

# Plagiarism – a hanging offence or poor referencing?

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## What is plagiarism?

Is it cheating?  
Is it theft?  
Is it a failure to reference properly?  
Is it a problem?  
If so, why?  
Is a person who plagiarises dishonest?  
Would or could you write them a reference?

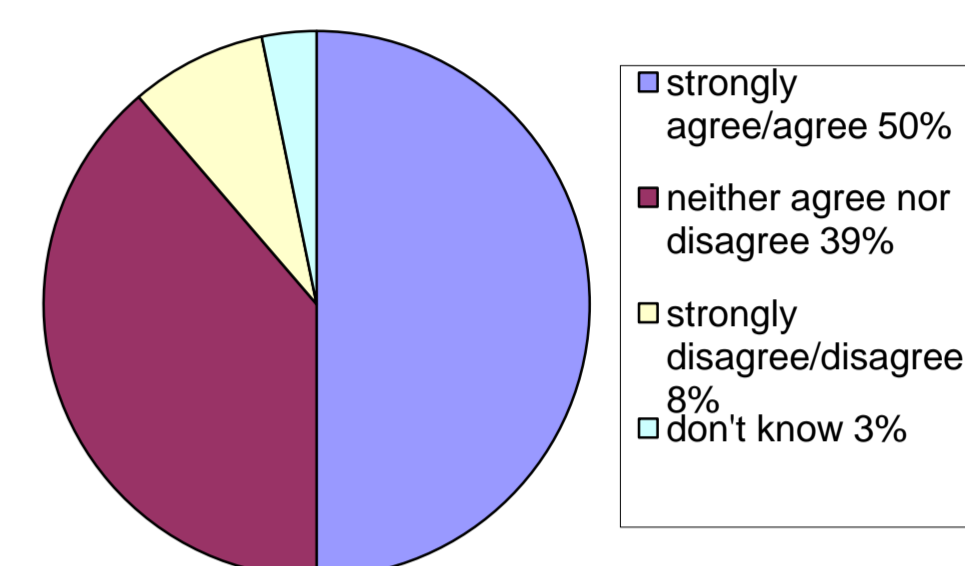
The Times, 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2005  
**Student work 'rife with plagiarism'**,  
Alexandra Blair, Education Correspondent

At Westminster University last year, 707 students were found to have copied work without declaring it, the highest incidence in the survey of 64 higher education institutions

## Method

- Questionnaire sent to 100 academics in University of Westminster School of Life Sciences July 2009
- On Google apps, so entirely confidential
- 12 questions, 63% response rate

I think students who plagiarise deserve to be punished



## Should we care?

Yes, because

- It devalues our University degrees
- It benefits students who cheat
- It's wrong to steal other people's work
- It hinders learning**

No, because

- We all have to get our knowledge from somewhere
- Students are taught to cut and paste at school
- Some cultures see it as a mark of respect to not alter the words of the master

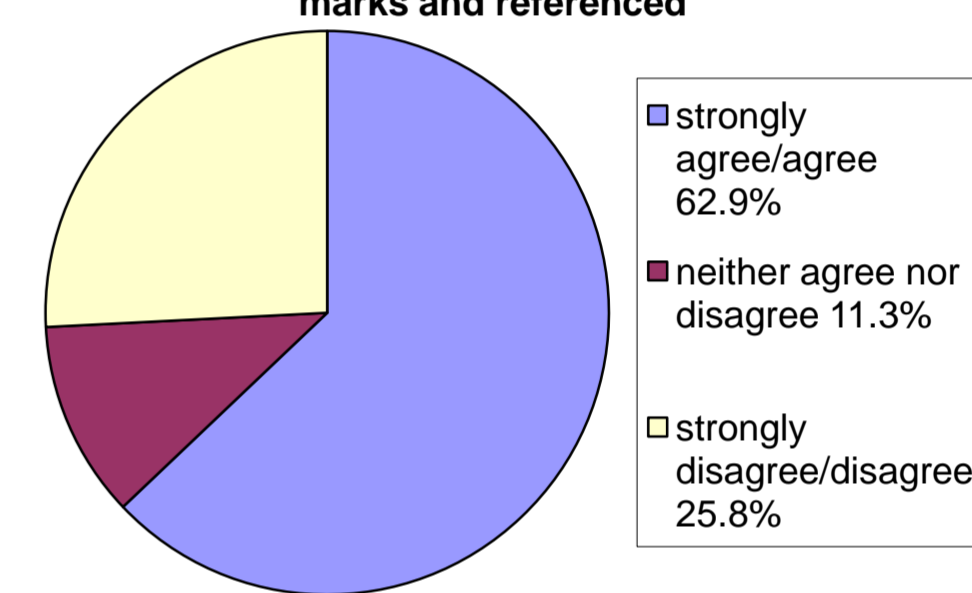
## Results

What words would you use to describe plagiarism?

Tick up to 3 boxes:

Poor referencing	12	19%
Poor writing skills	10	16%
Poor study skills	8	13%
Misunderstanding	18	29%
Ignorance	16	26%
Copying	41	66%
Dishonesty	31	50%
Cheating	31	50%
Lying	5	8%
Fraud	15	24%
Stealing	11	18%
Other	1	

I think it's OK if a student's work has some copied sections as long as it's in quotation marks and referenced



## We can define it etymologically

Plagium in Roman law: kidnapping (actually stealing a slave from his master!) and later a literary thief  
(Goudy, Jurid. Rev. 1908-1909)

The Greek word plagios – obliquity – was interpreted as meaning 'morally crooked, practicing double-talk'  
(Skandalakis & Miral, 2004. Arch Surg)

## Or semantically

"The practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own"  
(The Oxford Dictionary of English)

Whichever way, our understanding of what plagiarism is rooted within a concept of immorality

**House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2003**

**The Decision to go to war in Iraq**

**Para 23: 'We conclude that it is wholly unacceptable for the Government to plagiarise work without attribution and to amend it without either highlighting the amendments or gaining the assent of the original author.'**

## Institutional Policies

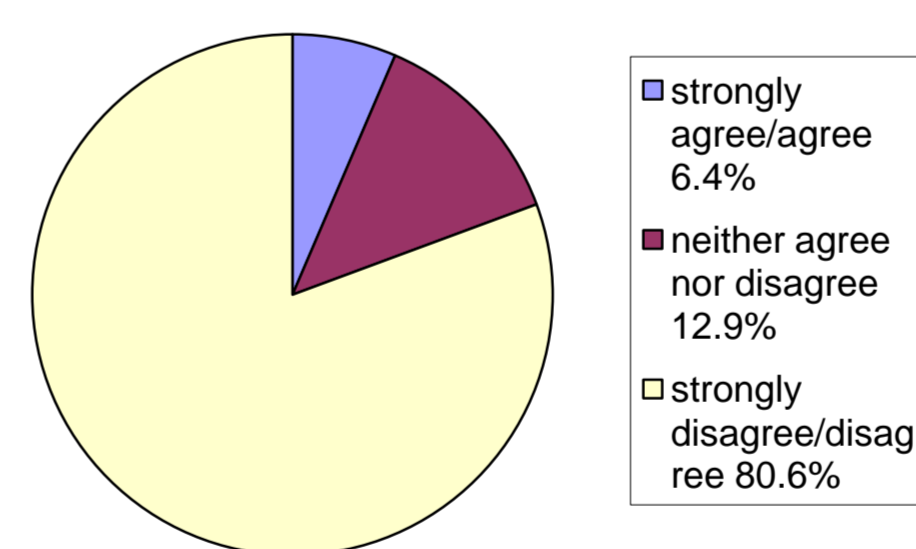
A new academic integrity policy was adopted at the University of Westminster in Summer 2009

The intention is to:

- Provide consistency across the University
- Draw a distinction between poor scholarship and academic misconduct
- Support students to avoid plagiarism

How does this operate at the chalk-face?

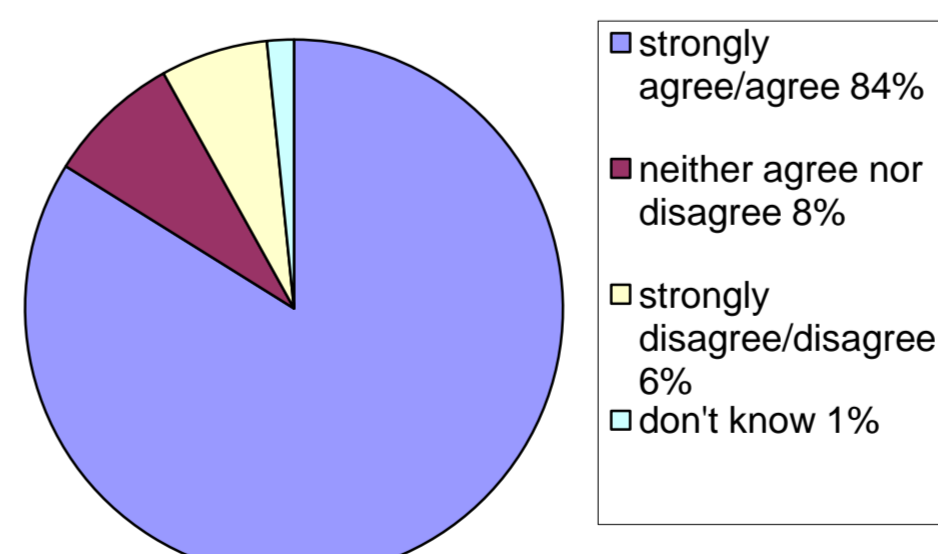
Other than telling students not to plagiarise, there is little else I can do to prevent it



## How do academics operate when faced with plagiarism?

Hang 'em & flog 'em  
Pass it on up to QA office & let them deal with it  
Turn a blind eye  
Best intentions, but.....  
...not really sure if 'this is bad enough'  
...this is a student with problems  
...don't want to be responsible for getting student into trouble

I think students who plagiarise need to be educated



What would you do if you found a small section of a student's work (e.g. a few sentences) had been plagiarised?

Discuss with a colleague - 30  
Report to academic registrar - 4  
Discussion with student & guidance - 2  
Reduce mark by a percentage - 15  
Reduce mark to a fail - 2  
I would not do anything - 4  
Depends on circumstances - 1  
Don't know - 4



**BBC News, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2008**  
**Media doctor admits to plagiarism**

**'Psychiatrist and broadcaster Dr Raj Persaud has admitted plagiarising material for a book and articles published under his name.'**

## Outcomes

Although a small number with extreme opinions, most staff shared broadly similar views  
Staff clearly wanted someone to discuss cases of plagiarism with  
Named individual 'gatekeepers' appointed in SLS  
Minor cases dealt with on academic grounds, but record kept to prevent relapses