

# PLAGIARISM, A WIDESPREAD CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM

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**Abstract:** *Student plagiarism has been a well-known issue for the academic world over the last years. This study highlights the way that this issue is addressed in the literature of the last two decades: the extent of the phenomenon; the different perspectives on it; the solutions identified; and the relation between student plagiarism and the Internet. The study also contains a few remarks regarding these approaches and signals a possible supplementary cause for the propensity of students for plagiarism, namely encouraging pupils in pre-academic education to draw up school projects using information available online.*

**Key words:** *plagiarism, Internet, academic ethics.*

## 1. Introduction

Student plagiarism represents an issue that most of the members of the teaching staff in higher education have to cope with in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I have directly noticed a growing number of plagiarized papers submitted by students over the past years. What started as an isolated phenomenon, has soon transformed into a current approach to my didactical requirements.

This has become an increasingly bothersome and baffling situation and has led me to wonder about its underlying causes and the means to efficiently manage it. The first possible answers I identified focused on my own particular situation: the content of the lectures did not appeal to the students, the formulation of the tasks for the essays was not clear and accurate enough, the students undervalued the examiner's skills to detect plagiarism, the topics suggested for coverage were not interesting, etc. It was only later, in 2013, during some informal conversations with academics from Great Britain and the Balkan countries in a Tempus project that it dawned on me that the problem was shared by all of us and hence the answers could be common.

In the context of this problem's recalibration, I considered it necessary to first look into the approaches to plagiarism in the academic journals in the last two decades.

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## 2. A Phenomenon on the Rise

Student plagiarism has boomed for the past years (Mansoor and Ameen, 2016; Vanbaelen and Harrison, 2013), even at Oxford University (Halupa and Bolliger, 2013), and thus has led to desperate confessions like: “If I failed everyone who plagiarizes, I wouldn’t have very many students.” (Vanbaelen and Harrison, 2013, p. 5). Plagiarism is one of the most frequent deviations from academic ethics (Marques, Reis and Gomes, 2019). Correspondingly, the concern for academic integrity on behalf of professionals in higher education has also grown (Busch and Bilgin, 2014). However, the approaches to student plagiarism are different and hence, the phenomenon acquires a number of facets.

The correlation between the tendency for plagiarism and a multitude of factors has been highlighted: gender, age, level of education, cultural affiliation, ethical codes and procedures, specialization (Busch and Bilgin, 2014), school performance, motivation, alcohol consumption (East, 2010), distance learning (Ewing et al., 2019), ethical relativism and Machiavellianism (Quah, Stewart and Lee, 2012) and students’ admission to the chosen/allocated university profile (Atudorei, 2015).

In the past years the interest in detecting cross-language plagiarism has grown, and algorithms and detection software like the segmentation by key words (Ehsan and Shakery, 2016), the continuous word alignment-based similarity analysis (Franco-Salvador, Gupta, Rosso and Banchs, 2016), fuzzy semantic-based model Alzahrani, Salim and Palade (2015) and others have been developed.

## 3. Different Approaches to Student Plagiarism

Mismatches among the attitudes towards plagiarism of those directly involved have been highlighted. It was noted that the ethical underpinnings of plagiarism differ from one culture to another (Busch and Bilgin, 2014; Hofmann, Myhr and Holm, 2013; Löfström and Kupila, 2013; Ramzan et al., 2012; Vanbaelen & Harrison, 2013).

Las but not the least, students’ and teachers’ opinions on the phenomenon diverge. Teachers have stricter standards than students and, as for the latter, their perceptions vary depending on their specialization (Chen and Chou, 2017; Pecorari and Petrić, 2014). In the case of academic people, plagiarism is more often than not equated to the theft of research data and in the case of students, plagiarism is rather the illicit replication of some work or of a set of sentences, than the un-allowed borrowing of somebody else’s ideas (Li, 2013b); unlike teachers, students are not clear about what cheating means, but they believe that the associated punishments are very severe, as Busch and Bilgin (2014) show. Students’ view on plagiarism is considered to result from a mix between their previously acquired knowledge and their direct experience as to institutional policies and resources (Powell and Singh, 2016). Bokosmaty et al. (2018) consider that students have a permissive approach to plagiarism. There are various opinions on the relation between the electronic means employed to detect plagiarism and the quality of academic anti-plagiarism policies - unlike teachers, students feel that their teachers are not very skilled and that anti-plagiarism policies are not very clear (Ramzan et al., 2012)

The facets of the dishonesty involved by plagiarism have been emphasized. Plagiarism distorts scientific credit (Helgesson and Eriksson, 2015). Research conducted on plagiarism in secondary schools in seven European countries, Romania included - which actually is the only former Communist country among the seven - reveals plagiarism as a deeply rooted problem, even though both teachers and students know it is illegal (Dias and Bastos, 2014a). Gómez, Salazar and Vargas (2013) show that most plagiarism occurs in relation with small didactic stakes and that there is evidence that perpetrators are aware of the possible consequences of their dishonest actions.

The relative character of plagiarism assessment was signalled: there are circumstances that make plagiarism more or less serious and hence more or less to be blamed (Helgesson and Eriksson, 2015), and sometimes textual plagiarism is but the result of not understanding how references should be used (Pecorari and Petrić, 2014). There are also critical analyses of the possibility that plagiarism might be culturally anchored. More than half of Taiwanese students believe plagiarism is culturally anchored, as Chien (2017) shows. On the other hand, even though Chinese students and teachers view plagiarism differently from their Anglo-American counterparts, they totally disagree with plagiarism, as Hu and Lei (2016) indicate. Moreover, Yang et al. (2014) show that, rather unexpectedly, children from cultures that view the idea of copyright quite differently, have similar approaches to plagiarism since they are five years old.

The uncomfortable situation of teachers confronting the spread of student plagiarism was outlined. Checking students' papers is time consuming, the text can be easily modified and thus becomes difficult to trace. Thus, starting from the assumption that students are to copy either way, some academics avoid requiring written essays even in the case of disciplines where such tasks are necessary (Rosenberg, 2011). Most students do not tell on their colleagues who copy or plagiarize (Busch and Bilgin, 2014; Ramzan et al., 2012). The strategies employed to detect plagiarized work underline the incapacity of institutions and their limited resources when fighting a battle in which likely plagiarizers are privileged. Anti-plagiarism systems are useful to detect copied texts but not intelligent plagiarism (Alzahrani et al., 2012). Many of the teachers prefer to ignore any plagiarism suspicions for various reasons: lack of direct evidence, bureaucracy, lack of administrative support, lack of effects on the culpable ones (Busch and Bilgin, 2014) and suspicions of low didactic performance (Vanbaelen and Harrison, 2013).

#### **4. Student Plagiarism and the Internet**

The importance of the Internet in the current educational context has been underlined. Researchers have agreed upon its role in plagiarism spreading given its ease of access as a public source of information (Dias and Bastos, 2014a, 2014b; Husain, Al-Shaibani and Mahfoodh, 2017; Mansoor and Ameen, 2016; Stabingis, Šarlauskienė and Čepaitienė, 2014). It is the very architecture of the Internet that favors the "copy-paste" technique (Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre, 2010; Townley and Parsell, 2004), it puzzles students as to copyright rules (Löfström and Kupila, 2013) and thus, leads to plagiarism, in a more or less aware manner (Vanbaelen and Harrison, 2013). On the other hand, the Internet can contribute to an increase in the efficiency of the teaching activities (Granitz

and Loewy, 2007) and is an opportunity for students (Ramzan et al., 2012) and also, as a trigger of the problem of plagiarism, it can also be the one providing solutions to it (Townley and Parsell, 2004). The IT skills required by the use of the Internet are also instruments to be employed in the detection of new unethical academic practices (Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre, 2010).

The academic environment expects students to behave on the Internet as they would in libraries (Townley and Parsell, 2004). At the same time, most students copy from the Internet without deeming that an unethical academic practice since they perceive plagiarism as part of college culture (Heckler and Forde, 2014). Web plagiarism is considered by students as a less serious offence than “traditional” plagiarism since the Internet is a public and open source of information. A significant number of students admit to plagiarizing and do not view that as a threat to academic integrity (Ramzan et al., 2012). However, severe plagiarism is rare (1-2%, Coutts et al., 2011).

## 5. Identified Solutions to Student Plagiarism

Students’ sensitivity to the problem of plagiarism has been (joyfully) underlined. Research results show that the latter feel the need for training in this respect (Vanbaelen and Harrison, 2013), want to gain more theoretical and practical knowledge related to quoting the sources (Ramzan et al., 2012; Stabingis, Šarlauskienė and Čepaitienė, 2014) and deem as useful their full access to the reports on how to use systems meant to detect plagiarism, not only to check the results of plagiarism (expressed as similitude percentages) (Löfström and Kupila, 2013).

Depending on the factors identified as responsible for plagiarism spread among students, various solutions have been suggested. A first set of solutions focuses on directly supporting students in correctly writing their papers. In this respect, the proposal is to guide students in planning related tasks/managing resources and encouraging them to write despite fears of accidental plagiarism (Löfström and Kupila, 2013), to create collaboration opportunities between students and researchers (Löfström, 2011) or supervising opportunities of students’ writing activities (Mahmood, 2010). Universities should provide centres for assisting students in the practice of writing, teachers should explain students the rules of academic writing (Gómez, Salazar, Vargas, 2013), as well as identify, consider and reduce the pressure on students (Ramzan et al., 2012).

Responsible assistance of beginners by coordinating professors was also considered useful (Li, 2013a; Li, 2013b). The interest on behalf of Chinese academics to manage plagiarism has been on the rise given the frequent association of Chinese culture with the copy-paste phenomenon (Kelm, 2013). It is mainly a constructive interest, oriented towards the variant of supporting authors in their undertakings of ethically producing scientific texts. Students can be directed towards honest solutions for educational tasks, highlighting the dialectic of the relation between copying and imitation (in Chinese cultural tradition, the disciples are encouraged to copy the words of their master). They can be explicitly taught how to efficiently work with the text in order to draw up reading notes and/or implicitly, through repeated and responsible demands of revising a written text, how not to corruptly borrow someone else’s written text (Li, 2013b). Mansoor and Ameen (2016) sanction the orientation

of Pakistan universities towards the use of anti-plagiarism software rather than towards counselling researchers on how to avoid plagiarism.

The interest in controlling the production of texts written by students is not the exclusive concern of Chinese academics. Hofmann, Myhr and Holm (2013), referring to Norwegian doctoral students, suggest increasing the quality of teaching, focusing on case studies and on repeated dissemination of best practices related to academic standards, ensuring better training for supervisors, as well as clarifying and efficiently communicating the institutional policy on the lack of scientific rigor and honesty in order to sensitize and improve attitudes to the ethical dimensions of scientific research. Trautner and Borland (2013) propose employing sociological imagination in a pedagogical exercise meant to build and analyze scenarios concerning the reasons and consequences on dishonest academic behaviour. Such an exercise that was initially elaborated for American students can be easily adapted to various institutional contexts and would help many more others simultaneously understand personal and social implications of what the lack of integrity means. Yang, Stockwell and McDonnell (2019) signal the temporary efficiency of a "Writing in Your Own Voice" intervention in fighting plagiarism.

Another set of solutions refers to acquiring thorough knowledge of the rules on writing scientific texts. According to Dee and Jacob (2012) better informed students is a more efficient method than increasing the (perceived) probability of catching and punishing them. Researchers suggest the dissemination of information on documentation and quotations (Granitz and Loewy, 2007), in a form that helps and does not puzzle students (Bell, 2018), drawing up manuals about quoting rules, clarifying concepts associated with plagiarism and with intellectual property rights (Mahmood, 2010), the drawing up of guides of best practices for students and teachers (Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre, 2010), having students sign academic integrity documents (Granitz and Loewy, 2007), promoting research ethics (Löfström, 2011) and specific policies regarding plagiarism (Halupa and Bolliger, 2013; Heckler and Forde, 2014, Jereb et al., 2018). Poff (2010) considers that the introduction of ethics elements in academic curricula is certainly useful. Ramzan et al. (2012) propose organizing seminars, workshops and symposia on plagiarism, and Li (2013a) supports the usefulness of an online available handbook elaborated by COPE (The Committee on Publication Ethics), editors and journals that would be meant to clarify, by examples, the cases of plagiarism and to indicate the rules of avoiding these. According to Vanbaelen and Harrison (2013), if students caught to have plagiarized are warned, explained what mistake they made, asked to redo the paper, they will do that and thus the rate of plagiarism will decrease. Pandoi, Gaur and Gupta (2019) suggest inducing the feeling of shame in plagiarators in order to decrease plagiarism.

The courses on how to correctly make references to bibliography have reduced the number of unethical quotations (Law, Ting and Jerome, 2013); the mix between conceptual and practical aspects characteristic of each discipline has increased the understanding and application of knowledge related to plagiarism in educational enterprises (Powell and Singh, 2016); a course on research methodology at master's level has been well received by students in the innovative form in which it was

proposed: namely as a collaboration between teachers and librarians and focused on two aspects - the correct use of references and the legal and ethical aspects of plagiarism (Gunnarsson, Kulesza and Pettersson, 2014). Libraries and librarians have been granted a wider role in combating plagiarism: from the informal status of irregular counselling on anti-plagiarism (Mansoor and Ameen, 2016) to formal training in the field and prevention of the phenomenon (Gibson and Chester-Fangman, 2011).

Other solutions are oriented towards teachers taking full responsibility for the educational process. In this respect, researchers recommend balance and clarity in the formulation of requirements for their students (Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre, 2010; Heckler and Forde, 2014), acting as role models for the latter (Granitz and Loewy, 2007), shifting attention from technological solutions to building a community based on trust through transparent institutional disciplinary and individual practices (Townley and Parsell, 2004). In Lithuanian universities there are four categories of prevention measures against plagiarism: adopting ethical codes, training and counselling students, monitoring their progress and the internal evaluation of academic processes, as Stabingis, Šarlauskienė and Čepaitienė (2014), show. The latter also underline the motivating role played by the respect and trust established among teachers and students, as well the shift in focus from the quantity of processed text on the quality of its approach, namely on the originality and innovation required to avoid plagiarism. Dias and Bastos (2014b) indicate as another solution to counter the phenomenon developing transversal competencies, innovative and attractive teaching methods, promoting contextual interventions in teachers' practice, orienting education towards creative individual work rather than towards memorizing and repeating information. Law, Ting and Jerome (2013) underline the importance of maintaining an academic integrity policy with no rule trespassing in order to avoid transforming plagiarism into acceptable practice.

Another set of solutions suggests retrieving the role of the Internet as a didactical instrument. Thus, researchers suggest that teachers should require their students to synthesize the materials that are available online and to use anti-plagiarism tools to evaluate their own work (Granitz and Loewy, 2007) and be themselves the first to use new technology (Heckler and Forde, 2014). Even though the intention of teachers is to preponderantly check their students' work, plagiarism detection can also become an instrument for the development of knowledge (Mphahlele and McKenna, 2019) since the use of such a program develops students' ability to write scientific papers and imposes a review of the procedural guides on plagiarism (Löfström and Kupila, 2013). Even students acknowledge the usefulness of an anti-plagiarism program for supporting the learning process, understanding academic writing, motivating students to learn how to correctly employ available resources and teachers to correctly disseminate the rules of academic writing, as well as for preventing dishonest students from obtaining undeserved advantages. Specific anti-plagiarism training is more efficient than the general one and should be introduced in academic curricula from the very beginning, as Halupa, Breitenbach and Anast (2016) show. Dias and Bastos (2014a) suggest using anti-plagiarism software starting with secondary school. Löfström, Huotari and Kupila (2017) signal the academic success of the implementation of text-matching software in Finland.

## 6. Discussions and Conclusion

Many students from many parts of the world plagiarise. Student plagiarism is judged and managed in different ways, depending on the policies of universities and on ethical connotations of copying in various cultures. The phenomenon affects the didactic behaviour of professors and their relating to educational tasks.

Researchers estimate that the problem could be solved if students were informed about plagiarism, if they were actually supported by (well trained) professors in carrying out their papers, if they were clearly and repeatedly informed about the rules and institutional policies regarding the honesty of written academic texts. Guides to good practice and ethics courses in academic curricula would be useful in this context. Reclaiming the Internet as a didactic instrument, through its controlled use as a source of information with the aid of plagiarism detecting software, is also considered as part of the solution to the problem of student plagiarism. Researchers signal in this context the opposing sides of using anti-plagiarism software in order to verify students' work: on the one hand, the abilities of academic writing are developed and accidental borrowings are indicated; on the other hand, students who deliberately plagiarise are forced to improve their technique, plagiarising in a more sophisticated way in order to trick the software.

Wrigley (2019) calls "de-plagiarism" the action of erasing traces of plagiarism, of cleaning the text. In the case of works that I checked, de-plagiarism consisted in changing the font of one or several characters in the text, joining some of the prepositions or conjunctions to neighbouring words or introducing hidden characters, in order to hinder the identification of the original text.

Most of the solutions identified for student plagiarism address it as a fact; they refer to it as remaining current. However, in order to complete the repertoire of solutions, I believe that the perspective on the causes of plagiarism has to be enlarged. Most causes already identified in works about plagiarism are in line with the solutions, they refer to plagiarism remaining current. They will be addressed separately, in a different study.

As Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre (2010) indicated, in contemporary European education, the accent shifted from acquiring theoretical information to carrying out creative educational activities. Against the background of this shift of accent, a cause of student plagiarism is added, which is more strongly related to pre-academic education than to the fact that plagiarists are students. It is a matter of encouraging students in primary education and in secondary education to draw up personal or group school projects that are taken over by copy-paste materials available on the Internet. As we have shown on a different occasion, students find it hard to admit and manage that "what proved to be useful and efficient in the elaboration of these 'projects' is now considered blameable" (Sorea, Rățulea and Borcoman, 2011, p. 317). This cause of plagiarism, together with the related solutions of solving the problem, is worthwhile being considered as the theme for a different study.

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