

## **Promoting Maturity in Policies for Plagiarism across Europe and beyond**

### **Abstract**

The project “Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe” (IPPHEAE) was funded by the European Commission (2010-2013). The consortium of five universities investigated the effectiveness of policies within higher education institutions for managing and discouraging cases of student plagiarism and academic misconduct in 27 member states of the European Union. The findings based on just under 5000 responses, led to recommendations for each country surveyed on how national and institutional policies could be strengthened in order to promote an institutional culture of academic integrity.

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### **Background**

The Bologna Process is achieving harmony in higher education (HE) course structures and credits across Europe, but there is still very little commonality in quality assurance, governance and educational strategy across European HE institutions. In 2009-10 a consortium of five EU Universities designed a project proposal to investigate how different HEIs were responding to the specific growing threat of student plagiarism to institutional quality and integrity. Funding was granted under the Erasmus lifelong Learning Programme for “Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe” and the project operated successfully between October 2010 and September 2013.

The decision by the European Commission to fund the project acknowledged that, although a great deal of prior research had been conducted into the problems of plagiarism and academic dishonesty in Anglophone countries, very little was known about how European HEIs were responding to the problem. Further, never before had a comparative study been conducted involving all 27 member states of the EU to explore the effectiveness of policies for addressing plagiarism.

The project results are discussed in this paper, but a more detailed account of the project findings is included as a book chapter by this author in the (shortly to be published) Handbook of Academic Integrity (Glendinning 2015a).

### **Project aims and objectives**

An overarching aim for the project was to raise awareness across the European educational landscape that academic standards will suffer unless academic misconduct is taken seriously by institutions. The expectation was to find examples of effective national and institutional policies and practices that could be shared across and beyond Europe. Project objectives included the development of resources for helping to deter, detect and respond to cases of academic misconduct.

The main instrument for the research was a survey of HE students, teachers and senior managers. The anticipated volume of data from teachers and students, and different range of languages spoken by the target population, determined that the main surveys needed to be on-line questionnaires consisting of questions that could yield comparable data.

An investigation into previous surveys and consultation with experienced researchers, particularly Jude Carroll (formerly Oxford Brookes University, UK), confirmed that no suitable survey

instrument existed for reuse. Ideas for questions were found through a review of literature and research (McCabe surveys, Park 2004, Tennant and Rowell 2010, Tennant and Duggan 2008, Hayes and Introna 2005).

Different questions were designed for teachers and students, with some overlap for comparison and triangulation of responses. The questions were translated into 14 different languages to ensure that participants could understand and respond accurately, using mainly Likert scale questions. Coding of the responses allowed data from all 14 language versions to be analysed as single datasets.

The survey for senior institutional managers and administrators was also made available as an on-line questionnaire, again translated into 14 languages. Since the expected volume of responses was lower, this survey had many open questions to encourage free-format responses. In addition semi-structured interview questions were designed for both senior managers and for use with participants working externally to institutions, typically in nationally based roles on quality assurance and educational policy.

A variation of the student survey was designed to be conducted as student focus groups, to allow a small amount of qualitative data to be captured, with opportunities to explore some areas in more detail. Most focus groups were conducted by students employed as research assistants, which helped to put participants at ease when discussing what could be seen as a controversial topic. The detailed analysis of the student focus group data will form part of a forthcoming PhD thesis.

In addition to the survey several case studies were completed with in-depth studies evaluating, comparing or documenting interesting practice in policy development or implementation. One partner, Mendel University in Brno, developed an anti-plagiarism software tool ANTON, which was piloted and evaluated during the project.

## **Results**

Including all methods of data collection, just under 5000 survey responses were collected encompassing 27 EU member states, with well over 200 HEIs contributing to the study. Although in a few countries response rates were likely to be representative samples, especially Austria, Portugal and Malta, in other countries great reluctance by individuals and institutions to contribute to the survey led to patchy coverage (particularly in Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Denmark).

Reasons for refusal or reluctance of potential contributors include: fears about anonymity, some people expressed fear that poor practice in their institution would be exposed; lack of any clear institutional guidance and policies to report was seen as a reason to refuse participation; the number and complexity of questions in the on-line questionnaires were disincentives to those with low interest in the subject of the research; some academics approached reported few or no known incidences of plagiarism or academic misconduct (for example in UK, Estonia, Denmark, Sweden), which was cited in different places as evidence either for effective policies or justification for having no policies.

Invitations to participate were sent to all IPPHEAE partners' existing EU contacts. Also many Europe-based HE support organisations helped to distribute the request to institutions. The voluntary decision by institutions and individuals whether to participate meant that the data cannot be seen as a fully representative sample of the whole HEI sector for most of the countries studied. Nevertheless, the resulting responses reflect views in HEIs within each EU member state studied and provide insights into the perspectives of students, teachers and managers in each country, where none existed before this project.

The detailed survey results are available on the project web site (<http://IPPHEAE.eu/project-results>). A country report was prepared for each of the 27 EU member states incorporating a set of recommendations. An overarching EU-wide report compared the results for all countries using a tool called the Academic Integrity Maturity Model (AIMM), created by the author specifically for this project, based on set of 9 metrics calculated from the survey data (Glendinning 2014, Glendinning 2015b).

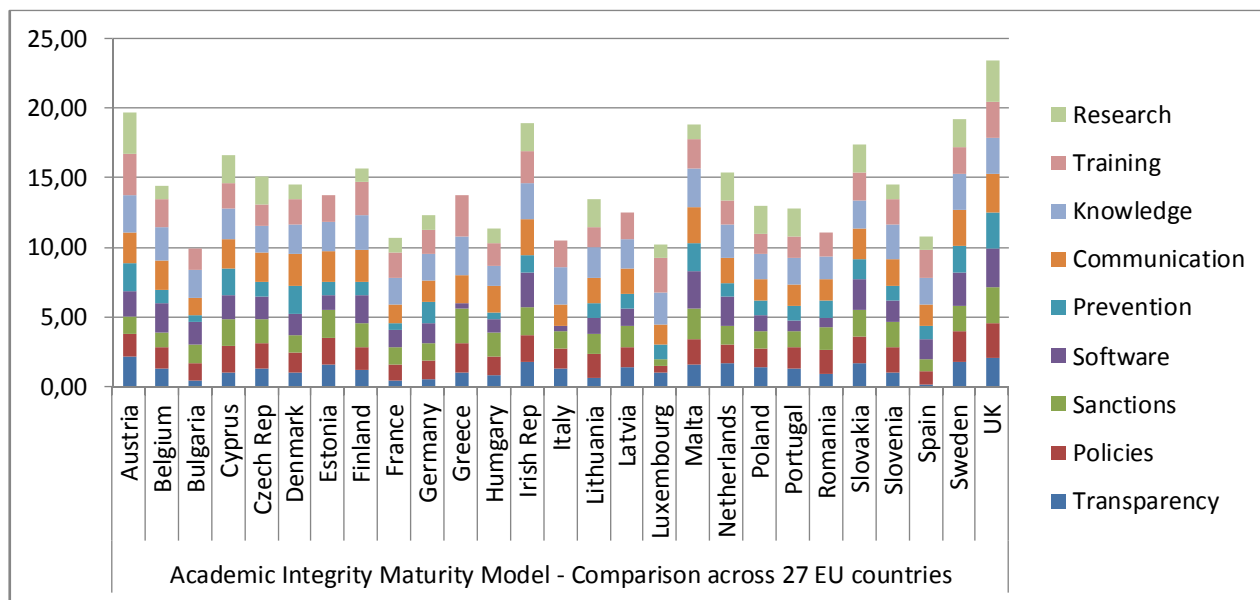


Figure 1 AIMM scores and profiles for each of the 27 EU countries surveyed.

Results for each country are summarised on one page of the EU-wide report, giving the AIMM scores, both numerically and graphically, together with a list of Strengths and Opportunities, Weaknesses and Threats.

### Selected findings

The data collected is wide-ranging and complex, therefore only a few key results will be presented here, with general discussion and interpretation of the broad findings.

One of the most significant findings to emerge is lack of agreement between participants about what is acceptable academic practice for students, teachers and researchers. This deficit was found to apply at all levels of the survey, within and between institutions and countries.

In many parts of the EU, particularly in countries where rote learning is still predominantly practiced, plagiarism of materials in the form of restatement without attribution of sources is often the normal and acceptable way for higher education students at bachelor and master's levels to demonstrate what they have learnt. In countries including France, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, it is common to find that HE students at undergraduate and master's level are rewarded for reproducing theory and memorising lecture notes and discouraged from including original ideas in assessed course work. Several student respondents noted their discomfort with this situation and suggested that plagiarism would be reduced if they were rewarded for their own ideas and critical reflection.

In other countries including UK, Malta, Sweden, Republic of Ireland, evidence emerged of an institutional culture requiring students to demonstrate independent learning in assessed work,

combined with measures deployed systematically in some institutions to detect and penalise plagiarism and other forms of cheating.

The concept of collusion by students, or sharing work and ideas, was seen by some respondents as the normal way students learn from each other, for example this was recorded in France and Poland. In contrast respondents from UK and Ireland reported that collusion by students in work designed to be individual is viewed and penalised as a form of cheating in their institutions.

Other important conceptual differences of opinion observed in the responses included acceptance or denial that the concept of self-plagiarism was a problem with student work or in academic publications. Some participants said they had observed varying practices for handling cases of plagiarism and self-plagiarism in peer reviews for journals and conferences, ranging from condoning or ignoring the issue to rejecting the paper. This finding aligns with the on-going work of Retraction Watch and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

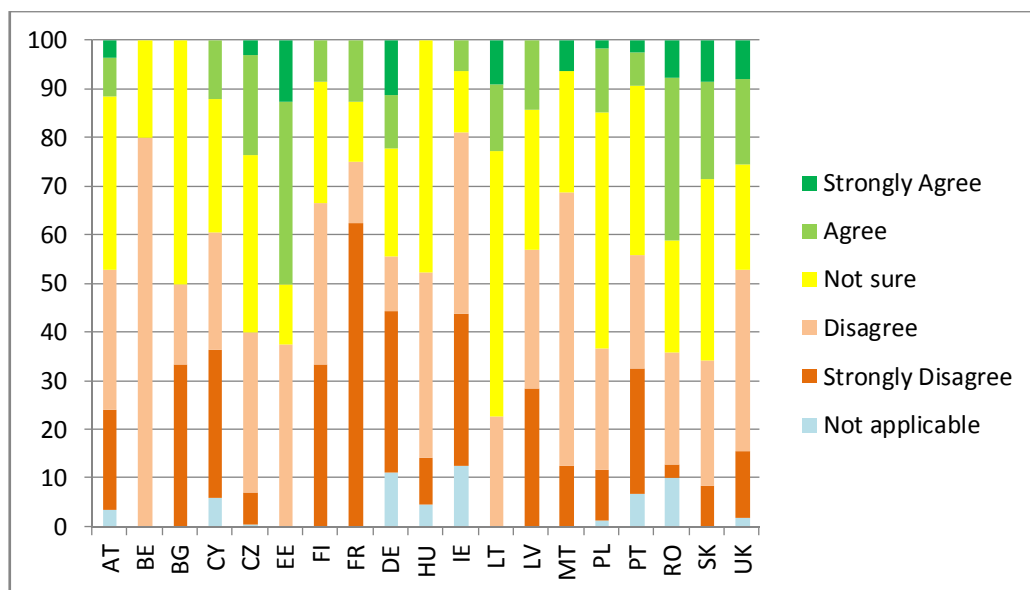
In Sweden and Germany there is a requirement for academic staff to prove “intent” to deceive by the student before a case of student plagiarism can be successfully brought. Obstacles such as this that place heavy demands on academic staff time create major disincentives for raising suspected cheating cases. Respondents from Sweden suggested that onerous procedures often drive academics to circumvent the regulations by applying their own penalties.

Policies have been developed by several universities in the UK trying to minimise the burden on academic staff and encouraging them to follow the correct procedures for academic misconduct cases (MacDonald and Carroll 2006, Morris and Carroll 2011, Park 2004, Glendinning UK case study).

The types and severity of penalties applied for cases of academic misconduct varied significantly across countries and institutions. Many student and teachers did not know what penalties were applied, how often the different types of penalty available were used or whether students’ circumstances were taken into account. The inability for teachers to respond about these issues suggests there may be lack of transparency leading to inconsistency and inequity in student outcomes.

In Sweden, where national standard policies and penalties exist, the maximum inconvenience for a guilty student is one year’s suspension after which the student may resume their studies with a clean slate. Respondents believed that the most severe sanction was very seldom applied and many suspected dishonesty cases are not reported or are dealt with informally. Very few teacher respondents, from across Europe, selected “suspending student registration” as an option for penalising cases of plagiarism in an assignment (8%) or a final project (18%). The most severe form of sanction, according to some teachers from UK (33%), Austria (6%), France (38%) and Lithuania (9%), is for students to be expelled or permanently excluded for more serious forms of misconduct.

While most respondents said their institutions had policies for plagiarism and academic misconduct, responses to related questions suggested that often policies were not effectively or consistently applied. Figure 2 shows teachers’ responses for 19 EU member states to a question about how consistently teachers are in dealing with cases of plagiarism, broken down according to country. Taken overall 44% of teachers responded negatively to the statement, only 19% of respondents expressed agreement and 37% did not express an opinion. These responses suggest that more could be done to strengthen the implementation of existing policies and also to communicate and monitor procedures surrounding academic misconduct.



**Figure 2: I believe that all teachers follow the same procedures for similar cases of plagiarism**

It is worth reflecting on potential conflicts of interest highlighted in several senior management and national interviews.

All HEIs depend on student fee payments for their operating costs, either received from the student directly or as government grants. International students are a lucrative source of income in some countries, particularly in the UK where international tuition fees range from about £10,000 to almost £40,000 per annum. If students do not progress or graduate because they are failed or expelled due to academic misconduct then the institution may lose valuable revenue. As an example the Finnish government provides funds for institutions based on student completion, not admission.

Potential conflicts in the UK exist by the growing importance of HEI league table positions. Several organisations and national newspapers base national rankings of HEIs on various performance metrics including attrition rate, results from an annual national student satisfaction survey (NSS) and the number of good quality completions (percentage of first class and upper second class honours degrees awarded). These factors could serve to encourage grade inflation and discourage fail grades. Individual academic staff may feel pressured to maintain a high percentage of passes at module level, irrespective of the variable nature of student abilities and academic misconduct cases.

Factors such as these may present tensions for institutional managers, module and course leaders and institutional conduct officers who may feel obliged to consider reducing sanctions, despite clear evidence of deliberate attempts to subvert the assessment process.

Misconduct in examinations featured in the results for several countries, notably France, Belgium, Romania and Bulgaria (France IPPHEAE pp2-3, Belgium IPPHEAE p5). In France the lax approach to invigilation featured in a report commissioned by the French government (Mazodier et al 2012). In some eastern European countries the concern was more about use of communications technology to enable “wired up” students (more recently using wireless devices) to receive help from friends and family during the examination. Other responses indicated that institutions are trying to detect and stop such unfair practices by using cameras and sound jamming equipment in the examination halls (Romania IPPHEAE p9, Bulgaria IPPHEAE pp5-6).

Responses from some eastern European countries pointed to problems with bribery and corruption to circumvent the normal admission or progression requirements (Bulgaria, IPPHEAE), confirmed by Transparency International’s research into corruption in education (2013).

A surprising finding was that none of the EU national HE quality assurance agencies included routine monitoring of institutional policies for academic misconduct in their auditing policies, guidelines and procedures. In interviews concerning UK national policy it was suggested that academic integrity policy deficiencies would be identified by the Quality Assurance Agency's institutional audit panels through scrutiny of annual monitoring processes, but doubts about this were expressed by other UK respondents.

It emerged that many EU national quality agencies focus on course accreditation and approval rather than examining the effectiveness of quality processes and systems. Combined with this was the revelation that in many universities across Europe there is little or no oversight of grading or marking decisions made by academics, a concept that was several times described by interviewees as “the professor is God”. Where there is little oversight for quality or integrity there is no way of knowing how consistent approaches and decisions are for either student assessment or student misconduct.

### Recent developments

During the initial formulation of AIMM to compare national results from IPPHEAE, it became apparent that this tool could be readily adapted to evaluate policies at institutional level. Recently trials have been conducted using anonymous student and teacher data from IPPHEAE. When discussed with institutions surveyed, this analysis was found to have value directing the focus for strengthening institutional policies. As a result of dissemination activities about the research further institutional surveys were conducted following requests. The resulting institutional profiles to date are shown in Figure 3.

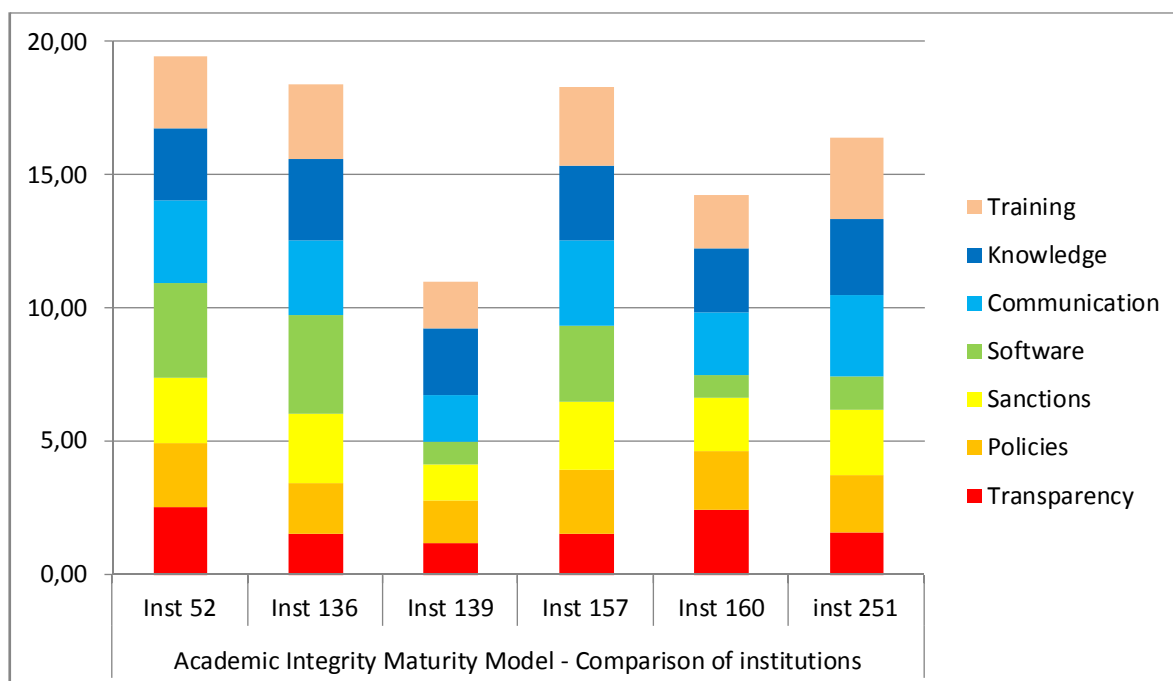


Figure 3: Comparison of Institutional policies, using the Academic Integrity Maturity Model

It emerged that a similar tool had been developed in parallel by Dr Tricia Bertram Gallant through the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), the Academic Integrity Rating System (AIRS). It was agreed to evaluate the two toolsets to explore whether a hybrid tool could be constructed that built on the strengths of both.

The AIRS / AIMM hybrid now has a working title of Scorecard for Academic Integrity Development (SAID). It specifically draws on research conducted in USA (ICAI's Academic Integrity Handbook,

AIRS), Australia (Bretag and Mahmud 2014), UK (Morris and Carroll 2011) and Europe (Glendinning 2013).

SAID is based on ten characteristics indicative of “mature” policies. International workshops, keynotes and conference presentations during 2015 were utilised to seek feedback for refining the characteristics. The latest version below was presented at the Council of Europe’s Prague Forum on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2015.

Characteristics of mature policies and systems for Academic Integrity in HEIs:

1. Institutional **governance and strategic commitment** to support academic integrity
2. Clear and consistently applied **institution-wide policies** and procedures for academic integrity
3. **Fair and proportional sanctions** applied across the institution
4. **Engagement and buy-in** of whole academic community towards **strategies for deterring academic misconduct**
5. **Institutional culture and values** for encouraging scholarship and deep learning
6. **Student leadership** in actively supporting the institutional strategy for academic integrity
7. **Transparency**, openness, maintaining institutional data, effective communications at all levels
8. On-going **evaluation**, monitoring, reviews to enhance strategy, policies and systems
9. Engagement with **research and development** within and external to the institution into academic integrity
10. **Institutional understanding** about what is acceptable academic practice, in line with international norms.

A set of questions has now been defined to score maturity of institutional policies and systems on each category. An on-line questionnaire will be constructed, tuned for responses from students, teaching staff, administrators and academic integrity officers. The questionnaires (initially English only) will allow the tool to be evaluated through piloting in volunteer HEIs in different parts of the world. The final toolset will be translated into different languages accessed via a purpose-built on-line platform.

In defining the characteristics and related questions, it became clear that here is proposal for a set of benchmarks for effective institutional policies for academic integrity. Further elaboration on each of these characteristics is included in a paper shortly to be published by the International Institute for Educational Planning (Glendinning 2015b pp7-10).

A further spin-off from IPPHEAE by key team member Dr Tomas Foltýnek from Mendel University in Brno, is a proposal to formalise a European Network of Academic Integrity that would be hosted by his Institution and affiliated to USA-based ICAI.

It is hoped that these initiatives will receive the required funding in order to continue the important work started through the IPPHEAE project.

### Summary of recommendations

- Strive to reach consensus on definitions and standards for integrity;
- Achieve international agreement on a set of benchmarks that define characteristics of mature policies and systems for academic integrity in HE institutions;
- Develop SAID and associated on-line platform for evaluating maturity of institutional policies for academic Integrity, based on the defined benchmarks;
- Support (in practical terms and financially) from education departments at EU level and national / regional governments for institutions to develop effective institutional policies;

- Encourage systematic monitoring of institutional academic integrity policies by agencies responsible for oversight of quality, accreditation and validating;
- Institute a programme of awareness-raising and research through the formation of a European network of academics with interest in promoting good practice in academic integrity;
- Promote a culture of academic Integrity throughout all levels of education through all the above activities and a targeted international programme of seminars and conferences;
- Ensure that an on-going programme of effective education is provided for students at all levels to promote good academic practice, ethical conduct, honesty and integrity.

## Final thoughts

Improving integrity in education will serve as a catalyst for tackling corruption and dishonesty generally in civil society. It may be difficult and slow to make progress, which makes it urgent that we begin immediately.

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