

WCES 2010

Plagiarism in higher education: A case study with prospective academicians

Esra Eret^a*, Tuba Gokmenoglu^a^aResearch Assistant, ODTU Egitim Fakultesi No:302, Ankara/06531, Turkey

Received October 27, 2009; revised December 3, 2009; accepted January 14, 2010

Abstract

Being a growing problem, plagiarism is generally defined as “literary theft” and “academic dishonesty” in the literature, and it is really crucial to be well-informed on this topic to prevent the problem and stick to the ethical norms. With this motive, the aim of this study is to investigate the prospective academicians’ views on plagiarism, the degree to which they are knowledgeable about plagiarism, and the factors leading them to plagiarize, if any. The results showed although the prospective academicians have negative attitude, they might plagiarize due to foreign language problems, time constraints, and lack of knowledge about plagiarism.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Plagiarism; academic dishonesty; higher education.

1. Introduction

In the Dictionary of Etymology, the word plagiarism, which means “literary theft”, is explained as coming from the English word “plagiarist” (‘one who wrongfully takes another’s words or ideas’), derived from the Latin plagiarus (‘kidnapper, seducer, plunderer, literary thief’), from plagium (kidnapping) from plaga (snare, net) (Barnhart, 1988, p. 801). The Compact Oxford English Dictionary (2009) defines plagiarism as the act of “taking the work or idea of someone else and pass it off as one’s own.” In literature, plagiarism is defined as “a form of intellectual theft” (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997, p. 200), and “academic dishonesty” (Wilhoit, 1994). In fact, variety of definitions exist in articles and dictionaries to present what plagiarism is; and as Ercegovic and Richardson (2004) proposed the reason for this depth of the plagiarism topic might be its interdisciplinary nature and its being widespread day by day. Parallel to this notion, different reasons might also lie behind this academic dishonesty such as intentionally deceiving or unintentionally ignoring the rules of academic writing (Jolly, 1998). Regardless of the reason, nowadays, there have been prominent attempts to detect the plagiarism and to punish plagiarists through certain set of ethical rules in higher education institutions. Besides these rules to discourage the attempt to plagiarize others’ work, especially, the invention of technological plagiarism detection tools can be, indeed, beneficial if used by instructors and institutions effectively (Beasley, 2004). On the other hand, the national

* Esra Eret. Tel.: +90-312-210-4035; fax: +90-312-210-4079.

E-mail address: eseret@metu.edu.tr

and international studies and articles on the topic reveal that students and researchers commit plagiarism for some reasons in some ways, and this violation of the academic ethics is being hindered through certain sanctions (Eminoğlu & Nartgün, 2009; Koç, 2006; Lanier, 2006; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). In the study of Devlin and Gray (2007), 56 Australian University students were interviewed to investigate their views on the reasons of plagiarism in their school; and student's understanding of plagiarism, poor academic skills, teaching and learning factors and some others were found to be the main reasons leading the students to plagiarize in their institutions.

As a result, the literature supports that the plagiarism is a bigger-growing problem (Park, 2003; Wilhoit, 1994), for that reason being well-informed about the plagiarism for all researchers should have a great importance nowadays to stick to the ethical norms. Along these lines, the purpose of the study is to investigate the prospective academicians' views on plagiarism, the degree to which they are knowledgeable about plagiarism, and the factors leading them to plagiarize, if any. To reach these aims, the research questions of the study are:

- 1- What are the views of prospective academicians on the plagiarism?
- 2- To what extent are the prospective academicians knowledgeable about plagiarism?
- 3- Are there any significant differences among the prospective academicians studying in different programs in terms of their plagiarism test scores?
- 4- What are the factors that lead research assistants to plagiarize?

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sampling method is a census sampling in this study. The questionnaire was distributed to all 150 research assistants at Faculty of Education at Middle East Technical University (METU), and response rate is 49.33 % ($N=74$). Of them, 68.90% are female and 31.10% are male. Furthermore, 68.90 % of the 74 research assistants are PhD students and 10.80% of them are from Computer Education and Information Technology; 21.60% of the participants are from Educational Sciences; 8.10% of them are from English Language Teaching; 32.40% of the assistants are from Elementary Science and Mathematics Education; 14.90% of the participants are from Physical Education and Sports; and 10.80% of them are from Secondary Science and Mathematics Education department. In addition to these, the participants are following three different research assistant programs which are OYP (60.80%), 35th law (18.90%) and METU assistants (16.20%). One of the reasons for conducting a case study at METU is that METU has founded Applied Ethics Research Center, and set the rules against the violation of the ethical issues including plagiarism.

2.2. Design

This is a quantitative case study having a survey research design. To gather data a questionnaire were developed by researchers. The initial pool of 30 items was drawn from the detailed literature review. After analyzing the item pool, and conducting the pilot test, the number of items was reduced to 19. The reliability analysis of the plagiarism survey was conducted and the Cronbach Alpha was found to be .76, which a sign of high internal consistency. Furthermore, the plagiarism test was conducted to explore the participants' basic knowledge about plagiarism as a second scale. There were 29 true-false and 2 multiple choice test items in the test. The test was developed by considering the first and the second levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive domain which are knowledge and comprehension levels. The original test items were taken from the "plagiarismtests.org" with permission. Finally, the items' clarity and lengthiness were redesigned after conducting the pilot test. The data gathered through the likert-scale and test results were analyzed through SPSS.

3. Results

3.1. Views of Prospective Academicians

The first research question of the study was asked to learn about the views of the research questions on the plagiarism issue. The results indicated that the research assistants agree on the necessity of including references in

their work ($M=4.89$, $SD=.33$) and the importance of avoiding plagiarism ($M=4.85$, $SD=.57$). Moreover, while they mostly they know about plagiarism ($M=4.69$, $SD=.62$), they also agree that universities should take some precautions against plagiarism ($M=4.57$, $SD=.74$). Additionally, the research assistants agreed on not asking or paying someone to write a paper/assignment/article for them ($M=4.45$, $SD=1.21$). The other items the participants agree were presented in Table 1. On the other hand, the research assistants disagree on plagiarism's being right when not caught ($M=1.19$, $SD=.52$), and the results show that they mostly did not plagiarize for some reasons ($M=1.58$, $SD=.94$). The research assistants also do not accept copying from internet into their works ($M=1.68$, $SD=.88$). The others items they disagree on were also given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Related to the Prospective Academicians Views' on Plagiarism

Items on Plagiarism	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Including references in my work is necessary	4.89	.33
I think it is important to avoid plagiarism	4.85	.57
I know what plagiarism is	4.69	.62
I think universities have to take necessary precautions against plagiarism	4.57	.74
I would never ask or pay someone to write a paper/assignment/article for me	4.45	1.21
I know about the METU Applied Ethics Research Center	4.22	1.26
I can successfully avoid doing plagiarism	4.15	.75
I know how to keep away from committing plagiarism	4.04	.80
I have never plagiarized when writing a paper/article/assignment.	4.04	.93
I sometimes have difficulty to find the right words when using others' ideas	3.62	1.12
It is easy to avoid doing plagiarism	3.46	.94
I know how to locate information about getting permission for images/sound/video clips in my works	3.41	1.06
To avoid plagiarism, I know with whom or where to contact.	3.24	1.23
If a researcher plagiarizes for the first time and is caught, he/she shouldn't be punished and be allowed to stay at institution since he/she has so much to lose	2.96	1.10
Some tutors don't care if I commit plagiarism or not	2.71	1.28
I think my instructors/advisor make too much fuss about plagiarism.	2.29	1.31
I have copied sentences from internet into my works	1.68	.88
I also plagiarized for some reasons	1.58	.94
Plagiarism is ok if you don't get caught	1.19	.52

3.2. Knowledge about the plagiarism

The plagiarism test was utilized and the mean score of the test was found to be 78.67 points out of 100 and standard deviation is 9.12. The scores revealed variation between 54.84 and 96.77 points. The test items were analyzed in terms of true response rates. Less than 80% of the research assistants gave right answer to 11 true-false test items. Some of these items are; When you summarize a block of text from another work, citing the source at the end of your paper is sufficient (58.10%), you don't have to cite famous proverbs because they're common knowledge (47.30%), using a few phrases from an article and mixing them in with your own words without citation is plagiarism (66.20%), if you see the phrase "era of error" and use it in your paper, you have to cite it (52.70%), the date for M. Kemal ATATÜRK's birthday is common knowledge which means you don't have to cite the source in which you found it (67.60%), if the professor says some interesting things in today's lecture on Plato, it is plagiarism to use her ideas in your paper (59.50%), if you include a famous dialogue from Romeo and Juliet in your slide show presentation about Shakespeare's works, it is plagiarism (51.40%), students who lend classmates copies of their papers, tests, and homework are to fail the class because they are allowing other students to cheat (51.40%), giving another source for information instead of the correct source can be called plagiarism (71.60%), I have very little time to write a paper for my class. I wrote an essay about a similar topic last year. I can use part of it for my new assignment (39.20%), if I read something and then write it as my own words; I will not plagiarize (66.20%).

3.3. *Difference in test scores*

For answering the third research question of the present study, Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were utilized to explore whether there is a significant difference on test scores between the groups in terms of department, gender, degree and program. Before the analysis, the assumptions were checked; Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed that the normality assumption was met, and Levene's test for homogeneity of error variance resulted in $p > .05$, which suggests that there were equal error variances among groups. Therefore, homogeneity of variance assumption was also satisfied. The results showed that there were not significant differences on participants' test scores regarding their department $F(5,73) = .66, p = .65$; gender $F(1,74) = .13, p = .72$; degree (Ms/ Ph.D) $F(1,73) = 1.20, p = .27$ and program (OYP/ 35th law/ METU assistants) $F(2,71) = .61, p = .54$.

3.4. *Factors affecting plagiarizing*

Prospective academicians were asked what the reasons were that led them to plagiarize if they plagiarized in some time of their life. The most frequently stated factors are following: problems with using foreign language (32.40%), time constraints (31.10%), lack of knowledge about plagiarism (25.70%), overloaded course requirements (18.90%), lack of ideas about the work/assignment/paper (17.60%), lack of interest in the topic (13.50%), difficulty of the assignment (12.20%), lack of understanding of the assignment (12.20%), lack of enough academic skills (10.80%), lack of respect or interest for the course (5.5%), lack of punishment for the plagiarism (5.5%).

4. Discussion

The first research question of the study was asked to explore the views of the prospective academicians on plagiarism. The results suggested that the research assistants believed in the necessity of including references and the importance of avoiding plagiarism. This might show that the research assistants in the college of education at METU are generally conscious about the plagiarism and have a negative stance towards it. Moreover, the results also indicated they are know about what plagiarism is and believe that taking precautions for it is necessary for higher education institutions. At this point, it could be restated that the sample is consisted of research assistants who mainly deal with the academic writing and the university has the Applied Ethics Research Center to set the rules against the violation of the ethical issues. This might affect the results in a positive way.

Additionally, as the second dimension of the study, the plagiarism test results of the students indicated that the test scores of the research assistants are not as high as expected from a prospective academician. Although the research assistants regarded themselves as knowledgeable about the plagiarism ($M = 4.69, SD = .62$) with high mean score, the test results were found to be, to some extent, different. The reason for this difference between research assistants' perceptions and test results might be that they know about plagiarism and at least heard about it; however, they did not have enough academic knowledge or a course. The integration of a "course on plagiarism and academic ethics" into higher education institutions' graduate curricula could be suggested to increase the students' academic knowledge and awareness about what really plagiarism is and what plagiarism includes.

Another result found in the study was non-significant differences among the research assistants in relation to department, gender, degree, and program in term of plagiarism knowledge. As the research assistants, being the sample of the study, are all part of education faculty, the reason for no difference might be that they mostly have similar characteristics as being the part of education faculty and having the background of teaching profession.

When looking at the results related to factors affecting why they plagiarize, it is seen that the stated factors are generally problems with using foreign language, time constraints, lack of knowledge about plagiarism, overloaded course requirements, difficulty of the assignment, lack of understanding of the assignment, lack of enough academic skills, and others. The results are mainly consistent with the literature. To give an example, Devlin and Gray (2007) found that students plagiarize because of institutional admission criteria, students' understanding of plagiarism, poor academic skills, teaching and learning factors, personality factors, and external pressures.

To sum up, although the prospective academicians generally have a negative posture towards plagiarism and regard themselves as conscious, there are some deficiencies in their academic knowledge about plagiarism. The suggestions made above could help the higher education institutions to develop strategies and increase awareness on plagiarism. In that way, in the age of technology and internet, increasing act of plagiarism could be handled in a

better way. Lastly, more studies are needed to investigate the issue of plagiarism and suggest practical solutions. This study could be revised by including more participants from different departments and universities, and could be conducted nation-wide to see the general picture on plagiarism in Turkey. The more scientific studies are conducted, the more ways of prevention could be found to inform the stakeholders. In this way, the awareness and consciousness might help to stop this increasing problem of the age.

References

- Ashworth, P., Bannister, P., & Thorne, P. (1997). Guilty in whose eyes? University students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(2), 187-203.
- Barnhart, R.K. (Ed.) (1988). *Chambers dictionary of Etymology*. Edinburgh: Chambers.
- Beasley, J. D. (2004). The impact of technology on plagiarism prevention and detection: research process automation, a new approach for prevention. Plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policies 2004 Conference, 1-11.
- Compact Oxford English Dictionary; accessed from http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/plagiarize?view=uk on 15.10.2009
- Devlin, M. & Gray, K. (2007). In their own words: a qualitative study of the reasons Australian university students plagiarize. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26(2), 181-198.
- Eminoğlu, E., Nartgün, Z. (2009). Üniversite öğrencilerinin akademik sahtekarlık eğilimlerinin ölçülmesine yönelik bir ölçek geliştirme çalışması. *Uluslararası İnsan Bilimleri Dergisi*, 6(1).
- Ercegovic, Z. & Richardson, Jr., J.V. (2004). Academic dishonesty, plagiarism included, in the digital age: a literature review. *College & Research Libraries*, 65(4), 301-318.
- Jolly, P. (1998). The ethics of plagiarism. (ERIC Document Reproducible Service No. ED421725).
- Koç, S. (2006). Yayın etiği ihlalleri ve hukuksal düzenlemeler. *Araştırmalar ve Etik*, 50, 63-75.
- Lanier, M.M. (2006). Academic integrity and distance learning. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 17(2), 244-261.
- Park, C. (2003). In other (people's) words: plagiarism by university students—literature and lessons. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(5), 471-488.
- Scanlon, P. M., & Neumann, D. R. (2002). Internet plagiarism among college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 374-385.
- Wilhoit, S. (1994). Helping students avoid plagiarism. *College Teaching*, 42.