



**Business,
Management,
Accountancy and
Finance**



He in FE project

Perceptions of plagiarism: An HE in FE case study

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HE in FE Case Study

1. Introduction

This report describes the activities and outcomes of a JISC DeL Advisory Board funded HE in FE case study conducted by the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service (JISCPAS), JISC Regional Support Centre Eastern (RSCe) and the HE Academy Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance in conjunction with City College, Norwich (CCN). With advice from Senior Advisers at the Higher Education Academy, a proposal to conduct a case study considering the needs of students and staff on Accountancy and Finance HE courses in an FE institution in relation to plagiarism prevention and detection was submitted to the HE Academy. Harnessing the national expertise of JISCPAS with the local knowledge of the CCN staff, the regional expertise of RSCe and the discipline specific knowledge of the HE Academy Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance Subject Centre would, we were sure, enhance the validity of the study and its outcomes. In line with the guidelines for funded projects the proposed study involved the use of technology to support learning and teaching in the subject community, and provides a case study example of a cultural issue.

Plagiarism has been the subject of much media attention in the UK, which has, in the main, been focused on student plagiarism in HE institutions and, more recently, plagiarism by pupils in the coursework element of GCSE awards¹. To date, however, very little research has been conducted into the extent, or nature, of plagiarism in the FE sector in the UK. Many FE colleges now offer courses covering the full range of qualifications from GCSE and their equivalent to HE-accredited degree courses, and it is inconceivable, therefore, that the FE sector is immune to the problems faced by other education providers both in the UK and further afield.

Feedback from JISCPAS workshop participants suggests that initial engagement with the issues of plagiarism in FE colleges is often linked to the provision, and requirements of, HE-accredited courses. Students and staff on such courses are generally bound by the regulations of the validating HE institution, which may be substantially different to those pertaining to other students and staff in the college². In addition, feedback also indicates that colleges considering the use of plagiarism detection software often intend such use to be for their HE accredited courses only.

This study built upon work previously conducted in CCN and upon plagiarism prevention workshops previously delivered by JISCPAS in conjunction with RSCe. City College, Norwich holds Centre of Vocational Excellence (COVE) status in Accountancy and Finance, and currently has approximately 1500 students enrolled on HE courses in the College, so was considered an ideal location for the project.

¹ Qualification and Curriculum Authority (2005) *A review of GCE and GCSE coursework arrangements* QCA Available at <http://www.qca.org.uk/15525.html> [accessed 16/01/06]

² Direct Learn Training Ltd (2002) Student plagiarism and FE. Direct Learn Training Ltd

2. Project aims and objectives

The study considered the extent and nature of guidance on plagiarism available to staff and students, and the potential use of plagiarism detection software in the context of an FE college offering HE-accredited courses, as such the following objectives were set for the project:

- Assess the current guidance on plagiarism provided to CCN staff teaching on HE courses in the college
- Assess the current guidance on plagiarism provided to CCN students studying on HE Accountancy and Finance courses in the college
- Evaluate the potential of plagiarism detection software as an educational tool for CCN staff and students
- Identify training needs of CCN staff teaching on HE courses with respect to effective plagiarism prevention and detection
- Develop a training workshop for staff teaching HE validated courses in FE colleges

3. Methodology

In common with most case studies a range of methods, mostly qualitative, were employed for data collection and analysis. As this project also forms part of a larger PhD study by the CCN researcher, some overlap of data collection was possible. The study was underpinned by a review of current CCN policy guidelines and guidance literature, which then informed the discussions with key stakeholders in CCN and semi-structured interviews with HE teaching staff in CCN Business School.

Due to time constraints only 2 of the planned 4 semi-structured interviews were held. In addition, online surveys for both staff and students were provided to the college by JISCPAS, however, responses were insufficient to enable analysis, therefore this data has been disregarded for the purposes of this study.

4. Research

4.1 CCN Policy Review

The CCN policy document “Cheating and plagiarism procedure for use with HE programmes” was last issued in July 2003³. The document is available in both student and staff handbooks, which are issued to all students at the start of the academic year and to staff, upon commencement of their employment at CCN and subsequently when revised. The policy document is also made available on the CCN intranet and copies are available in the library. Unfortunately, a request for permission to view these documents externally was not granted, therefore this aspect of the research was evaluated internally by the CCN researcher. However, the policy does state:

“all HE students should be made aware of what constitutes plagiarism and current good practice re referencing and the use of bibliographies.”

“All HE students’ work will be subject to random sampling to test for plagiarism.”⁴

During the lifetime of the project the policy was under revision to incorporate procedures for use of the Turnitin® plagiarism detection software for submissions to HE validated courses. There are no current plans to extend the use of the Turnitin® software to other student assignments in the college. Under the procedures pertaining at the time of the research, all student assignments for HE validated courses require submission of both a hard copy and an electronic copy of the work. A random sample (10%) of assignments are then submitted to the Turnitin® database for comparison with previously submitted student work, an extensive database of electronic material from both proprietary databases and cached internet searches. The reports generated by the software are then viewed in conjunction with the assessed work by the appropriate tutor. The judgement as to whether a student has plagiarised is made by the tutor not the software.

³ CCN (2003) City College Norwich, cheating and plagiarism procedure for use with HE programmes. Version 2 (for 2003/04) City College Norwich, unpublished.

⁴ *Ibid*

4.2 CCN guidance review

In addition to the policy document the following guidance material is also made available to students:

- Information booklet on Harvard referencing (also available as an on-line resource)
- Information booklets on referencing specific resources (also available on-line)
- Generic training sessions on referencing are offered to students and staff by the Library (although take up of these are poor)
- Individual support is also available from Learner Support Services and the library (no figures are available for take up)
- Instruction on the conduct of a literature review is included in modules teaching higher learning skills

4.3 Interviews and Discussion

Informal discussions were held with 12 individuals in the college who were considered to be key stakeholders in the development and maintenance of policy and procedures relating to plagiarism and academic misconduct at CCN. These stakeholders included individuals who were responsible for the implementation and support of the Turnitin® detection software within CCN, as well as those responsible for the wider development of HE courses and their associated policies and regulations, and the provision of generic guidance on referencing for all CCN students.

Semi-structured interviews with individuals teaching HE courses in the CCN Business School were planned. Time constraints, however, eventually resulted in only 2 of these interviews taking place.

JISCPAS also developed staff and student surveys to assess current perceptions of plagiarism policy and practice within an institution, and these were offered to CCN as part of the project. Unfortunately the responses received were insufficient to warrant inclusion of the data in the subsequent analysis.

5. Findings

5.1 Policy review

The review of the CCN policy highlighted that it did provide clear and detailed information on the college's plagiarism policy. However, whilst there are clear guidelines provided on the sanctions available to disciplinary panels, the guidelines were less clear on how to determine the appropriateness of sanctions in relation to the nature and extent of individual incidences. This is a concern in the wider community and was the subject of a keynote address at the 2nd International Plagiarism Conference in June 2006 by Baroness Deech, the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education⁵. Indeed, the JISC have recently commissioned an independent review of current practice and procedures in HEI's to consider this precise topic as a result.

5.2 Current guidance on plagiarism for staff and students

Although CCN provides guidance on referencing, citation and avoiding plagiarism in a variety of formats and using a number of different mechanisms, many students commence their HE courses claiming, when challenged, little or no knowledge of how to reference their work. Moreover, staff are concerned that the training provided to students at induction tends to become lost in the midst of more pressing concerns.

A tendency was also found, amongst lecturers, to assume sufficient prior knowledge of appropriate referencing and citation techniques to meet the course requirements. In practice, relevant knowledge was found to be FE/sixth form specific, although the assumption was held for all students entering HE courses.

Similarly, there is a tendency to assume that lecturers also, have the appropriate knowledge needed to identify potential plagiarism, provide appropriate instruction on referencing and citation and recognise specific cultural aspects that may contribute to student plagiarism. From the interviews and discussions held for this project it is apparent that these assumptions cannot be upheld. Staff, themselves, had varying levels of knowledge regarding referencing, citation and issues relating to plagiarism. Lecturing staff with overly vocational backgrounds, for example, were not confident of their own referencing and citation practice and were, therefore, concerned about their ability to provide appropriate instruction to their students on the topic. The limited take-up of generic training provided by the library staff for both staff and students suggests, perhaps, a reluctance to highlight the issue. Other concerns highlighted during the data collection were:

- Lack of up-to-date knowledge when citing electronic resources
- Lack of confidence when teaching academic writing
- Inadequate knowledge of cultural issues relating to plagiarism

⁵ Duggan, F (Ed) (in press) 2nd International Plagiarism Conference proceedings 19 – 21 June 2006. Northumbria University Press. Newcastle-upon-Tyne

5.3 Evaluating the potential of plagiarism detection software

From the data provided by the CCN researcher it was apparent that there were some misconceptions about the nature and role of plagiarism detection software in the college. Some problems were experienced with the initial procedures, whereby students were required to submit both hard copy and electronic versions of their assignments and a random sample of these were then submitted to the Turnitin ® database. Revised procedures utilising the CCN VLE for all student submissions to Turnitin ® are expected to reduce the problems experienced with corrupt and missing disks.

The reports produced by the software met with mixed reactions from ‘helpful’ to ‘scary.’⁶ Some misconceptions about the software were expressed in the college report, in particular, participants were unaware that it was possible to set up assignments within the system to allow submission of drafts that would not be compared against each other, thereby producing a ‘false positive’ result. More worryingly, participants considered plagiarism detection software as “too dangerous in that if the student could learn to check that their work would pass the detection software test, they would also have the opportunity to learn how to cheat the system and plagiarise undetected.”⁷ This viewpoint has been discussed on the JISCPAS mailing list⁸ and also at the two international conferences hosted by JISCPAS. Whilst to some degree the concern is understandable it does imply that no other measures are in place to educate students in the appropriate use of sources in their work, and is not backed up by an early pilot study of use. Hanlon’s (2005) study⁹ “found that the prospect of using the software, made them think more carefully about their work, generally, and also more specifically in relation to citation and referencing.” Moreover, Hanlon felt that “the process of bringing students to the detection software is an opportunity to encourage students to see that acknowledging, sharing and responding to research and wider reading, is an effective way to develop students’ own thinking.”

⁶ For an example of an ‘originality report’ see <http://www.submit.ac.uk>

⁷ Mazey, R (n.d.) Plagiarism detection, practice and policy (unpublished report)

⁸ Accessible at PLAGIARISM@JISCMail.AC.UK

⁹ Hanlon, Susannah (2005) Detection software: threat or opportunity – student perspectives *in* Duggan, F & Peden Smith, A (2005) Plagiarism: prevention, practice and policy conference proceedings 28 – 30 June 2004. Northumbria University Press, Newcastle-upon-Tyne p. 301 - 306

5.4 Training

There were a number of training needs identified during the research, relating to both the use and interpretation of Turnitin® software reports and the general lack of confidence by lecturers in their own ability to provide instruction on appropriate referencing, citation and academic writing practices, particularly with regard to electronic media. Interviewees also expressed an interest in receiving training on the nature of potential plagiarism and guidance on identifying plagiarism in student work in addition to the use of detection software.

The findings of this research project have informed the development of a JISCPAS workshop aimed at HE in FE practitioners. The workshop, which will be piloted in the RSCe region aims to provide FE tutors, teaching HE accredited courses, with the knowledge and skills required to enable them to prevent and identify plagiarism in student submissions, and to demonstrate an awareness of the cultural issues that might lead to plagiarised work.

The objectives set for the training are that participants will be able to;

- Identify possible plagiarism in a range of written materials
- Identify where opportunities for plagiarism might exist in assessed work
- Demonstrate knowledge of appropriate referencing and citation methods
- Interpret originality reports produced by Turnitin plagiarism detection software to support the identification of possible plagiarism
- Explain the potential impact of cultural differences in student understanding of plagiarism
- Reflect upon their own practice focusing on how the ideas presented in the training can be incorporated into their own teaching and assessment

Expected outcomes of the sessions are;

- Handouts and exercises from the training session will provide participants with simple guides to the identification of possible plagiarism and the basic rules of citation to increase their confidence in these areas.
- The training provided will be commensurate with training previously provided to HE staff to ensure equality of provision for staff teaching HE courses in an FE environment
- The benefits of technological responses to plagiarism in the identification of possible plagiarism will be highlighted
- An awareness of the common problems faced in HE institutions and their relevance to their own situation

6. Conclusion

This research project highlighted existing good practice at the case study college, but also identified areas for attention and further research. CCN have recognised the need to continually monitor their policies and procedures in relation to plagiarism, as the recent revision to accommodate the use of the Turnitin® software demonstrates. The research, moreover, has highlighted a need for guidance on the appropriateness of sanctions and tariffs, which is the subject of further research by JISCPAS. The training needs identified by the research are probably applicable throughout the sector although further research is required to support this assertion. However, JISCPAS has already received expressions of interest in the planned workshop from another Regional Support Centre, which suggests that the scope and content of the proposed training is relevant throughout the sector.

Despite the availability of online surveys the data for this project did not include consideration of the student perspective with regard to the policies, procedures and instruction provided. Responses to other surveys conducted by JISCPAS, however, show that students (93% in one survey) believed that their tutors checked their work for correct attribution, demonstrating perhaps that the lack of confidence expressed by lecturers in this study is not apparent in the feedback provided to students.