

Misconceptions about plagiarism in South Asian Higher Education

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So, my talk today is about misconceptions about plagiarism in South Asian higher education, and I want to tell you about a study that I conducted in South Asia on that.

So first of all, we should share a definition of plagiarism so that we all know what we're talking about. So I'm going to share a couple of definitions of plagiarism and then I'll tell you about why we decided to investigate this topic and how we did that study. And then I'll talk about the findings.

And for the findings, I'm going to focus on three main misconceptions that, uh, we found in this study. Okay, so let's think about definitions of plagiarism. I'm going to share two definitions with you, and I'm sure these will be broadly familiar to you. So this first one comes from the Cambridge English Dictionary, and the second one from Jude Carol, um, who's written extensively on plagiarism. And what I want to highlight about these two definitions is that it's not just about copying words. In the first definition, you can see that it refers to a person's ideas. So even if we don't copy paste words, we can't use someone's ideas.

Without acknowledging that, uh, and acknowledging the source. Otherwise, that would be considered plagiarism. And in the second definition, I think what's important is that Jude Carroll highlights

this idea of plagiarism being potentially intentional or unintentional. This is important when it comes to our students because, in my experience, most students don't intend to cheat. They do it because they're not fully informed about what plagiarism really means, or because they misunderstand something about the referencing process. So you may think that these definitions of plagiarism are globally accepted norms, and this is where the idea of, uh, global stability comes in.

But in fact, research tells us that the way plagiarism is understood varies around the world. And that's probably because the way it's taught varies around the world in even in, uh, Anglophone countries, like in the US or in the UK we have to teach our students, I mean, native speakers, we have to teach them about that because otherwise, they don't know.

Um, referencing and plagiarism is kind of that, those systems are unique to higher education, and if students are new to higher education, they probably don't know about that. So we have to teach them. And why in South Asia? Well, as you know, South Asia has a, a big chunk of the world's population. A lot of young people who would like to go and study in higher education and in most South Asian countries, there's a policy of internationalization. In other words, they would like their academics and their

students to be globally mobile and to be able to go and study overseas. If that's going to happen, then um, the students have to know that what they're doing is in line with a globally accepted. Norm, if they're doing some kind of practices, which might be considered plagiarism here in s Lanka and then they go and study in Australia or the UK, they may find that, you know, those things are not considered acceptable and then they are at a disadvantage. So it's important that we are all, um, kind of. Using the same globally accepted norms and supporting our students to follow those norms. Okay, so let me tell you about the study that we did. Our study had two main research questions. The first of these was, uh, to find out what our students and staffs' conceptual understandings of plagiarism. So we were not looking at students' work and trying to see if they've plagiarized. We don't know about this. What we wanted to find out was how well do they understand this concept of plagiarism and how to avoid it. And then secondly, we also wanted to know if there were policies on plagiarism, and if so, how well were these understood.

We collected the data from four countries in South Asia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. And from those four countries, we collected data from 14 universities. We did this study in 2019 and um, we collected the data from three stakeholder groups. Those were English language teachers, about 108 of them from subject lecturers who are teaching their own subject, For instance, history through the medium of English.

And then we also collected data from about 1500 students. And we collected the data via, um, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. We had an online questionnaire. We distributed the link to that, and then we also asked research assistants to print those questionnaires and give them out in hard copy to their students. So we got a lot of questionnaires that way, and then we also did interviews and focus groups in order to ask for more information. We did classroom observations and we analyzed institutional policies on plagiarism. So let me, um, before I go on, just mention that I didn't do this study by myself. I did that with my colleague, Dr. Bimal Indrarathne, who is from Sri Lanka, but she's based in the UK at the University of York. We were also assisted, um, in this research by five research assistants from the four countries and the research was supported by a grant from the British Council.

So what did we find in this study? Well, let me start with the policy aspect of, of this study. So in the questionnaire, we asked staff, um, how seriously is plagiarism taken in your institution? And as you can see, most staff believed that it was taken. Very or fairly seriously. This was a little bit lower actually, in Sri Lanka.

When we looked at Sri Lanka by itself, it was, um, about 30 or 40% of staff said that it was not taken very seriously. So, um, some disagreement about that and this kind of lack of clarity was also seen in the interviews. So here's a quote from an English teacher in Sri Lanka.

So she said that, you know, teachers are not very sure about there being a university wide policy. They tend to have their own rules or maybe at faculty level. And this is also something we noticed in the interviews when we asked. Lecturers, how do you deal with plagiarism? Um, what's the policy on that?

They tended to say things like, I check by going on to Google, or I don't penalize them. I try to help them. I, so they, they talked about their own individual approach, like they're making their own rules about how to deal with that rather than following an institutional policy in most cases. And when we searched on the public websites, we found that only five out of the 14 universities had a policy on their website.

Um, it may be of course that they had a policy that wasn't on the public website. Okay. Okay, so let's look at students' understanding of plagiarism. In the questionnaire, we ask students, do you know the term plagiarism? And do you know what that means? So more than 75% of students told us in the questionnaire that they know clearly what that means.

So they're fairly confident in their understanding. We were conscious that they might not know the term plagiarism. So we asked them in a different way. We asked them, you know if you use reading material in your writing, do you have to give the author's name or date? And as you can see, 91% of the students said, Yes, it's important to give the author's name and date.

So that's quite a high level of knowledge, um, that the students believe they. However, um, As I told you, we also then did interviews with the students and we could ask for more detail. We could tell them to explain more about that, and this is where we found that there was quite a big gap between what they believed they understood and what they actually understood about plagiarism.

So let's look at three of the main misconceptions that we noticed in the data. So one was that they tended to equate plagiarism with copy pasting. In other words, it's about the words, right? So they believe that if you copy the words maybe from the internet in particular, that is plagiarism. But this then entails that if you don't copy the words, and if you paraphrase, then that would not be plagiarism.

So if we look at a brief example now this, um, a short piece of text, you don't need to read it in detail. This is a piece of text, uh, screenshot from an article by Prof. Ananda. So you may recognize Prof. Ananda, you may recognize your own, um, article. So if a student wanted to avoid plagiarism, they might paraphrase, um, that text. So you can see where they've kind of changed the wording, but of course, this puts the emphasis on the words, not the ideas. And if they did this with no citation, this would be considered plagiarism, even though they've changed the words. They're still copying the ideas and not giving any citations. So this was one big misconception. The second misconception that students had was that kind of the opposite, was that copy would

be okay as long as you give a citation. So here's that quotation from a student in Nepal. So you can see that this student actually has quite a high level of, of knowledge already, right? They, they're familiar with APA. They've heard of that. They know that referencing system. They know that they can't copy and they know that they have to cite. However, this last sentence, unfortunately, shows that they don't really understand. So we can copy and paste, but we must do citations. So in this case, using the same extract from Prof. Ananda. This student may use the same words, just copy the words. Okay, so here we have exactly the same words, but a citation is given. And this student may believe that because they've given a citation, this is okay.

But of course, this is plagiarism, right? The only way that you can copy the words, even if you give a citation, is if you mark it as a quotation. There are no quotation marks here. This student didn't talk about the quotation. So, um, it seems that that is a risk for the student that they may be copying text and thinking that that's okay. And then the third and possibly most puzzling misconception was that in-text citation is not needed. It's just a reference list at the end that you need. So here's an extract from a focus group in Sri Lanka. So again, you can see that the students' kind of, they know, um, that they have to give some kind of acknowledgment of the sources. If they use material from the internet, they will give the author's name at the end. But we ask them, you know, do you also give something in the text itself? And they say, No, not really, only if we

quote. Now, as you know, this is not a rule in any referencing system. You have to give In text citation and the reference list at the end. And here's another example from another focus group.

So here we see that the students are telling us what the teachers tell them. Most of the teachers tell them just to do the references at the end. Um, and. That, that the references are not needed in the text. But of course, this would be considered plagiarism. If they went to the UK this would be a big problem um, or the US for that matter. Any Anglophone country or any country where, where they're kind of tough and they take that seriously, would pick that up as plagiarized. And what we don't really know, um, is what's happened here. We don't know if the teacher was trying to make things simpler for the students by just asking them to do half of the citations, um, and the reference list at the end, or if the teacher also believed that the citation was not needed in the text. So, it's possible that, the teacher also didn't really understand, um, where the citation was needed. So how did this happen? How is it possible that the students can, can have these misconceptions?

And yet they're not aware that they have these misconceptions. They believe that their knowledge about plagiarism is good. We asked lecturers, "do you teach about plagiarism and how do you do that?" and this is what they told us.

We also ask the students, do your lecturers teach you about plagiarism? And you can see that they say no. And the emphasis here seems to be on telling, right? So it's

like the subject lecturer, we tell them to avoid that. Um, but. Maybe telling them is not enough. Right? It's not really that straightforward. It's not that you can't copy, you also can't paraphrase unless you give in text citations. Um, And the subject lecture in Bangladesh says, We give, you know, some kind of awareness, but not the technicalities. But you probably would agree that the technicalities are not really that straightforward. Right? It's a bit complicated. And if you're, you know, if you're 20 years old and you're doing this for the first time, it's. Sure that you're gonna make some mistakes with that. So probably pointing them to a referencing guide and asking them to follow it or warning them not to copy is not enough. So let's, uh, summarize before I finish. So overall there was widespread agreement. Across the staff and the students that understanding and avoiding plagiarism is important.

Most of the students had heard of that. Most of them knew it wasn't acceptable. Um, and the staff also agreed it was important for the students to know that. However, there was a lack of clarity on institutional policies. In some cases, it seemed that institutional policies were not there, they didn't exist, or if they were there, lecturers were not really aware of them. And students also, we also asked students about that and they were not aware, uh, of any clear policy. It seems like some lecturers do this and some lecturers do something different. Students had a limited understanding of what really counts as plagiarism, but they weren't

aware of the limitations of their own knowledge, and this is, I think, you know where the problem really lies.

If they think they understand it, but they don't, then they could easily run into problems, particularly if they want to go and study in angle of phone contexts. And this is probably because there is a lack of teaching and probably partly because there was a lack of teaching about plagiarism. So it seems that staff are just telling students, um, don't copy or don't plagiarize.

Um, and maybe with a moral element to that, but this is not enough. We need to help our students to raise awareness of examples by looking at examples of good or not so good. Um, referencing looking at mistakes, asking the students to correct the mistakes, doing some classroom activities and some formative tasks that would help the students, um, to get to grips with the complexities of that and to learn how to do it correctly.

Okay, so I am going to stop there. This research has been published in the Journal of Higher Education Research and Development. Um, an article about it was also written in the Times Higher Education. If you would like copies of those articles, we would be very happy to send them to you.

You are very welcome to contact me. Um, you can Google me if you don't have time to write down this address and you'll find me, um, online. Thank you very much.