

The history and implementation of a policy on plagiarism: a case study from K.U.Leuven (Belgium)

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The K.U.Leuven policy on plagiarism focuses both on preventing plagiarism and on its detection and repression. Since 2009, the university has been using a plagiarism detection system as a tool to equally serve both purposes. However, the implementation of this tool and its integration in the university policy on plagiarism is marked by a long itinerary of extensive debate, refinement and validation among different stakeholders (representatives of teaching and support staff, academic management and students). In this paper we describe the background and history of the K.U.Leuven policy on plagiarism and try to explain the burdensome process of its implementation. Questions to be answered are: What were the reasons for choosing plagiarism as a policy item? Why did the decision-making process on plagiarism demand so much time and efforts? What were the decisions taken and on what basis? How were these decisions translated on the faculty level?

In 1999, K.U.Leuven introduced a new educational concept. One of its main principles was decreasing the guidance and steering by the teacher and, correspondingly, increasing the students' autonomy, self-activation and responsibility. One of the consequences was the increasing number of papers to be written by students. At about the same time, the master thesis started gaining importance after the introduction of the bachelor-master structure in the course of the Bologna process. Together with the growing number of (research-based) information on the Internet, these developments gave rise to the impression that students, more than in the past, might be tempted to plagiarize.

In 2004, plagiarism was put on the agenda of the Educational Board of the university. Although the Board was clearly aware of the problem, the time was not yet ripe for introducing a system for the detection of plagiarism: students were afraid of a 'witch hunt' and feared that unsuspecting (and perhaps not well informed) students would become the victim, while teachers were not fully convinced of the value of this kind of system. The Board was rather inclined towards a focus on preventing plagiarism.

Two years later, plagiarism was again put on the agenda: particularly master programmes in English for international students increasingly started using systems of detection of plagiarism, but not in a coordinated way. Moreover, higher education institutions (HEI's) in Belgium felt an increasing external pressure as local press turned plagiarism into a recurrent item.

In the summer of 2006, the debate on plagiarism developed rapidly on the central level at K.U.Leuven with the creation of a working group committed to submit suggestions on prevention, detection and sanctioning of plagiarism.

Prevention of plagiarism took off first, mainly because it corresponded with the earlier concern to focus primarily on prevention. A first step was the university wide sensibilisation campaign (March 2007). Key events in this campaign were the launch of a plagiarism website (<http://www.kuleuven.be/plagiarism>), still a reference point for HEI's in Flanders, and the organisation of a conference with national and international experts. At the same time the examination regulations were amended in order to better define plagiarism as a particular type of academic fraud.

The decision process on the acquisition of a system of detection of plagiarism and the launch of a sanctioning policy took more time. In January 2007, the Academic Board approved to

start a market research in order to purchase an electronic system. After extensive market research, testing and discussions between October 2007 and March 2008 the working group established a list of criteria that served as a basis for a tender for the acquisition of an electronic system. This tender led to the selection of Turnitin in November 2008. The decision process took some time but encountered no major obstacles, even though the system was eventually acquired not only for the university but also for its associated colleges. In February 2009 this system was successfully launched.

In line with the institutional policy, the final evaluation of the detection software was not only based on the quality of the software, but also took account of its possible usage in prevention and sensibilisation, and in teaching. An equally important criterion was the possibility to integrate the system as an online service in the electronic learning environment of the university. Direct access to the entire functionality of the online service for the detection of plagiarism from within TOLEDO was essential.

In parallel with the preparations for the acquisition of detection software, the decision-making process with a view on implementing a policy on plagiarism, was taken a step further. Proposals were developed regarding concrete measures supporting prevention (e.g. using the detection system as part of the teaching process), detection (e.g. obligatory screening of all papers), handling of cases (e.g. appointing a plagiarism responsible in each faculty), and sanctioning (e.g. establishment of a fraud commission). It turned out to be hard to reach a decision on these proposals. In the end, only the aspect of sanctioning (the fraud commission) was implemented. There are several explanations for this difficult decision-making process: fear to create a climate of distrust, fear for intruding the autonomy of individual teachers and of exam committees, etc.

Currently, one year after the introduction of the detection system, again the question of implementing the other aspects of a plagiarism policy comes to the fore.

The case study of K.U.Leuven leads us to the conclusion that a successful implementation of a full-blown plagiarism policy needs to a) set as a goal to include all aspects of plagiarism (prevention, detection, sanctioning); b) take account of possible resistance among both students and staff towards this goal; and c) take account of the (long) time it takes to create or develop a culture throughout the institution in which plagiarism (or avoiding it) is taken for granted, which entails that (central) policy makers should proceed step by step, focusing on intermediate milestones and on the ultimate goal.