

Exploring University Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism: A Focus Group Study

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Abstract

Plagiarism is a matter of great concern to those who teach in higher education. The increase in technology has resulted in plagiarism becoming a source of anxiety for many students. Universities are continually being called upon to devote more time and resources to combating plagiarism. However, what of their understanding of students' attitudes towards and understandings of plagiarism? It is critical to understand student perceptions towards plagiarism to develop approaches to combat plagiarism. This paper reports on a focus group study that generated qualitative data on students' perceptions of plagiarism. Informal group discussions were held with first-year students to show how plagiarism appears from the undergraduate student's perspective. An interview schedule was developed to provide an overall direction for the discussion. The schedule followed a semi-structured, open-ended format to enable participants to set their agenda. The analysis revealed three themes of perceptions of plagiarism: lack of understanding of plagiarism, assumptions about plagiarism, and negative attitudes towards assigned tasks. This paper argues that there is merit in understanding students' perspectives regarding plagiarism to develop successful strategies to promote academic integrity and prevent plagiarism. The paper concludes with a recommendation that lecturers at tertiary institutions need to explicitly teach plagiarism, how to avoid it, and referencing.

Keywords: plagiarism, reference, focus group, undergraduate students

Introduction

Plagiarism is a global challenge in most academic institutions (Khoza & Mpungose, 2017; Mohamed, Abdul Samat, Abd Aziz, Mohd Noor & Ismail, 2018; Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). It is no secret that plagiarism has become a widespread practice among university students (Curtis & Vardanega, 2016; Nelson, James, Miles, Morrell & Sledge, 2017). For decades, students have been taking ideas and work from others and passing it off as their own. Park (2003) and Smart and Gaston (2019) state that mounting evidence proves that student plagiarism has become increasingly common

worldwide. Tertiary institutions worldwide aim to produce highly skilled and competent graduates and honest and ethical professionals (Ramzan et al., 2012). Yet, today more students are engaging in the act of taking the work of others without acknowledgment. Gullifer and Tyson (2010, p. 463) state, “universities need to devote increasing time and resources to combating plagiarism”. One way of addressing this problem is by understanding the reasons why students plagiarise.

Gullifer and Tyson (2010) state that from a psychological perspective, modifying someone’s behaviour or attitude is essential to gain a good understanding of that person’s perception of the problem. The purpose of this study was to explore university students’ perceptions of plagiarism. Learners at school are generally unaware of plagiarism’s challenges (Chu, Hu, & Ng, 2020). Secondary school learners have been known to use copy-paste (Nwosu & Chukwuere, 2020). Schools are not generally tasked with teaching students about plagiarism. There is a difference in the “literacy and epistemological understanding” (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 448) between schools and universities. Schools are characterised by “heavy reliance on textbooks” and “rote learning” (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 448). Schools do not make knowledge; universities do. The ethos of the level of education informs and infuses the writing, reading, and knowledge practices. Plagiarism is less of an issue in schools because they do not require students to use existing knowledge to overtly and clearly create their own new knowledge, expressed as different kinds of arguments. However, universities do, so acknowledging others’ work to build knowledge and establish your credible claims is vital.

Upon their arrival at university, students realise that higher education institutions take plagiarism rather seriously. In a study conducted by Khoza (2015), it was found that higher education institutions’ students find it easier to plagiarise if they were not trained to avoid plagiarism at the high school level. Given this, I feel higher education institutions must learn more about their students’ perceptions of plagiarism. This study may help universities develop strategies to promote academic integrity and reduce plagiarism.

In this paper, I present the findings from a focus group discussion on university students’ perceptions of plagiarism. In this study, the critical question is *what are the university students’ perceptions of plagiarism?* The paper is divided into four parts. The first part presents a review of the literature on plagiarism. In this part, I discuss the nature and purpose of plagiarism, plagiarism is a common problem, and how universities deal with plagiarism. I include a discussion of some of the pertinent studies that have been conducted on plagiarism in higher institutions of education. In the second part, I discuss briefly the methodology adopted in the generation of the data. Part three presents a discussion of the data in the form of questions (why do students’ plagiarise, how serious is plagiarism and how easy is it to be caught plagiarising) with the participants’ verbatim responses. The last part of the paper concludes with a recommendation that students at schools and tertiary institutions need to be taught explicitly what plagiarism is, how to avoid it, and referencing.

Plagiarism in higher education

The nature and purpose of plagiarism

There is no one agreed-upon definition of plagiarism (Fishman, 2009; Hansen, Stith & Tisdell, 2011). Bouville (2008) maintains that plagiarism has a general meaning of appropriating the words and ideas of others. Fish & Hura (2013, p. 35) agree when they state that there is a common element across many definitions that plagiarism is “the act of using another author’s work without citation, thus portraying it as one’s work”. The intentionality of the act of plagiarism also needs to be considered in defining plagiarism. Fish and Hura (2013, p. 37) assert that the viewpoint of unintentional plagiarism “often raises the question of whether students should be penalised when they are unaware they have plagiarised”. However, Yeo (2007) asserts that regardless of the intention, unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism. For this study, plagiarism will be defined as “passing off someone else’s work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your benefit” (Carroll, 2007).

Plagiarism as a common problem

There are several reasons as to what causes students to plagiarise. Such reasons include failure to understand tasks, attempts to deceive markers (Wilkinson, 2009), the pressure to excel in their studies, the belief that they cannot get caught, and poor time management (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010), laziness (Ismail, 2018; Magubane, 2018) and increased workload (Karasalides & Emvalotis, 2019; Chan, Rahman, & Sanudin 2020). Some scholars maintain that the students who cheat the most are those who party a lot and have active social lives (Straw, 2002; Ferro & Martins, 2016).

Aside from poor time management skills, unintentional plagiarism is another cause of student plagiarism (Joob & Wiwanitkit 2018; Chrysler-Fox & Thomas 2017). Unintentional plagiarism is a debatable issue that results from misunderstanding or confusion rather than a deliberate intention to plagiarise (Bramford & Sergiou, 2005; Das, 2018). Clough (2000) and Selemani, Chawinga, and Dube (2018) assert that students plagiarise unintentionally because they are not aware of how sources should be used within their work. Gullifer and Tyson (2010) found that students at an Australian university were confused about what plagiarism encompassed. These points to the issue of teaching and learning. Hendricks and Quinn (2000) caution that referencing should not be seen only as a technical skill. They assert that referencing goes beyond the conventions of acknowledging the sources. Students who do not know what plagiarism is or how to avoid it are perhaps not taught about referencing in a meaningful way related to knowledge-making as an act. Most lecturers tell students that plagiarism is cheating, and they will be punished. Very few lecturers explain why it is such a problem or how to avoid it in practical and disciplinary ways.

How universities deal with the problem

According to Baruchson-Arbib and Yaari (2004), there are four types of academic plagiarism. The first type involves submitting work written by another student. The second involves ‘patch-writing’, where one takes sentences from a source and mixes

them with their own words without crediting the source. The third is neglecting to cite the citation and, fourthly, is failing to use quotation marks. University students do not understand that plagiarism constitutes all of these actions (Baruchson-Arbib & Yaari, 2004). For instance, in a study conducted by Dawson and Overfield (2006), it was discovered that students knew that plagiarism was wrong but was not sure what it constituted. They also found that students desired knowledge and good referencing practice to avoid plagiarising. However, a note must be made that students cannot divine from the ether to get this knowledge. The role of the lecturer in providing this knowledge is crucial. Hendriks and Quinn (2000) advocate for the explicit teaching of referencing as part of the overall curriculum. To this end, Vardi (2012) suggests that referencing may be taught from a plagiarism perspective or through a critical writing approach. In the plagiarism perspective, the emphasis is on avoiding plagiarism and its resultant penalties (Vardi, 2012). The preferred approach is the critical writing approach since “to write critically, students need to engage deeply with and respond to a range of sources to express their own thinking much like the expert writers do” (Vardi, 2012, p. 923).

Power (2009) discovered that students had a good understanding of what plagiarism is. However, they experienced confusion between paraphrasing, quoting, and citing. Mishra and Gautam (2017) state that there will always be confusion between plagiarism and paraphrasing. They discovered that some students believed that copying from various sources and combining constitutes ‘research’ rather than plagiarism. Students experience a lot of confusion and misunderstandings about what it constitutes, resulting in unintentional plagiarism (Howard, 2016). These cases show us that students have a basic understanding of plagiarism; however, there is also a lack of knowledge of the different acts that are also regarded as plagiarism.

The university’s treatment of plagiarism cases is also covered in the literature on plagiarism (Cahyono, 2016; Carroll, 2016; Thomas, (2017) and Chrysler-Fox & Thomas, 2017). According to Clough (2002), plagiarism is treated severely in universities. Universities have different ways of dealing with plagiarism. Clough (2002) explains that in some universities, the penalty for plagiarising is being given a mark of zero for the assignment. Whereas in other universities, the penalties range from withholding the student’s degree to student expulsion.

Students’ perceptions of plagiarism

Fish and Hura (2013), Smith (2017), and Moss, White, and Lee (2018) inform us that the frequency of student plagiarism occurrence is overestimated in universities by students and faculty. In a study conducted by Fish and Hura (2013) at a large urban college, they found that most students admitted that they had never committed plagiarism; however, the students believed that the other students committed plagiarism frequently. Fish and Hura (2013) further argue that it can be problematic as students who overestimate the frequency of plagiarism by other students may see plagiarism as a norm and choose to plagiarise. This is also confirmed by Ismail (2018, p. 200) that if students estimate the incidence of plagiarism among their peers to be

relatively high, they may consider plagiarising to be the norm and, therefore, less severe an offense. This incorrect perception of plagiarism can increase student plagiarism, as students will believe that it is acceptable to plagiarise because other students have. Therefore, students should be taught how widespread plagiarism is in their universities to eradicate the over-exaggeration of student plagiarism and avoid such confusion.

Yeo (2007) argues that students, in general, do not regard plagiarism as serious, especially when compared to other acts. Yeo (2007) states that some students do not consider falsifying bibliographies and submitting work done by someone else as serious cheating. Similarly, Gullifer and Tyson (2010, p. 474) found that students believed that unless the plagiarist copied work “wholesale”, the “penalties associated with plagiarism were perceived to be draconian, while the act of plagiarism itself is not perceived as serious relative to other deviant acts”. Although students acknowledge that there are serious consequences to plagiarising, they do not think it is as serious as other things such as crime.

Across the literature, many scholars have found that students have different perceptions about the chances of being caught (Molnar & Kletke, 2012; Brimble, 2016). According to Lathrop and Foss (2000), students plagiarised because there was only a 10% chance of students being caught. Park (2003) argues that students believe that there are more ‘pro’s’ than ‘cons’ to plagiarising work because there is hardly a chance of getting caught. However, in contrast to the above, Gullifer and Tyson (2010) reported that in their study, students believed that there is a 100% chance of being caught. This, however, was based on various rumours, such as lecturers supposedly knowing the sources very well. They argue that rumours of such influence students’ perceptions into believing that they can easily be caught.

Methodology

An interpretive paradigm guided this study. This paradigm emphasises an individual's ability to construct meanings of reality (Mack, 2010) and aims to understand these meanings, which influences one’s behaviour. It allows the researcher to look at the world through the participants' perceptions and experiences and explore their world by interpreting the understanding of individuals (Thanh and Thanh, 2015) and how they make sense of their social contexts. The interpretive paradigm was chosen for this study to understand how university students perceive plagiarism at a tertiary institution in KwaZulu-Natal.

The study adopted a qualitative approach. This is because qualitative research involves viewing and gaining insight into a particular world built by individuals' perceptions and beliefs. In qualitative research, researchers view their participants in their natural settings to make sense of the phenomenon in terms of the meanings the individuals have (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Myers (2013) asserts that the benefit of qualitative research is that it helps the researcher to view and understand the social and cultural context where decisions and actions take place. This study used a qualitative approach to discover students’ perceptions of plagiarism to reveal the

meanings of what students believe about plagiarism and why they choose to plagiarise.

This was an exploratory, qualitative study interested in understanding and interpreting students' perceptions of plagiarism. I used focus group interviews with a sampled group of students to generate data to this end. This study was a focus group study that interviewed a select group of undergraduate students at a tertiary institution in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants involved in this study were first-year Bachelor of Education students. There are a few reasons for targeting first-year students. Firstly, these students were already exposed to academic writing in a compulsory foundation of education module. Secondly, university students in the final year of study are less likely to plagiarise (Sims, 1995). Sims elaborates that students in their final years of study have more invested in their study and therefore have more to lose. He also speculates that they have had more practice at writing with sources. Thirdly, first-year university students generally understand epistemology as "something out there; not as being constructed" (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 451). Of the 900 first-year students invited to participate in the focus group interview, fifteen positive responses were received. From the fifteen, seven eventually attended the focus group interview. There were five female and two male students. Four students were African, and three students were Indian. Two students were registered for the Foundation/Intermediate (Grades R to 7) programme. The other five students were registered for the Intermediate/Senior (Grades 4 to 9) programme.

Focus group interviews allow for a conversation between the researcher and many participants at the same time to explore people's perceptions. The focus group interview process allowed me to examine what students think about plagiarism, how they perceive plagiarism, and why they feel that particular way about plagiarism. The focus group students were asked a set of five questions, which were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability increase trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The concept of credibility refers to how the findings reflect the participants' actual reality and experiences. This was ensured by audio-recording the interviews and transcribing the recordings verbatim. These transcribed results were handed back to the participants to confirm if what they had said during the interviews was correct. This increased the dependability of the study. To improve further the confirmability, I made the research process as transparent as possible. After the data had been analysed and discussed in detail, commonalities were drawn out of the study to make research and results transferable to other contexts.

Durrheim and Wassenaar (2002) suggest that it is vital that all research studies follow the three ethical principles, which are: autonomy (refers to gaining participants consent and voluntary participation), non-maleficence (non-harmful study), and beneficence (who is going to benefit). These three ethical principles

worked to ensure the participants' protection and safety and were applied throughout this study's research process. Before conducting the research, the participants' autonomy was taken into account by gaining permission from the participants to participate in this study. All seven participants had signed a consent form agreeing that their inputs would be audio recorded, that participation in this study was voluntary, and they were at liberty to withdraw from the interview at any point. The participants were also informed about non-maleficence, in which they were ensured that participating in this study would bring no harm to them in any way possible. Participants were also assured that their participation would be kept strictly confidential and that their names or any other aspects revealed in this study would be kept anonymous. It is only once this was made known to the participants that the research commenced.

For the analysis of the data, the transcriptions were read several times to identify content topics. In other words, I looked for similar threads interwoven in the transcripts. After the initial trawl (involving the continued coding of the data until no new categories were found), patterns and commonalities were identified and grouped into themes.

In the next section, I present selected data followed by a theorised discussion.

Discussion of data

I will discuss the data obtained from the focus group interview in terms of the three research questions:

- Why do students plagiarise?
- How serious is plagiarism?
- How easy is it to be caught plagiarising?

Why do students plagiarise?

According to the participants, one cause of student plagiarism is laziness. Students show a lack of responsibility when it comes to their academic careers. From the interviews, it was discovered that students might be lazy to engage critically in the assignments given to them. The participants said:

P2: Maybe you are too lazy to think. People are sluggish to go and do research.

P5: They make friends with people who have done it before and people who have excelled before, and they take their work.

From this, we discover that the participants perceive that students, in general, do not like to engage in assignments and become involved in the research of information, but instead choose to plagiarise. The participants also perceive that some students choose not to make an effort at all but rather submit another student's previous assignment as their own. Overall, the participants viewed students' lack of responsibility and work ethic as laziness, which causes them to plagiarise. The issue of laziness as a possible reason for students to plagiarise is confirmed in studies conducted by Ismail (2018), Selemani et al. (2018), and Ayon (2017). In the Selemani et al. (2018) study, 84.9% of the Malawian postgraduate students indicated laziness as a reason to plagiarise.

There is a perception among participants that students are also procrastinators and choose to tackle their tasks closest to the due date. When students do this, they begin to panic at the last minute due to a lack of time and resort to plagiarism. A participant said:

P1: Maybe you are doing your work at the last minute, like close to your submission date. Then you have to take whatever you have without adequately analysing the information and not writing it in the right way, so you go and put whatever you have and then submit.

The above shows that there is a perception that students begin to panic when their work is left for the last minute, and this may easily lead to plagiarism. If the student is against the clock in completing a task, they may quickly fail to reference and cite their work properly. When students are more focused on completing the task, they tend to forget academic writing rules and end up committing plagiarism.

The participants also revealed that university students do not know how to reference correctly. The participants could not understand why there are so many different referencing styles and why it is always changing. The students commented that the causes are:

P7: Not knowing how to reference. They are not learning how to reference correctly.

P5: What I do not get about referencing is the APA 1, 2,3,4,5, and 6. I do not know if they have 7, 8 9 now (laughter); it does not make sense because there are so many references changing.

P6: I also did not know about those APA somethings.

The above views are an indication that many of the participants do not know how to reference because they did not learn how to reference correctly. This may lead to a paraphrasing of ideas and words from different sources, without referencing and passing it off as their own. Participants also argued that they do not know what APA referencing is, nor do they understand why the APA styles of referencing are always changing. This changing of the APA reference style further confuses students, leading to a greater misunderstanding of how to reference. This also speaks to the issue of poor teaching and learning. Lecturers are responsible for teaching students when, how, and why to reference. The teaching of referencing should not be seen as a technical skill. Referencing is closely related to knowledge-making in the disciplines.

The participants also specified a lack of an understanding of how to reference and write academically. The participants argued that the referencing styles are always changing, which brings about confusion in them. They also noted that some students do not know how to reference correctly and must be taught how to reference correctly. Similarly, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC, 2002), in the UK, discovered that “the main cause of minor plagiarism is a lack of understanding of how to cite material from other sources” (Bramford and Sergiou, 2005, p. 20).

The participants had also indicated that another cause of plagiarism at tertiary institutions is that students do not understand the task given to them.

P5: When you are given work, and you do not understand it, then you will end up plagiarising or taking other people's ideas because you are blank. When you genuinely do not know what to do, you end up taking others' ideas.

This lack of understanding of the task causes students to plagiarise because they cannot answer the task on their own. Because the student does not understand what to do and because of fear of failing, the student may resort to plagiarism by taking information from various sources and submitting it. This, too, points to the issue of teaching and learning. Hendricks and Quin (2000) found in their study with first-year English Second Language speakers that students could use technical conventions of referencing successfully after being explicitly taught referencing.

One of the participants indicated that yet another cause of plagiarism at tertiary institutions is that the students experience difficulty in academic writing. The student argues that at the primary school level and high school level, they are not taught how to write academically. However, at the tertiary level, one is expected to have the skills to write academically. This unpreparedness causes students to feel stressed, anxious, and overwhelmed; therefore, they resort to plagiarism to cope. The participant pointed out:

P3: You know, if at university I am going to be taught about academic writing, if I am writing a lot, why not at primary, at the high school level. Why am I just being introduced to it at university? Because it is going to be overwhelming. You know, now I am going to have to write articles, I have to write twelve-page assignments, it is going to be too much, and on top of that, I might not even have the fluency to express myself. But when, you know, you go on the internet, on Google, it's all there, you know, you look at one article, and you say "ah, I couldn't have said it any better" and when it comes to academic writing, you know because that's another set of skills on their own. Some students become somewhat difficult, and it goes back to the inconsistencies between tertiary education and our basic education.

The participant points out here that students are not trained on how to write academically at the basic education level. However, at university, academic writing is required of students. The student points out the inconsistencies and the gap between tertiary and basic education and states that this is why students plagiarise, as they did not acquire the skills needed in tertiary education. Some students have difficulty expressing themselves or their viewpoints in writing; therefore, they resort to going online or to other sources and extract words from there. According to Selemani et al. (2018), 84.9% of the participants in their study indicated that lack of good academic writing skills led them to commit intentionally or unintentionally plagiarism.

How serious is plagiarism?

The focus group participants were asked a question of how serious plagiarism is at their tertiary institutions. They revealed that they believed plagiarism is a severe matter at universities. However, they argued that it is only severe if one has to get caught plagiarising. The participants indicated that if one is caught plagiarising an assignment or task, they would have to face the consequences of their actions. However, the participants noted that although they were made aware of the consequences of plagiarising, they had never experienced nor heard of any student facing such harsh consequences. The students commented:

P2: It is very serious, you can be caught, and you can be penalised. Students in varsity could face disciplinary action or could end up being expelled. It is just that we do not realise how serious it is. It is serious.

P3: In my three years in university, I have never heard of an academically excluded person for plagiarising. I have never heard of anyone paying a fine, suspension, or anything, so we might say it is serious, but we have not seen the consequences yet.

P5: If a student has plagiarised, the lecturer is giving that student another chance.

These views above show that the participants believe that there are serious consequences to plagiarising that can essentially harm their academic careers; however, they have not seen or known any student who has had to pay the price of plagiarising. They believe that the university lecturers are lenient on students as they allow students a chance to resubmit their work rather than allowing them to face the severe consequences of plagiarism. Therefore, it could be said plagiarism is taken seriously at the university. However, the consequences are not perceived to be serious as lecturers show leniency to students. The study conducted by Selemani et al. (2018, p. 1) with Malawian postgraduate students found that academics' common sanctions include giving a warning and asking the student to re-write the plagiarised work.

The participants view plagiarism as serious and believe that there are both academic and legal consequences to face if one is caught. However, they had not heard of any student caught and faced these consequences, but instead, they have been let 'off the hook' by the lecturer. Participants state that lecturers often give students another chance to rewrite their plagiarised assignment rather than allowing them to face the university's consequences. In a study done by Kuther (2003), it was found that students believed that ethical lecturers do not tolerate cheating or plagiarism. However, they felt that lecturers should exercise judgment in handling and acting with compassion and allowing students a second chance to rewrite plagiarised work. Although the participants in my study acknowledge the severe consequences of plagiarism, they appreciate that lecturers provide them with another chance to correct their work rather than allowing them to face such consequences.

How easy is it to be caught plagiarising?

The focus group was asked a question on the chances of one getting caught plagiarising. The participants revealed that they believed that the chances of one getting caught plagiarising is very slim and unlikely. One of the reasons is because of the large number of students in a class. One participant commented:

P6: I think the chances are very slim. I do not believe they have the time to go out and look at every assignment. The volume of students that our lecturers have to cater to because if I am sitting in my office with 300 scripts, there is no way I am going to read through thoroughly through all of them.

The view above shows us that participants perceive that it is unlikely to be caught plagiarising, especially when large amounts of students are in a class. The participants believe that it is impractical for lecturers to go through all scripts to determine if students have plagiarised, especially when there is a 200-300 student class. The participants believe that lecturers do not have sufficient time to check thoroughly through each assignment to see if they plagiarise.

The focus group revealed that students are unlikely to be caught plagiarising as they are always coming up with new ways to beat the system to avoid being caught. Even with anti-plagiarism programs like Turnitin, students still find a way to cheat their way out. A participant spoke from her experience:

P4: People were submitting it with weird things like their CV's and job application letters. It is an Education Studies assignment, but you would submit your Physical Sciences practical to Turnitin. Students are smart. They can get away with anything. Students find ways to be not caught.

The above shows that students have found ways to cheat the system. Rather than submitting their assignment onto Turnitin to get a plagiarism report, students choose to be dishonest and submit other documents so that the percentage of plagiarism would be low.

The participants interviewed revealed that students are unlikely to be caught plagiarising if they change the words in their assignments. The participants point out that if one has to plagiarise and synonymise the text, they would not be caught plagiarising. The participants also indicated that using a "Word Spinner" program, which ultimately changes all the words around and into synonyms in the assignment, would help you plagiarise and get away with it.

P2: Spin the assignment. Use synonyms. You will never be caught. If you use synonyms and what you call this - word spinner, you never are caught.

The above shows that students have ways of avoiding being caught for plagiarising. Their manipulative methods are commonly used at the tertiary institution, and, according to the participants, these methods have proven to be successful. Such instances make it difficult for universities to develop strategies to prevent students from plagiarising. Perhaps constant motivation or reminders of the importance of honesty and good morale from the university may change students towards being upright, ethical, and honest.

My study has shown that students choose to be deceitful by submitting false documents to anti-plagiarism programs such as Turnitin or using programs such as 'Word spinner', so plagiarism cannot be detected. The participants believed that they could get away with it because there are many students in a class, and lecturers do not have the time to go through each script to check for plagiarism. Burnett (2002), as cited by Park (2003), states that the students most likely to cheat are those who believe that the lecturers do not bother to read their assignments thoroughly or closely review their work. This shows that students take the chance of being deceitful and dishonest as a choice as they believe lecturers would not take the time out to check their work to see if students plagiarise.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of plagiarism at a tertiary institution in KwaZulu-Natal. Focus group interviews were conducted at the tertiary institution to gain information on how students perceive plagiarism.

This paper recommends that students are taught what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. Clough (2000) states to reduce unintentional plagiarism, students should be taught how to reference correctly. This teaching can take place at schools and tertiary institutions.

Khoza (2015) argues that students are more likely to plagiarise because they may not have been taught how to avoid plagiarism at the high school level. He further explains that teachers in schools should prepare students for tertiary education while they are in school by using digital technology (such as Turnitin) to lower the risk of plagiarism in universities. McCabe (2005) asserts that high school students use the internet to “copy and paste” plagiarism and usually get away with it. Teachers usually turn a blind eye towards it, sending the message that it is acceptable. He then argues that high school teachers should promote academic integrity and to reduce opportunities for student cheating. These opportunities include preparing multiples versions of the test, setting essay questions rather than short - answer questions or tests that are less vulnerable to cheating where students interpret the information they gather rather than “copy and paste”. Students feel it is acceptable to cheat at the high school level, and teachers ignore it. In turn, students take this perception of “getting away with it” to universities and continue to plagiarise. However, if anti-plagiarism techniques are taught to high school students, it may reduce plagiarism in tertiary institutions.

Tertiary institutions should teach about plagiarism and referencing to first-year students entering university. The main reason students plagiarise at the tertiary institution is that they lack an understanding of plagiarism. I agree with Hendricks and Quinn (2000) that references should not only be taught as a technical skill but should be part of the overall curriculum. Students in the Hendricks and Quinn (2000) study used technical conventions of referencing successfully after being explicitly taught referencing. The teaching of referencing should go beyond the “negative emphasis” to avoid plagiarism (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000:456). Mphahlele and McKenna (2019, p. 1087) agree universities should focus on “developing students’ academic writing practices” instead of “detecting and punishing plagiarism”.

The participants in my study referred to Turnitin as a tool to detect plagiarism. The university at which this study was conducted uses Turnitin quite extensively. All students (undergraduate and postgraduate) are compelled to submit Turnitin reports with their writing. However, the literature on technological detection tools for plagiarism suggests that these be viewed with some caution. In a study conducted by Ayon (2017) among students and instructors in Lebanon, the participants revealed that Turnitin deters plagiarism but does not inhibit it. Similarly, Mphahlele and McKenna (2019) caution universities not to see Turnitin as a tool to detect and punish plagiarism. Their study recommended that:

that in order for text-matching software to be appropriately understood and implemented, significant work needs to be done in the field of academic development to ensure that staff and students understand that plagiarism

can be an unintentional act, which requires appropriate development of academic literacies to avoid, and that referencing is a central academic literacy practice emerging from our knowledge-making practices (Mphahlele and McKenna, 2019, p. 1087).

The teaching of referencing should educate students on what plagiarism is, what actions are considered plagiarism, and cite and reference using the correct referencing style. If students were educated on this, unintentional plagiarism would be limited. However, if the student has completed the course and still chooses to plagiarise, they should bear the university's consequences of plagiarism.

I agree with Ismail (2018) that there is a genuine need to increase university students' understanding of plagiarism and its consequences. Therefore, I recommend in line with Colella-Sandercock and Alahmadi (2015) and Leonard et al. (2015) that it is not enough to alert students of university rules around plagiarism, but that lecturers have conversations with students about plagiarism and its consequences. Lecturers need to find strategies to take a proactive approach to plagiarism. To this end, I borrow from Eaton et al. (2017), who suggest that lecturers include formative feedback in their teaching so that students get opportunities to focus on developing their writing and referencing skills.

Universities should also provide a constant promotion of honesty and academic integrity to students. This form of motivation could subconsciously change students' negative attitudes and guide them to become honest citizens of the community. Creating a 'culture of integrity' may reduce student cheating and establish 'the value of living in a community of trust' (McCabe and Trevino, 2002).

I would like to conclude by acknowledging that my study included only seven first-year undergraduate students. Future research should include students from across the year of study as well as postgraduate students and lecturers. This research could also evaluate the effectiveness of anti-plagiarism interventions and prevention strategies.

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