

Plagiarism in the South African Higher Education system: Discarding a common sense understanding

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Abstract:

Many universities around the world grapple with ways to manage plagiarism successfully. The effective approach depends on the understanding of plagiarism by institutions. This presentation is based on a PhD study on 'the conceptualisations of and responses to plagiarism in the South African Higher Education system'. Data was collected from 26 South African public universities primarily in the form of plagiarism policies and related documents, supplemented by interviews with plagiarism committee members. Using a social realist lenses it was found that the approach to plagiarism management in policy and procedures signifies a common sense understanding of plagiarism and teaching and learning, which is centred on subjective interpretation rather than one that is theoretically interrogated. Firstly, the conceptions of plagiarism as predominantly an academic dishonesty issue prioritises punitive response over pedagogic interventions. Due to this misconception, Turnitin (and similar text-matching software) are seen to be plagiarism detection tools, used to detect and punish those committing plagiarism. Secondly, the absence of policies related to academic integrity or plagiarism, or these are not updated, or not implemented, could imply plagiarism is taken very casually in a few institutions and cases are managed in an ad hoc manner. Lastly, there is evidence lack of institutional deliberations towards the policy or its development in some institutions, where plagiarism policy text is being borrowed fraudulently. These suggest a problematic misconception of plagiarism is fairly widespread in the sector in ways that enable its proliferation.

Keywords: academic integrity, academic misconduct, common sense, plagiarism, social realism.