

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON PLAGIARISM AND RELEVANT POLICIES IN CYPRUS

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Abstract: This paper discusses the findings of a research conducted among university students in Cyprus with the purpose of exploring students' awareness and perceptions relating to academic plagiarism. It is clear from the findings of this study that there is a need for a clear and uniform definition and understating of the terms "plagiarism" and "academic dishonesty". There is also a need to develop mechanisms for communicating these definitions both to students and to faculty in addition to ensuring that these terms have been understood. In the setting up of policies, procedures and penalties for plagiarism and academic dishonesty, it is necessary to have uniformity and consistency in their implementation and especially in the implementation of penalties. The results also indicate that the use of tools, such as software for prevention and/or detection of plagiarism, would definitely contribute positively in reducing plagiarism.

Introduction

Easy accessibility to online educational resources and to scientific publications has facilitated academic plagiarism. The increased number of identified cases at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) raises concerns among academic faculty and higher administration as well as among policy makers at quality assurance institutions. The rising concerns on the extent of plagiarism practiced by students worldwide, has promoted the research and publications on prevention, detection and deterrence of plagiarism in order to address various interrelated aspects.

Research on the contributing factors for plagiarism (Chanock 2008) and the deterrence mechanisms (Carroll 2007) have associated good practices on academic writing with anti-plagiarism approaches. A number of educational resources are available online or published which offer advice primarily to students and also to academics willing to assist their students. They outline best practices that contribute towards prevention of plagiarism. Published educational resources include principles and examples on paraphrasing, referencing and properly addressing sources. Awareness of best practices, per se, is only a part of any policy aiming to prevent plagiarism. Repetitive practice on academic writing (Emerson, Rees & MacKay, 2005) and proper examples have also been proposed in the framework of anti-plagiarism approaches.

Another relevant approach is the provision of detailed feedback to students' work (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006). This can be accomplished as part of a formative assessment of students' work, which includes software packages that support identification of text similarities (Davis 2009). Recently, Ireland and English (2011) have proposed the concept of a "safe environment" where students are allowed to "plagiarize" as a means for gradually developing proper academic writing skills. This approach was made possible as a result of the development of software tools, such as Turnitin®, which rely on detection and prevention of plagiarism and allow formative assessment (Bennett, 2005; Davis, 2007; Murray, 2006).

Combating plagiarism effectively while maintaining consistency in the standards and quality of higher education across the European Union (EU,) requires the identification of any gaps, best practices and case studies on plagiarism across the member states. Research on practices and policies on anti-plagiarism at universities has been conducted primarily at English-speaking countries (MacCabe, 2005; Hayes and Introna, 2005) and less so at non-English speaking ones (Carroll and Zetterling 2009). This paper reports on the findings of research conducted among university students in Cyprus HEIs as part of the “IPPHEAE: Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe ERASMUS-Lifelong Learning project” (2010–2013). The purpose of this research was to explore students' awareness and perceptions relating to academic plagiarism. More specifically, the survey attempted to identify students' interpretation of the term “plagiarism”, their awareness of plagiarism, the extent of plagiarizing and the reasons for this, and the existence and implementation of policies, procedures and penalties for dealing with plagiarism at the institution of their study.

Methodology

The research was undertaken in two stages. Initially, the questionnaire was designed based on the feedback received from the five partner institutions participating in the IPPHEAE project. Prior to administration, the questionnaires were pilot-tested for reliability with the utilisation of the test re-test method and the use of experts.

The second stage was the survey of the targeted group. The target population of the study included all students, undergraduate and graduate, pursuing an academic degree, in public and private universities in Cyprus. The survey questionnaire included 33 questions, some open-ended and some with multiple answers, which were made available either on-line or as hard copies. A total of 318 correctly completed questionnaires were collected. Prizes, based on a lottery draw, were offered to students to encourage them to complete the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the responders (74.7%) were undergraduate students, studying on a full-time basis (81.5%), in their last year of study (34.8%) and between 21–25 years old (55.4%).

With regard to the definition of plagiarism, the most popular answers (in terms of descending popularity) given by students were: “Copy and paste, without acknowledgement of the source you took your material from”; “Plagiarism is a close imitation or form of cheating” and “The uses of work/research of others without citation, thus making it appear as your own work”. These results indicate a lack of a clear understanding of “plagiarism” by students and are in agreement with Carroll (2007) conclusions that students' perception of the term is not shared by universities or academicians.

As shown in Fig. 1 there are no differences in the number of students who become aware of plagiarism either before or during their undergraduate studies. However, the majority of students (70.8%) appear to learn how to cite and reference only during their undergraduate studies (Fig. 2) from sources like the web, course booklets and class notes (Fig. 3). It is interesting to note that these are also the sources that students report

Table 1
Demographics: Cyprus Data

Percentage of total students responded (n = 318)							
Degree	%	Mode of study	%	Year of study	%	Age (years)	%
Bachelor's	74.7	Full time	81.5	First	27.2	<20	13.1
Master's	25.3	Part time	12.0	Second	17.0	21–25	55.4
PhD	0.0	Other	6.5	Third	17.4	26–30	9.6
				Fourth	34.8	31–40	16.9
				Fifth	3.3	41–50	4.8
				Sixth or higher	0.3	50+	0.3

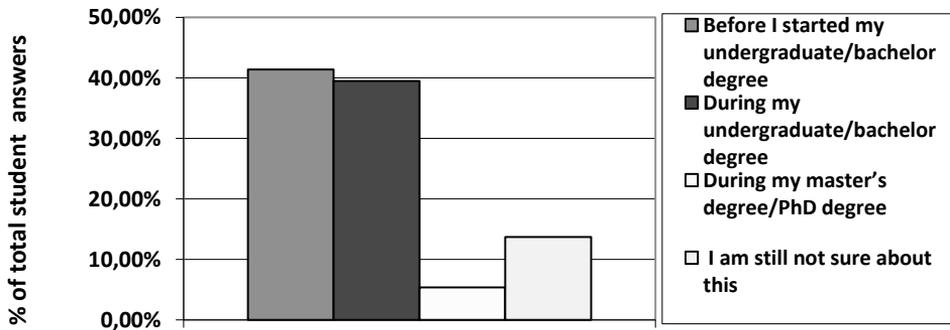


Figure 11.2. Timing of plagiarism awareness

to have contributed to their awareness of plagiarism (Fig. 4). These results indicate that the period of university undergraduate training is an important period for sensitizing students to plagiarism.

Awareness of plagiarism may be part of the students receiving adequate training on academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues (70.8% agree) as indicated from the results to the relevant question in Table 2. Although, on the basis of the questions used it was not evident how early the students receive such training, it was of interest to see that the majority of them (70%) received it from “tutors and lecturers and/or during a course/module” (60%) as shown in Table 3.

Table 2
Percentage of students' responses on received training on scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not applicable
2.2%	11.1%	10.5%	47%	23.8%	5.4%

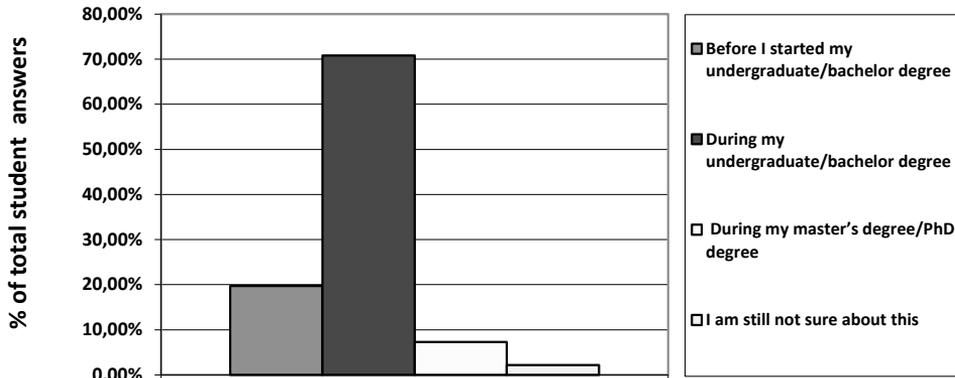


Figure 11.2. Learning to cite and reference

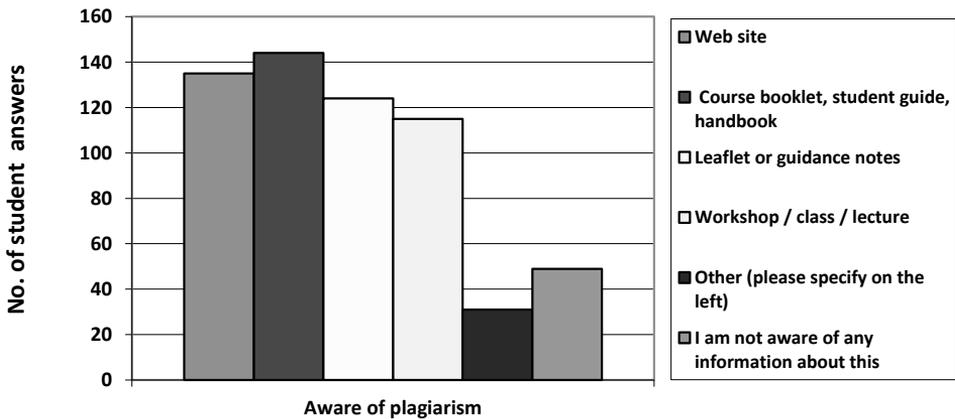


Figure 11.2. Sources of Plagiarism Awareness

These findings suggest that having an institutional formal service to provide students with information and advice on how to avoid plagiarism may be an effective means of raising student awareness and preventing plagiarism. As indicated in Fig. 5, 78.3% of students knew that they would avoid being accused for plagiarism, if they were to use the correct referencing and citation. This is in agreement with what the majority of students consider plagiarism and it would suggest that indeed teaching students about referencing/citing could be the right approach to reduce plagiarism. Of, course, from the results shown in Fig. 6, it does appear that the majority of students (72%) use referencing and citation for promoting their own writing rather than for giving credit to the author(s) of the sourced material. These results confirm the findings above that the students' definition of plagiarism differs from that of teachers. They also indicate that the students lack of understanding of the importance of acknowledging the authors

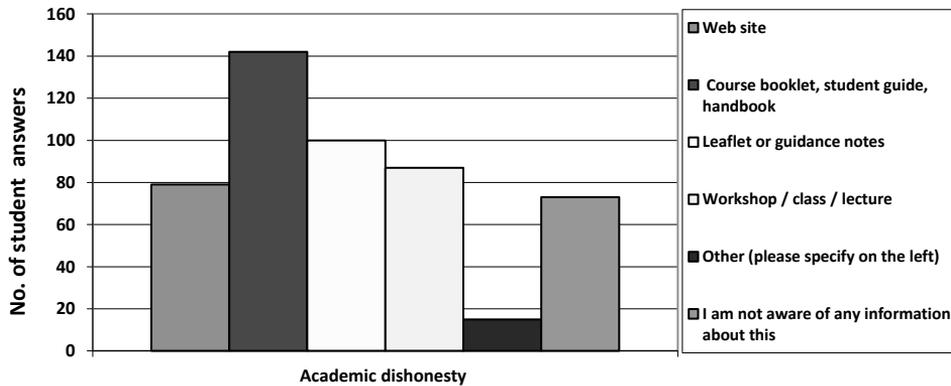


Figure 11.2. Sources for academic dishonesty

Table 3

Responses to type of advising services provided on avoiding plagiarism

Services	Responses
Academic support unit	64
Advice in class during course/module	181
Additional lectures or workshops	80
Advice from tutors or lecturers	222
Guidance from the Library	99
University publisher	91

and crediting them with the originality of the work, can be remedied through teaching the students the correct reasons for using referencing and citations.

Looking now at the reasons for which students plagiarize, the most popular answer (65%) (Fig. 6) was “it is easy to copy and paste form the internet” followed by “they run out of time” (58.5%) and “they think they will not get caught” (58.0%). These results suggest that although students realize that plagiarism is wrong, and know how to cite and reference correctly, they resort to plagiarism simply because it is easy to do if they run out of time, and especially so if they are not going to get caught. Preliminary studies on similar feedback from students who were introduced to the Turnitin software have indicated that they are less likely to plagiarize if they are going to get caught suggesting that the knowledge that plagiarism can be detected can be very effective in preventing plagiarism.

Table 4 presents the findings with respect to the existence of policies, procedures, and penalties for plagiarism and academic dishonesty in the HEIs of Cyprus and with respect to communicating and implementing these.

As Table 4 indicates, the majority of students agree on the existence of policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism (68.2%) and for dealing with academic integrity (55.4%) at their institution. However, only 32.4% of the students agreed that

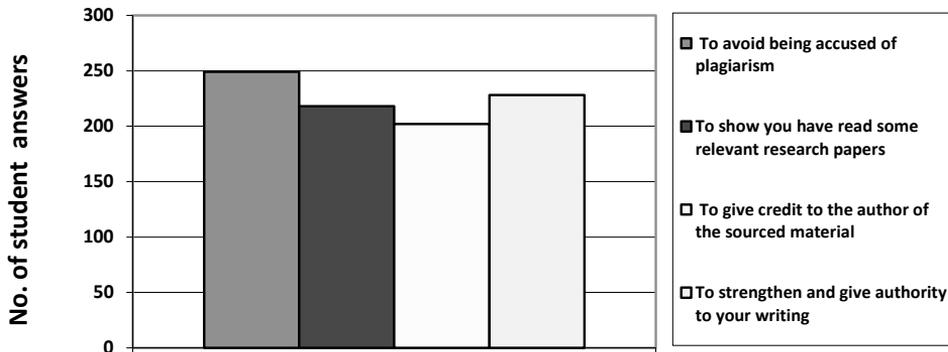


Figure 11.2. Reasons for using correct referencing and citation in scholarly academic writing

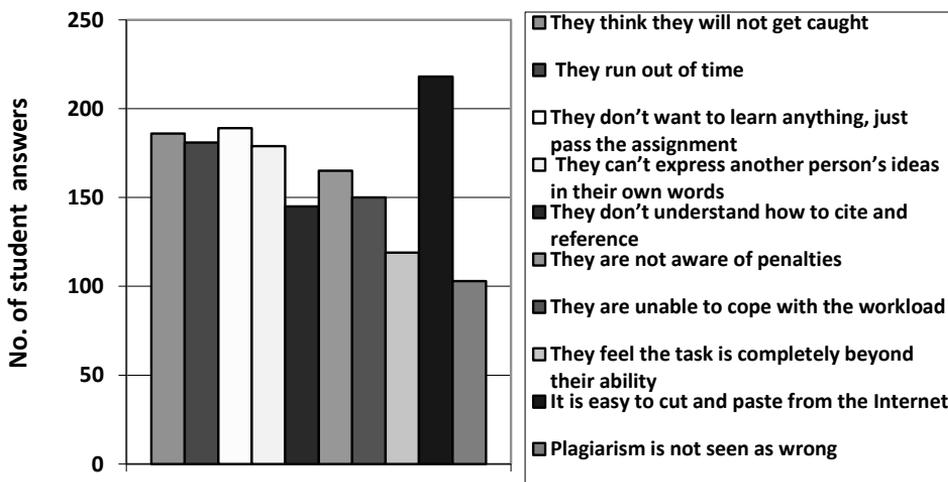


Figure 11.2. What leads students to decide to plagiarize?

policies, procedures and information about penalties for plagiarism are available to them. Furthermore, 43% of the students were not sure how these policies apply. In addition, 41.6% of the students were not sure if all lecturers follow the same procedures for similar cases of plagiarism, or (31.6%) if lecturers treat in the same way cases of plagiarism which are similar, or even (39.5%) whether lecturers follow existing procedures when dealing with plagiarism. These findings suggest (a) that HEIs in Cyprus may not communicate clearly such important information to students, (b) that there may be inconsistency in the ways lecturers apply or follow such policies and procedures, and (c) that there are HEIs that may not always apply their plagiarism related procedures. Noteworthy are also the findings relating to what the penalties for student would be if found guilty of plagiarism, which are shown in Table 5. The most popular (51%) penalty proposed by students for plagiarising in assignments,

Table 4
Percentage of students' answers on Policies, Procedures and Penalties

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not applicable
The institution where I now study has policies and procedures for dealing with academic dishonesty	1.3%	5.7%	35.8%	37.0%	18.4%	1.9%
The institution where I now study has policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism	1.0%	4.5%	23.2%	39.2%	29.0%	3.2%
Plagiarism policies, procedures and penalties are available to students	3.2%	12.7%	22.5%	32.4%	22.5%	6.7%
I know what penalties are applied to students for different forms of plagiarism and academic dishonesty	3.8%	19.7%	43.0%	19.4%	5.4%	8.6%
I believe that all teachers follow the same procedures for similar cases of plagiarism	4.85%	11.7%	41.6%	27.6%	11.4%	2.9%
I believe that the way teachers treat plagiarism does not vary from student to student	5.7%	20.6%	31.6%	24.7%	12.7%	4.7%
I believe that when dealing with plagiarism teachers follow the existing procedures	2.5%	14.0%	39.5%	28.3%	12.7%	2.9%

Table 5
Responses of students to the outcome of being found guilty of plagiarism in their assignment or final project/dissertation?

Penalty	Assignment	Final project
No action would be taken	52	29
Verbal warning	153	67
Formal warning letter	116	106
Request to re write it properly	133	159
Zero mark for the work	163	103
Repeat the module or subject	92	101

was “zero mark for the exam”, followed (48%) by “verbal warnings”, whereas for a final project/thesis the most popular (50%) penalty was “request to re-write the work” followed by (33.3%) “formal warning letter”. These findings indicate that students are willing to accept a more severe penalty for the types of student assessment that have less of an impact in their overall grade (i.e. assignment vs. thesis).

Research on the digital tools or other techniques used for detecting plagiarism at the HEIs of Cyprus, showed at that time, that there was no student awareness of any such tools and techniques for detecting plagiarism. This could explain why “not getting caught” is the most popular reason for Cypriot students to plagiarize. The lack of knowledge on the availability and effectiveness of such tools may also explain why they were last in the choices selected by Cypriot students as a means to reduce plagiarism.

Conclusions/Recommendations

According to our findings there is a lack of a clear understanding among Cypriot university students of what plagiarism is. Cypriot universities need to bring about immediate improvements in plagiarism awareness so as to limit plagiarism and address inefficiencies in plagiarism policies, procedures and penalties. Specific recommendations that arise from the above conclusions to the benefit of the Universities and students, are (a) installing into students the concepts of plagiarism, academic dishonesty and the giving of credit to the rightful owner of the original work; (b) implementing in a consistent manner through faculty and audits the institutions' policy and procedures for the prevention and punishment of plagiarism and (c) utilizing plagiarism detection software to deter plagiarism and to enable students to practice on academic witting without plagiarizing. The HEIs in Cyprus have been established only recently (last 25 years) and are by majority under private rather than public governance. It would be of interest to see how the Cyprus results compare with those of Greece who have a much longer public university traditions as well as with those from other EU countries.

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