

# Dealing with plagiarism: Using research to develop an holistic approach

**Ranald Macdonald**

Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK  
r.macdonald@shu.ac.uk

**Madeleine Freewood**

Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK  
m.j.freewood@shu.ac.uk

***Abstract:** Plagiarism has long been a focus of regulatory concern in many higher education institutions. However, the increasing use of the internet and the opportunities it offers for students to access information that is not easy for a tutor to source, has acted to reinvigorate the debate with a new sense of urgency. Responding to this a whole range of commercial electronic software detection packages have been developed and a proliferation of research and academic guidance on how to identify and punish plagiarism once the 'academic offence' has been committed is readily available.*

*Less research however has been carried out on what students understand by the term plagiarism and why and how they think it occurs in an academic setting. A study commissioned by members of the Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) Plagiarism and Collusion Working Group used data on student views to inform a re-drafting of the University regulations and procedures relating to plagiarism and collusion, as well as providing clearer guidelines for students and staff.*

*Based on a model of previous SHU research into cheating [Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne 1997] a series of 11 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students studying a broad range of subjects were undertaken. These reveal that student's understandings of plagiarism are varied and their concerns are not typically addressed by the university or departmental guidance they have available.*

*The paper reinforces the notion that a holistic approach to plagiarism needs to be adopted both on an institutional and departmental level and that detection and punishment need to occur alongside pedagogic measures to 'design out' plagiarism opportunities [Carroll and Appleton 2001].*

*The paper thus draws together research findings, policy and practice in order to maintain the holistic approach.*

**Keywords:** *plagiarism, holistic, research*

## Introduction

This paper draws on work undertaken and published internally within Sheffield Hallam University (SHU, Freewood & Macdonald, 2001). An action from SHU's Assessment Annual Quality Review for 2000 was for the Academic Registrar and the Learning and Teaching Institute to consider what measures were being taken to discourage or prevent students from using plagiarised material in assessment, particularly in IT related areas. It was also felt that the University's procedures and current approaches should be reviewed and that priorities identified in good academic practice should be promoted and as a consequence of external developments. In particular, practice should be reviewed against the UK's Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice on the Assessment of Students and the implications of the Human Rights Act (1998).

Following a workshop involving representatives from all academic Schools within the University as well as key staff from central departments such as the Academic Registry's Exams and Awards Office, a working group was established to progress the debate further and propose any necessary actions. One of the group's actions was to commission Madeleine Freewood (2001), whilst she was a Research Assistant in the Learning and Teaching Institute, to carry out a small scale qualitative research project into student perceptions of plagiarism. The findings of the research would subsequently help in the process of re-drafting the current University regulations relating to plagiarism and collusion which were under review. The research findings would also help inform recommendations to be made by the working group about other measures needed to help deter students from undertaking plagiarism – whether inadvertent or malicious.

The remit of the working group was to consider:

- Recommendations and proposals on University policy and practice on plagiarism and collusion
- Actions to be taken by Schools and other Departments
- How the University policy and practice should be monitored

The Working Group agreed to look at this under three headings:

- Staff and Educational Development
- Student Information
- Regulations and Procedures

## Why is Plagiarism an Important Issue?

Concern that plagiarism is on the increase within Higher Education has heightened over recent years, with a number of high profile cases lending credence to this fear. Academic concerns have been exacerbated not least by the ease with which plagiarism is now potentially possible as the internet and use of communication and information skills become increasingly part of the academic experience for students.

A number of external drivers have also raised the profile of plagiarism prevention and detection recently. The UK's Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice on Assessment, 2000, Precept 3 states "*Institutions should have effective mechanisms to deal with breaches of assessment regulations, and the resolution of appeals against assessment decisions.*"

The code continues by explicitly referring to plagiarism under the precept heading in the following way:

*"Additionally, institutions will wish to consider how students are provided with information and guidance on their responsibilities within the assessment process including, for example: - definitions of academic misconduct in respect of assessment, such as plagiarism, collusion, cheating, impersonation and the use of inadmissible material (including material downloaded from electronic sources such as the internet)."*

Furthermore, under the Human Rights Act 1998 failure to have equitable, transparent and consistent approaches to informing students and dealing with plagiarism is a breach of the act, which could potentially lead to legal action. Plagiarism will also breach copyright laws under certain circumstances.

More than this, however, plagiarism is also seen as an important issue because it is a fraudulent act, which devalues the academic experience and allows students to unjustly gain personal reward. Claiming credit for another person's work, be it written work, photos, artefacts, music, plans etc, acts to undermine scholarship and the academic community.

## **The research project**

A group of 11 undergraduate students were chosen at random from a range of courses and included mature and international students. Using a similar methodology to that used in the earlier study at SHU (Ashworth *et al*, 1997), students were invited to take part in individual semi-structured interviews. Given the seriousness with which the University treats plagiarism as a serious academic offence, as well as wishing to encourage students to be open and honest, in each case the researcher signed a statement agreeing to anonymize all comments made in interview.

The detailed findings and analysis of the research is being reported and published elsewhere, so a brief summary will suffice here, recognising that this grossly simplifies the data and analysis. Interviews were analysed individually to draw out themes and common issues. The five main themes identified were:

### 1. defining plagiarism

Whilst most students clearly understood plagiarism as copying without referencing, the first year students, in particular, were confused by the fact that it was acceptable to use other peoples ideas if they were attributed, as one student commented:

*" As long as you put the author in the bibliography then it seems it's OK to copy."*

Further probing in the interviews also showed that there was confusion about what really constitutes plagiarism and what will be found to be acceptable by tutors and the University.

### 2. problems with group working and collusion

Students were confused as to where the dividing line between legitimately working together and plagiarism of someone else's ideas occur:

*"I never thought of plagiarism in those terms I thought it was more copying academic work, you know people who've had their work published rather than copying from a friend or somebody on your course".*

### 3. lack of clarity over regulations and punishment

Whilst students believed that one of the greatest deterrents against plagiarism was seeing one's peers caught and punished, none of the students knew what the punishment for plagiarism was. However, there was agreement that offenders should be punished:

*"There's no point writing out word for word, there's no point opening a book, a set text and reeling it off... I definitely think it's wrong, I mean you come to University to learn, it's just lazy."*

There was also a feeling that in the first year students were having to get over bad habits developed at school so plagiarism was often a study skills issue. However, by the second or third years students needed to be treated more harshly, though they might also need help in avoiding plagiarism in more complex situations.

### 4. student motivations for plagiarism

Reasons given varied from those who were seen as lazy and couldn't be bothered to use their brains; to those with poor time management skills, particularly if assignments were bunched in time; to personal problems or family pressures to achieve consistently high marks. There was also a fear of doing badly on units/modules which carried high credits:

*"10 credits is nothing - stuff that, if I get a bad mark what's that going to affect in the end, but if it's a central unit to the course, you need to get the grades".*

Students were also worried about inadvertent plagiarism or collusion, particularly around deadline times or working in certain situations such as laboratories or for group presentations, when it might not strike them to attribute a quote.

### 5. practical suggestions to deter plagiarism.

As well as written guidelines, students wanted talks or workshops early in the first year to explain what plagiarism was and how to reference properly. However, students wanted a much more consistent approach by tutors in explaining what it is, providing the appropriate training such as in referencing, and then dealing with it.

*"What I've found over the years is that some lecturers are right blasé about things like that and yet some stress them as being really important so who do you believe. If one tells you 'oh well' and explains it in a laid back sort of attitude you're going to think it doesn't really matter, so I don't know I think I'd rather have something there written down."*

Students also mentioned the internet as both a potential help to plagiarism but also as a deterrent as the software was there to detect it, though there was also the fear of being punished for inadvertent plagiarism.

However, one of the greatest deterrents to plagiarism is related to perceptions of the tutor, how likely they are to catch plagiarism, how seriously they appear to take it (i.e. does course specific material refer to it, do they discuss this in class, do they explain how to reference properly) and how likely they are to punish it if they do catch it. Furthermore, it was suggested in one interview that where tutors appear to appreciate a student's work they are more likely to 'risk' incorporating their own ideas rather than just playing safe and relying solely on secondary sources – which can lead to inadvertent plagiarism.

## **The holistic approach**

What became clear to the working group as a result of the research and their discussions was that plagiarism had to be dealt with from a number of perspectives at the same time. As reported to the University's Academic Development Committee, discussion focused on:

- *staff development in relation to how coursework can be set to minimise the chance or advantage of plagiarism* (e.g. in the design of the unit, assessment tasks and assessment criteria). There is also a need for staff to be aware of the pressures facing students and the sources of material available to them, including the World Wide Web. Further staff and educational development is being undertaken in the form of workshops, consultations and support for course development and staff have been referred to Carroll and Appleton's (2001) good practice guide on plagiarism as an easily accessible source of further assistance.
- *existing practice on how students receive information regarding plagiarism, and student awareness and student study skills that require further development*. Given that students suffer from information overload during induction, the Working Group agreed that information needs to be timely and meaningful, for example included in assessment briefs as well as a signed declaration on hand-in sheets as to the authenticity of the work. Email and the Web could also be used regularly to inform students of the regulations and sources of study skill support. Newly developing Blackboard sites and the LTI Web site might also be sources of information. There was also thought to be a role for student representatives and the Student Union.
- *ways to address issues of clarity and equity of practice in relation to regulations and procedures*. There was particular concern that, as a result of the current regulations involving time-consuming procedures and apparently draconian punishments, some staff were adopting local procedures or turning a blind eye to the issue. Further, whilst plagiarism should always be considered an academic offence, clear criteria need to be established to determine the subsequent punishments. These may differ according to the Level at which the student is studying, the seriousness of the offence and the student's previous educational experience and how it has been
- *the need to research further the student experience and attitudes towards plagiarism*.

## **Conclusion**

Plagiarism is perceived as a growing problem within higher education and much emphasis has been placed on 'catching and punishing'. However, our research, and that carried out earlier, suggests that there is lack of clarity as to what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. As a result, we have adopted a

more holistic approach to plagiarism which addresses it from three perspectives – staff and educational development, student information and skills, and the University’s procedures and regulations. One implication of this is that academic staff, educational developers and academic registrars have to work much more closely together to develop appropriate and clear guidelines, training, procedures and regulations.

As reported elsewhere (Macdonald, 2000),

*“An interesting thought at my own university was: is a good university one that detects plagiarism, or one where it seldom occurs?”*

A further conclusion within the University is that this holistic approach can be applied to many other issues, such as course development, and that research-informed policy, practice and regulations might better mirror the rigorous scholarly nature of work that we expect from our students!

## References

- Ashworth, P., Bannister, P. & Thorne, P. (1997). Guilty in Whose Eyes? University students’ perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(2), 187-203.
- Carroll, J. & Appleton, J. (2001). *Plagiarism: A guide to good practice*. UK: Oxford Brookes University and Joint Information Systems Committee.
- Freewood, M. & Macdonald, R. (2001) *Assessment Handbook – Plagiarism Guidelines*, Sheffield Hallam University
- Freewood, M. (2001) *Plagiarism and Collusion Working Group Research Project: Student Perceptions of Plagiarism*, Sheffield Hallam University internal document
- Human Rights Act, Chapter 42* (1998) Crown Copyright
- Macdonald, R. (2000). Why don’t we turn the tide of plagiarism to the learners’ advantage? *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 24 November 2000.

## Copyright statement

Copyright © 2002 Ranald Macdonald and Madeleine Freewood: The authors assign to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD-ROM and in printed form within the HERDSA 2002 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.