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# The 'Accidental Plagiarist'

An institutional approach to distinguishing  
between a deliberate attempt to deceive and  
poor academic practice

Jackie Harvey and Simon Robson

# Overview



## ► This paper focuses on:

- The theoretical justification for a distinction between deliberate plagiarism and poor academic practice
- The strategic context in which academic consultation and debate occurred
- How acceptance and support was gained from academic colleagues
- How changes were disseminated
- The tools developed to support both colleagues and students

# Types of Plagiarism



- ▶ A Distinction can be drawn (Beasley 2004, Dennis 2004, JISC 2005) between:
  - Intentional plagiarism by the 'committed' plagiarist
    - ▶ Deliberate intent to deceive
  - Unintentional plagiarism by the 'accidental' plagiarist
    - ▶ Ignorance or misunderstanding
    - ▶ Poor academic practice

# Explanations for Plagiarism



- ▶ Plagiarism is seen as a 'coping mechanism' or as a rational response to the circumstances in which the student finds themselves (Dordoy, 2002, Graham & Leung, 2004 and JISC 2005)
  - Students are under pressure
  - Perceived lack of academic interest
  - Personal factors
- ▶ Implication is that the majority of plagiarism is committed by the 'accidental' plagiarist

# Our Situation



- ▶ Inconsistency and variable 'local practice'
- ▶ Tendency to 'turn a blind eye' due to
  - Consequences for students
  - Implications for staff work load
- ▶ Regulations seen as too harsh at the bottom end
  - Same penalty for 'more than a single phrase' as for an entire piece of work
- ▶ and too lenient at the top end
  - entire piece of work – mark of zero but opportunity to re-sit.....



# Our Situation



- ▶ We feel uncomfortable if we are not certain that
  - the student knew what they were doing (unintentional)
  - they were forewarned of the consequences (intentional)
- ▶ As a result we often make some adjustment to the mark and provide feedback on the importance of referencing

# Principles I



- ▶ Staff must be able to agree on a working distinction between deliberate plagiarism and poor academic practice
- ▶ The agreed distinction (and application of penalties) must be
  - discussed with students
  - consistently applied and totally transparent
- ▶ Students should see that those who cheat are caught but also treated fairly and transparently

# Principles II



- ▶ Students need to be able to practice good academic skills across all modules
  - importance and understanding of academic integrity
  - development of critical thinking
- ▶ Staff must be given time to think about and to set methods of assessment
- ▶ Staff who suspect plagiarism must be properly supported

# Distinction between plagiarism and poor academic practice and suggested penalties



	EXAMPLE	CLASSIFICATION	OUTCOME
1	A student copies verbatim from a source without acknowledgement	<b>Plagiarism</b>	<p><b>First minor</b> – one or two short paragraphs of copied text with no citation. Recorded conversation (placed on student file) with the student and referral to study skills centre, reduction by 7 – 10 marks from total for piece of assessment.</p> <p><b>First major (or second minor in a subsequent assessment period)</b> – in accordance with ARNA regulations Appendix I</p>
2	A student copies from a textbook or web page making small changes - e.g. replacing a few verbs, replacing an adjective with a synonym; acknowledgment in the bibliography at the end of the work	<b>Plagiarism</b>	<p><b>First minor</b> – one or two short paragraphs of copied text with cosmetic changes, no in-text citation but acknowledged in bibliography. Recorded conversation (placed on student file) with the student and referral to study skills centre, reduction by 5 – 7 marks from total for piece of assessment.</p> <p><b>First major (or second minor in a subsequent assessment period)</b> – in accordance with ARNA regulations Appendix I</p>
3	A student cuts and pastes material by using sentences from the original but omitting one or two and/or putting one or two in different order; no quotation marks; with in-text acknowledgments and a bibliographical acknowledgment.	<b>Strictly Plagiarism however, to be treated as patch-writing and Poor academic practice</b>	<p><b>First Incident</b> – recorded conversation (placed on student file) with the student and referral to study skills centre, reduction by 0 – 5 marks from total for piece of assessment.</p> <p><b>Second Incident</b> - recorded conversation (placed on student file), resubmission of corrected work and mark for assessment capped.</p>

# Distinction between plagiarism and poor academic practice and suggested penalties



	EXAMPLE	CLASSIFICATION	OUTCOME
4	A student composes material by taking short phrases of 10 to 15 words from a number of sources and putting them together using their own words to make a coherent whole with in-text acknowledgments and a bibliographical acknowledgment	<b>Patch writing from multiple sources</b> <b>Poor academic practice</b>	Referral to study skills centre. In the event that the student fails to provide evidence of their own reasoning, or to develop a logical argument in their work, normal marking criteria would apply.
5	A student paraphrases a paragraph by rewriting with substantial changes in language and organisation; the new version will also have changes in the amount of detail used and the examples cited. The source material is acknowledged in the text and the source is cited in bibliography	<b>Not Plagiarised</b>	<b>No action needed</b>
6	A student quotes a paragraph by placing it in italic font and/or using quotation marks with the source cited in text and in the bibliography.	<b>Not Plagiarised</b>	<b>No action needed</b>

Examples taken from Devlin 2002 (using materials from Carroll 2000 based on an exercise in Swales and Feak 1994) and from Dennis 2004 (using an exercise from Swales and Feale 1993)

# Support



- Teaching of academic skills
- Table of penalties included on ePortal Programme sites and in student handbooks
- Promotion of the use of JISC as a formative tool
- Production of a student information leaflet 'How not to plagiarise'
- Support for a 'good practice' guide to note taking and paraphrasing
- Student guide to Harvard referencing