about going through the motions to get a credential. Educational programs serve many purposes, and when they lead directly into a profession, learning to conduct oneself in an ethical manner must absolutely be a core element of the training.

In the case of the nursing students, if they were to carry forward their unethical behaviour into their future

professional roles, then the lives could be at stake. This point can be considered more deeply in the case of Philip Baker, who resigned from his role as of the Dean of Medicine at the University of Alberta in 2011. What none of the Canadian media reports picked up on was that Baker had been at the heart of another ethical scandal several years prior. In 2000, there news in the UK reports that implicated Baker in death of a baby in Nottingham, England. News reports from the UK detailed how Dianne Bacon, and her husband, Andrew, lost their unborn daughter despite pleading with Baker for an emergency caesarean, which he allegedly refused to perform. Judge Stephen Oliver-James was quoted in the media as calling the care Mrs. Baker received under Dr. Baker as “substandard and inappropriate” (Weaver, 2000). The case was described as a “legal landmark” in the UK (Weaver, 2000).

Baker’s involvement in the Nottingham case was all but absent from Canadian media reports, which focused exclusively on his plagiarism of a convocation speech, despite the UK story having been documented in publicly available news reports. This case in particular highlights an opportunity for those who work in higher education to engage in more intense conversation about how hiring of academics is undertaken. It is possible that the committee in charge of hiring Baker into his role as Dean at the University of Alberta had no idea about his previous alleged transgressions in the UK. To the best of my knowledge, when someone applies for a full-time faculty role at a Canadian post-secondary institution, there is no legal or other requirement for them to declare any previous misconduct, be it academic or professional. This is a topic that merits further discussion, especially given how few full-time faculty roles are available in today’s job market.

Finally, as I was reading through these news reports, it struck me that in a number of cases there was a lag between when the incidents occurred and when they were reported by the media. For example the case at the University of Brandon that allegedly involved up to 48 nursing students in the fall of 2019, was not reported by the media until January 2020. Although time is needed to conduct thorough and careful investigations, it is unclear why some incidents are not reported until weeks after they occurred.

## Limitations

One limitation of this inquiry is that it was conducted only in English. As a bilingual country, Canada offers post-secondary education in both English in French. As a result, one direction for future research would be for Francophone colleagues to conduct a similar inquiry to investigate media reports in French.

A second limitation of this work is that research that relies on secondary sources may not be as reliable as those which rely on primary sources. In this inquiry I examined cases as they were presented in the media. I did not contact or communicate with any individuals who were allegedly implicated in any of the stories covered by the media. That would mean that any inaccuracies or errors in the media stories could have been carried forward in this report. I made every attempt to recount the cases as accurately as possible, using publicly available news stories as sources. If there are factual errors, I apologize to all parties involved.

A final limitation that I wish to acknowledge is that this work is not exhaustive. It highlights particular cases only. I am particularly aware that I found no cases reported in the media about academic misconduct in Atlantic Canada or Canada’s North.

## CONCLUSION

After digging into media accounts of academic misconduct from 2010 to 2019, it is clear to me that more investigation is needed.

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It is clear that deeper investigation is needed into the extent of academic misconduct in Canada.

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The last time large-scale research was published on academic misconduct in Canada was in 2006 (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006a, 2006b). The data for those studies was collected in the 2002-2003 academic year (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006a), which means the most reliable large scale data set available about academic misconduct in Canada is now more than 15 years old.

One reason for this lack of research on academic misconduct in Canada could be that studies in this area are underfunded (Eaton & Edino, 2018). This has resulted in smaller studies, often conducted only at the institutional level. It is time for another national, large-scale study that includes post-secondary institutions across the entire country. We need reliable data that helps us to understand the state of academic integrity in Canada today.

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Single events of academic misconduct do not exist in a vacuum. They are part of a larger narrative about quality assurance in education.

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Higher education quality assurance is largely overseen by provincial bodies (Universities Canada, n.d.). It is imperative that provincial assurance bodies and systems become even more rigorous about how institutions are expected to uphold academic integrity and how to be transparent when there are breaches of it.

Single events of academic misconduct do not exist in a vacuum. They are part of a larger narrative about the quality assurance of education. It is time for Canadian educators, researchers, policy makers to take a more pro-active stance on ensuring the highest quality standards for education in Canada are held up. To do this, we must acknowledge that this issue does not affect one institution, but all of them.

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