

# PREVENTING STUDENT PLAGIARISM: FINDINGS OF A JOINT PROJECT INVOLVING CZECH UNIVERSITIES

Petr Černíkovský<sup>1</sup>, Tomáš Foltýnek<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia*

<sup>2</sup>*Mendel University in Brno, Czechia*

In 2020, nine largest Czech universities embarked on a new project with the view to foster mutual collaboration to prevent ethical misconduct in student writing. The presentation will summarize the main experiences from and outcomes of this joint project.

Over the last two decades, Czech HEIs identified the increased lure to plagiarize among students and responded to the rising threats to academic integrity with several initiatives, notably with building up open-access repositories of student papers and implementation of antiplagiarism software. There is sufficient evidence that, as a result, a tolerance for student plagiarism has generally decreased at Czech universities. Findings of recent audits of plagiarism checkers carried out at several Czech universities indicate that the deterrent effect of these tools has been strong enough to drive the most severe forms of plagiarism out of the mainstream higher education towards its very margins. Furthermore, it is clear that subtle forms of misconduct are being commonly identified, reported and prosecuted, also to much greater extent than it was usual 10 or 15 year ago. In this respect, the new technology tools have had a positive impact on Czech higher education.

In comparison with the approaches that mostly tend to support repressive treatment, the 2020 project has risen out of the belief that repressive tools are bound to be complemented by preventive interventions, supporting the general teaching of academic integrity values. A particular emphasis has been laid both on early-stage university students, who usually face the challenges of academic writing for the first time in their life, as well as on their teachers, i.e. their tutors and guides in developing their writing skills.

During 2020 the project team consulted multiple experts on academic ethics from several countries,

vice-rectors of Czech universities, ethics and disciplinary committee members, academics, students, various representatives of state institutions and other specialists. The project team also organized a topical conference Academic ethics and prevention of plagiarism (Prague, 13th - 14th October 2020), conducted extensive research on the existing literature, studied successful strategies and initiatives at foreign institutions and conducted several analyses on this topic within the Czech context. All evidence, including multiple incentives for further action, has provided a solid summary of the current findings in the "student-driven" plagiarism in Czech universities and colleges.

The main target was twofold: to harmonize the incoherent criteria for assessing the extent to which a work can be considered to be serious plagiarism, supporting the complex view of potential risks that plagiarism brings; and to promote the main idea, as discussed above, i.e. to draw attention to the prevention, rather than repression, with developing competences of all players to intervene and provide support as early as possible.

The joint efforts resulted in two publications, available to general public, that address both university students and academics, acting as authorities, tutors and assessors of the student work. The project team has come to the conclusion that responsibility for perseverance of the ethical principles is not to be delegated only on particular students, academics or academic departments. Much of the responsibility is to be taken by the universities as self-governing institutions, providing the frame and particular mechanisms for support as well as coercion of academic ethics. These should be robust, transparent and understandable enough to stand up not only to the academia, but also to the general public.

The project met with great success in 2020 bringing results relevant for HEIs both in the Czech Republic and abroad and attracting new institutions to further collaboration. For 2021 a follow-up project involving 20 out of 27 Czech public universities was supported by the Ministry of Education. This project not only further develops and disseminates

the outcomes of the 2020 project, but also addresses a wider range of topics, incl. contract cheating and academic integrity in online education. Also, the online magazine *Universitas.cz* is part of the project to cover the integrity topics and to approach the entire Czech academic community.