

Plagiarism, nuisance or crime



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Derived from the Latin term, *plagiare* (meaning to steal), plagiarism would in laymen's terms mean stealing someone else's work and portraying it as your own. Although it is looked upon as a serious academic offence, it is not criminalized and has been around as long as writing could and have been published.

Taking a student's approach and to decisively analyse a students' approach to plagiarism, one has to know what plagiarism is and understand why it is still prevalent amongst today's student and academia.

Wikipedia¹ describes Plagiarism as " the use or close imitation of the language and ideas of another author and representation of them as one's own original work." It is also described as " to use another person's idea or a part of their work and pretend that it is your own" in The Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary², and according to Merriam-Webster³, to plagiarize means:

1. to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
2. to use (another's production) without crediting the source
3. to commit literary theft
4. to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

Through the different descriptions of the word it is clear that plagiarism is viewed as an act of dishonesty and by some definitions could even qualify as a fraudulent act.

Plagiarism seems to not only be a very real issue for students today, but seems to be a pressing and growing concern for the institutions mandated with the education of these students. In 2006 alone 39 cases of plagiarism involving undergraduate students was reported at the University of Cape Town, 17 at the University of Stellenbosch and 20 incidents at the University of Pretoria. ⁴One lecturer at the University of South Africa also resigned after being charged with a disciplinary hearing involving plagiarism. ⁵

Even more disconcerting is the problem and practise of senior academics plagiarizing the work of students. Dr. Fulufhelo Netswara, a research director at Unisa, and Ndinannyi Malada, a researcher at the Centre for Education Policy Development, have been conducting research into what they call "academic thuggery." ⁶Their research led them to the shocking discovery that post graduate students have had parts of their dissertations published under the names of their supervisors, and without their knowledge or consent.

It is ever clear then that plagiarism is still alive and well in our academic circles and needs to be addressed at the root of the problem if institutions are going to be successful at preventing plagiarism.

The only way to prevent plagiarism is to educate and inform the target group that would be the most vulnerable, that being students entering the exciting field of studies at any institution of higher learning.

Plagiarism, according to Professor Johan Jacobs of the University of Kwazulu Natal's Howard College campus "is not always a clear-cut, unambiguous criminal activity from the perspective of students. There is, of course, blatant plagiarism, but a lot of what falls under plagiarism is a grey area." ⁷

It seems then that students could possibly be unaware precisely what the definition entails, and how to effectively recognize plagiarism.

One can even be faced with the situation where copying your own work can be seen as plagiarism. Self plagiarism occurs when copying material you have previously produced and using it as new material.

According to the website plagiarism.org, plagiarism can be avoided by "learning to identify the factors that make plagiarism an attractive alternative" and goes on to list poor planning, peer pressure and "search versus researching" as factors relevant and leading to plagiarism. 8

Most students that plagiarize also do not fully understand that it is wrong and do not know how to effectively deal with it. According to Brian Martin (1992), "an alternative approach is to allow, in some circumstances, resubmission without penalty. Under this approach, submissions containing plagiarism can be resubmitted with the only changes being appropriate quotation marks, footnotes, etc. The revised submission would then be marked by the original standard. In this way, the student gains experience in giving proper acknowledgements." 9

According to Martin (1992)¹⁰, "the policing approach to plagiarism is educationally counterproductive. Students should be encouraged to model themselves on the best thinkers and, at the same time, to think critically and originally. This is hardly possible if they are constantly being scrutinised for intentional or inadvertent plagiarism."

So how does a student deal with plagiarism when faced with writing an assignment and looming deadlines? An ideal way to approach the question is to rather pose the question of what you as a student would expect from your institution when you realise that your work has been copied by someone else and even worse, that the fingers are pointing to you as the plagiarist!

In Plagiarism and responsibility¹¹, Martin comments that " Plagiarism is treated more as a taboo topic than as a normal, albeit undesirable, feature of scholarly life. This is unfortunate, since it is through exposure that the incidence of plagiarism and other violations of proper academic behaviour is most likely to be reduced."

The biggest challenge would probably be overcoming the rationalization of plagiarism by a student. When a student submits a plagiarized piece which goes undetected and renders no consequences, the inevitable situation will arise where a student will probably continue doing so until found out and penalized. This certainly does not mean that the Institutions are not doing enough to prevent plagiarism, but rather that it's up to each and every individual student to ensure through their own conduct that institutions' high ethical standards are maintained.

Although prevalent in student circles and in a lesser manner under academia, plagiarism is a pressing problem that can only successfully be curbed when it is understood. Students have not only to be informed and educated in this regard, but they need to play an active role in discouraging this problem under their peers and maintaining their respective institutions' high ethical standards. To this effect these same institutions have an active

role to play in fulfilling their mandate to not only educate, but also to inform and guide students in this regard.