

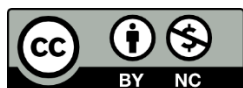


Copyright trolling: The experience of HE and related organisations

Findings from a survey of Higher Education and related organisations,
July 2026

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with Chris Morrison (University of Oxford) and Jane Secker (City St George's, University of London)



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Executive summary

‘Copyright trolls’ target organisations and individuals with false or excessive claims for compensation for alleged copyright infringement. Trolling is a significant issue for many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and related organisations, with trolling claims making up over 80% of all copyright infringement claims they receive.

Trolling overwhelmingly targets photographs used on websites and social media. This is typically commercially licensed stock photography, although openly licensed images may also be targeted. Beyond any financial harm, trolling creates additional stress and workload burdens. It can also cause a chilling effect, discouraging legitimate uses of copyright-protected works at some organisations.

Approaches to handling infringement claims vary across the sector. Organisations without dedicated legal support can find this particularly challenging. Around 1 in 3 organisations lack robust procedures to handle claims efficiently. A similar proportion have no preventative measures in place to reduce the likelihood of future claims.

Organisations are looking for support to develop consistency and good practice across the sector for assessing the validity of copyright infringement claims and challenging those which are trolling.

Key recommendations for the sector are:

- Develop a good-practice workflow to evaluate and respond to infringement claims, with template responses
- Develop and share material and strategies for awareness raising within organisations
- Share examples of success and good practice
- Gather further data on trolling claims across the sector to inform best practice into the future.

Organisations are looking for support to develop consistency and good practice across the sector.



Background

This research arose from discussions between copyright practitioners in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) about the copyright infringement claims their organisations were receiving. These claims were typically for material used in online contexts such as webpages and social media posts. Practitioners were concerned about how best to respond to these requests for payment, especially claims which seemed excessive or unfounded – often known as ‘copyright trolling’.

In early 2026, Liesl Rowe (Leeds Beckett University) and Tim Riley (University of Aberdeen), delivered a copyright community webinar based on experiences of ‘copyright trolling’ at their institutions. Discussions at the webinar showed many other copyright practitioners had similar experiences and revealed a variety of approaches to the issue. They indicated an interest in the community in investigating the issue further and a potential desire for good practice guidance within the sector.

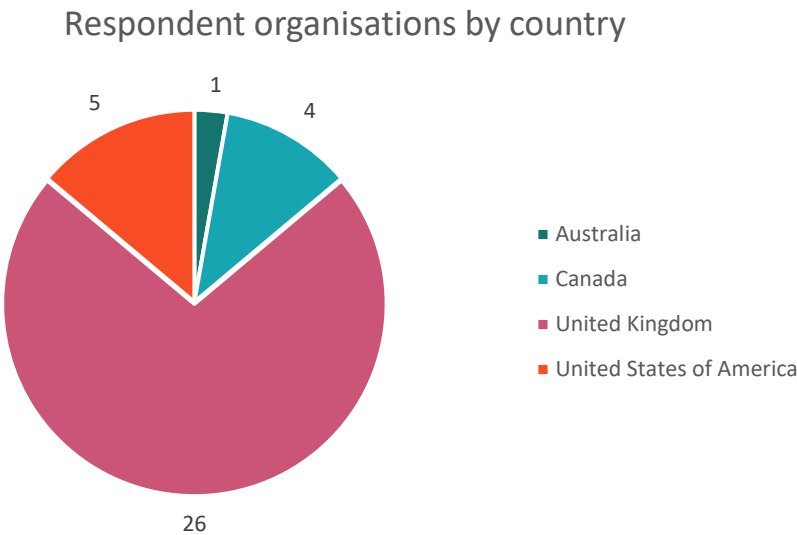
Following the webinar, Liesl and Tim, with support from Jane Secker and Chris Morrison of ALTCoOLSIG, designed an anonymous online survey to gather data from the copyright practitioner community (see *Appendix*).

The survey was distributed to copyright specialists at HEIs, national libraries and associated organisations in February and March 2026. The survey was initially targeted at UK institutions but was opened to international respondents following interest from the wider copyright community. Respondents were asked to submit one survey response per organisation to assess the current prevalence of copyright infringement claims, organisational responses to managing them, and any further support that might help organisations manage these claims more effectively.

Results

Responding organisations

We received responses from a total of 36 different organisations. These were primarily HEIs but also included national libraries. The majority of responses were from UK organisations (26 respondents) but there were also responses from the USA (5 respondents), Canada (4 respondents) and Australia (1 respondent).

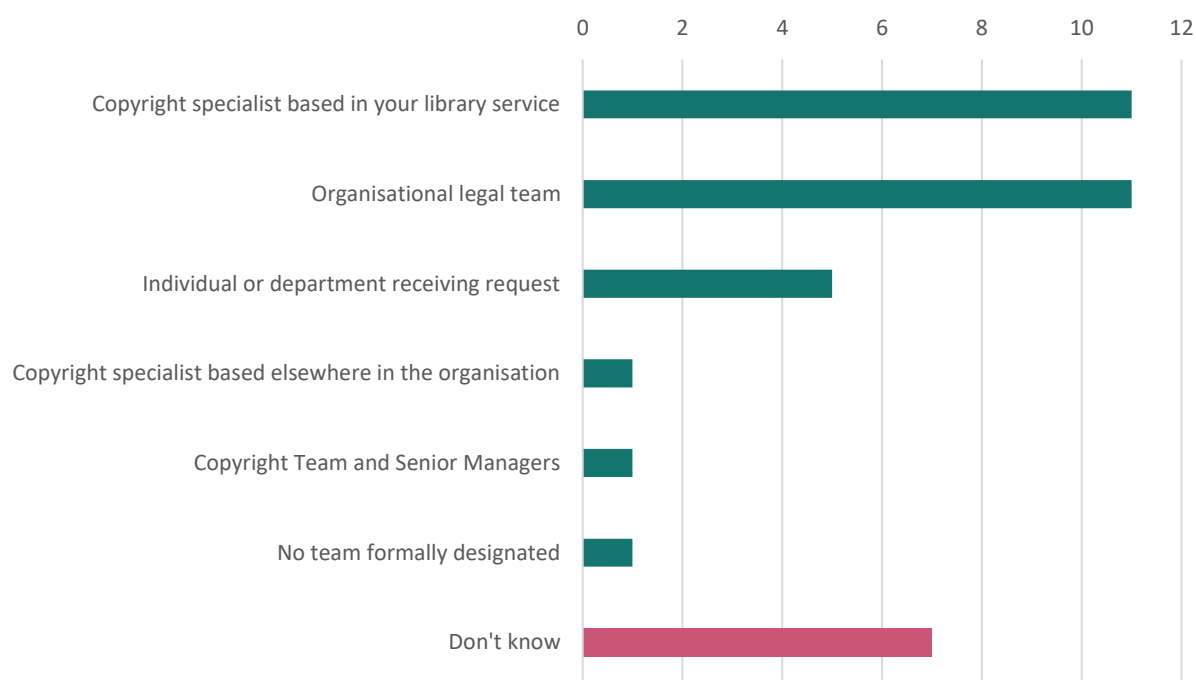


Handling infringement claims

Respondents had a variety of different teams or individuals responsible for handling infringement claims. Typically, responsibility fell to a copyright specialist based in the Library Service (11 respondents), or to an organisational legal team (11 respondents). Two respondents said claims were resolved cooperatively by two distinct groups of colleagues.

Less commonly, the individual or department receiving the request would be responsible for resolving it (5 respondents). 7 respondents said they did not know who was responsible within their organisation, and another said no one had formal responsibility, indicating a potential lack of clarity or ownership around this in some organisations.

Person responsible for dealing with copyright infringement claims



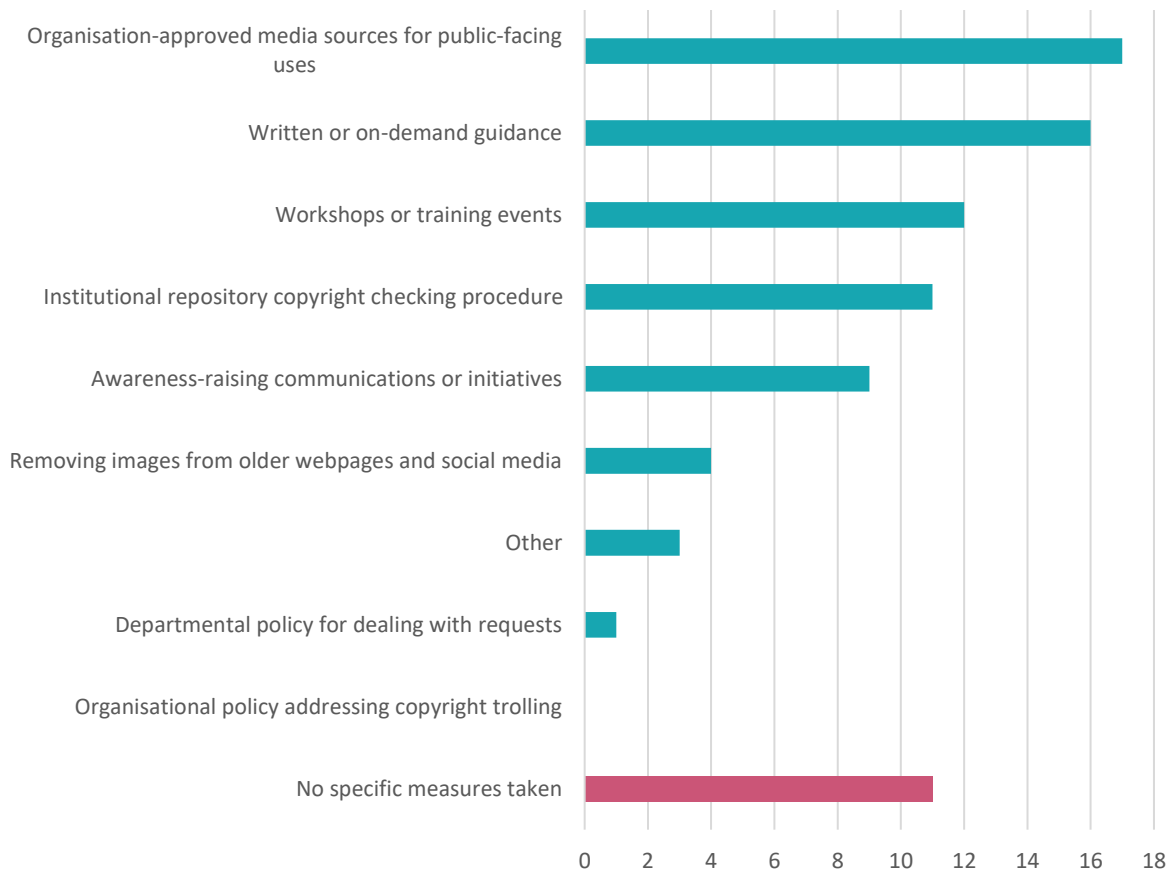
Many of the responding organisations had proactive measures in place to reduce the likelihood of receiving infringement claims.

The most common measure, implemented by just under half the respondents, was having sources of images or other media for public-facing use which had been explicitly approved or endorsed by the organisation (17 respondents). One respondent commented that although their organisation had recommended sources, people were still able to use alternatives if they chose.

The other most common measures centred around user education, either written or other on-demand guidance (16 respondents) or workshops and training events (12 respondents).

Just under 1-in-3 respondents said their organisation had no specific measures in place to reduce the risk of receiving infringement claims (11 respondents).

Measures taken by organisations to reduce risk of infringement claims

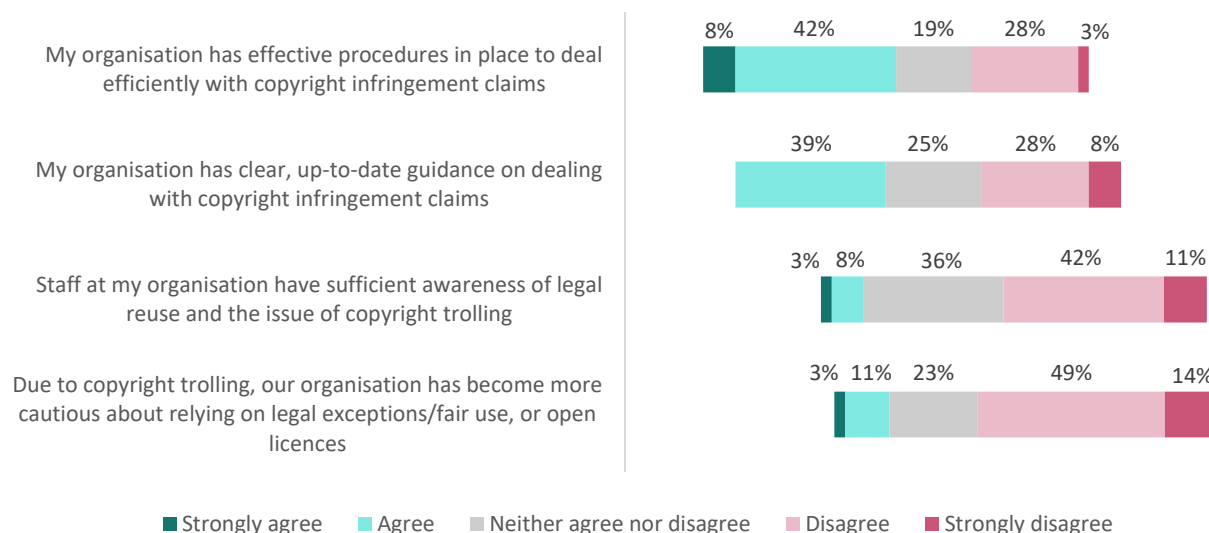


Respondents were also asked the extent to which they agreed with four statements about managing infringement requests at their organisation. Responses revealed some divergence in sentiment across different organisations, as well as some common broader trends.

Respondents tended to show reasonable confidence that their organisations had effective procedures in place to deal with infringement claims, although nearly a third of respondents (31%) lacked confidence in the effectiveness of their organisational procedures to a small or large extent. Respondents were slightly less confident that their organisational guidance was clear and up to date. When it came to awareness, respondents were considerably less confident that staff in their organisation had an appropriate level of awareness of copyright infringement and trolling, with only 11% of respondents agreeing staff awareness was adequate.

The fourth question was designed to assess whether organisations were experiencing ‘copyright chill’ i.e. avoiding legally permitted acts, due to copyright trolling. Only 14% of respondents indicated that copyright trolling was having a chilling effect on their organisation, with 63% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that trolling was having this effect on their organisation.

Respondent agreement with statements about managing copyright infringement



23 respondents included additional comments about the management of infringement claims at their organisation. Several key themes emerged from these comments.

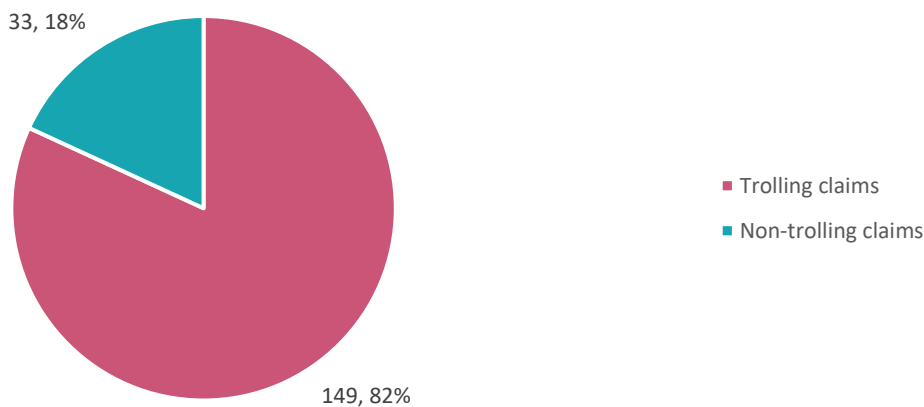
- **Uncertainty and inconsistency:** Copyright specialists will not necessarily be involved with handling all infringement claims. This means they may not be aware of all the claims their organisation is receiving and whether claims are being handled in a consistent way. This can be especially challenging at large or decentralised organisations. Some organisations receive no or very few claims overall.
- **Assessment and legal support:** Claims vary in their legal merit and need to be carefully assessed to decide the appropriate response. Organisational legal teams may have a low appetite for risk and may be reluctant to challenge claims, even those which lack merit. Where organisations have the scope to push back, requesting further evidence from suspected trolls may lead them to drop their claims. Some organisations lack dedicated legal support to help deal with claims.
- **Training and awareness:** Copyright specialists often have responsibility for organisation-wide training, which may include awareness of trolling. Infringements may occur when people who lack suitable training create public-facing material e.g. webpages.

Copyright infringement claims received

Two thirds of respondents (24 respondents) were aware of their organisation receiving at least one copyright infringement claim in the previous 3 years. 6 respondents said their organisation had not received any claims within the past 3 years, and 6 were unsure.

Of the claims that organisations had received, respondents classified 82% of them as ‘unfounded, excessive or unreasonable’ i.e. copyright trolling. This left a remainder of only 18% of claims which were believed to be warranted and proportionate.

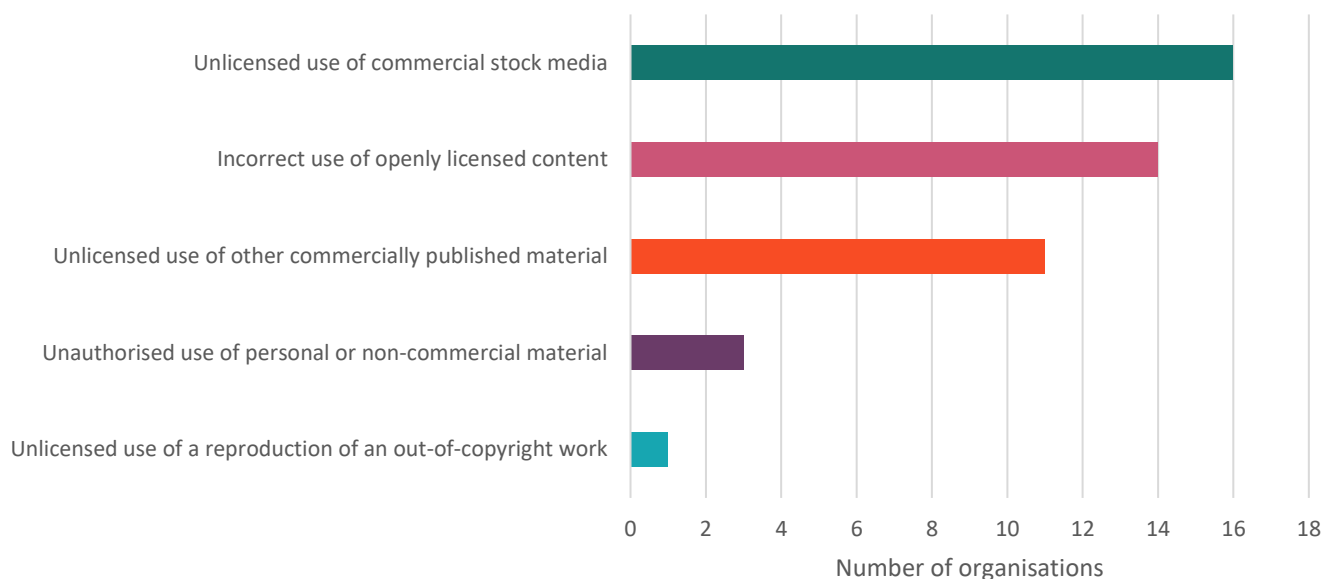
Prevalence of trolling vs non-trolling claims



The median number of trolling claims received was **2 per organisation**, although the total trolling claims received by the respondents ranged from 0-48, showing that not all organisations are targeted equally.

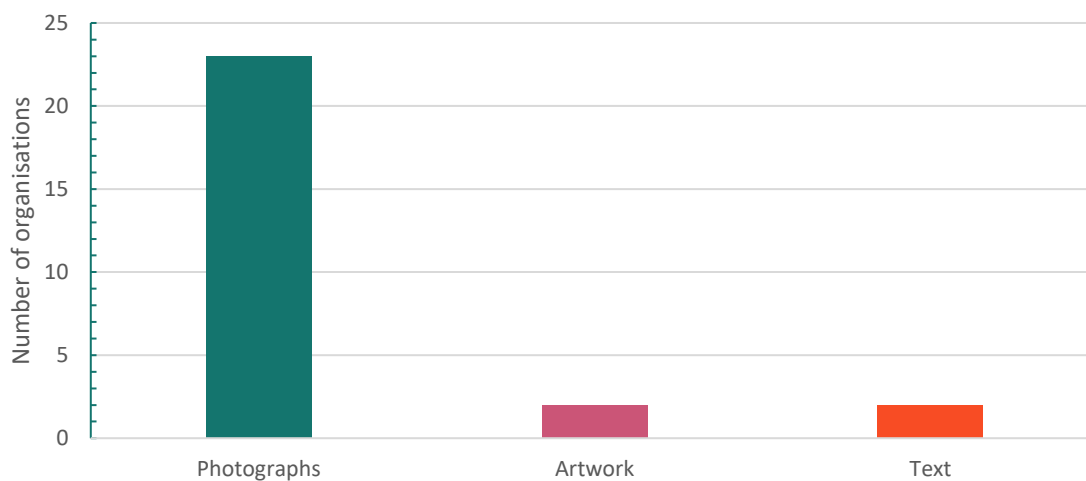
The grounds for the claims received by the respondents mainly fell into 3 categories: unlicensed use of stock media, incorrect use of openly licensed content, and unlicensed use of other commercial media. A small number of claims were related to unauthorised use of non-commercial content or reproductions of public domain works.

Claimed grounds for infringement experienced by organisations



The infringement claims overwhelmingly involved photographs. 23 of the 24 organisations had received claims relating to photographs, with only 2 receiving claims regarding artworks, and 2 relating to text.

Types of disputed material



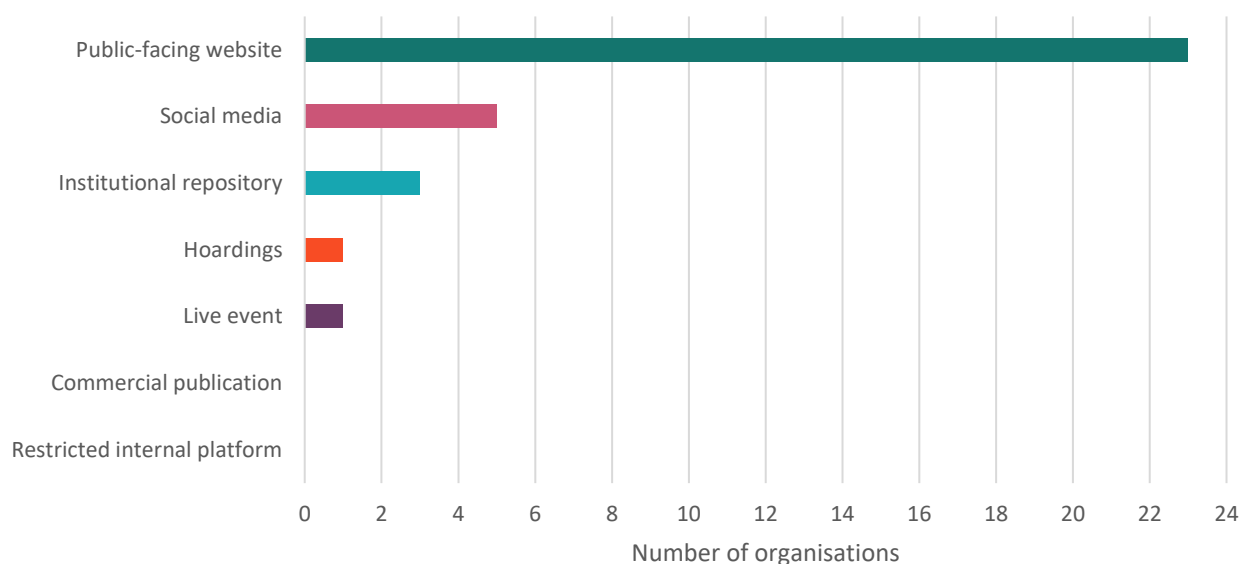
Material used on public-facing websites was by far the most common source of infringement claims. A small number of respondents had received claims for material used on social media or institutional repositories. One organisation had received claims for material used on hoardings and at a live event.



*“Images accessible via the web
are the primary targets,
presumably because they are
easier to find.”*

Survey respondent's views on the kinds of material usually targeted for
infringement claims

Places where organisations had used disputed material

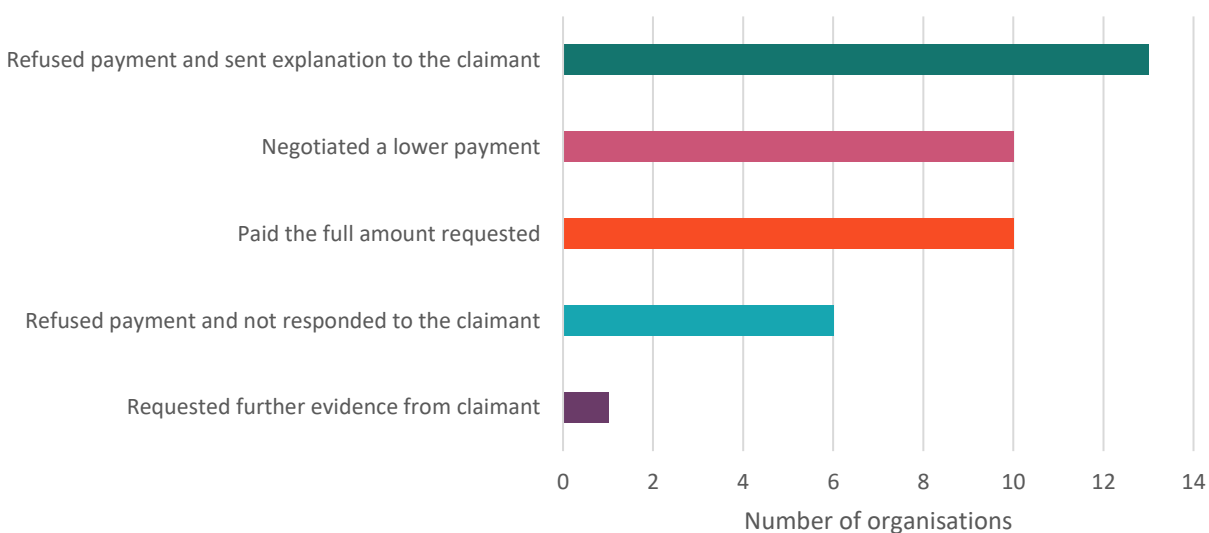


Free-text comments from respondents reaffirmed that infringement claims focused on material on the open web – predominately photographs, particularly stock or press images. This material can be found relatively easily through searching or web crawlers: one respondent noted that they had been contacted after material had been discovered by AI crawlers. This was typically material posted directly on webpages, but respondents commented that images embedded in PDFs, presentations or other documents had also been targeted. This could include material created by students as well as staff. Respondents noted that images could be posted online for years before a claim was received.

Respondents also commented that copyright trolls will exploit older CC BY licences (e.g. CC BY 2.0) and claim damages for minor licence infringements. Trolls may also mislead users about the licence terms to argue that infringement has occurred. Respondents said claimants seem to be primarily interested in financial compensation rather than correcting errors in reuse.

When it came to dealing with claims, some respondents noted that their response to an infringement claim would depend on the nature of the claim. 13 organisations had refused payment at least once and sent an explanation to the claimant. 10 organisations had negotiated a lower payment at least once, and 10 had also paid the full amount requested at least once. A smaller number of organisations had refused to respond to claims (6). One organisation mentioned contacting a claimant to ask for further supporting evidence: as noted earlier, this action can result in a claimant dropping their claim.

Responses from organisations to infringement claims



The survey also invited further free-text comments from respondents about their experiences with infringement claims. Respondents raised a number of issues.

- Not all claims are trolling, and people need a way to distinguish genuine claims from speculative trolling.
- Communications from trolls are often aggressive and intimidating. They can be persistent, regardless of whether the organisation responds or not.
- Copyright trolls cannot always provide proof that the relevant rightsholders have authorised them to act on their behalf.
- False claims impose costs in terms of staff time and stress, even if organisations do not pay the money requested. Organisations lack legal recourse against trolls who act in bad faith with baseless claims.
- Organisations with a lower appetite for risk or which lack staffing capacity or expertise may not push back against infringement claims, even when they are unfounded.

“The wording in the emails sent from trolling companies is aggressive, and this is what makes my institution react.”

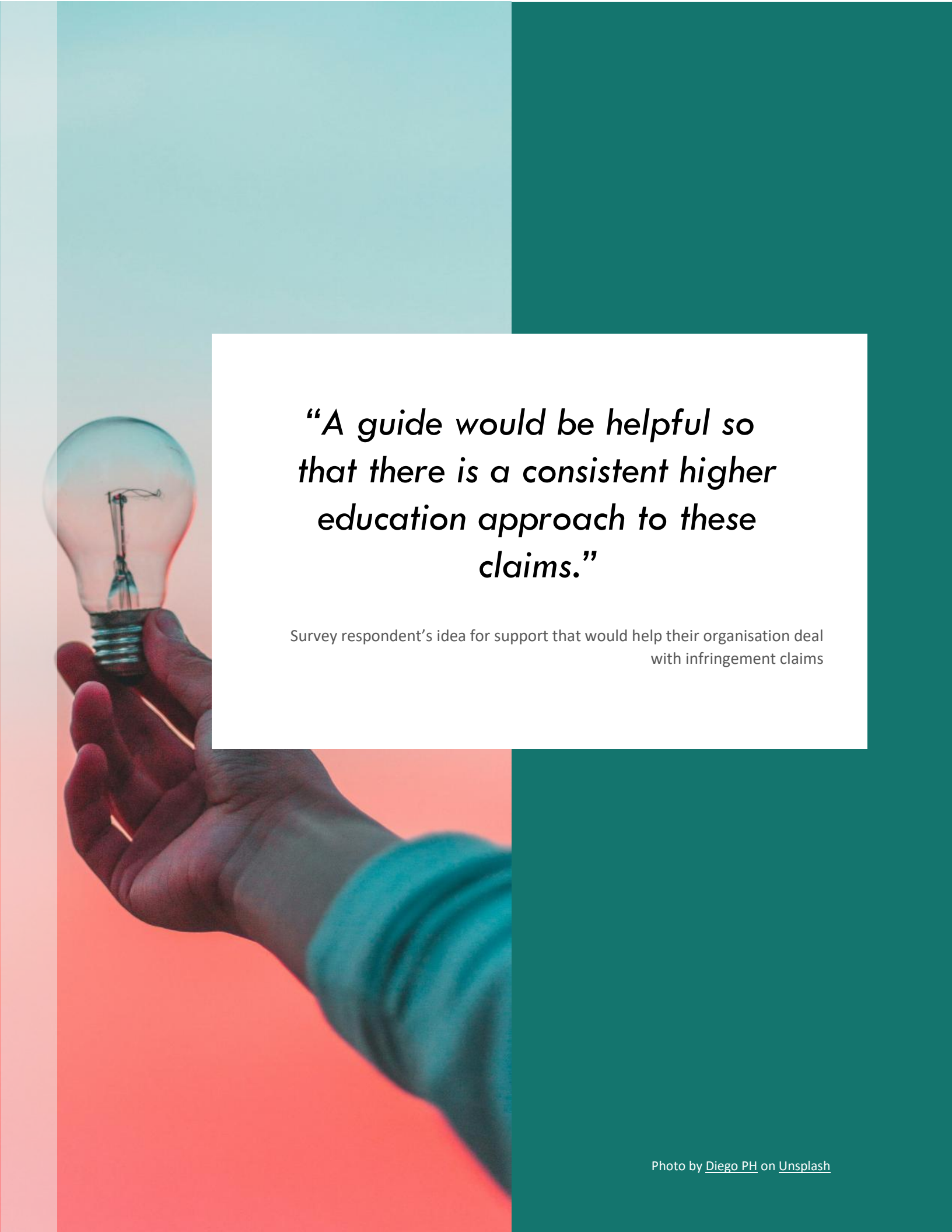
Survey respondent's view on the 'trolling' infringement claims received by their organisation



Support from the copyright community

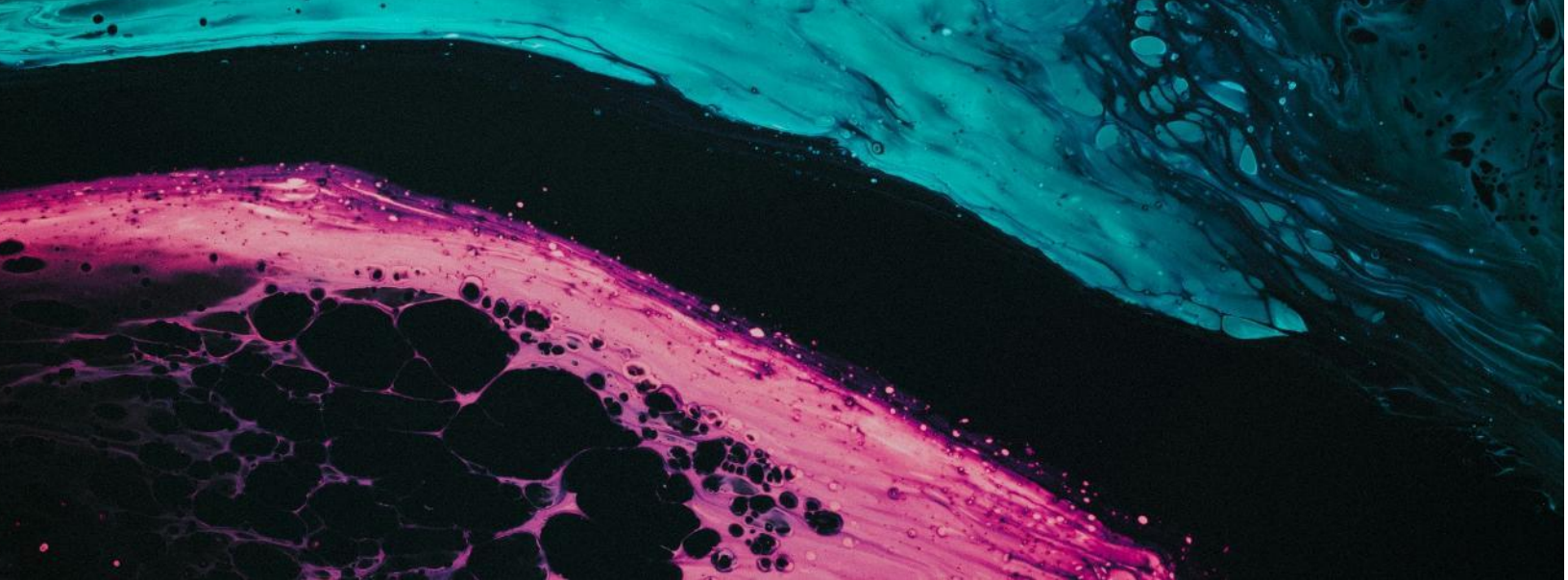
The final section of the survey asked respondents what support they would like to see from the wider copyright community to help them deal with infringement claims at their organisation. There were 22 comments from respondents which gave the following suggestions:

- ▶ Sharing names of specific companies or individuals known to engage in trolling
- ▶ Advice on scoping out the extent of the problem at an institution (when the copyright specialist or team might not be aware of all incoming infringement claims)
- ▶ Best-practice advice for preventing and responding to claims, with recommended workflows, identifying genuine from 'trolling' claims, and template responses for correspondence with rightsholders and suspected trolls – possibly produced or endorsed by a national body such as Jisc or SCONUL
- ▶ Sharing experiences and success stories from other institutions
- ▶ Relevant background legal information e.g. relevant IPEC SCT judgments in copyright cases
- ▶ Teaching/awareness-raising material to use in user education
- ▶ Taking action to secure damages for vexatious claims.

A hand holding a lit lightbulb against a teal and orange background. The lightbulb is glowing with a warm orange light, and the hand is holding it from the bottom. The background is split into two main colors: a teal color on the right and an orange color on the left. A white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing text.

*“A guide would be helpful so
that there is a consistent higher
education approach to these
claims.”*

Survey respondent's idea for support that would help their organisation deal
with infringement claims



Discussion

The survey results show that copyright trolling can be a significant issue for HEIs and related organisations. Two-thirds of responding organisations were aware of receiving at least one copyright infringement claim within the past 3 years. Although some claims are genuine, over 80% of claims received were considered trolling.

The overwhelming majority of claims relate to photographs used on public-facing websites. A small proportion of claims relate to content on social media or institutional repositories. Claimants typically use web scraping or AI bots to identify these images, and this is often done by a third-party firm on behalf of the rightsholder.

Trolling claims appear to use two main strategies:

- **For commercial content:** Speculative claims sent out whenever use of an image is detected, requesting proof of licence or payment of a fee.
- **For openly licensed content:** Claims alleging breach of the licence, typically around attribution or non-permitted uses, and requesting payment of a fee. This usually focuses on older Creative Commons licences. It may involve genuine mistakes on the user's part, or misrepresentation of the licence terms by the claimant.

Claims may use intimidating language to prompt a swift response in the claimant's favour.

These claims can be costly for organisations, especially for those that pay all claims as requested to avoid hassle and legal risk. Even where organisations successfully push back against trolling claims, this still creates costs in staff time, stress and disruption. There can also be indirect costs due to the chilling effect where some organisations stop the legal use of material under open licences or fair dealing/fair use due to fear of opening themselves up to trolling claims.

There is no standard response to handling these claims across the sector. Responsibility usually falls to a central organisational legal team or designated copyright specialist, typically within a library service. The risk appetite of the legal team can affect whether organisations pay claims or push back. Not all organisations have designated legal support available, which can also affect their appetite for risk.

There is scope for collaboration across the sector to enable organisations to take a more consistent and measured approach to dealing with infringement claims. This could bring several benefits, such as:

- Enabling organisations to evaluate the genuineness of infringement claims more effectively, for speedier resolution of valid claims and more effective pushback against claims which lack a firm legal basis. This could save organisations time and money and potentially disincentivise trolling claims aimed at HEIs.
- Reducing stress and uncertainty for staff dealing with these claims across all organisations but especially for those lacking dedicated legal support.
- Providing an opportunity for dialogue within an organisation in cases where the approach of a copyright specialist differs from that taken by an organisational legal team.
- Increasing awareness and discussion of this issue across the sector and internationally.

Good practice guidance for the sector should focus on the following areas as recommended by survey respondents:

- Decision matrix for evaluating claims
- Step-by-step process for disputing claims or negotiating lower payments
- Templates and recommended wording for correspondence with claimants
- Examples of good practice from sector organisations to demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches in real-life scenarios
- Awareness-raising and educational material which can be reused and adapted by organisations.

Limitations and further research

This survey gives a window onto the experiences of a relatively small number of organisations within the sector, focusing on the last 3 years. The statistics for the prevalence of claims may not represent the true extent of the issue of copyright trolling due to the self-selecting nature of the respondents and the lack of accurate tracking of claims received at many organisations.

Collecting further data on an ongoing basis will assist monitoring the wider prevalence of copyright trolling in the sector and identifying any developing trends, as well as giving more granular data about how specific claims are handled.

Appendix

Copyright trolling survey

*indicates a required question

Participant information and consent

The aim of this research is to investigate the prevalence of speculative, excessive and unfounded claims of copyright infringement, also known as 'copyright trolling', targeted at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other related organisations, and the approaches organisations are using to deal with them.

Please read the following information carefully before agreeing to participate (if you wish to) by ticking the consent box at the bottom of this page. Your participation in the survey is entirely **voluntary**, and you can opt out at any stage by closing and exiting the browser.

The research is led by Tim Riley (University of Aberdeen) and Liesl Rowe (Leeds Beckett University) on behalf of the ALT Copyright and Online Learning Special Interest Group. The results of this research will be shared with the HEI copyright practitioner community and used to help develop best practice for the sector.

We invite you to take part in this survey if your role involves working with copyright at a Higher Education Institution or related non-profit educational organisation. We ask that you submit only **one survey response per organisation**.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to answer a short series of questions about how copyright trolling affects your organisation. The survey should take around **5-10 minutes** to complete. Please be aware that after completing the survey, you will not be able to withdraw your data.

The survey tool does not collect any data which can be used to identify you as an individual or your institution, unless you provide this yourself in the free-text fields. Your answers will be treated confidentially and the information you provide will remain anonymous.

All data generated by the study will be securely stored by the University of Aberdeen and retained in accordance with the University of Aberdeen Research Data Management Policy for 5 years after the research end date. Your data can only be accessed by the research team. Anonymised data may be used in presentations or publications aimed at communicating the research findings to the copyright practitioner community.

If you have questions about the survey or how your data is used, you can contact: timothy.riley@abdn.ac.uk. *

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the above statements and I consent to take part in the study under the outlined conditions.*

Managing copyright infringement claims at your organisation

2. Where is your organisation based? *

- United Kingdom
- European Union
- United States of America

- Other

3. Who is responsible for dealing with payment requests for alleged copyright infringement received by your organisation? *

- Organisational legal team
- Copyright specialist based in your library service
- Copyright specialist based elsewhere in the organisation
- Don't know
- Other

4. What measures has your organisation taken to reduce the risk of speculative or unfounded copyright infringement claims (i.e. copyright 'trolling')? *

- Written or on-demand guidance for users
- Workshops or training events for users
- Awareness-raising communications or initiatives
- Organisation-approved sources of images and media for public-facing webpages or social media
- Copyright checking procedure for images used in your institutional repository
- Organisational policy addressing copyright trolling
- Pre-emptive removal of images from older webpages and social media posts
- No specific measures taken
- Other

5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? *

Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree

- My organisation has effective procedures in place to deal efficiently with copyright infringement claims
- My organisation has clear, up-to-date guidance on dealing with copyright infringement claims
- Staff at my organisation have sufficient awareness of legal reuse and the issue of copyright trolling
- Due to copyright trolling, our organisation has become more cautious about relying on legal exceptions/fair use, or open licences (e.g. Creative Commons) to reuse third-party material

6. Is there anything else you'd like to add about how infringement claims and copyright trolling are managed at your organisation? (*Optional*)

7. Has your organisation received any requests for payment for alleged infringing use of third-party material in the past 3 years? *

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Copyright infringement payment requests received by your organisation

8. In the past 3 years, approximately how many requests for payment has your organisation received regarding alleged infringing use of images, video, text or other material? *

9. Of these requests, how many did you consider to be unfounded, excessive or unreasonable (i.e. copyright 'trolling')? *

10. For all the requests you received, on what alleged grounds was the claimant seeking payment?

*Select all which apply **

- Unlicensed use of commercial stock media (e.g. stock images, stock video footage)
- Unlicensed use of other commercially published material (e.g. articles, images, films, music etc.)
- Unlicensed use of a reproduction of an out-of-copyright work
- Incorrect use of openly licensed content (e.g. incorrect Creative Commons attribution)
- Unauthorised use of personal or non-commercial material (e.g. personal photographs, web or social media content)
- Other

11. What kind of material was disputed?

*Select all which apply **

- Photographs
- Artwork
- Video
- Music
- Text
- Other

12. Where had your organisation used the disputed material?

*Select all which apply **

- Public-facing website
- Social media
- Restricted internal platform (e.g. intranet, VLE, reading list)
- Institutional repository
- Commercial publication (e.g. academic article or book)
- Live event (e.g. presentation, conference, webinar)
- Other

13. How has your organisation responded to the requests?

*Select all which apply **

- Paid the full amount requested
- Negotiated a lower payment
- Refused payment and sent explanation to the claimant
- Refused payment and not responded to the claimant
- Other

14. Based on experience at your organisation, do unreasonable or 'trolling' infringement claims tend to target certain sources, types or uses of material? If so, please specify. (*Optional*)

15. Is there anything else you would like to add about the copyright trolling requests your organisation has dealt with? *(Optional)*

Copyright trolling and the copyright community

16. Is there any support which the wider copyright practitioner community could provide which would help you in dealing with copyright trolling requests at your organisation? *(Optional)*

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the respondents for completing the survey and making this research possible, and to the Association for Learning Technology Copyright and Online Learning Special Interest Group for supporting and promoting this research.



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