Don’t be a copycat! Lecturers’ perceptions of plagiarism among university students.

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ABSTRACT
Plagiarism is a serious and growing problem which significantly diminishes the academic integrity of university education. Since the advent of the Internet and the consequent free access to large amounts of information, the endless possibilities for ‘copying and pasting’ large tracts from online documents and submitting this as original coursework makes plagiarism so easy that many students find it difficult to resist the temptation. The paper aims to help fill some of the ‘gaps’ in the existing literature by focusing on university lecturers, in terms of their definitions of plagiarism, perception and attitudes, as well as individual strategies for detection and prevention of plagiarism in university coursework.

Keywords: plagiarism, university education, academic dishonesty, exploratory research, qualitative.
1. INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is a serious and growing problem which significantly diminishes the academic integrity of university education [1]. Since the advent of the Internet and the consequent free access to large amounts of information, the endless possibilities for ‘copying and pasting’ large tracts from online documents and submitting this as original coursework makes plagiarism so easy that many students find it difficult to resist the temptation [2]. Students who submit plagiarized coursework, and which is not being detected, are failing to develop a broad range of skills and capabilities such as study, research, analytical and writing skills [3].

This ‘work-in-progress’ paper reports on a study undertaken at a Catalan public university on the views of teaching staff of plagiarism among university students. The paper aims to help fill some of the ‘gaps’ in the existing literature.

Firstly, the main focus of research on this issue has traditionally been on students and their attitudes to and perceptions of plagiarism. In contrast, this study focuses on university lecturers, in terms of their definitions of plagiarism, perception and attitudes, as well as individual strategies for detection and prevention of plagiarism in university coursework.

Secondly, unlike much of the existing research, the present study takes a qualitative approach with the intention of developing a holistic understanding of this complex problem. The data collection was based on in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Thirdly, unlike many existing studies undertaken in the context of the ‘anglo saxon’ university model, this study was carried out in the Spanish public university education system. It is important to note that although the strategies adopted in the ‘anglo saxon’ system to prevent plagiarism are also applicable in the Spanish context, the legal situation regarding student discipline requires a very different approach to responding to plagiarism once it is detected.

The motivations for embarking on a study of plagiarism are based on the personal experiences of the authors, the most senior of whom have worked in academia for almost 20 years, in many different national contexts including Ireland, the UK, Spain, Argentina and Mexico. The authors are members of a recently established interuniversity network (the University of Limerick, Ireland and the Universitat Rovira I Virgili in Catalonia, Spain) of lecturers concerned about the growing problem of
plagiarism in university education. Currently the network includes members from various disciplines such as Business Studies, Economics and Geography as well as members of the university library services.

Indeed, plagiarism is a topic which invites cross-disciplinary cooperation because of its transversal presence. Since the advent and popularisation of the Internet in the mid 1990’s students and lecturers have instant round-the-clock access to vast amounts of information. There is no doubt that this presents huge benefits to university education. However, the benefits of ubiquitous access to seemingly endless information go hand in hand with the opportunities to misuse this information. There is no doubt that plagiarism in university education has become a serious problem because information is so easily available and in such large quantities that students sometimes find it impossible not to give in to the temptation to ‘copy – paste’.

Indeed, looking no further than the personal experiences of the authors of this paper, plagiarism is so pervasive that it has been encountered at many academic levels. We have encountered plagiarism among undergraduates and postgraduate (masters) students, in individual and group coursework and in final year projects and masters theses, in traditional as well as distance or online education. We have also identified plagiarism in doctoral theses, in the role of external examiner as well as while reviewing past thesis as part of their own research. In addition, we have identified plagiarism in academic textbooks as well as while reviewing manuscripts as part of the peer review process for academic journals.

Faced with what seems like an ever increasing incidence of plagiarism and concerned for the impact this has on the quality of university education, the authors decided to form a network of lecturers and library staff interested in defining the current situation regarding plagiarism and finding solutions to this serious issue.

2. WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

There is a large and increasing body of academic literature dedicated to examining the problem of plagiarism in higher education. This literature examines issues such as knowledge and attitudes of students and teaching staff to plagiarism [4], the design of tools to detect plagiarism [5] [6] and the development of strategies to inform and educate students in order to avoid unintentional plagiarism [7].
The concept of plagiarism, which may be considered one form of academic dishonesty, is open to discussion as regards its precise definition [8], particularly in terms of some of the behaviours which may constitute plagiarism. In the context of university education plagiarism is a type of academic misconduct [9], often described using terms such as 'lack of honesty', ‘misdemeanour’, ‘intellectual theft’, and ‘cheating’, [10]. According to Williams & Carroll [11] plagiarism occurs “when students copy other people’s work and present it as their own”. “Plagiarism is the use of another’s ideas and/or words without a clear acknowledgement of the source of the information”. In university education this behaviour is considered a serious academic offence [12].

The following are generally accepted as behaviours which may be considered plagiarism:

- **Copying** text [or data] [from any source] and inserting it in a document without proper citation” [13]. Also known as **word-for-word** or **verbatim** plagiarism. This includes copying and translating before inserting into your own document.

- **Summarising** or **paraphrasing** some else’s work without properly referencing the original author. Paraphrasing “is to express the author’s work in your own words” [14].

- **Submitting some else’s work as your own**. “Taking someone else’s work and presenting it as your own” [15] such as having someone else prepare an exercise for you, buying, or finding a similar exercise (on the Internet or elsewhere) and submitting it as your own work.

- **Basing your work on someone else’s** ideas without properly referencing the original author. This includes using the same or similar, structure, arguments, making the same points, using the same data, drawing the same conclusions as someone else, without clearly identifying the full extent of the contribution of the original author.

- **Mosaic** involves copying a series of texts from various sources and then combining them, slightly modifying a few words or sentences in order to join them together, without clearly and properly acknowledging all the sources employed. Mosaic is ‘pick-n-mix’ type behaviour.
• **Self-plagiarism** involves reusing an exercise (or parts of) prepared for one university course and resubmitting the same exercise for a different course, without making this clear and obtaining the consent of the professor involved. You cannot receive two grades for the same piece of work [16].

• **Collusion** is when two or more students jointly prepare an individual assignment (or part of) and then each submits the same (or slightly modified) exercise as the fruit of their own individual effort.

Other behaviours which may be considered plagiarism (mostly for postgraduate work):

• **Not clearly identifying your sources according to conventions.** It is important to cite information properly according to the conventions of your discipline [17]. Citation should enable the reader to locate the sources of information you have used to prepare your work.

• **Not linking references to precise points in the text.** This involves not clearing identifying in your text the sources of information individual ideas or points are based on. This may involve including a list of bibliographical sources at the end of the text without linking each reference to the specific part of the text it informed.

• **Citing articles which you have not read.** This involves citing articles which you have not actually read. For example, you read article X. This article cites a series of other articles (A, B, C). You do not read articles A, B and C but your reference them. By citing an article you are claiming that you have read and considered this article. You should not cite articles you have not read.

There is some disagreement in terms of the intentionality of plagiarism. Some consider that lenience should be taken when students unintentionally copy someone else’s work, and that this should not be interpreted as plagiarism.

However, it is generally agreed that it is the responsibility of the student to inform themselves in terms of what is considered plagiarism and to take all necessary actions to avoid it. Hence, plagiarism, intentional or not, is generally considered a reprehensible behaviour and a form of academic dishonesty [18].
3. METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on a study which is currently ongoing. Therefore, it is based on work in progress.

Researchers with very different backgrounds and from a broad range of academic disciplines have contributed to the debate on plagiarism in university education. This manuscript reports on a study undertaken at a faculty of business and economics in a Catalan public university in Spain.

There is a notable lack of variety in methodological choice in previous research on these issues with the overwhelming emphasis on survey research. As the purpose of the present study was to examine perceptions of plagiarism from the subjective viewpoint of lecturers, the decision was taken to adopt an exploratory approach with an emphasis on qualitative data collection. More precisely, it was decided that a grounded theory approach [20] was appropriate given the exploratory and subjective nature of the research [21] [22]. An initial focus group involving both teaching staff and postgraduate students was carried out in order to identify and discuss aspects of how plagiarism was understood and interpreted. This was followed by 10 in-depth interviews with teaching staff from a range of specializations within the area of business and economics. The qualitative data was examined using Nvivo. Further interviews will take place in line with the research methodology adopted.
This paper reports on the outcome of the first round of interviews as well as the initial open coding of the resultant qualitative data.

4. RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

The section will outline and discuss the initial findings from the first round of interviews of this ongoing research project.

Interpretations of types of plagiarism by lecturers

There is wide range of interpretations and perceptions on the part of lecturers of the precise definition of plagiarism. Although there is general agreement on the fact that plagiarism is a significant and growing problem in university education, there is, so far, a marked difference of opinion among participants as to how plagiarism should be defined.

For instance, we have noted that in general plagiarism is associated with ‘copy-paste’ from the Internet. This is described as ‘obviously unacceptable’, ‘cheating’ and ‘dishonest’. Interestingly, although participants agreed that to ‘copy/paste’ was to plagiarise, there was much emphasis placed on the degree or extent to which a students copied from other sources. While many of the participants related stories of encountering entire essays copied from one other source, they felt that copying and pasting a few lines from a source, without including the reference was seen as a minor offense in comparison. The following quotation is representative of this category.

_I don’t really mind if they copy the basic company information from the company website [...] that’s standard information. I’m more concerned that they will copy the whole essay from the ‘Lazy Corner’ website._

Many of the other forms of plagiarism prompted by the interviewer were in general greeted with many different reactions. For example, ‘summarising or paraphrasing without properly referencing the original source was seen by some as a minor offense which could be forgiven. Anything that wasn’t a direct copy-paste was seen as a less serious offense. Self plagiarism was greeted with indifference and even scepticism.

Therefore, our main discovery about the types and perceptions of plagiarism is that it’s not so much the type of plagiarism that concerns lecturers, but the degree to which students plagiarise. Hence further research needs to move beyond plagiarism and focus more on degree of plagiarism. Instead of asking what is and what isn’t plagiarism,
we need to identify and consider the variables that determine the degree of plagiarism from the viewpoint of lecturers.

**Variance between lecturers**

Even though the study is at a very early stage and a small qualitative sample has been employed we have identified the age of the lecturer as one variable which distinguishes between different types of lecturers according to their ability to detect and willingness to pursue plagiarism.

In this sense, there is a marked difference between junior and senior members of the participants in terms of their formal training in identifying and avoiding plagiarism. While none of the more senior participants had any form of formal ‘anti-plagiarism’ training, the younger members of staff have benefitted from attending research seminars as part of their PhD training course, on referencing techniques and referencing software.

Indeed, the initial analysis of the data suggests that senior lecturers are more likely to turn a blind eye to plagiarism, and avoid getting involved in pursuing students who plagiarise. Indeed, unlike younger lecturers, when a possible case of plagiarism arise their suspicions, they don’t tend to go to the Internet to check. This could be related to different types of searching skills on the part of different lecturers.

**Reactions to plagiarism**

One of the more surprising outcomes of the first round of interviews was the emergence of the category ‘it’s their problem, not mine’ in which some lecturers expressed their lack of concern when detecting plagiarism in coursework. In this sense, the lecturers expressed their opinion that the consequence of plagiarising would be suffered by the offending student, as they would not benefit from the learning activity. Some of the lecturers, in a way, distanced themselves from the consequences of plagiarism.

However, when lecturers decided to do something in response to a case of plagiarism a number of issues arose. There is a general unawareness in terms of the options open to a lecturer who detects plagiarism. In this sense, lecturers don’t know what they can and cannot do in terms of penalising plagiarism. This creates a feeling of uncertainty and produces a desire to be supported in their decisions by the institution. Some of them even realised that doing something about it could bring further
complications and problems to all parties involved, themselves, the student and the institution. One of the quotations from the interviews sums this up very well.

“If I had known how complicated this would become and how much of my own time I would have to invest in this, and the negative reactions of my colleague, I would have kept my mouth shut”.

In the specific case of the university where we carried out our interviews, there was no formal institutional policy on plagiarism. However, an initial search of other Spanish universities shows that this is the case in many universities in this country. However, this should not be interpreted as a lack of interest on the part of Spanish universities but an outcome of the current legal framework which governs matters of plagiarism.

The relevant laws date from the 1950’s and they deal with the limited ability of universities to impose sanctions on students. Indeed it would only be possible to sanction a student after a complex disciplinary process which is normally reserved for the most serious disciplinary issues. The prevailing law was formulated at a time when the access to information provided by the Internet was beyond comprehension.

The outcome of this situation is that the most common consequence of plagiarism is that the student fails the specific piece of coursework which was identified as plagiarised and if this leads to a fail grade on the subject, the student may take the course again at the earliest possible opportunity.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, this paper presents the initial results of an ongoing investigation into this topic. To this end the authors are currently presenting the same results at two conferences this year in order to get feedback from our peers before proceeding with the second round of data collection.

5. REFERENCES


[10] ibid


