Dishonest Behavior and Plagiarism by University Students: An Application to Management Studies

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Abstract

This paper describes a practical experience showing the importance of regulating plagiarism at the University. The experience takes place at the University of La Rioja where new degrees have been adapted to European Higher Education framework. The documents were treated through the Blackboard platform and the software Safe Assign. The results obtained show that there is an inverse relationship between the matching percentages of plagiarism in each document and the contribution of these documents to the final grading. Temporal comparison of matching percentages shows that those working teams that have previously plagiarised are more likely to continue with this behaviour. The study also shows evidence of the sources used by students to plagiarise.

Keywords: University, student plagiarism, ethical behaviour, plagiarism sources

1. Introduction

Although plagiarism is by no means a new concept and it has traditionally been associated with academia, the development of new information and communication technologies has led to the general consensus that its occurrence has grown in scale (Flynn, 2001; Gümüşeli and Hacifazlioglu, 2009; Honing and Bedi, 2012; Roberts, 2008 and Trinchera, 2001). The use of this practice, which is not always easy to identify, not only has implications for student’s evaluation, but it also negatively affects the development of core ethical values such as honesty, integrity, personal effort and respect for the work of others.

All these arguments justify that a considerable amount of research has been developed in order to investigate the factors that facilitate that practice (Bolin, 2004; Davis, Grover, Becker, and McGregor, 1992; Granitz and Loewy, 2007; Jawakar, Stone and Kisamore, 2007; McCabe, Butterfield and Treviño, 2006). Despite its importance and the negative consequences of this behaviour, in some cases the lack of regulation, the failure to detect its use, or the lack of knowledge about the existence of tools that allow its detection means it goes unpunished.

Our purpose in this exploratory study is to describe a practical experience, which attempted to empirically examine the issue of plagiarism by university students, to investigate the frequency in the use of this practice and the most usual sources used.

To attain this aim, the structure of the document is as follows: We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on student’s plagiarism. We then describe the purpose of the study, and the method we have used. Finally, we conclude...
with a discussion on the study’s findings, we outline their implications for Universities and highlight the necessity of explicitly regulating this practice.

2. Plagiarism at the University: Causes, Consequences and Detection

Different authors have provided a definition of the term plagiarism in an academic context (Anderson and Steneck, 2011; Park, 2003). Taking the common elements of these definitions and making reference to the activities of students, plagiarism makes reference to the act of copying texts or ideas from the work of other authors and without making reference to their original authors.

Several causes have been associated with high levels of plagiarism. For example, in a recent study by Honing and Bedi (2012) these authors relate its incidence to certain characteristics of the students involved. They argue that young and male students, and those with lower levels of GPAs, lower levels of school identification and without adequate English proficiency are more likely to plagiarize. Along with these, the literature also establishes many other factors affecting students’ willingness to plagiarize (Anderson and Steneck, 2011; Warn, 2006) such as: new academic contents and methodologies which change the rules and the evaluation techniques, misconceptions about what is, and is not, plagiarism (intentional vs unintentional plagiarism), the general availability of new information and communication technologies, imperfect skills, poor time management, academic pressures to attain a good qualification and the belief that copying is an acceptable behaviour, that is, social acceptability.

Knowledge of these causes is of prime importance because it is the first premise for the design of measures to prevent it. Indeed, Universities are aware of the importance of developing a regulatory framework to punish these practices and they are developing institutional frameworks and honour codes to prevent and punish such behaviour (Brown and Howell, 2001; Park, 2004). Given that in most cases students do not know that they are plagiarising or they do not know what is the right way to reference other authors’ words or ideas, the institutional regulation usually includes a clear definition of what plagiarism is, how to cite references and an institution or committee in charge of punishing dishonest behaviour. The positive effects of this framework are undeniable and there are several empirical studies that confirm that the existence of institutional honour codes or institutional policies reduces the likelihood of such behaviour (Brown and Howell, 2001; McCabe and Treviño, 1993).

Plagiarism has important consequences, including unequal treatment between the assessment of students and the non-achievement of learning objectives and competences. Regarding the latter, plagiarism prevents the development of core ethical values such as honesty, integrity, personal effort and respect for the work of others. As mentioned above, to avoid the negative consequences of this practice, Universities formally show their institutional position against plagiarism and provide teachers with tools that help in its detection. In this sense, the availability of software greatly facilitates its detection, although this is only the first step, as plagiarism detection does not end when the software provides the report (Walker, 2010). Apart from the fact that many software programs do not distinguish whether the sentences of paragraphs suspected of being copied are within quotation marks, or whether a correct reference is included (Warn, 2006), plagiarism reports only serve as the raw material of a process that attempts to improve the learning process.

In this paper, we describe a practical experience whose objective has been to measure the characteristics of student plagiarism at University. More than explicitly dealing with both the causes and the consequences of plagiarism, we attempt to show its incidence under certain conditions. In particular, we analyse the frequency with which students engage in this practice, its evolution over the semester and the sources used by them.

3. Practical experience

3.1. Context of the experience

The context in which this exercise takes place is the course Strategic Management at the University of La Rioja (Spain). As many other European Universities, the University of La Rioja has adapted its degrees to the new European Higher Education framework. Spanish regulation assigned to the National Agency for Quality Assessment
and Accreditation (ANECA) the faculty for evaluating proposals for new curricula through the VERIFICA program. So, a curriculum of the new degree has been designed taking into account the proposals of different Spanish Universities, the criteria established in "The White Paper on the studies of Economics and Business", the resolutions adopted by the Spanish Conference of Deans of Economics and Business (CONFede), the document prepared by the General Council of Economists "Economists at the European Higher Education" and the report "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe". Among other important challenges, the new framework highlights the importance of acquiring a set of specific and general skills as a result of completing students’ training. For example, the capacity to work in teams, the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice and ethical commitment are an example of them. Therefore, in our context, plagiarism is seen as a form of non-ethical behaviour that must be avoided by students.

By the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year, we delivered information on the expected skills that students should achieve and on the desirable behaviour through the Strategic Management course guide. This document also informed students of the concept of plagiarism and warned them about the risk of detecting any irregular behaviour in any of the documents they should hand in along the course. The students had to submit six documents with the answers to practical questions related to the topics of the course, and a final essay. All the assignments were treated through the Blackboard platform.

3.2. Methodology

A positive feature of the Blackboard platform is that it provides us with a tool, called Safe Assign, which checks for plagiarism through a comparison between several Internet sources and student’s written works. Specifically, this software checks the submitted papers against documents in these databases (www.safeassign.com): 1) Internet; 2) ProQuest ABI/Inform database; 3) Institutional document archives that include documents submitted by other using Institutions and, 4) the Global Reference Database that contains papers that were volunteered by students from other institutions using Blackboard to help preventing cross-institutional plagiarism.

The software offers a report that has three different parts titled: paper information, suspected sources, and paper text. At the top of the report (paper information), there is information about the file name, printable options, and the percentage of matching between the submitted document and other sources. A second part of the report (suspected sources) includes the links to all the sources used and also provides the option to repeat the process excluding some sources. Finally, the report also includes the manuscript text (paper text), and in order to facilitate the process of identification of those parts plagiarised, the software highlights those sentences suspected of being copied.

Once the reports are obtained, we classify them according to the thresholds recommended: scores below 15%; scores between 15% and 40%; and scores over 40%. The documents included in the first group include common text with other documents; however do not require further analysis. In the second group and especially in the third group, this indicator has to be understood as first approximation to the identification of plagiarised documents, given that the teacher has to check whether these documents have been properly referenced. Although this process is time-consuming, the software facilitates it given that, as commented, the report highlights those suspected sentences or paragraphs.

3.3. Results

Out of the seven documents delivered by students, we checked for plagiarism in three of the exercises and the final essays. This was done for each of the twenty-four working groups in the class (104 documents). Once the reports were obtained, these were classified according to the thresholds commented on above: scores below 15%; scores between 15% and 40%; and scores over 40%. The distribution of the number of documents in each group is shown in Table 1. These figures indicate that almost half of the documents were not suspected of plagiarism. Of the
remaining documents, forty-two of them had all percentages ranging from 15% to 40%, and thirteen documents a percentage over 40%. Therefore, 12.5% of all documents significantly copied the ideas or texts of other authors without recognising the origin of them.

Table 1. Distribution of the number of documents in each group by the type of document and total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Exercise 1</th>
<th>Exercise 2</th>
<th>Exercise 3</th>
<th>Final Essay</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%M&lt;15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>49 (47.12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15&lt;%M&lt;40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42 (40.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%M&gt;40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the mean values of plagiarism matching percentages and the contribution of each activity to the final grading. The average score ranges from 15.96% to 31.20%. The highest and lowest value corresponds, respectively, to the second exercise and to the final essay. Interestingly, if we relate these percentages with the contribution of each activity to the final grading we can see that the final essay, which has a higher weighting in the final course grading, obtains the lowest mean of the matching percentages. Therefore, students seem to reduce the amount of copying depending on the importance the exercise has on the final mark.

Table 2. Mean values of the plagiarism matching percentages and contribution to the final grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exercise 1</th>
<th>Exercise 2</th>
<th>Exercise 3</th>
<th>Final Essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>21.54</td>
<td>17.17</td>
<td>31.21</td>
<td>15.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To find out if there is an evolution in the percentage of plagiarism between the different activities we calculated the correlation between the percentages of matching obtained in each practice (see Table 3). The activities are arranged chronologically, so the signs and significance of these correlations give us information about the trend and the importance of this pattern. Interestingly, there is a positive correlation between the scores indicating plagiarism in the same groups. In other words, those groups that copy more in one of the exercises tends to copy more in all the others. The temporal comparison between scores obtained indicates that the most important correlations arise between exercises 2 and 3, followed by the one between exercise 2 and the final essay.

Table 3. Correlation matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exercise 1</th>
<th>Exercise 2</th>
<th>Exercise 3</th>
<th>Final Essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>0.297</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise 2</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.583</td>
<td>0.393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise 3</td>
<td>0.297</td>
<td>0.583</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Essay</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>0.393</td>
<td>0.227</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, in order to ascertain the sources from which students plagiarized their texts, we classify plagiarism sources provided by the report into three different groups: corporate web, specialized press and others. The latter group includes several sources such as blogs, wikipedia or slideshare. The analysis of the results show that Internet pages such as Wikipedia and slideshare are used in more than 60% of the cases. They are followed by corporate web pages with a 25% and, finally, economic press with, approximately, 12%.

Table 4. Sources used in the plagiarism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Corporate web</th>
<th>Specialized Press</th>
<th>Others (blogs, wikipedia, rincón del vago, slideshare…)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25.18%</td>
<td>11.62%</td>
<td>63.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusions

This paper describes an experience developed at the University of La Rioja that shows the need to regulate plagiarism. Proof of this need, is that 12.5% of analysed documents obtained a plagiarism percentage above 40%, and another 40% of the documents show significant copying.

The study also characterizes the behavior of those groups that decided to plagiarize, obtaining important findings about the pattern followed. Specifically, the analysis performed shows that the groups are more likely to plagiarize those activities where the importance to the final mark is lower. This seems to suggest that students are conscious of the possible consequences on their marks and, for this reason; they significantly reduce the percentage of text copied in those practices most valued. Moreover, the positive correlation obtained between the different percentages of the groups shows that the percentages of plagiarism maintain a slightly positive trend, and that plagiarism is not isolated behavior.

The analysis of the sources used by students’ shows that in more than 60% of the cases they are not official or academic. The magnitude of this percentage and the characteristics of the students’ behavior described in this study open the opportunity for further work on the detection and the elimination of plagiarism at the University. They also suggest the need of offering more clear and detailed explanations on the behavior that is expected from students, on the rules to follow at the time of referencing and on the proper sources to be used, among others.

References