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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF PLAGIARISM IN THE ACADEMIC WORLD: THE TREAT FOR THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the major challenges against the quality of education in different levels across the world is plagiarism. It is growing in alarming rate, even in the advanced levels, due to the fertile conditions that are related to the advancement of technology. However, it is the responsibility of the education sector professionals and stake holders to design strategies which are to be implemented at different levels so as to curb the problem. This ranges from creating awareness to setting policies which discipline learners who involve in the act. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to explain the prevalence of the problem stepping from the concept of the term 'plagiarism'. Moreover, the reasons and motivations to plagiarism are analyzed based on the results of various studies from different nations. Finally, the responsibilities which the main stakeholders must carry out are indicated as per the research output and the ongoing experiences.

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is known that education is a key tool to ensure development and transformation in a society. Many countries in the world allocate huge amount of finance to educate their citizens. However, recently, the quality of education is becoming a serious concern in developing countries like Ethiopia as quality education determines the quality and the rate of development. Very specifically, in the process of educating citizens, assessing and measuring individual's performance using different tools like tests, assignments, thesis, and reports is vital to decide their ability and performance level after imparting certain content/ subject matter.

These days, plagiarism is becoming the real challenge which puts the quality of education in question by affecting the process of measuring students in different levels. Scholars of education underscore the students' assessment strategies as core part in insuring quality. In reality, student assessment should be regarded as a complex, multidimensional activity that requires alignment, balance and rigor in order to assure quality outcomes (East, 2009).

The status academic integrity, which is explained in terms of plagiarism, is getting ground in many schools and academic institutes up to earning higher degrees. It is clear that the advancement of technology has contributed to the prevalence of the problem. Though different academic organizations set rules and regulations which are being implemented, research results show that the extent is becoming very high even in universities where learners are at the verge of taking responsibilities of their nations (Dordoy, 2002).

**What is Plagiarism**

There are a lot of definitions which can describe the meaning of plagiarism. 'Plagiarism' derives from the Latin word *plagiarius*, meaning 'kidnapper' or 'abductor'. It is the theft of someone's creativity, ideas or language; something that strikes at the very heart of academic life. It is a form of cheating and is generally regarded as being morally and ethically unacceptable (Anon, 2002).

According to East (2009), plagiarism, whereby another's work is deliberately used or appropriated without any indication of the source thereby attempting to convey the impression that such work is the student's own is prohibited. Any student failing to properly credit ideas or materials taken from another has plagiarized.

The Council of Writing Program Administrators, based in the United States, refers to plagiarism as "a multifaceted and ethically complex problem". However, as an aid to educators, administrators and students, they provide a pragmatic definition as follows: "...plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source" (WPA, 2008).

Thus it is possible to summarize that, in the academic context, plagiarism is submitting someone else's text as one's own or attempting to blur the line between one's own ideas or words and those borrowed from another source, and carelessly or inadequately citing ideas and words borrowed from another source to earn academic grades, promotions and degrees.

**Prevalence of plagiarism**

Given these developments, it is not surprising that a large volume of literature has emerged in the last few years focusing on the subject of plagiarism in the higher education sector. The general consensus appears to be that, while plagiarism is not a new phenomenon, its incidence has grown in scale to the point where it is almost of epidemic proportions. In the USA, for example, research indicates that cheating among undergraduate students has increased steadily over the past half-century or so from around 23 per cent to as much as 90 per cent (Drake, 1941; Jensen *et al.*, 2002). It is true that some studies put the ‘cheat rate’ somewhat lower than this, but, these studies notwithstanding, there has been sufficient concern over the trend in student behaviour for the Center for Academic Integrity to be established, a consortium now comprising more than 320 institutions of higher education.

In the UK, meanwhile, the plagiarism problem has been considered serious enough for affected parties to seek the assistance of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), a strategic advisory committee working on behalf of the funding bodies for further and higher education in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to investigate electronic solutions to the issue of plagiarism. The key outcome to emerge from this initiative was the establishment of a national plagiarism advisory service to act as a source of information for teaching staff and institutions, including a national electronic plagiarism detection service

Beyond the subjective evidence regarding an increase in the amount of plagiarism, empirical data on the extent of plagiarism depends on who is asked and in what context. Student data, for example, differs from that of academic staff, and cheating is considered as either synonymous with, or separate to, plagiarism. In the United States, in a sample of 5,331 postgraduate students, 56% reported plagiarising some of their material (Owunwanne, Rustagi & Dada, 2010), while in a survey of almost 50,000 undergraduates, 40% of students admitted plagiarising (Jense *et.al.*, 2009). In the broader context of plagiarism as cheating, East (2010) reports that evidence from several large-scale enquiries conducted across North America showed that over 70% of students admitted cheating as distinct from plagiarism while another study (Bruwelheide, 2010) reported that 77% of under graduates did not see plagiarism as cheating, viewing them as discrete activities. In the United Kingdom, when staff at one university were asked about the prevalence of plagiarism, 90.7% of staff reported some experience (Dordoy, 2002) while in a broader study, academics felt that 10% of students were guilty of plagiarising (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006).

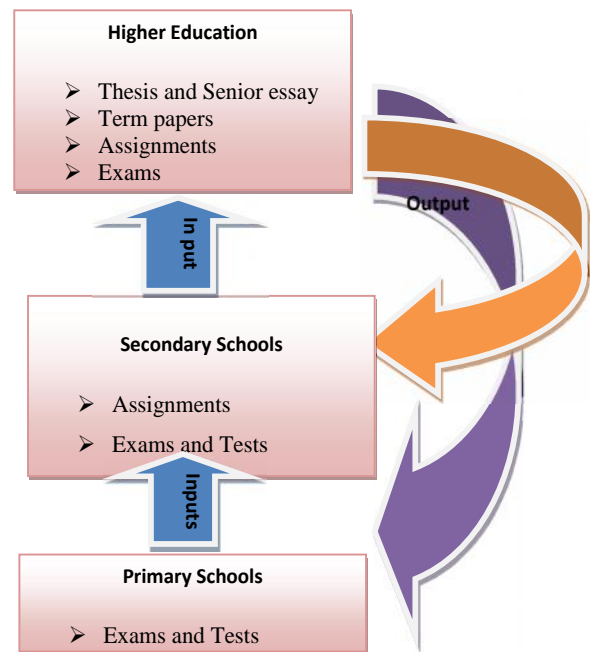
Australian evidence on the prevalence of plagiarism is somewhat limited. Institutions are often reluctant to provide data on numbers of students caught plagiarising. Research has tended to have a particular focus and to be confined to one or two cohorts. Curtis and Popal (2011) using a self-report approach found declining levels of plagiarism between 2004 (81%) and 2009 (74%), although these were still alarmingly high. Investigations by the State Ombudsman in Victoria found some academics were reporting international students

as more likely to plagiarise, but did not offer any figures, and further reported a contradictory view from other staff that it is easier to detect amongst students from a non-English speaking background.

Generally, studies investigating plagiarism report increases, and identify patterns. Bennett, Behrendt, and Boothby (2011), for example, report that many studies show male students as being more likely to plagiarise than female students. Ready access to information technology has also been cited as accompanying an increase in plagiarism (Owunwanne, Rustagi & Dada, 2010). Finally, factors such as bigger class sizes, lack of personal contact, financial pressure (East, 2009) and new approaches to course delivery which stress collaborative learning have also been cited as contributing to an increase in plagiarism.

**The Vicious Circle of Plagiarism**

The present experiences in the academic contexts reveal that the prevalence of plagiarism is increasing in an alarming rate from one level to the other level of education. In the lower levels, where students are not matured physically and mentally, plagiarism exists dominantly in the form of exam and test cheatings. In the secondary levels, when students get matured both physically and mentally in addition to their academic progress, the rate of plagiarism is becoming more intense and complex. As it is indicated in the figure 1, the varieties of the plagiarism are increasing when we compare the higher levels with the secondary and the secondary with the primary.



**Fig 1** Vicious circle of Plagiarism and Quality Education

The arrows in the left side of the figure indicates that how plagiarism influences the quality of education in different levels. It is known that graduates from higher institutes are expected to impart students at different levels including the higher level itself. Therefore, if we have graduates are awarded different academic certificates on the basis of the grades which they scored due to plagiarism, we definitely

have teachers or instructors whose academic quality is in question. In turn, this influences the quality of education to be delivered for the students in different levels.

### ***The motivations for plagiarism***

To some, the increasing incidence of plagiarism in the higher education sector may be looked upon as perfectly acceptable behaviour. According to author and satirist Stewart Home, plagiarism 'saves time and effort, improves results, and shows considerable initiative on the part of the plagiarist' (cited in Duguid, 1996). This line of thinking is predicated upon the notion that there is nothing sinister about the liberal use of other people's ideas. To plagiarise is not to steal another's property, it is simply about the spread of information and knowledge.

Indeed, prior to the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, plagiarism was useful in aiding the distribution of ideas and, in this sense, can be said to be an important part of western cultural heritage, up to that point in time. One might argue further that, with the new social conditions that have emerged with the widespread use of ICTs, it has once again become an inevitable part of contemporary culture, although for rather different reasons (Critical Art Ensemble, 1995). Allied to this is the increasingly results-driven education system, with its associated league tables, as well as the increasingly difficult labour market conditions for graduates, resulting from the UK's wider-access policy for higher education.

Taking a more sceptical view, if we accept that it is typically the academically weaker students who tend to engage in the various forms of plagiarism, it is unlikely that these individuals will, consciously or unconsciously, be part of any crusade to spread information and knowledge. On the other hand, as the statistics cited in section 2.1 would tend to indicate, it cannot be just they who are indulging in unethical practice (unless the majority of students can be described as academically weak!). Why is it, then, that students are resorting to plagiarism in increasingly large numbers?

Irrespective of a student's ability, pressure to plagiarise can emerge because of a variety of influences. These include, for example:

- poor time management skills (a problem often exacerbated because of the increasing competition for students' time arising from the need to work part time or care for children) and an inability to cope with workload (perhaps as a result of class timetables and the corresponding assessment tasks);
- a lack of motivation to excel because of a perception that the academic responsible for the class has little enthusiasm for the subject (the students then expending what they consider to be a commensurate amount of effort);
- increased external pressure to succeed from parents or peers, or for financial reasons;
- an innate desire to take on and test the system (particularly if the punishment associated with detection is relatively minor);

- Cultural difference in learning and presentation styles where, in some settings, it is considered normal custom and practice to quote the experts without citation (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2003).

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the factors that might be considered responsible for the frequency of plagiarism; suffice to say that it is an indicator of the complexity of the issue. Neither do these factors necessarily explain the increasing incidence of plagiarism. Indeed, many, if not all, of those reasons listed above were in existence prior to the dramatic increase in the number of reported cases of plagiarism. The key explanatory variable, it would seem, is the increasing availability of electronic text. It is this, coupled with any of the above motivations, that has spawned the seemingly inexorable rise in student plagiarism.

### ***Students' Reasons for Intentional Plagiarising***

Student plagiarism is a complex issue that requires complex solutions (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Park, 2003). Other than not understanding the formalities of academic writing, students also report problems with lecturer expectations about plagiarism – a situation not helped by inconsistent application of penalties (Park, 2003). Park (2003), drawing on the work of a range of authors, provides the following reasons.

- To save time.
- To gain a better mark.
- Personal values/attitudes – better marks enhance self-esteem or because short cuts are a sign of cleverness.
- Defiance – where plagiarism is a means of expressing dissent and anti-authority feelings. It is a tangible way of showing dissent and expressing a lack of respect for authority.
- Assessments are seen as neither important nor challenging.
- Some students deny to themselves that they are cheating and/or find ways of legitimizing it by passing the blame on to others.
- Temptation and opportunity.
- A lack of deterrence where the benefits of plagiarising outweigh the risks.

In contrast, Power (2009) reports that students made a deliberate attempt not to plagiarise because they feared getting caught; found it easier to do the actual assignment; respect the instructor; enjoy writing papers; feel guilty if they plagiarise; cannot afford to buy papers online; find online papers not specific enough; or have a sense of morality. Of these, fear was the greatest deterrent.

### ***Responsibilities of Core Stakeholders to Curb Plagiarism***

When assignments are highly generic and not classroom-specific, when there is no instruction on plagiarism and appropriate source attribution, and when students are not led through the iterative processes of writing and revising, teachers often find themselves playing an adversarial role as "plagiarism police" instead of a coaching role as educators.

Just as students must live up to their responsibility to behave ethically and honestly as learners, teachers must recognize that they can encourage or discourage plagiarism not just by policy and admonition, but also in the way they structure assignments and in the processes they use to help students define and gain interest in topics developed for papers and projects.

### **Responsibilities of Students**

Students should understand research assignments as opportunities for genuine and rigorous inquiry and learning. Such an understanding involves:

- Assembling and analyzing a set of sources that they have themselves determined are relevant to the issues they are investigating;
- Acknowledging clearly when and how they are drawing on the ideas or phrasings of others;
- Learning the conventions for citing documents and acknowledging sources appropriate to the field they are studying;
- Consulting their instructors when they are unsure about how to acknowledge the contributions of others to their thought and writing.

### **Responsibilities of Faculties/ Academic Units**

Faculty needs to design contexts and assignments for learning that encourage students not simply to recycle information but to investigate and analyze its sources. This includes:

- Building support for researched writing (such as the analysis of models, individual/group conferences, or peer review) into course designs;
- Stating in writing their policies and expectations for documenting sources and avoiding plagiarism;
- Teaching students the conventions for citing documents and acknowledging sources in their field, and allowing students to practice these skills;
- Avoiding the use of recycled or formulaic assignments that may invite stock or plagiarized responses;
- Engaging students in the process of writing, which produces materials such as notes, drafts, and revisions that are difficult to plagiarize;
- Discussing problems students may encounter in documenting and analyzing sources, and offering strategies for avoiding or solving those problems;
- Discussing papers suspected of plagiarism with the students who have turned them in, to determine if the papers are the result of a deliberate intent to deceive;
- Reporting possible cases of plagiarism to appropriate administrators or review boards.

### **Responsibilities of Education Administrators**

Administrators need to foster a program- or campus-wide climate that values academic honesty.

This involves:

- Publicizing policies and expectations for conducting ethical research, as well as procedures for investigating

possible cases of academic dishonesty and its penalties;

- Providing support services (for example, writing centers or Web pages) for students who have questions about how to cite sources;
- Supporting faculty and student discussions of issues concerning academic honesty, research ethics, and plagiarism;
- Recognizing and improving upon working conditions, such as high teacher-student ratios, that reduce opportunities for more individualized instruction and increase the need to handle papers and assignments too quickly and mechanically;
- Providing faculty development opportunities for instructors to reflect on and, if appropriate, change the ways they work with writing in their courses.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Academic dishonesty is a growing concern among professionals in various academic institutions in the worldwide. It is a problem that starts in elementary school and goes on through college, and universities having level programs to award degrees. In additions, the complexity of cheating behaviours gets its due momentum in the upper level where students are matured to access various opportunities including advanced technologies. This requires multiple strategies be used to monitor and respond to the threat.

As a professional, the first step to curb academic dishonesty is identifying the extent of practices in different levels. That means the practice in elementary, secondary and in colleges and universities as the cheating form is different in each context. Then, the causes of the problems should also be sorted out so as to design appropriate intervention mechanisms which fit with the practice in each academic level. In the process, the commitment of each stakeholder in the system to carry out its own responsibility is a crucial factor for the success in curbing the acts. Above all, since students are in the society, their parents should guide and consult them in their early ages to avoid such acts which hamper the quality of education that in turn have a huge impact in the development of the nation.

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