

European Responses to Student Plagiarism in Higher Education

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Abstract

A significant amount of research has been undertaken in response to the recent flood of student plagiarism now being detected in higher education institutions (HEI). Based on deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for this problem, new models have emerged for strategies and systems for detection, penalties and mitigation of student plagiarism.

So far the research has been largely initiated by academics from English speaking countries, particularly the UK, North America and Australia. Their work has included research into plagiarism from students from other countries, including Sweden, Germany, Lithuania, Greece and China. However, the situation within the majority of countries in Europe is not well understood and there has not yet been a comparative study of plagiarism in HEIs across Europe.

The IPPHEAE project (Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe, funded by the European Commission 2010-2013), aims to plug the identified gap by focusing on plagiarism in European HEIs. The initial research will compare the policies and procedures in place across all European Union countries for detecting, penalising and deterring plagiarism. Surveys are being conducted in HEIs at three levels: students, teaching staff and senior managers, to determine how well any procedures are understood, to what extent they are operating as intended and whether there is consistency within and between institutions.

Where possible representatives from national quality agencies are being interviewed in order to gain overarching national perspectives on issues such as national policies and how plagiarism impacts on quality and standards. This dimension also provides a means of highlighting the importance of the research to people who can influence educational policy in Europe.

This paper describes the progress so far with the IPPHEAE surveys and presents evidence emerging from the results to date. In addition the paper provides an overview of other research being conducted under the IPPHEAE project including an overview of in-depth institutional studies and interventions for reducing the number of incidences of student plagiarism.

Key words: Plagiarism, academic integrity, plagiarism survey, European survey

Background

This paper concerns research being undertaken for the project *Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe* (IPPHEAE), which has been funded through the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, under the Modernisation of Higher Education agenda. The project was designed to investigate how plagiarism is being dealt with in different countries and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the 27 states of the European Union.

The project runs from October 2010 until September 2013. This paper reports at the half-way stage of the project, covering background research, the methodology, research design and reflection on progress to date. The motivation for the author in presenting a paper at this stage in the project is to raise awareness about the research and the agenda it supports and to encourage participation in surveys and case studies. Further publications will be prepared in due course by members of the

consortium to disseminate the detailed findings arising from different aspects of the IPPHEAE research and development activities.

The idea for the project derived from meetings initiated by a Swedish academic in 2010 who expressed frustration about how to respond to the increasing number of cases of plagiarism detected in submissions from international students taking courses in Sweden delivered and assessed in English. The mutual interest in conducting research was established and the consortium was assembled utilising existing links. UK plagiarism expert Jude Carroll was consulted about the project focus, contributed to the application for funding and agreed to participate in the project in a consultancy capacity.

The project consortium is led by the author who is part of a team from Coventry University, UK, with partners from Lodz University of Technology, Poland, Mendel University, Brno, Czech Republic, Aleksandras Stulginskis University, Kaunas, Lithuania and University of Nicosia, Cyprus. The original Swedish partner agreed to participate in the research but decided not to join the consortium. The Lithuanian National Academic Library is associated with part of the project in a consultancy capacity.

A significant amount of research has been undertaken in recent years covering different aspects of student plagiarism in response to the high volume of plagiarism now being detected in HEIs. So far most of the research has been initiated by academics in English speaking countries, particularly the UK, North America and Australasia, for example a Benchmark Plagiarism Tariff was developed by the AMBeR project (Tennant, Rowell 2010), (Tennant, Duggan 2009); East and more recently Bretag led projects to investigate the effectiveness of policies for dealing with academic integrity issues in Australian universities (East 2009), (Bretag et al 2011).

Some researchers, notably MacCabe, have particularly focused on the attitudes to plagiarism in North America (2005) and Canada (Abasi and Akbari 2008). More recently MacCabe and colleagues compared experience of how universities are dealing with plagiarism in the USA to the situation at selected institutions in the Lebanon (McCabe, Fenghali and Abdallah, 2008). A few researchers have investigated plagiarism relating to non-English speaking countries particularly Sweden (Carroll and Zetterling 2009), (Razera et al 2010). Hayes and Introna explored cultural influences to plagiarism in international students studying in an English university, drawing comparisons between students from UK, Asia, Greece and China (Hayes and Introna 2005). Although much research has focused on text-based plagiarism, a team from University of Warwick investigated students' understanding of plagiarised computer programming code (Joy et al, 2011), drawing on earlier work by the team (Cosma and Joy 2008) and work done by a number of other researchers on aspects of code-based plagiarism.

The evidence from this wide range of research has increased understanding of why plagiarism occurs, different methods in place for dealing with the problem and what can be done to encourage good scholarship. The research findings have prompted redesign of procedures and policies in several UK institutions (Macdonald and Carroll 2006), (Park 2004), (Neville 2010) which in turn led to further evaluation and refinement of ideas.

Interesting ideas and viewpoints have emerged recently about innovative approaches to supporting students to learn to write in a good academic style, particularly international students who have not previously been required to write essays or dissertations as part of their educational assessment. Several researchers referred to the tendency for "transgressive intertextuality" (Abasi and Akbari 2008), (Borg 2009), whether deliberate cheating, through lack of knowledge or poor language skills. The useful expression "patchwriting" is well established in the vocabulary of plagiarism researchers, describing the construction of textual writing through "borrowing" phrases and sentences from a

variety of sources (Howard 1999), (Hayes and Introna 2005). Davis developed and evaluated workshops for using Turnitin formatively for improving academic writing skills (Davis 2009). More recently Ireland and English proposed providing an early formative assessment in a “safe environment” where students are allowed to plagiarise without penalty can be an effective method for developing academic writing skills (Ireland and English 2011). All such examples epitomise the shift from a strictly punitive approach towards academic plagiarism, instead advocating a supportive environment allowing time for students’ writing skills to develop.

It is clear from reviewing a wide range of sources of literature in this field that plagiarism is a very complex and broad area for study. It is also apparent from the author’s own work over many years in educating students and supporting teaching staff in the area of academic integrity that there is often lack of agreement and inconsistencies when discussing acceptable academic practices and what constitutes plagiarism. Despite the increase in understanding about reasons and motivations for plagiarism, the high levels of plagiarism detected in UK HEIs as reported in UK national Sunday newspapers (The Sunday Telegraph March 2011), (The Independent of Sunday March 2012) suggest that even with evidence-led advances in policies and procedures for supporting students particularly when they enter higher education, there is no panacea. However it is possible and desirable, not least for integrity of educational standards, to continue to increase awareness of good practice and encourage consistency of approach, particularly in parts of Europe that may not be aware of the significant amount of useful research and development to date in this area.

Methodology

The starting point for IPPHEAE was acknowledging that the nature and effectiveness of policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism being applied in the majority of HEIs in countries across Europe are not well understood. This research was designed to correct that gap in the knowledge and in doing so to highlight to participants what constitutes good academic practice, particularly in locations where there has been little dialogue recently about academic integrity.

Research activities comprise three major strands:

- A cross-Europe survey of HEIs

- Development of software tools for searching a national e-library archive

- In depth case studies of strategies and policies in HEIs

The three strands are discussed in turn below, but the survey is the main focus of this paper.

Surveys have been designed to determine at institutional and at national levels what processes are in place for dealing with plagiarism and whether the systems are working as intended. The national level was seen as important to understand any government policies influencing the situation within institutions.

The intention was to survey a representative sample of different types HEIs in every EU country to obtain an overview of the status quo. However the timescale and funding available for the project made it impossible to attempt a comprehensive investigation of HEIs in each country. Instead the project relied on opportunistic selections of participant HEIs. Each of the partners in the consortium pooled their EU links and each contact identified was asked to participate in the project research. Each consortium member took responsibility for surveying certain countries. Geographical and institutional category gaps were then identified and further networking activities initiated in order to encourage further participation. The estimated volume of data to be collected is summarised in Table 1.

The scale of the data collection, the geographical scope and language ranges of the participants in the survey made it essential to have on-line questionnaires for collecting the institutional data. Language translations of the survey questions and guidance notes were needed to engage participants from across Europe and to ensure the questions were understood. The high volume of data to be collected and compared meant that data capture and analysis needed to be efficient and language-neutral, which necessitated collecting largely quantitative responses. This decision also reduced the need for translation into English for responses captured in different languages.

For 27 EU Countries	minimum	target
Institutions per country	1	10
Senior staff per institution	1	6
Teachers per institution	6	20
Students per institution	60	200
Institutional Surveys per country	67	2260
Overall institutional surveys	1809	61020
National surveys	27	54

Table 1: Number of people to be surveyed

The second strand of the research involves the development of a text comparison search engine and user-interface for the Lithuanian language digital library of master's and doctoral theses. The Czech partners provided software development expertise and Lithuanian partners are intermediaries for the Lithuanian digital Library clients.

The purpose of the third part of the research is to build on and exploit the outputs from the first two strands, using the knowledge gained through the EU-wide survey to conduct in-depth case studies and interventions and evaluating the software tools developed for Lithuania. A number of case studies are being developed by each partner.

The research for IPPHEAE was submitted for ethical approval through the normal channels at CU. The timescale and developmental nature of the research determined that an incremental approach to approval was required as the project progressed. It was important for securing participation at both levels to ensure anonymity of individuals and institutions, particularly considering the potentially sensitive nature of the data being collected. There was a tension between the need for anonymity and the analysis to be conducted at institutional level. This was resolved through the use of coding for respondents, institutionally and individually, and separation of the identifying data from the data captured for the research. Informed consent and associated guidance notes were built into the introduction to the on-line survey and paper versions were available for manually conducted surveys.

Survey Design

The first part of the project specifically focuses on exploring existing systems within institutions for dealing with plagiarism, encompassing detection, penalties and prevention strategies. Surveys are being conducted at four levels in all EU member states, collecting information from

- Students (bachelor and master level) in HEIs;
- Teaching staff in HEIs;
- Senior management in HEIs with responsibility for quality or academic integrity;
- National level representatives with responsibility for HE or quality assurance of HE.

The purpose of capturing data at three levels within one institution was to provide a means of comparing perceptions of students, teaching staff and management to determine the degree of transparency and efficacy of the current institutional practices. An important “selling point” to convince institutions to participate in the survey was to provide access to the anonymised results for their institution for their own research and analysis.

The national level survey was designed to

- Ascertain whether any national policies impacted on institutional practices;
- Explore awareness nationally about the responses to plagiarism in HEIs;
- Find out about imminent national policy changes that would affect HEIs;
- Raise awareness at the highest level about the current global threats to academic quality;
- Influence national policies.

Consideration of the high volume of data to be collected at student and teacher level and the need for language translations of the survey questions determined that narrative responses would present considerable difficulties for analysis. For these reasons most of the questions were presented in various multi-choice formats, with significant overlap of questions between levels to allow direct comparison between the student and teacher responses. However some open questions were included. Although it may not be possible to analyse all the data within the timeframe of IPPHEAE, the data-set will persist and could provide an interesting additional area of research. In particular respondents were asked to define their own understanding of plagiarism.

The survey questions were influenced significantly by previous research (McCabe 2005), (Hayes and Introna 2005), (Park 2004), (Flint et al 2006), (Macdonald and Carroll), (Tennant and Duggan 2008), (Neville 2010). However none of the earlier work had the same focus as the IPPHEAE project therefore survey questions had to be tailored to the specific needs of the research. Consortium members each had different views of what data should be collected therefore the process of agreeing a set of surveys that was acceptable to all parties took some time.

The three levels of institutional surveys were scrutinised by members of the consortium, then by experts in questionnaires, academic integrity research and also from a psychological perspective. The surveys were then released to the partners for initial translations and piloted within partner institutions as a paper-based exercise. Adjustments were made following feedback from the pilots and the final versions of the surveys were then released for language translation.

The student survey includes 33 questions about experience at their current HEI. Many questions take the form of a statement requiring their response using the following Likert scale.

1. Strongly Disagree	2. Disagree	3. Not Sure	4. Agree	5. Strongly agree	6. Not applicable
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Other questions ask students to select from a list of options, with one or many responses expected. The topic areas for the questions are

- Understanding of plagiarism and when they became aware;
- What information was provided by the HEI about aspects of academic integrity;
- Understanding of policies, procedures and penalties;
- Views of how prevalent plagiarism is in the institution: students, teachers, self;
- Consistency of approach by teaching staff towards plagiarism cases;
- Use of digital tools to aid plagiarism detection;
- View of why students plagiarise;
- Understanding of what would happen to a student found guilty of plagiarism.

The survey asks for information about the student's stage and programme to aid analysis.

Many of the 45 questions in the teaching staff survey are similar to those in the students' survey, but with phrasing adjusted to capture the teacher's understanding of what students should experience. The similar questions allow direct comparison of the student and staff perspectives of the provision within the same institution. The teachers' survey includes questions about institutional policies that students could not be expected to appreciate, such as responsibilities for decision making and policy review procedures.

The senior management survey has a different format and style to the other surveys. It is divided into six categories, each with a number of mainly open questions. This format allows the questionnaire to be conducted either by interview or on-line. Despite the different style, there is considerable overlap with the teaching staff questions and some commonality with the student questionnaire. The overlap allows for triangulation between the three different perspectives on key areas of policy and procedures. The six categories are:

- Understanding of plagiarism concept;
- Incidence of plagiarism at this institution;
- Institutional approach to the prevention and detection of student plagiarism;
- Institutional policies and procedures for student plagiarism and academic dishonesty;
- National Regulations and guidance concerning prevention of plagiarism in Higher Education;
- Comparison between faculties and schools at this institution and across the country.

The survey at national level has 21 mainly open questions, some overlapping with the senior management institutional level survey and some that are specific to the national perspective.

The most difficult question to formulate was about the assessment regime within an institution. It was important to capture this information because where the assessment is mainly by examination the views of plagiarism may be different to perspectives in regimes where coursework assessment contributes to a significant proportion of student grades. Ideally it would have been useful to include these questions at all levels, but it was difficult to find a concise enough form of words that would be meaningful and unambiguous to participants that could be safely translated. In the final surveys only the teaching staff survey included specific questions about this aspect, with the expectation that some discussion would take place at institutional and national levels.

Finding a suitable on-line survey platform was impacted by the complexity of some question formats. After trying a number of alternatives, the Bristol On-line Survey (BOS) platform proved to have the most appropriate range of question options. Only minor modifications to question rubric were required to enable full implementation of the surveys. Moreover good analytical tools were available within the BOS toolset.

The national survey questions were checked and tested by the consortium members and associates. The low volume of data to be collected at this level coupled with the decision to deliver as open questions by interview and dialogue made rigorous testing less critical.

Identifying and engaging participants

To ensure the sample of data collected was meaningful and representative, partners agreed the target number and type of HEIs to be surveyed per country and guidelines were provided about the number of respondents at the three levels within institutions. Each country in the European Union was assigned to a specific IPPHEAE partner, who were then responsible for establishing contact with a representative sample of HEIs in that country to negotiate and arrange how and when to conduct the surveys. Leaflets and guidance notes were prepared both printed and electronic forms and the project web site was populated with information about the project and how to participate. Links to

the three institutional levels of the survey were made available on the project web site in fourteen different languages, <http://ippheae.eu/surveys> .

Coventry University's PHEENIX well-established network of over 200 European partners provided a useful starting point for the consortium to identify participants. All five HEIs in the consortium were members of this network. Requests for participants in the survey and information about the research were disseminated at regular PHEENIX partner meetings. This was followed up by email requests and specific contacts to arrange the details of the institutional surveys. The IPPHEAE consortium members had additional contacts in HEIs across the EU, therefore some pooling and sharing of contact details and exploration of other contact methods such as social media networking, helped to complete the EU map of project participants. National level contacts have been established with help from senior colleagues, utilising national and international senior educational networks and through access to European Commission agents for each country.

An unanticipated difficulty was the reluctance of some students and teachers to engage in the survey without the provision of valuable prizes or payment for participation. Fortunately this applied only to potential participants a minority of EU countries. Two small prizes (digital cameras) have been made available, one for the student participants and the second for teaching staff. The prize winners will be decided through a random draw after the survey finishes and announced at the IPPHEAE Project Conference in June 2013.

Early in 2012 iParadigms agreed to support the project by offering a Turnitin trial license as an incentive for participant HEIs that do not already have a license. They also agreed to sponsor the project conference in Brno, Czech Republic in June 2013. Their support provided access to the Turnitin User Group representatives from the UK and wider. The author addressed the Turnitin User UK group in February 2012 and invited HEIs to participate in the project and to complete the survey. This was followed up by a mail-shot about the project and research in March 2012. These initiatives yielded a number of interested contacts for both conducting the survey and requests for deeper involvement in the project case studies.

Detailed case studies

In addition to conducting the cross-EU survey the IPPHEAE team was keen to begin to make an impact on responses to plagiarism in HEIs within the scope of the project. Each team member in the consortium selected at least one case study to undertake within the same geographical domain as their survey responsibility. The case studies are being conducted as individual or small team research projects and the findings will be submitted for publication at appropriate conferences and as journal papers.

Examples of case studies:

- Workshops about aspects of plagiarism;
- Documentation of examples of good practice;
- Studies of the impact of changes in policies;
- Interventions for helping to deter plagiarism;
- In-depth comparisons between policies and practices in specific institutions;
- National differences from student perspectives;
- Plagiarism policy for distance learning courses;
- A comparison of different approaches for deterring plagiarism in programming code.

The author has been involved with development and implementation of new institutional policy and procedures for plagiarism and academic conduct at Coventry University. The new procedures include the provision of an institution-wide "Good Academic Practice Quiz" for students. A case study is being developed to explore evidence of the impact of aspects of the new approach in order

to advise others contemplating adopting such a strategy and to further refine the operational aspects, policy and overall strategy.

Reflections

IPPHEAE is an ambitious and complex project, but the results of the research will help to reveal new information about how different institutions and countries across the EU are responding to the challenge of student plagiarism in the Internet age. The simple act of contacting an institution to discuss the project helps to elevate the issue of how plagiarism is being handled, which encourages people to reflect and take action. From initial responses on engaging contacts about participation it is apparent that most institutions contacted see recent increased levels of detected plagiarism as a problem and people are interested in the research and in hearing about the results of the project. There have been a range of different follow-up dialogues for example:

People wishing to share the good practice in policies for handling plagiarism at their institutions;

People asking for support in establishing new procedures or initiatives to reduce plagiarism;

Those nervous about sharing data from their institution;

Institutions interested in collaborating with the project team in specific areas of detailed research.

There are many risks in a project of this complexity and scale. There is a danger that respondents may be discouraged from completing the survey because the questionnaires are long and some of the questions concern complex concepts. Despite reassurances, several respondents have expressed concerns about anonymity of the data, which may lead to some responses that are unreliable. There may be inconsistencies in the way surveys are conducted, for example in most cases the project team is relying on support from their institutional contacts who have been asked to coordinate student surveys during classes. As the project team cannot witness every survey session, there is no guarantee how much advice and direction the respondents will be given by the survey administrator.

The surveys are available for an extended period, between January and December 2012. The translation of the surveys into different languages carried the risk of mistranslation and inconsistencies in understanding by different participants. However without the language translations it is likely that responses would be significantly less reliable, geographically patchy and lower in volume.

To some extent the time of year in the educational cycle that the student survey is conducted will influence students' level of knowledge and experience of the institutional policies. To counter this potential problem institutions have been asked to conduct the survey across all academic years in the first and second cycles (bachelor and master's degree levels). However, to maximise participation levels, no restriction has been placed on the time of year the survey should be conducted.

All above concerns need to be taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Initial results from surveys

The responses to the on-line surveys are continuing to accumulate and there has been a significant level of interest from the institutional and national contacts established to date across the EU. It is apparent that plagiarism is viewed as a topical issue by most of the people who have agreed to participate in the surveys. A number of structured interviews have taken place and more are scheduled with individuals who have a national perspective on educational standards and quality,

including some government representatives and educational advisers. The interviews completed to date suggest there may be differences between countries in both awareness and maturity of approaches for responding to student plagiarism. However much more data and further evidence is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Early analysis of two questions on the surveys indicate that of those students responding to date

- a) almost 50% agreed (34%) or strongly agreed (15%) that their current HEI has policies and procedures in place for plagiarism, and just over 40% of students were not sure (37%) or thought the question was not applicable to them (3%).
- b) almost 45% believe they may have plagiarised “accidentally or deliberately” at some time (agreed 37%, strongly agreed 7%). It is encouraging to note that the students who responded in this way were confident enough to make this contribution to the survey.

There are signs from responses to requests for participation in the survey that there are pockets of active research into plagiarism in countries where there is little evidence of institutional or national strategies for responding to plagiarism, for example participants in Finland and Bulgaria.

The project team have been approached by an institution outside Europe with a request to make use of the surveys for institutional profiling purposes, which is indicative of the visibility of the project and success of the early dissemination.

Conclusions

The IPPHEAE surveys took much longer to finalise than had been originally estimated, but they are now on-line and fully active until December 2012. The project team are keen to invite as many participants as possible to complete the survey and help to add the body of knowledge about the European perspective on plagiarism. The in-depth case studies provide a second opportunity for individuals and institutions to contribute to the IPPHEAE research. Interested parties are invited to contact the author for further information, or to go directly to the project web site <http://ippheae.eu/>.

Various materials have been created already for use during and beyond the lifetime of the project. These include the Good Academic Practice Quiz and tried and tested workshops for students and staff. Testing on the software tool being developed for the Lithuanian National Academic Library is close to completion and this tool will be piloted and evaluated during the second half of the project. As indicated by the interest already in the surveys, the four different levels of survey questions will provide a reusable resource for institutional use and further research beyond the lifetime of the project.

The findings from the survey analysis and other research from the project will be made available at an international conference hosted by Mendel University, Brno, Czech Republic on 12th and 13th June 2013. Details about the conference and the call for papers are available on the project web site <http://ippheae.eu/conference>. All participants and interested parties are welcome to join us for this event.

The outputs of the project will include a country-by-country report profiling the policies across the European Union, setting out the findings from the four levels of surveys. The report will critically evaluate examples of good and poor practice and set out recommendations for the attention of HEIs and raise issues for national agencies, for Europe and elsewhere in the world. The evidence from the surveys will be utilised in the second IPPHEAE report, which will contain detailed information from each of the case studies, where possible analysing and generalising the findings to broader contexts.

In addition to follow-up research building on the forthcoming findings of IPPHEAE, there is great scope for further related projects within this field, focusing in more depth on some of the specialist

areas touched upon in this report (code programming, distance learning), addressing plagiarism in research and at pre-university level.

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