

## *In Other (People's) Words: plagiarism by university students—literature and lessons*

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper reviews the literature on plagiarism by students, much of it based on North American experience, to discover what lessons it holds for institutional policy and practice within institutions of higher education in the UK. It explores seven themes: the meaning and context of plagiarism, the nature of plagiarism by students, how do students perceive plagiarism, how big a problem is student plagiarism, why do students cheat, what challenges are posed by digital plagiarism and is there a need to promote academic integrity? It is concluded that plagiarism is doubtless common and getting more so (particularly with increased access to digital sources, including the Internet), that there are multiple reasons why students plagiarise and that students often rationalise their cheating behaviour and downplay the importance of plagiarism by themselves and their peers. It is also concluded that there is a growing need for UK institutions to develop cohesive frameworks for dealing with student plagiarism that are based on prevention supported by robust detection and penalty systems that are transparent and applied consistently.*

### **Introduction**

Much has been written on the theme of plagiarism by students, particularly in the context of North American experience. This paper reviews that literature in order to discover what lessons it holds for institutional policy and practice within institutions of higher education in the UK.

As well as being 'the problem that won't go away' (Paldy, 1996), plagiarism is a problem that is growing bigger. There is mounting evidence that student cheating in general, and plagiarism in particular, are becoming more common and more widespread, encouraging Alschuler and Blimling (1995) to speak of 'epidemic cheating'. This evidence is multi-dimensional, coming from many countries, including the USA (White, 1993), the UK (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997), Southern Africa (Weeks, 2001) and and

Finland (Seppanen, 2002), embracing both undergraduate and postgraduate students and including public and private higher institutions of education, large and small.

The emphasis in this paper is on the causes and consequences of student plagiarism. Whilst the paper also addresses some aspects of designing appropriate coping strategies for dealing with them, this is very much a secondary theme here. It is, therefore, not by accident that the focus is primarily on the student perspective and experience. This is not to deny the important role played by academic staff and the relevance of particular academic traditions, for example in setting particular types of assignment which might be easier to plagiarise or where the temptations to plagiarise might be stronger or in privileging the ability to reproduce existing knowledge above originality in student writing, which merit detailed treatment elsewhere.

The paper is in seven sections, which deal in turn with the meaning and context of plagiarism, the nature of plagiarism by students, how do students perceive plagiarism, how big a problem is student plagiarism, why do students cheat and what challenges are posed by digital plagiarism. The paper rounds off by looking at the need to promote academic integrity.

## **Plagiarism: Context**

### *Definition*

According to the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (Hanks, 1979), plagiarism is 'the act of plagiarising', which means 'to appropriate (ideas, passages, etc) from (another work or author)'. Plagiarism involves literary theft, stealing (by copying) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one's own without crediting the source.

Barnhart (1988, p. 801) traces the etymology of the word plagiarism ('literary theft'), from the earlier English word plagiary ('one who wrongfully takes another's words or ideas'), derived from the Latin *plagarius* ('kidnapper, seducer, plunderer, literary thief'), from *plagium* (kidnapping) from *plaga* (snare, net).

The term plagiarism is usually used to refer to the theft of words or ideas, beyond what would normally be regarded as general knowledge. This is the spirit of the definition of plagiarism adopted by the Association of American Historians, who describe it as 'the misuse of the writings of another author ... including the limited borrowing, without attribution, of another's distinctive and significant research findings, hypotheses, theories ... or interpretations' (Fialkoff, 1993).

### *Rhetoric*

The rhetoric of plagiarism is nothing if not colourful. Some writers describe plagiarism in moralistic tones, for example as 'the unoriginal sin' (Colon, 2001), 'sin ... against originality' (Anonymous, 1997) and 'a writer's worst sin' (Miller, 1993). It has also been criticised as 'an attack on ... nothing less than a basic human right, to property, to identity' (Freedman, 1994) and a 'cancer that erodes the rich legacy of scholarship' (Zangrando, 1991/2). Some writers prefer more legalistic language. The US Office of Research Integrity (ORI), for example, views plagiarism as 'the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property' (Anonymous, 1995). The plagiarist has been described as a 'thought thief' (Whiteneck, 2002) or 'intellectual shoplifter' (Stebelman, 1998), charged

with having committed ‘forgery’ (Groom, 2000), ‘theft of ideas’ (Hopkin, 1993) and a ‘crime’ (Franke, 1993).

Whilst many regard plagiarism as malpractice, others view it as poor practice. Thus, for example, it has been dismissed as a ‘slip in scholarship’ (Leatherman, 1999) and ‘poor scholarship’ (Fialkoff, 2002), a question of ‘academic etiquette and polite behaviour ... [rather than a form of] intellectual theft’ (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997), ‘a lapse rather than a crime’ (Gray, 2002). More bluntly, it has been described as ‘a disease of inarticulateness’ (Bowers, 1994) and a form of mental illness (Howard, 2000).

### *Origin and Emergence*

Plagiarism is not a new phenomenon. Copying from other writers is probably as old as writing itself, but until the advent of mass-produced writing, it remained hidden from the public gaze.

According to Mallon (1989), the Elizabethan playwright Ben Johnson was the first person to use the word *plagiary* to mean literary theft, at the beginning of the 17th century. Then, it was not uncommon for a writer to borrow work from other writers. What Thomas (2000) calls ‘textual misappropriations’ became much more common as mass-produced books became more widely available and there was more material to steal from. Even Shakespeare appears to have both copied (Julius, 1998) and been copied (Thomas, 2000). Before copyright laws it was difficult for writers to establish let alone protect authorship, but by the mid 18th century plagiarism was more clearly defined by copyright laws and plagiarists were confronted with changing public attitudes towards literary property and strong moral views of literary theft (Goldgar, 2001). The Western literary tradition connects authorship with ownership, but Bowden (1996) argues that such a notion is challenged by the rise of plagiarism in the post-modern literary era. Inevitably, opportunities to plagiarise the work of others have expanded greatly since the advent and increased accessibility of the Internet.

Like many things, plagiarism is seen differently when viewed through different lenses. Now widely considered a vice, in days past it was sometimes considered a virtue, imitation being considered the highest form of flattery. This same tension still holds true today in some non-Western cultures, and it must be taken into account when dealing appropriately with plagiarism by students from different cultural backgrounds, grounded in different notions of respect for authority and different traditions of academic writing.

### *Beyond the Academy*

Students have no monopoly on plagiarism as a form of dishonest behaviour. What Straw (2002) calls ‘the P-word’ is common in many fields, including journalism (Lieberman, 1995), politics (Perin, 1992) and science (Vandervoort, 1995). Suspicions, allegations and (where available) proof of plagiarism by public figures, and the fall from grace that often follows, regularly make headline news. Recent high profile examples include history writer Stephen E. Ambrose, Kennedy biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin (Fitzgerald, 2002) and David Robinson, the former Vice Chancellor of Monash University in Australia (Baty, 2002).

Many well-known authors have been accused of plagiarism, including William Shakespeare (Julius, 1998), Mark Twain (Kruse, 1990), George Orwell (Rose, 1992), Alex Haley (Taylor, 1995), Samuel Beckett (Acheson, 1978) and Edgar Allen Poe (McMullen, 1995). Song writers including Celine Dion (LeBlanc, 1997) and Michael

Jackson (Dezzani, 1999) and film directors such as Steven Spielberg (Kessler, 1998; Zeitchik, 1998) have faced plagiarism charges in court. Others accused of plagiarism include the scientists Pythagoras (Maddox, 1995) and Einstein (Broad, 1997), the philosophers Descartes (Smith, 1998), Sartre (Gottlieb, 1994) and Wittgenstein (Goldstein, 1999; Cohen, 2001) and churchmen John Wesley (Abelove, 1996) and Martin Luther King Jr (Carson & Holloran, 1991; Luker, 1993).

Against this background of plagiarism as a long-established practice evidenced in many different areas of activity, plagiarism by students sits as a special problem within higher education. Many causes and practices of plagiarism from 'beyond the academy' cross over into the world of student writing, although there are additional drivers of plagiarism by students (see 'Why do students cheat?' below).

### **Plagiarism by Students**

The core business of the knowledge industry is handling information and ideas from different sources, so there is inevitably great scope for plagiarism within the academic world. Here plagiarism occurs in a variety of settings, including collaboration or cooperation between students working together (Wojtas, 1999), unattributed use of other people's writings by undergraduates (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997), Master's students (Baty, 2001) and PhD students (Morgan & Thomson, 1997), copying of graduate students' work by supervisors or other members of academic staff (Smith, I., 1995; Macilwain, 1998) and taking credit in research grant applications for work done by someone else (Stone, 1996).

#### *Types of Cheating*

There is an extensive literature on the theme of plagiarism within higher education, particularly in North America and particularly by students (see for example Carmack, 1983; Brown, V. J. & Howell, 2001; Landau *et al.*, 2002). But plagiarism *per se* must be viewed as part of the broader problem of cheating (Leming, 1980; Barnett & Dalton, 1981; Raffetto, 1985; Haines *et al.*, 1986; Roberts, R. N., 1986; Deikhof *et al.*, 1999; McCabe, 2001). Observers have situated plagiarism in different ways, as a matter of academic misconduct (Stern & Havlicek, 1986), academic dishonesty (Hardy, 1981/2; Singhal & Johnson, 1983; Carmack, 1983; Reams, 1987; Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996; Caruana *et al.*, 2000; Higbee & Thomas, 2000) or academic integrity (Nuss, 1984; Iovacchini *et al.*, 1989; Cole & Conklin, 1996; Cole & McCabe, 1996). To some it is simply a matter of unethical behaviour (Anderson & Obenshain, 1994; Buckley *et al.*, 1998).

Studies of academic dishonesty amongst students have often focused on the types of behaviours and practices they are likely to engage in, including cheating on tests and assignments, falsification of data, plagiarism, inappropriate use of resources, taking credit for work done by others and manipulation of academic staff (Raffetto, 1985; Saunders, 1993; Ferrell & Daniel, 1995; Baldwin *et al.*, 1998). Sims (1993) has shown how students who cheat often persist in cheating throughout their subsequent career.

Plagiarism by students is a moral maze, because it raises important ethical and moral questions about good/bad or right/wrong behaviour and about acceptable/unacceptable practices. Who decides it is wrong, on what basis and for what reasons? Who is responsible for deciding on behavioural norms in the context of plagiarism? (Hopkin, 1993). Should universities seek to teach students about values, moral leadership and

personal ethics and, if so, why and how? (Cole & Conklin, 1996). The challenge for institutions is how best to deal with what Stahl (2002) calls 'the no-fear generation' and Straw (2002) refers to as 'generation 'why-not'', who believe that the older generation is 'clueless' and that copying material from the Internet is 'fair game'.

Plagiarism is also a legal minefield because, although 'plagiarism isn't a legal term' (Fialkoff, 1993), legal cases involving plagiarism have ended up in court in the USA, and these have tended to focus 'on the role of intent, procedural rights and the relationship between plagiarism and copyright' (Saunders, 1993). Brandt (2002) stresses that 'copyright abuse and plagiarism are like two sides of a permission coin: on the one side, people take without asking, and on the other side, people take without telling.'

### *Forms of Plagiarism by Students*

Students plagiarise in four main ways (Wilhoit, 1994; Brandt, 2002; Howard, 2002).

1. Stealing material from another source and passing it off as their own, e.g.
  - (a) buying a paper from a research service, essay bank or term paper mill (either pre-written or specially written),
  - (b) copying a whole paper from a source text without proper acknowledgement,
  - (c) submitting another student's work, with or without that student's knowledge (e.g. by copying a computer disk).
2. Submitting a paper written by someone else (e.g. a peer or relative) and passing it off as their own.
3. Copying sections of material from one or more source texts, supplying proper documentation (including the full reference) but leaving out quotation marks, thus giving the impression that the material has been paraphrased rather than directly quoted.
4. Paraphrasing material from one or more source texts without supplying appropriate documentation.

Whilst the word 'plagiarism' is not itself ambiguous, a number of complications arise as soon as it is applied to an academic setting because 'between imitation and theft, between borrowing and plagiarism, lies a wide, murky borderland' (Anonymous, 1997). One is the problem of distinguishing degrees of plagiarism, because it covers a spectrum of situations, ranging, as Wilhoit (1994) puts it, 'from sloppy documentation and proof-reading to outright, premeditated fraud. Few other terms that we commonly use in our classes have such widely differing meanings'. Given that 'zero tolerance' is the ultimate objective, how do students learn what is acceptable practice, particularly at the lower end of the spectrum? Secondly, how much does an original text need to be altered to avoid the charge of plagiarism? Roig (2001) points out that most students struggle with distinguishing between paraphrasing (which 'involves restating text from an original source in the writer's own words') and summarising (which 'condenses large amounts of text into a few sentences for the purpose of conveying the main points of the original').

A third difficulty is that whilst most authorities agree that plagiarism covers the copying of ideas as well as words, ideas are often fluid and evolve through time and it is not always easy to trace and attribute the originator of ideas. White (1993) contends that students need to learn that sources should support, not substitute for, their own ideas. There is also uncertainty about 'the point at which an idea passes into general knowledge in a way that no longer requires attribution' (Leatherman, 1999). Most writers agree that

matters of common knowledge do not need referencing in academic writing, but what precisely is 'common knowledge', and who defines it?

### *Motive and Intent*

Some students plagiarise on purpose, knowingly. Intentional plagiarism is intentional if it is pre-meditated, designed to deceive and thus a deliberate act of literary theft. Whilst intentionality might be difficult to establish or prove, there is no doubt that some plagiarism is accidental or inadvertent. Such unintentional plagiarism occurs when a student fails to adopt (perhaps because they do not know) proper protocols for referring to academic material, including appropriate ways of quoting, acknowledging ideas and compiling reference lists (Mills, 1994). In cases like this there is no ultimate intent to deliberately deceive, and the literary theft is accidental (Colon, 2001).

Unintentional plagiarism can be caused by what psychologists describe as cryptomnesia or 'hidden memory' (Brown & Halliday, 1991; Marsh & Landau, 1995), which is 'an intriguing type of mental illusion in which people mistakenly believe that they have produced a new idea when in fact they have simply unwittingly retrieved an old, previously encountered idea from memory' (Macrae *et al.*, 1999). For example, Acheson (1978) describes Samuel Beckett's 'instances of involuntary memory' and his failure to include footnoted acknowledgements in some essays. Experimental studies have shown how implicit memories of previously seen material can inadvertently lead to repetition (Penpenny & Keriazokas, 1998), how such errors might be avoided (Marsh & Landau 1997) and how this unconscious recall is stronger with more credible sources (Bink *et al.*, 1999).

The literature contains mixed messages about how serious a problem unintentional plagiarism is. Bugeja (2001) points out that 'a student who honestly did not intend to plagiarise may still be held legally liable ... But, from an ethical perspective ... absence of intent is a mitigating factor'. However, Fialkoff (1993) insists that 'there's no excuse for plagiarism' and Perin (1992) argues that 'carelessness is almost as great a sin in writers as deceit'.

### **How do Students Perceive Plagiarism?**

Results from surveys of student attitudes and perceptions are often quite contradictory; some studies (for example Sutton & Huba, 1995) find broad agreement amongst students about what kinds of behaviour constitute cheating, whilst others describe great variability in student perceptions about cheating in general (Barnett & Dalton, 1981) and about plagiarism in particular (Overbey & Guiling, 1999). As Roberts and Rabinowitz (1992) point out, student perceptions of cheating situations are contingent upon the interplay of multiple factors such as need, provocation, opportunity and intentionality. Nonetheless some broad patterns are apparent in the literature.

First, many students generally regard plagiarism as 'no big deal'. Payne and Nantz (1994) found that 'according to many students, there is a significant difference between cheating on exams ('blatant' cheating) and other forms of academic cheating (often viewed as less serious or 'not really' cheating.)'. In the overall scheme of things, students often view plagiarism as a relatively minor offence, although Ashworth *et al.* (1997) found a strong moral basis for UK student perceptions of cheating, focusing on values such as friendship, trust and good learning. Sutton and Huba (1995) explored the impact on North American students' perceptions of academic dishonesty of race

(African-American and white students had different perceptions) and religiosity (perceptions depended partly on students' level of participation in religious activities). Students often do not see cheating as a major problem among their peers (Daniel *et al.*, 1991). For example, a study by Lim and See (2001) based in Singapore, which they describe as 'one of the most competitive educational systems in the world', found that students 'are morally ambivalent about academic cheating and are rather tolerant of dishonesty among their peers. On the issue of whether cheating behaviours should be reported ... a majority of students chose to take the expedient measure of ignoring the problem rather than to blow the whistle on their peers'.

Secondly, many studies have shown that academic staff and students have very different attitudes towards cheating and plagiarism (Stern & Havlicek, 1986; Anderson & Obershain, 1994; Roth & McCabe, 1995; Higbee & Thomas, 2000). Evans & Craig (1990) uncovered general agreement between high school students and staff that cheating is a serious problem, but major differences in views regarding scale and criteria, causes and effective approaches to prevention. Academic staff views on plagiarism appear to vary between disciplines (Roig, 2001). Although staff generally consider specific dishonest behaviours as more serious than do students, there is evidence that the differences decrease as students progress towards graduation (Sims, 1995). Ashworth and Bannister (1997) argue that, in the UK 'in general, plagiarism is a far less meaningful concept for students than it is for academic staff, and it ranks relatively low in the student system of values'.

### *Social Construction*

Payne and Nantz (1994) explore social accounts and metaphors of cheating amongst students and they conclude that students' academic behaviour is socially constructed and legitimated. This helps to explain why cheating and attitudes to it vary so much within and between different groups of students and between students and staff. Framing plagiarism as a social construct is a useful way of reconciling differences in student views, attitudes and practices relating to cheating between western and Oriental countries (Lim & See, 2001). It also underlines the essentially socially situated nature of writing, which allows students, 'through interaction with more experienced peers and instructors, ... [to] negotiate and de-construct their notions of plagiarism' (Evans & Youmans, 2000).

### **How Big a Problem is Student Plagiarism?**

The available statistics don't paint a very consistent picture about the scale and nature of the plagiarism problem, the extent to which it is changing through time or varies from country to country, from subject to subject or between undergraduates and graduate students.

Comparative data are difficult to find, for two main reasons. First, studies differ in focus; some examine cheating in general, others focus specifically on plagiarism. Secondly, there are differences in sources of information; some studies (for example Michaels & Miethe, 1989) are based on self-reporting by students, whilst others quote detection rates by staff (which is likely to be 'the tip of the iceberg', because most plagiarism probably goes undetected). Even the self-reporting category is open to ambiguity and inconsistency, and Karlins *et al.* (1988) stress the need to investigate what students do rather than what they say they do in the context of academic dishonesty,

because there are often major differences between the two. Caruana *et al.* (2000) developed and tested a measure of academic dishonesty and found it reliable and valid for measuring actual cheating and plagiarism by students. However, there is no doubt that more research needs to be done in this area.

### *Incidence*

The reported incidence of cheating varies a great deal from study to study. At the lowest end of the spectrum, Karlins *et al.* (1988) found that only 3% of the students on a business course plagiarised a library research assignment. More common are reported incidence levels of at least 50%. For example, Haines *et al.* (1986) found that more than half of the 380 students they interviewed self-reported cheating during the academic year in at least one area (exams, quizzes, homework assignments). In a study by Hollinger and Lanza-Kaduce (1996) more than two-thirds self-reported some form of academic cheating during a sample semester. Some studies report incidence levels of three-quarters or more. Eighty per cent of the graduate business students interviewed by Brown (1995) had engaged in at least one form of cheating, including plagiarism. Stern and Havlicek (1986) found that 82% of the 314 undergraduate students in their survey admitted to engaging in some form of academic misconduct during their college careers.

### *Trends and Patterns*

Although the number of studies is small, there is evidence of patterns of variations in the incidence of cheating by students.

1. Variations between disciplines. Meade (1992) asked 6000 students at 31 top-ranked US universities if they had cheated during their college career. Cheating was most commonly reported by students in business studies, ranked highest (87%), followed by engineering (74%), science (67%) and humanities (63%).
2. Variations between countries, Diekhoff *et al.* (1999) found similarities and differences in attitudes and behaviours between American and Japanese college students. Lupton *et al.* (2000) found significant differences in behaviour and beliefs about cheating between US and Polish business students; 84% of the latter reported having cheated, compared with 55% of the former.
3. Variations between undergraduate and graduate students. Few studies have explored this, but Brown (1995) found that despite their self-perception as more ethical than undergraduates, graduate business students had a similar frequency of unethical behaviour compared with undergraduates in other studies.
4. Variations through time. Longitudinal and time series data on student cheating are thin on the ground, but the evidence suggests that it is becoming more common. For example, McCabe and Bowers (1994) discovered a dramatic increase in self-reported cheating among male undergraduate college students between 1963 and 1991 and Diekhoff *et al.* (1996) found a significant rise in cheating by US college students between 1984 and 1994. Many observers believe that the incidence of plagiarism in the UK is on the rise, driven by ease of access to digital sources of information (particularly the Internet) (Baty, 2000) and by the relentless pressures of mass participation and declining contact between students and staff (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997).



### Why do Students Cheat?

Educators need to recognise the causes of plagiarism in order to address them, as Weeks (2001) stresses. But the situation is often complex and multi-dimensional, with no simple cause–effect link. For example, Michaels and Miethe (1989) situate academic cheating within social psychological theories of deviance and Lieberman (1995) argues that plagiarism resembles kleptomania ‘in that the stolen passages may not be needed and the person taking them has a wish to be caught’. Groom (2000) suggests that the act of forgery and fakery has inherent appeal to students. There might be large-scale processes at work, too, because as society in general become more competitive and as fraudulent behaviour is uncovered and exposed elsewhere, often on a huge scale, such as the major Enron financial scandal of 2002, student sensitivity towards cheating, and the propensity to take risks, may well be changing.

A simple typology of reasons why students plagiarise, informed particularly by the work of Stevens and Stevens (1987), Davis *et al.* (1992), Love and Simmons (1998) and Straw (2002), captures the multiple and contingent motives of plagiarism by students.

1. Genuine lack of understanding. Some students plagiarise unintentionally, when they are not familiar with proper ways of quoting, paraphrasing, citing and referencing and/or when they are unclear about the meaning of ‘common knowledge’ and the expression ‘in their own words’.
2. Efficiency gain. Students plagiarise to get a better grade and to save time. Some cheat because of what Straw (2002) calls ‘the GPA thing’, so that cheating becomes ‘the price of an A’ (Whiteman & Gordon, 2001). Auer & Krupar (2001) identify a strong consumer mentality amongst students, who seem to believe that ‘they should get grades based on effort rather than on achievement’.
3. Time management. There are many calls on student’s time, including peer pressure for an active social life, commitment to college sports and performance activities, family responsibilities and pressure to complete multiple work assignments in short amounts of time. Little wonder that Silverman (2002) concludes that ‘students’ overtaxed lives leave them so vulnerable to the temptations of cheating’.
4. Personal values/attitudes. Some student see no reason why they should not plagiarise or do it because of social pressure, because it makes them feel good or because they regard short cuts as clever and acceptable
5. Defiance. To some students plagiarism is a tangible way of showing dissent and expressing a lack of respect for authority. They may also regard the task set as neither important nor challenging
6. Students’ attitudes towards teachers and class. Some students cheat because they have negative student attitudes towards assignments and tasks that teachers think have meaning but they don’t (Howard, 2002). Burnett (2002) emphasises the importance of a relationship of trust between student and teacher, because ‘the classes in which [students] are more likely to cheat ... are those where students believe their professor doesn’t bother to read their papers or closely review their work’.
7. Denial or neutralisation. Some students deny to themselves that they are cheating or find ways of legitimising it by passing the blame on to others
8. Temptation and opportunity. It is both easier and more tempting for students to plagiarise as information becomes more accessible on the Internet and web search tools make it easier and quicker to find and copy
9. Lack of deterrence. To some students the benefits of plagiarising outweigh the risks,

particularly if they think there is little or no chance of getting caught and there is little or no punishment if they are caught (Davis & Ludvigson, 1995)

### *Which Students Cheat (Most)?*

There is no doubt that some students cheat more than others. One group of students who regularly feature on the 'at risk' list is international students for whom English is not their first language and who, as Deckert (1993) points out, 'in settings of higher education are frequently viewed by Western instructors as persistent plagiarizers.' As well as coping with language difficulties, these students often have different attitudes towards academic authority and deference, come from cultures with radically different attitudes to academic plagiarism and arrive with less well-developed study skills (including note taking, essay writing and bibliography construction skills) (Burnett, 2002). Beyond this broad group there is less consensus, partly because of the complex interplay of variables, including students' beliefs and values, personality, stress, social groups and peer pressure, classroom environment and contextual and situational factors (Barnett & Dalton, 1981; Roth & McCabe, 1995; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Gerdeman, 2000).

### *Determinants*

Although there is ongoing debate about whether (Ferrell & Daniel, 1995) or not (Brown, 1995) students who engage in cheating behaviour share common characteristics, the evidence suggests that some factors might be particularly helpful in predicting or explaining cheating behaviour by students.

1. Gender. Cheating tends to be more common among male than among female students (Calabrese & Cochran, 1990; Buckley *et al.*, 1998; Straw, 2002).
2. Age and maturity. Young (Straw, 2002) and immature (Haines *et al.*, 1986) students tend to cheat more often than older and more mature students.
3. Academic ability. Some studies (for example Straw, 2002) have shown that cheating is more common among students with lower GPAs than among those with higher grades, but others (for example Leming, 1980) have found no such pattern.
4. Student social life. Cheating is more common amongst students who party a lot and have very active social lives (Straw, 2002), students involved in several outside activities (Straw, 2002) and students who are members of campus fraternities and sororities (McCabe & Bowers, 1996).
5. Peer disapproval. Peer disapproval is often only a minor influence on cheating by students (Diekhoff *et al.*, 1996), although it may be stronger in institutions with honor codes (McCabe & Trevino, 1997).
6. Student personality factors. Students tend to cheat more often if they lack confidence, feel under pressure from and seek the approval of parents and peers (Raffetto, 1985), if they have an aggressive (Type A) behaviour type (Buckley *et al.*, 1998), if they lack commitment to their studies (Haines *et al.*, 1986), if they have a neutralising (rationalising) attitude (Daniel *et al.*, 1994) and/or they feel alienated at college (Calabrese & Cochran, 1990).
7. Student attitude towards their classes. Cheating tends to be more common in classes where the subject matter seems to students unimportant or uninteresting or where the teacher seemed disinterested or permissive (Gerdeman, 2000).

8. Risk of being caught. A number of studies have underlined the importance, in students' decision making about cheating, of their perception of the probability and consequences of being caught (Leming, 1980; McCabe & Trevino, 1993, 1997; Buckley *et al.*, 1998) and of the importance of deterrents such as embarrassment and fear of punishment (Diekhoff *et al.*, 1996).

### Digital Plagiarism

Recent years have witnessed the emergence and proliferation of a new form of plagiarism, from digital sources, which offers new opportunities and ease of access and which poses particular challenges across the whole education sector globally. Students now have ready access to a huge variety of digital sources, including full-text CD-ROM databases and electronic journals on the Internet (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997), most of which are rapidly accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week and can be downloaded from the safety and comfort of their own rooms. Material on the Internet is particularly accessible via effective search engines such as Google.com (Lathrop & Foss, 2000; Laird, 2001), which is why UK universities are taking steps to cope with the expected rise in the incidence of student plagiarism (Baty, 2000).

#### *The Internet*

The Internet provides unparalleled temptation and almost unrestricted opportunities for students to cheat by engaging in what has variously been described as 'cybercheating' (Stebelman, 1998), 'cyberplagiarism' (Anderson, 1999), 'mouse click plagiarism' (Auer & Krupar, 2001) and 'academic cyber-sloth' (Carnie, 2001). Laird (2001) has suggested that 'Internet plagiarism may be gathering sufficient force to become an academic hurricane'.

One of the major problems confronting universities is to persuade students that such material is not 'free for the taking' (Colon, 2001; Whiteneck, 2002) in the same way that artists can freely collect and use 'found objects'. Attitudes towards ownership of material on the web is a major challenge, because today's students 'have become so accustomed to downloading music and reading articles free on the Internet that they see it as acceptable to incorporate passages into their papers without attribution as well' (Young, 2001). Kellogg (2002) warns that 'the problem is likely to get worse as more and more students reared on the Internet enter college'.

It's not all bad news because, as Carnie (2001) points out, 'the Web is a fabulous resource that no student or scholar can ignore. Somehow, though, we have to convince people that learning requires more than high-speed connections and a good search engine'.

#### *Term Paper Mills*

A growing challenge for universities everywhere is the proliferation of online term paper mills (Anderson, 1999), through which 'a student can simply log onto the Internet and buy a paper with a click and a credit card' (Whiteneck, 2002). Groark *et al.* (2001) point out that paper mills existed long before the Internet, although 'with the advent of Internet technology ... the number of places where papers are available has grown and the ease with which papers can be obtained has increased'.

Paper mills, such as [www.cheathouse.com](http://www.cheathouse.com) and [www.schoolsucks.com](http://www.schoolsucks.com), sell pre-prepared essays and papers over the Internet (Furedi, 2000), as an enterprising form of academic 'outsourcing' (Anonymous, 2002), or what Silverman (2002) describes as 'paper pilfering'. Some sites allow free downloads while others charge, including an extra fee for immediate E-mail delivery (Stebelman, 1998). Some will write a customised paper, using an online ghost-writer who will produce a custom-written paper on any particular topic, within an agreed time frame, for an agreed fee (Howard, 2002). One North American web site ([www.ivyessays.com](http://www.ivyessays.com)) even sells successful college admission essays to students.

### *Digital Detection*

Digital plagiarism is a double-edged sword for students, because whilst it allows them to find and copy material at will, the same technology allows staff to detect plagiarism by comparing versions of text (including comparing a student's text with massive databases which cover much of the Internet). Web search engines (like [www.Google.com](http://www.Google.com)) allow staff to search the Internet for web sites containing strings of words, if they suspect that parts of a student's assignment have been plagiarised from the Internet. In this sense 'the Internet may make it easier to copy, but it also makes it easier to expose the copier' (Colon, 2001). Fialkoff (2002) concludes that 'it is clear that technology has made the practice of good scholarship more complex, even if the principles remain the same. ... The computer, and the net, may be both a curse and a blessing when it comes to writing ...'.

### **Promoting Academic Integrity**

Surveys of student cheating in North American universities during the 1990s showed that 'students don't think cheating is a big deal and professors [academic staff] are doing little to curb it' (Wilson, 1999). In response to this challenge, many institutions adopted formal honor codes, designed to appeal to students' sense of ethics and to emphasise such values as truth, accountability and social responsibility (Bugeja, 2001). Underlying this movement has been a desire to foster what McCabe and Trevino (2002) describe as a 'culture of integrity', aimed at reducing student cheating but also at foregrounding 'the value of living in a community of trust'.

### *Honor Codes*

Uptake of the honor code idea was initially slow; by 1994 only about a quarter of the colleges and universities in North America had introduced them (Kibler, 1994). In the late 1990s US colleges were urged to take a more proactive stance towards preventing cheating by students, and to define academic integrity and stress its importance (Wilson, 1999). The establishment of the Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) at Duke University in North Carolina was instrumental in achieving this ambition. The Center, a consortium of more than 200 institutions of higher education in North America, promotes an approach that emphasises the fundamental values of academic integrity (honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility) (McCabe & Pavela, 1997).

The CAI approach is based on advising students what academic integrity is and why it is important (thus identifying values and behaviours to be promoted, rather than listing behaviours to be prohibited) and encouraging or requiring students to sign a pledge that

they will uphold academic integrity and not cheat or plagiarise. Procedures vary from place to place, within the spirit of the honor code system. At some institutions, such as Duke University (Burnett, 2002) and Vanderbilt University (McCabe & Trevino, 2002), students take part in public 'signing ceremonies', to indicate their personal commitment to upholding the institutional honor code. At other institutions, such as the University of Maryland (Anonymous, 2001), students are asked to write and sign an honor pledge on each of their assignments and exams.

No matter whether, when and how often students are asked to sign an honor pledge, it is vitally important that the institution has a clear code that is distributed or readily available to all students and that academic staff hold discussions with their students to establish academic 'rules of engagement' and avoid misunderstandings (Burnett, 2002). Students must be made aware that academic integrity is a major institutional priority (McCabe & Trevino, 2002).

North American experience also shows that honor code systems work best when students are actively engaged in the process and take part in it, if not actually assume ownership of it. Few honor code systems are entirely student managed (Paldy, 1996), and codes that require students to report instances of academic dishonesty rarely work effectively (Jendrek, 1992). McCabe and Trevino (2002) insist that there should be 'student participation in campus judicial or hearing bodies that review alleged infringements of the honor code ... [that] students should also have a voice on task forces or committees charged with informing other students about the purposes and philosophy of the code, and they should play a major role in its development and implementation'.

There is ongoing debate about whether or not integrity can be taught (Vandervoort, 1995) and student attitudes towards academic integrity appear to be influenced by multiple factors, including students' personal characteristics, student activities, student attitudes and gender (Iovacchini *et al.*, 1989). Nonetheless, there is mounting evidence that students in institutions with academic honor codes view the issue of academic integrity and treat cheating behaviours in very different ways to those at institutions without honor codes (McCabe *et al.*, 1999). Academic honesty is higher, and levels of self-reported cheating are lower, in institutions that have honor codes (May & Lloyd, 1993; McCabe & Bowers, 1994).

## Conclusion

There is an extensive literature on plagiarism by students, particularly in the context of North America experience, but it clearly holds important lessons for institutional policy and practice within institutions of higher education in the UK. The literature shows that plagiarism by students is common and getting more so (particularly with increased access to digital sources, including the Internet), that there are multiple reasons why students plagiarise and that students often rationalise their cheating behaviour and downplay the importance of plagiarism by themselves and their peers.

Whether or not the problem has reached epidemic proportions, as some observers insist, it is clearly a major problem, and one that appears to be on the increase. The practice of plagiarism is a major challenge to institutional aspirations of academic integrity and a major threat to institutional quality assurance and enhancement, and it needs to be taken into account when developing and implementing institutional learning, teaching and assessment strategies. There is a growing need for UK institutions to develop cohesive frameworks for dealing with student plagiarism that are based on

prevention supported by robust detection and penalty systems that are transparent and applied consistently.

### Notes on Contributor

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