

# A Scottish university's cross-institutional approach to reduce plagiarism: first results and recommendations

Dr. Christina Mainka  
Department of Educational Development  
Napier University, Edinburgh, UK  
[c.mainka@napier.ac.uk](mailto:c.mainka@napier.ac.uk)

Scott Raeburn  
School of Computing  
Napier University, Edinburgh, UK  
[s.raeburn@napier.ac.uk](mailto:s.raeburn@napier.ac.uk)

Shirley Earl  
Department of Educational Development  
Napier University, Edinburgh, UK  
[s.earl@napier.ac.uk](mailto:s.earl@napier.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** Research and consultations in session 2003/2004 by a University's Plagiarism Working Group uncovered a poor understanding of plagiarism and inconsistent handling procedures throughout its schools. In an effort to address both these issues, a strategic 2-year Action Plan was developed and rolled out beginning the following academic year in order to improve student support, staff awareness and more consistent practice overall. The plan included a pilot using the detection software service, Turnitin®UK, with five of the University's 14 schools. The pilot was only one of a series of university wide deliberations, others included the revision and piloting of a University plagiarism code of practice, implementation of school-based academic conduct officers, improved staff development opportunities and student support materials and events. The University's School of Computing has served as a role model of good practice throughout. Noteworthy is the school's record keeping practice since session 2001/02 of incidences of plagiarism. In the paper we present the factors such as gender, nationality and level of study that have been found linked to the incidences of plagiarism in the school. Furthermore, the role plagiarism detection software plays in addressing plagiarism is explored within the collaborative and holistic approach of the Action Plan. Finally, the challenges and resistance faced by key players throughout the implementation of the first phase of the Action Plan at the University are considered and the commitment to continuous enhancement recognised.

**Keywords:** plagiarism, strategic development, detection software, record keeping, student support, staff development

## Introduction

Plagiarism is certainly not new to higher education, and it has been widely recognised that internet technology makes it easier to plagiarise than ever before. Academics and plagiarism experts expect the opportunities for “point-and-click” plagiarism to expand further as the internet continues to grow [Williams, 2002] [Carroll, 2005]. These findings are further borne out by a 2002 survey conducted at Northumbria University in which 40% of students and 35% of academic staff approached attribute plagiarism to the ease with which material can be copied from the Internet [Dordoy 2002], consistent with a similar survey of North American students reported by McCabe in 2003 [McCabe, 2003].

Consultation of the “academic research services” for custom written term papers in the 1960's has since evolved into diverse forms of cyber-pseudo-epigraphy facilitated by the increasingly networked research environments which include the commercial and private online availability of written academic work on seemingly any subject matter. Downloading began replacing manual transcription around the mid 1980's, and after Google's launch in 1998, the internet ultimately became a public panacea for information of increasingly dubious origin seemingly responding to steadily increasing student demand. But, plagiarism is restricted to neither student

incidences nor higher education. Vice Chancellors in Australia, newspaper editors in the U.S. and established authors in Germany have been caught copying written work. Increasingly plagiarism-detection service providers are in demand outside the education sector such as by law firms, military agencies and information services [e.g., LexisNexis, 2005].

Australian and U.S. education institutions have been proactive in recording and addressing plagiarism for over 30 years, the first such U.S. study dating even as far back as 1940 [Drake, 1940]. Paper mills are found critically discussed in U.S. literature in the early 1970's [Stavisky 1973] and Australian reports on the extent of plagiarism and reasons for cheating appear a few years later [e.g. Bushway and Nash, 1977]. In 1992 *The Center for Academic Integrity* was founded in the U.S. in an effort to promote the values of academic integrity among students at a national level. Six years later John Barrie, a biophysics professor at Berkeley, founded Turnitin.com, the first commercially available software service developed to detect online plagiarism. In 2002 six Australian universities commissioned a comprehensive study of plagiarism using Barrie's detection software service and found that 14% of the 1925 student essays submitted were plagiarised to varying degrees [Foster, 2002]. Most recently a large-scale U.S. survey was conducted with 30,000 undergraduates at 34 colleges, of which nearly 40% admitted plagiarising, up from 10% in 1999 [McCabe 2005].

To paraphrase Barlow [1995, p.18], UK HE institutions, on the other hand, seem only recently beyond the stage: "Pretending that it ain't broke means you don't have to fix it." This is somewhat surprising considering the findings of the first UK survey of its kind in 1995 in which 50% of the surveyed undergraduate students admitted engaging in different forms of academic dishonesty [Newstead, et al. 1996]. The results hardly spearheaded institutional change, but after subsequent polls and surveys confirmed an increasingly worrying trend in UK higher education, the publicly-funded Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Plagiarism Advisory Service was established in 2001 to help handle the problem on a national level [JISCPAS]. One year earlier Oxford Brookes had developed a novel system of specialist officers (*academic conduct officer*, ACO) to assist academic staff deal with students not complying with university academic conduct regulations. Books on plagiarism by UK publishers began appearing [e.g. Carroll 2002; Angelil-Carter 2000] and the JISC-funded, US based plagiarism detection software, Turnitin®UK, was made available at no cost to all UK higher education institutions between 2003 and 2005. Though uptake by UK institutions was not systematic, the inaugural UK Conference on Plagiarism sponsored by JISC PAS in 2004, gave plagiarism in higher education in the UK a further profile [JISC PAS 2004].

Napier University's School of Computing has stood out internally since 2001 by recognising and recording cases of plagiarism over a period of 3 years to 2004/05. Their results and local educational and preventative measures enhanced the work of a University Plagiarism Working Group in the spring of 2004 in an effort to address the school's initial findings and wider concerns on an institutional wide basis. In this paper, the School of Computing's misconduct data analysis is first presented. Measures implemented by the Working Group based on the good practice modelled by the school are described. Finally, the results and challenges of the first set of university-wide deliberations to prevent plagiarism are explored.

## **Good Practice at Napier**

Napier University, Edinburgh is a modern (post-1992) university organised into 14 schools plus an LLL department. It has 4 faculties. Some 15,000 undergraduates and postgraduates are taught by 750 members of academic staff. Nearly 30% of Napier students are mature students. Following an upsurge of interest in

plagiarism in UK higher education in 2003 and recognising the limitations compared with Australasian higher education partners, a short term Plagiarism Working Group, was established by the institution's LTA committee, headed by one of the authors and with members from Educational Development, secretariat, library services, quality enhancement services, the Napier Student Association and pro-active members of the academic community, including another of the authors from the School of Computing.

### **The Case Study**

Following the example at Oxford Brookes the appointment of an "academic conduct officer"<sup>1</sup> by the School of Computing in mid-session 2001/02 led to a change in approach by the school in dealing with plagiarism and associated issues. The change was prompted by the recognition that plagiarism and collusion were separate issues and were becoming a significant problem which had to be dealt with consistently.

At the end of the session, an internal report showed that there was some evidence for patterns in the occurrences, albeit based on a sample of only 25 cases. Notably:

- Males were 2.3 times as likely as females to be involved
- PG students were half as likely to be involved in misconduct as UG
- Non-native speakers (NNS) were 10 times as likely to be involved as native speakers (NS).

The first two points fit in with the pattern of "academic cheating" reported by Hart & Friesner, [2004]. Summarising research by others, including Newstead et al [1996], they noted that "cheating appeared to be associated" with males rather than females and non-mature students rather than mature. Sutherland-Smith [2005] advises caution on the 3<sup>rd</sup> area, highlighting cultural differences in terms of academic conduct.

The School used terms in the following common ways:

*Plagiarism* is the unacknowledged use of the words and/or ideas of another

*Collusion* occurs when two or more students submit joint work on an individual assignment with the knowledge of each.

There was no clear definition of major or minor misconduct in the University in the ACO's first year . In order to establish an unequivocal definition for use in the School, the ACO proposed and implemented a very simple rule:

"First offence = minor; second & more = major".

This applied even if the 1<sup>st</sup> offence was a major download in the Honours project. It worked in the sense that all could understand it and the School had by far the highest reporting rate of misconduct in the University in the Working Party's later survey (see below).

The students who come to the School of Computing are typically not those well versed in essay work and citation. From comments in hearings, many come from educational traditions in which repeating the "words of a

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<sup>1</sup> An ACO is a member of academic staff in a School charged with responsibility for the consistent application of guidelines on academic conduct and investigating cases identified by colleagues.

master” verbatim seems to gain most marks and in which comparing two contrasting teachers’ views and giving one’s own opinion would be unfavoured [Turner & Acker 2002].

The interpretation of these in practice means that plagiarism is only investigated if there is no attempt to cite a source for extracts of published work. A student who borrows extensively from a website and only lists its URL somewhere will fail because there is little of the student’s own work to mark but won’t be recorded for misconduct.

Other students seem to have an instrumental view of higher education and will do what it takes to get the qualification. There are further resonances here with Hart & Friesner [2004].

### Cases heard by ACO

Table 1 shows details of the cases heard by the ACO, including those in which no further action was taken, i.e. the incident was “not proven” misconduct but was investigated. Also shown is the number of academic staff (from a roll of 65) who reported misconduct. Noteworthy is the observation that largely the same members of academic staff report plagiarism each year.

**Table 1. Misconduct cases from 2002-2005**

| Cases           | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|
| PG              | 22      | 21      | 17      |
| UG              | 69      | 45      | 35      |
| Total           | 91      | 66      | 52      |
| Reporting staff | 25      | 18      | 20      |

As can be seen, the total number of cases has fallen, reported by (approx.) the same proportion of staff. Possible reasons for this include:

- The workload and “hassle” for staff
- Better education of students on misconduct issues: posters, handbooks, Head of School talks, etc.
- Changes to the composition of the student population.

### Student population

Details of the student cohorts were obtained from the University’s Student Record System. It was soon clear that this data was unreliable for absolute analysis, e.g. too many students who did not matriculate or who withdrew after a short period are still included. However, assuming that such errant data is spread over all types of students, the data could be used for relative analysis.

Table 2 shows details of the numbers of students taught on campus in Edinburgh in the three sessions under consideration. Two trends are clear: a) the proportion of female students is falling and b) the proportion of NNS students is increasing<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that the NNS category is determined by recorded “nationality” code rather than “ethnicity”. There are very few students attending the School from foreign Anglophone countries. Students with a nationality code from UK & Ireland are assumed native speakers; others are assumed non-native speakers.

**Table 2. School student population 2002-2005**

| Students          | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| PG                | 724     | 536     | 560     |
| UG                | 1460    | 1416    | 1339    |
| Total             | 2184    | 1952    | 1899    |
|                   |         |         |         |
| M                 | 1729    | 1576    | 1607    |
| F                 | 454     | 375     | 345     |
| F as % of total   | 20.8    | 19.2    | 17.7    |
|                   |         |         |         |
| NS                | 1647    | 1441    | 1326    |
| NNS               | 506     | 505     | 559     |
| NNS as % of total | 23.5    | 26.0    | 29.7    |

### Analysis

Table 3 shows the principal results of the analysis of Tables 1 & 2.

**Table 3. Relative rates of misconduct cases, 2002-2005**

| Factor | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| PG/UG  | 0.6     | 1.2     | 1.2     |
| M/F    | 3.2     | 0.9     | 2.6     |
| NNS/NS | 4.3     | 4.7     | 4.1     |

The interesting points to note are:

- Something odd happened to females in 2003/04, otherwise the initial finding is confirmed
- PG students have moved from being less likely to cheat to slightly more likely
- NNS are some still 4-5 times more likely to be identified as cheating than NS (lower than the 2001/02 estimate but still worryingly high). A separate analysis of UG NNS in overseas programmes confirms this result.

A further analysis of the NNS/NS figures was carried out by breaking down the overall figure by level of study. Table 4 shows the results.

**Table 4. NNS/NS relative rates of misconduct by level of study, 2002-2005**

|    | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 |
|----|---------|---------|---------|
| PG | 2.8     | 6.2     | 8.4     |
| UG | 5.2     | 4.2     | 3.2     |

This clearly shows changes in the pattern of misconduct by PG & UG students. It could be inferred that, whilst the education in avoiding misconduct has a chance to work with undergraduates (NNS are in the School typically for 2-3 years), this appears not true for postgraduates (typically with the school for one year).

### Plagiarism Working Group Survey

The initial findings by the School of Computing clearly indicated a central role that should be played by educative measures preventing plagiarism. In light of these results, the Working Group responded by developing a 10-question survey to measure and evaluate the educative-preventive-detection and disciplinary procedures in place across the university. Response rate by the 14 schools and LLL was 100%. The results exposed three main areas of concern: detection described as ad hoc by 93% of the respondents ranging from 0 to a maximum of 91 (School of Computing) cases (noteworthy here is that the highest rate of incidence out with the School of Computing was only 16 cases); deterrence proactively practiced in only two out of 14 schools and LLL (13%) and an overall

unsatisfactory perception by staff of other staff as role models of good practice. The results reflected themes from a Napier Student Association report in which the inconsistency of awareness, school guidelines and disciplinary procedures were raised with the Working Group. It was agreed among Working Group members that the polarisation of the student experience across the schools and particularly for distance learners and the international Asian-Pacific students in terms of plagiarism contributed to lowering student experience and academic morale. Purposive, strategic action at all levels of the institution, benchmarked by good practice in the most proactive schools, was felt essential.

### **The Two Year Action Plan**

In order to promote a threshold standard of good practice across all schools, a two year Action Plan was drawn up which included a total of 10 measures to be implemented in a stepwise fashion between the academic years 2004/05-05/06 within an educative, preventive, detection and disciplinary continuum. An extant (but little known) institutional wide definition of plagiarism was adopted as follows: Plagiarism: “unacknowledged incorporation in a student’s work either in an examination or assessment of material derived from the work (published or unpublished) of another”.

Primarily, the four strategic actions that have been taken in the first year are:

- Academic Conduct Officers (ACO’s) appointed in all 14 schools
- Educative and awareness raising seminars and workshops for staff and educative materials written for students
- Systematic Turnitin®UK service pilot
- Plagiarism Code of Conduct pilot and consultation.

All four actions were approved by Academic Board. The two pilots, running for the duration of the Action Plan, began with self-selected schools for the first session, followed by a university wide implementation. The code of practice was drafted by a small team drawn from Educational Development, two academic faculties, and Secretariat and Management services. It was circulated in three schools at the beginning of Semester I of academic year 2004/05. Together with the Napier Student Association, the original authors and pilot participants reviewed and revised the code in Semester II for renewed implementation in schools in the following academic year. The revised Code was again approved by Academic Board.

The plagiarism detection software Turnitin®UK was piloted from within Educational Development in two phases, initially on a small scale with 13 volunteers from 5 schools, expanded to 18 to include interested ACO’s. Recognising that software could only be one tool of many in the effort to deter unoriginal thought and support academic staff, the pilot’s main objectives were to:

- Assess the reliability and usability of the detection software
- Evaluate the educational potential of the service
- Evaluate the software as a staff support tool
- Address staff perception of the role detection software plays in reducing plagiarism.

The staff experience would play a key role in the decision to subscribe (or not) to the service after it became subscription-based in August 2005. Academics were inducted to the service online in WebCT self-study training

developed to facilitate and manage the pilot and support its participants. Here all software documentation and additional online resources which addressed web literacy, showcased student tutorials or linked to essay banks and ghost writing services were made available. Correspondence between the administrator of the training module and pilot participants occurred via e-mail, online discussion board or phone. Staff were encouraged to use the software as an educational tool with their students, not solely as a detection tool during periods of assessment. Staff were given the opportunity online to share with one another their experiences and advice. A comprehensive survey at the end of Semester I marked the end of phase I of the small scale pilot followed by a revised and slightly expanded pilot in Phase II.

### **The Turnitin®UK Pilot Survey Results**

Turnitin®UK pilot participants completed a 20 question survey after the first four months of operation. Response rate was 78%. The results are summarised in the order of the above stated pilot objectives for the pilot:

- The detection software service: All active service users (7/14 respondents) agreed that the software was easy to use and required less than 3 hrs of preparation before assignment submission. The high quality of information returned in the 178 Originality Reports was identified, but long return times (>24 hrs) during peak submission periods criticised. The service was unavailable twice during Phase I, which proved frustrating. The small breadth of the database was criticised.
- The educational potential of the service: All but one respondent agreed that plagiarism was a serious problem in their school. Only 33% of active users, used the service with their students. These gave students opportunities to practice referencing by submitting drafts to the service, recognising the potential for improving the quality of student work. One respondent recommended student use be discouraged to prevent misuse.
- Staff support: Respondents who didn't use the service argued either that it was too time consuming to learn, using conventional search engines was better or that plagiarism was not such a problem that it warranted use of such a service. Active users, however, felt well-assisted, remarking that using the service saved them time and could act as a deterrent. Checking for collusion was found especially helpful. All active users anticipated using the service again and would recommend its use to colleagues. ACO's using the service commented that the additional cases of detected student plagiarism at the school since piloting the service proved extremely stressful and hard to manage.
- Staff expectations of service: In the comments section of the survey a few respondents reported disappointment with the service for failing to check for matched text from databases students had access to. One respondent criticised the need to use the service alongside other detection methods such as search engines.

### **Additional Survey Results**

The survey exposed a recurring theme, namely the lack of extensive school support for efforts to address plagiarism. Comments by 30% of the respondents ranged from "Anything that may cause students to fail seems deeply unpopular" to "Peers have felt let down by the inaction to even gross misconduct." And cynically, "What's the use? The penalties for plagiarism appear so slight that some students perceive it worth the risk." Finally, one participant remarked "There are senior lecturers who don't seem to either care about plagiarism or want to take the time to deal with it." In personal talks with affected pilot participants one of the authors confirmed that

pressure to ignore plagiarism in order to submit grades in a timely fashion or improve retention rates was not uncommon.

## Discussion

The end of the first year of the Action Plan sees the University recognising its need to continue to plan strategically and enhance its practice in this area. Additionally, it sees it in wider institutional debate about academic integrity and plagiarism. The holistic, transparent and cross-institutional approach taken by the Working Group on all fronts has proven successful in a number of ways. Academic and support staff, Academic Board, management and student communities of practice have had the opportunity to contribute to the enhancement and development. Their feedback has ensured cyclical consideration of measures and improvements to the Action Plan already within the first year. More improvements have been made for the second year based on formal and informal observations and discussions, summarised as follows:

- Academic Conduct Officers (ACO): Following the recommendations made by the School of Computing ACOs were appointed but their responsibilities were not clearly defined. Less than half of designated ACOs have regularly attended staff development seminars. Only two have regularly made use of the detection software despite repeated efforts to include all ACOs in the pilot. The increased workload of the most proactive members of the ACO team has proven controversial. For 2005/06, guidelines have been drafted for all ACOs. All ACOs will receive personal support from a member of Educational Development and development sessions will be held to facilitate understanding of procedures, exchange good practice and to encourage networking. Workload allowances are being discussed.
- The five staff development events in 2004/2005 that addressed plagiarism were reasonably well attended but largely by the same members of academic staff. The number of events has been increased to include sessions addressing problematic trends flagged by the School of Computing data, such as the apparent increases in postgraduate offences and amongst international students. A new plagiarism information website for staff and students is being developed to go live during semester I of 2005/06. New student material will include informative handouts at matriculation and entries in programme handbooks, additional to student diary and freshers' guide inserts and posters already available. Plagiarism information and useful links are included in a newly developed pilot online induction for distance students.
- The Plagiarism Code of Practice is in operation university-wide already in a revised format. Academic Board has recognised that further revisions will be required for the session 2006/07.
- Turnitin®UK: Despite the disappointing rate of actual software uptake by pilot participants (50%), positive feedback secured University wide subscription to the service for 2005/06. The breadth of the database is growing. Session 2005/06 sees weekly face to face inductions to the service made compulsory for potential users in order to promote good practice and dispel common misconceptions of the service. Its educative dimension will be stressed.

Although the lessons suggested by the School of Computing data have not yet been addressed effectively on an institutional basis, one School and Educational Development have chosen to allocate a member of staff and research money for the area. Unengaged academics continue to give overall cause for concern. This is not a local issue, as evidenced by the 2004 survey carried out by FreshMinds and JISC PAS which reported a mere 3% detection rate of plagiarism [FreshMinds 2004], a figure that, if continued, will thwart the impact of even the

most exemplary of measures to address the issue. It would seem to be in the primary interest of all University educators to engage in efforts to reduce plagiarism, but School of Computing data and the Turnitin®UK pilot survey results suggest otherwise. Why? Part of the answer can be found in the paper, “Why do professors ignore cheating?” in which Keith-Spiegel and Tabachnick [1998] link factors such as emotional stress, lack of time and institutional disinterest in traditional values to academics’ apathy. The authors advise that Napier University has chosen to engage strategically from evidence base and quality enhancement perspectives rather than to ignore. The authors further suggest that UK universities should be serious about promoting academic integrity and that in order to do this they will need to recognise and respond to the requirements of staff engaged in measures to prevent and confront plagiarism, lest resistance increase further.

## Conclusion

First lessons, innovation and record keeping within the School of Computing provided a data set for wider University development and an Action Plan. The first 2004/05 phase of the Action Plan has been successful in raising awareness of the issues that surround plagiarism and in the use of a consistent strategic framework to enhance support for both staff and students. The initial uptake of that support by academic staff has been slower than hoped, the reasons for which are being currently explored in a separate study. The Working Group and pilot studies, however, have already paved a way to increase education about and reduce the incidence of plagiarism.

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