



Inconsistent responses to notifications of suspected plagiarism in Finnish higher education

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Plagiarism in higher education has long been a hidden and silenced topic in Finland. The aim of this conference paper is to describe the current Finnish practices in defining and dealing with plagiarism in published Master's theses, especially those published in universities of applied sciences. The IPPHEA (Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe) report on plagiarism in Finland based on statistics and interview data showed the problematic situation (Glendinning 2013), but the publication and content of the report raised no interest or public discussion. The only national attempt to clarify the extent of plagiarism was the article based on a conference paper in Plagiarism across Europe and beyond 2013 (Moore 2014). It was found that 12% of theses published in Theseus (common publication forum of universities of applied sciences) contained at least two paragraphs of plagiarized text. This study, however, has later been invalidated and ignored in a statement by The Ministry of Education and Culture. The Ministry's letter to YLE (Finnish Broadcasting Company) states that "there is no research, knowledge or statistics to show that plagiarism in higher education studies has increased" (Ahjopalo 2019).

There is a national policy to deal with suspected violations of good scientific practice, but research on the extent of plagiarism or other violations is still absent. All higher education institutions are committed to following the guidelines presented by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2012). The aim of these guidelines is to promote the responsible conduct of research and ensure that the handling of suspected violations is competent and fair to all parties. These guidelines are applied to research practices and Master's and PhD theses in higher education. The violations of good scientific practice are divided into disregard for the responsible conduct of research and misconduct. Plagiarism is categorized as one of the forms of misconduct. The guidelines, however, are found to contain poorly elaborated definitions that leave room for (mis)interpretations and allow diverse interpretations of plagiarism (Räsänen & Moore 2016).

There is only one known case in which a former student was stripped of his Master's degree due to plagiarism. In this case the student had appealed to Administrative Court after he did not accept the university's decision to revoke the degree due to plagiarism in his Master's thesis. The Administrative Court decided that the university cannot revoke a degree and based the decision on the principle of 'protection of confidence'. The university filed the case to Supreme Administrative Court which decided that the degree is to be revoked due to public interest.

The data of this conference paper consist of 29 written notifications of suspected plagiarism in Master's theses sent to the rectors of universities in 2018 and decisions on these 29 cases. The notifications were all similar providing evidence of copied text, and most rectors started a preliminary inquiry. Inductive content analysis is used to classify and typify first the decisions, second the definitions of violation of good research practice and third, the outcomes or sanctions rectors place on misconduct or disregard. All the decisions, following

the guidelines by TENK, have been made locally in the institution in question. Due to inconsistency and perplexity in some of the decisions, classification of the definitions is overlapping. The main actor in the process is the rector of the higher education institution, who, in the case of universities of applied sciences is also the managing director, as universities of applied sciences now function as corporations.

Another important actor in decision making is that of preliminary enquirer who is appointed by the rector among the staff of the named institution. In the decision, the rector refers to the report and findings in the preliminary inquiry, but the report itself is kept internal and in most cases not attached to the decision. Some of the rectors, however, did not see plagiarism in the suspected thesis, and ruled the text comparisons to represent (mild) disregard or merely carelessness. In four cases the rector refused to start the preliminary inquiry due to a long time having passed since the publication of the thesis (3-6 years).

The outcome of detection of plagiarism in the thesis for the author varies from nothing to an attempt to revoke the degree in Supreme Administrative Court. As an outcome, statements have been added to the covers of some of the theses stating that this thesis contains plagiarism or a violation of good scientific practice. Some theses were re-evaluated, but not failed, after plagiarism was found. Plagiarized theses were not retracted, the pages containing plagiarism were not marked, and it is up to the reader if (s)he notices the line notifying about plagiarism at the bottom of the cover page. However, some of the theses have later disappeared from Theseus. Comparisons of the severity of misconduct is not possible as investigations proper were not performed and the preliminary inquiry reports in most cases are not public.

Finnish universities started to use electronic plagiarism detection 5 - 10 years ago, and generally these e-tools are only used at the final stage of university studies to examine whether a thesis, which is commonly but not always published electronically, contains plagiarism. There is no statistics or research available either on how widely plagiarism detection is used or on the findings of these e-tools. One case in the data shows how the plagiarism detection system for addressing academic misconduct was used in a reverse purpose. After the plagiarism detection system had showed "too much" plagiarism in the student's thesis text two times, the thesis was not accepted, but the third time was successful. The text had been changed just enough that electronic plagiarism detection gave a "low percentage" and the thesis was accepted and published.

The results of this study show that a new practice in applying the misconduct guidelines in cases of plagiarism has taken over in universities of applied sciences in case of suspected plagiarism in theses: preliminary inquiry has replaced investigation proper. The procedures are kept internal and local. In media coverage this is manifested as a so-called 'admit and forget'-policy. Merely conducting an internal preliminary inquiry and possibly placing an extra sentence on a plagiarized thesis does not promote responsible conduct of research or scientific writing and this policy does not prevent misconduct in research. One of the underlying reasons for accepting theses that contain plagiarism could be the financial system by which higher education institutions obtain part of their finance based on the number of degrees granted and the amount of credits given in the higher education institution. Therefore, every thesis leading to a degree counts, whether it contains plagiarism or not. In conclusion it is worth mentioning that there is currently no sanction for higher education institutions



that accept and publish theses containing plagiarism.

Keywords: plagiarism, theses, higher education.

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