



Why students turn to plagiarism

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UNIwise have compiled a series of white papers focused on examining trends in academic misconduct and seeking to inform and raise awareness of its evolving patterns.

The information presented in these papers will serve a general educational purpose as well as provide knowledge and draw attention towards ways to counter academic misconduct.

Intentional academic misconduct

Plagiarism remains a serious and growing issue for educational institutions (see Historic trends in academic misconduct, specifically plagiarism). While unintentional academic misconduct contributes to the problem (see Understanding the Reasons Behind Rising Academic Misconduct), some students make a conscious decision to plagiarise. In this white paper, the focus will be on understanding why students who commit plagiarism do so deliberately, and exploring potential strategies to prevent or counter this.

Meta-analysis of plagiarism reasoning

In 2020, a meta-analysis set out to identify and rank the most common reasons for plagiarism. This meta-analysis, written by Frederik Gerhardus Hattingh, Buitendag A.A.K and Manoj Lall, synthesized pre-existing literature and research on common reasons for plagiarism into one comprehensive overview.

The authors systematically explored the most prevalent motivations behind student plagiarism by conducting searches across academic databases, using keywords such as “plagiarism” and “academic misconduct” to locate relevant studies. In total, 37 studies made it through the selection process and were further investigated for the purpose of synthesis and summary. In their meta-analysis, the terms “plagiarism” and “academic misconduct” are used interchangeably, and students’ reasons for plagiarism were categorised into 11 distinct groups and ranked according to their frequency. In the following section, their groupings will be listed and briefly described.

Major groupings of reasons for misconduct

Bad time management: These students turn to plagiarism due to insufficient time to complete assignments. They most often try to complete the exam or assessment correctly, but find themselves running out of time, therefore turning to plagiarism to meet deadlines.

Temptation and opportunity: These students commit plagiarism due to the ease of available resources. With the significant available information online, this group feels more tempted to copy available texts. A significant portion of this group also hired others to complete their assignments.

Academic difficulties: These students commit plagiarism due to difficulty with the topic that they study or, more specifically, the exam or assessment is beyond their academic comprehension and ability.

Lack of deterrence: These students perceive the benefit from plagiarism to outweigh the risk associated. The risk of getting caught is either too small or the penalties from getting caught too insignificant.

Efficiency gain: These students plagiarise to get a better grade faster and with less effort. The goal of the misconduct is to reduce the workload required to make the fulfilment of the assignment easier.

Genuine lack of understanding of academic conduct (Unintended misconduct): These students plagiarise because they lack understanding or knowledge of the rules regarding academic misconduct. For this reason, it is not surprising that a significant number of students consider it reasonable that they might commit plagiarism unintentionally. In a previous white paper, the phenomenon of unintentional plagiarism, highlighting that it is a significant cause of plagiarism and that many students lack a clear understanding academic guidelines has been examined.

Denial or neutralisation: These students legitimise their plagiarism by deferring the blame away from themselves and putting it onto others. This group will claim that they have always done exams this way or that other students do the same.

Personal values/attitudes: These students plagiarise because of personal circumstances, values, or attitudes. They may fear individual failure or hold a sense of pride in successfully “beating the system” without getting caught. Their approach to plagiarism is often influenced by their own attitudes or feeling of psychological pressures.

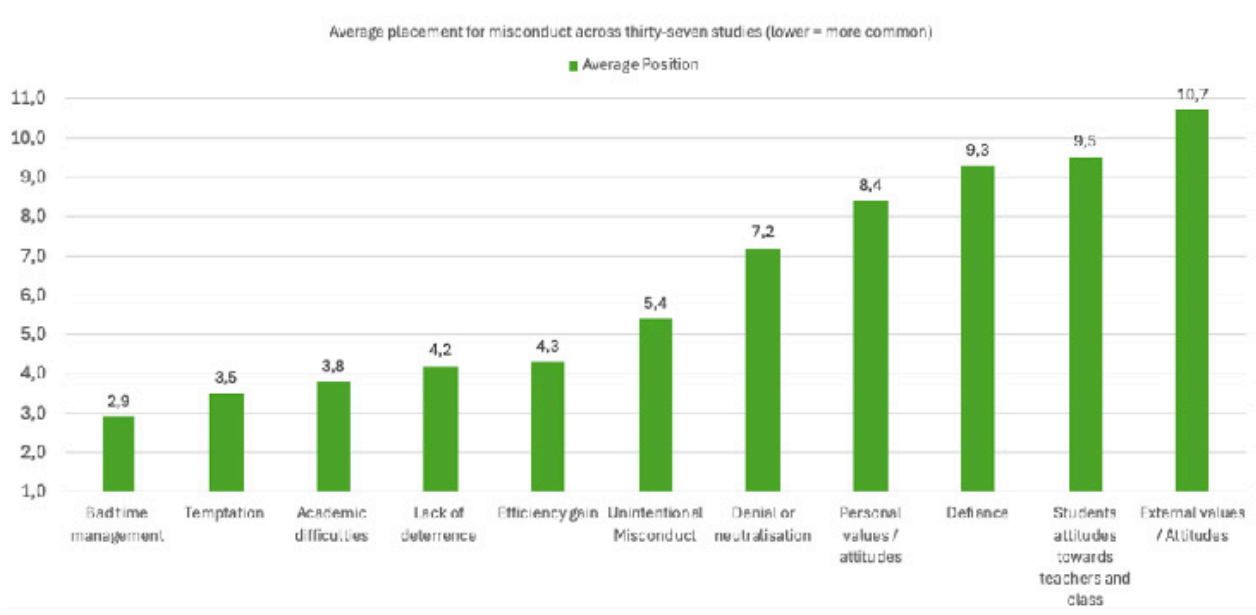
Defiance: These students engage in plagiarism as a form of defiance towards institutional procedures. This group also includes cases where the students consider the assignment to lack value or relevance to their studies.

Students’ attitudes towards teachers and class: These students show a negative attitude towards the teacher, class, content, or how the content is delivered, and this has led them towards academic misconduct. Students might think the teacher doesn’t care or won’t check for misconduct. Furthermore, students in this group often believe that the instructor failed to explain the rules for the exam or the class.

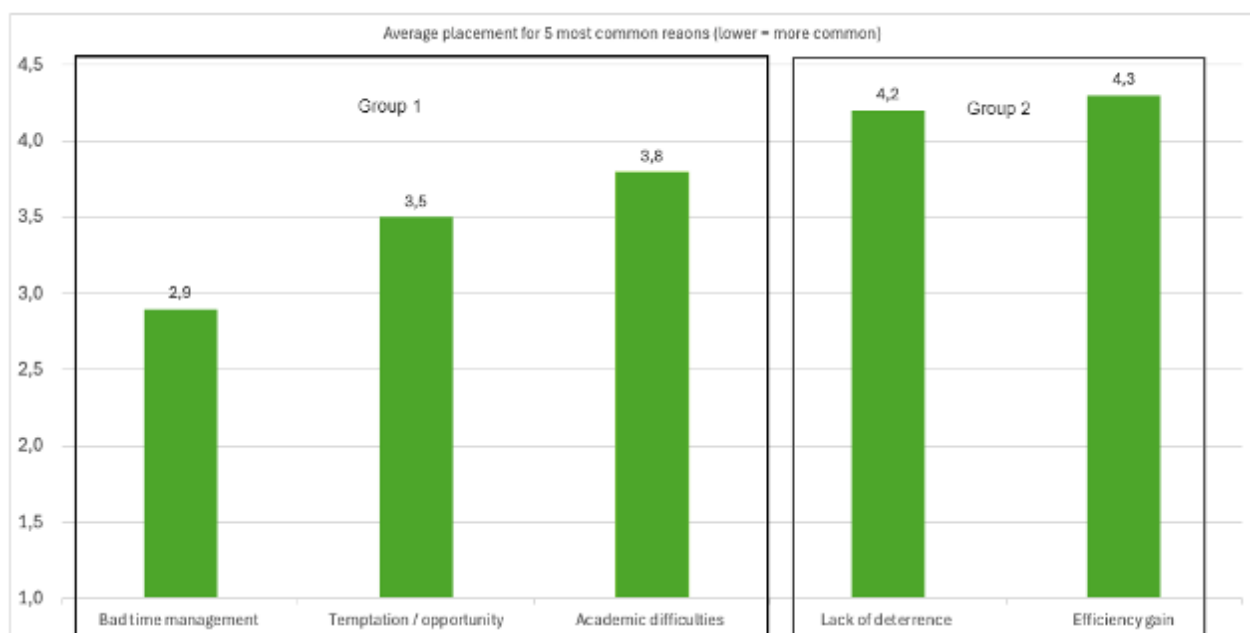
External values/attitudes: These students plagiarise due to external influences within personal relationships. This group often feel external pressure due to family members pressuring them to perform well academically. Also included in this group are students who believed that they would suffer significant damage to their relationship with peers if they don’t perform well.

Prevalent factors for plagiarism

Each reason across the 37 studies of the meta-analysis was afterwards calculated based on their average ranking position, using statistical methods to create a composite ranking. The graph below presents the average ranking (with 1 being the most likely and 11 the least likely) assigned by students for each categorised group of reason:



When examining the distribution, six groups are significantly more likely than the rest. Removing unintended plagiarism from consideration, as we here exclusively focuses on intentional misconduct, leave us with five significant groups:



On average, the bad time management was ranked as the most probable reason for plagiarism followed close by temptation/opportunity and academic difficulties. These three reasons might also be grouped and seen as one as they potentially aid the likelihood of each other. Bad time management result in insufficient time, resulting in academic difficulties. And academic difficulties can then lead students to look for opportunities to cheat.

Lack of deterrence and efficiency gain are both close to one another in terms of score. The proximity suggests a close connection between the two factors, potentially one even reinforcing the other. When the perceived risk of detection is low, or the punishment for plagiarism insignificant, the potential efficiency gain might be deemed worth the risk.

Based on these clustering's, we might overall divide the individuals who commit academic misconduct intentionally into two different groups. One group consisting of bad time management, temptation/opportunity and academic difficulty reasons and another one consisting of lack of deterrence and efficiency gain. We could reference them as “reactive” and “proactive” plagiarisers, as the first group constitute a reactive approach (they are “dragged” into plagiarism), while the other is actively engaging in it from the outset. In the graph above, “Group 1” represents reactive plagiarisers, and “Group 2” represents proactive plagiarisers.

Reactive plagiarisers

Reactive plagiarisers will constitute those students who find themselves in high-pressure situations due to poor time management, unforeseen circumstances, or academic difficulties. With deadlines approaching, they feel it is impossible with the amount of work required and resort to plagiarising as a last resort, hoping to meet their obligations. The decision to plagiarise is made spontaneously to relieve the stress they face.

Proactive plagiarisers

In contrast, proactive plagiarisers actively seek ways to gain an advantage. Plagiarising is viewed as a tactical move for efficiency gain, and in hopes of achieving own goals with minimal effort. For these students, plagiarising is not a reaction to crisis, instead it is a premeditated decision, weighing the risk compared to potential benefit.

Approaches to combatting plagiarism

Grouping the reasons for plagiarism and differentiating between the two main of reactive or proactive approaches, also makes it evident that different measures must apply when looking towards combating plagiarism and these students intentions.

The first group of reactive plagiarisers might be helped by negating the issues that brought them into the position of plagiarising in the first place; predominantly bad time management. Students transitioning from lower-level education or coming from outside the educational system to higher education often find the transition from mandatory daily classes to a more self-paced study difficult. This freedom often translates as students moving to a more open and unguarded approach to managing their time, resulting in underestimating the workload associated with higher education level studies. Some students may likewise struggle to establish effective study habits without the structure of daily classes or work life, thus positioning them behind schedule.

Mitigating and countering actions towards these groups, institutions could provide students with the necessary knowledge and competence on how to properly manage time and support the development of sufficient self-discipline to succeed at universities or similar higher educational institutions. Additionally, looking for signs of students having academic difficulties and reaching out to them in time might help and prevent the stress that push reactive plagiarisers towards plagiarism or even dropout.

On the other hand, the second group constituted by proactive plagiarisers will not be swayed by further knowledge or competence measures, as they are not plagiarising as a means of necessity. To direct this group of students away from misconduct, institutions may make the likelihood of getting caught greater and the sanction for academic misconduct stricter. Some institutions already have very strict policies if students are caught committing misconduct. However, if this is not followed by greater and more thorough plagiarism detection control, this group of students may still consider it to be highly unlikely or even impossible to get caught, and thus they might still not deem the risk high enough to outweigh the reward. For instance, some students in this group would believe that they can bypass normal plagiarism detection (i.e by rephrasing or “translating” content) and thus feel secure in their misconduct. For this reason, stricter policies should be followed by broader and more in-depth qualitative inspections of students work for plagiarism by tools that detect such malpractices.

Conclusion

A meta-analysis on student reasons for plagiarism found 11 reasons, of which 5 significantly stood out towards intended plagiarism, and were more frequently utilised than the rest. From these five reasons, two groupings emerge which we referred to as reactive and proactive plagiarisers. The difference in the groups becomes clear when focusing on strategies to minimise and counter the misconduct.

For reactive plagiarisers, academic misconduct often arises from situational pressures of bad time management or other academic related issues. Addressing these through measures to heighten knowledge, skills of time management and study discipline could help reduce the likelihood of students turning to plagiarism.

In contrast, proactive plagiarisers instead see academic misconduct as a calculated choice. This group of students weigh the likelihood of detection and severity of penalties against the reward from the misconduct. To steer this group of students away from plagiarising, institutions may need to adopt harsher penalties or stricter control mechanisms in order to thus increase the likelihood of the students being caught. By doing so, the perceived reward from plagiarising should decrease to a degree where it can't outweigh the risk, discouraging others from plagiarism.

A following white paper will investigate the different strategies those reactive and proactive plagiariser engages in when plagiarising, in order to get a better understanding of from where, and how, plagiarism is conducted.

References:

Gerhardus Hattingh, F., A. K. Buitendag, A., & Lall, M. (2020). Systematic Literature Review to Identify and Rank the Most Common Reasons for Plagiarism. In InSITE Conference (pp. 159–182). InSITE 2020: Informing Science + IT Education Conferences: Online. Informing Science Institute. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4576>