The Plagiarism panic and the Partial Academic

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Author's note: This paper was presented in two different versions to the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Conference in Brighton December 2006 and to the Education in a Changing Environment (ECE) Conference in Salford September 2007. What was most interesting to the author, especially at the second conference, was the breadth of interest in the subject and the diversity and extent of personal experience. Interestingly, every single attendee acknowledged that during their academic career they had committed plagiarism within the definition included below. The paper was subsequently reported on by the Times Higher Education Supplement on 5/10/07 under the headline "Beating plagiarism seen as 'a lot of extra hassle'" although this is just one of many issues involved. Whilst it was presented as a paper it is reported below in the style of a workshop since this allows for some of the discussion to be included. Readers interested in discussing this topic further are welcome to contact the author by email.

Introduction

The context of the current debate on plagiarism is that it is a growing problem in education. The solution is presented as a combination of detection (eg using software) and punishment of the guilty, together with education of students about the meaning and consequences of plagiarism. The author's experience, however, is that plagiarism is more often a matter of opinion than fact, and furthermore the circumstances leading to plagiarism are at least as worthy of attention as dealing with the miscreants. The outline below explains the meaning of the title of the paper. It then gives the definition of plagiarism in use at Salford (and very similar to that of other Universities). Finally it discusses the author's experience. Sections are followed by discussion that developed during presentation of the paper.

The Plagiarism Panic

The JISC briefing paper of 2003 'Deterring, detecting and dealing with student plagiarism' (JISC 2003) suggested that plagiarism was a growing problem in higher education in the UK, linking this growth to the use of digital media and the internet. The paper suggests that "it is reasonable to expect to encounter at least 10% of students' work that requires attention beyond normal assessment (ie beyond deducting marks for poor referencing or writing a reminder in the feedback that the student should attribute ideas and quotations from others)". The paper contributed to a revision of procedures in many Universities and significant increase in the adoption of tools to detect plagiarism such as Turnitin. Little hard evidence of growth in plagiarism is presented and many people have shown that plagiarism is a long established practice (eg Macfarlane 2007). However there is little doubt that political and public concern has grown. This is illustrated by some of the newspaper headlines below:

- "Plagiarism and Google generation under the spotlight" (Guardian 19/6/06)
- "Staff ignore cheating"(Times 23/6/06)
- "University catches 237 student cheats who trawl the internet" (Observer 10/9/06)
- "..Students who have been accused are starting to fight back" (Guardian 12/9/06)
- "Plagiarism 'is fault of indulgent lecturers'" (Baroness Deech quoted in Times 18/10/06)

This concern can be likened to the deviancy amplification spiral described by Stanley Cohen in his seminal work on moral panics (1972). "Moral panics revolve around a perceived threat to a value or norm held by a society normally stimulated by glorification within the mass media or 'folk legend' within societies… a factor in a moral panic is the deviancy amplification spiral, the phenomenon defined by media critics as an increasing cycle of reporting on a category or antisocial behaviour or other undesirable event" (Wikipedia accessed 10/09/07)

This increasing cycle of reporting on antisocial behaviour in general has very serious consequences for the perpetrators. In the case of the University of Salford much more severe penalties for plagiarism have been introduced in recent years.

Definition and Penalty

The detailed definition of plagiarism in use at the University of Salford between 2001 and 2005 was as follows:

"Plagiarism involves taking the work of another person or source and using it as if it were one's own …

- "The following characteristics, if found in assessed course work, will be deemed to constitute plagiarism:
- the inclusion of quotations from published works, the source of which is not properly acknowledged;
- the inclusion of passages which are closely based (in summary or paraphrase) on published material, the source of which is not properly acknowledged;
- the inclusion of material which is identical or virtually identical with that of another person including another student, past or present, unless this method has been agreed by the member of staff concerned for a reason particular to the course work"

The penalty was laid out as follows:

"If the Board of Examiners find the plagiarism to be proven or admitted, it shall award a mark of zero for the module, dissertation or thesis concerned. The Board of Examiners must refer all cases of proven plagiarism to the Discipline Committee. The Discipline Committee shall have the discretion to decide whether further action shall be taken against the student".

(University of Salford Academic Regulations 2004/5)

It should be noted that in practice further action was very unusual.
In a subsequent revision to the regulations the definition is very similar but the severity of the punishment has been significantly increased:
"

- *At Level 0 or 1 (including equivalent Level of an HND or HNC):*
- A module mark of 0 is awarded.
- *At Level 2 or 3 (including equivalent Level of an HND or HNC):*
- A module mark of 0 is awarded for the module(s) in question and marks for all other modules at that level will be capped at 40%
- *At Level M:*
- The student is permanently expelled from the University, a mark of 0% is awarded for the module(s) in question and the marks for all other modules at Level M which have been taken shall be limited to a maximum of 50%. "

(University of Salford Academic Regulations 2007/8)

Discussion

It is important to note that the definition of plagiarism does not include intent or mens rea (guilty mind), although it could be argued that most people equate plagiarism with cheating or stealing both of which are commonly understood to include some kind of intent. The word plagiarism in fact derives from the Latin, plagiare, meaning to steal. This is an important issue in relation to the prosecution of plagiarism as is illustrated in examples in section 4. Some staff are only prepared to pursue a case of plagiarism when they are convinced that there is intent involved.

The Partial Academic

During the period 2001-5 the author conducted the preliminary investigations into all alleged cases of plagiarism by undergraduates in his school. At any given time the school had approximately 500 undergraduates. In 18 cases it was agreed at the outset with the member of academic staff concerned that, although there was some evidence of plagiarism, this essentially amounted to poor referencing and a mark was awarded for the coursework which reflected this.

However, in 61 cases students had submitted work which fell within the University definition of plagiarism. Every case included a passage or passages of unattributed work and the member of staff involved wanted to ensure that this was properly investigated. Once a prima facie case had been established, an investigator was the appointed to look into the case and give the student(s) concerned the opportunity to defend themselves. In some cases the work would also be referred to an external examiner for an opinion. In 30 of the 61 cases the investigator/ external examiner did not feel that the punishment (a mark of 0 for the module and possible further disciplinary action by the University) fitted the crime, and therefore did not find that plagiarism had been committed. In one case involving 10 students alleged to have plagiarised their coursework on the same module, the external examiner remarked that any University in the country could find thousands of similar cases every year. In another case the investigator felt that the assessment set had invited plagiarism by a) being at much too high a level for the students and b) by being much too open and with little bearing on the course teaching.

Thus 31 cases of plagiarism were presented to the Board of Examiners during this period and penalties were applied. Whilst there was no doubt about the commission of plagiarism in these cases, a significant number were felt to have some relationship to the quality of teaching involved. In 4 cases, the coursework set was the same as the previous year, so that students had copied the work from students in a higher year. In 3 cases students had submitted dissertations involving plagiarism, claiming to have had minimal contact with their supervisor over the year and little or no opportunity for the discussion of draft work. In one case the students had been encouraged to work in a group but penalised for making submissions that were too similar.

Interestingly, although the research suggests that the great majority of academic staff have experience of detecting plagiarism (Dordoy 2002 cited in Flint et al suggests 90%) over two thirds of staff in the school during the period above never reported a single case of plagiarism. With the introduction of more severe penalties one can expect a decline in reported cases of plagiarism as staff take into account the penalty prior to reporting plagiarism.

In summary, whilst it is convenient to present plagiarism as a simple objective 'fact', it is in fact something which only exists if reported by a member of academic in the first instance, which is clearly a highly subjective decision. Typically this decision is then reviewed and a second subjective decision is taken. Plagiarism is not as clear an issue as first presented.

Discussion

The paper by Flint, Carroll and Macdonald (2006) is an excellent review of literature in the field, for example giving a number of reasons cited by academic staff for not reporting plagiarism. These reasons include increased workload and stress as well as concern for the consequences to the student. They also discuss other areas of research that have been conducted in relation to staff perceptions of plagiarism and their paper is highly recommended.

These issues, along with the whole area of different cultural attitudes on the part of staff and students to plagiarism, were brought up in discussion on the paper. For example, in cases where plagiarism is carried out by students for whom English is their second language, are the circumstances a relevant consideration in tackling the problem? This is a difficult issue to cover in University regulations but it is undoubtedly an issue for those on the ground who are involved in the detection and reporting of plagiarism.

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