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**The perception of students towards plagiarism: a survey of selected educational institutions of Peshawar**

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**ABSTRACT**

## **Introduction:** This research aims to evaluate the perception of students regarding plagiarism in educational institutions across Peshawar. Despite widespread exposure to information on plagiarism through media and literature, many students still exhibit uncertainties regarding its boundaries within academic writing.

## **Objectives:** To gauge and define students' comprehension of plagiarism within academic contexts.

## **Materials & Methods:** The study, conducted from February 01, 2021, to June 01, 2021, at the Department of Psychiatry, Rehman Medical Institute, Peshawar, employed a quantitative survey methodology by administering a questionnaire to a randomly sampled group of 60 students comprising 24 males and 36 females, aged between 19 to 44 years, studying at selected educational settings of Peshawar. Data were analyzed by SPSS 22 for descriptive statistics.

## **Results:** Analysis of the survey responses highlighted significant confusion among students regarding the definition of plagiarism as well as its practices, indicating the need for a clearer demarcation between academic writing and plagiarism.

**Conclusion:** Considerable misconceptions exist about the nature and practice of plagiarism in students of educational institutions of Peshawar thus necessitating the need for clear cut guidelines about plagiarism and their implementation in all academic settings.

**Keywords:** Plagiarism; Student Perception; Academic Integrity; Education; Awareness; Academic Writing.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Plagiarism, a term derived from the Latin word "plagiarius," originally signifying a kidnapper, has evolved into a serious ethical concern in contemporary academia and beyond. It encapsulates the act of presenting another individual's ideas, thoughts, or work as one's own, an offense that not only violates the tenets of academic integrity but also extends its implications across various domains such as art, technology, and scientific research.1,2

Defined as the act of presenting others' work without appropriate attribution, plagiarism manifests in diverse forms, ranging from direct copying to subtle self-reuse of one's prior work without due citation.3 The prevalence of plagiarism stems from a confluence of factors, including time constraints, inadequate understanding of authentic academic writing, and a relentless pursuit of academic success.4

While students often recognize external work as plagiarism, they tend to overlook the ethical considerations of reusing their own assignments.5 This varied perception highlights the complexity surrounding the understanding and acceptance of plagiarism among different academic communities.6

The influence of peer behavior, educators' leniency, and insufficient awareness further compounds the issue, particularly among students in certain regions, such as Pakistan, where referencing norms and language proficiency play significant roles.7 Efforts to address plagiarism encompass educational training, raising awareness about plagiarism detection tools, and debating the intricacies of self-plagiarism to strike a balance between knowledge reuse and proper citation.8,9

In light of these complexities, combating plagiarism requires a multifaceted approach, involving education, stringent penalties, and continuous efforts to cultivate a culture of academic integrity and ethical scholarship among students.10 Plagiarism, despite being a persistent challenge, necessitates ongoing endeavors to mitigate its prevalence and ensure ethical scholarly practices.

Students' perceptions of plagiarism vary widely. Eret & Gokmenoglu6 found that while many students condemn plagiarism, they often lack a full understanding of its nature.

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Kocak and Ozbek11 revealed a belief among postgraduate students that copying published work to clarify ideas is acceptable when lacking topic knowledge.

Factors contributing to plagiarism include time constraints, peer pressure, and cultural disconnection.12 Interestingly, students do not view reusing their own work as plagiarism, unlike purchasing research papers.5

Student perceptions are influenced by social environments and unintentional copying.13 Obeid & Hill advocate proactive training to combat plagiarism, reducing incidents effectively among postgraduate students.8

Horbach & Halffman argue that self-plagiarism could be acceptable with proper citation in minor research areas.9 Meanwhile, Shirazi, Moazam, & Jafarey stress the need to train students in research methodologies and referencing, especially in Pakistan.10 Ramzan M, et al.14 highlight the importance of increased awareness about plagiarism detection tools among Pakistani postgraduate students.

Aziz & Quraishi7 advocate for awareness-building on academic dishonesty, citing that while penalties may deter misconduct, it requires collective efforts in academia to effectively enforce guidelines provided by the Pakistan Higher Education Commission.

In conclusion, students' perceptions of plagiarism are influenced by various factors including knowledge gaps, cultural differences, and lack of awareness. Addressing these issues necessitates proactive training, increased awareness, and guidance to foster a culture of academic integrity among students.5-14

**MATERIALS & METHODS**

A quantitative descriptive research study design was used to measure the perception of students towards plagiarism. The study was conducted on students who had experience in doing research during their studies in different universities of Peshawar. The survey included a sample of 60 students of BS, MS, PhD and other disciplines. The survey questionnaire comprised of 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaires were distributed online to students attending different educational institutions in Peshawar including University of Peshawar, IM Sciences, Rehman College of Nursing, and other institutions. Demographic information was collected, including the student's gender, age, marital status, education, and institution. Part I of the questionnaire consisted of 20 scenarios briefly describing academic malpractice and possible plagiarism, where the respondents were asked to rate the terms of their ‘seriousness’ on a five-point scale: 1 = not plagiarism, 2 = not serious, 3 = minor offence, 4 = serious and 5 = very serious. Part II of the questionnaire collected evidence about the causes that students had found most supportive in developing their understanding of plagiarism. SPSS 22 was used for data analysis. Descriptive and comparative statistics were used to determine the results.

The alternate hypothesis formulated during the survey analysis is mentioned below:

*H1: Students at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) perceive plagiarism as a serious offence.*

**RESULTS**

Among the 60 students, 24 were males and 36 were females with ages ranging from 19 to 44 years. The key findings of the survey study are mentioned in Tables 1a-1e below:

**Table 1a: Responses of students to Question #1 through Question #5 (n=60).**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Severity Level | IM Sciences | Other | Rehman College of Nursing | University of Peshawar | Total |
| Not Plagiarism | 0 | 36 | 9 | 14 | 59 |
| Minor Offence | 1 | 30 | 9 | 23 | 63 |
| Serious | 1 | 57 | 11 | 21 | 90 |
| Very Serious | 1 | 34 | 4 | 13 | 52 |

**Table 1b: Responses of students to Question #6 through Question #10 (n=60).**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Severity Level | IM Sciences | Other | Rehman College of Nursing | University of Peshawar | Total |
| Not Plagiarism | 0 | 36 | 9 | 14 | 59 |
| Minor Offence | 1 | 30 | 7 | 32 | 70 |
| Serious | 1 | 48 | 12 | 21 | 82 |
| Very Serious | 0 | 40 | 6 | 21 | 67 |

**Table 1c: Responses of students to Question #11 through Question #15 (n=60).**

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Severity Level | IM Sciences | Other | Rehman College of Nursing | University of Peshawar | Total |
| Not Plagiarism | 0 | 45 | 13 | 18 | 76 |
| Minor Offence | 1 | 23 | 12 | 32 | 68 |
| Serious | 1 | 45 | 7 | 17 | 70 |
| Very Serious | 1 | 37 | 5 | 14 | 57 |

**Table 1d: Responses of students to Question #16 and Question #17 (n=60).**

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Severity Level | IM Sciences | Other | Rehman College of Nursing | University of Peshawar | Total |
| Not Plagiarism | 0 | 17 | 5 | 6 | 28 |
| Minor Offence | 1 | 20 | 6 | 16 | 43 |
| Serious | 1 | 40 | 9 | 12 | 62 |
| Very Serious | 0 | 33 | 4 | 17 | 54 |

**Table 1e: Responses of students to Question #18 through Question #20 (n=60).**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Severity Level | IM Sciences | Other | Rehman College of Nursing | University of Peshawar | Total |
| Not Plagiarism | 0 | 29 | 7 | 6 | 42 |
| Minor Offence | 2 | 27 | 6 | 22 | 57 |
| Serious | 0 | 38 | 7 | 15 | 60 |
| Very Serious | 0 | 13 | 4 | 8 | 25 |

**DISCUSSION**

The survey findings shows that most of the respondents (24/60, 40%) feel that copying sentences and making minor changes in sentences without citing the sources is a serious offence (Question #1). However, some of the respondents believe it’s a minor offence. In view of Questions #2 and #3, majority of the survey respondents believe that re-submission of last year assignment with change in paragraphs order and use of a portion of a text from a journal without citing it in the list of references is a serious offence. In view of Questions #4 and #5, majority survey respondents believe that citing the references correctly, inclusion of short phrases of 10-15 words from diverse sources, putting quotation marks for a paragraph taken from an article does not come under plagiarism. In response to Question #6, majority survey respondents believe that listing an article in the reference list from which an idea have been taken in one’s study is not plagiarism. In response to Questions #7 and #8, survey respondents are of the view that it is not a serious offence if an idea is proposed without knowing and citing the sources who has actually proposed it. Respondents are also of the view that submitting an assignment as an individual work that has actually been done through mutual collaboration is not a serious offence. Downloading an essay from the internet is viewed by many respondents (23/60, 38.33%) as a serious offence. In response to Questions #10 and #11, respondents believe that copying someone else PhD thesis without acknowledging them and asking for a friend or relative to write one’s assignment is a serious offence. The survey respondents have termed taking an assignment from a fellow student without their consent and naming it as their own as a serious offence; 17/60 (28.33%) survey respondents have termed the passing off of one’s assignment to their fellow student for the purpose of facilitation as a minor offence. In view of Questions #14 and #15, survey respondents believe that taking material from the assignment of another student without their consent and coercing or forcing another student into writing an assignment is a serious offence. The majority of the survey respondents believe that submission of an assignment that has been bought from the internet is a serious offence. In response to Questions #17 and #18, group study by the individuals and exchange of text through email has not been viewed as a serious offence by the respondents. The survey respondents believe that passing an outline of an assignment to a fellow student as an email attachment to facilitate them is not a serious offence. In response to the last question of the survey, the respondents have termed the stating of a reference in the reference lists without having read the article is considered as a serious offence.

A cross sectional study was conducted in 2018 on 551 medical students in Saudi Arabia15 to find out the attitudes and perceptions towards plagiarism. The study analyzed if attending ethical writing courses influences students attitude towards plagiarism. The study found a major association between mean positive and negative attitude scores and grade point average (GPA) (p=0.004 and 0.007, respectively). It concluded that those students who attended the ethical courses had higher mean negative attitude scores as compared to those students who have not attended such ethical courses. The majority of medical students involved in the study showed a greatly negative attitude towards plagiarism.

Another cross-sectional study was conducted in 2018 in two different medical colleges in Rawalpindi Pakistan16 to find out the perception of medical students toward plagiarism and different aspects concerning plagiarism. The study included 1100 participants, and the findings showed that around 86.91% (n=956) were not aware of the presence of plagiarism, but the majority, which was 71.18% (n=783), had plagiarized their work by others. It was concluded that awareness regarding plagiarism should be created along with its consequences.

**CONCLUSION**

The knowledge and perception of surveyed students towards plagiarism was not clear in defining plagiarism or its practice. However, the majority of the students did view plagiarism as an offense.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Students’ uncertainty regarding the knowledge of plagiarism needs to be given more attention. In different educational institutes there are codes of conduct that regulate plagiarism cases as per the guidelines given by Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan. Having knowledge and understanding of these codes of action is important not only for students but also for the academia. The academia needs to perilously reflect on their obligations, morals and practices towards maintaining academic honesty among students.

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