

TRAINING OF ACADEMIC WRITING: IMPROVING COMPETITIVENESS OF CZECH UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

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Project “Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe” has reached its final phase. We have collected lots of data reflecting facts and opinions about plagiarism and related areas. Training of academic writing is one of important means for plagiarism prevention.

The paper compares levels of training of academic writing between the Czech republic and the rest of Europe. The answers in a questionnaire survey dealing with plagiarism and training of academic writing will be compared and analysed. According to these answers, best practices in European higher education institutions will be identified, and gaps in the Czech institutions will be described. Removing gaps than poses a step to improve the competitiveness of the Czech higher education institutions.

plagiarism, academic writing, competitiveness of universities

Competitiveness of Czech companies is partially derived from a competitiveness level of their employees and thus from certain level of Czech students and graduates. One of important characteristics of students is respect for other's work, honesty and integrity in relationships at school and then in practice. Academic writing is one of the means of development and formation of students, and of promoting understanding of given content.

Academic writing is serious, intended for an informed and critical audience, based on closely investigated knowledge, and assume ideas or arguments; students are enforced to apply their analytical skills to the discourses of their chosen disciplines (Swales & Feak, 2004). However, students – particularly those from the “hard” sciences – are often unhappy with uncertainty, and lack the necessary skill and interest to become ethnographers of their own field (Swales & Feak, 2004). Therefore the proper training in academic writing is crucial for students' understanding of the topic (Shih, 1986). For this reason, it is important to consider comparing how Czech students behave in this field in comparison with other countries.

The research, which was carried out within the project IPPHEAE (Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe) in the years 2010–2013, was focused on the issue of plagiarism and related areas: academic writing and references. The project team has been investigating policies and procedures in place in Higher Education Institutions across the whole European union for detecting and preventing student plagiarism (ippheae.eu, 2013).

METHODS AND RESOURCES

In the research project mentioned above, the project team have developed questionnaires containing particular questions dealing with academic writing and with the perception of plagiarism. These questionnaires were implemented in electronic form available via the IPPHEAE project Internet address with the help of Bristol Online Surveys (Bristol Online Surveys, 2013). The questionnaires were available in 14 language variants; the project team has gathered almost 3000 answers from all countries of the European Union.

For purposes of competitiveness comparison, we have compared students' answers coming from

Czech Republic, EU as a whole, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. The division line between Western and Eastern Europe was set up geopolitically as a border of former Soviet block. We assume that the attitude to plagiarism and academic writing is different in these areas, influenced by the form of rule and government. The most important information comes from the comparison of answers of Czech students (474 filled surveys) and those from Western Europe (1726 surveys) and Eastern Europe (951 surveys).

We have focused on these questions:

- 5a: *I have received training in techniques for scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues* with offered possible answers *Strongly disagree, Disagree, Not sure, Agree, Strongly agree* and *Not applicable*;
- 5b: *I would like to have more training on avoidance of plagiarism and academic dishonesty* with the same offered possible set of answers as above;
- 5j: *I have come across a case of plagiarism committed by a student at this institution* (possible answers as above);

The answers *Disagree* and *Strongly disagree* were merged together. Also the answers *Agree* and *Strongly agree* were merged to make the processing easier and to avoid different attitudes to questionnaire filling among people.

Then, we have cross-tabulated answers to these questions with answers indicating students' understanding of the issue of plagiarism: *Assuming that 40 % of a student's submission is from other sources and is copied into the student's work as described in (a–f) below, indicate your judgement on plagiarism by ticking one of the boxes (...)*

Each question from this group indicate certain level of plagiarism obfuscation:

- 15a: *word for word with no quotations,*
- 15b: *word for word with no quotations, has a correct references but no in text citations,*
- 15c: *word for word with no quotations, but has correct references and in text citations,*
- 15d: *with some words changed with no quotations, references or in text citations,*
- 15e: *with some words changed with no quotations, has correct references but no in text citations,*
- 15f: *with some words changed with no quotations, but has correct references and in text citations.*

Possible answers of all these questions are *This is serious plagiarism, This case is plagiarism, Not sure about this case, This is definitely not plagiarism.*

To processing the responses, the method of cross-tabulation of responses in the form of contingency tables was used. These analyses are available directly in Bristol Online Surveys system (2013). Some of the data were then processed in Excel spreadsheet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the question *I have received training in techniques for scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues*, we can notice huge difference between Eastern and Western approach (See Tab. I.). In western countries, such training is common for three quarters of students, whereas in eastern countries only one third passes it.

I: *Students receiving training for academic writing*

	CZ	EU	EU E	EU W
Yes	36%	59%	32%	74%
No	60%	31%	59%	15%
Not Sure	4%	10%	9%	11%

Students in western countries are more enthusiastic to have more such training (62 %), than students in eastern countries (53 %). Generally, we can say that more than half of students across Europe want to have more training of scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues. Therefore, those higher education institutions, which offer this type of training, meet better the students' expectations, which bring them considerable competitive advantage.

Answers to the question *I have come across a case of plagiarism committed by a student at this institution* are also very interesting. As we can see in Tab. II, the ratio of students with experience with a case of plagiarism is higher in Eastern Europe. It might mean that the more training students receive, the less they plagiarise (and consequently the less they meet the case of plagiarism).

We have examined the correlation of these two answers using contingency tables. Result can be seen in Tab. III.

II: *Students coming across a case of plagiarism*

	CZ	EU	EU E	EU W
Yes	60%	36%	53%	27%
No	30%	41%	29%	47%
Not Sure	11%	23%	18%	25%

III: *Correlation between ratio of students receiving training and ratio of students meeting plagiarism*

Have met a case of plagiarism	CZ			EUE			EUW		
	Trained	Not sure	Not trained	Trained	Not sure	Not trained	Trained	Not sure	Not trained
Yes	70%	56%	59%	63%	55%	33%	31%	18%	31%
Not sure	10%	0%	10%	15%	23%	15%	18%	37%	15%
No	20%	44%	31%	22%	23%	52%	52%	45%	54%

As we can see, in the Czech Republic, students who are trained for scholarly academic writing, meet with plagiarism more frequently than those who are not trained. The same relation is in Eastern Europe, whereas in Western Europe, these ratios are without statistically significant difference. This may be caused by the fact, that there is less experience with the concept of plagiarism in Eastern Europe. Some institutions take it seriously, train students and discover cases of plagiarism, but there are also institutions ignoring this topic, which neither train their students nor uncover plagiarism. In Western Europe, higher education institutions are oblique (either by the law or by the press of the society) to uncover plagiarism and therefore the ratio of students who have met a case of plagiarism is independent to any training they may have received.

Next, we have examined the indicative questions dealing with students' view of plagiarism. As mentioned above, students had to judge whether given case is plagiarism or not. Satisfactorily, answers from Czech students were much more similar to those from Western Europe than to those from Eastern Europe.

The judgement of the most extreme case – 40% of student's work copied word for word without quotations, bibliography or in-text citations – is described in Tab. IV.

Although the only correct answer to this question is This is serious plagiarism, there are lots of different answers. The most significant difference can be seen between EU W and EU E. Eastern students are much less convinced about this case.

Given less extreme example – 40% of student's work copied with some words changed, without quotations, bibliography or in-text citations – students also have to judge. Even this case fulfils the definition of plagiarism in the same rate and moreover the trying of obfuscation (and hence obvious cheating) may be observed, the convincement about this case is much less across whole EU (see Tab. V).

As we can see, eastern students are less sure about this case than their western colleagues. Czech students answered the best in this question.

Let's form a contingency table of this questions according to the question *I have received training in techniques for scholarly academic writing and anti-plagiarism issues*. Surprisingly, we will see that both groups of students (those who have received the training and those who have not) provided the same answers. But, in Czech republic the results are different, convincing us that training may be useful (see Tab. VI).

In the following analysis we will try to answer the question *What influences students' view of plagiarism?* It means what makes students to answer differently than is the overall average? Therefore we have formed cross tables according to all the other questions in the survey. Only numbers with statistically significant difference from the average are mentioned.

The question *Which of the following services are provided at your institution to advise students about plagiarism prevention?* didn't distinguish students much. All services have roughly the same impact; only students being advised by university publisher

IV: Student's judgement about the case of plagiarism

	CZ	EU	EU E	EU W
This is serious plagiraism	75%	72%	67%	75%
This case is plagiarism	21%	22%	25%	20%
Not sure about this case	3%	4%	5%	4%
This is definitely not plagiarism	1%	2%	2%	1%

V: Student's judgement about the case of plagiarism

	CZ	EU	EU E	EU W
This is serious plagiraism	31%	23%	20%	24%
This case is plagiarism	47%	41%	38%	43%
Not sure about this case	17%	25%	31%	23%
This is definitely not plagiarism	5%	11%	11%	10%

VI: Student's judgement about the case of plagiarism

	CZ		EU	
	Trained	Not trained	Trained	Not trained
This is serious plagiraism	41%	27%	26%	25%
This case is plagiarism	46%	46%	45%	41%
Not sure about this case	12%	20%	20%	24%
This is definitely not plagiarism	1%	7%	9%	10%

tend to answer *Not sure about this case* (24% compared to 20% in average). If we focus just on the Czech students, the academic writing unit may influence the students positively, they more likely judge given case as plagiarism.

There are also differences in answers of students, who haven't already learned how to cite and reference sources. 35% of them are not sure about this case (compared to 25% in average).

Another interesting difference can be observed around students who study university which definitely have not policy and procedures dealing with plagiarism (although the institution may have policies dealing with academic dishonesty). These students more likely answered, *This is definitely not plagiarism* (19% compared to 11%), or didn't answer at all (7%). Students who think that penalties are definitely not administered according to a standard formula tend to more extreme judgement (Serious plagiarism for 32% of such students compared to 23% in average).

Students who don't know the reasons for using correct referencing and citation in scholarly academic writing are less convinced that this would be a case of plagiarism. Only 42% of them answered this was serious plagiarism or plagiarism, compared to 64% in average. Also students who are not sure about the existence of any citation style, or are not confident about referencing and citations, tend to judge this case as not plagiarism (56%, respectively 57% thinks it is plagiarism or serious plagiarism, compared to 64%), but the statistical significance is not so high.

Overall, we can say that more correct answers are coming from students, who:

- study at institution with policies and procedures dealing with plagiarism;
- have already learned how to cite and reference and are convenient about this;
- know the reasons for correct referencing.

All these groups of students have tendency to judge 40% of copied work with some words changed with no quotations, no references or in-text citations as plagiarism or even serious plagiarism. However, the overall opinion of the society is pushing the most frequent answer to non-extreme position.

If we do the same analysis with the question *40% of student's work copied word for word without quotations, bibliography or in-text citations*, we will find out that all students are answering roughly the same independently to their training, existence of policies or familiarity with citation styles. It means that if somebody copies 40% of work, the majority of society would consider this act as serious plagiarism. Change some words is then enough to be judged more moderately, even the nature of offence (stealing somebody else's idea) remain the same. Fortunately, further education about plagiarism helps students to judge this act correctly.

As we have already mentioned, majority of students wish to receive more training about

scholarly academic writing. Taking into account previous findings, we are able to design a course, which may be useful for students to prevent either deliberate or unintentional plagiarism. The answers for the question *What do you find difficult about academic writing?* will help us.

The most often answer for this question is *Finding good quality resources*, second was *Paraphrasing*. If we add information from following question *What leads students to decide to plagiarise?*, we can see that the most frequently ticked reasons (across whole EU) are:

- It is easy to cut and paste from the Internet.
- They run out of time.
- They think they will not get caught.
- They don't want to learn anything, just pass the assignment.
- They can't express another person's ideas in their own words.
- They don't understand how to cite and reference.

Copying from the Internet is easy and always will be. Running out of time is matter of students' time management and may be marginally mentioned in the course. Just trying to pass the assignment without learning anything is the matter of students' motivation and it is also different topic. However, the other reasons can be successfully solved via the course. It doesn't have to be specific course, it can be just part of bachelor seminar or similar course. As we can see, the most recommendable parts, which should not be missed, are:

- The concept of plagiarism itself. Students have to understand that no matter how many per cent of their work is copied or if some words have been changed.
- The reasons for correct referencing and citation.
- Citations, referencing and citation styles.
- How to find good quality resources and how to paraphrase them with correct citations.
- Uncovering plagiarism, electronic tools and how to use them for prevention.
- Time management.

This knowledge is valuable not only for students and their academic writing. It teaches more general concepts – authorship and honour to authors and their intellectual property, veracity and improving overall quality of produced work – which makes secondary competitive advantage for those institutions who will introduce such course in their curricula.

CONCLUSIONS

Some assumptions about differences between the perception of plagiarism by Czech students and by students of Western countries were filled. Undoubtedly, an important result is finding that Czech students are significantly less willing to pass training of academic writing. Also, their perception of plagiarism is more benevolent than by students of

Western countries and they more often encounter plagiarism from their schoolmates.

One of the ways to improve this situation is the organization of a larger number of courses focused

on academic writing, proper use and citation of sources. This is consistent with the wishes of students irrespective of the tested group.

SUMMARY

In Western countries the training of academic writing is much more common than in Eastern ones. Students in Western countries much likely meet with a case of plagiarism, which is not caused by higher amount of plagiarism itself, but by more care devoted to this issue resulting in more cases of uncovered plagiarism.

Czech students, who have received training of scholarly academic writing, can better judge about given case of plagiarism. In European average the training has no proved influence.

Given an example (40% of student's work copied word for word with no quotations, no references and no in-text citations), the majority of population is convinced this is serious plagiarism. However, in Eastern Europe the rate of convincement is much lower than in Western Europe. If some words in copied part are changed, students mostly think this is plagiarism, but not serious one. Positive answers (serious plagiarism or plagiarism) come from students who are convenient about citation styles, study at institutions with policies and procedures dealing with plagiarism and have already learned why and how to reference resources.

According to these findings, the guidelines for the course preventing students from plagiarism were outlined. The higher education institution educating students in this area will meet students' needs and expectations and therefore gain important competitive advantage.

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