

[A] Working Together to Reduce Plagiarism and Promote Academic Integrity: A Collaborative Initiative at Leicester

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[B] Abstract

This staff student collaboration arose from a staff-led research project that examined the potential for an American-style honor code system to reduce plagiarism in higher education. This system promotes the positive benefits of good scholarship, encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and is based on a community of trust between staff and students. Students' Union Education Officers, student course representatives and academic staff worked together to re-frame advice given to students on plagiarism in a more positive light. This ongoing collaboration has resulted in joint recommendations from staff and students to the institution on how to reduce plagiarism and promote a culture of academic integrity.

Keywords: plagiarism, academic honesty, academic integrity, academic writing skills, study skills

[B] Introduction

Plagiarism in Higher Education is said to be on the increase (Eaton, 2004; Hart & Friesner, 2004). It is difficult to know the cause of this rise, but it is probably linked to an increase in detection through the use of electronic detection mechanisms and exacerbated by an increasing reliance by students on Internet resources (Hayes, 2009; Lancaster & Culwin, 2005). Studies have shown that students who plagiarise do so for a variety of reasons, from failing to understand the importance or mechanism of referencing and paraphrasing to poor time management and study skills to deliberate attempts to obtain an unfair advantage (Bennett, 2005; Park, 2004).

Recent years have also seen an evolution in policies to deal with plagiarism across the HE board. However, the two national surveys conducted by JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service that benchmarked the policies and penalties in place for dealing with plagiarism across UK Higher Education Institutions (Tennant, et al., 2007; Tennant & Duggan, 2008), highlighted substantive differences between HEIs in their approaches to plagiarism. This means that students ‘committing’ the same offence are likely to be treated differently by different institutions, something that former adjudicator for Higher Education, Baroness Deech (Baty, 2006), saw as a major problem facing HE institutions.

The concern that plagiarism threatens the quality of the degrees awarded by higher education institutions has lead to considerable media attention on the subject and considerable research and discussion of how the problem of plagiarism can be addressed in higher education (Larkham & Manns, 2002; Park, 2003; Fielden, 2008). A holistic approach to dealing with plagiarism that places major importance on plagiarism prevention has been emphasised by a number of authorities in the area (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Park, 2003).

Anecdotally, it seems that when a student is introduced to plagiarism in their early days of Higher Education, the induction is normally that of the “it’s-bad-so-don’t-do-it-or-you’ll-be-punished” type. Strict warnings, a range of punishments, accounts of students who have fallen foul of accidental or deliberate slips in scholarship are typical examples of how plagiarism is often framed in the academic world - in very negative terms.

These observations find support in more systematic empirical research. Park (2003: 472), for example, collected different metaphors for referring to plagiarism, among which are ‘the unoriginal sin’, ‘a writer’s worst sin’ and a ‘cancer that erodes

the rich legacy of scholarship'. Pecorari (2001) compared institutional anti-plagiarism policies in three countries, the USA, the UK and Australia, stating that, overall, they 'appeared to assume a universal view of plagiarism as an academic crime' (p. 243). In her UK-based overview of student-oriented plagiarism prevention guidelines, Yakovchuk (2004) concluded that most institutions in her randomised sample referred to plagiarism and '(intellectual) dishonesty and cheating'.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that from their early days onwards, students tend to treat plagiarism with a great deal of caution and concern. While source attribution enhances student work and gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and learn to weave their emerging voices into the existing academic scholarship (essentially very positive aims), in reality it often becomes a burden and a source of worry for students. A patronising and moralistic attitude on the part of academics seems to widen the gap between them and their students, rather than provide encouragement and a warm welcome into the academic world.

There seems to be a growing understanding that a more radical change may be needed to deal with plagiarism successfully – a shift in academic culture that towards academic integrity and good academic scholarship. Our team set off to explore how changing our approach to plagiarism (and academic dishonesty in general) could lead to a transformation of staff and student views on the issue, and could help students make the most of their academic potential through embracing core academic values and mastering correct academic conventions. We see our staff-student partnership as an evolving process of collaboration between the team members (and the wider groups they represent), through which perspectives have been developed and enriched (and perhaps in some cases altered) and joint efforts have been made to instigate

changes to educational practice in light of the current developments in pedagogic research.

This chapter reports on our attempts to frame the issue of plagiarism in more positive terms and increase student involvement in the promotion of academic integrity and good academic scholarship. After providing some background information about the honour code system, we describe our staff-student cooperation in more detail, outline its outcomes, reflect on the process of collaboration and offer ideas of how this partnership can be taken further.

[B] Background

When faced with similar problems, some higher education institutions in the USA have implemented radical solutions that led to a transformation of staff and student views on the issue (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002). Over the past few decades, a growing number of US institutions have been adopting an *honour code* system, which has been reported to have a positive effect on the level of academic misconduct among their students (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; McCabe et al., 2002). This value-based system places campus-wide emphasis on academic integrity, student involvement and mutual responsibility of staff and students for adhering to academic values and maintaining academic standards. Collaboration between staff and students and student-led initiatives, therefore, are instrumental to this model's success (McCabe & Trevino, 1997).

The University of Virginia is believed to have the oldest honour code system of its kind that is entirely student-run. The basic principle of this system is a community of trust - 'a community where each student acts honourably and lives up to an ideal standard of conduct' (The Honor Committee, 2002). Students are trusted to

uphold the principles of academic integrity to the extent of having unsupervised exams, student-run judiciary and the expectation that students will report any ‘honor offenses’ to the Honor Committee (also student-run) (The Honor Committee, 2008). It is also assumed that the ethical principles exercised on the university campus are carried over to the community life outside. As one of the students observed, ‘To truly understand the honour system you have to live with it. And I think once you live with it, you begin to see how honor will inevitably become a part of everything that you do, now just now when you’re a student, but every day of your life. When you’re an honourable person, people know it’ (The Honor Committee, 2008). Staff members of the university also see the benefits of such a system: ‘I’ve taught at other universities, and the system here liberates me and my faculty colleagues. They concentrate on what’s important in the classroom – learning and not policing the students’ (ibid.).

This focus on ‘learning and not policing’ has informed our collaborative efforts to change the angle from which plagiarism can be viewed in the context of our university.

[B] Our collaboration

Our staff-student collaboration has developed as a spin-off from a university-wide academic integrity project run by a staff research team from the School of Biological Sciences and the Genetics Education Networking for Innovation and Excellence (GENIE) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The project aimed to explore staff and student views on plagiarism, academic integrity and the US honour code system. The team of Students’ Union (SU) officers was initially contacted to discuss best approaches to setting up a consistent procedure for recruiting student participants across different subject disciplines. This cooperation gradually

grew into more substantial collaborative work between the staff research team and the SU, and led to a review of SU's approaches to educating students about plagiarism.

[C] Students' Union Concerns

The Education Unit is one of the services that the University of Leicester Students' Union provides for students. It provides a free and impartial service to help and advise students. All kinds of requests for guidance are made and frequently students approach the Education Unit for advice about plagiarism.

There are various help points for students at the University of Leicester who are concerned about plagiarism:

1. Departmental Handbooks include reference to plagiarism.
2. Departmental induction programmes/ tutorials
3. The Education Unit in the Student Support Centre
4. The Student Learning Centre, David Wilson Library

The SU education unit were involved in recruiting students from across the institution to take part in focus groups for the academic integrity research project. The main participants were those students that were already Students' Union course representatives. Their involvement in the project and the recruitment of a new Education Officer, Alysoun Hancock, led to a discussion how the SU Education Unit gave advice on the avoidance plagiarism and supported students in this area.

The Education Unit took the opportunity to gain some feedback on this topic and asked a range of students, some who had been found to plagiarise, about their experience of plagiarism. Between January and June 2009 twenty students visited the

Education Officer for advice and guidance on how to proceed after being found to plagiarise. Each case varied in the extent of plagiarism, and it was interesting to note that the responses from Departments were also varied. Some departments were more positive in their dealings with the student concerned than others. Student experience of learning about plagiarism also varied enormously. Generally, the introduction reinforces negative points. Many students were able to give only a partial definition of the word usually along the lines of ‘using the ideas of someone else and pretending they were your own’ but were unclear of the range of activities plagiarism covers.

A wider consultation with students was achieved through the student course representative system. The undergraduate and post graduate student co-ordinators took the topic to their course representative for discussion and collated their responses. The feedback was wide ranging. Students report various experiences of being informed about plagiarism and the consequences for them. The following examples support the inconsistencies found by students.

Some found their induction clear helpful and reassuring. They were offered plenty of help and advice and encouraged to seek clarity and guidance from staff. One student in Year 1 said, ‘We had an informative lecture at the beginning of the first semester. The message has been reinforced before every written assignment. Occasionally we are given additional information about other aspects of plagiarism e.g. turnitin’. Another student said, ‘My Department held a lecture on this in the first year and we also have information in our Departmental handbook. We are taught how to reference work correctly and how to take notes from an academic’s work and to use these ideas to expand and develop our own ideas. The handbook also refers to the Student Learning Centre for further information’.

Others were less positive and felt advice given to them was inadequate. A 3rd year student said, 'I had no explanation of plagiarism until my 3rd year dissertation model was presented'. A postgraduate student said, 'We were warned about plagiarism and told to reference correctly. We were not taught about the different things that could be classed as plagiarism'. One first year student who came to the Student support centre to see the Education Officer for advice said 'I'm always worried about referencing when I hand in a piece of work'.

These Students' Union's findings corroborated the outcomes of the staff-led academic integrity project: although there has been a wealth of information targeted at students to tell them that they should not plagiarise, a gap in students' understanding still exists of what range of activities constitute plagiarism and how to actually avoid it. Also, the picture of inconsistency in dealing with plagiarism found nationally (Jones, 2006; Tennant et al., 2007; Tennant & Duggan, 2008) was also the case within the institution.

This evidence obtained from both staff- and student-led systems of enquiry led to the SU-initiated process of re-designing their materials on plagiarism prevention and referencing. Since the results of the academic integrity project demonstrated positive acceptance of a more academic integrity based system, Students' Union took on board some principles of the honour code approach and decided to apply them in the process.

[C] How has the Students' Union improved what advice and help is available?

The Student Support Centre based within the Students' Union produce advice leaflets on a variety of topics. One leaflet gives specific advice with regard to Plagiarism 'What is Plagiarism & Academic Dishonesty' (see figure 1). We attempted to revise

the content and to present the information in a more positive way which also gave more responsibility to students. The earlier consultation with students done through the Students' Union provided quotations and a frame of reference for the revised student information leaflet on plagiarism and informed the Students' Union recommendations.

[insert figure 1 here]

The original leaflet was very much centred on warning students that plagiarism had severe consequences. The language was very negative and much attention was given over to 'offences' that would result in 'penalties' and 'cheating'. Very little of the text was given to defining plagiarism or making it clear where students could seek help.

A redesign of the leaflet was based on the principles of academic integrity and honesty (figure 2). It was developed by the Students' Union Education Officer in consultation with the research staff involved in the academic integrity project and the SU sabbatical officers. It was changed in format from A5 booklet style to a single-sided A4 sheet. The emphasis was on providing a student guide and assisting student understanding. Sources of help are clearly listed and this section includes links to interactive guides as well as the policies and practices students need to be aware of.

Quotations from students about their experiences and thoughts on plagiarism help to provide an empathetic point of view. The aim here is to begin to break down the barriers between staff and students and move our student culture away from an 'us and them' system to a single unified academic community of trust. This also introduces the concept of peer education, students giving advice to other students, an important part of an honor code system. The phrase 'no student wants to find out that

they have unwittingly fallen foul of the rules’ was deliberately included to encourage students to recognise that they needed to take responsibility for their own work.

Finally, a clear definition of what plagiarism is included to educate and inform.

[insert figure 2 here]

The word ‘plagiarism’ originates from Latin plagiaries ‘kidnapper’, from Greek plagion ‘a kidnapping’. It is sinister and the semantic field surrounding the word ‘plagiarism’ is interesting. All the words have negative connotations: guilty of, breaking the rules, caught out, warned about academic cheating, academic dishonesty. The list goes on. There is much to be done to redress the understanding of plagiarism and present the topic in a more positive and helpful way.

One idea we had in the Student Support Centre was to introduce the concept of plagiarism visually. This will alert students to the topic in a quick and lively way. This illustration (figure 3) may be used in a poster campaign and when we have an awareness week.

[insert figure 3 here]

[C] How has the institution improved what help is available?

The Student Learning Centre has a learning zone based in the University’s David Wilson Library. Before the start of the academic integrity project, advice on plagiarism was available as a paper-based leaflet entitled ‘Avoiding Plagiarism’. As part of the improvements to the student learning zone and a wish to provide more relevant and positive resources on this topic, an online subject-specific tutorial was developed. The tutorials deliver high quality, interactive learning materials to students in a format that allows them to work at their own pace and review and consolidate

their learning as often as necessary. The tutorials are publicly available at -

<http://tinyurl.com/plagiarismtutorial>.

[insert figure 4, two images]

The rationale of the development of the tutorial was that if students could learn the study skills to enable them not to plagiarise, they would not simply be avoiding getting penalised; more positively, they would be developing the academic skills required to help them in their academic work. This rationale also supports the essential principles of academic integrity, with a more positive aim to educate students in the goals of good scholarship rather than force punitive measures upon them.

Whilst generic advice on study skills is valuable, it is enriched when subject-specific examples are used. The tutorial was inspired by a study skills tutorial from Acadia University in Canada and the intention was to include an adaptation of a subject-specific exercise developed by Willmott and Harrison (2003). It was structured on a core of generic content that could be re-versioned. The discipline-specific elements were designed as discrete entities so that their adaptation would not interfere with the pedagogical integrity of the rest of the resource.

Since its development the original tutorial has been adapted for 14 further departments at the University of Leicester including: Computer Science; Criminology; Engineering; English and American studies; Geography; Geology; History; Labour Market Studies; Law; Management; Medicine; Museum studies, Occupational Psychology and Psychology. The tutorial has had more than 18,000 viewings from September 2006 to May 2009. Feedback from staff and students on the tutorial has been overwhelmingly positive; the vast majority identifying it as interesting, easy to understand and informative.

[C] Work in progress: Students' Union's Recommendations

Most students would like to avoid plagiarism. It is clear from the discussions with students groups within the Students' Union that more could be done to educate and inform students about the pitfalls of plagiarism. It is important that they know what plagiarism is, how to avoid it and where to go for help if it becomes an issue for them. We want to promote the topic of plagiarism in a positive way and avoid the connotations of it being a punishable 'crime'. The Students' Union is keen to work in partnership with staff at the University of Leicester to promote academic integrity and reduce plagiarism.

The Students' Union has formally approached the institution with a set of recommendations, which will be considered in conjunction with recommendations from the research project looking at academic integrity. These recommendations seek to improve student awareness of plagiarism:

Students' Union Recommendations:

- departmental check that the topic has been covered
- departmental check that student understands topic and also understands how wide a term it is
- examples showing a range of types of plagiarism, either in handbook, or as part of initial tutorial
- guidance to the interactive tutorials on offer from the Learning Zone
- consistency of approach between departments to introduction
- consistency of approach to penalties and outcome
- plagiarism covered at the beginning of each academic year
- topic revisited at key points in course e.g. before a dissertation

- avoidance of punitive language when giving back work to a student that has been found to plagiarise
- more understanding of electronic devices used e.g. Turnitin
- more publicity around the university e. g. departmental notice boards, the library
- plagiarism awareness week and partnership between University and Students' Union
- involvement of the Students' Union to run workshops, publicity campaigns and distribute student guide to understanding plagiarism
- information about the Education Officer in the Students' Union and where to go for help if plagiarism has been found
- student forum asking students what would be helpful to them
- induction for postgraduate students
- induction specific to international students' needs
- refresher sessions and work shops

This joint approach by staff and students to make coherent and concordant recommendations to the institution is a direct product of the staff-student partnership project.

The University has already begun to subtly change its approach in this area. During the planning phases of the academic integrity project, the learning and teaching strategy was updated in 2006/07 and included the phrase 'academic integrity' as a core value of the strategy:

'that students should appreciate and demonstrate the importance of displaying high standards of academic integrity in every aspect of their studies'

It is this shift in emphasis in terms of policy, the language of instruction and the language of policy that are the seeds of change for a cultural shift in the institution away from plagiarism detection towards the promotion of academic integrity. The wider research project led by staff demonstrated that the values and overarching ethos of modified honour code system could be adopted in the UK. We believe that by discussing these issues openly and in partnership we are leading by example in respecting each other and working together towards the ideal of good scholarship and practice by staff and students alike.

[C] How can this practice be transferred and carried forward in other institutions?

The problem of plagiarism can be turned around into positive learning experiences. Discussion about good academic practices and a focus on key skills can start to offer reassurance to students and assist their development to mature, critical and analytical graduates. Staff and student partnerships working together on this area help to embed the cultural changes required to break down the division between staff and student as ‘mentor’ and ‘disciple’.

From our experience, we believe that this cultural change could be instigated at other institutions by enacting the following recommendations:

- Development of an academic code of conduct which seeks to use positive language and clearly define terms and conduct. This should include examples with a range of types of plagiarism, either in handbook, or as part of initial tutorial.
- Seek to provide a single point of information for staff and student on plagiarism and the skills necessary for good academic scholarship. This will help to promote a consistent approach across the institution.

- Guidance to staff to avoid punitive language when giving back work to a student that has been found to plagiarise.
- Involvement of the Students' Union to run workshops, publicity campaigns and distribute student guide to understanding plagiarism.

[B] Future trends

This staff-student partnership has focused on creating a community of trust and a strong ethos to encourage good scholarship. In our discussions about academic integrity, it is clear that the issue goes to the heart of the purpose of higher education. For this reason we believe that in the future, an increasing number of higher educational establishments will seek to move towards a positive response to academic scholarship and move away from projecting a threatening and punitive view of plagiarism. Some institutions, such as Northumbria University, have already begun this process by setting out their core values for students to engage with from the beginning of their university careers (Shepherd, 2007).

There are signs that national bodies and influential policy makers are beginning to look at the role of partnership with students in making decisions about the future of higher education. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE) is examining its future role as the arbitrator in disputes between students and their higher education institutions. Part of this role is to issue guidance and recommendations to institutions on how they deal with complaints. A recent consultation exercise by the OIAHE specifically sought feedback on whether there should be increased student representation on their board (at present limited to representatives from the National Union of Students).

Students recognise that the value of their degrees is related to the quality of education they receive. The National Union of Students in the UK has a renewed

focus on matters of scholarship and recently held their first national conference on Higher Education, looking at the purpose of higher education. The student voice is increasingly being heard in Quality Assurance Audits and through the National Student Survey. A movement towards incorporating not just the views of students, but further engaging them in peer learning and commitment to their own learning must surely follow. This involvement by students as equal partners in the higher education community of trust is at the heart of the values that underpin the academic integrity movement.

[B] Conclusion and Reflections

The staff-student partnership at the University of Leicester is an example of a research-led initiative to instigate changes to educational practice. It is hoped that this may be the beginning of a cultural shift towards a focus on good academic scholarship. Students who become aware of how to avoid plagiarism will also be developing their writing skills and critical thinking abilities.

There is considerable scope for continued cooperation as student-led initiatives can potentially extend to student engagement in peer mentoring / tutoring schemes or even judiciary system, to name but a few. Involvement in the judiciary process, for example, could promote leadership skills and provide responsibilities essential for good citizenship and employability. The process of working on this project has been informative for both staff and students, with both gaining an appreciation of the other's point of view. Participation in the project itself raises awareness of the issues surrounding good scholarship. This was one of the implicit aims in conducting such a research project.

One of the difficulties faced by the author team was the transient nature of the student population. One of the original members of the author team graduated and moved to a new position. This transiency serves to remind us of how new policies and initiatives must be self-sustaining to be successful. Each new intake of students needs to be successfully engaged in good academic practice and the experiences of graduates need to be captured before they leave the confines of the institution.

Framing the issue of plagiarism in more positive terms and increasing student involvement in the promotion of academic integrity should hopefully get students thinking less about plagiarism 'horror stories', and more about establishing themselves in a new and stimulating academic world. Achieving this through a working partnership, to create a more positively focused community of trust is surely a sustainable answer to the problem of plagiarism.

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Working Together to Reduce Plagiarism and Promote Academic Integrity: A Collaborative Initiative at Leicester

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