Chapter V
Working Together to Educate Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a descriptive case study of how a UK university has addressed the problem of plagiarism through collaboration between academic staff, student support professionals, and the students’ union. It outlines the developmental process undergone in devising, piloting, evaluating, and implementing the programme designed to educate students about plagiarism. Specific details of the tools and techniques used to achieve the intended pedagogical aims are included. The chapter identifies aspects of the institutional culture operating within our universities, such as discipline-specific conceptions of knowledge and the diversity of students’ and staff’s previous educational experiences, which make tackling plagiarism problematic. Findings indicate that the approaches described are valued by students and staff but that barriers to achieving university-wide adoption persist. Suggestions for ways forward for any institution interested in tackling plagiarism are offered. It is anticipated that this chapter will stimulate discussion and inspire learning support professionals, including academics, by the success a collaborative approach can bring—not just a system of detecting and punishing plagiarism, but a method of educating students about what it is, why it is wrong, and how it can be avoided.

INTRODUCTION

Brunel University is located in west London. It was founded in 1966, and a long succession of developments and mergers has brought it from modest beginnings to the institution it is today. Brunel University’s traditional strengths were engineering, science, and technology, and it was a pioneer in sandwich courses (courses containing a work placement element). Today the subjects
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offered extend far beyond these fields, but all programmes endeavour to meet the needs of the real world and contribute in a practical way to progress in all walks of life. Brunel University currently caters for 14,000 students, including 3,000 postgraduates and 1,600 international students drawn from 110 countries.

The chapter starts with a description of how this institution dealt with plagiarism in 2004, when it enforced a “zero tolerance” approach. To complement this tough approach, a working party was established to share best practice in deterring student plagiarism among academics, student support professionals, and the students’ union. This group decided to create a programme to enable students to learn effectively about plagiarism and how to avoid it. The bulk of the chapter details the development of this programme, including the principles that underpinned it, and the teaching and learning materials that were developed. The chapter also reports the results of a pilot study of this programme, and the methods so far used to roll it out across the university. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the Brunel approach, and a look to the future.

THE UNIVERSITY’S STARTING POSITION

Plagiarism has been viewed as an increasingly important issue in UK higher education since the early 1990s. From the turn of the millennium the issue had caused widespread outcry—featuring heavily in both the popular press and specialist publications such as Times Higher.

Against this background, Brunel University became explicit about treating plagiarism as a serious issue affecting academic standards. In 2004, the university Senate supported a proposal to change the penalties for plagiarism in line with the existing definition, which explicitly aligned plagiarism with cheating in examinations:

Cheating involves taking unauthorised material into an examination, actual, intended, or attempted deception and/or dishonest action on the part of a student in relation to any academic work of the University, and includes aiding, or attempting to aid, another candidate in deception or dishonest action, or any attempt at such action, with intent to gain advantage. Plagiarism is the knowing or reckless presentation of another person’s thoughts, writings, inventions as one’s own. It includes the incorporation of another person’s work from published or unpublished sources, without indicating that the material is derived from those sources. It includes the use of material obtained from the Internet. (Senate Regulation 6.44)

Severe penalties (Figure 1) were sanctioned for anyone found to have committed plagiarism, with the aim of creating a culture of “zero tolerance.”

Up until this point, plagiarism had been dealt with by departments, often by the course tutor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1 undergraduate students</th>
<th>A fine of £100 and a severe warning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 undergraduate students (repeat offence)</td>
<td>Expulsion without credits. Barred from re-admission to the University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 and 3 undergraduate students</td>
<td>Expulsion without credits. Barred from re-admission to the University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate students</td>
<td>Expulsion without credits. Barred from re-admission to the University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students at undergraduate Level 2 and 3, and postgraduate students, committing offences without clear premeditation</td>
<td>Expulsion but permitted to retain credits and/or award to which the credits lead. Barred from re-admission to the University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Penalties for committing plagiarism at Brunel University
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