

# Addressing plagiarism



The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project





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# 1. Introduction

The issue of plagiarism has become a hot topic in higher education in recent years. There is much generic advice available about deterring and dealing with plagiarism. See, for example, advice from [Napier](#) and [Leeds](#). An excellent resource for students which includes self-testing and tailored feedback on answers is available from the [Open University](#).

There are also many studies relevant to international students. Many are referenced throughout this resource and they underpin discussion of the issues here. However, it must be said at the outset that much teacher discussion and concern about plagiarism linked to international students is driven by assumptions, generalising from particular groups of students, and sometimes by frustration with how complicated these issues can turn out to be. It is a delicate balance between acknowledging difficulties and talking about real experiences, and, on the other hand, risking stigmatising some students as 'blatant plagiarists'. Dealing with student plagiarism as a teacher of international students turns out to be a complex issue.

This section focuses on how institutions and teachers can teach international students about how to avoid plagiarism, ensure they have the necessary skills to avoid it, and deal fairly with cases amongst international students when they do occur.

In other sections, you will find additional guidance on group work, assessment and feedback and critical thinking.

## 2. The main issues: getting started

Institutional and teachers' concerns when managing plagiarism with international students include:

### 2.1 Levels of plagiarism

Assumptions about frequency and severity of plagiarism often conflate plagiarism and cheating. You might find it useful to distinguish between deliberate and inadvertent plagiarism and to be clear about the difference between how many students plagiarise and the number of cases which are reported. In most institutions, penalty statistics show much higher levels of reported cases amongst international students. Many attribute this to ease of detection of copied text in second language writers. Many students also say they use the original source text rather than attempting a paraphrase (Carroll, 2008).

Plagiarism due to deliberate cheating remains a low percentage of all cases and it happens amongst all students. There is little evidence to show that home or international students differ in levels of deliberate plagiarism (Partridge and West, 2003; Gillmore et al, 2009). Where plagiarism is deliberate, some methods may be more common in some groups of international students. In particular, use of translation software and buying essays are often linked to non-native English speakers. We do not know how frequent the use of translation and commissioning is but it is probably a small (or even tiny) percentage of overall cases.

Nevertheless, translation and commissioning continue to worry teachers. Here's how one teacher in the UK described it with reference to students in her own country, Malaysia:

"The pressure to perform has an even darker side: sometimes it can lead to fraud in the writing of essays and examinations. Financial pressures may be one of the side factors causing plagiarism to be more of a problem among these students, but the main factor is an innocent one: they simply do not understand that it is wrong. It is the Western worldview that plagiarism is morally wrong because it constitutes a violation of the author (Kolich 1983). But to these overseas students, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. They want to use an author's work because it is very good but their English is not good enough to paraphrase what the author has

said, so the practical solution is just to copy chunks of it. They do not understand they are committing fraud; they do not mean to.”(Chuah, 2010)

These studies (and many more) show that plagiarism due to copying without attribution and to unacceptable use of sources is higher (and in some cases, much higher) amongst some groups of international students. The [Australian IDP research database](#) on international education lists more than 100 papers on this issue, most of which agree that unintentional plagiarism is due to students either assuming the expectations have not changed from previous writing contexts and/ or they do not understand how to apply the UK rules, once they are aware of them. However, misunderstanding amongst international students varies. Neville (2010) found that 25% of the 354 international postgraduate students he questioned reported no difficulties or differences in these matters and a further 25% had no trouble shifting to UK expectations; 50% were still experiencing ‘radical educational and social transitions’ even after months of intensive teaching.

## 2.2 Differences in expectations

Many students, both home and international, say that when they started university study they had not expected to find differences in how sources are used and acknowledged. International students probably find changes needed to avoid charges of plagiarism to be very fundamental.

Students often describe becoming aware of differences in how knowledge is ‘owned’ (for example, is it a common good or linked to a named individual?); how sources are used (for example, as short extracts from texts rather than understanding of the whole work); and how sources are acknowledged (as a formal citation or an informal allusion such as ‘according to experts’). Some changes are deep-rooted such as the feeling that it is disrespectful (or just dull) to tell a reader about things which they clearly already know.

## 2.3 Language issues

Lack of vocabulary, either in general or specific to the discipline or to academic writing, can block efforts to ‘use your own words’, at least at first. Students often explain copying by links to competence in English, explaining ‘this says what I think’ or even, more commonly, ‘this says it better than I could write it’. Language competence also impacts on reading, on note taking, and on time management, all aspects which have been linked to student plagiarism. (Davis and Carroll, 2009) See the section on Language in this resource bank.

## 2.4 Ease of access to information on the internet

For all students, the huge range of sources mean that for many, copy-cut-paste ‘harvesting’ is a common way to start writing. This is one reason to explicitly teach note making as transforming text rather than straight copying. However, whereas home students then often ‘write over’ and alter the original, international students often do much less, leaving text as identifiable copying. It is arguable that both groups are using a very similar form of ‘authorship’ and Pecorari (2003) classifies this type of writing as ‘patchwriting’. She and others (for example, Schmitt, 2005) regard this as potentially a useful transition phase in students’ developing writing skills though some risk being labelled as ‘plagiarists’ for doing so.

Second, many students can access materials in their own language then convert the text into English through so-called ‘back translation’. This makes it very difficult to identify the student’s text as copied because the new version will not trigger software packages and usually appears authentic. Studies in the last few years have begun to identify these translated texts as potential sources of concern.

Thirdly, so-called ‘ghost writing’ sites (where students commission and pay for work) are now ubiquitous and almost impossible to avoid – pop-up ads litter the Internet with turnover thought to be in hundreds of millions of pounds, from 250 UK sites plus many more around the world (Clark and Lancaster, 2006). Speculation and accusation surround this topic, making judging their impact on all students difficult. Someone must be using them but are international students especially drawn to such ‘services’ (sic)? Wellman and Fallon (2010) describe intensive efforts to educate several hundred MBA students in UK academic practices

(see the case study in related documents/ links on the download page for details). Despite their efforts, between seven and nine percent of this particular group continued to submit work which, in the authors' view, was created by 'back-translation and contract cheating' but they then speculate that this has more to do with their discipline (Marketing) and lack of engagement with the course than their 'international student' status.

## 2.5 Fear of accusations of plagiarism

Neville (2010) refers to 'the spectre of plagiarism' hanging over students with students' fear of being accused continuing to be 'at the core of their difficulties [with learning academic writing]'. Students' fear, even at the end of Masters-level study, led them to use referencing 'as a form of protection against accusations... with the consequence that their writing never [developed into] authorship'. Other students report similar worries, often resulting in them focussing on the mechanics of citation, perhaps due to teachers' apparent priorities. One student said, 'I don't know why I handed in the essay because all the feedback was about my referencing'. Teachers' feedback will be more useful in deterring plagiarism if it refers to the underpinning values of using sources and of argumentation.

## 3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

Solutions are best addressed at different levels of authority and responsibility.

### 3.1 Individual teachers

It is probably useful for teachers to assume that students do not arrive with developed academic skills necessary to avoid plagiarism then check out the assumption. Neville reports that students with the same nationality (in this case, Hong Kong Chinese) reported very different levels of knowledge of plagiarism. At course level, teaching approaches to deter and deal with international student plagiarism could include:

- **making expectations explicit.** For example, tell students that they must use quotation marks at the point of use, as well as showing where the quote is from. Tell them that a bibliographic list is not sufficient rather than say 'use good referencing'. Students will welcome written guidance on academic writing and referencing, especially if it goes beyond the mechanics of formatting a citation to explain the underpinning rationale. Many institutions now create their own written guidance materials but other useful resources abound. Two Centres for Excellence, [Write Now](#) and [Learn Higher](#), have especially useful resources. Students could start their awareness of these matters before travel via sites such as [Prepare for Success](#).
- **scaffolding** in the form of exemplars, model answers, and frameworks.
- **clear feedback** alongside suggestions for improvement. You could think about ways to streamline common remarks about students' writing practices such as using a pre-written comment sheet on, for example, where and how to use an in-text citation or ways to signal use of a quoted extract. These are likely to be both quicker and more easily understood than a quick margin note ('refs?' or 'your own words?')
- **setting assessment tasks which encourage creating** rather than finding an answer. Students report they are less likely to plagiarise where assignments are authentic, useful, and perhaps draw upon their own experiences. Montgomery (2009) offers many suggestions on designing such tasks for culturally diverse groups of students. Group work assessment tasks also need care to lessen 'social loafing' and differential contributions to lessen the chances of students 'submitting others' work as their own'.

- **sensitive use of institutional policies to assign penalties** when cases arise. It may sound paradoxical to stress penalties here but the key point is to encourage students to put in time and effort for mastery. Teachers taking no action in the hope that ‘they are still learning’ could send a message that these matters are not important. On the other hand, treating early copying and poor practice as cheating is unhelpful and in many cases, unfair. Students do need to adapt and adopt UK practices but this will not happen quickly. Finding the balance between support and penalty probably requires discussion and consensus amongst teachers.

### 3.2 Plagiarism issues at the programme level

Teaching about plagiarism usually starts at induction, then proceeds to early use of written guidance and includes alerting students to appropriate help and support. Whilst some might find this sufficient, most students, and perhaps especially international students, often need a more systematic approach as they set aside approaches which have served them well plus develop complex new ways to use sources, often in an unfamiliar language. Juwah et al (2006) call this process acculturation, where students are socialised into really understanding and engaging with new academic practices. Programmes will support this acculturation by:

- **Mapping skills teaching and practice** over time with opportunities to improve and continue to revisit the issues. This ‘distributed’ approach will probably mean students get plenty of practise plus no individual course or teacher bears the whole burden of developing students’ skills in academic writing and referencing.
- **Modelling good practice** in lectures and on handouts, teachers’ citations and references to colleagues can show that they, too, need to acknowledge others’ work. Teachers ‘walk the talk’ in their own publications and this can be explicitly discussed with students.
- **Assessment criteria** which stress the value of using sources and supporting an argument with evidence. Do students gain marks by doing these things skilfully rather than loose marks for errors in the formatting and use of citation conventions?
- **Feedback** All of the usual good practice guidance on feedback applies here (timely, specific, including guidance on how to improve etc). Issues linked to plagiarism are often misunderstood, so chances for interaction and dialogue with peers and the tutor can help students to self-correct and thereby close the gap between current and desired performance (Nicol, 2008).

### 3.3. Plagiarism issues at the institutional level

- **Language support.** Some international students will need additional teaching and/or support to reach a standard necessary for academic success. Most students who require such support will need to access it over some time although others will only seek help for specific needs. Balancing the resources to provide proactive, ongoing and reactive support will be difficult but if the aim is preventing plagiarism, the argument is a need to ensure the students have the necessary capability to comply with university requirements.
- **Policy on plagiarism and academic misconduct.** The HEA Academic Integrity Service offers guidance on how policies can be regularly revisited in the light of changing circumstances. When universities revise their policies, include students’ views and involve specialist groups such as Librarians or those whose job it is to advocate for students accused of plagiarism such as the Students Union and English language teachers.

One example of the need to review might be rethinking penalties for buying work from ‘ghost writing’ sites. In many institutions, this is treated as fraud and punished accordingly, rather than considering it under the plagiarism policy. If this is the case, all students need to know this early in their studies where it will have the most impact on their decisions. Another area relevant to international students concerns students submitting others’ work which is unchanged from the original text apart from running it through a translation tool such as Google Translate or Babel Fish. Again, consistent treatment of these cases needs institution-level consideration and once it is clear that students understand what is expected, then use of ‘back translation’ is usually treated as cheating. A third area that is often used is to require a signed declaration of originality with all assignments. Some claim this reinforces the rules; others point out that it does not exempt institutions from ensuring adequate guidance and teaching and many say ‘it makes no difference’.

- **Monitoring and reviewing data on cases.** Compiling case data allows institutions to learn lessons and spot issues. For example, if the number of cases involving international students is disproportionate to their overall percentage then there may be issues to explore about how cases are identified, how students are taught necessary skills, or how teachers apply penalties. Students also need clear guidance on consequences and penalties for plagiarism. This is a requirement for fairness and also a significant shaper of their decisions, especially with regards to deliberate cheating.
- **Staff training and development.** Topics for staff development could include cultural awareness, course and assessment design, learner support to prevent plagiarism and procedures for dealing with plagiarism. Juwah (2006) quotes one person, post-training, “this session was an eye opener for me. I was unaware that culture played a role in the students’ understanding of plagiarism”.

## 4. Top Tip:

### Use text-matching software for formative feedback

In many institutions, text-matching software is used to identify copied text in summative coursework. This approach has attracted a number of studies on the impact on the number and severity of cases. (Badge, 2010) An alternative is to use software formatively, as an additional way to alert students to their responsibilities for ‘doing your own work’ and ‘using your own words’. Davis studied what happens when international postgraduates are shown their ‘Originality’ report and have a chance to discuss it with her. She claims this is a powerful way to engage and inform, akin to what she terms ‘a Eureka moment’ when all the talk of plagiarism becomes relevant and personal (Davis and Carroll, 2009). She can show that students have learned, not just become better at evading detection.

## 5. What is the evidence?

### 5.1 Top Resources

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## Contact us

**The Higher Education Academy**  
**Innovation Way**  
**York Science Park**  
**Heslington**  
**York**  
**YO10 5BR**

**+44 (0)1904 717500**  
**enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk**

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