Teaching about plagiarism at higher education level

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Salim Razı / Irene Glendinning /
Tomáš Foltýnek (eds.)

Towards Consistency and Transparency in Academic Integrity

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Towards Consistency and Transparency in Academic Integrity

This book is an outcome of the 4th International Conference *Plagiarism across Europe and Beyond* organized by Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Mendel University in Brno, and the European Network for Academic Integrity. The conference is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships Programme of the European Union. It aims to be a forum for sharing best practices and experiences by addressing issues of academic integrity from a wide-scope global perspective. With regards to the crucial role of ethics and honesty in academic work, universities are in need of more effective policies against infringements of academic standards. The papers in this book therefore aim to contribute to the standardization of consistent and transparent approaches to issues of academic integrity from several perspectives.

The Editors

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PETER LANG

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Teaching About Plagiarism at Higher Education Level

Abstract: The aim of the survey carried out in this study was to find out how students at all 30 faculties of the University of Zagreb are educated about plagiarism. The content of codes of ethics was analysed and all courses that included issues about plagiarism were identified. The method used was content analysis of the syllabi at the University's and faculties' web sites. The majority of the programs (87%) do not have courses that explain plagiarism. Syllabi of 23 courses were analysed according to the following parameters: year of study, scientific field, whether the course is compulsory, which ethical issues are included (plagiarism, authorship, citations, etc.), and how old the latest bibliographic reference in the recommended literature was. It is necessary to enhance faculty programs at the University because today's students are future scientists and authors. Finally, the basic content of a course about plagiarism is proposed.

Keywords: authorship, Croatia, ethics, plagiarism, research integrity, students

Introduction

Plagiarism is one of the three main manifestations of research misconduct (Bornmann, 2013). The other two are fabrication and falsification of research results; thus some authors use the abbreviation FFP (fabrication, falsification, plagiarism) when writing about research misconduct (Martinson, Anderson, & de Vries, 2005). Plagiarism is defined as using and passing off someone's intellectual property (words, concepts, ideas, etc.) as one's own, without giving credit (Hames, 2007). Credit can be given by proper citing of sources.

The Internet today gives many possibilities for students to plagiarise, i.e. to cheat, while writing their exams and assignments. The copy-paste practice is easy and can be done in seconds. In addition, many companies offer to write essays for students in exchange for money. However, the Internet also gives professors and mentors many possibilities to detect plagiarism. A much better solution is to prevent plagiarism and cheating by educating students – explaining principles of

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professional and academic ethics and teaching them about information literacy that includes ethical use of information (Gilliver-Brown & Johnson, 2009; Webber & Johnson, 2000).

Students often take advantage of modern technologies to cheat by plagiarizing. It is easy and they are ready to take the risk of being caught. They have various reasons for doing so. Navarre Cleary (2017) gives the top ten reasons why students plagiarise. Some of them are: laziness, sloppiness, lack of confidence, belief that static knowledge belongs to everyone, they do not know how to explain other people's ideas in their own words, they are still learning, and they are used to a collaborative model of knowledge production. Also, they could be under pressure to maintain their grade point average (Spieler, 2012) in order to qualify for a college, job position or scholarship.

A survey of British universities in the academic year 2009–2010 identified 17,000 serious incidents of cheating, most of them cases of plagiarism. This number is 50% higher than four years earlier (Barrett, 2011). Based on the 2012 British Office of the Independent Adjudicator annual report (OIA, 2012), students very often cheat accidentally – they are not informed what is acceptable and what is not.

There are several options for universities to prevent plagiarism. They should implement at least some of the following (if possible, all of them):

- publish a code of ethics that includes an explanation of plagiarism and authorship, e.g. the code of ethics at New York University (2006) or the University of Birmingham (2013)
- publish guidelines for students and handouts, such as on the web sites of Middle Georgia State University (2018), the University of Pretoria (2008) or Vienna University of Economics and Business (2018)
- accept and recommend other institution's guidelines, e.g. guidelines of the Office of Research Integrity of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Roig, 2015) or guidelines of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (2018)
- introduce online courses and tutorials on their own web sites, such as courses at the University of Birmingham (2018) or Nuffield Department of Medicine (2018) at Oxford University, or recommend other institutions' courses, e.g. online course providers such as Epigeum (2018)
- and the most important: implement compulsory courses into their study programs.

Research Aims, Methods and Sample

The aim of the research was to investigate how faculties at the University of Zagreb educate students about plagiarism. The University's Code of Ethics was analysed; courses about plagiarism at the faculties were identified and their syllabi were analysed.

The largest Croatian university, the University of Zagreb, consists of 30 faculties covering all scientific fields. In the first part of the research, the University's Code of Ethics was analysed to find out whether topics about plagiarism are mentioned. Also, the faculties' web sites were analysed to learn whether they recommended the University's Code of Ethics and/or if they published their own guidelines. In the second part, all the available programs at the faculties' web sites were analysed. There are 310 programs at the faculties of the University of Zagreb. Syllabi of 245 programs were available online in December 2017. Twenty-six (10.6%) programs included at least one course that mentioned plagiarism-related topics (plagiarism, authorship or citation practices). Those programs have 23 different courses (some programs at the same faculties use the same course). The courses were compared regarding year of study, scientific field and whether they are compulsory. The literature was analysed to find out how old the newest reference was, since the topic of research integrity is evolving. Courses that deal with ethics in specific fields, e.g. experiments with humans or animals, and do not mention plagiarism, authorship or citation practices, were not included in the analysis.

The limitation of the analysis is that some faculties do not regularly update their web sites with information about the study programs. Therefore, some syllabi in the analysis might have newer versions that were (in December 2017) still not available online.

Research Results

University of Zagreb Code of Ethics

All Croatian universities have codes of ethics or similar pronouncements and all of them have at least one statement that explains plagiarism (Hebrang Grgić, 2014). The current version of the *University of Zagreb Code of Ethics* was published in 2007. It gives ethical rules for all the students and all the employees of the university. It has six parts and 41 paragraphs. The third part is entitled *Ethical Rules in Educational, Scientific and Artistic Activities* and has 14 paragraphs (paragraphs 14–27). Some of the paragraphs are about: professional duties in education, unacceptable practices in the teaching process, usage of people and animals in scientific research, fabrication of research results, falsification, etc.

The title of the 19th paragraph is *Plagiarism*. It says that all forms of plagiarising texts and ideas are unacceptable. All members of the academic community have to guarantee the originality of texts or artworks they authored. They also have to guarantee the honesty and accuracy of cited sources used in their work.

Authorship is not defined in the code, honorary and ghost authorships are not mentioned by name, but paragraph 19 says: "It is expected that authorship is assigned to all and only those authors who intellectually contributed to texts or artworks. Intellectual property of all the members of academic community has to be protected" (University of Zagreb, 2007).

According to the University's code, the University has to establish an Ethical Board and faculties should establish Ethical Committees. The committees should act according to the University's Code of Ethics. Despite the fact that faculties do not have to publish their own codes of ethics, some of them have similar documents (codes of ethics, rules or regulations).

Seventeen faculties publish the University's Code of Ethics on their web site and another ten faculties recommend the code only by mentioning it on the web site. Three faculties do not mention either the code or any similar document, although being part of the University connotes the implementation of the University's policies, including ethical ones. Ten faculties publish their own code of ethics: eight of them do not mention plagiarism, six mention citation practices, and one explains authorship saying that guest, ghost and honorary authorship is not allowed. The same faculty in its code explains that biased citation is not acceptable.

However, students cannot be educated about plagiarism only through codes of ethics. Sometimes students are not even aware of the rules. The first important thing is to make the rules visible and accessible through the University and faculty web sites. Only two faculties in the University of Zagreb have direct links to the University and faculty ethical policy on their home pages. All the other faculties should rearrange content on their web sites to make ethical policies more visible. In addition, shorter versions or guidelines for students would be helpful.

Courses about plagiarism

Analysis of study programs

Another important way of educating students is introducing courses about ethics and plagiarism in the study programs. Our analysis shows that 10.6% of programs at the University of Zagreb have courses that mention plagiarism and related topics.

We analysed the syllabi of all the 23 courses according to the following parameters: year of study, scientific field, if the course is compulsory, if it explains the main structure of a scientific text, which ethical issues it includes (plagiarism,

authorship, citations, etc.), and the age (i.e. year) of the latest bibliographic reference in the recommended literature.

Fifteen out of 23 courses are compulsory. That means that the courses about plagiarism are compulsory in 6.2% study programs at the University of Zagreb. Eight courses are in the first year of study (seven of them compulsory); 22 courses explain the structure of scientific texts, 17 explain citation practices, 10 mention ethics, six courses mention plagiarism, and three explain authorship (Chart 1). On the study program level analysis – courses in seven programs mention plagiarism (2.9% of all the analysed programs, Chart 2).

Figure 1: Topics connected with plagiarism in courses at the University of Zagreb
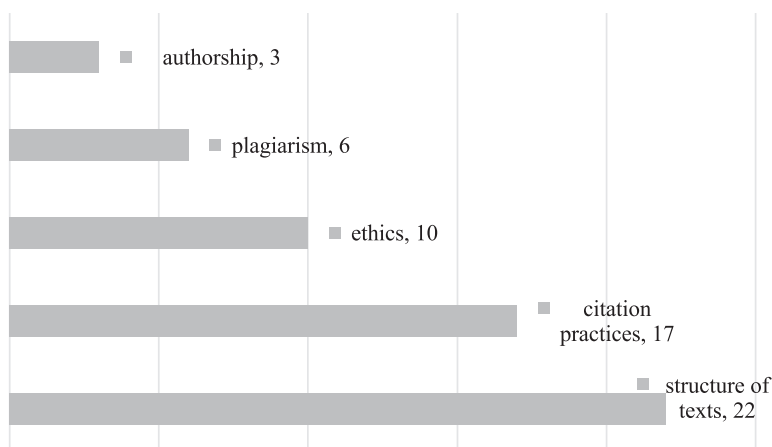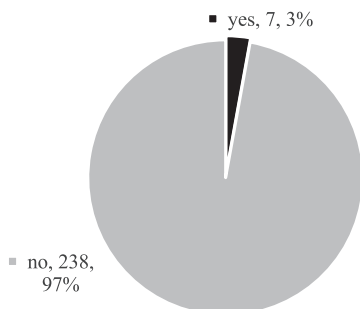

Figure 2: Study programs at the University of Zagreb including courses mentioning plagiarism in their syllabi

Twenty syllabi have a literature section and we analysed how old the newest reference is (Figure 3). On average, references are 10 years old. There are six courses where the latest reference is up to five years old. All the other courses use and recommend literature that is more than five years old. There are many new trends in the field and the recommended literature should be up to date. All the references on one course are more than 10 years old – the newest was published in 1993. Some of the courses are probably updated in practice, but the content on the web pages was not updated.

Figure 3: Number of syllabi with average age of references in the literature sections
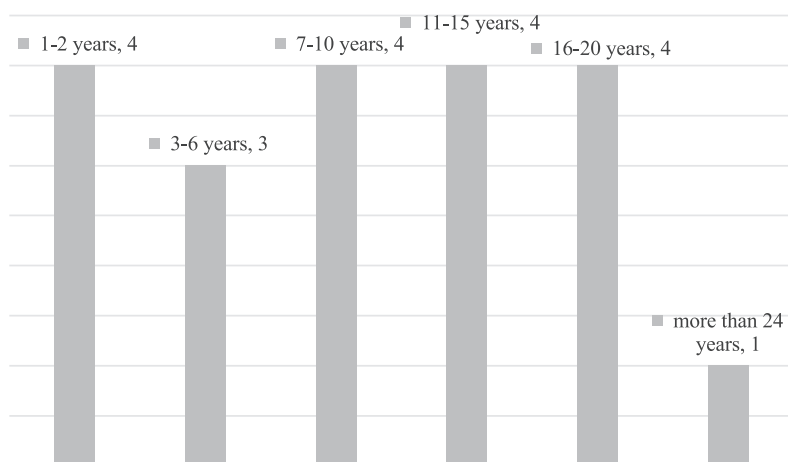
Examples of courses

The content of two courses will be presented – one at a faculty in the field of social sciences and another from a faculty in the field of natural sciences.

The first example is course entitled *Academic writing*, a compulsory course at a faculty of social sciences. It is compulsory in the first year of undergraduate study. Students have 30 hours during the first semester to learn about three topics – scientific style of writing, formal aspects of academic texts, and the content of academic texts. In the second topic, plagiarism is explained, as well as other manifestations of research misconduct, in order to prevent students' future misconduct. The course consists of practical work – students have to analyse scientific texts and to express their own opinion precisely and in academic style. For the course, literature is not available online. (Faculty of Political Science, 2018).

Another example is a course at a faculty in the field of natural sciences. The course is entitled *Elements of scientific work*. It is compulsory in the fifth year (i.e. second year of graduate study). Students have 45 hours to learn about the main principles of scientific work, writing and publishing scientific papers, critical reading and data interpretation, scientific projects and scientific misconduct, including plagiarism. Sub-topics that are explained on the course are self-plagiarism, ghost authorship, journals' retraction policies, writing services as dishonest practice and many examples are given. At the end of the course, there is an online exam. There are six references in the literature section: the oldest from 1978 and the newest from 2010 (Faculty of Science, 2012).

In Conclusion: A New Online Course

The number of courses that deal with plagiarism in the study programs at the University of Zagreb is extremely low. Although probably many professors and mentors mention plagiarism informally, it is unacceptable for a study program not to formally include the topic. Based on our survey, as well as on other earlier research and experience, ethical issues that should be explained in a course about plagiarism are:

- definition of the academic community
- how the community communicates
- definition of scientific journals
- definition of research integrity and research misconduct
- definition of ethics (professional ethics, academic ethics)
- definition of information literacy (academic literacy, ethics literacy, online literacy, open access literacy, etc.)
- definition of authorship and intellectual property
- copyright law – traditions and concepts (moral and economic rights)
- unethical authorship (ghost authorship, guest authorship, honorary authorship, gifted authorship)
- definition of plagiarism (and self-plagiarism)
- guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism including definitions and examples of:
  - citation practices
  - citation styles and systems
  - paraphrasing
  - footnotes
  - bibliography
  - self-citations

- author's guidelines
- codes of ethics.

Such courses should be compulsory and at the early stage of higher education (in the first year of undergraduate study if possible, but also a wider aspect of ethics and plagiarism could be implemented in courses after the first year).

This concept is the basis of an online course that is being developed (March 2018) in cooperation with the University of Zagreb Computing Centre (SRCE). The course will be freely available in Croatian language under CC-BY-NC-SA licence (Creative Commons – Attribution – Non Commercial – Share Alike). Approximately 6 hours will be provided for finishing the course. The course will be available in Moodle (course management system). It will consist of three main chapters: *Authorship*, *Plagiarism* and *Citing*. The topics will be presented through text, quizzes and multimedia (e.g. animated schemes). The course will be recommended to all students and also to professors to include it in some of the existing programs.

Free online courses could be the basis for new and more detailed, compulsory courses. Free online courses are important for bridging the gap until new programs are developed and implemented at the University.

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