Perceptions of plagiarism by students at the University of Economics in Bratislava

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Abstract: Plagiarism undermines the very purpose of obtaining education, and plagiarising final theses diminishes the value of university education in society. Therefore, it is necessary to tackle this issue in all university courses, including foreign language courses. Stemming from the definition of plagiarism and its classification the paper aims to analyse how students perceive plagiarism. The analysis of students' perception of plagiarism is based on a questionnaire distributed among students at the University of Economics in Bratislava. A Likert scale was used to measure students' attitudes. The findings of the study show that the majority of 68 undergraduate students who participated in it are aware of what constitutes plagiarism with verbatim plagiarism being recognised as its most typical form. The respondents see the complexity of citing sources as the main reason for plagiarising, which is also reflected in their varying opinions on referencing. Finally, measures on how to prevent plagiarism are suggested. The goal of the study was to provide the ground for a better understanding of plagiarism from students' viewpoints and thus help find effective ways to eliminate this phenomenon.

Key words: plagiarism, quantitative analysis, questionnaire, students' attitudes, tertiary education

1   Introduction

Plagiarism is one of the ways of breaching academic integrity with which institutions at the tertiary education level have to deal. It undermines the purpose of obtaining formal education, and plagiarising final theses diminishes the value of university education in society. However, plagiarism does not apply to qualification theses only, as it is present in seminar papers, projects, and assignments, which have become an inseparable part of university courses due to the shift from test- or examination-based to continuous assessment (Brown, 2001). It is therefore essential that due attention be paid to this issue from the very beginning of undergraduate university studies. Doing so can prevent plagiarising theses and dissertations, as these cases may result in serious implications, such as the revocation of an academic degree. However, the goal is not to penalise plagiarism but to increase awareness of what constitutes plagiarism and most importantly, to take steps to avoid it to the highest possible extent and thus improve the quality of tertiary education.

Plagiarism has become massively widespread with the development of new technologies, especially the internet. The easy and rapid accessibility of vast amounts of information raised a growing ethical concern over plagiarism and intellectual

property in general. It is also claimed that student plagiarism "is conjectured to stem from problems with information searching and exploitation, underdeveloped exposition skills and difficulty in using sources, especially concerning quotations and references" (Chankova 2017, p. 1). On the other hand, digital technologies also provide tools that make plagiarism detection easier.

The main part of the presented paper deals with students' perception of plagiarism, which is based on an anonymous questionnaire distributed among students at the University of Economics in Bratislava. The analysis of the answers is the first step towards better understanding how students view this phenomenon, which can provide a sound basis for further research in this area, and crucially, for measures to be adopted to reduce it.

2 What constitutes plagiarism

The views on plagiarism are constantly evolving. It is therefore vital to define the term plagiarism and analyse the forms it can take. The concept of plagiarism is considered to be a relatively new one (Sentleng & King 2012; Do Ba et al. 2017) though Wager (2014, p. 33) states that "(p)lagiarism has caused problems for editors and publishers for centuries". Similarly, there are different opinions what plagiarism actually is. However, defining the term is crucial if being accused of breach of academic integrity can lead to significant penalties. As Fishman puts it in the title of one of her articles "We know when we see it' is not good enough" (Fishman 2009, p. 1) and proposes a definition of plagiarism based on its five constituent elements:

> Plagiarism occurs when someone (1) uses words, ideas, or work products (2) attributable to another identifiable person or source (3) without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained (4) in a situation in which there is a legitimate expectation of original authorship (5) in order to obtain some benefit, credit, or gain which need not be monetary (Fishman, 2009, p. 5).

Sarlauskiene and Stabingis follow a similar approach and suggest that a complete definition of plagiarism "can be achieved by using not short definition of plagiarism and by enumerating and explaining the various forms and types of plagiarism" (Sarlauskiene & Stabingis, 2014, p. 642). The authors follow this premise and base their definition on distinguishing four types of plagiarism:

1. appropriation – stealing information from a work done by another person or stealing all the work,
2. cheating – presentation of a bought work, presentation of the work or created piece done by another person, and presentation of the students' collaborative work as individual work,
3. improper presentation of information from the works of other authors or improper citation of the sources and presentation of references,
4. self-plagiarism (Sarlauskiene & Stabingis, 2014, p. 643).

Compared to the four types of plagiarism outlined above, Jamieson and Howard (2019) differentiate only between *cheating* (contract cheating, downloading whole papers, or otherwise knowingly submitting someone else's texts) and *non-transparent source use* or *intertextual missteps* (failure to cite extracted material, failure to correctly mark quotations, and patchwriting) thus actually putting the two categories of appropriation and cheating by Sarlauskiene and Stabingis' (2014) under the heading of cheating and not mentioning self-plagiarism at all.

A more detailed classification of forms plagiarism was presented by Martin (1994), comprising six types: *word-for-word plagiarism, paraphrasing plagiarism, plagiarism of secondary sources, plagiarism of the form of the source, plagiarism of ideas,* and *plagiarism of authorship*. While most of Martin's categories are clear, his explanation of paraphrasing plagiarism can be confusing, especially, but not only, speaking about foreign language courses. Martin says (1994, p. 37): "When some of the words are changed, but not enough, the result can be called paraphrasing plagiarism. This is considered more serious when the original source is not cited". The second sentence implies that any paraphrasing, i.e. also paraphrasing a cited source, is considered plagiarism. Another disputable point in this definition is its vagueness regarding the number of words that have to be changed so that the text is not viewed as plagiarised – how many words are "some, but not enough"?

Study of the available literature indicates that there is no universally accepted definition of plagiarism. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers and students to consult their university's policy on this matter. To facilitate the understanding of integrity issues not only in academia but also in business the University of Economics in Bratislava provides their staff and students with the Glossary for Academic Integrity referring to plagiarism as "Presenting work/ideas taken from other sources without proper acknowledgement" (Tauginiené et al., 2018, p. 35), which is a definition adopted from Meuschke and Gipp, who understand "academic plagiarism as the use of ideas and/or words from sources without giving due acknowledgement as imposed by academic principles" (Meuschke & Gipp, 2013, p. 51). As already noted, such a brief definition of plagiarism would not suffice thus the glossary enumerates and explains various types of plagiarism, e.g. recycle, boilerplate, subconscious, clone, find-replace, idea, image, multimedia, hybrid plagiarism, etc. Such guidelines serve as the basis for consistency in assessing students' papers and theses, however, they should be complemented by training in academic writing including instructions regarding the proper ways how to work with various sources, such as analysing, synthetising, quoting, citing, and writing bibliography to name a few.

3 Research design and methodology

It was mainly our pedagogical experience that triggered the interest in the topic of plagiarism from theoretical point of view (Maierová 2022) as well as in its practical implications, because part of the continuous assessment in the undergraduate courses of English for advanced students at the University of Economics in Bratislava is a seminar paper on a particular topic corresponding with the material covered during these courses. The presented study can be seen as the beginning on the way to explore this phenomenon in the academic setting.

The aim of the study was to find answers for the following research questions:

1. Do undergraduate students know what plagiarism is?
2. Are undergraduate students aware of proper ways of citing and referencing?
3. What do undergraduate students see as the reasons for plagiarism?
4. What do undergraduate students perceive as most effective methods to prevent plagiarism?

The questionnaire used in the research was designed to investigate students' perception of plagiarism. It was divided into four sections. The aim of the first part was to collect general information about the student (faculty, the year and the level of studies, gender), which served as the basis for studying potential differences in students' approaches to plagiarism. The second part dealt with students' perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism. The third part studied what students see as the reasons leading to plagiarizing. The final, fourth part explored the possible ways of plagiarism prevention.

The total number of questions was 10, out of which four were multiple-choice questions, four used a Likert scale to measure students' attitudes towards plagiarism, and two questions were open-ended so that respondents were able to express their opinions and suggestions freely.

At the end of the summer semester of 2021/2022, the questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students using a link sent via MS Teams to different groups in foreign-language courses with the help of colleagues from the departments of the English and German language. The questionnaire was anonymous, with the limitation that only students at the University of Economics in Bratislava could answer it, ensured by the requirement of an official university e-mail.

Within the time frame of almost three weeks, from April 28, 2022, to May 16, 2022, altogether 68 answered questionnaires were collected.

The questionnaire was completed by 68 students of five faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava. Chart 1 shows the distribution of respondents by

faculty. Most participants were students of the Faculty of Business Management (33.82%), followed by the Faculty of National Economy (27.94%), Faculty of Commerce (20.59%), Faculty of Economic Informatics (13.24%), and finally, Faculty of International Relations (4.41%). Two faculties of the university, the Faculty of Applied Languages and Faculty of Business Economy in Košice, did not participate in the study.
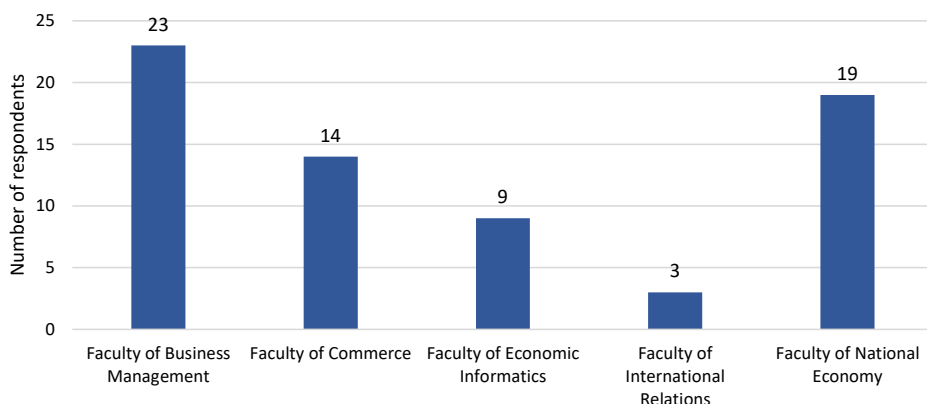

Fig. 1: *Distribution of respondents by faculty (N = 68)*

All respondents were undergraduate students, out of whom more than a half were 2nd year students (63.23%), over a third 1st year students (35.29%), and there was only one 3rd year student (1.47%), as shown in chart 2. The result that most participants were students of the first two years of undergraduate studies can be explained by the fact that foreign languages for economics at intermediate and advanced levels are part of curricula at individual faculties at the very beginning of university studies. Specialised seminars concerned with writing theses are, as a rule, included in the final year of either bachelor or master studies.

The last general question referred to the participants' gender. As illustrated in pie chart 3, there were almost twice as many females (64.71%) as males (35.29%).

4 Research results

4.1 What is plagiarism

At the beginning of this part of the questionnaire, we wanted to find out where the respondents learnt about plagiarism, since this topic is present not only in academia but also in society in general. It can be seen in chart 4 that exactly one half of students became aware of plagiarism at secondary school. Almost 40% got the information from media (tv, press, internet), which can be linked to recent
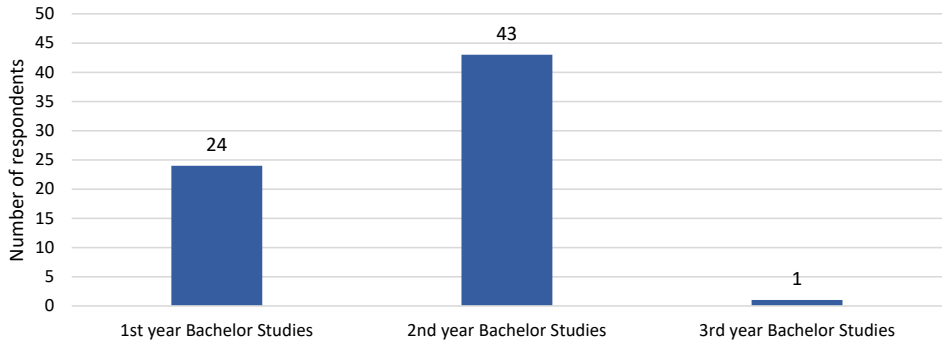
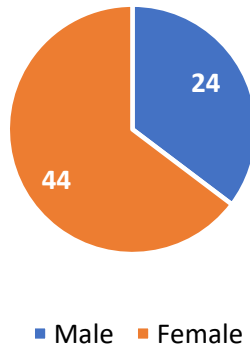Fig. 2: *Distribution of respondents by the year of studies (N = 68)*

■ Male ■ Female

Fig. 3: *Distribution of respondents by gender (N = 68)*

accusations of plagiarism against high-ranking politicians. It is therefore logical that only 4.4% of respondents learnt about plagiarism at the beginning or during their university studies. An interesting finding is that the same number of students (4.4%) heard about this term already at elementary school.

The data show the source of information but not the quality of it or participants' comprehension of the term since knowing about this phenomenon does not necessarily translate into using proper techniques when writing academic papers. Hence there is enough space to tackle the issue of plagiarism at university level.

The question *Which of the following do you consider plagiarism?* comprised ten specific instances of plagiarising as listed below. Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement using a 5-point Likert scale: *strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree.*
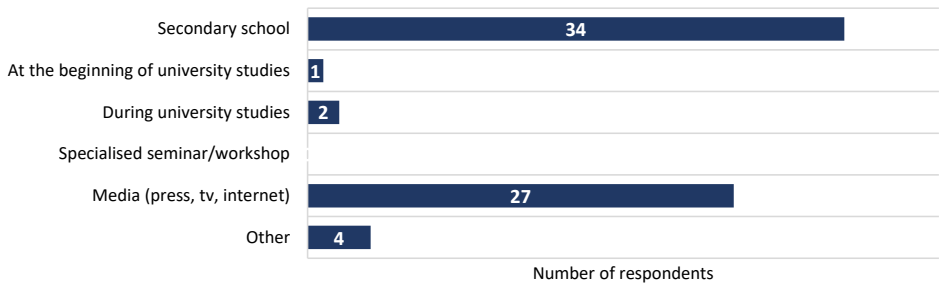
Secondary school	34
At the beginning of university studies	1
During university studies	2
Specialised seminar/workshop	
Media (press, tv, internet)	27
Other	4

Number of respondents

Fig. 4: *Sources of information about plagiarism (N = 68)*

Q1 Presenting someone else's thoughts as my own
Q2 Verbatim copying whole sentences/paragraphs without citing the source in the text
Q3 Paraphrasing sentences/paragraphs without citing the source in the text
Q4 Translation of a text without reference to the source
Q5 Compilation of multiple texts without citing the source
Q6 Submitting a paper written by a colleague as my own work without his/her knowledge
Q7 Submitting a paper written by a colleague as my own work with his/her knowledge
Q8 Submitting a paper written by someone else hired to do so
Q9 Submitting my own paper for another course/subject
Q10 Submitting group work with only one author's name

These examples are closely connected to various types of plagiarism as elaborated in relevant literature mentioned in the previous parts of this paper. From the theoretical point of view, there may be a terminological debate as to whether particular instances, e.g. Q6-10, are examples of plagiarism or cheating. However, they all belong to unethical academic practices or breaches of academic integrity, of which students should also be aware.

From the results summarised in table 1 and visualised in chart 5, it is evident that in nine out of ten cases participants recognised ways used in plagiarising since they predominantly answered *strongly agree* (Q2, 6) and *agree* (Q3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10). Verbatim copying (Q2), also called clone or Ctrl+C plagiarism, was placed on top with 99% of respondents agreeing with it belonging to plagiarism practices.

The fact that paraphrasing, translating, and compilation of texts (Q3–Q5) without any reference to the original source were not considered instances of plagiarism by more than a quarter of students can be caused by the fact that part of instruc-

tion in foreign language teaching is summarizing texts, which might be mistaken for paraphrasing or even translating texts.

The only example participants mostly disagreed with being a case of plagiarism was submitting one's own paper for another subject/course (Q9). It is a controversial topic with varying opinions on it and mostly it is seen as unethical behaviour or cheating. However, when delivering a Master's thesis, it is strongly recommended that students meticulously check the rules and regulations applied to re-using parts of their Bachelor's thesis.

Tab. 1: *Responses to ten instances (Q1–Q10) of plagiarism (N=68); SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neutral, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree*

	SA	A	SA+A	N	D	SD	D+SD	Mean
Q1	32	26	58	01	9	0	09	4.19
Q2	59	8	67	00	1	0	1	4.84
Q3	16	30	46	00	18	4	22	3.53
Q4	15	34	49	01	18	0	18	3.68
Q5	7	40	47	02	19	0	19	3.51
Q6	56	8	64	00	4	0	4	4.71
Q7	26	21	47	02	12	7	19	3.69
Q8	26	19	45	03	13	7	20	3.65
Q9	5	11	16	10	24	18	42	2.43
Q10	21	24	45	08	12	3	15	3.71

Another point of interest in this study was students' familiarity with the correct ways of citing and referring to sources because recognising plagiarism is not enough, more important is to acknowledge the original source appropriately. The respondents were asked to express their attitudes to five statements. A 5-point Likert scale was used in this case, too.

S1 Sources only need to be cited in bibliography
S2 Sources must be cited both in the text of a thesis/paper and in bibliography
S3 Internet sources do not need to be cited because they are publicly available
S4 It is not required to refer to sources of images, tables, charts, etc
S5 It is not required to cite information obtained in lectures and/or from the textbook

The cases were chosen based on our experience with papers delivered by students at the end of the course *Business English for Advanced Students*. It is very common that students include bibliography (as it is part of a template), but in-text references are missing or, if they are used at all, then the acknowledgement of the source follows verbatim quotations only. This fact is reflected in the responses, where almost a half of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that sources only need to be cited in bibliography, a quarter was undecided, and only 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the first statement (S1).
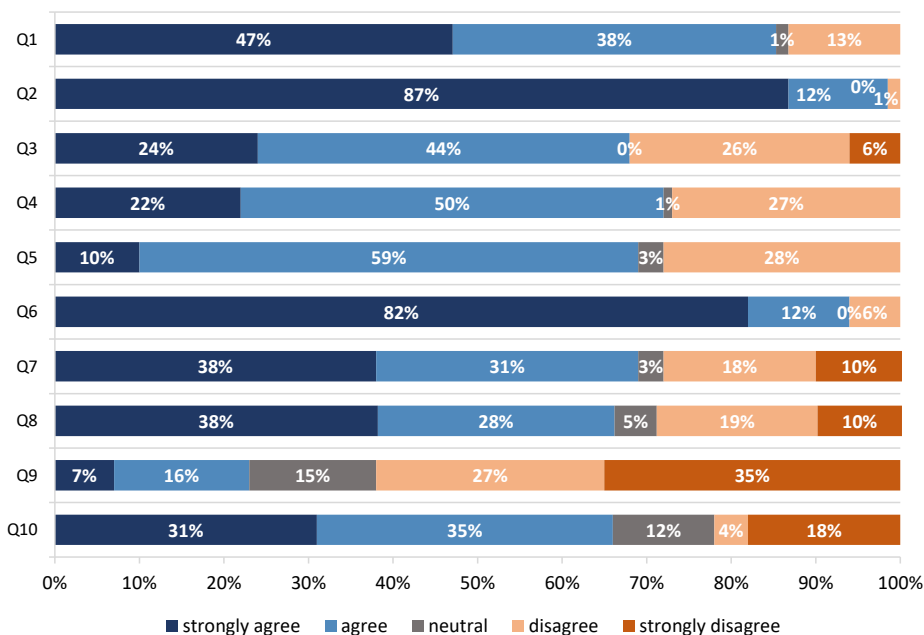
Fig. 5: *Responses to ten instances of plagiarism in percentages*

Only the second statement (S2) is considered good practice in citing sources, and most respondents strongly agreed with it, though the overall attitude was *agree*. The rest of the statements (S3–S5) are 'wrong', and they were recognised as such by prevailing negative attitudes towards them. However, compared with the previous set of answers about plagiarism in general, as highlighted in the table, there are more neutral responses in this set.

The results in the section dealing with citing and referencing show that undergraduates are generally aware of the rules on how to refer to literature, although there is still inconsistency in dealing with specific techniques of citing sources.

Tab. 2: *Responses to five statements (S1–S5) concerned with references to sources (N=68); SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neutral, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree*

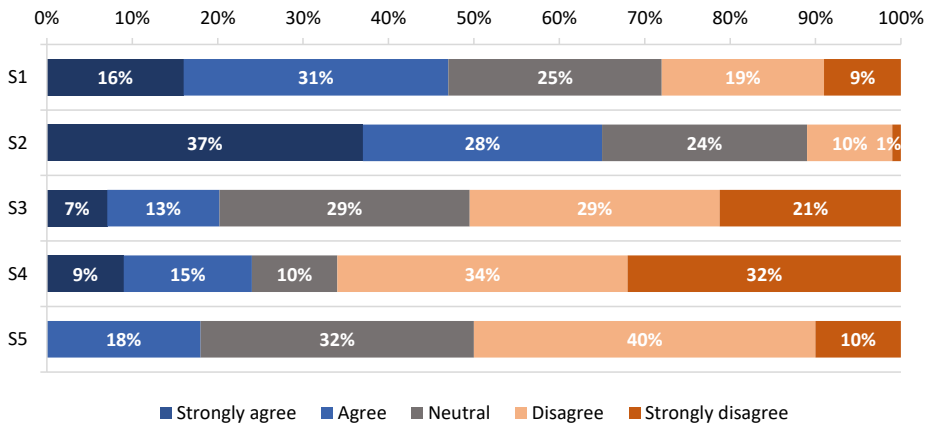|	SA	A	SA+A	N	D	SD	D+SD	Mean
S1	11	21	32	17	13	6	19	3.26
S2	25	19	44	16	7	1	8	3.88
S3	5	9	14	20	20	14	34	2.57
S4	6	10	16	7	23	22	45	2.34
S5	0	12	12	22	27	7	34	2.57

Fig. 6: *Responses to five statements concerned with citing and referencing in percentages*

4.2 Reasons for plagiarism

The goal of this section was to explore the reasons leading to plagiarism. Respondents were asked what they think the causes of plagiarism are. They were offered twelve possible motives for plagiarising, as listed below. These were then followed by an open question where students could add what they perceive as other reasons for plagiarism.

R1 Lack of knowledge of the rules to be followed when writing a thesis
R2 Complexity of citing sources
R3 Problems with paraphrasing and summarising texts
R4 Complexity of the assigned topics
R5 Lack of time
R6 Teacher's disinterest in whether someone cheated or not
R7 Insufficient sanctions when plagiarism is detected
R8 Plagiarism is not perceived as an issue
R9 All students engage in plagiarism to some extent
R10 Simplicity of copying, especially from the internet
R11 Striving to achieve the best possible results
R12 Fear of failing the course/subject

The highest level of agreement on what the causes of plagiarism are, was reached with regard to the complexity of citing sources (R2), problems with paraphrasing and summarising texts (R3), and fear of failing the course/subject (R12), closely followed by the simplicity of copying (R10), lack of knowledge of the rules to

be followed when writing a thesis (R1), and striving to achieve the best possible results (R11).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, respondents mostly disagreed with the reasons that plagiarism is not perceived as an issue (R8), insufficient sanctions when plagiarism is detected (R7), and teacher's disinterest in whether someone cheated or not (R6), as shown in table 3 and graph 7. Besides these three options (R6, R7, R8), all other alternatives were viewed by participants as valid reasons that may lead to plagiarizing, i.e. more than 50% strongly agreed or agreed with them.

The presented results provide guidance on how to improve the standard of theses, which is to give instructions on citing and using references in academic writing, as noted in the previous part, as well as paying more attention to paraphrasing and summarizing texts, notably in language courses, where participants need to process the specific economic information in a foreign language.

Tab. 3: *Responses to possible reasons (R1–12) for plagiarism (N=68); SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neutral, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree*

	SA	A	SA+A	N	D	SD	D+SD	Mean
R1	28	25	53	1	12	2	14	3.96
R2	28	29	57	2	8	1	9	4.10
R3	20	36	56	4	8	0	8	4.00
R4	18	28	46	3	17	2	19	3.63
R5	19	21	40	2	21	5	26	3.43
R6	11	22	33	8	21	6	27	3.16
R7	14	8	22	12	24	10	34	2.88
R8	8	12	20	5	20	23	43	2.44
R9	11	29	40	7	12	9	21	3.31
R10	18	36	54	1	10	3	13	3.82
R11	28	23	51	3	11	3	14	3.91
R12	28	27	55	5	7	1	8	4.09

Eight more reasons were elicited by respondents in an open question, which varied from the situation in Slovak society and universities – the low level of Slovak universities and people studying only to get a degree, the impossibility to revoke a degree if it was based on a plagiarised thesis, to more specific reasons such as students' laziness and unwillingness to engage in honest practices when completing their theses, disinterest in the topic (choosing from topics that are left), not enough knowledge about the chosen topic, the inability to describe one's thoughts in the text to make them sound professional, and finally, simply forgetting to cite a source.
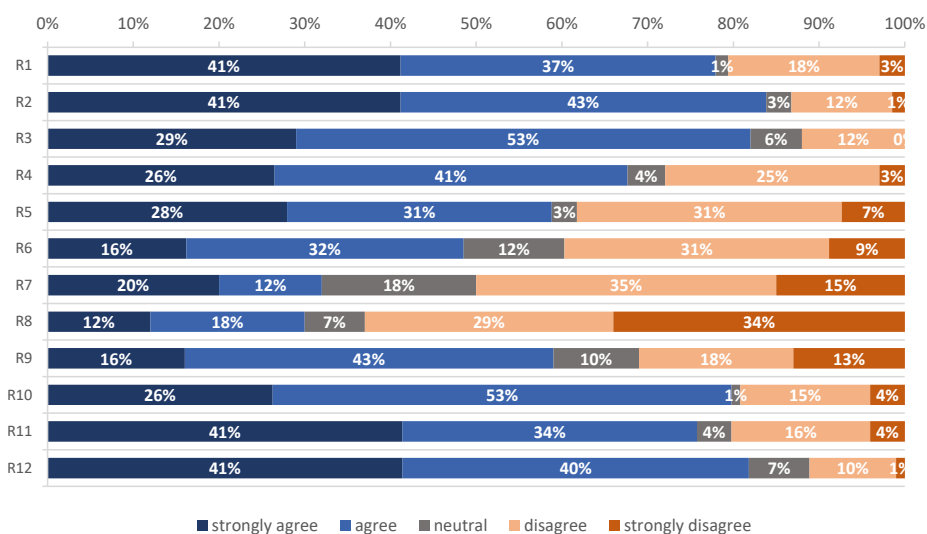
Fig. 7: *Responses to possible reasons for plagiarism in percentages*

At least one of these points can be addressed instantly – giving students the possibility of suggesting their own thesis topic (linked to the course material), which is used in our courses of Business English for Advanced Students. However, it must be added that it happens in exceptional cases when students come up with their proposals.

4.3 Plagiarism prevention

The final part of the survey was devoted to methods how to reduce plagiarism. Respondents were asked what they thought would help students avoid plagiarism. They expressed their attitudes to nine suggested measures in a 5-point Likert scale. These were followed by an open question, similarly to the previous section.

P1 Instructions on how to cite correctly at the beginning of university studies
P2 Posting a 'model' seminar paper
P3 Consultation with the teacher
P4 Consultation with a library staff member
P5 Clear university guidelines on what constitutes plagiarism and what the penalties are
P6 Practical workshop/seminar on how to write a thesis at university
P7 Formulation of seminar/final thesis topics
P8 Use of anti-plagiarism software by teachers
P9 Use of anti-plagiarism software by students

The data in table 4 and figure 8 show the overall agreement with proposed measures to avoid plagiarism as the attitudes *strongly agree* and *agree* add up to more than 50% in all cases. The strongest agreement was recorded with the first three suggestions, i.e. consulting the teacher (P3), posting a 'model' seminar paper (P2), and being instructed on how to cite correctly at the beginning of university studies (P1). On the other hand, the lowest agreement among respondents was with consulting a library staff member (P4) and the use of anti-plagiarism software by teachers (P8). It is interesting to note that the use of anti-plagiarism programs by students is seen as more effective in plagiarism prevention than teachers using them.

Nine respondents answered the open question what else, not mentioned previously, could help them eliminate plagiarism. There were general ideas such as improving the quality of tertiary education in Slovakia by including more practice in curricula, decreasing the number of theoretical subjects, and excluding students whose main aim is to obtain an academic degree regardless of gaining new knowledge. More specific proposals included simplification of thesis topics, the university offering courses in academic writing, publishing a brochure how to write theses that would be easier to grasp than the existing one, senior students providing guidance to freshmen on how to write a seminar paper and thus not only help them increase the quality of theses but also to avoid future problems linked to plagiarism, and also keeping a continuously updated list of sources during the preparation of a paper.

Tab. 4: *Responses to proposed measures for plagiarism prevention (P1–9), (N=68); SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neutral, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree*

	SA	A	SA+A	N	D	SD	D+SD	Mean
P1	47	18	65	0	1	2	3	4.57
P2	52	15	67	0	1	0	1	4.74
P3	44	24	68	0	0	0	0	4.65
P4	13	25	38	15	11	4	30	3.47
P5	38	24	62	0	5	1	6	4.37
P6	40	25	65	1	2	0	3	4.51
P7	33	24	57	7	4	0	11	4.26
P8	18	17	35	12	15	6	33	3.38
P9	32	17	49	9	8	2	19	4.01

5   Discussion

The results from the survey with regard to the four research questions asked show that most undergraduate students at the University of Economics in Bratislava know what plagiarism is though they recognise various forms of plagiarism to varying degrees with verbatim plagiarism followed by submitting col-
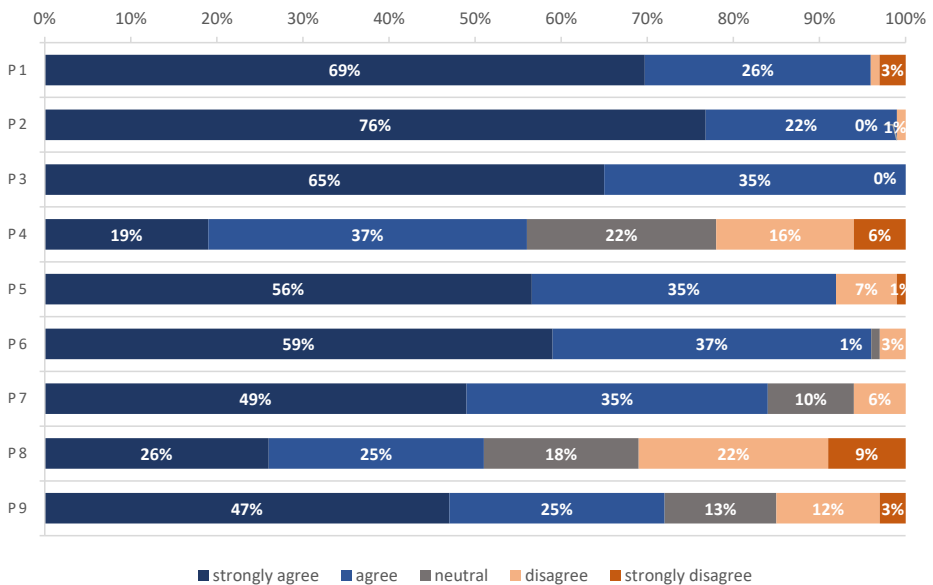
Fig. 8: *Responses to proposed measures for plagiarism prevention in percentages*

league's work as one's own without his/her knowledge being the most clearly ac-
knowledged methods of plagiarism. There is still space for improvement regarding
students' understanding that paraphrasing, translating, and compilation of texts
without acknowledging appropriate sources also present plagiarism practices.

The majority of undergraduate students are aware of proper ways of citing and
referencing though this knowledge is often not reflected in seminar papers sub-
mitted in Business English courses, where students often use references to verba-
tim quotations only or do not use in-text references at all.

The most common reasons for plagiarising, as elicited by the respondents, are the
complexity of citing sources and problems with paraphrasing and summarising
texts. If plagiarism is to be minimised, the first two reasons should be addressed
during university studies as soon as possible in order to avoid the possible per-
petuation of the wrong use of literature in academic writing. This statement was
confirmed by the responses to the ways of plagiarism prevention, among which
consulting the teacher, posting a 'model' seminar paper, and being instructed on
how to cite correctly at the beginning of university studies were regarded as the
most effective though the rest of the suggested methods of avoiding plagiarism
were also identified by the participants as efficacious.

We believe that in the first place, students need to understand how they can benefit from ethical academic practices. At the same time, it is clear that they also need consistent and clear instructions how to write seminar papers and theses both in Slovak and foreign languages from the very beginning of their university studies together with developing their critical thinking and writing skills at all levels and all courses.

Other areas need to be taken into consideration besides students' training in academic writing, and that is the cooperation of the university administration with academic staff, implementation of necessary policies at the university level, raising teachers' awareness of how to prevent this unethical academic practice and lecturers' training in disclosing plagiarism including the use of new technologies.

6   Conclusion

The present study is a tentative step towards dealing with plagiarism in courses of foreign languages for specific purposes at tertiary education level. The limitations to this study include the relatively small size of the research sample and the methodological approach of the questionnaire based solely on students' attitudes towards plagiarism. This perspective could be enhanced by including practical examples of correct and incorrect practices in academic writing and their assessment by participants. Finally, we suggest that the obtained findings are compared with written projects delivered in foreign language courses to provide a more objective picture of how far the views of plagiarism have been addressed and internalised.

It would be of utmost interest to explore if there is any shift in the approach to plagiarism, especially regarding students in the final year of their bachelor's or master's degrees. We suggest that the research into students' perceptions of plagiarism is also compared with university teachers' views on this issue, which should lead to joint efforts to minimise plagiarism as we firmly believe that understanding the reasons behind plagiarism and exploring methods of its prevention brings better results than sanctioning it.

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