Introduction

There is broad consensus across the academic community in the UK that incidences of plagiarism have risen over the last decade. The rise in cases is largely due to the increase in institutions’ ability to detect plagiarism using computer software. The issue has also received increased attention in the media and we have witnessed the growth of a multi-million pound industry in selling custom, or pre-written, coursework.

The internet has presented students with a colossal, and largely free, resource online that can be easily copied. The Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research Project (AMBeR, for more information see section ‘Penalties’) found that there were 6.7 cases of plagiarism for every 1000 undergraduate students and 11.9 cases of plagiarism for every 1000 postgraduate taught students. The disparity between the proportion of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students is something that receives little attention by media and in research, unlike international students and plagiarism.

The numbers of international students receiving penalties for plagiarism are disproportionate to their non-international peers. International students often come from different academic traditions and backgrounds. There is a need for institutions to work doubly hard to ensure that these students understand what academic integrity means in a UK university and that they are given the support to develop these skills. This should be true, however, of any student – home or international – attending University for the first time, in particular, those who may be returning to studies.

The ever-increasing time pressures that students face may also help explain why more numbers of students than ever have turned to plagiarism. The HSBC Students Research Experience Report: Students in Employment & Post Course Plans 2009 highlighted that the majority of students will undertake paid employment within the academic year, with 32% taking work during term time (please see chart 2). Research conducted by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) revealed that one in five students now works 20 hours a week or more.

Intentional plagiarism is unacceptable and deliberate misconduct denigrates the hard work by fellow students and they should be rightfully punished. The way, however, an institution decides to ‘punish’ a student when caught plagiarising is variable throughout the sector; there is currently no national tariff of penalties, although this is an area currently being researched and advocated by some academics. The problem lies in drawing a clear distinction between mistake and misconduct; between students who unwittingly find themselves breaking academic regulations and those who intentionally set out to do so.

The increased attention in the academic community, however, has provided a platform for both students’ unions and universities to work together and examine collaborative ways that they can work together to prevent plagiarism, as will be demonstrated further on in this resource.

This section of the F.A.C.T. toolkit will look at some of the most pertinent issues around plagiarism, and explore some of the work that both institutions and students’ unions are doing to reduce the number of cases of plagiarism on their campus.

Defining plagiarism

Latin plagiarius: kidnapper
Greek plagion: a kidnapping
Oxford English Dictionary:
“The action or practice of plagiarizing; the wrongful appropriation or purloining, and publication as one’s own, of the ideas, or the expression of the ideas (literary, artistic, musical, mechanical, etc.) of another.”

A number of academics have highlighted the differences in the definition of plagiarism between institutions: many attempt to define the concept in regards to their own institutions’ pre-existing rules and procedures.4

One study found that there was inconsistency with how academics themselves defined and identified plagiarism in work.5 This has led to increased calls for standardisation of definition, procedures and penalties across the sector.

Why do students plagiarise?

According to a report released by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) on detection and prevention there are ten main reasons for students plagiarising, as follows:

1) Bad time management skills.
Perhaps the most common reason people plagiarise is bad time management skills. Having left it to the last minute to complete an assignment they panic and try to find the quickest solution. External pressures affecting much more of the student population, such as the need to work or care for children, may make the situation worse.

2) Unable to cope with the work load.
This is similar to bad time management, but this problem lies with the student’s timetable and assignments from multiple modules clashing.

3) The tutor doesn’t care why should I?
If the student senses that the academic is not interested in the subject or the student’s learning then the student is less inclined to care. This apathy by the lecturer can be shown in a multitude of ways such as showing no enthusiasm for the subject, providing handouts that have obviously been used for years or assignments that seem dated.

4) External pressure to succeed.
In the U.S, statistics have shown that one of the main reasons people resort to plagiarism is the need to keep up a grade average. Although this does not appear to be an issue in the UK, there may be external pressures such as parental and cultural expectations that make students feel they have to plagiarise to achieve.

5) Lack of understanding.
The most common cause of minor plagiarism is a lack of understanding of how to cite material from other sources.

6) I can’t do this!
If a student is faced with an assignment they feel is completely beyond their ability they may feel they have no option but to copy the answers. However, this may have more to do with a lack of clarity in the assignment specifications than a student’s

ability. This problem is often linked to bad management skills: it is human nature to leave until last the things we either consider hard or unpleasant.

7) I want to see if I can get away with it.

Students may be motivated to see if they can get away with plagiarism for several reasons. If they are trying to test the institution and/or academic, it is likely that, whatever prevention methods are put into place, this small proportion of students will always attempt to plagiarise. In fact there is an agreement that the more visible prevention methods are the more challenging for students. However, particular problems arise if the institutional policy encourages students to plagiarise merely to see if they can get away with it. If a student has left an assignment until the last minute, knowing that the penalty for plagiarism will simply be to resubmit the work, they are in a win-win situation. Either they won’t get caught or they will effectively be given an extension.

8) I don’t need to learn this, I only need to pass it.

If a student is not motivated to take part in the educational process or does not appreciate that they need to acquire the knowledge to continue their education, they may be inclined to take the quickest route to success.

9) But you said work together!

Most people in the project identified collusion as far bigger problem than plagiarism from printed material or the web. As noted in the introduction to this section, no distinction has been made between the plagiarism of external sources and plagiarism of peers’ work. In this instance the term collusion has been used to describe a situation when students have been asked to work together on an assignment and have presented the same text. Obviously in some cases the assignment specification allowed for this; if not the work will be regarded as plagiarism. It is important that the specification makes clear what is expected so students are aware if individual or joint assignments are required.

10) But that would insult the experts in the field.

Finally, there is the issue of cultural differences in learning and presentation styles. In some countries it is customary to include material from experts in the field without citation. Although all students must work under their institution’s regulations it is worth taking this into account when training students in study skills.\(^6\)

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Detection vs. Deterrence

Deterrence

Effective deterrence at an institution has the potential to make a significant impact on the numbers of students penalised for plagiarism. The most important aspect of deterrence is that it should not be left to one point in the academic year, such as the induction period; it should be a constant activity. Deterrence activities carried out by institutions may include, for example, compulsory training ensuring assessment questions are regularly changed, declarations attached to assessments submitted or regular strong disciplinary messages sent to all students.

While some deterrence activities are more encouraging than others, their presence can provide a positive environment in the attempt to prevent plagiarism. A culture of deterrence over detection can be initially created by effective induction and then access to the relevant study skills support being available through a student’s studies. It is essential that students are given the skills necessary to reference correctly so that they can avoid accidentally plagiarising and it is crucial that they learn about the principle of academic integrity so that they understand why plagiarism, or any form of cheating, is wrong. Institutions that have led the way in reviewing and developing their policies on plagiarism have also simultaneously worked to encourage academic integrity.

It is important to remember that a student’s decision to plagiarise can often be due to external pressures. It is, therefore, important to ensure that students are aware of university support services available to them such as where to get financial support and advice or where to access emotional support such as counselling services. Students should also be made aware of any mitigating circumstances procedures that exist or request for extension procedures to minimise the possibility of turning to plagiarism at difficult times.

Examples of deterrence activities include:

1. **Providing staff and students with clear explanations** of what is valued (integrity, honesty, wide-ranging research, choosing and using others’ ideas etc) and why academic conventions are important. Students should receive the information in printed material, discuss it with teachers, and see staff treating each other in accordance with the principles.

2. **Defining plagiarism and collusion in everyday language**, including examples of acceptable and unacceptable practices and behaviours. Definitions themselves have changed in the last ten years with less emphasis on theft and plunder, citing the Latin origins of the word plagiarism, and more likely on the word’s contemporary meaning of academic malpractice. Treating plagiarism as a crime or a moral issue is less helpful than a focus on students’ behaviour.

Complications arise because the definition contains words that, in themselves, have tacit meanings. Students look at the definition and wonder ‘How does work become “my own?”’ ‘Which work of others must I acknowledge – all of it or is common knowledge exempt and what is common knowledge?’ ‘Must I do it in oral presentations?’ and so on.

**Students understand the definition by practice, feedback and discussion as they become familiar with academic culture and the community of practice in the context of their own discipline.**

3. **Effective induction** that stresses both academic integrity and provides skills to reference correctly and avoid accidental plagiarism and meet the institution’s assessment requirements.
Detection

Many institutions use Plagiarism Detection Systems (PDS) to check students’ work for plagiarism, this software is actually now one of the most commonly used pieces of electronic software in education. National statistics show that 92.3 per cent of all plagiarism cases recorded were first offences, this possibly suggests that once detected further plagiarism is prevented.

The best known of these systems include:

**Turnitin** -
http://www.turnitin.com

**Copy Catch Gold** -
http://www.copycatchgold.com/

**Glatt Plagiarism Services** -
http://www.plagiarism.com/index.htm

**Eve2 Plagiarism Detection Service** -
http://www.canexus.com/eve/index.shtml

The most widely used is the ‘**Turnitin**’ system. Its website claims that it is the global leader in originality checking and plagiarism detection. This software scans a piece of written work and compares it to its database which include, academic resources and books and every piece of work submitted to the system in the past – including those from other institutions and countries. The software also trawls the internet to add content to its database. It claims that it has over 130 million previously submitted student papers, 13.5 billion pages of web content and articles from more than 80 000 subscription-based journals and periodicals.

It is important to understand however that such software cannot make an academic judgement as to whether plagiarism has occurred, and the guidance that comes with the software makes this clear. Instead it provides an ‘originality report’ which highlights areas of the work that has been duplicated – the marker can then make a judgement as to whether any of this duplication of words constitutes plagiarism (eg if it hasn’t been correctly referenced etc).

Some, however, are often the front for essay bank services meaning that once checked students will be offered access to pre-written essays. NUS believes that where electronic detection software is used, it is important to ensure that this does not become part of an unhealthy culture and that students have access to the software to use as a learning tool before their submit their final work.

**Actions for your union**

1. Read the QAA’s ‘Code of Practice: the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 6: Assessment of students’ – find out if your institution is living up to the requirements set by the QAA. This could be something to feed into a Student Written Submission during an institutional audit. Find the link to the relevant section online in the ‘useful resources’ section at the back of this briefing.

2. Find out if your institution uses detection software. Are there effective policies in place to ensure that this is not misused? Do students have access to it before they submit their work so that they can use it to learn how to avoid plagiarism? Are students aware of the fact their work is being electronically scanned?

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3. Conduct a survey to find out if students feel they are being unfairly punished for plagiarism and if they think the institution does enough to teach them how to avoid it.

4. Review your casework – is there a large number of students coming for advice from your union having been accused of plagiarism? What have been the outcomes and how can you build these into your work on plagiarism with the institution?

5. Read your institution’s definition of plagiarism – is it up to date and easy to understand? How does it compare with other institutions?

6. Is there a role for the union to play in student induction on academic issues? Many students’ unions design their own materials about issues such as plagiarism and they are often more user-friendly than those produced by institutions. For ideas, see ‘examples of students’ union projects.’

Penalties: What happens if students are caught?

Penalties for plagiarism are not consistent across the sector. A student can attend one institution and receive a different penalty for the same offence as a fellow student at another institution. Variation can even exist internally in institutions. In 2006 Baroness Deech, the former independent adjudicator for higher education, highlighted the legal implications of allowing this variation to exist. Concerns have been cited on the way institutions collect and record the number of students committing plagiarism.

1. Informal or verbal warning or reprimand.
2. Formal or written warning or reprimand.
3. Fine.
4. Resubmission of assessment with no cap on mark.
5. Marks deducted from assessment, grade above pass.
6. Assessment mark reduced to a pass.
7. Resubmission of assessment for a pass mark.
8. Assessment mark reduced to a fail/zero with no resit.
9. Marks deducted from module, grade above pass.
10. Module mark reduced to a pass.
11. Resit of module for a pass mark.
12. Module mark reduced to a fail/zero with no resit.
13. Suspension.
14. Reduced or capped final degree mark /classification.
15. Re-sit of academic year for a pass mark.
16. Reduced qualification.
17. Student failed or expelled from programme.

The AMBeR project was funded to carry out research into the standardisation or contextualisation of procedures and penalties in regards to plagiarism by the JISC and other organisations. In part two of the AMBeR research, which looked at which penalties and how commonly they were applied across a number of institutions, a set list of penalties were identified amongst institutions in dealing with plagiarism. They are as follows:

Whilst the punishments range from mild to severe, the most common being resubmission of an assessment for a capped (or reduced) mark and assigning a formal warning (or reprimand), the research also showed that 143 students out of 8000 cases were expelled from their programme. Work is currently being done across the sector looking at reducing these wide differences in the implementation of penalties. Using the research into institutions’ use of penalties, the AMBeR project has put forward a tariff of existing penalties for plagiarism where students receive increased points, for example, if it is not their first offence, the work submitted is a dissertation project, they are not in their first year of study etc.

International Students

The relationship between international students and plagiarism has been greatly commented on both in academic research and within the media. Statistics show that international students are over-represented out of those being punished for plagiarism. This does not, necessarily, mean that international students are more likely to plagiarise, but this may be because of the fact that a noticeable change in writing style as Introna and Hayes point to in their research on Plagiarism Detection Systems and international students. They argue that Plagiarism Detection Systems fail to take into account the writing practices of those who do not speak English as a first language and the value that is placed on ‘plagiaristic forms of writing’ in other cultures. They encourage institutions to take a more progressive and formative approach to the issue.

Many authors believe that by institutions providing adequate support, advice and appropriate interventions these ‘cultural issues associated with plagiarism’ with international students are very easily overcome. A study conducted by the Higher Education Academy, Business Management Accounting and Finance (BMAF) Subject Centre in 2006 found that the most important cultural factor that impacted on a international student concept of plagiarism was ‘referencing conventions related to previous educational experience.’ Other significant factors listed included language problems, ‘lack of awareness and understanding of plagiarism from the western construct and plagiarism does not matter’ and ‘respect/reverence for teachers or ‘authority figures.’ 60 per cent of students surveyed for the research stated they do not critique the work of their teachers or authority figure.

With numbers of international students increasing whilst paying a significant amount more for their education than their home student peers this is an issue that institutions can not ignore. Internationally we have seen the emergence of organisations that research and promote academic integrity amongst academics such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Educational Integrity (APFEI, http://apfei.edu.au). Increasingly the academic

Community is looking for global solutions in an increasingly internationalised higher education system.

Christina Yan Zhang, NUS International Students Officer:

‘There is a concerning number of international students reprimanded by institutions for plagiarism. At a time when institutions are looking to attract more international students this should be an area of priority. Whilst students should have an understanding of the definition and rules and regulations on plagiarism it is up to institutions to provide adequate induction activities and constant study skills training to ensure all students are aware of these. By improving study skills activities and English language support institutions could make a big difference in the number of plagiarism incidents linked to international students. It should not be assumed that international students are more likely to plagiarise – work must be done to ensure all students are aware of what plagiarism means in a western academic environment.’

Actions for your union

1. Review your institution’s regulations – do they take into account international students and their issues?
2. How accessible are the materials that you produce and how accessible are your institution’s? Is there a way of making them easier to understand and appreciative of different languages and cultures? How interactive are they?
3. Could your union work in collaboration with your institution on study skills activities around campus or with the distribution of accessible materials on plagiarism?
4. If you have an advice service, ensure that the service collects data on the number of students visiting for advice or representation on plagiarism.
5. Work with student societies or union officers that might represent international students – they can be an ideal way of reaching different groups of students on campus.

The marketisation of essay writing

The market in online plagiarism is a multi-million pound industry. Figures in 2006 suggested that the market was worth £200 million: it is believed this has significantly grown in recent years. One essay writing company reported turnover of £1.6 million, employing over 3000 writers. According to the same research one in two students stated that they would consider buying an essay from an essay bank. The concept of buying essays goes completely against academic integrity and can have severe consequences for students. Below we discuss ghost writing and essay banks in further detail.

‘Ghost writing’

Ghost writing is known by the academic community as the term used to describe the activity where essays are produced as specified by the buyer and then bought for a fee. For often very large amounts of money, these websites offer their customers an essay or dissertation, written exclusively for and exactly to the specifications provided by their customers.

References:

These ghost writing services have caused a dilemma for institutions because the work is generally unique, so it is usually impossible to detect that plagiarism has occurred. Such services also exploit students and the increasing time pressures they face; they often charge extortionate prices under the guise of ‘guaranteed 1st class degrees.’ One has a speech bubble with: ‘Damn! I will have to cancel my Saturday night out to finish off the essay by Monday. But no! help is at hand...’ Ghost writing services both exploit students and diminish academic integrity; whilst often not against the letter of plagiarism regulations, any student that was found to buy an essay in this way would have action taken against them by their institution.

**Essay Banks**

Online databases of essays known as ‘essay banks’ have been around for even longer than the customized writing services. Some offer pre-written essays for free and some others charge. Like ghost writing services they can often charge extortionate prices with dubious claims such as promises that they will never sell the essay to anyone else and that using said essay could ‘get you a first class degree’. There are literally thousands of such websites based all over the world – many of them have identical content. Plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin will have most of these essays included in its database – either by picking it up from the website directly, or by a student having submitted a piece of work obtained in this way as their own.
Useful Resources

General sites about plagiarism

http://www.plagiarismadvice.org/ = Currently one of the leading sites in the UK raising awareness of plagiarism in the academic community on plagiarism. The site is run by the organisation responsible for the AMBeR project.


http://www.academicintegrity.org = The Centre for Academic Integrity provides "a forum to identify, affirm, and promote the values of academic integrity among students, faculty, teachers and administrators". It also commissions and reports on research on student cheating and offers further services to members.

http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cyberplag/ = A comprehensive site managed by the University of Pennsylvania which is regularly updated and provides useful links to other sites and to electronic detection services.

http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/faculty/plagiarism/index.html = This site at the University of Texas is often cited by others who are setting up their own sites or investigating plagiarism.

documents/tipsheetsv3/tp06_AQuickGuideToReferencing.pdf = References allow readers to follow up ideas and opinions and check the authenticity of quotes, they also allow authors to relate their work to others in the field and provide support for the opinions expressed.

http://citationmachine.net/ = Citation Machine is a web based tool to inform and help in the prevention of plagiarism.

Teaching students about plagiarism

Students’ unions can play an important role in educating students about plagiarism. Here are some useful websites if you are looking to run any campaigns or workshops on plagiarism.

http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/pages/plagiarism.html = Extensive guidance, information and examples.

http://education.indiana.edu/~frick/plagiarism/ = This site includes an online quiz with 10 items to demonstrate paraphrasing and citation rules that allows students to check their understanding.


http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/style/plagiarism/plagiarism.html = A frequently recommended site. Covers everything and offers good examples and exercises. Useful for generating handouts [with appropriate acknowledgement, of course].

Referencing

Always encourage students to speak with academic staff or to liaise with learning and teaching departments in regards to advice on referencing. For those who would like further help here are a couple of useful resources:

http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk/

Copyright

For an understanding of what copyright means and how this relates to plagiarism please use these resources.

http://www.templetons.com/brad/copymyths.html = Ten big myths about copyright explained Brad Templeton – ‘An attempt to answer common myths about
copyright seen on the net and cover issues related to copyright and USENET/Internet publication.

http://www.rbs2.com/plag.htm = Plagiarism in Colleges in USA Ronald B. Standler - This detailed discussion of the legal aspects of plagiarism that is cited frequently. It includes references to legal cases and offers views on how universities should manage the difference between plagiarism and copyright.