

## European students' voices on plagiarism and academic practices

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Researchers agree that there is a strong relationship between approach to plagiarism and the cultural background of students in Higher Education (Introna et al. 2003, Pennycook 1996, Yusof 2009). However, nationality and social influence are only one side of the problem. Other could be improper academic practices that are tolerated across different European institutions due to gaps in plagiarism regulations, as well as insufficiently plagiarism-proof standards of teaching and assessment.*

*This paper discusses the issue of plagiarism in Higher Education seen from the perspective of students from diverse European countries. Using qualitative methods of data collection, such as focus groups and interviews, along with basing her research on phenomenographical approach, the author was able to investigate students' beliefs on proper and improper academic practice, their understanding of plagiarism and reasons for dishonest behaviour. The author believes that by approaching students directly using semi-structured discussion, rather than questionnaires, it was possible to build a rapport and obtain more information about attitudes and practices among focus groups participants, as well as document the unheard voices of ordinary students.*

*The author made an observation that it is possible to draw a link between plagiarism and the concept of "loyalty" (based on Sykes and Matza 1957) that can be exploited to explain students' attitudes and improper academic practices. The author believes that the interviewed students commit plagiarism not because of their unethical or immoral intentions, but rather due to specific hierarchy of values that they follow.*

**Keywords** *Student plagiarism, national differences, hierarchy of values, focus group study*

### **BACKGROUND**

The author of this paper was a member of the EU funded project, IPPHEAE (Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe) that aimed at investigating improper academic practices along with finding gaps in policies and procedures that could contribute towards reducing the problem of students' dishonesty. The project focused on prevention, detection, and awareness of plagiarism at institutional level, as well as sharing best practices for upholding consistency in standards and quality of Higher Education across Europe (IPPHEAE 2014).

Using the opportunity of working with multinational group of experts, the author decided to conduct a spinoff project in a form of a PhD study. Her research focused on examining students' views on plagiarism issues and linking these views with students' nationality. The research was based on two distinctive approaches which aimed at disclosing reasons behind the dishonest academic behaviour.

One part involved investigation into students' morality and values, whereas the other concerned analysis of the Higher Education system in which students gain academic knowledge and improve their writing skills (Michalska 2012).

### Cultural differences among students

Studies show that cultural background and ethnicity can influence understanding of proper academic behaviour. According to Introna et al. (2003: 10) "different cultures view the world in different ways, they have different value systems and hence the ways of teaching, learning and communicating vary". The noticeable link between students' nationality and their opinion towards academic integrity became a foundation for numerous studies. Furthermore, many researchers (Introna et al. 2003, Pennycook 1996, Yusof 2009) agree that the concept of intellectual and textual ownership comes from a "Western world". Pennycook (1996: 212) explained: "this particular version of meaning, originality, and authorship is located within a Western cultural and historical tradition that stresses creative and possessive individualism". For that reason, many authors generalise and unify European approach towards plagiarism, neglecting any possible differences in mentalities of students inside Europe. This created an opportunity for a new project to analyse these issues and to collect data from a variety of European HEIs, in order to investigate the following topic:

Do all European students perceive plagiarism in the same way?

The main research questions stated by the author concerned the issues of:

- Diversity of practices and attitudes towards plagiarism among students across Europe
- Reasons for students' behaviour leading to plagiarism

### Hierarchy of values

In 1957, Sykes and Matza derived a theory that people are always aware of their moral obligations to follow the rules and social norms and they have the same moral obligations not to break these rules and commit a crime. Therefore when they do behave illegitimately they have to convince themselves why these actions must be done, so the urge to follow moral obligations can be silenced. The authors suggested that people who commit misconduct use techniques of "neutralisation" to excuse their unlawful behaviour. This theory seems to be very appropriate for academic dishonesty considerations, as students give many explanations and justifications when they do not follow university's regulations.

Sykes and Matza (1957: 664) listed five "techniques of neutralisation" that could be applied to university setting:

- **Denial of responsibility** – Students may claim that they became victims of circumstances or were forced into situations beyond their control
- **Denial of injury** – Students may insist that their behaviour did not cause any harm or damage. Hence, they believe that no one was hurt by their actions
- **Denial of the victim** – Students might think that the victim deserved the action that the offenders committed
  - Students typically blame the teacher or the institution believing that they got what they deserved

- **Condemnation of the condemners** – Students might claim that their actions are being condemned out of spite, or the blame is being shifted onto them unfairly
- **Appeal to higher loyalties** – Students may suggest that their offence was for the greater good, with long-term results that would justify their actions
  - Students may commit plagiarism to please their family or peers who would like them to succeed

The last technique of “appealing to higher loyalties” became a starting point for further analysis of motives that may drive students to commit plagiarism. Discussion about students’ hierarchy of values will be presented in the Findings section of this article.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### Qualitative research

This paper draws on research conducted by the author as part of her PhD study. Presented aspect of the research utilised qualitative methods of data collection, namely focus groups and interviews in order to enhance and deepen quantitative research conducted by the IPPHEAE project team. The author believed that by approaching students directly using semi-structured discussion, it was possible to obtain more personal and qualitative information about attitudes towards dishonest academic behaviour.

### Phenomenography

The author based her research on a phenomenographical approach, which is built on the assumption that there are numerous ways in which people experience and understand arising incidents. They perceive a phenomenon through the prism of past experiences and their very own contexts. This idea seems to be relevant to many areas of social studies including the topic of this particular research. Plagiarism is a phenomenon that is difficult to define and analyse, as its comprehension depends on cultural background, individual viewpoint and past experiences.

The concept of phenomenography had a major influence on designing and analysing the focus group questions. The author used ideas presented by Ference Marton (1994) which suggested that the starting question may aim directly at the general phenomenon, or could ask participants to come up with instances of this phenomenon. The next set of questions tried to encourage students to reflect on the situation or the problem and describe their own way of dealing with it. Further queries attempted to investigate students’ approaches towards academic writing, teaching and learning styles, and assessment norms at their university. The sessions were designed to end with collection of participants’ opinions on whether or not they think they might have plagiarised.

### Building rapport

Another very important aspect of the research methodology was built on an opportunity to create a “peer” relationship with focus group participants, due to similar age of the researcher and the interviewed students. Sharing common language and experiences with participants had a great influence on the research and enhanced it significantly. This enabled open discussion about academic practices as well as intentional or unintentional dishonest behaviour.

## **FINDINGS**

It was possible to conduct 17 focus groups and 2 interviews with students from diverse European countries, such as Cyprus, England, Eire (Republic of Ireland), Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Romania and Sweden. The research was conducted in two languages known to the author, namely English and Polish.

Table 1 Focus Group participating countries

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of focus groups</b>	<b>Date of focus group</b>
Cyprus	1	September 2012
England	2	September 2013
Finland	2	December 2012
France	3	April 2012
Germany	3 + 2 interviews	November 2012
Ireland	2	October 2012
Poland	2	May, June 2012
Romania	1	July 2012
Sweden	1	February 2013

Results presented in this paper have been divided into four categories:

- Plagiarism awareness
- Plagiarism occurrence
- Teaching and assessment norms
- Reasons to plagiarise

Most of the students talked freely about their experiences and attitudes towards dishonest academic behaviour, sharing their opinions with the researcher. Results presented below are the actual comments made by the students discussing plagiarism issues during the focus groups. Due to the fact that English was not the mother tongue of most of the participants, some statements might be unclear or grammatically incorrect.

### **Plagiarism awareness**

Majority of the students understood the concept of plagiarism and were fully aware of its meaning:

- “It’s when you are stealing somebody’s ideas and make them your own” (Romanian)
- “Taking credit for work that is not yours” (Irish)
- “Using material without referencing or citing it” (Irish)
- “Paraphrasing without giving the author” (German)
- “Breaking copyright law that protects the author” (French)
- “It’s like using a shortcut” (Polish)

Participants also showed their awareness of accidental plagiarism:

- “Accidental plagiarism is possible, if you are not warned... especially from websites, people take something from Internet without thinking about it, they don’t write down the link, reference or source of the information” (Irish)
- “Mostly it happens by accident” (German)

- “Exchange students don’t know about it... they just copy” (German)

There were also some misunderstandings and confusions about the meaning of the discussed topic. Being asked about what is meant by "plagiarism", some students said:

- “Cheating during exams” (Polish)
- “Copy music” (French)

Another interesting issue that was observed during the focus groups was attitude of some students towards acceptable and unacceptable practices:

- “If both people agree, you can plagiarise your friend” (Polish)
- “Stealing from a book is more a crime than stealing from Wikipedia” (French)
- “When you put something on the Internet, anyone can take it”(French)
- “Research is a public good, it belongs to the public, knowledge available to everyone” (German)
- “If we change a few words, then it’s alright” (Polish)
- “When we paraphrase, why should we reference?” (Polish)
- “[Answer to the question: Is plagiarism immoral?] Moral? Today?” (German)
- “...for teaching purposes it’s ok!” (German)
- “It’s wrong, because I could be caught” (German)
- “It’s not wrong to plagiarise, because it’s ok for a student to copy, but I don’t want the professor to know” (French)

#### Plagiarism occurrence

Students’ opinions and experiences about plagiarism incidences were not uniform. Some of them encountered many cases of plagiarism committed by their friends:

- “Everyone is plagiarising in lab reports” (Polish)
- “Yes, a lot!” (Irish)
- “Yes, a lot of students copy...” (French)
- “For us it’s normal” (French)
- “...in France plagiarism is some kind of “way of life” for students” (French)
- “German and international students are doing it!” (German)
- “It happens to everyone... Even when you are a top student!” (Cypriot)

Others did not remember many cases or could not name even one:

- “Not many cases” (German)
- “In psychology – no, not really” (Irish)
- “No, I personally don’t know any student who did that” (Romanian)

Most of the students admitted that they had committed plagiarism, some intentionally, others unintentionally:

- “All of us have plagiarised!” (French)
- “Sure, I have!” (Polish)
- “I did... me too... me too” (Cypriots)
- “It happens...” (Polish)
- “I might have plagiarised... by accident!” (German)
- “In my very first seminar paper... by accident, but it wasn’t found!” (German)

Some students declared their honesty and denied committing plagiarism:

- “No! I used common knowledge... to be on a safe side” (German)
- “No, I prefer to work hard for the good mark” (French)

- “...rather no!” (Irish)
- “I would like to be plagiarised and be at that level. I will definitely be proud of it. No, I haven’t done it so far” (Romanian)

### Teaching and assessment norms

Another part of the research focused on teaching, learning and assessment standards that could influence students’ approach to plagiarism. The author believes that poor accessibility of materials and information about plagiarism regulations can decrease students’ awareness, whereas lack of consequences can encourage students’ misbehaviour.

According to participants, different institutions present dissimilar approaches towards plagiarism. At some of them students struggle to find regulations on the websites or in their handbooks:

- “Of course not! Or it’s hard to find info!” (German)
- “We’ve learned about plagiarism from news!” (German)
- “The university assumes we already know about that” (Polish)

Other universities are much more conscious and educate their students about academic dishonesty:

- “Guidelines available on-line, in every task description, in student guidelines” (German)
- “Yes, we have them at the beginning of every course [*module*], they give us a page with the course outline” (Cypriot)
- “At some universities there is a lot of information about plagiarism and at others there is little, mainly handouts” (German)

The way the students are taught or assessed could also influence their understanding of plagiarism concept. Some students blame their university or educational system for not detecting or not being concerned about plagiarism cases:

- “I think is frequent enough since even the lecturers are encouraging this, what can you expect when you give the exact piece of coursework every year.” (Romanian)
- “Writing bachelor project was hard! We had no practice with writing” (German)
- “German system lacks about plagiarism” (German)
- “I haven’t written so far any report in an academic way” (Romanian)
- “They don’t really say anything. If you take into consideration the amount of plagiarised materials used by our lecturers, it would be a bit naughty to tell you not to do it” (Romanian)
- “The entire system is purely theoretical, everything that we learn is based on theory and nothing is practical. Everyone knows the theory by heart but doesn’t have any practical skills” (Romanian)
- “We are required to write reports and I don’t really have any idea on how to write it or add references or how to use quotations in my report” (Romanian)
- “In laboratory reports it’s like an ‘authorised plagiarism’” (Irish)
- “We use this method of learning: memorise, pass, forget, get drunk” (Polish)

Some students also confirmed lack of awareness at lower levels of education in their countries:

- “They tell us at the university, before the university we don’t know” (Cypriot)
- “Plagiarism in secondary school? We called it ‘homework’!” (Irish)
- “At school we did quoting, but not scientific” (German)
- “Nothing about plagiarism [*at school*]” (German)
- “We did projects in fourth year in school, but we didn’t have to reference it and didn’t have to mention from where we took the information” (Irish)

- “In my high school they didn’t give much effort to stop us from copying and pasting. They told us do this essay for tomorrow, so we go online, find it at Wikipedia, copy and paste to Word, go the next day and present it in front of the class” (Cypriot)

### Reasons to plagiarise

When asked a direct question about what can drive students to plagiarism, focus group participants suggested many possible motives:

- “We don’t mind, we don’t care” (French)
- “Pressure to meet deadlines” (Irish)
- “They don’t expect to be caught... like burglars” (German)
- “They don’t have time” (French)
- “Teachers don’t care about it” (Polish)
- “Professors don’t control it” (French)
- “Some people might do it because they don’t know what the consequences are, especially when you come straight from your secondary school and you don’t know the rules” (Irish)
- “Sometimes we think that work of other person is better” (French)
- “Our generation is not really good at writing” (French)
- “They’re afraid they can’t do it in their own words” (German)
- “It’s hard to express your opinion” (German)

However, analysing answers to other questions it was possible to derive additional reasons to plagiarise. Implementing Sykes and Matza’s (1957) concept of five “techniques of neutralisation” the author decided to link possible plagiarism motives with the issues of loyalty and hierarchy of values. It was possible to categorise different types of reasons stated by the students according to the specific kinds of “loyalty” observed while conducting the study. Categories proposed by the author are presented below.

The author suggests that if a student decides not to cheat then he/she might be loyal to or situate high in hierarchy the following values:

- **University/institution/rules** - Student feels that he/she must obey the rules
- **Knowledge** –
  - Student wants to learn, therefore will not cheat
  - The subject is important and there is a reason to master it
- **Ethics and fairness** –
  - Student feels it is unethical to cheat
  - Student shows respect to other people’s work
- **Fear** – Student is afraid of penalties
- **Friends** – There is a peer pressure not to plagiarise
- **Lecturer/teacher/supervisor and/or the subject** –
  - Student feels respect to his/her mentor
  - Student enjoys the module, so is pleased to study it

On the other hand, if a student commits plagiarism then he/she might be loyal to:

- **Family**
  - Student cannot disappoint his/her parents’ expectations

- Student has other, more important responsibilities, hence there is no time to study
- **Friends** – Student feels peer pressure to plagiarise; there is a culture of dishonesty
- **Grades** – Student is more concerned about the grades than the knowledge
- **Pleasure** – Student is lazy, prefers to do something more enjoyable
- **Known or perceived rules (accidental plagiarism)** –
  - Student plagiarises, because this is seen as normal, typical behaviour or a common practice in his/her subject area
  - Student plagiarises, because he/she does not understand that this is against the rules; student is unaware that the rules have changed

Another interesting viewpoint on reasons to plagiarise might be situating low in hierarchy of values or lacking loyalty to:

- **University/institution** –
  - Student does not care about university rules and regulations
  - Student believes that a particular subject is unimportant or irrelevant to his/her course of study. Student does not feel motivated to do the work
- **Lecturer/teacher** – Student does not respect the lecturer and therefore does not care about the consequences

Table presented below contains different types of loyalties suggested by the author, as well as relevant student quotes recorded during the focus groups. It is worth mentioning that student’s decision to plagiarise might be triggered by being loyal to one or more kinds of values.

**Table 2** Plagiarism and the concept of loyalty - student quotes

<b>Student decides not to plagiarise:</b>	
<b>Loyal to:</b>	<b>Supporting quotes:</b>
University/Institution	“Plagiarism is a big deal at this university” (Irish) “In this faculty we don’t plagiarise” (Polish)
Knowledge	“We want to learn something” (German) “We need to know things now, so we need to do research” (Cypriot) “Analysing information is like shaping our ego” (Polish) “Now we are in the third year so we understand that if you don’t use journals, you don’t do proper research, you’re useless” (Cypriot) “People who choose their own topics are more responsible. First of all they do what they like and they want to learn about it” (Cypriot)
Ethics/Fairness	“It is a civilised way and it shows that you respect other people’s work when you use them” (Romanian) “How would you feel if you do the paper and someone else took a credit for it and not acknowledged what you did? What if you found a cure for cancer and someone else would take a credit for it? How would you feel?” (Cypriot) “I prefer to work hard for the good mark” (French) “It’s like stealing from a store... It’s stealing so it’s unethical” (French)



Fear	<p>“People were afraid to plagiarise” (German)</p> <p>“I am afraid to do it. I am afraid because you might be in the position of answering for what you’ve done and it’s not worth it” (Romanian)</p> <p>“The teachers told us that to scare us” (Cypriot)</p>
Friends	<p>“This year I’ve worked with a student that was way much better than me and I wanted to work with him, because I had a lot things to learn from and much to gain” (Romanian)</p>
Lecturer/Subject	<p>“The students who like the subject and studies don’t cheat” (French)</p> <p>“You love the topic, you put passion into it” (Cypriot)</p> <p>“When we like the subject, when we get some inspiration, then we don’t plagiarise” (French)</p>
<b>Student decides to plagiarise:</b>	
<b>Loyal to:</b>	<b>Supporting quotes:</b>
Family/ Other responsibilities	<p>“They don’t have time” (French)</p> <p>“They have other hobbies” (German)</p>
Friends/Culture	<p>“If both people agree, you can plagiarise your friend” (Polish)</p> <p>“Plagiarism is some kind of “way of life” for students” (French)</p> <p>“It’s not really bad... you’re helping. It’s also the way how students strengthen their relationships” (Cypriot)</p> <p>“There is a fear of inadequacy, people want to be accepted as equal to other students at their course, so maybe that accounts for some cases of plagiarism” (Irish)</p> <p>“When I look to someone’s exam and the person doesn’t know then it’s cheating. When the person knows about it is not cheating, it’s ‘cooperation’” (Cypriot)</p>
Grades	<p>“Pressure to meet deadlines” (Irish)</p> <p>“To get better marks” (French)</p> <p>“They might take someone else’s answers to get better marks” (Irish)</p> <p>“We use this method of learning: memorise, pass, forget, get drunk” (Polish)</p>
Pleasure	<p>“It’s an easy way out” (Irish)</p> <p>“They are lazy” (German)</p> <p>“Because I don’t want to work” (French)</p> <p>“It’s easier” (German)</p>
Known rules	<p>“Exchange students don’t know about it... they just copy” (German)</p> <p>“They don’t know they’re doing something wrong”</p> <p>“Plagiarism in secondary school? We called it ‘homework!’” (Ireland)</p> <p>“They tell us at the university, before the university we don’t know” (Cypriot)</p> <p>“Everyone is plagiarising in lab reports” (Polish)</p>
<b>Not loyal to:</b>	<b>Supporting quotes:</b>
University/Institution	<p>“You have classes from which you can’t really get that much, you just attend because the curriculum has that class in there and you are not encouraged to produce anything new. So why should you work extra, if</p>

	<p>you are not gaining anything from it?" (Romanian)</p> <p>"I want to have fun in learning... I came here to learn something, because I liked it and they will make me hate it, because of too much work"</p> <p>(Cypriot)</p> <p>"When I don't like the module I prefer to copy, because it's easier"</p> <p>(French)</p>
Lecturer/Teacher	<p>"Teachers don't care about it" (Polish)</p> <p>"They don't really say anything. If you take into consideration the amount of plagiarised materials used by our lecturers, it would be a bit naughty to tell you not to do it" (Romanian)</p> <p>"It seems that they're not even reading them (<i>lab reports</i>)" (Irish)</p>

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Interesting link between "techniques of neutralisation", hierarchy of values and student academic practices brings a new dimension to the debate about plagiarism motives. Although it is derived from the theory which compares students to criminals it explains their actions using the concept of loyalty and respect to higher values. Observed issue of limited discussion about plagiarism and academic integrity in some secondary schools only strengthens the necessity to encourage a debate at lower levels of education in order to increase plagiarism awareness and promote loyalty to values like intellectual property, honesty, and respect to work of others.

This paper is based on the preliminary analysis of collected data. However, taking into consideration only the initial results, one can notice how diverse students' experiences are and how greatly their understandings of proper academic practices differ. The reason for such disparities may lay in cultural differences as well as variation in academic practices common at different universities.

Most of the interviewed participants understood that plagiarism is wrong and unethical, but some presented a worrying viewpoint on widely acceptable academic practices. The author believes that cultural differences, "bad" academic practices and inadequate teaching and assessment norms could have substantial impact on students' understanding and acceptance of rules of proper academic behaviour.

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