



JISC

AMBeR
PROJECT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research Project: Part II

The Recorded Incidence of Student Plagiarism and the Penalties Applied

Tennant P and Duggan F

May 2008



Part II: The Recorded Incidence of Student Plagiarism and Penalties Applied

Introduction

There is a commonly held concern within the UK Higher Education (HE) sector that penalties for student plagiarism are applied inconsistently both within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and across the sector. The JISC-funded Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research project (AMBeR) sought to investigate this inconsistency.

The first stage examined the range and spread of penalties available for student plagiarism as stated in the regulations of UK HEIs. This second stage set out to investigate the number of penalties *applied* for student plagiarism whilst also taking the opportunity to estimate the recorded number of cases in single year.

Methods

168 UK HEIs were contacted and asked to complete an electronic questionnaire requesting details of the number of cases of student plagiarism recorded for one academic year, and also details of the penalties applied in the recorded cases. 100 HEIs responded in the timeframe allocated, of which 93 provided details of the total number of cases and 86 provided details of the number of penalties assigned. The questionnaire sought further information on the cases recorded, broken down by level of study and previous history, however, a number of respondents were unable to provide this level of detail.

The previous phase of the AMBeR project had identified three groups (termed A, B & C) within the sector, that were significantly different in terms of various descriptive statistics such as the number of students, source of funding, RAE average and intake. Analysis of the response to this phase of the project identified a shortage of responses from Group A institutions (*predominantly 'smaller HEIs with low income for both teaching and research'*), replaced by an excess of Group B (*predominantly 'larger institutions with a particularly large number of full time postgraduate students, large average research funding and higher than average RAE average per staff and UCAS points per student'*) and Group C (*predominantly 'larger institutions... with a higher [than average] number of part time students, and lower [than] average RAE per staff and UCAS points per student'*) HEIs. National estimates were, therefore, weighted to reflect the expected national profile.

Results

In total, the responding institutions reported 9229 cases of student plagiarism in the chosen year, which equates to an estimated national recorded prevalence of 7.2 cases for every 1,000 students. Group A institutions recorded the lowest prevalence of cases, equivalent to 5.1 cases for every 1,000 students, whilst Group C institutions recorded the highest at 10.4 cases per 1,000 students. The reasons for this variation are not

Part II: The Recorded Incidence of Student Plagiarism and Penalties Applied

apparent from the survey responses.

Respondents were asked to provide details of the number of recorded cases of plagiarism by level, i.e. whether undergraduate or taught postgraduate students. 81 and 80 HEIs respectively provided this information. Surprisingly, the recorded level of plagiarism by taught postgraduate students was higher than the equivalent level for undergraduate students, being 11.9 and 6.7 cases per 1,000 students respectively. Although these figures suggest a higher incidence of plagiarism among postgraduate students, it is more likely that plagiarism is simply treated as a more serious issue at postgraduate level, thus increasing the relative number of cases that are formally recorded.

The figures provided by respondents for each level of undergraduate study similarly revealed a higher incidence at levels two and three (10.1 per 1,000) than at level one (4.8 per 1,000). Again, it is impossible to say whether this is due to a genuinely larger number of cases in higher level students or increased engagement with the formal procedures. It is also worth noting that only a relatively small number of HEIs were able to provide figures for academic level.

Institutions were asked to provide details of the proportion of recorded offences that were first and subsequent offences. The estimated national

proportion of first offences was 92%, although this figure was over 95% among group B HEIs. While 72% of institutions had advised their staff to consider the previous history of the student when assigning a penalty, over 25% of these same institutions could not supply information on the number of first / subsequent offenders.

In addition to requesting information on the number of cases recorded, the questionnaire also sought information on the recorded penalties applied. The most commonly reported penalty was resubmission of an assessment for a reduced or capped mark, with 2372 occurrences. Although expulsion was mentioned as a potential sanction in 99% of plagiarism regulations, it was only applied in 143 of the 9229 recorded.

There were marked differences between the three groups in the utilisation of certain penalties, most notably 'degree-level' penalties (i.e. penalties that are most seriously likely to affect the outcome of the degree) including expulsions. While degree-level penalties accounted for around 1% of all penalties in group A institutions, this was nearer 14% and 20% in group C and group B institutions respectively. These differences were not explained by variations in the proportion of postgraduate or repeat offences, indicating that the inherent characteristics of an institution are more important in predicting the likelihood of a severe penalty than the nature of the offence.

Part II: The Recorded Incidence of Student Plagiarism and Penalties Applied

In 22 HEIs, including 11 group B institutions, all of the recorded cases of plagiarism were first offences. Despite this, these institutions reported that 71 degree-level penalties, including 12 expulsions, had been applied. This suggests that low academic level does not itself compensate if the offence is deemed sufficiently severe in other respects.

Conclusion

Concerns that the application of penalties for student plagiarism is inconsistent across the HE sector would appear to be upheld by the findings of this research. However, there would equally appear to be clusters of consensus within certain groups, particularly those that were identified in the previous stage of this project. Institutions are encouraged to improve their existing recording procedures to engender a more complete and transparent picture of activity within the sector and to aid the development of a coherent national approach to the allocation of penalties for student plagiarism.