

Perception of plagiarism among undergraduate students in Greek Universities

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Abstract:

Purpose - The aim of the research is to discover, mainly, the opinions and perceptions of undergraduate students in Greek Universities regarding plagiarism.

Design/methodology/approach - This research attempts to discover not only the opinions and perceptions but also the proposals of undergraduate students in Greek Universities regarding plagiarism. The research method that was used for the survey is quantitative, with the use of questionnaires. A total of 467 questionnaires were collected by students from all Greek Universities and the majority of the scientific fields.

This research is an attempt to collect data regarding the students' perceptions of the essence and concept of plagiarism, their opinions about the factors that lead students to plagiarize or to plagiarism and the consequences that the Universities where they study impose. In addition, through the questionnaire, students had the opportunity to express their proposals about the methods they think are appropriate for plagiarism to be prevented effectively.

The main objective of this research is to portray the extent of the problem of plagiarism in Greek Universities. Additionally, it aims to contribute to the problem's solution and create the necessary policies and mixture of methods that will lead to the required education for students to avoid plagiarism.

Findings - The research revealed various valuable findings. It is worth pointing out that the vast majority of the undergraduate students replied that they knew the term plagiarism (98,3%). On the other hand, below half the student population said they had not been trained in academic writing and, consequently, how to avoid plagiarism.

Originality/value - The paper presents Greek Universities' undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism. Remarkably, the collected data outcome is from all Greek Universities.

Index Terms - Plagiarism, Perception of plagiarism, Prevention of plagiarism, Higher education, Universities, Undergraduate students.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that plagiarism has been a severe problem in the academic field for many decades. However, which is the definition of plagiarism? There have been many definitions throughout the years. One of the briefest yet comprehensive definitions is: "Plagiarism is conducted when someone uses

someone else's work, without referencing the source, in order to gain something" [1, p. 20]. The above definition illustrates the central concept of plagiarism and emphasizes the appropriate reference to the original information source.

Plagiarism can be deliberate or intentional when someone uses someone else's work on purpose. It can also be accidental or unintentional when someone makes a reference mistake or does not know how to make an appropriate reference to a source [2, p. 58]. We cannot ignore ghostwriting, which is also a type of plagiarism. Another special form of plagiarism is self-plagiarism. This occurs when someone presents their work more than once as original [3, p. 162], [4], [5, p. 120]. Without a doubt, there are many forms of plagiarism. Generally, many believe that whatever the reason, the intention or the nature of plagiarism, in any case, it is severe academic misconduct that, on the one hand, leads, in many cases, to the infringement of intellectual property rights and, on the other hand, violates the moral rules and undermines the academic or the scientific integrity [6, p. 134]. It is evident that plagiarism is a form of cheating, and as a result, it offends academic integrity.

Many recur to plagiarism because it is easy to do whatever they want to achieve or due to lack of time, personal problems, pressure, or other difficulties. This usually leads to deliberate plagiarism. However, the most common cause of plagiarism, especially the accidental cases, is ignorance, lack of training, and "academic illiteracy". Unfortunately, not many have been trained to avoid plagiarism, to make references correctly and properly, or how to write a paper according to the academic standards [7, p. 38], [8], [9, p. 175, 177], [10, p. 127], [11, p. 767], [2, pp. 58 - 59].

Many believe that, apart from the lack of training, social changes, mass admissions to the Universities and the plethora of papers available lead sometimes, especially students that cannot meet the requirements of their studies, to plagiarism [12, p. 107].

Technology has also a dual impact on the plagiarism phenomenon. On the one hand, it has a positive impact due to plagiarism detection software. The development of such software made plagiarism detection easier, quicker, and more reliable [13, p. 10]. On the other hand, the spreading and expansion of the Internet impact the phenomenon negatively because it makes copying and pasting easier and gives access to a huge amount of information sources online [14, p. 169]. In addition, the plethora of assignments and

poor time management by students lead to an increased percentage of plagiarism [15].

Plagiarism has been mostly a problem of the scientific and academic community [10, p. 127]. In Universities, the number of plagiarism cases has been increasing worldwide, which causes severe damage to their status. According to relevant surveys, the percentage of students plagiarising is very high [16]. Remarkably, there is an increase in competition, and consequently, students feel the pressure to succeed in their studies [17, p. 220]. Because of this situation, Universities tend to use plagiarism detection software (e.g. Turnitin) and try to educate students to avoid plagiarism and punish cases of deliberate plagiarism [11, p. 767]. Needless to say, this is not an easy task.

Greek Universities face a severe problem regarding the spread of plagiarism. Apart from the increasing numbers, each Greek University must decide how to tackle the problem due to the lack of specific legislation regarding plagiarism. In more detail, Greek law deals with plagiarism only regarding copyright infringement. The Greek Universities, through their regulations (e.g., the University of West Attica provides such a regulation), try to prevent and eliminate the problem. They organize seminars where students can be trained to avoid plagiarism. In addition, the professors try to inform their students about plagiarism. Greek Universities use Turnitin, a plagiarism detection software, to detect plagiarism cases. Lastly, the Universities impose punishments, such as grade reduction, failure of the class or even degree revocation. A few years ago, there was a proposition for the Universities to design explicit and strict regulations against plagiarism that would be included in the regulation of studies and would be applied to all Greek Universities.

Apart from the consequences that each University decides, there are legal consequences when plagiarism includes copyright infringement. There are also severe moral consequences for the credibility of a university, student, or scientist when accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism shows a lack of respect for others' work, ethics and moral values. In addition, it also leads to unfair student evaluation and harms the educational process in general [11, p. 767], [18, p. 197].

However, Universities should continually educate and inform students on how to avoid plagiarism, conduct surveys, or write academic assignments according to the rules. Nevertheless, when penalizing plagiarism, each case should be examined separately and thoroughly so that the proper punishment would be imposed [19, p. 369].

II. THE RESEARCH

The main goal of this research is to discover the opinions and perceptions of undergraduate students at Greek Universities regarding plagiarism. Furthermore, it was essential to showcase the level of training and knowledge of the students, the causes, and consequences, if and how their universities informed them regarding plagiarism. In addition, the research aimed at recording indicative proposals on behalf of the students. The expected responses will lead

both to an in-depth view of the magnitude of the problem and to illustrate ways to prevent and conceivably solve or even reduce the problem of plagiarism.

For this research to be conducted, a quantitative method, with the use of questionnaires, was employed. The research was anonymous, and no personal information of the participants was kept. It was conducted online for almost a month, between 8/2/2021 and 10/3/2021. The questionnaires were created using Google Forms, which allowed not only to create and distribute the questionnaire but also to collect, store and process the data without special knowledge or requirements.

The population that the questionnaires addressed were all undergraduate students in Greek Universities. At this point, it is useful to note that there are 26 public Universities in Greece for the time being. The questionnaires were distributed via Facebook groups. The questionnaires were posted in closed Facebook groups of students from every scientific field. This particular distribution method was chosen because it was quick, easy and, as it turned out, effective. The sampling method that was used was nonprobability sampling. With this method, it was possible to address and target a random part of the population since the target group was quite large. An introductory note that made clear to whom the questionnaires were aimed was essential to ensure that the research participants were indeed undergraduate students. Out of approximately 20.000 students that were members of the Facebook groups, 467 questionnaires were answered. The turnout is considered satisfactory, even though the a low participation ratio. Hence, the number of questionnaires (about 500) is more than an adequate sample to approach undergraduate students' perceptions in Greece.

The online distribution of the questionnaires allowed the reach of a geographically spread population quickly. The questionnaire was based on previous similar surveys. Specifically, the survey was designed based on research of the European Union regarding plagiarism [20], the research of Kokkinos and Koulouris [21], and lastly, the Doctoral Dissertation of Avramidou [22]. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions, separated into six categories:

- demographics,
- definition and views on plagiarism,
- causes of plagiarism,
- plagiarism and technological developments,
- consequences,
- prevention and suggestions.

The goal was to prepare a short questionnaire, easy to answer, objective and accessible. Therefore, there were only closed-ended questions, with as many answers as possible and the choice of "Other" when it was necessary. Apart from the introductory note that explained the goal and the target group of the research, an email address was also available where the participants could send any questions. The time that was needed in order for someone to answer was approximately 5 minutes.

The participants were mostly women (71,1%) from all years of studies. Slightly larger participation was noted

from senior students. The most impressive finding of the participants' analysis was that there was participation from every Greek University and scientific field. The University of West Attica and Hellenic Open University greatly participated. As far as the scientific fields are concerned, the students of the social sciences gave the most responses.

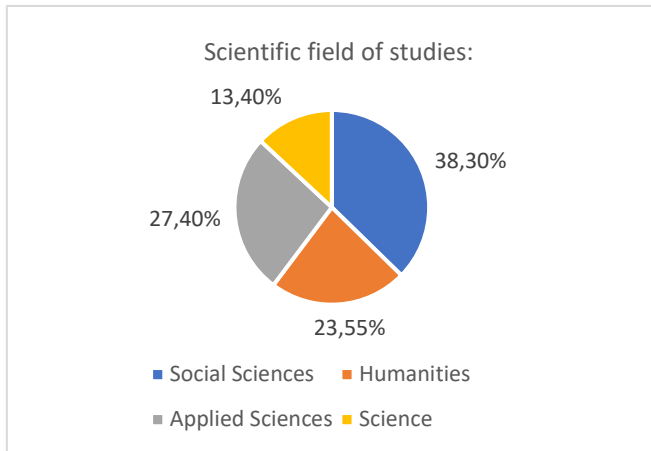


Fig. 1. Scientific field of studies of the participants

The first group of questions -beyond demographics- were about the definition and students' views on plagiarism. Almost all the participants (98.3%) knew the term plagiarism. This is an extremely high percentage, which is very optimistic, but perhaps it is not accurate or true. However, 42,2% of the students said they had not been trained on academic writing or ways to avoid plagiarism.

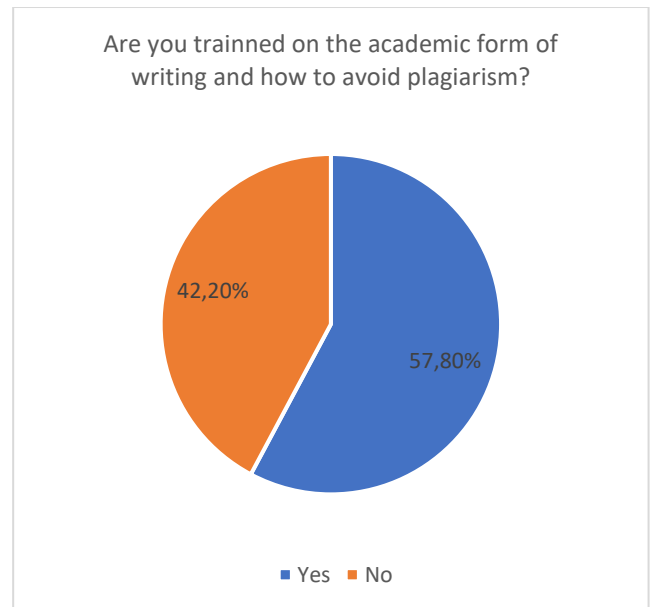
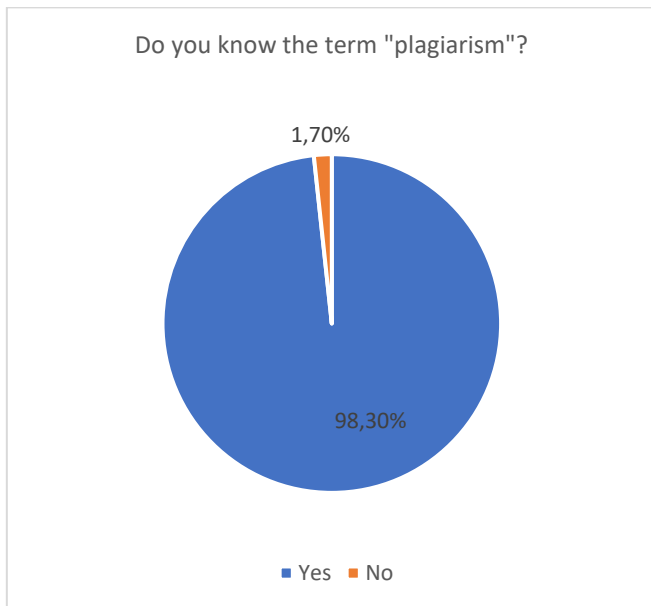


Fig. 2. The two charts show what percentage of the participants know the term "plagiarism" and if they are trained on the subject of academic writing to avoid plagiarism

The next question of the first group (of questions) was about the students' confidence when creating bibliographic references. Most of the participants feel very confident. Concerning the difficulties they face with academic writing, all the possible choices (finding reliable sources, paraphrasing, referencing, understanding bibliographic standards) got many answers. Due to a lack of training and education, the difficulties seem complex and have an essential variety.

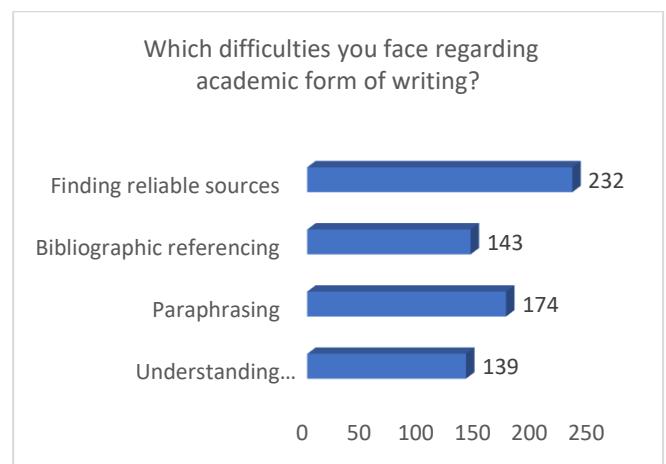


Fig. 3. This diagram shows what difficulties the students face when they are requested to write a scientific paper or when they need to apply the rules of the academic form of writing

The following two questions aimed to deepen the primary reasons for correct referencing and using others' work. Participants think that correct referencing enforces the reliability of their work, and, secondary, they want to avoid plagiarism. Additionally, they use others' work to

strengthen their ideas and arguments and make their work more comprehensive.

In the last question of the first category of the questionnaire, some examples of plagiarism were given to the participants. Some of them were examples of plagiarism, and some were not. The goal of that question was to confirm if the students knew what plagiarism is without using an open-ended question. The answers indicated that students know the plagiarism forms since they chose the correct answers. However, the percentages of the examples of self-plagiarism and ghostwriting had fewer answers than expected.

The next category of the questionnaire was about the causes that lead someone to plagiarism. The group of questions started with a compilation of questions. First, participants were asked if they think they have ever recurred to plagiarism intentionally or unintentionally (Q1). Furthermore, they were asked if they had copied or paraphrased texts without referencing the source (Q2) and if it had come to their notice a case of plagiarism from a fellow student or classmate (Q3). In general, the answers were divided; however, the answer 'I do not know' had been chosen by many, meaning they had doubts, probably due to a lack of training. Although, it is encouraging that intentional plagiarism had a low percentage.

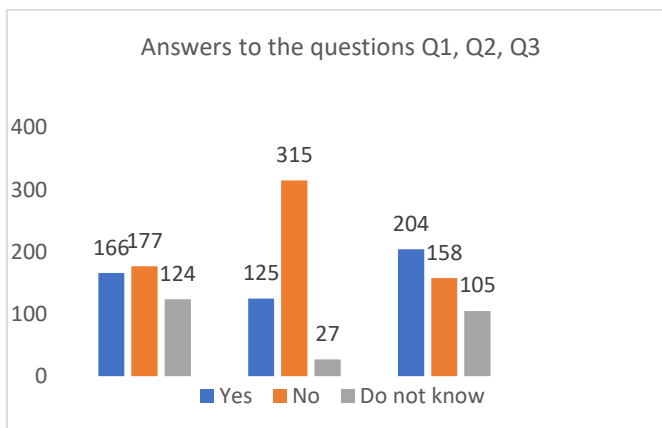


Fig. 4. This diagram is a compilation of questions that aim to illustrate the extent of intentional or unintentional plagiarism among students of Greek Universities

The second question addressed the reasons why someone lapses into plagiarism. The answers were split among all choices, which means that students believe that a combination of causes drives someone to plagiarism. More interesting is the fact that causes that are related to both intentional (lack of time, lack of consequences, easy coping from the Internet, etc.) and unintentional (lack of training, ignorance of paraphrasing, referencing and bibliographic standards, etc.) plagiarism had high percentages. The last question of this category was about the justification of plagiarism. Specifically, participants were asked which excuses are acceptable for someone that commits plagiarism. The majority chose ignorance and lack of intention. However, there were not a few who believed that there was no excuse for plagiarism.

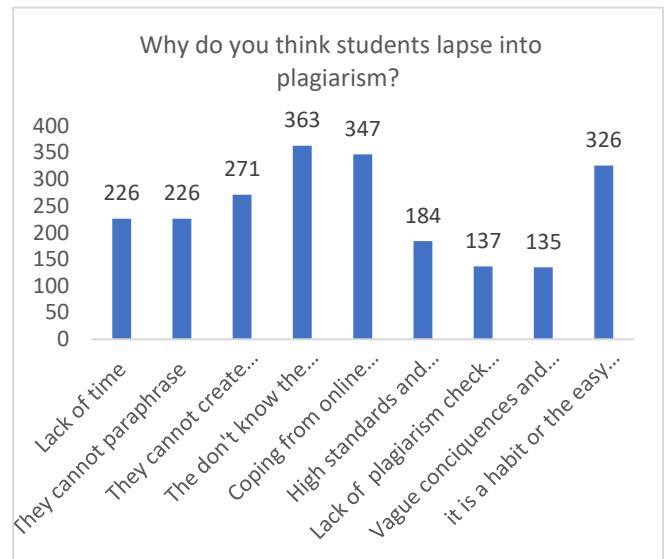


Fig. 5. This chart refers to the reasons why the participants think someone would lapse into plagiarism intentionally or unintentionally

The next section of the questionnaire is about the relationship between plagiarism and technological advances. The section starts with a group of questions that aim to address the level of comprehension of plagiarism via the internet and digital sources. The answers indicated that students understand that using online sources, even with free access, without appropriate referencing is a case of plagiarism, and they can get caught. The last question of this section asked if the students use the plagiarism detection software their University provides. The answers were disappointing, meaning that technology's positive effect remains untapped since plagiarism detection software can be a valuable educational tool.

Regarding the consequences of plagiarism, which was the next section of the questionnaire, students believe that someone who commits plagiarism should be penalized, but they do not know what punishment policy their University enacts.

The next question deepens into the penalties that Greek Universities incurred. Most participants said that getting no grade on the paper is the most common punishment, yet a big percentage does not know the penalties.

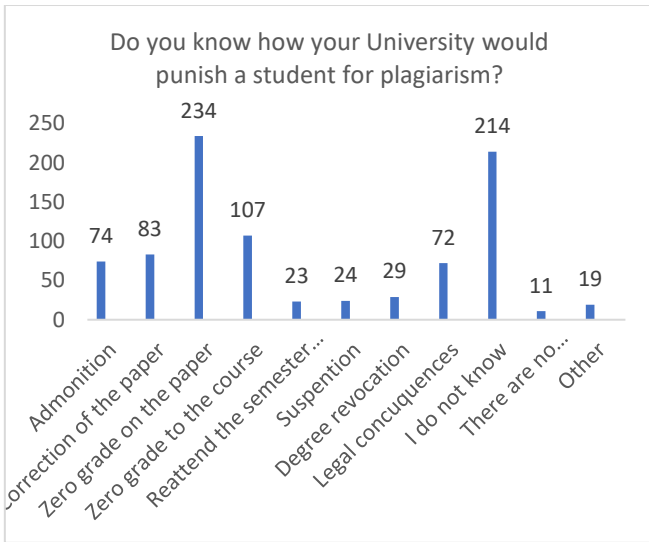


Fig. 6. This chart refers to the punishments that Greek Universities use when a student is caught for plagiarism

The section ends with the moral consequences and consists of a group of questions where participants had to declare whether they agreed with the given statements. From the answers, it was evident that students understood the moral aspect of plagiarism.

The questionnaire concludes with a group of questions regarding preventing plagiarism and students' proposals to deal with the problem. Most participants said that the Universities provide no information material or guidelines.

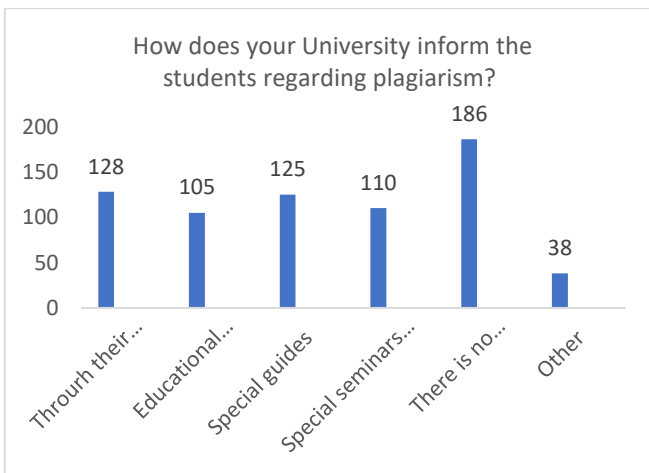


Fig. 7. This chart illustrates the methods the Greek Universities apply to inform and educate students regarding plagiarism

This raises the question of whether there is a lack of material or information. It is very interesting and promising that most participants want to be informed and educated on avoiding plagiarism. Lastly, in the question "What do you propose for the plagiarism cases to be contained?" all choices were selected, which means that various measures and actions are needed to have the best possible results.

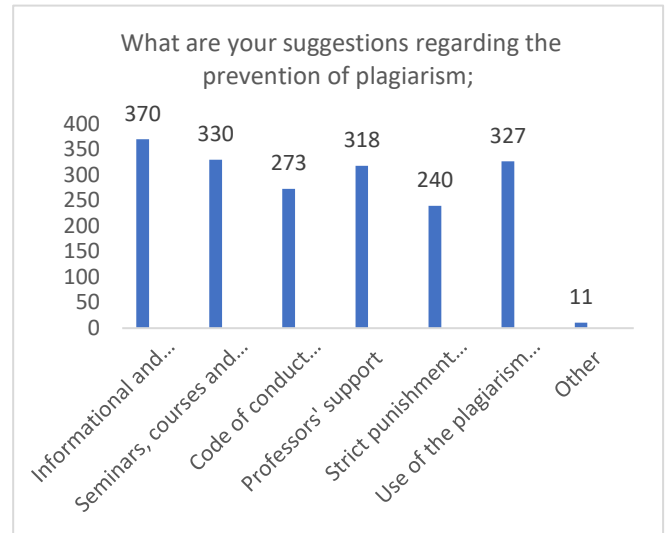


Fig. 8. This chart aims to present the proposals that the students of the Greek Universities made so that the prevention of plagiarism will be improved and more effective

To further examine the results of this research, it was considered useful to combine and compare some of the findings based on the year of study and the scientific field of study. It was noted that almost the same percentage of incoming and senior students are educated on avoiding plagiarism. Furthermore, a considerably higher percentage of seniors (compared to the respective percentage of first-year students) said they have resorted to plagiarism. Regarding the difficulties they face when they must deliver an academic paper, finding qualitative sources and difficulties in paraphrasing are the most important. Lastly, there has been found that the percentage of ignorance regarding the consequences and the information material is more considerable in senior students.

From the comparison based on the scientific field of study, it was found that students of social sciences participated the most and had the highest percentage of training, hence the most awareness and the smaller percentage of plagiarism. On the contrary, students of Natural and Applied sciences participated the least, with the lowest percentage of training and the highest percentage of ignorance regarding the possibility of committing plagiarism. As for the difficulties students of different scientific fields face, paraphrasing, finding reliable sources and understanding bibliographic standards are the most significant.

III. LIMITATIONS

It is essential to point out that the survey's results were used for the fulfilment of a Master's Thesis entitled: "University students' perception and proposals regarding plagiarism", which was submitted to the Department of Archival, Library and Information Studies at the University of West Attica. As a result, one major drawback was the lack of time. The duration of the research was one month. However, the responses were sufficient and allowed the export of valuable findings.

Unfortunately, one of the difficulties was that all Greek Universities were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This led to the decision to conduct the research using social networks. Of course, this is a coin with two sides because social networks are ideal for receiving instant responses. Inevitably, the survey was based on the electronic distribution of the questionnaires via the Internet.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the findings of this research show that students at Greek Universities not only know the term but also identify cases of plagiarism, have high levels of confidence when writing an academic paper, and can understand the value of referencing the source. On the other hand, the findings also indicate that the students could not identify self-plagiarism and ghostwriting; they lack training on how to avoid plagiarism and are not sure if they have fallen into the misconduct of plagiarism.

Additionally, it appears that students commit plagiarism mostly unintentionally and the percentage of intentional plagiarism is considerably lower than in past surveys. Regarding the reasons that someone turns to plagiarism, the spread of the Internet, free access to a plethora of sources, easy copy-paste, lack of education, personal reasons and exceptional circumstances have the highest percentages. Moreover, students appear to be uninformed regarding the consequences that their University implies; however, they can understand the moral consequences.

Regarding the acts and material that the Universities use to educate the students, findings show that they use mostly informative guides and educational material on their websites. From brief research on the Universities' websites, it was found that every University provides material to educate students in academic writing and how to avoid plagiarism, although students appeared unaware of that. Lastly, it appears that Universities do not use the educational benefits that plagiarism detection programs can provide since the students do not self-check their papers, except in a few Universities, such as Hellenic Open University or the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Moreover, results show that students are willing to participate in educational programs about plagiarism. In parallel, they stated that a holistic strategy is needed to reduce plagiarism. Actions and measures like the spread of appropriate information and learning material, support from the professors and educators, specific policies and guidelines (e.g., codes of conduct), and preparation and conducting seminars are necessary.

To sum up, on the positive side, the findings indicate that most cases of plagiarism in Greek Universities are unintentional. Additionally, the vast majority of Greek Universities take action to educate and inform their students on academic writing and how to avoid plagiarism. Furthermore, students appear to respect academic and scientific rules and are interested in education concerning plagiarism. However, senior students do not appear more informed than incoming students, so they do not get any more education regarding plagiarism during their studies. Furthermore, even though Universities take action to inform

students and have policies on punishing plagiarism, it does not seem that the information and communication policy they use is suitable.

The survey findings lead to the conclusion that the Universities should focus on creating a specific and consistent policy that will include educating the students on academic writing and avoiding plagiarism and the penalties that will impose for plagiarism cases, especially intentional ones. Professors would also play a significant role by educating students, assigning papers that follow the academic rules of writing and encouraging students to use plagiarism detection software. In general, findings indicate that the intentions and actions of the students and the Universities are in the right direction. However, it would be helpful if their planning and communication were more organized.

Finally, it is remarkable that the survey was conducted on undergraduate students. As additional research, It would be interesting to conduct qualitative research on undergraduate students with the method of interviews to explore some findings further. Furthermore, it will be useful to extend the quantitative research not only on postgraduate students but also on faculty and teaching staff.

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