

## Research Plagiarism in Academic Writing of Postgraduate Students Specializing in English: Myanmar University Context

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### Abstract

The objectives of this study were 1) to investigate the postgraduate students' awareness and knowledge about research plagiarism, 2) to examine the common forms of research plagiarism committed by students in their master's theses, 3) to study their perceptions on their referencing skills, and 4) to study the actions taken by universities against postgraduate students who plagiarize. The samples were 110 postgraduate students, and 22 supervisors. The collected data were conducted by the questionnaire survey with the postgraduate students and the follow-up interviews with the supervisors. The statistics for data analysis were percentage, mean and standard deviation. The findings of this study were revealed that overall,

only (M=1.44) of the participants were aware of the meaning of plagiarism. Approximately (M=0.49) of the participants have not heard about plagiarism. Regarding common forms of plagiarism to be committed by students in their master's theses, majority of the theses (M=1.24) were found copied and pasted from written source or web followed by presenting or citing the secondary source as a primary source (M=1.29). According to interview responses of common forms of plagiarism reported by supervisor participants, most of the supervisors reported lack of plagiarism workshop. The data showed that students were not confident of their referencing skills. Even though most of the students were aware of the university policies, systems and procedures for involving plagiarism, they might plagiarize due to foreign language problems, time constraints, and lack of knowledge about research plagiarism.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, English specialization, Myanmar, Postgraduate students, Research plagiarism

## **Introduction**

In view of the several research findings mentioned earlier, it is plausible to accept that plagiarism does exist in higher education but what differs is the level and depth of prevalence. In that regard, the higher education stakeholders' focus should be on how to prevent or minimize plagiarism. There can be multiple reasons for getting involved in academic misconduct of plagiarism that include ferocious competitive academic environment, external pressure, poor time management, and the impractical deadlines.

## **Literature Review**

### *1. Knowledge of Research Plagiarism*

How students view plagiarism has many determinants. These likely include the culture, both inside and outside academia; the capacity, personality and training of students; and the benefits for successful plagiarism versus the likelihood of, and penalties for, detection. There is recognition that the problem is widespread and increasing and an agreement that students should

be inculcated with ethical principles and legal implications related to plagiarism. However, the views and definitions of plagiarism vary both among teachers and students, and even when there is an agreement of the principles of what plagiarism is, it is hard to agree on tolerance levels or appropriate responses. Referencing is an integral part of scientific writing and professional research conduct that requires appropriate acknowledgement of others' work and avoidance of plagiarism. University students should understand and apply this as part of their academic development, but for this, it is essential that supervisors also display proper research integrity and support.

## *2. Common Forms of Research Plagiarism*

According to Batane (2010), the common forms of plagiarism committed by students include “copy and paste” without quotes and acknowledging the source; providing incomplete information about the original source; fabricating references; copying from a friend or submitting work done by a friend; and presenting or citing the secondary source as a primary source. A study by Jager and Brown (2010) categorized students copying from each other as intentional plagiarism whereas copying without citing sources was categorized as unintentional because students plagiarized due to ignorance or incompetence. According to Scouller et al. (2008), students plagiarized due to lack of skills to paraphrase, summarize and reference properly. Scouller also noted that students usually rate themselves as good at academic writing yet they unintentionally committed various forms of plagiarism. The study further found that the common sanctions applied by academics include giving a warning and asking the student to re-write the plagiarized work.

## *3. Referencing Skills*

Referencing is the way that students must acknowledge the sources of information that they use in their assignments, reports, and dissertation. This includes ideas, theories, quotations, facts and figures, as well as illustrations

and even diagrams that are originally created by someone else. Lack of correct referencing skills has been noted earlier in connection with the issue of plagiarism. Since plagiarism and correct referencing are to some degree interlinked. Aspects of correct referencing are an indicator of respondents' understanding and these revealed issues of misconceptions and disagreement both among students and supervisors. When an author is referencing citations by secondary authors, there is a risk that the results of one study appear more solid when it has multiple references. As it was clear in this study, all supervisors and most students would consider a statement more reliable if it contained multiple references. It was also evident that many were willing to cite a secondary reference, even without reading the original study, or to add both as references, which would give a false sense of reliability and risks citation out of context. Information or ideas from other people's work used in the writing of research reports must be acknowledged. The method one chooses to use must be consistent throughout the document. Several methods have been developed over the years to record details of the sources one has used for his/her work. Well-known methods include Harvard (also known as the author-date system), American Psychology Association (APA) and Oxford (documentary-note). This document gives links to resources on these methods. Other methods not covered here include Chicago, MLA and Vancouver. Different methods are generally favored by different subject disciplines. Students always contact their teacher before using a bibliographic style as they may have a preferred method. Courses and trainings on research ethics or scientific writing should include aspects of referencing and plagiarism, since these are vital parts of academia. Correct referencing gives credit where it is due, helps the reader find further evidence, and gives weight behind statements allowing fact-based claims. Incorrect referencing can cause misperceptions and makes it difficult for the reader to know the truth behind statements, and therefore, it is an important ethical issue. In light of this, recent moves by some universities to require students to publish before they can obtain their MSc or PhD provide an incentive to publish at all costs including perhaps plagiarism or poor referencing.

#### *4. Actions Taken by University to Deal with Research Plagiarism / Penalties Applied to Each Research Plagiarism Offence*

Some of the ways suggested by Devlin (2006) to curb plagiarism include: the need by universities to set clear definitions of what constitutes plagiarism and the corresponding penalties applied to each plagiarism offence, and putting in place a formal policy on how plagiarism should be handled by all university stakeholders including lecturers, students and administrators. Nonetheless, having the policy and publicizing plagiarism through university websites and the students' handbook is not a guarantee that students understand and avoid committing it (Ryan et al., 2009). There is also a need to have dedicated classes aimed at teaching students rules and standards of academic writing. Other researchers such as Roberts (2008) have suggested that lecturers can play a greater role in dealing with plagiarism by designing assignments that require students to apply high level writing skills rather than “copying and pasting” thereby making it very difficult for them to plagiarize.

Of course other studies such as that of McCabe (2005) found that lecturers occasionally ignored incidents of plagiarism in North American Universities. Another notable reason student resort to plagiarizing is the way assignments are designed, that is, assignments are sometimes too easy to plagiarize. This is the reason some higher education stakeholders advocate for the design of assignments that will prevent students to just “copy and paste” but rather they should require students to combine and apply higher level of thinking, analysis and synthesis of other sources (Roberts, 2008).

#### *5. Problem Statements*

This small survey used an educative survey to assess perceptions towards plagiarism and referencing, with the aim of facilitating training in scientific writing. Training on these aspects may be particularly necessary in low-income countries and when English is not a native language, since the increased pressure of writing may push students into taking short cuts, even when they know it is wrong. Surprisingly, there seems to be a lot of

misperceptions as to how referencing should be done, even among supervisors. This indicates a need for more thorough training at different stages of the academic careers and more discussions within faculty. Research integrity may be difficult to teach students when supervisors do not always constitute good examples. The overall conclusion of this study is that these topics should be more frequently addressed and discussed and that the approach used for these questions can be used as a learning tool.

- 1) How knowledgeable are postgraduate students about research plagiarism?
- 2) What are the common forms of research plagiarism reported to be committed by postgraduate students at Universities?
- 3) What are the students' perceptions on their referencing skills?
- 4) What are the actions taken by Universities against postgraduate students who plagiarize?

## **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate the postgraduate students' awareness and knowledge about research plagiarism
2. To examine the common forms of research plagiarism committed by students in their master's theses
3. To study their perceptions on their referencing skills, and
4. To study the actions taken by universities against postgraduate students who plagiarize.

## **Methodology**

### *1. Research Design*

This study was conducted from January to October 2019, among students and supervisors predominantly in English specialization in order to assess the knowledge and practice of students with regard to referencing and plagiarism. The online questionnaire was distributed through a mailed link to the following groups with the instruction that the survey was meant for students at master's level and above and their supervisors.

## 2. Population and Samples

The samples of this study were 110 postgraduate students and 22 supervisors.

## 3. Instruments and Procedures

The instruments of this study were a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire consisted of 17 comprehensive statements which were specifically designed to determine the knowledge of participants regarding various forms of plagiarism and its consequences. Similarly, supervisors were also surveyed with the interview methodology.

## 4. Data Collection

We sent a questionnaire to 150 postgraduate students, of which 110 (73%) questionnaires were returned. Follow up interviews were conducted with 22 research supervisor academics.

Table 1

*Demographic Data of Postgraduate Student Participants of English Specialization at Master's Degree Course (n=110)*

SN	Demographic Data	Data		
		Number	Percentage	
1	Gender	Male	25	22.73%
		Female	85	77.27%

Table 2

*Demographic Data of Supervisor Participants (n=22)*

SN	Demographic Data	Data		
		Number	Percentage	
1	Gender	Male	4	18.18%
		Female	18	81.82 %

Altogether, the questionnaire lists comprised around 150 potential participants. The questionnaire survey was answered by 110 student respondents although 40 did not finish the full questionnaire and 22 to be

supervisors. The academic experience was varying among the participants. Of the 22 supervisors; 3 had PhD degrees, 2 were still pursuing PhD degrees, and 17 got master's degree. Among students, all were pursuing master's degrees. By employing a uniform system, two of the authors distributed the questionnaire to random students once the regularly scheduled classes ended. Once the aims and objectives of the study were explained, a verbal informed consent was obtained, and the participants were given ample time to fill out the complete form. To encourage truthful responses, the participants were taken into confidence and guaranteed total anonymity with record of only their area of expertise. All student participants had written a master thesis. Only 5% of supervisor participants had never been an author of any peer-reviewed publication. Apart from one supervisor (who also had PhD degree), all of those that had never written a peer-reviewed publication.

### *5. Data Analysis*

The statistics for data analysis were percentage, mean and standard deviation.

## **Results**

The aim of this study was to generate evidence to help postgraduate students and supervisors build the research capacity. The overall goal of this research was to improve the scientific writing of students, through the specific objectives of this survey of improving the understanding of the attitudes towards plagiarism and knowledge of referencing. From the total number of volunteers of the study, there were 20.46% males and 79.54% females, 16.67% were English supervisors, and 83.33% were students of English specialization. Since there were a total of 17 comprehensive statements on the questionnaire, hence the results will also be divided based on their sub-headings.

### *3.1 Knowledge of Research Plagiarism*

The participants were asked if they had heard about plagiarism and if they knew what it was, and after answering this, they were given the definitions



but had no possibility to go back and correct their answers. Definitions used were on purpose as simple and non-academic as possible, and thus Wikipedia definitions were used, as they were considered understandable by all participants. The survey used the following definitions, which was explained to the participants after the first questions regarding if they had heard about plagiarism and could describe it themselves.

Research Question (i): How knowledgeable are postgraduate students about research plagiarism?

Table 3

*Awareness and Knowledge about Research Plagiarism among Students (n=110)*

SN	The statements best describe what we think research plagiarism is and is not.	M	SD	Meaning
1	We have heard about research plagiarism.	1.45	0.50	Disagree
2	We have heard of it but did not think it was very common.	1.41	0.49	Agree
3	Research plagiarism is when someone uses the work or text of another without clearly marking that it is someone else's work.	1.42	0.49	Agree
4	Wikipedia defines research plagiarism as paraphrasing without citation.	1.62	0.49	Disagree
5	Wikipedia defines research plagiarism as repeating an idea expressed by someone else, and not giving credit.	1.49	0.50	Disagree
6	Wikipedia defines research plagiarism as using ideas of someone without citing the original author.	1.37	0.48	Agree
7	Wikipedia defines research plagiarism as using words of someone without citing the original author.	1.29	0.45	Agree
Average		1.44	0.49	Agree

Note. 0.45 - 1.44 = Agree, 1.45 - 2.44 = Disagree.

Based on table 3, the participants responded that they had heard about plagiarism (Mean=1.45, SD=0.50) but the most common answer as to how often it occurred was that they had heard of it but did not think it was very

common ( $M=1.41$ ,  $SD=0.49$ ). Significantly, the lowest mean score was statement 7 at “Agree” level in the fact that they have the knowledge of how to define plagiarism by Wikipedia ( $M=1.29$ ,  $SD=0.45$ ). It was also clear that there was no consensus among participants on what constituted correct behavior. This survey shows a need for greater consensus on appropriate knowledge and that there is need for more discussions and training on the topic for students.

### 3.2 Common Forms of Research Plagiarism

The study also sought to understand the prevalence of plagiarism by establishing common forms of plagiarism reported to be committed by students at Universities. Data collected using a questionnaire administered to students and academics are presented in Table 4 where it is clear that indeed, students admitted having committed some forms of plagiarism which were also encountered by academic staff.

Research Question (ii): What are the common forms of research plagiarism reported to be committed by postgraduate students?

Table 4

*Common Forms of Research Plagiarism to Be Committed by Students in Their Master’s Theses (Source: McCabe, 2005) (n=69 theses)*

SN	Common Forms of Research Plagiarism	M	SD	Meaning
1	Lack of proper acknowledgement after paraphrasing	1.39	0.49	Agree
2	Lack of proper acknowledgement after summarizing	1.43	0.50	Agree
3	Lack of proper acknowledgement after using quotation marks	1.56	0.50	Disagree
4	Copy and paste from written source or web	1.24	0.43	Agree
5	Copy and paste without quotes and acknowledging the source	1.34	0.47	Agree
6	Providing incomplete information about the original source	1.32	0.47	Agree

Table 4 (Continued)

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7	Copying from a friend or submitting work done by a friend	1.98	0.14	Disagree
8	Presenting or citing the secondary source as a primary source	1.29	0.45	Agree
	Average	1.44	0.43	Agree

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*Note.* 0.45 - 1.44 = Agree, 1.45 - 2.44 = Disagree.

According to table 4, it was reported from the interviews with academic staff that students were not good at paraphrasing, summarizing and citing as evidenced by many errors in their academic assessments and these available in the library. The study established that prevalent forms of plagiarism reported to be committed by students in their Master's thesis included copy and paste from written source or web ( $M=1.24$ ,  $SD=0.43$ ), presenting or citing the secondary source as a primary source ( $M=1.29$ ,  $SD=0.45$ ) and providing incomplete information about the original source ( $M=1.32$ ,  $SD=0.47$ ) at "Agree" level respectively.

Results are well corroborated by those from the academics' interview responses as can be seen in table 5. Follow-up interviews with some academic staff also verbatim without quotes and proper acknowledgement, "copy and paste" from Internet and submitting others' work confirmed that the common forms of plagiarism committed by students, include copy as their own.

In this study, postgraduate students from diverse backgrounds participated. Universities may not have exposed students to good academic writing skills with perhaps a different referencing style from that in a department or faculty. In addition, the level and depth of academic writing at postgraduate level is quite different from that required at undergraduate level.

Table 5

*Interview Responses on Common Forms of Research Plagiarism Reported by Supervisor Participants (n=22)*

Supervisor participants	Common forms of research plagiarism
1	Students usually rate themselves as good at <i>academic writing</i> , yet they unintentionally committed various forms of research plagiarism.
2	Students plagiarized due to <i>lack of skills</i> to paraphrase, summarize and reference properly.
3	Students <i>lack good academic writing skills</i> because they were not taught these skills.
4	Students <i>lack research plagiarism workshop</i> .
5	Despite students reporting that they had a conceptual understanding of research plagiarism, the majority of them reported that they had intentionally and unintentionally committed research plagiarism, mainly due to lack of good academic writing skills, <i>pressure for good grades, and laziness and poor time management</i> .
6	Although students have positive attitude, they might plagiarize <i>due to foreign language problems, time constraints, and lack of knowledge about research plagiarism</i> .
7	Academic sources (e.g., books and journals) are more credible than the Internet, yet students still rely heavily on <i>Internet sources</i> for their research.
8	Typically, the most common trap students fall into is <i>finding an online</i> which concerns a similar research topic to which they have been working on and submitting it.
9	Some research students also fall foul of not putting quotes in quotation marks therefore it appears that they have <i>simply copied the work without giving credit</i> to the original author.
10	It is important for the students to demonstrate that they have the capacity to interpret the complex research topic and rely on <i>their own analytical skills</i> to advance critical comment.
11	The aftereffects of being caught research plagiarism are really quite profound. If caught plagiarizing the immediate outcome is that the students have proven themselves to be <i>lazy and untrustworthy</i> .

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12	The main aim for modern students should be to attain information literacy. Information literacy is essential in ensuring that students do not <i>plagiarize academic content</i> .
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Table 5 (Continued)

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13	Research plagiarism, or passing someone else's work as your own, is not a new phenomenon in research. It has gained greater attention <i>with the advent of technology</i> that has made it easier to uncover instances of research plagiarism.
14	Research plagiarism may occur because of the different types of sources. For example, when a researcher references a source that is incorrect or does not exist, it is a <i>misleading citation</i> .
15	Research plagiarism also occurs when a researcher uses a secondary source of data or information, but only cites the <i>primary source of information</i> . Both these types lead to an increase in the number of reference sources. This, in turn, increases the citation number of the references.

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According to follow-up interviews with academic staff, one common reason students commit plagiarism is because of the ease of “*copying and pasting*” *online content*. Many lecturers observed that students are always under pressure *to meet due dates, score good grades or any other pressure and they resort to the content available* on the Internet where they just “copy and paste”. Many previous studies have explained that the avalanche of information *on the internet* makes plagiarism conveniently easy and tempting for students and some students will “*copy and paste*” because they want *to save time* for other assignments and do other personal things.

### 3.3 Referencing Skills

Referencing is used to acknowledge the books, journal articles and other sources of information that students use when writing a paper. This is done by briefly referring to (citing) the sources of information in the text of their work, and by producing a corresponding, alphabetical list of references (or a bibliography) at the end of their work. Participants were asked to rate themselves (self-reporting) on a Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) on their referencing style as regards to each item hence percentages were calculated based on each item's total.

Research Question (iii): What are the students' perceptions on their referencing skills?

Table 6

*Students' Perceptions on Their Referencing Skills (n=110)*

SN	Referencing skills	M	SD	Meaning
1	Information or ideas from other people's work used in the writing of our research reports must be acknowledged.	4.29	0.68	Agree
2	The method we choose to use must be consistent throughout our document.	4.23	0.63	Agree
3	Well-known methods include Harvard (also known as the author-date system), American Psychology Association (APA), the Modern Language Association of America, and Oxford (MLA documentary-note).	3.45	1.17	Agree
4	Different methods are generally favored by different subject disciplines.	3.37	1.05	Neutral
5	We always contact our teacher before using a bibliographic style as they may have a preferred method.	3.35	0.88	Neutral
	Average	3.74	0.88	Agree

*Note.* 0.44 - 1.44 = Strongly Disagree, 1.45 - 2.44 = Disagree, 2.45 - 3.44 = Neutral, 3.45 - 4.44 = Agree and 4.45 - 5.44 = Strongly Agree.

The data shows that the students want to choose the way they used that must be consistent throughout their document (M=4.23, SD=0.63). According to the average result of table 6 (M=3.74, SD=0.88), we found the perceptions on referencing skills of the students are at "Agree" level and the fact that they have the knowledge of the referencing skills. However, as the table show, agree and neutral, has a higher percentage than on the other items meaning that students were not that confident of their referencing skills.

### *3.4 Penalties Applied to Each Research Plagiarism Offence*

During follow-up interviews, some lecturers argued that students may commit serious cases of research plagiarism, but it is possible that academics

fail to detect plagiarism due to workload. In that regard, most academics recommended the use of text-matching software, which in addition to detecting plagiarized academic work, this text-matching software also helps students to improve their work before finally submitting to the lecturers. Students were asked to express their views in regard to the ways/actions employed by Universities to curb or minimize research plagiarism. The findings are presented in table 7.

Research Question (iv): What are the actions taken by Universities against postgraduate students who plagiarize?

Table 7  
*Views in Regard to the Ways/Actions Employed by Universities to Curb or Minimize Research Plagiarism*

SN	Ways to Curb or Minimize Research Plagiarism Suggested by Students	M	SD	Meaning
1	Setting clear definitions of what constitutes plagiarism and the corresponding penalties applied to each plagiarism offence	1.49	0.50	Disagree
2	Putting in place a formal policy on how plagiarism should be handled by all university stakeholders including lecturers, students and administrators	1.33	0.47	Agree
3	Having the policy and publicizing plagiarism through university websites and the students' handbook	1.31	0.46	Agree
4	Designing assignments that require students to apply high level writing skills rather than “copying and pasting” thereby making it very difficult for them to plagiarize	1.24	0.43	Agree
5	Have dedicated classes aimed at teaching students’ rules and standards of academic writing	1.27	0.44	Agree
Average		1.33	0.46	Agree

*Note.* 0.45 - 1.44 = Agree, 1.45 - 2.44 = Disagree.

Based on table 7, according to the findings, the participants highly agree the ways to minimize research plagiarism; designing assignments that require students to apply high level writing skills rather than “copying and pasting” (M=1.24, SD=0.43) thereby making it very difficult for them to plagiarize

and objected to those punishments that jeopardized their academic progression. In more specific terms, the students agree that they want to have dedicated classes aimed at teaching students' rules and standards of academic writing ( $M=1.27$ ,  $SD=0.44$ ) while students preferred having the policy and publicizing research plagiarism through university websites and the students' handbook at "Agree" level ( $M=1.31$ ,  $SD=0.46$ ).

## Discussion

In this survey, the knowledge, and perceptions of students about research plagiarism and referencing were explored. Although the study included a relatively small number of participants, it points to knowledge gaps that could affect the quality of scientific writing. The study established that many students plagiarized because they lacked academic writing skills as reported by students and academics, and by analyzing reported common forms of plagiarism presented below (which emanate from lack of writing skills) and from follow up interviews. According to follow-up interviews with academic staff, one common reason students commit plagiarism at Universities is because of the ease of "copying and pasting" online content. Many supervisors observed that students are always under pressure to meet due dates, score good grades or any other pressure and they resort to the content available on the Internet where they just "copy and paste". Many previous studies have explained that the avalanche of information on the internet makes plagiarism conveniently easy and tempting for students (Walker, 2008) and some students will "copy and paste" because they want to save time for other assignments and do other personal things (Batane, 2010). With the help of the questionnaire, we determined the responses of students regarding: (i) students' knowledge, (ii) forms regarding plagiarism, (iii) referencing skills of the participants and (iv) response towards penalties. Answers to our questionnaire, turned in anonymously, revealed that more than 1/2 of the respondents did not lack knowledge about the most basic principles that constitute plagiarism. It was also found in the students' theses that the common forms of plagiarism committed by students include "copy and paste" from written source or web



(M=1.24), presenting or citing the secondary source as a primary source (M=1.29) followed by providing incomplete information about the original source (M=1.32). Furthermore, students were not that confident of their referencing skills. Most respondents were aware about means of detecting research plagiarism: teachers could search the internet for suspicious text, and there was a piece of software for detecting research plagiarism. There was a general consensus among all 110 answering the questionnaire that testing should be done, with believing it should always be done, although this percentage was higher among students. Similarly, most of the students also believed that increasing the number of assignments would improve their skills regarding research plagiarism. However, despite the increased percentage of knowledge regarding research plagiarism, some of the students also believed that they still need some workshop regarding research plagiarism, whereas a few considered they had no need for it and very few did not know. Results of participants show that they still need guidance about research plagiarism.

## **Recommendations**

Furthermore, to promote a research environment in Myanmar, the revision of postgraduate curriculum should also be considered which could consist of research methodology, referencing and analytical methods. We also recommend increasing the study data on national level, not only to give awareness about research plagiarism but also to prepare the new generation, deal with it properly specially in research and postgraduate level.

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