Fighting Academic Plagiarism in Romania

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Abstract

Plagiarism is one of the most debated subjects in Romanian society. While most of the attention is on politicians, the subject has had a major impact on the academic environment and it has led to important changes in how we view academic integrity today. The aim of the present paper is to list both the progress we have made as well as the challenges we still need to face.

Status of plagiarism before and after 2012

Before the year 2012, the issue of plagiarism was only sporadically discussed in Romanian society. There were a few articles written about it but no true analysis was made. The subject was mostly discussed in scientific circles, without it ever reaching the students. When students submitted their papers, they were required, as they are now, to sign a declaration that the papers were entirely their work. However, students were not told what plagiarism is or how to avoid it at any point before submitting their papers. Some universities, at the time, used anti-plagiarism tools, but few actions were taken to prevent it. At a national level, there was no stand taken regarding plagiarism. As a result, plagiarism was wide-spread at all educational levels and it was accepted.

What changed in 2012? One very important and well-known factor had an immense influence on how we treat plagiarism today – The international scandal of the Prime Minister's plagiarised PhD thesis which started from a report in the Nature scientific journal (Schiermeier, 2012). Because of this scandal, national media started to write about the topic and debate the issue of plagiarism thoroughly. Thanks to the massive media coverage, society became aware that plagiarism is a serious form of academic misconduct, and that it should be treated as such. Plagiarism became a hot topic with everybody discussing it, and more and more people sharing

their opinions on it. At the same time, universities started to take more steps in order to prevent plagiarism in their students' papers.

In that period, Romania also had the first study that asked over 1000 university professors about plagiarism (*Sistemul de învăţământ din România: atitudini, opinii şi reprezentări sociale*, 2013). The study asked professors how common they think plagiarism is in higher education among students. 32% of the respondents said that plagiarism is present to a very large degree, and 37% of them said it is present to a large degree. Therefore, 69% of professors at that time thought that plagiarism was a widespread phenomenon among students. The same study also asked how common plagiarism is among professors. 13% of respondents answered to a very large degree, and 26% of them answered to a large degree. As we can see, the impression of the academic community was that plagiarism was present on a large scale, on all academic levels and amongst all those participating in the educational sector. This study managed to give numbers to what we knew but never managed to quantify – the immense scale of dishonesty in education.

Progress in the fight against plagiarism

Thankfully, since that time, we have made significant progress in the fight against plagiarism. The Ministry of Education has developed a national platform dedicated to processing and evaluating PhD theses and academic titles. Doctoral schools have access to it and are able to check theses for plagiarism before they are defended.

In 2016 it became mandatory that all PhDs are checked against plagiarism, and the Ministry also set the procedure for withdrawing doctoral titles (*H.G. nr. 134/2016 pentru modificarea şi completarea Codului studiilor universitare de doctorat*, 2016). The issue of withdrawing doctoral titles was a very confusing one prior to this point. No institutions had withdrawn a title because the Ministry signed the order for the degree, but the Ministry did not withdraw any titles because it said that the institution gave the degree. This procedure ended the period of indecisiveness and, as a result, several titles of very important and well-known politicians were withdrawn. This action gave a very strong message, the national stand that was missing in Romania, that plagiarism is now being treated as a serious issue, and it will no longer be tolerated.

Universities have also taken several steps to prevent plagiarism. Most universities in Romania now use anti-plagiarism tools, they have implemented procedures and guides which detail the evaluation process thus making it transparent and clear for all parties involved. Recently, universities in Romania have started introducing courses for students and professors which treat topics of academic integrity, and at the beginning of 2018, the Ministry of Education announced that mandatory courses on ethics and academic integrity will be introduced for master and doctoral degree programmes (*Ordin Etică Universitară*, 2018).

At the same time, the media is still very much involved when it comes to this issue, and we have seen several propositions and discussions regarding new legislation covering academic misconduct.

The challenges we still face

One of the key factors which stop a faster progress is the fact that the legislation regarding plagiarism keeps being debated and postponed. This indecisiveness of lawmakers affects society because, without unitary and clear rules for all, we face such situations as we have seen when there were verdicts of plagiarism for many PhD theses, but there were no actions taken to withdraw the titles and no measures taken against those who plagiarised. Because of the lack of laws or because of unclear laws, universities are left to decide their own set of rules on how to deal with plagiarism and this can lead to different institutions having different policies regarding the prevention and punishment of plagiarism.

Because a PhD degree is regarded as far more superior to a bachelor's or master's degree, there are many universities which check for plagiarism only in doctoral theses. Observing this practice from the perspective of a student, I find it strange that we would expect them to be completely honest and original only towards the end of their studies as if everything they did in their 17+ years of education is being wiped away. Applying this method means ignoring all the years that a person has spent learning and evolving into the doctoral student we face today. Furthermore, if we continue to view bachelor's and master's degrees as being unimportant and we treat them with less seriousness than doctoral studies, we cannot expect them to become more important by themselves. Their importance is based on how much we value them. We should treat all academic degrees with the same level of seriousness.

Many professors, because of lack of time or lack of understanding, expect an anti-plagiarism system to give the verdict of plagiarism. It would, of course, be ideal if we could scan every paper and a computer could tell us which one is original and which one is plagiarised. It would save us a lot of time and effort. After all, technology is here to help us and make our lives easier. Unfortunately, the reality is that technology has not evolved so much that it can think like a human being can. We are not yet at that point in which a computer can replace a professor in deciding if a paper is original or not. When the anti-plagiarism system issues a similarity report, the result of the anti-plagiarism check, it is still necessary for a person to analyse the results, make the actual evaluation and give the verdict.

Even if plagiarism has been discussed numerous times in the past years, we have noticed that there is still a poor understanding of what plagiarism actually is and what its consequences are. We see cases of students asking why they can't just take their bachelor's paper, change it a bit, and use it as a master's paper or they ask what percentage of plagiarism is accepted. We have also encountered professors who believe that some forms of plagiarism should be treated as less serious than others or that plagiarizing ideas is not really plagiarism because you still have to write those ideas in your own words. Therefore, while debating the subject has drawn everyone's attention, we can see that the details are still unclear sometimes.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in the offers of paper mills. Paper mills are companies or people who write papers on demand in exchange for money. They offer a variety of services, promising to deliver anything from PowerPoint presentations to bachelor's, master's and even PhD theses. They say they can write these papers on any subject and what is more, many say their works are 100% original. The prices of such papers vary depending on which of the multitude of websites you choose and some of them have special discounts if you convince a friend to also buy from them or if you like their pages on Facebook. The issue of paper mills is not discussed much in the media and no action has been taken against them until now, which allows them to flourish in the paper market.

What are we afraid of?

When we talk about plagiarism, it is not uncommon to come across the word "fear" several times. Noticing this, I decided to list the fears I have encountered. Considering the fact that in

Romania it has become common to have a new person accused of plagiarism every few months, it's understandable that every one of us is afraid of being accused of plagiarism. It has become a political tool used to hurt others, especially when they have just taken a new important position. Even if we can prove that we have not plagiarised, there is still a fear of having a stain left on our reputation which we can never erase.

Universities have a fear of discovering rampant plagiarism. They fear that by checking all papers they will discover that many of their students plagiarised and that this will hurt their reputation. Thankfully, the reality is not as bleak as this, and the simple fact that students are informed that there will be anti-plagiarism checks discourages the majority of them from plagiarizing. In 2013, one university was considering the option of checking all of their students' papers. They decided not to do it because, in their opinion, it would have meant opening Pandora's Box. They expected half the papers to be plagiarised, they thought they were going to have to kick out students and lose credibility. In 2017, the same university did check all their students' papers and less than 5% of them had high similarity percentages, which does not automatically mean that they were plagiarised.

Professors are afraid of being held accountable if their students plagiarise, but they are also afraid of giving a verdict because they have no laws to support them. They have to sign for the theses they are coordinating, and they are required to evaluate them, but in this age of information, can we expect professors to read everything that is published on their subject? Even if they would have access to everything, there would not be enough physical time for them to read everything and also accomplish their other activities, therefore we cannot expect them to know everything written in their domain.

University professors are also afraid that there might be different evaluations at the Ministry level compared to the university level. There is the possibility that two different professors can give different verdicts regarding the same paper, so it is understandable that evaluations done by different committees can also be different.

Last, but not least, we are afraid of the unknown. As much as plagiarism was discussed, we can't help but notice that people, students especially, do not know exactly what plagiarism is. They do not know how many types of plagiarism there are, what they are exactly or how to prevent them.

What can we do?

Knowing what challenges we need to overcome and what fears we need to face, what can we do in order to progress? One clear way to progress is to be better informed on plagiarism. We need to make sure that all parties involved in education understand what plagiarism is, how to prevent plagiarism and what the consequences are if they plagiarise.

Students need to be taught about research and referencing. Every student comes from 12 years spent in an educational system that encourages them to memorise texts, without being asked to analyse, give their own opinion on them or even to understand them. Then, when they start their university studies they are expected to be original without having the basic knowledge on research and referencing.

My opinion is that we should also focus on prevention before punishment. We have to look at the causes of dishonesty, we need to understand them and help our students overcome them. While we should not let cases of plagiarism pass without consequences, finding ways to prevent plagiarism is more reasonable and more beneficial in the long run. When we do discover cases of plagiarism, it is important that we take action and send the message that plagiarism is not accepted. Discovering plagiarism without doing anything about it sends the message that we tolerate it and that ultimately, it is still acceptable to plagiarise.

A very important element in the prevention of plagiarism would be the creation of a national database which should contain not only doctoral theses but also bachelor's and master's theses. Such a database could also help in combating the problem of paper mills as the likelihood of all those papers written on demand being original is low. It would also help with the cases in which former students sell their papers to their colleagues. Having transparent procedures and guidelines is another important factor as it is vital that the evaluation process is clear for all the parties involved. A student has the right to know how his or her paper will be evaluated and the same principles should be applied to all students.

Best practices

When setting out on solving the problem of plagiarism, we can also take the time to look at what others are doing right. There are many examples to be found both in Romania and in other countries.

In Romania, the Academy of Economic Studies has implemented anti-plagiarism checks for all papers written within their institution. They have also put in place an anti-plagiarism procedure which is detailed, transparent and public. All parties involved are encouraged to read it and be informed about the process. The system has been running for several years with great results.

At the University of Bucharest, starting with the academic year 2017, a mandatory ethics and academic integrity course was introduced for master's and doctoral students (*Cursuri de etică și integritate academică la facultățile Universității din București*, 2017). From 2018, it will also be mandatory for bachelor's students, and there is also a similar course for professors. An excellent example of one of the ways in which students and faculty members can be informed on plagiarism and other types of academic misconduct.

In Poland, the legislation allows the withdrawal not only of PhD titles but also of bachelor's and master's. Additionally, the withdrawal of the doctoral degree does not exclude disciplinary, criminal or civil law responsibility. In Ukraine, all dissertations are mandatorily checked with anti-plagiarism tools and they are posted on the universities websites. They are also currently working on a central database of dissertations. In Kazakhstan, it is mandatory that PhD theses and master's dissertations go through an anti-plagiarism verification and they have also developed a national database of dissertations.

Conclusion

When looking at all we need to do in order to progress, it might seem overwhelming. The list may not be long, but each step involves many people and a lot of hard work on all sides. But if we look at where we were a few years back and where we are now, we can see that even the smallest of steps have brought a positive contribution. Thankfully, we also have examples which show us that it is not impossible to do something when we set out to do it.

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