

‘A can of worms’

In English, difficult and tricky issues are referred to as ‘a can of worms’.

If you think about ‘Managing Plagiarism’, you will probably find these sorts of ‘worms’.

They are listed here in no particular order of importance.

- Very very few people in Swedish universities will report cases of plagiarism involving deception – it’s far too demanding and frustrating. The incentives **not** to report are far greater than the incentives to report. This makes it impossible to know how cases of deception are being handled.

- Institutions shy away from saying what has happened or predicting what will happen around plagiarism in their university. Saying it might hurt their reputation.

- Swedish students have rights. Current systems always say they place students’ rights first. Sometimes, saying they support students’ rights means universities create systems which may or may not defend students’ rights but which do threaten their learning.

- The Ordinance only refers to deception but is regularly assumed to refer to plagiarism.

- Procedures for managing plagiarism assume it
 - is rare;
 - is always cheating
 - is a serious threat to students’ credentials
 - must be handled as if each case will end up in a court of law.These assumptions do not match assessment in 2009. In 2009, the context is:
 - more home examinations
 - the Web,
 - very diverse students,
 - less and less time to teach skills
 - enormous resources in English,
 - pressure to pass (on students and on teachers)The result is an estimated **minimum** of 10% of students’ work needs attention for plagiarism.

- Available penalties do not reflect the range and complexity of cases. The result is that the penalties are rarely seen as fair or proportionate – either by teachers or by students.

- Many desirable changes would be possible under current policies and procedures if teachers would only plan ahead – but teachers won't plan ahead so they are not possible.

- Most Swedish teachers just do not see copying in their students' work. Maybe they cannot. Maybe they do not want to – whatever the reason, it goes by undetected.

- Lawyers have one set of non-negotiables around plagiarism; teachers have another set of non-negotiables around what they will and will not do. Lawyers and teachers seem to LIKE blaming each other for any stalemates (where they exist) in current management procedures.

- Teachers hide behind '*We can't do that. It's not allowed*' as a way of avoiding making changes. Many make the claim without checking whether it is or is not allowed. Often, it is perfectly possible.

- Teachers can get away with just ignoring hard cases which they do not report. They just delay or do nothing and eventually, the case goes away.

- Pragmatic solutions for managing plagiarism often collide with the worry that all cases could end up in a court of law. 'Do it this way so any appeal or challenge can be defended' means procedures and systems are very complex. This makes it very difficult to convince anyone to use the procedures at all.

I am sure you can add your own tricky issues and difficult problems. The challenge is finding ways to work with these realities or to change them. For each 'worm', what do you think should be done: work with it or change it?

