

STUDENTS AND STAFF VOICES ON “ZU GUTTENBERG’S CASE” AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PLAGIARISM AWARENESS IN GERMAN HEIS

Anna Michalska

Abstract: Plagiarism is one of the greatest concerns in academic circles and it became even more “popular” after uncovering cases of academic dishonesty committed by high ranking politicians. It started with German defence minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg proven to copy 63% of the lines on 94% of pages in his PhD thesis without referencing the sources.

People responsible for exposing these “prominent” cases are being called “die Jäger” (eng. the “hunters”) and their reputation is spreading across Europe. Despite their noble intentions to catch and punish all the cheaters, do they positively or negatively influence German Higher Education? Does discussion about politicians’ doctoral theses help to raise awareness about the problem or does it only create atmosphere of fear and intimidation?

Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe (IPPHEAE) is a project that investigates equality and coherence of standards in Higher Education across the European Union. The project has discovered major disparities and gaps in policies at national and institutional level in many European countries. Being a member of the IPPHEAE project team, the author received an opportunity to focus on her own research which is an offshoot of the main project and concentrates on academic dishonesty from the student perspective.

This paper presents results of observations made during the author’s visit to four German HEIs in November 2012. Conclusions are based on opinions of 20 students and 12 members of staff collected during focus groups and interviews carried out as a part of the IPPHEAE project.

Key words: student plagiarism, German Higher Education

Setting up the scene: A few words about Karl zu Guttenberg

Karl Theodor Maria Nikolaus Johann Jacob Philipp Franz Joseph Sylvester Freiherr von und zu Guttenberg or simply Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg was a German “rising star” politician of the Christian Social Union (CSU), who ended up being publicly humiliated and despised for his dishonest academic behaviour.

He became a Member of Parliament in 2002 where he held the post of Secretary General of the CSU party and then was appointed as Federal Minister for Economics and Technology in the first Angela Merkel cabinet on 10 February 2009. In her second cabinet, from 28 October 2009, zu Guttenberg became the Minister of Defense and one of the most popular German politicians.

In the meantime in 2006, under supervision of Peter Hübner, zu Guttenberg completed his dissertation for the University of Bayreuth and in 2007 was awarded a doctorate in law receiving the top grade of summa cum laude. His thesis was published under the title “Constitution and Constitutional Treaty: Constitutional developments in the USA and EU” (Kelsey, 17 Feb 2011).

In February 2011, zu Guttenberg was publicly accused of violating academic standards in his thesis by extensively copying information from many sources, such as newspaper

articles, public lectures or term papers, without referencing them correctly. On 18 February 2011 Guttenberg made a statement that “I will temporarily, I repeat temporarily,” “give up my doctoral title” and added that “My dissertation is not a work of plagiarism and I completely reject all such accusations” (BBC, 18 Feb 2011). However three days later, on 21 February 2011, he asked the University of Bayreuth to permanently invalidate his academic degree after admitting to make “serious mistakes” and “do not meet the ethical code of science” (BBC, 22 Feb 2011). The university retracted his degree on 23 February, based on their own investigation which provided evidence that zu Guttenberg had “violated scientific duties to a considerable extent” (BBC, 24 Feb 2011).

On 24 February 2011 Bundestagspräsident Norbert Lammert said that zu Guttenberg had used six reports created by the parliamentary research service without obtaining necessary approval. However, Lammert admitted that it was a common practice among Bundestag Members to use such documents without authorisation. The Bundestag decided not to press any charges against zu Guttenberg. Even Chancellor Angela Merkel stood behind her “rising star” saying that she “appointed Guttenberg as minister of defence (. . .) not an academic assistant or doctor”. Merkel also added that “What is important to me is his work as minister of defence and he carries out these duties perfectly” (BBC, 22 Feb 2011).

Both Guttenberg’s misbehaviour and Merkel’s backing raised criticism and anger in German academic circles. As a result, Chancellor received an open letter signed by over 50,000 researchers and PhD students, expressing their disapproval for Guttenberg’s continued role in her government (BBC, 6 May 2011).

Entanglement in plagiarism scandal, public humiliation and invalidation of his doctoral thesis led to Guttenberg’s resignation as Minister of Defence on 1 March and from the Bundestag on 3 March 2011. Upon further investigation, it was found out that more than half of zu Guttenberg’s 475-page thesis contained large sections intentionally plagiarised from other sources. Bayreuth University claimed that Guttenberg had “grossly violated standard research practices and in so doing deliberately deceived” (BBC, 6 May 2011).

“The hunters”: Who are they?

The analysis of zu Guttenberg’s thesis was done on the online crowd-sourcing platform GuttenPlag Wiki (de.guttenplag.wikia.com) and was followed by similar initiatives on VroniPlag Wiki (de.vroniplag.wikia.com).

When day turns to night, the online chatroom VroniPlag Wiki starts buzzing. At 6:00 p.m., the first users begin to appear on the screen. By around 10:00 p.m., the majority of them are online. They’re looking for plagiarized work in doctoral theses. They do this all through the night, after their day jobs in many cases, but they don’t get paid for it (Binder, 2012).

For some of the internet activists it is almost like a hobby to check the originality of the prominent theses (Kelsey, 26 Apr 2011). Some have had a personal experience in “copying and pasting” and joined online community after plagiarising their own doctoral dissertations. Other “hunters” started to realise the scale of the problem after becoming aware of zu Guttenberg’s case (Binder, 2011). Taking part in the plagiarism

seeking campaign is open to anyone. The results of each search are checked by a number of community members to ensure accuracy and merit. The most common text-matching tool is Google which is used to compare suspicious and unreferenced passages from dissertations with other documents accessible through the Internet in order to find similarities and matches (Naumann, 2011). As a recognition and appreciation of the good work (documenting and discussing zu Guttenberg’s case as well rising public debate about plagiarism) the GuttenPlag Wiki and its all contributors received in 2011 the Grimme Online Award in the “Special” category (http://de.guttenplag.wikia.com/wiki/Grimme_Online_Award).

Despite their noble actions, “the plagiarists’ hunters” have to face many criticisms. In August 2011, the authors of the online platforms were accused of running a political campaign against CSU party after revealing that the founder of the VroniPlag, and also an active affiliate of the GuttenPlag Wiki, is a member of the opposition SPD (social democratic) party (Badische Zeitung, 2011). Another accusation concerned their identities. Some observers believe that despite uncovering academic dishonesty and triggering positive actions, community of plagiarism hunters hides behind the online anonymity. Only a few decide to make their real names public. However they have their motives. Investigating prominent figures and going after colleagues is seen as betrayal and therefore the hunters with a career in academia prefer to remain anonymous (Binder, 2012). Members of the online community feel threatened. They understand that a person who uncovers such scandals is often seen as a whistle-blower and for that reason they decide not to put their careers at risk. They believe that the pseudonym can offer them a reasonable security (Naumann, 2011).

Anonymity of the online community has raised many questions concerning ethics of their actions. The biggest would be damage to reputation in case the allegations turn out to be groundless. Some observers agree that the online crusade is a positive initiative and it is important that society starts to pay attention to plagiarism problem, though it may appear as an uneven fight when the alleged plagiarist does not know who stands behind the accusation (Kelsey, 26 Apr 2011).

One of “the hunters”, Debora Weber-Wulff, a professor of media and computing at the HTW science university in Berlin, explains anonymity of activists by highlighting the fact that it is not about the attacker, but about the issue. She disagrees that their actions can irreversibly damage reputation of the alleged person: “They’re not accusing anyone of plagiarism, they’re saying, ‘Can you explain why no quotes were used?’” (Kelsey, 26 Apr 2011). What is more, Weber-Wulff believes that the problem lays with lack of universities’ reaction to the academic dishonesty issue: “As long as universities fail to take measures against plagiarism, many plagiarist hunters will remain anonymous” (Binder, 2012). She has a strong opinion about condition of Germany Higher Education claiming that many cases of academic misconduct have been “sweeping under the table” and that the situation got out of control (Kelsey, 26 Apr 2011). Debora Weber-Wulff frequently and passionately highlights her belief that there is no real support for plagiarism prevention and detection at German universities and the lack of training for tutors and teachers only worsens the situation. Moreover there are no procedures for dealing with plagiarism cases at lower levels of education.

Zu Guttenberg's case was just a starting point. According to Debora Webber-Wulff and Graf Isolan (2012):

Currently 26 cases are documented on the site. Of these, eight doctorates have been rescinded (with several lawsuits pending); three have been declared to be within the bounds of acceptability by the awarding universities, although those institutions have provided no explanations for the substantial numbers of text parallels. (...) Other cases not on VroniPlag Wiki have involved the Romanian minister of education [Ioan Mang], the Romanian prime minister [Victor Ponta], the Hungarian president [Pal Schmitt], an official in Thailand, and a parliamentarian in South Korea. Documentation is also underway in Russia concerning the dissertation of their new education minister [Vladimir Medinsky].

The authors also added "The extensive documentation has demonstrated that plagiarism is not just an occasional incident, but something that the German university system must now get serious about" (Webber-Wulff and Isolan, 2012).

Another prominent figure whose case hit the headlines was German Education Minister Annette Schavan accused of plagiarising parts of her doctoral thesis in 1980. Investigators discovered over 60 cases of paraphrased passages used without references. Mrs Schavan was found guilty of "intentional deception through plagiarism" and her PhD title was revoked (Diehl and Trenkamp, 2013). On 9 February 2013 she announced her resignation as minister.

Research: Assumptions of negative impact

The author of this paper is a research assistant to the Europe-wide plagiarism project, Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe (IPPHEAE) led by Irene Glendinning from Coventry University. The project is a cooperative work of five partners:

- Coventry University, United Kingdom
- Lodz University of Technology, Poland
- Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic
- University of Nicosia, Cyprus, and
- Aleksandras Stulginskis University, Lithuania.

IPPHEAE aimed to conduct a survey in all 27 European Union countries at three different levels: management responsible for setting out plagiarism policies; teaching staff that deal with plagiarism cases according to established regulations; and students who try not to be tempted by available "shortcuts". IPPHEAE team also carried out a set of interviews with national representatives who were able to present an overview of the plagiarism situation in their country.

IPPHEAE project focused on investigating participants' understanding of academic dishonesty, as well as perception of plagiarism policies within institutions and countrywide. As a member of the team the author received an opportunity to access the project data and its participants to conduct her own research. The aim was to carry out a comparative study of different European nationalities and find out whether students

from diverse countries and backgrounds present common or dissimilar views towards plagiarism problem. As a part of her PhD, she conducted a set of focus groups that brought new dimensions and qualitative data to the IPPHEAE project.

Trying to approach many German HE Institutions and national authorities, IPPHEAE team was faced with many negative responses from potential participants who refused to be interviewed and talk about plagiarism issues in their country. The team was aware of “zu Guttenberg’s case” and suspected it may have been linked with the reluctance of some people to be interviewed. The project team believed that an atmosphere of fear and intimidation may have been created as a result of “the hunters”. The researchers began highlighting the positive purpose of their research with the idea of sharing the good practice and improving academic standards. IPPHEAE finally managed to receive some positive feedback and conducted 47 student, 7 teaching staff and 2 senior management surveys in German HEIs. The team also interviewed 14 national and university figures (senior academics, university leaders, managers, research integrity leaders) from across the sector. The author was able to carry out 5 focus groups and interviews with 21 master students during her visit to Germany in November 2012. The findings of this research are presented in the next chapter.

All data collected in the survey and during focus groups was held anonymously and securely in order to ensure that none of the responses would lead to the identification of a participant or institution. Codes and details of participants whose views and opinions were used in this paper are shown in a table below (contribution of some participants was omitted as their comments were irrelevant to this paper).

Findings: Positives and negatives

The plagiarism situation in Germany can be best described in the words of the interviewed participants. They have mentioned many negative, but also positive characteristics of German Higher Education. What is more, they recommended some actions to improve the system and implement constructive changes.

Starting from negative comments stated by national and university representatives, many respondents mentioned general lack of awareness and discussion about plagiarism problem:

- (Nat40) “There is no great awareness.”
- (Nat16) “There’s little discussion.”
- (Nat16) “‘None issue’ in Germany, each professor is responsible for his own problems”
- (Nat20) “*More training for students and staff?* Absolutely—very few. (. . .) We do not do enough for quality of teaching and learning, too many student per instructor, no incentives for good teaching.”

Interviewees admitted increase in number of plagiarism cases:

- (Nat20) “In the last few months 2 or 3 surveys have been completed in Germany, but not published. Consistently showing up to 40% of students regularly copy and paste content from sources without citing and referencing. This is a big issue in

Table 1

Participants' codes and details

Participant Code	Survey Level	Participant Description	Survey Type	Institution	Number of Participants
Nat16	National	Plagiarism expert, academic	Interview	University E	1
Nat20	National	Plagiarism expert	Interview	N/A	1
Nat34	National	Academic and researcher	Interview	University F	1
Nat40	National	Academic	Interview	University G	1
Nat41	National	University Rector	Interview	University B	1
Nat42	National	Founding Rector	Interview	University D	1
Nat43, 44	National	Chairmen of Board of Examiners	Interview	University D	2
Nat45, 46	National	Academics	Interview	University D	2
Nat47, 48	National	#47 Exam Officer #48 Associate Dean of Academic Services	Interview	University C	2
StuA	Student	Master students	Focus Group	University A	8
StuB	Student	Master students	Focus Group	University B	5
StuC.1	Student	Master students	Focus Group	University C	6
StuC.2	Student	Former master student	Interview	University C	1

secondary education, known to be a general phenomenon that homework is always copied.”

- (Nat41) “[Plagiarism is] doubtlessly increasing, even professors would agree to this.”

Unfortunately not many statistics are available:

- (Nat43, 44) “There are statistics at the level of institutes—not faculty or university level.”
- (Nat45, 46) “We keep statistics for departments, but there will be huge difference between real cases and documented ones. (...) The system is very draconian, so some colleagues prefer not to record cases. It’s a structural problem—the more severe cases go to a court, where is a different set of penalties, but if cases are not severe many professors don’t want to bother.”
- (Nat16) “No statistics whatsoever therefore would not know in general, however we find more cases—maybe because we are looking better.”

National and university representatives stated many interesting aspects of German plagiarism culture:

- (Nat16) “It is about attitude, a culture of plagiarism has grown up”.

- (Nat34) “Some [lecturers] don’t know, some deliberately ignore, don’t want people to question their practices, and some chase everywhere, strict leading to exclusion of students”.
- (Nat45, 46) “There is no consistent approach towards plagiarism. Some people don’t want to be ‘controllers’—they are here for different reasons”.
- (Nat16) “There is no transparency in Higher Education in Germany”

Participants also mentioned lack of national as well as institution-wide policies:

- (Nat16) “I have a slide in my presentations of an ostrich with its head in the sand that describes the attitudes in Germany. No national or state policy, although some states may set some guidelines, many don’t”.
- (Nat20) “In Nord Westphalia rectors have recommended policy for using software to detect plagiarism. But many academics think we cannot put students and scientists under general suspicion—should only act where there is strong suspicion of cheating”.
- (Nat20) “Very few institutions have top-down strategy/policy for preventing and detecting plagiarism. Highly decentralised”.
- (Nat16) “No evidence of procedures being effective.”
- (Nat20) “There are no institution-wide policies therefore can’t be effective”

Fortunately there were many positive aspects stated by the interviewees:

- (Nat45, 46) “We are getting more precise and detailed about our policies. We have list of penalties for each case.”
- (Nat16) “Some institutions are purchasing software”
- (Nat45, 46) “On the first semester of undergrads—they [students] do special course about academic writing—different aspects of politics and social science, but it’s about testing their awareness.”
- (Nat42) “[Policies] somehow effective, explaining, getting aware of plagiarism. More attentive. But we could do more.”

Participants had many suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the system:

- (Nat20) “Trying to detect is the wrong way—Universities should start to invest in infrastructure.”
- (Nat43, 44) “The key point is to give students an assignment which they cannot plagiarise.”
- (Nat20) “Needs national debate and discussion. It should be banned. Every university should develop policy, clear communication to students and professors about it. Invest in infrastructure and provide lessons to help students to be better writers of homework, thesis. Universities need to reduce the number of students per teacher.”
- (Nat41) “Talking about it, explaining, showing examples, trying to know, it is a question of honesty, students should be proud to be in academia.”

- (Nat41) “If you work with students during writing of their thesis there will be less plagiarism in the final version.”
- (Nat34) “Teacher dialogue, bring into open and talk about it more.”
- (Nat16) “Training, transparency, testing—this is what Germany needs!”

What is more, during interviews with representatives of German HEIs, the team has found out that all of the interviewees were aware of “zu Guttenberg’s case” and recognised it as a step towards improving anti-plagiarism system in Germany:

- (Nat43, 44) “There is a psychological effect after zu Guttenberg’s case.”
- (Nat42) “Starting point was zu Guttenberg’s case—it raised public interest and awareness at institutional level.”
- (Nat41) “There has been a changed view. A year ago no one was talking about it, but because of zu Gutenberg people are now aware, attention has increased.”
- (Nat45, 46) “Guttenberg and other cases had a major influence on PhD level studies. Reactions were varied and different questions were asked: How to raise awareness? Should we do electronic checks? Etc.”

Research participants mentioned exposing prominent cases as a trigger for positive actions across Germany and listed some new initiatives:

- (Nat41) It has been discussed at the state level. There is a recent policy paper for all Universities of Applied Science, decided 6 months ago. The new policy about safeguarding good academic practice contains several new rules and regulations, such as:
 - Explain to students what plagiarism is
 - All final theses should be kept in electronic copies
 - Faculty/Department defines the person to whom thesis given
 - Confidentiality clauses
 - All final theses must be checked for plagiarism
 - If evidence of plagiarism found, thesis has to be redone.
- (Nat41) “Confederation of Vive-Pro Rectors for teaching has been discussing this—whether to be forced by law to do some evaluation, peer-review.”
- (Nat16) “Suggestions were presented to the Bundestag, recommended 3 pronged programme:
 - 1: Educate people—set up a central body to educate teachers about how to avoid plagiarism
 - 2: Transparency, open access, digital submission of dissertations—will expose some shocking examples
 - 3. Mode of controlling—federal body chooses a sample from last 5 years to identify where the problems are, introduce a QA process.”

There were some other aspects raised when talking about “zu Guttenberg’s case”:

- (Nat47, 48) “Guttenberg plagiarised his supervisor—why did the supervisor not find it? Perhaps experts do not read the thesis?”

- (Nat34) “Guttenberg, nobleman (...)—no one would question honesty.”
- (Nat20) “The whole culture starting with secondary education is far too soft. I want to point out that the first public Minister, zu Guttenberg. The Chancellor Mrs Merkel, who has PhD herself, was asking ‘why are you so critical, he only copied, it is not important! I hired him as a minister not a scientist’”
- (Nat19) “Public cases have been exposed, but not from institutions about cases not so prominent—ministers etc., but behind that I think there is a lot going on.”
- (Nat16) “We expose people and in the press we’re nasty people, not those who have plagiarised.”

Some participants expressed their support towards “the hunters”:

- (Nat40) “*Examples of good practice?* Debbie! [Debora Webber-Wulff]”
- (Nat40) “Why does VroniPlag only exist in Germany?”

Despite giving many recommendations on how to improve German anti-plagiarism system, many teaching staff participants did not recognise existence of the problem among themselves, inside academic circles. When asked “*Do you think there should be more training about preventing plagiarism and academic dishonesty for staff?*” some of them answered:

- (Nat42) “I don’t think they [staff] need training—maybe in a form of open discussion with students. Academics know about plagiarism.”
- (Nat45, 46) “It would be ridiculous to teach staff about plagiarism, professors are already experts and authorities when they are appointed to their posts.”
- (Nat16) “German people link plagiarism with ‘copyrights’, so they think it’s ok to use your own words, ‘self-plagiarise’, as you have the copyrights.”
- (Nat47, 48) “Self-plagiarising—not just one view—some people say it does not exist, i.e. it is still my own idea, no need to reference.”
- (Nat45, 46) “Self-plagiarism is OK at PhD level.”

Many sarcastic comments from press only exacerbate the atmosphere calling zu Guttenberg “Mr zu Googleberg” or “Baron Cut-And-Paste”. On the other hand public interest in plagiarism matter is only visible when journalists expose a case involving a prominent figure. Publicising plagiarism affairs helped increase student awareness about academic integrity. Students participating in the research said:

- (StuB) “We’ve learned about plagiarism from the news!”
- (StuA) “We don’t know many [plagiarism] cases personally, but many nationally.”

Most of the interviewed students admitted that revealing “zu Guttenberg’s case” influenced the quality system at many universities and made the rules more rigorous:

- (StuA) “Since Guttenberg it gets really strict”
- (StuB) “F***** Guttenberg!”

Despite some negative comments from the students who obviously do not like the fact that the rules are now stricter and they have to behave more properly, many students are happy about new regulations and see it as a chance of “healing” the system.

At one of the institutions where anti-plagiarism policies were already implemented and used, students had mixed opinions about impact of “zu Guttenberg’s case” on teaching and learning style at their university:

- (StuC.1) “We don’t see any difference after zu Guttenberg’s case”
- (StuC.2) “Zu Guttenberg had influence—it damaged the reputation of PhD students! Our university is quite rigorous, but it could have influence.”

Conclusions: What’s next?

IPPHEAE project team managed to reach only a few HEIs in Germany. These cannot represent the whole German education system. It is possible that only “good universities” which are more concerned about plagiarism issues than others decided to share their experience and spread positive actions across academia. It is also probable that some universities which remained silent are ashamed of their poor approach towards academic dishonesty or are simply unaware of gaps in their policies and procedures. Taking into consideration all the problems the team had to challenge, as well as some negative comments from survey participants, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a fear that all “plagiarism projects” have only one thing in mind—to catch the cheaters. Maybe we all have something to answer for.

Guttenberg’s guilt is undeniable. But what with other plagiarists like Annette Schavan? Should we punish for crimes conducted in the distant past? Where do we draw the line? According to one of the participants (Nat42) “there is nothing wrong in finding these [prominent] cases. If you did something wrong, you need to be punished”.

Despite the fact that anonymity of “the hunters” raised debate about ethics and morality of their actions, the positive influence of their campaign is unquestionable. It affected large and small universities in many subject areas and levels of study. It initiated discussion about quality of academic research and will almost certainly lead to improving standards in German Higher Education. Some institutions have already implemented new policies and anti-plagiarism regulations. Zu Guttenberg’s case “also influenced wider community while its “fame” spread to other European countries. The next step should be to introduce positive initiatives for master and bachelor students and possibly start academic integrity campaigns at lower levels of school education.”

“Training, transparency, testing—this is what Germany needs!” says Debora Webber-Wulff.

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Author

Anna Michalska, aa8789@coventry.ac.uk, Coventry University, United Kingdom

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