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Introduction

Research consultancy FreshMinds, in association with the JISC's Plagiarism Advisory Service, has for the first time conducted a national survey of students and recent students into the prevalence of plagiarism, the reasons for it, detection rates and the effectiveness of policies against it.

The survey, certainly the most recent and one of the most comprehensive investigations of the issue in the UK, coincides with the final day of the Plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policies conference. The full set of results will be available at www.freshminds.co.uk.

N.B. The survey wasn't commissioned by the JISC/Plagiarism Advisory Service, it was developed in consultation with them.

Headline statistics

- 75% of respondents have never plagiarised*; 9 % plagiarised once, 16% have plagiarised more than once
- Only 3% think that plagiarism is not cheating; 78% classify it as moderate to serious cheating
- The detection rate is only 3%
- Only 1% of the sample had obtained essays from an online 'mill' (free or for a fee)
- Of those engaging in some form of cheating on written assignments (not limited to plagiarism as defined below), most say it was because of academic pressure on their time (24%), the next highest specific reason was simply that it was easier than not cheating (15%)
- 47% of respondents don't think plagiarism is a problem at their institution; 20% think that it is
- 83% of respondents disapprove of the practice of plagiarism
- 76% of respondents were informed about the academic integrity/cheating/plagiarism policies on their campus. A surprisingly high number (24%) weren't
- Respondents found faculty staff and student handbooks more informative than their first year orientations when it came to learning about their institutions' policies
- 21% believe plagiarism policies aren't strictly enforced by their institutions whilst 26% don't think the policies are very effective in deterring the practice
- Women differed to men in their attitudes in a number of areas. 71% of men, compared to 77% of women claim never to have plagiarised. 19% of men compared to 12% of women claim to have plagiarised more than once. 36% of men compared to 41% of women think plagiarising is 'serious' cheating. 21% of men think plagiarising is 'trivial' cheating, compared to 16% of women

*Defined as: 'Inserting sections of text from any outside source into your own work, whether they are left whole or amended to conceal their origins.' This broad definition was selected to make the practice relevant to the types of assignment carried out by students on a variety of courses.

Notes on the sample and survey

- Questionnaire 2004 - The questionnaire was built with the assistance of the JISC's Plagiarism Advisory Service and the US Centre for Academic Integrity, (which has for a number of years conducted similar work in the US and Canada: <http://www.academicintegrity.org/>.) It is intended as an annual exercise in order to compare any changes in, for example, attitude or detection rates from a student perspective, although next years' research may also survey academics.
- Sample size and composition - This year, the sample consisted of 363 respondents, distributed to FreshMinds' database of recent graduates (600) and current NUS student officers (1000). Respondents, assured that their submissions were to be kept confidential, indicated they attend/attended a spread of HE institutions across the country and studied a variety of courses. 90% were either at an institute of HE at the time of answering or had completed their courses within the last four years. FreshMinds is confident that the results are indicative of student opinions because they are in line with a 'dry run' survey of current students only, conducted in early June 2004.
- The survey was distributed, and results collected, between 22/6/4 and 29/6/4 by means of an online survey, distributed by email to the sample.

FreshMinds' comment on the statistics

Annabel Kilner at FreshMinds said: "The results are broadly in line with the outcome of similar surveys in the US and Canada. They indicate students are on the whole virtuous and well informed about their institutions' policies but they put a question mark over the effectiveness of current policies in preventing plagiarism."

"Although there is a lot of hype around the use of Internet essay 'mills', only a tiny minority of students have ever made use of them. We'll be able to tell in coming years if that number is increasing."

Organisation backgrounders

The Plagiarism Advisory Service

The Plagiarism Advisory Service was inaugurated in September 2002. It's funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (see below) and is based in the Information Management Research Institute at Northumbria University. The service provides staff and students in UK further and higher education institutions with generic advice and guidance on all aspects of plagiarism prevention and detection. It promotes the adoption of a holistic approach to plagiarism prevention encompassing institutional policy and procedures, academic practice and student skills

(<http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/jiscpas>)

The Plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policies conference is happening at Northumbria University from June 28-30 2004. The conference, hosted by the Plagiarism Advisory Service is aimed at policy makers and practitioners in Higher and Further Education and is intended to showcase good practice, stimulate discussion and encourage positive action.

The Joint Information Systems Committee

For issue 30/6/4

The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) supports further and higher education by providing strategic guidance, advice and opportunities to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to support teaching, learning, research and administration. JISC is funded by all the UK post-16 and higher education funding councils (<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/>)

FreshMinds

FreshMinds is one of the country's fastest growing research consultancies (www.freshminds.co.uk).

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