



Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe

Plagiarism Policies in Italy

Full Report

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1. Information sources

Italy was one of the most difficult countries with regard to getting people (student, faculty and university administrators) to participate in the survey and/or to talk to us about plagiarism. A large number of attempts to make contacts with administrators at the Italian Ministry of Education and/or at various Universities across the country with requests to allow/facilitate/promote the survey failed. We had to resort finally to European colleagues collaborating with or visiting Italian Universities to help us. The input of information presented in this report was derived from sources which included:

- IPPHEAE on-line surveys (3 students,) with responses Italian/English;
- Skype discussions with 3 focus groups (total of 11 students - 4 different Universities)
- Informal Interviews with 12 teachers (4 Universities) plus 1 senior manager.
- Documentation provided and on-line evidence.

Discussions and questions were about the Italian education system and about the national and university policies and procedures for plagiarism prevention and detection as well as about the incidence of plagiarism (faculty, staff, students). The number of respondents to different elements of the survey and their affiliations are shown in Table 1. Due to the small number of responses the analysis of information received was primarily qualitative.

Table 1: Breakdown of Survey responses								
Country	Student responses	Teacher responses	Senior and National	Management	Student Groups	Focus	Organisations and Institutions	
Italy (IT)	3 + 11	12	1		0		3	
Breakdown of student responses	Home students	Other students	EU students	Non-EU students	Not known	Bachelor, diploma	Master, doctor	Blank, other
Italy (IT)	14	12	4	0	0	12	2	0

2. Higher Education in Italy

In the Italian education system, the State is responsible for general education issues and for ensuring that the minimum education standards are offered in the whole of the country (1). Implementation is via regional governments which have to comply with the State law. Primary and lower secondary education span over 8 years and make up the 1st cycle of education. The 2nd cycle includes either attendance of upper secondary school (5 years) or a vocational training programme (3-4 years). State schools are autonomous with regard to learning, teaching and research and everybody in Italy has the right to stay in the education system for at least 12 years and/or obtain a 3 year vocational qualification. Vocational programmes and post-qualifications or diploma vocational courses and training are under the control of regional governments.

The three levels of higher education which make up the 3rd cycle, are offered by universities and by the Higher Arts and Music education system, Alta Formazione Artistica e Musicale (Afam). Since 1989, the State universities in Italy, have gone through the process of becoming fully autonomous (statutory, financial, didactic, staff recruiting), and in line with the Qualifications Framework for the



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European Higher Education Area – QTI (2). This was made possible through the passing of various acts that promoted the simplification of the old system and enabled the share of powers between the central government and individual universities by setting up the Ministry of Education, University and Research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) (MIUR) (1).

Currently, there are 77 Universities in Italy, some of which are among the oldest universities in the world. The number of students attending these was close to one and ¾ million in 2010-2011, with female students (67%) exceeding male students (2). According to the 2013 Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the Italian Universities fall between the 110th to 500th ranking positions (3). Students require an upper secondary school qualification Diploma for entry to the University. Some programmes, however, may require students to pass an entry exam and have qualifications that comply with certain admission criteria specified in the regulations of the university offering the programme (4).

3. *Quality Assurance in Italian Higher Education - teaching, learning and assessment*

(a) Quality Assurance

Programme accreditation in state universities in Italy started in 2001. Each university had to establish its own *Regolamenti Didattici di Ateneo* (RDA) that had to be approved by MIUR. RDA is responsible for ensuring that each degree submitted for approval to the Ministry complies with the minimum formal, objective standards set by MIUR. In addition, there are specific bodies that are responsible for accreditation of professional degrees, like Engineering, Masters of Business Administration, etc., and for the accreditation of non-state university programmes. Private and state universities are reviewed by the independent National Committee for Evaluation of the University System (CNVSU) (4). As stated by MIUR:

“According to the principle of university autonomy, each university may draw up its own statute and regulations by rectoral decree... Each statute states the regulations governing management, teaching and research within the institution... Universities reach their institutional goals in teaching and research through the faculties, departments, institutes and service centres. ... Each university decides the teaching organisation and structure of its degree courses in accordance with the teaching regulations which are issued by rectoral decree and approved by the Ministry” (4).

(b) *Teaching and Learning*

Of all universities in Italy, 55 are state universities, 3 technical universities and 14 private universities (legally recognised), 2 universities for foreigners and 3 university institutions for postgraduate studies. All are entitled to award qualifications with legal validity (4). The academic degree qualifications that comprise the three cycles of higher education have been specified by MIUR (4) as follows:

- **First cycle – Undergraduate studies** : First degree - laurea (3 years)
- **Second cycle – Graduate studies**: Second degree – Laurea specialistica (2 years)
1st Level Master degree – Master universitario di 1° livello (1+ years)
- **Third cycle – Postgraduate studies**
Research doctorate degree – dottorato di ricerca – (3+ years)



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Specialisation degree – diploma di specializzazione (1-5 years depending on national legislations or EU directives)

2nd level Master degree – master universitario di 2° livello (1+ years)

Degree programmes have been classified, with the approval of MIUR, into 47 different classes (groups) for the first degree Laurea and into 109 different classes for the second degree (Laurea Specialistica) (4). The classes belong to one of the five subject areas:

- engineering and architecture,
- health,
- humanities,
- science and technology,
- law and economics.

Teaching and learning regulations for each Degree programme are issued by each university through the rector's office, and they must be approved by the Ministry. Teaching regulations must provide for the methods of learning and student assessment including examination procedures and final degree examinations. These regulations also include the writing and defence of a thesis for any awards of "Laurea specialistica" or higher.

Listening to faculty and student responses it appears that the changes introduced in the last ten years following the review of the entire Italian higher education system required the undertaking of a large number of tasks to achieve the government's objectives. One of the aims was for the Italian universities to change their traditional approach of teaching, from teacher-centred to student-centred, by adopting innovative teaching methods and applying different approaches to learning (5). Faculty and students thought that although considerable progress had been made, there were a lot more improvements that needed to be made but were not due to budget reductions.

4. *Academic Integrity and Plagiarism in Italy*

In view of the large number of reforms that had to be implemented, the issues of academic integrity and plagiarism have been low down the list of priorities of Italian universities. Budget cuts due to the economical crisis and EU pressures have reduced the university resources and as some of the respondents suggested, some universities were actually in the verge of bankruptcy. The reductions in the number of courses, faculty and researchers have added to overcrowding (about 20 students to 1 teacher) (6). According to the faculty interviewees, this overcrowding has facilitated cheating during exams and allowed students opportunities to get away with plagiarism.

The prevailing atmosphere of job insecurity, the budget cuts and the economic crisis may have contributed to the reluctance/avoidance by faculty to discuss academic integrity or to promote the IPPHEAE project at their Universities. No faculty or administrators contacted, answered the on-line questionnaires and basically all administrators "refused" to be interviewed in person or through Skype on the pretext of a very busy schedule. Initially only five students completed the survey on-line and many faculty did not want to deal with the bureaucracy associated in getting permission from the Ministry and administrators regarding such a sensitive matter as plagiarism in academia. However eleven further student responses were captured by interview towards the end of the project.



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The general attitude when faculty were questioned, was reminiscent of what the Irish novelist Paul Hyde was quoted to say about the acceptability of plagiarism in the January 3rd, 1998 issue of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (London): "Collective silence (omerta) imposed as a ground rule ensures few disclosures. Legal and moral considerations are often secondary to career" (7). Retrospectively, on site distribution of hard copies (perceived to secure anonymity better) by a hired person living in Italy may have been more successful. Such an approach was taken in Greece, where the prevailing situation regarding the higher education system and educational budgets, is very similar to that of Italy's.

Apparently, as we have discovered, most Italian universities do refer to academic integrity in their Code of Ethics document. The compilation of such a document is a relatively recent development for some Italian universities according to our faculty interviewees. "It is part of the drive for the Italian Universities to adopt the changes required to bring quality assurance measures in line with the European Framework and the Bologna process". Our own searches identified that usually this document has at least one statement about respecting the intellectual property of others. Some universities, however, also refer to plagiarism. An example is the anti-plagiarism statements in the Code of Ethics document of the University of Pavia (8), which is intended to deter students and faculty from plagiarizing:

"Art.14 - Protection of intellectual property and the condemnation of plagiarism

- 1 . The academic community, in consideration of the social relevance of scientific research, believes that the results should contribute to the development and welfare of the community, and promote the protection of intellectual property in the manner prescribed by law.
- 2 . The academic community condemns plagiarism understood as the partial or total attribution of words, ideas, discoveries, results of research or laboratory activities of others to themselves or to another author, regardless of the language in which they are officially presented or disclosed, or as the omission of the citation of sources. Plagiarism may be intentional or unintentional.
- 3 . The academic activities of scientific importance held collectively must specifically indicate, if possible, the contribution of the individual components....."

Several Italian University websites also contained instructions on how to avoid plagiarism. These ranged from a short statement to general instructions that were part of a school/department policy document (guide) on writing an undergraduate or graduate research project/thesis. We also found references to plagiarism, in on-line tutorial handbooks/help sessions. In some cases, there were specific and more explicit on-line instructions on how to avoid plagiarism. Some indicative examples are shown below:

- (A) Web page link for students at the Department of Economics and Law at the Sapienza University of Rome, one of the largest Italian State Universities (9):

"How do I avoid plagiarism?

In preparing a written text, it is very easy to copy the work already done by someone else but you should not do it. Copying is a very serious act and has consequences both on the evaluation of the text presented, disciplinary and even criminal: it is a crime to commit plagiarism. This is the link to the web page [che cosa sia il plagio](#) of the University of Pavia, where it is clearly explained what is plagiarism and how to avoid plagiarism."



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(B) Web page link for plagiarism definition by the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Pavia (9).

“What is plagiarism: Plagiarism is defined as "appropriation , total or partial , of other people's work , literary, artistic and similar , that you want to pass off as their own" (Zingarelli dictionary , Freeman 1999) . It is a dishonest practice that violates fundamental ethical norms of university life. In the event of discovery of plagiarism by a student, the Faculty authorizes teachers to apply sanctions.

Plagiarism can take several forms:

- Copy directly , word for word , the work of another person, without the use of quotation marks and without reference to the source (the source may be published in a book or magazine, published or not , can be a document network copied using the " cut and paste " can be the relation of another student , with or copied without his permission) ;
- Paraphrase the work of another person without any indication of the source ;
- Submit an innovative idea of another person without indicating the source ;
- Lean on the work or ideas of an employee , by passing it as a fully autonomous work, that which is in part the work of the employee.”

(C) Guidelines for the Bachelor’s thesis and for other written assignments to students of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Ferrara (10).

“Plagiarism is the improper use of material which is the intellectual property of others, generally by disguising the fact that the thoughts and words are not theirs but the writer’s. The intellectual property of another person can be used in one’s arguments, but this must be done strictly according to the rules (for citing and referencing) outlined above. In the preparation of a Bachelor’s thesis or other works it can happen that one may accidentally plagiarize due to inexperience or omissions of references. However, there are those who intentionally try to hide the limitations of their work by the misuse of sources of information. It should be noted, moreover, that it is also wrong to use the material purchased or obtained free of charge from third parties. And it is forbidden to use the services of the sites selling thesis.”

5. Dealing with plagiarism cases

None of the faculty or administrators were willing to provide any statistical records on the number and type of punishment imposed by their university when plagiarism was committed by either students or faculty. Also no faculty admitted whether they knew/were aware of any cases of serious plagiarism, which were dealt by the disciplinary committee of their university. However, they did admit that there may have been undergraduate cases regarding some students’ assignments, which were dealt with in class by the lecturer. None of the students who responded to the survey stated



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that they knew about any disciplinary actions taken by their university or how such actions were administered or knew about the procedures followed.

Faculty and students did point out that an undergraduate thesis at an Italian state university does not normally involve original research. It is viewed as “a term paper” written under the supervision of a Professor and based on the literature available. Some faculty considered that this type of thesis may provide students with the opportunity to plagiarize intentionally or unintentionally due to ignorance of paraphrasing or using in text citations and references. Anecdotal evidence was provided that thesis supervision in some Faculties was inadequate because of the large number of undergraduates assigned to the same supervisor. Faculty also referred to the existence of cases of serious plagiarism in some theses, which they believed were discounted to avoid embarrassing the supervisor. Anecdotal cases of plagiarized publications in Italian journals and of books by academics were also mentioned, but no specific details were provided regarding the numbers and/or frequency of such incidents and/or if there were punitive measures taken by university or government administration. One Liaising Office administrator, who deals with intellectual property at a large Italian University, refused outright to be interviewed about plagiarism. Contrary to inside information provided to us, he insisted that his office had no cases of plagiarism.

Our research also showed, however, that some Faculties in a number of Italian universities have started to take steps in dealing with plagiarism. In the policy document of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Ferrara (10), it is stated that the supervisor of the thesis shares the responsibility with the student for a successful thesis. The supervisor must take measures and protect the student from being punished for plagiarism. This includes supervising the writing of the thesis, showing students how to cite and reference and demanding that students express his/her personal judgment about the topic analyzed rather than copy-paste other people’s opinions. The penalties for plagiarism in a thesis are also stated explicitly in this policy, as summarized below:

- In case of detection of plagiarism during the preparation of the thesis, the chair of graduation committee can ask the rewrite of the thesis under a different supervisor.
- If plagiarism is noted/reported after the student has applied for graduation, graduation is postponed and the student has to write a new thesis under a different supervisor. If the student refuses to comply with the deliberations of the committee, the student is suspended for 6 months.
- If plagiarism is noted after the delivery of the degree to the Secretariat, the Chair can propose the rejection of the thesis and the student is suspended for 6 months.
- In the case that the thesis is completely plagiarized (bought or fully copied), or it consists of copied parts with minimal original contributions by the student, the Chair after consultation with the Faculty Board can expel the student without award of the degree.

There are other universities that also have similar punitive measures with suspension up to a year. The majority of faculty we talked to thought that plagiarism should be dealt with as a disciplinary action and students should be allowed to have a second chance provided they had made real efforts to add original content to the thesis. The majority of student responders also agreed that a fair way to punish a student for plagiarism would be to give a zero for the assignment/thesis and be asked to rewrite the assignment/thesis.



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Digital tools

The use of digital tools for the detection and prevention of plagiarism have been a recent development in Italian universities. In some universities, they have been incorporated and become part of the requirements for the submission and defence of a Master's thesis. One example is the Ca'Foscari University of Venice which provides access to an anti-plagiarism software tool (compliatio.net) for documents written in Italian. This tool, which is similar to Turnitin, produces a report that indicates the originality of the submitted document based on the comparison of the percentage of original text and similarity (as well as index of similarity) with other sources that are identified and listed in the report. Students can have up to four trials, free of charge, on this software to self-evaluate their thesis and correct any problematic text. To be allowed to defend their thesis, students must upload it first on-line at a university website reserved for this purpose. The thesis is subsequently checked by the university administration through the same software tool and a report is produced for the supervisor. This report is part of the requirements for allowing students to defend their thesis for the award of the Master's degree. Students are advised, before using the software, to use an on-line site for learning about the correct use of sources, citations and referencing as well as the legal and disciplinary implications if they plagiarize. (11).

Another example is the School of Engineering in Computer Science, at the Sapienza University of Rome, which has also developed an anti-plagiarism policy, effective since March 2013. The policy requires that both the student and the supervisor of the thesis take responsibility in reducing/avoiding plagiarism by using the same anti-plagiarism software tools:

"A.the Master thesis of any student belonging to Master of Science in Engineering in Computer Science and to Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics will be checked for plagiarism through the software "Compliatio"....; Form B. "Compliatio" Authorization form - must be filled in It's a prerequisite for the student's validation; Form C – "Compliatio" anti-plagiarism verification done by the supervisor – this form must be delivered to the secretary office at least five days before the thesis"

TURNITIN, a more user friendly digital tool is used only by a private university in Italy, most likely due to its higher cost for licenses.

According to faculty interviewees, examples like the above could make students a lot more aware of the risks to be caught plagiarizing and could reduce the work of the supervisor who has a lot of theses to correct. Faculty had their doubts, however, as to whether a student who chooses to manipulate the text until the percentage similarity is reduced, would learn about academic writing.

5. Perceptions and understanding of Plagiarism

Faculty and students interviewed admitted to the notion of plagiarism as being the copy-paste of other people's work without acknowledgement of the source. The majority of students did not relate plagiarism to infringement of intellectual property rights and were more familiar with copy rights related to downloading music and movies from the internet. Talking to students it was evident that they were more aware of the views of their university on plagiarism provided there was specific on-line information regarding plagiarism avoidance and/or punishment of plagiarism. Even then,

however, our research showed that undergraduate students who had just started or were half way in their studies were less likely:

- (a) to be familiar with what is considered as plagiarism,
- (b) to have been taught how to correctly cite and reference and/or
- (c) to have had any practice on citing and referencing so that they can avoid plagiarism.

In most cases the students attributed their ignorance to the lack of practice in academic writing due to the absence of written assignments. Based on hearsay comments, the Italian students believe that many lecturers, especially those teaching courses of the Arts and Humanities programmes, did not even bother to read students' assignments and thus students grades were based primarily on their performance at the final exams. Students who had heard/knew about plagiarism were more likely to be in the final year of their studies and/or had started working on their thesis and/or (mainly graduate students) were talking specific courses on research.

It was interesting to note that students expected their thesis supervisors to explain/identify for them where they needed to paraphrase or quote, and argued that the emphasis for grading them should be on the originality of the way they presented the topic in their thesis and not on the amount that was copied and the use of references per se.

Students and the majority of faculty admitted that the publicizing of policies on plagiarism or explaining what constitutes plagiarism in programme curricula may not be effective enough to deter students from plagiarizing. Apparently, the majority of students do learn about citations and the different styles of referencing only when they are about to start writing their final year thesis. Students argued that the lack of practice in paraphrasing and academic writing was a more likely cause for driving students to plagiarism than intent to deceive.

It is also of interesting to note that a number of the faculty interviewed were of the opinion that when students copy from the Internet, they are actually learning to write in an academic manner and, provided that they are taught how to cite and reference, they did not consider this to be a bad thing. One faculty drew attention to a recent (2012) e-publication by Roberto Caso, an Associate Professor of Law at the University of Trento, in Italy, who supports the idea "that imitation is an essential part of the creativity process as well as a significant facet of the progress itself. In the new digital dimension, freedom of copying and recombination of digital pieces is a core fundamental value, which copyright law has to take into account" (12).

6. Discussion

Italian universities are making progress in implementing the changes to their higher education system in their effort to come in line with their European counterpart on educational matters. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty have been acknowledged, since several measures have been taken in order to monitor and reduce them. These include policies and procedures for administering punishment and discouraging plagiarism, the use of anti-plagiarism software tools for monitoring it and reducing plagiarism, as well as the use of guides on avoiding plagiarism by using in text citations and references.

No conclusions could be drawn about the extent of plagiarism that takes place at undergraduate and Master's levels in Italian universities since no official numbers were provided by university administrators or faculty members. Considering the large number of theses that supervisors have to



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deal with and the fact that the majority of these are primarily based on literature reviews rather than on innovative research, it is very likely that part and/or the whole of such theses may be plagiarized. Copying as a means of learning was favourably noted by one faculty informant with the provision that the sources used for deriving the information should be acknowledged. This flexibility, however, could be misunderstood by students who may plagiarize liberally and/or seek to pay and have a thesis written for them instead.

7. Recommendations for Italy

National

Ensure that the teaching ethics regarding intellectual property and copy rights is included in the curricula of university undergraduates.

Ensure that university students are taught about research and about reporting research and literature during the first cycle.

Promote quality assurance methods with regards to teaching and learning about research and academic writing.

Budget for software tools at universities to educate students and faculty about anti-plagiarism.

Institutionally

Train and empower academics to detect and take the appropriate action in the case of academic dishonesty like plagiarism, collusion and ghost writing.

Promote the use of anti-plagiarism software tools to check and report on academic misconduct and plagiarism

Promote and publicize anti-plagiarism policies/procedures.

Reduce the number of students/class to give faculty the opportunity to apply student centred practices in teaching and learning,

Individual academics:

Promote assignments that will help students develop original academic thinking and writing.

Encourage original thinking in academic writing and research.

Become familiar with software tools to detect plagiarism in students work.

Make informed decisions on students' plagiarism by the use of free on-line anti-plagiarism software when possible.

8. Conclusions

Our research regarding plagiarism in the higher education system in Italy was sharply limited by the difficulty in recruiting participants. In some cases, this unwillingness to participate may have stemmed from a desire to avoid admitting problems and, due to structural issues, from the lack of resources to address these problems. Within the limited scope of our research, however, it was apparent that university academics and administrators are aware of plagiarism and academic misconduct but the education system still lacks the maturity to acknowledge and deal with the problem effectively throughout the country.



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