

Plagiarism : A pilot focus group study exploring wider perspectives of Asian University Students

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Abstract

Few words can inspire the same vitriol in scholars as plagiarism. It has been variedly conceived as a crime (Suntherland-Smith, 2005), a disease (Petress, 2003), a deception (Athanasou and Olasehinde, 2002) and a threat to general public (Marsden, Carrol and Neil, 2005). The study of plagiarism has thus spawned a vast and convoluted body of discussion and research. Much of the existing literature has singled out University students as a particular group of concern. As developing learners, they are often framed as culprits of plagiarism with a growing rate of offence (Carroll, 2005). This mindset is likely the foundation of studies that explore students' reasons and methods for plagiarizing, and how Universities can use these results to formulate preventive, or judicial, strategies to curb the offence of plagiarism (Whitley, 1998; Park 2003; Devlin, 2003). However, Howard (1999) recognized that the course of mitigating plagiarism among students cannot be successful if their lived experiences are not accounted for. It has been explicitly found that students from different cultures behave differently in University, to the extent that stereotypes are engendered (Melles, 2003). One cultural group that has been examined intensively, are students from 'Confucian heritage cultures', a term first used by Biggs (1996) in a book by Watkins and Biggs (eds), which explores issues concerning Chinese learners. More specifically, it is noted that students from this culture do not readily view plagiaristic behaviors as improper. This paper explores a twist to this cultural construct. A focus group study involved 15 students, organized in groups of 2-5, who are from Asian societies that are identified as 'Confucian heritage cultures' (ibid) but matriculating in an Asian University that practices the open and facilitative pedagogy that is more typical of western institutions (Ramburuth and McCormick, 2001). The aim of the study is to explore the perspectives on plagiarism of University students who are within an Asian culture, but are undergoing an independent and discursive mode of education. An analysis of the results demonstrated good understanding of plagiarism by the students, while echoing disillusion and discontent about inconsistent standards of plagiarism imposed by instructors. Further analysis debates upon the quality of culture's impact on the students' views. Lastly, the paper suggests several strategies, which consider a circumstantial and customized approach to academic integrity, providing instructor support and increased student engagement, as means to create a student culture of moral academic awareness.

Introduction

Plagiarism affects all who consume content for any form, and it has been posed as a problem that begs an urgent solution. Unfortunately, this all encompassing solution remains elusive to the present collective of educational entities. This is arguably due to plagiarism's paradoxical nature; it is so universally vilified, while its definition is the subject of vigorous debate. Underscoring plagiarism's wide-ranging infamy, its mere mention incites among scholars what might be best described as creative hatred. In scores of articles, it has been variedly analogized as a crime (Suntherland-Smith, 2005), epidemic (Petress, 2003; Duggan, 2006), fraud (Athanasou and Olasehinde, 2002) and a public threat (Marsden et al, 2005). However, in the same vein, plagiarism has not been easy, or possible, to categorically define to the satisfaction of every involved stakeholder. (Angelil-Carter, 2000; Harris, 2004). Nevertheless, in the midst of these difficulties, many studies have attempted to investigate plagiarism from moral, academic, legal and even cultural perspectives – each of which offers its own share of definitions, implications and strategies. One of the most focal groups towards which much research is directed are University students. They are at the beginning of their academic journey and would face more challenges posed by plagiarism than any other group while seeking to learn and develop in an unfamiliarly sophisticated academic environment

In the academic context, plagiarism is usually associated with situations where students reproduce text or content without citation or attribution, or the more aggravated offence of using, or purchasing, 3rd party services to complete their assignment (Selwyn, 2008). Much debating literature on plagiarism and University students have raised the concern that the latter are becoming more prolific at plagiarism and the number of student plagiarists are on the rise (Paulhus et al, 2003; Carroll, 2005). Duggan (2006) found that perceived growth in plagiarism rates have inevitably caused concern in Universities, while Park (2003) points out the resultant frustration felt by academic instructors who have to deal with this influx of plagiarizing students.

In a bid to understand student plagiarism, studies have explored the plethora of reasons that might underlie this behavior. In the study by Park (2003), nine reasons were suggested as reasons for plagiarism, including a genuine lack of understanding in academic standards, the desire to perform better using less effort, time pressures, rebelliousness towards academic rules and the absence of deterrence. Studies into the reasons for student plagiarism have also suggested possible strategies to prevent or reduce the incidence of the act. These strategies range from preventive educational initiatives such as seminars and citation courses, moralistic engagement such as pledges and honor codes, to judicial measures such as sanctions matrices that mete out punishment in accordance to the category of offence committed (Whitley, 1998; Park, 2003; Devlin, 2003).

However, Sutherland-Smith (2010) cautioned that the ‘crime and punishment’ approach towards plagiarism might be detrimental to attempts at engaging students productively, which in turn complicates efforts to inculcate them with self-rejecting attitudes towards plagiarism. It must be recognized that students are undertaking education as part of their life journey and the richness of their personal experience, which would inevitably affect their scholastic attitudes, are not restricted to their incubation within their institute of learning. Howard (1999) suggests the active recognition of students’ lived experiences in accounting for an exploration of student plagiarism. Thus, to create a student body that rejects plagiarism by choice and whom actively engages in lively debate about the problems of plagiarism must begin with an understanding of their personal worlds.

Using this approach of understanding, the aspect of cultural differences cannot be ignored. Melles (2003) found that students from different cultures would exhibit dissimilar behaviors in University. This might be the source of the “mythology of information about students from [other] cultures” mentioned by Marshall and Garry (2006, p26). One cultural group that has been extensively studied is that of students from ‘Confucian Heritage Culture’ or CHC (Biggs, 2006). This group refers to students belonging to predominantly Asian cultures including countries such as China, Hongkong, Taiwan and Singapore. It has been suggested that students from these cultures tend to misunderstand neither the concept of plagiarism nor the rationale behind its enforcement (Yang and Lin, 2009). It was explained as an artifact of their cultural practices of rote learning and respectful regard for authoritative text (Turner, 2000; Angelil-Carter, 2000). This is stark contrast to the western academic tradition, where “the reuse of language already used by others [is] a crime against...the individual” (Pennycook, 1996, p214). Furthermore, the practice of rote learning and attentiveness towards academic repetition also goes against the grain of the western university model where a “highly interactive social setting and operational freedom...[shall]...stimulate creativity” (Boulton and Lucas, 2011, p2507). Therefore, it should be an inquiry of interest should these worlds collide in a collaborative manner.

The objectives of this pilot focus group study is to explore the perceptions of a small group of Singaporean students who are matriculating in a Singaporean University that adopts a western-styled pedagogy of open class discussions and participative curriculum, and to compare them with existing preconceptions of students from Asian cultures. It further seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of their views about plagiarism, the management of academic conduct in the University and what particularities of these phenomena affect them as students the most. Lastly, the study also seeks to align their fundamental beliefs of higher education with their notion of academic integrity, which might lead to an exploration of ways to fruitfully engage their developing minds in the areas of personal growth. Necessarily, this growth might lead to an enlightened choice in their academic endeavors.

Method

Design

This pilot research study utilized student focus groups in order to gather qualitative responses and opinions. A facilitator was assigned to each focus group of 2 to 5 students, and raised each topic question in turn, while abstaining from providing any input during the student discussions. The aim of the study is to allow students to voice their perceptions and opinions without guidance or preempting from administrative or faculty members. This would produce realistic data based on their actual knowledge about plagiarism and other academic conduct issues. In accordance to suggestions by Madriz (2000), the focus group method is ideal for this approach as the facilitator takes a backseat when students begin to discuss on the fielded topic questions. Hence, the students will address their views to each other, in an uninfluenced state, rather than addressing or conversing with the facilitator.

Participants

A total of 4 focus groups were assembled, comprising of 15 students (6 men and 7 women) from a Singaporean University. The ethnicity of the participants were all Asians, specifically, Chinese, Indian and Malay. They comprised of students from the Faculty of Business, Economics, Information Systems and Social Sciences. The students were distributed across their first, second, third and fourth year of studies; and grouped according to their availability. It was logistically difficult to fully randomize the selection, and categorical allocation was thought to be a possible confounding variable. The single common link among the volunteers was their involvement in University as student leaders who were heavily involved in peer assistance. Being student leaders, they have deeper knowledge of University policies and regulation, and the reason for this purposeful selection was to examine a best-case-scenario benchmark for the pilot study. The detailed composition of each focus group is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Composition

Session	Name	Age	Gender	Race	Nationality	Course	GPA (1.0-4.0)	Year
1	JCB1	27	Male	Indian	Singapore	BSC (Info Sys)	2.9	4th
1	SUN1	21	Female	Chinese	China	BSC (Economics)	3.4	3rd
1	SHM1	23	Male	Malay	Singapore	BSC (Social Sci)	2.6	1st
1	YH1	23	Male	Indian	India	BSC (Info Sys)	3	4th
1	NL1	21	Female	Chinese	Singapore	BA (Business)	2.85	2nd
2	DV2	27	Male	Indian	Singapore	BA (Business)	3.1	2nd
2	ANC2	21	Female	Indian	India	BA (Business)	2.2	2nd
3	WX3	23	Female	Chinese	Singapore	BSC (Social Sci)	3.1	4th
3	STP3	22	Female	Chinese	Singapore	BSC (Social Sci)	3.1	3rd
3	TD3	26	Male	Chinese	Singapore	BSC (Economics)	3.8	4th
3	ZH3	24	Male	Chinese	Singapore	BSC (Economics)	3	3rd
3	HT3	23	Female	Chinese	Singapore	BSC (Economics)	3	4th
4	CH4	21	Female	Chinese	Singapore	BA (Business)	3.1	2nd
4	SF4	22	Female	Malay	Singapore	BSC (Social Sci)	2.5	2nd
4	AL4	21	Female	Chinese	Singapore	BA (Business)	2.6	2nd

Materials

Each focus group followed a list of topic questions that was asked by the facilitator in sequence. The questions were designed to avoid self-disclosure from the students, or allude to any sense of incriminating judgment from peers and the facilitator. This was to encourage the participants to speak freely and without fear or anxiety. The questions were as follows:

1. What is plagiarism?
2. Do you think plagiarism is common in this University?
3. Are you aware of Turnitin?
4. Do you think Turnitin has a deterrent effect on plagiarism?
5. Why do you think people might plagiarise?
6. Are you aware of the punishments for plagiarism?
7. Do you think punishment is appropriate?

8. What is one key issue you feel about plagiarism?
9. What does higher education mean to you?

The reason for asking each of the above questions shall be highlighted as the sub-section headers in the section on Data Analysis.

Procedure

Participants were sought for the focus group through an email broadcast to student leaders who were involved in peer assistance in the University. They were informed of the broad objective of the focus group study as well as a schedule of dates for each focus group session. Students who responded were grouped according to their preferred dates. Each focus group session was held in a meeting room setting, which was quiet and isolated from external University activity. Prior to the start of the session, the participants were given a Research Consent Form (Appendix A). The Consent Form outlined the objectives of the focus group study, informed them of the conduct of the study and the confidentiality of their identity and responses. It also sought their consent for the discussion to be anonymously recorded for transcribing. Upon reading the form, they were invited to ask any questions they might have about the study. Students who gave their consent were then told to sign on the Consent Form, of which they received a copy for their retention. The session commenced with the facilitator setting the basic ground rules, which requested the participants speak their thoughts freely and to build on any point they might find relevant to the topic question. They were further requested to speak in turn and refrain from interrupting one another. They were also requested to hold any questions they might have for the facilitator until the end of the session. The facilitator would then conduct a test recording, where they briefly introduced their course and year of study, to ensure the audibility of each participant. The facilitator would start with the first topic question, and when the discussion tapers off, field the next question. When the questions were completed, the facilitator would debrief the group by answering any question they had held, and to clarify any additional questions about the focus group. The group was then thanked for their time and assured that they would receive a copy of the completed research.

Preparation of Data

The recording of each focus group was transcribed by a person other than the assigned facilitator. This was to prevent any existent bias that might manifest in the transcription process. The transcription was then checked by another person to ensure content accuracy. Nevertheless, it was inevitable that some audio artifacts compromised some words and sentences; such incidences were resolved by transcribing words that sounded closest to the source. The transcript (Appendix B) was then read through and coded by emergent themes within each question that might signal common themes or sentiments across the 4 focus groups.

Analysis of Data

Question 1: What are student perceptions of Plagiarism?

When answering the question of what plagiarism is, 9 of the 14 participants said they felt plagiarism was a failure to attribute a source.

Another common explanation of plagiarism among participants was the claiming of credit for other people's work, further distinguishing it as intentional theft. They also made it clearly distinct from a technical mistake of missing out a citation.

Some of the participants also showed depth in their understanding of plagiarism. They grasped the notion that plagiarism covered the theft of ideas, furthering arguing that the absence of copyright does not absolve an act of plagiarism. One participant also felt that verbal communication of ideas might not be considered plagiarism. This analysis suggests that most of the participants had a fairly good grasp of the definition of plagiarism, which goes counter to the findings by Yang and Lin (2009) referenced in the introduction. Furthermore, they had concurring opinions with the western academic tradition defined by Pennycook (1996).

Question 2: Do students think it is common among their peers? What are trends that they observe or experienced?

The participants' responses to suggesting their perceived prevalence of plagiarism in University varied widely from 20% to 80% of the student population. Interestingly, many of the participants sought to explain their response in terms of conditions of plagiarism. For example, one participant, SHM1, added that referencing mistakes might take place for 80% of all students, but intentional theft of source content is less common.

Some participants also added that prevalence depended on the course (SUN1 and YH1, session 1), while others comments that the theft of ideas is harder to detect, or inevitable, and therefore likely more rampant (SF4 and AL4, session 4). One common trend that emerged was students who blatantly copied, or paraphrased, assignments obtained from their seniors.

One participant (DV2, session 2) raised a counter point that he knew friends who took pains to avoid plagiarism, while another suggested that plagiarism in a class is sometimes dependent on the teaching methods of the instructor (JCB1, session 1).

This analysis suggests that the participants tend to perceive the prevalence of plagiarism in looser terms and consider other factors that might influence its occurrence.

Question 3: What are students' perceived awareness of Detection Software, i.e. Turnitin

Question 4: What are students' perceived deterrent level of Turnitin?

Both these questions used Turnitin as the premise of plagiarism detection, as it was less likely to be affected by the more variable nature of enforcement and teaching that might be adopted by individual instructors. All of the participants felt that Turnitin had a strong presence in the University as a detection mechanism.

However, the participants added that its deterrent effect varied in terms of how Turnitin was used. Several participants (SUN1, session 1, DV2, session 2, HT3, session 3) suggested that Turnitin can be easily circumvented through external (internet pre-checks) or internal (knowing the teaching assistant) means. One common comment was the inconsistent application of Turnitin by instructors, where in some cases it was not used at all (SUN1, session 1, WX3, ZH3 and TD3, session 3, CH4, session 4).

This analysis suggests that the participants are fully aware of Turnitin being used to detect plagiarism, while at the same time being aware that its use in the University that depended on the instructors. That in turn affects its deterrent effect on plagiarism.

Question 5: What is students' perception of why students plagiarize?

In responding to what they thought were reasons for the commission of plagiarism, the two most common reasons cited were laziness and the wish to complete an assignment with less effort. Time and performance pressures were also mentioned, in terms of meeting tight deadlines (JCB1, session 1, ANC2, session 2, TD3, session 3) and wishing to perform better by splicing, but not citing, competent sources (SHM1, session 1, DV2, session 2, ZH3 and STP3, session 3).

The internet was also mentioned as being a tool of convenience, making it easy for students to search for material to add into their assignments (WX3, session 3, AL4, session 4). Two participants mentioned ignorance, in respect of either the course content or different citation formats. In the former instance, HT3 (session 3) stated an example where plagiarism was committed as a means to manage an assignment that the offender did not understand. In the latter, SF4 (session 4) explained the difficulties associated with using different citation standards.

In this analysis, it is noted that none of the participants had suggested plagiarism occurring as a consequence of conceptual misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge in basic citation formats. The reasons offered had tended towards an explanation of plagiarism as a consequence of laziness, stress and meeting performance standards.

Question 6 : What are students' understanding of punitive consequences of plagiarism?

Question 7 : What are students' opinions of punitive consequences of plagiarism?

Both question sought to understand the participants' awareness of punitive consequences and their opinions regarding plagiarism as a punishable act.

In the University, plagiarism is evaluated on a matrix of intentionality and impact, and is assessed flexibly by instructors and the Council of Student Conduct. The participants were mostly correct about the possible punitive measures, ranging from a written warning, grade penalty, suspension and expulsion. The most common answer, 8 out of 14, was grade penalty, which happened to be the most common consequence in the University as well.

Many of the participants supported punishments in the event of intentional plagiarism, while there were also calls for a more lenient approach when meting out sanctions (YH1, session 1, TD3, session 3, AL4 and SF4, session 4). A few participants had difficulty deciding on punitive measures as a consequence. SHM1 (session 1) suggested that plagiarism is not as important as a violation of patent or intellectual property and ideas are manifestly unconstrained. NL1 (session 1) added that the essence of an idea is always present in a student's work so the intention must be evaluated in a fair investigation before punitive measures are meted out.

This analysis suggests that participants felt the intention to plagiarise should be a key determinant of consequential punishment. However, they also felt that a gradient of severity should be adopted to address different conditions of plagiarism.

Question 8: What are students most concerned about with regards to the matter of plagiarism?

This question was an attempt to allow participants to free associate on what comes immediately to their mind when thinking about plagiarism. 6 out of 14 participants remarked that the University and instructors are inconsistent in managing plagiarism. YH1 (session 1) gave the example of instructors who varied from strict to nonchalant, which was echoed by JCB1 (session 1), while TD3 (session 3) added that standards and thresholds could vary between courses, which was similarly opined by ZH3 (session 3), CH4 (session 4) and SF4 (session 4). These participants also mentioned the need for transparency, education and stable standards.

3 participants felt that plagiarism was a matter of respect and responsibility. NL1 (session 1) and HT3 (session 3) emphasized the need to give due credit to others, while STP3 (session 3) felt that students should be self motivated to avoid plagiarism without needing the deterrence of Turnitin.

DV2 and ANC2 (session 2) were both concerned about plagiarism being a prelude to declining intellect as more people resort to lazy copying, forgoing the development of their potential.

This analysis suggest that the participants are concerned about consistency, as they take courses under different instructors and have to struggle to adapt to different standards. Nevertheless, there are participants who have aspirant views of originality and citation as a developmental process and a consequence of intellectual respect.

Question 9: What values, or experiences, do students ascribe to undergoing undergraduate education?

This question was an attempt to understand how the participants made sense of their University experience, which may shed light on their perception of education, their aspirations and rationalizations of their current moment in life. This would tie into constructing the beginnings of an understanding of the student experience in order to integrate it into a management of plagiarism.

Three major themes emerged from the responses. 6 participants remarked that University life was a means to obtain qualifications for success in their future, in other words, a career (SUN1, session 1, ANC2, session 2, ZH3, session 3, SF4, session 4, AL4, session 4, CH4, session 4). 6 participants added that University life was a focal point of opportunities and experiences, where they could embark on ventures, meet people and gain skills that were otherwise inaccessible (NL1, session 1, SHM1, session 1, DV2, session 2, HT3, session 3, WX3, session 3, STP3, session 3). The remaining 2 participants shared a more cynical view of the University as a constricted system of limited utility. JCB1 remarked that he learned more from the practical world on his own than he did in school, while YH1 shared that most instructors did not inspire him, but University did help him focus, albeit by restricting his outlook.

This analysis suggests that while some students did view education as a developmental process, they were still mindful of performance and outcomes, for example, career prospects, as a key reason for going through University.

Discussion

Being a pilot study, the findings are intended to serve as a guide for future expanded studies that involve a larger sample of students with the same distribution. Furthermore, it must be added that the results are merely indicative of students from this particular University in Singapore; as other Universities might practice different pedagogies, and indeed, contain a different range of undergraduate programmes.

Within the scope and size of the sample, several themes can still be observed from the various topic questions that were discussed. These themes will be discussed in turn.

Cultural Understanding and Explanation of Plagiarism?

According to Brennan and Durovic (2005) and Angelil-Carter (2000), students from CHC do not consider copying without attribution, which is conventionally plagiarism in the Western world, as such. However, the participants in this focus group demonstrated a definition of plagiarism that is reasonably close to the western tradition view. Some students even added deeper glimpses into the notion of domain distinction and copyright. That said, the participants echoed a sense of confusion arising from what they perceive as inconsistent academic standards applied by individual instructors, and for different subjects.

This is a particularly strong finding when contrasted to studies by Lahur (2005) and Zobel and Hamilton (2002), where one of the most common reasons for plagiarism offered by CHC students is that of unfamiliarity with the concept. On the contrary, the participants were able to explain what plagiarism is, and did not suggest a misunderstood definition of plagiarism as an explanation when explaining why students might commit plagiarism. One possible explanation is that being student leaders, the participants are highly experienced in University administration, and therefore institutional policy. This finding can be further verified in future studies with a larger and more diverse participant pool.

The key reasons offered instead were that students tended to shirk the effort to cite, bowed to time pressures and plagiarized to meet performance standards. It has been suggested by Yang and Lin (2009) that the stress to complete or succeed at an assignment at all cost is characteristic of the pressure felt by CHC students, who face the need to maintain “a complex mix of personal ambition, family face, peer support and material reward” (p7). However, this was not evidenced from the responses given by the participants. It would be useful to add a more pointed question asking the participants about external stressors to clarify this point in future studies.

Two possible, and vital, lessons from this analysis are, firstly, that understanding could manifest competently from student engagement; to an extent, fundamental cultural behaviors can be adapted or modified. Secondly, while the evidence for a cultural difference is lacking in this study, it does highlight the usefulness of developing a holistic solution that might extend beyond cultural boundaries. This approach would be one that considers each individual student circumstantially to develop an inclusive and effective guidance process.

Prevalence, Detection and Punishment

According to a literature review by Park (2003), prevalence of plagiarism among students ranged from a low of 3% to as high as 75%. Apart from the explanations offered by the study for the variation in incidence rates, the responses of the participants also offer a student’s perspective into the ranging difference of prevalence – that of circumstances and conditions of plagiarism.

The participants explained that up to 80% might have committed some form of referencing mistakes, while serious plagiarism of ideas and sources might be significantly lower. This is linked to the previously mentioned sentiment of instructor inconsistency; prevalence might be dependent on how instructors viewed potentially plagiaristic behavior as an academic offence, which left the students tentative in addressing its frequency. This point is also associated to their comments on Turnitin as a detection and deterrence tool; where its effectiveness depended more on the way the instructors used it, as opposed to its mere existence in the University as a figure of deterrence.

This attitude of anxiety towards inconsistent standards extended to their contemplation on punitive measures. Their general belief was that plagiarism should be punished based on intention, which might be felt as a more consistent variable than instructor standards. The importance of intent as an ethical dimension in the assessment of plagiarism was also highlighted in a study by Yorke et al (2009). Lastly, the participants suggested a gradient of punishments, as opposed to stiff technical penalties, to address the potentially different circumstances of plagiarism. This opinion might reflect a concordance with an outcome-oriented view of education, reflected in the earlier section, where future prospects can be mercilessly jeopardized by punitive measures.

Why are we in University?

Generally, the participants' thoughts on plagiarism showed a competent understanding of plagiarism, their primary concern about inconsistent instructor standards and the explanation of time and performance pressures as an explanation of plagiaristic behavior.

Their grasp of a generic definition of plagiarism lends weight to their fear of inconsistent standards, and underpins their desire for a fair process that investigates plagiarism for intention while having leeway to punish leniently. These conclusions can be attributed to the reasons the participants cited as reasons for being in the University.

Most participants said they pursued University education in order to achieve later success, or to gain experiences that would be unavailable elsewhere. From these participants' perspectives, an overly harsh punitive system would compromise the chance for success (and hence in the former instance, and undermine the experience of the University life in the latter. These would merely add to the pressures that have been stated in the earlier section.

Strategies

The context for an Asian account of plagiarism was not supported by the result of this study. None of the participants' responses alluded to an account of plagiarism that conformed to the findings in other studies that showed a serious misconception of the offence. However, the fears

and disillusion felt by the participants should not be discounted, but accounted for, when devising measures to address plagiarism. This is echoed by studies that show that strict and overly formal disciplinary systems would only serve to demoralize students (Black, 2004; Cantor and Wright, 2001; Heal, 1978). Furthermore, such systems are fundamentally unable to change external circumstances that affect any student, Asian or otherwise. Student involvement and engagement, coupled with measures by disciplinary administrators to understand each student as a person, could be the keys to creating positive outcomes from the management of plagiarism.

Thus, Universities should review their disciplinary procedures to ensure that each student gets a fair chance during disciplinary hearings to share their circumstances. Students should be informed that this step does not necessarily lead to mitigation, but it is a channel for them to be understood more holistically before an ideal solution can be found to remediate their academic mistakes.

Universities should also facilitate students to actively participate in the learning process on citation and referencing standards. It is understandable that academic standards have to be met eventually, but students should be eased into recognizing the importance of attribution through gradual exercises and discussions, before being led into the technical realm of citation formats. In doing so, they might internalize the moral importance of academic integrity, forming a foundation for academic methods, instead of mistakenly learning the method without understanding the reason.

In addressing consistent instructor standards, it is the ideal to seek a streamlined codification of a consistent application. However, the difficulties outlined by Sutherland-Smith (2005) suggest that academics are themselves besieged by administrative and pedagogical constraints, which might have led to inconsistent standards. The University can assist the students by assisting academics with a comprehensive detection and reporting mechanism that does not onerously add to their existing teaching load. Furthermore, instructors who promote academic integrity in any way should be recognized for these efforts as part of their teaching evaluation.

On a broader perspective, the ideal strategy would be self-perpetuating peer programmes among students who educate, encourage and motivate each other towards academic integrity, recognizing moral character as an important outcome of learning. Turner and Shepherd (1999) suggested many positive reasons and benefits of peer engagement programmes. The idea could be seeded by seeking student volunteers with a passion for academic integrity and training them in methods to engage their peers. The objective of the engagement would be to generate discussion and active thought on the subject, while creating greater awareness on academic integrity. In taking these directions, it is hopeful that Universities shall become a positive environment of growth and development, supporting self-actualizing students who are actively involved in their own learning journeys.

Keywords: plagiarism, academic integrity, education, university students, student engagement

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