International Students and Plagiarism: an analysis of the reasons for plagiarism among international foundation students

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Introduction

Plagiarism is regarded as a serious academic offence, although more often than not it results from misunderstanding rather than a deliberate intention to cheat. This pilot study attempted to explore the extent of plagiarism amongst a cohort of international foundation students and the reasons why they plagiarise. This study will be followed with a comparative study that will look at the differences in understanding between home (UK) foundation students and international foundation students. An issue to be explored is the usefulness of the distinction between intentional and unintentional plagiarism.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that plagiarism is more of an issue amongst international students, therefore this project sought to carry out an initial evaluation as to whether plagiarism was prevalent amongst this particular cohort of international students. The findings are not out of line with other studies, as Szabo and Underwood (2004) found similar levels of intentional plagiarism. Clough (2000) discovered that plagiarism is even easier to detect amongst international students because the tutor is familiar with their writing styles.

It is argued that the data supports this position. The analysis presents to some extent a picture of confusion and lack of knowledge on the issue of plagiarism which is understandable, especially at the beginning of students' studies; however, ignorance can not be accepted as an excuse or defence against an accusation of plagiarism.

Methodology

It was intended that the research project should pilot a questionnaire to collect data with regard to questions raised on the issue of plagiarism and the understanding of plagiarism from the international students' perspective. A simple questionnaire was designed of which thirty five returns were collated. In addition to piloting a questionnaire it was necessary to address issues of unintentional plagiarism through

a qualitative approach to the research because of the subjective aspect of unintentional plagiarism. Some open questions were therefore posed in the questionnaire and two focus groups were carried out to verify the questionnaire as well as investigating further what constitutes unintentional plagiarism. The focus groups provided further insight into the students' definitions of plagiarism and the place of unintentional plagiarism within the context of the international student perspective on plagiarism.

The sample contained international students from 17 different countries. Data from the questionnaires was analysed from an overall perspective as well as looking at a cultural breakdown. The majority of the respondents fell into three major regions - West Africa, Asia and China - that the team considered useful for the purposes of an analysis of cultural trends (see table below) and some of the anecdotal assumptions that are often made with regard to cultural background and issues of plagiarism. As this project was a pilot study, the findings are therefore only indicative and will be researched further for a more extensive analysis.

Intentional plagiarism

With regard to intentional plagiarism, 18 out of the 35 respondents admitted that they had plagiarised. There were various reasons given for this both within the open-ended question posed in the questionnaire and in the focus groups. The most quoted was time pressure and the fact that in their own country copying from textbooks was not an issue. Interestingly a majority admitted copying from books at school. In what might seem to be a contradiction, in response to the open question of whether they believed plagiarism was wrong, most felt that it was immoral or unethical to plagiarise. Piety (2002) expresses suspicion that any culture regards plagiarism as a good thing but acknowledges that some cultures take a more lenient view of the 'offence'.

The majority of respondents confirmed that they had learnt about plagiarism at the university they were attending. Almost half (16 out of the 35) acknowledged being tempted to plagiarise even if they had not done so. Plagiarism or the temptation to plagiarise would therefore appear to be rife amongst this particular cohort of students. All but one of the West African respondents admitted to copying from books at school and the focus group highlighted the fact they had expected to do so at university and could not understand lecturer's 'obsession' with discovering their sources of information. Only 3 out of the seven Chinese respondents said they had copied from books at school. However, the majority of Chinese students said they had heard of plagiarism before coming to the UK. This rather contradicts assumptions made with regard to Chinese students being the group that are culturally are unaware of what we mean by plagiarism in the UK. By contrast, most of the Asian group said they had not heard of plagiarism before university.

Table of results for cultural grouping

Questions posed	Yes or No	Nigeria & Ghana [8 students]	China [7 students]	Asia [8 students]
Taken university entrance exams	Y	4	5	6
	N	4	2	2
Copy from texts at school	Y	7	3	2
	N	1	4	6
Know what plagiarism is	Y	7	7	6
	N	0	0	1
Heard about plagiarism before university	Y	3	4	1
	N	4	2	7
Been told about plagiarism at university	Y	7	6	8
	N	1	1	0
Ever given work to a friend	Y	0	2	0
	N	8	5	8
Ever plagiarised	Y	4	3	4
	N	4	4	4
Ever been tempted to plagiarise	Y	2	3	2
	N	2	3	4
Do you think its wrong	Y	7	7	8
	N	0	0	0

In terms of cultural grouping, half of the West African and Asian students and just under half of the Chinese group admitted to plagiarism. This is probably not unexpected in terms of the gap between the strict definition of plagiarism in the UK and the acceptance of textbook copying prior to entry to higher education. The focus groups supported the view that students do not really regard such copying from textbooks as 'cheating', as does the research carried out by Bannister and Ashworth (1998). It is interesting that one of the students whilst denying that he had passed his work to a friend, confessed that he had plagiarised, but highlighted the reason for his plagiarism as being due to copying from a friend. This implies a

lack of understanding of the term among international students that was further researched in the focus groups.

Unintentional plagiarism

While the majority of students questioned appear to understand the moral and academic implications of plagiarism, some simply do not. Martin (1994) discovered that many students simply do not understand proper acknowledgement in practice. Therefore, it is true to say that in some cases the plagiarism was unintentional. Although the notion of unintentional plagiarism is a debatable issue, it clearly presented itself, particularly in the focus groups discussions. Out of the eight students interviewed in focus group one, three admitted that their knowledge on plagiarism was 'hazy' and that they had probably plagiarised at some point throughout the past year, but not intentionally. Perry (2001) explains that confusion between plagiarism and paraphrasing will always exist. He found that some students believe that if you copy from several different sources, and then combine them, it is not actually plagiarism but 'research'. The second focus group expressed identical concerns about plagiarism but also expressed their lack of understanding of what they regarded as an obsessive attitude towards what they perceived as something not terribly serious. This further underlines a deep chasm that appears to exist between the acceptable academic norm and the students' perception and/or acceptance of the university standard. In fact it is clear that international students have not grasped the finer points of acknowledgement and referencing when it comes to academic pieces of work and cannot therefore be viewed as having plagiarised intentionally.

The studies of Alberta University (2001) similarly found that 60% of students interviewed could not distinguish between paraphrased and plagiarised text. In the UK, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC, 2002) also discovered that the main cause of minor plagiarism is a lack of understanding of how to cite material from other sources.

Being allowed to 'copy' from textbooks at school or college also proves problematic for the students, as it is very difficult to break routine habits. Alberta University (2001) also discovered that for many Asian students proper acknowledgement of the language and ideas of others is a very difficult concept to understand. Both focus groups confirmed that copying from textbooks was not prohibited, but copying from each other was. McKenzie (2000) suggests that students from other cultures may be prone to plagiarism because they actually believe that copying another's work is not cheating, it is a compliment.

Whilst plagiarism cannot be justified, it is clear that in some cases, it is not done with knowledge or with any deliberate intention. As one student cited in Piety (2002, p.1) said: "we've all done it, at some point or other, without meaning to".

Conclusion

The results of this small pilot study indicate that plagiarism is prevalent amongst international students. From the students' responses in the questionnaires, the main reasons for acknowledged plagiarism were external pressures to succeed or time pressure. The picture with regard to unintentional plagiarism is more complex as cultural factors play a role with regard to whether plagiarism is intentional or unintentional. Students from different cultures cannot always understand the UK position with regard to plagiarism. The focus group findings demonstrated that many of the students had plagiarised unintentionally. It is also very difficult to break routine habits amongst students.

The implication is that a cultural reorientation is required in order to aid students to master the skill of proper attribution. Unfortunately, there is no simple strategy to break old routines amongst international students. McKenzie (2000) states that in this case it is useful for every lecturer on every module to prepare a handout that explains to the students the nature of plagiarism. The idea behind this strategy is to 'drum it into their heads' from every angle. Further to this, it is also an idea to test the students on the topic of plagiarism to ensure they fully understand it.

It is also worthwhile remembering that plagiarism takes many forms, and as Piety (2002 p1) theorises, "plagiarism is subjective….what is plagiarism to one person is not necessarily plagiarism to another".

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