



Ways in which students plagiarise

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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.

Introduction

Plagiarism remains a serious and growing issue for educational institutions (see *Historic Trends in academic misconduct, specifically plagiarism*). There are many different factors that lead students to commit plagiarism, some unintentionally (see *Understanding the Reasons Behind Rising Academic Misconduct*), some intentionally (see *Why students turn to plagiarism*). In this white paper, the focus will be on gaining an understanding as to how, and from where, students plagiarise.

This paper examines three notable strategies commonly utilised in acts of plagiarism: the direct plagiarism, paraphrasing for other sources, and translingual plagiarism - understood as translating from other sources. We will explore from where students most commonly plagiarise, understanding which sources are most commonly used for the different types of plagiarism. Finally, we will turn to common ways of detection and sanctioning the misconduct. The foundation of this paper is qualitative research based on a series of interviews conducted by UNLwise with various educational institutions across Denmark in the fall of 2024.

The different strategies for plagiarism

At its core, the evaluation of plagiarism hinges on two fundamental questions. Has the submitted material originally been created by the author (in this case the student)? If the material is not original, has the author appropriately cited the sources from which it was taken? If not, the author is seen to have taken credit for something that they themselves did not produce. In such cases the material will be classified as plagiarised. However, despite the straightforward definition, plagiarism manifests itself in various forms.

Direct Plagiarism

Direct plagiarism represents the most obvious and identifiable form of plagiarism. It occurs when a student copies pre-existing text word for word without providing adequate citation. This form of plagiarism often involves replication (by simple copy and paste) of sentences, paragraphs, or even entire pages. In cases of direct plagiarism, no attempt has been made to alter the text from its original source.

Paraphrasing

In contrast to direct plagiarism, paraphrasing is more nuanced and less easily identifiable. Paraphrasing occurs when a student copies from another source but makes minor changes when pasting it in his or her own work and thus claims it as their own. Despite being an attempt to alter or maybe 'personalise' the copied content, paraphrasing still constitutes plagiarism in most cases, as it predominantly provides same semantic meaning but in a slightly different wording.

If reference to the original text from where the paraphrasing origins are not provided, the student is seen to be claiming full ownership of other authors ideas. On the other hand, acceptable paraphrasing would require the student to rephrase the information from another source in a manner so it appears in the students own words, not those of the author, and with proper reference to the origin of the idea, concept or information paraphrased. As such, acceptable paraphrasing requires significant engagement with the source alongside reference or citation. On the contrary, unacceptable paraphrasing occurs when a student

rewords the original source without sufficient alteration or engagement, and thus failing to demonstrate genuine comprehension and interpretation of the information. This instead amounts to a disguised form of plagiarism. This is further highlighted and discussed in another white paper - (see Understanding the reasons behind the rise of academic misconduct).

Translingual plagiarism

Translingual plagiarism is a specific type of plagiarism where a student translates from an original and prewritten source into a different language without reference or citation and thus claims it as their own. For example, a student might translate sentences, paragraphs or whole pages from a source in another language into their own language and copy it directly into their own assignment. This is especially a concern for educational institutions in areas where the native language is minor compared to global languages such as English, as many educational sources often will be in a different language from the native tongue used for the assignments. Similarly to paraphrasing, a student must not translate directly from another source and present it as their own. The student must transform, engage, and give sufficient credit to the original material in the form of own wording and proper reference or citation to the original. Otherwise, the student has merely disguised their plagiarism.

Most common strategies utilised by students

Based on our qualitative research among Danish higher educational institutions, the most common strategy used by students reported is direct plagiarism. E.g. copying smaller or larger parts from other sources and pasting it directly into their own submission with no citation or rewriting. As discussed in previous papers (Understanding the reason behind the rising academic misconduct & Why students turn to plagiarism), there are different reasons as to why students end up plagiarising. Our interviews with the Danish institutions further confirm the reported findings discussed in the above papers, showcasing a split between intentional and unintentional behaviour by students, with confusion towards the rules and boundaries counting for the majority of unintentional cases. Bad time management, academic difficulty and pure risk versus reward calculation remains the dominant reasons for those who engage in plagiarism intentionally. For students who commit plagiarism due to a risk versus reward assessment, institutions reported that a large number of students had a belief of there being a set threshold or percentage of plagiarism required before detection, under which the institution would render the plagiarism 'insignificant' and thus let it pass.

Our research also suggested that paraphrasing presented a general challenge for institutions but constituted the second most used approach by students engaging in academic misconduct or plagiarism. As there is no set definition or thresholds to determine when something is paraphrasing, many institutions reported this as a specific grey area for them. One that many also had a specific focus on for both students and assessors or markers, who needed guidelines to better identify non-conform paraphrasing. As there is considerably more judgement and analysis involved in these instances, institutions also reported this to be a major obstacle, as this takes up considerably more time for the assessor when marking. Better support to determine academic misconduct by paraphrasing was a general wish by most institutions.

The research also found that even though Danish is a minor language, the translingual

plagiarism from major languages such as English was not perceived as a major contributor to academic misconduct. To this end, institutions also reported limited support to detect such misconduct, as plagiarism detection tools used on average were not able to detect translanguing plagiarism. The cases institutions did find, were predominantly detected due to the assessor being able to identify or spot the original source in the translated text as this source was specifically well known to them.

Places students plagiarise from

As we have looked into how students plagiarise, our research also asked the educational institutions as to where the students plagiarise from. Our qualitative research found that the most common sources of plagiarism across all institutions include previous assignments as the overall dominant source, followed by self-plagiarism, collusion and sources from the internet.

Previous assignments or exams

Every institution reported that previous assignments was by far the major source for all cases of plagiarism at their institution. The students caught or detected conducting plagiarism to a large extent copied, whether directly or paraphrased from pre-existing assignments, from other students. The previously submitted exam papers and assignments are either sourced by borrowing them directly, finding them on dedicated 'exam paper portals' or accessed as part of example papers provided during course.

Recurring courses with a more or less fixed academic curriculum often foster exam and assignments year in and out which often require or end up displaying a similar structure, topic and approach for exams and their assignments as previous years. This renders previous assignments and submitted papers valuable in terms of insights relating to structure, knowledge and topics for those set out to plagiarise. Institutions might try to limit the access by not allowing for marks, partial-marks or feedback to be available directly after the exam, or by shuffling or changing the order of questions for participants during an exam. However, in most cases, student will have access to a copy of their own handed in work, which can be shared if desired.

Self-plagiarism

Our qualitative research also found that a great deal of institutions reported a significant portion of the incidents of academic misconduct related to self-plagiarism. Self-plagiarism occurs when a student directly reuses or repurposes text or material they have previously submitted for exams without proper reference or citation to the previously submitted text. As such, self-plagiarism involves reusing one's own work rather than copying from other sources. Often the case is, that a student chooses to copy or integrate parts of a their previously written submission into a new assignment without any citation or reference, as they assume their authorship exempts them from proper referencing. Whether by mistake or lack of clear knowledge regarding rules, the students in such instances plagiarise from themselves and are exercising academic misconduct.

Collusion

During interviews institutions also reported collusion as part of sourcing for plagiarism. Although not of major volume, collusion was known to most and thus important to include in here for understanding.

Collusion, in regards to plagiarism, often involves students collaborating on exam questions or assignments meant for individual completion or submission. This may include collaborating on crafting responses to questions, sharing answers or cowriting text or whole assignments together, although these was meant for individual evaluation. In such cases, identical or part-identical submissions are handed in by two or more individual students, and are thus falsely presented as independent efforts. In cases of collusion plagiarism, the identical or part-identical handed in assignments by the students, will be detected as plagiarism when scanned for originality. In such cases, the students are seen to plagiarise from each other and are both in violation of academic conduct. To this, group assignments marked a special case, as such may come with or without requirement of individual responses. There are indications that institutions with a larger portion of group work and assignments, found more collusion instances of plagiarism.

Online Sources

Finally, the last source for plagiarism reported during our qualitative research, although with minor significance, is internet resources in general. Here the case is that the student either directly or in a non-acceptable paraphrasing manner copy text found on the internet and paste it (whether large or small parts) in their assignment without citation or reference, thus presenting it as their own words and work.

With the rise of the internet and world wide web, information of many forms and of nearly any subject, can be searched, found and accessed freely. Free resources, shared information and open global access is in many ways the essence of the internet, and what marks the information age we live in. The internet is not only a vital part of our global economy, but also the foundation of our education and learning approach. Places like Wikipedia, museums, and government together with private companies and public organisations create and showcase important general and specific knowledge to a global audience, of which we today all rely on in our everyday life and work. While ubiquitous and accessible for all, the internet is still a source which needs proper reference or citation in students work, in the same manner as research papers or books. Luckily it seems that most students already know this, as this source for plagiarism was reported to be low.

Summarising findings on main sources for plagiarism

Based on our research and interviews it can be concluded that the most common place students plagiarise from is previous assignments or exam papers. While our interviews only cover Danish institutions, brief sanity checks on this tendency at institutions in other countries such as Norway, Germany and UK confirm the same picture. Students most often plagiarise from other students – whether directly, by paraphrasing, part of a collusion or as self-plagiarising. Evidence also shows that even in courses where exams do change yearly, older exams still provide a not insignificant source for cases of plagiarism. And maybe not surprisingly, particularly in courses where the students have easy access to earlier exams, plagiarism is to some extend found to pose a bigger issue. These findings also indicate that not only do students predominantly plagiarise from other students, they also do it from students within the same institution. So, to a great extend plagiarism is limited to an institutional setting. This means the general view of plagiarism seems to be, that students copy from students within their own institution.

Our findings also suggests that paraphrasing from other students, self-plagiarism and collusion contribute in varying levels to the cases of plagiarism, but are seen as the other noteworthy forms secondly to direct plagiarism of other students. This only adds to the significance of students copying students. In the cases of self-plagiarism and to some extent also in paraphrasing instances, institutions reported that the students often were surprised that they have broken the rules, hinting at the fact that knowledge of rules and regulations was poor for these students. In terms of collusion, the findings seemed affected by the use and prevalence of group work and group exams. Institutions with a strong focus on group work reported more instances of plagiarism from collusion. Group work might then unintentionally add to the misunderstanding of right and wrong regarding academic conduct, or it might be unintentionally adding to the opportunistic side for students, as institutions with lower amounts of groupwork reported significantly fewer such incidents.

From our qualitative research it was found to be less common for students to plagiarise from external sources like Wikipedia or other web resources. Even less likely, the institutions reported, was cases of plagiarism from books or journals, and thus also cases of translingual plagiarism from such sources.

Sanctions upon cheating

From the qualitative research it seems that the rules and regulation regarding plagiarism are fairly consistent throughout academia. What constitutes plagiarism, whether directly, paraphrasing or self-plagiarism, within smaller variations and tolerances, is to a large extent the same from institution to institution. This should, to some length, also render the teaching and learning of the rules more simple and unproblematic.

All institutions reported to have the authority and obligation to impose penalties in cases of academic misconduct, where some were free to choose sanction schemes themselves and other were bound by regulations. However, most institutions reported that the general and most used sanction was the issuing of a warning together with an annulment of their exam submission – thus missing their attempt of that particular exam. Only in extreme cases of plagiarism, e.g. copying of full assignments or many pages of text, was there provided harsher sanctions for first time cases. The sanctions were then reported to be several exam attempts annulled or a full semester suspension. For repeated offences sanctions were reported to be a full annulled semester or expulsion. The latter cases were reported to be very rare for all, but did happen occasionally. On the other hand, most institutions reported that the general rule of thumb was, that students caught for plagiarism, very seldom made a similar offence.

It was interesting to learn from our research, that while the rules and sanctions was widely similar, institutions showcased variance in their approaches to the consultation and involvement of the student in the sanctioning process. Most institutions went for a written format of consultation and hearing, while others invited the student to meeting face to face with responsible educational manager. In all cases, students were allowed provided documentation of the misconduct and given a chance to explain, admit or otherwise elaborate on the offence. In rare cases this would lead to an altered or milder sanction.

The process of detection

Our research shows that most institutions systematically engage in plagiarism detection by use of various detection software once the students have handed in their assignments and papers. Once scanned, institutions leave the report generated to be reviewed by the assessors as part of their marking process. The assessors then investigate the report and determine if detected matches are posed to be plagiarism, or it includes a proper citation and reference and thus can be excluded as a match of plagiarism.

The research also shows variance in institutional, and assessors approaches to the review of the plagiarism report generated for each student submission. Some institutions opt for a threshold in the way that reported matches below a certain percentage in total, are not reviewed at all or are just briefly glanced. Others ask for assessors to review all reports and don't accept a threshold of any sort, as minor percentages may just as well showcase examples of straight plagiarism. Other institutions opted for another approach, where it was mandated that reports deemed above a certain threshold percentage required them to review and address the findings of the report. It is also interesting that some institutions choose to put different values as to the finding of plagiarism in the report. Finally, there also seems to be nuances as to who can access the plagiarism report. Some institutions only allow assessors, limiting it for external markers or co-assessors, while others opt for a more open access for all involved.

For most institutions a match was a match wherever and however it was performed in the students submission, while a few institutions seemed to differentiate between taxonomical levels. Matches found in more theoretical, explanatory or descriptive parts of the student's text would be deemed less serious compared to the analytical and evaluating parts. The rationale here being that the analytical and evaluating parts was viewed as a more vital showcase of individual understanding and mastery, than theoretical parts, that to some extent was closer to text-book rendering.

It seems to be dependent on institutional size what happens next, when an assessor deems a student to have plagiarised. Larger institutions often have a legal entity who deals with the following process involving the student, the hearing and possible sanction. Smaller institutions often do not have dedicated legal personnel to handle the process, therefore this is handled more locally, for example by the Head of Study or a similar person with a managing position. They will perform and maintain a similar process as larger institutions of informing the student, holding a hearing and posing a warning with sanctions if needed.

Conclusion

From the interviews with several representative Danish higher educational institutions and our qualitative research, the general picture seems to show when it comes to academic misconduct and in particular plagiarism, that students plagiarise from other students from their own institution. When engaging in plagiarism – for whatever reasons we have explored in earlier white papers – they do it mostly by copying text directly from pre-submitted assignments or by paraphrasing from the same. To a lesser degree students indulge in plagiarism by collusion, but more so when their study and institutions engage to a greater extent in group work. There is also evidence of students to a much lesser degree plagiarising from open resources on the internet and rarely from subject matter, textbooks and research

articles. Finally, it also appears to be of a minor portion of students who translate into their own language from other sources, also known as translingual plagiarism.

Our research indicates that this general picture is not only valid in Denmark, but more widespread in Europe. It is of course important to note that the evidence is drawn from those incidents where students are caught of misconduct and from the experience of institutions, legal personnel and assessors. We cannot paint a picture of what we don't know – e.g. depict how student plagiarise and from where, who aren't caught in the action.

Institutions show variances in their dealing with reports of plagiarism. Some scrutinise all reports while others build their approach on tolerance and percentages of plagiarism, determining their tactics based on thresholds. Behind this we also sense there is a larger and understandable discussion on resources and time spent, as marking overall is both a heavy and time-consuming task that must be carried out in often a very limited timeframe. In such environments, scrutinising a plagiarism report for every student can be viewed as an extra and large burden.

Finally, there is general consistency as to their sanction schemes and the outcome. Most students end up being warned and have their submission annulled and thus must enter a re-examination. However, the institutions also report, that there are very few instances of repetition, showcasing that the sanction scheme works in favour of supporting academic conduct. That should also conclude that the time and effort invested in controlling, reviewing and processing plagiarism detection is not wasted.

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