UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:
CONSIDERING THE EXTENT OF STUDENT ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

AN EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS BY ERICA J. MORRIS

It is widely established that student academic misconduct is a multifaceted and complex problem requiring a holistic institutional approach that emphasises a teaching and learning perspective (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Bretag et al., 2018; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006; Morris and Carroll, 2016; Morris, 2020).

This evidence synthesis focuses on existing research about the prevalence of student academic misconduct, whether this issue is increasing, and what is known about contract cheating or assignment outsourcing. Companion syntheses on the explanatory factors for academic misconduct and strategies to promote academic integrity can be found at *https://lta.hw.ac.uk/resources/assessment-and-feedback/*

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT THE PREVALENCE OF ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT?

There is widespread recognition that academic misconduct includes a range of student behaviours, from inadvertent plagiarism due to under-developed writing and citation skills, to more serious forms such as impersonation (e.g. where a person takes an exam on behalf of a student) (Birks et al., 2020). Research in the field of academic integrity has investigated the prevalence of student academic misconduct, particularly plagiarism whether inadvertent or not (Adam, 2016) and more recently, focusing on contract cheating[1] or assignment outsourcing (Awdry, 2021; Bretag et al., 2018; Curtis and Clare, 2017; Newton, 2018).

Drawing on a range of studies, Adam (2016) has highlighted the wide variation in the reported prevalence of plagiarism in higher education, from a minority of students (e.g. 2%) to higher proportions (e.g. 63-78%). Typically, prevalence rates have been determined by undertaking surveys that rely on self-report data from students about their behaviours and/or staff about cases they have identified, which can mean that findings have limitations in terms of accuracy. For example, students may not be fully aware of inadvertent plagiarism or find it difficult to be entirely honest about the extent of their unacceptable academic practice, and staff can only report on their own experiences, which may not represent a full picture of the problem (Adam, 2016; de Lima et al., 2021).

Statistical evidence on student academic misconduct has been typically derived from surveys that are conducted in a subject, institutional or national context (Awdry, 2021). However, this can hinder the development of a broader understanding of academic integrity issues across higher education, particularly when differing definitions for forms of academic misconduct are used and survey questions employed across studies differ (Adam, 2016; Awdry, 2021).

In addition to the challenge of relying on student and staff self-reporting, further issues for estimating the extent of student academic misconduct flow from research studies focusing on different kinds of student behaviour and different forms of misconduct. These methodological issues for identifying prevalence mean that depending on, for example, the questions under investigation and the context of the research (e.g. scale of study; global, national or institutional study) prevalence estimates can range from a small minority of students to more significant proportions.

MIGHT ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT BE INCREASING?

In general, there have been concerns that student academic misconduct has been increasing, with a rise in contract cheating in particular (Birks et al., 2020; Newton 2018; Morris, 2018). Debate and discussion in the literature has often focused on possible reasons for this increase and whether this might be explained by a more diverse student body, the widespread use of internet technologies and social media (Adam, 2016; del Mar Pàmies et al., 2020; HEA, 2010; Sutherland-Smith, 2008) and – more recently – how online opportunities, such as essay mills or academic custom writing services are seen as readily available to students (Awdry, 2021; Birks et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Lancaster and Clarke, 2016; Morris, 2018).

Over the last decade, however, there has been a growing awareness of the different forms of academic misconduct. There has also been a greater emphasis placed on institutions identifying, reporting and monitoring cases, along with reviewing and improving academic integrity policy and evaluating its implementation (Bretag and Mahmud, 2016; Morris and Carroll, 2016). It could be, therefore, that one of the explanations for an increase in academic misconduct is that cases are being identified and reported when they would not have been previously; research involving interviews with

staff in Australia, New Zealand and the UK has found: 'many participants have seen greater evidence of the problem in recent years ... this increase may be the result of improved vigilance' (Birks et al., 2020, p. 4).

Institutions have also considered how different types of assessment might be used to mitigate the likelihood of student academic misconduct, such that invigilated exams are perceived as an effective mechanism in preventing plagiarism or contract cheating. However, there is evidence that with such high stakes summative assessment, students will engage in other forms of academic misconduct, such as using smart watches or notes (Birks et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2020).

It is likely that student academic misconduct has been increasing over recent years, but that perceptions of increased prevalence may be due in part to enhanced awareness of academic integrity issues in higher education, along with more systematic reporting and management of cases.

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT STUDENTS' SHARING AND OUTSOURCING BEHAVIOURS?

A recent large-scale institutional survey in the USA explored several dimensions of academic integrity, including students' views of cheating behaviours, and asked students about academic integrity breaches they had engaged in during their studies (Harris et al., 2020). Here, it was found that amongst undergraduate respondents the most-reported cheating behaviours were:

- 'paraphrasing or copying a few sentences from any source without references' (22%),

- 'working on an assignment with others when the instructor asked for individual work' (11%),

- 'using any unauthorised material to assist in completing a test, examination or other course assignment' (12%).

This study also found that only 3% of students reported 'turning in work done by someone else', along with 3% 'turning in a paper or other material you purchased or obtained'. These findings echo work focused on identifying the proportion of students engaging in contract cheating, establishing that a minority of students engage in this form of academic misconduct, with estimates ranging from 2.2% (Bretag et al., 2018) to 3.5% (Curtis and Clare, 2017; Newton, 2018). Through an extensive survey of students in Australia, Bretag and her associates examined a spectrum of seven sharing and cheating behaviours that students engage in (Bretag et al., 2018) finding that:

- 15.3% reported 'buying, selling or trading notes'

- 27.2% reported 'provided assignment (for any reason)'

- 2.2% reported 'obtaining a completed assignment to submit as one's own'

- 3.1% had 'provided exam assistance'.

Students' sharing and outsourcing behaviours have been investigated further through a global survey involving respondents from 54 countries (Awdry, 2021). This research considered the range of methods students might use in formal outsourcing (e.g. essay mills, bespoke writing services, peer-sharing sites) and informal outsourcing of assignments (e.g. from peers, friends or family members). It is recognised that peer-sharing sites are used by some students to make their own work available to others in exchange for downloading materials, such as notes or assignments (Awdry, 2021). The survey considered the modes relevant to the outsourcing

opportunity (e.g. paid for or for free) and the way in which students made use of the work completed for them (including for reference only or submission as their own assignment). It was found that the highest proportion of formal outsourcing was in the use of peer-sharing sites (4.5%), with 3.3% of students reporting the use of essay mills and 2.1% the use of bespoke sites.

Overall, a higher proportion of students indicated that they had made use of *informal* outsourcing (12%) involving a friend or family member completing their assignment (11.2%) or another student (2.1%). Students, however, did not necessarily submit outsourced work as their own: for example, for those where another student completed their work, 41% edited this before submitting and 22% reported using it as reference only (Awdry, 2021).

It is clear from research that academic misconduct encompasses a complex range of behaviours and that the term 'assignment outsourcing' would more accurately capture the different possibilities than 'contract cheating':

> *'Assignment outsourcing can be defined as the act of a student obtaining their assignment (by request) whether or not for academic gain, from another party. This is applicable irrespective of the method, mode or purpose of the outsourcing and is relevant for assignments in any format'*
>
> **(Awdry, 2021, p. 231)**

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES IN USING TEXT-MATCHING TOOLS?

Technology in the form of text-matching tools, such as *Turnitin*, have become widely used within higher education institutions to aid in the identification of possible incidences of plagiarism and collusion (Birks et al., 2020; Morris, 2016). There are universities and colleges that also arrange and enable students to use such tools for formative purposes, so that they can develop their skills in using and presenting reference sources in their work. However, staff sometimes raise concerns that such an approach may lead to students tending to 'check' their draft assignment as a way of 'avoiding detection for plagiarism' rather than focusing on authoring an assignment with integrity through good academic practice (Birks et al., 2020, p. 4). There are also concerns that students are making inappropriate use of applications:

> *'students are known to take existing work and "spin" it through paraphrasing or translation software, or insert white characters … in a document to fool plagiarism detection software'*
>
> **(Birks et al., 2020, p. 6)**

A heightened concern arising in the use of text-matching tools is that they can be ineffective in relation to identifying whether an assignment has been outsourced (Morris, 2020). In particular, a purchased custom written assignment (or indeed, one written by a friend or family member) may not include copied material and will not necessarily be picked up as a potential case of academic misconduct by using the text-matching tool (Lines, 2016; Medway et al., 2018).

Although text-matching technology is widely adopted across higher education as a preventive measure for academic misconduct and to assist in the identification of possible cases, there are limitations in relation to identifying whether a student may have submitted work that has been written by a third-party. Consideration should, therefore, be given to how tools, such as *Turnitin* might be effectively used as part of pedagogical interventions to support students' assessment and academic literacies.

Conclusions

Establishing reliable estimates of the extent of student academic misconduct is complicated by the need to rely on self-report survey studies, which involve limitations. Recent work that has focused on the prevalence of students' outsourcing behaviours indicates that a relatively low proportion of students engage in *formal* assignment outsourcing. However, findings from a global survey indicate that a proportion of 12% of students can be involved in *informal* outsourcing involving a friend, family member or another student to complete their assignment (Awdry, 2021).

There have been concerns that student academic misconduct is increasing, but this perceived increase may in part be due to more awareness of the issue and developments in institutional academic integrity policy, ensuring that more cases are identified and documented. There has been wide adoption of text-matching tools to help identify plagiarism and collusion, but there is a growing recognition that additional strategies are required to gather supporting evidence for other forms of academic misconduct, particularly assignment outsourcing.

In response to the pandemic in 2020, institutions have made significant changes to how teaching, learning and assessment is delivered (Curtis et al., 2021; Pitt, 2021):

'This rapid switch to more online forms of practice had far-reaching implications for educators as they had to negotiate logistical, quality assurance and practical assessment and feedback issues'
(Pitt, 2021, p. 5)

These implications include academic integrity concerns (Curtis et al., 2021), particularly the possibility of student academic misconduct relating to online assessment (Reedy et al., 2021). This issue is considered further in the evidence synthesis on *Strategies and interventions in higher education*.

KEY POINTS

- Estimates of the prevalence of student academic misconduct range from a relatively low proportion of students (e.g. 2%) to higher proportions (e.g. 78%), depending on the context and scale of the research study and the form of academic misconduct considered.

- There are methodological challenges in accurately assessing the prevalence of academic misconduct, particularly with the need to rely on self-report data from students and/or staff about cases identified.

- The perceived or evidenced increases in the prevalence of academic misconduct may be partly due to more attention being paid to the issue over recent years, as well as in advances in identifying and reporting of cases within higher education institutions.

- Survey work has found that more students report engaging in *informal* assignment outsourcing (e.g. a family member completing an assignment for the student) than *formal* assignment outsourcing (e.g. purchasing an assignment from a bespoke writing service) (Awdry, 2021).

- Text-matching software is widely used to help identify possible cases of plagiarism or collusion, but such applications have limitations in relation to identifying whether a student has submitted work written by a third-party.

This synthesis has considered evidence on the extent of student academic misconduct. Companion syntheses on the explanatory factors for academic misconduct and strategies to promote academic integrity can be found at **https://lta.hw.ac.uk/resources/assessment-and-feedback/**

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[1]'Contract cheating happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted' (QAA, 2020, p. 3).

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