



Press Office: 7 Northumberland Street, London WC2N 5RD
Direct Line: (020) 7782 1589 Fax: (020) 7925 0529
Switchboard: (020) 7930 6441 Mobile: 07918 617466

E-mail: newsdesk@atl.org.uk Website: www.atl.org.uk

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SCHOOL WORK PLAGUED BY PLAGIARISM - ATL SURVEY

Internet plagiarism is a major problem among sixth form pupils according to over half the teachers questioned in an Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) survey, out today (Friday).

Fifty-eight per cent of teachers said plagiarism is a problem. Of this group 28 per cent estimated that half or more than half of work returned by their pupils included plagiarism. These findings come from an ATL survey on internet plagiarism which questioned around 300 teachers working in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and further education colleges across England, Wales and Northern Ireland in December.

Some of the most blatant examples of plagiarism were:

Gill Bullen from Itchen College in Southampton said: "Two GCSE English retake students were very late handing in their last piece of coursework, an essay on Romeo and Juliet. When finally given in, the pieces turned out to be identical - and significantly better than either of them could have done! Not only that, the essays given in didn't quite answer the title question I had set...."

A teacher from Leeds said: "I had one piece of work so blatantly 'cut + pasted' that it still contained adverts from the web page."

ATL general secretary, Dr Mary Bousted, said: "This survey highlights one of the risks of putting so much emphasis on passing tests and getting high scores at any cost. Unsurprisingly pupils are using all the means available to push up their course work marks, often at the expense of any real understanding of the subjects they are studying.

"Long-term pupils are the real losers because they lack the skills they appear to have. And teachers are struggling under a mountain of cut and pasting to spot whether work was the student's own or plagiarism. Schools and colleges need to have robust policies to combat plagiarism, but they also need help from the exam boards and Government with resources and techniques for detecting cheating."

For teachers plagiarism is a problem because it can be difficult to spot, and time consuming to have to continually check to see if students have copied work and presented it as their own.

Mark Jones, from Wirral Metropolitan College, said: "Any work found to be plagiarised will not be marked - the student has to do it again. However, the problem is that, with the best will in the world, you haven't got enough hours in the day to search out where info was plagiarised from to prove it."

Connie Robinson from Stockton Riverside College, Stockton on Tees, said: "With less able students it is easy to spot plagiarism as the writing style changes mid assignment, but with more able students it is sometimes necessary for tutors to carry out internet research to identify the source of the plagiarism - this obviously adds to the tutors' workloads."

Teachers are also torn between wanting to ensure pupils are graded accurately and not wanting to put them at a disadvantage. A sixth form teacher from Wiltshire summed up the dilemma: "I am feeling a tension between wanting to be rigorous and not wanting to put my own students at a disadvantage when competing against other candidates whose teachers are not so scrupulous."

Over 55 per cent of teachers said students don't have sufficient understanding of what is plagiarism and what counts as legitimate research.

Diana Baker from Emmanuel College in Durham said: "I have found once students clearly understand what plagiarism is, its consequences and how to reference correctly so they can draw on published works, plagiarism becomes less of a problem. I think the majority of students who engage in plagiarism do it more out of ignorance than the desire to cheat, they really want to succeed on their own merit."

Having a robust school or college policy on plagiarism seems to be critical. But over 55 per cent said either their school doesn't have a policy to deal with plagiarism or they are unaware of one.

Teachers are concerned about the continued use of course work in A levels. A teacher from East London said: "The new A level syllabuses are going to make this a far, far more serious problem with the emphasis more on coursework."

A sixth form teacher from Wiltshire said: "I am Head of English and have moved over the years from being a firm supporter of coursework to wishing it would disappear entirely. I am depressed that English remains one of the only subjects to retain it in the new syllabi."

And over 90 per cent of teachers are concerned about the impact of plagiarism on their students' long-term prospects.

Beverly Alaimo, from Newcastle under Lyme College in Staffordshire, said: "I believe students who provide excellent pieces of work which achieve a high grade will find progression to a higher level far more difficult, as they will not have the knowledge and understanding necessary to cope with the work, however, new lecturers will, again, assume that students do."

For further information please contact the ATL press office on 0207 782 1589 or visit our website www.atl.org.uk.

Note to editors:

278 ATL members teaching sixth form pupils in schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were surveyed in Dec (5-19) 2007. These are the key findings:

Q1 Do you regard internet plagiarism as a problem when it comes to the returned work you have set students?

Yes – 58.2%	No – 40.7%	Don't know - 1%
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Q2 If so, what do you estimate is the proportion of work returned to you in which you suspect internet plagiarism?

Less than half – 72.1%	Half – 15.1%	More than half – 12.8%
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Q3 Does your institution have a policy for dealing with plagiarism?

Yes – 44.5%	No – 26.6%	Don't know – 28.8%
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Q4 If your institution has a policy for dealing with plagiarism is it robust enough?

Yes – 42.7%	No – 24.2%	Don't know – 33.1%
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Q5 Do you think students have sufficient understanding of what counts as legitimate research and what counts as plagiarism?

Yes – 37.2%	No – 55.3%	Don't know – 7.4%
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Q6 Could internet plagiarism harm a student's prospects?

Yes – 91.1%	No – 3 %	Don't know – 5.9%
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1. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, headteachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom.
2. ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice.
3. ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). The union is a member of the Social Partnership – working with the UK Government, employers and other unions on education issues. ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.