Differing local responses to plagiarism in Finnish higher education

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Context

- Finnish HE

- 14 universities, 25 polytechnics (UASs)

- publicly funded

- autonomy in functions

- (FINHEEC – audits)

- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre - audits

- Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) – ethical guidelines

Plagiarism policies and quality in HE

- *"Plagiarism management is an ongoing issue for quality insurance and risk management"* (Sutherland-Smith 2014, p. 29)
- Internationally, plagiarism is seen as threat to the quality of learning outcomes and research
- In Finland, still no national research*, no discussion, no statistics about plagiarism
- No reports available about how systematic the use of plagiarism detection is or

  what are the results

Defining plagiarism

- National guidelines of good scientific practice and procedure for handling allegations of misconduct (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012)

- plagiarism is *"unacknowledged borrowing"*, *"representing another person's material as one's own without appropriate references"*, *"plagiarism includes direct copying as well as adapted copying"* (p. 32).

* Glendinning 2013: no concensus about what constitutes plagiarism

* Moore 2014: plagiarism in 12 percent, sloppy referencing in further 17 percent of UAS theses

Forthcoming: Analysis of General Regulations on Degrees in UASs

- All HE institutions have '*General Regulations on Degrees*' in which plagiarism is seen as fraud and not accepted

- Regulations follow the national ethical guidelines on research integrity

- One anomaly: *"If deceit or plagiarism, according to the teacher, is to be assessed as minor or unintentional, the teacher can lower the grade or scoring of the study module instead of initiation of a disciplinary procedure."*

  (Karelia UAS 14.1.2015)

Aim and data

1) How plagiarism policies are made public in Finnish universities?

Data: Search on webpages, what universities tell about plagiarism policy and prevention

2) How plagiarism policies are implemented in cases of (suspected) plagiarism?

Data: Documents on administrative procedures and decisions in dealing with plagiarism

Search results for plagiarism policy on universities' web pages

	Term plagiarism mentioned n/total (range)	Electronic plagiarism detection used in theses n/total	Ethical issues of education and/or research covered n/total (range)
Universities (n=14)	13/14 (1-577)	13/14	13/14 (less than ten hits in 2 universities, range 4-1940)
Polytechnics (n=25)	13/25 (1-5)	10/25	18/25 (zero hits in 7/25, 1-9 hits in 8/25, range 1-768)

Cases

- **Case 1.** The student had presented a plagiarized text to be evaluated as his Master's thesis (Business) in 2012. Sanctioned.

- **Case 2.** Master's thesis (Health) in 2012 had plagiarised sections. Accepted and published with minor corrections.

- **Case 3**. A Licentiate thesis (Law) in 2009, whistle-blower suspected plagiarism one month after acceptance, it took three years to come to a decision. The student asked for retraction of thesis and degree.

- **Case 4.** Master's thesis (Science, 2012) and degree retracted after plagiarism was addressed. The Administrative Court: the student has a right to his degree based on the principle of *protection of confidence*.

- **(Case 5.** Master's thesis (Business) in 2012, the ethical board did not find plagiarism. The thesis is not public any more. Documents are not public.)

Procedures in defining plagiarism

- Whistle-blower
- The whistle-blower was involved in defining plagiarism in only one case
- In cases in which plagiarism was addressed, text comparisons were used
- If plagiarism was not identified text comparisons provided by the whistle-blower were not used
- The student was heard in all cases
- No mention about the use of electronic plagiarism detection

Student views on suspected plagiarism

- In all cases the students deny that they have committed plagiarism

- Excuses:

"In no sentence the word order is the same as in the original".

"This mistake was, as seen afterwards, based on lack of knowledge."

- **Lack of intention to deceive** is mentioned in all student views – this seems to affect the definition of plagiarism in two(three) cases

Justification of decisions and processes

- In only one of the cases (case 1), the procedures dealing with plagiarism followed fully the guidelines provided by TENK

- Undecided procedures in case 3

- The student view justified the decision in cases 2 and 5

- University Law used in only one case

Disordered administrative decisions

- Suspension from studies (half a year) in one case, in other cases no sanctions
- Three theses rejected and one of these accepted again after court order
- Two theses accepted with major sloppiness in referencing
- One thesis "hidden" in archives
- Administrative Court can abrogate University's autonomous decision

Conclusions

- Plagiarism policies – if existing - are not connected to quality issues in Finnish HE

- Only a few cases of plagiarism annually

- Procedures are time-consuming and bureaucratic

- Disordered decisions and processes

Conclusions

- Strong cultural belief among students (and staff?): *"lack of intention to deceive"* cancels out plagiarised text to "not plagiarism"

- No policy or consensus for retractions of theses and degrees

- Lack of evaluation of HE quality and silencing of plagiarism > huge workload for future external (international) evaluators

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Thank you!

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