

Institutional change to deter student plagiarism: what seems essential to a holistic approach?

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Abstract:

To date, there has been little published research relating to institutional practice on student plagiarism and no comparative data available of the effectiveness of either current or newly-developed holistic approaches to the problem. This paper outlines a study conducted to examine the motivators for change in dealing with plagiarism in 9 UK academic institutions and the lessons that might be learned from their experiences. All of the institutions surveyed had revised, or attempted to revise their approach to plagiarism in the preceding five years. Where respondents viewed the changes in the approach as effective and integrated in the institution, a common factor was the presence of enthusiasts willing to put energy into implementing and embedding the new approach. The endorsement of senior management in the institution was also a crucial factor in the successful adoption of the revised approach. The nature of the events, which triggered recognition of the need for change within the institutions, were disparate, but were frequently used by the architects of the new approach to maintain momentum for the process. Amongst the recommendations for institutions considering adoption of similar approaches to plagiarism, foremost was the considerable time needed to revise existing policies and procedures and a plea to put pedagogy at the heart of all changes in approach. Finally, this study highlighted that whilst it was possible to adopt a holistic approach to student plagiarism further evaluation is necessary before the effects of the approach are fully appreciated.

Keywords: Plagiarism, academic integrity, institutional change, holistic approach,

Background

The literature on student cheating, including that on plagiarism, has grown substantially post-2000. Interested individuals have no difficulty finding descriptions of the problem or the characteristics of plagiarists; nor would they need to look far for suggestions for dealing with the issue. Authoritative advice is available in academic journals and a number of specialist conferences have been devoted to the topic (including the one for which we have written this paper). The guidance available is becoming ever more specific and as research on the topic develops, contributions are moving beyond advice and suggestion to investigation of the effectiveness of the suggested remedies (Culwin, 2005; Ahearn, 2005).

Much of the available literature concentrates on actions and issues at the level of students and teachers, whereas published research at the level of institutional practice is noticeably harder to find. Yet the two are clearly connected. Simon et al (2003) state that they could find “little attention on the possible connection between organisational characteristics and the efforts made by faculty to deter student academic ethics violations” (p.193). A search for institutional-level investigations elicits general guidance on institutional issues connected to student plagiarism (see, for example, Walker, 1998; Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Carroll, 2002; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Longstaff, Ross & Henderson 2003; Carroll, 2004; Pickard, 2005). Park (2003) produced an often-cited literature review on student plagiarism that concludes,

“There is a growing need for UK institutions to develop cohesive frameworks for dealing with student plagiarism that are based on prevention supported by robust detection and penalty systems that are transparent and applied consistently.” (p. 484)

Addressing this gap in 2004, Park described his own institution’s changes to policy and procedures to accommodate the changing nature and frequency of plagiarism cases. He offers the example as “...a contribution to the emerging national [i.e. UK] debate ... to save others from having to invent the same wheel” (p.304). In 2005, in the same spirit, the *Plagiarism Advisory Service* produced a document they call *The Road Map* (2005) which describes the actions required for dealing effectively with student plagiarism at an institutional level. The Road Map lists 83 actions and suggested interventions, a seemingly daunting range of requirements on tertiary education institutions, which are already facing a well-documented number of changes and challenges.

It is the authors’ belief that plagiarism is a complex issue that requires a complex response and we have argued elsewhere for a holistic approach to tackling the problem (see Macdonald and Carroll, in press). Whilst the holistic approach advocated is widely accepted in the literature and gave rise to the publication of the Road Map, the opposite view is still held by many practitioners. We, the authors, regularly encounter those who describe a limited number of causes (e.g. “it’s all because of the web” or “it’s because we have lowered our admission standards”) and an equally straightforward solution (e.g. “Give them a lecture on avoiding plagiarism” or “We should go back to 100% examination-based assessment”). The holistic approach, on the other hand, requires consideration and implementation of a range of activities such as those described in the Road Map.

We embarked on the study described in this paper to discover whether specific institutions employed a holistic approach already and could confirm the appropriateness of the Road Map’s suggested multi-layered approach. We wondered what triggered the change(s) (if any) in institutional policies and procedures where institutions had begun to adopt approaches like that advocated by the Road Map. What lessons might be learned from institutions already embarked on the “journey” to effective management of student plagiarism to avoid Park’s “reinvention of the wheel”? Finally, we wondered whether the literature on change management, which suggests that certain actions are necessary for achieving successful institutional change, was relevant in this instance. For example, Proctor & Doukakis (2003) note the importance of early involvement of staff, effective communication and creating a “readiness for change” (p. 275). Did these elements appear in the experience of institutions attempting to deal with their students’ plagiarism? By documenting practice, we hoped to be able to offer informed guidance to institutions about to embark on the development of institutional policies and procedures designed to deter and deal with student plagiarism.

Methodology

We were interested in changes over the last five years because this coincides with the growing number of factors, e.g. access to electronic resources, increasing class sizes, decreasing contact time with students and an increasingly diverse student population, that are said to account for the rising number, nature and variety of cases.

We, therefore, approached institutions where we were either aware that changes had been made in their policies and procedures in this timescale, or, in the case of institutions that had been involved in the pilot projects for the

JISC electronic plagiarism detection software (Chester, 2001), conducted to gauge the suitability and relevance of access to institution-wide plagiarism detection software, and, therefore, where we anticipated that changes had occurred. We acknowledge the inherent bias in the data collected during the study, however, as the focus of the study was on gathering information about actual changes and lessons learned the selection of respondents can be justified on this basis.

Initially, we contacted 13 potential respondents by letter or e-mail, and follow-up e-mails and telephone calls were made to individuals who did not respond to the initial request. In a number of cases the request was passed on several times before reaching the appropriate person. We were seeking an interviewee with wide knowledge of the institution and sufficient seniority to be able to describe what and, more importantly, why things had happened. All but one of the participants matched this description. Positive responses were received from 10 individuals and a further two respondents, from one institution, were identified through personal contact with one of the authors.

Two potential interviewees were unable to schedule interviews in the time available, therefore, 10 interviews were eventually conducted with participants representing nine institutions.

Interviews were conducted by phone and face-to-face, using a semi-structured interview plan of 16 questions (Appendix 1). Respondents were assured of anonymity, thus, details that would enable identification of participants have been removed from all quotes in this paper. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour and all were completed during July, 2005. Transcriptions of the interviews were inspected for common themes and responses compiled for each group of questions.

The interview results

Nature of the institutional change

Eight of the 10 respondents stated there had been significant changes in the way their institution managed plagiarism over the last five years; one said changes were partial and incomplete and one did not cite actions beyond attempts to change others' views on plagiarism, so far apparently unsuccessfully. The chart below lists institutions by number, which were allocated randomly but consistently throughout this paper. Quotations from interviews are followed with the same institutional number in square brackets [], again used consistently through the paper.

Questions 4, 5 and 6 asked about the nature of changes made in the previous five years. All interviewees could name specific changes though these varied between institutions:

Table 1. Institutional changes

	1	2*	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Revise policy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Set up a working group				x	x	x		x	x	
New written info for students		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
New teaching activities						x	x			
New info for staff			x			x	x	x		
Internal survey and/or pedagogic research	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	
Adopting specialist officers / conduct officers	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x
Revision of punishments	x			x			x	x	x	p*
Central record kept						x	x	x	x	*

* These changes do not apply to the whole university as yet and are described by the interviewee as partial and incomplete.

** There was a change in one school, which “appears to have been very successful” and extension to the whole university is planned.

Trigger events for institutional change

Questions 7 and 8 asked interviewees what triggered the changes in how the institution managed student plagiarism. Questions 9 and 10 asked the three participant institutions who had participated in the 2001 pilot project that provided access to Turnitin text-matching software about the impact of participation. Respondents mentioned a range of events that prompted change.

Table 2. Trigger Event

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
“nothing specific”, general concern				x	x					x
Awareness of inconsistency	x							x	x	
Research or survey to document one aspect of the problem	x	x		x	x			x		
Input from an external “expert”	x						x			
Complaints from students	x	x								
Participation in JISC pilot			x							
One “keen” person encouraging change	x		x	x			x		x	
Concern about workload under current procedures					x					
Specific request from someone more senior than interviewee					x	x		x	x	
One poorly-handled case	x							x		

Many, especially those who had been active for most of the previous five years, could see the direct connection between the “trigger” event and subsequent change and had little difficulty generating a “story” in answer to this question:

Back in 2002, we knew this bad case was coming so it encouraged us to think about it and we did an initial year of tinkering with assessment regulations then we had xx in and we started a review and built the new regulations in 2003/4 that came into effect in 4/5. In some ways, it was perfectly timed because we had seen the case coming forward. It was messy. There was recognition that we really don't want to be in this position again and how do we avoid it? [1]

Five years ago, we saw it [plagiarism] as rare and as something that happened to other people. I had a case and felt it was not handled properly. I was unsupported and the student was unsupported. We were just reactive – when it happened. Now the changes are sort of woven into the fabric of the place. [7]

None suggested that participating in the JISC study was instrumental in subsequent activities though one said,

...it had a profound effect on our reputation as an example of good policy and for me to be known around the area and the [institution] to get the kudos. [3]

This is not to say that the introduction of TurnitinUK nationally was not useful – four institutions which were not in the pilot had planned to introduce or had already adopted TurnitinUK and those who had done so stressed its usefulness as part of the overall approach. However, the early participants seemed to remain isolated within the institution and were not encouraged to take further action once the project ceased.

Problems encountered when making changes

Questions 11-13 asked interviewees about any problems encountered during the changes made to deal with student plagiarism and what, if anything, had been done to resolve them. Four could not identify any general difficulties though they often described the apparent lack alongside anticipatory efforts to deter them:

It went relatively smoothly and I think people are happy with what we were proposing to do [1]

I have not been aware of any difficulties. We did work quite hard on publicity and making sure that Course Organisers and Convenors were aware what was happening. It's the perennial problem of getting information out....it really seems to have gone quite well. [4]

No problems. It's been very smooth because everyone was in the same place in their thinking about dealing with the problem. [7]

I think we didn't have problems because we had a university-wide working group and we made sure that people who needed to be there were on it and we took external advice and we ensured both academics and admin people were represented. We consulted and consulted and did more internal research and fed that evidence in so evidence was always at the centre. The results were evidence based. [8]

Others described a mixed picture

There are always muttering from staff, and they still have to get the student in to hear a case no matter what they do. They complain they have to give the student the evidence before the meeting, which I think is just as it should be. They didn't have to do that in the past. They still, in a lot of cases, want to deal with it at school level even though it's not allowed. [5]

No problems with the introduction of Faculty Academic Conduct Officers but I suspect that formalising procedures has made it more difficult for lecturers to deal with cases of poor academic practice rather than outright cheating. [10]

A range of other difficulties were mentioned, listed below in order of frequency

Four respondents mentioned difficulties with ensuring the newly-created specialist role, variously named as Conduct or Misconduct Officer, appointed in all cases to increase the student's chances of being treated consistently.

Three mentioned variation between the way lecturers saw the issue of plagiarism as a problem as well as their general wariness of the policy changes.

Two referred to dissatisfaction amongst lecturers relating to their perception of penalties as too lenient and colleagues finding the procedures were still too onerous despite the redesign to make them less so.

Other issues raised individually included:

- Schools continuing to manage cases under the old regulations rather than using the new ones which included use of a specialist officer
- Changes being localised and partially applied
- Having to re-write the code of practice several times
- Not using Turnitin or having its use supported by the institution
- Disinterest from senior management
- Blocking by senior management
- Handling poor academic practice cases.

Evaluation of the impact of changes

When asked about evaluation (Q14), many cited efforts to monitor, review and track the effects. Some efforts offered as evaluation are more accurately aimed at quality enhancement.

Table 3. Monitoring and review activity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Monitoring of statistics on individual cases			p			p	x	x	x	
Adapting in response to suggestions				x				x	x	
Monitoring specialist officers'/panel decisions	x						x		x	
Regular meetings with all specialist officers/panels	x			x			x	x	x	
Working group continuing to meet and discuss	x			p	x					
Submission of reviews or reports to university committees	x					p	x		x	
Commission of studies in response to monitoring data already in hand						p		x	p	
Activity to enhance the changes										
Briefing and inducting of specialist officers				x		x			x	x
Recording suggestions for future revisions					x					
Requiring school-based induction of students				x						
Soliciting informal emails from all staff as a reality check							x			

p = planned

Several of the institutions were described as still being in the first year of the range of changes they had implemented so evidence of impact remained anecdotal or anticipated. Others with longer experience cited monitoring and review activities as above but these apparently did not result in data. In two cases, local research was planned: in one case, to identify whether the perception that international students were being caught more frequently was correct and if so, whether this was because they plagiarised more or for some other reason; in a second case, the interviewee was speaking after the first year of the new specialist officer system, noting:

We have lots of qualitative data and some quantitative data, lots of positive responses about the changes but I'm not sure yet whether we have consistency between schools. Of course, no one worried about that before, consistency, but now we can show trends so what are they? Is it fair? Is it fair to international students? We need to publish our stats so people don't just use the grapevine and I need to write a report for some committee somewhere I think. [6]

One, responding to question 14 on evaluation of impact, described how an idea arose from the annual meeting of the Academic Conduct Officers.

...to have a new cover sheet for submitted worka set of tick boxes for the various items that come up again and again [in plagiarism interviews]. That students are doing that they shouldn't. So the reminder is not just hidden away in a handbook or in some regulation but is there in front of them every time they hand in their work. Have you given credit for all the diagrams? Tick. Have you referenced properly? Tick. That sort of things, ten items. We [ACOs] can put this out as good practice. It's not mandatory but we do have considerable clout in saying things like look, this is what you really should do. [4]

Advice to others contemplating institutional changes

The final question (Q. 16) asked for advice to anyone contemplating institutional changes. Many positive comments made during interviews were not reiterated as “advice”. None suggested **not** following their approach and most said something similar to the view expressed by [4]: *I would certainly recommend going down the sort of route we have taken.* Much of the advice was common across the interviews and is summarised below (number of respondents in brackets).

- (5) Spend considerable time on revising the policy itself. *“both rigorous and flexible which sounds like a contradiction but isn’t”.* [1]

- (5) Put pedagogy at the centre of your thinking.

There’s a danger of too much focus on punishment. Now, teachers are starting to trust the process and they can answer questions with “yes” from external examiners about “do you do this”, “do you do that”. [7]

- (5) Convene a group, and use the group to seek ownership of the changes across the institution.

- (4) Ensure the process is iterative,

- Other suggestions included:

Go for a bottom-up approach where you build from the needs of individual teachers. [7]

Make sure whatever you learn along the way gets fed into university committees and decisions. [1]

Train your students. Make sure they know how to use academic conventions. [4]

Explain to staff how much evidence they need to construct a case. How much is enough. [5]

Discussion

The interviews showed that adopting a holistic approach to deterring student plagiarism was possible and that where it seemed to be happening, was seen as very desirable by those interviewed. Several of the institutions contacted were clear that their own case illustrated the holistic approach and one used the word without prompting to describe their efforts. Institutions adopting a holistic approach were undertaking some but in no instances, all of the actions advocated by the Plagiarism Advisory Service Road Map. This seems to confirm the appropriateness of this document.

We then tried to identify factors common to institutions which had implemented successful change (Q’s 7 & 8). The first and most obvious was the presence of enthusiasts willing to put energy into the change and support others to do so. These enthusiasts were even more effective if they identified and documented issues and above all, if they could influence future actions.

It just happened that when I was Associate Dean, I did a survey in science and engineering to find out how plagiarism was being handled. It was a feeling cases were not being handled in a fair way so I decided that I would find out. I made the results known to [the Dean] and she spotted this as an opportunity to take it forward [4]

It's because of that person [the Academic Conduct officers' co-ordinator] that it works as well as it does and that it has a direct impact. Without her, the system just wouldn't work and without me [an Associate Dean] it would work lots less well. [7]

Enthusiasts without data and access to power was not sufficient. A second crucial factor seemed to be ensuring that senior managers and official decision-making channels were involved, either as instigators or, if a bottom-up approach was used, as endorsers of others' actions.

Well, after that incident [a poorly managed case] I started talking to people and it went on for three years. I nearly always met with support but there was no action. I was seen as personally obsessed – I ran workshops, responded to requests for help, I talked to anybody who would listen but they couldn't change things. But then the Registrar was replaced by someone new and the new one saw it was an issue. By then I had an idea of what to do and briefed her. She got the lawyers to make it a formal policy and it went to Senate for approval. It was College policy. Usually these things are top-down but this was bottom up and people are with me. They stop me everywhere I go and suggest things and I show them activities they can do with their students. That's not happened here before, I think. People own it I think. Now we have a new Learning and teaching Director, too, and she is interested and she is advocating research and bringing externals in and making sure there is some pedagogy behind the process but the issue is still getting beyond the converted. I e-mail everyone once a year about their experiences and get loads of responses. Opinion and facts and it's clear they are not all [following the new procedures]. [7]

We worked together as ACOs for three years then in 2004, the Dean of Learning and Teaching was brought in as group co-ordinator and made sure the ACOs wrote annual reports for their schools. He published an overall review that went to committees and the senior executive. Then they started to take notice. [9]

Where this link with decision-makers was missing or where the support did not engender strategic action, there was frustration and discouragement, even if the trigger event was identified:

We are rolling out a whole new policy and procedures [describes the problems that prompted this] and there's apathy. They [lecturers] say "we barely have enough time to do our jobs and now this". We piloted the detection service and have academic conduct officers because staff were overwhelmed by the amount of time it took but the role is not defined. Unfortunately it hasn't worked because the wrong people were appointed or just, told, "You are it". Pushed rather than volunteered. So they didn't come to the training. We have to work on that and re-appoint and last week, we sent another reminder out to ACOs to remind them of their role and to come to another awareness-raising session in August. It's not working as well as I would have liked but we are addressing the issue, which we weren't a year ago. [2]

A third factor that seemed significant was the multi-faceted nature of the change. Whilst statements like that above demonstrate the effort involved in changing many aspects of practice and policy at the same time, the effort was nevertheless seen as worthwhile. In contrast, institutions implementing a small number of single-focus actions viewed the process as a struggle. All respondents in answer to Q. 11 about difficulties could cite them but in two cases, participants said the problems were sufficient to stop change. One of the two spoke only of revised regulations and one interviewee's efforts seemed isolated from the rest of the institution, describing his work as "not integrated into the main college system"[3]. This was a surprising development: not only was the holistic approach desirable, but respondents who did not operate within a wide-spread and generalised pattern of change perceived the institution as not successfully adapting to the issue of student plagiarism. Others, operating within a more holistic approach, acknowledged that there were threats to the overall changes made.

In three cases, respondents mentioned too strong an emphasis on punishment rather than pedagogy and one said “*apathy*” [2] was a threat. However, change continued.

A fourth factor that emerged from reviewing transcripts was the importance of local research and documentation. The effort to record and confirm local circumstances was frequently mentioned as significant, even where local data replicated findings published elsewhere. Local studies were often cited as a “trigger event” for starting the whole process and where they occurred along the way, as key elements in keeping up the momentum and ensuring the wider institution “bought in” to the changes. Like publicity for local studies, one-off events such as a badly-handled or a particularly “messy” case could be instrumental, but only if the experience of handling the case was shared with a wide range of influential people, or set in train a personal willingness to advocate for change. The interviewee who was most dissatisfied with the institution’s approach describes a badly-handled case that hardened rather than shifted others’ views about change.

A final factor that seemed important in stimulating and maintaining a holistic approach was identifying and using developments as they occurred. One spoke proudly of reducing the regulations from 15 pages to seven regulations, adding, “*We really have done a big job on that.*” [4] One enjoyed the external publicity of becoming a national spokesman for colleges such as his own. Another described the adoption of a new cover sheet for student work. These unexpected spin-offs appeared to encourage momentum and bolster the interviewees’ energy.

Conclusion

This study shows that, not only is it possible to have holistic change in an institution but that without the holistic approach, change does not happen and often, leaves those trying to encourage it frustrated. Those considering whether or not to embark on a similar “journey” can be reassured that the Plagiarism Advisory Service Road Map identifies actions which have proven to be effective in some institutions over the previous five years. No clear “trigger event” common to the institutions surveyed was identified so it would appear that any point in the Road Map would be equally appropriate for embarking on change as long as the intention was to ensure all or most of the suggested activities would be addressed. This is also a useful reminder for institutions contemplating introducing one aspect such as electronic detection software without addressing other aspects of the need for careful consideration of the merits of a holistic approach.

The study also showed that holistic change, whilst possible, nevertheless proved challenging. Participants’ experience suggests useful ways in which institutional change can be enhanced and momentum maintained. The factors that emerged are largely similar to those cited in the generic change management literature. In particular, it seems useful to:

- **Ensure institution-wide ownership** of the process by using whatever mechanism matches the local context. Often, this entails setting up a representative group to collect and discuss views and to inform and consult senior managers with perhaps one named as responsible for progress.
- **Nurture and support enthusiasts.** Plagiarism seems to be an area that attracts interest and draws in people with energy and value-driven commitment to students or fellow academics.
- **Commission and publicise local research and investigations.** These often confirm or encourage further development and should be widely communicated.

- **Provide additional resources** to support the change. Participants mentioned appointing specialist officers, introducing electronic detection software, hiring researchers, and taking issues to university committees for consideration.
- **Remain patient.** In all cases where holistic change was happening, respondents spoke in terms of years of effort. Changing something as complex as a university or college does not happen quickly.
- **Collect data** for evaluation and monitoring of the impact of changes.

Holistic change by its nature requires sustained, evidence-based activity by a number of individuals across the institution. In the case of deterring student plagiarism, future evaluation and monitoring of the effects of changes on staff and students will allow us to judge whether the holistic approach can have a positive impact on the students' experience as learners and on their behaviour. Those interviewed had not yet collected data to show the impact of their efforts. Further evidence is required before we can be assured that a holistic approach can enhance students' learning and change the amount and type of behaviours where they pass off others' work as their own, but the findings from this study suggest that most of the institutions surveyed are confident that they have at least made a considerable step towards that aim.

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Appendix 1

Interview plan for institutional change research

Brief introduction of researcher and research aims and reassurance that all responses provided will remain anonymous. Permission to record interview requested.

1. Request general outline of institution size, location and type.
2. General question about the individual's role and seniority in the institution.
3. General question about the institution's current policy and procedures for dealing with plagiarism and the mechanisms used to inform and evaluate student understanding.
4. Has the approach changed in the previous five years, and if not, request information about future plans?
5. If so, to what extent and in what form has the approach changed?
6. Are the changes applicable throughout the institution?
7. Was there a specific occurrence that highlighted the need for change in the institution?
8. If "no" to the above, who or what instigated the change process within the institution?
9. If the institution was involved in the JISC pilot projects, was this a factor in the changes made?
10. What effect, if any, did participating in the pilot project have in the institution?
11. What problems have there been in gaining acceptance of the changed approach?
12. How have these problems been resolved?
13. Have they been resolved?
14. What evaluation, if any, of the new structures have been / will be made?
15. Is there any record of the impact that the changes have had on staff/students?
16. What advice would you give to anyone contemplating a similar change within their own organisation?