

## **Understanding Plagiarism from the Lens of First Year Tertiary Level Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research assesses the understanding of plagiarism among first year Malaysian university students. The assessment is crucial to chart future directions in promoting good academic practices and academic integrity among the first year university students at the initial stage of their university academic journey. Specifically, the research objectives are to determine the extent of first year students' understanding of plagiarism in identifying plagiarism and non-plagiarism acts. Data collection involved administration of a quantitative survey among first year university students via purposive sampling. The findings present a lack of understanding of fundamental concepts of plagiarism among first year university students. In particular, the first year students displayed ambiguity in distinguishing between plagiarism and non-plagiarism acts. The implications of the findings call for the attention of university management, educators, and students towards the implementation of necessary policy priorities in inculcating and sustaining good academic practices among university students.

*Keywords:* Academic practices, academic integrity, first year students, higher education, plagiarism, tertiary level

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Malaysia, plagiarism in higher education is an activity that is not given serious consideration (Ali, Ismail, & Tan, 2012) although most universities have their own

academic integrity policies in place for the purpose of deterrence and punishment. Furthermore, Al-Shaibani, Mahfoodh, and Husain (2016) stressed that forms of plagiarism were not deeply examined nor clearly defined in Asian, African and Western context. Generally, plagiarism occurs in every aspect of our daily life and it occurs intentionally and, in some instances, unintentionally. As mentioned by Selemani, Chawinga and Dube (2018), there was high prevalence of plagiarism,

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cheating and other forms of academic misconduct in higher education institutions. Generally, plagiarism is viewed as copying without acknowledging the original source. However, viewing through the lens of academia, academic plagiarism is considered an equivalent of academic crime. Numerous studies in relevant literature (Clegg & Flint, 2006; Manjet, 2015a; Thompson, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009; Zangenehmadar, Tan, Abdullah, & Yong, 2015), have indicated that plagiarism is rampant in academia and it is a kind of academic dishonesty that is currently on the rise. Analysing the issue further, a general definition provided by Ooi, Sarjit, and Fauziah (2012), and Park (2003) asserts that plagiarism involves literary theft, stealing (by copying) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one's own without acknowledging the source. It is very crucial that this notion of plagiarism is understood by every academic community member. Notably, it is the responsibility of members of the academia to initiate the eradication of it at some point of time and place. Hence, at the tertiary level, the views of first year students on plagiarism would be a crucial first step towards further deliberation. This will make clear to the relevant authority the readiness of first year tertiary level students to engage in good academic practices, sustain those practices throughout their study period, and curb opportunities for academic dishonesty to flourish.

Much research mulls over plagiarism in the context of Anglophone countries, but there is little known about the understanding

of plagiarism among university students (Smith, Ghazali & Minhad, 2007) especially first year students in the context of Malaysian tertiary level institutions. Hence, this study is positioned to look into the understanding of plagiarism among first year Malaysian tertiary level students. Firstly, it is essential to detect the awareness of academic plagiarism among this group of students. Secondly, identifying the understanding of plagiarism from the lens of first year tertiary level students, relevant university authorities can initiate measures to propagate healthy academic practices that include awareness creation. At the same time, the relevant authorities can impose measures to curb and penalise academic plagiarism. The direct effect of these measures will be the practice of healthy academic practices at the initial stages of one's higher education journey. This will foster a certain extent of sustainable progressive decline in academic plagiarism among university students as they gradually progress from undergraduates to postgraduates.

### **Related Literature**

Many studies (Clegg & Flint, 2006; Devlin & Gray, 2007; O'Donoghue, 1996; Park, 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Thompson, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009) have documented empirical findings on plagiarism committed by university students, particularly in American, British, and Australian contexts. Furthermore, the key contributing understanding of various elements underlying plagiarism in Malaysian based studies may differ in perspectives compared

to the studies found in certain Anglophone countries. In this vein, Smith et al. (2007) pointed out that the differences in the studies were typically contextual, cultural and religious. Their empirical findings indicate the differences influence how plagiarism is viewed in the Malaysian context. In the context of Malaysian higher education, plagiarism, especially academic plagiarism is an issue that has come into the limelight only recently as the universities have started acknowledging that academia is being tainted with acts of plagiarism that go undetected and unpunished. This has led to the setting up of academic integrity policies to curb plagiarism and penalise plagiarisers (Zangenehmadar et al., 2015). For example, the university under study has set up an Academic Integrity Unit (AIU) as a base to look into the matters pertaining to plagiarism among its students.

#### **Meaning and Context of Plagiarism.**

According to the plagiarism policy at the university under study, academic integrity is at stake if plagiarism occurs in relation to published and unpublished ideas, writings, works or inventions of others in written or other medium as one's own original intellectual endeavours without clear acknowledgement or reference of an author or source. The policy on plagiarism by a particular research university in Malaysia, USM Policy on Plagiarism (2013) defines plagiarism as the act of presenting, quoting, copying, paraphrasing or passing off ideas, images, processes, works, data, own words

or those of other people or sources without proper acknowledgement, reference or quotation to the original source(s).

The acts of plagiarism include but are not limited to the following:

- (a) Quoting verbatim (word for word replication of) the work of other people.
- (b) Paraphrasing another person's work by changing some of the words, or the order of the words, without due acknowledgement of the source(s).
- (c) Submitting another person's work in whole or part as one's own.
- (d) Auto plagiarising or self-plagiarising one's own previous work or work that has already been submitted for assessment or for any other academic award and pass it as a new creation without citing the original content.
- (e) Insufficient or misleading referencing of the source(s) that would enable the reader to check whether any particular work has indeed been cited accurately and/or fairly and thus, identify the original writer's particular contribution in the work submitted.

This definition provided by the institution contributes to the fact that apart from plagiarism occurring intentionally; it can also occur unintentionally whereby it is still considered by many to be plagiarism.

### **The Nature of Plagiarism by Students.**

Studies by Angelil-Carter (2000), and Lillis and Turner (2001) have brought factors like time management, lack of confidence and misunderstanding of conventions into the limelight. Yeo (2007) also emphasised the apparent lack of seriousness with which undergraduate students perceive plagiarism as a type of misdemeanour.

In the present nearing fourth industrial revolution, digital revolution in information technology has contributed to the increase of digital-based plagiarism. For example, Batane (2010), found that the easy access to information via Internet was perceived to have contributed to higher level of plagiarism among students. This construes plagiarism as pandemic that is technology led and has brought an increase in the prevalence of plagiarism and also its visibility. As indicated by Smith, Ghazali, and Minhad (2007), and Yeo (2007), the internet's revolution has given access to full-text databases and World Wide Web pages for students' reference. The setback is the misuse of this information for the purpose of cut-and-paste tendency and the purchasing of online material for self-use without acknowledging the original source. Meanwhile, plagiarism is also paired with causes such as laziness, lack of language proficiency especially English, desperation in meeting deadlines. In this context, internet sources have become life saviours for many plagiarists (Chien, 2017).

Focusing on tactics of plagiarism, Brandt (2002), and Wilhoit (1994) emphasised that student plagiarism occurred via four avenues.

Firstly, students stole material from other sources and claimed as their own. Next, students claimed work done by someone else as their own. Thirdly, students copied sections of material from one or more source texts. This action is supported with the provision of supporting documentation (including the full reference) but with the quotation marks omitted. This action gives an impression that the material has been paraphrased rather than directly quoted. Lastly, students paraphrased information from source texts without providing the required documentation.

Higher education institutions provide academic handbook once, at the beginning of an undergraduate student's academic life. This handbook contains the necessary information on academic integrity policy. However, based on a study by Gourlay (2006), the information lacks visibility as first year students are not made aware of the importance of the information. In addition, the effectiveness of booklets on plagiarism provided to the students is also questionable. Lillis (2001) claimed that when students experience transition from the school or college to the university, there was a great concurrent transformation and escalation of expectations in terms of academic writing. However, the students are not formally inducted to integrate the expected academic writing norms in their work. These students struggle through trial and error to conform to the writing expectations. As indicated by Lillis (2001), this is an 'institutional practice of mystery' or the failure of the institution to teach the students the conventions of

literacy practice expected of the students. This indicates that further academic support is needed as dissemination of information is not sufficient and effective in creating understanding and getting the students to be involved in developing good academic writing practices.

**Understanding of Plagiarism from the Cultural Lens.** The learning culture within which plagiarism activities occur is also another cause of concern. Further deliberation of mismatch in the understanding of plagiarism's conception leads to a question: to what extent is a universal definition of plagiarism applicable to every context, country and ideology? Different learning cultures among students have given rise to different interpretations of plagiarism. Are the learners in the east (geographical location of the study) imposed by the Western definition of plagiarism? For example, drawing a line between an academic act not considered as plagiarism in the Confucius Heritage academic culture, however, is considered as a plagiarism act based on the Western definition as the practices are not in accordance with the western academic conventions. Majority of studies (McDonnell, 2004; Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005) have reported that many students who come from countries other than United Kingdom or United States have displayed different kinds of understanding towards the meaning of plagiarism as well as its importance in various academic circles.

McDonnell (2004), Pennycook (1996), and Sowden (2005) indicated that in the context of different learning cultures, the differences in learning modes in the far East and among East Asian international students (Zobel & Hamilton, 2002), notably the emphasis on memorization, and the importance of mastering the text contributed to culture-based notions of plagiarism. Pennycook (1996) concluded that plagiarism must be considered in its specific context in regard to the cultural and educational differences and how it could influence students' perception of text and ownership and consequently their textual borrowing strategies. Later, Ashworth, Freewood, and Macdonald (2003) and O'Donoghue (1996) concurred with Pennycook's views. Ashworth et al. (2003) asserted that the academia should not be intrigued if students from different cultural backgrounds were puzzled at not being allowed to include texts from accepted sources in their assignments:

*. . . plagiarism can be seen to be part of a particular cultural configuration [which] assumes . . . the individual ownership of work; personal ownership, creativity or originality, and the view that knowledge has a history; and past authors must be acknowledged. All these things are . . . implicated in a certain western modernist episteme.*

Majority of studies have also concluded that students of different cultures have different understandings of plagiarism (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Introna, Hayes,

Blair, & Wood, 2003; McGowan & Lightbody, 2008). In many cases, the practices of different learning styles in Asian teaching and learning cultures creates confusion among students on the concept of plagiarism as well as its application. Such misunderstanding might get them to deliberately practice unacceptable writing practices, which can affect their academic performance. Furthermore, the concept of plagiarism in academia is ambiguous among westerners themselves, thus it could be even more confusing among non-western learners overall. It is undoubtedly a daunting task for these learners who are strangers to the western principles, standards, and values to embrace the concept of plagiarism. The understanding of plagiarism from varying cultural lens may also provide evidence that an activity such as copying the work of expert authorities is acceptable in certain cultures. For example, in many Asian learning cultures, it is a trend to apply verbatim reproduction of scholars' work for knowledge sharing (Sowden, 2005).

Sowden (2005) highlighted that memorisation and regurgitation of original ideas were encouraged among Chinese students to show respect towards the authorities and great scholars. Swoden's findings help draw a clearer picture that in China, it is considered appropriate to use traditional philosophers' ideas without citation as these are considered a part of common knowledge. A vast difference in how learning occurs in the Asian (Chinese) and Western context can be partly due to the Chinese cultural values that priorities

the acceptance of authorities' ideas without arguments. The differences on how academic conventions are practiced indicated a strong learning cultural influence. Earlier on Introna et al. (2003) stated that memorisation and rote learning were not appreciated in the Western countries. These activities are argued to promote superficial learning. On the contrary, memorisation and rote learning are actively practiced in the Asian context. Devlin and Gray (2007) further added that language was a barrier for non-native speakers of the English language. Lack of proficiency in the English language hinders students' ability to paraphrase or improve on the wordings based on original sources. More recently, Zafarghandi, Khoshroo, and Barkat (2012) also asserted the pervasiveness of plagiarism among Iranian EFL Master's students in universities in Iran. According to them, this phenomenon occurred due to a lack of understanding of the different forms of plagiarism.

Other researchers such as Maxwell, Curtis and Vardanega (2006) did not indicate any differences between the Australian and Asian undergraduate students in two Australian universities in their perceived seriousness or understanding of plagiarism. Students of both groups identified purloining (copying another person's assignment without knowledge) and verbatim copying as plagiarism but less than one third of the students perceived direct quotations passed off as paraphrase as an act of plagiarism. Later, Maxwell, Curtis, and Vardanega (2008) asserted that students who perceived plagiarism as not a serious academic

misconduct were more likely to plagiarise. Citing Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) rational-choice theories, Maxwell et al. (2008) indicated students' perception of plagiarism based on the notion that their behaviour and moral evaluations of a situation tended to go hand in hand. This notion foregrounds the mismatch in terms of how academic practices are perceived. An act of plagiarism within the Western context is not perceived similarly in the Asian context. Therefore, a universal definition of plagiarism cannot be applicable to every context, country and ideology.

**Plagiarism in Malaysian Context.** The prevalence of discussion on academic integrity in the Malaysian education system is not prioritised. Therefore, the lack of information disseminated on academic integrity within academia, is an indirect contributor to plagiarism. For example, O'Donoghue's (1996) notion of education culture especially among Malaysian undergraduate students highlights "teacher-centred passive learning" preference. This syndrome has been identified as not encouraging independent learning for the development of academic literacies and research that is needed for academic achievement. Consequently, Rosman, Hassan, Suratman, and Marni (2008) and Yusof and Masrom (2011) argued that Malaysian university students lacked knowledge on plagiarism. There is also indication of failure among the students in making good sense of information relating to plagiarism. This situation occurs

perpetually, despite the students being provided information relating to plagiarism. Furthermore, the students may not be aware that there are many different levels of plagiarism. However, Rosman et al. (2008) stated the respondents in their study showed low frequency of plagiarising although their understanding of the concept was vague.

Later, Ali et al. (2012) argued that one of the drawbacks of the limited understanding of plagiarism was that the concept of plagiarism itself had different meanings based on different contexts. This was also earlier substantiated by Ercegovac and Richardson (2004). Ali et al. (2012) further added that the concept needed to be clarified among Malaysian university students in its context. The dissemination of information should be positioned through seminars, campaigns, and during lectures or practical sessions. This approach will provide an avenue for the students to grasp the importance of academic integrity.

Another study (Smith et al., 2007) contradicts with Rosman et al. (2008). Smith et al. indicated that undergraduates in a Malaysian university were not fearful of being caught for not acknowledging the source of their academic work. The students were of the perception that the lecturers could not or would not successfully identify incidences of plagiarism. Additionally, there was no mutual consensus among the students of what constituted plagiarism, the penalties for plagiarising and adhering to procedures for citation and author acknowledgement.

Meanwhile Ahmad, Mansourizadeh and Ali's (2012) postgraduate respondents in a Malaysian university were found to

be aware that plagiarism is wrong but they could not correctly identify the multiple forms in which plagiarism could occur. The researchers argued that the students need to be taught and exposed to various forms and layers of plagiarism to allow them to know how best to avoid it in their own writing. In another student context, Law, Ting, and Jerome (2013) substantiated that undergraduate students in a Malaysian public university had plagiarised in one way or another in doing their written assignments. Shockingly, these students did not perceive plagiarism as a serious academic misconduct. They viewed the penalty for plagiarism should be warning, counseling and resubmission of the assignment.

**The Necessity of Promoting Academic Integrity.** A definition of academic integrity involves “understanding what it means to be honest in the particular culture of the academic world and being able to apply the scholarly conventions of acknowledgment” (East & Donnelly, 2012). Turner and Beemsterboer (2003) had added the various notions of teaching, learning and the wider academic environment, and described academic integrity as “honesty in all matters relating to endeavours of the academic environment”, which included “the teaching and learning of knowledge, skills, and values and the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge.”

Plagiarism, a symbolic issue of morality, often leads to the creation of codes of academic conduct at educational institutions. These codes are based on

the assumptions that students will directly practice virtuous conduct as members of an academic community and be integrated into the community. In actual academic context, exposure and training to adhere to the genre requirements of academic writing rather is crucial. Students need to be educated on the manner of writing citations, referencing, as well as quoting directly and indirectly. The role of universities is not only one of providing the first-year students a brochure on academic integrity and expecting them to follow the rules and regulations of academic integrity. Universities should integrate academic integrity through student learning tasks. As highlighted by past research (Aluede, Omoregie, & Osa-Edoh, 2006; Burr & King 2012; McCabe, 1993; True, Alexander, & Richman, 2011), universities need to tap on class discussions, syllabi, and course outlines that acknowledge academic integrity as effective channels of facilitating student learning on the subject. Student-faculty relationships and interactions need to be accounted upon to ensure successful learning of ethical guidelines and codes of academic conduct.

Universities’ responsibility to ensure students’ understanding of academic integrity and the viciousness of plagiarism is crucial. In fulfilling the responsibility, research indicates that universities have designed websites to assist students to be better informed to avoid plagiarism. For example, Maxymuk (2006) listed websites of eight universities that guided the lecturers in detecting plagiarism among students, websites of four universities that assisted



students on ways to avoid plagiarism. Apart from that, online tutorial testing to assess students' knowledge of plagiarism is provided by the websites of 11 universities.

This study addressed the need to critically examine the issue of plagiarism among first year Malaysian tertiary level students. This is done by gauging their level of understanding of plagiarism. The significance of this study is that the findings revealed the readiness of this particular group of students in terms of practicing academic integrity at the tertiary level. Therefore, this study answered the following research question:

1. What is the first year Malaysian tertiary level students' understanding of plagiarism?

## **METHODS**

The research question was investigated using data collected from a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire sought to identify Malaysian first year tertiary level students' understanding of plagiarism. The participants comprised of first year students pursuing Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science programmes at a Malaysian public university in the academic session 2016-2017. These students gained entry to the university by three different means of enrollment that takes into consideration the matriculation, high school, or diploma route. Through purposive sampling, data was collected from a total of 1281 first year students comprising of 346 (27.01%) male students and 935 (72.99%) female students at the main campus of the university.

Marshall and Garry's (2006) survey questionnaire in the English language was adapted for the purpose of this research. Firstly, the questionnaire elicited demographic information from the respondents. Secondly, the respondents responded to 15 four-point Likert Scale items. These items tested the respondents' understanding of plagiarism by having them indicate their view of possible behaviours that constitute plagiarism or non-plagiarism acts.

The questionnaire was administered among the first year university students during the orientation programme at a main hall located at the university's main campus. The students were briefed by the researcher on the objectives of the study and the duration to complete the questionnaire (15 minutes). The students were also informed that their participation in the study is voluntary.

## **RESULTS**

First year university students' feedback offered insights that are valuable to identify their understanding of plagiarism. Student responses to the Likert-scale questionnaire and the mean scores show a good understanding of plagiarism (Table 1). On the contrary, majority of the respondents are ill informed of their academic practices or integrity that constitute plagiarism as reflected in the various aspects investigated. Table 2 highlights some of the respondents' inability to differentiate between academic activities that are not related to plagiarism.

Table 1  
*Plagiarism activities*

Categories of Plagiarism Activities	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	Mean	SD
Copying the words from another source without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	40.3	35.8	15.5	8.5	1.92	0.945
Copying short sentences (less than 50 words) from another source without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	14.8	47.2	31.7	6.4	2.30	0.795
Copying the organisation or structure of another piece of work without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	28.7	41.5	22.7	7.0	2.08	0.889
Copying the ideas from another piece of work without appropriate reference or acknowledgement.	30.3	38.3	23.7	7.7	2.09	0.917
Copying from a website and putting your own words and names into the content of the pages.	35.7	30.4	21.6	12.3	2.11	1.028
Using a published work to identify important secondary citations that make a particular logical argument and then citing only those secondary sources to support your own use of the same logical argument.	9.8	42.2	39.2	8.7	2.47	0.788
Using another piece of work to identify useful secondary citations that you cite in your own work without reading the cited material.	12.8	44.4	36.4	6.4	2.36	0.785
Changing the words of a material from another piece of work and representing it as your own.	19.7	41.7	30.0	8.7	2.28	0.876
Buying a complete piece of work in order to submit it for as your academic work.	36.9	32.1	17.2	13.8	2.08	1.043
Resubmitting an academic work that was submitted in one course for assessment in another course.	22.6	42.4	28.3	6.8	2.19	0.862
Translating an academic work from one language to another and back to the original language.	18.7	46.1	27.6	7.7	2.24	0.844

Scale: 1- Strongly Agree 2- Agree 3- Disagree 4- Strongly Disagree

The findings indicate that the issue of understanding of plagiarism among first year tertiary level students appeared to be very serious at the university under study. The respondents failed to accurately determine the activity that clearly constitutes plagiarism, while the activity that is not plagiarism is perceived otherwise. This observation is an indication that the respondents do not understand basic perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism clearly. As Table 1 suggests, respondents' understanding of

plagiarised work constitutes well in terms of their academic practices with a mean score of 1.92. It is vital to note that 307 (24%) respondents are ignorant to the fact that plagiarism involves copying words from various sources without appropriate citations and references. Similar to that, 38.1% (f = 488) of the respondents assume that copying short sentences comprising of approximately 50 words from other sources without acknowledging is not an act of plagiarism. Surprisingly, majority of the

respondents who comprise 62% of 1281 are aware that such an act of lifting sentences from other sources without adhering to proper referencing underlies academic dishonesty.

A mean score of 2.08 highlights respondents' ability to classify plagiarism as replicating the organisation or structure of a piece of work by complying with adequate referencing format. The findings also showcased that 38.1% or 488 respondents are not well informed of plagiarism being involved in this academic practice. In this context, most respondents (68.6%) labelled the activity of replicating ideas based on another piece of work as plagiarism but 31.3% of the students categorised it as a non-plagiarism act. Quite a significant proportion, i.e., 33.9% or 435 respondents considered themselves honest in terms of lifting ideas from a website and using their own words in the content of their work. On the contrary, 66.1% (f = 846) construe this act as plagiarism.

Of the 1281 respondents, 614 (47.9%) of them are in the practise of locating secondary citations from published work, cite these sources in their academic work, and regard it as not a misconduct underlying plagiarism. Nevertheless, 667 (52%) respondents are of the belief that such an act stipulates plagiarism. Similar results indicate 42.8% of the respondents are in the practise of taking the easy route in preparing academic work by using another piece of work to cite relevant secondary sources without reading the materials and perceive this as non-plagiarism. Another

57.2% ( $\bar{x}=2.36$ ) are aware that this is an act of plagiarism.

It is worthy to note that 495 (38.6%) respondents are in the habit of changing the words in a piece of work and promoting it as their own original work but classify this practise as non-plagiarism. A mean score of 2.28 (f = 786) displays students' awareness of this plagiarism act. In addition, 31% (f = 397) of respondents are of the belief that purchasing a piece of related work and submitting it as one's own personal academic work is not equivalent to plagiarism but another 69% are aware that it is plagiarism.

Resubmitting an academic piece of work that was previously submitted in one course for assessment and subsequently in another course is not considered as an act of plagiarism by 35 % (f = 452) of the respondents and on the same issue, 65% (f = 829) are well informed that it is plagiarism. A significant number (f = 452) of respondents translated an academic work from one language to another and back to the original language without being aware that this is an act of plagiarism but a large proportion (f = 829) of respondents classify this practise as plagiarism.

Table 2's sample data highlights the misconception of academic integrity as a significant number of respondents misconstrue non-plagiarism activities as plagiarism. From this sample data, a total of 577 (45%) respondents are of the assumption that copying words from another source with an acknowledgement is considered plagiarism while 704 ( $\bar{x}=$

Table 2  
*Non-plagiarism activities*

Non-Plagiarism Activities	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	Mean	SD
Copying words from another source with an acknowledgement.	12.3	42.7	33.7	11.3	2.44	0.848
Creating a new piece of work structured according to a documentation standard, by referring to existing work of the same type.	12.3	39.2	35.1	13.4	2.50	0.875
Creating a new piece of work on the same theme as an existing one but in a new context and without copying the existing one.	11.5	30.1	36.9	21.5	2.69	0.936
Quoting from an existing piece of work with a reference to the source.	13.5	37.2	33.7	15.5	2.51	0.912

Scale: 1 - Strongly Agree    2 - Agree    3 - Disagree    4 - Strongly Disagree

2.44) respondents are aware that this act does not constitute plagiarism. The trend is noteworthy in relation to nearly an equal proportion of respondents who are of the belief that when an existing work of similar nature is referred to when creating a new piece of work structured according to a documentation standard is plagiarism ( $f = 660$ ) and non-plagiarism ( $f = 621$ ).

On an alarming note, a majority ( $f = 749$ ) of the respondents are of the false notion that plagiarism is committed by creating a new piece of work on the same theme based on an existing one but in a new context without copying the existing one. In this light, 41.6% of the respondents are aware that this act does not liable them to plagiarism. Meanwhile, 49.2% of the respondents are of the misperception that quoting from an existing piece of work with a reference to the source is labelled as plagiarism. However, 50.7% ( $f = 650$ ) of the respondents are aware that quoting from an existing piece of work with a reference to the source is not an act of plagiarism.

## DISCUSSION

There is growing literature on the views of students concerning plagiarism, but few have unveiled first year Malaysian tertiary level students' views in relation to their genre of work that constitute plagiarism. This study sought to examine the understanding of plagiarism among first year tertiary level students. Generally, the findings of this study are multifaceted. For one, this study highlights that the students only showcase many of the beliefs commonly reported in the literature.

The findings provide data-driven support that majority of the students were unaware of various academic acts that reflect the characteristics of plagiarism. In particular, this finding aligns with other studies which state that tertiary level students were not aware that certain activities which they considered as non-plagiarism actually constitute some form of plagiarism and otherwise (McCabe, 2006; Manjet, 2015b; Yeo, 2007). Based on the extensive

discussion of various scholars' views concerning the occurrence of plagiarism from diverse cultural perspectives, an act of plagiarism within the Western context should not be perceived similarly in the Asian context. Therefore, the findings stress that a universal definition of plagiarism cannot be applicable to every context, country and ideology. On the contrary, a study by Maxwell et al. (2006) did not indicate any differences between Australian and Asian undergraduate students in two Australian universities in their perceived seriousness or understanding of plagiarism. Students of both groups identified purloining (copying another person's assignment without knowledge) and verbatim copying as plagiarism but less than one third of the students perceived direct quotations passed off as paraphrase as plagiarism. In this context, it is justifiable that the understanding of plagiarism's conception can differ across cultures, ideology, and country. An education system value laden with cultural values of the dominant society of a particular country influences the teaching and learning experiences a learner is exposed to and expected to follow. This practice will directly have an impact on how academic honesty is managed by the learner in academia.

Furthermore, the findings also positioned the fact that students were ignorant of plagiarism involving copying words from various sources without appropriate citations and references. This could be argued that in Asian learning cultures, it is a trend to apply verbatim re-production of scholars' work

for knowledge sharing. Another significant fact highlighted is lecturers cannot and will not successfully identify incidence of plagiarism. This is in tandem with the result of Smith et al.'s (2007) study. Such student viewpoint gives the students an avenue to plagiarise. The implication is that lecturers should acknowledge that they have a very important role as an educator and punisher if the students plagiarise.

To further compound this issue, quite a significant proportion of students confessed in contradicting to academic integrity in terms of lifting ideas from a website and using their own words in the content of their work. In the western context, Breen and Maassen (2005) condemned this act as internet-related academic dishonesty which tarnished the academia's image and imposed an urgency to address it. This finding also concurs with Manjet (2015b) where she reiterated that Malaysian university students were unaware of the degree of seriousness when indulging in activities that were aligned to plagiarism and internet-related academic dishonesty which tarnished the academia's image.

In this study, findings also revealed that quite a number of students replicated ideas based on another piece of work and this could be due to a lack of understanding of plagiarism which will eventually lead to an increase in the copy and paste activities in academic work as the students' progress through their academic study. As noted earlier by Belcher (2006), this activity is due to the convenience of website references that result in students neglecting the conventions

of acknowledging sources. Manjet (2015a) further expanded on this issue in her study on academic writing challenges faced by international graduate students that students tended to divert towards copy and paste syndrome to complete their written assignment due to a mismatch with the present institutionally accepted codes and conventions in academic writing when they were from different academic literacy backgrounds. Hence, first year students need proper education on the nuances of plagiarism in order to prevent misperceptions of what plagiarism is and deter plagiarism from becoming an academic routine.

The findings on students purchasing a piece of related work from ghost writers and submitting as one's own personal academic work conforms to Babalola's (2012) research. It was identified that students resort to this act when they had the purchasing power although they were aware that this act was academic cheating. There is also the probability of peer pressure and social identity where students are in the scramble to compete with one another and thus, are willing to sacrifice academic integrity. Indirectly, students take pride in academic dishonesty by sacrificing integrity for the gain of good grades in their academic work. As De Jager and Brown (2010) argued, the complexity of plagiarism was built upon several varying behaviours. These behaviours ranged from deliberate dishonesty or negligence to ignorance of the understanding of plagiarism.

First year university students in Malaysia are exposed to the concept of plagiarism when they enter tertiary level institutions and have hardly any knowledge on plagiarism prior to that. The results of this study reflect the need for academic integrity education as a significant number of students misconstrue non-plagiarism activities as plagiarism. The results of this study provide some evidence to suggest the ambiguity of plagiarism acts among students. Thus, first year students' ignorance of plagiarism can be addressed by facilitating introduction courses on plagiarism in their university's orientation programme. Furthermore, the severity of plagiarism needs to be stressed to first year Malaysian university students as they will be immersed in academic practices for a long period such as three to four years. In relation to this, academic practices need to be performed with integrity. If enforcement is not put into place, plagiarism activities in academia will continue to flourish. To further reiterate the lackadaisical attitude of students, according to Law et al. (2013), undergraduates in a Malaysian public university did not perceive plagiarism as a serious academic misconduct and believed that the penalty for plagiarism should be lenient such as warning, counseling and resubmission of the assignment. In this context, plagiarism might take the form of being a cultural norm or value in Malaysian higher education if not immediately eradicated.

The results show that, in general, a great proportion of first year students still have a superficial understanding on plagiarism.

Students are unaware that there are many tiers to plagiarism and there is a need to ground their understanding that is vital in consolidating academic integrity of higher education institutions. The stance should be to educate and support this group of students. In this context, lecturers should stress the importance of academic integrity and should educate the students on the importance of maintaining academic integrity in their academic practices. However, if this stance fails, tertiary level institutions need to look into appropriate disciplinary measures.

### **Recommendations**

Educating the students on understanding the scope of plagiarism, prevention and good academic integrity practices are crucial to ensure that newcomers to the university do not fall into the trap of committing acts of plagiarism. As indicated by Smith et al. (2007), electronic means of detection can also be used in an educative role to demonstrate the meaning and extent of plagiarism. Furthermore, the Academic Integrity Unit at the universities should also perform an educative role to ensure the lecturers are educated on plagiarism detection. Parallel to universities' role, plagiarism-oriented training should also be emphasised among lecturers so that they are able to deal with those suspected of plagiarism. It is possible that such measures provide indication to the students that plagiarism is detectable and punishable. In addition, further research should look into the implementation of academic integrity

education, the responsible stakeholders involved in dissemination of information and the handling of plagiarism cases.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study presents crucially revealing insights on the understanding of plagiarism among first year tertiary level students and the need for institutional policy and practices to deal with academic integrity-based issues. The results have given rise to the urgency in increasing education efforts to raise awareness of first year students about plagiarism and the measures that need to be undertaken in deterring the violation of integrity expectations in academic work. It should be noted that the study was limited to the participation of one institution only, and the respondents are not necessarily representative of the overall population. Future considerations of this study will aim at increasing generalisability by taking into consideration participants from a greater number of institutions. Optimistically, future studies should also take into consideration comparative studies to investigate the differences in understanding of plagiarism among tertiary level students of different years such as freshmen, sophomores, junior and senior university students. In relation to mixed method research design, further research involving qualitative methodology such as interviews should be considered to understand the students' views of plagiarism. This is because the empirical findings on plagiarism in this study are predominantly based on the participants'

response to standard instrument. This method may unlikely reveal very clear underlying motivations involved among the participants. In conclusion, academic integrity educational strategies and robust enforcement measures for breaches of academic integrity standards (Curtis & Vardanega, 2016) should be integrated by the university and lecturers to deliver a stern message to the students on the adverse consequences of plagiarism.

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