Threatened Academic Integrity: Understanding the Increasing Tendency of Plagiarism among Undergraduates during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract - The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all domains in Sri Lanka including education, leading to the complete closure of higher educational institutions. This compelled both teachers and students to adapt to online teaching and learning which was never/rarely used in state education before, placing them in a constant struggle to make the overall online experience a success. Within such a framework, academic integrity has been threatened as students have begun to resort more convenient ways such as plagiarism to accomplish their academic goals. Plagiarism is discovered and problematized in language learning as it is a discipline where originality and creativity are respected. This paper discusses why students see plagiarism as a 'liberator' in their academic success and how this practice betrays academic integrity in the current online education system. The study was conducted through an online survey, the examination of ESL (English as a Second Language) assignments that were submitted online in one academic year (April 2020-2021) by ten first year and ten second year undergraduates, and interviews with five relevant stakeholders in the faculty of Allied Health Sciences, University of Peradeniya. Our findings show that the reasons for plagiarism are two dimensional. First, the system is new and the students are not made aware of the ethics of online education and secondly, the students are unable to access physical resources that were previously available for them. Therefore, this study attempts to create a discourse on understanding and reducing 'plagiarism' when learning English in higher education.

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