

Deterring, Detecting and Dealing with Student Plagiarism

Briefing Paper

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There is evidence to support widely expressed concerns that student plagiarism in the UK is common and is probably becoming more so (Park, 2003).

Most institutions that decide to reconsider and update their approaches to student plagiarism will have to develop their own approach to detection, and implement home-grown procedures to make policies operational. Some have already done so. This briefing paper seeks to support the efforts of institutions wishing to reconsider the policies and any procedures they currently have.

What has caused the rise in deliberate cheating?

Although students who misunderstand or misuse academic conventions and attribution rules form the majority of plagiarists, those who do so deliberately account for the majority of *concern* about plagiarism. Students who deliberately cheat or engage in fraudulent behaviour are characterised as threatening the values and beliefs that underpin academic work, angering and discouraging other students who do not use such tactics, devaluing the integrity of UK awards and qualifications, and distorting the efforts of lecturers who wish to teach rather than police others' actions.

A decision to plagiarise may be associated with increasing pressures on students arising from, for example, undertaking paid work, heavier coursework load, or lack of personal organisation skills (Bannister and Ashworth, 1998). When stresses rise, students see plagiarism as a reasonable and reasonably risk-free way out of difficulties.

A minority of students do deliberately plagiarise. We can only guess as to the frequency of behaviours such as paying ghost writers, wholesale downloading of coursework, or copying from other students although the increasing use of electronic detection tools such as Turnitin UK software in the UK is building an evidence base.

Many studies show that the bulk of plagiarism can be attributed to students who do not understand academic requirements. Plagiarism may be more common in some teaching methodologies or programme structures. It is often discussed in connection with 'top-up' final year programmes

with high numbers of international students who do the first two years in their home country then finish the degree in the UK, often submitting a dissertation after eight months of UK study. Many academics do not think this is sufficient time for students to develop the required skills. Others worry it is more frequent in distance-learning programmes where authorship of coursework cannot be easily authenticated. It may be more common in very large classes. If these students enter programmes where the 'rules of the game' are unclear, they might continue to use tried and tested approaches and thereby, inadvertently, plagiarise. The number of students falling into this category will grow as student cohorts become more diverse due to widening participation, increasing numbers of international students and greater use of different teaching modes (eg distance learning, work-based learning).

Encouraging ownership and helping to establish the underlying cultures and beliefs that shape the framework for dealing with student plagiarism must be lead from the top with commitment from the Vice Chancellor or Head of College. The emphasis should be very firmly upon teaching and valuing students' learning rather than on detecting and dealing with offenders.

Effective institutional approaches to deterring student plagiarism

A holistic, coordinated, institution-wide approach to plagiarism is a more effective way to proceed with an institutional plagiarism policy, as any single focus interventions (eg encouraging better detection, making induction compulsory etc) will not have a significant effect on the complex issue of student plagiarism.

A national initiative for dealing with student plagiarism was established in 2001 by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) which launched and funded the Plagiarism Advisory Service, designed to offer advice and guidance and to host the UK implementation of a US-registered electronic detection service called Turnitin. Both aspects of the Service have subsequently contributed to institutional approaches to dealing with plagiarism by providing a central focus for institutional support. The service provides: a website;

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workshops and conferences; it undertakes research; has created an audit tool and provides access to the detection software 'Turnitin UK' for all higher education (HE) and further education (FE) institutions in the UK.

In 2002, CAVAL, a university library consortium in Australia, used Turnitin software to screen 1,770 pieces of student work from five HE institutions over a range of disciplines and found that 8.8% contained more than 25% of unattributed web-based material. The same study found two instances (out of 1,770) of student work containing more than 75% of unattributed material, most of it from the web though some may have been identified from the Turnitin database of student material.

Placing the emphasis on deterrence and assessment

Deterring plagiarism will always be more effective than detecting it once it occurs and significantly less time-consuming than pursuing and punishing offenders. 'Catch and punish' approaches are self-defeating in that they absorb huge amounts of staff time (Carroll, 2002b), do not lessen the overall incidence of plagiarism, and deflect students from a focus on learning to one devoted to not breaking rules or not getting caught (Cole and Kiss, 2000).

Where Turnitin UK software has been adopted, institutions have used a variety of approaches. Some are screening large cohorts; others do so randomly. Some offer access to students as a tool for learning how to use referencing and acceptable paraphrasing. Whatever the approach all institutions ensure students understand the inspection process.

Senior managers should take a view about how, where and by whom plagiarism will be detected and what should happen once it is identified.

Creating specialist officers for dealing with plagiarism

An increasing number of institutions have designated specialist officers (or, in the case of Sheffield Hallam University, a panel of specialist officers) located within the school or department, who deal with all cases of plagiarism. Under this system, markers must continue to detect unacceptable behaviour but then pass the case to the specialist who decides whether plagiarism is demonstrated and allocates a punishment from a limited range of options. Oxford Brookes University, where the system has been in place for five years, has 14 Academic Conduct Officers located in the eight academic schools who interview the student, review the case presented by the person who detected it with the student at an interview, decide whether the evidence warrants taking action and, if so, select the appropriate level of action.

Both intentional and unintentional plagiarism are unacceptable though the approaches to tackling them and the consequences for the student are necessarily different. Tackling plagiarism requires action at the national level, at the level of the institution as a whole, at the level of the student's programme of study, and at the level of the individual lecturer or member of staff responsible for decisions affecting the student. Action can start at any point in this interconnected network of activity, however it will only be fully effective if all aspects are addressed. The key to a holistic approach lies in an understanding of the issues of plagiarism and a shared sense of responsibility for the problem of student plagiarism and its solution between all levels. A major success factor will be the commitment, energy and focus of the senior managers of the institution.

Actions and Resources

- Establish the culture and overall values, placing academic issues at the centre of the discussions and any changes
- Appoint a named person responsible for ensuring the institution is dealing effectively with student plagiarism
- Ensure policies and procedures are appropriate to the current situation
- Require systems for keeping records of all incidences and what action has been taken; identify the person or people responsible for monitoring and reviewing data; identify how and where the resulting information will be discussed
- Take steps to improve detection rates, including access to electronic detection tools
- Create communication systems that allow consultation, discussion and dissemination of information

For more advice about plagiarism and information about the electronic detection service contact:

www.jiscpas.ac.uk

This paper was taken from a report produced by Jude Carroll on behalf of JISC. The full report with full references can be found at:

www.jisc.ac.uk/publications