Chapter IV
Dealing with Plagiarism as an Ethical Issue

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines various strategies employed to reduce plagiarism both at a departmental and an institutional level. A detailed description and evaluation is given of two workshops that were designed specifically to educate students about the nature of plagiarism. The workshops also aim to provide students with alternatives to plagiarism by improving their writing skills. Most importantly, we believe that students should learn about plagiarism in the context of professional ethics and an ethical attitude should be promoted throughout their study. By using both an ethical and educational approach to dealing with plagiarism, we hope that students will learn that they have nothing to gain from plagiarising and be confident in their own skills.

INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is unprofessional, unethical, devalues degrees, and is an issue that has to be taken seriously if the integrity of university qualifications is to be maintained (Ashworth, 2003; Carroll, 2002; Carroll & Appleton, 2001). It can lead to a loss of writing and thinking skills in students. Moreover, they can spend a lot of “misplaced” effort and ingenuity in plagiarising and not studying (Netskills, 2004).

Plagiarism has always existed, but the growth of the Internet in an online world has made it much easier to do and, therefore, more of a temptation to students (BBC news, 2006a, 2006b). At the same time, other changes in the nature of univer-
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University education in Britain have also inadvertently encouraged the practice of plagiarism (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995). Student numbers have greatly increased, there are lower staff-student ratios, and continuous assessment of course work has increasingly replaced traditional exams.

Our experience is in teaching and assessing students in the Institute of Biomedical and Life Sciences (IBLS) at the University of Glasgow. By UK standards, we have one of the largest bioscience classes in the UK with 500-700 students in each of four years. Cases of plagiarism are found in each year.

The reasons why students plagiarise are many and varied (Carroll, 2002; Howard, 2001), and although a detailed analysis of these is beyond the scope of this chapter, they have been taken into account in designing our strategies.

This chapter describes the range of approaches that we are developing in biology at the University of Glasgow to try to minimise the incidence of plagiarism by developing the ethical skills of our students. Although we mainly teach using traditional methods we are now making increasing use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) Moodle (2006) to supplement our courses especially in this area of ethical training.

BACKGROUND

IBLS is a department within the University of Glasgow, one of the oldest universities in the UK (over 550 years old), located in the west of Scotland. The University has 15,486 undergraduate students and 4,061 postgraduates (University of Glasgow, 2006a). IBLS offers courses in a large number of biological subjects ranging from the study of molecules up to whole organisms, including medical biochemistry, genetics, marine and aquatic bioscience, and anatomy. These courses contribute to both three- and four-year undergraduate degree programmes that lead to either a designated BSc (three years) or a BSc with Honours (four years). IBLS has a wide range of postgraduate degree programmes leading to MSc (both taught and by research), MRes and PhD. IBLS staff also provide important contributions to the teaching of professional courses such as medicine, dentistry, and nursing.

The standard four-year degree programme is divided into four levels. Normally, Level 1 is completed in the first year that a student attends and so on. There is, however, the possibility that some students may enter directly into the University at Levels 2 or 3 depending on their previous qualifications. Most students come directly from British high schools at age 17 or 18, but there are many students with a wide variety of other backgrounds, ages, and nationalities.

At Level 1, all IBLS students study a common biology course, one third of their first year requirements. There typically are between 650 and 720 Level 1 students each year, making it one of the largest biology courses in the UK. Some of these students go on to study subjects outside biology, so at Level 2 there are about 550 students who study a variety of optional courses. Each of the Level 2 biology courses is designed to occupy 1/12 of the timetable and an IBLS student will typically choose between six and 12 biology courses in the year. In the final two years of their study, Levels 3 and 4, the students take courses specific to their final degree choice. An advantage of this system is its flexibility, as students do not have to decide on their final degree subject until the end of Level 2.

IBLS requires all its postgraduate students (just under 300) to complete a number of specific courses designed to improve their generic skills. This includes a course on research ethics, and later in this chapter we describe in detail the contents of a new workshop that forms part of this course.