

# ACCURACY OF REFERENCING IN MASTER'S THESES REFLECTING INTEGRITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Academic integrity and internationalization of higher education are themes widely covered in research. This paper presents a study combining these themes and more specifically, focuses on integrity in academic writing in Master's theses within internationalization of Finnish higher education.

The Finnish language does not have a direct equivalent to the word 'integrity' and often 'ethics' is used in the context of integrity in academic writing. A frequently used definition of integrity is the one presented in the Cambridge dictionary: "the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to change". Merriam Webster dictionary adds another word to the content of the definition: "incorruptibility". The content of academic integrity is defined and explained for the Finnish higher education sector in RCR-guidelines (TENK 2012) that were originally written in Finnish, Swedish and English, but later translated also to Chinese, Russian and Spanish. Academic writing as such is not mentioned in the guidelines, but students, teachers and researchers are supposed to take "due account of the work and achievements of other researchers by respecting their work" and "citing their publications appropriately" (TENK 2012, p.30).

Internationalization of higher education in Finland has broadened in the 21st century. Finland offers higher education to international degree-seeking students, and follows the principles of internationalization at home (Weimer et al. 2019). In the recent policy by Finnish Ministry of Education and culture (2020) higher education is described to have "strong learning outcomes" that "provide ample evidence of the quality of Finnish higher education". This kind of quality discourse has not been questioned and for example academic writing outcomes or quality of theses have not been evaluated. In the EU report on internationalization of higher education (de

Wit et al. 2015, p.95) it was noted that "Finnish universities and universities of applied science are far too accustomed to working towards the achievement of quantitative goals in their internationalization efforts" and "...Finnish higher education institutions must become more quality-oriented in their approach to internationalization."

This paper presents a study that partly replicates the study published in 2014 analyzing the accuracy and consistency of referencing in theses (Moore 2014). The analysis instrument that was developed for the 2014 study is used in the current study. The data consist of a purposive sample of 28 English language Master's theses that have been accepted in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences in 2020 and published in Theseus. The sample covers one percent of Master's thesis published in Theseus in 2020 and it is estimated to cover 10 percent of Master's theses written in English. Accuracy of referencing is categorized into four categories: accurate, some inaccuracy, constant inaccuracy and misleading referencing/plagiarism. The analysis was performed "manually" using the browsing tool first in Theseus to form the sample, and second in analyzing the use of references. If inconsistency or inaccuracy was detected in between in-text citations and the list of references, simple plagiarism check-ups were done using Google to identify possible plagiarism. Specific attention was paid to the methodology chapters and accuracy of referencing used in methodology. In many theses students show that they master referencing and follow the integrity guidelines in writing. However, a significant proportion of theses have inaccuracies or mistakes in referencing. Patterns of writing inaccuracies are diverse, partly similar to those found in the 2014 study (Moore 2014): confusing references, quotations without quotation marks or page numbers, the primary source is not

identified, and misquoting. New patterns of inaccuracy were found. Mistakes in author or publication details were found to originate back in time and place, e.g., a mistake in the title of the referred book can be found in texts published on the other side of the world resulting in a truly international mistake. Other inaccuracies in referencing are: rearranging the names of authors in alphabetical order and thus referring to the wrong person as the first author; referring to the authors by their first names; referring to texts on commercial websites which, in some cases, are not available anymore less than a year after the publication of the thesis.

The scrutiny of methodology in theses reveals vast differences in quality of references used. All theses in the sample have a methodology chapter written, but the content varies from no references at all to profound and detailed reflections of the methodology with references to appropriate sources. Internationalization at home is manifested in the data when the student uses Finnish literature and paraphrases Finnish text in English. It is noteworthy that Finnish methodology guides are referred to also in theses written in English which can be seen as using secondary sources, knowing that the author of the guide has referred to methodology books originally written in English. In some occasions the student's translation (back) to English has led to

a mistake in the meaning of the sentence. Several plagiarized text columns were also found in the analysis.

Based on the analysis of 28 recent Master's theses, written in English and accepted in Finland, there is evidence that plagiarism is present in theses in the context of internationalization of higher education. The writing instructions given by each HE institution are not always followed even if statements from TENK have presumed otherwise (Moore 2021). Referencing was found to be accurate in six theses (21%), and some inaccuracy was found in seven theses (25%). In 15 theses (54%) inaccuracy of referencing was constant, references were misleading or the thesis contained plagiarism. Internationalization at home and the unquestioned use of English language (Weimer et al. 2019) has led to situations in which neither the teacher nor the student is using their mother tongue, and the linguistic level of a Master's thesis is not sufficient. The results of this study call for increased quality orientation in Finnish higher education and evaluation of contents and outcomes of higher education programs that are offered to degree-seeking international students and as internationalization at home. There is a need for international external evaluation of Finnish higher education outcomes and a need for international cooperation in plagiarism research.

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