

Plagiarism in Education Programmes

Legitimised Dishonesty or Lack of Awareness?

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Abstract

Data and literature available due to technological advancements in computation and Internet connectivity has encouraged plagiarism among undergraduate and postgraduate students. We addressed the question whether this is because of lack of awareness about plagiarism and its serious consequences amongst students and teachers or whether plagiarism is permitted as a soft crime. We conducted a survey amongst students and teachers using the questionnaire method. The major questions were related to whether the student/faculty was informed about plagiarism, and whether they know that plagiarism is a serious misconduct. Questions also assessed whether the subjects recognised plagiarism and knew about 'referencing'. On the basis of our study, we suggest that there is lack of awareness in students about the various aspects of plagiarism and there is a feeling in the academic community that plagiarism is somewhat permitted. We propose some ways to correct the situation and ensure development of skills for original writing.

INTRODUCTION

The undergraduate and postgraduate students of most of the Indian Universities have to submit lab record book, assignments in various forms (write-ups, posters, descriptive text), literature surveys (review of a

given topic in detail) and/or thesis (a detailed write-up of experimental work carried by them). Most of these activities are mandatory and are supposed to be carefully evaluated and graded. The ultimate grade given to the students is dependent

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on the quality of submissions made. At best, all these activities require originality, creativity and expression skills. Leaving laboratory journals as a means for facilitating or of assessing learning, the very purpose of including these activities in the curricula is to nurture novel thought processes, writing skills and documentation. This also encourages students to develop professional attitude in the field of their choice. However, this can only happen if all these activities are done with a spirit of learning and with ethical responsibility. Any misconduct in this area can be extremely damaging not only to the individual but also to the community at large. Today, one of the major challenges faced by educationists in the country is a very specific misconduct, plagiarism, which is rampant and damaging at all levels in professional life (Satyanarayana, 2010). The advances in in-silico technologies have aggravated the problem because of ease with which this can be done. A 'copy-paste' job has never been simpler and more tempting! The problem of plagiarism is global; however, it appears to be plaguing the Indian academia far more as not many educational institutions have paid adequate attention to the malice (Chaurasia, 2016).

As it goes unpunished in any form, most of the time, it appears to have gained some legitimacy and acceptance in classrooms. Apathy to address the problem is so serious that often the students are never informed clearly about the inappropriateness

of plagiarising. We hypothesised that plagiarism seen in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes is because of lack of information and not because of poor work ethics of students. This hypothesis was tested by conducting a survey amongst our own students and faculty.

METHODS

The survey was conducted by using the questionnaire method (See Appendix). The subjects that participated in this research study included Junior College students (12th Standard), Undergraduates and Postgraduate science students with various specialisations (life sciences, microbiology, chemistry) and members of the Science Faculty at Sophia College. A total of 308 students were administered the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into four parts (Section I to IV). Section I had personal information; Section II investigated whether the students and the faculty were aware of plagiarism and was adopted from a questionnaire already used (www.danielcraig.com/illinois/eslclasses/esl401spr00/.../questionnaire.doc). Section III asked questions regarding whether different forms of plagiarism could be identified as misconduct and whether the students knew about how references are written. Section IV investigated whether students and faculty considered plagiarism as a serious offence which deserved to be punished. Questions of Sections III and IV were adopted

from the survey questionnaire by Marietta Bardinova.

RESULTS

The results were calculated by coding 'Yes' as 1 and 'No' as 0; the percentage of positive response was calculated as in percentage of the total sample size. The consolidated results are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of positive responses

Section	Faculty	PG	UG	JC
Section II				
1	92	92	43	22
2	54	58	35	7
3	54	75	52	40
4	71	92	80	57
Section III				
1	75	75	68	52
2	58	67	36	34
3	46	0	39	32
4	58	58	37	32
5	79	67	58	61
6	79	50	56	51
7	96	67	66	53
8	92	67	56	50
9	75	58	38	29
10	75	50	42	33
Section IV				
1	79	92	84	80
2	92	75	60	52
3	54	75	62	58
4	46	42	53	57
Section V				
1	88	67	87	84

Graphs were generated to provide details of the results specific to sections and are given in Figure 1. The question number is as it appeared in the questionnaire and the proportion of students/faculty answering positively (Yes) to the question have been plotted against each group.

This data (Fig. 1) suggests that in junior college and in undergraduate classes, 60 per cent or more students had not heard about plagiarism nor had been instructed by the teachers about it as misconduct.

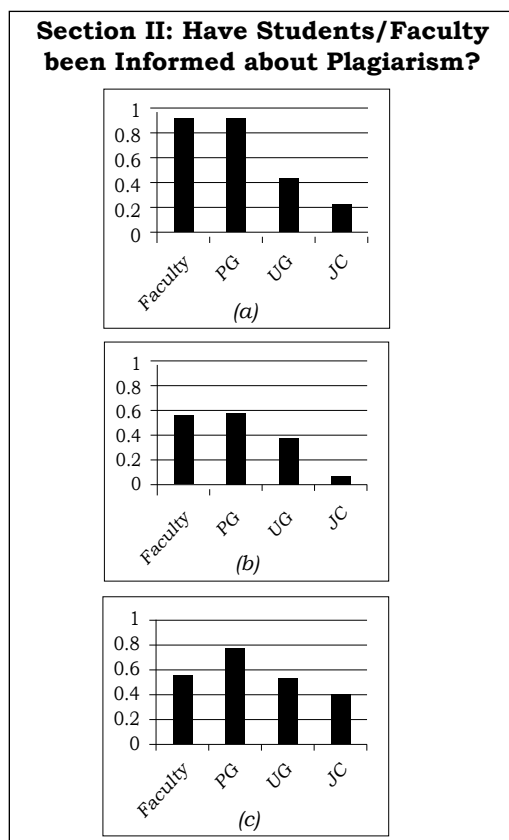


Figure 1. Graph depicting answers to Section II (Appendix)

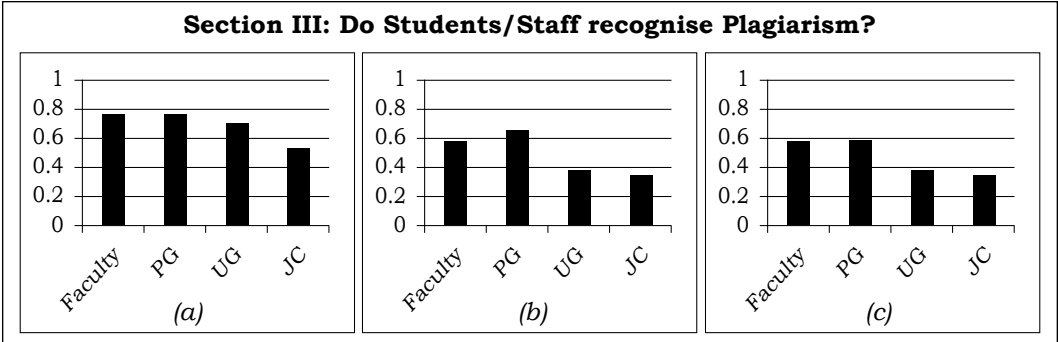


Figure 2. Graph depicting answers to Section III (Appendix)

This data suggests that though 50 per cent or more students know that it is wrong to use somebody else's work, 60 per cent of UG and JC students are not aware of various forms of plagiarism.

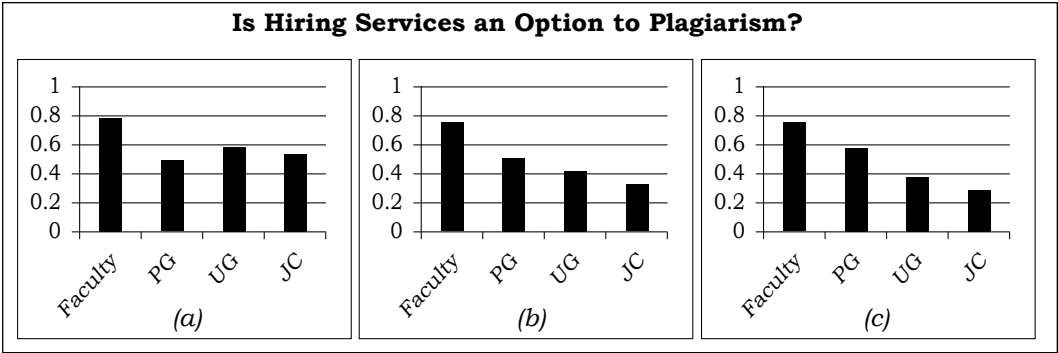


Figure 3. Graph depicting answers to Section III (Appendix)

The data indicates that majority (>60%) know that hiring help is misconduct.

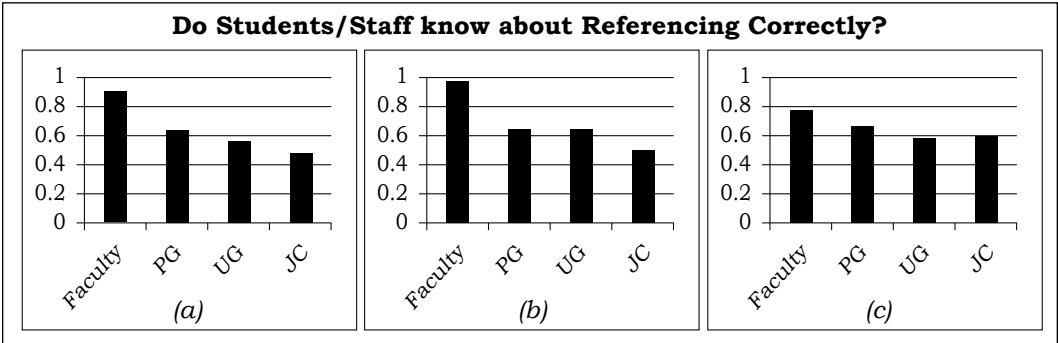


Figure 4. Graph depicting answers to Section III (Appendix)

Most students do not seem to know that footnotes or quotation marks are important.

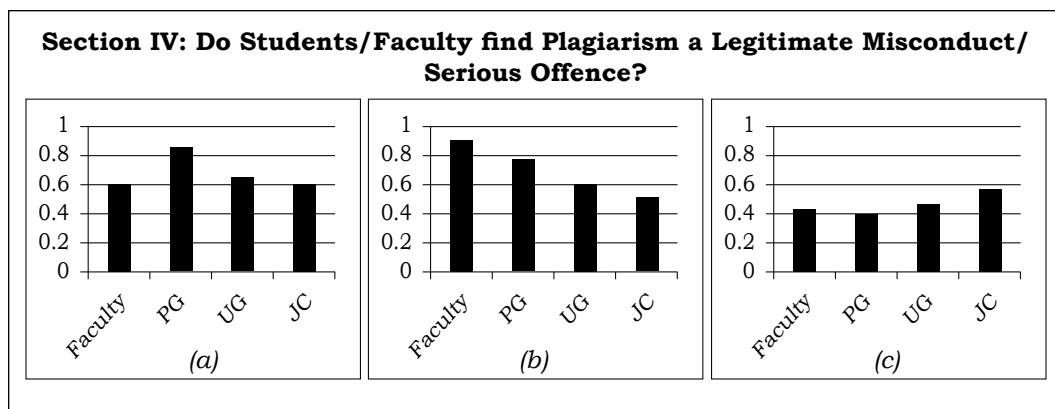


Figure 5. Graph depicting answers to Section IV (Appendix)

Most students feel that plagiarism is wrong and should be punished, however not severely.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Plagiarism is defined as reproducing another person's work as one's own work. It is a serious and mounting form of academic misconduct reported from all spheres of academic communities. While the dictionary definition of plagiarism is simply put as—to take and use another person's thoughts, writings, inventions as your own—it takes forms that are often, not clearly recognised by the offender. Students often argue that all information available to date is essentially not generated by them and it is impractical to acknowledge every idea or work specifically. There is clearly haziness about what should be definitely acknowledged and what is freely available. Among students of all nationalities, particularly Asian students with poor language skills, this has become a contributing

factor. Indian students have been notorious for their behaviour in this regard (Venugopal, 2010). The malice of plagiarism in Indian science has reached unprecedented dimension with scientists from reputed institutions implied in the misconduct (Anon., 2007; Anon., 2010; Pandey, 2016; Tewari, 2008). Though written about (Balaram, 2005; Mahadevan, 2008; Rao, 2008) and discussed amply, it has not resulted in universal guidelines to be adopted by educational institutions. While it is amply enforced that the way to tackle the problem is to address the root (Satyanarayana, 2010), the educational system—the method of teaching, examinations and evaluation—little is done at the classroom level to just stop the menace. There is no doubt that the ultimate solution lies in a complete overhauling of the way we teach and learn, there is a lot that can be done within the existing framework. General interactions with the

students at various levels suggested to us, that our students have never been clearly taught about what is right and wrong in copying of various forms. To ensure ethical practice by academics and students as well as to create awareness we conducted a survey among our college science students and faculty.

Results of our survey suggest that lack of awareness about misconduct in scientific writing could be a major cause of plagiarism. As recently pointed out very eloquently in a comment in the prestigious journal *Nature* (Chaurasia, 2016), in India, confirming strictly to text is taught very early in school. This subconscious 'copy-pasting' from books to examination papers strongly settles in higher secondary and, in fact, is highly valued by examiners. Students and perhaps teachers as well find it legitimate to borrow words in totality from others. Plagiarism is a non-issue at this stage and if pointed out, is considered a minor offence. Students who enter university education system are skilled users of Internet—plagiarism seems to be an academic way of life. There is no system in place to catch offenders nor is there a code of conduct defined by most educational institutions. Teachers, while instructing repeatedly not to 'copy-paste', have little time and inclination to ensure that every assignment/literature survey submitted is not a result of some form of plagiarism. The reason partly is also lack of knowledge about various

types of misconduct that comprise plagiarism. Reproducing resources from thesis or assignments done by their older peers is not considered as a serious offence. In case offender is clearly caught, the education system has no legal resort and it is easier to let go with severe warning or mild punishment such as re-writing the document with corrections. Our data provides evidences for this conclusion.

The present study also demonstrates that students are not aware about referencing. This is a deep-set problem which is at best ignored. No footnote in journal work, incomplete references, Power Points that are often downloaded from the Internet and absence of bibliography during documentation are order of the day in most classrooms. No clear data has been collected to indicate how widespread the malice is, though personal communication and observation suggests that it is all pervasive in undergraduate programmes. As per our study, there is improvement in postgraduate programmes. Specially, there appears to be more awareness and compliance to the instructions given. However, clearly these changes are not universal and sufficient to ensure that this misconduct would be completely rectified by the time students enter formal professional life as scientists, as there are several reported instances of senior, reputed scientists plagiarising. The situation clearly requires a solution which is urgent and cannot wait for total reform of the present system. We

suggest the following especially for Junior college, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Firstly, lab-note work should be made into an exercise which specifically encourages original writing. No printed journal should be provided. The journal should be a log of what is done in the laboratory. In case it is necessary to provide some protocols, a short, minimal manual with references should be provided. The journal should have a simple section of 'What I did in the lab today', which cannot be plagiarised. The marks allotted to the journal should be given on examination of one practical written in their own language (which the student should be free to indicate).

Secondly, within the framework of syllabus, writing of long answers/descriptive paragraphs and/or short essays should be given as assignments. The questions/topics given should be so proximal that there is no information available on the Internet. For example, describing an experiment demonstrated by seniors/teacher, an animal behaviour observed on the campus, review of a movie clip (on topic which is part of the syllabus) in class or a personal review of what was taught in class that day. This exercise could be done during every lab work and at the end of every class for ten minutes. Pushing students to write at least ten original sentences every day is likely to improve their language skills and build confidence. Once

in a while this exercise may be evaluated and rewarded. Students with poor language skills should not be penalised but adequate time be given to improve their ability to express their ideas. Young adults often respond to criticism by switching off and this can be avoided. With better language skills plagiarism is likely to be curbed, especially as students learn to enjoy their own writings!

Thirdly, concrete steps need to be taken to spread awareness about plagiarism. A minimum of two workshops, even if repetitive, can be conducted for students. Master peer group instructing undergraduate students might go a long way in making these workshops effective. Library or spaces where students are likely to work should have charts about referencing from various resources. Lab reports should also carry a clear instruction on types of plagiarism and about how to cite resources.

Lastly, a strong local code of conduct should be evolved and communicated. It can be emphasised that plagiarism is as serious an offence as cheating in a formal examination and can be punished with the same severity.

The present study is limited by numbers participating in the survey and has a strong gender bias as it was conducted in the college which is essentially for women. The questionnaire too has a mild bias towards positive answers. Despite these limitations, the survey provides insight

into how an academic misconduct settles into student community and is perpetuated thereafter. Our suggestions on improving the situation deserve attention, specially, as they are doable in any classroom. There is no doubt that the education system requires a completely new vision, however, the problem of plagiarism cannot wait till that happens and needs immediate attention.

Therefore, incorporating a learning module in academic writing, development of critical reading pattern can change poor study habits and distinctly improve scientific communication skills. Also, inculcating ethical study practice with access to web-service tools can prevent plagiarism. There is a serious need for statutory controls as well as a national level awareness to be implemented by national level bodies for higher education.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

An overview of the formalities of questions, demography of subjects and total number is given below.

Section I

- **Demographic questions included** (Age, gender, subject and position)

Section II

- **Have students/faculty been informed about plagiarism?**

Have you heard about Plagiarism earlier? (Yes/No)

Was plagiarism ever mentioned or explained to you at school/college? (Yes/No)

- **Has plagiarism been explicitly pointed out?**

How often did any of your teachers in the past ever tell you (i.e., by means of spoken or written comments) that you have made this kind of mistake in your own written work?

- **Do students/staff consider plagiarism wrong instinctively?**

In your own opinion, to what extent do you feel you yourself copied the words or ideas of other writers without indicating the source in your writing assignment for school? Please, answer this question without considering whether or not you understood what might be wrong with such a habit.

Section III

- **Do students/staff recognise plagiarism?**

Reading someone else's term paper and then writing your own using some of his ideas and then copying part or all of his bibliography. (Yes/No)

Writing a report as a group and then each person writing a report that is a little bit different to hand in. (Yes/No)

- **Do students/staff recognise self-plagiarism?**

Taking a report or term paper you wrote for one class and rewriting it for another class. (Yes/No)

Taking a report or a term paper you wrote for one class and handing it for another class without re-writing. (Yes/No)

- **Do students/staff know about 'referencing'?**

Listing books in your bibliography that you have never read. (Yes/No)

Copying sentences or paragraphs from the encyclopedia for your report without using quotation marks or footnotes. (Yes/No)

- **Do students/staff know about referring from Internet correctly?**

Copying a report or term paper from the Internet and editing it to be 'yours'. (Yes/No)

Copying report or term paper from the Internet and handing it in without any changes. (Yes/No)

- **Is hiring services an option to plagiarism?**

Hiring a tutor to rewrite your papers for you. (Yes/No)

Paying another person, or an editing service, to write your term paper. (Yes/No)

Section IV

- **Do students/faculty find plagiarism a legitimate misconduct?**

I don't think plagiarism is right, but there are still some situations in which a student might be forced to plagiarise in order to get a decent grade in a course. (Yes/No)

Plagiarism is always wrong, regardless of circumstances. Do students/faculty find plagiarism a serious offence? (Yes/No)

- **Do students/faculty find plagiarism a serious offence?**

If I discovered that a student had plagiarised, I would punish him or her.
(Yes/No)

If a student in this class got caught plagiarising a paper, he or she would deserve to fail the course. (Yes/No)

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