Plagiarism: Academic dishonesty or 'blind spot' of multicultural education?

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One of the issues facing universities operating in a range of market situations and contexts is that of plagiarism.   Different universities have taken different approaches in dealing with this issue. In an Australian university context, this issue is of particular concern, given the large numbers of overseas students studying in Australia, and offshore in Australian administered programmes such as in China and India. It is also an issue in a climate where students increasingly see themselves as consumers with increased rights, power, status and legal standing (Onsman, 2008). Students from a number of countries were interviewed for this paper, to identify their own views about plagiarism. The study found that there were several reasons why students tended to plagiarise and these included challenges of language, skill and respect for 'the foreign expert'. What emerges from this paper is a complex and at times confusing web of perceptions and attitudes towards plagiarism. These pose a significant set of challenges for foreign universities developing and delivering programmes in a range of markets, particularly in locations such as Australia, where the importance and value of attracting, supporting – and, indeed, understanding - foreign students, has tended to underpin many university marketing efforts.

Introduction

Concerns about plagiarism are on the increase within many areas of the global university system, especially in the context of the increasing number of international students that now form a key aspect of so many university programmes. Figures obtained from an investigation by The Sydney Morning Herald (Alexander, 2006) reveal something of the extent of the growing problem in Australia. For example, the University of Technology, Sydney recorded 362 counts of plagiarism in 2005, while the University of Wollongong recorded 134. It is estimated almost 3500 students have been caught plagiarising or cheating across eight Austral-

ian universities since 2001. Another article entitled 'Plagiarism rises amid founding cuts', in the Sydney Morning Herald (Susskind, 2006), indicated that the problem of plagiarism was exacerbated by the overseas student influx.

Plagiarism may not, of course, be limited to international students: an Australian study suggests that more than 8 per cent of students have been found to pilfer large amounts of text from the web (Buckell, 2002), but according to the accusers, it does appear to be more evident among international students.

Recently several initiatives have been introduced by universities in Australia and elsewhere to strengthen academic integrity, including compiling more strin-

gent academic writing guidelines, instituting plagiarism detection software, undertaking additional staff teaching programmes and so on. However, it could be argued that the reason behind student plagiarism, particularly those from countries such as India or China, still remains somewhat misunderstood, and even quite opaque.

However, some academics have raised concerns and questions over the Western notion and definition of what constitutes plagiarism. For example, Pennycook (1996) writes that the notion of 'ownership of text' is a particularly Western concept. He points out that plagiarism cannot be viewed as a black and white issue, but that it is a far more complex phenomenon related to the relationship between text, memory and learning. Scollon (1995, p23) also states that 'the concept of plagiarism is fully embedded within a social, political, and cultural matrix that cannot be meaningfully separated from its interpretation.'

To date there has been a limited amount of research identifying what university students actually think about the concept of plagiarism. What does it actually mean to them? How important is it in their lives? In an international student context, does plagiarism even have the same meaning and context as in a location such as Australia where this study was primarily undertaken? For example, if a student comes from a country like China, where there may be, in some more traditional educational situations and contexts, a higher degree of emphasis on replication, what does plagiarism actually mean? The aim of this paper is to identify a range of international students' perceptions, views and attitudes regarding the concept and applicability of the term plagiarism in a Western university educational context and environment. A range of students from a variety of backgrounds who were studying in postgraduate degree programmes in Australian universities were interviewed for the study.

Literature review

In the Oxford Dictionary of English, plagiarism is defined as 'the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own' (2005, p1334). Most often plagiarism is viewed as an issue of academic dishonesty. However, exactly what constitutes plagiarism has been defined and interpreted differently in different cultures. Bell (1999) notes that plagiarism is not considered to be a problem in many cultures. In some cultures it is acceptable, even flattering to copy the work of the 'master'. In some cases, it

is considered humble and even honourable, and rather better than boldly advocating one's own view about an issue better researched and expressed by an expert in the field.

By the start of 2007, there were 209,237 international students enrolled in Australia higher education, with the largest influx from China, India, South Korea, Hong Kong and Malaysia (AEI, 2007). The increasing multicultural student population in higher education, especially from Asian countries, has spurred some authors to focus increasingly on issues of international students' learning styles within a Western learning environment. Several authors (Biggs, 1999; Pennycook, 1996; Ryan, 2000; Barron & Zeegers, 2005, 2006) have highlighted the importance of recognising the needs of students from different cultures. Ryan (2000) states that Western educational institutions need to adapt to the differing needs of international students instead of trying to make them fit into an existing and often distinctly Westernised academic structure. Institutions themselves must change their teaching and assessment practices to accommodate different ways of learning. Other authors, noted above, have also focussed on the challenge of making Western institutions more adept at dealing with issues of cross cultural and international educational delivery while, at the same time, maintaining their core focus (and perceived value) of being a Western educational provider.

Part of this growing attention on the issue of international education delivered within a Western university context has been devoted to some of the less savoury aspects of the issue – such as plagiarism. Bloch (2001) notes that when considering plagiarism and collusion among international students, it is vital to be aware that Western perceptions of authorship, intellectual property and what may be seen by institutions to constitute plagiarism, are not universally accepted. Researchers (Scollon, 1995; Pennycook 1996; Currie, 1998; Barron and Zeegers, 2005, 2006) who seek to understand the complexity of plagiarism in cross-cultural education all agree that students from countries where English is a second language, may not have a good knowledge of plagiarism. In addition, Howard (2002) suggested plagiarism is not always the result of a wilful desire to deceive. Pecorai (2003) confirms the fact that the majority of international students whether plagiarising or not, do not have 'the intention to deceive'. Therefore, university managers and academics need to be careful about dealing with this issue, he notes. Literature related to international students studying in the

Western environment reveals several reasons that may contribute to plagiarism. Those reasons include the culture and social adaptation pressures, lack of English ability, high expectations from their families, cheating to get ahead, different writing styles, lack of knowledge of Western academic referencing and citation policies, and a general belief it may be safer and more sensible to quote verbatim rather than use one's own words and phrases in a language which is not well understood, particularly in terms of detailed academic writing styles. What these studies tend to lack is the view from the students themselves and this is the key aim of this paper. What is their view about this issue? How do they view the concept of plagiarism? Perhaps it is time to return to the students themselves to gain a deeper understanding as to why this issue not only continues to be a problem but seems to be, in some cases and situations, growing.

Research method

The data presented in this paper used the results of a survey that was conducted among 68 students in two postgraduate units from four classes within eight months. Ninety-five per cent of the students in these classes are international students and about half of these students were from the IT school but enrolled in a 'business' elective unit. The survey was designed to check the knowledge and understanding of Western-defined plagiarism among these international students and the reasons for plagiarism. The surveys were conducted anonymously and were administered and distributed during the last lecture of the academic semester for the students to complete. The surveys were collected at the end of the class. A group discussion was conducted after the survey to seek a better understanding of students' opinions and expressed concerns.

The survey consisted of three sections. The first section was about students' demographic characteristics and to check on students' own definition of plagiarism. The second section described various situations to test students' knowledge of plagiarism. The final section aimed to find out the reasons for plagiarism and the students' perception regarding the spread of plagiarism among their peers.

Findings and analysis

Demographic data included students' nationality, age, sex and time at the University of Ballarat and universi-

ties attended in Australia before studying at University of Ballarat. A total of 68 students were surveyed, as summarised in *Table 1*. Only two students had previously studied at other Australian universities. Their average age was 25.6 years.

Table 1: Student Characteristics

Characteristic	No.	Per Cent
Total no. students	68	100%
Female	12	18%
Male	56	82%
Nationality		
Indian	37	54%
Asian	14	21%
European	9	13%
South America	2	3%
African	1	1%
Arabian	1	1%
Other	4	6%
Length of Study in Australia		
3~6 months	19	28%
6~12 months	17	25%
1~2 years	24	35%
More than 2 years	8	12%

Some of the open-ended question statements about how respondents defined plagiarism follow, and these are a good starting point for discussion. The quotes are verbatim.

Australian students

'Producing work not written by oneself, without referencing' *Australian student, 3.5 years*

'Using someone else's exact work for a particular idea or description.' *Australian student, 4 years*

'Copying someone else's idea or direct wording and claiming it as your own thoughts.' *Australian student, 3 years*

European students

'Writing other person's ideas as yours; without mentioning the authors' name.' *French student, 8 months*

'It is the fact of writing a text of a part of a text, sentence of another people with out putting in quota-

tion mark.' *French student, 8 months*

'Copying another person's idea without stating referencing this person.' *German student, 8 months*

'Copy without referencing the person and source.' *Polish student, 6 months*

Indian students

'Copy from another assignments. Cut and Paste material from another sources without references.' *Indian student, 6 months*

'Plagiarism is a cheating done to avoid new ideas from the students mind into the assignment.' *Indian student, 1.5 years*

'If I get some source from books, internet and from other source, I must mention their reference where I get it from.' *Indian student, 1 year*

'If you copy any thing from anyone's written thing, you must reference it, if you not it means you have done cheating that is called plagiarism.' *Indian student, 1.5 years*

'Direct copy from others. If you do not know how to do ask the teacher!' *Indian student who attended CQU before coming to Ballarat, 3 months*

'Copying chunks of material from different mediums like books, journals, websites, database etc. copying the ideas, expressions in our work, imitating the ideas in different expression, gathering someone's work without reference' *Indian student, 1.5 years*

'Plagiarism someone's work is like stealing the money from a person who put his full effort to earn that.' *Indian student, 8 months*

'Stealing and late using other student's work or paraphrasing someone else's words without acknowledging properly. e.g. not referencing or citing properly.' *Indian student, 1.5 years*

'It means copying the same reference of others students work, or from any copyright information, without giving a code of reference.' *Indian student, 2 years*

'To copy word by word (verbatim), without referencing, without giving proper credit to the person to whom the article or words belong.' *Indian student, 2 years*

Chinese and other Asian students

'Plagiarism is copying other's works such as articles and theories without reference.' *Chinese student, 2.5 years*

'It is not allowed, bad action.' *Chinese student, 3 years*

'Shouldn't use plagiarism in any task; make sure mark the sources of the sentence or words.' *Chinese student, 3 years*

'Using others' sources without citation and references. But that's what we are forced to accept here. It makes some Asian students less creative.' *Chinese student, 2 years*

'Copy something or someone's idea without reference.' *Taiwanese student, 9 months*

'Copy exactly same things from book, internet and friends' *Japanese student, 9 months*

'Copy works from others without changing and referencing. Exactly the same works (paragraph, sentences are the same.)' *Thai student, 6 months*

'Take someone work without put or attach his/her name as a reference.' *Indonesian student, 1.5 years*

'Copying other people work without referencing.' *Indonesian student, 1.5 years*

Students from other continents

'Plagiarism is to present the knowledge of someone else as your job, your research, your own creation of knowledge.' Colombian student, 9 months.

'Plagiarism is copying the material written by someone without acknowledging.' Dubain student, 3 months.

'The use of other people's findings or ideas in published work in one's own work without acknowledging the source of such ideas or findings in the work.' Malawian student, 4 months.

These comments indicated a significant degree of agreement and confluence regarding how the students viewed the concept of plagiarism. There was a sense that plagiarism, per se, was somehow morally wrong. As one Indian student said, plagiarism was like stealing money from others and one Chinese student commented that it was not allowed – a 'bad action'. In addition, from these answers it would appear, at least to some degree, that the longer students were immersed in the Australian educational environment, the closer their definition moved towards the Western view, which suggests that the emphasis on avoiding plagiarism in the Australian education system helped these students to develop a clearer and more astute understanding of plagiarism.

The second section of the survey assessed students' knowledge of plagiarism in rather more specific terms. Students were asked to examine 11 commonly made plagiarism and collusion cases from the author's and colleagues' experience, depicting straight plagiarism to collusion and inappropriate source use. Students indicated whether in their view, each case was 'plagiarism', was 'not plagiarism', or if they 'cannot determine'. The results from the assessment of the student knowledge of plagiarism are summarised in *Table 2*.

For the basic plagiarism question (Q1) 'cutting and pasting material from various sources and including it in the written report without referencing where it came from', 95.6 per cent of the students agreed that this was plagiarism 'clear and simple'. Only 4.4 per cent believed it was not plagiarism or that it could not be determined.

The next question raised the issue of referencing and copying substantive amounts of text, without using quotation marks. Only 79 per cent of the students identified this as plagiarism. The proportion of students who didn't believe this to be overt plagiarism or who had difficulty in determining the status of the issue was quite high, at 21 per cent.

The results for questions 3, 4 and 5 indicate that when it comes to various indirect acts of plagiarism, such as rewriting, paraphrasing, reordering, inversion, grafting and mixtures of various forms of plagiarism, students started to vary in their perceptions of plagiarism.

While 72 per cent of the students could clearly identify that (Q3) 'rewriting or paraphrasing the material from any source without saying where the original material came from' was plagiarism, around 28 per cent who either ignored the necessity to attribute the material to the original source, or did not know how to do it.

Results for Q4, 'material is copied almost word by word by deleting or adding one or more words, or rewording the sentence, or changing the tense or numbers', indicate 13 per cent of the respondents believed this was not plagiarism and more than 21 per cent did not know whether it was plagiarism or not.

The results for Q5 show that 38 per cent of respondents believed 'Copying two or more simple sentences from the original source into a complex or combined sentence" was not plagiarism, with another 19 per cent unable to determine the status of this situation. Discus-

Table 2 Responses to Survey Questions

	Question	Survey Responses (Per Cent)		
		Plagiarism	Not plagiarism	Cannot determine
1	Cutting and pasting material from various sources and included in the written report without referencing where it comes from.	96	1	3
2	Copying material with substantive length from the original source, without the use of quotation marks.	79	12	9
3	Rewriting or paraphrasing the material from any source without saying where the original material comes from.	72	19	9
4	Material is copied almost word by words by deleting or adding one or few words, or reordering the sentence, or change the tense or numbers.	66	13	21
5	Copying two or more simple sentences from the original source into a complex or combined sentence.	43	38	19
6	Borrowing peer student's assignment for reference and copying a large section of his/her work, though there maybe some differences elsewhere.	69	15	16
7	Borrowing a senior student's assignment for reference and imitating the senior student's structure and methods.	52	38	10
8	Discuss the assignment with other students and produce a similar report or exam answers.	16	58	26
9	Cutting and pasting material from various sources and included in the written report and at the reference section listing out the source of the information.	34	56	10
10	Citing or referencing in the reference section any paper that you have not cited in your report.	24	35	41
11	Citing or referencing a paper in the reference section that you have not read.	19	35	46

sion from the focus group revealed that students who did not believe 'copying two or more simple sentences from the original source into a complex or combined sentence' was plagiarism, felt that this was simply part of the normal learning process and not really plagiarism at all. For them, quoting the expert was appropriate, fair and even honourable.

These initial findings indicate that international students tended to lack the concept of ownership of words – or at least how to use these words in an acceptable manner. This was further evidenced from some of the students' unedited comments:

'The definition of plagiarism is quite different with my previous study. For example, we do not have to paraphrase a sentence as long as we put the name of the author as a reference.' *Indonesian student*

'In my opinion, except the scientist and the people who are doing surveys, everybody is copying from another. You cannot know everything. I think that when you put the reference, you can copy/past as you want. Intelligence is to be reasonable.' *French student*

'Nobody know the rule of the plagiarism, which level we call plagiarism' *Chinese student*

These comments reflect Bloch's view that students from different cultural backgrounds may have a different interpretation of the ownership of words and plagiarism (Bloch 2001). To simply cut and paste a chapter was plagiarism: to cite sections from an expert as part of one's own work was far less clear!

The Chinese respondent, whose comment is cited above, also suggested that combining the sentences from different sources not only helped him to get the meaning across but also assisted him in using correct academic language. His opinion seemed to be widely accepted among these international students, especially students from Asian countries. They claimed if they could remember words or sentences or even a big chunk of text and then be able to apply it in a suitable context, it was a successful educational process (their words) and should not be construed as plagiarism. Their opinion mirrors Chan's (1999) view to the effect that Chinese students are taught to memorise large amounts of text from an early age, in order to show respect and acknowledge an author; therefore, problems may arise in relation to plagiarism when studying in a Western environment.

Questions 6, 7 and 8 assessed students' perception about academic collusion.

Around 70 per cent of the students identified (Q6) 'Borrowing peer student's assignment for reference and copying a large section of his/her work, though there maybe some differences elsewhere' as plagiarism, with 30 per cent who either did not believe it was plagiarism or were somewhat unsure. While borrowing and copying a large section of a peer's assignment was largely felt to be plagiarism, borrowing a senior student's assignment for referencing and imitation was felt to be more acceptable – perhaps because of their perceived seniority and expertise (a point raised in some of the focus group meetings).

In regard to Q8, 'Discussing the assignment with other students and producing a similar report or exam answer', more than 57 per cent of the respondents identified this behaviour as appropriate and acceptable. Only 16 per cent of the students believed it was plagiarism while 27 per cent had difficulty in coming to a decision. A number of Indian and Asian students in the focus group claimed they had always been encouraged, at home, to work with other students and to compare notes, and assignments. This was not perceived as copying or collusion, but, rather, a matter of demonstrating good sense and adding value to each other in an academically appropriate manner. They would have agreed with Biggs and Watkins (1996), who suggested that Asian students tend to collaborate more on assignments than Western students. This could be more of a cultural and behavioural issue rather than a pure academic collusion issue.

Questions 9, 10 and 11 were used to assess the students' knowledge and skills in regard to the issue of referencing. Once again, the results indicated a rather opaque picture of students' referencing knowledge.

As shown in Q9, 'Cutting and pasting material from various sources and including in the written report and at the reference section listing out the source of the information', 56 per cent of the students did not think this constituted plagiarism, while there were still 10 per cent who were unsure.

In regard to Q10, 'Citing or referencing in the reference section any paper that you have not cited in your paper', 35 per cent believed this situation was not plagiarism while more than 41 per cent were not able to come to a clear conclusion.

Similarly, in Q11 'Citing or referencing a paper in the reference section that you have not read' close to 46 per cent of the students were unsure about this issue, while more than 35 per cent believed that it was not plagiarism.

The third section of the survey asked about the reasons for plagiarism. Just under half of the respondents felt that they had plagiarised in the past and the reasons given were as follows:-

a. I did not know that what I've done is plagiarism – 42 per cent.

b. I found it difficult to express in clear English – 31 per cent.

c. Too many written assignments – 18 per cent.

d. I run out of time – 14 per cent.

e. I am lazy – 7 per cent.

f. The assignment is too difficult – 7 per cent.

g. I did it before and got away with it 3.5 per cent.

h. I need to get a high mark to impress my peers and teachers – 3.5 per cent.

i. I need to get a high mark to meet family expectations – 3.5 per cent.

j. I don't think the teaching staff care if I plagiarise or not – 0 per cent.

k. I only need to pass the unit to get the degree for immigration purposes – 0 per cent.

l. Additional reasons that were not listed in the survey questions – 24 per cent.

These additional reasons included:

• Pressure to meet the required word requirements for the assignment.

• Used to discuss with seniors about the requirements and structure of the assignments to get a better idea.

• Not familiar with Australian research style.

• Authority respect, as captured in one of the comments:

'When a professional analysis has already been made on the subject, how could my analysis be better? Consultants are paid and spend months on reports'

These statements identified a number of reasons – themes – why people tended to plagiarise. One aspect was a lack of awareness of Western academic writing and referencing style, and another was weak mastery of the English language which encouraged people to, in essence, take a short cut and copy and paste the words of others. In addition, different and often somewhat confusing assessment requirements, the length of assignments (i.e. 3000 words per assignments), the perceived complexity of some written assignments (which required a variety of written skills including high level critical analysis), and students interactive behaviour (that is, their tendency to work together and compare notes, drafts and finished assignments) all came into to play to encourage students to plagiarise. The focus group students from India, China, Indonesia, Columbia, Dubai and France, all felt there were simply too many written assignments for each subject. As one Indian student explained, in India there were only 16 exams in his whole Bachelor degree and seldom did he have a written assignment.

Time was another issue that emerged in focus groups: often students simply ran out of time. So they would take short cuts and copy. Time became a problem because they often had part time jobs to support themselves. Many underestimated the costs of living, working and studying in Australia. Not only that, in a wider sense and context, they found every issue in Australia took more time than in their home countries because of issues of language, culture and lack of familiarity - and personal networks such as family.

In the last section of the survey there was a question asking the students about the percentage they estimate their peers had plagiarised. *Table 3* shows there was a clear correlation between the estimated percentages of peer plagiarism among students who admitted to plagiarism, and amongst students who did not. The average estimated peer plagiarism of 24 out of 30 students, who admitted to plagiarism, is 47.5 per cent, while the students who claimed they never plagiarised only estimated 11.1 per cent of peer plagiarism. These results may indicate that the students who admitted to plagiarism might have held the perception that the other students were doing the same.

Table 3: Plagiarism by Peers

Plagiarised or Not?	No. of students	Average of estimated peer plagiarism %
Yes	24	47.5%
Yes	6	No idea
No	38	11.1%

Implications and recommendations

On the basis of the data collected, it can be suggested that the two core reasons for plagiarism were first, a lack of awareness of Western academic writing including referencing styles and, second, poor mastery of the English language. There were other issues as well, noted in brief, above, but these two seemed to be at the very core of the problem.

The lack of awareness of Western academic writing style meant that students would sometimes feel almost obliged to copy large slabs of written material

to ensure that they 'got the format and style right', as some said. At times, and particularly in the initial part of their degree programme (or when they were under time pressure), they were too nervous and insecure to try to write in such a formal style on their own and this seemed like a viable and useful compromise, particularly when under time pressure and stress. Although there was recognition that this approach was probably wrong there was also a feeling that it was sometimes a better course of action than simply writing in a style and manner which they knew would not necessarily be appropriate. As one student said:

' I get so worried about the style, format, referencing and all of that … that sometimes I simply do resort of copying down some sections of existing text because at least I know that this is correct and in the right style. I know this is wrong, but - then, and this is the problem – writing in a style which may fail is also not so good either. But it is so hard for us to work out exactly what is required - what the lecturer is asking for sometimes. They tend to assume everyone knows and this is not always the case when you come from a different country with its own language and cultural issues'

This comment and many others like it attest to a certain lack of confidence on the part of students. Lost in a sea of a new environment, language issues, cross cultural misunderstandings, and other problems, sometimes copying from a written text seemed to be not so much an issue of improper behaviour, as, rather, a safe and viable course of action in what often seemed to be a time of confusion and uncertainty.

This lack of confidence also emanated from more fundamental and basic language issues. These can be divided into a range of dimensions. First was the issue of simply reading, writing and expressing oneself in a language which was not one's own. That was hard enough in any context, academic or whatever. Next was the issue of being able to convey (in a written sense) ideas, concepts and theories which were complex, ornate, often expressed in specific, distinctive and exacting language. In these situations it often did seem safer and indeed more viable to copy sections from a book or internet site where (at least) one knew that the language used was appropriate and correct in

terms of being able to convey the essence of the concept theory or idea. Also worrying, was the issue of being able to write in a formal academic writing style and this was a whole new set of problems. To many students it was a particularly archaic and unusual form of written expression. So often, one would end up resorting to the use of existing words, phrases and indeed paragraphs to ensure that the concept, the idea - and also, the style - were right and appropriate. Suddenly, the issue of plagiarism was not so much about right or wrong as much as about language, comprehension and cross-cultural complications.

Second, the *different assessment formats* (more written assignments than exams) and requirements further worsened the international students' plight. Many assignments had a variety of formats and requirements and this was often confusing to students who were used to a more rigid and prescriptive range of formats for assignments in their home country. As mentioned earlier, the focus group students from India, China, Indonesia, Dubai, France etc. all felt that this was a key problem and issue. Often they felt that they just copied slabs of material to deal with the range and complex nature of assignments. Ironically, as Australian universities add a wider variety of assessment models, students felt under even more pressure to somehow cope with what was often considered a bizarre range of assessment activities, modes, forms and assessment tools. What had once been two assignments and an examination was often now a complex web of tests, assignments, some online content, and a presentation and so on. To students versed in a very formal, rigid and traditional form of education, such innovation and flexibility often seemed to be just too stressful. Eventually some of them would succumb to copying just to cope with what seemed to be a never-ending series of changes from one unit to another.

Students also felt under considerable pressure in terms of time and associated tensions and issues. First there was the tension of living (and working) in a new country – many had to find accommodation, prepare meals, conduct transactions and learn to look after themselves for the first time. Many also had to find work to support themselves. All of this just took time

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- everything seemed to be in almost slow motion as students negotiated the issues of living and working – let alone studying, in a cross-cultural environment. As one Indian student commented:

> 'Most of our parents spent all their money for sending us out and paid the first semester's tuition, the rest of our tuition we need to find a work to support ourselves. Otherwise, we would not be able to complete our degree.'

It was not uncommon for students to miss classes or come to class late because of work pressures. There were also time pressures within the university: students had to deal with life in an often complex university framework, cope with about four units or subjects per semester (sometimes more as there was always pressure to finish early to save money), deal with the competing demands of each unit, and fathom each piece of assessment.

These various tensions and issues seemed to combine to create a very tense, busy and often stressed environment in which it sometimes seemed easier and even more appropriate to use sections of existing texts to make life easier when preparing what seemed to be a never ending stream of assignments. Sometimes one just had to get work done and submitted on time, so it was tempting to take short cuts. Of course, local students also had the tensions of moving away from home, coping with working, and so on but at least this was all within a safe, predictable, and relatively comfortable cultural and linguistic environment.

As one student from China noted:

> 'At home I lived with my parents and they did everything and now I have to do it all and it is very stressful. And not only that. I feel that I need to work at a job to cover some of the costs as it is very expensive studying in Australia - not just fees but also the costs of living and paying rent and all of that! Everything is hard, it takes time and we are always rushed and stressed… '

Living and coping – some barely – in such a 'pressure cooker environment' was not an excuse for plagiarism – but it was a reality, a face of life, and an indication that the world of 'studying abroad' was far from fun and glamour. It was rather more about stress, tension and competing demands.

Another key and final theme which emerged from focus groups was the view students had of foreign authors and academics, including lecturers and professors. In essence students believed that the best way to treat a foreign author (and, indeed, teacher, if he or she was respected – that is), was to quote their words, diagrams and phrases verbatim. It therefore was not intended as plagiarism per se, but of respect. In some Asian countries, to quote was to show face, respect and empathy. It was a sign of 'respecting the expert'. It was not wrong at all – rather the contrary! After all, how could a student add his or her own views about a theory which had been written by a famous foreign expert… and how rude it would be to even try – as so many respondents indicated. As already mentioned by one student earlier:

> 'When a professional analysis has already been made on the subject, how could my analysis be better? Consultants are paid and spend months on reports'.

This was simply not to be done. It was to show a lack of respect. It was also to suggest in a way, that the theory or concept was not overly valuable – i.e. in the sense that one could simply write it in one's own words and phrases. When students got poor marks or worse for simply rote like copying the words out of books, they were often quite shocked. After all, why travel all the way to the west to learn about - for example – marketing and then not bother to correctly use the words of the experts?

These overall results suggest that, at the very least, the reasons for plagiarism are complex. In essence, two key aspects seem to form the very core of the issue - and this was also the view of respondents. One issue was the perceived lack of awareness about specific and defined Western academic requirements, skills and associated referencing issues, and the second issue was that of language: it was not just that the students were living and working in a new language environment, but that the language required in academic writing was also, in itself, a different and even more challenging world.

If language and skills were the two core issues, it is worth considering these issues in more detail, and, in particular to ponder whether they were related and if so in what ways. For example, was there a direct and specific relationship between language and skill, in this context? Diagram 1 encapsulates a range of options which indicates that the nexus between the two concepts was not so clear or precise.

This diagram, which emerged from focus groups, raises the possibility of four options for students.

Group one consisted of 'trapped' students who had good English language skills but poor academic skills. In this situation, they were fine on issues of day-to-day
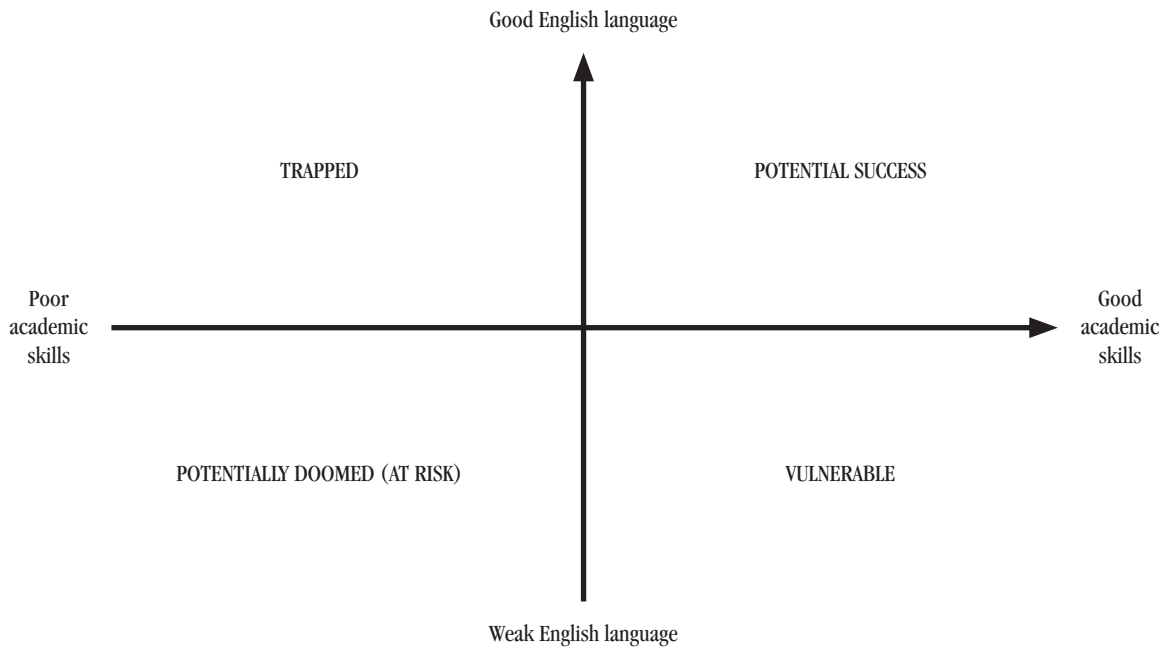
Good English language

TRAPPED

POTENTIAL SUCCESS

Poor
academic
skills

Good
academic
skills

POTENTIALLY DOOMED (AT RISK)

VULNERABLE

Weak English language

Diagram 1

speech and writing, but they still lacked key and core academic skills. They often felt particularly irritated and frustrated and so this sense of conflict – of being able to speak and write the language but still have to face problems in terms of actual skills, often drove them to copy and plagiarise as a way of relieving a sense of frustration.

The second group had been termed potentially doomed and certainly at risk because the confluence of poor language and / or skills meant that they felt that they had nowhere to go – no chance of success, and almost 'no way out', and so they were - of the four groups – most likely to plagiarise. They were the ones who needed the most help – and in both dimensions and not just one.

Those in the third group were potentially successful because they had a high level of language and skills (however issues of time and the prevailing perception of the foreigner as the expert could still lead them down a dangerous path of plagiarism), whereas the fourth group, termed vulnerable, were a complex group because it had the skills per se but language defeated them – some of the Asian students felt that this was their problem.   They were also very frustrated and irritated because they could see and understand what was needed but they lacked the language to convey their ideas and thoughts so they, too, sometimes simply reverted to plagiarism out of sheer frustration and the other issues and factors raised in this paper such as

lack of time and adherence to the letter of the text book or journal paper.

This discussion suggests that the link between skills and language was there but it was complex and the two issues were also quite separate. One needed both to be successful: but one still had surrounding issues of time, respect for the academic expert and associated issues to consider as well. These tended to create an environment, a background and an associated set of factors which had an impact on issues of language plus skills to help formulate student behaviour and views about the use or non use of plagiarism.

This discussion does tend to tease out another issue: there seems to be an underlying sense of vagueness and uncertainty about the very nature and concept of plagiarism, at least in the focus groups and in some of the more detailed questions noted above in the initial part of this paper.

On the one hand, respondents felt that plagiarism was bad, and on the other hand, there was a sense that it was wrong not to quote the foreign expert and that, if one lacked language/skills, one should not be too concerned about direct quotation. This sense of seeming contradiction needs further research because it takes one into a rather opaque area of behaviour.

In essence, students had two sets of views and both, in their way, had some rationality.

First, there was a view that if one wilfully, and deliberately and lazily just copied slabs of work for the

sake of it, this was plagiarism and it was morally and ethically wrong. That is to say, if a student had a high level of skills, expertise, language, time and so on, they should not plagiarise. If they quote the foreign expert they should credit the source. This was a general view. The findings in the recent court case Hunzy-Hancock (2007) supported the view that the requisite intention is the central element in order to be found guilty of academic misconduct.

However, if any or all or a combination of factors (such as language, skills and so on) were negative or if they combined to cause significant stress, then the situation was far less clear: in this situation students had to make choices and decisions on the basis of what they could do, what they could achieve and how they could pass a unit. This was less an issue of morality than attempting to make a choice which would help to overcome the problem at that point of time.

A way of explaining this view was to consider another context and situation. If one drove a car too fast and broke the speed limit because of a basic wilful intention, and in a situation where there was no need to speed, this was wrong. But if the person drove fast because they were very late for a key meeting which could affect their career or because they had no choice in the matter this was less evil and might even be perceived as being acceptable.

It could even be necessary – and that was how the students felt about plagiarism…. but it was just a little more complicated because speeding was a matter which could be defined and measured easily, but plagiarism, to all of these respondents also remained a somewhat ill-defined and opaque matter. By nature a complex concept, it was clear that not one of the respondents actually had a very clear idea of the full nature, and extent of plagiarism. Was it copying? Maybe? Was it not referencing? Maybe? They were never quite sure – so the concept, itself, was ill defined and this created an unstable and opaque basis for decision making. No wonder students were so often shocked to hear that they had plagiarised: they only had the vaguest notion of what this really was.

> **...students tended to plagiarise for a range of reasons, of which language problems and skill deficiencies were the two most obvious issues. Other factors were lack of time, the stress and tension of living and working in a foreign country, and a view that one should quote the foreign expert verbatim to show respect and honour.**

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of the survey indicated that students tended to plagiarise for a range of reasons, of which language problems and skill deficiencies were the two most obvious issues. Other factors were lack of time, the stress and tension of living and working in a foreign country, and a view that one should quote the foreign expert verbatim to show respect and honour. In addition, the very definition of plagiarism was actually not really very clear for the students and this was another issue. Plagiarism was often used as a means of completing a task – moving on – submitting work – getting through rather than a deliberate and planned act of deception and poor behaviour.

What this means for universities in a climate where students increasingly see themselves as consumers with increased rights, power, status and legal standing (Onsman, 2008) is the following:

• They need to define the nature of plagiarism in far more specific detail.

• They need to provide better skills and language training (not just one or the other or a vague mix of both) to provide a stronger basis for students to perform better.

• They should understand the nature of the 'foreigner as expert' issue and associated time stresses and strains as the possible basis of plagiarised activity.

They also need to judge less hard and fast and take more time to consider cases of plagiarism, particularly for newly arrived foreign students. This was a view of all respondents, who felt that the systems used in Australian universities were too black and white for an issue which to them seemed to be confusing and confused. 'Judge less and trust more' might be a useful piece of advice for some universities which tend to assume that every issue of plagiarism is wilful and criminal.

On the basis of this research, perhaps university managers need to do three things: educate their students better regarding what they consider to be plagiarism issues, problems, and challenges; understand better the nature of many foreign students for whom copying is a form of respect for the printed text or the word of a lecturer; and develop more comprehensive support and assistance networks for students who fall

foul of plagiarism issues and problems in an environ-
ment and context where they might feel that they have
actually done 'the right thing' while their university
managers feel that they have broken the law. This key
dichotomy is one of the key issues underpinning much
of the present study, which casts an uneasy light over
the present nature, definition and conceptualisation of
plagiarism as applied by many Australian universities
to at least some of their foreign students.

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