

Cultural Values, Plagiarism and Fairness: When plagiarism gets in the way of learning

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Abstract

The dramatic increase in the number of overseas students studying in the UK and other western countries has required academics to re-evaluate many aspects of their own, and their institutions' practice. This paper considers differing cultural values among overseas students towards plagiarism, and the implications this may have for postgraduate education in a western context. Based on focus group interviews, questionnaires and informal discussions, we report the views of plagiarism among students on two postgraduate management programmes, both of which had a high constituency of overseas students. We show that plagiarist practices are often the outcome of many, complex and culturally situated influences. We suggest that educators need to appreciate these differing cultural assumptions if they are to act in an ethical manner when responding to issues of plagiarism among international students.

Keywords: Plagiarism, alienation, fairness, learning, patchwriting

[**Note:** This paper is in final revisions for the journal *Ethics and Behaviour*]

The issue of academic integrity within higher education has received considerable attention in the literature over recent years (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Deckert, 1993; Dryden, 1999; Harris, 2001; Howard, 1995, 1993; Kolich, 1983; Lathrop, 2000; Martin, 1994; Myers, 1998; Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1995; Sherman, 1992). Academic integrity refers to honesty and transparency in the ways in which knowledge is acquired and transmitted (The Centre for Academic Integrity, Duke University, 2004). Honesty is premised upon high levels of trust between staff and students, and ensuring that all students are treated fairly. Further, academic integrity requires that all writers acknowledge the work of others, and that action is taken if there is any wrongdoing (Drinan, 1999). Examples of where academic integrity is compromised include copying from others during exams, taking crib sheets into exams, unpermitted collaboration in coursework, submitting the same piece of coursework more than once, and including other people's words in a coursework assessment without marking them as being such. The latter examples of academic dishonesty in coursework are termed 'plagiarism,' and are the focus of this paper. According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'to plagiarise' is "to take and use another person's ideas, writing, or inventions as their own." Importantly however, we will suggest that plagiarism should not always be considered to be synonymous with cheating (Hunt, 2003).

Much of the literature on academic integrity, coupled with the considerable anecdotal evidence amongst colleagues in our own and other universities, suggests that plagiarism is on the increase. There have been many articles that seek to identify the extent of plagiarism and understand why students become plagiarists. In relation to the extent, O'Connor (2003) describes one recent Australian study that spanned twenty subjects and six universities.¹ This saw 1925 essays being submitted to Turnitin, an electronic detection service and found that 14% of essays "contained unacceptable levels of unattributed materials." The report also highlighted that only a small amount is ever detected electronically, as Turnitin does not cover most books, journals, and paper mills (O'Connor, 2003).²

In relation to the literature that has considered why students plagiarise, Carroll (2002) has suggested that as most students are unsure what plagiarism is, they do not plagiarise with the

¹ Conducted by Caval in 2002 on behalf of the Victoria Vice Chancellors Committee.

² Paper mills provide completed essays for a charge or in exchange for another essay.

intention to deceive. Furthermore, Angelil-Carter (2000) claim that there is also a lack of clarity across a university about what constitutes plagiarism and a discrepancy in the way plagiarism is detected and enforced (Biggs, 1994; Ryan, 2000; Scollon, 1995). Others have highlighted that due to the growing staff-student ratio, staff have less time to talk through issues regarding writing practices which has contributed in the rise in the number of cases of plagiarism (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; O'Donoghue, 1996). Carroll (2002) also claims that the move from examination to coursework and project-based assessment has resulted in not just over assessment, but students under constant pressure to attain high marks (Carroll, 2000). Others suggest that poor time management by students, as well as staff setting the same submission dates for a number of different pieces of coursework are major contributing factors (Errey, 2002; Lim and See, 1992; Bamford et al., 2002). Finally, and perhaps as a consequence of many of the above, when students are dissatisfied with the course, their interest and work rate decreases, which may contribute to plagiarism.

Though much of this literature has shed considerable light on why students plagiarise, it is rooted in western contexts, and thus does not specifically address the theme of this paper: examining the differing cultural attitudes and understandings of plagiarism amongst overseas postgraduate students undertaking management-related programmes. This is perhaps surprising when most western countries, especially those whose national language is English, have witnessed a prolific increase in the number of overseas students. In relation to the UK, there has been a dramatic rise in overseas students' studying at British Universities.³

To explain why students from different cultures plagiarise when studying abroad, several authors have said that for many students from the East, the approach to learning in the West is contrary to their experiences in their own country. For example, in China and other Asian countries, learning and assessment typically focus on the content of a textbook. A consequence of this is that when they enter western higher education, it is especially difficult for students to be critical about an author and to state their own opinions. As Pennycook (1996) shows, for Chinese students, using another author's words is a form of respect and it is hard for these students to change this cultural practice. Other commentators have highlighted how when English is a student's second language, the increased time it takes for them to write places them under

³ The number of full-time overseas students has risen from 202,000 in 1990 to 313,000 in 2000 (Churches Commission for International Students).

pressure. Fear of failure generally, especially when students are funded by their family (often extended), their government, or a particular company, also places considerable pressure on the student to do well (O'Donoghue, 1996; also see Bond, 1986). Furthermore, some commentators have found that overseas students may feel that they cannot improve upon what is already written and prefer to use the original text rather than their own (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Biggs, 1994; Fox, 1994). Furthermore, some overseas students are said to plagiarise, both intentionally and unintentionally, due to their lack of experience in essay writing, as many eastern countries still rely exclusively on examinations (Ashworth et al, 1997; Carroll & Appleton, 2001).

Our research will extend this literature by examining the different cultural understandings that students from different nationalities, studying two UK management-related postgraduate programmes, have of plagiarism. Based on this, we will consider the implications this raises for postgraduate management education. The following section will outline the methodology that underpinned this study. Section three will review the students' past practices, and judgements pertaining to academic integrity. Following this we will discuss some of the key analytical themes arising from our empirical work. The final section will present some brief conclusions. Before we continue a word or two about terminology might be appropriate. In the UK the term 'assessment' is used for all parts of work that contribute to the final grade awarded to the student for a course. Assessment normally consists of 'coursework' and 'examinations'. The term 'coursework' is used for work that is normally done 'at home', such as essays (or term papers), reports, literature reviews, and so forth; the term 'examinations' normally refers to examination papers completed under supervised examination conditions. Plagiarism is obviously an issue in coursework rather than examinations.

Methodology

Our research was conducted primarily with a cohort of MSc students studying two different postgraduate programmes at Lancaster University Management School, one a specialist masters program pertaining the interrelationship between technology and organisations, and the other a general management programme. Though this research was conducted after they had been in the UK for about 5 months, our questions focussed exclusively on the students' past practices and judgements on various manifestations of academic malpractice as encountered at

their universities in their home countries. The first programme, an MSc in Information Technology, Management and Organisational Change (ITMOC), comprised of 46 students with a diverse range of nationalities, including students from India, Pakistan, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Greece, France, Ukraine, Germany, Brazil, Iceland, Columbia, and of course the United Kingdom. The general management programme, the MSc Management, comprised approximately 80 students with the same diversity of backgrounds.

As Table (1) indicates, we conducted focus-group interviews and distributed questionnaires to the MSc ITMOC students, while with the MSc Management students we primarily distributed questionnaires. Supplementing this has been considerable informal discussion with ITMOC students by both authors, as we explain below.

Table 1

Number of Responses to Questionnaires & Interviews

MSc Programme	Method	Number in Programme	Number of responses / focus group interviews
ITMOC	Questionnaires	46	46
	Focus Groups		22
Management	Questionnaires	80	57
	Focus Groups		1

Our questionnaire was based on a well known survey developed by Donald McCabe, Professor of Organization & Management at Rutgers University and former president of The Center for Academic Integrity. We included an extra section and modified some of the terminology to make it more comprehensible for those not from the USA. For both programmes, as Table (1) highlights, we had an extremely high response rate to the questionnaire. This was primarily due to the authors' handing the questionnaires out during a scheduled core lecture session. We also explained the importance of their completing the questionnaire honestly. One of the authors made himself available for questions, while the other stood by the exit to collect them, making it difficult to leave the room without handing in a questionnaire. For the ITMOC students, we also left a copy in their pigeonholes for those students who were not at the lecture,

and provided a box in their programme base-room for them to deposit it. The questionnaires were anonymous (unless there was only one person from a particular country).

The questionnaire data was entered into a spreadsheet. We then analysed the resulting tables and graphs, identifying differences and inconsistencies between the national groupings. However, though the sample was not large enough for it to form the basis of any predictive claims, it did provide us with indicative insights into the variations of academic malpractice within and between the different groups that we then pursued in detail in the focus group discussions.

Table 2

Numbers of students from the different national groupings in each postgraduate programme

	Asian	Chinese	Greek	UK
MSc IT, Management & Organisational Change	5	9	17	10
MSc Management	12	35	10	15

The focus group discussions were highly successful in relation to the ITMOC programme, partly because there was quite a small core of teaching staff associated with the programme. Further we make use of small tutorial groups, so we tend to know the students well. This communal ethos assisted in encouraging a significant number of students to attend the focus groups. The focus group interviews lasted approximately forty five and sixty minutes each and were organised on the basis of national / regional origin. They were tape-recorded and then the notes were transcribed afterwards. This resulted in five groupings, a UK Group, a Chinese group, an Asian (other) group, a Greek group, and a group from the rest of the world (Table 2 indicates the distribution per nationality group for each of the programmes). As with the questionnaires, our focus group discussion also sought to understand the students' experiences prior to coming to Lancaster, though the conversation inevitably became referential to their experiences of plagiarism since arriving in the UK. The interview transcripts were then coded and analysed through Nudist, Sage's qualitative data analysis software. With regards to the MSc Management programme, we organised the focus groups on similar lines. However, unfortunately, only one student, from China, attended any of the focus groups, and thus for this programme our data has

to rely on that obtained from the questionnaires. Unlike the ITMOC programme, neither of the authors has any contact with this postgraduate programme in either a teaching or an administrative capacity, which we believe could have been partly responsible for the negligible turnout for this optional session.

The questionnaires and the focus groups were supplemented by considerable discussion with students during a study skills module the authors convened and taught together, as well as at the Programme Director's weekly meeting. Though discussions in such circumstances were not recorded systematically, it did help us understand the differing cultural attitudes to plagiarism in the programme prior to, during, and after the data collection. As the study was primarily qualitative we did not attempt to do detailed statistical analysis of the quantitative data. The quantitative data served merely as a starting point for the qualitative work rather than as an attempt to demonstrate any particular hypothesis.

Student Attitudes to Issues of Academic Integrity

This section will introduce the issues that emerged in the focus groups and questionnaires. Again, due to the small sample, the results of the questionnaire were indicative rather than predictive, and formed the basis for the qualitative questions that we asked during the focus group interviews. The first section focuses specifically on the issues that arose with regard to plagiarism and the students' experiences of coursework assessment in their previous university. Section two considers the experiences of malpractice during examinations at the students' previous university. As most international students had limited or no experience of coursework assessment in their own country, looking at their views and experiences of cheating during examinations, provides a valuable insight into the values surrounding academic malpractice in their country of origin. The final section examines the pressures that some students encountered to gain good marks.

Academic Integrity in Coursework

How much copying is plagiarism? All the British students considered copying a limited amount of text without referencing the sources to be tolerable. They suggested that it was generally acceptable to at least plagiarise what they termed "very general and background information" such as company information or general facts and figures without referencing them.

Further, UK students suggested that if some text was written more eloquently than they felt they were able to do themselves, and they understood it, then it was acceptable for them to copy it. In this sense it was about English proficiency, rather than content, even though they themselves had English as their first language.

Table 3

The extent and judgement of copying text word for word without citing the source

	Asian	Chinese	Greek	UK
Copied a <i>paragraph</i> or more word for word once or more	20%	40%	21%	19%
Never copied a <i>paragraph</i> or more word for word	80%	60%	79%	81%
Judge such copying as not cheating or <i>trivial</i> cheating	40%	30%	7%	25%
Judge such copying as <i>somewhat or very serious</i>	60%	70%	93%	75%
Copied a <i>few sentences</i> word for word once or more	75%	56%	57%	56%
Never copied a <i>few sentences</i> word for word	25%	44%	43%	44%
Judge such copying as not cheating or <i>trivial</i> cheating	100%	60%	64%	63%
Judge such copying as <i>somewhat or very serious</i>	0%	40%	36%	38%

When asked what they considered substantial plagiarism in the context of a 3000-word essay, the British students' responses ranged from it is being more than two sentences, a whole paragraph, while one student said he would not try to quantify it, but more generally could be considered substantial "at the point when the text they were copying began controlling what they were writing." However, several of the other British students responded vehemently to this by stating that if students were consciously copying extensive amounts of material, this was substantial plagiarism. Table 3 highlights the mixed response UK students provided in relation to whether they had copied, or considered copying, material word-for-word from any source and turning it in as their own to be serious or not. It indicates that 19% of UK students admitted to doing this once or more, while 25% of UK students saw this as not being cheating or at least

being trivial. When asked if copying material was done by combining one or two sentences (patching) from the work of different authors the student said this was a typical approach they adopted when plagiarising coursework.

In relation to non-UK students, surprisingly most students explained that they had little experience of coursework in their undergraduate education and thus were not able to comment extensively on the issue of plagiarism in coursework. Typically, the only form of coursework non UK students had completed was group project papers or business reports. In China and Greece, it was estimated that they write only one essay during their undergraduate education, and perhaps a couple of reports. Due to this lack of experience in undertaking coursework, students naturally started to refer to their experiences since arriving in the UK. One Greek student suggested that copying a few words as long as they were not copying a concept or an idea was acceptable. Another Greek student claimed that it was important only when it became a significant amount—after some discussion significant was considered to be a paragraph or more. Further, they claimed that referencing was not as rigorous in their own countries as it is in the UK, partly because most courses often required students to consult only one textbook.

Due to the non UK students' limited exposure to coursework, it is more revealing to look at how serious they judge cheating in coursework rather than how they judge their previous writing and assessment practices. As Table 3 indicates, all the different student groups judged copying a few sentences word-for-word without referencing it as only being a trivial form of cheating, at best. In relation to previous practices, 56% of UK students admitted to having done this once or more, while 63% of UK students judged this as being trivial or not cheating at all. This supports the view that a small amount of plagiarism is considered by UK students to be acceptable. In relation to the judgement of non-UK students, 100% of Asian students viewed this as only being trivial cheating. For the other national groups approximately two thirds of the students saw copying a few sentences of material without referencing them as not cheating or a trivial form of cheating. This indicates that across all cultures, not only is copying several sentences likely to be endemic in coursework (or term paper) submissions, but also that regardless of background, students do not tend to judge it as an unacceptable practice.

Unintentional plagiarism in coursework. Several UK students mentioned how plagiarism may be unintentional. They attributed this to the way they make notes while doing research for their essays, explaining that in the process of researching and drafting an essay, they collect

many electronic and non-electronic references, keep several windows open simultaneously, and copy and paste among them. They recognised that this could be dangerous (as it may result in their losing track of the different sources), or be extremely tempting to pass off other's work as their own. One UK student suggested that not fully referencing the resulting patchwork could come about due to his or her own poor time management, saying that "most of the cases arise when students are short of time." In this sense UK students viewed some form of plagiarism as being unintentional. Further, based on their experiences of coursework since arriving in Lancaster, many non-UK students echoed these points.

Learning and plagiarism. One surprising view that emerged in both the UK and Greek focus groups was that plagiarism is perceived as being inextricably interlinked with a students' development. For example a UK student commented that when students plagiarise (well), it often still requires an understanding of the topic, and thus exhibits a degree of learning, saying that, "If you take all the sentences / paragraphs from other authors – then you have to do the work to put it together – you have learned and need a certain understanding of the topic, it is not just blatant copying." At a subsequent focus group, several Greek students supported this, claiming that being able to generate an argument in a coursework assessment, even if some of it was plagiarised from different sources (patching), demonstrated a good level of learning.

English Proficiency and plagiarism. Based on their insights gained since arriving in Lancaster, several Greek students said that when English was not one's first language, "taking a bit here and there helps with getting meaning across. Paraphrasing if you are not a native speaker is difficult." Others suggested that there are only so many ways that issues could be written, as one Greek student commented, "All the ways for saying something have already been said, and thus we have to use the same words. But this is about words and not concepts." The later point reinforces the earlier issue about how one could demonstrate a degree of learning even if some of the words were copied.

Collaboration and coursework. In relation to the essay-writing practice of students (Table 4), between 50 – 75 % of the non-UK students judged receiving unpermitted help from fellow students to be trivial, while only 38% of UK students viewed this as trivial.

Table 4 highlights how 6% of UK students admitted to providing a coursework paper for another student. Interestingly, the UK students judged writing a paper for another student as being more trivial than their practice suggested. However, this was still much lower (13%) than

any of the other national groups. Further, Table 4 shows that 80% of Asian students consider writing a paper for another student to be trivial or not cheating, while 60% admitted to having written or provided a paper for another student. For the Chinese and Greek groups, 40% and 36% respectively admitted to having written a paper for another student, while 40% and 29% respectively viewed this to be only minor cheating.

Table 4

Extent and judgement of student collaboration in coursework

	Asian	Chinese	Greek	UK
Received substantial, unpermitted help on an assignment once or more	25%	40%	50%	31%
Never received substantial, unpermitted help on an assignment	75%	60%	50%	69%
Judge such unpermitted help as not being cheating or only <i>trivial</i> cheating	75%	50%	50%	38%
Judge such unpermitted help as being <i>somewhat or very serious</i> cheating	25%	50%	50%	63%
Have written or provided a paper for another student once or more	60%	40%	36%	6%
Have never written or provided a paper for another student	40%	60%	64%	94%
Judge such collaboration as not being cheating or only <i>trivial</i> cheating	80%	40%	29%	13%
Judge such collaboration as being <i>somewhat or very serious</i> cheating	20%	60%	71%	88%

Academic Integrity in Examinations

This section considers the issues raised by students with regard to academic integrity during exams. Due to the limited experience of coursework that non-UK students have in their own countries, examining the extent of examination based malpractice committed by students in their previous university, and their judgement as to its seriousness, can provide a further useful insight into how academic integrity is viewed by different national groups.

Exams as Memory Tests. In all the countries represented other than the UK, most students viewed exams as being purely memory tests. For example an Indian student mentioned that in his undergraduate examinations, more marks were awarded when students simply reproduced lecture notes or the course textbook verbatim rather than if they paraphrased them. Indeed, he said that the exam questions “will ask us to repeat definitions word-for-word from the textbook.” He added that they are not required to reference quotes or definitions in exams as it is assumed that it derives directly from the lecture notes or the textbook. Similarly, the Chinese students explained that there was one book for each course and exams were designed to allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorised the book. Further, Chinese students complained that the book they were required to memorise was often out of date. This alienation from the examination system in China was evident in how 30% of students admitted to using unpermitted crib sheets (unpermitted notes) during exams.

The Greek students were particularly animated with regards to the futility of the examination processes. They explained that often during their undergraduate education, they were required to memorise many pages of text word-for-word, or memorise a multitude of different mathematical formulae. They all agreed that this was ridiculous, as one Greek student explained: “the point is that it is about knowing how to use them not memorise them.” Indeed, he claimed that due to the emphasis on memorising material, all Greek students were forced into a position in which they “had to cheat.” This lack of faith in examinations was evident in how 43% of Greek students admitted to using unpermitted crib notes during an exam, while none of the UK and Asian students admitted to using them.

Reciprocity and exams. The issue of unpermitted collaboration during examinations was seen by all national groupings, other than the UK, to have taken place in their previous institutions, and also to be judged by many as not being serious. The survey indicated that 80% of Asian students and 20% of Chinese students admitted to this form of copying, and

significantly, 80% of Asian students and 30% of Chinese students judged this to be trivial or not cheating. Greek students mentioned that they would frequently provide unpermitted help to each other during exams, as was graphically explained by one Greek student: “I have submitted exam papers for others, swapped exam papers while writing it. It is perfectly logical as we do not care if the people are learning anything or not, they don’t care they just want to pass.” Table 5 also highlights that 36% of Greek students admitted they had copied during an exam, even though 79% of them thought it was somewhat or very serious.

Table 5

Extent of reciprocity and the judgement of reciprocity in relation to exam malpractice

	Asian	Chinese	Greek	UK
Copied from another student during a test with his or her knowledge once or more	80%	20%	36%	0%
Never copied from another student during a test with his or her knowledge	20%	80%	64%	100%
Judge such copying as being not cheating or not <i>trivial</i> cheating	80%	30%	21%	6%
Judge such copying as being <i>somewhat or very serious</i> cheating	20%	70%	79%	94%
Helped someone else cheat on a test/exam once or more	80%	40%	79%	0%
Never helped someone else cheat on a test/exam	20%	60%	21%	100%
Judge such help as being not or only <i>trivial</i> cheating	60%	50%	50%	6%
Judge such help as being <i>somewhat or very serious</i> cheating	40%	50%	50%	94%

Table 5 casts a different light on the issue of assisting others to cheat during an exam. It shows how 80% of the Asian group admitted to helping someone else cheat once or more, which though high, is consistent with their responses concerning copying from another student during a test. However importantly, twice as many Chinese and Greek students admitted to helping

someone else cheat once, even though 50% of them judged it to be a serious form of cheating. As well as this collaboration being attributed to exams' merely requiring regurgitation, non-UK students also attributed it to cultural norms of reciprocity, as a Greek student explained: "in general if you help, you will get help when you need it." Indeed, the main concern and fear among Greek and Asian students was not getting caught, but that those who copied did not get as high a mark as the person they copied from. For example, one Thai student mentioned, "there is nothing wrong with helping friends, as long as they do not get as high a mark." A Greek student also admitted to making one or two deliberate mistakes to ensure the student copying did not get a higher mark. Both the questionnaire and focus-group data indicated that UK students viewed collaboration of any form during exams as taboo.

Trust and exams. One of the most shocking insights that emerged from the empirical research arose in the Greek focus group. One Greek student suggested that a further condition that forced them to cheat derived from their lack of trust in Greek academics to treat all students equally, saying "sometimes I cheat because you know other people do so, other people do so with the professor's knowledge, sometimes the professor gives the exam paper to students before the exam. Students have certain connections with professors. Everybody knows that this happens." All twelve Greek students who attended the focus groups agreed with this. Another Greek student continued this theme and provided further insight, saying, "When you see that people are taking degrees without doing anything – the youths of political parties have a say in the promotion of professors. They tell professors who they should pass. It leaves people thinking why should I bother to study and memorise things that I do not need afterwards when these things are going on around you. Why should I try not to cheat when even the professors are cheating behind my back? The competition was unfair from the start, in my institution there were 600 and about 50 of them took a degree without even opening a book." When this was asked of other national groups they said this did not occur, other than in the case of perhaps a professor's favourite student, or a family connection. In general they trusted the equity of their professors' marking.

Motivations for Cheating. Marks and their fear of failure were seen by all respondents, but specifically the Asian and Chinese students to be the main pressure behind cheating. In Asia, China and Greece, high marks were seen as important in terms of finding a good job, but especially for them to undertake an overseas postgraduate programme may lead to cheating. One

Greek student explained that they are allowed to repeat a year and resit an exam as many times as they wish, leading to many Greek students writing on an exam paper “don’t mark it if it does not get 8 or higher,” indicating the importance for some in gaining a high mark. Those who would not cheat felt it unfair that they had to work even harder to get higher legitimate marks than those students who cheated. In their view not cheating came at a substantial cost for them.

Discussion of Results

Many overseas students have a significantly different understanding of higher education from UK students. This section will examine some key themes pertaining to cultural differences among overseas students as a basis for developing a more sensitive and morally responsive understanding of plagiarism. The issues raised are likely to be of significance for other western higher education contexts.

Memorisation and the Borrowing of Words

Our study and the literature highlighted that many overseas students, arriving at UK universities, are more familiar with a ‘textbook based’ teaching approach than one that requires them to consult a number of sources. In Asian, Chinese, and Greek universities, lectures often cover systematically the material in the textbook and the exam requires students to demonstrate that they can recall all relevant material from one textbook and their lecture notes—often verbatim. There is often minimal or no interpretation, or commentary, expected from the student. Through his research in China, Pennycook (1996) has argued that this form of learning should not be frowned upon, but should be viewed as different, and deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic practices, most notably with regard to paraphrasing. He suggests that the Chinese view of language is quite different from ours: “In this [view of language] primacy is accorded to language and not to the ‘real’ world, notions such as metaphor, which suggests that some word ‘stands for’ something else, become quite different because reality is in the language and not in the world” (p.221). Thus altering the exact expression of something through paraphrasing for example *is*, in this view of language, the same as altering the reality of the world itself. Though our data did not represent this point as eloquently as Pennycook, several Chinese students mentioned that memorising texts has been the focus of their learning experience throughout all levels of education. Indeed, though we cannot apply this culturally embedded analysis to the

students from across the world, students from the rest of Asia and Greece reinforced this emphasis on memorisation, and the assumed authority of the author of the 'prescribed' text. The underlying explanation for this is that they consider the teacher to be the authority and therefore the only one properly authorised to have an interpretation. We suggest that an appreciation of the importance of memorisation and the use of exact expressions for some overseas students is crucial if western academics are to be effective in facilitating their adjustment to higher education in western countries.

Postgraduates in the UK are expected to be able to read material from many sources, distil and reference the important arguments, and to be able to formulate and justify their own position, in relation to the literature. Consequently, many foreign students will often find themselves in a context where they have a huge deficit of skills, which is likely to deepen as the expectations and workload increase through the duration of the course. Further, many students lack the confidence to express and defend their own views. Thus, they would tend to fall back on the supposed authority of the text, and 'string together' arguments from a diversity of texts on the reading list without critical evaluation of the issue, or reference to appropriate sources. Though this is an intentional act, it is often fuelled by the mismatch of skills required in different educational contexts. It is vital to address these culturally laden points, by for example, showing overseas students how to evaluate material and formulate arguments prior to their first assessment.

Language, Writing Practices and Academic Malpractice

The transition from an institution that has a textbook-based teaching model and assessments based on a 'recall' type examination to one in which assessments typically take the form of a critical review of a topic must be quite daunting. If one adds to this the issue of language, not just ordinary linguistic competence, but the ability to master *disciplinary academic language*, then one can see that such a task would tend to overwhelm the foreign student. Add to this other things such as family and financial pressures along with a history of success in a different teaching approach, then it is easy to imagine the sort of pressure that many students feel.

In order to deal with this anxiety they often turn to a number of writing practices that may be more or less acceptable to us (Howard, 1993). One typical form draws on their experiences of the past, namely repeating the words of others, though not in exactly the same form. Instead of

merely submitting to the authority of one author, they engage in subsuming the words of multiple authors. This is referred to as *patchwriting*. Howard (1993) defines patchwriting as “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes” (p. 213). She argues that writers often turn to patchwriting when they are unsure of their understanding of the material or lack confidence in the use of a particular language (such as academic language and phraseology).

This is true not only for non-native speakers, it is also true for native-speaking academics when paraphrasing a difficult-to-understand text—even material within their own discipline. Roig (2001), in a fascinating study, provided college professors in psychology (all members of the American Psychological Society) with two different texts to paraphrase: the first was a difficult text from a peer-reviewed psychology journal article and the second was an easy-to-read text from an introduction-level psychology textbook. Twenty-six percent (26%) of the professors appropriated text—strings of five words in length or more—from the original text, whereas only three percent (3%) appropriated text from the piece that was easier to read. If psychology professors—and most probably native speaking students—feel the need to ‘stay close’ to the text when confronted with difficult material, we can see why, students who understand the importance of ‘speaking’ like the teachers and the people they read, do the same to be accepted into the community. Likewise, non-native academics also feel they need to ‘borrow words,’ as a Chinese chemist says (Myers, 1998): “Many scientists are not good at English. In order to publish their articles in foreign journals they have to translate their journals [work] from Chinese to English. So they usually borrow some words from foreign articles. I don't know if this is a kind of plagiarism.”

Is this type of writing plagiarism—a deliberate intention to deceive on the part of the professors or the non-native speaking student? Howard, following Hull and Rose (1989) says that this form of writing is a legitimate attempt to “interact with the text, relate it to your own experiences, derive your own meaning from it” (p. 150). This is something most writers do in unfamiliar contexts or with difficult-to-understand texts. It is indeed how we all learn: by mimicking or copying others whom we consider exemplary in an academic discipline or in terms of their linguistic competence. However, in the case of many authors, instead of merely reproducing one exemplary figure as they have done successfully in their own country, they patch together the work of several authors.

One could also say that in a ‘cut and paste’ style of writing a ‘beautiful patchwork’ may indeed be valued (Howard, 1993). It seems correct to assume that such patchwriting implies a serious attempt to make sense of, and engage with, the material, as was claimed by several Greek and UK students. One UK student commented: “If you take all the sentences / paragraphs from other authors – then you have to do the work to put it together – you have learned and need a certain understanding of the topic, it is not just blatant copying.” Should patchwriting not be considered as a legitimate pedagogical step towards becoming a competent ‘speaker’ of academic English in the academic community? Or should we simply conclude, as Roig (2001) suggests, that “a small but significant proportion of writing by college professors may be classified as plagiarism” (p. 320). This seems an inappropriate conclusion, both in the case of the professors as it is in the case of these students. Nevertheless, this issue of language proficiency was often claimed to be one of the fundamental reasons students may ‘plagiarise’, as one Greek student said: “taking a bit here and there helps with getting meaning across. Paraphrasing if you are not a native speaker is difficult.” As Pennycook (1996) comments on this tension: “while [students are] constantly being told to be original and critical, and to write things in their ‘own words,’ [they] are nevertheless only too aware that they are at the same time required to acquire a fixed canon of knowledge and a fixed canon of terminology to go with it” (p. 213). Indeed one could ask what other means are available for progress to competency, and use the language of the subject, but a sort of patchwriting? Thus, perhaps a more pertinent question may be at what point in a student’s apprenticeship should patchwriting be considered unacceptable. Patchwriting may be a crucial starting point in a student’s development. Unfortunately our punitive approach to plagiarism does not always have the subtlety to make these very important distinctions, often leading to devastating consequences for already vulnerable students.

Equality, Alienation and Academic Malpractice

Our case study also highlighted how many students feel alienated from their country’s education system. This was attributed to the emphasis on memorisation, out of date material, and the lack of trust in the equality of the assessment process. The extent of alienation also helps us to see why there can be such a paradoxical situation that although many international students believe cheating is wrong they still engage in it in quite an extensive way. In the extreme case, this alienation from the academic system could imply a situation in which the assessment is so

‘preconfigured’—due to politics, untrustworthy academics, and so forth—that the outcome becomes completely meaningless and any cheating behaviour becomes potentially morally justifiable. One can see such a moral justification in the comment of a Greek student: “When you see that people are taking degrees without doing anything – the youths of political parties have a say in the promotion of professors. They tell professors who they should pass. It leaves people thinking why should I bother to study and memorise things that I do not need afterwards when these things are going on around you.”

Equally, those who do not engage in these practices even though they are aware of the inequality, still note they have to work hard to compensate for their cheating. Interestingly, this shared sense of alienation from the academic system in many contexts resulted in a strong degree of collegiality among students. For example, collaboration in tests and exams was said to be common in all of the non-UK countries represented. It seems that as the sense of alienation increases the students feel increasingly justified to cheat—often collaboratively. This was perhaps most graphically depicted in the Greek context, where 90% of students said that they had cheated and helped others to cheat. Thus, if the issue of plagiarism is to be addressed (and academic malpractice) we need to attend to the systemic conditions of alienation. Though we hope to discount lack of trust in professors in western institutions, overseas students find themselves in an educational system that expects of them things they are not prepared for, and in a language they are not competent in. Addressing the resulting feeling of powerless is as much the responsibility of academics, as it is the students’.

Towards Increased Fairness in Assessment Practice

In this paper we have tried to show that the issue of plagiarism is not always simply a matter of cheating or not cheating. We believe we have shown that the practices that might be termed plagiarism are often the outcome of many diverse and complex influences, especially for students who find themselves in unfamiliar and difficult terrain. On one hand, the ideological basis of the notion of plagiarism and the alienation from the assessment task (due to learning skills, language, perceived unfairness, and so forth) may lead students to feel justified when they plagiarise. On the other hand, when students sincerely try to cope with the situation by patchwriting and ‘borrowing of words,’ they may be further alienated by our attempts to impose

rigid categories of judgement. Such attempts could further alienate, leading to an increased sense of powerlessness and of being justified in the first place.

One central implication arising from our research pertains to the need for western academics to not only develop a broader understanding of how overseas students were taught and assessed, but also to communicate their expectations, and explain how they differ to those in the students own country, and provide resources for students to meet these expectations. Further, it is important to ensure that students view their assessments as an opportunity to learn rather than as being merely an externally imposed logic of judgement.

A further important implication is for staff to recognise for those students who are unfamiliar with paraphrasing, and writing arguments based on multiple sources, in their second language, patchwriting should be viewed as an inherent part of the teaching and learning process. It should be made explicit that patchwriting and borrowing of words, when sources are cited, is a legitimate *step towards* independence of thought and create the conditions for students to freely discuss their writing practices with academic staff as a means for students to move beyond it. More broadly, institutional frameworks should be developed that are sensitive to the issue of culture and alienation. It would be unfortunate if our judgements about students within an institutional framework become an additional and final humiliation of a student already within an asymmetrical power relationship. This means that we should insist on the things we value in the west—that is, academic integrity, yet be mindful that in insisting on these we do not compromise other things we equally value such as fairness.

Clearly due to its limited scope, our research is provisional and merely indicative of the issues at stake. There is a need for more detailed ethnographic studies that explore the transition involved in students becoming independent writers. This may include research that charts how their recognition and understanding of plagiarism is formed and put into practice, how they draw on the words and ideas of others, and how they utilise technology composing their essay. A detailed understanding of such issues is necessary if institutions, with diverse student populations, are to effectively develop preventative plagiarism policies and procedures.

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