Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe

Plagiarism Policies in the United Kingdom

Executive Summary

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ES 1   Background

ES 1.1   The investigation that took place between June 2011 and June 2013 explored the nature and effectiveness of policies and procedures for assuring academic integrity that were implemented in higher education institutions, particularly focusing on bachelor and masters levels.

ES 1.2   The research findings for the UK were based on responses from over 400 survey participants from the Higher Education (HE) sector (students, teachers, senior managers and national representatives). People from 36 institutions and organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland contributed to the research, providing information about all categories of HE institutions, ancient and modern.

ES 1.3   National governance and funding for Higher Education differs significantly in the four countries that make up the UK. However outcomes and good practice arising from educational developments and research are collegially and openly shared between institutions across all parts of the UK and beyond.

ES 1.4   Although UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) seriously protect their autonomy, the UK has strong national bodies that influence policy, systems, quality and standards within the sector, including: the Quality Assurance Agency; the Higher Education Academy (England and Wales separate from Scotland); relating to student appeals the Office of the Independent Adjudicator; and JISC for establishing common resources, communications and IT infrastructure.

ES 1.5   The student populations in most UK HEI include a high percentage of international students, particularly at master's level, where some programmes can include over 80% international students.

ES 2   Findings

ES 2.1   Since about 2001 in the UK a great deal of research has been conducted into plagiarism and HEIs have been concerned with development and evaluation of policies relating to detection and prevention of plagiarism and academic misconduct. The culture of sharing good practice has resulted in researchers from the UK influencing HEIs and individual academics throughout the world with a view to raising academic standards and making student assessment fairer.

ES 2.2   Statistics are not maintained nationally in the UK on cases of academic misconduct at any level of education. Most institutions have some records of cases, but the type of data recorded and the level it is maintained within the institutional hierarchy differs substantially between and often within institutions. The inconsistency makes it meaningless to compare statistics across UK HEIs.

ES 2.3   There was no consensus between respondents at senior management and national levels about whether the number of cases of plagiarism is rising in the UK. There was general agreement that there are still too many cases arising, but many participants said the number of cases has risen because of greater awareness and enhanced tools and systems for detecting cases. A few institutions reported a downturn in cases through implementing better policies.

ES 2.4   The National Plagiarism Advisory Service was established in 2002 based on the results of a six month trial involving 6 universities. JISC "*provided access to, and support for, the Turnitin … plagiarism detection software at no cost to higher and further education institutions for an initial period of three years*", (Rowell 2009, p2). The combination of a theoretical framework ('the holistic approach') and provision of relevant software at no cost transformed the way many UK HEIs now respond to plagiarism and formed the basis for much of the innovative use of digital tools in the UK today.

ES 2.5   Several high-profile pioneers across the UK helped to bring about changes to institutional strategy by developing reusable resources and evaluating holistic approaches to academic integrity (Carroll and Appleton 2001, Macdonald and Carroll 2006, Morris 2011, Neville 2010, Park 2003).

ES 2.6   The JISC funded AMBeR project developed a tariff for plagiarism sanctions based on a UK-wide survey of current practices in HEI (Tennant and Duggan 2008, Tennant and Rowell 2010), which has been adopted or consulted by many institutions when reviewing policies and regulations. Responses to the IPPHEAE survey showed that there is a growing tendency to impose sanctions that err on the side of being supportive rather than punitive when there is doubt, for example "*in the event of minor errors*" asking the student to rewrite their work properly, "*could be the simplest option*". The most common penalty reported was giving a zero for either an assignment or a thesis that had been plagiarised. The low responses to "*no action would be taken*" from teachers and students suggest that where clear cases are identified most of the institutions participating impose some form of penalty.

ES 2.7   Applications for digital tools have recently been expanded from the original use in aiding detection of plagiarism to include use in formative learning situations. It is becoming increasingly common for UK academics working with students in the context of research and academic writing to deploy text matching software to promote scholarly use of academic sources (Davis 2009, Ireland and English 2011).

ES 2.8   Research into academic integrity, mainly within Anglophone countries, has led to a recent shift in perceptions about plagiarism that is impacting on policies for plagiarism in some UK HEIs. Rather than classifying plagiarism inevitably as academic misconduct requiring sanctions and penalties, research indicates that plagiarism can often be the result of many correctable factors, such as background and expectations of previous study environment, lack of confidence in language, poor writing skills or lack of appreciation of academic conventions for source use (Park 2003, Robinson-Pant 2009). Some of the survey feedback suggests a growing understanding among people responsible for managing aspects of academic integrity in institutions that relatively few cases of plagiarism are deliberate attempts to cheat.

ES 2.9   89% of students and 98% of teacher respondents agreed that *this institution has policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism* and the great majority of teachers agreed with the statement that *this institution takes a serious approach to plagiarism prevention* (85%) *and detection* (83%) (Annex UK-1).

ES 2.10   Responses to questions about consistency of application of the policies and procedures showed relatively high numbers of respondents not sure about some answers. Only 25% of the teachers and 49% of the students believed that all teachers *follow the same procedures for similar cases of plagiarism*, with 53% and 11% respectively disagreeing with the statement (Annex IE-1 Qu S5l, T5q). Only 36% of the teachers agreed with the statement *I believe the way teachers treat plagiarism does not vary from student to student*, with 41% disagreeing and 22% not sure. However 57% of the students agreed with the same statement, with 9% disagreeing and 29% not sure (Annex IE-1 Qu S5m, T5r).

ES 2.11 Two participants (national interviews) said they were unhappy about the amount of time accusations of cheating took to be resolved, particularly as their system involved convening a central panel to ensure consistency of approach.

ES 2.12 National interviews indicated that many UK universities had implemented strongly enforced institutional policies and procedures, but it was common in a minority of universities, particularly some of the more established "research intensive" universities, to rely on academic judgement from individual academics rather than to standardise policies within departments, faculties, colleges or across the institution.

ES 2.13 Evidence emerged from interviews across all parts of the UK that several universities involved student representatives in institutional working groups for establishing disciplinary policies and in some cases student representatives are full members of disciplinary panels.

ES 2.14 Many UK participants highlighted the growing phenomenon of ghost writing, often through "paper mills", which presents a great threat of as yet unmeasured significance to academic standards across the world. The difficulty of recognising and challenging such cases makes it a priority for action. More effective systems are needed before it can be claimed that the problem is adequately managed.

ES 2.15 It is common in the UK for students studying in some fields, including health, medicine, social-work and law, who are found guilty of any academic dishonesty cases (including plagiarism) during their studies, to be debarred from professional registration even before they have qualified and therefore to become unable to practice when they graduate. It is remarkable that the sanctions and consequences for students are often more severe than those applied to established members of the profession for more serious failings.

ES 2.16 Many senior UK academics serve at some time as external examiners or on audit or accreditation panels, visiting other institutions, with opportunities for observing practices and systems across the HE sector. Specifically "*auditing other institutions can lead to peer sharing of good practice between colleagues on the team, external examining, working with partners makes you clarify your own procedures*" (national interview).

ES 2.17 Some UK institutions work with diverse and numerous partner institutions. Managing aspects of quality with international partners and overseeing how they deal with student plagiarism is *"one of the areas of risk in any university is arrangements done by a partner on your behalf"*. The experience of collaborative provision *"depends on what quality arrangements you have with a partner down road or in other country"*. There needs to be an *"equivalent role* [in quality assurance] *together with good staff you can depend on* [at the partner college]*".* It is important to take steps to maintain *"the reputation of UK HE abroad"*.

ES 2.18 Different respondents spoke of the need to "*prepare potential students before they come to University, secondary schools, feeder institutions and partners overseas*" (national interviews) about our expectations of scholarship and academic conduct.

ES 2.19 The on-line questionnaires for student and teachers included scenarios with examples of possible plagiarism. The relatively low number of students identifying some of the examples that were clearly plagiarism suggests that some have a poor grasp of academic writing conventions. Compared to responses from some other EU countries to this question, a higher percentage of the teachers were able to identify most or all scenarios describing possible cases of plagiarism, but some teachers indicated uncertainty.

ES 2.20 Many participants indicated the need for more information for students about academic writing practices and academic integrity in the form of workshops, tutorials or a module.

There was no consensus about whether support should be at the outset of study, continually during the study period or whether embedded within the curriculum or kept distinct and separate.

ES 3   Recommendations

ES 3.1   Nationally

ES 3.1.1 Capturing a national view on academic dishonesty and plagiarism is hampered by having no consistent way to compare policies, systems and cases across institutions.   Most interviewees at UK national level expressed strong opposition to more intrusion and monitoring.   However since UK HEIs already have audits and monitoring by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), it is recommended that QAA audits require institutions to

> Explain their policies and procedures for discouraging, detecting and managing student plagiarism and academic dishonesty at all levels;
> Demonstrate how effectively and consistently these policies are operating;
> Explain their systems for monitoring and revising their strategy.

ES 3.1.2 Although a national system of recording plagiarism and academic dishonesty cases would be desirable to allow progress to be monitored, the current inconsistencies and disparities in internal policies and systems within and between HEIs would make such data meaningless and open to misinterpretation.

ES 3.1.3 Unlike in most EU countries, over the last 12 years significant research has already been conducted in the UK into plagiarism and academic dishonesty on higher education. Research funding has been provided through JISC, HEA and the EU (IPPHEAE).   However funding would be useful for:

> a) Dissemination and development, applying the findings from HE to secondary education;
> b) Applying procedures developed for taught programmes to PhD and at research level within HEIs;
> c) Research into paper mills and ghost-writing services;
> d) Research into plagiarism in non-text forms and media.

ES 3.1.4 Responses by professional accreditation bodies to student plagiarism and academic dishonesty as it affects "fitness to practice" status of graduates, should be more nuanced. Sanctions need to be commiserate with the scale of the offence and equitable with workplace disciplinary procedures.   In particular, references to plagiarism as theft should be removed since theft is often seen as a criterion for disbarment. Plagiarism is specifically excluded from UK laws governing theft because unacknowledged use does not permanently deny the owner use of the artefact.

ES3.2 Institutionally

ES 3.2.1 UK HEIs that do not currently have an institution-wide strategy for academic dishonesty and plagiarism need to develop consistent policies and procedures for managing, detecting, applying sanctions and discouraging student plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. *"… a good place to start, the basic requirement, is the Policy Works document* (Morris 2011) *… policy turns out to be a very good point of enquiry. Where policy is wrong it often stops everything else …"* (national interview).

ES 3.2.2 "*People recycle things, no surprise, year-before papers, lack of originality – it is incumbent on staff to encourage a higher level of critiquing, not using wikis*" (national interview). On-going and regular staff development programmes should be available within HEIs to ensure that all "front line" academic staff concerned with student assessment avoid this type of

recycling mistake and consistently follow the correct procedures for dealing with plagiarism and academic dishonesty, including "designing out" plagiarism and appreciating use and limitations of digital tools for aiding detection.

ES 3.2.3   HEIs should centrally monitor cases of academic misconduct for the whole institution to ensure consistency and fairness of approach. HEIs not already doing so should monitor their progress towards sustained genuine reductions in cases of student plagiarism, potentially leading to improved academic standards. "*Evaluate the effectiveness of what we do, on-going task*" (national interview).

ES 3.2.4   Guidance and information must be readily available and accessible via a range of media and embedded throughout the study programmes to ensure that all teaching staff and students are aware of and fully understand about all aspects of academic writing, academic integrity, plagiarism, policies and procedures for academic misconduct, available sanctions and consequences for misconduct. "*Academic skills – nobody is born with these skills, need to be taught*" (national interview).

ES 3.2.5   Staff support, development and collegiality is really critical, "*if your first language is not English, for teachers, even strong English speaking colleagues, can't spot plagiarism in the same way a native speaker can see it*" (national interview). Existing systems for double/second marking can be utilised to ensure cases of plagiarism are not missed.

ES 3.3   Individual academics:

ES 3.3.1   Not all teaching staff participants agreed that more staff training was needed; some HEIs may already provide adequate training. However other responses suggest more could be done: "*it depends on academics being compliant with a set of principles – that's where it falls down*" (national interview). The following observation was about guiding students: "*It goes back to training and awareness, getting it into their heads, good practice, ethics of scholarly work, working in ethical manner with integrity*", but the same point could be applied to less engaged teaching staff.

Individual academics have a responsibility to acquaint themselves and regularly update their knowledge and skills to ensure they

   a) Have a consistent view of what constitutes student plagiarism and other different forms of academic dishonesty;
   b) Understand and comply with the regulations, policies and procedures for potential cases of academic misconduct;
   c) Know about the value and limitations of digital tools for aiding detection of plagiarism;
   d) Ensure that their students receive levels of support and advice, according to their individual needs;
   e) Be vigilant about and respond to potential threats to academic standards, such as ghost-writing: "*Buying essays – (burden of proof problem) this is an academic judgement call, the balance of proof*"; "*Cheating changes over time*" (national interviews).

ES 4   Conclusions

This study, particularly the enlightening conversations with many highly influential people and input from students, academics, administrators, researchers and many national authorities, confirms that the UK has been and remains the most active part of the EU for research and interventions into academic integrity and plagiarism, "*speaking for the sector I have the feeling that work that has been done over the past 10 years or so has been helpful in drawing students' attention to plagiarism as an*

issue, why and how they should avoid it and universities manage it" (national interview). However "*there is generally a lack of evidence and evaluation of empirical studies about impact*" of all the research and development (national interview). A view was proposed about how the R&D in UK HE sector has led to maturity of approach over time: "*where we have moved on – we are now talking to students about academic literacy, more innovative assessments*", but the same interviewee was also aware of less good practice, "*unfortunately, at some institutions they don't use any new ways of assessing students – they are where they were*" (national interview), implying that there is still work to do to reach a consistently high standard of practice across all HEIs in the UK.

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Annex UK-1: Responses to question 5: (1=strongly disagree – 5=strongly agree)

Qu	Negative (1,2)		Don't know		Positive (4,5)		Statement
	student	teacher	student	teacher	student	teacher	
s5a t5a	14%	4%	7%	6%	74%	90%	*Students receive training in techniques for scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues*
s5b t5p	24%	37%	15%	15%	57%	43%	*I would like to have more training on avoidance of plagiarism and academic dishonesty*
s5c t5b	3%	2%	4%	0%	89%	98%	*This institution has policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism*
t5c		9%		6%		85%	*I believe this institution takes a serious approach to plagiarism prevention*
t5d		9%		6%		83%	*I believe this institution takes a serious approach to plagiarism detection*
s5d t5e	4%	2%	12%	2%	80%	96%	*Plagiarism policies, procedures and penalties are available to students*
t5f		2%		8%		87%	*Plagiarism policies, procedures and penalties are available to staff*
s5e t5g	5%	11%	28%	17%	64%	72%	*Penalties for plagiarism are administered according to a standard formula*
s5f t5h	14%	11%	24%	15%	58%	74%	*I know what penalties are applied to students for different forms of plagiarism and academic dishonesty*
s5g t5i	17%	19%	43%	28%	36%	53%	*Student circumstances are taken into account when deciding penalties for plagiarism*
s5h t5m	4%	2%	11%	4%	80%	90%	*The institution has policies and procedures for dealing with academic dishonesty*
t5j		21%		60%		19%	*The penalties for academic dishonesty are separate from those for plagiarism*
t5k		23%		51%		26%	*There are national regulations or guidance concerning plagiarism prevention within HEIs in this country*
t5l		19%		72%		9%	*Our national quality and standards agencies monitor plagiarism and academic dishonesty in HEIs*
s5i t5n	42%	26%	30%	32%	22%	41%	*I believe one or more of my teachers/colleagues may have used plagiarised or unattributed materials in class notes*
s5j	42%		22%		28%		*I have come across a case of plagiarism committed by a student at this institution*
s5k t5o	41%	57%	23%	6%	31%	38%	*I believe I may have plagiarised (accidentally or deliberately)*
s5l t5q	11%	53%	36%	21%	49%	25%	*I believe that all teachers follow the same procedures for similar cases of plagiarism*
s5m t5r	9%	42%	29%	21%	57%	36%	*I believe that the way teachers treat plagiarism does not vary from student to student*
s5n t5s	4%	23%	22%	25%	70%	53%	*I believe that when dealing with plagiarism teachers follow the existing/required procedures*
s5o t5t	9%	6%	20%	14%	67%	78%	*It is possible to design coursework to reduce student plagiarism*
s5p t5u	10%	4%	35%	36%	49%	57%	*I think that translation across languages is used by some students to avoid detection of plagiarism*
s5q	19%		11%		51%		*The previous institution I studied was less strict about plagiarism than this institution*
s5r	10%		13%		69%		*I understand the links between copyright, Intellectual property rights and plagiarism*

Table 16: Student and teacher responses to questionnaire Question 5 (percentages)