

University Research, Plagiarism and the Internet: Problems and Possible Solutions

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Abstract

The Internet has many beneficial features but a major drawback is that it enables almost effortless plagiarism. The current problems of plagiarism by students in academic institutions and possible solutions are reviewed. Details are provided of a post-graduate research skills module that is offered at the University of Sunderland as part of its taught masters programmes. The particular approaches used to combat plagiarism in the module are discussed. These include the use of special lecture sessions and use of peer group reviewing processes to deter and detect plagiarism. Finally an evaluation of the Sunderland approach is presented.

1. Introduction

The call for papers highlighted the fact that information and communication technologies (ICT) can have profound social consequences and that they have caused many organisations to change both their internal operations and the global reach of their activities. This "Transformation of Organisations in the Information Age" has not been restricted simply to commercial businesses. Organisations throughout the public, private and governmental sectors have all experienced enormous changes due to ICT. In particular, during recent years, these changes have been driven by the opportunities and facilities offered by the Internet. Universities are simply one type of organisation that has experienced enormous changes. ICT has resulted in radical changes in learning and teaching approaches, the World Wide Web offers an almost boundless information resource, and students are no longer constrained by physical limitations on attendance. The sources and volume of information readily available to staff, researchers, and students today is far beyond the imagination of researchers of a mere fifteen or twenty years ago. No longer is information held in the dusty recesses of libraries guarded by the academic librarians. It is instantly on hand via the Internet and on-line databases. More importantly, such resources are not seen as only the domain of researchers but of all students within an institution. A major development in learning approaches is a greater and greater expectation that undergraduates, as they progress through the stages of their degree programmes, will be able to undertake tasks at higher intellectual levels relying more and more on academic resources, and that postgraduate students on master's level programmes will be able to critically evaluate current research and advanced scholarship. Such expectations are clearly reflected in the qualification descriptors given in The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England Wales and Northern Ireland (QAA, 2001). However, the range and volume of "instantly" available information resources has a major downside in that it has exacerbated the age-old academic problem of plagiarism producing what is often referred to as the New Plagiarism (McKenzie, 1998). The

means to “take” or “lift” information or text is a simple “Click. Cut and Paste” away. In addition, there is the problem of World Wide Web sites that will sell existing reports (Evans, 2000) or even produce new ones to order (Pearson, 2002). The purpose of such sites is quite clear – it is simply to help students cheat.

At the University of Sunderland in the UK we offer a range of taught masters programmes in computing. Within each of these programmes we include a compulsory research skills module entitled “Research, Ethical, Professional and Legal Issues” (REPLI), an outline of which is given in appendix A. The aim of the module is “to provide the students with an ability to undertake postgraduate level research and an appreciation of relevant ethical, professional and legal issues”. Essentially the ethical, professional and legal issues provide a research domain but the overall purpose is to ensure that the students gain research skills that will support them in the rest of their programme, in their future careers, and that they will undertake their research activities in an ethical and professional manner. Most importantly we wish to ensure that they are aware of issues associated with cheating (including plagiarism) and the means that are to available to prevent/detect such cheating. In the following two sections we review the problems of plagiarism and possible solutions. In section four we provide further details of Sunderland’s REPLI module and then in section five we detail our particular approaches to combating plagiarism. In particular, we detail the use of “How to cheat” and “How to get caught” lecture sessions and our use of a peer group reviewing processes to deter and detect plagiarism. Finally we present an evaluation of our approach and details of how we plan to progress matters in the future.

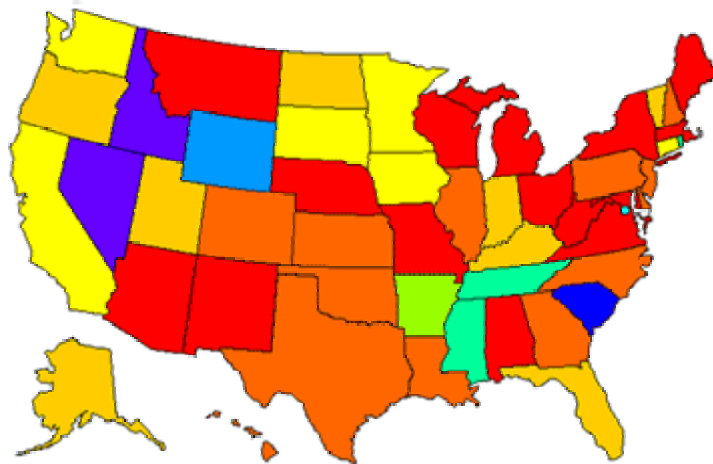
2. The Problem of Plagiarism

The University of Sunderland, like most other academic institutions, in its regulations clearly specifies those activities that are not acceptable academic practice by its students when they undertake assignments. Six categories of infringement that students need to be aware of are identified in the regulations (University of Sunderland, 2000):


- Cheating - an infringement of the rules governing conduct in examination or other time-constrained assessment. Cheating includes: unauthorised communications, using unauthorised written or printed material, introducing any unauthorised electronically stored information into an examination room, gaining access to any unauthorised material relating to an examination or other assessment during or before the specified time, and obtaining a copy of an 'unseen' written examination paper in advance of its authorised release.
- Plagiarism - the deliberate and unacknowledged insertion into a student's work of material taken from the work, published or unpublished, of another.
- Collusion - where a student either knowingly submits as entirely his/her own, work done in collaboration with another person; or collaborates with another student in the completion of work which (s)he knows is intended to be submitted as that other student's own unaided work; or knowingly permits another student to copy all or part of his or her own work and to submit it as that student's own unaided work.
- Falsifying Data - the presentation of data in laboratory reports, projects, etc., based on experimental work falsely purported to have been carried out by the student, or obtained by unfair means.
- Impersonation - the assumption by one person of the identity of another person with intent to deceive.

- Any other form of dishonest practice not falling within the above categories may amount to infringement (for example, the offering of inducements).

Of the above, plagiarism and collusion are the areas at Sunderland in which most infringements occur and there is no doubt that it is the issue of addressing plagiarism that cause major problems for many academic staff. But this is not just a problem at Sunderland - it is world- wide. A visit to the web site plagiarism.org (2002), an online resource for educators concerned with the plagiarism, provides clear evidence of the scale of the problem. This evidence includes the shaded map reproduced below, which gives an indication of the levels of cheating in term papers across the USA. Here calculations were normalised based on the number of term papers analysed from a particular state.



Levels of cheating in term papers.
From plagiarism.org updated 9 April 2002

Very low  Very significant

An indication of the scale of plagiarism involving material from the web can be gained from the a report by Ryan (undated) concerning students who were taking an introductory information security concepts course at George Washington University. Her investigations revealed that, in each of the semesters in the 1997/98 academic year, 1 in 6 of her students had plagiarised most or all of the papers they had submitted to her!

Hannabuss (2001) examines in detail the developing issues associated with plagiarism in the age of the Internet and the challenges that are facing academics as gatekeepers and facilitators. He also considers the differences in cultures and the fact that what applies in the capitalistic western world is not necessarily applicable across the globe. While Hannabuss provides what can be regarded as a rather academic view, a much more practical one is provided by Harris (2002) who provides the following as the major reasons as to why students resort to plagiarism:

- Students are natural economisers and want the shortest route possible through a course.
- Students put off what they regard as low priorities or simply many have poor time management and planning skills. In both cases they run out of time and resort to cheating.
- Some students fear their writing ability is inadequate and hence look for a superior product.
- A few students like the thrill of rule breaking and see plagiarising as a challenge.

3. Possible Solutions

An analysis of the literature reveals that to counter plagiarism in academic institutions there are three commonly adopted approaches that may be used individually or in conjunction:

- Educate the students to avoid plagiarism.,
- Have staff introduce anti-plagiarism strategies with regard to assignments.
- Deter students from plagiarising by staff being effective in its detection.

The advice and guidelines published by The University of California (2001), Baylor College of Medicine (Rogers 1996), and Le Moyne College (Pearson, 2002) are typical of that directed at students to encourage them to cite fully and correctly and avoid plagiarism. The material by Pearson (2001) is particularly comprehensive with lots of guidance for students on how to write a good paper. It also provides information on the dangers of using papers freely downloaded or bought over the web. This includes details of the types of deficiencies that occur in such papers that result in them being less than worthless.

The strategies that academic staff can adopt to combat plagiarism are detailed by several authors including Culwin and Lancaster (2001), Harris (2002), and Pearson (2002). Harris is particularly helpful and highlights the need for both strategies of awareness and strategies for prevention.

The former includes:

- Understanding why students cheat (as outlined in section 2 above).
- Educating staff about plagiarism.
- Educating students about plagiarism.
- Discussing with students the benefits of citing sources
- Making the penalties for committing plagiarism clear.

While the latter includes:

- Making assignments clear.
- Providing lists of specific topics.
- Requiring specific components in a paper.
- Requiring process steps for the paper.
- Require oral reports from the students on their papers.
- Require that most references are up to date.

Strategies for the detection of plagiarism are also covered in depth by both Culwin and Lancaster (2001), and Harris (2002). Culwin and Lancaster promote a four-stage plagiarism detection process of: collection, analysis, confirmation and investigation. Harris highlights the clues that can indicate possible plagiarism at the analysis stage. Clues include: mixed citation styles, a lack of references or quotations, unusual formatting, off-topic content, signs of datedness in the material, and anomalies of style. He also highlights the “blunders of the clueless” that normally indicates mindless copying. Both Culwin and Lancaster, and Harris promote the use of automated plagiarism detectors to analyse papers and identify possible occurrences of plagiarism. They each provide lists of detection tools and detail their particular strengths. Pearson (2002) also provides comprehensive information on plagiarism detection sites and software. She highlights that Turnitin.com (the site of the detection tool supported by

Plagiarism.org) has been reported as achieving the highest rate of detection amongst subscription software.

4. Sunderland's REPLI module

Taught MSc. programmes at the University of Sunderland comprise taught Certificate and Diploma stages followed by an individual "capstone" project stage. Each stage has an equal weight in terms of points within a Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) and in terms of student learning hours (each stage has 60 CATS points and 600 hours). The taught stages within the School of Computing and Technology normally have four equally weighted modules. The REPLI module, which we outlined in section 1 (and which is detailed in Appendix A), is normally studied during the Certificate stage. It prepares students to undertake research-orientated assignments within other taught modules but most importantly it prepares them to undertake the research element of their individual capstone projects. Each project is required to have a clear research component and students must pass this component as well as the overall project to gain their masters degree.

The REPLI module was developed in 2000 from an earlier research skills module. However, the teaching, learning, and assessment approaches have been fine-tuned during the last two academic years. The major development in 2000 was the specification that ethical, professional and legal issues would be explicitly addressed within this research skills module and that these areas would provide the topics on which students would produce individual research papers. Partly instrumental in these decisions was the attendance of the first author of this paper at the 1996 and 1998 Ethicomp conferences. Students are expected to devote 150 hours learning to the module. Of this some 44 hours are contact hours. Typically some 22 hours would be devoted to lectures and "milestone sessions" and some 22 hours devoted to smaller group tutorials. For students studying in full-time mode the certificate stage is 15 weeks. Typically, of these, 11/12 weeks are designated as for teaching and assessments and 3/4 weeks are designated for assignments only. The arrangements for the module for the 2001/2002 academic year, for full time masters students, was that students from five of our masters programmes (almost 200 students in all) received common lectures each week but for tutorials they were in smaller groups - typically 36 students to two members of staff for each tutorial. In tutorials, wherever possible (numbers allowing) the students were from a single programme.

The assessment regime for the 2001/2002 academic year centred on the production, by each student, of an individual research paper of 3,500/4,500 words to a set of formal standards i.e. a paper that equates with the size of a typical conference paper. The total assessment regime was as follows:

Portfolio Element (worth 70% of the total assessment)

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| (i) Research paper proposal (outline, structure, and key references) | 10% |
| (ii) Research paper on nominated, and approved topic | 40% |
| (iii) Detailed reviews on two papers produced by other students | 20% |

Presentation Element (worth 30% of the total assessment)

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----|
| (i) Formal presentation on research paper | 10% |
| (ii) Presentation materials | 10% |
| (iii) Defence of issues raised in research paper | 10% |

Formal assessment is on an individual basis. However, much of the tutorial work and the ethos of the module are both group-based to emphasise the value of peer group reviewing and collaboration. A typical tutorial exercise is that students, in small groups, would find an appropriate academic paper in the library, appraise it against specified criteria, and in the tutorial period report back their findings to their peers and the staff. Discussions would then follow each group's presentation. Even for the assignment students are organised into small self-help groups all of whom would be writing papers in the same general area (e.g. Privacy in a Digital World). They are allowed to help each other with regards to finding references, commenting on structure and drafts etc. In fact, this type of activity is strongly encouraged. However, each student will be producing their own paper on a subtopic within the chosen general area and it is made absolutely clear that what is finally handed in is to be their own work and their responsibility.

5. Our Approaches to Combating Plagiarism.

Much of what we do in the REPLI module is in line with the strategies to combat plagiarism that were outlined in section 2:

- In lectures and in tutorials we emphasise the importance not only of citing sources but citing sources of appropriate academic value. In fact, several of our "group exercises" are directed at this area.
- The assignments we set are formally specified, the assessment criteria is explicitly defined, and where a formal feedback form is used in the marking then a copy of that is also included with the assignment. All this should ensure that there are no misunderstandings regarding what is being assessed.
- We provide the lists of topics from which the students have to select.
- We require specific components within each paper including appropriate fully referenced academic sources, which we would expect to be reasonably recent.
- The research paper proposal (in the form of an extended abstract and initial references) ensures that students start their work early, and so that staff can provide initial feedback very quickly the proposals are marked with the student present in one of the tutorial sessions.
- Each student makes a short presentation on their paper and this is followed by questions that have been identified when the paper was marked.

However, as we describe in the next two subsections, we have also taken very specific actions to ensure that we are educating students about plagiarism, making the penalties for committing plagiarism very clear, and taking particular actions to help deter and detect plagiarism.

5.1 "How to cheat" and "How to get caught" lecture sessions

By the start of the 2000/2001 academic year (the time when the REPLI module was introduced) We were becoming more and more concerned about the instances of plagiarism by students especially from Internet sources. The approach to treating plagiarism within our previous research skills module concentrated on: highlighting the relevant parts of the University's regulations, emphasising the consequences of plagiarism with respect to assessment results, highlighting the relevant parts of the university regulations within assignment specifications, expanding significant amounts of staff time investigating potential infringements, and then taking even more time following the formal University procedures relating to infringements

when our suspicions proved positive. Hence we decided to add to our existing range of formal lectures an additional major lecture aimed specifically at addressing plagiarism in a very “upfront” manner and which would be provocatively titled “How to cheat Successfully and get away with it”. Not surprisingly attendance at this session has been somewhat higher than at many of the other sessions for the module.

Of course, the lecture does not deliver what the title promised. What it actually does is inform the students about how easy it is to attempt to cheat by plagiarising material from the web and how it is even easier for us to detect such plagiarism by using the detection tools that are readily available. The lecture is intended to be very interactive and really engage the students in a dialogue. The outline content for it is:

- Explain what constitutes cheating and what constitutes an infringement of the University regulations.
- Cover the penalties for infringement and the statistics for cheating on our masters programs.
- Take an in-depth look at what constitutes plagiarism using a set of examples.
- Emphasise the need to reference explicitly and avoid using a general bibliography.
- Cover the reasons why students cheat.
- Highlight that only clever students are really capable of cheating and getting away with it (and that they do not need to).
- Copying from the Internet and sources of E-Documents.
- Cheat sites where students can buy papers and the problems with such sites.
- The use of detection software such as Turnitin.

The lecture concludes with the advice: Don’t cheat unless you are...

- Cleverer than those assessing your work.
- Willing to put time and effort into cheating.

The lecture is followed by a tutorial exercise where the students are given an “extract” from a paper and they are required to determine whether parts have been plagiarised, and if so what were the sources. Probably the most salutary knowledge gained by the students is that concerning the power of the detection software that is available. That software such as Turnitin can find so much and highlight what has been copied and from where is obviously a major revelation to most of the students.

5.2 Use of peer group reviewing processes to help deter and detect plagiarism

Within the module our “bottom-line” aim is to ensure that we have given the students sufficient knowledge, skills and abilities so that they are able to undertake a library based literature survey and produce a well structured academic report on the results of their investigations. Thus the assessment regime has been created so that the majority of the activities, that the students undertake, would be similar to many of those that a researcher would undertake if producing a paper for a conference such as Ethicomp:

- The submission of an extended abstract on which feedback is given.
- The production of the final paper.
- Producing and delivering a presentation.
- Responding to questions following the presentation.

However, one difference between what happens in our regime compared with the “real-world” is that the students are being assessed by academic staff while for a conference such as Ethicomp everything is via peer review. As active researchers we knew from our own experiences that peer review can be enormously helpful, especially when a researcher is inexperienced. Plus we believed there were several other potential benefits that could result from introducing formal peer reviews into the assessment regime:

- The students could develop their skills in critical appraisal by reviewing each other’s papers.
- They could learn about other topic areas by reading papers written by students outside their self-help group (who would be working on a different topic).
- Students may be more willing to act on comments given by their peers than comments given by academic staff.
- The students may be better at detecting plagiarism than the staff (especially if they use detection tools) – the theory was that poachers often become the best game keepers.

During the 2000/2001 academic year we started introducing peer group reviews into the assessment regime. During that year students were required to undertake an outline review of three other students papers. Marks were not explicitly awarded for the reviews but those who produced very poor or no reviews had penalties awarded against them. One of the areas students were directed to consider in their reviews was the possibility of plagiarism and we had many successful identifications. Our conclusions about these initial exercises were so positive that for the 2001/2002 academic year the peer reviews were more formally incorporated into the assessment regime as outlined in section four of this paper.

The arrangements for this last academic year were that students have had to hand in two printed copies of their paper and a word-processed version on disk to be assessed by the module tutors. They also have had to produce two additional copies of the printed paper and two disks containing the word-processed version of the paper. A paper and disk were handed, in person, onto two designated students for them to review. The form used by the students in carrying out their reviews is reproduced in Appendix B. The elements assessed on page 2 of the form are similar to those used by the staff in their assessments but are somewhat modified to place particular emphasis on issues that we believe would be beneficial for the students to consider in depth. Students are also directed that if they suspect that part(s) of the report contain plagiarised material they must detail their suspicions and carry out investigations using diagnostic software. Two copies of the review are to be handed in after completion. Students are fully aware of the requirements of the reviews in advance and the fact that their work may formally investigated by their peers. It should be noted however that the student reviews do not contribute to the reviewee’s marks. The reviews themselves are assessed by the staff with regard to their completeness and accuracy. The latter is assessed in the light of the staff review undertaken on the same paper. One copy of the student review is returned to the reviewee so they gain peer feedback. The other copy with the staff marks is returned to the student who made the review.

6. Conclusions

So, has our approach been a success? We believe that it has. Despite a significant increase in the number of students on the module during the last academic year we have had only three cases of

plagiarism that were so severe that they had to be formally actioned using the University procedures. This is a significant decrease on previous years. However, a one-year trial can only provide an indication of success. It does not produce absolute proof. Also, there are drawbacks in our approach:

- Significant administrative time is needed to sort, distribute, resort and redistribute the review sheets prior to and after staff appraise them.
- There were significant problems in achieving the hand-over of papers and disks. A set of alternative papers for review had to be provided to cover hand-over failures.
- The assessment of individual student presentations takes significant academic time and again has an administrative and organisational overhead.

Nevertheless, we believe that our approach has brought real benefits not only in reducing the occurrences of plagiarism but it has also:

- Made the students more aware of the issues associated with cheating.
- Showed the students that the Internet is not just a source of material to plagiarise but that there are powerful tools out there that are really effective in detecting plagiarism.
- That the students have developed their skills in critical appraisal by peer reviewing papers.
- That the students have gained extra information on current ethical, professional, and legal issues by reading the papers produced by other students.
- That the students receive useful feedback not only from the staff but also from their peers. We often feel that no matter how much feedback we provide on assignments all the students are really interested in is the final mark and that all that advice given is forgotten when the next assignment is undertaken. Perhaps, it is possible that they will take more notice of the peer reviews to see how they compare with what they reported in their reviews.

We intend to repeat our approach with this next year's students but will fine-tune the administration procedures. Also, we plan to make the running of the diagnostic software on the exchanged papers a compulsory part of the review and that the output from the diagnostic is handed in with the review. In addition, the reviewer will have to comment on what the diagnostics showed. A problem we have encountered this last year is that the diagnostic tool detects similarities and the students tend to assume there has been plagiarism. But in most cases there has been none as sources have been correctly acknowledged or there has simply been a case of poor referencing rather than out and out plagiarism. By being required to consider the actual output the reviewers should themselves learn more. In addition, we can explore the issues concerning what needs to be physically in quotes and what does not.

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Appendix A Module Outline

RESEARCH, ETHICAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND LEGAL ISSUES

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

The aim of the module is:

To provide the students with an ability to undertake postgraduate level research and an appreciation of relevant ethical, professional and legal issues.

Upon successful completion of the module, students will have knowledge and abilities as follows:

Knowledge:

1. Appropriate research and problem solving techniques
2. Ethical, professional and legal issues relevant to the student's programme of study
3. Ethical issues regarding research.

Abilities:

1. Can carry out research investigations using information repositories.
2. Can effectively report the results of research activities
3. Can develop and deliver presentations to disseminate research findings

CONTENT SYNOPSIS:

Exploring philosophies of research. Ethical issues in research. Outlining research problems and developing research questions. Qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data collection and

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data analysis: literature surveys, survey and questionnaire design, experimental design. Use of control groups. Problem solving techniques. Critical analysis and evaluation. Use of graphics.

Writing a technical paper. The publication process. Structuring a report and dissertation.

Presenting work orally and by other appropriate means.

Professional, ethical and legal issues that relate to the relevant academic discipline and industry.

For example, for students following a computing course this would include studying the BCS code of conduct, the ACM code of Ethics, and the UK Data Protection Act.

Appendix B Student Evaluation Form

COMM93: Evaluation of Research Papers

Hand in two copies of each evaluation with the paper (which you can annotate if you wish). Complete only after having read the paper fully.

Your Name:

Programme and Student Number:

Author's Name :
and Paper's Title :

The paper is within the required length (yes/no)	
The abstract is within the required length (yes/no)	
Each bibliographic reference is sufficiently detailed so that you could easily find it (yes/no)	

Provide a short appraisal of the paper (40-50 words)

List the major points that you believe are covered by the paper (maximum of 5)

Evaluate each of the elements listed below on a scale of 0 to 5 and provide evaluative comments:

- 0 Totally unacceptable – essentially no significant attempt made
- 1 Unacceptable standard (Fail).
- 2 Barely acceptable – borderline pass (below standard expected of Honours Graduates studying on a Master’s Level Course).
- 3 Expected standard (The standard expected of Honours Graduates studying on a Master’s level course. A sound pass with no significant faults).
- 4 Clearly above expected standard (clearly distinctive).
- 5 Excellent- no possible improvements can be identified (Full Marks).

Element	Scores 0 to 5	Comments (continue over if necessary)
1. The report is clearly structured.		
2. Balance between sections.		
3. Standard of English: readable and written in own words (see below).		
4. The abstract can be read in isolation to provide a summary of the paper.		
5. Introduction: sets the scene.		
6. Introduction: introduces rest of report.		
7. Main content: matches with title.		
8. Main content: overall quality regarding subject chosen.		
9. Suitable references are cited and used appropriately within the paper.		
10. Conclusion (or summary) draws out relevant points from paper and brings the paper to a close.		
Total (from 50)		

If you suspect that part(s) of the report contain plagiarised material (i.e. material that the author has taken from others and not clearly acknowledged the source) you must detail your suspicions. You should also carry out investigations using appropriate software as detailed in the lecture “How to Cheat Successfully and get away with it!” (for example use of “Turnitin” from: www.turnitin.com) to provide appropriate evidence. Such evidence should be attached to your report.

Signature and date:

Remember two copies of each review are needed