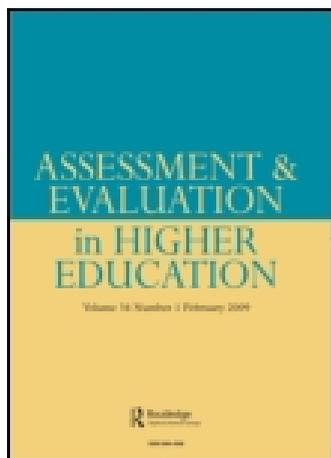


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Plagiarism—a complex issue requiring a holistic institutional approach

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Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the incidence of plagiarism, though the response has largely been to focus on deterrence through detection and punishment. However, student plagiarism is a much more complex issue than suggested by a one-solution response and this paper argues for a more holistic institutional approach that recognises the need for a shared responsibility between the student, staff and institution, supported by external quality agencies. Case studies from three institutions are used to illustrate possible triggers for adopting a holistic approach. The paper presents a checklist for identifying the absence of a holistic approach to dealing with student plagiarism and concludes that a key aspect is to adopt assessment-led solutions which focus on using low stakes, formative (as distinct from high stakes, summative) assessment.

Introduction

Before 2000 in the UK, university policies and institutional procedures often did not define what was meant by plagiarism (Stefani & Carroll, 2001) or state procedures for dealing with offenders. Where procedures did exist, they were not linked to those dealing with learning and teaching although there might be some overlap when Examination Boards considered students' marks. Post 2000, the literature on plagiarism grew in size and scope, documenting both the complexity of the issue and the growing number of ways students can be deterred from doing it. In 2003, Park compiled a helpful summary of the literature, covering seven aspects including student and staff understanding of what plagiarism is; attitudes and motivations that are linked to unacceptable behaviours; and what is known about its incidence. He states that 'plagiarism is doubtless common and getting more so' (2003, p. 271) and confirms that the last four or five years have been very productive ones for increasing our understanding of the issues.

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In the same time period, informal arenas for discussing plagiarism outwith the academic literature have been even more active with frequent articles in the popular media focused on the scandal of students who buy work from so-called 'essay mills' or on high tech ways to catch students who copy from the Internet. Academics, too, find a range of informal avenues for airing views and their increasing concerns but, like the popular press, academics' interests tend to be very focused on knowing how much is happening and how best to catch those doing it without expending too much of their own time and energy. For example, a UK discussion list set up in 2002 for those interested in dealing with student plagiarism (<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/PLAGIARISM.html>; accessed 31 March 2005) has considered a range of comments and questions, but the most frequent seem to have been exchanges as to the relative attributes of different electronic detection systems and how best to use them to catch student plagiarists. Contributors who ask about detection are virtually guaranteed a number of responses; those with other interests, less so. Institutions, too, have entered into the production of material on student plagiarism with most now having sites devoted to the issue. However, though some address a range of matters, most sites concentrate on informing students as to what plagiarism is, that it is bad and how they will be punished if they do it.

The message that all this activity sends, in the authors' view, is that students bear the key responsibility for solving the problem, with academic staff and their institutions primarily having the role of ensuring that there are sufficient deterrents and punishments in place. The authors argue that, faced with the acknowledged increase in student plagiarism (Park, 2003) and in the light of the complexity of the issue, we should start from the premise that we need to get assessment right in the first place and we need to integrate the specific, focused actions proposed to deal with it into an institution-wide, coherent, principled and evidence-informed approach.

There have been others who have made similar calls in the past for institution-wide approaches to dealing with student plagiarism. In 1998, Walker described how his own university in New Zealand dealt with student plagiarism and called for more studies to 'assist in developing more comprehensive measures to deal with it' (p. 105). A few authors seek general principles and recommendations for good practice (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Larkham & Manns, 2002). The UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) developed a Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education (issued in May 2000). The code of practice states that

Institutions should have effective mechanisms to deal with breaches of assessment regulations, and the resolution of appeals against assessment decisions. (Precepts and Guidance, paragraph 3)

The document goes on to state:

Additionally, institutions will wish to consider how students are provided with information and guidance on their responsibilities within the assessment process including, for example:

definitions of academic misconduct in respect of assessment, such as plagiarism, collusion, cheating, impersonation and the use of inadmissible material (including material downloaded from electronic sources such as the internet);

accepted and acceptable forms of academic referencing and citation; (Precepts and Guidance, paragraph 3)

In 2004, the Plagiarism Advisory Service (PAS—see <http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk>; accessed 31 March 2005) published an institutional audit tool designed to alert Higher Education Institutions to effective and coordinated action through a series of questions institutions might wish to ask when developing their own framework. Finally, in 2004, Park published a paper advocating better institutional frameworks in the UK for dealing with plagiarism. He notes the lack of studies focusing on institutional approaches, other than American examples, and stresses the need for a value-driven, holistic, institution-wide approach:

An institutional approach to dealing with plagiarism by students should set plagiarism clearly into context as a breach of academic integrity ... [a] positive approach would place the emphasis on prevention and education, backed by robust and transparent procedures for detecting and punishing plagiarism. (p. 294)

The need for a holistic approach

However, each of the above advocates a wide-ranging approach but then looks in detail at only one aspect. The QAA guidance makes it clear that students need to be ‘provided with information and guidance’, including definitions of academic misconduct, and that they have responsibilities as to what are inappropriate practices, but there is nothing here about the responsibilities of institutions to ensure that students have the necessary skills to avoid plagiarism, or on staff to consider how best to minimise the opportunities for it through their assessment practices. The PAS audit lists the questions institutions might ask themselves but provides no recommendations as to the answers. Park (2004) calls for a policy where academic integrity is at the heart of the framework for dealing with student plagiarism then describes in detail policies and procedures at Lancaster University as ‘...a contribution to the emerging national [i.e. UK] debate ... to save others from having to invent the same wheel’ (p. 304). He deals rhetorically with the issues of prevention and education, stating their importance but offering no guidance as to how to make them operational at an institutional level.

Many readers, the authors included, will find that a detailed description of one university’s approach to developing an institutional framework or the QAA’s reminder of the importance of ensuring students know their responsibilities are useful. Our argument remains that all the above, except perhaps the PAS audit, focus almost exclusively on identifying and punishing students who plagiarise.

What is missing from the current debate is recognition that plagiarism is a complex problem, being dealt with by complex institutions in an increasingly diverse higher education system. A holistic approach matches the solution to the significance of the problem by:

- ensuring students have the appropriate information and skills within the context of a scholarly/academic approach to learning

- developing approaches to curriculum design and assessment that ensure that skills development is built in and that assessment does not encourage or reward plagiarism, as well as focusing on low-stakes formative assessment for learning and using high-stakes assessment sparingly to genuinely measure student learning—all this supported by appropriate staff development and support from educational developers
- having in place institutional procedures and regulations that recognise that students are not adequately prepared when they enter HE and that we have a responsibility to ensure that they move fairly quickly to an understanding of the appropriate conventions and practices implicit in academic study in a western university—even though this may be open to challenge within certain disciplines or philosophical positions. Regulations are not just designed to punish but to ‘rehabilitate the offender’ i.e. to provide the means whereby they can avoid it in the future. This does not make institutions ‘soft’ but rather ‘fair’ and robust.

The model is thus a set of roles and responsibilities for staff, students and institutions with quality review processes ensuring all three elements are constantly in play without being dominated by one such as detection, regulations or punishments. At the level of the debate itself, there is a need to draw out some of the lessons from both research and practice in individual institutions to enable practitioners, policy-makers and educational developers to move towards a clearer understanding of where plagiarism sits within academia and how it should be addressed. If the current ‘catch and punish’ voices are heeded, we risk continued inability to deal with the challenge plagiarism presents. Park (2003) reminds the reader, ‘The practice of plagiarism is a major challenge to institutional aspirations of academic integrity and a major threat to institutional quality assurance and enhancement’ (p. 483). Unless we change how it is dealt with, our attempts to deal with it may also be a threat to students’ learning.

Finding a way into the holistic approach

Institutions that have tried to adopt a holistic approach have started at different points in the interconnecting web of actions and procedures. Examples are described below, all of which have resulted in institutional change, though one of the three cases cited here is still too recent to be sure of its effect. None can yet be shown to have reduced the overall level of student plagiarism but all have had a significant impact on the way the institution as a whole deals with the issue. The three cases illustrate the complexity of the issues and the variety of trigger events that can lead to developing a holistic approach.

Media interest followed by external, independent enquiry

The first case concerns the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, where the university decided to publicly acknowledge the negative impact of several high profile plagiarism cases which were featured repeatedly and highly critically in

the Australian national media. A subsequent report into the matter (Longstaff *et al.*, 2003), endorsed fully by the University's senior management, summarised the position before the review as follows:

Students have been unfairly denied advice about the allegations against them. Staff have found themselves deemed to have engaged in unsatisfactory performance. The reputation of the University and its senior staff has been called into question. Finally, what seem to be extremely serious cases of plagiarism have been resolved in a manner that has as much to do with the Discipline Committee's assessment of the University's conduct in this matter as that of the relevant students. None of this can be judged satisfactory. ... most (if not all) of this could have been avoided if the University had a clear policy and procedure around plagiarism effectively communicated to students. (p. 70)

In brief, the University acted by commissioning an independent enquiry by the St James Ethics Centre, who in turn conducted extensive research and consultation within the institution. Their final, lengthy report (Longstaff *et al.*, 2003) contained a Management Action Plan listing 33 specific actions and clear mechanisms for tracking and overseeing their completion. The University's Council subsequently resolved to:

... in the interests of openness and transparency, make available to the University community and the public the St James Ethics Centre Report and the Management Response and Management Action Plan. (<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/services/academic-integrity>; last accessed 31 March 2005)

It is too early to have any indication as to the effect of the proposed actions on the situation that triggered the development of a holistic approach. However, evaluation is incorporated in university plans and action has already started on a number of fronts to ensure such a bruising incident does not recur.

Collegial review at Oxford Brookes University

Another way in which the development of a holistic approach might be instigated is illustrated by the case of Oxford Brookes University where, in 1999, the Academic Registrar expressed concern that delegating decisions on plagiarism to individual academics made it almost certain that staff were acting individually and independently. Should decisions derived in this way be challenged, it would have been difficult to justify why students were treated differently in different parts of the same university or even how decisions came about. All such circumstances are not acceptable under quality assurance requirements nor do they comply with natural justice notions. More worryingly for some, they do not meet UK institutions' obligations under the Human Rights legislation which protects students' rights to treatment that is fair and consistent. Although this protection has yet to be tested in the courts, procedures and policies would probably be found wanting if they were. In the Oxford Brookes case, the Academic Registrar deemed the situation in 2000 unsatisfactory and instituted collegial discussion and a review of the policies in general and, in particular, of the procedures for handling student plagiarism.

The result was a new set of both policies and procedures and a decision to create specialist officers, originally called Academic Misconduct Officers (AMOs), later

renamed Academic Conduct Officers (ACOs). Markers must continue to detect unacceptable behaviour but then pass the case to the ACO who decides whether plagiarism is demonstrated (sometimes with the help of the marker, sometimes acting independently). The ACO allocates an action from a limited range of options, being:

- 1) a recorded discussion, usually including referral to study skills support
- 2) a reduction in marks determined by removing the work that was not the student's and marking the remainder
- 3) resubmission of a corrected version for a capped passing mark
- 4) 0% for the piece of work
- 5) 0% for the module.

If the ACO decides the student's misconduct is such that it warrants a penalty more severe than one of these five, the case goes to a full disciplinary panel convened under procedures outlined in the disciplinary policy. The student also has the option of refusing to accept the decision and opt for a full panel review. ACOs handle the majority of cases within a week to ten days and meet regularly to discuss their decisions, reach consensus on difficult matters, and keep up to date on developments. A full description of the procedure is on http://www.brookes.ac.uk/regulations/student_conduct.html#procedure, and evaluation of the ACO system can be found on http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnitch/2_learnit.html (both accessed 31 March 2005).

Much time and attention in the last five years at Oxford Brookes has been devoted to seeking greater consistency, fairness and transparency in how punishments are allocated. As ACOs became more experienced with handling cases and more aware of the complexities surrounding tariff allocation, it became clear that most were using a common set of criteria to arrive at a suitable punishment. This shared understanding has proved very useful for three reasons. Firstly, annual monitoring of actual tariffs used by ACOs as detailed in an annual report created opportunities for discussion and informal peer review. Where, for some reason, an individual was acting outside the shared practice of others, this could be identified and discussed safely by providing anonymous data on decisions where each ACO can only identify their own. One said in 2003, '[two years ago], I was one of those who thought students should be thrown out but now after I've done it [the ACO role], I can see it's not like that. It wasn't until I totted it all up that I realised I actually seemed lenient in what I was doing. Consistency is really important yet each case has to be approached individually'. Another said, 'After three years, the interviews get easier but the cases don't'.

It was only possible to compare decisions by creating a shared set of criteria for arriving at a suitable tariff because all decisions are highly contextual and ACOs must consider a wide range of factors rather than conform to a simple match of action and punishment. All punishments are now derived from consideration of four factors:

- 1) *Extent*. How much of the work is not the student's own? ACOs decided it was important to check where the plagiarism was located—in the main body or in an appendix? In the research methods description or in the conclusions?

2) *Level*. All ACOs distinguish between students at the start of their academic career and those further advanced. However, a second-year student who has just entered the University with credit would be considered differently from one who had already done a year's study with the institution. This aspect is discussed under the next criteria.

3) *Knowledge of UK academic regulations, assumptions and rules*. This factor seeks to explore aspects of intentionality; something that we found had to be addressed if ACOs were to use the new system. In this factor, ACOs are asked to seek evidence which would allow them to judge how likely it is that the student has been alerted to their responsibilities as to citation and referencing. Is it the first offence? Did the student attend a study skills course? In the case of International Students, how recently did they arrive in the UK and for all students, how recently did they enter the institution? Where were they beforehand? Is the offence limited to poor in-text citation with no evidence of the wish to deceive or is the action fraudulent or seeking to trick the assessor?

4) *Rules of the discipline*. ACOs insist that academic conventions and rules differ according to the academic conventions in particular disciplines.

As decisions were tracked annually and analysed, it was possible to demonstrate growing consistency, even if the resulting decisions seem to be different. In 2003, ACOs reported students' growing confidence in the new procedures, saying they were pleased that a formal system is in place, albeit one that is often daunting for those called to an ACO interview.

The significance of this example is that a holistic approach requires energy to be devoted at many different actions, giving simultaneous attention to a range of issues. In this case, several years' efforts were necessarily given over to ensuring procedures functioned fairly and consistently. After five years, the specialist officer function is embedded in the culture and operating as a normal part of academic life, albeit one that still stimulates discussion and disagreement amongst colleagues. However, other aspects of the holistic approach remain patchy and, in some places, absent. In 2004, this aspect was recognised formally by asking the Dean of Learning and Teaching to be responsible for the ACO role, tying down how and where information would be reported, and devoting energy to rolling out more widely the use of early diagnostic tasks to identify students' skills gaps for complying with academic regulations. Some schools did this regularly, others less so. All were attempting to address assessment more strategically. One key aspect leading to a more holistic approach was the proposal to allocate time for quality enhancement rather than simply quality assurance.

Research at Sheffield Hallam University

At Sheffield Hallam, the trigger for a holistic approach was pedagogic research and concerns about the meaning of this data for institutional quality assurance. Following an annual quality review in 2000, the Academic Registrar requested a thorough investigation into plagiarism, including the perception that it was increasing, probably due

to the growing use of the Internet. A Plagiarism and Collusion Working Group was set up which, amongst other things, commissioned research into student perceptions of plagiarism building on earlier work by Ashworth *et al.* (1997) that highlighted problems students had with the concept of plagiarism. More recent investigation (Ashworth *et al.*, 2003; Freewood *et al.*, 2003) showed this continued to be a problem and that, where students did comply, they could not explain the grounds for their action 'other than to avoid punishment' and, even when trying to follow the rules, their attempts were often misguided. A typical comment was:

As long as you put the author in the bibliography then it seems OK to copy.

The data gathered from interviews with students naturally led to a holistic approach because it demonstrated five main themes: defining plagiarism, views on whether plagiarism is wrong, prevention, detection and punishment. Freewood's study confirmed Ashworth's earlier work that, rather than just talk about the penalties for plagiarising, students needed to be engaged with the nature of academic culture; they look to tutors 'to provide the guidance to signpost the values of scholarship and nature of originality'. Investigation also confirmed that students' hazy notions of the moral values underpinning plagiarism was no bar to being clear about its implications, especially in the later stages of their programmes. Comments centred on both punishments and the external reputation of the institution:

At the end of the day I want my degree to mean something. I want people who are going to employ me to say he studied Construction Management at Sheffield Hallam and that's a good thing. Obviously he had to face some sort of challenge to receive that degree.

The research highlighted the need to improve student understanding and ability to avoid plagiarism; to have clear, consistently applied regulations; and to work with staff to improve assessment to reduce the opportunity to plagiarise and even in some cases the rewards from unacceptable behaviour.

This evidence-based approach at Sheffield Hallam centred on students' experiences but needed to identify actions for responding to the findings. The actions, as in most cases when problems are identified, first focused on revising procedures for dealing with cheating. A second action was the establishment of Academic Conduct Panels in all Schools. Panels dealt with more serious individual cases and administered penalties, including a new reaction to plagiarism that recognised that students may enter the university with ill-formed views and skills and that the university had a responsibility to ensure that these gaps were addressed. New regulations allowed for formal warnings for minor cases as well as a limited number of penalties, providing incremental increases in severity reflecting the seriousness of the case. This formal approach replaced the previous one where individual tutors often handled matters themselves and bypassed regulations they viewed as too onerous and draconian. Now, students were treated with greater consistency and in all cases were guided to the appropriate support and resources to ensure they have the necessary skills and information to avoid it in the future. It quickly became clear that regular cross-institution meetings between panel chairs and secretaries were necessary to ensure

panel decisions were consistent and to discuss trends, specific cases and any further actions needed.

As internal investigation with students had proved a spur to a range of actions, it was tried again, this time targeting staff (Flint *et al.*, 2004a, 2004b), though these took place before the new procedures had been fully introduced. The research confirmed what other studies have consistently shown (see, for example, Walker, 1998 or Carroll, 2002): that staff had no consistent understanding and/or definition of plagiarism both in relation to student behaviour and to cheating as a practice. It also highlighted further the potential mismatch between staff, students and the institution with regard to policy and practice and reinforced the findings of Ashworth *et al.* (1997) that:

In general, plagiarism is a far less meaningful concept for students than it is for academic staff, and it ranks relatively low in the student system of values. (p. 201)

However, the various pieces of research have also provided the evidence to support the holistic approach as described above. The University recognises that it needs to engage with staff and students in discussions about academic integrity, the nature of assessment and how to enhance skills and understanding through staff development, information and training for students, and an approach to procedures and regulations informed by research and reflection on practice. Guidelines, websites, workshops and briefing sessions have all been used to disseminate the findings and outcomes of the review and changed approaches.

Taking a proactive decision to review policies and procedures

The case studies describe examples of institutions responding to events. However, there is a case for being more proactive as any of the instances described below should alert institutions to the need to begin their own review with a view to developing a more holistic response:

1. *No clearly documented evidence of where students are taught the skills necessary to comply with academic regulations and the conventions of academic writing.*

It should be possible to track where the teaching itself happens (rather than simply informing students as below). It should also be possible to show where in the programme students can practise academic skills and receive constructive feedback. General statements about the content of the Handbook or availability of online study skills would probably not be enough to defend the claim that this happens should a challenge arise, though this appears to be tested in a 2004 example of just such a claim (Baty, 2004).

2. *The absence of clear approaches to ensuring that students are aware of academic regulations and the need to uphold academic integrity and what their responsibilities are in complying with these.*

Evidence to the contrary, i.e. the assertion that students *are* informed, would need to be concrete, recorded, and specific to this issue. It would need to apply to all students,

even those who entered at non-traditional points in the programme. A statement that the information can be found in student handbooks will probably be insufficient if challenged.

3. *No clear evidence that the university promotes academic integrity as a primary value for staff and students.*

Contrary evidence would need to go beyond rhetoric, mission statements and general admonitions. Though the latter are widespread, action in support of such statements is sporadic and evidence usually anecdotal.

4. *A lack of staff development activities relevant to deterring plagiarism to ensure all staff are familiar with current procedures and regulations, good practice in course design, approaches to detection and any legal responsibilities.*

It is all too easy for staff to miss changes to procedures and regulations, particularly if they are announced at a pressure point in the academic year. Similarly, some staff may not be aware how to design opportunities for plagiarism out of their assessment and how they might detect it where it is occurring.

5. *Evidence that staff may be taking individual decisions that could lead to inconsistent or unfair treatment.*

This will invariably be the case if individual markers are responsible for initiating action and applying sanctions or punishments.

6. *No systematic approach to collecting the data on the occurrence of cases of plagiarism (both intentional and unintentional).*

Data would need to include decisions made about each case and how the university deals with repeat offences. It should be recorded centrally for the whole institution; be collected regularly; be reviewed for trends, gaps and 'hot spots'; and result in actions and appropriate modifications to policies and procedures.

7. *Statistics that reveal the detection of a small number of cases.*

It is difficult to prescribe what might constitute 'a small number' but several studies suggest a rate for the UK in 2004 of 10% of all student work needing attention beyond normal assessment can be justified (FreshMinds Survey, June 2004), though many academics claim this to be an understatement. If the assumption of the lower level is correct, it would mean, in an institution of 10,000 students, with each student submitting (for sake of argument) 10 pieces of coursework annually, a possible 10,000 examples per year of unacceptable work warranting action beyond reducing marks or commenting on the need for referencing in the marker's feedback. It is important to remember that the majority of these hypothetical 10,000 cases would be of misuse or misunderstanding of academic conventions with only a small minority reflecting serious deliberate plagiarism. In reality, no HEI in the UK could demonstrate this level of activity and few could cope if they did encounter this level, even if (as is usually the case) the 'action' consists of recorded conversations with students

about their responsibilities and/or requirements to complete online skills development sessions.

As a trigger for institutional review, rates well below even the reduced expectations would be strong grounds for discovering how procedures impeded detection and/or encouraged informal, unrecorded local solutions and punishments.

Dealing with the complexity: assessment-led solutions

The message from the scenarios and the indicative signs is that plagiarism is a complex issue, understood differently by students, staff, institutions and the media, and with some attempt to at least bring it to the fore as a quality issue. Any institution attempting a holistic way of dealing with the problem will not find a ‘one size fits all’ solution but could draw upon sector-wide discussion about the nature of learning and assessment. Too often assessment is seen as being *of* learning, i.e. the generation of summative marks, rather than being *for* learning, by providing feedback and generating meaningful learning tasks. A useful distinction is made by Knight (2001) between ‘high stakes’ assessment, where ‘those being assessed are likely to do all they can to conceal ignorance and suggest competence’, and ‘low stakes’ assessment, which is more helpful ‘when learners are open about their limitations and don’t try to conceal ignorance or bury mistakes’.

As a result of the over-emphasis on high stakes, summative assessment students begin to think only of gaining higher marks, coping with poor time management, or general instrumentalism or consumerism about their learning. The focus often shifts exclusively to the final award or qualification. High stakes assessment encourages behaviours regularly shown to be associated with higher levels of student plagiarism (Park, 2003). It follows that staff and institutions seeking a solution need to switch to more low stakes formative assessment, providing more support for the development of students’ learning skills, including note-taking, paraphrasing and referencing. Further, attention should be given to designing out the opportunities for, and rewards from, plagiarism (Carroll, 2002). Much of this will involve staff development to support staff in making the shift to assessment for learning as well as how to support students in acquiring the necessary skills and scholarly approaches—not just *how* but also *why* to avoid plagiarism.

Low stakes assessment would also create opportunities to use procedures and that accommodate the fact that not all students are at the same stage of learning development. Institutions have a responsibility to put arrangements in place to support those still developing necessary skills. This is particularly, but not solely, true of international students at postgraduate level where it seems institutions often assume that, because they have a Bachelors degree, they understand the conventions. Such assumptions do not reflect what academics regularly report in informal settings such as the staff common room and more formally via Examination Boards and course planning committees. If the impact of assessment itself on students’ behaviour were more widely accepted and acted upon, then institution-wide frameworks would need to find ways to react. If and when they did, they would be advised to take a strategic, careful approach (for

suggestions as to how this might be done, see Gibbs, 1999) as too tight specifications as to the types and amounts of assessment are likely to inhibit innovation and variety and push staff to more formal, summative methods. Thus, the argument returns to the original point that too great a focus on any one aspect threatens to distort the overall framework. A holistic approach must mean a holistic approach to assessment, as well.

Conclusion

Plagiarism is a complex issue. The various players in the drama are equally complex. However, seeing assessment as an integral part of the learning experience of students, staff and institutions, supported by appropriate quality agencies, means that it becomes a shared responsibility. There may always be some students (and staff) who will cheat but the duty on the institution is to provide creative, imaginative environments for learning and assessment rather than those that are tightly controlled, lacking variety and tending towards compliance. Some may chose the latter option and their students, despite it all, may succeed. But one of the implications of meeting the Government's widening participation agenda—in all its dimensions—is that the previous learning and assessment regimes will not work with the majority of the 'new' students in higher education.

Looking to the underlying causes of plagiarism rather than just the symptoms provides the opportunity for fresh thinking about assessment and the roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders in the learning enterprise—and thereby potentially reduces the complexity of the plagiarism issue. This is perhaps the key to ensuring that a holistic approach to plagiarism is adopted, where the emphasis is on promoting good scholarly, academic practices rather than focusing on potential problems and channelling all the institution's energies into deterring through detection and punishment. The latter approach is not the basis for a healthy learning environment whilst the former at least contributes to it. There is also a real danger of being sidetracked from the former to the latter approach by a knee-jerk reaction to unfavourable media publicity when this is just the moment to restate the visions and values of a learning university.

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