Plagiarism among Belarusian students: Contributory factors, consequences, and solutions

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Executive summary

- In contemporary academic teaching, greater and greater emphasis is given to written assignments, especially research-like essays. Without doubt, this is one of the best ways for students to familiarise themselves with particular topics and develop critical thinking skills. On the other hand, written assignments are extremely vulnerable to various dishonest practices – plagiarism being the most conspicuous.

- At least 50% of Belarusian students plagiarise. They commit all varieties of plagiarism, although “compiled” and “copy-paste” plagiarisms occur most frequently. It is very likely that a significant percentage of Belarusian students studying at Western-type universities also resort to plagiarism.

- There is remarkable tolerance of plagiarism within the Belarusian education system. Lecturers are generally lenient when it comes to punishments for plagiarism.

- There are no critical thinking and/or academic writing courses, which would introduce students to good practices in respect of finding and processing data. The current system requires that students produce a large quantity of written essays, but it does not give them tools for doing so appropriately. This is a chief contributory factor in plagiarism.

- Other contributory factors of plagiarism include: the absence of licensed anti-plagiarism software at lecturers’ disposal, the excessive workload of students and lecturers, lecturers’ low salaries, and the weak academic ethos in Belarus.

- To start seriously dealing with the problem, universities should first of all train students in critical thinking and academic writing. It is imperative to give students instruments with which they can complete written assignments. No other measures will work if this element is neglected.
1. A (methodological) introduction

1.1. What this research is about and what it is not

This research is practically-oriented and informed by a strategic vision. The strategic goal is to make the Belarusian education system a space of professionalism, comparable to its analogues in developed countries, such as Germany, the USA or the UK. A necessary (though not sufficient) condition for achieving this goal is overcoming the problem of plagiarism. We want to contribute to overcoming the problem and our contribution may have different forms. These include: drawing attention to the problem, creating some networks around the idea of combatting plagiarism, and developing practical recommendations to stakeholders.

To contribute to overcoming the problem of plagiarism we must, at least approximately, assess its scope and establish its main causal factors. The cognitive aspect of a problem-solving process is very important since without it we risk wasting time, efforts and other resources on the implementation of ineffective decisions. On the other hand, it is advisable to avoid making the cognitive part of an undertaking a goal in itself. Above all, we need to acquire the knowledge that is useful to dealing with the problem. One can enquire about a great many aspects of plagiarism: What is the percentage of students and educators committing plagiarism? What psychological state accompanies the process of producing a plagiarised essay? Why do Belarusian students plagiarise? What solutions to the problem do Belarusian students and lecturers have? How many Belarusian citizens are aware of the existence of plagiarism in the Belarusian higher education? Who was the first Belarusian to produce a plagiarised text?

All of these questions can be interesting in themselves, but not all of them are useful to our purposes. No doubt, the answer to the question about the percentage is of much use here as the choice of practical measures is likely to depend on whether the problem is marginal and occurring sporadically, or overwhelming and systemic. Of even greater use is the answer to the question about causal factors. As knowing the cause of a disease enables a physician successfully to treat it, so knowing why people plagiarise is very helpful in finding effective instruments for overcoming the problem. But knowing the percentage of the Belarusian population aware of the existence of plagiarism seems of little use here. Establishing who was the first Belarusian to plagiarise would be a wonderful historical discovery, but it would certainly be of no use for our needs. So, one thing that our research is not about:

(1) The research is not aimed at offering a complete knowledge about plagiarism in Belarusian higher education.

It is believed that the main virtue of academic and expert knowledge is its reliability. We subscribe to this statement, with three caveats, however. First, one should remember there is no such thing as “absolute reliability.” When it comes to empirical data, the factual statements that are beyond reasonable doubt and considered “reliable”,¹ if one needs to use, for example, data from the Gallup Institute or Pew Research Center, they do not need to have an airtight proof for their being reliable: it is enough that there is no reason to doubt that those data, at least approximately, reflect a given reality. When it comes to explanatory

statements, for them to be reliable it is enough that they offer a better explanation of relevant facts than any other set of explanatory statements.

Second, “reliable” does not necessarily mean “quantitatively exact”. One can, for example, reliably know that Mister X is hairy (not bald) without being able to tell how many hairs he has on his head. Similarly, to know reliably that plagiarism is not a marginal phenomenon it is less important to know whether the percentage of plagiarisers is 74% or 77% or 72%. Even if we allow for a wide margin of error (say, ±15%), the conclusion on the non-marginality is still sound given that a survey reveals 74% of plagiarisers.

And third – relevant specifically to policy-oriented research – it is not always necessary to possess knowledge of what is highly-probable to develop effective solutions to a problem. Sometimes a relatively high or even moderate probability suffices. A moderate probability of rain can be a sufficient reason for advising to take an umbrella. Even a low probability of an event’s occurrence can sometimes be a serious reason for taking preventive steps as is in the case of low probability, high consequence events that are widely discussed within the methodology of risk analysis. Similarly, in order to advise systemic measures for overcoming plagiarism we do not need to be absolutely certain that the problem is ubiquitous; a relatively high or even moderate probability suffices.

From the above, these further disclaimers follow:

(2) The research is not aimed at offering absolutely reliable data. The data the research offers are considered to be beyond reasonable doubt.

(3) The research is not aimed at quantitative exactness as this is not necessary for assessing the scope of the problem.

1.2. The context of discovery vs. the context of justification

In the previous section we argued that the reliability of research findings must be relativised with respect to the tasks the research is intended to fulfil. In this section we will touch on a broader issue: what makes knowledge reliable regardless of how “reliability” is understood.

There are two approaches to obtaining reliable knowledge. Some methodologists say that in order to get such knowledge we need a sort of algorithm, a step-by-step guide, which, if followed faithfully, is believed to lead us to reliable knowledge. Others say that attempts to find such an algorithm is a futile undertaking and claim that for a knowledge to be reliable it has to be intersubjectively testable. According to this second approach, the method of obtaining the knowledge is less important or entirely unimportant.2 The first is known as the “discovery context approach”, and the second as the “justification context approach”.3 Our research presupposes the latter.

One major consequence of giving preference to the justification context is that the way of obtaining empirical data should be viewed as a realm of creativity. It is up to us (the researchers) how and when and where we have obtained the data. What really matters here is how relevant the data are to solving given cognitive problems. It may happen (and it does happen) that an army of sociological surveyors conduct tens of longitudinal surveys, spend the budgets of hundreds of thousands of dollars, but their data proves irrelevant to solving the given cognitive problem. An unplanned observation sometimes shows itself more relevant than a longitudinal survey.

The cognitive tasks we have to address within the research are the following:

a) Demonstrate whether or not the problem of plagiarism exists

b) Establish the main forms of plagiarism

c) Assess the scope of the problem

d) Establish the causal factors underlying the problem

To achieve (a) and (b) and (c) we have consulted a recent survey on the topic, conducted semi-structured interviews and used our own experience. To achieve (d), we used abductive reasoning,4 which is a universal way of establishing causal factors. Statements about such factors are hypotheses with different degrees of probability (as a rule, they are never one hundred percent certain). Generally, the process of establishing these factors follows the logic of explanation.5

1.3. A definition and classification

In our research, by “plagiarism” we understand conscious borrowing from another source of cognitive units that do not belong to the body of common knowledge

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By “plagiarism” we understand conscious borrowing from another source of cognitive units that do not belong to the body of common knowledge without acknowledging the borrowing.

In our research, we do not discuss the issue of autoplagiarism. The problem of idea-plagiarism will only be touched on in passing. Our main focus will be on text- and hetero-plagiarism.

We will present our research body in the following order. First, we will present the empirical data on the scope and forms of plagiarism. The data will come from three sources: a) BIPI survey; b) semi-structured interviews; c) participatory observation by one of the research authors. Next, we will discuss the factors causing the problem and then go on to conclusions and practical recommendations.

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6 In classifying plagiarism, we draw to some extent on Левин В.И. Плагиат, его сущность и борьба с ним // Высшее образование в России. 2018. № 1 (219): pp.145-146.

7 This criterion applies only to text-plagiarisms.
2. Empirical data regarding the extent and forms of plagiarism

In this chapter we will assess how widespread plagiarism is in Belarus and the forms it takes. As was stated in the introduction, we will use three sources of empirical data. One source is a survey by BIPI. Another is the semi-structured interviews with Belarusian lecturers that were designed specifically for this research and carried out in November 2018. The third source is the personal teaching experience of Piotr Rudkouski, one of the authors of the research paper.

2.1. BIPI survey

The title of the survey is Evaluation of the results of the Ministry’s work and the problems that higher education in the Republic of Belarus faces – from the perspective of students and graduates. It was conducted by the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative (BIPI) between December 2016 and January 2017. The survey was conducted online in a “pop-up” format; questions were shown to internet users selected at random. Commissioned by the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, the survey aimed mainly at getting information on how Belarusian students perceived the Bologna Process, with academic integrity being just one of many issues.

The total number of students surveyed on plagiarism was 126. Of these students, 79% studied at bachelor’s level, 10% were MA students, and 10% fell under the category “other”. 20% studied at private institutions and 80% at state ones. 77% studied in Minsk and 23% in other cities.

As many as 74% of those surveyed admitted having handed presentations that had been downloaded from the internet (25% of them did so only once and 49% admitted to doing so on several or many occasions). 63% admitted they had copy-pasted other authors’ texts without indicating the source (of which: 25% did so once, 38% did so many times). Less popular, but still widespread, forms of plagiarism include taking essays from other students (45%), translating text from foreign languages (32%) and buying texts written to order (30%).

2.2. Semi-structured interviews

The interviews within this research project were carried out on 14-21 November, 2018. The interviewees were 11 lecturers from different Belarusian universities, including the Belarusian State University, the Belarusian State Economic University, the National Institute for Higher Education, the Belarusian National Technical University, the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts, and the Belarusian State University of Physical Culture.

The interviewees teach both day students and those studying through distance-education; some of the interviewees also conduct refresher courses. All of them have experience in supervising various forms of written works: term papers, course essays and dissertations.

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The interviewees teach both day students and those studying through distance-education; some of the interviewees also conduct refresher courses. All of them have experience in supervising various forms of written works: term papers, course essays and dissertations. Moreover, they also have experience in applying tests and topic presentations as evaluation methods.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in person. The interviewees first answered the questions that had been prepared beforehand, and then they had an opportunity to add something on their own. The interview presupposed anonymity and interviewees were assured that their answers would be edited to prevent any possibility of identification.

In this section, we will confine ourselves to presenting the findings relevant to the issue of the extent and forms of the problem. The findings are as follows:

1) **At least some lecturers tend not to notice certain forms of plagiarism.** Belarusian lecturers are reluctant to count as plagiarised some essays or presentations that otherwise would have been so classified. One of the interviewees said he/she would consider a text as plagiarised only when anti-plagiarism software has revealed more than a 50% match. This means that:
   a) Small or very small plagiarism (in our terminology) are not counted as plagiarisms
   b) Plagiarism modified by editing or translating a source text would not to be counted as plagiarisms regardless of the percentage of the match
   c) Plagiarism not detected by an anti-plagiarism software seem not to be counted as plagiarism at all

2) **Lecturers are quite lenient when it comes to punishing for plagiarism.** All the interviews revealed that if just one paragraph in an essay has been plagiarised, the author does not face any consequences.

   What happens if an essay is classified as “plagiarised”? Again, Belarusian university educators turn out very tolerant in this respect. The minimum mark given was 20%, and the maximum mark 90%. The most common marks given to essays containing plagiarised material were in the range of 70-75%.

3) **Students do not need to resort to sophisticated forms of plagiarism.** Easy and cheap methods of plagiarising prove effective. Thus, stolen plagiarism seems to
be prevalent. Contract plagiarisms are rather exceptional: students do not need to resort to expensive ways of plagiarising all the while more primitive and cost-free ways usually suffice for an essay to be accepted by a university.

4) **Interlingual plagiarisms and idea-plagiarisms are not dealt with at all.** The interviewees confessed their helplessness (in terms of the possibility to detect) when it comes to both interlingual plagiarism and idea-plagiarisms.

In this connection, one of the lecturers mentioned the problem of incorrect citation. In such cases, instead of the exact citations contained in quotation marks, there are only general references to some sources and yet the fragment is either a paraphrase without indicating the authorship, or just a copy of another text.

### 2.3. The data from participatory observation

If the first source of data let us realise the problems with academic writing in Belarusian universities, then Dr. Rudkouski’s observations show what happens when students from post-Soviet countries enter Western-type universities.

From 2012 to 2016, Dr. Rudkouski taught at Lazarski University (LU), mostly within a Polish-British programme and exclusively at the MA level. Though not very broad in quantitative terms, the data are relevant for several reasons. First, LU is one of the ranking leaders among the Polish universities and prestigious within the region. Second, it pays much more attention than other universities in the region to teaching its students academic writing and critical thinking and making them sensitive to academic ethos. Third, its policy on academic integrity is very strict: students caught at dishonest practices are punished severely. Fourth, all the instances of dishonest practices discussed below took place at the MA level and the majority of them within a Polish-British programme. One can reasonably assume that if such problems appear at a prestigious school with a strict policy on academic integrity, then *a fortiori* can we expect them in less prestigious schools which pay less attention to academic integrity.

The facts are as follows. Out of about 45 students Dr. Rudkouski taught at LU, as many as 14 students were detected to have committed plagiarism. That amounts to around 30%. All the plagiarisms were “interlingual”, that is source texts were in other languages than English (Russian or Polish, as a rule).

A few words of additional explanations are in order here. The figures quoted above only show the extent of detected plagiarism. It is highly probable the real figure was higher, and there are two reasons to think so. One reason is that Dr. Rudkouski did not always check essays for interlingual plagiarism. He started to do this only when collocations and phraseology of English-language essays were strikingly “Slavonic”. Another reason is that even if one attempts to check an essay for this type of plagiarism, there is no guarantee that he or she will reveal all cheating.

The Turnitin software programme could not detect interlingual plagiarism based on Slavonic languages, and the only way to detect it was to use one's linguistic intuition, attentiveness, and skills in employing internet search engines. Of course, such a method, apart from being very time-consuming, often works as a random
shot: it helps detect plagiarism occasionally at best. So, given that interlingual plagiarisms were detected by Dr. Rudkouski by means of “random shots”, the figure of 30% for cases of plagiarism is very alarming.

In addition to the 45 essays submitted within Dr. Rudkouski’s own courses we have to add ten more essays written within other courses, which were handed to him within the post-moderation process. Out of the ten, four essays were found to include inter-lingual plagiarisms. This further strengthens our conviction that this kind plagiarism is very widespread.

The most common schema of this type of plariarising is the following. First, a Russian text is found. Second, it is translated with the aid of Google Translate (with major or minor corrections). Third, it is copied into a docx before, fourth, fake references are added. Finally, it is presented to the lecturer/moderator as a term-paper. Of course, in reality plagiarised essays differ from one another in both kind and degree of intellectual dishonesty. Some students take pains to accurately edit the plagiarised text, others use Google’s translator and do not even try to edit the text. Some, though inserting plagiarised passages, nevertheless add their own contribution, while others produce a totally dishonest essay (for an illustration of this see the Appendix).

The relevance of this sort of data needs to be explained. As a matter of the fact, the sample observed consisted of Ukrainian, Belarusian, Azerbaijani, Kazakhstani, and Polish students among others, with those from the post-Soviet countries being the most numerous (ca. 90%). Thus, the conclusions from these observations are relevant to post-Soviet countries’ students, not just those from Belarus. Anticipating a possible objection of the division fallacy, we would like to explicate two assumptions that seem plausible.

(Assumption 1) It is highly probable that the Belarusian education system is affected by the problem of plagiarism no less than education systems in other post-Soviet countries.

(Assumption 2) It is highly probable that the patterns of how Belarusian students deal with written assignments at Western-type universities do not differ significantly from the patterns by students from other post-Soviet countries.

If these assumptions accepted, there is no division fallacy in claiming that the presented data are relevant to Belarusian students.

2.4. What we learn from the data

All three sources of data may cause various concerns in respect of the reliability of generalisation from them. That is to say, can we justify the inference from the observations based on those samples to the whole population of Belarusian students? The BIPI sample was quite small; besides, internet surveys may lead to overrepresentation of frequent internet users and underrepresentation of occasional users. The semi-structured interviews and participatory observation raise even more qualms as to how far they are representative. Let us recap, however, the basic statements regarding the pragmatics of the research that were

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9 Within the “double-diploma” studies, it is obligatory that, apart from the lecturer who teaches the course, another lecturer checks students’ assignments to ensure impartiality and eliminate possible errors in the process of the verification of students’ progress. This process is called “moderation”. The task of a moderator is to make sure if his/her colleague checked and graded assignments appropriately.
formulated in the introduction: a) we do not need quantitatively exact data; b) relatively high or even moderate probability suffices.

The main tasks of research at this stage were:

a) Demonstrate whether the problem of plagiarism in Belarusian education exists
b) To establish the main forms of plagiarism
c) To establish the approximate extent of the problem

The data we presented above are quite sufficient to fulfill these tasks. The statements below are supported by the data and relevant to our goals:

(0) The problem of plagiarism in Belarusian education is not marginal.
(1) At least 50% of Belarusian students studying in Belarus commit plagiarism.
(2) The students that study in Belarus commit all the types of plagiarism, out of which “compiled” and “non-modified” plagiarism are the most prevalent.
(3) There is widespread tolerance of plagiarism within Belarusian academia.
(4) A significant percentage of Belarusian students studying at Western-type universities plagiarise.
(5) The students that study at Western-type universities commit various types of plagiarism, out of which the translated variant (usually with Google Translate) is most prevalent.

The data directly supports statements (1) – (5), and their epistemic status is no lower than being beyond reasonable doubt. We can draw at least two more indirect conclusions if some additional assumptions are accepted.

(6) At least 50% of Belarusian students studying at universities in other post-Soviet countries commit plagiarism. [The assumption: Belarusian students who go to study at universities in other post-Soviet countries share learning patterns with those who study in Belarus].

(7) A significant percentage of actual Belarusian lecturers committed plagiarism when they were students [The assumption: Given the low prestige of lecturing at universities in Belarus and low standards of Belarusian academia, it is unlikely that the lecturing staff consists of the small minority of those who have never plagiarised].

All these statements can be arrayed according to epistemic degrees. As there are no clear-cut distinctions between particular degrees, the left column is thought to render continuity, with no sharp demarcation lines:

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10 CIS – the Commonwealth of Independent States.
### The epistemic degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The statement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evident</strong></td>
<td>The problem of plagiarism in Belarusian education is not marginal.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At least 50% of Belarusian students studying in Belarus commit plagiarism.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The students that study in Belarus commit all the types of plagiarism, out of which “compiled” and “non-modified” plagiarisms are the most prevalent.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Beyond reasonable doubt</strong></td>
<td>There is widespread tolerance of plagiarism practices within Belarusian academia.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A significant percentage of Belarusian students studying at Western-type universities practise plagiarism.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The students that study at Western-type universities commit various types of plagiarism, out of which “translated” plagiarism (usually with the aid of Google Translate) is most prevalent.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>More likely than not</strong></td>
<td>At least 50% of Belarusian students studying at CIS universities commit plagiarism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A significant percentage of Belarusian lecturers committed plagiarism when they were students.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Counter-balanced</strong></td>
<td>Assumption: Given the low prestige of lecturing at universities in Belarus and low standards of Belarusian academia, it is unlikely that the lecturing staff consists of a small minority of those who never resorted to plagiarism.</td>
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3. Factors contributing to plagiarism

3.1. Factors named by students

The BIPI survey not only shows how many students confessed having committed plagiarism but also how students explain the existence of this practice. In answering the question on why students plagiarise, those surveyed were allowed to select more than one answer and the answers were distributed in the following way:

- 54% explain plagiarism by the “lack of any practical value” of written assignments and 48% say they are told to discuss “obsolete and irrelevant topics.”
- 46% of respondents say students tend to commit plagiarism or other forms of cheating because this is a common practice.
- 37% of the respondents consider plagiarism “an integral part of the student’s way of life in all times, and one should not exaggerate the negative consequences of such actions.”
- Only 29% say plagiarism is caused by the fact that writing skills, research culture and methodology are not instilled during the learning process.
- 22% pointed to the overall atmosphere of tolerance of plagiarism among students and lecturers.
- According to 20% of students, the extent of plagiarism is a consequence of the lack of clear legal mechanisms to combat the violation of the academic integrity principles in higher education in Belarus.

In summary, the factors pointed to by students can be grouped into four categories: a) the feeling that (many) written assignments lack use; b) the perception of plagiarism as a common practice; c) the lack of academic writing skills; d) the lack of legal mechanisms to combat plagiarism.

3.2. Factors named by lecturers

During the interviews we asked lecturers to give their opinion as to why plagiarism is widespread among students. The answers can be divided into three categories: a) those indicating factors related to students’ situation, b) those indicating factors related to lecturer’s situation; c) those indicating cultural background.

3.2.1. Factors related to students’ situations

1. Students do not have necessary skills for doing written assignments. Many interviewees highlighted that, during the whole cycle of education, Belarusian youth is not trained in writing, expressing their thoughts, as well as dealing with literary sources. To quote some interviewees:

   • “The cause is that they [students] are not taught to write their essays, [or] to think.”
   • “There are no courses on academic writing.”
   • “Students are not motivated to learn and manifest creativity because the culture of education is focused mainly on lectures, and not on independent work, thinking, and discussion.”
“Most students are not able clearly and coherently to express their thoughts – either in writing or orally.”

“The Belarusian education system does not actually encourage students to express their own opinion, and the majority of exams consist in making students reproduce from memory lecture notes. So how can students learn to work with sources, deliberate and express their thoughts?”

“Students are not able to formulate their opinions, they are tongue-tied.”

“Students did not acquire writing skills in secondary schools.”

2. Students assume that plagiarism will go undetected, and that there would be no serious consequences if detected.

“It is common [among the lecturers] to turn the blind eye on plagiarism. They are first-year students, what can you expect from them? And so they get accustomed to such practices.”

“Students underestimate the ability of a lecturer to spot plagiarism, and underestimate lecturers’ computer literacy.”

3. Learning is not the main motivation for students, which means that they are not inclined to invest time and energy in learning.

“Students study because their parents told them to... or to get a postponement for the draft to military service, or to find a husband – that’s why [many students] devote minimal efforts to their education.”

“There is just a formal attitude to higher education: just to receive a diploma, not to acquire a particular specialty.”

“Almost all want to get higher education, although not all of them are able and motivated to do serious work.”

“Students are not interested in their grades, few are willing to do something to get more than the minimal positive mark.”
4. Belarusian higher education poorly meets the demands of labour market. Students are not interested in studying disciplines that seem to them as being of no use in a workplace.

- “Students do not see [the opportunity to get] professional skills in [university] education.”
- “Most subjects – regardless of their name – are hardly related to a future profession and do not have any practical value.”

- “If, after a training in a subject, the student does not feel he/she has gained the competences that are in demand in a workplace, he/she sees no need to spend their time on studying sources, let alone doing written assignments on their own.”

5. Poor selection procedures in universities: low passing scores and inappropriate forms of control. After the introduction of the Central Testing System, most universities and faculties have lost the possibility to have a say on who should be taken on.

- “Applicants with low scores [enter universities] – they do not know how to write.”
- “Entrants are trained in doing tests; when it comes to expressing their thoughts, they have forgotten how to do it.”
- “Freshers are not able to put two words together, they do not know the basics from school courses, and lack even general knowledge. How can they write about ancient culture, and express their own thoughts on it, if they do not know any Greek or Roman god by name?”
- “I must spend half of a lecture explaining the things that were supposed to be explained by school teachers. Sometimes I have the impression that I work not at a university, but at a high school. To write texts of an academic level, most students need to go a long way, which can not be compensated within the framework of a course paper supervision.”

3.2.2. Factors related to lecturers’ situations

1. Lack of time for customised work with a student. In the Belarusian academic tradition, the hours spent checking written essays and on supervision are perceived “a light workload”. Accordingly, the remuneration is negligible, disproportionate to the actual time that is needed for individual assistance in academic writing. Checking essays that have been rewritten because of plagiarism receives no remuneration at all.

- “To write a good essay with a student is very time-consuming, it takes much more than 3-4 hours.”
- “They submit essays too late, missing the deadline, all at once and at the last moment – how can one check them?”
- “There is too much work, which is not officially considered part of the workload (e.g. compensatory activities, retakes), so the lecturer does not want to overwork and do what is not included in the job description.”
2. Low salaries. Belarusian university professors receive so little remuneration for their work that they prefer to save their time for additional part-time jobs, rather than for additional checks for plagiarism. In addition, low salaries have a negative impact on self-esteem and lead to indifference towards the results of a job.

• “There is no correlation between checking for plagiarism and the remuneration for it, which is generally low.”

• “For the money [I’m paid], I’m ready to work formally, but such a salary does not compensate the time and nerves for combating plagiarism.”

• “I work on a one-and-a-half duty at my university, and part-time at another. With such a load, I simply have no time to engage in accurately checking for plagiarism. This is not good, but it is not because of a good life that I take on so much load.”

• “I beg your pardon, but who will pay me for the extra time if I read essays of students twice or thrice to prevent from accepting a plagiarism?”

• “I know that some of my colleagues work in the firms that produce graduation dissertations for sale. It is not surprising that they are reluctant to combat plagiarism: bees [do not revolt] against honey.”

3. Dejection because of students’ lack of motivation. Lecturers feel that their students’ attitude to education is not genuine, there is little interest in the subject, so it does not make any sense for lecturers to invest their time in someone who does not want to learn.

• “Like many other lecturers, I see which students can get motivated to working on their own, seriously and fruitfully, and which cannot be motivated because of their imitative attitude to education, or their negative perception of studying at higher schools.”

• “I have no motivation for spending my efforts on the students who are unlikely to achieve a good result.”

• “If a student is not interested in any knowledge or skills, why should his level [of education] bother me? We are both satisfied with the lowest passing score that reflects the level of knowledge of the student.”

3.2.3. Systemic and cultural factors

1. The education system does not make sufficient use of the opportunities offered by anti-plagiarism software. At some universities, automatic checking for plagiarism is centrally imposed, at some others it is up to a lecturer. However, in both cases appropriate conditions are not created: no licenced versions of software are purchased that would allow checking essays quickly and thoroughly.

• “Essays are submitted [only] in paper version, and I’m not willing to type the text letter by letter, or scan it, to check for plagiarism.”

• “It is very inconvenient to check for plagiarism with the programmes available on the internet for free. I spend more time on checking than the student does on downloading and compiling from different sources.”
Universities are interested in carrying out plans to make profits. Expelling any students that study on a fee basis means losing money. This is especially true of foreign citizens, who pay relatively more for their studies (usually in foreign currency), such that their expulsion is virtually impossible.

- “Students are well aware that in reality it is impossible to punish them, which is why they blatantly do that plagiarism.”

- “How can the Chinese or Turkmen, who are not even able to formulate a question in Russian, write academic essays on their own? But no one will allow me to dismiss them.”

- “I was told straightforwardly: you receive your premium from extra-budgetary funds, and these funds are made out of the profits from foreign students. If we expel them, there will be no way to pay premiums.”

3. The weakness of academic culture:

- “Only formal criteria work. There are no ethical codes within the university space.”

- “We need to create a new moral imperative in higher education.”

- “The level of corporate culture is low.”

As some interviewees were scholars in the humanities, their reflections on the causes of plagiarism went far beyond the Belarusian education system. In their view, plagiarism is encouraged by the global changes taking place in contemporary culture, communications and the ways of dealing with information:

- “We live in a culture of simulacra. A plagiarism instead of a genuine essay – this is a simulacrum of education.”
• “[There is] a global information revolution: everything is now available, the way of working with text has changed. One can [easily] minimise the intellectual effort.”

• “[There is] a dialectical contradiction: information is available, but we are losing the skills of working with it, academic writing skills.”

• “The language of communication has changed, it no more fits with academic text: [there are] memes, smiles, stickers.”

• “The skills of critical thinking are being lost; they should be taught as an alphabet. We consume information without an analytical approach.”

3.3. A synopsis of the factors named by respondents

Below is the synopsis of all the factors that students and lecturers named as contributing to plagiarism during the survey and interviews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>As seen by students</th>
<th>As seen by lecturers</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FACTORS RELATED TO STUDENTS’ SITUATIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students think that (many) written assignments do not have any practical value.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Lecturers tend to emphasise the disconnect between the education and labour market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students perceive plagiarism as a common practice (all do it, why should I not do it?).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive workload with too many assignments.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students lack academic writing skills.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Lecturers tend to emphasise the problem of critical thinking skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education is not the main motivation of students.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FACTORS RELATED TO LECTURERS’ SITUATIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time for individual tutoring with a student.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low salaries.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dejection because of the students' lack of motivation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SYSTEMIC AND CULTURAL FACTORS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The atmosphere of tolerance regarding plagiarism.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of legal mechanisms to combat plagiarism.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor selection procedures in universities.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The commercialisation of education.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The globalisation of information.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What conclusions can be drawn from the above report on perceived factors? Of course, we should approach answers proffered by respondents cautiously given that:
a) The respondents formulated their opinions spontaneously and accordingly might follow the “availability effect”: the first thought to cross one’s head was used for the answer.

b) They might be biased toward justifying their involvement in committing or tolerating plagiarism. Trying to find some excuse for themselves, they may exaggerate some external factors.

Nevertheless, the participants’ opinions on contributory factors in the education process have quite a high value as we can reasonably assume that:

c) A majority of those surveyed and interviewed perceive plagiarism as a negative phenomenon and are interested in finding appropriate measures to overcome the problem.

These opinions therefore have a methodological value, that is they can be taken into account while developing an explanatory account of the facts revealed.

4. Why do Belarusians plagiarise?

4.1. A look from afar: what other researchers say about contributory factors

The literature on the factors encouraging plagiarism is very rich and diverse and it would be impossible – and unnecessary – to repeat it extensively here. We will present a brief synthetic account based on four scholarly articles on the issue: those by David Thomas,11 Sergei Zenkin,12 Vitaly Levin,13 and Irina Petrakova.14 The order of presentation is borrowed from Thomas.

1. **Academic pressures.** Parents, schools and environment put too much emphasis on achievement so that many students tend to “leap over” some stages of learning process, striving to produce something that would imitate the expected result.

2. **Poor planning.** Students are greatly affected by a culture of procrastination: many tend to put off their duties to the last minute and are not able to do the job properly.

3. **Poor preparation.** “Some students find they have a poor foundation or background for their current academic programmes, perhaps because they were ‘slackers’ in earlier courses.”15

4. **Excessive or mindless workload.** Students can be pushed towards plagiarising by having too many assignments with too little time and skills to do what is required.

5. **Opportunity.** The easiness of producing plagiarised work serves as a permanent temptation. Petrakova also points to this factor as a major one.

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14Петракова И.Н. Философский анализ проблемы плагиата в образовании: к вопросу о причинах // Известия ТулГУ. Гуманитарные науки. 2014. №1. р.55.
6. **Cultural background.** Thomas observes that “students from certain parts of the world will have less compunction against plagiarism than students from, for instance, the Anglo-American or western European cultural and legal tradition.”

7. **Prominent bad examples.** From time to time it transpires that celebrities and people in high places have committed plagiarism. This serves as an excuse for similar behaviour on the part of “ordinary people.”

As we can see, most of the factors pointed to by Thomas and other scholars resonate with those named by Belarusian students and lecturers, in particular: academic pressures, poor preparation, excessive workload, cultural background and opportunity. The role of bad examples and a procrastination culture did not appear explicitly in the answers by the Belarusian respondents.

### 4.2. Back to Belarus: four key factors

Virtually all the above-mentioned factors are relevant to the problem of plagiarism in Belarusian higher education, and all of them shed light on how to look for solutions. Using our background knowledge and experience of working close to Belarusian education, we have singled out four factors that seem to be especially relevant to the Belarusian context.

1. **Automatic systems for plagiarism detection are often absent.** Many Belarusian universities do not possess any anti-plagiarism software, which is partly due to the software’s high costs. In this situation, lecturers are often forced to use free plagiarism detection services online, which have numerous limitations and do not work in an automated mode for large documents.

2. **Anti-plagiarism software is available but its abilities are overestimated.** This is especially relevant to Western-type universities. The experience of Dr. Rudkouski shows how delusive a blind trust in software’s powers can be. Software is necessary but not sufficient to combat plagiarism.

3. **There are no critical thinking courses in the curricula at Belarusian universities.** There are no critical thinking and/or academic writing courses, which would introduce students to good practices when finding and processing information. The current system requires that students produce a large quantity of written essays, but does not give them tools for doing so appropriately. Students are, as it were, “forced” to resort to plagiarism.

4. **The academic ethos is generally weak in Belarus.** One has to be aware that the problem of academic integrity is not just a problem among students. It is much wider and deeper; in fact it is a problem of culture and mentality.

The last factor is especially important. There is need for developing a strategy aimed not just at a single segment of academia (e.g. students), but at all participants of the educational process. The strategy must be directed not to a single aspect of education (e.g. the problem of plagiarism), but towards the full variety of didactic undertakings. Finally, it must presuppose not just one set of measures (e.g. punishment), but a system of measures aimed both at effectively discouraging participants from bad practices and – what is more important – encouraging and enabling good practices. In short, if we want to approach the problem seriously, we have to do it holistically.
Recommendations

• **Train students in critical thinking and academic writing.** It is crucial to give students *instruments* with which they can undertake written assignments. No other measures will work if this element is neglected. The Belarusian students who plagiarise are not only “culprits”, but also “victims”: if they are not trained in academic writing or if it is at a low level, how can they succeed in doing written assignments on their own? As one of the interviewees aptly said, “It is necessary to distinguish between cynicism and the lack of knowledge. We must introduce the courses for lecturers on how to analyse a [student’s] text and detect plagiarism, and for students on how to write academic essays.”

• **Provide financial incentives for combatting plagiarism.** The incentives can be both positive and negative. To quote one of the interviewees, “A system of selective post-checking [is needed]: premiums for lecturers should depend on whether they accepted plagiarised essays or not.”

• **Use automatic anti-plagiarism checkers, preferably licensed versions.** However, one should remember that these checkers cannot substitute for the personal commitment of a lecturer. Software is not a panacea. To quote one of the interviewees, “Yes, we need anti-plagiarism checkers; up to half of all plagiarism can be detected in this way. But it can only serve as an element supplementary to human engagement.”

• **Revise the workload of both lecturers and students.** For lecturers to be able to combat plagiarism, it is necessary to ensure enough time and appropriate conditions for doing so. When it comes to students, it is advisable to reduce the volume of classroom tutorials to allow more time for students to work on their own. To quote one of the interviewees, “Students are overloaded with classroom hours, they have no time to prepare written assignments.”

• **Combat plagiarism at the earlier stages of the educational process.** If young people get accustomed to plagiarising in secondary schools, it is extremely hard to eradicate this habit later. “Plagiarism originates in [secondary] school. We should check essays and presentations [in schools] more strictly.”

• **Change the system of recruitment to universities.** “The most important thing is that it is motivated students, and not just school leavers, who should be accepted in universities,” as one of the interviewees noticed.

• **Do not act rashly.** It is important to combat plagiarism, but it should be done gradually and prudently. To quote another of the interviewees, “It is necessary to think about the consequences of any harsh measures.” The antidote should not be more poisonous than the poison.
Attachment. Illustrative samples of interlingual plagiarism

SAMPLE 1.

*The most scandalous form of plagiarism: the original text was translated with Google Translate and not even edited. Many lecturers, unaware of the fact that such essays are plagiarism, accept them and grade positively, just lowering the mark for "grammatical errors."*

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>...in an MA student's essay, submitted as a term-paper</th>
<th>ORIGINAL (RUSSIAN) TEXT</th>
<th>The original text, when translated with Google Translate:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The concept of «ideal state» is generally reflected in the ethical component of his philosophy.</td>
<td>Концепция «идеального государства», как правило, отражается в этической составляющей его философии.</td>
<td>The concept of «ideal state» is generally reflected in the ethical component of his philosophy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Plato’s ethics is characterized by the following main elements:</td>
<td>Для этики Платона характерны следующие основные положения:</td>
<td>For Plato’s ethics is characterized by the following main elements:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- All men are by nature tend to good;</td>
<td>- все люди по природе стремятся к благу;</td>
<td>- All men are by nature tend to good;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In all things of nature there is the desire to improve and perfect their existence. Man is no exception to this rule;</td>
<td>- во всех вещах от природы присутствует стремление улучшать и совершенствовать свое бытие. Человек не составляет исключения из этого правила;</td>
<td>- In all things of nature there is the desire to improve and perfect their existence. Man is no exception to this rule;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When the soul realizes this natural tendency, the result of its proper operation is called a virtue;</td>
<td>- когда душа реализует эту естественную склонность, результат её правильной деятельности называется добродетелью;</td>
<td>- When the soul realizes this natural tendency, the result of its proper operation is called a virtue;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What happens when good and in harmony with nature works body (health).</td>
<td>- то же происходит, когда хорошо и в согласии с природой работает тело (здоровье).</td>
<td>- What happens when good and in harmony with nature works body (health).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

16 Курсовая работа «Учение Платона о душе в контексте идеального государства (Идеальное государство по Платону)» available at http://bighreferat.ru/
SAMPLE 2.

An interesting case when two students plagiarised using the same source. However, they did it in different ways: M.D. apparently used Google Translate, but V.A. translated it on his own. There is also an interesting moment when M.D. follows Google's translation which rendered a meaning opposite to what was in the original text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russian (original) text17</th>
<th>An MA student M.D.</th>
<th>An MA student V. A.</th>
<th>Google translator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>В одной из книг «Государства» Платона, главный герой Сократ рассуждает о месте женщин в системе идеального государства. Женщина является важным элементом системы, так же, как и мужчина. Какой же должна быть роль женщины в идеальном государстве, и реализовалась ли она в современном мире? (…)</td>
<td>In the book 'The Republic' written by Plato, the main character, Socrates talks about the place of women in the ideal state. He says that the woman is an important element of the system, as well as men. What should be the role of women in the ideal state, and was it realized in the modern world?</td>
<td>In one of Plato books “Politics”, Socrates discourses concerning the place of women in the system of perfect state. Woman is an important element of system, such as a man.</td>
<td>In one of the books of Plato’s «State», the main character, Socrates talks about the place of women in the ideal state. The woman is an important element of the system, as well as men. What should be the role of women in the ideal state, and whether it was realized in the modern world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato приходит к выводу, что природа женщин не отличается от природы мужчин.</td>
<td>Plato comes to the conclusion, that the nature of women is different from the nature of men.</td>
<td>Plato comes to a conclusion, that woman nature has no differences from nature of man.</td>
<td>Plato came to the conclusion that the nature of women is different from the nature of men.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SAMPLE 3.

This sample illustrates a more sophisticated way of plagiarising. Apart from the fact that this is an interlingual plagiarism (which in itself is very difficult to detect), it is also slightly paraphrased. Pay attention to the reference. It is put here arbitrarily, for visual effect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The original (Russian) source17</th>
<th>An MA student’s term-paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Из неё были исключены не только рабы, не имевшие ни политических, ни элементарных человеческих прав, но и метеки. Последние не получали политических и гражданских прав, даже если жили в Афинах в течение нескольких поколений. Афинское государство было заинтересовано в увеличении числа метеков, и в некоторые периоды принимались специальные меры для их привлечения.</td>
<td>...slaves who had no political or simple human rights and also metics (Greek métoikos) were excluded from the political life. Metics did not have social, political and civil rights, even in case of the long stay in Athens. However, in times when the rulers of the Athenian state were interested in the expansion of the population, they were trying to do so at the expense of immigrants, that is why at various times different reforms were held in order to attract such class (McKay 2007).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18 Ограниченность и уязвимость Афинской демократии http://yspu.org/hreader/2/?in=5)
About the authors

Piotr Rudkouski is the director of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS). He received his MA from Jagiellonian University (Krakow) and his PhD from Warsaw University, both in humanities. From 2007 to 2012 he lectured at the European Humanities University in Vilnius and from 2012 to 2016 at Lazarski University in Warsaw. In addition, he has been a guest lecturer at Jagiellonian University, Warsaw University, Wroclaw University, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Bialystok University, St. Thomas College in Kiev, and the Belarusian College in Minsk.

In 2008, he was a visiting scholar at Southwestern College in Winfield, USA. He was twice a research fellow of the Institute of Civic Space and Public Policy (Warsaw), within which he headed the Belarusian Centre. Dr. Rudkouski is the author of four books and around 70 articles, mainly focusing on Belarusian identity issues, the political potential of churches in Belarus, the Belarusian state ideology, and the methodology of social sciences. In April 2013, he received the Polish Lew Sapieha Award, one of the most prestigious in the region, «for outstanding merits in shaping and developing civil society in Belarus and bringing Belarus closer to Europe».

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Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) – is a think tank founded in 2007 by a group of prominent scientists and public figures, with the support of the international organization ‘Pact’. Its main mission is to provide an integrated picture of socio-political processes in Belarus and assess them in a long-term (strategic) perspective. In the past, the most emblematic projects of the Institute were: ‘Social Contracts’, ‘National Self-identification of the Contemporary Belarusians’, ‘International Monitoring’ (later – ‘Foreign Policy Index’), the ‘Eurasian Review’, and ‘Human capital.’ Currently, the institute implements the project ‘Blitz-Commentary’ (jointly with ‘Our Opinion’ website), and the educational project ‘be critical’. In the nearest future, it is going to launch research projects ‘Value Transformations’, ‘Identity Index’, and educational project ‘Be Critical’. BISS’s website: https://belinstitute.com.
Ostrogorski Centre

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on the problems which Belarus faces in its transition to a market economy and the rule of law. Its work is non-partisan and dedicated to achieving practical results. Its analysts, working in Minsk, Kyiv, London and Berlin, understand the challenges of transition in the region because they have lived through it.

Educated at the world's leading universities, the Centre's experts have cultivated the culture and technical skills required to deliver Western-style analysis. The mission of the Ostrogorski Centre is to contribute to better understanding of transition processes in Belarus and learn from the experiences of other countries. The Centre aims to promote reforms and thinking which helps the economy become more competitive, its governance more efficient and integrate Belarusian scholars and analysts into pan-European and global networks.

The web site of the Ostrogorski Centre is www.ostrogorski.org.