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PLAGARISM BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:

THE PROBLEM AND SOME PROPOSALS

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The problem

Plagiarism - the use of other people's words or ideas without giving proper credit - is only one part of the general problem of cheating. Anecdotal evidence as well as a few studies suggest that student cheating is much more widespread than usually recognised. (Although exams are thought to prevent cheating more than essays, the actual rate of cheating on exams may be higher than for any other assessment mode.)

Most cheating is undetected. For every student caught plagiarising, it is almost certain that many more plagiarisers escape detection.

Elimination of plagiarism by detection and penalties is labour-intensive and ultimately impossible. One article recommends that, to detect plagiarism, each essay be read four times. But this only picks up copying from published sources; copying from other essays, or false authorship of essays, is seldom detectable or provable.

More importantly, the policing approach to plagiarism is educationally counterproductive. Students should be encouraged to model themselves on the best thinkers and, at the same time, to think critically and originally. This is hardly possible if they are constantly being scrutinised for intentional or inadvertent plagiarism.

Reducing plagiarism

The proposals here are aimed not to "stamp out" plagiarism but rather to create the sort of educational environment where it is rare because both students and staff expect the highest standards in each other. The aim should be to develop a culture of respect for quality work.

Open discussion

There needs to be much more explicit discussion of what is meant by plagiarism and what is appropriate acknowledgement in particular circumstances. This includes detailed examples in subject notes, discussion in lectures and articles in student newspapers.

Most students do treat

plagiarism seriously. According to one study, the major issues so far as students are concerned are "fairness to authors and other students, the responsibility of students to do independent work, and respect for ownership rights."

What is considered appropriate acknowledgement depends on the subject and circumstance. Adding footnotes to a musical score is not a common practice! Departments and, in some cases, even individual lecturers may need to develop their own guidelines.

Staff and students must recognise that the academic culture, with its acknowledgement of authorship, is at variance with many other parts of society. Unacknowledged copying is tolerated by some school teachers. Misrepresentation of authorship is standard practice among politicians, business executives and public sector administrators, who seldom give appropriate credit to their speechwriters and junior staff.

Prevention

In many subjects, plagiarism can be minimised by appropriate design of essay questions, or student assessment generally. For example, essay questions can be posed which require the student to refer to recent newspaper or magazine articles, draw on personal experiences, or make connections between theory and example not found in the literature. This prompts students to do their own work without any specific concern about plagiarism. By contrast, offering long lists of possible essay topics, little changed from year to year, is a prescription for copying from published sources and/or past essays.

Acknowledgement of collaboration

In some subjects, students commonly work together on assignments, and this may be a valuable part of the educational process. If this is the case, it is better to encourage students to acknowledge their collaboration, for example by providing for group submissions accompanied by signed statements allocating

credit for work done.

Acknowledgement by staff

Academics can provide a good example for students by giving appropriate credit for ideas in their lectures and subject notes. When academics are more explicit about the source for examples, problems or approaches, this also helps students gain a better appreciation of the position of their teachers in the development and communication of knowledge.

Honour code

Many universities have an honour code by which students undertake both to not cheat and to report cheating by other students - and in some universities the code is widely respected and observed. At many universities, such a culture of honesty would be difficult to introduce in the short term. Nevertheless, it remains a worthy goal, and may be possible to introduce within individual departments or faculties.

Learning by re-submission

Most students who plagiarise from published sources do not understand that it is wrong. (On the other hand, most students realise that having another student write one's essay is wrong.) When lecturers subtract marks or fail an essay because of plagiarism, the student is penalised but may not learn how to do it correctly.

An alternative approach is to allow, in some circumstances, re-submission without penalty. Under this approach, submissions containing plagiarism can be re-submitted with the only changes being appropriate quotation marks, footnotes, etc. The revised submission would then be marked by the original standard. In this way, the student gains experience in giving proper acknowledgements. (Of course, a piece of work that is entirely plagiarised would, on re-submission, be entirely made up of quotes, and would receive little credit.)

Discipline by peers

A number of overseas

universities have discipline committees to deal with student cheating that include significant numbers of students. In fact, it is commonly found that the student committee members are much tougher on cheaters than staff, possibly because the students have a better feel for what is going on and for the resentment felt by honest students. In any case, judgment by peers gives greater credibility to the discipline process. Also, commitment to honesty and fairness is given a much higher profile in the student community via the personal influence of the students selected for the discipline committee.

All disciplinary procedures must be respectful of the rights of those accused of plagiarism. The legal ramifications of dealing with plagiarism are forbidding, a fact which only serves to emphasise the superiority of prevention and a culture of honesty over an approach based on detection and punishment.

Policy

Universities, faculties and perhaps departments need to have clear, well-publicised policies on plagiarism. These policies need to do more than say "do not plagiarise." They need to explain what plagiarism means in practice with examples of correct and incorrect citations.

A sense of proportion

Plagiarism is often treated like a mortal sin: assumed to happen only rarely and warranting the most extreme penalties when discovered. The reality is different: plagiarism in mild forms is quite common. Plagiarism needs to be understood as a straightforward issue of learning how to give acknowledgements in the fashion expected in a scholarly environment. The main focus should be on learning, not penalties for transgressors.

(Due to space constraints, the footnotes have been omitted. They are available from the author.)