

# **The Plagiarism Problem – reflections on plagiarism and nursing students**

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Plagiarism is a problem that is present in all forms of writing, whether it is the construction of new music, fiction or academic writing. The penalties for plagiarism can be severe, particularly when it comes to writing for publication or for assessment purposes in higher education establishments, with anything up to expulsion serving as a sanction for those caught. Markers have always been vigilant in looking for signs of plagiarism including changes in writing styles and fonts etc. however when papers were submitted in paper form, it was a particularly difficult task to pick up when work had been plagiarised. The emergence of online submissions and resources such as [Turnitin](#), created a sea change in the detection rates of plagiarism, particularly with the more minor offences. As turnitin becomes more available for students to use themselves for the detection of plagiarised writing, this should, in theory, serve as a deterrent.

It gives cause for thought when investigative journalists Mostrous and Kenber, working for the Times newspaper, uncover that plagiarism among nursing students is widespread (Bodkin, 2016; Mostrous & Kenber, 2016). They state that 1,700 nursing students have received

some form of sanction for plagiarism over the last three years, with statistics showing that nursing students are disproportionately more likely to commit some form of plagiarism than students from other faculties. However, this is may not quite be the entire story. The Royal College of Nursing Professional Lead for Education, Anne Corrin, believes many nursing students are not familiar with academic conventions, with a result that much of what is termed as plagiarism has less to do with dishonesty and more with naivety (Jones-Berry, 2016).

So what maybe behind these alarming figures? In nursing, there is a higher proportion of essay material required for students to produce than in other types of healthcare courses. In other courses, such as medicine, testing is done more by short answer or MCQ assessment than producing long pieces of coursework. Many nurses enter their degrees having done a variety of entry courses that may have called for less rigorous forms of referencing. Some may have had former education in other countries so the essay writing etiquette demanded in the UK may be less familiar to them. Often, no matter the level that the student is working at, whether pre- or post-registration, undergraduate, or postgraduate, on exploration of cases of plagiarism, it seems in most instances to be the case that the student has not developed an understanding that using text verbatim from a source, even if there is a reference for it, is plagiarism; similarly, putting the source on a reference list and not citing where it has been used in the piece of work, is not referencing.

It is this naïve type of plagiarism, where the student isn't aware that they are actually plagiarising in the first place, that is the most common type

we see in some nursing assignments. The level of plagiarism has become more evident since submissions went over to online submission of coursework, with everything being put through Turnitin. In most of the cases the plagiarism is categorised as minor i.e. less than 20 % and investigated within the faculty in which it is submitted. The students are usually upset and contrite at the interviews held to discuss the issue, as they haven't realised that what they are doing is incorrect. Many of those found guilty of plagiarism lack computer literacy skills, and are therefore not making full use of their access to Turnitin prior to submitting their piece of work. More than half of the students who find themselves in this position do not have English as their first language, with many not having done much previous study in the UK; as a consequence, they will have undertaking study in environments where academic convention may be significantly different (Price, 2014).

A second type of plagiarism that is seen is self plagiarism. Some students seem unaware that submitting the same work for two different assignments, even if they have written it themselves, also constitutes plagiarism.

The sort of minor plagiarism described is more evident, and dealt with at a course level in a formal but local manner, than the rare occasions of obviously malicious plagiarism. Often, this will be picked up towards the end of the course, with students who, having explained their circumstances, could have requested mitigation and delayed submission of their work, but feel (often owing to personal financial circumstances) that they have to complete the course on time. Nevertheless, instances like this are sent to be dealt with at a college level, where a full hearing is undertaken, and where the student, even if not expelled, may be

subject to misconduct proceedings, as it needs to be explored whether what they have done would constitute a risk for professional practice.

Most institutions of higher education provide a significant amount of support in terms of referencing and plagiarism within taught courses, with access to referencing guides, guides on using bibliographic software, help using Turnitin, and training in study skills (Kings College London Library, 2016) are also available, there is still something of a difference between nursing students and students on other courses. Many students are post-registration nurses undertaking courses to top up to higher qualifications like BSc's. They will be undertaking their study largely remotely, while still working full time and dealing with their home life. As a consequence, it can often be more difficult for students to access the help and resources that may prevent plagiarism in the first place. In addition with the introduction of undergraduate fees, students may be even more desperate to pass.

Price (2014) provides advice on how students can avoid plagiarising, but the question is not whether such advice is there (as it is), but whether students are following it. It is here that perhaps the “carrot and stick” approach may be of value – promoting to students that, by writing their own words on a topic, they will gain a better understanding of what they are learning, while at the same time making clear the potential penalties for plagiarism. It is perhaps here that more could be done for students, both that are on placement and that are undertaking remote study, to reinforce this, with greater encouragement for students to use those resources available to them on site, in addition to the ones from their own university. It may soon be appropriate to make completion of the plagiarism online module part of mandatory training for all staff working in the NHS to ensure this plagiarism is not only to be found in

work submitted for academic purposes but also in work related reports and guidelines. Certainly, in a field like nursing, it is important that new practitioners fully understand what they are learning, as learning and professional development is a continuous process. The plagiarism problem is a serious one, but not huge, with 1,700 sanctioned students from a total of 70,000 (Jones-Berry, 2016). But, it is important that all who are involved in their education try with every resource available to stamp it out.

## References

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