



Institutional case study Northumbria University.

**Gillian Rowell, Plagiarism Advisory Service
&
Deborah Trayhurn, Northumbria University.**

Contents

1.	Context for case study	1
1.1.	Northumbria University	1
1.2.	The Plagiarism Advisory Service	1
1.3.	Plagiarism strategies at Northumbria University	1
1.3.1.	Academic Misconduct Group	1
2.	Methodology	2
3.	Results	3
3.1.	Good academic practice	3
3.1.1.	Helen Smith, School of Health, Community and Education	3
3.1.2.	Jackie Harvey, Newcastle Business School & Simon Robson, School of the Built Environment	3
3.1.3.	Helen Hooper, Ruth Valentine & Isobel Finlay, School of Applied Sciences	4
3.2.	The student perspective	5
3.3.	Use of the TurnitinUK plagiarism detection software	7
4.	Discussion	8
4.1.	Points arising from student survey for further consideration	8
5.	Recommendations for further investigation	10
	References	11
	Appendices	
	Appendix A: Student survey	12
	Appendix B: Demographic breakdown of survey respondents' school	16

1. Context for case study

1.1. Northumbria University

Northumbria University is situated in Newcastle upon Tyne, exercising its regional, national and international role through an extensive network of partnerships. The University has a total student population of 29,501, consisting of 24,400 undergraduates and 5,101 postgraduates (Student numbers by category, 2006). Around 11% of the Northumbria student population is from overseas (Student numbers by category, 2006) and, contrastingly in excess of 65% of students originate from the North East region (Student access indicators, 2005).

1.2. The Plagiarism Advisory Service

The Plagiarism Advisory Service acknowledges that plagiarism is a complex problem, which demands an equally complex response from educational institutions. The service was inaugurated in 2002, to provide advice and guidance on plagiarism prevention and detection to UK JISC-funded institutions. Additionally, the service hosts a national electronic detection facility, provided by US software developers, iParadigms, and based on the Turnitin product. This detection facility, now known as "TurnitinUK" was offered free of charge to JISC-funded institutions until summer 2005, and following this trial period a subscription to the software has been required. Currently over 80% of HE institutions in the UK have active subscriptions to the software. Although initially the software was viewed as an immediate solution to the issue, institutions more recently have adopted a holistic approach to plagiarism which considers how use of these tools integrate with institutional policies and procedures and robust pedagogical practices.

1.3. Plagiarism strategies at Northumbria University

Northumbria University has developed a university-wide model of practice and support mechanisms over recent years such as 'Guidelines for good assessment practice' (2004) and also guidance on application of the University academic regulations (Assessment regulations for Northumbria awards 2006/07, 2006). The University operates a sustainable model of practice and has recently reviewed its institutional approaches, policies and practices regarding plagiarism and academic misconduct. One of the main aims of this review of practice was to determine the clarity and extent of the practices in place and assure the University of the transparency and consistency of processes operating with staff and students.

1.3.1. Academic Misconduct Group

A group was set up with membership drawn widely from schools, the Students' Union, support areas such as Student Services, Library and Learning Services and the University's Secretary's office. The work used the Plagiarism

Advisory Service roadmap (Duggan, 2005) as a guide to frame review practice. The working group examined the levels of confidence found in institutional practice and focussed on reporting and developing best practice approaches. Deliverables from the working group included a student guide, student and staff workshops, a revised version of 'Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice' (Trayhurn, 2007), web site resources, improved access to TurnitinUK from the University's eLearning Portal, Blackboard and a plagiarism campaign for students run by the Students' Union in conjunction with the group.

2. Methodology

Using technology to detect plagiarism once it has occurred can be viewed as one response to the growing issue of academic misconduct, although for the University arguably a more effective method is to adopt a holistic approach. The preventative approach must draw on sound pedagogical practice and seek to engage with the student community, whilst being underpinned by robust institutional policies and procedures. Use of technology to assist with this approach requires careful planning, and should consider the benefits of using plagiarism detection software not merely as a summative tool, but also as a formative mechanism which can assist students with the correct attribution of other people's work. To this end, a qualitative methodology employed sought to incorporate the following three key strands:

Highlight best practice within teaching practice at the University.

This area sought to highlight teaching practice and research by academic staff which aids and addresses students' understanding of University policies and procedures on plagiarism and academic misconduct.

Offer a student perspective on plagiarism and academic misconduct.

This area investigated how academic misconduct is perceived by the student population at the University, and how they view the guidance provided by tutors and support services. This was carried out by means of an online survey tool developed by the Plagiarism Advisory Service with input from the local Students' Union.

Roll out and implementation of the plagiarism detection software.

This area sought not only to look at technology roll out and how this has been managed within the University, but also consider strategies for embedding plagiarism detection software into assessment practice from both a formative and a summative perspective.

3. Results

3.1. Good academic practice

The work of three members of academic staff at the University, which were presented as research papers at the 2nd International Plagiarism Conference, 19-21 June, 2006, are highlighted here. Such activities should not be viewed in isolation, as the University supports a range of approaches to ensuring teaching and learning activities encourage good academic practice from staff and students.

3.1.1. Helen Smith, School of Health, Community and Education

In a paper co-authored with Jim Ridgway, from the University of Durham, details of a research project which investigated staff and student perceptions and reasons for “cheating in undergraduate programmes” (Smith & Ridgway, 2006, pp. 3-17) were presented at the conference. The research aims to “explore attitudes to cheating” (Smith & Ridgway, 2006, p.4) along with appropriate assessment techniques and knowledge of issues relating to academic misconduct.

Specifically, the paper discusses findings of follow-up interviews with 10 students and 12 members of academic staff. The findings noted that when being assessed students preferred practical tasks which clearly demonstrated a link between theory and practice. Academic staff viewed essays as those most associated with opportunities for student plagiarism. Both staff and students viewed “cheating in examinations” (Smith & Ridgway, 2006, p.5) as demonstrating the most serious cheating behaviour. More commonly, students and staff saw “procuring work from essay banks or other students” (Smith & Ridgway, 2006, p.5) as unacceptable.

The research also highlighted a lack of consistent practice to ensure students are aware of plagiarism when writing assignments and being assessed. Additionally, the research also revealed that if students are not aware of their peers who are being investigated for unacceptable academic behaviour, then they are often willing to risk unacceptable conduct themselves. This highlights a need for a strategy of transparent case handling and penalty tariffs, in order to prevent students from abusing the “weakness of university systems of detection” (Smith & Ridgway, 2006, p.17).

3.1.2. Jackie Harvey, Newcastle Business School & Simon Robson, School of the Built Environment

The formulation of approaches and mechanisms to deal with “accidental” (Harvey & Robson, 2006, pp.1-9) plagiarism, relating to poor academic practice, rather than a deliberate attempt to deceive on behalf of students was the focus of this conference paper, as is outlined accordingly:

“The purpose of this approach is to ensure that our students are in a to clearly accept how plagiarism is defined and more importantly, why it is unacceptable within a academic community that maintains certain standards with respect to academic integrity” (Harvey & Robson, 2006, p.8)

The research acknowledges that inconsistencies may exist within definitions, School procedures and interpretations of regulations for dealing with plagiarism. Therefore, the Harvey and Robson propose that a series of key principles is established in order to address these anomalies (2006, p.7). The principles seek to provide clear distinctions between “plagiarism and poor academic practice” (Harvey & Robson, 2006, p.7), whilst offering a more detailed approach to penalties for academic misconduct and also the teaching of key academic skills for students. Accordingly staff should be provided with guidance on creating assessment instruments that promote critical thinking, and hopefully in doing so, prevent any intentional instances of plagiarism. The principles also propose a fair and transparent case-handling process if plagiarism is suspected, and suitable support for staff to pursue cases.

The principles were distributed to academic staff and also library and study skills staff in the Business School, and the School of the Built Environment. Following some discussion a “broad agreement” (Harvey & Robson, 2006, p.8) on the principles was achieved, and steps are now underway to implement the principles. For instance specific modules have been introduced within both schools in order to assist with students’ understanding of a complex area. Additionally formative use of TurnitinUK has been proposed, and a first draft of a system of consistent tariffs has also been developed. This tariff system is being considered for use across the University.

3.1.3. Helen Hooper, Ruth Valentine & Isobel Finlay, School of Applied Sciences

A lively and interactive workshop was provided at the conference based on the development of resources to assist students with their academic skills and aid their understanding of, and avoidance of plagiarism and academic misconduct (Hooper, Valentine & Finlay, 2006). Practical sessions were conducted using a Personal Response System where voting technology was used to assess and develop comprehension of issues surrounding academic integrity, and stimulate discussion. This type of engagement with students on the subject has been shown to be more effective than simply defining plagiarism in a course or module handbook, with little further explanation or contextualization. For instance in this case it was reported that, the approach not only enabled tutors to instantly assess levels of understanding, but also because of its novelty “encouraged high levels of student interaction” (Hooper, Valentine & Finlay, 2006).

3.2. The student perspective

In order to establish a picture of students' views on plagiarism and academic misconduct within the University, a survey was undertaken. The staff in the Plagiarism Advisory Service had created a number of generic questionnaires for this purpose. These were based around the institutional audit tool or "roadmap" developed by the service, which focuses on key areas in a holistic approach to plagiarism prevention (Duggan, 2005). The survey tools focus on staff and students views and it was felt that this research would provide the ideal opportunity to pilot the questionnaire developed for students.

In contrast to some surveys on plagiarism and academic misconduct, such as those created by the US Centre for Academic Integrity which asks students to self-report cheating behaviour such as plagiarism (Centre for Academic Integrity , 2005), the questionnaire does not seek to determine whether a student may or may not have plagiarised in the course of their academic career, but rather looks at their understanding of academic practice, and the means by which they have been informed about the correct attribution of another person's work or ideas. In this case assurance was given to students as to the anonymity of responses provided.

The questionnaire sought first to assess which activities students believe to be contrary to the rules and regulations of the University, and therefore gauge their understanding of the issue of academic misconduct. Additionally they were asked to consider whether the guidance that had been provided to them on plagiarism and academic misconduct by tutors and other institutional mechanisms, was, in their view, adequate for their needs. Students were also asked about their views on using plagiarism detection software, such as TurnitinUK, and their awareness of their tutors' actions in detecting plagiarism in students' work.

The questionnaire was made available online via a commercial hosting company, and a link was circulated to all academic staff interested in using the tool with their students via members of the Academic Misconduct Group. The questionnaire was circulated during a three-week period in March.

The survey received 95 responses during this period, and because of the way in which the questionnaire was designed, all questions were answered by the respondents. In the case of the multiple choice questions respondents were able to select more than one response, resulting in some overlap in views. Although four respondents did not provide details of their school, almost three quarters of those completing the questionnaire were based in the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences. A more detailed demographic breakdown of respondents' school can be found in Appendix B.

In excess of 90% of respondents acknowledged a series of activities associated with academic misconduct which are contrary to the regulations of the University. Common behaviours associated with academic misconduct such as “Copying paragraphs from various sources without acknowledgement, and handing them in as your own” and “Including material in your work taken directly from the Internet without referencing the URL for the site” were most commonly recognised. Less frequently identified were other forms of misconduct such as commissioning work from a ghost writing service or falsifying data. Full details of the survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Most students had obtained guidance on referencing and citation from information supplied by institutional and course/module handbooks, with a slightly smaller proportion of respondents citing study skills sessions as their source of information. In addition, further analysis of free text responses entered as “other” indicated that the “Cite them right” guide (Pears & Shields, 2005). was listed as a source of guidance in 31.59% of cases. Accordingly, 81.05% of respondents, felt that the University guidelines made it clear how other people’s work and ideas should be incorporated into their own. When asked to gauge their confidence in referencing other people’s work and ideas in their own without infringing the university’s regulations, the majority of students (in excess of 75%) were either “very confident” or “reasonably confident”, and only a small proportion (4.21%) lacked any confidence in this area.

The second part of the questionnaire asked students a series of questions on their personal views relating to academic misconduct and their perceptions of the mechanisms used by their tutors and the institution to detect unoriginal work. Interestingly 92.63% of respondents felt that students who submit essays purchased from the Internet devalue the qualification they are working towards. Likewise, a similarly high proportion of respondents (90.53%) felt that their tutors checked that they had correctly credited other people’s work when marking assignments. However, respondents were less unanimous when asked whether they felt that their tutors were always able to spot work taken from the Internet and submitted as their own, with a small majority (56.84%) feeling that their tutors were able to identify this type of academic misconduct.

Perhaps contrary to some perceptions, in excess of 90% of students were in favour of their tutors using plagiarism detection software to check that other people’s work and ideas had been correctly attributed. Students were also asked about what they felt was the role of electronic detection in the assessment process. For 71.58% electronic detection was viewed as a deterrent, and 57.89% felt that using the software could open up a debate on referencing and citation. Less than 10% felt that it would make no difference at all. Respondents felt plagiarism detection software would:

- “Help address the issue by encouraging students to spend more time checking the work of others because it is being explicitly checked”: 71.58%

- “Help address the issue by discouraging the submission of work which is copied from the internet, but not credited”: 69.47%
- “Help address the issue by encouraging tutors to spend more time talking about correct referencing and citation techniques”: 57.89%
- “Make little difference to current practice”: 9.47%

The final two survey questions asked respondents to assess whether the issue of plagiarism and academic misconduct was dealt with seriously in their view and also to consider punitive measures for students who submit unoriginal work. For 83.16% of respondents it was felt that the issue was dealt with sufficiently seriously. On the question of what punitive action should be taken, 43.16% of respondents felt that a zero mark should be returned for the assignment, whereas 35.79% felt that resitting the module or assessment was appropriate. A formal warning, or expulsion from the course was less popular.

3.3. Use of the TurnitinUK plagiarism detection software

Access to the plagiarism detection software has been available at Northumbria with pilot studies undertaken since early 2003. The 2005/6 academic year demonstrated the institution’s most determined use of the software, with over 1,300 submissions to the system, almost a three-fold increase on the previous year. This level of usage positions Northumbria approximately mid-range of all subscribing institutions in the UK. Whilst it is important not to view this figure in isolation, awareness of the capabilities of the software within the institution have been growing. Also of interest is a two-fold increase in the numbers of students enrolled in the system in 2005/6, indicating development of the formative use of the software.

The University’s approach to development of use of the software has been to provide and endorse use of it as a formative, self submission tool from as early as September 2004. At that time the University Learning & Teaching committee (ULT) advised School Learning & Teaching committees that the use of the detection software should be built, as a formative tool, into the early stages of all programmes (including, where appropriate, taught post-graduate and direct entry into later years of undergraduate programmes). Use of the software was also endorsed as a tool that could be used in the informal stage of the existing academic misconduct process (Assessment regulations for Northumbria awards 2006/07, 2006). This ensured it could be used to investigate further suspected plagiarism after the initial interview with a student, or the student could be asked to bring an Originality Report to the interview. The committee expressly regarded ad hoc use of the software outside of the misconduct process to check the work of individual students, as inappropriate.

Most use of the software, outside of formative practices, is for whole class summative screening by lecturers. Schools are encouraged to identify modules for screening and advise students of the possibility that this may be done. In

selecting modules for screening, schools must be aware of the workload involved in uploading assignments and in checking Originality Reports. Schools using this service must also ensure that they have secure procedures for electronic submission of student work in place. The Academic Misconduct Group is developing further principles on use of the software to support expansion throughout all University schools and collaborating partners. Workshops and staff guides have also been developed to disseminate best practice in formative and summative use of TurnitinUK to aid the roll out and embedding of the software into undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Staff development resources with a staff member working in the role of plagiarism software advice officer, provide the opportunity for personal advice and attendance at workshops which run throughout the year. These workshops are increasingly being focused and offered school-wide with the attendance of both administrative and academic staff found to be most effective. Recent workshops have addressed approaches to designing out academic misconduct through development of techniques to assessment design. Various principles relating to these activities are also in development.

4. Discussion

4.1. Points arising from student survey for further consideration

Although the relatively low number of responses to the survey, mean that it is not possible to view the opinions expressed as entirely representative of the student population at the University, the results nevertheless provide an insight into perceptions and understanding of plagiarism and academic misconduct. Additionally as almost three quarters of those completing the questionnaire were based in one of the nine University Schools (Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences) it is appropriate to see views as more representative of the views of that school, and not necessarily those of the University. However the findings also show a high number of similarities with a survey conducted with students directly via the TurnitinUK interface with in excess of 3000 respondents (Bell, 2006).

It appears that students at the University have a sound awareness of what constitutes inappropriate academic practice, with the survey demonstrating an understanding of a range of academic misconduct activities. Although there may be some doubt as to whether such high percentages indicate true awareness and comprehension of these actions, or are perhaps merely an assent of what students feel their tutors would want to hear. Indeed determining understanding of this complex area is difficult, and, although outside the remit of this study, conducting focus groups with students may assist with gauging comprehension more accurately. Indeed in several instances interviews and focus groups may have proved useful in determining the credibility of some of the responses,

however this, without doubt would have compromised the anonymity of the survey.

Students reported a range of sources that were key in their understanding of correct referencing and citation practice. However this may indicate a lack of one consistent mechanism for communicating this information, and may provide some cause for concern. Additionally whilst students' enthusiasm for the "Cite them right" (Pears & Shields, 2005) referencing guide (which is made available on-line) is a tribute to the quality and effectiveness of the publication, there may perhaps be a danger, that this emphasis on a commercial publication may detract from students' knowledge of the University's policies and procedures. However this concern is counterbalanced by the fact that a high number of respondents felt that the University guidelines made it clear how the work or ideas of others should be incorporated in students' own work. It is perhaps unclear whether respondents were actually referring to the University guidelines, or the guidance provided by "Cite them right" (Pears & Shields, 2005) in this context. Although this issue may not be significant, it may be worthy of further investigation.

It is interesting to note that over 90% of respondents considered cut and paste plagiarism from the Internet undermined and devalued academic awards. This viewpoint was certainly echoed in initial discussions between representatives from the local Students' Union and the Plagiarism Advisory Service when developing the survey questions. The survey also highlights the deterrent effect of knowing that tutors are checking students' work for plagiarism, which, it could be argued has a similar effect as that which has been noted with regard to plagiarism detection software. An institution that publicly acknowledges that it uses plagiarism detection software, such as TurnitinUK, may find that such a declaration is sufficient to deter some students from taking part in any deliberate attempt to cheat.

Somewhat worrying however, respondents were unsure as to whether tutors are able to identify when work has been taken from the Internet without acknowledgement. This finding was also exhibited in the research carried out by Bell (2006, p.2). It would be interesting to investigate further how respondents have arrived at this conclusion, and a free text question may have assisted with this understanding. Of course a key method of assisting tutors with identifying potentially unoriginal work is via the use of detection software, and respondents were almost entirely in favour of using this method to check for correct attribution of other people's work and ideas. This is perhaps a surprising finding, and again is reinforced by other research carried out by the Plagiarism Advisory Service, in addition to anecdotal evidence communicated during training events with students. This adds further emphasis to the argument in favour of the software as an effective formative tool, and dispels the perception of it as an entirely punitive measure.

On the question of what respondents see as the role of electronic detection it is difficult to assert any definite conclusions in this area, as, due to the design of the questionnaire, students were able to select more than one option in answer to this question, a factor which will be re-evaluated in future revisions of the survey. However, the low percentage of responses to the category “make little difference to current practice” may be seen as encouraging, although not necessarily statistically credible. Nevertheless in tandem with the previous question this serves to highlight a high level of awareness amongst students at the University of measures available to institutions and tutors to prevent and detect plagiarism and academic misconduct.

5. Recommendations for further investigation

Various activities are highlighted for possible developments. Whilst the responses of students surveyed are generally encouraging, there are clear areas to explore, as indicated when discussing the penalties applied to proven cases of plagiarism. Considering and reviewing these; the use of penalties, dissemination of information, together with approaches to development of skills to prevent poor academic practice are areas of future activity highlighted by this work. Consideration of materials used by staff in skills development activities in Schools, examining the provision and reliance on texts such as “Cite them right” (Pears & Shields, 2005) is also suggested.

Some work has been undertaken here particularly demonstrating the attitudes of some students. Considering how far these endure given a Students’ Union campaign and activity in schools and at University level would be relevant. Additionally, related work to establish the views of staff would also be of interest.

Further some consideration is also being given to the importance of development of shared values / community approaches within the University. In this context discussion is underway concerning the possible development of academic value agreements with the Students’ Union.

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Appendix A



Plagiarism Advisory Service Student Survey

Using other people's work, often copied from the internet, without proper citation is known to be an issue within Further and Higher Education. We believe that the correct way to address this issue is through the proper education of students and by making it clear what is expected of them in written work.

The survey will identify:

- Which activities students believe to be academic misconduct.
- Where the rules and regulations of academic misconduct are defined for them.
- Whether they consider the guidance given to them to be adequate for their needs.
- Their awareness of actions taken by lecturers to detect plagiarism.
- Their awareness of actions taken by their institution to detect plagiarism.
- Their attitudes towards electronic detection tools.

However, the survey **will not**:

- Identify responses from specific individuals.
- Identify responses from specific institutions.
- Ask students to self-report academic misconduct.
- Ask students to report other students' behaviour.

In all cases, unless specified, please circle the response which reflects your view.

1. Are you aware that the following activities are **against the regulations of your institution**?

- Copying paragraphs from various sources without acknowledgment, and handing them in as your own work.
YES NO
- Downloading or purchasing a piece of work from an essaybank¹, and handing it in as your own work.
YES NO
- Commissioning a piece of work from a ghost writing service², and handing it in as your own work.
YES NO
- Working with other students on an assignment, and handing in work which is very similar when you are supposed to be working alone.
YES NO
- Copying passages of text from another source, changing some words and handing it in as your own work with no acknowledgement of sources.
YES NO
- Including material in your work taken directly from the Internet without referencing the URL for the site.
YES NO
- Making up references for an assignment. YES
NO
- Falsifying data in an assignment. YES
NO

2. Where are the guidelines for how you provide references and credit other people's work in your own assignments defined? (tick all that are appropriate)

- *Student handbook*
- *Induction session*
- *Course/module handbook*
- *Study skills session*

¹ An essaybank is a web site offering completed assignments on various topics to students. These are often freely available, or a charge or subscription is required.

² A ghost writing service offers custom written assignments. A charge is made for this service.

- *Library session*
- *Other (please give details)*
.....

3. Do the guidelines make it clear how you should incorporate other people's work in your own work?

YES NO

4. On a scale of 1 to 4 rate how confident you feel about correctly incorporating other people's work in your own without infringing the institution's regulations. (circle one)

1 *Very confident*

2 *Reasonably confident*

3 *Only a little confident*

4 *Not confident at all*

5. Do you think that students who submit essays bought from the internet devalue the qualification you are working towards?

YES NO

6. Do your tutors check you have correctly credited other people's work in your assignments during marking?

YES NO

7. Do you think your tutors are always able to spot work taken from the internet and submitted as a student's own?

YES NO

8. Are you in favour of tutors using electronic detection tools³ to check that students have correctly credited other people's work in their assignments?

YES NO

9. Would using electronic detection tools as part of the assessment process: (tick all that are appropriate)

³ A detection tool allows a tutor to check an assignment electronically against all other work submitted for the assessment and against an international database of several billion pages of content from essaybanks, electronic journals, and web pages in order to identify copied pages.

- help address the issue by discouraging the submission of work which is copied from the internet and not credited.
.....
- help address the issue by encouraging students to spend more time crediting the work of others correctly because it is being explicitly checked.
.....
- help address the issue by encouraging tutors to spend more time talking about correct referencing and citation techniques.
.....
- make little difference to current practice.
.....

10. In your opinion, is the issue of students submitting work that is not their own dealt with seriously?

YES NO

11. What action do you think should be taken against students who submit work which is substantially not their own? (tick one)

- *Expelled from course*
- *Resit module/assignment*
- *Zero mark for assignment*(continues over page)
- *Formal warning*
- *None*

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Appendix B

Demographic breakdown of survey respondents' school

- School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences: 72%
- School of Arts and Social Sciences: 15%
- School of the Built Environment: 6%
- School of Applied Sciences: 1%
- School of Law: 1%
- School of Psychology and Sport Sciences: 1%

- No school specified: 4%