

# Is plagiarism more prevalent in some forms of assessment than others?

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It is increasingly evident that plagiarism in assessment has become a serious problem for universities. This paper reports the results of a survey of postgraduate students in a Master of Information Technology course. The paper presents students' perceptions of plagiarism (intentional and unintentional), percentages of students plagiarising across different forms of assessment, and any correlations found between plagiarism and demographic, situational and perceptual factors. All forms of assessments are subject to plagiarism and occurrences of plagiarism vary between different forms. The paper also discusses ways of addressing plagiarism. It suggests that universities need to undertake an integrated approach that recognises and counters plagiarism at every level from school policy, through staff and student induction, assessment design, deterrence and penalties, and ongoing support. A web based online workshop on plagiarism could be made available to students. Use of plagiarism detection software combined with individual academic support appears to have a positive impact on students. Staff should design assessment tasks that prevent unintentional plagiarism.

**Keywords:** plagiarism, international students, assessment.

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## Introduction

It is increasingly evident and widely accepted in the literature and the popular press that academic dishonesty among students, in particular plagiarism in assessments, are at all time high and still on the rise in Australian universities (Marsden, 2003; Park, 2003; Walker, 1998). This has become a serious and stressful concern for both staff and students. "Student plagiarism subverts the system of course evaluation, debases qualifications, and offends against academic integrity" (Walker 1998; p.89). Managing plagiarism in a constructive and consistent way is challenging and there are issues with additional workload and resources for staff.

At the University of Canberra, during the last five years, there has been an increase in the number of overseas students enrolled in graduate coursework courses, such as the Masters of Information Technology (MIT). At present two thirds of the MIT students are international students, the majority coming from Southeast Asia. Many computing subjects require minimal report writing skills but those in the Information Systems (IS) area, central to our MIT graduates, have assignments that emphasise effective research and critical analysis. Students appear to have difficulty with this form of assessment and there has been an increasing incidence of intentional and unintentional plagiarism that has led us to consider how to address this issue.

In this context, in order to obtain an impression of postgraduate IT students' perceptions, experiences with, and attitudes towards plagiarism, a survey was carried out within the school of Information Sciences and Engineering at the University of Canberra. This paper reports the results of the survey describing students' perceptions of plagiarism (intentional and unintentional), percentages of students plagiarising across different forms of assessments, any correlations found between plagiarism and demographic, situational and perceptual factors. The paper concludes with implications for the university.

## Major hypotheses of study

In addition to measuring the prevalence of plagiarism reported in the sample, three sets of theoretical hypotheses were tested.

*Hypothesis 1*

Plagiarism is more prevalent in some forms of assessment than others. There has been a rise in unintentional plagiarism in Information Systems subjects in recent years within the school. There has been considerable research into perceptions of cheating in assignments and in tests and exams (Park, 2003), but quantitative data on plagiarism across different forms of assessments amongst Australian university students is scarce. A number of studies examined a particular piece of academic work, for instance, a major assignment, or an end of semester examination (Marsden, 2003). For example, some research examined test and exam cheating behaviour including discarded cheat sheets and use of gestures (Croucher, 1994; Pullen et al, 2000). Other research relied on students to self report their behaviour over an entire degree program (eg. Roig & Detommaso, 1995). This study was interested to find out what are the relative frequencies of self reported plagiarism incidence among IT postgraduates in various forms of assessment used in the school.

*Hypothesis 2*

Students plagiarise more in report writing assignments than programming assignments due to an incorrect understanding of citation and referencing conventions arising from the cultural and social diversity (CALD international students, NESB) of students.

This is a two part hypothesis. Based on recent experiences by staff and the Head of School, it was believed that students plagiarise more in technical report writing assignments than programming assignments.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students (CALD) students would plagiarise more due to cultural and language difficulties (Cohen, 2003). The reproductive learning culture (Samuelowicz, 1987) prominent among the CALD students, coupled with stress and difficulties experienced due to study shock, lack of English proficiency and critical thinking ability, means that students struggle to come up with original ideas. Critiquing or even paraphrasing renowned authors' work is like challenging established wisdom as commented by some second year MIT students (Head of School, personal communication). International students represent a significant proportion of the school student population. Staff experience claims that many international students have never written a technical report. They are more likely to plagiarise inadvertently due to incorrect understanding of citation and referencing conventions (Larkham & Manns, 2002, p343).

## Method

Both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used to ascertain student perceptions or misperceptions of plagiarism defined in university policy and reported acts of plagiarism in various assignments in the sample. Three broad sets of data were collected. Each of these provided the basis of the outcomes of the project as detailed below.

*Data gathered through a survey*

A survey was conducted among students enrolled in the MIT. A four part self report questionnaire was distributed in selective graduate and masters level subjects, carefully chosen to range from core programming to information systems management oriented subjects. Participation was during class time and was both anonymous and voluntary. Students who were enrolled in more than one of these subjects were requested to respond to the survey once. The refusal rate was less than 1%. The Human Ethics Committee at the University of Canberra approved the research reported in this paper.

The questionnaire contained a number of closed questions plus questions requiring open ended responses. Section I of the survey was scenario based, describing cases of a student plagiarising. The survey asked students to identify whether it is a case of plagiarism or not, to classify the plagiarism as intentional or unintentional and to justify their responses. Section II of the survey inquired about how many times students have plagiarised in different forms of assessment while doing graduate course work. Section III of the survey contained several open ended questions to identify the deterministic rationales behind plagiarism and how the university can help students to minimise plagiarism practices. Section IV contained items designed to collect demographic information related to the study. Two further items were added to measure the receipt of information on university rules on plagiarism and referencing conventions.

### *University and school data*

Data were collected on the university policy on plagiarism and related matters such as assessment and appeals, and the inclusion of policy information in subject outlines, orientation programs, subject websites etc.

### *Informal interview data*

Other forms of qualitative data were obtained through informal interviews with key academics and support staff. The interviews sought the views of four staff on personal experiences, attitudes towards plagiarism, anecdotal evidence and how to set up assessment tasks to minimise plagiarism.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative data analysis**

99 students participated in the survey with 98 usable responses corresponding to a 99% response rate. The students ranged in age from 21 to 54 with a mean of 28.4 (SD = 7.79). There were 73% male and 27% female, with 40% local and 61% international students. A series of Chi-square test of associations was carried out between plagiarism and demographic variables (i.e. age, sex, employments, average grade etc) and situational variables like awareness of rules and referencing techniques. Significant associations with plagiarism were found only for age and average grade for this sample indicating that younger students with lower grades self report the most instances of plagiarism. Descriptive statistics for the measure of plagiarism are presented in table 1 that reports percentage scores of plagiarism by demographic and situational variables. Some of these measures might not be statistically significant, but have significant implications for the school. For example, students are aware of university rules on plagiarism and penalties, but still they plagiarise. Gender difference in plagiarism is insignificant in this sample.

### *Students perceptions and misperceptions*

There was noticeable confusion in the sample group about attributing acts as plagiarism or non-plagiarism and in classifying intentional and unintentional plagiarism. The four scenarios on proven cases of plagiarism used in the study ranged from neglecting to acknowledge sources to copying others' work in its entirety. Table 2 summarises the students' responses for both local and international students.

Students generally perceived the use of un-cited work as plagiarism. They perceived not quoting others' work as unintentional plagiarism and not acknowledging sources as intentional plagiarism. The rationalisations students provided ranged from laziness, to meeting deadlines, to ignorance of referencing techniques. There was total agreement among the sample that outright copying of another student's assignment was seen as an act of intentional plagiarism. Surprisingly there was a fair amount of tolerance among students that copying or getting someone to write considerable amount of code for programming assignments was not an act of intentional plagiarism. Many saw taking help from peers to complete programming tasks as legitimate and a way of learning.

The study assessed if there existed any significant disconnects between the students' perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism and the university policy, where more disconnects would mean more plagiarism. It examined a combination of situational and perceptual factors in an effort to predict any such relationship. A series of independent chi-square test of associations failed to find any statistically significant associations between students who plagiarised at least once or never with these factors.

In addition, students were asked to identify their stance in terms of how they perceived plagiarism on a 10 point scale ranging from 0 (totally unacceptable) to 10 (totally acceptable). Students generally perceived plagiarism as an unacceptable act. A t-test comparison of means was carried out to find any significant difference between the means for those who plagiarise ( $m = 3.37$ ) and those who do not ( $m = 2.90$ ). The two means are very close indicating that there is no impact ( $p = 0.383$ ) on students' decision to plagiarise even though they perceive plagiarism as unacceptable.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics and predictive plagiarism**

	n	Plagiarised		Asymp. Sig. P
		Never %	At least once %	
<b>Sex</b>	93			.807
Male	68	41.2	58.8	
Female	25	44	56	
<b>Age</b>	89			.023*
21-30	65	33.8	66.2	
31-54	21	69.1	38.9	
<b>Enrolment</b>	92			.114
Part-time	28	53.6	46.4	
Full-time	64	35.9	64.1	
<b>Average Grade</b>	87			.001*
Pass	15	6.7	93.3	
Credit	44	34.1	65.9	
Distinction	18	72.2	27.8	
High Distinction	1	100		
N/A	9	55.6	44.4	
<b>Employment</b>	91			.498
Full-time	25	40	60	
Part-time	37	37.8	62.2	
Not employed	29	51.7	48.3	
<b>Status</b>	92			.236
International	56	37.5	62.5	
Local	36	50	50	
<b>Units Completed</b>	89			.610
Up to 3 units	37	45.9	54.1	
Up to 6 units	21	33.3	66.7	
Up to 9 units	13	38.5	61.5	
Up to 12 units	13	53.8	46.2	
Up to 24 units	5	20	80	
<b>Awareness of Rules</b>	93			.310
Yes	85	43.5	56.5	
No	8	25	75	
<b>Referencing Techniques</b>	92			.734
Yes	76	42.1	57.9	
No	16	37.5	62.5	

p < 0.05 indicates there is a significant association

**Table 2: Perceptions of students of plagiarism based on university policy**

Scenario for perceptions		Plagiarism (%)	
		Yes	No
Local Student	Did not put quotation mark	72	28
	Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	22	78
	Did not acknowledge source	89	11
	Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	77	23
	Copied other student's assignment	100	0
	Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	97	3
	Another student wrote major part of the assignment	77	23
International Student	Did not put quotation mark	59	41
	Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	31	69
	Did not acknowledge source	88	13
	Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	68	32
	Copied other student's assignment	98	2
	Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	98	2
	Another student wrote major part of the assignment	65	35
Considered plagiarism as Intentional yes/no	70	30	

## Discussion

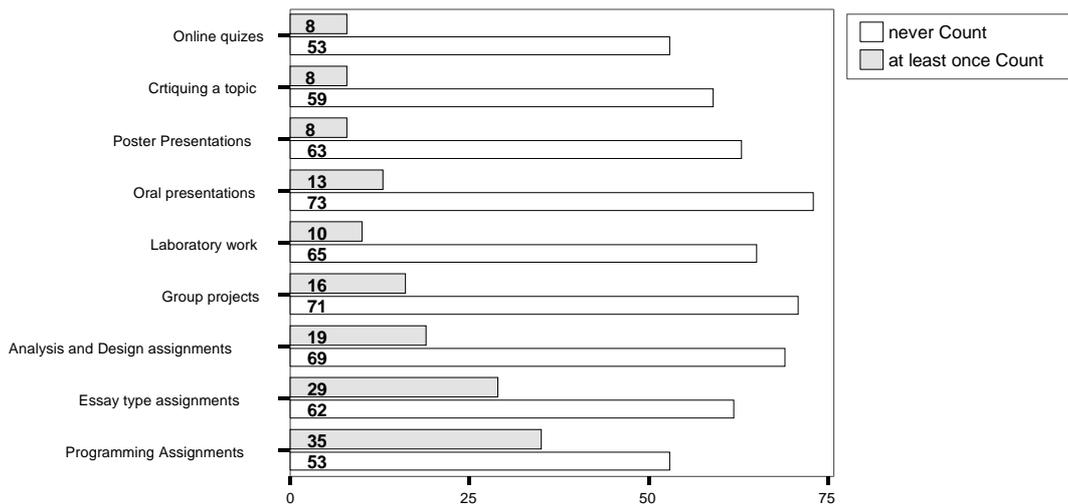
Amongst the current sample, 57% of the students admitted to plagiarising at least once. This is much lower than the benchmark study conducted among 954 students at four Australian universities where 81% of the students admitted to plagiarism (Marsden, 2003).

Hypothesis 1: Plagiarism is more prevalent in some forms of assessment than others.

Students were asked to self report on their personal experiences of plagiarising on a five point scale of 0 (never) to 4 (many times). The results below show the relative frequencies of plagiarism across assessments, with more students admitted to cheating in programming assignments, ahead of essay type assignments, then analysis and design assignments (i.e. databases related assignments), and finally group projects and laboratory work.

Hypothesis 2: Students plagiarise more in report writing assignments than programming assignments due to an incorrect understanding of citation and referencing conventions arising from the cultural and social diversity (CALD international students, NESB) of students.

The first part of this hypothesis is rejected. Programming assignments have a mean score of .80, analysis and design assignments 0.45, and essay writing assignments 0.62 on a scale of 0 (never) to 4 (many times). This (and chart 2 below) is indicative that students tend to plagiarise more in programming assignments than essay type assignments.

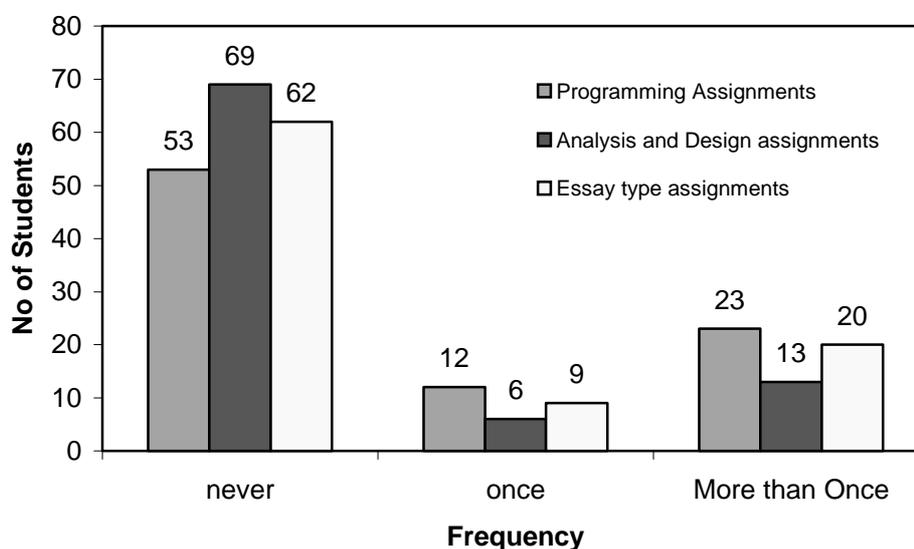


**Figure 1: Self reported plagiarism across different forms of assessment (no of students)**

For the second part of the hypothesis, the study failed to find any correlation between student perceptions of acknowledgement and referencing conventions and plagiarism in essay type assessments ( $p=0.315$  &  $p=0.324$ ). An important and somewhat surprising outcome of the present study is the unexpected finding that information on proper citation and referencing techniques had no impact on plagiarism, where one would hope, especially in the cases of CALD international students, that lack of knowledge of referencing conventions within the discipline area would mean more plagiarism in essay type assessments. One explanation to this anomaly as claimed by students was that they were aware of the locations of the resources on citation conventions (i.e. subject outline, assignment handout, Academic Skills Program, library website, staff etc) but never read/used them.

In addition it follows through, from discussion on student perceptions and table 1, that there was no statistically significant data to relate misconceptions of international students with plagiarism, which can be seen as a limitation of this study. As discussed earlier (and later in qualitative analysis) students'

responses and rationalisations and interviews with ESL staff confirm the prevalence of this claim. The survey shows that 34% of international students plagiarise in essay type assessments as opposed to 19.4% of local students, which shows a bias ( $p = 0.132$ ).



**Figure 2: Self reported plagiarism frequencies in assessment (no of students)**

### Qualitative data analysis

One of the more interesting aspects of the survey was the open ended comments by students that provided a more in-depth view of their perceptions of why plagiarism occurs and their views on the ways in which it could be minimised and managed.

#### *Why students plagiarise*

The investigation sought to find reasons why students' plagiarise in IT. The majority of the students (43%) identified laziness, lack of motivation to work hard, and regarding copying as an easy way out as major reasons why students plagiarise. Only 11% of the sample plagiarise in order to achieve higher grades and /or simply to pass the subject.

One third of the students regarded poor time management and stressing to meet deadlines due to workload (both academic and work) as the reason for plagiarising. The majority of the students work part time, leaving them with little time to attend classes and to complete assignments on time. This is supported by a separate study of 477 students at our university that the higher the proportion of classes missed, the lower the average grade. For all fulltime students the study further found that paid employment for long hours per week (> 22 hrs) has a small but negative affect on average marks (Applegate & Daly, 2003).

At the other end of the spectrum, another significant group of the respondents (41%) identified lack of knowledge and understanding of and interest in the subject/ course as the major reason for plagiarism among IT students. This is a unique and significant determinant found in this survey, parts of which are apparently not emphasised in the literature. A fairly representative sample of their responses includes:

- Lack of understanding of the principles to complete the assignment.
- Lack of knowledge in the subject.
- Cannot cope with intellectual content.
- The subject may not be related to individual's future work.
- They shouldn't be doing the subject in the first place.

As shown by Gerdeman (2000):

Cheating tends to be more common in classes where the subject matter seems to students unimportant or uninteresting or where the teacher seemed disinterested or permissive (in Park, 2003; p.480).

The survey students clearly identified a 'lack of intellect to comprehend the subject or course materials' as the primary factor. This questions the intellectual ability of this group of students to take up studies in IT or their approach to study or their claim for credits or their interest in the chosen field (Baskett et al., 2004)

Among the students almost one fifth reported that students might commit plagiarism out of ignorance of 'what constitutes plagiarism', lack of knowledge of referencing and citation techniques, which were hypothesised to be the major factors behind plagiarism (hypothesis 2). Only a few (8%) thought conflicting cultural values and norms about plagiarism plays a role in plagiarism.

Further as suggested in several student comments, some students believe that the university contributes to student plagiarism – perhaps through lack of resources in terms of staff availability and library resources etc. (5%), encouraging an environment of collaborative learning through group work (3%), poor course assignments with unrealistic expectations and not accepting resubmissions (6%) etc.

A number of studies have confirmed that a perception, on the part of the students, that the low risk of being caught and an unwillingness among the staff to report such cases of plagiarism can contribute to plagiarism (Park 2003, p481). When asked, "do students plagiarise only when they think they would not get caught?" 54 out of 91 respondents disagreed. They referred to the reasons mentioned earlier as being the determinant for their decision to plagiarise or not. Use of detection software may reduce plagiarism, but will not solve the cause of the problem.

#### *Institutional support for students*

When asked what the university could do to assist students so that they do not plagiarise, students' responses ranged from issues related to assessment and submission requirements to increasing awareness of plagiarism. Representative student comments for minimising plagiarism include:

- Flexible [assignment] submission date.
- More group work will lead to plagiarism.
- Breakup assignments into smaller deliverables.
- Syllabus and assignments should be changed each year.
- University should offer enough information, models, samples and examples of each required assignment style.
- Review workloads of subjects.
- Publicise cases of plagiarism and how it was dealt with.
- Lecturer and tutors must give enough time to their students. [Lecturers should] repeat before each assignment question, take few minutes to explain what is plagiarism.
- Make sure all new students are given a session on plagiarism in their first semester.
- Creating more awareness using tools and software to detect plagiarism and enforce punishments, so others don't do it.
- Be more concerned about the people from different backgrounds as they are not familiar with the style of study and expectations from the staff and lecturers.

### **Implications for the university**

As seen in this study, the range of views on the topic of how to reduce plagiarism is broad, perhaps an indication of how difficult it may be to generate consensus on any campuswide strategy to address the issue. Based on the findings, the paper attempts to incorporate recommendations to the university in the form of support rather than a punitive approach on deterring, detecting and dealing with plagiarism.

### *Awareness*

- It was evident through the interviews and informal discussions with staff that there are uncertainties among the staff with regard to the so called 'grey area' of plagiarism (when and where plagiarism starts and what is plagiarism in academic writing) and what is the formal procedure for dealing with acts of plagiarism. Staff should be made aware of these policies through staff induction (i.e. workshops, seminars, discussion in school meetings).
- An orientation program for new students should be made compulsory rather than voluntary. Student orientation programs are short but memorable. A short and quick exercise on plagiarism will encourage students to think about what plagiarism consists of (Carroll, 2003).
- Both local and international students have misperceptions. Any strategy thus needs to address both cohorts. A web based online workshop on plagiarism can be made available for both local and international students as a way of removing misperceptions of issues related to plagiarism (Cohen, 2003).
- Some CALD students do not understand why they need to reference (ESL staff, personal communication). Workshops and/or lectures focusing on the need for referencing with practical exercises are desirable.

### *Assessment design*

- Minimise the number of assessments per subject per semester for the simple reason that over assessment contributes to plagiarism (Langsam, 2001). Consider coordinating the timing and number of assignments horizontally so that students are not tempted to plagiarise in order to meet the workload requirements.
- Have more in class assessments to reduce plagiarism (ESL staff, personal communication).
- Assignments should have elements of both theory and practice, relating to personal experiences and current events. Assignments should encourage critical thinking rather than ask to summarise findings (ESL staff, personal communication).
- Lecturers should make it clear what is expected in a group assignment. Encouraging students to collaborate may improve learning, but caution should be taken to illustrate when collaboration ends and collusion begins (James et al, 2002).
- Assignments should be set such that they do not end up testing the English proficiency of students where the purpose is to test the technical outcomes of the task.
- Do not recycle the previous year's assignment (Carroll & Appelson, 2001).
- If students know that they could be given a chance to resubmit their own work in case of failure, they might be less inclined to plagiarise to pass the assessment item.
- Breakup large assignments into components and have progress reports before final submissions.
- Lecturers should take time to explain to students what is regarded as plagiarism for any assignment when distributing the assessment item and remind them repeatedly of the penalties for plagiarising.
- Provide clear, unambiguous structural models of each assignment. Wherever possible, provide samples of accepted standard and academic conventions for an assessment item.

### *Student academic and language support*

- International students struggle with proficiency in English writing. Students need to learn how to write in the discipline area. NESB students goes through stages while developing writing skills starting from mere copying of texts to 'plagi-phrasing' (paraphrase) till they become confident academic writers (Wilson, 1997). As noted in the literature, the transition needs considerable time and effort. Staff should be more understating and supportive in first year subjects.
- First year students should have a compulsory component on plagiarism through an assignment on writing and referencing as part of the coursework or through a web based short course either as a prerequisite to admission or as a requirement of enrolment. The first approach may be more applicable as the students perceive assignments as important if that is related to their course or are graded and there is a consequence of failing.

### *Detection*

- It is recommended that each subject convenor add a *checklist* to indicate specifically which behaviors constitute plagiarism in each subject (Devlin, 2003).
- Use of detection software to check assignments acts as a deterrent. Electronic detection is not a magic bullet but it is a splendid way to entice people into thinking about plagiarism and it has a place

as part of a holistic approach (Carroll, 2003). Plagiarism detection tools like TurnItIn provide an excellent service in detecting matching text between documents. This is a time-consuming process and might require additional staff to implement such a service university wide (Baskett et al., 2004).

- The process of academic moderation and support has more value than simple detection as per our experience. We are currently trialling a system through which students who are caught for plagiarism go through a personal one on one session with an academic moderator to improve their writing skills and resubmit assessment work till they get it right. This trial of TurnItIn software combined with academic moderation process since 2003 has yielded positive feedback from both staff and student in reducing plagiarism (Baskett et al., 2004).
- All forms of assessment should be trialled to go through Software detection process to stop plagiarism practices evident in different forms of assessment.
- Another approach might be through establishment of a faculty plagiarism database where all occurrences of plagiarism, collusion and cheating would be recorded (Hill, 2004). This combined with a revised policy on plagiarism can act as deterrence and reduce incidence of plagiarism overall.

## Conclusion

This paper reports preliminary results of IT students' perceptions of plagiarism and self reported occurrences of plagiarism in a school in an Australian university. All forms of assessment are subject to plagiarism and occurrences of plagiarism vary between different forms. The results show that plagiarism is common among postgraduate students, that there are multiple reasons why students plagiarise and careful design of assessment tasks is necessary to minimise plagiarism. An integrated approach that recognises and counters plagiarism at every level through a process of plagiarism detection software combined with individual academic support will go along way in preventing plagiarism. University strategies should aim to generate constant awareness among students and staff with an approach to support rather than punish. A web based short course on plagiarism could be made available for students. For future exploration, investigation should be aimed at finding why students plagiarise in each form of assessment using more qualitative methods like focus groups.

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