

PRE-UNIVERSITY PATHWAY PERCEPTIONS OF PLAGIARISM AND PROACTIVE PRACTICES TO REDUCE PREVALENCE

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ABSTRACT

Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) is a pre-university ‘pathway’ provider in Australia. Specific to this research are the 98% international students who enter EIBT to undertake a Diploma in Business, Information Technology, or Engineering with provisional entry into *The University of Adelaide* or the *University of South Australia*. Using a author-researcher developed mandatory and online questionnaire—delivered to students during the three-day orientation program the week prior to the trimester commencing—rich qualitative data enabled exploration of 89 new students’ attitudes, perceptions and understandings to the open-ended question: *In your own words, what is plagiarism?* It is evident from this work that understandings of plagiarism vary among students. It is through increasing awareness of the importance of honesty and endeavour that a sense of the value of intellectual rigour within EIBT and for its academic reputation will be/remain heightened.

Keywords:

academic integrity (AI), cheating, international students, pathway programs, plagiarism

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the Higher Education (HE) context, lack of fluency with the primary language of administration and teaching may inhibit all students' academic achievement, but chiefly Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students *irrespective* of their cultural background (Marshall & Garry, 2006). Further, dependence on writing as a measure of competency in a subject-area can be problematic for international students who may not be accustomed and neither *familiar with* nor *proficient in* the skills of writing *vis-a-vis* the patterns of Australian academic discourse (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; McLean & Ransom, 2005; Sawir, 2005; Velliaris & Warner, 2009; Zhang & Mi, 2010).

As expressed by Nagy and Townsend (2012, p. 97), '[d]iscipline-specific words can be technical or abstract, and understanding them is essential to building conceptual knowledge'. The induction of students into an academic culture and development of an understanding of the norms of academic behaviour is challenging as uncertainty may exist as to the *what, why, when, where, who* and *how* of plagiarism. For example: *Is copying one or two words considered plagiarism? Where do I place the in-text citation? How many in-text citations should I use throughout my work? How do I know if the information is general knowledge or discipline-specific? Do I include the page number when I paraphrase?*

Unfamiliarity with the expectations of academic conventions in an educational context that is little-known, may result in plagiarism as notions/understandings are 'multi-faceted' and *not* 'cross-culturally' applicable (e.g., Ireland & English, 2011; McDonnell, 2004; Russikoff, Fucaloro, & Salkauskiene, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Tran, 2012). In agreement with Power (2009, p. 659), '[cross-disciplinary] [p]lagiarism is an intriguing topic with many avenues for exploration'. Certainly, plagiarism can result from 'honest confusion' (McGowan & Lightbody, 2008).

Throughout this article, 'international students' or 'students' is specific to individuals enrolled in EIBT on temporary student visas and who are exclusively from a (NESB). Pre-university pathways are important preparatory institutions for acculturating

[international] students to behaviours indicative of Academic Integrity (AI) and the mastery of skills whereupon the norms of Western academic conventions are made explicit (Velliaris, Willis, & Breen, 2015a).

2.0 BACKGROUND

Founded in 1998, the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) has a strong profile for pre-university ‘pathways’ in Australia. Specific to this research are the students who enter EIBT to undertake a Diploma in Business, Information Technology, or Engineering leading to *The University of Adelaide* or the *University of South Australia*. EIBT attracts predominantly ‘international’ students and provisionally secures their tertiary destination prior to them meeting the university’s direct entry requirements (Velliaris & Willis, 2014; Velliaris, Willis, et al., 2015a; Velliaris, Willis, & Breen, 2015b; Velliaris, Willis, & Pierce, 2015). Diplomas comprise eight courses that constitute the ‘first-year’ of a bachelor degree at the partner HE Institution (HEI). EIBT serves to acculturate international students and offers an intensive period of preparation for entrance into mainstream Australian HE.

Table 1. Citizenship of EIBT students over the past eight trimester (-01, -02 and -03)

Country	2013-02	2013-03	2014-01	2014-02	2014-03	2015-01	2015-02
Australia	5	2	4	3	5	5	3
China	139	137	205	202	256	304	246
Hong Kong	51	50	51	29	30	27	25
India	8	9	12	10	10	10	5
Indonesia	4	6	4	1	4	3	2
Kenya	1	3	5	5	5	6	3
Malaysia	12	9	16	17	17	20	18
Pakistan		1	2	3	5	6	4
South Korea	5	3	3	3	2	2	2
Vietnam	12	11	19	24	26	23	15
Other	12	14	20	18	14	17	14
Total	249	245	341	315	374	423	337

EIBT lecturers are faced, however, with the challenge of preparing students who are lower-level in terms of their: (a) English language proficiency; and/or (b) previous academic results. With reference to Table 1 above, EIBT international students are generally between the ages of 17-27 years and represent more than 20 different nationalities/ethnicities at any one time, but predominantly from mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.

The partner HEI moderates diploma delivery and grants advanced standing (credit) for all eight courses if students achieve the stipulated entry-level Grade Point Average (GPA) upon diploma graduation (Velliaris & Coleman-George, 2014; Velliaris & Willis, 2014). Approximately 40 ‘sessional’ and largely cross-institutional lecturers deliver 40 courses across three back-to-back trimesters; February (-01), June (-02) and October (-03).

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Preparing Non-Native Speakers (NNS) for the demands of academic study in a native English language speaking HE environment, requires a dual focus of helping them develop the language competency *and* study skills that will enable them to succeed. Comparisons of *native* and *novice* corpora of academic writing highlight features of non-nativeness or ‘unconventionality’ in the ‘phraseology’ of NESB students (Paquot, 2008) that can be used to detect plagiarism. Boshier (2003, p. 62) suggested that ‘[a]cquiring full academic proficiency in a second language can take 8-10 years and even then, residual errors may remain’ (see also Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi, 2015). Chronologically tracing the literature, plagiarism is characterised in a number of ways and some examples are elucidated here forth.

In the 1990s, Stearns (1992, p. 519) defined plagiarism as ‘intentionally taking the literary property of another without attribution and passing it off as one’s own, having failed to add anything of value to the copied material and having reaped from its use an unearned benefit’. Kibler (1993) asserted that academic dishonesty related to ‘forms of cheating and plagiarism that involve students giving or receiving unauthorized

assistance in an academic exercise or receiving credit for work that is not their own' (p. 253).

In the 2000s, Green (2002) used the language of criminal law in his definition of plagiarism, stating that it involved '...*actus reus* elements are copying a work (an act) and failing to attribute such work to its author (an omission) where one has a duty to do so. The *mens rea* element is less clear... a good deal of confusion over whether copying or failure to attribute must be 'intentional' or 'knowing,' or whether plagiarism is committed even when such acts are inadvertent' (p. 173). Larkham and Manns (2002, p. 348) suggested that most academic institutions view plagiarism to be a sub-section of cheating and commonly utilise the phrase 'seeking to gain unfair advantage'. Russikoff, Fucaloro, and Salkauskiene (2003) study's distinguished plagiarism as the three most common errors/omissions in relation to: *verbatim* i.e., word-for-word duplication and enclosed in quotation marks; *paraphrasing* i.e., the author's words transposed to simplify/summarise the text yet retains the original meaning; and *ideas* i.e., not commonly held and would appear specific to the author (p. 130). Park (2004) expressed plagiarism as 'a form of cheating or academic malpractice, which also includes cheating in examinations, fabrication of results, duplication and false declaration' (p. 292).

In the 2010s, Alzahrani, Salim, and Abraham (2012) noted that '[p]lagiarism can be of many different natures, ranging from copying texts to adopting ideas, without giving credit to its originator' (p. 133). Providing several examples of plagiarism, Hexham (2013) highlighted one as 'the deliberate attempt to deceive the reader... occurs when a writer repeatedly uses more than four words from a printed source without the use of quotation marks and a precise reference to the original source in a work presented as the author's own research and scholarship'. Last, Bakhtiyari et al., (2014) stated that, 'plagiarism is the act of copying someone else text, idea or language and publish it as it is his/her own work' (p. 53).

In their home country, for example, EIBT international students may not have been taught to question/challenge the ideas of an expert author (Lund, 2004). While this type of plagiarism may be innocent and unintended, simply '[t]urning a blind eye' (Park,

2004, p. 291) is *not* an appropriate response from lecturers for a variety of reasons. They include: assuring fairness among students; and promoting both the theory and the practice of AI among staff and students (Goddard & Rudzki, 2005). It is important to investigate the potential cross-cultural contexts of plagiarism (Handa & Power, 2005), thus in support of McCabe and Pavela's (2004, p. 15) assertion, '[p]rompt and equitable enforcement of academic-integrity policies does not have to be unduly punitive. Sanctions for first offences can and generally should have an educational emphasis'.

Increasingly, HE institutions are assigning persons responsible for issues surrounding AI. The Discipline-Specific Lecturer (DSL) may be the 'content specialist', but an AI-Officer (AIO) may be better able to decipher the seemingly foreign academic code and clearly lay out the necessary steps to fulfil the course requirements for students (Cantell, Scevak, & Parkes, 2010). Other synonyms for this role include: Academic Conduct Advisor; Academic Conduct Officer; Academic Course Advisor; Academic Integrity Advisor; Academic Integrity Coordinator; Academic Success Coordinator; and Academic Support Advisor.

Within the context of EIBT, the AIO facilitates: consistent interpretation and implementation of policy; consistent judgments to be made on cases of academic misconduct; consistent outcomes when academic misconduct is proven; consistent use of plagiarism-detection tools in sampling and targeting student work within each discipline; maintains streamlined management of reported instances of academic misconduct within each discipline, and regularly reporting to the Academic Director, Academic Advisory and EIBT Teaching and Learning Committees.

Where an EIBT lecturer has concerns that the action(s) of a student may constitute plagiarism, they will discuss the issue with the AIO. If the AIO believes the matter warrants further investigation, they will notify the student accordingly detailing the concerns and requesting them to attend a meeting to discuss the matter. EIBT stipulates that such a meeting should occur within 20 days of the initial notification. Where the student fails to respond to the notification, the AIO may decide on a course of action without the student being present. If the AIO determines that *no* academic misconduct

was involved, no further action will be taken and no record of the discussion will be entered on the central database. If the AIO determines that the action of the student *was* misconduct, they will provide academic counselling to that student and thereafter decide on further action if required. With this in mind, EIBT is striving to minimise the occurrence of various forms of academic misconduct, chief among them being ‘plagiarism’.

4.0 METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Trimesterly, as part of EIBT’s three-day ‘Orientation Program’, newly enrolled EIBT students are required to complete several mandatory online induction tasks. One task involves students completing an author-developed ‘semi-structured’ (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) questionnaire that includes a series of 25 ‘open-ended’ (Creswell, 2008; Kaufman, Guerra, & Platt, 2006; Neuman, 2004) questions. As students with a range of English language skills—ranging from 5.0-7.0 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores—would be completing the questionnaire, it was important that it was well-organised with clear wording and a straightforward layout (Blankenship, Crossley, Heidingsfield, Herzog, & Kornhauser, 2008; Oppenheim, 1992).

In first-person narrative form, qualitative and electronic data was obtain from new students (n=89) in Trimester 1, 2015 (2015-01), across all diploma offerings, who provided their response to the following question: *In your own words, what is plagiarism?* Through EIBT students’ voices, three research objectives underpinning this exercise: (a) to acknowledge the value of student narratives as a source of rich description; (b) to share qualitative responses for teaching and learning improvement in EIBT e.g., to improve policy, communication strategies and assessment practices; and (c) to seek insight into areas for future empirical exploration.

The researcher-practitioner decided against the use of computer-based analytic tools in order to remain open to flexible analysis and interpretation. The data provided rich data,

whereby students' 'personal' beliefs/understandings could be elucidated. Importantly, no comment can be contributed to any particular student respondent.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The excerpts selected for presentation below are based on EIBT students' personal attitudes, perceptions and understandings of plagiarism. They give insight into respondents' judgement(s) and should, therefore, be conceived as a subjective process.

Narrative responses

No matter how clear a definition of plagiarism, it is not a universally understood/accepted concept in academia. For the purpose of this research, students were explicitly told to use 'their own words' to answer the question: *What is plagiarism?* Any student would be able to rapidly reproduce a definition derived from the internet and cut-and-paste into the online questionnaire textbox. Without confirmation, several excerpts may have been derived from the internet, as the explanation was indicative of a site focused on plagiarism such as:

Plagiarism is the act of taking another person's writing, conversation, song, or even idea and passing it off as your own. This includes information from web pages, books, songs, television shows, email messages, interviews, articles, artworks or any other medium. Whenever you paraphrase, summarise, or take words, phrases, or sentences from another person's work, it is necessary to indicate the source of the information within your paper using an internal citation.

Plagiarism is the act of using someone else's information or ideas and taking credits for. It is a form of cheating and also unethical. Plagiarism may be deliberate or thoughtless, or unintentional. In high schools and universities, it is considered as disciplinary misconduct. To avoid plagiarism, it is necessary to specify the source of information.

The vast majority of students, however, formed their own assessment and the following three examples appeared to be the most comprehensive:

Plagiarism is like stealing other people's work and declaring it is your own without doing any referencing about the information that was found. Plagiarism can also be classified as cheating, because it has the same meaning by taking other people's work without their knowledge and submitting as your own work, thus by doing this it would eventually lead to failure in the subject and maybe expulsion.

Plagiarism is when you are taking someone else's work. It does not have to appear like a text, it could also be someone's speech that you copy. You have to make your own version of everything to avoid plagiarism.

Plagiarism refers to stealing someone else's work as their own. This behaviour can seriously affect the rights of authors, for example, if a student copying another student's assignment, then the student may not get another score, therefore, this is a bad behaviour for learning.

In vast contrast to the excerpts above, a small minority of students chose to answer the question with minimal effort and explanation. Such responses may be indicative of these students' approaches to coursework in the weeks following orientation and their inability to follow simple instructions:

Copy.

Copying.

Copy other person.

Copy other people.

Copying things.

Copy everything.

While most students recognise that plagiarism is 'wrong', they perhaps do not fully understand the multitude of actions that may constitute it. Most often, their response

was focused on and limited to school work i.e., essay and report writing, general homework and assignment tasks:

Copy and inadequate paraphrase.

Copying the same paragraph from another student's essay.

It means to copy or just change a little word from the existing article without referencing. The whole article needs to be written all by your own work.

People who copy our homework and reference without thinking by themselves.

Plagiarism is an act that can be copy and change the writing of the person who wrote the original and change into written of your own by editing it.

Plagiarism means copy or use others idea without reference.

The majority of students provided an adequate to good definition of plagiarism, such as the following excerpts:

It is the practice of using or copying someone else's ideas or work and pretending that you thought of it or created it.

Plagiarism is a action which people copied works or results from other people without a permission. Also isn't written as a reference list. Cheating and share work from a collusion work is also a kind of plagiarism.

Several students used a storyline approach—personal or hypothetical—to answer the question:

Plagiarism is a form of cheating, but it's a little complicated so a kid might do it without understanding that it's wrong. Chris should have given the author and the website credit for the information. Why? Because Chris didn't know this information before he came to the website. These aren't his thoughts or ideas.

Plagiarism is to rip-off someone else's work and use it as your own. For example, if I took a paragraph from Wikipedia and claimed it as my own during an assignment.

When I came to Australia and started my English course as the first class department told us, plagiarism phenomenon violating discipline is very serious here. If any student does plagiarism, they will fail this course, to repair, or student status will be expelled from school.

At least one-third of the cohort incorporated the terms ‘cheating’ and/or ‘stealing’ when attempting to define plagiarism. Excerpts referring to cheating included:

‘Plagiarism’ is a kind of cheating.

Plagiarism is similar to cheating, but it’s a little complicated than it.

Plagiarism is simply to copy and cheating.

Excerpts referring to stealing included:

For own profit, to steal other’s things, it is a illegal behaviour.

It is the thing in which someone steals the ideas of other people and uses as his own work.

It looks like you steal ideas of others and you don’t have anything to write.

It means someone copied the academic article, music, painting and other works from someone else. They stole others’ idea. It is unacceptable and illegal.

Plagiarism is the act of presenting someone’s work. Generally stealing someone’s work and publicising it as if it is yours.

Steal others ideas.

Few students resorted to their own ethical or moral judgement to formulate a response that took a condemnatory tone:

In my opinion, plagiarism is a crime. We cannot do that!

It is copying, which is very bad and deceiving. I never do it and hate it.

It’s about stealing and it’s a crime which causes a serious result.

Like cheating, it should be treated without tolerance. I will NEVER do that!!

Word thief, idea thief, assignment thief.

With even a minimal number of students failing to demonstrate even a basic understanding of plagiarism, further attention needs to be paid to the needs of EIBT's NESB students:

I have no idea.

This comment reinforces the need to *educate* and *explain* rather than *regulate* and *punish*. Teaching ethical behaviour, nonetheless, is complex and requires that educators and educational institutions model appropriate ethical behaviours.

6.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This study proved effective in demonstrating the perceptions of plagiarism among new EIBT diploma students. This study, however, was based on one single institution and findings may be characteristic of EIBT and the student population it serves. It is evident from this work that understandings of plagiarism *vary* among students. To advance/enhance this process, the following recommendations are noted: First, international students can be understood to respond to the education experience much like any other student; in the pursuit of 'Pass' marks. Yet, with their different educational backgrounds, international students are nonetheless in need of academic preparation and, left to their own devices and without clear indication, may not have the head-start they need to attain passing grades. Second, EIBT faculty must factor knowledge of international students' prior educational experiences into content delivery strategies. Expecting students to produce accomplished academic texts especially in the first few weeks of their diploma program, could strongly affect acculturation, transition, and retention rates.

7.0 CONCLUSION

While the findings elucidated in this article cannot be generalised because they are based on a relatively small number of students' self-reports at one institution, they do provide information about a novel practice that may reduce the number of incidents of plagiarism. Publicising the nature and frequency of plagiarism on the EIBT campus is a cost-free and effective way to not only reduce the time-consuming and emotionally difficult process of dealing with incidents of plagiarism, but to improve student learning as well. Additional studies will continue to be conducted within EIBT to explore students' understandings of academic conventions, to improve current practices, and to determine other strategies for reducing the presence of undesirable scholarly acts. It is hoped that this study will provide the literature on university plagiarism with a new perspective: one from the voice of 'pathway' students.

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