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Academic Integrity in Higher Education: The Case of Plagiarism of Graduation Reports by Undergraduate Seniors in Vietnam

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Abstract Plagiarism in higher education has become widespread among students in Vietnam. This paper aims to examine the seriousness of the problem by comparing the severity of plagiarism in two universities, one of which uses Turnitin software to check its student reports. For that purpose, 977 samples have been drawn from 1434 required graduation reports written by senior undergraduates in the economics and management field from 2013 to 2015. Turnitin's "Similarity Index" (SI) was used to check for alleged plagiarism, which was found to be more widespread at the university not using Turnitin. At that university, 91.7% of the graduation reports were defined as plagiarized, while 61.7% of the reports were plagiarized at the university using the software. The main source of this problem was the use of information from the internet without citing the original authors.

Keywords Academic integrity · Plagiarism · Higher education · Similarity index · Turnitin software

Introduction

Recently, several cases of plagiarism, either intentional or unintentional, have emerged around the world. These include the president of Hungary, Mr. Schmitt (Semmelweis University 2012), and the German Ministers of Defense and Education and Research, Mr. Guttenberg (Kimmelman 2011) and Mr. Schavan (Kupferschmidt 2014), respectively. The penalties for these cases were the revocation of their PhD degrees and their resignations from their current positions. Plagiarism, intentional or not, violates academic integrity.

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In Vietnam, academic misbehavior such as plagiarism has received the attention of the public only when social media has reported on the problem. For example, Ngoan Vu Viet, Chairman of the National Financial Surveillance Commission, was accused of using false qualifications. Tho Tran Ngoc, an economics professor, sued another Vietnamese professor for plagiarizing his book, International Finance. However, Professor Tho had translated the English book International Finance Management into Vietnamese and claimed it as his own (Hoang et al. 2013).

The mission of education is to train future respectable young generations to lead society, and academic integrity plays a crucial role in accomplishing this goal. Recently, higher education students in Vietnam have been accused of cutting and pasting other people's works into their graduation reports. How serious is this problem? This study will try to present evidence that answers this question.

Plagiarism: How do We Understand It?

Merriam-Webster dictionary (2014) defines plagiarism as "the act of using another person's words or ideas without giving credit to that person"; many researchers consider it to be an act of theft (Park 2003; Gibelman and Gelman 2003). In the same manner, Samuels and Bast (2006) suggest that one who misappropriates another's work is a plagiarist. Sutherland (2004) claims that a person who intends to copy other writers, whether using their exact words, their ideas, or original documents, without crediting them is a plagiarist. According to that definition, plagiarism can be inadvertent or intentional, such as the use of another person's ideas and words without citation or with an incorrect quotation and attribution.

Currently, plagiarism has become a concern among higher educators (Biggam 2008; Thurmond 2010) because of its prevalence in all academic activities (Wang 2008; Bretag 2013). Many studies have been conducted addressing this problem at universities around the world, including North America, Europe, Australia, Asia and Southern Africa (Teixeira and Rocha 2010; Ameen et al. 1996; Dias and Bastos 2014; Sutton et al. 2012; Klein 2011; Ehrich et al. 2014; Ramzan et al. 2012; Coughlin 2015…).

In studying the perceptions and attitudes of students and instructors toward plagiarism, several researchers have found that plagiarism was often a response to a heavy workload; inadequate essay-writing skills were also blamed (Jenaa and Sihotanga 2015; Ehrich et al. 2014). Other researchers have emphasized the impact of culture on plagiarism (Adiningrum and Kutieleh 2011; Wilkinson 2009). In East Asia, especially China and Southeast Asian countries, students are asked to memorize and repeat texts and accept the ideas that are taught to them. Doing so demonstrates their respect for those who provide knowledge (Chan 1999). Moreover, regarding attitudes toward knowledge and learning, Asian students are free to reproduce knowledge without acknowledgement (Hofstede 1986). Thus, they may fall more easily into plagiarism (Ehrich et al. 2014). Vietnamese students are at risk of this because they are taught to memorize materials and be obedient, especially to their teachers, as early as first grade.

Types of Plagiarism and How to Detect them

Researchers have identified many types of academic activities considered to be plagiarism. Biggam (2008) states that plagiarism is the act of copying or rewriting another person's words in part or entirely or stealing another person's ideas. In the same vein, Walker (2010) classifies the levels of plagiarism into three groups: i) Sham, quoting original words without placing them in quotation marks even though they are cited as the source material; ii) verbatim,

copying the exact words of other people without giving them credit; and iii) purloining, using the work of a classmate or student from previous classes as one's own. Turnitin (2012) has a more detailed categorization of plagiarism, using ten types (clone, ctrl-c, find-replace, remix, recycle, hybrid, mashup, 404 error, aggregator, and re-tweet), which range from using the whole work of another author as one's own to citing sources properly but copying most of their wording/ sentence structure.

Researchers have developed two main methods to detect plagiarism. The first is to ask respondents to fill out questionnaires about their academic activities. This is not reliable due to the high probability of biased answers from the respondents (Walker 2010). The other method is to use software to evaluate the level of plagiarism. Currently, Turnitin has become a popular software option for detecting plagiarism via a similarity index (Thurmond 2010; Walker 2010; Batane 2010; Ison 2012, 2015; Heckler et al. 2013…). It compares similar words, phrases or paragraphs from the reviewed paper with original sources from the Turnitin database. This software can check 19 different languages, including Vietnamese.[1]

The Similarity Index (SI) is the percentage of overlapping text between a checked paper and Turnitin's materials. This percentage can range from 0% to 100%. The higher the similarity index is, the more unattributed "cutting and pasting" in the analyzed work. Based on the level of matching text, Turnitin (2014) divides the SI into 5 levels represented by five different colors: blue (no matching text), green (1% – 24%), yellow (25% – 49%), orange (50% – 74%) and red (over 75%).

Researchers have not come to a consensus on what constitutes plagiarism based on the level of the SI (Stoltenkamp and Kabaka 2014). For some researchers, the cut-off is 10% (Ryan et al. 2009; Bretag and Mahmud 2009; Ison 2012, 2014), while others accept a level of 15% (Teesside University 2013; The University of the West Indies 2010). In practice, the acceptable SI level also varies for different types of reports. A term paper can be accepted with a higher SI level than a graduation report.

Data and Research Methods

This study employed the graduation reports of senior students in two academic years, 2013–2015. All of them were enrolled in a bachelor program in Economics at two universities in Vietnam, one using Turnitin and one not. The university using Turnitin has an Academic Integrity Board, which formulates guidelines on academic integrity issues (plagiarism, cheating, facilitating dishonesty, and fabrication). Additionally, students are asked to state "we guarantee only original content" in every single written paper, such as essays, reports, theses and research papers. Freshmen are introduced to plagiarism behavior in detail and taught ways to avoid it. Meanwhile, at the other university, an anti-plagiarism regulation is applied only to the graduation reports. However, plagiarism is not defined and types of plagiarism are not listed under that regulation. Students receive a zero mark and must retake the course if they plagiarize.

During the studied period, 1434 students graduated from the two universities. All their graduation reports were stored on computer disks. For various reasons, such as lost or faulty disks or portable document format files, 977 graduation reports remained after the filter process and were submitted into Turnitin to be checked by the similarity index. The university not using Turnitin provided 627 samples, and all remaining samples were from the university

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[1] http://turnitin.com/en_us/what-we-offer/faqs

that uses the software. The reports were taken from the disciplines of Management, Marketing, Trade, and Accounting (Table 1).

The Measurement and Analysis

Before being submitted to Turnitin for analysis under the SI, all the required parts of a graduation report format such as cover pages, acknowledgements, tables of content, reference lists, and texts in quotation marks were excluded (Bretag and Mahmud 2009; Rowell 2009). Only reports in Times New Roman font were used in the SI process. Moreover, any 25-word match was included in the similarity report. As mentioned, there are no clear rules about the cut-off level that indicates plagiarism. According to Turnitin's level of matching text, a report with a high percentage (over 24%) would probably be considered plagiarism. Therefore, this study considered reports with an SI higher 24% to be plagiarized.

Data were coded and processed with SPSS software version 18. Analysis methods include descriptive statistics to evaluate the current situation and variance analysis to examine the differences among disciplines and the differences between the two universities.

Results

Similarity Index Output

The SI had clear statistically significant differences between the university using Turnitin software (SI:32.0%) and the one that did not (SI:48.6%). When analyzing the mean SI within the four disciplines, Accounting received the highest average SI (48.1%). This might be due to certain requirements in Accounting. For example, Accounting students must exactly copy accounting or financial terms that are in Vietnamese Accounting Regulations and Standards.

The Prevalence of Plagiarism

The mean SI between the two universities was 48.6% (SD: 17.2) and 32% (SD: 16.1) for the university not using Turnitin software and the one using it, respectively. An SI of 48.6% falls into orange range of Turnitin categories, placing it in the high level of

Table 1 Data allocation differences by university and the discipline

Fields	Overall				University without Turnitin				University with Turnitin			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	n	%	N	%	n	%
Management	494	34.4	381	39.0	315	35	259	41.3	179	33.5	122	34.9
Marketing	188	13.1	109	11.2	55	6.1	47	7.5	133	24.9	62	17.7
Trade	120	8.4	93	9.5	79	8.8	65	10.4	41	7.7	28	8.0
Accounting	632	44.1	394	40.3	451	50.1	256	40.8	181	33.9	138	39.4
Total	1434	100	977	100	900	100	627	100	534	100	350	100

N: population; n: sample

Table 2 The similarity Index between the two universities and among the four disciplines

	N	Mean of SI	SD	F	P
Without Turnitin	627	48.6	17.2	219.035	.000
With Turnitin	350	32.0	16.1		
Management	381	40.0	19.9	26.311	.000[a]
Marketing	109	32.6	17.2		
Trade	93	42.2	19.0		
Accounting	394	48.1	15.7		

[a] There is variance heteroscedasticity (Levene's test); however, Brown-Forsythe's test resulted in *p < 0.00*

plagiarism (Table 2). Moreover, when the SI cut-off was fixed at 24%, the results revealed that 81.0% of graduation reports (*n* = 977) are considered plagiarized. However, the results are astounding when we separated whole samples based on the university that produced them. Plagiarism was found in 91.7% of the graduation reports at the university not using Turnitin and in in 61.7% of the reports at the other university. (Table 3).

In terms of Turnitin's categories, 44.2% of graduation reports in the university that does not use Turnitin fell into the orange or red range category (≥ 50% similarity), while the university using the software had 17.7% of its reports fall into that category of plagiarism. When the SI cut-off was fixed at 24%, the results showed that 81.0% of graduation reports (*n* = 977) were considered plagiarized with an astounding 91.7% at the university not using Turnitin and 61.7% at the one that uses it (Table 3).

Categories of Similarity Index Sources

Since the spread of information technology, people have used the internet as a valuable source for finding needed information. However, websites have been become the main source of high SI scores (Klein 2011). More seriously, the maximum SI has increased to a level of 92% at the sample university that did not use Turnitin. When writing their graduation reports, the vast majority of students seem to have copied from other sources without mentioning the original authors.

In Vietnam, students can currently gain access to five theses for only U.S. $ 5.00 from websites such as "theses market" or "luanvan.net.vn". Furthermore, there are websites, such as timtailieu.vn, tailieudoc.net, and so on, where students can find theses written by other students. They can also copy from previous students' reports, which Turnitin has discovered to have an SI of 23.7% (Table 4).

Table 3 Categories of the similarity index for graduation reports

Category	Overall			Without Turnitin			With Turnitin		
	Mean	%	SD	Mean	%	SD	Mean	%	SD
0 to 24%	16.9	19.0	5.7	18.7	8.3	4.5	16.2	38.3	5.9
25 to 49%	38.1	46.3	7.0	39.4	47.5	6.6	35.5	44.0	7.2
50 to 74%	59.1	29.2	6.8	59.6	35.6	6.8	57.3	17.7	6.3
75 to 100%	82.1	5.5	4.8	82.1	8.6	4.8	–	–	–
Overall	42.6	100.0	18.6	48.6	100.0	17.2	32.0	100.0	16.1

Table 4 Comparison of the Similarity Index between the two universities by source

Sources	Total samples		Without Turnitin checking				With Turnitin checking			
	Mean (%)	SD (%)	Mean (%)	SD (%)	Min (%)	Max (%)	Mean (%)	SD (%)	Min (%)	Max (%)
SI	42.6	18.6	48.6	17.2	5.0	93.0	32.0	16.1	2.0	73.0
Web	36.4	16.6	41.7	14.8	5.0	92.0	26.9	15.4	0.0	73.0
Pub*	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.8	0.0	12.0	0.2	0.6	0.0	9.0
Students paper	23.7	17.4	28.2	17.5	0.0	92.0	15.8	14.0	0.0	72.0

Pub*: Publication information

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed the seriousness of plagiarism in Vietnam. The mean SI in this study was found to be higher (42.6%) than the findings of some other studies (less than 20.5%) (Batane 2010; Heckler et al. 2013; Ison 2012, 2014, 2015; Martin et al. 2009). When using a cut-off point of the SI at 15%, which West Indies and Teesside University used, the results of this study were even more serious with the plagiarism rate increasing to 92.7%.

In the university not using Turnitin, such an extremely high percentage could result from the absence of any plagiarism detection tool, the lack of guidelines on anti-plagiarism, the failure to provide a course on essay writing skills, and the lack of an established procedure for faculty to follow (Bennington and Singh 2013). However, even with clear regulations of plagiarism and the use of a plagiarism detection tool, the percentage of plagiarized works were still high at the other university. Therefore, there must be other reasons underlying the prevalence of plagiarism among Vietnamese students.

We suspect that supervisors may not pay enough attention to this problem when they guide students in writing their graduation reports. Students still graduated even though they had committed plagiarism.

The plagiarism phenomenon is becoming more alarming (Tuoitrenews 2015). However, universities may try to cover up the fact because it might harm their reputation (Devlin 2006).

Students may not realize that they have committed plagiarism because they may not understand plagiarism well enough to understand its seriousness (Maxwell et al. 2008). This could be due to education practices such as repetition and the memorization of information. When students are encouraged to memorize and copy others' work during the learning process, unconscious plagiarism could result (Deckert 1993). In addition, they may not differentiate between common knowledge and ideas that must be credited to the authors to be used in the student's paper (Le Ha 2006).

Regarding a cost-benefit analysis, learners may have motives for plagiarizing when its possible benefits outweigh the risks involved, such as getting caught or receiving low grades. In other words, students are strongly guided by self-interest (Chapman and Lupton 2004; Martin 2012).

There may be still plagiarized works that cannot be detected due to the limitation of the Turnitin database. Additionally, the software could never be as effective as a pedagogical aid (Twomey 2009).

Therefore, along with the usage of plagiarism detection software, we highly recommend educator interventions focusing on building awareness and understanding the nature of plagiarism for both students and academics. Business schools need to provide clear guidelines and training to ensure that students acquire enough skill to avoid plagiarism while pursuing their

studies. Moreover, teaching and learning styles that rely heavily on repetition and memorization need to be eliminated because they may encourage plagiarism and limit the critical thinking and creatively of students (Le Ha 2001). In addition, the punishment for plagiarism must be taken seriously and result in substantial penalties to discourage students' misbehavior.

In sum, this problem has not been serious considered by educators or students in Vietnam. Although this study contributes to the literature on the prevalence of plagiarism in Southeast Asian countries, its samples were collected from only two universities. Future studies should try to gain participation from more educational institutions using multiple methods.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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