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Dionysis Kokkinos, Alexandros Koulouris

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Plagiarism: initial research findings in undergraduate students

Dionysis Kokkinos¹ Alexandros Koulouris¹

¹ Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies, University of West Attica, Athens, Greece

dkokkinos@uniwa.gr, akoul@uniwa.gr

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Abstract:

Purpose - This paper presents and discusses the main results of a small-scale research concerning students' and academic staff's perceptions about plagiarism and its implications. The research was conducted in 2018, at the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies, University of West Attica, with the use of two separate on-line questionnaires.

Design/methodology/approach - The questionnaires, consisted of open and closed-ended questions, were sent respectively to the undergraduate students and to the academic staff of the Department. As a result, 62 questionnaires were completed by the students (~10% of the whole population) and 9 by the academic staff, which was the total number of the faculty members at the time of the study.

Findings - The findings demonstrate that the students' and the academic staff's comprehension and perception of the term plagiarism, as well as their attitude towards the disciplinary implications, that this phenomenon entails, make it an imperative for academic realm and especially for libraries to deal with it actively and proactively.

Originality/value - Useful findings were made regarding the perception and the comprehension of plagiarism phenomenon for undergraduate students.

Index Terms - Plagiarism, Understanding plagiarism, Information Literacy, Higher Education, Statistical analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, there has been much debate regarding plagiarism. It is indisputable, that plagiarism is a controversial issue, and thus it is open to a number of interpretations. But what is plagiarism? Plagiarism is the act of appropriating the expressions or the wording and consequently, the thoughts and ideas of someone else, without crediting them to their creator or without referencing the used source. Similarly, Stern [1, p. 1] points out that plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, that might consist of words, ideas or images, either published or not, without attributing this work to its creator. Essentially, plagiarism means to commit intellectual property theft, in order to present it as new and original. Practically, a plagiarist steals someone else's work

and at the same time they lie about their act, because they present it as their own [2].

Given the fact that, plagiarism is a confusing concept, there is confusion defining it [3, p. 32]. It is obvious that there are many definitions of the term plagiarism [4].

Plagiarism is not a problem only for the academic community. Apparently, it is related to the ethical use of information and it entails both social and economic implications. It is worth mentioning that, due to the scientific and the economic value of information, the person who commits plagiarism can obtain benefits related to his professional or academic status. Therefore, when plagiarism has been detected, it may bring significant and various implications. For example, in academic realm, committing plagiarism may result in academic staff losing their position, or in students encountering disciplinary implications, such as suspension from studying. Moreover, given the fact that plagiarism is an unethical act can also tarnish the reputation of a university [5, p. 610]. In business world, it may result in lack of trust and simultaneously, in endangering someone's career [1, pp. 1-2], [6, p. 34].

Furthermore, plagiarism, apart from infringement of academic rules and ethics, is a linguistic phenomenon [6, p. 1]. In other words, it is directly related to language use and to ways in which an author embeds data, information and views in their text. There are many kinds of plagiarism. However, the most severe of them, according to Klausman [7], are direct plagiarism, paraphrase plagiarism and patchwork plagiarism. Direct plagiarism occurs when someone copies phrases verbatim, without referencing the source, while in paraphrase plagiarism, someone alters the wording in order to change the language used in the original source. Finally, patchwork plagiarism occurs when someone copies expressions or wording from different sources and different writers, either verbatim or in paraphrasing and mingles them with their own language [8, pp. 24-26].

At last, plagiarism can be defined as deliberate or unintentional. The key to avoid unintentional plagiarism is fair and correct use of bibliographic references [1, pp. 2-5]. Perhaps, it is useful to point out that one controversial form of plagiarism is self-plagiarism, for which there are many questions and a lot of discussion, because it is confused with republication. However, the current paper does not intend to analyze the term plagiarism in such a detail.

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper is based on the results of a small-scale research, which was conducted in the University of West Attica, in Spring of 2018. The research's tools consisted of two electronic questionnaires, which contained open and mainly closed-type questions. The first questionnaire was answered by 62 undergraduate students of the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies, while the second questionnaire was answered by 9 members of the Department's academic staff. It is remarkable that the population of the faculty of the Department was 9 members at the time the research was conducted and all of them had answered the questionnaire. In addition, the student's population was approximately 600. 62 students had answered the questionnaire (~10%), which is an adequate sample of the total population.

The research's results were used for the fulfillment of the Bachelor's thesis entitled: "Information law and plagiarism", written by the students Panagiota Gazi and Nikolia Mavropoulou. However, this paper focuses on the discussion of only certain research questions, which were chosen because they are considered primary to the library community. These are the following:

- What is plagiarism? Are we aware of its meaning?
- What do students and academic staff of the Department consider as plagiarism? Do they really understand it?
- Have they ever committed plagiarism, deliberately or not? What points do students and academic staff underline concerned with the plagiarism cases they have experienced?
- Why do students commit plagiarism? What are the main reasons?
- Should plagiarism be punished? What do students and academic staff of the Department, believe about disciplinary implications of plagiarism?

III. DISCUSSION

In this article¹, we will comment on answers of only certain questions, which were chosen because of their primary research interest. At first, it is worth mentioning that 38 out of 62 questionnaires (61,3%) have been answered by graduate students of the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies. Graduates are considered by default more knowledgeable and experienced than undergraduates in plagiarism, as they have written a considerable number of papers and essays during their studies.

The first important question asked if the students are aware of the meaning of the term plagiarism. The overwhelming majority of them answered that they are. Only 3 students (4,8%) stated that they are not certain of its meaning (Figure 1). The majority of the answers in this question may not be objective and therefore may be

misleading. Do students really know what plagiarism is, or they just believe that they do so? Is there a possibility that some students would not like to admit their ignorance on a subject they should have understood by now, because they are approaching the completion of their studies?

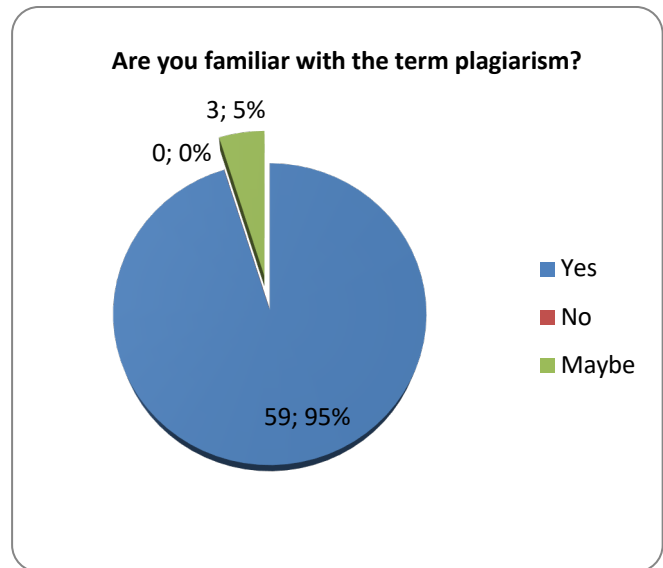


Figure 1. Understanding plagiarism (Students)

At this point, it would be useful to know, what did the Department's faculty members answer, to a related question. The question concerned their own beliefs about the extent to which students understand the term plagiarism. The answers evince a clear uncertainty that students have really comprehended the term plagiarism. In more detail, 5 members of the academic staff (55,6%) stated that, according to their opinion, students have not comprehended the meaning of plagiarism, while 3 of them (33,3%) answered that they are not certain to what extent the students are knowledgeable of it. Only one (1) member declared positively certain that students are knowledgeable of plagiarism.

We observe an important disagreement between students' and academics staff's views on the subject. In order to investigate the reason of this disagreement, it is necessary to compare the present research with similar ones. Sidera-Sideri [9] reports in her research that although students think they know the meaning of the term plagiarism, they have not really comprehended what plagiarism is [9, pp. 235-236]. Many students think that plagiarism is an act which concerns only verbatim copying and not paraphrasing [9, p. 238]. Evidently, students have not comprehended that paraphrasing, without referencing the original source and its creator, is also plagiarism.

¹ This article is based on a paper presented in the 24th Panhellenic Academic Libraries Conference, which was held in Larissa, Greece, November 2018.

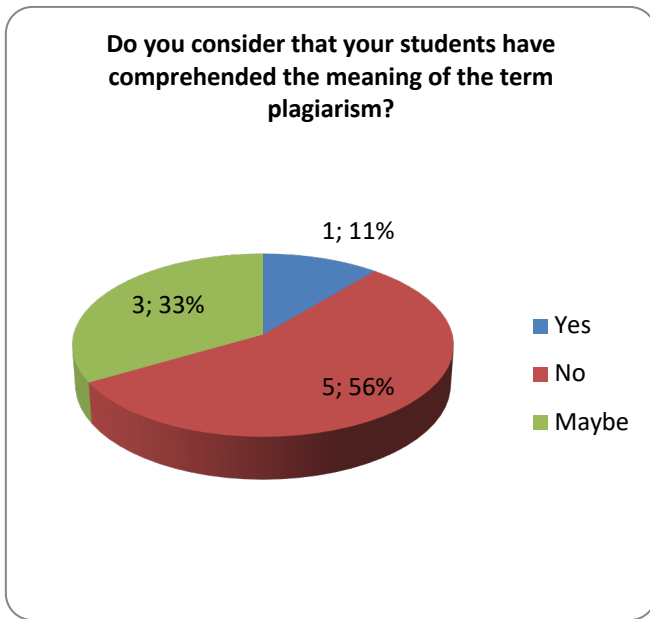


Figure 2. Understanding plagiarism (Academic staff views of their student’s comprehension of plagiarism)

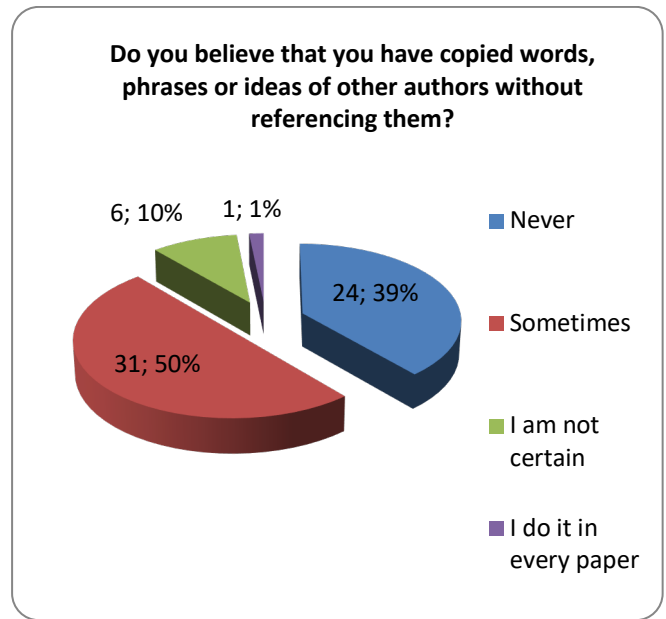


Figure 3. Plagiarism cases (Students)

Students’ answers with regard to what degree they believe that they have committed plagiarism are quite interesting. 31 students out of 62 (50%) declared that they have copied words or ideas of other writers and therefore they have committed plagiarism. On the contrary 24 out of 62 (38,7%) answered that they have never done it, while 6 (9,7%) stated that they are not certain whether they have committed plagiarism and if so, they have probably done it unwittingly. The above answers are only indicative but they reinforce the conclusion that students do not know, to a satisfactory degree, the meaning of the term plagiarism and as a result they are unable to evaluate their own academic papers. In other words, they are not certain if their papers reflect the knowledge that they have derived after having studied and having understood the information contained in various resources and then producing their original wording or ideas, or if their papers are mainly copies and/or paraphrases. Finally, 1 student answered, probably in a sense of humor, that he/she commits plagiarism in his/her every academic paper (Figure 3).

It is worth mentioning that all 9 members of the faculty staff gave a positive answer to the question “Have you ever experienced plagiarism, on behalf of your students?” (Figure 4). Therefore, plagiarism, deliberate or not, to a larger or smaller extent, is present and it cannot be ignored.

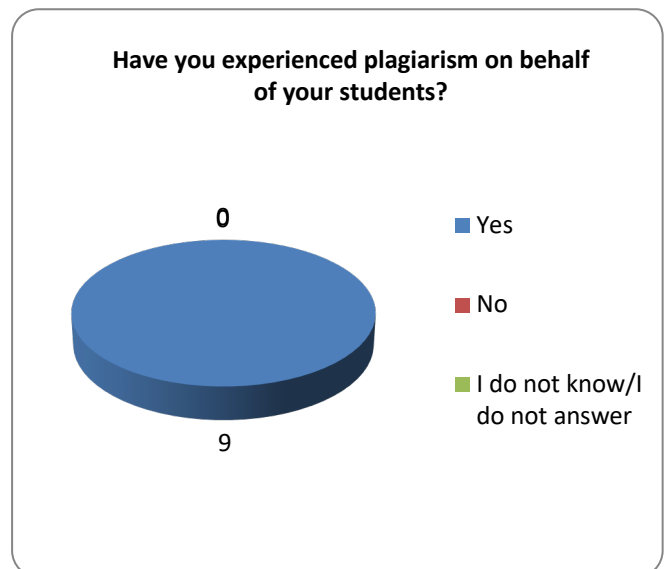


Figure 4. Plagiarism cases (Academic staff)

When students were asked “Has it ever come to your attention any incident of plagiarism, committed by a fellow student?”, 25 students out of 62 (40,3%), namely the largest percentage, answered “Yes”. Another 20 students (32,3%) gave the answer “I do not know/I do not answer”, either due to the fact that no incident of plagiarism has come to their attention, either because they do not wish to refer to any incident of plagiarism, that may put them in a difficult position. The rest 17 students (27,4%) answered that they

are definitely unaware of any incident of plagiarism which has been committed by a fellow student (Figure 5).

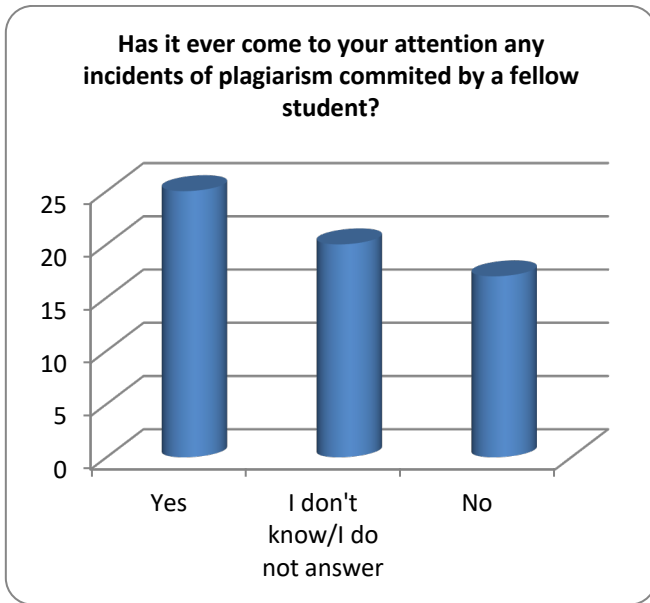


Figure 5. Plagiarism cases (Students)

When students were asked to complete a multiple choice question concerning the reasons why they choose to commit plagiarism, 40 students out of 62 (64,5%) chose as first option "Due to lack of time", while 37 students (59,7%) chose as second option "I consider that my academic paper and my ideas would not be good enough" (Figure 6). 36 students (58,1%) answered that they do not know if they have committed plagiarism, whereas 18 students (29%) answered that they believe they will not be caught and consequently they will not be punished.

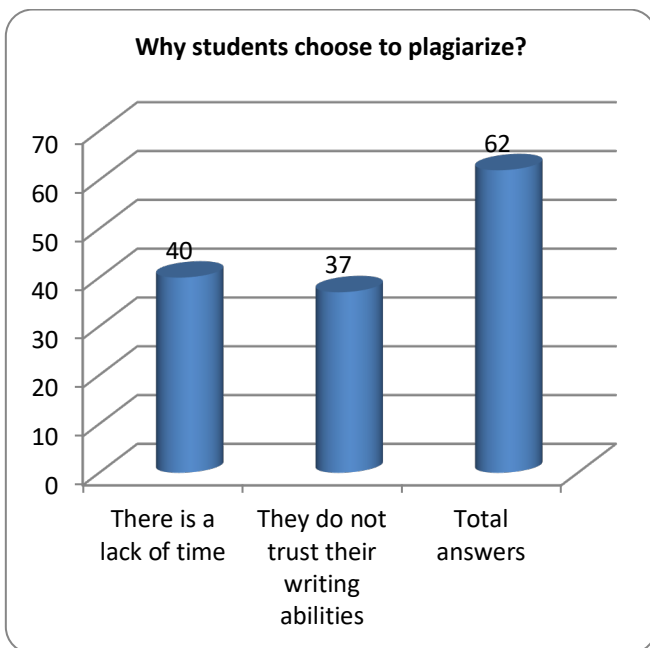


Figure 6. Reason of plagiarism (Students)

These answers are similar to those of two corresponding questions in Avramidou doctoral thesis, where students attribute the main reasons of committing plagiarism to lack of time and to poor trust into their academic writing skills [8, pp. 102-106]. It is particularly interesting that 64% of the respondents, in the same research [8, p. 104], stated that they had committed plagiarism in the past, without encountering any disciplinary implications and therefore they did not hesitate to re-commit it deliberately. Liddell [4, p. 45] confirms that students plagiarize because they think not only that they won't be caught, but also that if they are caught, they will not be punished.

The next research question is related to the disciplinary implications which draw or should draw any proven cases of plagiarism committed by students. The 62 students of the Department were asked to answer the following question: "Do you agree that it is right for someone to be punished if he/she has committed plagiarism?". Most of the students consider that it is right, as 24 students agree (38,7%) and 17 students completely agree with plagiarism punishment (27,4%). Namely, the 66,1% of students in total, understand that plagiarism is an unethical action, is a violation of rules and it must be punished. Only 9 students (14,5%) answered that plagiarism should not draw any disciplinary implications. The rest 12 students (19,4%) preferred to take no position on the subject, as they answered, "I do not know" (Figure 7).

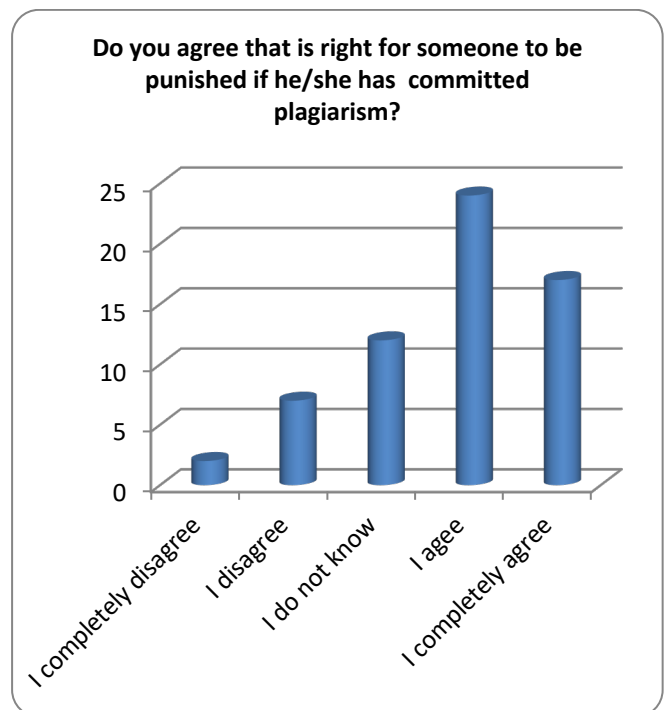


Figure 7. Punishment (Students)

In the same question, all 9 members of the faculty staff agree that incidents of plagiarism are blameworthy and therefore they should be punished. In more detail, academic staff was asked to answer the following question: "Do you agree that it is right for someone to be punished if he/she has committed

plagiarism?” and they all agreed with punishment. It is characteristic that most of the academic staff members choose the option “I completely agree” (77,8%) while a remarkable percentage of them (22,2%) seem to be more lenient by choosing the option “I agree” (Figure 8).

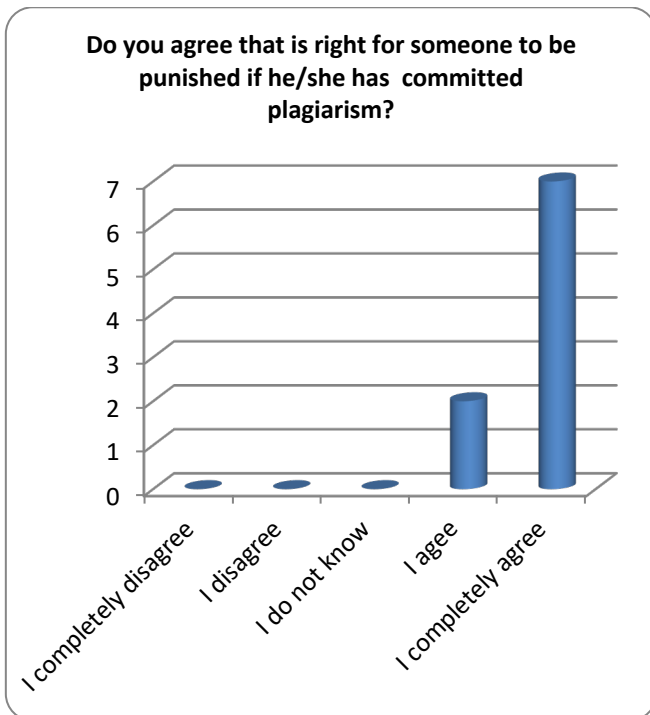


Figure 8. Punishment (Academic staff)

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The initial findings that derived from the interpretation of the students’ and the academic staff’s answers demonstrate their comprehension and their perception of the term plagiarism. It is essential that we have to point out the fact that most of the students have not understood completely the meaning and the implications of plagiarism. This assumption is also confirmed by the academic staff’s answers. What is for sure, is that there is an underlying confusion about what exactly plagiarism is and about the ways of this phenomenon’s handling and confrontation.

Furthermore, it should be highlighted that several students have committed plagiarism with the academic staff having noticed this. Therefore, they have undertaken the necessary disciplinary actions or recommendations towards students. Students and academic staff agree that disciplinary implications are imperative in order to prevent plagiarism among students.

It is obvious that plagiarism exists in academic world and consequently academic institutions, as well as libraries should take care of this phenomenon. In line with this, there have been developed software applications for the detection of plagiarism. Most of the Hellenic Universities have been subscribed to specific plagiarism detection software, called Turnitin² (Originality Check). Turnitin

juxtaposes texts of academic papers and articles with texts from the Internet, with published papers, such as articles and books and with students’ papers or essays that have been submitted into the institutional repositories. In addition, it provides the ability to detect plagiarism even in a translated text.

Suffice it to say, that the role of the academic library is crucial. What actions should academic libraries take in order to eliminate plagiarism cases in academic realm? Actually, the use of a detection software, in general, seems to be helpful so as to eradicate the phenomenon [10]. Apart from that, a first step should be information literacy skills development of library users. Information literacy objectives focus on the effective retrieval and use of information and include directions on how to avoid plagiarism [11]. This fact leads us to acknowledge the importance of information literacy skills for students, scientists and researchers. After all, a core academic library role in the current information society is the promotion of information literacy with an emphasis to learning how to learn. In any case, information literacy skills improve learners’ insight and consequently their critical thinking via the process of information review and evaluation.

Librarians are considered to be the experts who can play a new and active role in the learning environment [12, pp. 48-49], in teaching and learning [13] mainly because of their ability to provide access in information, anytime within any place or context. They are in a position to educate users through appropriate and adequate workshops in the library’s physical and virtual environment. Users’ education, in person (lectures and presentations) or from distance (on-line tutorials), should aim at developing skills such as, information retrieval techniques, sources’ evaluation, bibliographic references, ethical use of information and scientific writing for academic purposes.

Many Hellenic Academic Libraries have already taken the initiative to develop information literacy programs and workshops, as well as to create sources and educational material concerning not only information literacy, but also plagiarism. Such an example is the information literacy on-line program that has been developed by the Central Library of the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) (http://83.212.168.16/?page_id=559). Among others, the program provides an interactive exercise based on the book «What every student should know about avoiding plagiarism» [1].

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Laboratory at the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies at the University of West Attica. He has been a General Secretary of the Association of Greek Librarians and Information Scientists, as well as a Deputy Secretary for many years. His research interests include Plagiarism, Information Literacy, Institutional Repositories, Open access and Distance learning.



Alexandros Koulouris is Assistant Professor in the Department of Archival, Library and Information Studies at the University of West Attica. He has been involved in several European and national R&D projects in the field of information management (DELOS, EuropeanaLocal, Europeana, CrossCult, FP7, H2020). His research interests include information policy, digital libraries and repositories. In the past, he has worked as a librarian for the National Technical University of Athens and for the National Documentation Centre of Greece. He holds a PhD in Information Science from Ionian University, a BA in Library Science from the Technological Educational Institute of Athens and a BA (Hon) in International and European Studies from Panteion University

AUTHORS



Dionysis Kokkinos is currently a Technical and Laboratory Staff at the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies at the University of West Attica. He used to work at the National Technical University of Athens as a Technical and Laboratory Staff and as an ILL and repository librarian for 23 years (1996-2019). He was also Laboratory Associate at the Technological Educational Institute of Athens for 13 years (2005-2018). He holds a Bachelor degree in Library Science from the Technological Educational Institute of Athens (1995), a Bachelor degree in Greek Civilization from the Faculty of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University (2017), a Master's in Information Science from Ionian University (2005) and a Master's in Education from the Hellenic Open University (2006).

He is a member of the Information Management