

## *Why Students Plagiarise: Corrupted Morals or Failed Education?*

Joseph Wu, City University of Hong Kong, China  
Wing Hong Chui, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China  
Ming Tak Hue, The Education University of Hong Kong, China  
Anthony Yau, City University of Hong Kong, China

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### **Abstract**

Why do students plagiarise and how can we tackle the problem? An accurate understanding of reasons for student plagiarism is a crucial step to successful formulation of effective solutions to the problem. To this end, a focus group study was conducted to collect information from an “insider” view on why Hong Kong university students might engage themselves in acts of academic dishonesty. A survey questionnaire was eventually developed and then self-administered by a sample of Hong Kong university students. Based on the students’ self-report, among other forms of academic dishonesty, plagiarism is the most common type of academic misconduct and seems to be a “gateway behaviour” that might signify a “syndrome” of other academically dishonest behaviours. In addition, students in the focus group study generally opined that the plagiarism detection software currently adopted did not yield accurate detection and could be deceived. Regarding reasons for student plagiarism, the qualitative and quantitative data consistently show that that plagiarism is rooted in interactions between personal factors and contextual factors, such that when difficulty levels of academic tasks exceed student’s abilities and when student learning is insufficiently-supported, students are more likely to plagiarise. Taken together, our data tell us that the problem of student plagiarism should be treated as a challenge to teaching and learning rather than merely an issue of discipline violation. For its solution, emphasis should be placed on education instead of punishment.

Keyword: Plagiarism, Academic Dishonesty, Higher Education

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## Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, plagiarism refers to “the process or practice of using another person's ideas or work and pretending that it is your own” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). It is regarded as an increasingly common academic misconduct among students in higher education. In a recent study with university students in Portugal, as many as 24.6% of students responding to the survey reported having copied text from the internet into their assignment without citing the source, and 45% reported knowing someone who did it. Likewise, 17.1% of students reported having copied text from printed sources into their assignment without acknowledging the source, and 40.2% reported knowing someone who did it (de Lima et al., 2021).

There are several reasons that institutions in higher education are bothered by plagiarism among students. Students in higher education are requested to write in their own words to express their own ideas. Engaging in plagiarism among students not only indicates a lack of moral among students, but also signifies failure in institutions' endeavor in delivering high quality education. It can also invalidate academic results awarded to the involved students and cause damage to universities' reputations (Ives & Guikin, 2020). Nowadays, many universities have set up institutional policies to regulate plagiaristic behaviours, adopt detection software to check potential plagiarism in student assignments, and carry out training to heighten awareness of students and faculties to the issue.

However, viewing plagiarism as a misconduct or lack of morals might merely be a perspective from teachers and administrators. Unlike cheating, not every meaning of plagiarism is necessarily linked to dishonest intention (Jiang, Emmerton & McKauge, 2013). In a digital age, googling and copying-and-pasting information are common behaviours in everyday life. From students' perspective, using resources from the internet could be just a normal act that they might feel nothing wrong. Understandably, if freely using publicly available resources becomes a habit and is regarded as a social norm, it will not be surprising that some students will apply these behaviours in completing their assignments.

The link between internet use and plagiarism has been noted by researchers. For instance, in a literature review conducted by Jiang, Emmerton, and McKauge (2013), “use of technology” and “academic pressure” were two identified factors that might drive students to plagiarise. More recently, Amida, Appianing, and Marafa (2021) reported that favourable attitudes toward plagiarism was associated positively with usage of electronic learning materials and negatively with understanding of university policies. Existing evidence suggests that availability of internet or advance of technology is by no means the sole factor in triggering plagiarism. External factors such as academic pressure and internal factors such as students' level of knowledge and competence in academic subjects are also pivotal.

In our view, the mechanism that will trigger plagiarism among students are likely to be contextual and/or cultural dependence. In a context where academic achievements are strongly emphasised and highly valued, barriers to achieve are possibly more influential in triggering plagiarism among students as a way of coping with academic challenges. In a study on university students in China, teaching factors (indicated by the extent that students felt insufficiently-supported in their learning and that assignments were too many for them to handle properly) was found to be the strongest predictor of favourable attitudes toward plagiarism (Fatima et al., 2019). Likewise, after conducting a series of statistical modeling, de Lima et al. (2021) found that difficulties in academic life significantly predicted plagiaristic

behaviours among European university students. This finding throws support on a view that plagiarism among students is a way of coping with academic challenges.

Given a rising trend and increasing severity of plagiarism, clarifying the nature of plagiarism has important implications for prevention and intervention. A rapid advance of technology enables convenience of information accessibility and thus makes plagiarism easier and more subtle. In addition, the nature of plagiarism may vary with cultures. For example, in a collectivistic culture, learning by copying is a common and legitimate practice in its primary and secondary education, so students are getting used to this practice since a very young age. This cultural factor may facilitate use of plagiarism as a coping means when students are encountered with academic difficulties. Therefore, for a deep understanding of plagiarism, its context-dependent nature cannot be overlooked. As such, a timely update on this issue is therefore necessary and meaningful.

### **A Mixed Methods Study on Academic Dishonesty**

A mixed methods study on academic dishonesty was conducted among Hong Kong university students during the academic year 2019-2020. The study involved two phases: a qualitative focus group study in the first phase and a quantitative study in the second phase. In the latter phase, data were collected via an online survey with a questionnaire developed from analysis of qualitative data collected in the former phase. While the study originally aimed to focus on a broad issues of academic dishonesty, the returned data indicated that plagiarism was a major type of academically dishonest behaviours students being engaged in. As such, in this paper, only the data related to plagiarism are presented and discussed. The following questions were addressed:

- How prevailing is plagiarism among university students?
- Can plagiarism detection software prevent plagiarism?
- Why do students plagiarise?

In Phase 1 of the study, 50 Hong Kong university students were recruited. Students were invited to share their beliefs and experiences relating to issues of academic dishonesty in focus group study. When talking about academic dishonesty, most of the time participating students referred it to plagiarism. Data linking to students' common reasons for being engaged in academically dishonest acts were coded and thematically analysed. Eventually, a list of potential factors of academic dishonesty was thus constructed. Based on this list, in Phase 2 of the study, a 40-item questionnaire was developed to assess factors of academic dishonesty. In the survey instrument, another 26-item scale measuring academically dishonest behaviours that students might engaged in during their previous studying semester was also included (tapping plagiarism, cheating in exams/tests, unauthorised assistance, and falsification). The survey instrument was distributed online to students from eight government-funded universities in Hong Kong and a total of 508 valid responses were obtained.

### **How Prevailing Is Plagiarism?**

From the survey data measuring prevalence of various types of academically dishonest behaviours, plagiarism was the most prevailing type of academically dishonest behaviours. Around 42% of respondents reported having engaged in plagiarism in the semester prior to the time of survey. Students reported having been engaged in at least one type of listed academically dishonest behaviours constituted 82% of the total number of responded

students. Further analysis on the data shows that, among the students who reported having plagiarised, a bit more than half of them had also been engaged in other academically dishonest behaviours, whereas for those who had not plagiarised, only a bit more than one-eighth reported having engaged in other academically dishonest behaviours. In other words, students who had plagiarised were more likely to commit other forms of academically dishonest behaviours. As the other three types of academically dishonest behaviours are commonly regarded as more serious misconducts, these findings suggest a possibility that plagiarism may be a “gateway” behaviour leading to other more serious forms of misconducts.

### **What Are Students’ View on Academic Dishonesty / Plagiarism?**

In the focus group study, when asked to share personal experience or witnessed cases of academic dishonesty, almost always students talked about incidents of plagiarism. It reflects that, consistent with our quantitative data, plagiarism was the common most type of academically dishonest act in students’ learning environment, or that in students’ mentality academic dishonesty is mostly about plagiarism, or both. When students were asked about means of their studying universities in preventing academic dishonesty among students, quite often students’ immediate response was to name a plagiarism detection software (or text-matching software). It all suggests that academic dishonesty is predominately about plagiarism within the context of Hong Kong higher education.

Interestingly, students’ opinion about use of plagiarism detection software was mixed or even self-contradictory. While students generally agreed with the use of this tool, many commented that it would not really stop academic dishonesty. An observed consensus among students was that text matching did not validly indicate plagiarism (i.e., frequently leading to false alarm and missing real plagiarism), and that results could be easily manipulated (e.g., applying tactics to avoid being detected). A number of tactics were shared by participating students to escape detection from plagiarism detection software, such as modifying copied words, google-translating between Chinese and English, and adding tiny periods between words to confuse the software.

What the students were trying to point out was that detection of plagiarism had no impact at all on dishonest intention. Use of plagiarism detection software will only drive students to take “wiser” means to cheat as long as they have the intention or need to do so. As students shared, when one had a need to be dishonest, *“they would do it anyway”*.

### **Why Do Students Plagiarise?**

As discussed earlier, students’ perspective on nature of plagiarism is likely different from teachers’ and institutions’ perspectives. Thematic analysis on our focus group study data indicated that students attributed engagement in academic dishonesty to situations – in contrast to isolated factors – in which internal and external facilitative elements exerted its influences jointly. Particularly, students tend to choose dishonest means when:

- The students prefer “shortcuts” in doing academic tasks AND dishonesty is a convenient way out
- Task difficulty level exceeds students’ abilities AND learning are insufficiently-supported

This finding suggests that academic dishonesty will be appealing to a student under an influence of his/her situated context. Translating this idea to a language of statistical analysis, it means that academic dishonesty would be better explained by a model with interactions between factors rather than the one depicting independent factors only. To test for this speculation, a 40-item questionnaire was constructed and administered online to a sample of university students. Exploratory factor-analysis of the quantitative data yielded four personal factors (Academic difficulties, Dishonesty-prone mindset, Lack of academic integrity knowledge, and Lack of learning motivation) and five contextual factors (Convenience of cheating, Support from teacher, Institutional support for academic integrity, Peer cheating norm, and Lack of teacher support).

Subsequently multiple regression analysis was carried out to test the hypotheses that (1) dishonesty-prone mindset interacted with convenience of cheating to predict plagiarism, and (2) academic difficulties interacted with lack of learning support to predict plagiarism. In the statistical test, the two stated hypotheses were tested simultaneously in a single regression model with plagiarism tapped by the 10 items selected from the 26-item questionnaire measuring academic dishonesty. "Lack of Academic Integrity knowledge" and "Peer Cheating Norm" were also included in the tested model as covariates because preliminary bivariate analyses showed that they significantly associated with plagiarism. The overall regression model accounts for nearly 19 % of total variance of plagiaristic behaviours,  $F(10, 474) = 10.85, p < .01$ . "Lack of academic integrity knowledge" and "Peer cheating norm" no longer predicted plagiarism when other predictors were taken into account. Results of the regression analysis showed that the second hypothesis gained supported but the first was not. The quantitative data support a notion that students choose to plagiarise when difficulty levels of academic tasks exceed their abilities AND when student learning is insufficiently-supported. However, a mindset that prefers "shortcuts" over mastery learning and convenience in plagiarism in the context might not trigger actual plagiaristic behaviours when other factors were being controlled.

## **Conclusion**

To summarise, plagiarism is a frequently reported behaviour among Hong Kong university students, and is also a very common form of behaviour that the authority would regard as a misconduct. A possibility that plagiarism functions as a "gateway" behaviour leading to other forms of academically dishonest behaviours should not be overlooked. While university administrators tend to see plagiarism as an academic misconduct that should be "disciplined", students may regard it as an inevitable consequence of unresolved difficulties of learning. The former view would drive administrators to impose surveillance and punitive measures, but if the root cause lies in inadequacy in the process of teaching and learning, such measures would be ineffective, and even counter-productive (as these actions from administrators can comprise trusting relationship between students and the universities).

Findings from this mixed methods study suggest that plagiarism may be a consequence of effect jointly by personal and contextual factors. It seems that intervention and prevention need to be in a multi-layer and holistic manner. Students need to be better supported for learning (e.g., nurturing some more positive attitudes towards learning, equipping them with more effective academic skills) and universities need to establish an enhancing learning environment (i.e., a learning environment that not only facilitates positive growth but also minimise needs for taking inappropriate means to cope with academic difficulties). Emphasis of intervention and prevention of plagiarism among students should put on education instead

of punishment. It includes focusing on continuous pedagogical improvement, constant review and flexible adjustment to the curriculum to fit students' unique and changing needs, promotion of more responsive teaching and learning, and, last but not least, provision of enhanced support to faculties to empower their capabilities to respond to students' learning needs.

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**Contact email:** joseph.wu@cityu.edu.hk