

Plagiarism: A Review of Why Malaysian Students Commit the Academic Dishonour

Chee-Ming Chan*
Ahmad Shakri Mat Seman
Centre for Graduate Studies
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
Johor, Malaysia
chan@uthm.edu.my*

Alina Shamsuddin
Centre for Academic Development and Training
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
Johor, Malaysia

Abstract— Plagiarism seems to have proliferated and become notoriously comparable to an epidemic in the academia, particularly in IHLs (institutions of higher learning). It is a problem which threatens the very core of academic sanctity, raising questions on the marred honour and integrity in a world generally presumed to be inherently virtuous and trustworthy. Whether plagiarism is committed and condoned, consciously or unintentionally, the results are not very much different, with students being the very victims of the academic plague: distorted learning experience and undervalued learning outcomes. In addition, the internet has served as a two-edge sword cutting both ways, providing greater access to information and knowledge yet encouraging, though inevitably sometimes, increasing incidents of minor and major intellectual thefts. The circumstances notwithstanding, there is a need to review the culture of integrity or lack of in universities, where it encompasses the institution and system as a whole, the staff as the moral compass and the students seeking transparency and guidance in the matter. It is imperative to identify why students engage in plagiarism, how the current learning environment may have contributed to the rise in such misconduct, and what can be done to mitigate and circumvent plagiarism before it grows out of hand. A good grasp of the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ can lead to the formulation of effective strategies and solutions, i.e. the ‘whats’. This paper explores the reasons students plagiarize in Malaysian IHLs, particularly the public universities.

Keywords— plagiarism, academic integrity, scholarly writing, university, reasons

I. INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is researched extensively over the past few decades, and seems to have gained even greater attention in this digital age. The definition of plagiarism is myriad and can be easily found in the literature, e.g. [1]-[3]. The word ‘plagiarism’ itself originated from ‘plagiarius’ in Latin, meaning ‘kidnapper’, ‘abductor’ or ‘plunderer’, which rooted in ‘plagium’ (kidnapping) and ‘plaga’ (snare or net) [4]. Today the word is ascribed to the theft of words or ideas not considered as general knowledge, without adequate credits to the source.

The data acquisition details notwithstanding, reports of ‘cheating’ in the US, a world leading destination for quality

higher education, has made a quantum leap from less than 20 % in the 40’s [5] to approximately 90 % in the 90’s [6]. This surge in academic misconduct appears to coincide with the advent and increased accessibility of the internet in the 90’s. McKenzie [7] even playfully coined the term ‘post-modem’ to illustrate the speed and ease of taking and making other’s work as one’s own. The World Wide Web functions like a continuously enriched resource-rich repository of knowledge and information, with free access to all with an internet connection. These internet resources can be generally categorized as paper mills, open source websites and unsubstantiated information providers.

Considering that the necessary ICT infrastructure for uninterrupted internet accessibility in the country is still under development, it would be unfair to put the blame of increasing plagiarism among students solely on the popular source of information. As discussed in the following sections, other more fundamental factors come into play too.

This paper examines the academic misconduct from the perspective and in the context of Malaysian IHLs (Institutions of Higher Learning), with emphasis on the public universities which share a similar governance and operational ecosystem. Fig. 1 shows the relationship between these components, where the ‘WHYS’ sit in the centre of a learning environment of ‘HOWs’, influencing, accommodating or even encouraging acts of plagiarism.



Fig. 1. The components of ‘whys’, ‘hows’ and ‘whats’.

In order to curb the problem, an all-encompassing blanket approach is required to improve the situation (i.e. WHATs), if not to solve it entirely. As the focus of this paper, factors unique to the Malaysian public IHLs are identified and categorized accordingly to form the basis of a larger

framework in addressing the plagiarism problem, i.e. the ‘WHYS’ and ‘HOWs’.

II. WHY DO STUDENTS PLAGIARIZE?

Many reasons have been cited for students engaging in plagiarism, intentionally or unintentionally, and many if not all of these reasons are universal in nature. This section elaborates on the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ within the learning environment of a typical Malaysian IHL (see Fig. 1). The reasons can be classified into the following: historical baggage, institutional demands and individual attributes and perceptions (Fig. 2). It is uncommon that a student would plagiarize for a single reason. More often than not it is driven, consciously or not, by a combination of factors. In other words, the reasons from each category can overlap (Fig. 3).

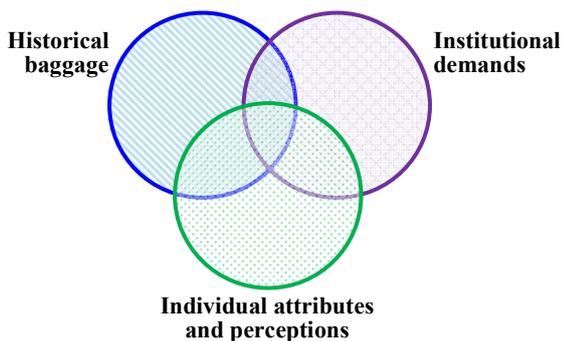


Fig. 2. Classification of the reasons for plagiarism: overlapped.

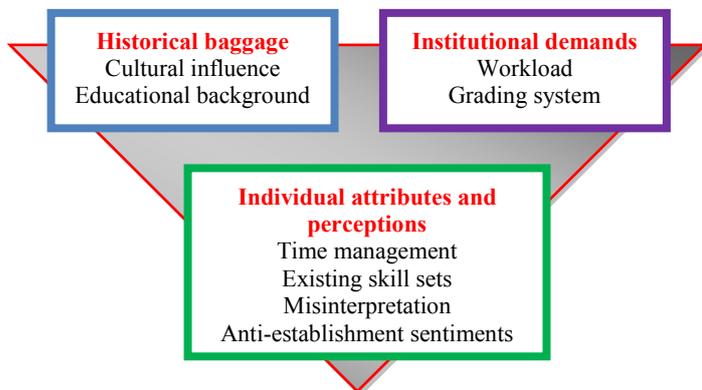


Fig. 3. Reasons for plagiarism under each category: inter-related.

III. HISTORICAL BAGGAGE

A. Cultural Influence

It has been generally reported that Asian students are more inclined to plagiarize than their counterpart from the West [8]. This was very much attributed to the cultural beliefs and values long beheld by the students. For instance, conforming to the norms and conventions is a virtue as compared to questioning the authorities or debating on existing practices, which are perceived as being disrespectful in most oriental cultures. Payne and Nantz [9] posited that viewing plagiarism as a social

construct is helpful in making necessary reforms to address the plagiarism issue among students.

As Malaysian public universities are making concerted effort to increase the enrolment of international students, this factor cannot be undermined. The influx of students from non-English speaking countries would require universities to make preparations for handling issues related to potential plagiarism. For instance, due to the language barrier, these students tend to replicate from various sources in writing academic reports without proper citations included. It may be acceptable in their country of origin, where such practices may even be lauded as a form of reverence to the original author, it is certainly against the conventions of today’s academia.

B. Educational Background

The second historical baggage a student may bring to his or her higher education is the previous training received in schools. Memorization and rote learning are not surprising among secondary school students due to the many and diverse subjects. Students are generally encouraged to remember the facts and formula to be regurgitated in the examinations, with superficial or zero understanding of what they have learnt. This line of argument has led researchers like Drum [10] to suggest dealing with plagiarism as a pedagogical problem instead of one of moral and ethical implications, i.e. when a student plagiarizes, he or she fails to engage in the learning activity designed to attain a specific result.

With little encouragement to commit themselves to cultivating educated opinions, such learning approach could be carried over to the institutions of higher learning. Students taught and groomed to reproduce knowledge by memory would inevitably adopt the same way of learning in the universities, without honing their critical and creative thinking skills. They may not even realize that plagiarism is an offence for the education they received earlier apparently condones passing patches of someone else’s work as one’s own. Ironically, in a way some form of critical thinking does take place in such exercises, where students have to evaluate and screen the information available before stitching them together into a coherent report. Small comfort though that is!

IV. INSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS

A. Workload

Although the current academic practice in universities stipulates the maximum credits a student can register for each semester, exemptions for extra credits do occur on request. In addition, to produce graduates with wholesome humanistic skills, students are obliged to participate in extra-curricular activities, which often take them out of campus for on-site training and exposures. While the effort is commendable, the combination of such excessive academic and non-academic demands may drive a student to sub-par performance. Students with excessive workload also include those with part-time jobs or family commitments. To counter that, students may be enticed to engage in plagiarism to fulfill the coursework requirements.

Excessive workload may be a matter of choice, but competitiveness in the university could be a driving force too. In spite of the heavy workload, high performing or very ambitious students especially, would still push their limits to attain excellence [11]. When the pressure becomes overwhelming, even those with the toughest of will power could succumb to the leeway provided by ‘borrowing’ others’ work.

On the other hand, that curriculum design and delivery these days place much emphasis on hands-on experiential learning seems to have backfired to a certain extent. Take for instance the incorporation of semester-long projects in technical and non-technical courses, as well as out-of-campus excursions for field measurements and data collection. Well intended as these activities may be, the strain on students’ time and energy may have been overlooked. As dire situations call for drastic reactions, with time running out and deadlines looming, students would be subjected to the temptation of plagiarism more than ever!

B. Grading System

The outcome-based education system widely adopted these days very much depends on continuous assessment to chart a student’s achievement of the intended learning outcomes with time. This in turn introduces regular exercises for each course the student signs up for in the semester. Coursework evaluation can constitute up to more than 50 % of the total marks, making it a ‘do-or-die’ situation for students going into final examinations with too much qualms. As a result, students are driven to excel in the coursework assessment, which generally consists of written assignments and reports. Unfortunately the drive to do well is not always accompanied by the conscience to present one’s original work, leading to the easy way out of copy-and-paste.

As aptly described by Williams [12], assignment and examination questions revolve heavily on the reproduction rather than the critical appreciation of content knowledge. Unless and until students perceive the assessment of their work to be truly reflective of their effort in intellectual enquiry, many will stray towards the easier path of plagiarism than honestly engaging in the learning tasks assigned.

Students may even perceive the grading exercise to be superficial, with lecturers making cursory examination and evaluation of the submitted work. In other words, it is not uncommon for students to imagine evaluations being made based on the number of pages and words instead of the actual contents, hence with little or no risks of them getting caught for plagiarism. This is especially true for large classes involving mass lectures. In cases like this, the grading system could have provided a loophole for students to cheat, or at least open to the temptation.

V. INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES AND PERCEPTIONS

A. Time Management

With reference to the institutional demands on students which could be quite a trial sometimes (as discussed above), students ill-prepared to manage their time with suitable

prioritization are likely to fall behind in their studies. Tertiary education could be daunting to students unused to the continuous assessment conducted throughout the semester, who are accustomed to the year-end final examinations and pre-determined tests at certain intervals in schools. Coursework in the forms of assignments, quizzes, tests, presentations, tutorials and project require skills in time management. This is especially so when a student is enrolled in several core courses, all of which share similar assessment structure and timeline. Trying to write up a number of academic papers or reports within the same timeframe can throw a student off course to seek out easier solutions, i.e. plagiarismism.

It does not matter if it is partial copying or unlawful ownership of others’ work, the academic misconduct is a manifestation of failure in teaching and learning. Running out of time, the affected students would veer off the conscientious learning path to meet the deadline, with an apparent urgency to pass the course than to actually learn accordingly. Razera et al. [13] summarized the combined lack of technical writing skills, time and motivation as the primary drivers of plagiarism among students. Indeed, without the necessary skills to engage in scientific writing, and lacking the time to learn and practice sufficiently (with looming overlapping deadlines), a frustrated student would be hard pushed to feel motivated to learn effectively. Hence the easy and often foolproof way out, i.e. to plagiarize.

B. Existing Skill Sets

Students embarking on tertiary education may not be equipped with the necessary skill sets for academic excellence. For instance, a student with limited IT exposure and commands is likely to lose out to fellow coursemates who come into the university well-versed with computing knowhow. Poor language proficiency can also be a major contributing factor, where technical and scientific writing skills are essentially built on a sound command of the language used. Many international students who originate from non-English speaking countries, for example, struggle to express their ideas in the language because of the minimal contextual grasp and background they have of the language, which hinders them from establishing a firm foothold for robust written academic discourse [14]. Plagiarizing would appear to be an acceptable solution, on the argument that the student did put much thought and analytical effort to search and identify the relevant information eventually passed up as his or her own. The lack of language skills is not a hindrance to knowledge acquisition, so to speak. In addition, the genuine lack of understanding of what plagiarism is can cause students to cheat unintentionally. They may find difficulties in discerning the often fine line between expression in their own words and making suitable quotations, citations, paraphrases or references.

C. Misinterpretation

Students who claim to have an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism may have a distorted interpretation of it. As can be seen in the interesting results of a survey conducted by Michalska [15] among students in a British university, the percentage of respondents who claimed to be confident about referencing and citation equal those who agree and strongly

agree to have more training on avoidance of plagiarism. The contradiction reflects an inconsistency which could be attributed to a self realization of inadequacy and incompetency, rooted in an uncertain interpretation of plagiarism.

It is also not uncommon to encounter students who misunderstand the meaning of team work, resulting in sloppy participation or over-dependency on other team members. Sharing is taken to a stretch and the work of others in the team is claimed to be one's own. It is understandably not a straightforward task to transform jointly acquired data into individually published reports, which requires critical analytical skills and creative thinking. Without solid understanding of the contents and data, a casual reference to a team member's work for guidance can turn into a plagiarism case, with a mix-match rearrangement of the jointly obtained data. While the attempt to reorganize the facts and data reveals some form of learning process, it remains unacceptable to take cover under the pretext of such 'intended misinterpretation'.

D. Anti-establishment Sentiments

Hard to fathom as it may seem, some students actually take it as a challenge to practically test the academic system by intentionally submitting plagiarized work. It is especially tempting for these risk-takers if the consequences of getting caught are either considered negligible or the punishment relatively mild. Some are simply lured by the seemingly glamorous notion of beating the system with short cuts to good grades. Such anti-establishment attitude may not be too surprising among young adults in their sophomore year, and can be conveniently, but not necessarily rightfully, attributed to the emotional upheaval experienced by the first-time home leaver. Michalska [15] reported that a quarter of the respondents in her survey admitted to being enlightened about plagiarism only in their postgraduate studies. This is suggestive of a growing sense of academic integrity and responsibility with a student's maturity.

A lack of trust and confidence in the academic staff can also breed rebellion among students who consciously commit plagiarism, with the intention of portraying their dissent, defiance and disrespect. Such seemingly baseless negative behaviour could stem from nonchalance towards a given task, where the purpose and learning outcome of the assignment remain elusive or obscure to the student concerned. Ignorance bordering on self-denial, or vice versa, could lead to acts of plagiarism too. Various excuses would be given to justify their cheating, but none would be to own up to the dishonourable act itself. These motives have been discussed in depth by Park [16].

VI. FINAL WORDS

The reasons for increasing cases of plagiarism in Malaysian IHLs were identified, categorized and examined in depth to form the foundation of a comprehensive framework targeting at deterring plagiarism. 3 categories of reasons were discussed, i.e. historical baggage, institutional demands, as well as individual attributes and perceptions. The reasons (i.e. 'whys' and 'hows') were found to be overlapping and inter-related, leading to students engaging in intentional or unintentional

plagiarism. The factors will be used to formulate a comprehensive and effective strategic plan against the rising plague of plagiarism in Malaysian universities. It is worth noting that with the growing global standardisation of academic curriculum design and delivery, the proposed strategic plan could be applicable to institutions outside of the country too. An internal survey is currently underway and the results will be presented in a sequential paper in the near future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Special thanks to Mr. Azlan Wanti (former Senior Assistant Registrar at the Centre for Graduate Studies, UTHM) for his invaluable effort in preparing the draft of Universiti Tun Hussein Onn's *Plagiarism Prevention Policy for Graduate Students*, which was officially endorsed by the Senate in December 2013.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. Gray, "Other people's words," *Smithsonian*, vol. 32, no. 12, 2002, pp. 102-104.
- [2] F. Fialkoff, "There's no excuse for plagiarism," *Library Journal*, vol. 118, no. 17, 1993, p. 56.
- [3] C.S. Hawley, "The thieves of academe: plagiarism in the university system," *Improving College and University Teaching*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1984, pp. 35-39.
- [4] R.K. Barnhart, "Chambers dictionary of etymology," Edinburgh: Chambers, 1988.
- [5] C.A. Drake, "Why students cheat," *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 12, 1941, pp. 418-420.
- [6] L.A. Jensen, J.J. Arnett, S.S. Feldman and E. Cauffman, "It's wrong, but everybody does it: Academic dishonesty among high school and college students," *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2002, pp. 209-228.
- [7] J. McKenzie, "The new plagiarism: Seven antidotes to prevent highway robbery in an electronic age," *From now on: The Educational Technology Journal*, vol. 7, no. 8, 1998.
- [8] C. Park, "In other (people's) words: plagiarism by university students-literature and lessons," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2003, pp. 471-488.
- [9] S.L. Payne and K.S. Natanz, "Social accounts and metaphors about cheating," *College Teaching*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1994, pp. 90-96.
- [10] A. Drum, "Responding to plagiarism," *College Composition and Communication*, no. 37, 1986, pp. 241-243.
- [11] R.A. Posner, "The little book of plagiarism," New York, Pantheon, 2007.
- [12] J.B. Williams, "The five key benefits of online final examinations (with three bonus benefits)," 8th International Innovation in Economics and Business Conference, 2001, France.
- [13] D. Razera, H. Verhagen, T. Pargman and R. Ramberg, "Plagiarism awareness, perception and attitudes among students and teachers in Swedish higher education- a case study," 4th International Plagiarism Conference, 2010, UK.
- [14] S. Fan, "The classroom and the wider culture: identity as a key to learning English composition," *College Composition and Communication*, no. 40, 1989, pp. 459-466.
- [15] A. Michalska, "Student plagiarism and national differences across Europe," www.archive.plagiarismadvice.org (Retrieved:10Nov2013).
- [16] C. Park, "In other (people's) words: plagiarism by university students-literature and lessons," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2003, pp. 471-488.