Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe

Plagiarism Policies in Germany

Executive Summary

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ES 1   Background

ES 1.1   The survey of Higher Education (HE) in Germany was conducted using on-line questionnaires (students, teachers and senior managers), student focus groups and national level interviews. The purpose was to explore the effectiveness of policies and systems for assuring academic integrity at bachelor and masters level applied in HE institutions.

ES 1.2   In Germany there is no central education strategy. Education is managed and funded federally across the 16 Bundesländer, which made it important to capture a representative picture about policy in different types of university and regions of Germany.

ES 1.3   No statistics were available either at national or state levels about cases of academic misconduct or plagiarism. However one HE institution participating in the survey maintained records of academic misconduct cases.

ES 1.4   Institutional and individual academic autonomy is paramount in German universities and Fachhochschule: *"A professor's rights as an individual are more important than the needs of the institution"* (national interview). This was manifested in the lack of systems for accountability and oversight of grading, for example although there was some evidence of second or double marking, where it was done it was just for the final thesis and did not apply to "semester papers".

ES 1.5   In most subject areas there are no external examiners nor are there any agencies in Germany responsible for standards and quality. The academic teacher generally makes the decisions independently whether a case of academic misconduct or plagiarism has occurred and if so how a student should be penalised. However *"some universities of applied sciences have developed* [their own] *quality assurance bodies and infrastructure but there is not a national or state body responsible for benchmarking and quality"* (national interview).

ES 1.6   National interviewees spoke of some under-investment in German state-funded universities and raised some recent factors that are adding further pressures to student populations and funding:

- *"Universities were historically under-financed regarding teaching infrastructure and number of students per teacher"* (national interview);
- *"Currently double the number of students will be entering higher education now compulsory military service has been abolished"* (national interview);

- The duration of compulsory education in Germany has been reduced from 13 to 12 years with effect from 2012, to comply with the Bologna process reforms.

ES 1.7   When asked about HE student assessment methods in Germany one interviewee reported that universities "*used to have two oral exams, that's all there was, now it is assessment, assessment, assessment, but they don't have culture of doing exams here, there are no systems in place for managing and proctoring them*" (national interview). Another view was that "*universities do more controlling of students in exams; it is not the same level of control for preventing and detecting* [academic dishonesty] *in other work*" (national interview).

ES 2   Findings

ES 2.1   The interviewees had some strong views on teaching and learning in Germany, summarised below:

- "*We do not do enough for quality of teaching and learning, too many students per instructor, no incentives for good teaching*" (national interview);
- "*We did not change from the old system set up decades ago*"(national interview);
- "*Organisationally when universities moved from research to mass teaching, and also Bologna reforms, there was not enough investment*" (national interview);
- Almost "*100% of teaching is done by professors but they are focused on their research results; PhD students also teach but on temporary three year contracts and need to produce PhD theses. Neither is focused or engaged in teaching*" (national interview).

ES 2.2   In the largest of the Länder, NordRhein-Westfalia "*rectors have recommended a policy for using software to detect plagiarism in universities*" (national interview). An agreement drawn up by the Landesrektorenkonferenz der Fachhochschulen in NRW in April 2012, which sets out a strategy for "*safeguarding good academic practice in all courses to which all NRW Fachhochschülen have agreed*" (HRK 2012). Under this agreement students are required to submit a digital copy of their final thesis and this must be checked for plagiarism. However the agreement does not specify how the checking will be done.

ES 2.3   A recent national initiative "*Excellence in University Research*", designed to raise standards of research outputs in Germany "*is based on number of the publications – that can lead to more plagiarism*" (national interview).

ES 2.4   67% of teachers but only 38% of students responding agreed that their institution has policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism.

ES 2.5   When students were asked: *What would happen if a student at your institution was found guilty of plagiarism in their assignment or final project/dissertation*, 40% of student respondents said there would be no consequences for plagiarising in their dissertation.

ES 2.6   "*Some institutions are purchasing software*" for digital checking of work, but there are misunderstandings about the capabilities of the software tools, "*they expect software to tell them whether it is plagiarism,* [they think] *the tools don't work*" (national interview).

However there was evidence converse was also true, with some teachers blindly believing that the outputs from the tools were comprehensive and diagnosing plagiarism.

ES 2.7 Some academics appeared to be apprehensive at the prospect of introducing systematic text matching in student work: "*many academics think we cannot put students and scientists under general suspicion and should only act where there is strong suspicion of cheating*" (national interview). Such sceptics would need to be convinced that there was a good reason and clear benefits for introducing a more invasive system.

ES 2.8 Despite 60% of student respondents expressing confidence in their referencing and citation skills, only 51% of the same respondents was able to correctly identify a scenario describing a clear case of plagiarism, with 27% not sure and 21% saying that this was not plagiarism.

ES 2.9 Almost all of the teachers that responded were able to identify the two most obvious cases of plagiarism presented out of six scenarios, but only 33% of them through there should be sanctions for this type of conduct in student work.

ES 2.10 There were differences in the student and teacher responses about why students plagiarise. The most common reason selected by students studying in Germany was *difficulties in expressing concepts in their own words* (67%), but only 38% of teachers believed this was a factor. Other reasons selected by students were *not understanding how to acknowledge source*s and the ease of *copy and paste via the internet* (both 63%). Most teachers (75%) also selected the copy/paste, also 75% of teachers thought that *not getting caught* and *lecturers not caring about plagiarism* were equally important reasons for student plagiarism. In some previous research (Park 2003) *running out of time* was one of the most common reasons, but for the IPPHEAE German responses this was selected by 56% of students and 50% of teachers.

ES 2.11 On the issue of continuing professional development for academic staff, one senior academic interviewed dismissed the idea as "*ridiculous*" and only 50% of teachers agreed they would like to have more training on aspects of academic integrity. However the responses to other questions suggests that many academic staff in Germany would benefit from some form of professional development about ways for handing cases of student plagiarism and encouraging good academic practice in student work.

ES 2.12 Research and investigation activities of a group of academics based in Germany who have exposed many cases of historic plagiarism by public figures, in Germany and in other countries, have had a profound impact on the awareness of plagiarism as an issue in Germany. The responses received for the IPPHEAE survey confirmed that so-called "whistle-blowers" divided opinion on whether their motives were viewed as vindictive or public spirited.

ES 3   Recommendations

ES 3.1   Nationally and internationally

ES 3.1.1 The well-considered list of three recommendations set out below that were presented to German national representatives at the Bundestag on 9th November 2011 provide an excellent basis to begin the recommendations from the IPPHEAE project for Germany.

> "*Introduce a three-pronged programme*
>
> > 1: *Educate people – set up a central body to educate teachers about how to avoid plagiarism*
> >
> > 2: *Transparency, open access, digital submission of dissertations, will expose some shocking examples*
> >
> > 3: *Mode of controlling – federal body chose a sample from last 5 years to identify where the problems are, introduce a QA process"* (Weber-Wulff 2011).

ES 3.1.2 A much difficult task for Germany would be to implement a national (or a centrally supported federal) infrastructure for transparent and accountable standards and quality assurance in Higher Education that will underpin and support any systems introduced for assuring academic integrity. There are good examples elsewhere on which to model a system for Germany (for example UK's QAA), but clearly the federal system and strong culture of academic autonomy in Germany present major obstacles to such a development.

ES 3.1.3 Financial and practical support for encouraging the adoption and development of digital text matching tools in HE institutions would help to highlight the importance of policies for discouraging plagiarism.

ES 3.1.4 The effectiveness of digital toolsets would be enhanced by national support for developing an openly accessible German language corpus of theses and research papers for matching and translation by the software tools.

ES 3.1.5 Germany hosts some of the most well-informed, active and effective investigative researchers in the world, in the domain of academic misconduct and plagiarism. The so-called "whistle-blowers" should be viewed with less suspicion by the establishment. Their expertise should be exploited as part of the process of establishing a national strategy for academic integrity for Germany.

ES 3.2   Institutionally

ES 3.2.1 "*There needs national debate and discussion:*

- *Every university should develop a policy, clear communication to students and professors about it;*

- *Invest in infrastructure and provide lessons to help students to be better writers, homework, thesis;*

- *Universities need to reduce the number of students per teacher;*

- *HE ethics system has to deal with this, it needs to change;*

- Digital tools are "*not the solution", they "can help to put the right solution in place but that's only part of it"* (national interview).

ES 3.2.2 "*Trying to detect [plagiarism] is the wrong way – Universities should start to invest in infrastructure. From the first semester tell students what the institution expects and how homework, papers, theses should be produced and how to handle citations, referencing and academic integrity*" (national Interview).

ES 3.2.3 Software for matching can only be effective for detecting copying and sharing of work between students if there is access to a substantial body of both academic papers and student work on a shared repository, ideally in different languages. Some respondents reported problems with intellectual property rights when student is work stored on digital repositories. However this obstacle is not insurmountable, because some German respondents reported they have already found a solution.

ES 3.2.4 It is important to students at least that any decisions made on sanctions and penalties for alleged academic misconduct and plagiarism are applied fairly and consistently. The institution needs to develop clear procedures for fair handling of allegations and maintain oversight of the system by requiring accountability for decisions, recording cases and outcomes. There are many examples of institutional systems elsewhere that could be adopted and adapted for use in Germany (Carroll and Appleton 2001, Macdonald and Carroll 2006, Park 2004, Morris 2011, Neville 2009).

ES 3.3 Individual academics

ES 3.3.1 Most students that responded to the survey said they would like to have more advice and guidance on aspects of academic writing. They would also benefit by having access to clear information about policies and guidance about sanctions and consequences for academic misconduct. The academic tutor is best placed to ensure students are well briefed.

ES 3.3.2 Although it is not common in some institutions for academic staff to engage in staff development, it is clear from responses that most of the teachers who responded would welcome and benefit from collegiate discussions about plagiarism and how to make effective use of software tools.

ES 3.3.3 Last but not least, academic staff need regularly to examine how they assess student learning and explore new approaches that encourage students to engage in critical appraisal, improve their scholarship and discourage them from plagiarism.

ES4 Conclusions

The federal system in Germany and absence of a joined-up quality assurance infrastructure for Higher Education in Germany present major impediments to progress in establishing country-wide strategies for responding to student plagiarism. However, in common with other European countries, there is a much larger challenge to face in Germany, namely that of overriding or overturning deeply rooted traditions and culture of individual and institutional autonomy. In any event, this significant paradigm shift is a prerequisite for Germany for progression towards compliance with European Educational Frameworks and Quality Assurance standards.

The reported historical underinvestment in teaching and learning infrastructure, coupled with the projected increase in the higher education student population over the next few years, does not provide an ideal springboard for major changes, but it does make it imperative that some action is taken now. Further, apparent complacency and inertia of the majority of academics and senior management in Germany has proved to be a barrier to those people who have already attempted to bring about positive change by raising awareness of the global threats to academic standards. Germany is not alone in some of these issues.

It is of additional concern that in Germany and across many other parts of Europe more emphasis is placed on academic research and its contribution to institutional reputation than valuing the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, particularly the influence of teaching and learning on the student experience. Institutions need to consider the reality that most academics will not invest in improving teaching and learning resources and approaches unless these are seen to be important to the institution and due rewards provided, either financial or in the form of commendations.

Attempts to silence so-called "whistle-blowers" about plagiarism and research misconduct may prove counter-productive and will not advance the process of improving academic standards in Germany.

It is important to the well-being of Europe-wide academic integrity that Germany as one nation ensures that all its higher educational institutions fully grasp the significance of the growing threat of student plagiarism to academic standards (focusing on cycles 2 and 3 initially, bachelor and masters levels) and take swift action to adopt best practice and begin to implement. Strategists and policy makers should be reassured to know that informed and skilled support is readily available both within Germany and from elsewhere across the world to help with the process of establishing a system for assurance of academic quality and integrity for all levels of education.

In order to facilitate the necessary changes it would help if the German government, nationally and federally, could provide funding to help every HE institution progress to where they need to be in quality terms: "*every university needs* [funding]" (national interview), there is "*funding for improvements to teaching and learning methods, but this funding very small compared to research excellence funds. Of course there should be funding provided, at state level*" (national interview).

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Annex DE-1: Responses to Question 5 (1=strongly disagree – 5=strongly agree)

Qu	Negative (1,2)		Don't know		Positive (4,5)		Statement
	student	teacher	student	teacher	student	teacher	
s5a t5a	16%	11%	8%	22%	72%	67%	*Students receive training in techniques for scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues*
s5b t5p	20%	22%	6%	22%	67%	44%	*I would like to have more training on avoidance of plagiarism and academic dishonesty*
s5c t5b	4%	22%	55%	22%	38%	56%	*This institution has policies and procedures for dealing with plagiarism*
t5c		44%		22%		33%	*I believe this institution takes a serious approach to plagiarism prevention*
t5d		22%		33%		44%	*I believe this institution takes a serious approach to plagiarism detection*
s5d t5e	14%	11%	55%	33%	28%	56%	*Plagiarism policies, procedures and penalties are available to students*
t5f		22%		22%		56%	*Plagiarism policies, procedures and penalties are available to staff*
s5e t5g	12%	56%	61%	11%	22%	33%	*Penalties for plagiarism are administered according to a standard formula*
s5f t5h	28%	56%	41%	11%	26%	33%	*I know what penalties are applied to students for different forms of plagiarism and academic dishonesty*
s5g t5i	22%	67%	67%	11%	6%	22%	*Student circumstances are taken into account when deciding penalties for plagiarism*
s5h t5m	4%	22%	65%	56%	26%	11%	*The institution has policies and procedures for dealing with academic dishonesty*
t5j		34%		44%		22%	*The penalties for academic dishonesty are separate from those for plagiarism*
t5k		33%		33%		33%	*There are national regulations or guidance concerning plagiarism prevention within HEIs in this country*
t5l		67%		22%		0%	*Our national quality and standards agencies monitor plagiarism and academic dishonesty in HEIs*
s5i t5n	24%	33%	39%	33%	31%	33%	*I believe one or more of my teachers/colleagues may have used plagiarised or unattributed materials in class notes*
s5j	48%		20%		28%		*I have come across a case of plagiarism committed by a student at this institution*
s5k t5o	62%	67%	20%	22%	10%	11%	*I believe I may have plagiarised (accidentally or deliberately)*
s5l t5q	28%	44%	61%	22%	8%	22%	*I believe that all teachers follow the same procedures for similar cases of plagiarism*
s5m t5r	35%	55%	31%	11%	28%	22%	*I believe that the way teachers treat plagiarism does not vary from student to student*
s5n t5s	18%	43%	43%	22%	33%	33%	*I believe that when dealing with plagiarism teachers follow the existing/required procedures*
s5o t5t	12%	11%	31%	11%	53%	67%	*It is possible to design coursework to reduce student plagiarism*
s5p t5u	18%	0%	35%	11%	45%	78%	*I think that translation across languages is used by some students to avoid detection of plagiarism*
s5q	18%		43%		6%		*The previous institution I studied was less strict about plagiarism than this institution*
s5r	8%		16%		72%		*I understand the links between copyright, Intellectual property rights and plagiarism*

Table 16: Student and teacher responses to questionnaire Question 5