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Academic integrity in Spanish higher education : three parallel worlds

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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN SPANISH HIGHER EDUCATION: THREE PARALLEL WORLDS

Cinta Gallent Torres and Isabel Tello Fons

Abstract

Despite the measures implemented by Spanish universities to combat malpractice and raise awareness among students and researchers, the reality may seem discouraging, as (i) students continue to plagiarise freely encouraged by an increasing volume of digital resources at their disposal; (ii) researchers face an extremely competitive and demanding university system with its own rules; and (iii) universities fail to tackle this socially rooted phenomenon. Although studies on academic integrity have a long tradition at the international level, this is not the case in Spain. However, since the 1990s, researchers have been working on this issue. However, they take undergraduate studies rather than postgraduate studies as their field of observation. And above all, they do not consider the world of research. Thus, when it comes to combating academic dishonesty, there is a growing gap between members of the academic community (students, researchers and institutions), which shows the lack of consensus on the issue. This article aims to describe how academic dishonesty is viewed in three worlds that coexist, but are independent of each other: students, researchers and institutions.*

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1. Introduction

The interest in the topic of academic dishonesty in higher education in Spain started in the 1990s, when studies began to address the issue of validity of college degrees.²⁶ Although more descriptive than analytical, these pioneers openly broached an issue that had hitherto remained unexplored in order to avoid discrediting the image and reputation of university institutions. The lack of integrity within academic settings had become a social phenomenon that should be analyzed from different angles, so empirical data was compiled. Rigorous research was begun, involving the analysis of students' reprehensible behavior and its underlying factors, prevalence, and severity, along with measures in place to counteract it.²⁷ During this period, the speed at which the students learned to act in this unethical manner in their degree courses contrasted with the inability of the universities to put in place measures designed to mitigate such behavior. In other words, it is difficult to understand the current 'passivity' shown by members of the faculty in this regard, particularly given the rampant rate at which this kind of fraud is developing in Spain.²⁸

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²⁶ J. M. Moreno Olmedilla, 'Con trampa y con cartón: El fraude en la educación, o cómo la corrupción también se aprende', *Cuadernos de Pedagogía*, 283 (1999), 71-77.

²⁷ J. Vaamonde and A. Omar, 'La deshonestidad académica como un constructo multidimensional', *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos*, 38 (2008), 7-27; R. Comas Forgas and J. Sureda Negre, 'Academic Plagiarism: Explanatory Factors from Students' Perspective', *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 8(3) (2010), 217-32.

²⁸ E.-M. Espiñeira-Bellón, and others, 'Cuestionario para la detección del plagio académico en estudiantes de doctorado (CUDECO-DOU)', *Revista de estudios e investigación en psicología y educación*, 6(2) (2019), 156-66.

A growing interest in the problem is also reflected in the significant increase in scientific publications aiming to shed light on the management of academic integrity by university institutions.²⁹

This article aims to describe how academic dishonesty is regarded within Spanish universities by the three main groups of players (students, researchers, and institutions) jointly involved in the knowledge creation process through research and teaching. By examining how each player deals with academic dishonesty, readers will grasp the current lack of coordination in addressing the problem and the extent to which Spain is dragging its feet in putting measures in place to prevent this behavior from becoming widespread.

2. The Spanish students' perspective

One the reasons suggested to understand why Spanish students resort to fraud and plagiarism is the problems they face with academic writing.³⁰ Students appear to find it difficult to use their own words in their papers, to quote and reformulate the ideas of other authors, or to use an authorized bibliographical reference style in their academic work.

²⁹ C. Gallent Torres and I. Tello Fons, “‘Le cyberplagiat’ dans le cadre de l’éducation supérieure espagnole: Explorer les causes pour atteindre des solutions concrètes”, *Synergies Espagne*, 11 (2018), 195-212; N. Olivia-Dumitrina, M. Casanovas, and Y. Capdevila, ‘Academic Writing and the Internet: Cyber-Plagiarism amongst University Students’, *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 8(2) (2019), 112-25; V. Cebrián Robles, M. Raposo, and S. Campos, ‘Study of the Reasons for and Measures to Avoid Plagiarism in Young Students of Education’, *Profesorado, Revista de Currículum y Formación del Profesorado*, 24 (2020), 50-74.

³⁰ M. T. Valverde González, ‘Escritura académica con tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en educación superior’, *Revista de Educación a Distancia (RED)*, 58 (2018), Article 58; M. M. Boillos Pereira, ‘Las caras del plagio inconsciente en la escritura académica’, *Educación XXI*, 23(2) (2020), Article 2.

They therefore succumb to dishonest practices that are perhaps unintended, but more often than not are blatantly deliberate.³¹ This handicap stems from learning practices prior to college.³² The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the unlimited access to multiple digital sources have transformed the way in which they articulate new data without having yet learned to express critical thinking.

New technologies have become the perfect allies to ‘help’ students with their assignments and the most direct way to make a mistake, because nowadays, students’ behavior is influenced by socially accepted attitudes that taint their ethics (e.g. the indiscriminating reproduction of the ideas of others, the recycling of already published articles, custom-made essays, and identity fraud). An example of this is a typical online platform in Spain: *El Rincón del Vago*. Since the late 1990s, it has enabled anonymous users to upload their work so that others can use it as support for their coursework or submit it as their own efforts.³³ Many sites thus present themselves as offering support to the students, when in reality they are accomplices in this dishonesty. And far from being met with outrage, this practice is generally accepted in Spain.

There are many free software and private online platforms (supported by user communities). Tools such as *Smodin.me* and *Spinbot* paraphrase texts from the Internet or from other users, so that students are able to submit the papers as their own. *Resoomer* and *LinguaKit* summarize texts with the help of a technology that detects the main

³¹ Espiñeira-Bellón and others.

³² K. S. López Gil and M. C. Fernández López, ‘Representaciones sociales de estudiantes universitarios sobre el plagio en la escritura académica’, *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 24(1) (2019), 119-34.

³³ D. Díaz Arce, ‘Evaluación del desempeño de tres herramientas antiplagio gratuitas en la detección de diferentes formas de copy-paste procedentes de internet’, *Edutec. Revista Electrónica de Tecnología Educativa*, 59 (2017), Article a354.

ideas of a text almost instantaneously. This enables students to identify the principal concepts in a text within ten minutes. Users are also able to apply different levels of paraphrasing, according to the number of terms that are modified. Consequently, provided the tool is used ‘intelligently’ and the student reviews and corrects the resulting version, the teacher will find it hard to determine whether the student has used the application.

The business is thriving, and students with minimal economic means can benefit from a sophisticated service. There are digital platforms that can produce papers on demand, and some of them can provide an acceptable standard of work for a reasonable price (e.g. *Hazmitrabajo.es*, *Hacertfg.com*, *Apruebatodo.com*, *trabajosfindegrado.es*, and *Apruebaya.es*).³⁴

They all promise their clients fast, personalized service with an assurance of confidentiality. They guarantee that students will obtain excellent marks, with the level of plagiarism kept to a minimum in case the university uses an application for verification. On the other hand, students are able to refer any questions relating to their work to a fraudulent consultant (referred to as a ‘university expert’) who is ready to provide personalized attention. These businesses provide easy payment terms and discounts and special offers to their clients (e.g. ‘-30% + free PowerPoint on Black Friday’). Certain platforms charge their fees per project or by page/slide, according to the type of work required (prices range between 7 and 9 euros per page, and 3 euros per slide). The most remarkable aspect of such services is the delivery speed: one week for a graduation project, ten days for a master’s degree project, and ten weeks for a doctoral thesis. The business models of such enterprises are fairly similar: they all benefit from the stress suffered by overworked students, who suffer from a considerable overload of academic work. Sooner or later, all students will likely be tempted to use

³⁴ Comas Forgas and Sureda Negre.

such services, particularly when they have the assurance that they will not get caught. Dishonest behavior by students is not only on the rise but has become increasingly sophisticated and much harder to detect.³⁵

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden increase in online teaching have led to considerable growth in the temptation to plagiarize. Traditional teaching has had to adapt fast and many teaching establishments were caught off guard.³⁶ And, in addition to universities, pre-university studies are also being affected. In science, for example, tools such as *PhotoMath* or *FreeFormulas* help solve mathematical problems without requiring the student to understand them. Although the application appears to be an educational aid, it allows the user to obtain a result by simply sending a photograph of the problem to be solved. The pupil receives the stages involved in solving the problem, but the solution is provided instantaneously; thus, it is a temptation that few pupils are able to resist. Another platform that has become much more popular during the pandemic is *Recursos1clic*, where you can find solutions to the most common questions appearing in textbooks, ‘quality’ study materials, and completed exams. Although it focuses on secondary education, the website indicates that it has ‘begun to upload university material’.

The absence of any legislation whatsoever to restrict or penalize this behavior has resulted in the general idea that ‘anything goes’, that everything is easily accessible and downloadable, and that it is all public and can be used for personal gain. The fast development of new technologies and the lack of integrity at the cultural level call for an urgent review and update of legal regulations, in order to address the full

³⁵ V. Cebrián Robles, and others, ‘Percepción sobre el plagio académico de estudiantes universitarios españoles’, *Educación XXI*, 21(2) (2018), Article 2.

³⁶ A. J. Baladrón Pazos, B. Correyero Ruiz, and B. Manchado Pérez, ‘Digital Transformation of University Teaching in Communication During the COVID-19 Emergency in Spain: An Approach from Students’ Perspective’, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 78 (2020), 265-87.

range of new realities.³⁷ Students are fully aware of the legal loopholes and minimal fines imposed on those who are caught red-handed. And they continue their dishonest practices at the university level.³⁸

These practices have become widespread, and it is common to find videos of young people (on widely viewed platforms such as TikTok and YouTube) explaining the advantages of using such methods to cheat. A feeling of impunity and complacency has become prevalent throughout Spain.³⁹

3. The researchers' perspective

The irresponsible attitude of students with regard to their education, combined with institutional silence and the current political passivity concerning academic fraud, poses a cultural problem for which there is no quick solution, at least in the short term. The issue is then to determine whether the second group of academic players, the researchers, might act as models of integrity, perhaps even as a mouthpiece.

In reality, researchers are subject to the same temptations as students for the same reasons of work overload, actual or perceived. The motive force of researchers is the production of papers for publication and the compulsion to ensure visibility for their professional experiences. The stress of having to compete for financial resources for specific projects can lure them into inappropriate behaviors. The competitiveness of the current job market and the obsession with having a brilliant career, measured in terms of volume of publications, can lead them to engage in dishonest practices. Unlike academics in the last century, who would

³⁷ J. Sureda Negre, J. Reynes Vives, and R. Comas Forgas, 'Reglamentación contra el fraude académico en las universidades españolas', *Revista de la Educación Superior*, 45(178) (2016), 31-44.

³⁸ Cebrián Robles and others, 'Study of the Reasons'.

³⁹ Espiñeira-Bellón and others.

allow their projects to mature over time, researchers nowadays are willing to pay high registration fees to attend conferences or to have their articles published in scientific journals. A new publishing market that threatens in-depth research work has emerged in recent years, driven by English-language publishers. Numerous fraudulent journals have therefore been launched that provide no guarantee whatsoever of a serious article review process.⁴⁰

Just as students are aware of their lack of ethics, researchers opting for this service know perfectly well that they are behaving unethically. However, they would allege that the fault lies with the Spanish university system, which is characterized by a closed, inbred structure. The pursuit of a career in academia, which involves becoming a civil servant, is a long and bumpy road. For instance, to obtain a certification from ANECA (the public body responsible for assessing the achievements of teachers and researchers), applicants must persuade it to allow them to enter a public university. They need to present a solid university record, broad experience in teaching and excellent results as researchers. Obtaining this certification—the level of which increases every year—drives researchers to this kind of practice, since the pressure is enormous: the idea is to publish in first-rate scientific journals in the shortest possible time. The passion for research is less important at this point than the tangible product, which might essentially be a mere mosaic of other sources.⁴¹ In light of these conditions, instead of choosing their publications on the basis of their intellectual appeal, researchers opt for the most publishable topics in order to secure a position and the associated remuneration.

⁴⁰ J. Segarra Saavedra, M. Túniz López, and A.-G. Custódio Frazão-Nogueira, ‘Impacto en el área de comunicación de *call for papers* de presuntas revistas fraudulentas’, *Revista Prisma Social*, 31 (2020), 264-82.

⁴¹ A. Vargas Franco, ‘Apropiación y plagio académico: Un estudio de caso sobre una alumna debutante en la escritura en la educación superior’, *Íkala, Revista de lenguaje y cultura*, 24(1) (2019), 155-79.

Do researchers want to escape this vicious circle? This situation usually exasperates young researchers, who accept it as a necessary evil, which they cannot get away from. Publishing houses benefit from this situation, resulting in impressive growth in the number of scientific journals and online events now available to the university community. There are numerous examples of this trend. In this transactional landscape, the more indolent researchers, those with laxer moral compasses, and those needing immediate results might be inclined to take a shortcut by resorting to academic fraud.⁴²

Academic institutions are aware of this rapidly expanding business. However, it would not be fair to state that the researchers who find themselves in the situation described above are the only ones to be affected by this phenomenon. Experienced researchers can be equally prone to a lack of integrity. In their case, the lengthy and competitive career in a university setting obliges professors to be highly productive if they wish to enjoy better working conditions. Researchers are more aware than ever of technology and applications, online platforms and tools enabling them to contact other researchers, and this facilitates fraud. The main difference between students and researchers is that the latter are fully aware of their offence. They cannot justify their behavior, they understand that they are being dishonest, and they are aware of the consequences of their actions.⁴³ Such dishonest researchers disseminate false information, and lie to their readers and their institutions. By repeating these dishonest practices, they are stealing academic positions from other more deserving individuals.

⁴² Segarra-Saavedra and others.

⁴³ A. Fernández Ramos, 'Estrategias y herramientas tecnológicas para evitar el plagio académico', in *La infodiversidad y el uso ético del conocimiento individual y colectivo*, ed. by E. Morales Campos (Mexico City: Library and Information Research Institute, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2017), pp. 253-75.

Who are they? Criminals in disguise? No, some are full-time researchers, faculty members, individuals working in public or private institutions. They are well-educated and are probably critical of plagiarism, but in a world of fake news, of easy access and weakness, they lack the moral strength to perform their jobs properly. They simply disregard the high standards that are inherent in their roles as researchers.

And yet, most researchers are also teachers, and if they are unable to conform to the highest standards of academic integrity, they cannot demand that their students act otherwise. This situation is unlikely to change rapidly unless the third player, the Spanish university system, chooses to place academic integrity at the core of its mission.

4. The universities' perspective

The examination of the strategies implemented by Spanish institutions to combat academic fraud helps to understand why Spain is lagging behind other countries such as Finland, Switzerland, Germany, France, and the United States. Academic integrity and the new forms of fraud that are appearing on the scene should be a serious issue of concern for universities and government educational bodies. Although the number of measures being implemented by Spanish institutions to combat reprehensible behaviors is on the rise, few positive results have been detected; this means that, to date, the efforts made by the universities have been very limited and focused on raising students' awareness.⁴⁴

Most Spanish universities are beginning to implement policies, guidelines, and institutional protocols in this area, but feedback on their

⁴⁴ P. Alfaro Torres and T. De Juan Juárez, 'El plagio académico: Formar en competencias y nuevas prácticas', *RUIDERAe: Revista de Unidades de Información*, 6 (2014), Article 6.

efficacy has yet to be gathered. They all suffer from significant limitations and legal loopholes that leave the door wide open for fraudsters.⁴⁵ Thus, most focus on academic plagiarism, penalizing the copying of ideas, opinions, and texts belonging to third parties without their authorization, but fail to penalize the sale of work on websites, data forgery, or identity theft. Certain universities require their students to sign codes of ethics at the start of the academic year and they are warned of what will happen if they break the ‘agreement’.⁴⁶ However, in reality, nothing happens because students are rarely reported, proving that this measure is ineffective in dealing with the situation. Other Spanish universities have appointed a group of professors to be ‘integrity mentors’ or have created academic integrity committees to act as arbitrators for the institution. In theory, they are responsible for resolving any conflicts that may arise when dishonest behavior is detected, although, in practice, neither the teachers nor the students are aware of their existence. Universities do not generally tend to make such mechanisms or services public; consequently, nobody makes use of them except in the event of major conflict between individuals.

A range of sanctions should also be used as deterrents when dealing with this problem.⁴⁷ But this is not actually the case. Students who are caught red-handed and found guilty of dishonest academic behavior are usually asked to redo the work that was copied, fail the subject, or have their final grade marked down by a certain percentage, but more serious measures such as commencing disciplinary proceedings or expulsion

⁴⁵ Sureda-Negre and others, ‘Reglamentación contra el fraude académico’.

⁴⁶ V. Cebrián Robles, M. Raposo Rivas, and J. A. Sarmiento Campos, ‘¿Ética o prácticas deshonestas? El plagio en las titulaciones de educación’, *Revista de educación*, 374 (2016), 161-86.

⁴⁷ A. Cueva Lobelle and L. Ochoa Sierra, ‘Representaciones sociales de profesores y estudiantes acerca de plagio: Estudio comparativo’, *Revista de Investigaciones · UCM*, 15(25) (2015), 60-69.

from the university are seldom applied.⁴⁸ As for researchers caught perpetrating fraud, they do not really risk anything at all. And, since the sanctions are not made public, they are not credible. It is clear that current measures are insufficient and that both students and researchers appear to believe that the benefits of academic fraud far outweigh any potential sanctions.

Are Spanish universities able to transfer their responsibility to the teaching staff? In order for the teaching community to model exemplary behavior, much needs to be done to provide optimal conditions in terms of workload and available resources. Unfortunately, except in a few cases, teachers have a volume of classes and students that considerably exceeds an acceptable level for quality teaching.⁴⁹ Teachers check work superficially and do not spend time innovating teaching methods to motivate the students. If their institutions should entrust them with the additional task of monitoring students' ethics and verifying that their coursework and exams are free from plagiarism, it is highly unlikely this will produce serious results. Some will choose not to penalize any fraud they detect in order to avoid problems with the students. Others are simply not concerned with the value of degrees from the institution they work for, and even less with their colleagues' unethical conduct. Why should they concern themselves with fraud and plagiarism amid such a culture of impunity? The issue becomes even more crucial when professors supervise doctoral students, who will ensure academic succession and who will become the guardians of academic ethics themselves in a few years.

⁴⁸ C. Gallent Torres and I. Tello Fons, 'Percepción del alumnado de traducción de la Universidad Internacional de Valencia (VIU) sobre el ciberplagio académico', *Revista Digital de Investigación en Docencia Universitaria*, 11(2) (2017), 90-117.

⁴⁹ P. Mahabeer and T. Pirtheepal, 'Assessment, Plagiarism and Its Effect on Academic Integrity: Experiences of Academics at a University in South Africa', *South African Journal of Science*, 115(11-12) (2019), 1-8.

Academic fraud, therefore, far from being an individual and isolated phenomenon, has become a social one.⁵⁰ The consequences of failing to address this issue are dangerous for society and for the higher education system, and could lead to its breakdown. Moreover, the behavior of institutions inevitably reflects the society to which they belong. Even though Spain is not the only country where cases of plagiarism by public officials have been identified, perhaps our society does not deem them to be very serious, which can be understood when one realizes that, in many such cases, this behavior has not been penalized. Given that Spanish politicians at the highest level from all political parties have obtained false master's and doctoral degrees and that the university hierarchy has been perceived as unwilling to do anything to remedy this, it is hardly surprising that the university system is not well regarded by Spanish society.⁵¹ The fact that legislation does not address the full spectrum of academic fraud is an important factor, but the attitude of leniency toward this problem that appears to be ingrained in our society is the first issue to be tackled.

5. Worlds that must converge

Education lies at the heart of society. But it is composed of three worlds with their own structures, codes, outlooks, languages, and valuation indices. Unless effective mechanisms of control, awareness, and information are put in place to prevent the development of unethical behaviors, these will become par for the course.⁵² Furthermore, such mechanisms must be implemented in a coordinated fashion, instead of the current situation where every institution unilaterally establishes its

⁵⁰ Boillos Pereira.

⁵¹ J. Gómez Muñoz, 'Plagios, engaños y masters fantasmas: La política española hace aguas', *France 24*, 15 September 2018.

⁵² López-Gil and Fernández López.

own measures with no communication whatsoever. This translates into an inadequate response to a general phenomenon, as well as lack of consensus on how to address such dishonest behavior. We could say that the time has come to hold a national summit and to make this a matter of ‘academic emergency’.

The three worlds that have been mentioned have different views of the problem, different ways of committing fraud, and different levels of awareness of university integrity.⁵³ However, what they have in common is a blatant lack of communication, resulting in a disorganized system and a poor understanding of the values of higher education. Whether due to laziness, overwork, or lack of training or coordination, none of the players in these three worlds seem interested in upholding the values of integrity. This stance may be a byproduct of a self-centered mindset, where everyone is completely focused on their own goals and concerns. Students resorting to plagiarism to achieve the best grades; university teachers concerned about publishing and being visible; and institutions concerned with meeting accreditation criteria and the reputation of their degrees. In short, none of them are seriously worried about the values of the education that should be their common mission.

Who should be responsible for organizing the interface between these three worlds? The institutions should be responsible for the education of students, the motivation of teaching staff, and the intellectual development of researchers, fully aware of the role they play in academia.⁵⁴ The efforts invested in educating and training professors in ethics should be as substantial as those made with regard to students and researchers. Such efforts will translate into standardized procedures, homogeneous actions, the adoption of specific measures to combat fraud, and the formulation of stronger policies designed to reduce the

⁵³ Fernández-Ramos.

⁵⁴ M. Bergadaà, *Le Temps: Entre science et création* (Caen: Éditions EMS, 2020).

extent of such practices at these educational levels.⁵⁵ Institutions have the power to adopt firm measures to reduce dishonest behaviors that discredit the validity of their degrees and research. Such mechanisms have been proposed and implemented in other places, so all that is needed is a willingness to go ahead and act. If Spanish universities do not wish to lag behind, they must come up with institutional strategies designed to encourage the establishment of ethical behavior as the norm.

6. Conclusion

It is odd that it has fallen to the media to openly address the problem and make society aware of the negative long-term effects of unethical practices. For example, the issue has been recently addressed in articles, interviews, discussions, and radio shows such as *ABC*, *El Español*, *Cadena COPE*, and *Cadena SER*, which have revealed the tricks students use to pass a class or an exam, the tools they use to plagiarize documents, and the reasons why they do it.⁵⁶ Despite the social impact, the effects of these initiatives have not yet been felt in the classroom. On the contrary, instead of feeling ashamed, students appear to be proud of their delinquent behavior. The lack of coordination and mechanisms adapted to dealing with dishonest practices in higher education, as well as the pervasive social permissiveness and leniency, appear to make this goal unfeasible. In Spain, students, researchers, and institutions alike now face a huge challenge in trying to combat a deeply rooted lax

⁵⁵ J. Sureda Negre, and others, ‘Las conductas fraudulentas del alumnado universitario español en las evaluaciones: Valoración de su gravedad y propuestas de sanciones a partir de un panel de expertos’, *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, 38(1) (2020), 201-19.

⁵⁶ ‘Silencio en la trama de los plagios’, *ABC*, 10 October 2019; ‘La picaresca en los exámenes online’, *La Tarde*, Cadena COPE, 15 May 2020; ‘Últimas noticias sobre plagio’, Cadena SER, n.d.; ‘Castells defiende que si los alumnos “copian bien” es una “prueba de inteligencia”’, *El Español*, 12 May 2020.

attitude that is so firmly rooted. But we love challenges. So let us hope that the efforts many institutions are now making will become widespread and serve as an example for all.

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