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ETHICS AND PLAGIARISM. OPINIONS OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract: The text deals with the analysis of the questionnaire survey among first-year students at the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies of Mendel University, which focused on the issue of plagiarism. Plagiarism is considered to be dishonest behavior, which is mostly done by the students in the academic sphere, however, it can affect all academics. Principles, when someone else's academic outputs are "taken over" without proper quotations, are generally considered unacceptable. Nevertheless, such excesses still occur. It is caused by expanding information flows, databases providing a large number of academic texts, as well as companies specialized in writing university theses. The aim of this text is, therefore, to discuss the issue of plagiarism and to present the empirical survey carried out among students at the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies. The data were collected in May 2018 using a printed questionnaire. The questionnaire primarily focused on the awareness of plagiarism and the reasons for plagiarism.

Key words: plagiarism, academic ethics, Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies, questionnaire survey

Etika a plagiátorství. Názory studentů prvního ročníku vysoké školy v České republice

Abstrakt: Předkládaný text se zabývá analýzou dotazníkového šetření u studujících prvního ročníku na Fakultě regionálního rozvoje a mezinárodních studií Mendelovy

univerzity, které se zaměřilo na problematiku plagiátorství. Plagiátorství se považuje za nečestné jednání, kterého se v akademickém světě dopouštějí především studenti, nicméně se týká všech akademiků. Principy, kdy jsou „přejímány“ cizí akademické výstupy bez řádných citací, jsou obecně považovány za nepřijatelné. Přesto k těmto excesům dochází. Důvodem jsou rozšiřující se informační toky, databáze poskytující se velké množství odborných textů, ale i firmy specializující se na psaní závěrečných vysokoškolských prací. Cílem tohoto textu tedy je diskutovat problematiku plagiátorství a představit empirické šetření realizované u studujících na Fakultě regionálního rozvoje a mezinárodních studií. Data byla sbírána v květnu 2018 pomocí tištěného dotazníku. Dotazník se týkal především informovanosti o plagiátorství a o příčinách plagiátorství.

Klíčová slova: plagiátorství, akademická etika, Fakulta regionálního rozvoje a mezinárodních studií, dotazníkové šetření

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of plagiarism in first-year students at the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies of Mendel University in Brno (FRRMS). The results contribute to the discussion on the causes and consequences of plagiarism. The content of the article builds on the views of the respondents in the questionnaire survey conducted in May 2018. This empirical contribution focuses on a specific area that is related to higher education, academic ethics and specific policies against plagiarism. The creation of this text was supported by the Internal Grant Agency of the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies of Mendel University in Brno. The research was conducted within the FRRMS Internal Grant IGA 2018/009 Plagiarism in FRRMS Students' Opinions. Based on the findings, specific measures are proposed to reduce – or ideally eliminate – this negative phenomenon that damages the academic environment. These recommendations may also affect the particular form of study programs or individual courses.

1 Research Objectives

The main research objective was to find out the opinions of the students of the first year of FRRMS on plagiarism. The research had the form of a questionnaire survey. The secondary research goal was to get acquainted with general attitudes towards unethical behaviour in the university environment among students coming from secondary schools and how the secondary school environment forms the students.

A number of studies have shown that plagiarism manifests itself primarily in lower years of study (Bretag, 2016). Therefore, for the purpose of this text, only the students of the first year 2017/2018 were selected.

This research can be characterized as an applied one because it will explore the student's ideas about plagiarism more closely. It can be assumed that, based on the identified attitudes, it will be possible to implement corrective measures to reduce the incidence of plagiarism at FRRMS.

2 Theoretical Framework: Definition of Plagiarism

Plagiarism (from Latin *plagiarius* – kidnapper) can be defined as alienation of a particular piece or part of it. According to Stern (2007, p. 3), this term is defined as a use of someone other's work including words, ideas, inventions, illustrations (published or unpublished) with the main designation (appellation) without the consent of the original author. Plagiarism is not only a problem for exposed individuals, but it is also closely related to changing perceptions of relationships in society, especially in academical culture. Each case of plagiarism is devalued and forms a dissonance towards the campus (Carroll, 2007, p. 6). That is why universities are more often accountable to ethical principles expressed by specific ethical codes, codes of conduct or codes of professional ethics (Smolík & Nesiba, 2017). Given that universities incline to define plagiarism as a problem of academic dishonesty in students, more knowledge about the type of student who is likely to cheat could be insightful. The attitudes brought to the judgments of student plagiarism are likely to influence the ways that faculty deals with accusations of plagiarism. These attitudes could be based on perceptions that plagiarism is evidence of ignorance of norms, poor competence in handling conventions, a transgression of standards, or low levels of morality. Judging instances of plagiarism as if they were breakdowns of cultural conventions could reduce anxiety and avoid the denigration inherent in accusations of academic dishonesty (East, 2010).

Plagiarism, as a phenomenon, represents, (not only) amongst a higher level of college students, typical misconduct encountered by a large number of educators. These unethical practices are on the rise, which is related to technological possibilities, that mainly concern the infinite amount of information in the internet environment. Since 1990, technology and communication technology (ICT) has become very popular amongst the students. The methods of plagiarism have also changed. The tools provided by ICT, such as the internet, have made it easy for students to obtain information by merely clicking the mouse. The information obtained from the internet

made it possible for students to save and “cut and paste” with ease, compared to the information gathered from textbooks, journals or magazines. In other words, the use of ICT can quicken the act of plagiarising. ICT is a new tool that enables students to plagiarise much faster (Ali, Ismail, & Cheat, 2012). Therefore, the prevention of this phenomenon was recommended in the first works 20 years ago as the most effective tool, most preferably based on an analysis of the university environment. The role of the university is transforming from the form of a strictly scientific institution to the ethically educating pedagogical institution (Renard 2000).

These cheating activities are facilitated by the fact that today students and academics make extensive use of electronic information databases (such as Wikipedia, WoS, Scopus, CEJSH, DOAJ, and others) to get information on virtually any subject. Additionally, there are databases in which users have access to websites with elaborated papers, processed searches, and so on (Smolík & Herbočková, 2018). Based on research that dealt with the motives and reasons why students at colleges commit plagiarism, it was found that (1) student did not have enough time to write his text; (2) student did not understand the topic; (3) student thought that the teacher would not read the written work; (4) student argued that “everyone does it”, (5) student “is just taking the risk” (Carroll, 2007, p. 26). Foreign researches show that about 10% of students observed plagiarism during college studies (see Carroll, 2007, p. 11). Although there is a large number of theoretical studies dealing with the phenomenon of plagiarism, there is only a small number of studies focusing on the “student population”. In terms of the number of studies published in the Web of Science database, we can say that the issue of plagiarism has gained importance since the 1980s. Currently, there exist several hundreds of texts in this prestigious database that focus on the subject from the pedagogy point of view.

We can define plagiarism as a fundamental failure to follow the usual scientific and publishing procedures. In most cases, basic citation standards are not met. Providing bibliography is a skill that learners should master in their early weeks at university. References to the quotations of the source are used to identify and distinguish the “ownership” of someone else and the “ownership of the author” of the work (see Borůvková, 2010, p. 25). According to the university experience, if students learn about citing and referencing techniques as soon as possible, a multiplier effect of teaching quality arises – students gain knowledge that they will use throughout their studies, professors do not need to spend more time reviewing seminar works, during writing bachelor and master’s theses students and teachers do not

have to invest so much energy in the formal side of the written text and can focus on the research.

Quotations are actually thoughts and statements of another author. It is a direct and literal transcription of the content being reproduced. Its indirect version is called a paraphrase. Quotations (or so-called bibliographic records) provide the necessary identification data of the quoted resource. Citation links facilitate the reader's orientation between quote and quotation (Francírek, 2012, p. 36).

By using quotations, we are taught the knowledge of the work of renowned experts. It also shows the continuity of the text with earlier works (cf. Francírek, 2012, p. 36). A quote in the scholarly text, on the one hand, means the "quote", i.e. the literal transcription of an excerpt from another author's text, or the bibliographic reference to another text/source, i.e. the quotation of the work. A quotation from professional literature is used, if it supports or complements our statements, or is the subject of our critique or analysis. In most cases, direct speech is used with an introductory sentence which contains the name of the quoted author and a brief reference to the source (see Čmejrková, Daneš, & Světlá, 1999, p. 226).

The thesis proves that the author understands the topic and his/her ability to arrange the selected information on the given issue appropriately (Čmejrková, Daneš, & Světlá, 1999, p. 201). The scientific texts (including the final papers) are supposed to be defined in a clear, precise and comprehensible manner, which is also related to the relevant literature cited (cf., Čmejrková, Daneš, & Světlá, 1999, p. 211). Another important indicator is the use of professional terminology of the given field (Čmejrková, Daneš, & Světlá, 1999, p. 216). It should also be mentioned that much of the plagiarism concerns not only seminar papers but also bachelor and diploma theses. Questions of academic ethics often also address the reasons why students plagiarise. On the one hand, the problem can be explained simply by the fact that students consciously violate the rules, they are negligent and make work easier for them, and their actions are unethical (Howard, 1995), but the problem may also lie in the fact that school has not taught them how to quote, in the course of the study, and the issue of plagiarism has not been sufficiently addressed in the classes. Students also believe that teachers also commit plagiarism (Cleary, 2018).

In the ambiguity of guilt and duty, a successful method of preventing the plagiarism appears to be to support long-term work between the student and the teacher, to emphasize and discuss with students the context-specific nature of what does and does not count as plagiarism (Price, 2002). Building a trust relationship between teachers and students should start in the first

year. As it has emerged from presented research, plagiarism among students is a popular method of working with text. To prevent this problem also means an emphasis on working in the academic environment with students from their first year at university. They take over the habits and practices of older colleagues. Thus, it is not possible to talk about one-off-time-based pedagogical activity, but the everyday part of academic work.

3 Ethics and Punishment of Plagiarism

Activities that can be described as plagiarism are also part of various ethical standards. However, ethical standards in an academic setting can never prevent plagiarism from becoming plagiarism. It will always depend on the responsibility and morals of individual authors (Průcha, 2011, p. 38), regardless of whether these authors are students or academics. Despite the cultural context and background, plagiarism can be understood as a violation of both written and unpublished ethical academic standards across the university environment in the global world (Bikowski & Gui, 2018). Students and lecturers can have a different understanding of plagiarism. There is a position of lecturers on the moral high ground and claims that lecturers understand plagiarism as a breach of trust undermining academic traditions, while students prioritise success as more important than avoiding plagiarism. This might be so, but if we step back and take a reflective approach to explain lecturer and student roles, we could understand lecturers and students as operating under different interests. Lecturers who have acquiesced to standards and worked hard to achieve their positions have an interest in ensuring those standards are not undermined (East, 2010).

The position of teachers and lecturers is different from that of students. The reason for complying with standards may be different, perhaps even the opposite. Generally, different approaches to compliance with standards have been observed since the establishment of modern universities, and it is evident that those who are creating norms have a different interest than those who follow them (Foucault, 1991). For this reason, Mendel University participates annually in an international conference dedicated to the topic of plagiarism. This issue is discussed by experts, the academic community and the students themselves (Plagiarism across Europe and Beyond, 2018). The ambiguous definition of standards also results from an intercultural context. Therefore, within the EU, Mendel University is part of the international project European Network of Academic Integrity (ENAI), which has been mapping academic ethics in EU universities for the second year (Academic Integrity, 2018).

The boundary between ethical and unethical has also become less sharp with the rise of the internet and social networks. Nowadays, there are opinions that everything available on the internet is publicly available to users. The existence of the internet has, therefore, changed the limits of copyright. The notion that freedom and free-sharing of information on the internet is the right of every person has its political proponents. Exact tracing of original information and genuine sources is also ambiguous on the internet. Whoever uses the internet must have confidence in the sources from which the information is used, mainly in situations where many teachers do not always fully understand the possibilities and search systems on the internet. Therefore, there exist several procedures that address the issue of plagiarism in this situation. Anti-plagiarism information systems cannot detect every case of plagiarism, however, they can respond to new forms of plagiarism. E.g., if a student enters the entire work of a third person, the plagiarism program cannot fully recognise this problem (Všianský, Dlabolová, & Foltýnek, 2017). This problem is a new phenomenon in the field of plagiarism, and due to its up-to-dateness, there are not enough analyses to evaluate all damages for academical integrity (Foltýnek & Králíková, 2018).

First of all, restoring the teacher–student relationship is necessary. They need to clarify their position and thus understand the importance of the academic environment and adherence to academic ethics. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the possibilities of using free databases such as Wikipedia and others. Teachers should also address how to use Wikipedia as a source rather than banning it. Even though it is forbidden as a source, many students consult Wikipedia because it provides a starting point for research on an unfamiliar topic. Students who don't know how to go deeper have their hands tied because they cannot cite a relevant source of their research – and then they are punished for plagiarizing from Wikipedia. Using sources with integrity is complex. The solution is teaching skills, not blaming the Internet. Students don't need threats; students need pedagogy (Howard & Davies, 2009).

One of the communication tools between students and teachers is the writing of ethical standards. To preserve the reputation of the university as a learning and research centre and to comply with ethical traditions, while at the same time keeping freedom of research, a large part of the academic workplaces adopted internal written ethical standards. Most of these internal documents are called codes of ethics, codes of conduct or codes of professional ethics (for research, publication, education, legislation, and others). Part of these documents also explains the relationship between ethics, plagiarism and, where appropriate, sanctions (Smolík, 2017a, p. 2).

However, ethical codes must be perceived as “significant guides” that ensure some self-regulation (Wysocki, 2008, p. 41). Plagiarism is one of the fundamental offences against academic morals and has its place among offences in the disciplinary code of each faculty or scientific institution (Smolík, 2017b, p. 17–20). However, differences need to be explained to students at the beginning of the study, such as the distinction between plagiarism, research and cheating (Burkill & Abbey, 2004).

A similar situation is at the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies of Mendel University in Brno (FRRMS). Based on previous FRRMS investigations, it has been found out that a large proportion of plagiarism is detected in international students (see Smolík, 2017a). This category is often referred to as a specific group of plagiarists, who often build on the fact that they can plagiarize from more than one world language, or they are in FRRMS for only one or two semesters, which makes their study easier (cf. Carroll, 2007).

The Code of Conduct of Mendel University is in general shared by the whole school environment; however, the Disciplinary Board meets for each faculty separately. Besides this primary document, the faculties have developed their codes of ethics, which follow the code of the university and specify it with regard to the orientation of the faculty (cf. Smolík & Nesiba, 2017).

The committee of the FRRMS (Disciplinary Commission) assesses compliance with standards in specific cases, including plagiarism, and assists to supervise compliance with the Study Regulations. Among the most common offences that have been dealt with is the issue of plagiarism. The Disciplinary Board at the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies at Mendel University (FRRMS) is based on Act No. 111/1998 Coll. on Higher Education Institutions and on Amendments and Supplements to some other Acts. This committee consists of six members (3 teachers, 3 student representatives). In case of equal votes, the chairman has two votes (cf. Smolík & Nesiba, 2017). In the case of penalties, disciplinary boards have several options. Either the commission decides on:

1. warning;
2. conditional exclusion;
3. exclusion from the study (Smolík, 2017a).

4 Methodology

To identify the attitudes of the first-year students of the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies at Mendel University in Brno,

a three-page questionnaire focused on the subject was compiled. The questionnaire was chosen primarily with regard to the merits of the questionnaire survey. The advantages include, above all, the fact that the questionnaire is a highly efficient data collection (time-saving) technique, it enables easy data processing (with proven data quantification, e.g. in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet software), the questionnaire allows for high validity, the anonymity of respondents, and so on (see Disman, 2000, p. 141; Ferjenčík, 2000, p. 183). Another aspect was the experience of authors with a questionnaire survey from previous researches.

Views, opinions, information, and knowledge about plagiarism were identified using the created questionnaire. We distributed the questionnaires in May 2018. The questionnaires attempted to capture the views of a large number of students of the first years of the study programs Regional Development and International Territorial Studies (FRRMS).

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part introduced the respondents with the aim of research and other information (approximate time requirements of filling in, thanks). The second part of the questionnaire focused on the primary sociological (factual) characteristics of the respondents (study program, gender, permanent residence). The last part of the questionnaire presented individual questions focused on attitudes, information, and others. (see Gavora, 2008, p. 122–137; Čeněk, Smolík, & Vykoukalová, 2016, p. 115).

The questionnaire consisted of 17 items, while item 16 contained five Likert scales. These five questions used the following points: I strongly agree (SA), I agree (A), Neutral-I don't know (N), I disagree (D), I strongly disagree (SD) (see Walker, 2013, p. 53–54). The advantage of Likert scales is that they can be relatively easy to construct and evaluate (Čeněk, Smolík, & Vykoukalová, 2016, p. 114).

Respondents were asked to review five statements characterizing the phenomenon under consideration, i.e. plagiarism. Subsequently, attitudes and opinions on this phenomenon were identified, with a degree of agreement or disagreement (see Schenk & Hrabovská, 2010, p. 78–107).

Closed questions were also used, some of which were dichotomous (yes / no / don't know). These were the items in questions 5, 8, 9, 11. Another type of questions also offered the possibility of free answers (see Hendl, 2005, p. 186). The last question (No. 17) was open and concerned possible suggestions for recommendations on fighting against plagiarism. The open question gave the respondents a free answer. It was more about the reflection on the phenomenon of plagiarism at the investigated institution. With regard

Table 1

Evaluation of question 5

Do you think you could define the term plagiarism?	
I think so	87%
I don't think so	3%
I don't know	10%

to the questionnaire coherence, the questions were considered unambiguous.

5 Results

In the period of data collection, 95 students attended the International Territorial Studies Program and 74 the Regional Development Program at FRRMS. 62 (65%) respondents of the International Territorial Studies Program and 63 (85%) students of the Regional Development Program took part in the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire aimed to find out the opinions of students of the first year of both programs on plagiarism, their personal experience, suggestions and reasons.

The first part of the questionnaire showed that students think they can define the term plagiarism (Table 1). However, in the following questions involving specific cases, students have not always chosen the right answer. We can provide an example: *“The student used text from a book or the internet with minor changes such as his/her remarks, changing names, etc. without a citation in the text, but the source is listed in the references”*, where 69% of students did not identify that as plagiarism. In this case, the quote is also referenced in the text as the student paraphrases someone else's idea. Likewise, *“Student paraphrases without a source because he changes most of the words and thus changes the meaning of the whole text”*. In this case, 66% of students do not see this case again as plagiarism.

On the other hand, the example *“Student changes only a few words from the sources and does not mention them (paraphrases without using a quotation in the text)”*, 82% of students evaluated correctly as an example of plagiarism.

In the next part of the questionnaire, students' real experiences with plagiarism were investigated. When asked whether FRRMS students had a personal experience of dealing with plagiarism during their studies, 94% answered “NO” (Table 2).

We can view this result from multiple angles, either that students are only in the first year of study and do not have many difficult subjects and are

Table 2

Evaluation of question 8

Do you have a personal experience with dealing with plagiarism during your studies?	
Yes	2%
No	94%
I don't know	4%

Table 3

Evaluation of question 11

Have you ever cheated?	
Yes	28%
No	65%
I do not want to comment	7%

not forced to write seminar papers that focus on independent and critical thinking, or that educators do not take the consequences of plagiarism so seriously that students are not familiar with them.

Based on other findings, it cannot be said that plagiarism does not occur at the FRRMS faculty. This is supported by the fact that 28% of students replied "YES" and 7% "I don't know" to the question "*You cheated alone during the study*" (Table 3).

Subsequently, when asked whether the teachers point out the consequences of plagiarism during each course, 82% answered "YES", but 6% answered "I don't know" and 12% "NO", which may seem rather unsatisfactory when we presume that all the students should attend the Bachelor Seminar course and the Introduction to their field of study where these issues should be clearly explained.

Furthermore, it appeared that the students are acquainted with the fact that the cases of plagiarism are solved by the Disciplinary Committee (60% of the answers). Particular solutions to the cases of plagiarism they attributed to the respective teacher or guarantee of the subject. Other options for addressing a particular plagiarism case (outside the Disciplinary Board) concerned Dean, Dean, Student Commission, Teacher of the course, and others.

The following question analyzed students' views on the most effective way to prevent plagiarism. The most chosen option was "*Teachers should say*

Table 4

Evaluation of question 16

		SA	A	N	D	SD	empty
1	My classmates plagiarize.	2%	13%	47%	28%	7%	2%
2	Cheating at our faculty is widespread.	2%	12%	50%	30%	6%	1%
3	Academic dishonesty is acceptable unless you're caught.	1%	10%	10%	29%	48%	2%
4	Most pedagogues point out at plagiarism during lectures.	20%	46%	9%	16%	6%	4%
5	I want our faculty to have a document that defines the citation requirements.	62%	26%	7%	2%	2%	1%
6	It is easy to plagiarize without my teacher finding out.	2%	9%	32%	30%	26%	2%

what is and is not allowed through lectures, and they should openly deal with plagiarism with students”.

The last question in the second part concerned students' views on increasing knowledge about plagiarism and general awareness of FRRMS. The most chosen options involved greater awareness of plagiarism in the educational process. Another frequently chosen answer suggested the creation of a comprehensive key document containing basic citation rules. Another popular option was that educators should provide more information to students about the implementation of strict plagiarism checks, or to promote public debate on this issue within the university.

The last part of the questionnaire consisted of the Likert scales. Table 4 summarizes views on individual items.

The conclusion of the questionnaire confirmed the previous views of the students. However, there is an opinion (see Table 4, Question 3), which shows that 10% of students agree that academic dishonesty is ok if they are not caught. This result only supports the fact that awareness of the consequences of possible plagiarism should increase. Another alarming finding is item 2, which suggests widespread plagiarism at FRRMS.

In the final part of the questionnaire, students could use the space for comments and recommendations. To sum up, the comments were very similar, mentioning little knowledge of how to quote correctly. Additionally, several comments suggested creating a universal document available to all students describing the citation standards. Many comments also agreed with the need for greater awareness of the consequences of plagiarism.

6 Discussion and recommendations

The objective of this paper was to analyze the attitudes of first-year students of FRRMS on plagiarism, to discover their awareness of plagiarism and, based on the findings, discuss possible measures to eliminate this phenomenon. The questionnaire survey showed that the topics related to plagiarism, scientific work, ethical principles and general education in this field should be reflected in pedagogical practice.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, possible recommendations for further pedagogical practice at FRRMS have emerged. One of the students' recommendations was, for example, the implementation of a "manual" to help students quote or prevent plagiarism. The document should contain the basics of citations, quote types, illustrative examples, and common mistakes. The document would be created by the faculty, and, every year, new knowledge and mistakes would be introduced into it by teachers in their courses. According to the respondents, the unique "manual" should serve to indicate the most common misdemeanours, mistakes, and others. It would also be advisable to raise awareness of plagiarism in the form of discussions within individual classes or to raise awareness of possible sanctions.

It is necessary to emphasize that the crucial time for work with students is the beginning of their study at university. Based on the results of the secondary research goal, it is the most important time for student training. It requires a long-term effort to get acquainted with the issues and risks of plagiarism, the integrity of the university environment, and the citation and resource-related techniques to cover in the following years of study.

Conclusion

This paper focused on introducing plagiarism in the context of higher education. After a theoretical introduction, a questionnaire survey was presented. Data from 125 first-year students at the Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies at Mendel University in Brno were collected in May 2018.

Based on the questionnaire survey, it is possible to state that FRRMS students have a certain awareness of the ethical principles related to the academic environment (quotes, references, sources, etc.). In some cases, however, students are not able to properly assess whether plagiarism is involved (e.g. in case of paraphrasing).

We also found out that there is a particular demand for information that would comprehensively present quotations in the form of a "manual", as well as general issues of academic writing. In general, the phenomenon of

plagiarism offers other possible areas of research. One possible option is research that focuses on (not) awareness of plagiarism at secondary schools.

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