Perspectives on Academic Plagiarism in Malaysia

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Abstract

Plagiarism is one of the major issues faced by institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The demands for quality tertiary education and the government's aspirations to be the regional education hub have resulted in the bourgeoning of private universities in this country. In order to remain competitive in producing graduates who are marketable and globally accepted, universities in Malaysia have adopted a more focused stand to address the issue of plagiarism by implementing academic integrity policies and procedures to prevent and discourage plagiarism. This chapter discusses studies done by Malaysian researchers on the definition and perception of plagiarism and the issue of plagiarism among undergraduates and academics in Malaysian universities.

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Introduction

The Malaysian government's aspiration and vision to promote Malaysia as the regional hub for higher education is reaping results as there is a marked increase in student numbers from foreign countries, specifically the Asian region, as well as a large number of Malaysian students who have chosen to complete their tertiary studies locally. The government's aims to internationalize higher education in Malaysia are evident in their target to increase the number of international students in Malaysian higher education institutions from 123,000 in 2014 to 200,000 by 2020 (Jusoh 2014).

This has directly encouraged the burgeoning of higher education institutions in Malaysia. According to the official website of Department of Higher Education (Ministry of Higher Education 2014), there are a total of 20 public universities, 41 private universities, 27 university colleges, 8 foreign campuses, and 431 colleges in Malaysia. However, with the existence of a large number of higher education institutions of learning, there is a growing concern among academicians regarding the quality of graduates, in terms of ethics and integrity. Academic dishonesty, specifically plagiarism, is becoming more noticeable among undergraduate and graduate students causing concerns among academics that graduates may eventually be involved in unethical practices in their work life (Nazir and Aslam 2010). This concern is even greater when they occur among students pursuing fields where professional conduct of honesty and integrity is essential in establishing public trust (Smith et al. 2007). As graduates start their work life, the rules of plagiarism become even less significant when practices of the real world are incongruent with the practices they have learned in the academic world (Md. Yusof 2009).

Plagiarism Among Students

Instances of plagiarism are common among students in both public and private universities. Research findings have identified a number of factors that have contributed toward plagiarism in Malaysia, namely, lack of awareness, lack of understanding, lack of competence and personal attitudes (Smith et al. 2007), poor time management skills, work or family commitments, and poor language skills (Md. Yusof 2009). Many students unfamiliar with citation conventions have the misconception that ideas expressed in their own words do not require referencing. Furthermore, the students' inadequate knowledge of citation conventions is exacerbated by lecturers who accept inadequately referenced pieces of work from students (Ting 2013).

Students in Malaysia are also experiencing difficulty in adjusting to a different education system. What students in Malaysia experience is similar to what many international students face when they pursue their higher education abroad, i.e., a school system that has not provided them with the analytical and critical skills required in tertiary education (Yang and Lin 2009). This is evident in instances of "mosaic plagiarism" whereby students merge information from different sources

into a paragraph with little or no input, without crediting the author (Ting 2013). Thus, they struggle to adjust not only to a more demanding academic system but also to one that requires strict adherence to academic integrity. So, it is understandable that students with lower CGPAs record more instances of plagiarism (Smith et al. 2007).

Another factor to take note of is that each culture may have a different understanding of plagiarism, and this causes problems in truly comprehending what plagiarism is and how it is applied (Md. Yusof 2009). For instance, many Malaysian students perceive plagiarism as a norm and are tolerant of academic misconducts which involve collaboration, due to the collectivistic behavior of Malaysians (Shafie and Nayan 2012). As a result, cases involving collusion are common, for example, students collaborating on assignments which are supposed to be individual assignments and believing that it is acceptable to copy a friend's piece of work if consent has been obtained (Ting 2013).

An analysis of reported cases of plagiarism from the business school of a Malaysian private university from 2010 to 2013 indicates that students are aware of the seriousness of committing this offense. However, weak language proficiency, poor time management skills, attitude, and inadequate knowledge on referencing skills have initiated the breach. These reasons are comparable to the findings reported by other Malaysian researches in this area. The penalty is imposed based on the severity of the misconduct and can range from lighter penalties like resubmission and counseling for inadvertent plagiarism to harsher penalties like zero mark for blatant plagiarism. Thus, penalties for plagiarism are fairly meted out and serve as a deterrent to students from committing plagiarism again.

Plagiarism Among Academic Staff

Very few cases of plagiarism among academics have been brought to the public's attention. The most publicized case, dubbed the first case of plagiarism at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) by its vice-chancellor, involved two public university academics that were found to have plagiarized a reference book produced for their management students in 2003. They were ultimately imposed penalties that included repaying the university the royalties received and receiving a "severe reprimand on their personal file" (UPM Duo in Plagiarism Scandal 2009). The most recent report involved an academic at a public university who was promoted not long after the said incident of plagiarism (Do We Want Malaysia To Be Seen As Promoting Plagiarism? 2013).

The lack of severity in cases of plagiarism has caused an outcry among academics and political leaders regarding the lack of severe punishment for serious breaches of academic conduct. Many Malaysian critics have questioned the leniency of penalties imposed and have appealed for acts of plagiarism among academics to be viewed more seriously. In fact, a number of academics attest to the widespread of plagiarism at their workplace. A former academician who has served a local university for 25 years has identified plagiarism as "the most endemic

academic fraud in the Malaysian higher education system" claiming that plagiarism is rampant among not just students but professors and associate professors as well, due to the lack of stern actions taken against offenders (Ramasamy: Plagiarism Most Endemic Academic Fraud 2009). As such, steps need to be taken to curb academic misconduct especially among academics to ensure that the credibility of higher educational institutions in Malaysia is not tarnished.

Recent Trends and Measures

Many universities view academic misconduct as a serious offense and have taken measures to educate their students about academic integrity. This is indeed a step forward for Malaysian universities as structured positive measures go a long way in instilling a respect for academic integrity.

Many higher educational institutions in Malaysia have written handbooks that provide guidelines on cases involving academic misconduct. These include handbooks that guide students on how to avoid plagiarism, as well as handbooks that guide academic staff on how to deal with cases of plagiarism. In addition, policies, procedures, and documents pertaining to academic integrity are duly documented and made available to all staff in most universities. This ensures the provision of clear guidelines on how academic misconduct among staff and students should be handled.

Apart from handbooks, workshops and training programs are also organized to provide new students with a better understanding of what plagiarism is and how they could avoid plagiarism. These sessions teach the students the skills required to effectively quote, summarize, and paraphrase information, as well as introduce the referencing systems that are used in that particular university. Ensuring students are sufficiently educated about ethical academic conduct is more fruitful than imposing punitive actions for breaches of academic integrity (MohdSalleh et al. 2013).

To address issues of plagiarism among academics, many universities have also set up committees to vet materials before they are submitted for publication or conferences. This helps to ensure that academics are kept on their toes and that the credibility of the university is not tarnished by indiscriminate acts of plagiarism by their academics.

Summary

For incidences of academic misconduct such as plagiarism to be contained and reduced in the academic arena, concerted effort has to be taken by all parties involved in academia, from the student right up to the education ministry.

Students need to be aware of the importance of academic integrity and to ensure that they behave ethically and with integrity during their studies and later on in their work life. Lecturers need to instill in students the desire to be ethical. They also have to be more vigilant in ensuring intellectual property is appropriately

acknowledged (Ting 2013) both in their own writings and in students' work. It is vital that all lecturers within the university cooperate and commit toward ensuring that academic integrity is adhered to by all students. Higher education institutions and the education ministry have to ensure that all cases of plagiarism and academic misconduct are investigated and punishment is meted out in accordance to the severity of the misconduct in order to deter further breaches of academic integrity.

Perhaps when all parties collaborate toward achieving a culture of academic integrity, the issue of academic misconduct in universities in Malaysia will be better addressed and controlled, and the penalties imposed for breaches of academic integrity will no longer be a topic of contention among academics and politicians. This is essential if Malaysia is to advance further as a regional education hub for higher education and remain competitive in the field of academia.

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