

Why do students plagiarise?

Understanding the reasons why students might plagiarise is the first step in developing effective strategies to reduce the incidence of plagiarism.

Ignorance - Many students are unclear about the precise nature of the activity known as plagiarism, with the result that they are liable to plagiarise in their assessed work without realising that they have done so. Institutions should ensure that students are given appropriate and frequent instruction on the need for, and mechanics of, accurate citation from the outset to reduce the likelihood of inadvertent plagiarism.

Lack of time - Where students leave the production of work to the last minute there can be a temptation to take shortcuts, such as cutting and pasting text from websites without attribution, to compensate for the lack of preparation. 'Bunching' of assessments can also cause problems for even relatively organised students. Assessments that are designed to assess both the process as well as a final product will reduce the temptation, and indeed the opportunity, to take short cuts.

Improving marks - Students who do not have confidence in their own abilities can sometimes see plagiarism as a way of improving their work and, therefore, their marks. Students who feel under pressure to achieve consistently high marks may also view plagiarism as a means to an end. Improving detection methods, including the routine use of detection software, can increase the risks associated with plagiarising for such students and make the possibility of discovery not worth the risk.

'Irrelevant' courses - Students who perceived that a module was not directly relevant to their eventual qualification or employment prospects could be tempted to expend as little effort as possible on assignments set for the module. In this context, plagiarism can be seen as a mechanism for producing the required work with the least effort.

'Disinterested' lecturers - Students who perceive that their lecturers' course materials and assignments are out-of-date or appear not to have been changed for years which suggest their own engagement with the subject is minimal may justify plagiarism as mirroring the effort expended by the lecturer.

Beating the system - Whatever the system in place a small number of students will attempt to 'beat the system'. Using detection software as an educational tool rather than a punitive measure, and impressing upon students that any detection software is part of a wider approach to the issue, should help to reduce these incidences of plagiarism.

Text based on Chester, G. (2001)

Plagiarism detection and prevention: final report on the JISC electronic plagiarism detection project. JISC.

Available at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/plagiarism_final.pdf (Accessed: 12 November, 2007)

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