Unintended Plagiarism Amongst International Students in Western Universities

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Abstract

In recent years, many western universities have experienced a notable increase of plagiarism and other behaviors that fall under the umbrella of academic dishonesty amongst students at various levels. Concurrently, higher-educational institutions have also seen a large rise in the enrollment of international students with extremely diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A growing body of research has connected higher rates of plagiarism, in western universities during this time period, to international students in particular. This article reviews the current literature in this area, with a focus on the most common factors that put international students in western universities at a higher risk for unintended plagiarism than their counterpart domestic peers. The results showcase a complex myriad of factors that put international students at risk, such as new cultural, financial, or time stresses; underdeveloped language skills; the inability to self-advocate; and cultural differences in both schooling systems and viewing sources. Considering these factors, several practical implementations are recommended for institutions of higher education, with the aim of lessening international students' risk factors of unintentional plagiarism, while simultaneously building academic confidence and community.

Keywords: unintended plagiarism, international students, risk factors

Introduction

With the increased reliance on technology, today's world of education is dramatically different when compared to the classrooms of yesterday. Internet technology, at the fingertips of students, has brought up several new concerns related to academic integrity, especially plagiarism. Many authors have argued that the increase of technology, such as easy access to online sources and online classes, have led to additional motivation for online students to plagiarize (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Moten, Fitterer, Brazier, Leonard, & Brown, 2013, as cited in Greenberger, Holbeck, Steele, & Dyer, 2016). Many western universities are reporting higher rates of plagiarism, and other academically dishonest behaviors, across different teaching modalities, especially amongst their international student community. It is critical for universities to understand the reasons behind this alarming trend, and to reverse it through enhanced plagiarism policies.

This paper intends to examine the existing body of literature to draw insights into why international students tend to be at a higher risk for unintentional plagiarism and suggests proactive methods that universities could adopt to address this sensitive subject.

Method

This literature review is two-pronged in nature. Firstly, exploring relevant research will deepen the universities' understanding of international students' most common reasons for unintentional plagiarizing.

Secondly, utilizing the research to mount a targeted and empathetic approach in policies, programs, and faculty training will help bridge the chasm between western universities and their international student bodies, so that more meaningful support can be provided to students who truly need it.

Literature Review

Risk Factors

The results from current literature showcase a complex myriad of factors that put international students at risk for unintended plagiarism. These include factors, such as new cultural, financial, and time stresses, underdeveloped language skills, the inability to self-advocate, a lack of support networks, and cultural differences in both schooling systems and viewing sources.

International students attending western universities not only have to quickly adjust to a new culture within the classroom, but also to the culture outside of the classroom. They must find their way around, learn how to drive a car or take public transportation, navigate the often confusing and complex immigration and healthcare systems, learn daily necessities like the local currency, shopping options, and different communication styles. As they adapt to a new culture, they might also have to take on a job, due to having inadequate funds to cover rent, tuition, and other living costs. This can add to the already mounting pressure that many international students face (Song-Turner, 2008). To top it off, many international students are very keenly aware of family back in their home countries, who are counting on them to honour the family's sacrifices by doing well in their studies, putting further pressure on them. The demands on their time and

energy can take a toll in leading this group of students toward a tendency to engage in, what might be considered, academically dishonest behaviors. According to Simpson (2016), "Because international students tend to invest more energy and resources, whether mental, financial, or familial, to support themselves and adjust to a new living environment abroad, the demand to succeed becomes higher. This added pressure leads to the increased risk of performing dishonestly" (p. 11).

Within the classroom norms themselves, there are many cultural differences that have put students from non-western backgrounds at a higher risk for plagiarism, than those from a western background. Perhaps the most obvious is the lack of ability to write in English at the rigorous level demanded in some western university programs. Authors Introna, L., Hayes, N., Blair, L., & Wood, E. (2003) mention scientists doing research, and needing to translate ideas from one language into another, but not knowing some of the technical words. These underdeveloped language skills in English could then lead to borrowing words from foreign sources, resulting in unintended plagiarism (p. 53). "For a student who understands the English language, but is unable to communicate it in writing, it seems easier and less confusing to cut and paste words from another author than to struggle with the proper writing style on his/her own" (Simpson, 2016, p. 9). Knowing English only as a second, third, or even fourth language can often pose a barrier for otherwise highly qualified and internationally respected academics (Fox, 1994).

In many cases, cultural inhibitions can prevent international students from self-advocating or seeking clarity from authority figures (Simpson, 2016). This can lead to inadequate understanding of the requirements for coursework, such as assignments and tests, making international students susceptible to unintentional plagiarism.

Another serious risk factor for unintentional plagiarism is cultural differences in perceiving and utilizing sources. Many articles have been written about the differences in thinking of students in eastern countries versus western countries. Some international students' backgrounds have not exposed them to what copyright law is, so they do not "know the importance of ownership and authorship of a published and referenced material" (Pawar, 2019, p. 39), or they come from backgrounds that have not taught them to cite every use of sources, which is a norm in western academics. In addition, they are often encouraged not to change any words to a source itself, as the person who wrote it is the expert, and to change anything would be seen as disrespectful. These students' reason that they should not try to say something themselves that someone else has already said better (modesty versus arrogance); therefore, copying the source's words without any changes is seen as acceptable (Pickering & Hornby, 2005). Students might be expected to repeat information in the form of rote memorization, without questioning or reflecting on it (Denisova-Schmidt, 2016), while many western students are taught to deconstruct sources and add their own creative, open-ended thoughts about them. The discouragement of creative and analytical thinking that might lead to "critiquing accepted knowledge" (Kutieleh & Adiningrum, 201, p. A-88) further widens the gap between eastern and western schooling norms. Pawar (2019) states that some students in India and China related that they would receive better marks if they used memorized textbook information word-for-word on exams. Some from the east view exams simply as a memory test. This stands in stark contrast to the more common western exams that consist of open-ended essays that demand creative ideas or writing assignments that ask students to analyze someone else's work.

Added to these differences is the very view and definition of plagiarism itself. Fuller (2017) mentions that many international students have very different views as to what plagiarism encompasses. According to Pickering & Hornby (2005), some students stated that they did not

see online sources as anything worth citing, since they came from the Web. Other sources mentioned that students from collective societies often did not see anything wrong with copying each other's work, and that this was seen as an acceptable and normal academic behaviour in their home countries; they were surprised to learn that it was different in the west. Author, Song-Turner, states that often in cases of unintended plagiarism, many students are just trying to complete a task and submit work. As such, they might use plagiarized materials to do so, rather than it being a "deliberate and planned act" (2008, p. 49).

However, Bamford & Sergiou (2005), along with many other authors, have concluded that many times, the cause behind unintentional plagiarism could stem from a lack of understanding in how to cite material from other sources correctly. When given text samples in a study conducted at Alberta University, Bamford & Sergiou state that 60% of students interviewed could not distinguish between plagiarized and paraphrased text (2005, p. 20). Angelova & Riazantseva (1999)'s article, "*If you don't tell me, how can I know?*" and Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace, Walker, McGowan, East, Green, Partridge, & James (2013)'s study titled, "*Teach us how to do it properly!*" expresses the idea that most students do want to follow the rules of their western university, but are not necessarily aware of how to follow these often-murky guidelines that may differ from what they are used to.

Recommendations for Higher Educational Institutions

In response to the risk factors most identified for international students, various research articles have mentioned a few consistent recommendations that show promise in lessening cases of unintentional plagiarism amongst international students at western universities.

One such recommendation is to hold workshops specifically designed for international students that are focused on teaching academic research and writing skills. Chen & Van Ullen (2011) describe such a targeted workshop, in a study conducted at the University of Albany. They tested students both before and after the workshop, and found significant improvement by just attending the workshops. Students were even found continuing to use and apply the skills learned in the workshops several months later (p. 209). Many universities are currently doing workshops like this to help their international students achieve academic writing proficiency. For example, the University of Saskatchewan is holding a series of free, online workshops focused on academic writing tutorials for international ESL graduate students during the summer of 2021.

Another recommendation, the literature emphatically states, is to offer free peer-help groups, such as student writing centres and peer-tutoring programs. These could benefit students who do not feel comfortable discussing issues or sharing academic difficulties with faculty members, but would be willing to seek out advice or assistance from peers (Simpson, 2016) in a less threatening and stressful environment.

Some studies have shown that students who are disconnected are at a higher risk of plagiarism (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999), but by simply having healthy support networks, students can lower their risk factors (Whitley, 1998) for unintentional plagiarism. Therefore, creating and marketing international student groups and social/cultural clubs on university campuses is extremely important to the success, both inside and outside of the classroom, of these students. These outlets can help build international students' social networks, as well as bolster confidence in both social and academic settings.

In addition to providing workshops and support networks, developing mandatory plagiarism training courses that are taken every semester could help in setting up expectations (Fass-Holmes, 2017) and student learning proactively, rather than on policing reactively. Pawar (2019) states that a workshop or orientation session at the beginning of an international student's academic life at the university is a must, and should discuss expectations of teachers, what plagiarism is defined as here in the west, why it is punishable, examples and non-examples of it, references on how to use citing tools, and examples of a works cited page (p. 64). These training courses should be examined regularly, along with the number and types of plagiarism cases found on campus during the specified time. This evaluation should be done to gauge the courses' effectiveness and to make any necessary changes as a result.

In the classroom itself, instructors can effectively help lower unintentional plagiarism cases by frequently showcasing examples of acceptable and non-acceptable work samples, as well as clearly stating when group work is allowed. Modeling and giving repetitive instructions about what sort of work is expected throughout the semester, as well as taking time to explain assignment guidelines, could be very helpful for students coming from strict, rigid backgrounds who are not used to the creative freedom expressed in many western universities. Note, though, that these students might experience challenges in integrating into western "academic freedom" and need some time to adjust (Denisova-Schmidt, 2016, p. 5).

Results

The reasons why students engage in unintended plagiarism are very complex and varied. There is not a simple solution, since each case of plagiarism is unique. However, broad connections can be drawn between many studies that show that major factors, such as language and skill deficiencies, views of authority figures, family, financial pressures, as well as cultural and academic adaptations could all be possible reasons that put international students at a higher risk for unintended plagiarism. The recommendations for institutions of higher education include creating support networks, offering peer tutoring groups and workshops geared toward academic writing and research, as well as developing and evaluating campus mandatory plagiarism training courses.

For western university instructors, modeling and discussing acceptable and non-acceptable work samples and expectations throughout the semester was also noted. Other important results for instructors from the literature include placing deterrents against online cheating, showing transparency and approachability to students, valuing all students' inputs, and seeing the first offense of unintended plagiarism as a chance to teach international students about this issue. A detailed discussion of these results is out of scope for this paper.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the literature reviewed, international students are at a higher risk than their domestic counterparts for academically dishonest behaviours, such as unintended plagiarism. They may not know any better, and need to be taught what is acceptable and what is not in their new, academic environment through clear modeling and discussion. International students want to be academically successful while at their western universities, but need help getting there from the faculty. Healthy relationships with both staff and peers are the key to helping international students adjust and succeed in western universities. Without empathetic relationships with

faculty members, students who are disciplined for plagiarism can be left on their own, feeling overwhelmed and stressed.

       Western universities should examine their plagiarism policies already in hand and see if they reflect individualized learning opportunities for each international student who is caught plagiarizing. Do their policies give these students the benefit of the doubt the first time they are caught? Do these policies truly offer a chance to teach these students the difference between what is acceptable and what is not, in a compassionate and non-judgmental way? Do these universities make policies based on the overwhelming conclusion drawn in the literature that international students simply do not understand the scope of academic dishonesty, or how to cite correctly, as understood in the west? Until universities start implementing policies that humanize students by seeing them for the people who they are, complete with unique histories and backgrounds, there will always be a stark divide between robotic punishment and true understanding.

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