

The Plagiarism Challenge

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Although searching for “plagiarism” in Google Scholar, generates more than half a million results, only 23.67% of students and respondents, respectively, 46.15% of faculty members in Serbia believe they have adequate knowledge regarding plagiarism. In order to learn more about what necessary understanding of plagiarism is lacking amongst students and faculty in Serbia, two voluntarily and anonymous online questionnaires were distributed to faculty and students at private and public universities throughout the country. Responses were obtained from 729 faculty members and 1741 students and analyzed to see what information could be gleaned.

While there is a vague general agreement that plagiarism involves presenting the content of someone else’s work as own, and also that submitting parts of a text or a text in its entirety without giving credit to the original author, both teachers and students show uncertainty about where the boundaries are. Competing popular definitions and descriptions of plagiarism such as “wrongful appropriation”, “patchwriting” (Howard, 1995), and “literary theft” are vague and unhelpful to students trying to ascertain where the lines should be drawn, while precise academic definitions such as Fishman’s proposal (2009) that plagiarism occurs when a writer uses words, ideas, or work products:

1. Attributable to another identifiable person or source
2. Without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained
3. In a situation in which there is a legitimate expectation of original authorship
4. In order to obtain some benefit, credit, or gain which need not be monetary

These definitions are rarely included in courses or handbooks where students might be more likely to benefit from them. Quite simply, it’s often assumed that because students are familiar with the general concepts of plagiarism, they know the specifics of how to avoid it. Research has shown that this is not necessarily the case and the students and sometimes even researchers often do not understand the concept of plagiarism (Bašić et al., 2019). This study demonstrates that students often talk about gray zones, saying that they need to refer to texts but they are confused about how to properly acknowledge their work. This confusion may explain why students have higher tolerance towards misconduct when compared to the faculty, especially regarding plagiarism and falsification of research results (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005).

In order to investigate what exactly it is that is considered to be problematic, the two groups have been asked whether they consider seven case scenarios to be plagiarism or not. The results show that both faculty and students show lack of knowledge, but that the faculty tends

to understand plagiarism better and thus to judge plagiarism as more serious than students. The difference between the faculty's and students' views is significant. In all the cases examined in the survey, the faculty rate the examples as plagiarism or serious plagiarism to a much greater extent than the students.

The uncertainty is not limited to knowing when to label something as plagiarism; it can also go the other way. While one of these cases was clearly not plagiarism, many students and faculty members have marked it as plagiarism and some even as serious plagiarism, showing clearly uncertainty about the conventions in that way as well.

Self-plagiarism is another topic that seems to be unclear for both teachers / researchers and students. Rules considering self-plagiarism in particular seem to be challenging. Particularly regarding the question of what is permitted to be reused and what must be original every time. Can you use the same method description or introduction in two articles that are based on the same project or submit the same text on two courses? The surveys revealed that 39.87% of the students and 24.20% of the faculty members believe that it is not cheating to copy a paragraph from your own earlier published text word by word without acknowledging a source, while 40.06% of the students and 21.61% of the faculty members think that it is ok to submit a work previously submitted to another course without specifying that.

The usage of the technology for the detection of plagiarism in Serbia is limited: merely 17.91% of the faculty members have used a text matching software, leaving a room for improvement. Instead, the faculty mostly rely on the feeling that something looks familiar or the variation of the language or the format in a text.

Although both students (70.34%) and faculty (65.92%) consider laziness to be the major reason for plagiarism there are several significant differences between both groups: while 52.92% of the faculty blame the internet for making it easy to cheat, only 34.42% of the students think the same. Other reasons that students and faculty consider important are that students want to pass the course at any price due to the pressure from family, friends, etc. While students stress lack of interest in the topic, faculty sees lack of punishment as well as insufficient knowledge on academic writing and of what plagiarism is as important reasons.

Previous research done within the SEEPPAI project has noted a discrepancy between students' and faculty's approach regarding ways to improve academic integrity in Serbia: "Students believe in education, whereas teachers prefer sanctions" (Foltýnek et al., 2017).

A clear majority of students and faculty in Serbia consider academic integrity to be an important question, however the results of this study show the need for further education. Both groups state making information about academic integrity an integral part of education at all levels from undergraduate to postgraduate to be the most effective way to prevent plagiarism. But while students experience a lack of information about plagiarism and only 13.58% feel they have received enough information, 69.35% of teachers believe that they

provide such information on their course, a discrepancy that shows that a review of the educational measures is needed. The surveys demonstrate that in Serbia, faculty as well as students would benefit from an enhanced pedagogical approach to academic integrity and getting more education in that area. Although a large majority of students and faculty members think that academic integrity indeed is an important question, the lack of confidence about the specific understanding about plagiarism is remarkable – and potentially harmful.

The majority in both groups does not think that they have enough knowledge on plagiarism, not surprisingly when the majority of students has not received enough information about the issue although the majority of teachers state that they have informed the students in the context of their teaching. Therefore, it might not be a coincidence that both groups consider education on academic integrity being one of the most effective ways to prevent plagiarism. A review of the pedagogical measures is recommended. Another area of improvement might be higher usage of the text-matching software, as well as the development of standard procedures for reporting the cases of misconduct. By analysing the various plagiarism survey responses, insight and potential avenues for improvement can be extracted which can be applied in other countries as well.

References

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