

Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices on Plagiarism among Law Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The action or practices of taking someone else's work or idea and passing it off as one's own is called plagiarism. This study aimed to assess knowledge, attitudes, and practices on Plagiarism, among law undergraduates of Kotelawala Defence University (KDU). An online questionnaire that consisted of four parts; socio-demographic data, knowledge, attitudes and practices on plagiarism was used for data collection, from among randomly selected 105 students in all four batches. The mean (\pm SD) age of the participants was 22.08 (\pm 2.86) years, and the majority of them were females (58.1%; n=61). The majority (80%, n= 84) of the participants knew about "plagiarism", and out of them, 80% (n=68) have learnt it through university lecturers. Further, 79.0% (n=83) were aware of the plagiarism checking software, which is available at KDU. The majority (84.8%; n=89) of the participants have realised that plagiarism is unprofessional and many (76.2%; n=80) have accepted that the plagiarism should be a punishable offence. Moreover, 91.4% (n=96) have believed that the level of English Language proficiency influences on practicing plagiarism. Among the participants, 24.8%, 20% and 10.5% were using Turnitin, Plagiarism Checker X and Grammarly software respectively to detect plagiarism. However, 57.1% (n=60) have stated that they submit assignments for their academic institute without checking plagiarism. An online system which indicates the level of plagiarism in the

initial stage of assignment submission should be introduced to the students. Further, the knowledge on plagiarism should be enhanced through compulsory course modules and interactive workshops on summarising and paraphrasing techniques.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Law undergraduates

Introduction

Plagiarism is "the action or practices of taking someone else's work, idea, etc. and passing it off as one's own; literary theft" in the Oxford Dictionary (Stevenson, 2010). Plagiarism may occur at any stage of planning, including research writing or publication (Kumar et al., 2014). According to The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), plagiarism has been defined as "use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing source" (Das and Panjabi, 2011).

Plagiarism is classified into four main categories based on the context in which it occurs. If someone is submitting someone else's words in his/her name without even acknowledging him/her publicly, it is called as Verbatim Plagiarism. This is commonly seen in the introduction and discussion part of a manuscript. The mosaic plagiarism happens when someone involves in the act of copy-pasting by

mixing one's own words with another author's ideas and opinions. Paraphrasing is a restatement of someone else's ideas on your own words. Changing a few words of the original sentences does not make it your writing. To avoid plagiarism, the content should be accurately referenced (Dhammi and Ul Haq, 2016).

Self-plagiarism is considered as intellectual stealing and involves dishonesty, and it does not contribute to scientific work. Roig (2002) provided the classification of self-plagiarism and categorised it into four types (i.e. Duplicate publication, augmented publication, segmented publication, and text recycling). When an author publishes a similar manuscript (same data, results, and discussion) in two different journals, it is considered as a duplicate publication. According to the Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines, it is considered as an offence and editor can take any action against the author and it is referred to as that the author adds additional data into his/her previous published work by changing title, modifying objectives of the study and changing results. A plagiarism detecting software cannot detect this because the word patterns are changed. It is not considered strictly as for plagiarism, and the editor would yet accept it under three situations. When two or more papers have been derived from one research project, it is called segmented publication. It is not easy to detect salami sliced papers, and generally, reviewers are pointing out the matter. Text recycling happens when the author uses large portions of his/ her already published text in his/her new manuscript and it can be tested by plagiarism checking software and can be controlled according to the COPE guidelines (Dhammi and Ul Haq, 2016).

If an author copies entire research papers or ideas from the internet by not giving acknowledgement for the original author,

is called as cyber-plagiarism. Suppose someone copies an image and a video without requesting the permission or by not providing the citation that would be called as image plagiarism (Dhammi and Ul Haq, 2016).

Before submitting any document for a journal, the authors must check the level of plagiarism. The reviewers of those articles also should have a practice of using plagiarism detection tools in order to avoid the practice of plagiarism. Once the editor of the journal receives the reviewed articles, he/she should recheck it for plagiarism using a powerful plagiarism detection tool before finalising the publication material (Kumar et al., 2014).

Systematic detection of plagiarism will be encouraged by plagiarism detection tools (Kim, 2013). Most of the Plagiarism detecting software like iThenticate, Viper, Turnitin do not detect plagiarism and would test the similarity index. Similarity index considers the total percentage of matched words that a system finds for a submission. This similarity index would also detect common words like E-mail IDs, phone numbers, address of academic affiliation, etc., even if it is presented in an article by the same authors (Khan, 2011).

The students who work on plagiarism would use the availability and accessibility of the internet to detect plagiarism. Therefore, appropriate punishment should be implemented for the committers if detected (Kenny, 2007). It is stated that the plagiarism is named as one of the three great misconducts of research and the other two misconducts are named as fabrication and falsification by the US Office for Research Integrity (ORI) (Godlee, 2007). Plagiarism can be started from simple dishonesty, and it can be extended up to the highest level, and therefore the penalty for that misconduct would be the same. The penalties would be ranged from

formal actions (i.e. apology letters) to criminal charges (i.e. suspension) (Kumar et al., 2014).

Literature Review

A research study conducted in Pakistan among graduate and postgraduate students in private and public universities found that the awareness and the practices on plagiarism were low among them. Majority of the population was not even aware of what the plagiarism is, and they have admitted that they practised plagiarism intentionally (Ramzan et al., 2012).

A cross-sectional study carried out at Hawler Medical University in Erbil to assess the prevalence of plagiarism among 400 medical and nursing students using a questionnaire found that plagiarism among the participants was 54.3%. The prevalence of the male students was found higher than that of females (54.9% Vs 53.8%; $P = 0.820$), and the practice of plagiarism among medical students was higher than the nursing students (58.9% Vs 43.3%; ($P = 0.004$). About 28% of the students were aware of the legal penalties of plagiarism, while 34.8% of the students were not aware. According to the results, the most common reasons for practising plagiarism were laziness, easiness of the procedure, confusion and the stress on meeting up with deadlines (Ismail, 2018).

In Australia, a study carried out to describe the awareness of university policies concerning academic honesty, attitudes to plagiarism and on cheating practices among pharmacy graduates and postgraduates reported that the plagiarism was commonly practised and they have not considered that as serious misconduct (Ryan et al., 2009).

A study carried out in Sri Lanka intending to investigate the concerns of plagiarism among 181 students in the University of

Moratuwa claimed that the students do not have complete knowledge regarding plagiarism. The lack of awareness was the most common factor for practising plagiarism among the eight factors identified (Kodikara and Kumara, 2015).

Though the studies conducted on knowledge, attitudes, and practices on plagiarism among the university students around the world is so high, it is less commonly reported in the Sri Lankan context. The results of this study will be beneficial in upgrading the rules and regulations on plagiarism in the University system in Sri Lanka. By considering all these reasons, this study was conducted to assess knowledge, attitudes and practices among all the intakes of Law undergraduates, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka.

Methodology

A sample of 105 law undergraduates was selected from a stratified random sampling method. A pre-tested questionnaire was used to obtain data. The questionnaire in English was circulated among the participants through an online platform. The consent for attending the study was also taken online from the participants, once the purpose and the objectives were explained through an online statement before the questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted among ten University undergraduates to determine the difficulty level of the items, ease of understanding of concepts in the items, any discomfort when responding, and the appropriate length of the instrument before the data collection. The students who have taken part in the pilot study were excluded from the main study.

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections. 'Section A' composed of questions regarding demographic information. 'Section B', 'Section C' and 'Section D' were composed of knowledge, attitudes, and

practices regarding plagiarism among the participants, respectively. Descriptive statistics were performed in SPSS 23.0 version, in order to obtain results based on the study objectives.

Results

Socio-Demographic Data

According to the results, the mean (\pm SD) age of the participants was 22.08 (\pm 2.86) years, and the majority of them were females (58.1%; n=61). Most of the participants were first-year undergraduates (42.9%; n= 45) while the majority (53.3%; n=56) of the participants had 'A' passes for the English language in GCE (A/L) (Table 01).

Table 01 – Socio-Demographic Data

Parameter	Status
Demographic Data	
Age (years)	22.08/ \pm 2.85
Gender	
Male	41.9 % (n=44)
Female	58.1 % (n=61)
Academic Year	
First	42.9% (n=45)
Second	15.2% (n=16)
Third	22.9% (n=24)
Fourth	19% (n=20)
The highest grade obtained for English in GCE (A/L)	
A	53.3% (n=56)
B	29.5% (n=31)
C	16.2 % (n=17)
S	1% (n=1)

Knowledge on Plagiarism

When the knowledge on plagiarism among participants is concerned, it was noticed that majority (80%, n= 84) of the participants had the pre-knowledge on the term "Plagiarism", and 64.8% (n=68) have got to know about plagiarism through

university lecturers. Most of the participants who were not aware of the term "Plagiarism" were from the first year (Figure 01). Most of the participants knew that their academic institution follows the rules and regulations to prevent plagiarism (98.1%; n=103). Many participants (77.1%; n=81) were aware of legal penalties for practising plagiarism at their institute. Further, 79.0% (n=83) were aware that plagiarism checking software is available in their institute. The majority (67.6%; n=71) had the belief that their knowledge on "in-text citation" and "referencing methods" is satisfactory (Table 02).

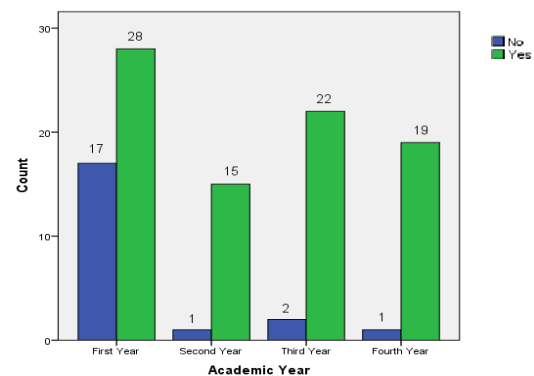


Figure 01- Awareness on Plagiarism

Table 02 – Knowledge of participants on plagiarism

Parameter	Status	
Question		
Have you known the meaning of the term "plagiarism" before?	Yes	80% (n=84)
	No	20 % (n=21)
How did you get to know about plagiarism?	From the University lecturers	64.8% (n=68)
	From books	3.8% (n=4)
	From the internet	14.3% (n=15)
	Other sources	17.1% (n=18)

Do you know that your academic institution takes the necessary actions to prevent plagiarism?	Yes	98.1% (n=103)
	No	1.9% (n=2)
Are you aware of the legal penalties for practising plagiarism in your institute?	Yes	77.1% (n=81)
	No	22.9% (n=24)
Are you aware of the plagiarism detecting software?	Yes	87.6% (n=92)
	No	12.4% (n=13)
Are you aware of the software available in your institute for checking plagiarism?	Yes	79.0% (n=83)
	No	21.0% (n=22)
Do you have adequate knowledge of "in-text citation" and "referencing methods"?	Yes	67.6% (n=71)
	No	32.4% (n=34)

Attitudes on Plagiarism

When considering the attitudes of the participants, the majority (84.8%; n=89) of the participants realised that the plagiarism is unprofessional and unethical and the majority (76.2%; n=80) of the participants have accepted that the plagiarism should be a punishable offence at their institute. However, the majority (23.8%; n=25) of the participants believed that the students detected with plagiarism should be given a chance to re-submit the assignments without reduction of marks.

The majority (91.4%; n=96) of the study population have believed that the level of English Language proficiency influences on practising plagiarism among the university undergraduates (Table 03).

Table 03 – Attitudes of participants on plagiarism

Parameter		Status
Question		
Do you believe that the plagiarism is unprofessional and unethical?	Yes	84.8%(n=89)
	No	15.2% (n=16)
Do you believe that the plagiarism should be a punishable offence at your institute?	Yes	76.2% (n=80)
	No	23.8% (n=25)
What sort of punishment would you prefer for that student?	Termination of the study programme	2.9 % (n=3)
	Considering the relevant module as "Fail."	21.0%(n=22)
	Considering the particular component as "Fail"	22.9% (n=24)
	Allow resubmission with deducting marks for the component	1.9% (n=2)

	Allow resubmission of the component without deducting marks	23.8% (n=25)
	Not relevant	27.6% (n=29)

Practices on Plagiarism

When the practices on plagiarism are concerned, the majority (57.1%: n=60) of the undergraduates have accepted that they submit assignments for their academic institute without checking plagiarism. The participants who practice plagiarism have admitted that reusing passages from their previously submitted work is the most common type of plagiarism (15.2%; n=16). Further, the most attributing factor for the practice of plagiarism was busy schedule and heavy workload (27.6%; n= 29). It was found that 57.1% (n=60) of the participants were having a plagiarism detecting software in their personal computers. Among those participants, 24.8%, 20% and 10.5% were using Turnitin, Plagiarism Checker X and Grammarly software, respectively to detect plagiarism on their own (Table 04).

Table 04 – Practices of participants on plagiarism

Parameter	Status	
Question		
Do you submit assignments in your academic institute without checking "Plagiarism"?	Yes	57.1% (n=60)
	No	42.9% (n=45)
If Yes, what is the type of plagiarism you practice?	Presenting an entire text by someone else as your work	1.9% (n=2)

	Rephrasing someone else's ideas without citation	7.6% (n= 8)	
	Directly copying a passage of text without citation	2.9% (n=3)	
	Combining texts and ideas from different sources without citation	8.6% (n=9)	
	Reusing passages an idea from your own previously submitted work	15.2% (n=16)	
	Not relevant	63.8% (n=67)	
	If yes, what is the most attributing factor for this practice?	Busy schedule and heavy workload	27.6% (n=29)
Ease of plagiarising and laziness		1% (n=1)	
Pressure to meet the deadline		12.4% (n=13)	
Lack of serious consequences		1.9% (n=2)	
Follow what my peers do		1.9% (n=2)	
Not relevant		55.2% (n=58)	
Are you using any software to avoid plagiarism?		Yes	57.1% (n=60)
		No	42.9% (n=45)
If Yes, what is the software that you use to detect the plagiarism? (You can select more than one answer)	Turnitin	24.8% (n=26)	
	Plagiarism Checker X	20.0% (n=21)	
	Cross Check	1% (n=1)	
	Ithenticate.com	1% (n=1)	
	Grammarly.com	10.5% (n=11)	
	Not relevant	41.9% (n=44)	

Do you believe that the level of English Language proficiency influences practising plagiarism among the university undergraduates?	Yes	91.4% (n=96)
	No	8.6% (n=9)

Discussion

This study was aimed at evaluating the knowledge, attitudes and practices on plagiarism among law undergraduates. It was found that the majority of the participants have known the meaning of the term "Plagiarism". Most participants who were not aware of the term "Plagiarism" were from the first year. Further, it was noted that most of the participants have known about the plagiarism from the university lecturers as they were informed about the ethics of plagiarism as a part of their curriculum. Therefore, it was highlighted that it is necessary to provide the students with a thorough knowledge of what plagiarism is from their first year. Similar studies conducted elsewhere on the awareness of plagiarism among university undergraduates revealed that majority had pre-knowledge regarding the term plagiarism (Kumar and Mohindra, 2019; Memon and Mavrincac, 2020) while some studies have revealed on a deficient level of awareness on the term plagiarism (Ramzan et al., 2012).

Students should possess a sound understanding on how to avoid plagiarism as well as why they should avoid it (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). However, it was good to know that most of the participants were aware of the necessary actions taken by the institute to prevent

plagiarism and about the legal penalties uplifted by the institute on plagiarism. Moreover, they were aware of the plagiarism checking software available in their institute. Majority of the participants from a similar study have revealed that their University does not provide access to plagiarism detection software (Memon and Mavrincac, 2020). Further, it was noted that the majority of the participants have accepted that the plagiarism is unprofessional and unethical as many have recommended that it should be a punishable offence at their institute. This emphasises that the study group has good attitudes towards avoiding plagiarism.

Most of the participants in the present study were aware of the term plagiarism, and they have also considered plagiarism as unethical and a misconduct. However, it was noted that even if they have the tools to check plagiarism among themselves and in the institute, the majority submit assignments for their academic institute without checking plagiarism. Moreover, the students have believed that their busy schedule and heavy workload as the main reasons for practising plagiarism. A similar study revealed that the majority of the undergraduates tend to practice plagiarism because of lack of time (Memon and Mavrincac, 2020). Therefore, it seems that it is necessary to plan for improving time management skills and coping strategies of stress in order to enhance academic motivation and reduce malpractices among the study participants.

There are other mechanisms that can be utilized to motivate the students in preventing plagiarism. As an initial strategy it is necessary to design assignments which would demand for an amalgamation of reading material rather than summarisation. The second strategy is a prior explanation of the students about the gravity of plagiarism as ethical misconduct. The third strategy is to provide

comprehensive knowledge on plagiarism and allocate more time to help the students complete their assignments focused on avoiding plagiarism. The fourth strategy is to offer students with explicit instruction on appropriate paraphrasing (Prohaska, 2012). However, A learning management system where the assignments undergo a mandatory plagiarism check at the initial stage of assignment submission would prevent plagiarism in the study population. Moreover, the knowledge and positive attitudes on plagiarism should be enhanced through compulsory course modules and interactive workshops on academic writing.

Conclusion

Plagiarism is classified as a serious breach of academic integrity that depreciates the value of original and honest scholarly work. The study revealed that the majority of the participants had the awareness on what plagiarism is, the legal concerns of the institute on plagiarism, and the availability of means to check plagiarism by themselves and at the institute. Further, as future law professionals, the participants have had good ethical attitudes on plagiarism. However, it was found that many undergraduates do not practice on plagiarism well despite the availability of Plagiarism checking software at their institute.

It was recommended to educate undergraduates how to use, interpret the reports generated by the Turnitin which is available at the institute. A learning management system where the assignments undergo a mandatory plagiarism check at the initial stage of assignment submission should be introduced to the study population. Hence, a preventative, education-based approach will be highly benefited for the Law undergraduates, which would lead to produce more ethical law professionals.

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