

# Malaysian Students' Understanding of Plagiarism

**Dahlia Syahrani Md. Yusof**

*Multimedia University, Cyberjaya, Malaysia*

**Umi Kalsom binti Masrom**

*Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Muadzam Shah, Malaysia*

## Abstract

*Academic institutions around the world have been plagued with the issue of plagiarism. In tertiary learning institutions in Malaysia, students are taught to write academic papers using correct referencing and citation rules. Yet, many of them still face difficulties in applying the rules. This paper investigates the extent of Malaysian students' understanding on plagiarism, referencing and citation rules. Questionnaires consisting of 3 sections were distributed by email to students studying in various institutions locally and abroad. Forty-eight Malaysian students responded via email and they come from different semesters taking different courses. The data collected reveals that students do have some basic understanding of plagiarism. However, their understanding on plagiarism and referencing rules can be categorized as weak. The results imply that educators may need to do more classes and give more info on plagiarism and referencing rules so as to reduce the number of students committing plagiarism.*

## Keywords:

Plagiarism, Malaysian students, academic writing, academic papers

## Introduction

Students in Malaysia are taught about plagiarism when they enter tertiary level institutions. Malaysian students studying abroad are also exposed to the concept upon their admission to their college or universities. Prior to that, they usually have zero knowledge on plagiarism.

Thus, being newly introduced to the concept of plagiarism and having no prior background information on it, many students are facing difficulty in understanding and applying the rules of plagiarism when doing assignments or projects (Stappenbelt, Rowles & May, 2009; Marshall and Garry, 2005). Nevertheless, many educators do not appear to hesitate in punishing students who are found to commit plagiarism. Most educators seem to be aware about the seriousness of plagiarism but they might not be aware that students may have difficulty adjusting to this western principle or have poor understanding of the concept.

Interestingly, few researches have been done in Malaysia to assess the extent of students' understanding on plagiarism. This study hopes to explore Malaysian students understanding of plagiarism and issues pertaining to plagiarism. It aims to understand plagiarism from the students' perspectives and thus find ways to make them understand the issue better. The study relies on a questionnaire with some open ended questions given to students currently studying in local institutions as well as overseas institutions.

## Literature Review

One of the issues plaguing many academic institutions across the world is plagiarism. In doing assignments and projects, many students are caught of plagiarism. Some may claim ignorance and some could be blatantly breaking the rule to meet deadlines (Dawson, 2004; Song-Turner, 2008). Giv-

en much exposure and emphasis on plagiarism to many students upon their admission to college or universities, plagiarism still occurs at large (Natheson, 2009).

A few western researches have implied that Asians students tend to plagiarize more often than their western counterparts (Lahur, 2004, McDonnell, 2003, Introna et al, 2003). Nevertheless, the reasons continue to be obscure. They could be due to inability to adjust to western academic writing conventions or unfamiliarity with the rules and regulations that pertain to plagiarism (Dawson, 2004; Song-Turner, 2008). Some have claimed that the academic writing standards, in most academic institutions including Malaysia, comes from the west and thus the aspects accompanying it such as plagiarism most probably also originated from the same region (Yusof, 2009).

At the simplest level, plagiarism means the act of copying ideas or words without proper acknowledgement (Bell, 1999; Oxford Dictionary, 7th edition, pp1106). At a more complex level, a detailed explanation of plagiarism could cover aspects such as improper referencing or changing the words but forgetting to acknowledge the source. These aspects may not be blatant plagiarism but could simply be attributed to carelessness among students (Dawson, 2004).

Regardless of the justification, the concern which may have originated from the west (Hansen 2003; Yusof, 2009) has been shared by almost all academic institutions around the world that aspire to have a world class quality education. Thus, academic institutions have to work together to prevent plagiarism from becoming rampant or worse, the norm, especially among new students entering tertiary level institutions.

## Research Methodology

A questionnaire consisting of 3 sections was distributed by email to students studying in various institutions locally and abroad. The first section obtains the demographic information of the students. The second section gives instances which may or may not be plagiarism and students have to identify accordingly. The third section asks about their background knowledge on plagiarism and how and where they could obtain further information on plagiarism should they need further clarification. Forty eight Malaysian students responded via email and they come from different semesters taking different courses at international and local higher learning institutions.

## Findings/ Results

### Section A

In the first section, students are asked to fill in the demographic information. The summary of the demographic information is presented in Table 1. The demographic data include students' gender, length of study, ethnicity and name of the institution or university.

Table 1 : Demographic information

	No. of students	Percentage
Gender		
Male	17	35.4%
Female	31	64.6%
Length of study		
Less than 2 years	30	62.5%
More than 2 years	18	37.5%
Ethnicity		
Malay	35	72.9%
Chinese	13	27.1%
Institution/ University		
Local	37	77.1%
Abroad	11	22.9%

## Section B

In the second section, students are given 14 instances of plagiarism. These are common cases of plagiarism that students normally encounter during their academic studies. Students are asked to identify each case whether considered 'plagiarism', 'not plagiarism', or 'cannot determine'. The results of section B are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Understanding regarding plagiarism

No.	Question	Responses (Per cent)			Correct Answer
		Plagia-rism	Not Pla-giarism	Cannot determine	
1	Copying the words from another source without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	86.8%	7.9%	5.3%	Yes
2	Copying the words from another source with an acknowledgement.	31.6	68.4	0	No
3	Rewriting or paraphrasing the material from any source without saying where the original material comes from.	73.7	18.4	7.9	Yes
4	Creating a new piece of work structured according to a documentation standard, by referring to existing work of the same type.	13.2	76.3	10.5	No
5	Using quotes from an article but citing only the author of the quotation but not the author of the article where it came from. OR <i>Using a published work to identify important secondary citations that make a particular logical argument and then citing only those secondary sources to support your own use of the same logical argument.</i>	13.2	44.7	42.1	Yes
6	Copying the organization or structure of another piece of work without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	84.2	13.2	2.6	Yes
7	Changing the words of material from another piece of work and representing it as your own.	52.6	42.1	5.3	Yes
8	Buying a complete piece of work in order to submit it for an assignment.	76.3	13.2	10.5	Yes

9	Copying the ideas from another piece of work without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	81.6	15.8	2.6	Yes
10	Copying a web site and putting your own words and name into the content part of the pages.	65.8	26.3	7.9	Yes
11	Creating a new piece of work on the same theme as an existing one but in a new context and without copying the existing one.	13.2	81.5	5.3	No
12	Using another piece of work to identify useful secondary citations that you cite in your own work without reading the cited material.	15.8	44.7	39.5	Yes
13	Quoting from an existing piece of work with a reference to the source.	5.3	86.8	7.9	No
14	Copying short sentences (less than 50 words) from another source without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	68.4	18.4	13.2	Yes

For question no 1, which tests students' basic knowledge of plagiarism, 86.8 per cent answered correctly as plagiarism. Yet, 7.9 per cent still view it as 'not plagiarism' and another 5.3 per cent cannot determine.

Question 2 and 3 test the students understanding on giving credit or providing acknowledgement to sources. For question 2 which states 'copying the words from another source with an acknowledgement', only 68.4 per cent answered it correctly as 'not plagiarism'. Surprisingly, 31.6 per cent students rated this as plagiarism. For question 3 which states 'rewriting or paraphrasing the material from any source without saying where the original material comes from', 73.7 per cent correctly acknowledged this as 'plagiarism'. However, a substantial number of 18.4 per cent viewed this as 'not plagiarism' while 7.9 per cent chose 'cannot determine'.

Question 4 gives a 'not plagiarism' situation which states that 'creating a new piece of work structured according to a documentation standard, by referring to existing work of the same type'. The percentage of students who answer this correctly as 'not plagiarism' is 76.3 per cent. The percentage of students who 'cannot determine' the issue is 10.5 per cent, which is viewed as relatively high. Another 13.2 per cent answered this question wrongly as 'plagiarism'.

Question 5 scenario which is regarding secondary citation could be unfamiliar to Malaysian students, thus the students might have been a bit confused with the question. Only 13.2 per cent of the students answered it correctly as plagiarism. A staggering percentage of 44.7 per cent answered it as not plagiarism while 42.1 per cent of the students answered it as 'cannot determine'.

A high percentage of students, 84.2 per cent answered question 6 as plagiarism. A low percentage of 13.2 per cent answered it as 'not plagiarism' while a smaller percentage, 2.6 per cent answered it as 'cannot determine'.

The results for question 7 show that many students are still not clear on the procedure for copying and changing words from other source. Only about half of the respondents, 52.6 per cent answered the question correctly as plagiarism. The other half of the respondents, 47.4 per cent, view it as 'not plagiarism' or 'cannot determine'.

Question 8 should be obviously plagiarism, yet only 76.3 per cent answered correctly, while 23.7 per cent answered as 'not plagiarism' or 'cannot determine'.

Question 9 is similar to question 6 and question 1, which is copying another piece of work without appropriate reference. Thus, as in question 1 and 6, a high percentage of students viewed it as plagiarism. Only 18.4 per cent view it as 'not plagiarism' or 'cannot determine'.

The situation given in question 10 seems blatantly plagiarism yet, many students, 26.3 per cent, still view it as 'not plagiarism', while a surprising low percentage of students, 65.8 per cent, view it as 'plagiarism'.

With regard to question 11, 81.5 per cent identified it correctly as 'not plagiarism' while the other 18.5 per cent identified it as either 'plagiarism' or 'cannot determine'.

As in question 5, Malaysian students may not be familiar with the issue of secondary citation in question 12 since majority of the respondents, 44.7 per cent, answered it wrongly as 'not plagiarism'. Only 15.8 per cent correctly identified it as plagiarism while another 39.5 per cent answered it as 'cannot determine'.

The scenario for question 13 is not plagiarism, yet 5.3 per cent of the students answered it wrongly as 'plagiarism'. There are still 7.9 per cent of the students who cannot determine the case. The other 86.8 per cent correctly believed that this is 'not plagiarism'.

The last question tries to assess students understanding on the method for copying short sentences. A low percentage of students, 68.4 per cent, correctly identified this as 'plagiarism' while 31.6 per cent answered either 'not plagiarism' or 'cannot determine'.

### Section C

The third section obtains the information on students' background knowledge on plagiarism and from whom and where they obtain more information on plagiarism.

For the first question on where they first obtain information on plagiarism, many students answered that they received the information during their first year of study in the tertiary level. Some answered that they started receiving the information only in their tertiary institution.

For the second question regarding people they refer to if students have problems, students wrote friends, lecturers and senior students as their reference source.

Regarding the third question on where they refer to for more information on referencing guidelines, some answered that they refer to their old notes provided by their lecturers when they studied for their diploma. Other answers include website search and written guidelines provided by their institutions.

## Discussion and Recommendation

The results show that, in general, most Malaysian students still have shallow understanding on plagiarism. They could understand the basic scenario on plagiarism such as depicted in question 1, 6, 9 and 13. However when it comes to the issue of secondary citation (Question 5 and 12), many students are still in the dark on how to do referencing.

The data shows that none of the questions has a score of 90% or above for the correct answer. The highest score for the correct answer is for question 1 and 13 which refer to common scenarios on plagiarism. This might mean that these two cases are the most common forms which are being explicitly taught to Malaysian students.

The least correctly answered questions are questions 5 and 12 which present the situations on secondary citation. Only a very small minority of Malaysian students are familiar with this concept in plagiarism. They seem to think that as long as they cite the author at hand, then plagiarism is avoided.

Question 7 shows surprising result because the phrases 'changing words' and 'representing it as your own' should be obviously plagiarism but somehow, it is still misjudged by quite a number of students.

The results for question 14 concur with many other researches on plagiarism (Stappenbelt, Rowles & May, 2009; Song-Turner, 2008; Marshall and Garry, 2005). The results indicate that many students misunderstood that if they copy a small chunk of the sentences from other sources, it is not considered as plagiarism – which is definitely untrue! Most students understand that submitting the entire work of an author as their own is clearly considered as plagiarism, but they are often confused about how to summarize and cite the work of others.

Regardless of whether students study overseas or locally or their years of study, they do not score highly on the survey. This suggests that students may not fully understand the ways of proper referencing and citation to fulfil academic writing requirements. In fact, academic writing standards as well as the rule of plagiarism and citation are mostly borrowed from the west. Thus, it explains the confusion faced by students in determining some scenarios in the survey whether they are plagiarism or not.

The results of section C reveal that students are taught and exposed about plagiarism only upon entering higher learning institutions. They are usually given a short overview of plagiarism which may not really emphasize the gravity of the issue. Students are usually informed that should they need more information, they can browse the university's academic handbook in hard copy or online. Even though the learning value can be enhanced by referring to the guidelines, possibilities for students to learn about academic writing by discovering and exploring also need to be considered.

In general, it can be concluded that Malaysian students have insufficient knowledge on plagiarism. Students may not be aware that there are many different levels of plagiarism. Educators may need to feed the students with more thorough explanation of plagiarism concept and ways to avoid it. Students may need to be presented with different scenarios of plagiarism and ways to overcome them. Longer training should be conducted for Malaysian students to help them understand the concept more thoroughly. They should be presented with concrete examples of what constitute plagiarism and what is not. They should be invited to ask questions about what they do not understand. Lecturers can also provide opportunities for students to find features they could use in their own writing.

One of the prevention strategies that can be done in the future is by giving the students clearer understanding of plagiarism and expose them to the negative impacts of plagiarism. Many institutions implement several strategies to prevent plagiarism including establishing academic integrity policies, conducting training and awareness programs, implementing plagiarism detection technologies and prescribing punishment for students who are found guilty of violating policies (Hughes & McCabe, 2006).

Another strategy to combat plagiarism is to change the institution culture from focusing on catching and punishing the students who plagiarised to promoting academic integrity. Institutional policies will be more effective if students perceive them to be fair and reasonable and applied consistently by all lecturers in the institution.

Online learning environment is an important component of higher education institutions nowadays. However, the rapid growth of online learning environment brings disadvantages to the education system. Since it is so easy to plagiarize using internet sources, students may plagiarize without recognizing that they are doing so, even though they believe that plagiarism is ethically wrong (Kraus, 2002).

## Conclusion

Plagiarism is viewed strongly as an academic misconduct by learning institutions yet many Malaysian students, as demonstrated by the survey results, do not share this view. The results suggest that Malaysian students have poor understanding of plagiarism. They also might not be aware of the different ways that they could plagiarize.

Academic institutions need to be aware that students may need more exposure and training on plagiarism given that the concept originated from the west and most possibly is alien to many Asians including Malaysian students. Students may need to be taught with specific strategies to avoid plagiarism.

Plagiarism is a complex issue that has become more challenging with the rapid growth of online learning environment. The challenge remains for the academician to instill the awareness and continuously educate the students on this issue. Using various pedagogical techniques, academician can choose to

evolve and adapt the teaching methods to create positive learning environment that encourages not only original thinking but also academic integrity.

## References

- Dawson, J. (2004). Plagiarism: What's really going on? In Seeking Educational Excellence, Proceedings of the 13th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 9-10 February 2004, Perth: Murdoch University.
- Hansen, B. (2003). Combating Plagiarism. *CQ Researcher*, 13(32), 773-796
- Hughes, J.M.C., & Mc-Cabe, D.L. (2006). Understanding academic misconduct. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 36(1), 49-63.
- Kraus, J. (2002). Rethinking plagiarism: What our students are telling us when they cheat. *Issues in Writing*. 13(1), 80-95.
- Marshall, S. and Garry, M. (2006). NESB and ESB students' attitudes and perceptions of plagiarism. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 2(1)
- Marshall, S.J. and Garry, M. (2005). How well do students really understand plagiarism? Paper accepted for the ASCILITE 2005 conference, Brisbane, Australia.
- Song-Turner, H. (2008). Plagiarism: Academic dishonesty or blind spot of multicultural education? *Australian Universities' Review*, 50(2), 39-50
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. (2006). (7th edition). China: Oxford University Press,
- Stappenbelt, B., Rowles, C. & May, E. (2009). Cultural influence on attitudes to plagiarism. In teaching and learning for global graduates. Proceedings of the 18th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 29-30 January 2009. Perth: Curtin University of Technology.
- Yusof, D. (2009). A Different Perspective on Plagiarism. *The Internet TESL Journal*, XV(2)