International postgraduate students' experiences of plagiarism education in the UK: student, tutor and expert perspectives.

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Abstract

Many studies have confirmed that learning to use sources is difficult, confusing and takes a long time, especially for international students who are likely to have learnt different academic conventions to those expected in Anglophone universities (Braine, 2002). Reports of problems with plagiarism seem to be particularly prevalent among international postgraduates (Pecorari, 2002), perhaps due to the necessity for them to adapt quickly to new rules about using sources (McGowan, 2005), and a lack of pedagogical support (Murray and Kirton, 2006). There is a growing focus on plagiarism education, as a key area of learning, not just what not to do, but also about good practice, gradual development of academic literacy and a discussion of the grey areas of plagiarism (Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Howard, 2008). However, to date, few case studies are available of the experiences of plagiarism education of international postgraduate students. Therefore, this study focuses on a number of international students from Asia and North Africa who took a year-long Pre-Master's programme of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), followed by a Master's degree at a UK university. The student participants were interviewed at the end of these 2 years of study, and their comments were used to analyse their awareness and knowledge of source use, and the strategies they were employing based on their learning. Interviews were also made with the tutors on the students' postgraduate programmes, and with plagiarism education experts, for further insights into student experiences.

In the interviews, the student participants reported some difficulty understanding the university's definition of plagiarism, while tutors either had a positive view or noticed different problems with it, compared to the students' views. Students reported how they attempted to follow their tutors' instructions with source use, but the requirements set by tutors for the students' level of source use seem very high. Some students reported that teaching and support related to source use were limited on their Master's programmes, and that they continued to have many concerns about plagiarism, especially at dissertation time. On the other hand, the views of the postgraduate tutors varied, as some felt it was not their responsibility to teach sources or that they did not have time to do so, while others said that they gave considerable support to students about source use. Tutors noted some reasons why they connected international students with plagiarism. The plagiarism education experts acknowledged the problems of time and resources, but also called for more pedagogical support, greater focus on learning, acknowledgement of the wider context of plagiarism education, and the need to look creatively for ways of dealing with the problem.

The implications of this study are that international students may not achieve the understanding, awareness and skills in source use required at Master's level. Their experiences of plagiarism education may also not match those expected by their tutors, and the support they receive seems to vary. Thus, the study calls for more attention to the international student experience of plagiarism education throughout the whole learning process.

Keywords: plagiarism education, international postgraduate students

Introduction

Many studies have confirmed that learning to use sources is difficult, confusing and takes a long time, especially for international students, who are likely to have learnt different academic conventions to those expected in Anglophone universities (Braine, 2002). Problems with plagiarism seem to be particularly prevalent among international postgraduates (Pecorari, 2002) perhaps due to the necessity to adapt quickly to new rules about using sources (McGowan, 2005), and a lack of pedagogical support (Murray and Kirton, 2006). In addition, there is also the perception that international students both plagiarise more, and are more likely to be caught (Bennett, 2005). This seems to be particularly the case when the student's discourse style changes to one with a more expert or native-like fluency (Bull et al, 2001).

In this context of problems with plagiarism and international students, Carroll (2007) has drawn attention to the effectiveness of a much more holistic approach to plagiarism, to get away from a 'catch and punish' response. This approach can be seen as plagiarism education, in which there is a focus on learning, not just what not to do, but also about good practice, gradual development of academic literacy and a discussion of the grey areas of plagiarism (Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Howard, 2008). Research by Pecorari (2003; 2006; 2008) has drawn attention to the complexity of plagiarism, and the fact that it is subject to a wide range of factors that influence international students' ability, such as their linguistic level, educational background, understanding of conventions and confidence with academic literacy. Howard (2008) calls for the pluralising of plagiarism to enable it to become an issue of debate and engagement, rather than an application of university regulations. Other researchers call for a pedagogical approach to plagiarism to be embedded in the curriculum (Eodice, 2008).

As can be seen, a growing body of research is emerging to support the need for plagiarism education. However, as it is a fairly new area of research and practice, to date, few case studies are available of the experiences of plagiarism education of international postgraduate students. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of a group of international postgraduate students at a UK university. For further insights, the study also aims to compare and contextualise their views with those of their tutors, and a number of experts in plagiarism education.

Methodology

The eight student participants in this study were from China, Japan, Sri Lanka and Algeria and took a Pre-Master's programme of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) followed by a Master's degree in business, technology or social science at a UK university. This paper will focus on the interview data at the end of the Master's degree when the student participants

were preparing their dissertations. Interviews were also made with eight tutors on the participants' Master's programmes. Extracts from both student and tutor participant interviews will be analysed related to the following four areas: perceptions of the university definition on plagiarism; tutor requirements related to source use; perceptions of learning and teaching related to plagiarism education; and associations between international students and plagiarism. For anonymity of participants, students will be referred to as S1- S8 and postgraduate tutors as PG1-8. In addition to the student and tutor data, extracts from interviews with four experts in plagiarism education will be used to gain a broader view of current issues. The experts were chosen based on their prolific, prominent and global-reaching research into plagiarism education. These participants agreed to be named in this study: they are Jude Carroll from Oxford Brookes University in the UK, Diane Pecorari from Mälardalen University, Sweden, Rebecca Moore Howard from Syracuse University, USA and Wendy Sutherland-Smith from Deakin University, Australia.

Findings

1. Perceptions of university policy

The definition provided by the university in student programme guides is 'Plagiarism - taking or using another person's thoughts, writings or inventions as your own' (Oxford Brookes University, 2011). In their responses, students indicated that this definition was not very clear to them.

> S1: It didn't mention …what exactly is the plagiarism but it said it's using another's thoughts, actually we do it, in our study, we always [use] people's knowledge, so maybe [it] should write 'you should always reference the authors when you [use] their words'.

> S2: This is not really a good definition because when you [write] something, you should take or use another's sorts of information or writings, but you have to mention who [has] written this and put the full reference.

> S3: Maybe it should add something more… like 'without citation' and mention where is the source from.

> S5: I don't think it's clear because if I make clear citation or reference, so it's not taking or using another person's ideas, the statement of this definition is not plagiarism.

> S7: So every single report or you know, dissertation or essay, must be based on the other people's writing or thoughts so if someone says like this, 'taking or using another person's thoughts, we can't', this means we can't use other person's thoughts, but we have to use [them].

For students, it seems that they expected the definition to say that plagiarism was taking sources 'without citation'. They did not comment about 'as your own' and seem to have overlooked or not to have understood this part of the definition. Several students interpreted this definition to mean that they could not use sources, which indicates a significant problem with the wording of the definition for non-native speaker students. The definition seemed to be presenting them with a dilemma as they knew they had to use sources, but this definition appeared to them to be banning their use.

In great contrast, some of the tutors responded with positive views:

> T1: It's quite simple and it gets through the issue that it's actually perceivable as your own view. I guess it helps to pick up those people who have just cut and pasted and put it in as their own work.

> T3: I have never really thought about it. I quite like it, it is a nice simple one, that covers the range of things that people may think about as plagiarism.

> T4: That seems right to me.

These views from tutors indicate that their perception was that the definition was 'simple' and 'right', while none of the student participants saw it in this way. However, some tutors did take issue with the definition and point out some problems with it, such as aspects they felt were missing:

> T1: I don't think it entirely captures everything, because I think when you think about what is happening on there, I think there is a suggestion that something is morally wrong, which is often what lies behind everybody's tension about the whole idea of plagiarism is that there is an intention to do something This is a sanitized version of plagiarism, because plagiarism, as I would understand, a dictionary definition of it would be something where there was a conscious intent or conscious knowledge of what one was doing.

> T2: I think there needs to be a distinguishing between deliberate and non-deliberate, accidental plagiarism.

> T5: There would need to be examples given to follow on from that.

> T7: Do you know what, something that stands out for me, and it's never ever made me realise it, that it's got 'another person's', as if taking from a group's 'thoughts, writings and inventions' isn't so much of an issue.

Thus, tutors highlighted the need for the definition to take in the factors of group authors, the intention to plagiarise and some examples to explain it. However, none of the tutors suggested including 'without citation', as the students did. One word in the definition was picked out by the tutors, which was 'inventions':

T1: The use of the word 'inventions' is obviously difficult…, because we are not in an environment where we are using inventions.

T2: International students may question 'inventions'.

T5: [international students] might find 'inventions' a little bit, 'what does inventions mean?'

T7: I think for students… working in sciences or technology, they would understand 'inventions', but would a business school student understand inventions?

Thus, some tutors were concerned about the word 'inventions' because they felt it did not fit the disciplinary environment for business and that international students would not understand it. In fact, some international students also commented that they were unclear about it.

S3: What's the meaning about 'inventions'?

S7: 'Inventions'? Not as clear as 'thoughts and writings'.

The use of the word 'inventions' in the definition thus provoked some concern for both students and tutors, but it seemed more important for the tutors, who tended to examine the definition word by word.

Overall, the concerns of students and tutors regarding the university's plagiarism definition seem to be clearly different. The students were concerned with the dilemma posed by the definition about having to use sources and not being allowed to, and thought 'without citation' needed to be added. Some tutors were happy with the definition, others analysed it linguistically and thought other terms needed to be added such as a group author and the writer's intention, and to change the word 'invention'.

University definitions of plagiarism are clearly important for students' understanding. However, as one of the expert interviewees, Wendy Sutherland-Smith, argues, plagiarism education is about promoting learning beyond regulations:

One of the biggest challenges is the need to reclaim the area of plagiarism education in terms of teaching and learning, and take back that turf in the area of learning and teaching, so to move it out of punitive, punishing wrongdoers, that whole sort of find and catch, detect and punish, carrot and stick kind of thing and take it back to - so what are the students going to learn from this?

In this way, Wendy Sutherland-Smith highlights the need to move away from what students should not do, and look more at what they should do. The next section will focus on what tutors required students to do with sources.

2. Tutor requirements related to students' source use

The student participants pointed out some of the approaches to source use that their tutors required them to take:

> S2: The tutor of this module said he didn't like quotation…he said quotation is not really good, so. He said 'just if you really want to say something from this book, you just try to use your own words, so try not to use quotation', so I didn't use.

> S4: My supervisor required me to do this, to use journal articles as my main source, so I use journal articles as my major source.

> S8: I printed some of journals like that and then I showed them to my tutor, and asked if it was OK to use them, were they credible.

These responses indicate that students tried to follow their tutor's advice and requirements, including their individual preferences, such as 'he didn't like quotation…so I didn't use'. At the same time, the tutor participants were asked about their expectations of the level of source use for students on the programmes:

> T1: We want them to critically evaluate the information they find. To debate issues, and as they progress through the programme, to increase that ability to debate so that when they get to something like the dissertation, they are comfortable with the issue of debating, especially in the literature review, so within that debating, we will be comparing, contrasting different perspectives that writers will have in relation to a theory, a model, about how an organisation has been successful or perhaps why an organisation has failed. Not everyone may agree on those things. So linked also into that is the ability to synthesise information from that pool of resources that they've looked at.

> T5: Our overall expectation at Master's level obviously is that students are using the sources effectively, not copying and pasting these sources in, but using them to develop and build arguments.

> T3: We expect them to use the Harvard referencing system pretty much perfectly, so we pretty much expect that the moment they submit their first proper assessed bit of coursework that they can use the referencing system correctly, that means the whole shebang so if they have made quotes, that they are in quotation marks with page numbers, that references at the end are properly formatted.

These comments indicate that the tutors' expectations of students' ability were very high. They considered students should be able to build their own arguments, use the referencing system perfectly, engage in critical evaluation and debate, and to select and synthesise information. On the demands for international students to use sources at this level, Rebecca Moore Howard gave the following view:

First of all, what we are asking international students to do is ridiculous, it's not possible. Unless there is some way to sort of inject vocabulary into international students, you know, it is not a question of them just knowing the rules, but it is a question of them acquiring the facility with English to allow them to do anything but cut and paste and patchwrite.

Thus, Rebecca Moore Howard's very strong argument makes clear that the requirement to use sources in sophisticated ways is unrealistic, due to the lack of vocabulary of non-native speaker international students. The next section goes on to examine the learning and teaching experiences of students and tutors more generally.

3. Perceptions of learning and teaching within plagiarism education

With regard to the teaching context of plagiarism education, tutors were asked how they taught students about source use and avoiding plagiarism.

T3: We do work during the induction, we do work with the Academic Conduct Officer in the first week of the course, and on one of the modules we do a formative assessment where they get to practise and we correct that.

T5: That's partly done in our induction and partly done in our early Personal Development Planning module as well, and reference guide, Harvard reference guide.

T6: They get a little bit on induction but then we have the research methods module whose sole purpose is to support them through the dissertation process, through the research process. They also take Personal Development and Leadership, in semester 1. That's really focusing on academic literacies and academic inquiry skills.

In these comments, tutors highlight the induction week as key input for plagiarism education, and mention other instruction: in the personal development module and research methods module, and in formative assessment, as well as the reference guide. Therefore, the tutors' view seems to be that a considerable amount of input is provided. However, the student perceptions of the plagiarism education available were very different.

S5: When you start your Master's degree, nobody [tells] you anything about plagiarism. Well we've got one session about this, but it's in the main theatre, and nobody really cares about this, so some people are sleeping. I mean, they're gonna tell you about plagiarism and referencing once or twice but that's it, they're gonna move on.

S6: In the first semester they gave us like a guideline about the issues about paraphrasing, especially about the issues about how to cite and how to write your bibliography, especially this one, they emphasise a lot on this one, just how it needs to be. We had a kind of workshop on that, maybe once, twice. The second semester, we

are expected to do these things more properly, to use the guidelines much more properly, they are not going to tell you how again, basically I mean, you are supposed to know.

It seems that students felt they received very little instruction or advice about plagiarism on their Master's programmes, and after the initial induction and some training, they felt they were 'supposed to know'.

In terms of actual teaching and support, some tutors thought plagiarism education was going on elsewhere, that they did not have time or needed to focus on subject content, rather than teaching the skill of using sources:

T4: They do that in semester 1 and in that they are taught all of those sorts of things, you know, they are taught how to cite, how to quote and so on, and actually how to find literature and sources. So I simply say, 'Right, that is what you have been taught, this is what you must do'.

Thus, T4 considers that plagiarism education takes place before they teach the student, at an early stage of Master's course, and therefore, by their reasoning, is not the tutor's responsibility. On the other hand, T7 believed plagiarism education to be important, but gave another reason not to teach it:

T7: This won't be a surprise to any academic, but we just don't have that time to sit and have that time with students, and when you do, it's so great for you because you see that kind of excitement and understanding, and things all slotting into place, their studies start to make sense and that is so important. To me, formative feedback is the most important thing, but it's also the hardest thing to do, because you just don't have the time to do it, it isn't scheduled.

It seems T7 would like to provide support, but drew attention to the lack of time as the major issue for tutors not giving support with plagiarism education. Some tutors clearly did not want to provide support:

T1: Some students will try, and get completely lost in trying to paraphrase, because they then run into grammatical structure issues and then you'll, as a marker, you are trying to read through this, and I just don't understand what this paragraph indicates and recently, I've said 'I think you need to go to Brookes International.'[1]

T2: It is not part of the normal module leader's role to say 'We are now going to tell you about sourcing and referencing', you know, because we've got stuff to teach. How much there is on sourcing and so on, I wouldn't like to say, nor when it appears in the syllabus.

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[1] Name of the university's English for Academic Purposes department

These comments seem to show that tutors felt it was not their responsibility to provide plagiarism education, and that the problem could be sent to another, more appropriate department. Jude Carroll commented on the tendency for content tutors to direct students elsewhere:

> I think that that it's very easy to ghettoise plagiarism as an issue, so it's very easy to send it to student support, it's very easy to send it to English language support people, it's very easy to send it to first year any sort of study skills type, god forbid type of people. It's very easy to ghettoise it and there's a very strong temptation amongst academics, who are just bombarded, to say 'Could I just send this student away to be fixed, and when this student is (what I used to call) 'oven ready', send them back to me and then I'll teach them'. That attitude has not gone away, it really hasn't. The 'oven ready' student is every academic's dream.

Jude Carroll's argument is that due to time pressure and heavy workloads, many academics would like the teaching of plagiarism education to take place elsewhere.

Students reported worries and concerns about plagiarism, especially with their final Master's dissertations. Some of these concerns show gaps in their knowledge of how to use sources and lack of confidence in their strategies.

> S1: When I [write], I try to change every word I use, make sure it's different from the other authors' work and maybe sometimes I will ask my tutor to check it with their system, if it is possible.

In this extract, S1 explains the extent of their laborious safety strategy to avoid plagiarism by changing every word of source text, and even recounts that they also asked their tutor to make a check, presumably through Turnitin, before submission. S3 also looked for tutor support:

> S3: I try to make all my sources which I arrange more [logically] but sometimes I still confused about where I can say my idea and where I should just use other people's words. I try to contact with my supervisor and want to have some support from him.

S3's main concern here is about where to use their own words and ideas, and where to use those from sources. It seems unexpected that at the dissertation writing stage, the student still had quite basic questions about using sources. Similarly, S7 had doubts about source use:

> S7: About Master's dissertation - I'm quite worry about it because most of the source is from the internet and I'm not sure if it's the right opinion, if it's the academic opinion or not.

S7 was concerned about whether their source use was acceptable because they got the majority of their sources from the internet. It is worth noticing that the student seemed to

have a limited understanding of how to engage with source use, as they were looking for 'the right opinion'. S2 voiced even stronger concerns:

> S2: I've got a question, is it really so strict, in the uni, this problem about plagiarism? I mean not the very obvious plagiarism, just copy or just take another dissertation, another work as your own. I mean like if you just copied something, a paragraph, then you didn't give the citation or something, if you did that, then you will fail, is the question I've got. So I'm worried about that, that's why I'm asking myself, different tutors, they have different opinions, so maybe this tutor, he will say 'That's fine' if you do it, and another tutor say, 'You can't do that'. The first year, I mean, I was studying here, I was very cautious about this problem, but now this year, nobody mention about this problem in all my assignments. So that's why, I ask myself that question, if they don't mind, or they just didn't mention, or they didn't find I've got some problem, I don't know. I want some feedback so that would make me know I shouldn't do that, or I can't do it, but now, I'm lost, like.

This very powerful account from S2 reflects quite an extreme level of anxiety and hopelessness, as they said 'I'm lost'. It also highlights the need for greater availability of support from tutors about avoiding plagiarism. Surprisingly then, the tutor participants indicated that they readily supported students:

> T5: We say 'If you've got any doubts about what you are doing and how you do it, please come and talk to us as the research methods module leaders', and people do.

> T6: You have to be really ready to support them. And they won't come to you for support either, so you have to be on the ball and aware and trying to diagnose problems. There are cultural issues at stake here, going to the tutor, there's a kind of admission of failure.

These indications of support available from tutors do not seem to match the student perceptions of support.

4. Perceptions of a connection between international students and plagiarism

Several tutor participants commented on their perceptions of a connection between international students and plagiarism:

> T2: All the most serious examples of plagiarism that I personally have come across have been from international students.

> T4: With an overseas student, well not all of them, but almost all of them, you would spot plagiarism in their initial work a mile off, because it is grammatically correct and this is kamikaze on their part quite honestly.

T5: It would be more with our international students, cases of plagiarism which are referred.

These perceptions indicate that tutors thought they could easily notice plagiarism in international students' work, and furthermore the tutors thought international students are more likely to plagiarise. Tutors gave some reasons for finding more plagiarism among international students:

T1: They have not been through the UK higher education system and there are mixed abilities in terms of independent research and inquiry. Typically students from South East Asia, Africa, they are used to the tutor being able to provide the answers.

T5: More due to the ignorance rather than the deliberate cheating.

T6: It is the background of whatever institution they have come from. 'Copying, well, no one ever told me about that, referencing, what are you talking about?' And I think that's probably quite a strong reason.

In these comments, it can be seen that these tutors thought international students plagiarised because they came from a different educational culture and lacked knowledge about their current one. It is useful here to consider Diane Pecorari's report of her study of the responses of tutors in Sweden to international students and plagiarism:

If their Swedish students would have been in the US, they are the international students, here it is the international students, not the Swedish students who are perceived to be the problem, and that makes me suspect that there is something 'them and us' about this. You know, it can't be the fact that only the international students, ie non-native English speakers have a greater proclivity to plagiarise, the Swedish students would be in the same boat as the German exchange students coming to Sweden.

Diane Pecorari's sense that there is a 'them and us' relationship between the international students and the academic environment they are in, seems highly significant. It suggests that the mere fact that students are originally from a different educational environment to their current one seems to mark them out as potential plagiarists, and influences the perception of tutors towards them.

Discussion

The main issues that emerge from these findings are outlined below.

1. **Different perceptions of plagiarism definition**

Firstly, this study has shown a considerable difference between the perceptions of students and tutors related to the university's plagiarism definition. The lack of consistency and

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consensus about what constitutes plagiarism has been established in research (Price, 2009). The results from this study provide some evidence to suggest that plagiarism definitions are also unclear to students. Research has been carried out to examine university plagiarism definitions in a study by Pecorari (2001) which found a number of anomalies and difficulties in interpretation. Pecorari also found that international students, who had a very different understanding of what is permissible with the re-use of source text, would need more than a brief definition of plagiarism to grasp what it means. Her research into the definitions of plagiarism used by a large number of universities indicated that although they were largely similar, many lacked clarification about whether plagiarism consisted of an intention to deceive, which was a concern of some of the tutors in this study. Pecorari (2001: 236) argues that this is important for international students: 'Since plagiarism by international students is believed often to be unintentional, whether institutions accept unintentional plagiarism is an important question'.

2. Different perceptions of teaching and learning

This study also found a gulf between tutors and students in relation to their perceptions of teaching and learning within plagiarism education. Blum (2009) demonstrated that in the current digital age, there is a wide gap between the expectations and perceptions of tutors and students in relation to use of sources. Tutors educated prior to the internet age may see citation rules very clearly, but current students, who are engaging in multiple text use, may not see these rules as clearly. She says 'contemporary students are swimming in a sea of texts' (2009: 4) and this may blur their concept of attributing words and ideas clearly to authors. Similarly, Belcher (2006) found that the instant availability of internet sources might make students pay less attention to citing conventions.

Furthermore, the study shows that students continued to have concerns about plagiarism and did not feel sufficiently supported. Some tutors felt they gave enough support, while others said they did not have enough time or thought it was not their role. These findings build on those in a study by Hall and Sung (2009) which indicated the lack of support for international postgraduate students in terms of academic literacy.

3. Connection between international students and plagiarism

The perception among academics that international students are closely linked to plagiarism has been established in many studies (for example, Bennett, 2005). The accuracy of this perception is open to debate. However, it is important to recognise the needs of international students so that they can avoid this automatic link to plagiarism. As Ryan (2005: 99) argues: 'Many international students can find themselves being punished for behaviour that was previously rewarded. In such cases, it's important to take an educative approach to plagiarism...rather than a punitive one'. Unfortunately it seems that universities are still more likely to respond with punishment rather than education (Pecorari, 2001) but this may be gradually changing.

Conclusion

This study has shown some of the current issues in plagiarism education through the perceptions of international students, postgraduate tutors, and plagiarism education experts. It has indicated a gap between students and tutors in terms of their understanding of the university plagiarism definition, and in terms of their experiences of learning and teaching within plagiarism education. It has also shown some issues in relation to tutor requirements of students' source use, and connections made by tutors between international students and plagiarism. Thus, the study calls for more attention to student views and to the student experience of plagiarism education throughout the whole learning process.

As a case study, this investigation is limited to a small number of participants within one university, and is therefore small-scale. However, the inclusion of both student and tutor participants gives greater weight to the study, and the views of key experts broaden the debate. Further research into experiences of plagiarism education at other universities using a greater number of participants, perhaps of more diverse nationalities and disciplines, could build on this study.

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