



# Law Students' Perceptions of Academic Integrity: Pilot-Study

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**Abstract.** The goal of the study is to investigate law students' perceptions about academic integrity and plagiarism. The study looked into the opinions and attitudes of students at a Law school in Osijek and a Law school in Rijeka. An online survey was conducted in March and April 2021. The sample included students of all five years of study who attended seminar classes in the summer term of academic year 2020/2021. Findings indicate that students are aware that plagiarism is a serious offence, but are not always sure what constitutes plagiarism. Only half of the sample is familiar with the ethical documents of their schools but a majority of respondents are well aware that their university professors use plagiarism detection software. Differences in the sample were spotted for male and female respondents, students with higher and lower Grade Point Average (GPA), students from Osijek and Rijeka, and students of lower and higher level of study. In future, educational activities focusing on issues of academic misconduct should be intensified in order to help students successfully avoid plagiarism and academic dishonesty.

**Keywords:** Academic integrity · Law students · Croatia · Plagiarism

## 1 Introduction

Academic dishonesty within the context of higher education has been a focus of various research studies [1–3], which indicates its importance for the academic community. There is a growing concern among academia that, with the advance of information technologies, such sort of behaviour would be impossible to prevent. However, although the new technologies and the Internet make academic dishonesty easier, they also make plagiarism more visible, mainly through the existing plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin or iThenticate [4].

Plagiarism can be a difficult term to define for students because it encompasses a number of errors in academic writing such as: (a) submission of a paper written by somebody else, without the authors' knowledge; (b) submitting a paper somebody else has written for the student; (c) copying a text (complete or fragments) without

acknowledgment; (d) copying material from a source text, acknowledging the source, but omitting the quotation marks; (e) paraphrasing material from a source without crediting it; (f) buying a paper from a research service or a paper mill [5]. Citing without crediting sources and failure to use quotation marks are believed to be the most common errors in academic writing among university students [6].

Academic dishonesty including plagiarism continues to remain a global problem. In 2015, 50,000 students enrolled at British Universities, were found to have plagiarized [7]. Similar observations were made in other countries, as well [8, 9]. The British study found that particular difficulties with plagiarism tend to occur with students from outside the European Union – students from overseas, and particularly China [10]. On the other hand, only a small fraction of students ever face punitive actions for their misconduct [11].

This paper looks into the perceptions and attitudes of law students of two Croatian law schools (in the cities of Osijek and Rijeka) toward academic dishonesty (such as submitting a paper somebody else has written for the student) and plagiarism practices of their peers and themselves as well as their knowledge about citing and referencing sources. The authors hope to stimulate students to start thinking about the topic and be more motivated to take library instruction classes at their law schools that focus on academic integrity.

## 2 Literature Background

There are various factors connected with academic dishonesty, such as gender, age, discipline or grade point average [9] or [11–13], but also low levels of understanding concerning academic ethical policies, lack of sanctions of academic dishonesty and absence of education and instruction on the topic [14, 15]. It must be pointed out, however, that results from studies of the relation between gender and academic dishonesty are inconsistent – there are those that report higher level of cheating by men [9] or [14], or others that observed no reliable gender differences [16, 17]. Further reasons for students' dishonesty mentioned in the literature are, among other things, grades, procrastination, student workload and the feeling that everyone is doing it and getting away with it [18]. Strongest correlates for academic misconduct are: moderate expectations for success, having cheated in the past, having poor study skills, holding favourable attitudes toward cheating, perceiving that social norms allow cheating, anticipating greater reward for success, social comparisons with peers (seeing others cheat or approve cheating), and the experienced severity of punishment for cheating [13, 19].

Additional problems for academic dishonesty and plagiarism practices are presented by the internet and online environment that make textual theft even easier. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the majority of authors believed that plagiarism increased with the advance of the internet. Especially worrisome are teenagers' attitudes to copying texts – in a 2009 United States (US) survey among students aged 12–18 36% said that downloading a paper from the internet was not a serious cheating offense and 19% said it is not cheating at all [10]. However, the research suggests that the level of internet plagiarism might be similar to the levels of 'conventional' plagiarism. For instance, the study from 2002 [20] found that students who went online to cut and paste without

citation constituted 24.5% of the sample, whereas in a 2009 study [10] on US teenagers 21% have turned in a paper downloaded from the internet and 38% copied text from a website. Similar results were found in 1963 (30% of students admitted to having plagiarised) and in 1993 (26% have plagiarised) [21].

Law students' plagiarism practices are believed to be similar to those of other students worldwide [11]. Legal research and advocacy rely heavily on proper citation. Law schools all over the world (including Croatia) include courses on legal research and writing in which they are taught about the concept of legal authority and proper citing of documents [3]. However, authors complain [3] that new students that come to law schools rely on their previous (high-school) experience which very often lacks proper citation instruction and therefore resent the rigor of law professors who ask them to provide the complete citation of the sources used. Legal research and proper document citing are crucial skills for law students' future employment. The data say that 56% of law firm associates indicated that their employers expected them to have strong legal research skills but did not provide any legal training. Associates in practice less than two years spent 35% of their time doing legal research [22]. Consequently, lack of legal research skills combined with absence of document citing may lead to serious consequences for law students – during their studies, but also later when they start their employment. Although the punishment for academic dishonesty may be as severe as expulsion from the university [3, 11] the majority of authors plead for universities to undertake actions to help students avoid plagiarism – this may include academic ethics policy documents, teachers who emphasise the importance of academic integrity and are not lenient when it comes to plagiarism, or workshops (which might be part of library instruction or information literacy classes) on plagiarism and how to avoid it [3, 5, 11, 18]. Although it is true that some students intentionally plagiarise, it is also true that students need help in understanding how to avoid plagiarism and how to attribute sources properly. The authors believe that, in the setting of Croatian law schools, the best direction would be to include topics on academic dishonesty and plagiarism in library instruction courses at those institutions.

In Croatia, the topic of academic dishonesty and plagiarism of students was often not a topic of research papers. The majority of papers identified on the topic in Croatia came from the discipline of medicine [9, 23–25] and this is the first study that looks into the attitudes and perceptions of law students on these topics.

## 3 Study

### 3.1 Goals and Research Questions

From 2015 Croatian higher education institutions are legally bound to deposit students' graduation papers in the national repository Dabar. Before deposition, every student paper must undergo the plagiarism check by one of the plagiarism detection software and be marked as an original paper. Therefore the issue of plagiarism, either intentional or unintentional, is of particular importance for all actors of higher education. This paper, for the first time in Croatia, looks into the perceptions and attitudes of law students to academic honesty and plagiarism. The study was guided by following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of Croatian law students toward plagiarism and academic honesty?

RQ2: Are there any differences in attitudes and perceptions of academic integrity and plagiarism in relation to demographic data?

RQ3: Do students possess enough knowledge about plagiarism in order to successfully avoid it?

Given the described and the limited scope of this study, this paper brings the selected findings from the study.

### 3.2 Methodology, Instrument, and Sample

A survey was carried out at two law schools of similar size – the Law School of Osijek (LSOs) and the Law School in Rijeka (LSRi). The online survey was completed by 169 respondents ( $n = 90$  from Osijek and  $n = 79$  from Rijeka). The study was conducted in March and April 2021 on the population of 230 students yielding a response rate of 73.5%. The sample included students of all five years of study who attended seminar classes in the summer term of academic year 2020/2021. Table 1 gives demographic data about the sample. The sample consisted of more female than male students, but this is consistent with the gender structure at both law schools. From LSOs more respondents had higher GPAs (3.5 or higher) (59.6%), whereas more respondents from LSRi were with lower GPAs (3.4 or lower) (63.6%). At both schools more junior students (attending the first three years of study) filled out the questionnaire, which again is consistent with the number of students in lower and higher years of study.

**Table 1.** Demographic data

	Male N (%)	Female N (%)	Lower GPA ( $\leq 3,4$ ) N (%)	Higher GPA ( $\geq 3,5$ ) N (%)	Junior (1st–3rd) N (%)	Senior (4th–5th) N (%)
LSOs	21 (23.3%)	67 (74.4%)	36 (40.4%)	53 (59.6%)	64 (71.1%)	26 (28.9%)
LSRi	22 (27.8%)	57 (72.2%)	49 (63.6%)	28 (36.4%)	66 (84.6%)	12 (15.4%)
Total	43 (25.4%)	124 (73.4%)	85 (51.2%)	81 (48.8%)	130 (77.4%)	38 (22.6%)
Missing	1	1	3			1

The questionnaire consisted of 37 multiple-choice and open-ended questions on students' views on and experience with plagiarism and academic integrity. The survey was found to be acceptable since the internal consistency of the questionnaire measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0.74 (values from 0.70 and above are considered to be acceptable) [26]. The questionnaire also included several citing examples where students were asked to choose the correct way of citing and referencing.

The majority of students did not participate in information literacy programmes organized by the library, as many as 160 respondents, or 94.1%, and only 9 respondents stated that they participated, or 5.9%. From the content they listened to as part of the trainings they list the search, use and evaluation of academic databases and other information sources, as well as guidelines for writing student papers.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Student Attitudes Towards Plagiarism

Table 2 gives an overview of students' attitudes about ethically questionable behaviour. We noticed the highest level of agreement for the claims that plagiarism is even copying small parts of the text (3.40), and that such a behaviour should be severely penalized (3.01). A lower level of agreement was observed for claims that plagiarism can be forgiven among 1st and 2nd year students but not for senior students (2.81), and that if students knew about such a behaviour, they would not report their peers (2.07). The lowest level of agreement was observed for the claim that it is normal for students to plagiarise because that is how they learn to write correctly (1.99).

**Table 2.** Students' attitudes about the ethically questionable behaviour of other students

Causes	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Even if only small segments of text are copied, it is still plagiarism	168	3.40	1.234
Such a behaviour should be penalized without exception	167	3.01	1.184
1st and 2nd year students can be excused for such a behaviour, but not older students	167	2.81	1.217
If I knew about such a behaviour of my peers, I would report it	167	2.07	1.106
Normal for students to plagiarise because it is the only way to learn properly how to cite and reference	168	1.99	1.092

Table 3 provides an overview of views on claims related to ethically questionable behaviour. We noticed the highest level of agreement for the following claims: the theft of an entire work of a person with the intention of presenting it as one's own (89.4%), the use of translation of a text in another language for presentation as one's own work (75.2%) and the purchase of the entire work of one person with the intention of presenting it as own (73.9%). The lowest level of agreement was observed for using the same written assignment for several different courses during one's studies (24.9%) and using someone else's ideas without giving them credit (45.5%). Statistically significant differences were noticed between male and female respondents using the same assignment for several different courses during one's studies, where more female respondents (63.4%) consider this to be an unethical procedure than the male respondents (34.9%). Also, a statistically significant difference was spotted for students in Osijek and Rijeka

in relation to purchasing somebody else's work and presenting it as one's own – students from Osijek (82.2%) are more convinced that this is unethical behaviour than is the case with students from Rijeka (63.3%).

**Table 3.** Views on ethically questionable behaviour

Causes	Sample N (%)	LSOs N (%)	LSRi N (%)	Male N (%)	Female N (%)
Copying somebody else's work in entirety	151 (89.4%)	82 (91.1%)	68 (86.1%)	37 (86.0%)	111 (89.5%)
Translating a text into Croatian and presenting as own	127 (75.2%)	65 (72.2%)	62 (77.2%)	30 (69.8%)	94 (75.8%)
Purchasing somebody else's work	125 (73.9%)	<b>74 (82.2%)*</b>	<b>51 (63.3%)*</b>	29 (67.4%)	93 (7.0%)
Copying parts of chapters without crediting sources	124 (73.4%)	66 (73.3%)	56 (70.9%)	30 (69.8%)	90 (72.6%)
Using the structure of an analysis, without crediting sources	113 (66.9%)	64 (71.1%)	47 (45.9%)	26 (60.5%)	83 (66.9%)
Copying parts of sentences	95 (56.2%)	54 (20.0%)	41 (19%)	29 (67.4%)	63 (50.8%)
Paraphrasing without crediting sources	81 (47.9%)	43 (47.8%)	37 (46.8%)	22 (51.2%)	56 (45.2%)
Using other people's ideas without attributing them (e.g., in oral communication)	77 (45.5%)	45 (50.0%)	31 (39.2%)	19 (44.2%)	55 (44.45%)
Submitting the same written assignment in several courses	42 (24.9%)	25 (27.8%)	16 (20.3%)	<b>15 (34.9%)*</b>	<b>26 (63.4%)*</b>

\*Statistically significant at 0,05

Table 4 provides an overview of students' views on the reasons why students plagiarise. We observed the highest level of agreement for the following statements about reasons for students' plagiarism: the habit of doing things at the last minute (3.87), the lack of time (3.69) and the lack of knowledge on how to write student papers correctly (3.67). We observed the lowest level of agreement for the following statements: that students plagiarise because the assignment has little effect on the final grade (2.73), because everything on the internet is in the public domain and can be freely downloaded

without citing sources (2.78), because when they copy somebody else's work, they get a higher grade (2.54) or because the teacher is an inexperienced internet user and will never detect the fraud (2.27). By comparing the obtained results, we noticed small differences between students with regard to their GPA or lower and higher year of study. Students in Osijek believe more often that teachers do not read students' assignments (3.10) than students in Rijeka (2.64). Students with higher GPAs and senior students are more prone to plagiarism if they believe the assignment has little effect on final grade. In addition, students with higher GPAs believe more often that it is easier to copy than to write on your own than is the case with students with lower GPAs. Finally, senior students are more often convinced that students plagiarise because they do not know how to cite and reference properly than is the case with their junior colleagues.

**Table 4.** Reasons for student plagiarism

Reasons	Mean	LSOs	LSRi	Lower GPA ( $\leq 3.4$ )	Higher GPA ( $\geq 3.5$ )	Junior (1st–3rd)	Senior (4th–5th)
Students always do things 'at the last minute'	3.87	3.91	3.83	3.78	3.98	3.88	3.84
It is easy to manipulate text on the internet	3.69	3.58	3.82	3.72	3.67	3.64	3.82
Lack of time	3.69	3.69	3.68	3.58	3.78	3.67	3.71
Students do not know how to cite and reference properly	3.67	3.58	3.79	3.56	3.78	<b>3.55*</b>	<b>4.08*</b>
It is easier to copy than to write on your own	3.56	3.54	3.58	<b>3.26*</b>	<b>3.85*</b>	3.48	3.84
Too many assignments	3.50	3.45	3.56	3.40	3.59	3.48	3.58
Assignment is extremely difficult and complex	3.23	3.16	3.32	3.13	3.32	3.20	3.32
Assignment is of an abstract and theoretical nature	3.08	3.02	3.16	3.10	3.05	3.02	3.24

(continued)

**Table 4.** (continued)

Reasons	Mean	LSOs	LSRi	Lower GPA ( $\leq 3.4$ )	Higher GPA ( $\geq 3.5$ )	Junior (1st–3rd)	Senior (4th–5th)
‘Everybody does it’	3.02	2.89	3.18	3.06	3.01	3.01	3.08
‘Teachers will not notice’	3.00	2.98	3.03	2.93	3.11	3.05	2.84
‘Teacher does not really read students’ assignments’	2.89	<b>3.10*</b>	<b>2.64*</b>	2.52	3.31	2.83	3.11
Students feel they are learning nothing from the assignment	2.84	2.70	3.01	.68	2.99	2.84	2.84
‘Everything on the internet is in the public domain and can be used freely’	2.78	2.74	2.81	2.68	2.89	2.75	2.87
Some teachers do not regard this as such a ‘major’ offense	2.75	2.69	2.82	2.64	2.89	2.70	2.92
The assignment has little effect on the final grade	2.73	2.5	2.91	<b>2.62*</b>	<b>2.86*</b>	<b>2.62*</b>	<b>3.11*</b>
When you copy somebody else’s work, you get a higher grade	2.54	2.56	2.51	2.37	2.71	2.59	2.35
The teacher is an inexperienced internet user and will never detect the fraud	2.27	2.31	2.21	2.18	2.37	2.34	2.00

\*Statistically significant at 0,05



## 4.2 Students' Own Experiences with Plagiarism

Regarding their own experiences related to plagiarism, only two respondents (one from Osijek and one from Rijeka) (1.2%) answered that they once paid someone to write a paper for them, and one respondent (from Osijek) (0.6%) stated that she did it several times. All three students are female and have a higher GPA. Only 19 students (11.2%) indicated that they resorted to plagiarism when writing a student paper during their studies. In addition, only two (1.2%) respondents (both from Osijek) stated that they were wrongly accused of plagiarism during their studies. Most of the respondents are not aware of any cases where one of their colleagues was accused of plagiarism during their studies ( $n = 148$ , 89.2%). Students with a higher GPA ( $n = 14$ , 17.3%) were more likely to hear about situations where their colleagues were accused of plagiarism than students with a lower GPA ( $n = 3$ , 3.5%).

Only slightly more than half of the respondents ( $n = 87$ , 51.5%) are familiar with their school's Codes of Ethical Student Conduct. The majority of respondents ( $n = 93$ , 55%) are aware that university teachers use plagiarism detection software when correcting student papers (e.g., Turnitin). Students with a higher GPA ( $n = 51$ , 63.0%) are more familiar with this than their colleagues with a lower GPA ( $n = 39$ , 45.9%), as is the case with students from LSOs ( $n = 60$ , 66.7%) compared to students from LSRi ( $n = 31$ , 39.2%).

## 4.3 Student Information Skills - Practical Tasks Related to Citation

Table 5 gives an overview of students' success in solving practical tasks related to the rules of citation and referencing. By comparing the obtained results, we noticed that students were most successful in examples of quoting someone else's idea ( $n = 148$ , 87.6%), citing all sources in examples where they were omitted ( $n = 144$ , 85.2%) and citing direct quotations ( $n = 136$ , 80.5%). In solving examples of omitted citations, female students ( $n = 112$ , 90.3%) were more successful than male students ( $n = 32$ , 74.4%), as were students from LSOs ( $n = 80$ , 88.9%) compared to students from LSRi ( $n = 64$ , 81.1%). Female students were also more successful in solving examples of citing direct quotations and paraphrasing in relation to male students, as were senior students in relation to junior ones. Students were less successful in citing book chapters, legislation and case law, internet sources, and scientific articles. Comparing the results, we noticed that when quoting Croatian laws, instead of citing the database of the official gazette of the Republic of Croatia, which is the primary source in quoting Croatian laws, 30 respondents (17.8%) cited the commercial legal base Ius-Info. When quoting the case law of Croatian courts, senior students ( $n = 37$ , 97.4%) were more successful than their junior colleagues ( $n = 106$ , 81.5%), students from LSRi ( $n = 56$ , 70.9%) were more successful than students from LSOs ( $n = 62$ , 68.9%), and female students ( $n = 97$ , 78.2%) were more successful than male students ( $n = 21$ , 48.8%). When quoting scientific papers and journals and quoting book chapters, female students were again more successful than male students. Senior students ( $n = 28$ , 73.3%) were also more successful in quoting chapters in books compared to junior students ( $n = 82$ , 63.1%), as were students with a higher GPA ( $n = 65$ , 80.2%) compared to students with a lower GPA ( $n = 55$ , 64.7%).

**Table 5.** Information literacy skills of law students – examples of citations

Examples of citations	Quoting someone else's idea N (%)	Omitted citation N (%)	Direct quotations N (%)	Para-phrasing N (%)	Book chapter N (%)	Legislation and case law N (%)	Books N (%)	Internet sources N (%)	Articles N (%)
Correct	148 (87.6%)	144 (85.2%)	136 (80.5%)	129 (76.3%)	122 (72.2%)	118 (69.8)	110 (65.1%)	99 (58.6%)	66 (39.1%)

#### 4.4 Student's Concluding Opinions

Almost half of the respondents ( $n = 79$ , 46.8%) thought that this survey changed their attitudes about plagiarism and that they would have a negative view of any form of plagiarism in the future. This is truer for students from Osijek ( $n = 43$ , 47.8%) than from Rijeka ( $n = 36$ , 38.0%). The vast majority of respondents ( $n = 140$ , 82.8%) believe that the offered practical examples will help them to cite sources correctly in the future. Female respondents ( $n = 106$ , 85.5%), students with a lower GPA ( $n = 69$ , 81.2%) and senior students ( $n = 37$ , 97.45%) are more likely to consider the practical examples as useful than the rest of the sample. The results have shown that the majority of students ( $n = 128$ , 75.7%) were aware that, according to legal obligations, their graduate theses would be publicly available in the National Repository of Undergraduate and Graduate Theses. However, students from Osijek ( $n = 55$ , 61.1%) were more familiar with this than students from Rijeka ( $n = 41$ , 51.9%).

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

This paper presents findings of a pilot-study on law students' (from Osijek and Rijeka) attitudes toward academic integrity and plagiarism.

The majority of students agree that academic integrity and plagiarism practices should be avoided and punished, but they are also not always sure what plagiarism really is – for example, “(...) it was only a part of two or three sentences, I wouldn't call it plagiarism” (S51), or “He [the teacher] explained that it is not allowed even in cases of Power Point presentations” (S90). Students condemn various types of unethical behaviour and plagiarism practices, but they are not likely to report it. Also, they are not really sure that using parts of sentences or submitting the same written assignment for several different courses should be seen as unethical. Although the vast majority of students seem to behave with integrity, 11.2% admitted to having plagiarised, whereas two (female) students even bought a written assignment once, and one additional (female) student did it several times. They all had a higher GPA. (RQ1)

We spotted differences in regard to gender, law school, level of study and GPA, which is consistent with other studies on this topic [9, 11–13]. Female students tended to have a higher developed sense of ethics and were more successful in solving practical citing exercises - as were senior students, and students with higher GPAs. Students from Rijeka are more likely to cite correctly than students from Osijek, but Osijek students seem to be more familiar with institutional ethical guidelines, usage of plagiarism-detection

software by their teachers and the existence of a National Repository of Graduate Papers. (RQ2)

Although the majority of students frowned upon academic dishonesty and plagiarism, there were still those who did not behave in a completely ethical way. However, sometimes plagiarism was the result of a lack of knowledge, and not intent. The study clearly showed that students need clear guidelines and instruction on all the topics included in our survey (the sample found exercises for citing books, articles, internet sources, laws and case laws especially useful). (RQ3)

More junior students (1st–3rd year of study) filled out the questionnaire which also explains their unfamiliarity or lack of knowledge with institutional ethical documents, plagiarism-detection software or the National Registry of Graduate Papers.

Only 5.9% of students took part in library instruction programs where they received instruction about writing an academic paper (which included guidelines on plagiarism and referencing), but this small percentage indicates that academic libraries at each library school must increase their efforts (which is extremely challenging today in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic) to include as many students in their workshops as possible. Since respondents claimed that the practical citing assignments from the questionnaire were extremely useful and will help them in writing future academic papers, it is our intention to embed topic on plagiarism and academic integrity in seminar courses at all study years at those two library schools and thus ensure reaching higher numbers of students than through library instruction classes that are optional.

The authors devised the questionnaire also with the intention to raise awareness among students about academic dishonesty and plagiarism, and practical citing assignments were included to help those who plagiarise unintentionally to learn about citing different types of sources. The study results confirmed that we succeeded in our intentions.

Considering the lack of research on this topic in the area of law studies in Croatia, this paper presents a contribution in understanding the problem and paves the way for future research in this area. Also, a particularly interesting topic for future research is unintentional plagiarism, which is often the explanation for plagiarised student assignments [14, 15].

On the practical level, this research may serve as a framework for the creation of formal programs of library information literacy instruction at all law schools in the country, but, with minor adjustments, also at academic libraries at other institutions of higher education in Croatia.

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