

Plagiarism: Student Perspectives

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Abstract

Context. *Universities are often required to lay the ethical foundation of student behaviour and none is more prevalent than the issue of plagiarism. Plagiarism is a violation of academic integrity although it is not specific to the academic community alone. The aim of this paper is to assess students' understanding of plagiarism and plagiarism policies, the extent to which they engage in plagiarism practices, and their perceptions on the adequacy of training workshops on writing practices for undergraduate and post-graduate students at a metropolitan university in South Africa.*

Problem and results. *Contradictory evidence was found about the students' understanding of plagiarism. The prevalence of plagiarism was perceived as low amongst students. The students seemed to understand plagiarism policies as the majority indicated awareness of departmental penalties for student plagiarism and perceived these penalties to be fair. Additionally, the results revealed that different faculty departments placed equal emphasis on plagiarism and that the students perceived the university and the department's workshops on academic writing and plagiarism to be adequate.*

Solution. *This study highlights that South African universities mirror the global trend of increasing student plagiarism practices and that efforts to improve academic integrity should adopt global best practices while taking into account local characteristics.*

1. Introduction

The requirements of higher education have evolved to incorporate higher demand against limited capacity, rising cost of tuition fees and the inclusion of non-Eurocentric voices. According to Siemens and Matheos [1] today's contemporary university must balance the challenges of globalisation, mass expansion and economic uncertainty while linking new technology with new learning methods and content. Universities are often required to lay the ethical foundation of student behaviour and none is more prevalent than the issue of plagiarism. Plagiarism is a violation of academic integrity although it is not specific to the academic community alone. Some well-known examples of

plagiarism by academics include social movement leader, Martin Luther King Jr., German minister of education, Anette Schavan, and in the non-academic context, musician Ed Sheeran. While accusations of plagiarism did not hinder King's leadership, Schavan was forced to resign and Sheeran had to settle a \$20 million lawsuit [2].

Plagiarism is a widespread practice driven by readily available information from internet sources. This in turn places more pressure on students to be more accountable and to create original work as the use of similarity detection tools, such as Turnitin, have become more widespread. Furthermore, institutions have differentiating strategies and attitudes towards plagiarism; either failing to warn students about plagiarism and its consequences or imposing such serious consequences that discourage any unoriginal work [3]. The aim of this paper is to assess students' level of understanding of plagiarism, the extent to which they engage in plagiarism (plagiarism practices), their understanding of their department's plagiarism policy and their perceptions on the adequacy of the University's and the department's training workshops on writing practices and plagiarism amongst undergraduate and post-graduate (Honours and BTech) transport and logistics students at a metropolitan university in South Africa. The department refers to the specific department in which the students' major subjects were housed.

2. Literature review

The earliest case of plagiarism can be found in Rome, when poet Martial discovered that his work was being copied and recited without acknowledgement [4]. Modern ideologies around plagiarism are based on legal accounts of literary property in eighteenth-century England [5]. There are no absolute definitions of plagiarism and as a result the act may include a range of actions from misquoting to fraud [6]. It is generally accepted that plagiarism refers to "the action of presenting another person's work or ideas as one's own" [7:196].

According to Hexham [8:1] academic plagiarism occurs when, "a writer repeatedly uses more than four words from a printed source without the use of quotation marks and a precise reference to the original source in a work presented as the author's own research and scholarship". Hexham [8] further includes continuous paraphrasing without argument of other perspectives as plagiarism. Devlin and Gray [9:182] group academic plagiarism with "other cheating behaviour such as taking notes into the exam, fabricating a bibliography, lying about personal circumstances to get special considerations and other similar actions". Turnitin, which is touted as the leading academic plagiarism detector reports ten types of unoriginal work, known as the plagiarism spectrum [10]. The spectrum is a result of

a worldwide survey of almost 900 secondary and higher education institutions and reflects the role that the internet and social media plays in student writing.

2.1 General plagiarism trends in higher education

Plagiarism is a global pandemic. In 1991, a study by Rutgers University reported that from a sample of 16,000 students at 31 United States universities, 66% had admitted to plagiarism [11]. A survey by McCabe [12] of 83 different universities across the US and Canada revealed that a significant number of students had admitted to either; working with others on an individual assignment (68%), paraphrasing or copying from a written source without footnotes (63%), paraphrasing or copying from internet sources without footnotes (60%) or receiving unpermitted help from someone on an assignment (37%).

Mostrous and Kenber [13] reported that in 2015, British universities caught 50,000 students plagiarising. In Australia and New Zealand, Devlin and Gray [9], Egan [14] and Walker [15] researched plagiarism at higher education institutions. Similar observations are described by Chien [16] in Taiwan, Ba [17] in Vietnam, Baruchson-Arbib and Yaari [18] in Israel and Arce Espinoza and Monge Nájera [19] in Costa Rica. It follows that the practice of plagiarism is world-wide. The lack of statistics from other regions of the world could be attributed to the severe underreporting of plagiarism cases [20].

2.2 Causes of plagiarism in higher education institutions

The practice of plagiarism is not new in the era of extensive internet access. Research has, however, indicated that mass sharing of media and other resources on the internet compels students to consciously plagiarise either owing to laziness or convenience [9]. In self-reported cases of plagiarism, students cited time constraints and deadlines (67%), overloaded course requirements (62%), difficulty of assignments or projects (56%) and the desire to obtain high grades (56%) to justify plagiarism [21].

Other notable reasons for high incidences of plagiarism are the fear of failure [9, 22, 23], pressure to perform academically well [23-26], financial concerns [9] and personal or family problems [23].

In 2015, British Universities were affected by thousands of cases of academic misconduct. Of these, 35% were cases from non-EU students [27]. Stereotyping non-native English speakers as more prone to plagiarism is speculative [28]. However, cultural perspectives, in terms of language and learning methodologies impact the inclination of students to plagiarise at Western institutions [14].

Chien [16] expresses that for non-English speaking students to understand plagiarism, English proficiency and basic academic writing skills need to be rooted in their native culture. Lund [29] is of the opinion that universities need to understand the cultural dynamics of second language English speakers and incorporate these findings into plagiarism policies.

With a greater number of higher education institutions moving towards e-learning, there is a perceived notion that distance education learners are more inclined to plagiarise. However, Ison [30] have found no significant difference between online and traditional learning environments as students mostly use the same research sources. The nature of the assignment may also determine the propensity to plagiarise. Youmans [31] found less similarity and plagiarism in written assignments where the number of citations students used remained optional. As such, there remains no definitive answer as to why students in higher education institutions plagiarise.

3. Methodology

3.1 Respondents and procedure

In 2016, the researchers administered a questionnaire to students enrolled for transport economics and logistics management modules at a metropolitan university in South Africa. Participation in the survey was during class time and was both voluntary and anonymous. The students were primarily drawn from the undergraduate pool, namely the first, second, and third year students, as well as the post-graduate pool, which comprised BCom Honours and BTech students. The questionnaires were administered in the second semester of the year in which the data was collected. This was deemed to be important so as to ensure that first year students would have completed some assessments at university, which required research and would therefore have learnt about plagiarism.

3.2 Survey Instrument

The four part self-completed questionnaire was designed to collect information on four measures. These were namely: the students' understanding of plagiarism (7 items), the extent to which they engage in plagiarism (plagiarism practices; 9 items), their understanding of department's plagiarism policy (6 items) and their perceptions on the adequacy of the University's and the department's training workshops on writing practices (4 items). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the four measures was tested by calculating the Cronbach alpha coefficients as shown in Table 1. The reliability scores for understanding of department's plagiarism policy and adequacy of the University's and the

department's training workshops were above 0.7 indicating that these scales were reliable. On the contrary, the measures for understanding plagiarism and plagiarism practices had lower alpha values of 0.596 and 0.694 respectively, although an alpha value of 0.5 is sufficient [32]. Descriptive statistics were applied to the data collected on the four measures. Additionally, data on the students' age, academic discipline and time spent at university were collected.

Table 1: Reliability scores

Measure	Cronbach alpha
Understanding of plagiarism	0.596
Plagiarism practices	0.694
Understanding of DTSCM's plagiarism policy	0.725
Adequacy of the University's and the DTSCM's training workshops	0.745

4. Results and discussion

The data were tested for normality, skewness, kurtosis and outliers and were found to be sufficiently normally distributed.

4.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Of the 289 students who completed the questionnaire (Table 2), 45.7% were males while 54.3% were females. The racial profile of the respondents comprised Blacks (74%), Whites (14.9%), Indians (7.6%), Coloured's (3.1%) and Asians (0.3%). As the target population was students enrolled for Logistics and Transport Management modules, 76.8% and 12.8% of the respondents were enrolled for these degrees respectively. The rest (10.4%) of the respondents majored in Marketing, Retail, Information and Hospitality Management. With regard to the academic year in which the students were enrolled for, 60 were first year, 110 second year, 87 third year undergraduate study while the post-graduate proportion comprised 5 Btech and 27 BCom Honours students respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic profile of the respondents

Gender	n	Percent
Male	132	45.7
Female	157	54.3
Race		
Black	214	74.0
White	43	14.9
Indian	22	7.6
Coloured	9	3.1
Asian	1	.3

Degree registered		
Logistics Management	222	76.8
Transportation Management	37	12.8
Marketing Management	20	6.9
Retail Management	3	1.0
Hospitality Management	1	.3
Information Management	4	1.4
Other	2	2.4
Academic year		
1st Year Undergraduate	60	20.8
2nd Year Undergraduate	110	38.1
3rd Year Undergraduate	87	30.1
4th Year BTech	5	1.7
4th Year Honours	27	9.3

4.2 Plagiarism perceptions

The scores for 'strongly disagree' and 'partially disagree', as well as for 'partially agree' and 'strongly agree' were combined into a single score for all measures. A mean score above 3 implies that the majority of the students agree with the statement. A mean score of less than 3 implies that the majority of respondents disagree with the statement. Table 3 shows the frequencies, percentages and mean scores of the students' understanding of plagiarism. The majority of the students seemed to understand what plagiarism is, as the mean scores of four of the seven statements were above 3. However, a closer analysis of the statements with mean scores less than 3 suggests that the students are not fully aware what plagiarism entails. For the statement with the lowest mean score, "Information on the internet is freely available and therefore it is acceptable to copy and paste passages without citation" (Mean = 1.88) 73.7% of the students strongly/ partially disagreed with the statement. The high incidence of internet plagiarism can be attributed to students viewing the internet as "fair use" [33:161], easy access essay hubs and paper mills [12] and the simplicity of illicit cutting and pasting [33]. Unintentional plagiarism resulting from ignorance of plagiarism conventions, inadequate training or a lack of understanding of what plagiarism actually is accounts for a large percentage of academic dishonesty [34-36]. Many student consider intentional plagiarism and getting caught to be trivial matters especially if they consider the risk to be low [37:13, 38:2].

Table 3: Students' understanding of plagiarism

Understanding Plagiarism	Strongly Disagree/ Partially disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Partially agree/ Strongly agree	Mean
An assignment submitted with passages copied directly from a book or article without citation is considered plagiarism.	30	18	241	4.41
	10.4%	6.2%	83.4%	
Information on the internet is freely available and therefore it is acceptable to copy and paste passages without citation.	213	29	47	1.88
	73.7%	10.0%	16.2%	
Copying text directly from sources (books, articles, internet etc.) is a means for me to survive the academic world.	187	57	45	2.09
	64.7%	19.7%	15.5%	
I do not know how to reference a source.	189	41	59	2.22
	65.4%	14.2%	20.4%	
Turn-it-in is a fair tool to assess plagiarism.	63	32	194	3.74
	21.8%	11.1%	67.1%	
I am more aware of plagiarism because of Turn-it-in.	34	34	221	4.05
	11.8%	11.8%	76.5%	
Paraphrasing is not plagiarism.	74	68	147	3.35
	34.6%	23.5%	50.8%	

Table 4 shows that the prevalence of plagiarism practices is low. The mean scores for eight of the nine statements were below 3. The statement

“Plagiarism at the university is widespread” had a mean score of 3.09 implying that the majority of the students were neutral (neither agree nor disagree).

Table 4: Frequencies and mean scores of students' plagiarism practices

Plagiarism Practices	Strongly Disagree/Partially disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Partially agree/Strongly agree	Mean
I have previously knowingly plagiarised on an assignment	180	44	65	2.27
	62.2%	15.2%	22.5%	
I will continue to plagiarise as long as I do not get caught.	240	28	21	1.56
	83.0%	9.7%	7.3%	
Students rarely plagiarise.	154	97	38	2.40
	53.3%	33.6%	13.1%	
Plagiarism at the University is widespread.	75	114	100	3.09
	26.0%	39.4%	34.6%	
Using a paraphrasing tool enables me to get away with plagiarism	128	91	70	2.65
	44.3%	31.5%	24.3%	
Plagiarism is an accepted practice because of the competitive nature of the academics	186	53	50	2.09
	64.3%	18.3%	17.3%	
It is very easy to plagiarise without my lecturer knowing.	191	60	38	2.07
	66.1%	20.8%	13.1%	
Acting with academic integrity is difficult.	145	75	69	2.50
	50.2%	26.0%	23.8%	
If I have knowledge that a fellow student has plagiarised, I will report it to my lecturer.	144	93	52	2.39
	49.8%	32.2%	18%	

The results (Table 5) reveal that the students partially agreed to understanding the department's policies on plagiarism as the majority partially agreed that they were aware of the department's penalties for student plagiarism (mean=3.52) and

that they perceived these penalties to be fair (mean=3.60). Additionally, the results revealed that the department compared to other departments in the faculty, and that it places the same emphasis on plagiarism (Table 5).

Table 5: Frequencies and mean scores of students' understanding of departmental plagiarism policy

Understanding of departmental plagiarism policy	Strongly Disagree/Partially disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Partially agree/Strongly agree	Mean
I am aware of the departmental policy on penalties for student plagiarism.	72 24.9%	46 15.9%	171 59.2%	3.52
I feel that the penalties for student plagiarism according to the departmental policy are fair.	42 14.5%	93 32.2%	154 53.3%	3.60
I do not understand the penalties for student plagiarism according to the departmental policy.	158 54.7%	79 27.3%	52 18%	2.38
This department is not concerned with plagiarism.	168 58.1%	79 27.3%	42 14.6%	2.19
Compared to this department other departments in this faculty are not concerned with the use of Turn-it-in.	117 40.5%	104 36.0%	68 23.5%	2.68
Compared to this department, other departments in the Faculty of Management are not concerned with plagiarism	134 46.4%	99 34.3%	56 19.4%	2.51

Lastly, as shown in Table 6, the study investigated the adequacy of the university and departmental training workshops on academic writing and plagiarism. The majority of the students (74%) partially/strongly agreed with the statement "A revision assignment will enable me to improve my academic writing" (Mean = 4.04). Similarly, the

majority of students (72.3%) partially/ strongly agreed that "Academic writing should be offered as a first semester course as part of my curriculum" (Mean = 3.96). The results also revealed that the students perceived the university and the department's workshops on academic writing and plagiarism to be adequate.

Table 6: Adequacy of university and departmental policies

Adequacy of university and departmental training	Strongly Disagree/Partially disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Partially agree/Strongly agree	Mean
Academic writing should be offered as a first year semester course as part of my curriculum.	52 18%	28 9.7%	209 72.3%	3.96
A revision assignment will enable me to improve my academic writing.	35 12.1%	40 13.8%	214 74%	4.04
Attending the university's academic writing and plagiarism workshops has improved my academic integrity.	38 13.1%	122 42.2%	129 44.6%	3.47
Attending departmental academic writing and plagiarism workshops has improved my academic integrity.	40 13.8%	136 47.1%	113 39.1%	3.36

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to assess students' understanding of plagiarism; the extent to which they engage in plagiarism (plagiarism practices); their understanding of department's plagiarism policy and their perceptions on the adequacy of the university's and the department's training workshops on writing practices and plagiarism. The survey was conducted amongst undergraduate and post-graduate (Honours and BTech) transport and logistics students at a metropolitan university in South Africa. The research had been conducted because contradictory evidence had been found with regards to the students' understanding of plagiarism.

An assessment of the plagiarism practices showed that prevalence of plagiarism was low among students. The results revealed that the students understood the departmental policies on plagiarism as the majority indicated that they were aware of departmental penalties for student plagiarism and that they perceived these penalties to be fair. Additionally, the results revealed that the specific department the students were originating from compared to other departments in the faculty, placed the same emphasis on plagiarism. The results also revealed that the students perceived the university and the department's workshops on academic writing and plagiarism to be adequate. In conclusion, South African universities mirror the global trend of an increase in student plagiarism. Sentleng and King [39] observed that most students had committed some form of plagiarism, primarily through the use of the internet as a source. Ellery [40] concluded that despite addressing the issue of plagiarism in academic writing tutorials, students continued to plagiarise, though there was little evidence to suggest that this was done deliberately. Then again, students are not the only perpetrators of plagiarism. A study conducted by Thomas and de Bruin [41] investigated 371 articles published in 19 South African management journals for incidences of plagiarism. The study found that almost 50% of the articles contained "high and excessive" plagiarism. Efforts to improve academic integrity should adopt global best practices while taking into account the local characteristics. Future research can compare the actual similarity indices of submitted assignments to students' perceived plagiarism practices.

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