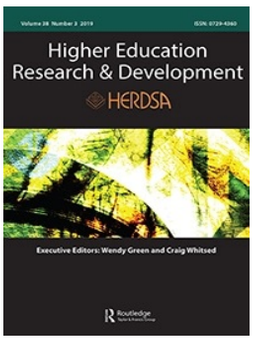

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Plagiarism in EMI higher education: conceptual understanding of staff and students in four South Asian countries

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates staff and students' conceptual understanding of plagiarism in higher education in four South Asian countries in which English is the primary medium of instruction in many disciplines: Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The study aimed to establish the extent to which avoidance of plagiarism was perceived as important by three stakeholder groups and the extent to which these three groups understood their institutional policies on plagiarism. Questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups were conducted with students ($N = 1575$), English language teachers ($N = 108$) and subject lecturers ($N = 86$) at 14 higher education institutions in these countries, and publicly available policies on plagiarism were examined. Findings reveal that, despite all three groups reporting that avoiding plagiarism was important, institutional policies were poorly understood. Students had limited understanding of plagiarism and held beliefs that could lead to inadvertent malpractice in an international context. Teaching staff were hampered by lack of detection tools, lack of clarity on policy, and inadequate understanding of plagiarism.

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Plagiarism; EMI (English as a medium of instruction); institutional policies; developing countries; South Asia

1. Introduction and background

English Medium Instruction (EMI) in global Higher Education (HE) is increasingly common around the world (Curle et al., 2020), with Dearden (2014) reporting that EMI is offered in more than 90% of private and 78% of public universities globally. This phenomenon is part of the so-called 'internationalisation of HE' (Curle et al., 2020, p. 10), whose purposes include enabling students to gain knowledge about other cultures and increasing the interconnectedness of education globally. Ha (2013) also points out that EMI is important in the 'production, circulation and dissemination of academic knowledge' (p. 160). Despite the goals of facilitating student mobility and

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increasing the production of international research by staff, researchers from the Global South still have a very limited presence in international journals. Several studies have found that articles by Global North researchers dominate in journals in a range of disciplines (Amarante et al., 2021; Arnett, 2008; Maas et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). Simply teaching one's subject in English may not suffice to enable academics in the Global South to fully participate, and factors such as poor understanding of international norms may also play a role (Fung, 2008).

South Asia represents a quarter of the world's population, and EMI is common in HE in the region, so it is important to understand how far EMI in HE achieves its intended goals of enabling staff and students to participate fairly in the global education and research market. The four countries participating in this study (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) all offer university courses in English. Private universities in Bangladesh use English as the medium of instruction (Karim et al., 2021), as do Medicine, Agriculture, Law, and Engineering courses in Nepal (Shrestha, 2008). English is the medium of instruction in much of higher education in Pakistan (Mansur & Shrestha, 2015), and for around 80% of degree courses in Sri Lanka (Lyne, 2013). EMI policies tend to be imposed from the top down (Macaro et al., 2018) and, as Bowen and Nanni (2021) point out, are often transferred from Anglophone contexts in a decontextualized way. Accordingly, it cannot be assumed that EMI in HE automatically means that students and staff will understand globally accepted norms such as those concerning plagiarism, mostly set by Anglophone academia.

2. Literature review

Shared understandings of concepts such as data protection, research ethics, and plagiarism are important in international HE and when producing academic knowledge in English. It tends to be assumed that norms of academic writing such as referencing and avoiding plagiarism are unproblematic for all to adhere to despite evidence that culture can influence understandings (Pan et al., 2019). For example, Bloch (2008) claims that Chinese culture values 'collectivism' and imitation of masters. In imitating, ownership is treated as a collective rather than individual phenomenon, therefore acknowledging authorship may be considered less important.

Plagiarism is defined as 'passing off someone else's work, either intentionally or unintentionally, as your own, for your own benefit' (Carroll, 2007, p. 9) and is, thus, considered cheating or theft as it allows someone to take credit for another's work (Koul et al., 2009). Such definitions are used in universities around the word and may be considered globally accepted norms of academic practice. Nevertheless, how well plagiarism is actually understood may vary. For example, some have claimed that a degree of copying may be more accepted in some contexts than others (Bloch, 2008; Shi, 2006). Some studies also suggest that students in some cultures can be more sensitive towards academic malpractice than others (e.g., Kayaoğlu et al., 2016; Mahmud et al., 2019).

Conceptual understandings of plagiarism are also likely to be influenced by educational experience, which varies around the world. Shi (2006) found that Asian students were less likely than their European counterparts to have learned anything about citation or referencing in school. Likewise, Liu et al.'s (2016) synthesis of 53 studies found very little instruction on source-based writing in East Asian contexts. Academics'

understandings are also important as these may influence how plagiarism is explained and dealt with. Research indicates, however, that staff understandings of what counts as plagiarism vary widely, even in the same university (e.g., Pecorari & Shaw, 2012; Shi, 2012). Clear policies on plagiarism can help staff and students (e.g., Gullifer & Tyson, 2014; Mahmud et al., 2019) to understand which practices are acceptable and how plagiarism should be dealt with, but the extent to which policies are understood may vary across contexts.

The need to understand globally accepted norms around plagiarism is becoming more relevant to both academics and students in South Asia since the education sector there is rapidly expanding and adopting internationalisation policies (Lyne, 2013; Nauman, 2019). Scholars from 'non-Western' countries may be less familiar with accepted norms relating to plagiarism, and international journals' implicit understandings regarding plagiarism could be opaque to researchers from the Global South. South Asian students also travel abroad for postgraduate study and must understand the plagiarism policies and practices of their host countries. In view of increasing internationalisation in HE, it is important to understand how the HE sector in South Asia understands and deals with plagiarism.

Several studies have identified a lack of understanding of plagiarism in South Asia. Kodikara and Kumara's (2015) study in Sri Lanka and Ramzan et al.'s (2012) study in Pakistan showed that students lack sufficient understanding of their institutional plagiarism policy. In Bangladesh, studies by Ashikuzzaman et al. (2018) and Ramzan et al. (2012), revealed that students did not understand plagiarism. Furthermore, a survey of five Sri Lankan universities found that none provided instruction on avoiding plagiarism (Ranaweera, 2011). Sharma (2007) reported that students in Nepali HE plagiarised even though they accepted that plagiarism was academic misconduct. Overall, the literature suggests that students in South Asian HE lack adequate understanding of plagiarism and how to avoid it.

Most students and academics in South Asia use English as a second/foreign language, which may mean that they have limited linguistic or discoursal repertoires, which may in turn make plagiarism more likely when they are under pressure to write in English. Ahmad, Mansourizadeh and Ai (2012) note that plagiarism is more prevalent when extra effort must be put into paraphrasing/summarising content in a second/foreign language. Thus, those studying in the English medium may need more guidance on avoiding plagiarism. Nevertheless, few studies have investigated the extent to which students in higher education in South Asia understand how to avoid plagiarism and we found none that compare the understandings of plagiarism of students, subject lecturers, and English language teachers. Considering the internationalisation of South Asia's HE sector, it is important to understand how students, their subject lecturers, and English language teachers in this region understand and deal with plagiarism. Thus, this study used questionnaires and interviews to investigate how plagiarism is understood by these three stakeholder groups. We also examined publicly available policies on plagiarism on institutional websites to analyse how plagiarism is understood in higher education in South Asia.

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is avoidance of plagiarism in writing perceived as important by three stakeholder groups (students, subject lecturers, and English language teachers) in HE in South Asia?

RQ2: To what extent do the three stakeholder groups in HE in South Asia understand their institutional policies on plagiarism?

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Context

We collected data from 14 universities in four countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This includes a private university in Bangladesh, a state university in Nepal, two private universities in Pakistan, and seven state, two private and one partially state-funded hybrid university in Sri Lanka, selected based on their willingness to participate. We contacted 17 universities in the four countries, starting with those in which we had professional contacts, then contacted the deans of those who agreed to participate to arrange campus visits to collect data. All 14 participating universities offer courses through EMI, with English being the only medium of instruction in most cases. The authors visited Sri Lanka in 2019 to collect data, and local research assistants collected data in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan.

3.2 Participants

We collected data from three groups of participants: students, subject lecturers, and English language teachers. 'Subject lecturer' refers to lecturers who taught disciplinary subjects such as engineering, business, law, etc., through the medium of English. English language teachers were employed directly by the university to teach English as a foreign language and were generally based in an English language teaching unit within the university. As illustrated in Table 1, 1575 student participants, 86 subject lecturers, and 108 English language teachers participated. Among the students, 28 in Bangladesh, 70 in Nepal, 32 in Pakistan, and 29 in Sri Lanka were postgraduate students, and the rest were undergraduates. Participants were from subject disciplines including medicine, engineering, computer science, business studies, accounting, law, allied health sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities.

3.3 Data collection methods

3.3.1 Questionnaires

Three questionnaires were used to collect data: one for students, one for subject lecturers, and one for English language teachers. This study investigated several aspects related to

Table 1. Number of participants

	Students		English language teachers		Subject lecturers	
Country	Questionnaire	Individual interview/ Focus groups	Questionnaire	Individual interview/ Focus group	Questionnaire	Individual interview/ Focus group
Sri Lanka	921	85 (F19, I2)	23	35 (F4, I14)	10	38 (F8, I9)
Nepal	234	7 (F)	6	4 (F)	11	3 (F)
Pakistan	180	8 (F)	7	6 (F)	10	2 (I)
Bangladesh	134	6 (F)	24	3 (F)	8	4 (F)
Total	1469	106	60	48	39	47
Total	1575		108		86	

academic writing including plagiarism, critical thinking, referencing, and using source materials. However, in this article, we only present data relating to plagiarism. In the student questionnaire, the relevant questions (five of 33 questions in the whole questionnaire) investigated their understanding of plagiarism and related institutional policy/practices. Both English teacher (six of 42 questions) and subject lecturer (nine of 56 questions) questionnaire questions focused on respondents' perception of how important it is for their students to understand plagiarism and their own understanding of institutional policy and practices related to plagiarism (see supplementary online materials). The three questionnaires were piloted in Sri Lanka with 25 students, seven English language teachers and five subject lecturers. As a result of the pilot, we amended the wording of some questions to make them easier to understand.

Questionnaires are subject to social desirability bias, where respondents may report what they believe to be preferred answers in order to manage the impression they give of themselves (Larson, 2019). In this case, students may have provided over-confident answers about their knowledge of plagiarism. Pecorari and Petrić (2014) have noted that respondents may be prone to under- or over-report certain practices relating to plagiarism or may not understand terms like 'plagiarism'. For these reasons, we asked similar questions in different ways in the questionnaire and triangulated the questionnaire data by conducting interviews/focus groups. These provided an opportunity to verify questionnaire responses by asking students to explain how they understood plagiarism.

3.3.2 Interviews

Focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted with all three participant groups. Table 1 shows the number of focus group and individual interview participants. Across the four countries, 106 students, 48 English language teachers, and 47 subject lecturers took part in the focus groups/individual interviews. The focus groups lasted between 15 and 60 min, while individual interviews lasted from 10 to 20 min. The focus groups and individual interviews focused on a range of issues relating to English language teaching and learning, but for the purpose of this article, we present data only relating to issues around plagiarism, which were elicited by approx. 8 of the 14–22 questions asked in the interviews (see supplementary online material for interview schedules).

3.3.3 Policy analysis

We searched the websites of the 14 universities to analyse any publicly available policy statements relating to plagiarism.

3.4 Procedure

The three questionnaires were distributed as both paper and online versions. The online versions were advertised within university networks through research assistants and paper versions were distributed via English language teaching units. After questionnaire responses were collected, the research assistants in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan conducted focus groups and individual interviews. In Sri Lanka, the authors conducted the

focus groups and individual interviews. Identical interview schedules were used in the four countries.

3.5 Ethical approval

We obtained ethics approval from the University of Central Lancashire and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

3.6 Data analysis

During data screening, incomplete questionnaire responses were discarded (31 student, 11 English teacher and 14 subject lecturer responses). Table 1 includes the number of questionnaire responses included in the analysis. Due to various types of questions and varying numbers of responses to the questionnaires, we have reported percentages in all questionnaire items.

We analysed all qualitative data, including open-ended questions in the questionnaires, focus group/individual interview responses, classroom observation data and document analysis findings, using NVivo (version 11). A broadly thematic analysis approach (Bryman, 2012) was applied, and themes relating to understandings of plagiarism and the policies and procedures around this were derived using an inductive method of coding. We compared these themes within the data from the three participant groups (English language teachers, students, and subject lecturers).

4. Results

4.1 Findings relating to university staff

4.1.1 Attitudes towards plagiarism

Several questionnaire items asked university staff about the extent to which they felt it important for their students to learn how to avoid plagiarism and, if so, why. English language teachers and subject lecturers in the four countries were in broad agreement that students needed to learn this, with a large majority responding that it was *very important* (89% of English language teachers in the four countries) or that students needed to learn about plagiarism *to a greater extent* (77% of subject lecturers in the four countries) (see country-wise results in Figures 1 and 2). The most common reasons were that plagiarism is an exam offence, that work produced should be original, that academic integrity should be maintained, and that avoiding plagiarism is a norm of scientific/academic writing.

4.1.2 Institutional policy on plagiarism

Staff were also asked how seriously plagiarism was taken at institutional or departmental level. Both English language teachers (87% in the four countries) and subject lecturers (81% in the four countries) reported that plagiarism was taken *very seriously* or *fairly seriously* in the questionnaire responses. However, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, some participants in both groups in Sri Lanka indicated that it is *not* treated very seriously. Most English language teachers (78% in the four countries) and subject lecturers (89% in the

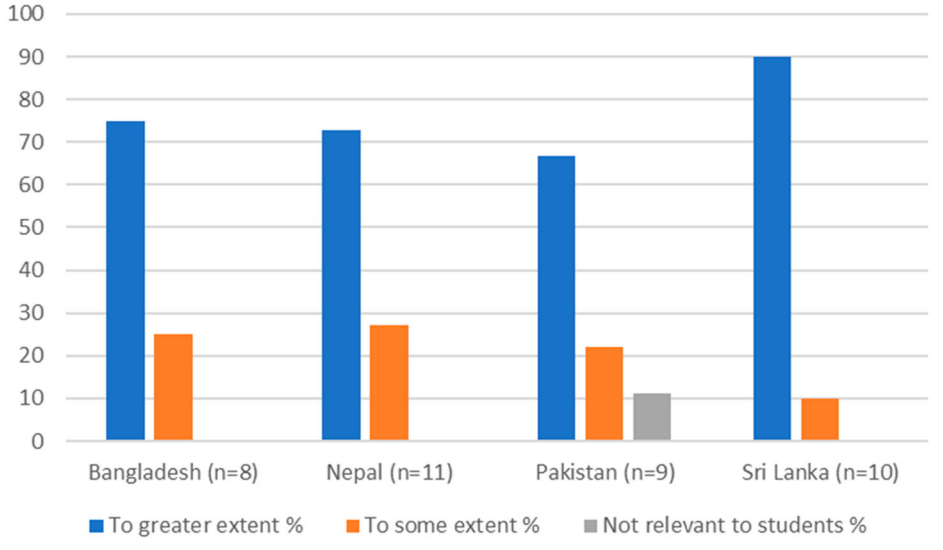

Figure 1. Importance of avoiding plagiarism: Subject lecturer responses in the four countries

four countries) also indicated that if their students copied text without mentioning the source author, this would be considered cheating by their institution (see country-wise results in Figures 5 and 6).

Despite relative certainty among staff in the questionnaire responses that plagiarism was taken seriously, the interview data revealed a lack of clear understanding of institutional policies on plagiarism. For example, in Bangladesh and Nepal, all subject lecturers described their personal approach such as 'I try to … ' rather than a common policy, saying 'there are no hard and fast rules'. In Sri Lanka, staff were more

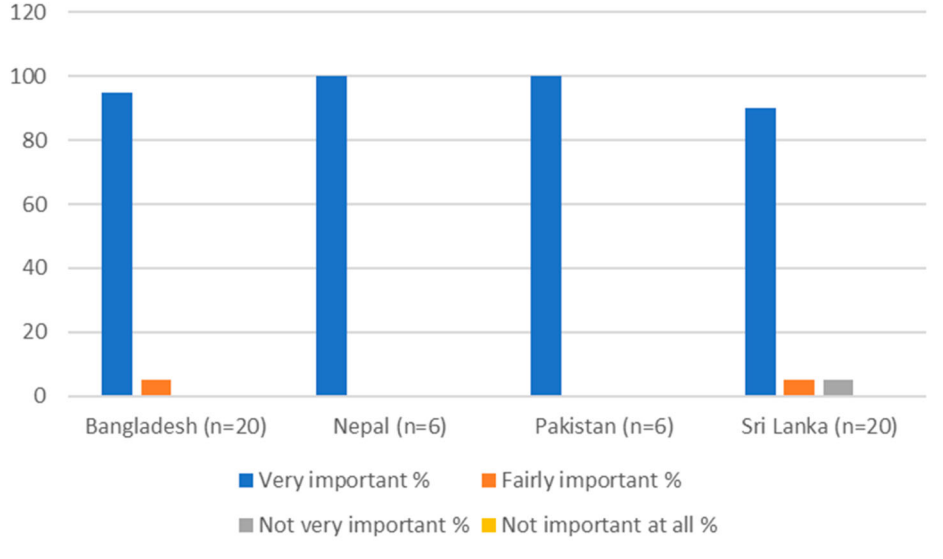

Figure 2. Importance of avoiding plagiarism: English teacher responses in the four countries

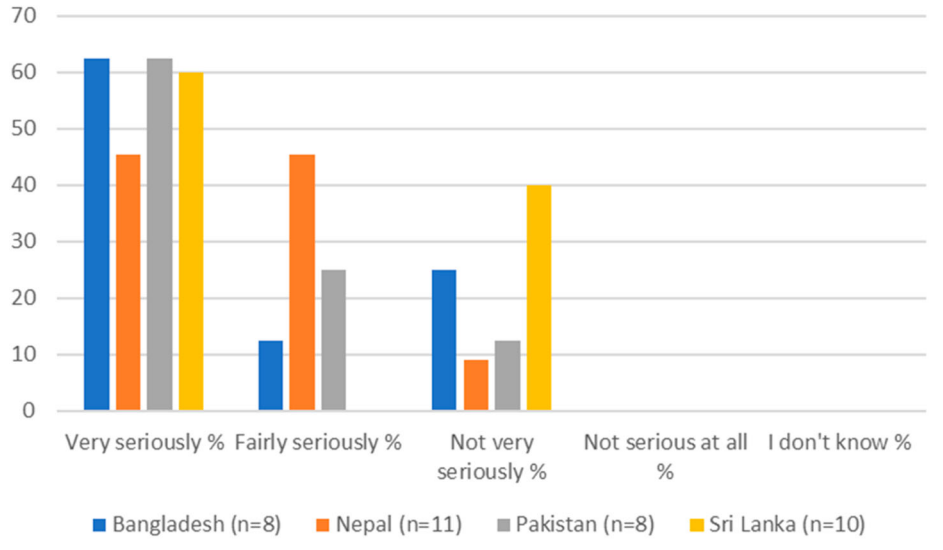

Figure 3. Institutional treatment of plagiarism: Subject lecturer responses in the four countries

confident that there was a policy, often at department level, but their understanding of how this policy worked varied widely. For example, an English language teacher in Sri Lanka commented:

> Teachers are not sure if there is a university-wide policy on plagiarism. I think faculties have their own rules or it's more individual lecturers. [SL][1]

In the interviews, some respondents felt that institutional concern was insufficient and suggested that their guidelines be revised. In Bangladesh, one subject lecturer noted:

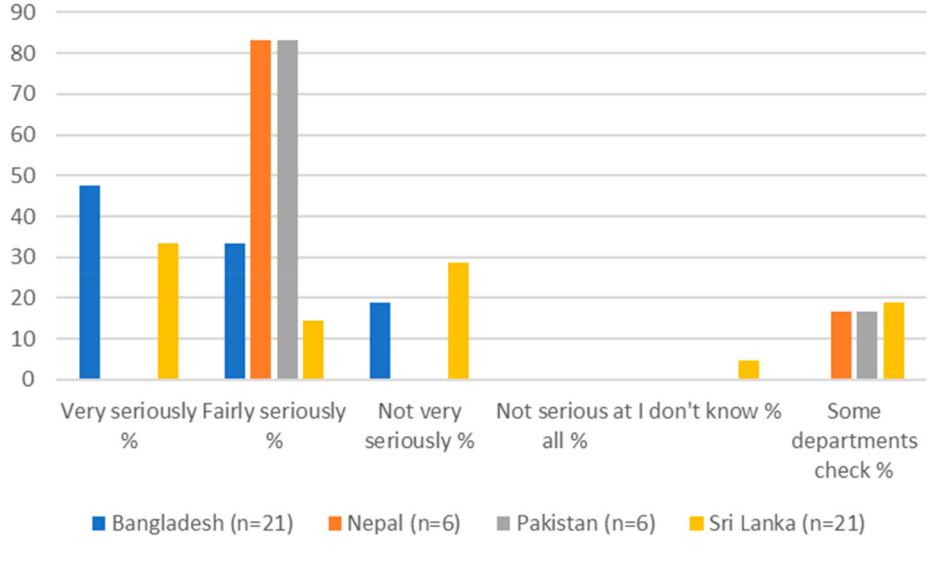

Figure 4. Institutional treatment of plagiarism: English teacher responses in the four countries

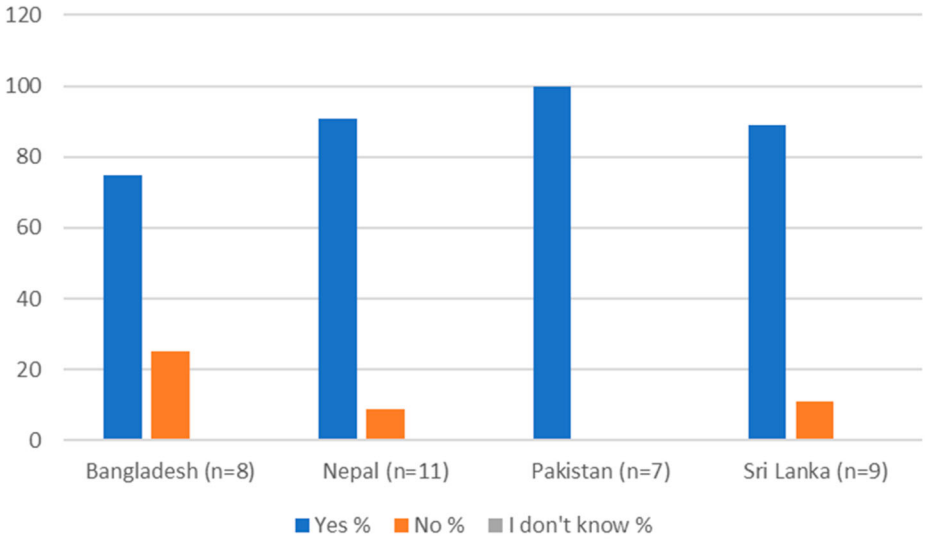

Figure 5. Institutions treating plagiarism as cheating: Subject lecturer responses in the four countries

> The sense of plagiarism has to be developed. For that, environment matters and even we are not putting emphasis on plagiarism or problems with plagiarism. [BD]

In Sri Lanka, one respondent described plagiarism as 'sporadically' dealt with 'at the insistence of the lecturer concerned' and reported that even staff were not held accountable for plagiarism.

Of the 14 participating universities, only five had their plagiarism policy on the public institutional website. The information given for these five universities was very brief, mainly highlighting that plagiarism was considered academic misconduct. Only two

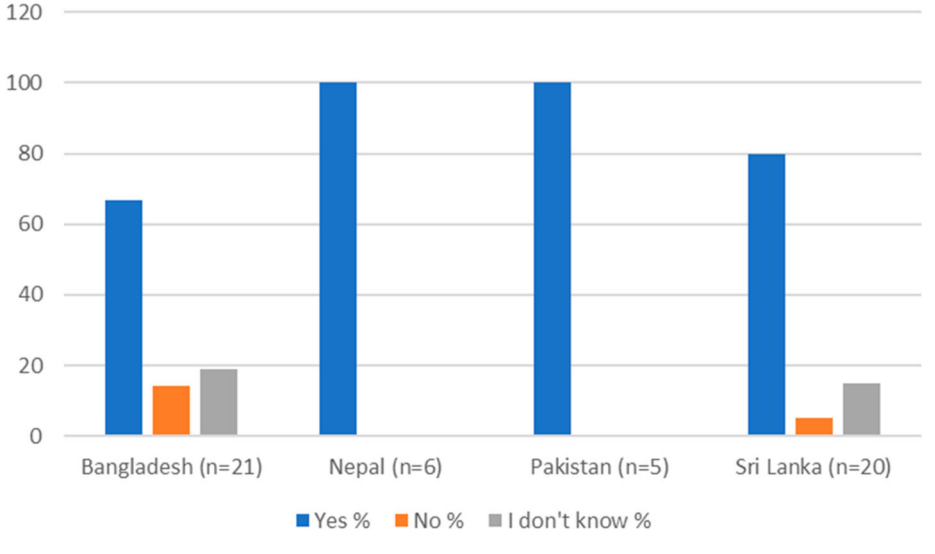

Figure 6. Institutions treating plagiarism as cheating: English teacher responses in the four countries

universities give any information on how plagiarism would be dealt with (e.g., the percentage of marks deducted).

4.1.3 How plagiarism is detected and dealt with

It is unclear how many of the 14 participating institutions used software such as Turnitin to detect plagiarism, or how consistently this was done. Neither English language teachers nor subject lecturers were in agreement about this. In the questionnaire responses, around the same percentage (one fifth) of English language teachers across the four countries thought that text-matching software *was* used as thought it was *not* used. Around 40% believed that some departments used it. The responses of subject lecturers also varied widely. A small majority (57% in the four countries) reported that their own department did *not* use Turnitin, while 37% reported that their department did use it, and the remainder were unsure.

Some differences emerged between countries with regard to the use of text-matching software (see Figures 7 and 8). In Pakistan, all subject lecturers and in Nepal most subject lecturers reported that text-matching software *was* used, while in Sri Lanka all believed that it was *not* used. Among English teachers in Pakistan, most believed that software *was* used, while English teachers in Bangladesh and Nepal believed that some departments used it. In Sri Lanka, most believed that it *was not* used. This may be explained by resource constraints. The participating Pakistani universities were both privately funded, while those in Sri Lanka were mainly state-funded, and the former are more likely to have the financial resources to pay for Turnitin licences.

Where text-matching software was used, staff reported in the interviews that they would allow a certain similarity percentage, but the amount varied widely from 10% to 60%. In Pakistan, one respondent mentioned that 'plagiarism of 19% or below' was accepted and another told us, 'anything which is not within the required range of

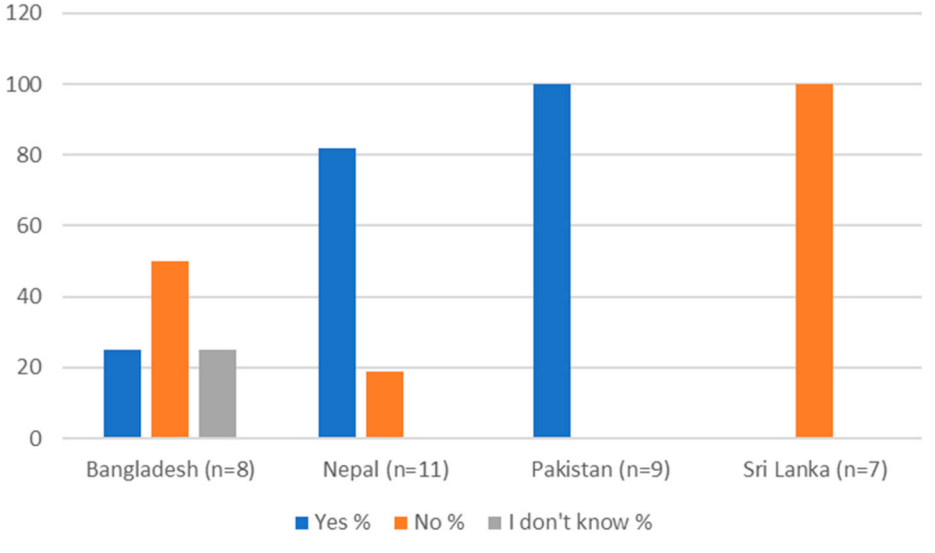

Figure 7. Institutional use of text-matching software to detect plagiarism: Subject lecturer responses in the four countries

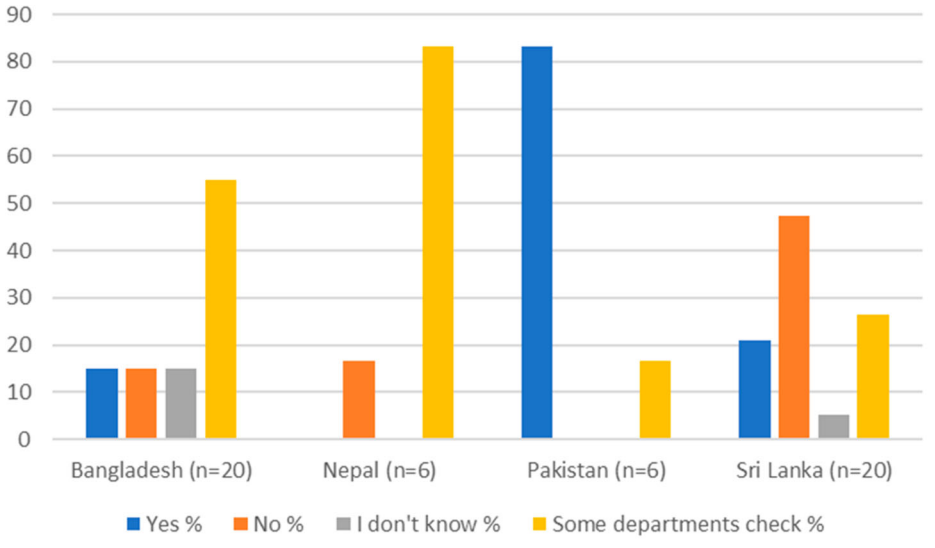

Figure 8. Institutional use of text-matching software to detect plagiarism: English teacher responses in the four countries

HEC [Higher Education Commission] is not accepted'. It is, however, unclear what is meant by 'the required range'.

All subject lecturers interviewed in Bangladesh and Nepal and around half in Sri Lanka reported checking for plagiarism manually as most students submit only hard copies of assignments. Therefore, detecting plagiarism is a subjective and time-consuming process. Lecturers believe they can recognise plagiarised materials but admit that, without software, they may miss cases:

> We don't have software as such. However, when I read I can notice where the plagiarism is, and I can suggest to the students. It's because of the difficulties of the language and all that I think we can easily notice. But if they write something we have never seen it might happen and we would not know. [NP]

We also asked about penalties for plagiarism. If students are caught plagiarising, penalties varied widely, from giving a grade of zero or asking students to redo the assignment, to reducing marks, but there was lack of consistency, which led some subject lecturers to apply their own criteria when deciding how to respond to plagiarism:

> I accept all because I can't do anything else. Even if I give zero, I get questioned because others give marks. I'm not able to do anything. [BD]

4.2 Findings relating to students

4.2.1 Understanding of and attitudes towards plagiarism

To investigate students' attitudes towards plagiarism, it is first necessary to establish whether they understand what plagiarism is. The questionnaire asked students about their understanding of the term 'plagiarism'. More than 75% of students in all four

countries reported knowing 'clearly' what it meant, and a further 10% reporting that they knew it 'to some extent' (Figure 9).

The specific term 'plagiarism' could be unfamiliar to some students, so to gauge whether the notion of acknowledging sources was considered important, in the questionnaire, we asked students if it was important to give the author's name and other information when using sources in their writing. Approx. 91% of students across the four countries responded that it was important (Figure 10). Thus, the questionnaire data revealed that, across all four countries, students reported familiarity with the concept of plagiarism and considered referencing an important aspect of academic practice.

Although the questionnaire indicated that students believe they know what plagiarism means, the qualitative data told a different story, indicating that their understanding of this concept is rather vague. In the interviews, students were asked to say what they understood by 'plagiarism'. In some cases, students did not know this term at all. In all but three cases, however, they had heard of it, but had an incomplete understanding of what it meant. For example, in 14 focus groups and interviews with students, plagiarism was described as 'copying and pasting' and often 'copying from the internet', but some appeared to believe that providing a citation would render this acceptable:

> Of course, we follow APA and it does not let us to copy. We cite. That is what allows us. So we can copy and paste but we must do citation. [NP]

This student did not mention quoting or using quotation marks, even though direct quotation is the only scenario in which copy-pasting would be acceptable, and then only if a citation were provided. In only 9 instances (2 in Pakistan and 7 in Sri Lanka), students mentioned paraphrasing or using their own words, but sometimes believed that this would not require citation. For example, in Sri Lanka, two students who mentioned paraphrasing said that they do not give citations if they paraphrase:

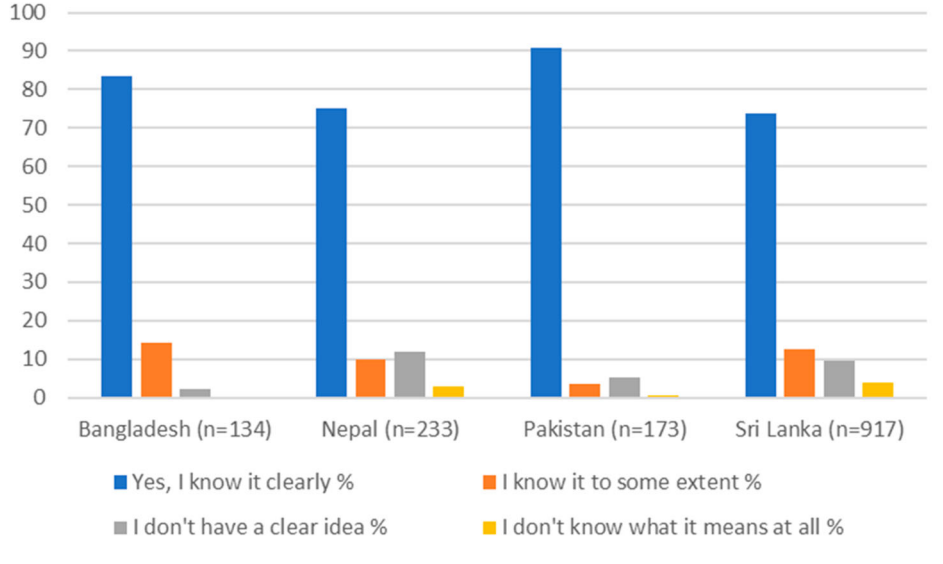

Figure 9. Student awareness of plagiarism in the four countries

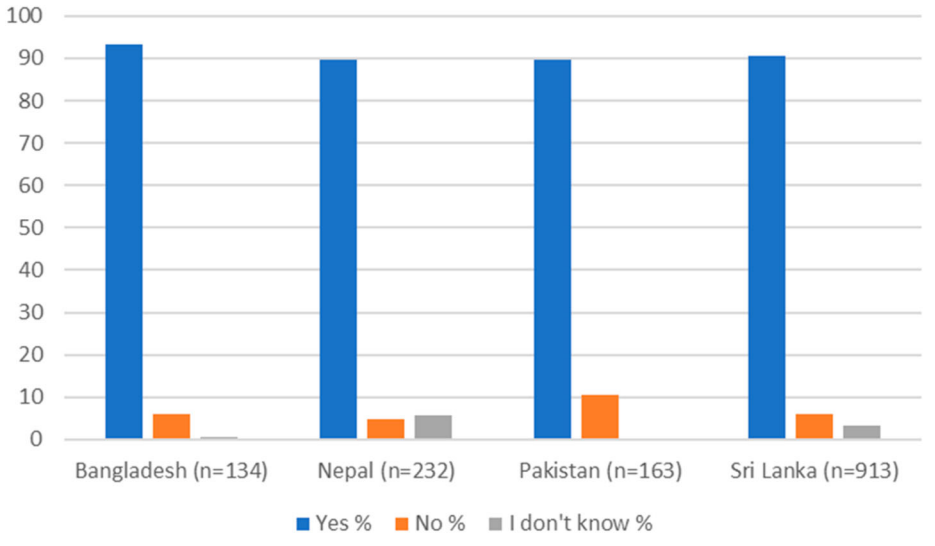

Figure 10. Student understanding of the notion of plagiarism in the four countries

> SS[2]: When we use information from reports that are written on the internet, we write authors' name and edition, names of the books at the end of the report.
>
> I: Do you give any of this information in the text itself?
>
> SS: No not really, only if we quote.

On seven separate occasions, students reported that they created a reference list, but would not do in-text citations unless a specific teacher requested this:

> Mostly we are asked to do references at the end of the report. Some teachers ask us to put something in the sentences, like a reference, but mostly we do that at the end. [SL]

4.2.2 Institutional policy on plagiarism

As well as asking about their own understanding of plagiarism, we also asked students how seriously they thought their university would take such practices. The majority, like their teachers, believed that copying in an assignment without mentioning the source would be considered cheating. Students were less certain than staff about this, with only 66.87% in the four countries responding affirmatively, compared to 78% −89% of staff (Figure 11).

4.2.3 How plagiarism is detected and dealt with

Students were unsure how plagiarism would be detected in their work. The questionnaire data revealed that around 50% of students in the four countries believed that their writing was checked using text-matching software, and another 19% believed that at least some departments checked (Figure 12). Similarly, the qualitative data from students indicate that they are uncertain if their writing is checked for plagiarism, but many of them suspect so. Comments such as, 'Yes, I think they check for plagiarism' were common,

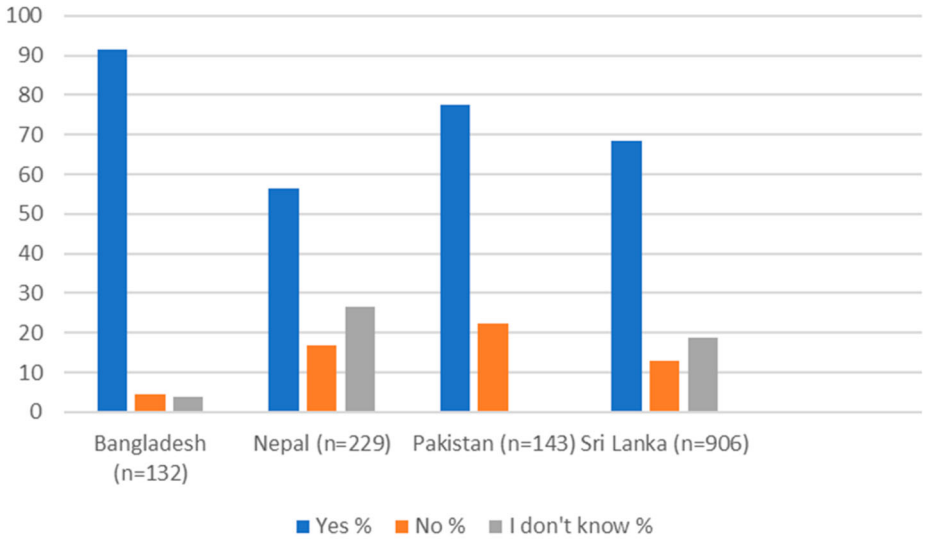

Figure 11. Student understanding of university policy on plagiarism in the four countries

but none described submitting assignments through software such as Turnitin. Generally, where students knew about text-matching software, they believed that the availability of this meant that their work might be checked for plagiarism, but this was not understood to be universally done.

In the interviews we found awareness among students that lecturers' ability to check for plagiarism depended partly on having access to an electronic copy of students' work and having text-matching software. Without this, plagiarism was seen as less likely to be

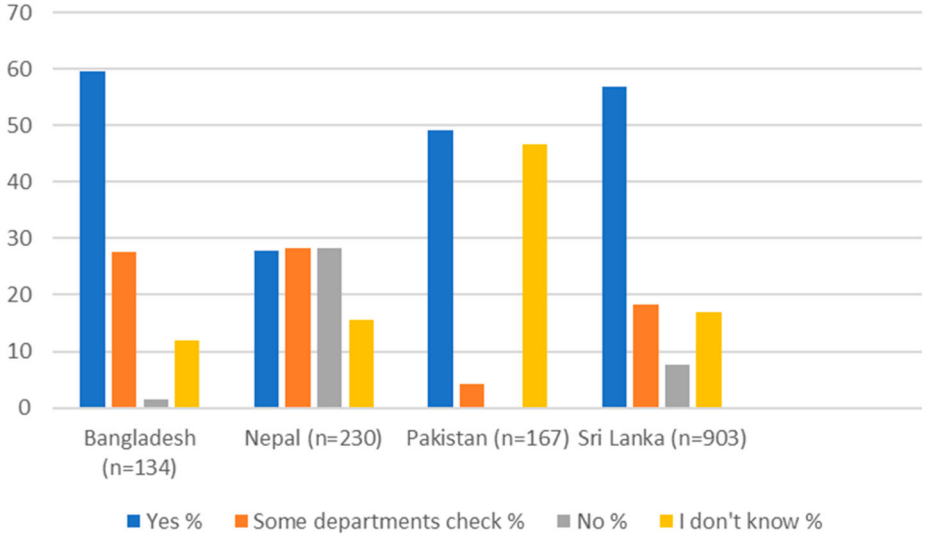

Figure 12. Student awareness if their institutions check their work for plagiarism in the four countries

detected. Students in Pakistan in particular felt that, although software was available in their institution, checking for plagiarism was not done systematically, as the comment below shows:

> Yes, certain teachers have software, in which they check the plagiarism but only in certain courses, not in all. [PK]

As with staff, students were also unsure how similarity reports would be interpreted. In one university in Sri Lanka, in the interviews students told us, variously, that 5%, 10%, 20% and 25% similarity was allowed, while two students believed that 30% similarity was allowed**.** Penalties for plagiarism were also unclear to students:

> I don't think there are strict regulations on plagiarism in our university. Even though there is a requirement, I don't think they will lose our marks for that. [PK]

In general, although it was widely perceived by all three groups of stakeholders (English language teachers, subject lecturers, and students) that plagiarism was unethical and should be avoided, students' knowledge of *how* to avoid it was less complete than they believed. In the questionnaires, students reported clear knowledge of what plagiarism was, but interviews and focus groups revealed their partial understanding. When prompted to talk about plagiarism or explain how they avoided this, gaps in their knowledge were evident.

5. Discussion

All three stakeholder groups across all four countries were in broad agreement that plagiarism was an important issue that students should be educated about. However, both staff and students had limited knowledge of the policies on and consequences of plagiarism at their institutions, and this led to inconsistent treatment of plagiarism, and in some cases, tolerance of copying. These findings echo other studies conducted in Asian contexts. Hu and Sun (2017), for example, found a lack of guidance on plagiarism in eight Chinese universities, and Bowen and Nanni (2021) found unclear treatment of plagiarism at two universities in Thailand.

In the interviews and focus groups, lecturers admitted that without using text-matching software they might miss some cases of plagiarism. Students in Nepal and Pakistan confirmed this, reporting that copy-pasting happened but went undetected. The aim of this study was not to investigate the incidence of plagiarism, but only to examine the conceptual understandings of staff and students. Nevertheless, evidence abounds of uncertainty leading to unintentional plagiarism (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). Lack of clarity and consistency in conceptual understandings should be taken seriously as they may result in poor practices, which in turn may lead to penalties in Anglophone contexts. Questionable practices by students might not be detected in South Asia, but if students study overseas, those same practices could result in serious trouble since the widespread use of electronic submission and text-matching software in Anglophone contexts may identify practices that students had hitherto been unaware were problematic. The understandings and practices revealed in this study therefore risk putting South Asian students travelling abroad for postgraduate study or trying to publish internationally at a disadvantage.

Electronic submissions and the use of text-matching software would bring several benefits in South Asia. First, electronic submission of assignments would facilitate easier checking for chunks of copied text. Many students in this study, as in Bowen and Nanni's (2021) study in Thailand, submitted their work only in hard copy, making it more challenging to detect plagiarism. Second, as well as aiding lecturers in detecting problems, the use of software may assure students that the system is fair, particularly if accompanied by appropriate training. This study found widely differing understandings by both staff and students regarding how software-generated similarity reports should be interpreted. Neither staff nor students in the current study appeared to understand that similarity indexes are only a starting point in understanding how students have used sources. No staff we interviewed mentioned the need to consider the actual content marked as copied. Instead, they appeared to believe that an assignment with a similarity index lower than the given threshold should automatically be accepted, while one higher than the threshold must be plagiarised. This demonstrates lack of understanding of how plagiarism, whether intentional or not, may manifest itself, and how text-matching software is best used. A final advantage of using text-matching software is that it can, if used appropriately, play a role in preventing plagiarism. Consistent use of text-matching software, along with introduction of integrity policies has been found to help to reduce incidences of plagiarism in the Vietnamese context (Do Ba et al., 2017). Furthermore, used formatively, text-matching software can also enable students to see where they are going wrong with referencing and paraphrasing. Davis and Carroll (2009) and Razi (2015) have found that Turnitin can help students in understanding their mistakes with using source material.

Students in the current study had declarative knowledge about plagiarism; most had heard of it and could describe what it was in basic terms. Furthermore, most expressed high levels of confidence about their own knowledge, particularly in the questionnaire data. Most knew that copy-pasting without providing a reference was unacceptable. However, students' comments in interviews and focus groups suggest that despite this, they were not fully aware of what really constitutes plagiarism or how to avoid it. They often described practices that would be considered inappropriate by most international standards. For example, not all students realised that an in-text citation as well as a reference list entry was required, nor that citations were required even when paraphrasing. This finding underlines the need for clearer guidance since practices that could be seen as plagiarism often stem more from lack of understanding than intention to cheat (McCulloch, 2012; Pecorari, 2010). Gullifer and Tyson (2014) and Mahmud et al. (2019) have also emphasised the importance of having clear policies to assist staff and students.

Overall, students in the four countries lack understanding of how to avoid plagiarism, but staff also appear to lack sufficient understanding and this varies across countries. These findings are compatible with those of Pecorari and Shaw (2012) and Shi (2012) who indicate that staff understandings of plagiarism can vary even within one university. Although staff's own practices regarding avoiding plagiarism were beyond the scope of this study, the data on staff responses to detecting and dealing with student plagiarism reveal that they lack the ability to systematically detect it. As well as having serious consequences for students, this may also have implications for staff's ability to contribute to the global research community in terms of their own publications.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms previous findings by Ashikuzzaman et al. (2018), Ramzan et al. (2012) and Ranaweera (2011) that not all students in the South Asian context fully understand the concept of plagiarism or how to avoid it. This is not because the topic is considered unimportant or because plagiarism is seen as acceptable. On the contrary, all three groups of stakeholders reported that avoiding plagiarism was important, and that copying and pasting without appropriate acknowledgement would be considered cheating. In this regard, the views of staff and students are broadly in line with international norms. However, despite knowing that plagiarism should be avoided, the students who participated in this study could be disadvantaged if they wanted to study for a postgraduate degree in Anglophone contexts because their understanding is patchy and some questionable practices are tolerated in the South Asian context which may not be tolerated in the wider international discourse community. Likewise, if participants tried to publish in international journals, they may find themselves in contravention of norms regarding plagiarism.

To comply with international norms in avoiding plagiarism, participating universities could use text-matching software and provide training to staff and students on how to use it. English language courses should provide opportunities for students to discuss examples of source use, including topics such as summarising, paraphrasing, citation and referencing. Clear institutional policies on plagiarism, to be communicated to staff and students, are also needed (Do Ba et al., 2017).

One of the limitations of this study is the uneven number of questionnaire responses we received from the four countries and the relatively low number of staff responses received from all countries. Furthermore, in reporting students' knowledge about plagiarism, we rely on self-reported data since we were not able to collect samples of students' work for analysis. Therefore, we cannot verify the extent to which students were or were not engaging in poor academic practices. Future research could usefully investigate the extent to which practices that could be considered plagiarism actually occur in South Asian students' work, and whether perceptions of poor academic practice in relation to source material are a factor in the low representation of South Asian researchers in international journals.

Notes

1. [NP] – Nepal, the other quotes labelled [BD] – Bangladesh; [PK] – Pakistan; [SL] – Sri Lanka
2. SS – students; I – interviewer

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