

# Plagiarism: Students' Perception

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**Abstract:** - Plagiarism may be defined as using others ideas and words and presenting them as one's own without clearly acknowledging the source of that information. It is a form of academic misconduct now becoming an issue of concern at educational establishments. Although, plagiarism is regarded as an academic offence with severe penalties, a huge number of students are still committing this offence, sometimes accidentally or unintentionally, but mostly with intent. This paper discusses how and why some students plagiarise and reports the results of an experiment that was conducted to understand students' perception. Students were given a number of simple scenarios and asked to determine whether they were instances of plagiarism, collusion or collaboration. The objective was to determine if students understood what plagiarism was and whether they knew the difference between plagiarism, collusion and collaboration. Our results show that whereas students think they know what plagiarism is, they cannot always identify it when presented with different scenarios of plagiarism, collusion and collaboration. The paper recommends that institutions need to be more proactive in informing the students and using the detection mechanisms to deter students from committing this academic misconduct.

**Key-Words:** - Plagiarism, Collusion, Collaboration, Cyber plagiarism, Contract cheating.

## 1. Introduction

Plagiarism is a form of *academic misconduct*. It refers to copying information verbatim, presenting someone else's idea without referencing, paraphrasing someone else's writing, providing incorrect references with the intention of cheating and collusion. Maurer et al [1] categorises plagiarism as:

- Accidental: due to lack of knowledge of plagiarism or understanding of the need of correct referencing.
- Unintentional: not realising that work produced could be considered as plagiarised
- Intentional: a deliberate act to deceive, hoping that it will go unnoticed.
- Self plagiarism: plagiarising from one's own previously published work.

Plagiarism is becoming an issue of concern at educational institutions. Although, not every student submits plagiarised work, instances of plagiarism are increasing with time. One reason for increase is the readily available information through the Internet as well as the availability of essays and course work through *essay mills* or *paper mills* from

websites such as Coursework4U.co.uk, CourseWorkBank.co.uk and UKEssays.com [2]. These sites, which are proliferating with time, provide what is known as *ghostwriting* service and specialise in the sale of essays. They would also be happy to do and sell assignment work for students. Such businesses are totally legal and they are simply selling goods, in this case essays, reports and course work. A number of auction sites are also available on the Internet, eg RentACoder, BizReef and GetACoder [3-5], which act as brokers between clients and contractors [2]. The clients (in this case, students) post requests for work to be done and contractors (specialists in the area) place bids to win the contracts. These are very well managed out-sourcing websites, operating legally and providing a legitimate service to individuals and industry. However, when students use these sites and purchase material to submit as their *own work*, then we have a problem. Purchase and submission of such work as students' own is referred to as *Contract Cheating* [2, 6-8].

A survey conducted by Freshminds recruitment consultancy and presented at a UK conference [9, 10] reported that a quarter of students had submitted

plagiarised work from other sources: 9% once and 16% of them more often.

## 2. Why students plagiarise

There are several reasons why some students plagiarise. In some cases, this is due to ignorance of what plagiarism is or what its penalties are. Often students, especially international students, do not see anything wrong in *copying* others materials. They do not understand the requirement of proper citation or referencing and do not distinguish between paraphrased and plagiarised text. Often they do not even know that academics regard plagiarism as a serious offence. Although, ignorance is not an excuse, various studies and academics' own experience testify to this [6-8, 11].

Sometimes, there is too much pressure of work for students to submit several assignments roughly at the same time, especially towards the end of a semester, and thus there is a temptation to collude or plagiarise. Studies have also shown that 47% students think they can plagiarise and yet get away with it [11]. Students understand that it is sometimes difficult, often impossible, to detect if plagiarism has taken place especially if it is an instance of contract cheating.

A general lack of confidence in one's writing abilities, especially in case of students from non-English speaking countries is another reason for plagiarising or contract cheating. A huge pressure to get good grades is another reason. Information readily available on the Internet as 'public property' can be a temptation to get 'help'.

## 3. Experiment

An experiment was conducted in the autumn semester of 2008 to find out if students understood what plagiarism was and whether they knew the difference between plagiarism, collusion and collaboration. A questionnaire was designed with 6 simple questions. Students were asked to define plagiarism, collusion and collaboration and comment on given scenarios to determine whether these were instances of plagiarism, collusion or collaboration. The target audience was 47 final year students of undergraduate programmes in Computing. They were asked to fill in the questionnaires during one of the lecturing sessions. There was no requirement for students to write their names on questionnaires so there was no way to find out who said what. Students were asked to be honest

in their answers to questions so that the analysis presented a correct picture.

The following sections present the questions asked as well as the results obtained.

### 3.1 Questions 1 and 2:

The first question was in three parts and asked students the following:

- Do you know what is plagiarism?
- Do you know what is collusion?
- Do you know what is collaboration?

There were three possible answers to each of the above: *Yes*, *No* and *I think I know*.

- 1 student (2%) did not know what any of these terms meant.
- 17 students (36%) answered these questions in affirmative (ie Yes, Yes and Yes).
- 2 students (4%) said *they think they know* what the terms meant.
- 14 students (38%) said they knew what is meant by plagiarism or collaboration but they were not sure of what collusion meant.
- 9 students (19%) said they knew what plagiarism meant but they did not know or they were not too sure of what the other two terms meant.
- 1 student (2%) knew what collaboration meant but was unsure of the other two terms.

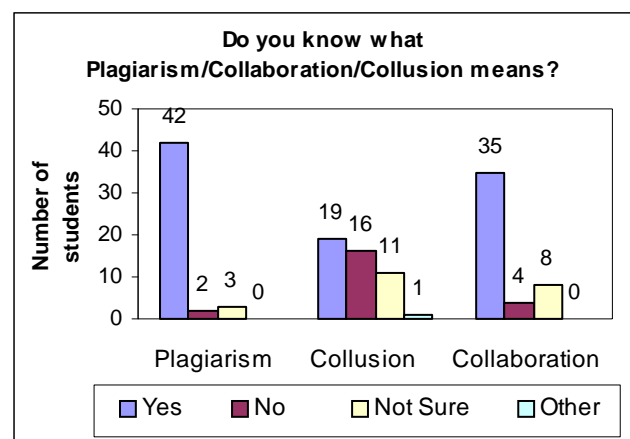


Figure 1: Understanding of plagiarism, collusion and collaboration

Referring to Figure 1, we note very clearly that students are not too sure as to what collusion means. Overall, we find that:

- 42 students (89%) knew what plagiarism was.

- 19 students (40%) knew what collusion meant
- 35 students (74%) understood what collaboration was.

Question 2 asked students to define plagiarism, collusion and collaboration. It was interesting to note that, of the 17 students who said they understood the three terms well (from their answers to question 1), only two students defined plagiarism, collusion and collaboration reasonably correctly. From the remaining 15 students:

- 14 students defined plagiarism reasonably satisfactorily.
- 3 students defined collusion reasonably satisfactorily.
- 2 students defined collaboration reasonably satisfactorily.

Referring to Figure 2, we note very clearly that students have not provided a satisfactory definition of the terms Collusion and Collaboration. Overall, we find that:

- 40 students (85%) defined plagiarism satisfactorily.
- Only 7 students (15%) defined collusion satisfactorily, 24 students (51%) defined it incorrectly and 16 students (34%) did not respond.
- 15 students (32%) defined collaboration correctly, 13 students (28%) defined it incorrectly and 19 students (40%) did not respond.

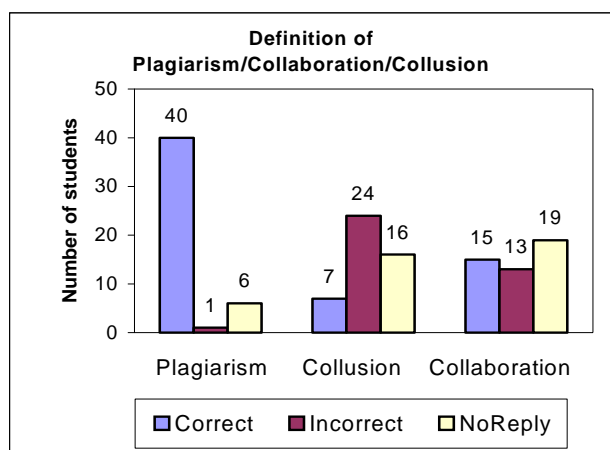


Figure 2: Definition of plagiarism, collusion and collaboration

Further analysis of the answers given by the 42, 19 and 35 students, who said they know what plagiarism,

collaboration and collusion is (refer to Figure 1), we find that only 39, 5 and 8 students defined the terms correctly, as shown in the Figure 3.

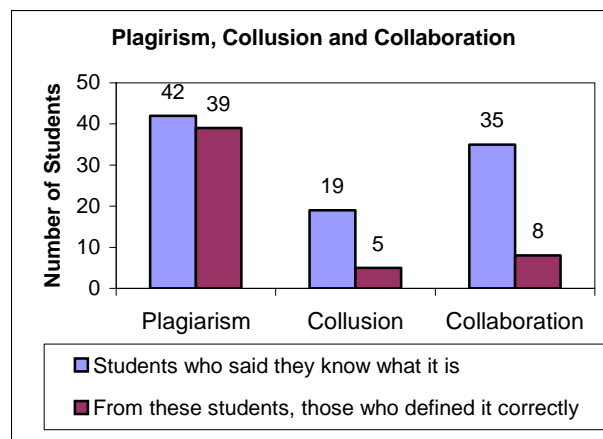


Figure 3: Understanding and definition of plagiarism, collusion and collaboration

Our study shows that overall 85-89% of the students know what plagiarism is. This figure is slightly better than 75% quoted by King [11] who investigated the perceptions of international students only. For our study, the majority of students were from the UK - their first language being English.

### 3.2 Question 3:

Question 3 presented five simple generalised scenarios (no more than three lines of text in each case) and students were asked to say whether these were instances of plagiarism, collusion or collaboration. Here is the summary of results as presented in Figure 4:

- only one student (from a total of 47) provided correct answers in each case.
- 9 students (19%) gave the correct answer to scenario-1, which was an example of plagiarism.
- 11 students (23%) gave the correct answer to scenario-2. This was an example of collusion.
- 23 students (49%) gave the correct answer to scenario-3. There was no plagiarism, collusion or collaboration in this example.
- 44 students (94%) gave the correct answer to scenario-4, where the scenario referred to an instance of plagiarism.
- 30 students (64%) gave the correct answer to scenario-5. This was an example of collusion.

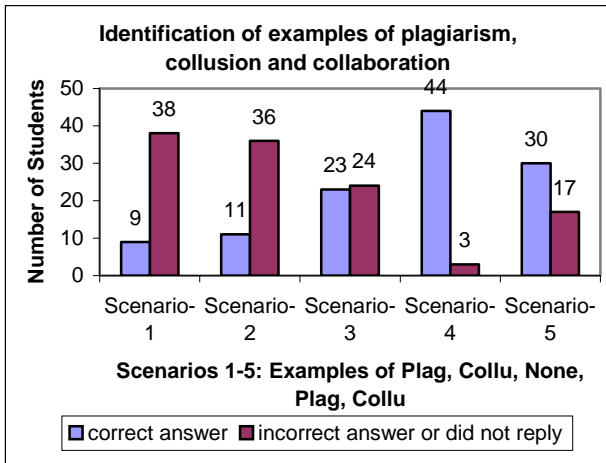


Figure 4: Identification of examples of plagiarism, collusion and collaboration

### 3.3 Question 4:

In this question, an extract from a book was provided. Based on this, four scenarios were presented and the students were asked to say whether these were instances of plagiarism, collusion or collaboration. Here is the summary of results as presented in Figure 5:

- only one student (from a total of 47) provided correct answers in each case.
- from the remaining 46 students, 24, 28, 7 and 11 students gave the correct answers to scenarios 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Other students provided incorrect answers or did not reply to the question.

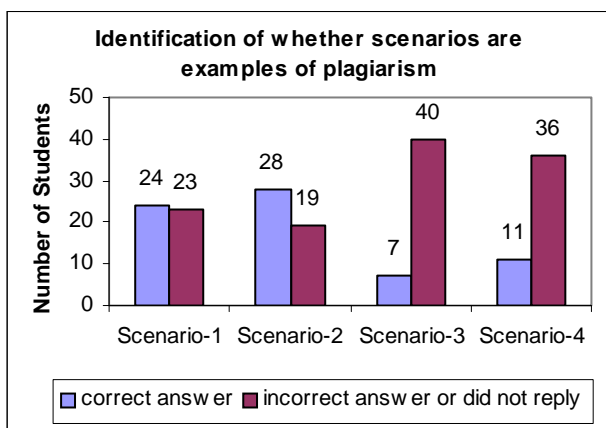


Figure 5: Identification of whether scenarios are examples of plagiarism

### 3.4 Question 5:

In this question, a paragraph taken from a book was made available. Based on this, an extract was provided (that someone might have submitted as part of an assignment). The original paragraph contained some scientific facts, which were reported in the extract, but without reference to any source. Since the original paragraph contained well-known universal scientific facts there was no act of plagiarism. The students were asked to determine whether or not there was an instance of plagiarism in the extract. Here is how students answered the question (refer to Scenario-A in Figure 6):

- 35 students answered the question; other 12 did not.
- only 15 ie 43% of them correctly responded.

### 3.5 Question 6:

This was very similar to the above question. A paragraph taken from a book was made available. This paragraph contained some well-known scientific facts. Based on this, an extract was provided where the same facts were presented as *result of author's own research*. Obviously, this is unacceptable. Students were asked to determine whether this was an instance of plagiarism or not. Here is how students responded (refer to Scenario-B in Figure 6):

- 31 students answered the question; other 16 did not.
- only 14 ie 45% of them correctly identified it as an example of plagiarism.

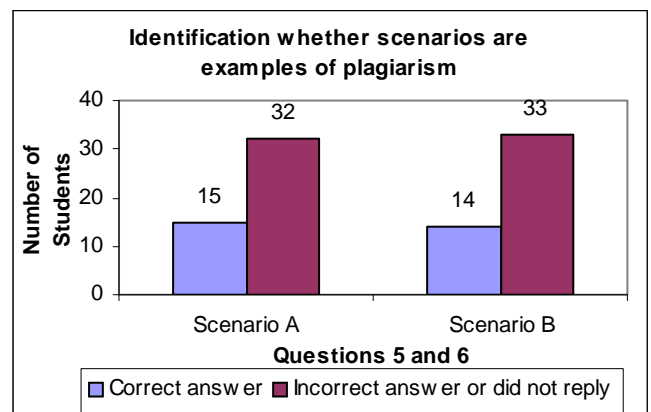


Figure 6: Identification of whether scenarios are examples of plagiarism

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Plagiarism is a form of *academic cheating* where others' ideas and words and presenting as one's own without acknowledging the source of such ideas or words. With the ready availability of information via the Internet and other sources such as *paper mills* and *essay auction sites*, plagiarism is on the increase. Although, educational institutions regard plagiarism as a serious academic offence with severe penalties, nearly half the students who submit plagiarise work think their offence will go unnoticed [11].

In this paper, we have presented the result of an experiment. A questionnaire was designed, containing a number of short extracts and students were asked to determine whether they were instances of plagiarism, collusion or collaboration. Our results show that:

- When asked for definitions, 89% and 74% students said they knew what plagiarism and collaboration was, however, 85% and 32% students defined the terms reasonably correctly. Similarly, only 40% of students said they knew what collusion meant but only 15% of students were able to define it satisfactorily.
- When four scenarios of instances of plagiarism, collusion or collaboration were presented, only 24, 28, 7 and 11 students (out of a total of 47) identified them correctly.
- When another example was presented and students asked to determine whether or not this was an instance of plagiarism, 35 students responded and only 43% of them gave the correct answer. This represents 32% of the total number of students providing the correct answer.
- When given another similar example, 31 students responded and only 45% of them gave the correct answer. This represents 30% of the total number of students providing the correct answer.

The results clearly show that whereas students think they know what plagiarism (and collaboration) is, they cannot always identify or determine it correctly. Also, students do not generally understand what collusion means. It was rather surprising to note the students' ignorance, especially when the students were in the final years of their programmes of study.

This suggests that educational institutions need to spend much more time explaining what constitutes plagiarism and what are its penalties and ensuring that students not only understand it but also actively avoid it. Besides, institutions need to be more active in detecting plagiarism – this will also deter students from committing this offence.

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