
**This is the postprint version.**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Higher education research and development* in 2007, available at: [http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/07294360701310805](http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/07294360701310805)

©2007, HERDSA

Reproduced by Deakin University with the kind permission of Taylor & Francis.

**Available from Deakin Research Online:**

[http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30006690](http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30006690)
The ways in which universities and individual academics attempt to deter and respond to student plagiarism may be based on untested assumptions about particular or primary reasons for this behaviour. Using a series of group interviews, this qualitative study gathered the views of 56 Australian university students on the possible reasons for plagiarism within their institution. The results indicate a wide and disparate range of possible contributing reasons for plagiarism including: institutional admission criteria; student understanding of plagiarism; poor academic skills; a range of teaching and learning factors; personality factors and external pressures. These findings are compared with other findings about reasons for student plagiarism in Australasia. The implications of these findings are considered for universities and individual academics seeking to better engage with their students to minimise or marginalise plagiarism.

Keywords: Plagiarism; Qualitative Research; Reasons; Student Experience; Student Voice

Although there is a significant and growing body of literature on plagiarism in higher education, the methodology of many recent studies of Australasia students is reliant on participants’ responses to standard survey items to identify reasons for plagiarism (for example, Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Hasen & Huppert, 2005; Marsden, Carroll & Neill, 2005; Marshall & Garry, 2005; Sheard, et al., 2003). While revealing, such studies are unlikely to offer deep insights into what motivates students to plagiarise.

A recent study showed Australian universities moving beyond approaches to reducing the incidence of plagiarism that assume plagiarism is deliberate and undertaken for personal gain (Murdoch University, 2005). Plagiarism-related policies in Australian universities still tend to emphasise procedures to be followed in cases of suspected plagiarism and penalties to be applied should such ‘academic misconduct’ be detected or ‘proven’. However, more of these policies now make provision for plagiarism that might have been inadvertent, for example, where a student was genuinely unfamiliar with the referencing requirements of a particular discipline, and make reference to a preventative or an
educative approach. Such changes in approach will be more likely to have an impact if they are based on a fuller understanding of what leads Australian students to plagiarise.

In some of the studies cited above, and in research that has been conducted in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.), plagiarism, that is, the act of using another’s work without appropriate acknowledgement, is often grouped with other cheating behaviour such as taking notes into an exam, fabricating a bibliography, lying about personal circumstances to get special consideration and other similar actions. This makes it difficult to determine the reasons for plagiarism-specific behaviour. For example, Franklin-Stokes and Newstead (1995) looked at U.K. university student cheating, defined as incorporating an extensive list of cheating, plagiarism and falsification behaviours, and found that there were nine major reasons given by students for these types of behaviours. These were:

1. to help a friend
2. time pressure
3. extenuating circumstances
4. peer pressure
5. to increase the mark
6. monetary reward
7. fear of failure
8. everybody does it
9. laziness.

Because cheating, which is deliberate, as opposed to plagiarism, which can be both deliberate and/or inadvertent (James, et al., 2002), was the focus in the Franklin-Stokes and Newstead (1995) study, it is unlikely that the list that resulted from their work can accurately or fully explain reasons for plagiarism per se.

Park (2003) reviewed the literature on plagiarism, mostly based on the North American experience, to extract lessons for higher education institutions in the U.K. Based on this review, he presents a typology of nine reasons why students plagiarise. These are:

1. a genuine lack of understanding of scholarship and referencing requirements that leads to unintentional plagiarism
2. efficiency gain – a better grade in less time
3. time management issues
4. student personal values that may be influenced by social pressure – it’s ok to plagiarise
5. defiance – a deliberate sign of dissent and/or objection to assessment tasks
6. negative student attitudes toward teachers and/or assessment tasks
7. denial or neutralisation of plagiarism-related behaviour
8. temptation and opportunity via the digitisation of information
9. lack of deterrence – low chance of being caught/effectively punished.
While Park’s (2003) typology is focused specifically on plagiarism and not the broader issue of cheating, it has been derived from U.S. studies and the validity of generalising U.S. results to Australian students is questionable.

One study that did look at plagiarism – among other assessment-related issues – in the Australian context was a 2001-2002 Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) funded national project investigating plagiarism. The researchers suggest that there may be common factors that influence the incidence of inadvertent plagiarism among students. These include:

- student understanding of the concept of plagiarism and what it means in practice
- student understanding of citation and referencing conventions
- students’ limited skill base in academic skills (such as critical analysis, constructing an argument and paraphrasing) and in learning skills (such as time, group, workload and stress management)
- student misunderstanding and ignorance about why and how they should avoid plagiarism

(James et al., 2002). Proposed reasons for deliberate plagiarism by the same researchers include:

- laziness
- sneakiness
- competitiveness
- pressure due to academic workload requirements and to running out of time

(James et al., 2002).

Although this DEST project included interviews with Australian university staff and students and other data collection from Australian universities, the project was focused on assessment broadly, on several sub-topics including on-line assessment, assessing large classes and plagiarism, among other issues and the specific question of why students plagiarise was not directly investigated.

Based on the work of Noah and Eckstein (2001) and James et al., (2002), Devlin (2003a) has proposed that the following six reasons may contribute to student plagiarism:

1. pressures on the individual to succeed
2. penalties for failure
3. expected reward to be gained
4. opportunities to be dishonest
5. probability of getting away with it
6. social norms governing such behaviour.

Devlin’s (2003a) suggestions about the reasons for student plagiarism were made in an Australian context, resulted indirectly from the Australian DEST study on assessment.

mentioned above and seem reasonable. However, direct empirical evidence, through hearing reasons for plagiarism in Australian students’ own words, is needed to validate the reasons proposed by Devlin, and to help plan effective interventions.

Likewise, other reasons for plagiarism that have been suggested by educators need authentication. If anecdotal evidence on reasons for student plagiarism is consulted, there is much variety. Some commentators will point to broad factors such as the ‘digital revolution’ (Sterngold, 2004), to mass education and increasing internationalisation (Devlin, 2003a) and to the diversity of the student body as explanation for why a level of plagiarism and/or cheating may appear to some to be the norm today in universities. Others will blame the forces of modern living with its foci on individual achievement and success for the apparently increasing occurrence of deliberate, blatant copying by students to advance their own position relative to that of their peers. Still others assume personality factors can account for plagiarism, with, for example, ‘competitive’ types choosing to cheat when necessary and ‘ethical’ types making different choices.

Universities’ implementation of software packages for plagiarism detection may have had less than optimal success as a result of being based on educators’ imperfect or incompatible assumptions about why plagiarism has occurred and what is likely to deter it in the future. The availability of “originality checking services” has “catalysed dialogue and debate within the academic staff community” in this area (Allan et al., 2005, p.2). A range of new research recognises the importance of deeper interrogation of such institutional and individual academic assumptions about plagiarism behaviour (for example, Johnson & Clerehan, 2005; Thompson, 2005).

In order to adequately prevent and address plagiarism, the factors that influence its occurrence must be better understood. The university at which the study reported in this paper took place is in Melbourne, Australia. It is a smaller university with career and vocationally orientated education. The university has a strong technology base and important links with industry, complemented by a number of innovative specialist research centres. This institution recently undertook a university-wide project to minimise plagiarism. As part of that project, a small study investigating the perceptions of reasons students at the university plagiarised was conducted. This paper reports on the perceptions of a small group of students at the university about why students at their university might plagiarise. The generalisability of these findings to other settings is considered.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 56 students who were enrolled at the university at which the study was conducted in 2003, and who self-selected for a one hour focus group interview. Ethics clearance for the project was granted by the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethics committee. Participants were recruited on a School basis through the electronic learning management system (Blackboard™) used to administer subjects in
the university. A date, time and venue for each School interview was fixed, accompanied by a Plain Language Statement outlining the purposes and nature of the research and posted on key subject areas within each School in Blackboard. Potential participants were assured of anonymity through the absence of any record of interview attendees and through assurance that the interviews were being conducted by a researcher (Devlin) who was not connected in any way with teaching or assessing students. Participants were interviewed in eight School-based groups that ranged in number from one to 11 students. One student who could not attend the scheduled group interview for her School was interviewed individually.

Demographic information about the participants appears in Table 1 as evidence of the student diversity captured in this study.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data gathering

A semi-structured interview (please see Appendix 1) was conducted with each group and with the one student who could not attend the group interview. The overall purpose of each interview was to gather student views on plagiarism, in their own words. Ashworth et al. (2003) argue strongly for this type of research, for “the elucidation of what the student means plagiarism to be, in the context of their lived and felt experience, without imposing an external conceptual framework” (p.264). The interview included questions on participants’ understandings of plagiarism, their views on what the most common types of plagiarism in their courses were and their views on why students at their university plagiarise. They were also asked for their opinions on how they thought plagiarism could and should be minimised at the University.

The interviewer specifically asked students not to give personal accounts or details about whether or not they themselves had plagiarised. This was to increase the validity of the study. Had the study relied on self-reports, it is likely that the validity of the results would have been compromised because at least some of the conditions necessary to ensure that the validity of the self-report research was protected would have been impossible to meet. According to Kuh (2001) these conditions are that questions are clearly worded, refer to recent activities to which the respondents have first hand experience, don’t intrude on private matters and don’t prompt socially desirable responses. Clearly, responses related to whether or not students had themselves plagiarised might well intrude on what is likely to be perceived as a private matter and would very likely prompt socially desirable responses at least from some students, particularly in the group interview situation.

Participation was voluntary and responses anonymous. No comments were attributed to individuals and no record of names was taken or kept. Interviewees were told that their responses would be combined with those from staff at the same university as well as from other Australian data to prepare advice for the university staff and students on minimising plagiarism and that the data gathered from the interviews may be used to prepare papers.
such as this one. The interviewees were each offered and accepted a $20 University bookshop voucher in appreciation of their time and input.

Participant responses were recorded in shorthand and note form by the researcher during the interview. Immediately after each interview had concluded, the researcher reviewed the notes, amending them where appropriate, and then wrote a full summary of all responses made.

Data analysis

The interview data for this paper were analysed in line with the procedure for analysing qualitative data set out by Kember and Kwan (2000). First, once all interviews were complete, the researcher read all the interview summaries to search broadly for important themes and categories related to reasons for plagiarism and these were noted. In addition to reviewing responses to the specific question, ‘Why do you think students at [name of university] plagiarise?’, responses to all questions asked in the interview were reviewed for responses that may have touched on reasons or explanations for plagiarism. The initial themes and categories identified were then refined.

The researcher then re-read the summaries to categorise the responses given in the interviews. In the present study, as in the process used to categorise responses outlined by Kember and Kwan (2000), the responses to the question about reasons for plagiarism were examined in the light of the summary of the whole interview to ensure the researcher’s interpretations were put into context. The allocated categories were recorded, and quotations from the summaries were identified to illustrate each category.

This process had the potential limitations associated with a single researcher determining categorisation. Although this could not be overcome within the scope of this preliminary study, in order to increase the validity of the process, the researcher left a seven month gap between refining the initial categories and re-reading the summaries to carry out the categorisation.

Reasons for plagiarism

The eight categories of responses found in this study are presented below. Indications as to the frequency of certain types of responses have been avoided – the focus is on presenting the range of reasons students at one university believe plagiarism occurs rather than to highlight some reasons over others. The eight categories are:

1. inadequate admission criteria
2. poor understanding of plagiarism
3. poor academic skills
4. teaching/learning issues
5. laziness/convenience
6. pride in plagiarising
7. pressures
8. Education costs

1. Inadequate admission criteria

One set of responses related to issues surrounding university entry requirements and the resulting student entry-level skills and/or preparedness for university study of students who plagiarise.

One student comment typifies responses in this category,

“The university is partly to blame...these students are admitted to a [postgraduate Information Technology course] with no background in I. T. or programming and no understanding”.

This student went on to report that one such student, with whom she shared accommodation, who had already been caught and penalised for plagiarism last semester, was currently plagiarising again, because “Really they do not have any choice”. She explained,

“Some of these students ... get exemptions of six months or one year from doing some study in their home institution ... but they shouldn’t. They aren’t up to it [study here at this level] but it’s not their fault. The uni shouldn’t let them in with exemptions”.

In response to a group interview discussion about the possibility that parents provide money to their children attending university that may be used to buy improper assistance with assignments (see 8. Education costs), one student hinted at a broader contributing factor in plagiarism related to student preparedness for university study,

“It’s not only the parents, the uni has fee paying places now – if you don’t get the mark, quite, it doesn’t matter, you can buy a place. So they’re encouraging it [plagiarism] by having people here who are not able to do the work”.

2. Poor understanding of plagiarism

A lack of student understanding of what, exactly, constitutes plagiarism was evident in reasons students gave for plagiarism. Typical responses included,

“They’re not aware of what it means”
“For individual assignments in a group, they might not know what is plagiarism in that situation”.

These responses were made in reference to students generally, with no particular student groups mentioned. In one interview, however, an international student put forward his
view that a lack of understanding of plagiarism leads some international students in particular to plagiarise. He suggested that unintentional plagiarism occurred because,

“Plagiarism is not explained. For many internations, from Asia anyway, rote learning is norm...you read, read and then write it in your work [without attribution]. In Australia, when you do that, it’s plagiarism. But in my country, this is not so. We don’t have to reference”.

3. Poor academic skills

This category was further subdivided into skills related to time management and those related to scholarly work.

3.1 Poor time management. Responses categorised as related to poor management of time by the student included,

“Some students procrastinate. Many do it [i.e. write the essay] the night before”
“Student time management skills”
“Running out of time”
“Left till last minute”.

3.2 Poor research, writing and/or referencing skills. Responses here as to why students plagiarise related to the process through which students must work to research and write an assignment and included,

“Because they’re not strong researchers or writers”
“They can’t find material for assignments”
“They don’t know how to do research so they just look around [for other students’ work]”
“Confusion over where stuff is from – it’s really hard to remember”
“...might not know about how to reference it correctly”
“Don’t know how to reference”
“They understand what they’ve read but don’t have that good a command of the English language so they just change a couple of words [from the original]”.

A student in one interview outlined what she viewed as “a serious problem”, the existence of which was confirmed by two other students present,

“In [a particular introductory subject] we have a number of international students in our class – English is the fifth language – they can not, or will not, speak. They have people who help them down there [in the Student Residential Village] and their assignments have perfect language. I mean, there’s just no way they could write this well”.

4. Teaching/learning issues

Based on research and experience in American universities, Sterngold (2004) claims that conventional teaching methods invite cheating. He uses the example of the traditional research based assignment common in universities all over the world to support his claim. He proposes that, “…most undergraduates have weak research and writing skills…Most college students do not know how to…evaluate the quality and appropriateness of source materials, or integrate data and ideas from multiple sources…Many…cannot write in a clear or logical manner, support their ideas with evidence and arguments, or edit their own prose” (p. 19).

Sterngold (2004) adds that the situation is compounded by the fact that students are expected to undertake assignments in their own time with little or no help from their teachers. He concludes that “Understandably, some students view these tasks as unfair, unclear, unimportant or even impossible” (p. 20) and adds that students who view the tasks this way are “…more likely to justify and engage in plagiarism…” (p. 20).

While students interviewed in the present study did not specify assignments as a contributing factor in the incidence of plagiarism, they did point to teaching and learning issues broadly as being one source of reasons for plagiarism. These included workload and knowledge related issues.

4.1 Workload amount and timing. Typical responses here included,

“So many assignments in 12 weeks”
“assignments all being due at the same time”
“Workload”
“We’re bombarded with work” and
“To ease the workload”.

4.2 Poor knowledge of subject matter. One sub-category of possible teaching and learning reasons for plagiarism was a weak grasp of the subject matter, which some students implied, or stated, was due to inadequate teaching,

“Not having adequate knowledge about the subject matter”
“Don’t understand subject content”
“Bad teaching”.

5. Laziness/convenience

The ease with which the option to plagiarise could be taken and the apparent unwillingness of students to resist opportunities was suggested in many of the interviews,

“Laziness”
“Can’t be bothered [referencing]”
“’Coz it’s easy to plagiarise, especially using other people’s work”

“It’s easier than trying to find books, find the information, re-write it – you just copy someone else’s”
“It’s pretty convenient to ask someone else for their work”
“There are not enough obstructions, repellents [to plagiarising] – it’s so easy”.

Sterngold (2004) points out that internet search engines, DVD-based reference works, online journals, article databases, paper mills, email attachments from fellow students and other electronic sources make it very easy for students to find information on a wide range of topics and copy and paste or buy material. The proliferation of group work in Australian universities may also have contributed to student-to-student plagiarism. However, a number of authors suggest that by paying attention to assessment design, opportunities for digital and other types of plagiarism can be significantly reduced (Devlin, 2003b; James et al., 2002).

6. Pride in plagiarising

A sixth reason given by students for plagiarism at the university was that some students enjoyed plagiarising and/or the notoriety of being “the guy with the answers”. Responses included,

“Some students take pride in it [committing plagiarism]. They use the loopholes and say ‘To do it the hard way is stupid’”
“... some take pride in others copying off them”.

An unsolicited and anonymous email received by one of the authors of the current paper during the period in which the university had commissioned and resourced a project to examine plagiarism and make educative and other appropriate responses to the issue provided further apparent evidence of the existence of this phenomenon,

...in a particularly hard programming assignment, I was the first one to complete it and receive a perfect score for it (it used an online submission and grading system). No one could score the maximum marks for several days. 3 days before the due date, I started helping one individual, then another, then another. Word had spread that I was helping. All of a sudden, others started scoring perfect scores. From my point of view I was doing nothing wrong, I was helping someone out (to me the world is about favours and portraying yourself as a useful individual, it's about building up good karma for the future) and I was getting great practice in debugging and coding.

7. Pressures

Pressures of various kinds were also suggested as contributing factors to student plagiarism,

“Time pressure”
“[Students are] stressed”
“Pressure from your family”
“Society’s pressure to pass”.

On these last two types of pressure, one mature-aged student suggested, “Parents nowadays expect their children to go to uni, whether they [i.e. the child] want to or not. As a parent, I’d say it reflects badly on you if your child doesn’t get in [to university]”. Another mature-aged student added,

“The other day, … our tutor did a survey in the tute – ‘Hands up if you looked forward to coming to uni today’. I was the only one to put their hand up and there’s about 20 of us. Lots of the kids said ‘My parents made me come to uni’ and ‘After 13 years of study already and we now have to go up a level’”.

In response to these comments, one younger student in a group interview laughed and said, “No wonder they plagiarise”.

McCabe and Pavela (2004) hint at another type of pressure, suggesting that if a solution to the problem of extensive internet plagiarism is not found, many students who may otherwise not have chosen to do so may decide that they have no choice but to plagiarise “…to level the playing field” (p. 13).

8. Education costs

Some of the responses to the question about why students plagiarise related to the costs associated with education, in a number of quite distinct ways. For example, some responses related to relatively minor costs and their implications,

“Sometimes the Subject Outline [containing material about avoiding plagiarism] is not printed out for you and it’s expensive to print so you don’t have a ready reminder”.

Other responses related to the broader costs of higher education with one student suggesting that one reason students plagiarise is that they have “Too much money”. This suggested reason for plagiarism prompted a long discussion within one interview group about the possible effects being “a paying student, whether it’s by HECS or fees” contributes to students (and their parents) expecting to be able to “buy a degree, just about”. One student suggested, “Some students get too much money from their parents and they spend it on other people doing their work”. Several present agreed. One added,

“The rich [students] are good at paying their way through – they’re used to having money fix things for them. It happens here and it happened in VCE[i]. Those ‘special tutors’ paid $50 an hour and the students got good marks in their CATS[iii]”.

Another agreed, saying, “Parents of some students here think it’s fine to pay for their child to get through uni. They encourage them to plagiarise – they pay for it”. “It’s the stigma of failing [that leads to this],” offered a third.

An international student in another interview offered this in relation to the effects the costs of a university degree can have,

“It’s so expensive to fail. I worked for three and a half years to save for this course and my father used all his savings and my family is middle class. Even I would find it expensive to fail. These girls [who the interviewee reported were having graduates write their assignments for them] cannot afford to fail – it’s eight thousand dollars a subject, you know, and two thousand more every time you fail. So they cheat”.

Discussion

This study determined a wide range of possible reasons that students at one Australian university plagiarise. These reasons accord closely with reasons identified in studies undertaken elsewhere and discussed earlier in this paper.

Selections from this range could be variably used to account for both inadvertent and deliberate plagiarism and may have direct or indirect impact on the incidence of plagiarism at the university at which the study was conducted. Whatever the likely impact of these reasons, the possibility of the influence of each has been considered in the multi-layered approach that the university is currently undertaking to minimise and better manage plagiarism. For example, the approach adopted by the university incorporates educative strategies aimed at clarifying the meaning of plagiarism for students (addressing Reason 2) as well as preventative strategies aimed at dissuading those students who might deliberately choose to plagiarise from so choosing (addressing Reasons 5, 6 and 7). The way in which the university is currently implementing their holistic approach is outlined further in Devlin (2006).

The sample of students interviewed was self-selected and very small and the findings are essentially the perceptions of this small group of students about the possible reasons for the plagiarism-related behaviour of other students. The validity of formally generalising the perceptions of those interviewed to other Australian university students is therefore limited. However, the study provides important confirmation for some anecdotal evidence both about the breadth of reasons why students plagiarise and about the details of those reasons. Further research incorporating a methodology that allows for both a larger sample size and for self-report of plagiarism that does not threaten the validity of reports through prompting socially desirable responses is therefore recommended.

Of particular interest to Australian universities in the current climate of aggressive recruitment of international students might be whether the educational background, English language skills, independent academic skills and/or understanding of plagiarism

and how to avoid it are contributing factors to plagiarism among some cohorts of international students. Implications of the internationalisation of higher education for individuals’ teaching practices have been canvassed by Leask (2006), who proposes that academics should deliberately acknowledge the different discourses of plagiarism and strive to work more effectively with intercultural communication. Such a conversational approach could be begin as an extension of the style of investigation reported in this study, with appropriate ethical safeguards to protect the student-teacher relationship. At a whole-of-institution level, “an institutional framework that supports rather than alienates” international students is a key to addressing major issues underlying their plagiarism behaviour, according to Introna et al. (2003, p. 53).

With Australia’s increasing cost burden on all students, universities might also be interested in exploring whether or not the resulting expectations and pressures are contributing to the incidence of plagiarism. Two reasons emerge from this study that may especially reflect changing student perceptions of the nature and purpose of a university education alongside its growing privatisation—on one hand, high pressure to perform satisfactorily, generated specifically by the rising cost of a university degree; on the other hand, a consumer mentality towards getting a degree, arising from (some) students’ ability to purchase all the services they need in order to graduate. Again, it is possible for academics to work dialogically with students to tackle such issues head-on, for example through analysing the phenomenon of buying and selling assignments in conversation with students, as described in Ritter (2006).

Another fruitful area for research arising from this study is how students’ plagiarism practices and reasons might alter over time. We should not assume that an individual’s plagiarism behaviour remains static, even if it goes undetected. Focus-group or interview-style prompts of student self-reflection or peer reflection, such as those modeled in this study, might play a useful role in action-research interventions aimed at improving students’ behaviour over the span of a degree course, taking account of factors related to maturity, and progress towards graduate capabilities.

Finally, it is important that teaching practices and curriculum reforms aimed at enhancing students’ academic skills be better informed by contemporary ideas of information literacy and media literacy, so that the design of university learning experiences requires something more sophisticated of students than that they merely have to ‘find “stuff” fast’. Students’ genuine skills in using copy and paste technologies and in writing blogs, text messaging and social networking web environments need to be recognised and built upon in the reform of academic assessment. Sigthorsson (2005) asks us to consider that “Plagiarism, far from being some sort of Internet-borne plague on the house of education, is a symptom of an emerging mode of reading and writing as usage … The pedagogical challenge is to help students to participate in all of this.” (paras. 8-9)

**Conclusion**

Despite its limitations, the study provides one possible set of reasons for plagiarism and one qualitative methodology for further exploration in Australian universities, and
contributes to the growing literature on plagiarism in Australian higher education and the ways in which its incidence can be reduced. While the reasons are broad, ranging from the inadvertent through the insouciant to the intentional, their description in students’ own voices here may be helpful to other universities seeking to engage with the reasons for plagiarism as a basis for planning approaches to minimising or marginalising its occurrence - among students across the spectrum, from those who are unprepared, through those who have bad habits or poor teachers, to those with different values.

Sterngold (2004) points out that in Margaret Atwood’s recent novel Oryx and Crake, the central character decides to write his own university assignments. What is notable about this decision is that within the futuristic setting of the novel, doing so is an act of rebellion against the status quo where most students routinely plagiarise and most university lecturers appear not to care. Sterngold (2004) suggests that the growth and ease of (digital) plagiarism coupled with the reluctance of many academic staff to add to their already significant workloads by challenging inappropriate student scholarship practices may mean that a future status quo such as the one Atwood imagines may not be as unlikely as some may choose to believe.

It is hoped that the continually growing interest from educationalists, researchers and university management in minimising student plagiarism with approaches that take into account the range of reasons that students plagiarise will ensure that the future that Atwood describes will exist only in the realms of imagination and fiction.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to anonymous referees for pointing out published accounts of other Australasian research projects that were under way at the same time as this paper was first written – the final version of this paper has benefited from our reflection on these.

References


Appendix 1: Plagiarism Student Group Interview Schedule

Thank you for coming to this interview. My name is Marcia Devlin and I am employed by the Higher Education Division as a researcher. I am therefore not involved in teaching or assessing students in any School. I’m here today to gather your views on plagiarism and in particular your understandings of plagiarism; your views about the most common types of plagiarism in your course; your views on why students plagiarise and your views on how, given all of the above, you think plagiarism could and should be minimised at [the university].

I am not asking for personal accounts or details about whether or not you have plagiarised. I would, however, like to hear your views broadly on why students in your course or at [the university] generally, might plagiarise and given those reasons, how plagiarism might be minimised.

As you know, your participation is voluntary and your responses remain anonymous. No comments will be attributed to individuals and no record of your names will be kept. I’m going to tape the interview and take notes – this is to aid my recall of your responses. The tapes and notes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet while they are relevant for the project and then destroyed.

Alongside other data from around Australia and from staff at [the university], your responses will be used to prepare advice for [the university] staff and students on minimising plagiarism. The interview will take just under an hour and at end I will distribute $20 bookshop vouchers in appreciation of your time and input. Are there any questions?

Demographics

- Male _____ Female _____
- Levels: 1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____ Postgrad _____
- Courses:
  - International _____ Local _____
- Countries of origin:

Base Questions (follow up questions will depend on responses)

1. In your view, what is plagiarism? (Examples? Different from cheating?)
   Please read [the university]’s current definition of plagiarism on the sheet in front of you [distributed by interviewer].
   1a. What do you think of this definition?
   1b. Does this definition fit with your understanding?
   1c. Do you think there is anything missing? (Then prompt: group work, using other students’ work)
   1d. Is there anything here that you think should be taken out? (Then prompt: “with intent to deceive”?)
2. What types of plagiarism are you aware of in your course? (Prompt if necessary: copying/buying from students (past/current); copying from group members; Internet; other?)
3. How common do you think plagiarism is in your course? (How do you know?)
4. Why do you think students at [the university] plagiarise? (Is there a difference between intentional and unintentional?)
5. How do you think plagiarism could be better managed and/or minimised by the university? (Prompt if necessary: different assignments; less work; financial help; language help; penalties?)
6. What do you think are fair penalties for those who plagiarise? (Prompt if necessary: different for first/subsequent years or offences; different for intentional/unintentional?)
Appendix 2: Definition of plagiarism from the university at the time at which the study was conducted

Plagiarism is the action or practice of taking and using as one’s own, the thoughts, writings or other work of someone else with the intent to deceive. Plagiarism includes:

(a) the unauthorised use of the whole or part of a computer program written by another person

(b) the use of the whole or part of a written work including the use of paragraphs or sentences in essays or other assessable work which are neither enclosed in quotation marks nor otherwise properly acknowledged

(c) the paraphrasing of another’s work without attribution

(d) the use of musical composition, audio, visual, graphic and photographic models, without attribution

(e) the use of realia, that is objects, artefacts, costumes, models etc., used in teaching to relate classroom learning to the daily life of peoples studied, without attribution.
Table 1: Demographic information on student participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>Total stu</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Fem</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Loc</th>
<th>1st year</th>
<th>2nd year</th>
<th>3rd year</th>
<th>4th year</th>
<th>P/G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sci/Eng</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.T.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soc Sci</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not ID</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Bus = Business; Sci/Eng = Science and/or Engineering; Design = Design; I.T= Information Technology; Soc Sci = Social Sciences; Not ID = field of study not identified; Total stu = Total number of students; Fem = female students; Int = International student; Loc = local student; P/G = postgraduate student.

---

i ‘School’ here refers to what would usually be called a Faculty in an Australian university. The University has had a restructure since this study was conducted and Schools have now been collapsed into Faculties.

ii VCE is the Victorian Certificate of Education, the final year high school qualification in the state of Victoria, Australia

iii CATs are Common Assessment Tasks, undertaken by Year 12 (final year) students in Victorian schools for the purposes of summative assessment.

[6902 words]