

Raising students' awareness of academic ethics through LIFE project in Tallinn University

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Last spring we conducted an interdisciplinary project called «Postmodern play or plagiarism» with 16 students from different disciplines (law, education, arts, political science, humanities) in Tallinn University within the framework of Learning in Interdisciplinary Focused Environment (LIFE). Of the 16 students more than a half were master students with work experience, and only few were first and second year bachelor students.

The aim of the project was to make students more aware of the discussions concerning academic ethics in the society, and to raise their awareness concerning their own academic activities. The major themes of the project were: where is the border between postmodern playfulness that seems to accept any free usage of other people's works and plagiarism, and what are the ethical issues students from different disciplines come across in their own chosen field of studies and work.

The first workshops consisted of discussing the mandatory readings about academic ethics (Kiil, Hennoste 2014), postmodern culture (Kraavi 2005, Loog 2010), after which students had to find cases from the media from different walks of life – the cases they found concerned cases from fashion (dress designs), music, graphic design (logos of campaigns and events). There was also a case of a politician's bachelor thesis written in Tallinn University 17 years ago, accused of plagiarism in the media, and students had to analyse the media coverage of the case, offer suggestions for resolving the case to the university ethics board and find arguments for and against the politician's actions concerning his thesis and his qualifications.

Then students devised their own mini-projects. One group devised a survey and sent these out to faculty members of all the institutes. The survey consisting of 29 questions targeted awareness of plagiarism in teaching and student supervision, as well as that of responsibility (who is responsible for the final check up of the work in terms of academic correctness, is anyone using plagiarism-discovering software). The number of respondents was 89, and though a vast majority of faculty members checks correct referencing, more than half felt that the number of discovered plagiarism cases was much smaller than the real number of plagiarised works.

Another group made oral one-to-one interviews with co-students about their awareness of plagiarism – asking about what plagiarism means for them, would they practice it, and if so,

what could be the reasons for it.

The third group devised a table with different types of plagiarism (cloning, copy-paste, find-replace, remix, 404 Error, recycle, re-tweet – based on Turnitin 2016) with concrete Estonian examples and suggestions how to avoid these types.

The fourth group made interviews (both oral and written) in the institutes with study coordinators and curators of programmes about the discovered cases of plagiarism in MA thesis, how the cases were resolved, and about the general attitudes concerning academic ethics and plagiarism.

During the project the general meetings for discussions took place every second week, and students presented their homework, and later their mini-project. The final results of the whole project for the students could be summarized as follows. There are many grey (unregulated areas) in academic ethics, and not all plagiarism cases result from corrupted mindsets. There is also, in the setting of university studies, issues about responsibility: since many plagiarism cases result from ignorance or slovenliness (referencing errors) and not from vexatious intentions, who should be responsible for unearthing them – the supervisor, the reviewer, the examining committee? Who is the person who should use the plagiarism discovering software – the student, the supervisor, the programme co-ordinator or curator?

The closing conclusion from the students was: plagiarism and academic ethics are not always clear-cut, and therefore it is necessary to raise the awareness of these issues at all levels. The students also mentioned that during the project their own awareness level raised, and the theme that initially seemed so simple became much more complicated and sensitive.

In the anonymous feedback to the project (10 out of 16 students involved with the project responded) the students' overall satisfaction with the project, their own work in it, and the consciousness raise was evaluated “good”, “very good” or “excellent”.

The results of the project were publicly presented in the university LIFE projects' sessions, and via us, the supervisors, also to the university plagiarism working group.

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