

**AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF PLAGIARISM:
THE CASE OF ALECU RUSSO BALTI STATE UNIVERSITY**

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Rezumat: *Una din problemele stringente ce țin de scrisul academic este plagiatul. Studenții par a nu înțelege gravitatea actului în sine, plagiind ori de câte ori le este greu să își formuleze propriile gânduri sau nu știu ce exact trebuie să facă. Astfel, ei nu realizează că încalcă normele academice comițând o infracțiune. Articolul prezintă o analiză a percepțiilor față de plagiat ale studenților de la Facultatea de Litere din anul 4 de la Ciclul Licență și anul I de la Ciclul Masterat care studiază limba engleză ca limbă principală. Rezultatele indică lipsa de conștientizare a gravității unui asemenea act la studenți. Atitudinea lor pare a fi una superficială față de scrisul academic, iar însăși actul de sfidare a normelor academice pare a fi nesemnificativ pentru studenți.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *plagiat, infracțiune, integritate academică, norme academice.*

Plagiarism can be considered as attempted theft of intellectual property, when a person knowingly claims authorship of a piece of writing which belongs to somebody else. This act of stealing violates the norms of academic integrity and shatters the academic credibility of the plagiarist whose reputation can be hardly recovered. Institutions adopt strict policies against plagiarism. The punishment varies from case to case, the most severe being the exclusion of the plagiarist from the discourse community he/she is affiliated to. Institutions also rely on various plagiarism detecting software which helps them fight against this type of crime.

However, when it comes to students' plagiarism the issue seems to be more complex. Scholars (Eckstein, 2013; Kolich, 1983; Pennycook, 1996; Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Wilhoit, 1983) seem to struggle to offer the exact definition of plagiarism which will clearly show what is to be considered plagiarism in students' academic writing. The very notion of the students contributing new knowledge to their discourse community implies transforming knowledge which has already been assimilated most probably through extensive reading. Indeed students might not even be aware of the complex network of intertextual relationships existing between different texts which they have internalized throughout their course of study. In this case, it becomes difficult for the students them-

selves to understand that they have plagiarized somebody's work. Therefore, the process of detecting plagiarism should be thoroughly considered.

Another controversy regarding plagiarism is whether the act itself should be criminalized or dealt with more consideration (Eckstein, 2013). There are cases when people might not even be aware of having plagiarized. If rote learning is the main technique of learning in some cultures (Pennycook, 1996) then it might become difficult for the student to discriminate between one's own genuine ideas against the ones memorized, which eventually have been internalized.

Western higher education institutions realize the seriousness of blaming students for plagiarism, as well as the consequences such a blame might have on the student's academic and professional development. That is why, apart from using plagiarism detecting software, they have suggested that a series of other steps be taken in order to determine whether the student has intentionally plagiarized his/her work.

Purdue University has created the online writing lab which assists students in their process of writing. It is one of the most useful resources to be used by students worldwide who want to improve their academic writing skills. In addition, it provides an overview of the basic steps to be taken while conducting primary research. When it comes to plagiarism, the creators of this writing lab emphasize what to do in order to avoid plagiarism. They clearly state the severe consequences of plagiarism in the American academic context (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html).

Harvard University has created the Harvard College Handbook for Students 2018-2019 page where such issues as Harvard College Honor Code, and Plagiarism are described among others. Thus students have the possibility to get acquainted with what they are expected to write throughout the course of study and what norms should be followed in order to succeed. Special emphasis is placed on academic integrity and its importance in the students' academic development. Plagiarism is viewed as infraction, which can result in the students' withdrawal from the College (<https://handbook.fas.harvard.edu/book/academic-integrity>).

The University of Oxford has created a web page devoted exclusively to Oxford students. Students can have first-hand access to useful information in their course of study. A comprehensive overview on plagiarism is given there enabling students to avoid plagiarism in their work. Developing one's own voice is viewed as essential in students' academic growth. One of the suggestions says:

You should avoid plagiarism because you aspire to produce work of the highest quality. Once you have grasped the principles of source use and citation, you should find it relatively straightforward to steer clear of plagiarism. Moreover, you will reap the additional benefits of improvements to both the lucidity and quality of your writing. It is important to appreciate that mastery of the techniques of academic writing is not merely a practical skill, but one that lends both credibility and authority to your work, and demonstrates your commitment to the principle of intellectual honesty in scholarship.

(<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism?wssl=1>)

It is interesting to note the overall recommendatory tone of the instructions written on that page. Moreover, students are given a very detailed account of the steps to be taken when suspected of plagiarism. Although the university clearly states its stance on plagiarism (which can result in expulsion from the University), the focus seems to be on helping students avoid plagiarism in their writing. Similarly, a thorough explanation is offered to enable students to defend their case if there is suspicion of plagiarism in their work.

As stated, plagiarism is unacceptable worldwide that is why universities take several measures to prevent plagiarism among students. Higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova also appear to acknowledge the gravity of such an infraction. Yet, the process of assisting students in avoiding plagiarism seems to be vague and poorly-defined. In addition, it is rather difficult to determine what penalties are actually applied to those who have violated the norms of academic integrity.

Alecu Russo Balti State University has elaborated the guidelines for writing a research paper. They refer exclusively to the final research papers students are expected to produce by the end of the second and third cycles of study. The guidelines reflect what a research paper should normally include. The issue of plagiarism is briefly mentioned in the section 'Exigențe etice' ('Ethical Requirements'). Yet, it is not clear what happens if the students are thought to have plagiarized

(usarb.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Recomandari_de_realizare_a_tezei_de_licenta_si_de_master_in_USARB.compressed.pdf).

The Department of the English and German Philology has elaborated the internal guidelines for writing a research paper where a more comprehensive overview is given regarding what is to be considered plagiarism. The guidelines also suggest three 'simple' rules students should follow in order to avoid plagiarism. Yet, it is again rather difficult to understand the steps taken to prevent plagiarism in students' works.

The present study aims to determine how Moldovan students understand the notion of plagiarism. It is an attempt to trace the possible causes of students' plagiarism as this can help tutors prevent students from plagiarizing in the future. The following questions have been posed to address the main goals:

1. What concepts do students associate with plagiarism?
2. What are the instances (if any) when plagiarism is considered acceptable by the students?
3. How serious is the act of plagiarizing in students' understanding?

A questionnaire has been created in order to answer the research questions. It consists of 10 questions which could be grouped in two parts. The purpose of the first was to determine what students know about plagiarism, whereas the second to understand their attitude towards this act. 57 participants took the questionnaire: 35 students were first cycle students (hereafter, BA students), and the remaining 22 students were second cycle students (hereafter, MA students).

The first question of the questionnaire aimed to establish what plagiarism is in the respondents' opinion. The students were invited to write down their understanding of this concept. While analysing the answers it was possible to draw the semantic field of the students' perception of the act of plagiarizing. Consequently, the most frequent actions BA students thought the act implied were: copying (32%), using (22%), and taking (16%). The MA students' beliefs were that plagiarizing involves copying (29%), presenting (18%), stealing (15%), using (13%), and taking (11%).

We can see that both BA and MA students understand that plagiarizing means producing something so that it is the same as an original piece of work. It also involves taking advantage of the fact that information can be easily accessed and there is little chance of being caught, and finally it means removing something without permission. It is interesting to note that a considerable number of MA students used even a more concrete action, i.e. that of stealing, which highlights their understanding of taking something without the permission or knowledge of the owner and keep it. Although on the whole students seem to understand that plagiarizing is wrong, they appear to diminish the gravity of such an act. The results also revealed a disturbing fact. Some of the students tend to plagiarize even when asked to state their own opinion. Thus, 5 BA and 2 MA students are believed to have copied their answers from the Internet.

In the second question, we wanted to find out when and what the students learned about plagiarism. This information might help draw certain conclusions regarding the students' tendency to reduce the seriousness of plagiarism. Thus the BA students admitted that they learned about plagiarism at the university (43%) and at school (37%). The MA students claimed the same thing, yet 64% of the respondents learned about it at the university, whereas 32% at school. The results seem to indicate that students learn quite late about plagiarism. And if the act has not been punished in their experience, they tend to believe that there is nothing wrong in doing so.

The third question aimed to determine whether or not plagiarism can be accepted by students for academic purposes. 63% of BA students and 59% of MA students said that plagiarism cannot be accepted. The others thought that it can be accepted under certain conditions. Upon analysis, the students' answers reflect their lack of proper understanding of what plagiarism is. For example, one of the most commonly encountered justification was that one can plagiarize if he/she mentions the source. Such answers appear to emphasize that students do not know what plagiarism is at all.

In the fourth question the students were asked to name the cases when they plagiarize. 37% of BA students admitted that they do so when they do not know what knowledge they should contribute. 23% admitted that whenever they are asked to write essays/reports/analyses, they turn to plagiarism. 9% said they plagiarize in various academic subjects. 11% claimed they do so when they can. Only 8% of the respondents said they never plagiarize.

When it comes to MA students, the results seem to be more encouraging as 28% claimed they never plagiarize. Yet, just like in the analysis above, when the students do not know what knowledge to tell/transform, they plagiarize (24%). With MA students it was quite difficult to understand what exactly they wanted to say. Thus 24% could not produce a concrete answer to this question. On the whole, we could say that the students' answers are disturbing as they appear to indicate that students approach writing for academic purposes superficially.

The fifth question aimed to unveil the students' writing habits. The results were supposed to reflect either what process is involved in writing for academic purposes or what strategies students use while writing. Yet, the results seem to indicate that the respondents misperceive the concept of writing with that of conducting research. Thus, 54% of BA students and 32% of MA students claimed that they write by reading, an answer which could suggest that they are more likely to plagiarize. Yet, some of the respondents wrote some of the strategies they use while writing. Thus, 8% of BA students and 23% of MA students quote; 17% of BA students and 18% of MA students paraphrase. There were cases where the students stated that they consult their teacher while writing (6% of BA students and 9% of MA students). However, there were students who could not produce clear answers to the questions (9% BA students and 18% MA students). 6% of BA students admitted to plagiarizing while writing, i.e. they consider it as an appropriate strategy to be used in the process of writing for academic purposes.

The purpose of the second part of the questionnaire was to elucidate the students' attitudes towards plagiarism and what actions they would most probably take to avoid it. Thus in Question 6 students were asked to state to what degree they agreed with the statement 'Plagiarism is unacceptable in an academic environment'. 66% of BA students and 38% of MA student agreed with this statement. It appears that MA students are more aware of the gravity of plagiarism as 43% of MA students strongly agreed with the statement whereas only 14% of the BA students did so. The percentage of those who are undecided or disagree is more or less the same for both BA and MA students (11% BA vs 9% MA – undecided; 9% BA vs 10% MA – disagreed).

Question 7 aimed to determine the students' attitude towards what extent plagiarism is difficult to avoid. Thus, 67% of BA students and 48% of MA students agreed that plagiarism is difficult to avoid. Whereas 3% of BA students and 9% of MA students strongly agreed with the statement. 14% of BA students and 29% of MA students disagreed with the statement. Only 11% of BA students and 14% of MA students strongly disagreed with the statement. Such answers are disturbing as they seem to indicate students' lack of clear understanding of what plagiarism is and of how serious the act itself is.

The answers to the 8th question seem to reflect the students' value of honesty. They were asked to state to what degree they agree to the following statement: 'I don't see anything wrong in plagiarizing if I don't get caught'. Although there was quite an impressive number of undecided students (26% BA and 20% MA), on the whole the students seem to disagree (49% BA and 40% MA) and to strongly disagree (11% BA and 30% MA). Yet, 11% of BA students and 10% of MA students agreed with the statement. Moreover, there were 3% among BA students who strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 9 aimed to elicit how often (if ever) students plagiarize. A disturbing 54% of BA students and 70% of MA students admitted to have seldom plagiarized. Only 12% of BA students and 20% of MS students claimed they never plagiarize. There were students who acknowledged that they usually plagiarize (3% BA and 5% MA) or that they plagiarize about half of the time (31% BA and 5% MA). The results are discouraging as they appear to reflect the students' lack of academic integrity although they understand that plagiarizing is wrong.

Due to the easiness of accessing a variety of materials on the Internet, the 10th question aimed to determine how often (if ever) students plagiarize from the Internet. The hypothesis that students tend to turn to the Internet in order to plagiarize seems to be confirmed by the answers the respondents gave. Thus, 43% of BA students and 57% of MA students admitted that they seldom plagiarize from the Internet as compared to 8% of BA students and 14% of MA students who stated they never plagiarize from the Internet. However, 29% of BA students and 15% of MA students said that they usually plagiarize from the Internet. The remaining number of students admitted to doing so about half of the time. These answers are also quite disturbing as they appear to indicate that the easier it is to plagiarize the more likely the students are to do so. It seems that writing has turned into an effortless process of copy-pasting something from the Internet.

On analysis, we can state that students' understanding of plagiarism is rather hectic. They cannot properly define what plagiarism is and what it is not. The majority of the respondents do not see anything wrong in 'taking', 'using', and 'copying'. The very fact that they give sometimes contradictory answers seems to reflect their misperception of plagiarism. Moreover, it seems that very few are aware of the gravity of such an act.

It appears that they learn about plagiarism quite late, whereas what they learnt seems to be quite difficult for them to define. That is why it should become a priority to raise the students' awareness of plagiarism at an early stage. The moment they are asked to prepare some additional information on a particular subject, the teacher should explain what exactly is expected from the students. It may also be the case of establishing a set of rules together with the students, e.g. a list of dos and don'ts while writing the assigned task.

The fact that students tend to justify their act of plagiarizing instead of looking for ways to avoid it may be due to their misperception of plagiarism. Another reason could be found in the fact that very often students might not know what exactly they are expected to produce. They might be confused not knowing how they can contribute to the already existing knowledge.

The results also seem to indicate that the Internet is a source of plagiarism among students. Having the possibility to easily access the needed information, the students see nothing wrong in 'taking', 'using', and 'copying'. We could assume that the very fact that it is online seems to give the students the belief that they have more right to plagiarize. The information is in open access, there is no one to trace their wrong-doing. In addition, another disturbing tendency has surfaced: students seem to look for easy ways of writing for academic purposes. They do not want to put any additional mental effort into the process of writing, which is extremely complex and sometimes time consuming.

On the positive side, it appears MA students seem to be a little bit more aware of the gravity of plagiarism than BA students are. This confirms the assumption that the earlier students understand what plagiarism is and what it is not the less likely students are to plagiarize.

In conclusion, we could state that while raising awareness of plagiarism the emphasis should not be primarily put on criminalising the act, but rather on satisfaction one gets in creating something original. Students should be encouraged not to be afraid to state their own points of view provided they give strong arguments. While relying on someone else's opinion the students should give the reference immediately. There is absolutely nothing wrong in quoting or paraphrasing as long as the proper citation is given. Teachers should also emphasize the role of such strategies, thus helping students acquire their own authorial voice. Indeed, while quoting or paraphrasing, what students are actually doing is providing arguments to their opinions and beliefs.

Another important suggestion would be to give the necessary explanations to the students as to what exactly they are supposed to produce. It would be good if students had feedback, which is extremely valuable. Students tend to erroneously believe that writing is a one-way-direction communication process. Not being given immediate feedback might make students disregard the process of writing for academic purposes.

Finally, students should understand the essence of academic writing. They are to be helped to distinguish the two fundamental processes in their academic development: conducting research and writing a research paper. These two notions are sometimes used interchangeably by the students. The very fact that extensive reading equals conducting research in the students' opinion might also be a reason why they plagiarize. That is why it is paramount to help students understand the differences and similarities of the two processes, but above all, how one complements the other.

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