

Comparative Analysis of Institutional Policy Definitions of Plagiarism: A Pan-Canadian University Study

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Abstract This article shares the findings of a study investigating institutional policy definitions of plagiarism at twenty English-speaking Canadian universities. The types of primary sources consulted for this study included: (1) university academic calendars for 2016–2017, (2) institutional policies on academic misconduct, and (3) student academic codes of conduct. Sources were analyzed in comparative tabular and narrative form. Results show wide variation in institutional definitions of plagiarism as a specific subset of academic misconduct. The conclusions call for a coordinated effort among Canadian universities to develop a common framework of academic integrity that includes clear and explicit definitions for plagiarism, as well as other forms of academic dishonesty, that are consistent across provinces.

Keywords Plagiarism · Academic integrity · Academic misconduct · Higher education · Canada

The Internet has been a societal catalyst for change in numerous regards, not the least of which is its effects on education. The Internet has created new opportunities for students to plagiarize others' work, using a simple cut-and-paste function (Batane 2010; Hodgkinson et al. 2016; Klein 2011; Walker 2010). With information at our fingertips, educators—and institutions—have been challenged to think differently about plagiarism, as information is readily available at a moment's notice.

Over half of North American undergraduates have engaged in plagiarism (McCabe 2005), with similar results in the UK (Culwin and Lancaster 2001; Elander et al. 2010) and Sweden (Trost 2009). Though specific data may not exist with a focus on the Canadian context (Christiansen Hughes and McCabe 2006), it is not

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unreasonable to surmise that the results might be similar for Canada. One underlying issue is that there is no standard definition of what it means to plagiarize. In a digital age where creativity abounds, when it comes to plagiarism neither students, nor faculty, always know clearly where or how to draw the line. This study highlights how institutions themselves may contribute to the problem. The purpose of this article is to examine how twenty Canadian universities define plagiarism in institutional policy documents and to provide a basis for deeper discussion among policy makers and educators in Canada and beyond.

Literature Review

Plagiarism is a particular sub-set of academic misconduct (Christiansen Hughes and McCabe 2006; Trost 2009). In this literature review the terms “academic misconduct” and “academic dishonesty” are used interchangeably and are generally seen as the antithesis of academic integrity, which is widely understood to mean “as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. From these values flow principles of behavior that enable academic communities to translate ideals into action” (Center for Academic Integrity 1999, p. 4). Plagiarism is technically defined as “literary theft” (Park 2003). Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that plagiarism has roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition and is a “sin” (Colon 2001) or a violation of Commandment ‘Thou shalt not steal’ (Park 2003; Standler 2012). Freedman (1994) takes a different, though equally stark position, calling plagiarism “an attack on individuality, on nothing less than a basic human right” (p. 517).

Plagiarism is far from being a clearly defined act of academic misconduct, rather it is complex and sometimes difficult to define precisely (Price 2002). Interpretations of plagiarism vary greatly (Luke and Kearns 2012) and may include acts including textual borrowing (Luke and Kearns 2012) and incorrect citations (Batane 2010), along with a range of other behaviours (Marsden et al. 2005). While some authorities indicate that plagiarism applies mainly to words and text (Park 2003; Standler 2012; Vogelsang 1997), in recent years, academic integrity scholars have expanded the definition to include music, images and art (Pecorari and Petrić 2014). As this study will show, some institutions also include digital outputs such as computer programs and code in their definitions.

Ghostwriting and Guestwriting as plagiarism

Ghostwriting is defined as “the unacknowledged authoring” of papers (Bosch 2011, p. 472), while guestwriting “includes authors who have made little contribution to the work” (Bosch 2011, p. 472). Guestwriting seems especially prevalent in the medical sciences (Anekwe 2009; Bosch 2011). Also referred to as “honorary authorship”, it is a specialized form of plagiarism in which an established expert will allow his or her name to be used as the author of a paper someone else wrote in order to lend credibility to the paper. While the issue of guestwriting is beyond the

scope of this study, it points to the variety of ways in which plagiarism can manifest in academic and scientific circles.

A more common issue among students is ghostwriting, which can be done in two ways. Firstly, it can be done for free by a benevolent third party aiming to help the student complete a paper. Secondly, it can be done as a commercial transaction in which the student buys the paper from services known informally as “paper mills”. While the commercial sale of term papers dates back to the 1960s, the Internet has made it easy for students to purchase papers online (Klein 2011; Standler 2012). While in some U.S. states it is illegal to sell papers that will be submitted as academic student work (Groark et al. 2001), it is not a crime in other countries, including Canada.

Perceptions Among Professors and Students

Plagiarism remains a topic of debate among educators and academics (Bruton and Childers 2016) and it is not confined to the student body. It is also an issue among the academic ranks (Anekwe 2009; Bartlett and Smallwood 2004; Bosch 2011). Professors often know their institutions have formal policies, but such policies are not well enforced or even understood by individual instructors (Glendinning 2014; Hodgkinson et al. 2016). Scholars themselves debate where to draw the line with plagiarism and what the consequences for it should be.

Klein (2011) reports that students too, have different perceptions of what plagiarism is, sometimes due to the fact that they receive “ambiguous or conflicting information” (p. 102) from instructors, leading them to believe it is a “victimless crime” (p. 102). Students also feel failed by their instructors and institutions, with regards to how poorly plagiarism is addressed among the student body (McCabe 2005). When institutions are perceived to have weak institutional policies or faculty members fail to address the issue of plagiarism proactively, students perceive this as effectively “allowing others to cheat” (McCabe 2005, p. 26).

The Role of Institutions

Institutions play a role in defining plagiarism (Standler 2012; Glendinning 2014), though this is often done at the level of individual universities. There is little literature that reports initiatives to address the issue of plagiarism (or academic dishonesty of any kind) on a larger scale. While there was one initiative in the U.K. to offer universities an audit tool to undertake a coordinated effort to developing institutional frameworks on academic integrity, whether the framework would be monitored at a national level was not known (Graham and Hart 2005). There is a gap in the literature regarding how institutions could coordinate their efforts in defining academic misconduct and plagiarism, in particular. The literature review found no studies examining how Canadian universities define, treat or address plagiarism at a policy level. A goal of this study is to show how individual Canadian universities define plagiarism in institutional policy documents, highlighting the differences among institutions, with a particular focus on how explicit they are in defining what counts as plagiarism.

Methodology and Data Sources

Institutional web-based documents were analyzed according to Patton et al.'s (2013) approach to policy analysis which involves a systematic approach to complex data sets, developing a tolerance for uncertainty and ensuring the analysis process is straight forward and transparent. While this study has been done with an eye to conducting a thorough and substantive overview of how Canadian universities define plagiarism in institutional policy documents, it is not intended as an exhaustive undertaking. A foundational underpinning of this study is that “there is no such thing as an absolutely correct, rational and complete analysis” (Patton et al. 2013, p. 16).

The types of primary sources consulted for this study included: (1) university academic calendars for 2016–2017, (2) institutional policies on academic misconduct, and (3) student academic codes of conduct. A minimum of one English-speaking university per Canadian province was included in the analysis. The study included a broad cross-section of public institutions, including research, teaching and polytechnic universities. Colleges, university colleges and private universities were not included in the study. Every attempt was made to determine how the institution as a whole defined plagiarism. In cases where no institutional definition was found, one or more academic calendars were examined for specific definitions of plagiarism.

Findings and Discussion

Canadian post-secondary institutions define plagiarism and academic misconduct in different ways. What some institutions call plagiarism others acknowledge as another form of academic misconduct. For example, Dalhousie University has an explicit statement on the misuse of others' data as a form of academic dishonesty, but it is not included under its definition of plagiarism. There is no question that theft of data is wrong, but it is not clear if it is plagiarism or some other form of academic dishonesty. This analysis is concerned solely with elements that are explicitly included in institutional policy definitions of plagiarism and the variation among Canadian universities in these definitions.

A Pan-Canadian Comparative Analysis of Institutional Definitions of Plagiarism

Table 1 offers a high-level analysis of which elements of plagiarism are explicitly included in policy documents of Canadian universities. Institutions are listed in alphabetical order.

It is worth noting that only explicit elements of institutional definitions of plagiarism, as a specific subset of academic misconduct, were analyzed for this study. It may be that broad-based statements, such as the ones quoted below have, as an underlying intention, an implicit inclusion of elements included in the table. This

Table 1 Comparison of variation in policy definitions of plagiarism in Canadian Universities

Canadian University, province	Elements explicitly included in definitions of plagiarism, as outlined in institutional policy documentation				
	Written materials	Ideas, theories or concepts	Data or research results	Digital work (e.g. computer code or programs)	Creative works (e.g. music, art, images, etc.)
Brandon University, MB	✓	✓	✓	X	X
Carleton University, ON	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Concordia University, QC	X	X	X	X	X
Dalhousie University, NS	✓	✓	X	✓	✓
Kwantlen Polytechnic University, BC	X	X	X	X	X
McGill University, QC	✓	X	X	X	X
Memorial University of Newfoundland, NL	✓	X	✓	✓	X
Queen's University	✓	✓	✓	X	X
Ryerson University, ON	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Saint Mary's University, NS	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
University of Alberta, AB	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
University of British Columbia, BC	✓	✓	X	X	X
University of Calgary, AB	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
University of Guelph, ON	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
University of New Brunswick, NB	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
University of Prince Edward Island, PEI	X	X	X	X	X
University of Regina, SK	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
University of Saskatchewan, SK	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
University of Toronto, ON	✓	✓	X	X	X
University of Victoria, BC	✓	X	X	X	X

study, however, is not concerned with what is implicit or intended, but rather what is stated in clear and transparent language. Specific points were not included in the tabular analysis unless they were deemed to be unequivocally explicit in their mention of a particular element.

This study resulted in four key findings about how plagiarism is represented in Canadian university policy documents. Two major themes show the main differences in the approach institutions take in their policy language either with broad and vague statements (Theme #1) or with detailed and explicit definitions (Theme #2). Two secondary themes emerged in terms of the treatment of digital work (Theme #3) and artistic work (Theme #4). These are discussed in detail below, followed by a discussion of related points worthy of consideration.

Finding #1: Plagiarism Discussed in Broad and Vague Statements

Concordia University (2015) defines plagiarism broadly as “the presentation of the work of another person, in whatever form, as one’s own or without proper acknowledgement” (p. 4). The University of Prince Edward Island offers an even more generalized definition, stating that plagiarism occurs when “a student submits or presents work of another person in such a manner as to lead the reader to believe that it is the student’s original work” (UPEI, n.d.).

The breadth of some institutional statements about plagiarism allows room for wide application of the definition, making it relatively easy for institutions to impose disciplinary measures on students who commit academic misconduct. Having said that, vague generalizations in institutional policy documents offer little direction to help academic staff and students develop a deeper understanding of what plagiarism is, how it might manifest in student work. In the author’s analysis, vague statements do little to provide a clear foundation for university educators, staff and students to start important conversations about plagiarism as a complex problem in academic settings.

Finding #2: Plagiarism Defined Explicitly

Some institutions define plagiarism more explicitly. The University of Manitoba (2009) defines plagiarism in a more detailed manner, declaring, “plagiarism applies to any written work, in traditional or electronic format, as well as orally or verbally presented work.” The University of Guelph notes that plagiarism can include misrepresenting various kinds of work as one’s own, including data, computer code, or “products of any other creative endeavour” (University of Guelph, n.d.). In its 2016–2017 Academic Calendar, the University of Calgary provides a detailed definition, with various sub-points, which include similar definitions to the Universities of Guelph and Manitoba, but also include presenting “work in one course which has also been submitted in another course.... without the knowledge of or prior agreement of the instructor involved” and “having another impersonate the student or otherwise substituting work of another for one’s own in an examination or test” (University of Calgary, n.d.). The University of British Columbia has similar definitions on its website, but does not list impersonation or submitting work to two different courses for credit as a sub-set of plagiarism, but rather as other forms of academic misconduct (UBC, n.d.). These examples show how definitions of plagiarism vary widely across a few Canadian universities, particularly in regards to the type of work included in their definitions and the explicitness of how these are articulated.

Finding #3: Lack of Clarity About Digital Work

Only ten of the twenty institutions included in this study specifically mentioned digital work, such as computer programming and code in their policy documents. While theft of digital work would no doubt be considered a type of academic misconduct, there seems to be little evidence of widespread acceptance of such theft

being categorized as plagiarism. There seems to be an underlying notion that whatever can be copied-and-pasted counts as plagiarism, but Canadian institutions have yet to make this explicit in a consistent manner.

Finding #4: Lack of Clarity About Artistic Work

Only six of the twenty institutions studied explicitly included creative works such as images, music or art in their plagiarism and policy definitions. As technology continues to evolve, it is likely that artistic and digital work will overlap more and more as multimedia continues to develop as an expression of computer-generated creativity. At present, the issue of the theft of artistic work as plagiarism is largely absent from Canadian university policy documentation.

Findings three and four, in particular, demonstrate the complexities in defining precisely what counts as plagiarism. In particular, the expansion of plagiarism from literary text or other forms of writing to other materials such as computer generated and creative products, is a pressing issue. In a digital age, these complexities will no doubt continue to present policy makers with topics for further debate.

Further Discussion

Implications for Academic Mobility in Canada

As students and professors move from one Canadian institution to another at various stages of their studies or academic careers, it is likely they will find different definitions of plagiarism wherever they go. While broad understandings of what is right and what is wrong as far as academic conduct may be more or less consistent, having such wide variation in specific interpretations in policy documentation at institutions across the country creates opportunity for misunderstandings and ambivalence among those in the academic community.

Limitations and Directions for Future Study

Data sources for this study were limited to publicly available web-based resources published in English. Institutions may have further internal documentation that the researcher did not have access to. Data are meant to share examples from a variety of universities, rather than be an exhaustive study of all definitions from every Canadian post-secondary institution. The study of academic calendars was limited to 2016–2017.

Directions for Future Research

There is room for significant research to gather evidence about how universities treat and interpret the issue of plagiarism. Two key topics remain at the forefront: (1) additional student resources and (2) self-plagiarism.

Additional Student Resources

It is worth noting that numerous institutions included in this study offered supplementary information in the form of web-based resources on plagiarism and academic integrity, often with concrete examples or strategies for helping students to understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. These resources were not included in this study, though they have been identified as worthy of further investigation (Griffith 2013).

Self-plagiarism

Self-plagiarism remains an ambiguous and misunderstood topic among both students and faculty. While it is beyond the scope of the current study, it merits deeper investigation, both from a policy perspective, as well as from a perceptual one. In reviewing the literature and sources for this study, it emerged that there is a lack of clarity around what does and does not constitute self-plagiarism and how professor and students should approach this topic when teaching students writing and research skills. Self-plagiarism remains an important point for scholars to investigate.

Directions for Future Policy Study

In addition, the relationship between institutional policy definitions and student resources merits deeper consideration. McCabe (2005) found that an institution's stance on plagiarism was a predictor of how its students perceived plagiarism. An institution's approach includes its formal policies, as well as the resources and services it develops to help educate students on how to develop a deep commitment to academic integrity. Examining the congruence between the level of specificity in policy documents in comparison to resources developed for student use would be a useful undertaking to help understand how an integrated institutional stance can be taken.

Finally, a comprehensive study of Canadian academic policy documentation would include Francophone universities across the country. This would certainly be another direction for future consideration.

Conclusions

At the conclusion of this study, the question remains about whether it is even important to define plagiarism explicitly in university policy documents. It is not enough to talk about academic integrity and misconduct in broad and all-inclusive terms that simply rely on common sense and general definitions about what is right and what is wrong. In order for students to understand how to cultivate skills that focus on academic integrity, educators and policy makers must first have language to talk about what academic dishonesty is and how to avoid it. Students and educators alike must understand what counts as academic misconduct, including

plagiarism. Similarly, students also need to know what the expectations for high quality scholarly work are and how to develop the skills to produce it. A point for further consideration and dialogue among educators is that vague policy language makes it easier for institutions to apply and enforce disciplinary measures when students commit offences, but does little to help professors, university staff and students develop a deep understanding of the specifics about what counts as right or wrong in academic contexts. The more specific and precise institutions can be with their definitions, the more they will demonstrate a commitment to educating members of their scholarly community, taking a progressive, rather than punitive approach to plagiarism. The more specific language and concrete examples students, educators and policy-makers have to talk about plagiarism, the more it can be demystified.

Finally, while some efforts have been made in the UK to establish a national framework to help institutions address academic dishonesty (Graham and Hart 2005), Canada has yet to undertake such an initiative. There is a need for a coordinated effort among Canadian institutions to agree upon how they wish to define and understand plagiarism, as well as other forms of academic misconduct, so as to better facilitate open conversations about academic integrity. Creating a space for Canadian scholars, educators, policy makers and students to talk about plagiarism, and other issues relating to academic integrity would allow the development of a deeper understanding of how Canadian students can develop and showcase superior skills as young scholars and emerging professionals. There is an opportunity for a Pan-Canadian discussion about how universities across the country can support learners and educators alike with progressive policies that focus on developing academic integrity as a cornerstone of post-secondary education in Canada.

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