

CHANGING THE CULTURE: DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A UNIVERSITY-WIDE POLICY ON PLAGIARISM

Smythe, J. The Open University, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the approach taken by the Open University in the UK to develop a plagiarism policy to serve the whole institution. The policy was developed by a project team comprising many different stakeholders drawn from across the range of academic and administrative staff.

An understanding of good academic conduct and what constitutes plagiarism lies at the heart of the learning process. Unfortunately definitions are often imprecise and interpreted differently depending on the level and subject of study. Hence it was not surprising that at the beginning of the project there was a diversity of opinion across the academic body which led to inconsistency in the treatment of students.

The project sought a team of University wide practitioners who would not only develop policy and practice but who would become the disciplinary authorities to implement and enact the policy. From the beginning it was clear that the most important aspect was the education and training of students in good academic practice rather than focussing on identifying and punishing plagiarism, hence the approach followed three main themes: Education, Detection and Process/Penalties. The project was especially complex given the size and disparity of the student population and the number of stakeholders involved. However, it was aided by the centralisation of assessment processes which enabled a central Academic Conduct Services Office to oversee process and ensure quality standards were met

The project has gone some way to developing standardisation and Academic Conduct Officer decisions are benchmarked and compared. The project sought to change the culture within the University on how plagiarism cases were identified and dealt with. The operation of the policy, the establishment of the central Academic Conduct Services Office and the regular meetings of the Academic Conduct Officers who cascade training and best practice throughout the University all contribute to achieving consistency.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The project was established in 2006 when there were concerns within the University that the reputation of the University was dependent upon the ability to ensure there were appropriate

academic conduct procedures to educate students in how not to plagiarise, and also to detect and punish cases of plagiarism where they were occurring. Awareness of plagiarism and academic conduct was growing and consequently the number of instances of academic conduct-related matters was increasing. It was evident that there needed to be guidelines on how the problem of plagiarism should be tackled. However, the tenor of the argument was also about educating the student about academically acceptable behaviours, as discussed by Macdonald and Carroll, 2006 who emphasise promoting good academic practices rather than focussing on deterrents and punishments. There was talk about the strategies for students to study in more efficient ways, the impact of assessment on students' learning (Rust, 2002) and the consideration of dealing with plagiarism and poor academic practice as part of this. It was felt that plagiarism was a very loaded word and thus the policy development focussed on ensuring the development of good academic practice and the detection of poor academic practice. The term 'Academic Conduct' was eventually chosen.

The stakeholders of the Plagiarism Project included Module Team and Examination and Assessment Board Chairs, Staff Tutors, Regional Managers, Associate Lecturers, the Central Disciplinary Committee, Academic Conduct Officers and students; who were all considered and consulted. The project team consulted Jude Carroll from Oxford Brookes and based many of the ideas around the best practice developed by Jude, as per her handbook for deterring plagiarism in HE, (Carroll, 2007).

The Open University is very different in structure to all other UK institutions, and so concepts that had proven to work in other institutions, such as the work of Carroll outlined in the handbook mentioned above could not be directly translated to and replicated at the Open University. All assessment and award of credit is handled centrally, meaning any system for overseeing academic conduct must also be managed centrally to enable the creation of a holistic and coherent approach across the institution. In hindsight this centralisation has been a very powerful driver in ensuring fairness and consistency of treatment.

The project sought a team of practitioners who would not only develop policy and practice but who would become the disciplinary authorities to implement and enact the policy. Those practitioners, the Academic Conduct Officers, were appointed as disciplinary authorities in accordance with the Code of Practice for Student Discipline with responsibility for investigating suspected academic conduct cases and for advising and, if appropriate, disciplining students accordingly: Academic Conduct Officer decisions are benchmarked and compared with each other through the centralised systems. There is also a responsibility to promote good academic practices within their Faculties, including training/development of staff and advising Module Team and Examination and Assessment Board Chairs about plagiarism detection and assessment design. They are responsible as a group for University level training of students in good academic practice and meet

bi-monthly to discuss process improvements, share experiences and discuss and benchmark difficult cases.

The project sought to change the culture within the institution on how plagiarism cases were identified and dealt with and move from a fragmented approach to a policy implemented consistently and fully embedded across the University. The operation and promotion of the policy, the appointment of the Academic Conduct Officers, the establishment of the central Academic Conduct Services Office, the central processes for handling assignments and the regular meetings of the Academic Conduct Officers who cascade training into Faculties and across the University have all been significant gone some way into achieving consistency.

THE PLAGIARISM POLICY

The issue of plagiarism and the University's ability to ensure assessment outcomes reflect an individual's capabilities is a challenge across the HE sector (Klein, D 2011). The widespread problem has been documented extensively (see Klein, D, 2011) with universities employing more sophisticated tools to detect plagiarism and students using more ingenious ways of plagiarising including software tools and essay mills – research by Rigby D, Balcombe K, Burton M, et al (2010), indicated the significant numbers of students that are willing to buy essays. Nevertheless the reputational risk is significant and it is essential to have recognised quality assurance processes in place to ensure the integrity of academic standards. This is achieved through appropriate policy and procedures together with academic staff who understand the challenges and opportunities this brings.

The Plagiarism Policy is made available to students and staff alongside the other University regulations. The approach to plagiarism covers three themes: education, detection and process/penalties. The ethos of the project is to focus on the education of students, helping them learn from any mistakes and developing good academic practices in their studies.

EDUCATION

From the beginning it was clear that the most important aspect was the education and training of students in good academic practice rather than focussing on identifying and punishing plagiarism and the majority of efforts were, and continue to be, focussed in this area. The number of cases of deliberate cheating found within the Open University was – and remains – small (0.2%). Nevertheless, systems are needed to deal with these cases fairly and consistently. The bigger problem is one of negligent academic practice. This arises out of either poor preparation for study

by the student or an inability to understand the importance of academic practice. There is now some awareness that re-use of words to improve the writing should be distinguished from intentional deceit for the purpose of stealing other authors' ideas (Shasok, 2011).

Plagiarism means different things to different people – Marcus et al, 2011 determined that 50% of the respondents did not clearly understand the institutional definition of plagiarism or academic integrity and/or did not properly apply the College's guidelines and its precise explanation varies depending upon cultural background, subject area and level of study. Thus it is essential that students understand clearly what is expected of them when they are engaging with a particular piece of assessment material from a particular course at a particular level.

One of the most significant activities that took place during the project was the development and launch of the Developing Good Academic Practices (DGAP) site, as promoted at the 4th International Plagiarism Conference (Hunter, 2010). The feedback received about DGAP has been overwhelmingly positive and the data captured about the use of this site is described in 'Promoting a culture of academic awareness and honesty: developing an institutional 'good academic practice' website and understanding how students can and do make use of it' (Hunter, 2010). A modified version is available for viewing/usage on OpenLearn; <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk>

DETECTION

The use of text matching software to help detect plagiarism is at the discretion of the Module Team Chair. Currently about 40% of all modules engage with some form of text matching software – either CopyCatch or Turnitin. Students do not have access to the software at present – instead, it is run centrally as part of a batch upload process and the output made available to Module Team Chairs for analysis. It is the responsibility of the Chair to review the software reports, thus giving a holistic view of the cohort and allowing them to see at a glance the academic conduct issues that are affecting their students, allowing them to review and develop their assessment materials accordingly as well as review the support and advice offered to students within the module. If a Chair suspects a student of poor academic practice it is their decision whether or not to refer a case on for further action, usually a recommendation that study skills support be given to the student or to use the output from the text matching tool to make an academic judgement when marking the work. Occasionally a case will be deemed to be serious enough to warrant further investigation by an Academic Conduct Officer for possible disciplinary action.

It is an integral part of the Plagiarism Policy that the detection of any suspect plagiarism must always be an academic decision, in order to uphold the academic standards of our teaching and assessment.

Cases are also detected by Associate Lecturers, Script Markers and Monitors. All cases have to be reviewed by a second Senior Academic – either a Chair or a Staff Tutor – before being referred further. The central Academic Conduct Services Office, can monitor the timescales and the distribution of cases returned by the Module team chairs thereby providing an important quality assurance process.

PROCESS

The appointment of Academic Conduct Officers – senior academic staff with joint ownership of the policy and its implementation across the institution – is fundamental to the processes employed, both for the processing of casework and for raising and maintaining the profile of academic conduct issues in the Faculties.

In summary, the process is that once a case has been identified by an academic member of staff as appropriate for further investigation, it is logged and referred to an Academic Conduct Officer. Each Academic Conduct Officer works in accordance with the Code of Practice for Student Discipline and contacts the student in writing; fully explaining the extent of the allegation, providing the student with appropriate evidence and seeking their explanation. The student is given 10 working days to respond and at that point the Academic Conduct Officer will make a decision on the next steps to take, including the provision of appropriate study skills support and, if appropriate, a disciplinary penalty based on the published tariff of actions. The Code of Practice for Student Discipline allows several different penalties that can be applied by Academic Conduct Officers. These include giving a student a formal caution, disallowing part of an assignment, capping an assignment at the minimum pass mark, giving a score of 0%, allowing the student to resubmit their work with a capped score, or referring the case to the Central Disciplinary Committee for a more severe penalty. In every case, students are always given appropriate study skills advice such as a referral to the DGAP site, in the hope that they will learn from their experience. All academic conduct casework is logged centrally in a dedicated system and the process is supported by an administrative and clerical support from the Academic Conduct Support Office. Each case is subject to academic conduct performance standards to tighten up the processing of cases and ensure the best possible service to students. The standards are designed to give each stakeholder in the process adequate time to make a balanced decision, whilst progressing the case so that the total time taken from the student submitting their work to a decision being communicated is minimised. The Academic Conduct Officer meeting regularly reviews the average timescales for individual areas.

As part of the policy, students can appeal any decisions made on disciplinary penalties; these appeals are heard by a subgroup of the Central Disciplinary Committee. The decision letter sent by the Academic Conduct Officer to the student includes information on the appeals process.

Summary reports are produced for all Examination and Assessment Boards. These reports summarise the academic conduct cases that have arisen on each module, enabling Examination and Assessment Boards to decide whether the levels of plagiarism within their module are acceptable, and discuss whether their assessment strategy or questions need to be revisited to reduce the likelihood of plagiarism on the module; they are not expected to spend time revisiting individual cases. It is at the Examination and Assessment Board that mitigating circumstances may be applied. The reports also enable different module presentations to be compared statistically.

DEVELOPMENT

The initial group of Academic Conduct Officers were instrumental in writing the Plagiarism Policy, agreeing the tariff and consolidating the procedures and as such their training and development took place over many months. As new Academic Conduct Officers continue to be recruited, there is a requirement for ongoing training. A basic induction workshop has been developed, taking new Academic Conduct Officers through case studies as well as discussing the elements required of the role; newer Academic Conduct Officers are also mentored and supported by more experienced colleagues. Bi-monthly meetings are a significant part of ongoing Academic Conduct Officer development.

The challenge was rolling out the policy developed by the initial stakeholders across the institution. A conference was held shortly after the policy launch, entitled “Enhancing Academic Integrity: designing out plagiarism and applying the policy”. The conference attracted over 100 attendees from the University. In addition, numerous workshops and staff development events took place all over the University in the following months for staff at all levels to attend. The policy was also promoted in media communications including staff newsletters, handbooks and websites. Numerous presentations were given to introduce the text matching software and give guidelines on interpretation and use. A procedures handbook was published and made available to all staff through a dedicated Academic Conduct website. To support this activity, additional administrative and clerical support office were recruited and the Academic Conduct Services Office formed to manage the operational processes necessary to ensure the consistent and appropriate roll out of the processes and raise and maintain the profile of the policy.

Although a lot of work has been done in training and developing Module Team and Examination and Assessment Board Chairs, there is still a significant and continuing role for the Academic

Conduct Officers to play in ensuring academic conduct remains a high priority in the Faculties. Additionally, regular development of Module Team Chairs is required to ensure that referrals are being completed in sufficient detail and with sufficient supporting evidence for the Academic Conduct Officer to proceed with their investigatory role in accordance with the performance standards. Additionally, Staff Tutors and Regional Managers play a key role in the academic conduct process and a number of workshops have been run by Academic Conduct Officers during the project, which will continue into the future. As co-ordinators of referrals from Associate Lecturers, Staff Tutors and Regional Managers have a responsibility to engage with the procedures and ensure that Associate Lecturers understand what is required, and that referrals are made in a timely and appropriate manner.

There is also ongoing training and development required by the central administrative support team in the Academic Conduct Services Office to enable the academic conduct process to be capably supported. The data produced by the Office is a valuable monitoring tool and turnaround times, software usage and volumes of casework are regular agenda items at each bimonthly Academic Conduct Officer meeting. In addition, a member of the Academic Conduct Services Office meets with the Faculty Academic Conduct Officers every 6 months to discuss in detail the data on cases related to their Faculty, and there is an annual report on academic conduct to the University's Assessment Policy Committee.

The Academic Conduct Website is clearly laid out with information for each of the various audiences involved including Module Team Chairs, Staff Tutors and Associate Lecturers. It includes useful slidecasts and information on interpreting reports, as well as procedures, links to other related sites and instructions on how to raise and refer cases.

CONCLUSION

The project was evaluated during a workshop that concluded that the project had been a great success and a number of very positive points were raised when summarising the achievements of the project. It was noted that one of the main achievements was putting academic integrity on the map and embedding a major culture change across the University. This has been done through the standardisation of policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism and the increased awareness of academic conduct issues throughout the University. There has been a change in attitude from the emotional to the pragmatic which has led to a consistency amongst academic staff when dealing with suspected plagiarism.

It was agreed that the project had improved the overall quality of teaching and learning at the institution, changing the way academics work when designing assessments and giving a steer to

Fitness to Practice directors when making decisions over students studying for professional qualifications. In turn, it was felt that this made the qualifications more credible. Through the work of the project, students are offered educational resources such as the DGAP site. The approach used whereby every academic conduct investigation is supplemented with appropriate study skills advice, in order that students learn and improve their academic writing, helps students learn from academic conduct investigations – they are not purely disciplinary decisions. The structured way in which investigations are conducted and decisions approached has been of paramount importance to this. One frequent criticism from students prior to the commencement of the Plagiarism Project was about the inconsistency of advice about referencing, leading to accidental plagiarism. Advice to students is much clearer through the work of the project, in a large part down to the promotion and use of the ‘Developing Good Academic Practices’ site (Hunter, 2010) although there remains work to be done to ensure a consistent message is delivered to students.

Academic Conduct Officers commented that a great source of satisfaction is when a student appears to have learned from the academic conduct investigation, turns their behaviour around and drastically improves their academic writing as a consequence. In addition, the cohesive approach to academic conduct gives fairness to the vast majority of students who do demonstrate good academic practices and do not plagiarise their work. The Academic Conduct Officers noted the relatively small proportion of students who were found to have deliberately plagiarised. The use of a Customer Relationship Management system to record cases and the guidance and support from a dedicated administrative office has also contributed to the consistent way in which plagiarism is now managed, and ensures that if students are studying more than one module their academic conduct progress is treated holistically.

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