Institutional Demands vs. Historical Baggage: What do Postgraduate Students Perceive of Plagiarism?

Chee-Ming Chan, Ismail Abdul Rahman, Rahmat Sanudin

Department of Engineering Technology, Faculty of Engineering Technology, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400, Parit Raja, Batu Bahat, Johor, Malaysia.
Email: chan@uthm.edu.my

Abstract
While plagiarism is wrily said to be common among undergraduates due mainly to ignorance, the occurrence of the academic dishonour among postgraduate students is perhaps not that unheard of either, though for reasons other than lack of awareness. Considering that plagiarism is a serious academic offence, it would logically be shunned by a mature, responsible postgraduate student in preparing written work for submission. As such, it is noteworthy that plagiarism cases among postgraduate students may be attributed to a combination of reasons at both personal and institutional levels. This paper describes an in-house study of postgraduate students' perception on plagiarism at the University, with emphasis on 2 clusters of factors, i.e. institutional demand and historical baggage. Responses from 315 postgraduate students at both master's and PhD level were analysed and discussed. From the institutional demand perspective of workload and grading exercise, it was found that excessive workload and time-consuming field trips with little impact on the assessment were considered silent factors pushing students towards the dishonest act, while seemingly unfair assessment by the lecturers was also thought to be a trigger to plagiarism. On the other hand, students do come with historical bagagge of prior experiences, and largely regarded reporting the published work of others (without citation) as a form of respect and recognition, and that creating a patchwork of others' efforts to be claimed as one's own is considered acceptable. All in all, the survey results shed light on the potentially negative pull towards plagiarism caused by intrinsic values of the students as well as the University's academic system in general, highlighting the need to realign the factors examined.
Keywords: Plagiarism, Integrity, Citation, Awareness, Postgraduate Writing

Introduction
Plagiarism is often claimed to be the most severe of academic misconduct in the realm of higher education. Students could have included others' work in his or her own writing without recording the necessary credits to the rightful owner or originator of the ideas. Whether it takes place in a conscious or unconscious manner, intentionally or unintentionally, the act would still be considered a serious offence and breach of academic propriety. Plagiarism does not only undermine one's integrity, it also affects the student's learning process as well as

that of their peers (McBabe *et al.,* 2002) while putting the validity of higher degrees in certain bad light (Ehrich *et al*., 2014). Hence it should be monitored where preventive or corrective measures were to be taken as when the need arises.

Debnath (2016) expostulated plagiarism of text to be most commonly encountered, and further categorized the academic theft in ascending order of severity as text-recycling or self-plagiarism, paraphrasing, literal copying and substantial copy-paste. This hints at the ease with which postgraduate students who write extensively for reports, assignments and thesis to falter on the slippery slope of plagiarism. The advent of the internet and proliferation of mobile devices have accelerated, if not complicated the matter (Boisvert and Irwin, 2006). A vast reservoir of information is not only available but readily accessible by a mere click of the mouse or tap of the finger (Wang, 2008). The ease of storage and subsequent retrieval from internet resources has also adversely encouraged the culture of copy-paste among students (Schiller, 2005). Such selective hoarding of information could encourage students to 'create' reviewed papers for publications in proceedings and journals (Long et al, 2009), despite the use of plagiarism detection tools and softwares as preventive measures (Sattler and Venn, 2015). Also, considering that bad habits, or worse, misconception of what is acceptable and what is not acquired at the university are routinely brought to the workplace of the graduates (Martin, 2009) reflecting a flawed character building process corrigible with appropriate measures by the University.

The present study was conducted to gauge the postgraduate students' perception on plagiarism from their own reckoning of institutional and personal aspects. The findings would lay the foundation for review and improvement of the University's learning environment as well as provision of assistance to the students against plagiarism, to nurture scholars of good ethics, morals and professionalism.

Contents of Survey
The survey circulated among the postgraduate students consisted of 2 clusters of 10 questions and 2 components each. The first category explores the students' views of the University's academic environment pertaining to plagiarism, and the second category derives from the students' inherent values in response to the matter termed as 'historical baggage'. The cluster of questions were designed to capture an opposing yet comprehensive review of the students' perception on the issue of plagiarism from within themselves and with relation to the learning environment they were immersed in, i.e. the University. Further details on development of the survey can be found in (Chan et al., 2014; Zaini, Masrek, Sani, & Anwar 2018). Students were simply asked to answer 'YES' or 'NO' to the questions. Breakdown of the survey clusters and components are as follows:

INSTITUTIONAL DEMAND	
Workload	
W1	There is so much to do that I have to "copy" others' work to pass of as my own.
W2	There are too many assignments to do for each course.
W3	The due dates for the assignments are always overlapping.
W4	Field work and site visit should be counted as part of the coursework assessment as they take up much time.
W5	The scope of each course is too wide and demanding for me to cope.
Grading System	
G1	I have to copy-and-paste to make good reports / assignments.
G2	My lecturer gives good marks for poor work too.
G3	There is not much difference between the marks given to good and poor work.
G4	As long as the report is long and wordy, I will get good marks for it.
G5	My lecturer does not have time to read through all the reports anyway.
HISTORICAL BAGGAGE	
Cultural Influence	
C1	I see reporting others' work as a form of respect and recognition.
C2	It is disrespectful to question / criticize the work of others.
C3	I have never heard of 'plagiarism' before my graduate study at UTHM.
C4	Referencing and citations are new ideas to me.
C5	I do not understand why I need to cite others' work.
Educational Background	
E1	I am used to memorizing facts to pass examinations.
E2	I search and transfer information from various sources (e.g. internet, books, journals, etc.) to my own work for good grades, with minimum alterations.
E3	I am not taught to read and think carefully before transferring others' work into mine.
E4	It is acceptable to combine information from several sources to form my own data.
E5	My previous institution of learning is less strict about plagiarism.

The Survey: Results and Discussions

Following are the analysis and discourse on the survey results per component. The responses were categorized as 'YES' or 'NO' as decided by the 315 respondents, and presented in pie charts for ease of comparison.

Cluster #1: Institutional Demands

Workload

Note that analysis for this sub-component is more attuned to the by coursework students who were required to attend regular classes with formative and summative assessments per semester. From Figure 1, it seems apparent that the students found the workload at postgraduate level to be rather overwhelming, with approximately a quarter of the respondents considered field trips to be burdensome with excessive semester-long assignments from the course taken, followed by almost 20% felt overloaded with the number of activities and tasks assigned. These were supported by affirmation in terms of the

overlapping due dates of submission as well as the wide scope of research necessary to complete the assignments. In addition, looking at the very low 'NO's for W4, programs with numerous field trips as part of the course contents should better incorporate appropriate assessment to make the time-consuming excursions rewarding not just in terms of exposure, but marks and grades as well. Note too that students may have the tendency to plagiarize less for tasks with higher marks assigned, and vice versa (Gomez et al., 2013), a tell-tale sign of their awareness of the consequences of the academic misconduct.

Responses in the 'workload' component can be summed up as an indicator of work overload driving students towards the inadvertent copy-paste practices. While not condoning the academic misconduct, no matter how small scale it may seem, it surely raises the concern of "too much teaching but too little learning" going on in the University in postgraduate taught courses program. Taking into account the fact that these master's by coursework programs were meant to advance the students' knowledge and cognitive skills in the respective areas of studies, turning to plagiarism to make the grades clearly is counter-productive, if not destructive for the students' learning.

Figure 1. Summary of responses on the factor of 'workload'

Grading System
This sub-component is also more relevant to the students enrolled in coursework programs, where the responses are summarized in Figure 2. Clearly the 'YES' and 'NO' responses were fairly balanced for this part of the survey. The charts show approximately 20% of the respondents considered the pressure of achieving good grades made them plagiarize intentionally, and that more worryingly, their perception of how the assessment is made cause them to be reckless in this matter. 22% did not think that a well written work would necessarily be given better marks, and that this could be associated with lecturers rushing through the marking resulting in unfair assessment. Besides, 20% of the students reckoned assignments were assessed by the amount of information included in the writing, i.e. the more words there were and the more pages were bound together, the better chances of them being given high marks. Moreover students may be disheartened by peers who got away with plagiarism because of the lack of monitoring by lecturers (Sisti, 2007; Pernamasari, 2018).
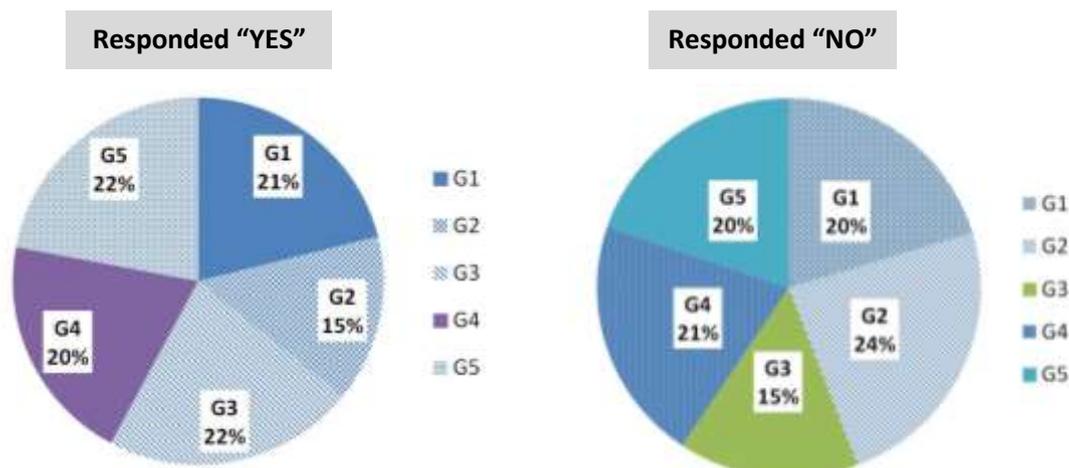
Figure 2: Summary of responses on the factor of 'grading system'.

These notions, albeit wrong and misled, do raise the concern of the rather negative regard students seemed to hold for some lecturers. It is suggestive of a learning environment driven primarily by marks and grades but not the thirst for knowledge. The responses are also indicative of a certain lack of professionalism among the academic staff in performing their duties, causing the students to make such assumptions of counter-productive nature. Nonetheless it is perhaps a little heartening to learn that only 15% respondents made the serious presumption that poorly written work were judged the same as the deserving ones. This could be taken as a sign that in general the academic staff were dedicated in the delivery of lessons and assessment instead of passing off bad work as good.

Cluster #2: Historical Baggage
Cultural Influence
This part of the survey focused on the students' pre-possessed views and values, with cultural influence being related with the respective student's cultural background and beliefs. In corroboration with reports of cross-cultural studies by Egan (2008), Asian students came across as being more receptive and accommodative of plagiarism, though it may be due to genuine lack of understanding of the matter. In Figure 3, it can be observed that about a third of the students consider reference to others' work as a form of recognition and honour, though not necessarily to be appropriately cited and recognized in their writing. About 20% each found it a little disconcerting to criticize others' work, which could lead to mild or shallow reviews in their writing; and claimed to be ignorant of the necessity to include proper citations in their own writing when referring to the work of others. Perhaps related to the ignorance of making proper citations in academic writing (C4), 16% respondents were unsure on the importance of making such recognitions in their writing. Also of interest is the 12% who found plagiarism as an academic misconduct to be alien to them until now.

Based on the responses discussed above, it would seem that a number of students were either unaware of the need to make proper citations, where plagiarism was something novel to them until their enrolment in the postgraduate programs, or that they simply could not grasp the need to make such references in a legit manner (C3, C4 and C5). However, whether or not ignorance should be considered a valid excuse for committing the academic theft is debatable, especially in this era of information overloading and hyper connectivity within the academia. On the other hand, the students' reluctance to make critical remarks on the work

cited could be attributed to their upbringing and cultural background of excessive courtesy, or more worryingly due to the under-developed critical thinking and analytical skills to make incisive reviews of others work with relevance to their own.
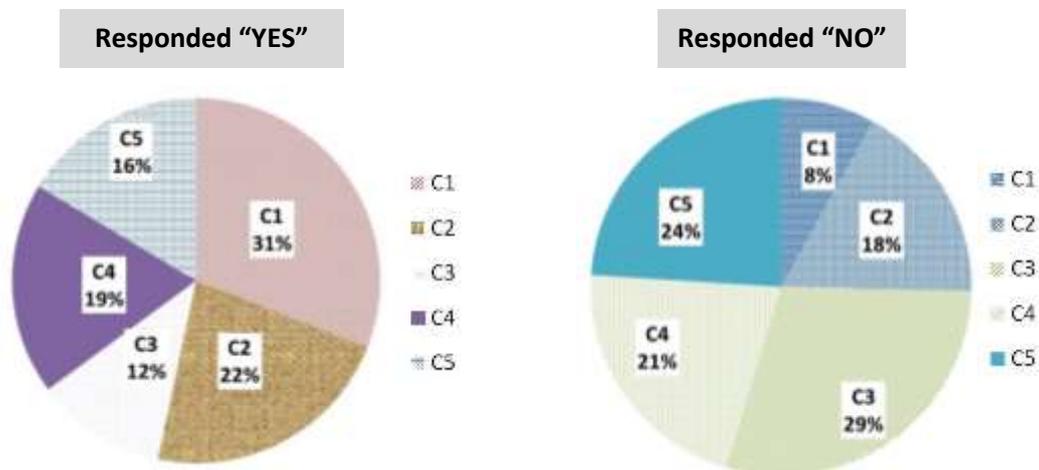

Figure 3: Summary of responses on the factor of 'cultural influence'.

Educational Background

Educational background refers mainly to the undergraduate level education undergone by the students prior to enrolment in the postgraduate programs at the University. Almost one third of the respondents (28%) considered the assembly of information from several sources an acceptable creative exercise, while almost a quarter of them (24%) admitted to the adoption of rote learning for passing examinations (Figure 4). Interestingly, the latter reflects the traditional teaching and learning approach commonly found in Asian institutions of learning, even at tertiary level. Corresponding to the former, 19% of the students owned up to the habit of copy-paste from different references in their written work (E2), suggesting a naïve or lackadaisical attitude towards academic propriety where written intellectual ownership is concerned. In addition, a small number of the respondents attributed their nonchalant outlook on plagiarism to the lack of exposure (E3, 16%), as well as the less stringent monitoring of such academic misconduct in their previous respective places of learning (E5, 13%).

The responses presented above hint at the significant prior understanding and notion of plagiarism have on the students' preconceived idea of what constitute plagiarism. Nonetheless, inadequate command of the language (usually English) and other related skills for learning effectively, such as conducting a literature review, could cause students to plagiarize too (Devlin and Gray, 2007; Moissidou, (2013). It may not seem wrong or even mildly unethical to reconstruct randomly acquired bits of information derived from others' hard work into a coherent composition of their own, without assigning proper attributions and citations. In other words the irresponsible practice was silently condone to the extent that it was never considered an inappropriate thing to do among these students. Arguably a certain amount of effort is required to search, review and reorganize the information gathered. Nevertheless that does not justify claiming the origin of the idea to be one's own.
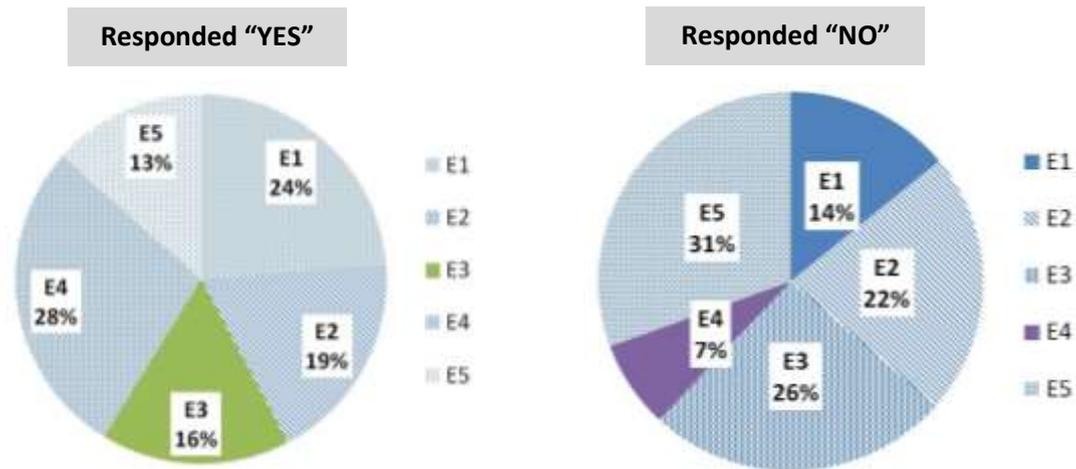
Figure 4: Summary of responses on the factor of 'educational background'.

Comparison between Factors

Distribution of the students' responses are summarized in Figure 5. Note that for every factor examined, the further apart the filled and blank circles are, the more balanced the percentage of responses were for the particular component. Taking 10% as the threshold to identify limits of the extreme ends of the spectrum, the lower limit is ≤5% and the upper limit is ≥20% in terms of direct difference between the numbers of 'YES' and 'NO'. Factors W2, G1, G4, G5, C4 and E2 were found to be in the range of the lower limit, i.e. these were the factors which elicited almost equal numbers of affirmation and responses on the contrary. A review of the factors revealed the claim that heavy postgraduate workload (W2) inadvertently pushes students towards sloppy copy-paste practices in preparing written reports (G1, G4 and G5) to be unsubstantiated, as the ratio of students who agreed and disagreed were about 50:50. On the other hand, justifying the practice of copy-paste with ignorance (C4 and E2) was also not necessarily the case when plagiarism is committed, as evidenced by the similarly distributed responses.
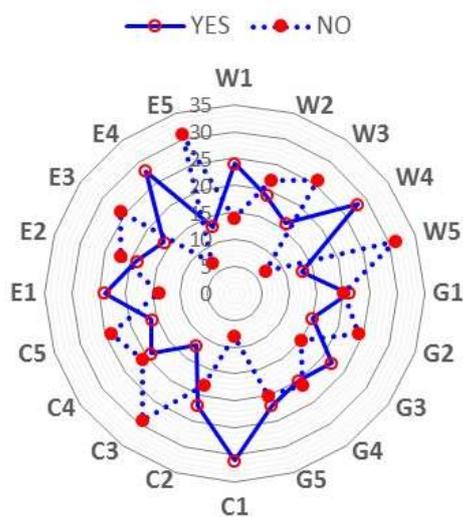

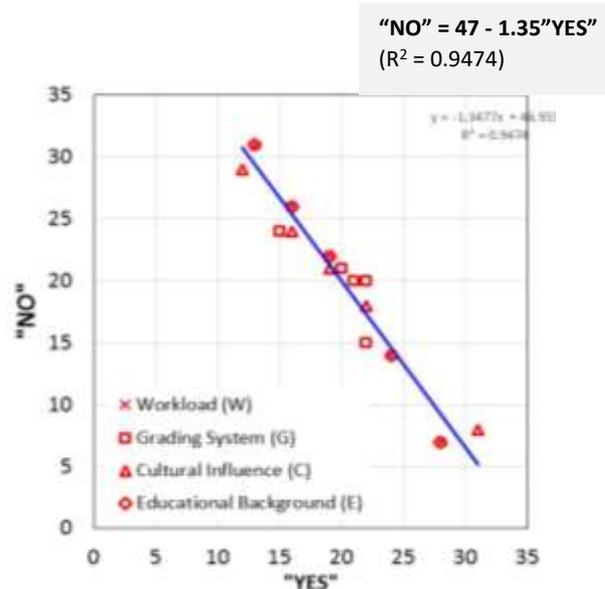Figure 5: Distribution of 'YES' and 'NO' for all factors.

Figure 6: Correlation between 'YES' and 'NO' in terms of frequency of responses.

Also referring to Figure 5, factors W4, C1 and E4 are captured in the upper limit range, all with affirmation leading in numbers. Wanting fieldwork to be incorporated in the assessment (W4) is most probably an expected reaction from students in an attempt to gather more marks in the formative assessment of their studies. Nonetheless there appears to be a rather alarming confusion between reporting others' work as a form of respect (C1) and creating a mix-and-match piece of writing from several sources to be claimed as one's own (E4). It would seem as if the respondents considered recognition to have been rendered when the work is being referred to, without necessarily making clear ownership of the information reported.

In Figure 6, the frequency of positive and negative responses are plotted against each other with a linear trend line plotted for the data. Despite the slight scatter, the 'NO'-'YES' plot shows a consistent 75% probability of a positive response for every negative answer given in the survey. The ratio of 'YES'/'NO' = 0.75 indicates a scenario where the postgraduate students were aware of the fact it is unethical and wrong to engage in such activities, though they may not be fully conscious of the implications and impact on their learning development.

Conclusions

The study gave an interesting overview of the postgraduate students' perception on the issue of plagiarism from both the perspectives of the learning environment of the University as well as personal values based on past experiences. In the 'institutional demand' cluster, students largely considered the workload drove them to inadvertently copy-paste to make the grades, while the grading exercise was perceived to be inadequately fair in some instances. From the 'historical baggage' aspect, cultural background seemed to steer some students away from criticizing the work of others, and perhaps of more concern is the students' uncertainty of what is considered plagiarism. The students' past education experiences also had a strong influence on their perception of what constitute plagiarism, to the extent of blurring the line between copy-paste and copy-reorganized-paste, both of which make no reference to the origin of the source. A distribution analysis of the responses gave insights to the correlation between the factors examined, such as the students' apparent misconstrued idea of recognition in referencing compared to actual citations. Also, derivation of the ratio of positive : negative responses = 75:35 suggests the students' awareness of the risk for them to slip into the unethical act of plagiarism. All in all the study shed light on the postgraduate students' perception of plagiarism with respect to institutional conditioning and their personal preconceptions: the 2 clusters which do not always complement each other to prevent the occurrence of the academic dishonour. In today's age of abundant internet-based knowledge accruement and advanced accessibility channels, both legit and not, the academia is indeed hard push for the cultivation of greater sense of honesty, credibility and accountability among scholars to sidestep the very tempting open trap of plagiarism. The academic honour can only come from within the student to uphold high level of academic integrity, irrespective of the pulling or pushing factors leading to the the dishonest act.

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Corresponding Author
Chee-Ming Chan, Department of Engineering Technology, Faculty of Engineering
Technology, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400, Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor,
Malaysia. (Phone: 6019-775-2040; Email: chan@uthm.edu.my).

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