A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF PROFESSORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENT PLAGIARISM

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Abstract

Plagiarism has become a major concern in higher education and is experiencing considerable growth in the last couple of decades. The increased use of technology has made it easier to reach a great deal of data and sources of information worldwide. All these developments have required institutions to pay special attention to developing students’ skills in order to select and use correctly such vast amounts of data at their disposal. However, it is not always easy for students to properly handle, interpret and process information to credit the right sources and avoid plagiarism. This situation has lifted plagiarism to the top of the list of academic integrity infractions.

The very concept of plagiarism is controversial and not widely shared, and in the literature we can detect disagreement about what constitutes plagiarism. Even universities and professors are often unsure of the concept and their knowledge may not truly reflect its real meaning [1]. Plagiarism is regarded as an increasing threat (Park, 2003; Stuhmcke et al., 2015; Yazici, Yazici, & Erdem, 2011) and a critical breach of academic integrity involving a violation of the standard of honesty, professional ethic and cast doubt on the value and therefore reputation of an institution [5], the quality of the courses offered (Beute, Elizabeth & Winberg, 2008) and the education system in general.

In this context, a key challenge for universities is to deal with academic dishonesty by means of collaboration between administrators and professors or even implementing a merger of competencies. This might entail rethinking the role of professors, their autonomy and their responsibility as well as encouraging them to become involved at different levels of action. Yet, studies to date have not realized the real value and critical role of professors, but have simply observed their perceptions on the topic what professors do or do not do when faced with students’ plagiarism, without attempting to pinpoint the whole reach of their important role.

This paper is therefore focused on addressing this research gap and aims aims to analyze the perceptions that professors have about student plagiarism as a means to understand how they react upon it. Namely, we intend to highlight how professors perceive the problem of plagiarism and what they do when they are faced with it.

This paper addresses this issue through a literature review of 33 journal articles. The results reveal that professors’ definition of plagiarism is confused and affected in some cases by the type of discipline and tenure in the university, contributing to increase the difficulty of managing it. Moreover, professors feel they are responsible to manage students’ plagiarism but at the same time they are disappointed with the lack of support offered by their universities. In this sense, it seems that they depend very much of how much effort and investment the whole institution is putting into addressing the problem, the sort of policies being applied, and the type of sanctions they are prepared to implement. Our analysis of the literature indicates that the role of professors in this topic goes beyond how they deal with plagiarism situations, and in this vein we suggest a number of avenues for much needed further research.

Keywords: plagiarism, educational management, academic misconduct.

1 INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism has become a topic of wide interest which has experienced a sustained growth in the last couple of decades. The use of ever more advanced technologies and ever greater amounts of Internet resources have allowed to access libraries, networks, and information worldwide. In this context, plagiarism in university is an ongoing problem [7] and a major transgression in academia which jeopardizes the quality of the courses offered, the validity and enforceability of honor codes and the University in general[6]. Lately there has been widespread concern in management academic misconduct and hence plagiarism [8]including calls for reviewing institutions policies and procedures [9] and improve practices and university’s code of conduct. We can observe an increasing evidence
from researchers that honor codes and hence understanding and implementation of misconduct policies and procedures play an important role in higher education having a significant correlations with deterrence efforts thus contributing to an effective reduction of academic dishonesty [10, 11]. Nonetheless it seems that honor codes cannot completely prevent and lift academic integrity without a collaborative effort among Institutions, faculty members and students [12, 13] intended to restructure process that reshape the configuration of the university. If honor code is applied as a “standard-setting” instrument among all the parties involved could be very useful for strengthening the academic stability and integrity helping faculty in the uniform and consistent application of polices [4, 14], providing students with the means to understand what plagiarism is and offering them guidance on how to elude it [1] likewise preventing and better managing plagiarism overall. The definition and proper administration of adequate policies is a crucial aspect in efficient governance. Notwithstanding these assumption, due to different perception about student plagiarism and disagreement over penalties [1] among faculty members may lead to lack of consensus in the management practices[15, 16] and dissenting opinions about how to treat students [17]. The vast majority of studies concerning students’ plagiarism have focused mainly on student understandings of plagiarism [18–20] and its determinants (R. Bennett, 2005; Park, 2003b; Rettinger & Jordan, 2005) instead of looking at professors’ understanding of students’ plagiarism. After having observed in the literature the important role professors play in shaping students behavior we decided to analyze their perception and role in managing students’ plagiarism. Faculty members are considered in some aspects responsible to promote ethical standards, and develops better behavioral capabilities among their students encouraging fair and honest practices. However professors informs their lack of power to take independent decisions, thus a systematic implementation of standards-based evaluation appear to be imperative being able to reduce plagiarism[25].

1.1 Objective

Despite the growing interest in students’ plagiarism, few studies have been carried out on professor perception about students’ plagiarism and their reactions and responsibility in managing it among students. However, by means of a detailed analysis of the literature it has become apparent that professors are responsible to mainain academic integrity and cope with specific situations of academic misconduct [26]. The aim of this paper is to review the current scenario of plagiarism, with a special focus on the professors’ perception and reactions in managing academic misconduct among students. We intend to show the challenges associated with professors’ crucial role as a lens to understand changes in the functions of universities which need to bring back for consideration the traditional mission of professors who have become essential actors in managing student’s dishonesty. Students cannot be presumed to assimilate the importance of good practices and ethical behavior unless professors demonstrate such commitment [27] and management capability within University, stressing once again the growing importance of academic integrity[28].

2 METHODOLOGY

An electronic search for published material from 1900 to 2016 was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar. No literature reviews specifically analyzing this issue were identified. Additional searches of websites, conference papers and bibliographies of papers were also undertaken carrying out both a forward reference research identifying articles that have cited the articles found in the search and a backward research from the reference lists according to Webster & Watson (2002) guidelines.

The guiding questions for this review were the following:

- What are the faculties’ perceptions of students’ plagiarism?
- How do professors manage university students’ plagiarism?

3 RESULTS

Articles reviewed for this synthesis ranged in publication dates from 1998 to 2016, the majority from 2006. Abstracts were reviewed yielding 300 articles, considering them relevant if explicitly mentioned the professor perception of student’s plagiarism. It is worthwhile to highlight that this review focuses on professors’ perceptions of plagiarism thus excluding the analysis students’ perception. Following the review of the articles, a total of 33 research studies were eventually included in the literature review.
Of the 33 articles, 31 were empirical studies, and 2 were conceptual works. Among these articles, 24 employed a quantitative research design, 4 paper were qualitative and 5 papers used mixed research methodology. Moreover, articles were published mainly in the following journals: eight articles in the journal Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, four in The Journal of Higher Education and three in Ethics & Behavior. The studies were conducted throughout the world nonetheless not all countries are well represented. With regards to the background of the research we can highlight that the vast majority of the articles are focused on Anglophone context, namely: 15 studies were conducted in US, 6 in UK, 3 in Australia, 1 in Sweden, 2 in South Africa. Only few studies were realized in other countries: 2 in China, 1 in Spain, 1 in Germany, 1 in Turkey, and 1 not specified.

3.1 Faculties' perceptions of students' plagiarism

Plagiarism and its different forms of expression is visible and by analyzing the literature further evidence of its conceptual difference has been found. Despite different perceptions of plagiarism we noticed that professors are unanimous in considering it a conscious and deliberate attempt to cheat [1, 6, 32–34] or to deceive a third person [15] and felt it was complex to define it (Flint et al., 2006). Thus is a serious [36–38] problem [32, 39] in their courses, and a “cardinal sin” in academia [1]. Other professors considered plagiarism not a problem or one that was dealt with effectively[40]. Lots of professors also recognized a wide range of behaviors and scale of plagiarism [33]. A wide number of action have been considered to constitute plagiarism by staff across the literature reviewed. Namely, the ones most commonly cited was ‘academic theft’ [1, 6, 33, 41] verbatim copying [1, 17] either entirely or in slightly modified form words[15] phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or data from a book, article, [3, 10] internet [36, 42, 43] or others people works [6, 41] without stating or acknowledging the original author or source and presenting it as one’s own work [3, 6, 10, 17, 33–37, 43–46]. Plagiarism is using other people’s ideas [17, 35, 37] recycling, paraphrasing with only minor modification [47] or without stating the source (K. K. Bennett et al., 2011; Espinoza Arce & Monge Najera, 2015; Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2005) or paraphrasing using citing or referencing practices inconsistently and not fully specifying bibliographic details [6]. Espinoza Arce & Monge Najera (2015) found that 9 of the 13 teachers interviewed associated plagiarism with falsifying literature or references. Conversely, Kwong et al. (2010) noted that creating a reference list that you have not really read in your assignment is considered a major violation only by 34% of the faculty members. Professors participating in Beute et al. (2008) study strongly supported the idea that plagiarism is a students’ “wrongdoing” or a moral defeat rather than an educational or enculturation issue, whereas, by contrast, professors interviewed by Jager and Brown (2010) perceive plagiarism as problem which is mainly pedagogical rather than disciplinary.

Disciplines and time in the university affect teachers' perceptions of students' plagiarism, and shape, as we will discuss bellow, teachers' attitudes and the lens through which they view plagiarism. Borg (2009) reported data supporting teacher disciplines biases when describing plagiarism in students. He studied professors in different disciplines and found that teachers from humanities considered plagiarism exist when a significant part of sentences and pages are reproduced. Whereas when some passages are directly lifted and a part of sentences and pages are reproduced there. Professors from history have fewer restrictions and allow the use and repetition of other peoples’ works. In law plagiarism is a serious problem while by the contrary, language studies professors and engineering professors believed that “Buildings are too big to be the result of one person”. For fashion design lecturer plagiarism is considered a strategy and copying, borrowing, stealing other work is an accepted practice. Flint et al.(2006) reported that teachers of humanities consider that plagiarism occurs when student falsifying data, use poor referencing techniques, collaborate unduly, or whenever people are paid to do the work for them. Professors in science considered plagiarism exist when people share information or download it from internet seeing it as type of cheating. Faculty from art and design consider plagiarism as an appropriations of ideas and design identifying it as the most serious form of cheating. Other authors such as Hudd et al. (2009) also found differences between professors opinion according to the faculty they come from: in health sciences, liberal arts, business and communications, highlighting the fact that faculty in the liberal arts and health sciences are more interested in this issue and thus more likely to report integrity violations on the campus. In the same study they also reported the part-time and full- time perceptions and observed that part-time instructors tend to consider academic integrity not a problem at all. Keith-Spiegel & Tabachnick (1998) also found differences between tenured and no tenured professors reporting that tenured faculty seems more likely to experience academic dishonesty than no tenured. These data suggest that the disciplines and level of engagement in the university are linked to the faculties' awareness of plagiarism.
In another research about Chinese teacher perception of plagiarism was highlighted that the culture of the teacher is not a significant factor which may influence teachers’ understandings of plagiarism. Namely, Hu & Sun (2016) found that Chinese faculty shared Anglo-American standards about plagiarism but emphasized that those teachers who had studied in overseas universities were more likely to see plagiarism when paraphrasing, word strings from the original text are included.

3.2 What do professors do when faced with student plagiarism?

The debate continues regarding how plagiarism is or should be managed by faculty members and Institutions. In this section, we shall look into that further with particular emphasis on actions taken against students who plagiarize. As we saw in the literature there is a lack of consensus in how to deal with plagiarism [15, 37] the vast majority of professors decide to manage academic dishonesty themselves [1, 32, 33, 49] by taking appropriate measures (Kwong et al., 2010). When professors are confident with the institution are also inclined to use formal methods in order to manage academic dishonesty, and when they are skeptical prefer to treat plagiarism informally and themselves [33, 37].

Flint et al. (2006), Jager & Brown, (2010) and Kwong et al., (2010) also cited that professors prefer to take autonomous judgment concerning the punishment of plagiarism. Sutherland-Smith’s, (2005) study underscores professor's hesitation regarding the possibility of imploiring Institutions’ procedures. Thus, many of them decide not to report plagiarism due to the lack of confidence in the managing policies and in the Institution.

According to professors, there is a lack of plagiarism policies, thus university should promote its presence [6, 34, 37, 46], with the aim to help students to write properly (Bruton & Childers, 2016), and correctly manage plagiarism. Professors in Beute et al.’s (2008) do not tend to consult the institution’s policy on plagiarism, and according to Hard et al.’s, (2006) study it is important to allow prevention efforts to resolve and assist faculty members into the management process. Conversely, professors in Jager & Brown’s, (2010) perceived Plagiarism ‘University policies problematic, inconsistent or not clear enough. Keith-Spiegel & Tabachnick, (1998) observed the existence of policies that uphold due process for students but are not meant to protect professors willing to act against plagiarism. Professors in Kidwell et al.’s,(2003) Bruton & Childers’s, (2016) argued that an honor code should be implemented as an important tool to avoid the risk of permissiveness by both instructors and students. Very few professors are aware of the ethical codes and standards and according to Jager & Brown, (2010) there is a general lack of consistency in applying the rules code.

Furthermore there is a lack of knowledge of the plagiarism detection software (Bruton & Childers, 2016) because the belief it can leads to violation of students’ rights to their intellectual property. Teacher in Avdic & Eklund’s (2010) study supported the benefits of using the databases such as Turnitin sufficiently well. Jager & Brown (2010) found that the vast majority of the faculty members considered needless the use of Turnitin due to their ignorance about how to apply properly the software and the fact that its use is time-consuming. Similarly, respondent in Bruton & Childers’s, (2016) indicated that University have done a very “bad job” failing to sufficiently promote Turnitin and thus they did not use this programme considering its time consuming. Teachers in that particular study also mentioned that Turnitin is a software invented by a company that is making huge profits off the back of intellectual property of people, for other staff is a useful program in online courses. Other teachers stated that tend not to put much trust in Turnitin and feel that its metrics doesn’t ensure clear and precise answer. Very few respondent declared to use it monitoring carefully matches before taking a final decision about punishment even because the lack of consistency in the use of the software by professors. Beute et al.’s (2008) participants expressed similar perception indeed only 36% of respondents used the software programs as an instrument to manage plagiarism in students. Pickard (2007) found that staff use Plagiarism Detection Service for postgraduate distance learning courses in order to manage academic misconduct. Sutherland-Smith (2005) found that when asked to list methods to manage plagiarism, teachers tended to feel comfortable using both Internet and detection software, such as CopyCatch, Wordcheck software or Plagiserve, for the screening of the presence of plagiarism. Professors in Bermingham et al.’s (2010) indicated that University have done a very “bad job” failing to sufficiently promote Turnitin and thus they did not use this programme considering its time consuming. Teachers in that particular study also mentioned that Turnitin is a software invented by a company that is making huge profits off the back of intellectual property of people, for other staff is a useful program in online courses. Other teachers stated that tend not to put much trust in Turnitin and feel that its metrics doesn’t ensure clear and precise answer. Very few respondent declared to use it monitoring carefully matches before taking a final decision about punishment even because the lack of consistency in the use of the software by professors. Beute et al.’s (2008) participants expressed similar perception indeed only 36% of respondents used the software programs as an instrument to manage plagiarism in students. Pickard (2007) found that staff use Plagiarism Detection Service for postgraduate distance learning courses in order to manage academic misconduct. Sutherland-Smith (2005) found that when asked to list methods to manage plagiarism, teachers tended to feel comfortable using both Internet and detection software, such as CopyCatch, Wordcheck software or Plagiserve, for the screening of the presence of plagiarism. Professors in Bermingham et al.’s (2010) declared that when some student is suspected to have committed an academic misbehavior the assignment is immediately submitted for plagiarism detection program. Participant in Broeckelman-Post's (2008), Beute et al's.(2008) and Ford & Hughes's (2012) studies advocate for workshop and training session for teachers with the aim to inform about their role and increase their awareness about how to punish academic dishonesty safeguards and discuss with students their expectation.

Professors interviewed by Keith-Spiegel & Tabachnick (1998) generally reduce the assignment grade as punishment or in other cases teach students about ethics behavior and integrity practices.
Professors in Sutherland-Smith's (2005) and Bermingham et al.'s (2010) declare that due to the fact that not all professors place the same importance to plagiarism they tend to deal with it in different manner. Also Barrett & Cox (2005) observed that teacher treat plagiarism according to the degree of seriousness and the amount of phrases plagiarized. Flint et al.'s (2006) study reported that many faculty members consider that the punishment must be proportionate to the scale or seriousness of the infringement and deemed acceptable when students copy a tiny amount of others’ task. Robinson-Zañartu et al.'s (2005) study of faculty members' perceptions of and responses to plagiarism found that two thirds of the professors revealed that they discuss the problem with the student or require them to take up the task. When students submit an assignment taken from previous pieces of work the majority of teachers (74%) responded that they did not report the case and 92% of them considered that no university sanctions is needed and between 9%-15% penalized the students who plagiarize lowering the assignment grade. In those cases where students incorporated a few pieces of another’s work into their electronic assignment 37% of professors tend to ask students to re-do de assignment whereas where the source material was electronic the less aggressive measures are taken such as talk with the student about the problem. And 41% indicated that no sanction was warranted by the university. Teachers in this study, like in Bruton & Childers's (2016) talk with the students when is the first time they plagiarize, and only subsequent misconduct are penalized. The same study found that 31% of teacher agreed that when a great deal of electronic work or paper is copied they would communicate the infringement to the department chair, while the same proportion would report to university judicial affairs. In Jager & Brown's (2010) study professors do not advocate excessive rigidity in plagiarism punishment highlighting that not all cases of plagiarism are alike, thus they should be treated according to the severity. The findings of these studies suggest that teachers normally failed the student or put a zero in the assignment and very rarely ignore plagiarism, but in spite of this actions, professors referred that they tend to not report plagiarism cases to the disciplinary tribunal. According to Beute et al.'s (2008) study, faculty members complain that penalties are not severe enough and that all students should be treated equally toward the same infringement. Teachers in Kidwell et al.(2003) reported that when evidence of plagiarism exist they fail the student or, 20% of professors, ask the student to retake the exam or re-do the assignment, however they consider that not all of them treat the instance in the same way. Data in Kwong et al.'s (2010) study showed that when teacher find plagiarism in student assignment are prone to lower the student’s grade. Only the 25% of them give students “formal warning” and 47% of faculty members surveyed declare that in cases they find the work is plagiarized they educate their students on integrity practices. Pickard's (2007) study found that a wide range of punishment were used by professors but mostly commonly used systems are formal and informal warning and discussion and very rarely they fail the students, put a g grade or Report to course leader.

Marcus & Beck’s (2011) and Pincus & Schmelkin’s (2003) studies reported that punishment of infractions varies considerably across faculty members. Teachers in Simon et al. (2003) who have more confidence in the university when manage plagiarism in an informal manner, tend to use both informal and formal punishment. Hu & Sun (2016) found that numerous teachers opted to assign a zero mark to all students who plagiarize. Interestingly, Hudd et al. (2009) noted that part-time and full-time professors face plagiarism in a different form. Part-time are more willing to reduce or not administer sanctions when the student misunderstand the policy and less likely to discuss and educate student about integrity practices whereas full-time professors penalize plagiarism by lowering the student’s grade and are more likely to report violation and teach students integrity issues. Professors in Bruton & Childers, (2016) and Keith-Spiegel & Tabachnick (1998) consider that manage plagiarism is among the most deleterious and onerous aspect in their job. Bermingham et al.(2010), Keith-Spiegel & Tabachnick (1998) and Sutherland-Smith (2005) all reported data supporting teacher lack of time in Verifying and dealing with plagiarism, considering time consuming getting involved with integrity incidents. As we have seen from plagiarism and its different forms of expression seems to be clearly described by Universities policies, which indicates their purpose to prevent academic misconduct and the need to demonstrate their positions as the "gatekeepers" of the educational system [56] thus proving their joint intention to overcome this issue[27]. However, due to the heterogeneity in intervention policies and procedures among institutions and even professors in the same or distinct department, it seems there is no unanimity about how to address this problem. Perspectives on punishment vary significantly within the University context, with some professors debating what types of punishment are acceptable in practice and who should determine appropriate punishment, while others are conflicted as to whether training practices and communication with “student infringer” represent an “alternative to penalty or an alternative penalty”
4 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to summarize the results of recent literature on professors' perceptions and reactions in university students' plagiarism, providing a snapshot of their perceptions and beliefs about this problem and their role in managing it. A common feature running through these analysis is faculty's belief that plagiarism is a contentious issue in higher education and an increasing serious problem among students [37, 57]. Notwithstanding the general understanding of what plagiarism is, a confused professors' definition of plagiarism is clearly perceptible having a big impact on the way they manage it. Indeed, the major conclusions that emerge from the analysis of professor's perceptions is the tension between what professors' feel that they can do themselves and the involvement and intervention of the institution. Professors frequently perceived that a lack of institutional support for students' plagiarism along with the lack of a widely accepted plagiarism management methods is a major challenge. Some professors consider themselves responsible to manage student's plagiarism but at the same time they feel the lack of support of the university. Professors in the articles analyzed are unanimous in recognizing that an implementation or more awareness of university plagiarism policies [6, 34, 37, 46] and a generally accepted honor code would makes a significant contributions in the control of academic dishonesty. Thus, future research is required to understand to what extent this is an emotional issue. This could leading a discussion about professors' feelings of empowerment, namely the ability to draw power from itself in order to control events such as plagiarism or on the contrary professors'powerlessness or product of the situation. In the same line several researchers support the notion that professors act as leaders in their classrooms thus, it could shape the forthcoming debate about the role of professors as transformational leaders examining the instructor-leadership which entail the influence over students to guide and structure their behavior and activities and in our case prevent plagiarism. Transformational leaders are considered by the literature as empowering, interactive and visionary persons that are able to stimulate others to seek new approaches and invest more effort to address problems.

REFERENCES


