

Improving academic integrity

Lynn Shaw

ifs School of Finance, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom

I have reported (Shaw 2008) that our students were not good at referencing or paraphrasing. The introduction of PLATO and Turnitin as educational tools for our students improved the quality of the work they submit. However, we were still struggling to ensure that referencing of work submitted by 1st year students was in accordance with stipulation, namely the Harvard Convention. As identified previously (Shaw 2008) students who are working full-time as well as studying do not do anything that they perceive as non-essential. Many responses to cases of potential plagiarism revealed our students had not taken the time to read in detail their coursework submission guidance.

Scribner (2003 p33) advised checking the student's work throughout the process of preparation as a means of helping students to avoid plagiarism. On a campus university this is relatively easy to implement but had not been considered a practical solution in our distance-learning environment. However, a review of our Level 4 programme in 2007-8 identified an opportunity to introduce an additional assessment component for each module that might assist in this as well as others area where it was perceived that students needed further support. Whilst this did not fully implement what Scribner had described it provided a window of opportunity to check 1st year students' understanding of higher education requirements.

The new component, a Guided Coursework Assignment of 750 – 1,000 words, contributes 20% to the overall mark for the module thus ensuring student engagement. It provided an opportunity for students new to higher education study to be given detailed feedback on their assignment at an early stage in the study cycle. This not only deals with the 'technical' content of the submission but also advises on referencing. McLafferty and Foust (2004 p186) had reported that if students are properly informed and assignments are well constructed the opportunity for plagiarism is limited. It was hoped that a generally higher standard in the End of Course Assignment that followed would result.

The revised programme has been in place for 18 months and we are now able to assess its impact. Basic data indicates that the number of cases of potential plagiarism at this level requiring review has reduced in the last year. We are now undertaking a detailed analysis to identify whether there is any link between the text matching level for the Guided Coursework and that for the End of Course Assignment. The distance learning nature of our programme means that there are students who completed some modules under the two part assessment and then the rest under the three part assessment thus also allowing us to investigate whether the change may have improved their level of achievement.

The workshop that will describe the process as well as look at the data will include interactive discussion of its interpretation providing an opportunity for delegates to exchange views, reflect upon the outcome and the potential future gains that might be seen.

References

McLafferty, C. L. and Foust, K. M. (2004), *Electronic Plagiarism as a College Instructor's Nightmare – Prevention and Detection*, Journal of Education for Business, January/February 2004

Scribner, M. E. (2003) *An Ounce of Prevention: Defeating Plagiarism in the Information Age*, Library Media Connection, February 2004

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