FULL PAPERS

EXPLORING ISSUES CHALLENGING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

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Abstract: This paper reports on the South-East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity (SEEPPAI) research study on academic integrity in higher education, which was conducted in Europe in late 2016. The study was funded by the Council of Europe. The data collection methods and results build upon the success of the Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe (IPPHEAE). Conducted between 2010–2013, IPPHEAE explored how higher education institutions (HEIs) in 27 European Union member states were managing student plagiarism and academic misconduct.

The SEEPPAI research covers six further countries in south-east Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. A mixed method research approach was adopted, utilising on-line questionnaires, student focus groups and interviews with senior managers and national policy advisers. Visits to the region to collect data also afforded the research team the opportunity to offer workshops to students and teachers surrounding aspects of academic integrity.

This paper draws on the full research report (SEEPPAI 2017) created for the Council of Europe to present key findings and insights. Central to this is the use of Academic Integrity Maturity Model (AIMM) evaluation tool to analyse the data and provide profiles of the countries participating in the research. Parallels are drawn throughout with the IPPHEAE research. The full report provides further details of the research findings and makes specific observations and recommendations appropriate to each country in the study.

Key words: Academic integrity; plagiarism; ethics; higher education; teacher; student; South Eastern Europe

1   Introduction and Objectives

The South-East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity (SEEPPAI) was commissioned by the Council of Europe as part of their Pan-European programme of initiatives on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED). SEEPPAI is the first of a series of regional studies to investigate how the higher education sector in parts of Europe are managing threats to academic integrity identified through recent research in different parts of the world (Bretag & Mahmud 2014, Lancaster & Clarke 2016, Daniel 2016, Transparency International 2013).

An earlier study of 27 EU member states, Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe (IPPHEAE) conducted in 2010–2013 by some of the same team, provided the starting point and initial resources for the new study (Glendinning 2013, 2016, IPPHEAE 2013–15).

In undertaking this research the team aimed to: identify and analyse policies and practices used in South-Eastern Europe regarding academic integrity in general; identify gaps and challenges, examples of effective practice and success stories that could be widely shared; sketch preliminary guidelines based on positive examples to serve as a reference basis for promoting capacity-building in higher education institutions and/or peer-learning to counter different forms of academic misconduct and plagiarism.

The study focused on delivering the following:

a) Analysis of replies to questionnaires addressed to staff and students in higher education institutions;
b) Review, analysis and synthesis of existing documentation on policies for academic integrity;
c) Lessons learnt on factors of success or failure regarding policies put in place by the institutions to foster academic integrity;
d) Presentation of concrete approaches adopted by universities to address the challenges;
e) Recommendations for actions based on good practices examples on how to bridge identified gaps.

The scope of the study encompassed exploring the impact of strategies, policies and procedures for maintaining academic integrity at all levels of higher education in Albania (AL), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA), Croatia (HR), The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (MK), Montenegro (ME) and Serbia (RS).

A more detailed analysis of the research is available in the project report (SEEPPAI 2017). Some of the text in this paper is extracted from or based on that from the full report.

2   Methodology

2.1   Research approach

The IPPHEAE survey methods were reviewed and revised in the light of the new research conditions and requirements. The decision was taken to adopt a mixed methods approach to collecting evidence from the region: on-line questionnaires, student focus groups, interviews and analysis of documentary evidence. It was anticipated that this approach, together with visits to the region, would maximise the opportunities to capture useful and good quality evidence. All research complied with Coventry University's ethical approval requirements. Participation in the research was on a voluntary basis.

In keeping with the successful survey for IPPHEAE, separate on-line questionnaires were created for students, academic teaching staff and senior managers. In addition to the English versions, student and teacher questionnaires were translated into the local languages used by people in the six countries of the study. The senior management questionnaire was made available in English.

Table 1

SEEPPAI—Summary of questionnaire responses in different languages

	AL	BA	HR	MK	ME	RS	Other country	Total
Responses from teachers	30	27	81	9	9	99	0	255
Responses from students	56	64	171	18	11	136	4	460
Responses from managers	1	4	4	1	0	5	0	15
Total Questionnaire Responses	87	95	256	28	20	240	4	730

To capture more in-depth information about institutional and national strategies, a set of open questions were designed for senior managers in HEIs and people with knowledge about national policies and initiatives. These were intended to be presented as face-to-face semi-structured interviews during visits to each country.

Student focus groups were planned to gain a deep understanding of students' perceptions on academic integrity, to supplement the mainly quantitative responses captured through questionnaires.

English was the language used in communications during interviews and focus groups, however where needed local contacts kindly served as language translators to ensure clarity and accuracy of responses.

2.2   Data collection

Primary contacts for the research included people from the region who were involved in ETINED and the Council of Europe and a wide range of institutional contacts of members of the project team. In addition, the project team attempted to contact all institutions in the region by email or telephone with a request for them to participate in the survey. The people who expressed interest were asked to disseminate the request for participation to their own contacts in the region. However, disappointingly, only a minority of the individuals and institutions contacted agreed to contribute to the project.

Several higher education institutions in the study region expressed interest in the research and generously hosted and supported visits by SEEPPAI team members. In total over 50 HEIs participated in some way in the study and visits were arranged to 17 HEIs. The bulk of survey responses came from the on-line questionnaires, with a total of 730 responses altogether, as summarised in Table 1. A total of 69 activities were recorded during the visits to the six countries, including 13 student focus groups, 17 interviews and 15 workshops.

During the visits to a range of different HEIs in each of the six countries, team members had opportunities to engage directly with many students, academics and HEI managers. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, team members provided presentations and ran workshops to audiences including a broad range of stakeholders about previous research and good practice in strategies for academic integrity in higher education.

A less formal approach to generating useful knowledge for this study was achieved by means of discussions with stakeholders during visits to the six countries. Sometimes

the discussions resulted from workshops or presentations provided by the researchers for students or teachers. Occasionally insights about local policies and practices were captured in a more social context, typically during a shared mealtime.

2.3   Data analysis

The quantitative data from the on-line questionnaires was statistically analysed. Results were both tabulated and presented graphically. Transcripts were made of the qualitative data collected from the on-line questionnaires and collected using audio recording and note-taking during the visits. Where necessary the responses were translated into English with support from colleagues in the region. Thematic analysis allowed comparisons of mixed responses from students, teachers and managers, which provided the means to triangulate and make sense of the results.

   The full report (SEEPPAI 2017) provides details of the findings from the research and makes observations and recommendations appropriate to each country in the study. Some key points from the study are summarised in the remainder of the paper.

3   Key Findings from the SEEPPAI Research

3.1   National perspectives

Examples of effective practice identified across the region were included in the project report (SEEPPAI 2017). Some national initiatives were noted, such as the Ministry of Education of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia requiring doctoral and master's theses to be submitted to a national archive and checked for originality. But generally, education ministries and accreditation and quality agencies in the region do not provide strong guidance or oversight for policies relating to academic integrity.

   Similarly to the findings from other countries in Europe, collusion and sharing of assessed individual work appears to be considered acceptable in the region. Responses suggest this is perceived as a way for students to support their peers and enhance their understanding.

   It was relatively common for training to be provided for students in academic writing, use of sources and ethical practices, but almost all respondents agreed ("strongly agree" or "agree" on five point scale) there should be much more information and education for both students and teachers about all aspects of academic integrity. This was confirmed by questions in the survey exploring the concept of plagiarism, which showed that many students, and a few of the teacher participants, had a poor understanding of how to make use of academic sources.

3.2   Pedagogic practices in higher education in South East Europe

In the region being studied, there seems to be a strong culture of academic autonomy in higher education, with oversight and monitoring of academic decisions uncommon. For example, routine independent second marking and moderation of assessment and grading are not common. This has implications for transparency, consistency and quality assurance in general.

Table 2

Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that their institution has policies and procedures for dealing with different forms of cheating

Agreement that "my institution has policies and procedures for dealing with …"	teachers	students	managers
Plagiarism	51%	60%	73%
Academic Dishonesty	55%	59%	94%
Exam cheating	75%	71%	94%
Ghost writing	51%	45%	73%

When asked about teaching, learning and assessment, senior managers provided a range of different responses. They suggested that, in their institutions, students are encouraged to engage in critical thinking and are given various types of practical and challenging assessment. However, responses from students (in focus groups and from responses to open questions in the questionnaire), gave the impression that teaching is largely by rote learning, assessed mainly by formal examinations. The predominant higher educational culture in the region that emerged from the survey is a didactical approach to teaching and learning, with critical thinking and innovation not encouraged in many faculties and institutions.

There were some exceptions: for example, highly practical studio-based creative classes in architecture at an HEI faculty in The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, small class sizes with oral examinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and evidence of requirements for critical thinking in language and teacher training in an HEI in Albania. Other atypical South Eastern European HEIs were distinguished through close associations or accreditation from other countries, such as USA or UK. Such institutions often adopted practices from their partner's institution, such as student honesty pledges, uncommon in Europe but often found in USA, and codes of practice in common with their international partners.

3.3   Policies related to academic integrity on a national and institutional level

When deans, vice-deans or teachers at higher education institutions were asked about the policies concerning plagiarism and academic integrity, they typically mentioned codes of ethics and ethical committees, normally concerning master's level and above. A few universities in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania adopted their ethical rules from western universities.

All the questionnaires included questions asking whether respondents' institutions have policies for dealing with plagiarism, academic dishonesty, exam cheating and contract cheating in the form of ghost-written work.

The senior managers' responses in Table 2 suggest that most institutions have a range of policies to counter different forms of academic misconduct, even if their communication methods to students and teachers could be improved. However little evidence emerged of rigour or consistency in implementation of policies for managing academic misconduct, particularly at bachelor and taught master's levels.

The evidence collected in SEEPPAI comparing observed student cheating with preventative measures, suggests that there is very appreciation of methods for discouraging or "designing out" academic misconduct (Morris 2011, Carroll 2005, Culwin & Lancaster 2001, Bretag & Mahmud 2014). Most of the responses to questions on "prevention strategies" from teachers and managers were passively dependent on students understanding institutional policies (typically available on the web site or course handbook). Occasionally text-matching software was proposed as a deterrent, but this did not appear to be widely used.

There does not appear to be an adequate response in many institutions towards deterring serious forms of academic misconduct, identified as prevalent across the region. Cheating in examinations was said to common, with inadequate invigilation. Third parties, remotely providing answers through hidden earpieces, were said to be readily available to hire. In some cases, examination seating arrangements meant that students could not avoid seeing how their peers had answered the questions. Problems were further exasperated with the reuse of examination papers, with students able to access questions and answers in advance. Similarly, written assessments were often reused, leading to assessment submissions not always reflecting the candidate's own achievements.

Contract cheating is recognised as a global phenomenon (Lancaster & Clarke 2016, Clarke & Lancaster 2006), that is difficult to detect, prove and eradicate. As a deliberate and premeditated act of fraudulent behaviour, it represents a serious breach of academic integrity. In the SEEPPAI region, contract cheating was reported to be very common, with companies advertising affordable services on campus. The use of such ghost-writing services provoked lively discussion with students, teachers and managers. It was of some concern to find that submitting ghost-written work appeared to be seen, by both teachers and students, as no more serious than other forms of plagiarism.

In one student focus group and in several free-format comments from students, it appeared that students (and some academic teachers) viewed exam cheating as a game of outwitting the invigilators. There was also evidence presented that obvious cheating was sometimes ignored, with invigilation proving to be very casual, or with the staff present seeming to not want to catch students cheating. On the positive side, some institutions are looking at measures designed to reduce examination cheating.

3.4   Student and teacher perceptions of plagiarism scenarios

One key part of the survey for IPPHEAE was designed to establish how well respondents understood the concept of plagiarism and capture their views on whether different forms of plagiarism should be penalised. A question, where students and teachers were given several scenarios and had to judge the severity of the cases, provides useful information about the culture and perceptions of plagiarism. Examples of the results from these scenarios, merging together the results from 27 EU countries from IPPHEAE and the six countries from SEEPPAI, are shown in Figures 1 and 2. The SEEPPAI results fall within the previous scale, suggesting that perceptions closely align.
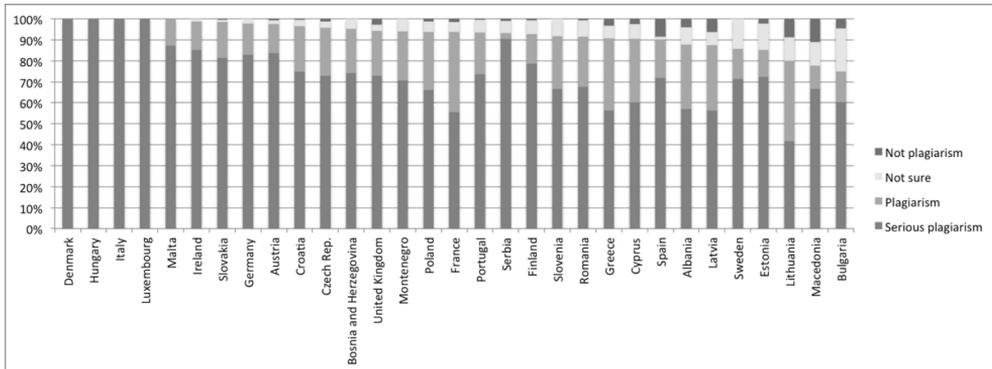
Figure 1. Students' perception of plagiarism in different European countries. 40% copied, word for word with no quotations, references or in-text citations
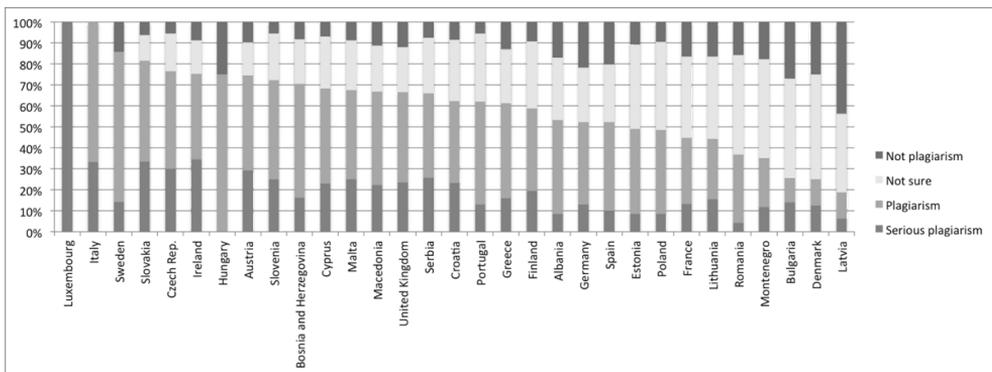

Figure 2. Students' perception of plagiarism in different European countries. 40% copied, some words changed, no quotations, references or in-text citations

Figure 2 shows the scenario where students copied 40% of their work without citation, but attempted to change some of it. 39.38% of students in the new study thought that this was not plagiarism. This figure compares with 38.58% of students across the 27 EU countries in the original study and suggests that some students have a poor grasp of source use and referencing.

Responses from teachers to the same question revealed a slightly more positive pattern in understanding, but still raise concerns. A poor understanding was apparent in a total of 11.6% of teacher respondents in the new study, compared to 17.3% of the teachers in the IPPHEAE study on 27 EU countries.

3.5   *Evidence from teachers and students on skills, knowledge and training*

Students in the online questionnaire were asked at what stage in their educational development they became aware of plagiarism and when they learned to cite and reference. These results are summarised in Figures 3 and 4.
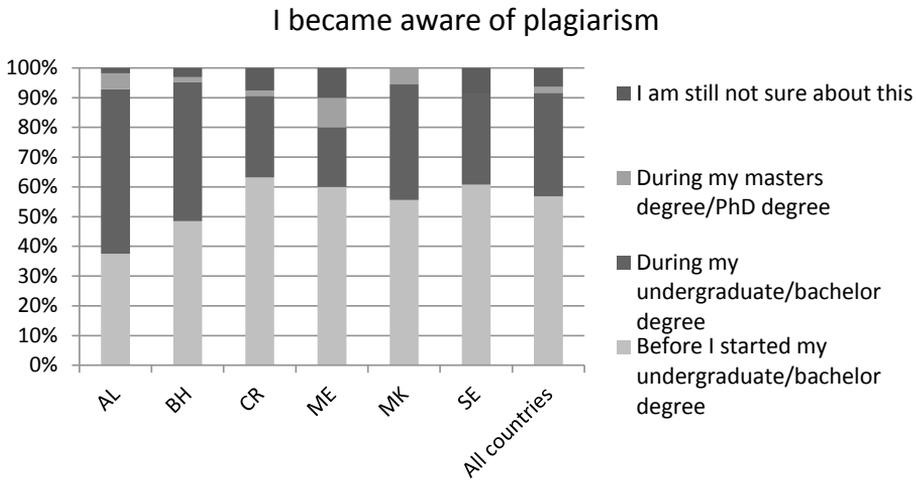
I became aware of plagiarism

Figure 3. Students' responses on how they had become aware of plagiarism
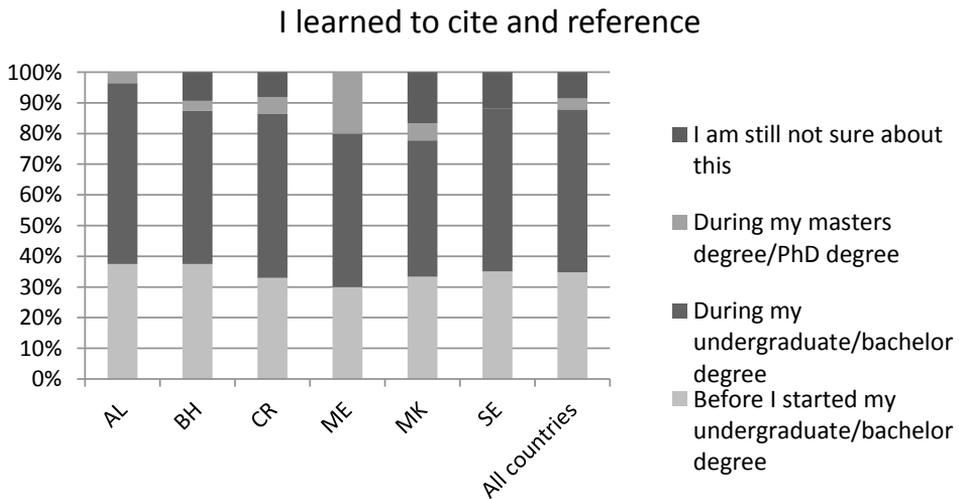
I learned to cite and reference

Figure 4. Students' responses on how they had learned to cite and reference

Under 40% of students in every country said they learned how to cite and reference before they started their undergraduate/bachelor degree. In general, 53% students learned this during the undergraduate/bachelor studies, showing similar results for all six countries.

Most students in focus groups were familiar with such terms as *plagiarism*, *auto-plagiarism* or *ghost-writing* and some said they were referring to experience gained in high school.

Students and teachers were surveyed about what sources of information made them aware of the seriousness of plagiarism and academic dishonesty and the consequences. Although there was overlap in the responses from teachers and students, an interesting distinction was that teachers assumed students learned from their teachers, from web sites, written sources, workshops and lectures, but students said they were also influenced by other students, social media and family and friends.

In general, students and teachers involved in the research agreed that there should be more education on "avoidance of plagiarism and academic dishonesty" in universities. In total 82.9% of student questionnaire respondents agreed ("strongly agree" or "agree" on five point scale) they would like to have more training and 87.2% of teacher respondents agreed that students should have more training. Perhaps more significantly, 80.3% of teacher respondents agreed that there should be more training for teachers on the same subjects.

To support this last finding, the question "Please provide suggestions for reducing student cheating" generated well over 600 open responses. Thematic analysis of this quantitative data from students, teachers and managers revealed that over 40% of the suggestions related to provision of more education, information and training.

3.6   *Relaxed attitudes to cheating*

Although the full SEEPPAI report (SEEPPAI 2017) identifies many further pockets of good practice, it also notes that these are both incomplete and inconsistently applied. Transparency International's (TI) influential research (2013, 2015) demonstrates that corruption is a problem affecting all six counties in this study. Such corruption is said to extend beyond education to Government level. To make sustained change will require wider cultural shifts, alongside the financial support needed to resource improvements in quality and integrity within education.

Notable issues were raised by students in several focus groups relating to a wider culture of cheating that had permeated through to HEIs. In one such example, students were known to pay bribes to teachers in return of preferential assessment grades.

A culture encouraging relaxed attitudes to cheating was notable in discussions with both students and staff. Examples were given of where tutors would turn a blind eye to cheating, although some teachers were known by students to be much stricter. Where university processes did exist, there was a consensus across both staff and students that these were often not followed, with staff making their own judgement over appropriate penalties. Student respondents also suggested that teachers could make more effort to discourage students from cheating and that further support and understanding of measures designed to present cheating would be useful.

4   Comparison Between South-Eastern Europe and EU Countries

4.1   *Analysis using the Academic Integrity Maturity Model (AIMM)*

As a means of summarising and comparing the findings for each of the six countries, the Academic Integrity Maturity Model (AIMM) has been applied to the survey data collected. The results are shown in Figures 5 and 6. The AIMM tool was designed to
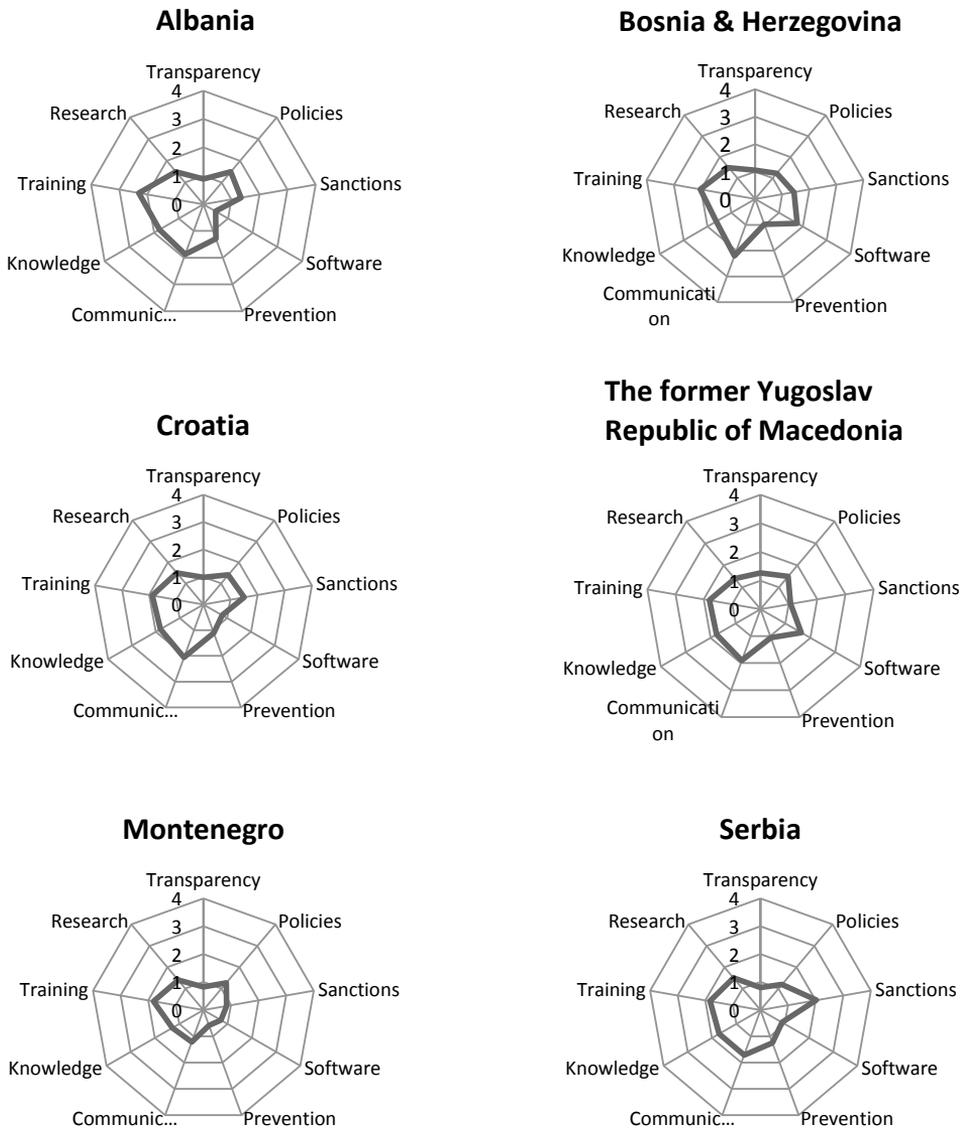
Albania

Bosnia & Herzegovina

Croatia

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Montenegro

Serbia

Figure 5. AIMM—Comparison of strengths and weaknesses of policies in the six countries

measure maturity of policies and processes based on the survey responses (Glendinning 2013).

The radar charts in Figure 5 depict the scores (out of 4) for the nine AIMM categories for each country. The same data is shown as a stacked bar chart in figure 10. All six countries show relative strength in training provision with scores between 1.8 and 2.3 out of a possible maximum score of 4. Use of software varies between countries, with BA
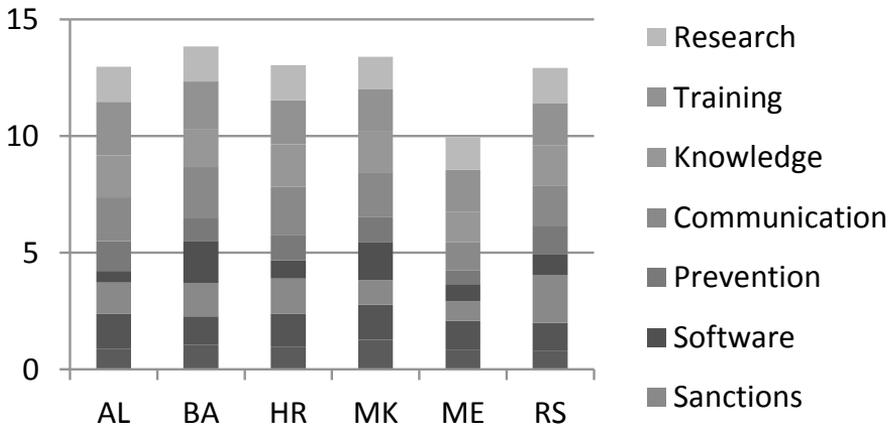
Figure 6. AIMM results for the six countries

scoring the highest (1.77) and MK second (1.64), but with very low scores in the other countries. Even where available the software use is generally restricted to detection of plagiarism rather than the more mature application of formative learning and development seen in some EU countries. Two other categories that scored reasonably well in most of these countries are communication and knowledge, which provides optimism for success in future developments. Transparency was found to be weak in all six countries.

4.2   Comparison of SEEPPAI and IPPHAEA results under AIMM

It must be noted that the survey questions used for IPPHEAE were updated and reformatted for this survey, which allowed data from more questions to be included in the AIMM analysis for SEEPPAI. However it is of interest to make a comparison between results for the two projects.

The AIMM results provide a useful guide to what is happening in each country and help to prioritise where attention is needed most. It also needs to be acknowledged that self-selection of institutions for participation combined with low volumes of data for a minority of countries in both IPPHEAE and SEEPPAI mean that the results from both projects cannot be considered representative of the full picture in every country. Further, the IPPHEAE data was collected 4–5 years ago, therefore the datasets are not contemporaneous.

When the IPPHEAE AIMM results are merged with the SEEPPAI results, all 6 SE Europe countries lie in the middle to lower part of the table for maturity. Taken as part of a ranking of all 33 countries, the SEEPPAI countries were ranked as follows:

- Bosnia & Herzegovina 14th
- The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 18th

- Croatia 19th
- Albania 21st
- Serbia 24th
- Montenegro 32nd

Taking into account differences in the two datasets, it is notable that new results are comparable with those captured for the 27 EU countries in the IPPHEAE survey.

5   Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1   Recommendations to national governments and quality agencies

National governments, through their education ministries and accreditation and quality agencies, should proactively provide oversight for and guidance in strengthening policies and procedures for academic integrity in higher education institutions as a crucial component of quality assurance. Accreditation and quality agencies should monitor the quality of education provided by both public and private higher education institutions. Research and development in academic integrity policies and systems should be encouraged through the provision of small grant funding.

National governments should consider engaging with software companies providing text matching software to negotiate an affordable nation-wide license. Ministries of education in the region should facilitate communications between institutions within the country and across national borders. This will enable others to learn from positive experiences and share ideas for effective ways to counter academic malpractice.

5.2   Recommendations to institutions

To address the disparity in policies and practices across different faculties in HEIs, institutional leaders should **initiate an internal review of local policies and practices** with a view to establishing an institution-wide working group that will coordinate the development and implementation of common institutional strategy, policies and systems for academic integrity. Institutions should **develop standard set of sanctions** for plagiarism, exam cheating, ghost writing and other forms of academic dishonesty. These sanctions must **be known** by students and followed fairly in each case. **Supervision and oversight arrangements** for formal examinations should be strengthened as a means of discouraging cheating, by increasing the number of invigilators and clarifying and strengthening their responsibilities.

Training should be provided for academic staff, thesis supervisors and invigilators. Potentially institutions within one area could organise **shared seminars and workshops**. Each institution should take responsibility to ensure that students at all levels are suitably informed and progressively educated **on matters of honesty and integrity, academic writing and use of sources**. This information should be provided as early as possible, preferably in the first semester. Institutions need to **develop guidelines** for students, academic teachers and decision-takers about issues relating to academic integrity. Institutions also need to **put guidelines to practice** and enforce the rules defined.

Where it is possible to **acquire software tools** for aiding the detection of plagiarism and collusion between students, the institution needs to develop clear policies for how the tools should be deployed and guidelines for the interpretation and use of the outputs. The institution should take **all measures possible** to deter cheating in whatever form it may take, including plagiarism, contract cheating, the use of essay mills and examination cheating.

Regarding pedagogical practices, the institution should **discourage rote learning by aspiring to provision** up-to-date learning experiences at all levels of study, where critical thinking is valued and teaching, learning and assessment are rewarding and inspirational. The institution should **mobilise representatives of the student community** as valued partners in the challenge to reduce all forms of student cheating. The institution should consider establishing **procedures for "whistleblowing"** to allow the reporting of cases of academic misconduct, particularly from students.

5.3   *Recommendations to individuals*

Academic staff must **take responsibility** for their own conduct as role models for the next generation of professionals. They should **commit to integrity**: fairness, consistency, honesty, transparency **in both their professional and private lives.**

Academic staff should ensure that all students they are teaching or supervising are aware of the value and importance of learning and scholarship and motivated to maximise their attainment. **Continuing Professional Development** (CPD) should be a requirement for all academic staff. This allows them to keep up to date with their subject, educational developments, pedagogical practices and institutional policies. Academic staff should ensure that **all suspected cases** of academic misconduct **are handled per the institutional policies and procedures**. Such procedures ensure fairness and consistency for all students.

5.4   *Conclusion*

SEEPPAI has identified many examples of good practice where individual teachers are trying to enact change across the region. Compared to many EU states previously surveyed for IPPHEAE, research proactively addressing academic misconduct is already happening in the region (ACSN SEE 2015, Harjrulla 2015, Zhivkoviki 2016, Re@WBC Project).

Despite such good practice, the journey towards reform in the SEEPPAI countries is going to be long and difficult. However many of the academic contacts established by the SEEPPAI team members showed appreciation of where the problems lie and the challenges delaying the reform of educational practices and policies.

Where progress has been made, a cost-effective way to begin development would be for this information to be widely shared. As suggested by many participants, it would help to provide lessons for students on academic writing and avoiding plagiarism much earlier in education, preferably before students start university. Academic teachers are needed here to set a good example. There is also a need to convince and motivate institutional leaders and managers to act.

Finally, the significance of studies of this type is that identifying the challenges can help to bring about change. Academia has the capacity to influence the overall culture of a country by educating the next generation of leaders of industry, commerce and government. By changing the values and aspirations of young people, academia can help to cut the cycle of corruption.

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