



Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe

Plagiarism Policies in Spain

Full Report

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Report about Plagiarism Policies in Spain

1. Information sources

Information about Spain was collected through:

- The three levels of online surveys;
- Documentation and on-line evidence;
- Structured interviews with academics and students.

It was really difficult to gain data about Spain. Even though the research team had personal contacts in some Spanish universities; it was hard to persuade them to fill the survey or to participate in any other form. The most common reaction we received was no reaction. We sent the survey to all Spanish universities. We did not use only the general e-mail address info@university, but we tried to find the e-mail addresses of all vice-rectors and vice-deans for education. Then we sent them personal e-mail offering anonymous data about their institution as a reciprocal service for their participation. We did not get any single response. Eventually, we succeeded in organising a workshop for teachers at one institution to interview teachers, and then we asked students in campuses of various HEIs in the same city to fill in the survey. Even though workshop participants were not familiar with policies and procedures at other universities, it was a valuable insight into Spanish view of the problem.

In the online survey, 44 students, 1 teacher and no senior managers participated.

2. Higher Education in Spain

The Spanish university system consists of 77 universities: 50 of them are public and 27 are private. In the academic year 2010/2011 there were 1,455,855 students, 54% of them were women. More than 88% studied at public universities and 12% studied at private ones (National statistics institute, 2012). Both private and public universities are paid by students.

In 2010/11 more than 36,000 Spanish students (2.5%) realized their international mobility. The most popular countries for Spanish students were Italy, France, UK, Germany and Portugal. More than 37,000 international students chose Spain as their destination, mostly from Italy, France, Germany, UK and Poland. In the same academic year, approximately 4500 teachers went abroad and 4300 teachers came from the other EU countries for their Erasmus mobility.





3. Quality Assurance in Spanish Higher Education - teaching, learning and assessment

When examining the on-line evidence, we went through the 600 pages long annual report on the state of the educational system (Ministry of Education, 2012). Higher education is not addressed separately; the report deals with the educational system as a whole considering the social and economical context and providing very detailed information in some aspects (namely finances). Even though 90 pages of this annual report were devoted to the quality of education and 44 pages were “Proposals for improvements” (also available separately in English), there was not a single mention of plagiarism.

Proposals for improvements contain just general statements like: *“As far as possible, education policies should be based on empirical evidence that provides a greater degree of certainty about their relevance and their expected outputs.”* According to improving quality of education, the material for example suggests that *“Academic standards should be raised, and both curriculum organisation and teaching methods should be aimed towards achieving command of the established subject matter.”* Nothing we could disagree with, but no action points binding anyone to some specific activity.

However, at least statements like *“To achieve an efficient education system, education quality is fundamental. (...) The quality of an education system depends on the level of training and continuing education of its teaching staff. (...) The necessary mechanisms should be established to conduct an assessment of teaching and learning quality and the impact on students’ academic outputs, throughout the education system.”* provides good ground to build up policies for addressing any kind of academic dishonesty and deal with plagiarism.

4. Academic Integrity and Plagiarism in Spain

It became clear in the research that there are no statistics for cases of students’ or teachers’ plagiarism in Spanish HEIs. HEI responses and attitudes to student plagiarism in Spain were likened to “an ostrich with its head in the sand”. On the subject of institutional policies for dealing with cases of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, very few institutions have top-down strategy or policy for preventing and detecting plagiarism. There is no national policy either. However there is evidence of raised concerns in some areas and a degree of progress towards aiding the detection of plagiarism.

Spanish teachers who participated on the workshop were concerned about the level of understanding of plagiarism not only in Spain, but in whole EU. They believed that compared to USA or Australia where people really care about it (one of participant said that those who commit plagiarism are excluded from community), in EU, plagiarism is not seen as wrong. They mentioned an example of Ana Rosa Quintana, a Spanish journalist, who plagiarized a whole book, but



afterwards became much more famous than she was before. It is a well known case in Spain mentioned widely in the media (Santiago, 2010). They also mentioned the famous case of Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, former German minister of defence, who was forced to resign due to plagiarism scandal and who now works for the European Commission. Some of the participants said that plagiarism was not considered a crime because no money was (directly) stolen.

Workshop participants were also convinced that teachers were plagiarizing much more than students. According to them, there was not even a law which would allow an institution to dismiss a teacher who committed plagiarism. They mentioned widely used ghost-writing services and the necessity for rules given from the top.

One particular aspect Spanish teachers and researcher are aware of, is the necessity of publication in English. Editors of journals in English speaking countries often reject papers due to their poor English. Looking for proper formulations of English wording can then lead to some unintentional plagiarism.

However, after few hours of searching Spanish Internet pages, the reality does not seem to be as pessimistic as described by the workshop participants. There appear to be few guidelines available for institutions or for individuals about how to avoid or prevent student plagiarism, other than some general statements about research conduct and ethics. This is confirmed also by academics focused on plagiarism or educational integrity: *“Also in Spain, gradually, the scientific community is becoming aware about it and taking action on the issue of academic plagiarism”* (Heine&Martin Garcia, 2011)

As national policy is absent and most universities don’t have their institutional policies either, it is often up to the teacher to decide what will happen when plagiarism is uncovered. Teachers often solve these cases themselves even if the institutional policy (considering plagiarism the same as any other case of cheating) orders teachers to give the case to someone else to administer. According to the feedback from survey, the most common penalty in case of plagiarism of an assignment is failing the module or subject, verbal warning or zero mark for the work. In case of plagiarism in dissertation, the most common penalties are expelling from the institution or failing whole program or degree. More detailed students’ answers can be seen in following table:

		Assignment	Dissertation
a.	No action would be taken	5 (11%)	5 (11%)
b.	Verbal warning	14 (32%)	6 (14%)
c.	Formal warning letter	11 (25%)	6 (14%)
d.	Request to rewrite it properly	10 (23%)	7 (16%)
e.	Zero mark for the work	18 (41%)	8 (18%)
f.	Repeat the module or subject	12 (27%)	8 (18%)
g.	Fail the module or subject	19 (43%)	8 (18%)

h.	Repeat the whole year of study	5 (11%)	4 (9%)
i.	Fail the whole programme or degree	6 (14%)	12 (27%)
j.	Expose the student to school community	6 (14%)	8 (18%)
k.	Suspended from the institution	5 (11%)	5 (11%)
l.	Expelled from the institution	1 (2%)	10 (23%)
m	Suspend payment of student grant	4 (9%)	8 (18%)
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n.	Other	5 (11%)	8 (18%)

However, we should admit that number of students who responded was quite low (44) to make general conclusions. On the other hand, the number of responses and overall attitude to our research in Spain also tells us an important message: Plagiarism is not seen as a problem and institutions are not dealing with it.

5. Why do Spanish students plagiarise?

According to teachers, there are three most important reasons: Technology makes it easy, time pressure and low motivation to submit good thesis. *"Students don't think about their work. They just sit down and type to the computer."* (participant on workshop).

Teachers also agree that zero mark is a low punishment, because student has nothing to lose. As we can see from the previous table, zero mark is very frequent "punishment" for plagiarism of an assignment, which also increases students' inclination to plagiarism. However, the number of students agreeing with statement *"I believe I may have plagiarized"* is the same as the arithmetic mean for the rest of the EU.

As we can see from the following table, when asked for reasons of plagiarism, students' most frequent answers are that it is easy to cut and paste from the internet, they run out of time, they think they will not get caught, and that they do not understand the consequences of plagiarism. Although the sample of respondents is low, the answers perfectly match what teachers said at the workshop.

	Reason	Number	Percent
1	They think the lecturer will not care:	8	18 %
2	They think they will not get caught:	23	52 %
3	They run out of time:	23	52 %
4	They don't want to learn anything, just pass the assignment:	21	48 %
5	They don't see the difference between group work and collusion:	5	11 %
6	They can't express another person's ideas in their own words:	20	45 %
7	They don't understand how to cite and reference:	12	27 %

8	They are not aware of penalties:	15	34 %
9	They are unable to cope with the workload:	15	34 %
10	They think their written work is not good enough:	6	14 %
11	They feel the task is completely beyond their ability:	8	18 %
12	It is easy to cut and paste from the Internet:	26	59 %
13	They feel external pressure to succeed:	6	14 %
14	Plagiarism is not seen as wrong:	13	30 %
15	They have always written like that:	11	25 %
16	Unclear criteria and expectations for assignments:	13	30 %
17	Their reading comprehension skills are weak:	10	23 %
18	Assignments tasks are too difficult or not understood:	7	16 %
19	There is no teachers control on plagiarism:	11	25 %
20	There is no faculty control on plagiarism:	9	20 %
21	The consequences of plagiarism are not understood:	22	50 %

6. Comparison of Spain with the EU average

Several differences in the Spanish survey results against the EU average are worth to point out. At first, students receive much less training. Only 39% of them agree that they have received training of scholarly academic writing, whereas the EU average is 65%. This is confirmed by answers to the question about the mean how the student became aware of plagiarism. In EU, the most common way is workshops, web sites prevail in Spain. However, Spanish students are slightly more demanding than their European colleagues to receive more training. More than half (61%) of Spanish students would like to have more training on avoidance of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, compared with EU average on 60%. The Spanish student participants were more likely to suspect their teachers of having used plagiarised or unattributed materials in class notes than the average EU student (39% compared to 31% of EU average).



When given a specific case (40% of a student's submission is from other sources and is copied into the student's work), the student participants tended to judge it as plagiarism (or serious plagiarism), much less than in the EU average. For example, the sub-question stating that some words in the copied 40% of text were changed, but with no quotations, references or in text citations, produced following results:

7. *Examples of good practice*

Even though teachers participating on workshop expressed their pessimistic view on the situation in Spain, several cases of good practice were identified. Since 1996 the team of teachers and researchers have been developing, implementing, using and testing a plagiarism detection tool for software code. They used it for checking programming assignments in the Faculty of informatics at Technical University of Madrid. Their programme pk2 proved to be good enough to detect many cases of plagiarism (Rosales, 2008). It also helped to spread the idea of intellectual property rights among students.

One outstanding example was found during the exploration of Internet sources: Course “Plagio academico” for teachers and researchers at Universidad Pablo Olavide en Sevilla (upo.es, 2013). The content of the course is:

- Intellectual property and authors’ rights: plagiarism
- Permitted usage of others’ content
- How to avoid plagiarism
- How to cite
- How to prevent that others plagiarise us
- How to detect others’ plagiarism: Tools for plagiarism detection.

The course of 3 hours is available for teachers and researchers. There was no indication that this course would be available to students too.

Several universities offer an explanatory web page. For example the university library at Universidad de Alicante provides an explanatory web page called “What is plagiarism and how to avoid it” (ua.es, 2013). The same is available in Universidad de Sevilla (bib.us.es, 2013) and Universidad de Valencia (ua.es, 2013).

Also emerging are cases showing positive changes in society. In April 2013 the Spanish Supreme Court confirmed that a professor, who had plagiarized doctoral thesis of Miaria Isabel Grimaldos, was guilty and had to pay compensation (Garrido, 2013).





In 2011, Universidad de Granada realized the project informing students and teachers about the concept of plagiarism, teaching them how to cite and reference correctly and how to avoid plagiarism in general. The project also offered some digital tool for plagiarism detection (ugr.es).

8. Recommendations for Spain

When asked to give suggestions or ideas on how to reduce student plagiarism, there were several interesting and inspiring answers: *“The concept of copying (plagiarism) does not exist in Spain. We have to inspire ourselves abroad.”* (student survey). This means that introduction of any policies will be difficult, because if the concept does not exist in the society, there will be no public pressure to deal with it. However, the pressure from abroad may help.

There were also two suggestions for plagiarism prevention, that match survey results and similar suggestions from other European countries. *“Teachers should talk about plagiarism and give formula to address it.”* and *“Give original assignments which cannot be copied from another student (...)”* (student survey responses)

As flows from our research, Spanish universities should introduce more training on scholarly academic writing. Survey results confirm that students want to receive more training and trained students can better judge given cases of plagiarism. Students should be convinced about the reasons for correct referencing during this training and taught how to cite and reference correctly. Moreover, training should be introduced not only for students, but also for teachers.

Also, policies and procedures dealing with plagiarism should be introduced either nationally or institutionally. And, which is much more important, teachers should be convinced to follow the procedures. There are numerous examples (from abroad) of institutions having their procedures which are just on the paper and nobody follows them. This is not only about plagiarism, it is general mentality and approach to educational integrity, which will be very hard to change, but it is needed.

Numerous text responses from both students and teachers suggested two aspects: Prevention (educate teachers and students) and adequate penalties (strict detection, consistency in dealing with cases of plagiarism, publicity and maintaining statistics). It is clear that adequate publicity (probably with sufficient level of anonymity) would convince students that plagiarism is addressed and those who plagiarize are being punished adequately. Maintaining national statistics may also make HEIs to address this phenomenon honestly.

9. Conclusion

The research on plagiarism in Spain showed us some specifics of the Spanish approach. Based on suggestions of respondents, comparison with other countries, exploitation of good practices and research results, some recommendations were raised. We will now summarize them clearly:





- Introduce the concept of plagiarism into Spanish society.
- Introduce training for students and teachers. They have to know exactly what plagiarism is, how to avoid it, how to cite and reference correctly and why it is important.
- Introduce policies and procedures dealing with plagiarism; Plagiarism should be explicitly mentioned in study regulations.
- Unify procedures and penalties for plagiarism across all HEIs in Spain. Cases of plagiarism should be published (anonymously) and institutional and national statistics should be maintained.
- Encourage academic teaching staff to adopt strategies to discourage plagiarism.

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