UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: EXPLORING EXPLANATORY FACTORS 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 looks at existing research about the factors that help explain student academic misconduct. Companion syntheses on the prevalence of academic misconduct and strategies to promote academic integrity can be found at https://lta.hw.ac.uk/resources/assessment-and-feedback/

It has been proposed that the problem of academic misconduct should be seen as multidimensional, involving aspects that are 'internal, organisational, institutional, and societal' (Bertram Gallant, 2008, p. 47). It is recognised that institutional approaches committed to academic integrity principles should be informed by evidence and developed in response to current concerns, and therefore reflect what is known about the many factors that contribute to student academic misconduct (Brimble, 2016; Morris, 2016; Tremayne and Curtis, 2021):

> '*there are a variety of motivations that may drive student behaviour resulting in a complex web of situational, behavioural, and contextual issues that educators and education managers need to understand in order to put strategies in place*'
>
> **(Brimble, 2016, p. 367)**

Research has looked at the role of individual factors, such as: students' understanding of plagiarism; students' skills for study and academic writing; and how situational and contextual factors (e.g. students' individual circumstances) can have an influence on student behaviour.

WHICH INDIVIDUAL FACTORS MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT?

It is well recognised that some students, early on in their programme of study, may inadvertently plagiarise in an assessment because they have under-developed academic literacies and skills (Adam, 2016; del Mar Pàmies et al., 2020; Morris, 2016; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). These include the skills and practices needed for: reading complex texts; effective time management, so that assignments can be effectively prepared and submitted to deadlines; and academic writing. For example, a student may copy text from an online source and not be clear about how to appropriately cite and make use

of this in their work, or they may not have kept thorough notes on what they have read, and when pushed for time, fail to reference particular sources. It is also established that learning to write for academic purposes should be seen as a practice that is developed, and not just about students acquiring skills in citation and referencing:

> '*Navigating the mystifying labyrinth of academic writing takes time, constant practice and knowledge of writing skills*'
>
> **(Sutherland-Smith, 2008, p. 97)**

Accordingly, institutional responses to concerns over plagiarism have focused on interventions that help ensure that students gain an understanding of how to effectively evaluate and use digital and print resources, and develop academic writing practices relevant to their subject or discipline (Morris, 2016). In addition, institutional policy is often designed to recognise that minor forms of plagiarism (e.g. where a student uses a small amount of copied and uncited material) are addressed by a penalty that is reflective of an educational response – rather than a disciplinary or punitive response – with the requirement that a student participates in academic skills workshops or tutorials (HEA, 2010, 2011).

Although the development of academic and assessment literacies is crucial, it is also clear that students need to understand what constitutes unacceptable practices, such as plagiarism. Tremayne and Curtis (2021) investigated student perceptions of the seriousness of plagiarism and their understanding of this issue, through a survey that involved considering different forms of plagiarism as illustrated by scenarios. Students were asked to self-report whether they had engaged in any of the forms of plagiarism, and whether each scenario represented a form of cheating, as well as rating how serious they judged each example. This research found significant links between student perspectives and reported plagiarism, such that 'those who understood plagiarism

and perceived it as more serious, engaged in less plagiarism behaviour' (Tremayne and Curtis, 2021, p. 214).

A similar finding has been obtained from a survey that included questions about whether the student respondents had been involved in plagiarism (by selecting from a list of different types) and the perceived seriousness of different forms of academic misconduct. Here, it was found that respondents who rated academic misconduct practices as more serious were less likely to self-report engaging in plagiarism (de Lima et al., 2021).

Tremayne and Curtis (2021) also assessed the influence of individual factors, finding that students were less likely to report engaging in plagiarism if they had more self-control and greater self-imposed pressure to gain high grades, and that these were stronger predictor variables, compared to student perceptions of the seriousness of plagiarism and understanding of this issue. Building student understanding of the seriousness of different forms of academic misconduct is key, but there is clearly a need for innovative interventions focused on addressing the role of self-control as an individual factor (Tremayne and Curtis, 2021).

There has been a recent focus on whether certain factors may be related to students' tendency to share or outsource their assignments. Through a qualitative study, involving interviewees in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, Birks and her colleagues have highlighted staff perspectives that contract cheating is apparent across a diverse range of students, but that 'international students' are seen as more likely to make use of third-party services for their assessments (Birks et al., 2020). Survey work has identified that cheating behaviours are linked to LOTE status in students (speaking a Language Other than English at home) (Bretag et al., 2018).

A variety of factors may influence whether a student engages in unacceptable academic practice or other forms of academic misconduct, such as assignment outsourcing: these factors include their understanding of plagiarism and skills for good academic practice, LOTE status, and how serious they consider academic misconduct.

WHICH SITUATIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS ARE PERTINENT?

In general, there is concern that students studying in higher education can be under pressure, may be experiencing stress or mental health issues, and/or have a number of competing priorities, including paid work or family commitments, and that these factors can have implications for study practices or increase the likelihood that a student may engage in outsourcing their assignment (Birks et al., 2020; Brimble, 2016; de Lima et al., 2021; Eaton et al., 2019). Essentially, under pressure to complete assignments, students may take short cuts or make poor decisions to meet deadlines. Staff have expressed concerns that some students arrange for family members to write their assignments: 'a blurring of the lines was seen between providing reasonable assistance, such as tutoring, and having "unfair help"' (Birks et al., 2020, p. 8). In recent perspectives, the student can be considered as 'vulnerable' who, in dealing with difficulties, may involve a third party to create an assignment (Rowland et al., 2018).

There is a growing recognition that students may share their work with their friends, which may include trading notes or providing completed assignments (Bretag et al., 2018; Eaton, et al., 2019). Students may offer their work, wishing to help, but not necessarily expecting that their friend will submit the assignment as their own (Eaton et al., 2019):

It remains unclear whether students are altruistically providing ... assignments to others ... to assist with their learning, to serve as a "model" for comparison, or recklessly providing their work ... knowing ... that the assignment will be submitted'

(Bretag et al., 2018, p. 12)

Academic integrity research designed to shed light on the reasons for student academic misconduct has tended to focus on generic or cross-disciplinary issues. However, depending on the programme, departmental, institutional or national context, there is likely to be variation in academic integrity issues across different subject and disciplines, as well as subject-specific issues. Qualitative findings on staff perceptions have indicated that there are disciplines that are seen as more likely to have cases of student academic misconduct, with staff perspectives in the UK referring to business, economics, maths, science and engineering (Birks et al., 2020). Clearly, guidance for students on good academic practice should be relevant and tailored to the subject:

'what are the accepted conventions that relate to academic integrity, to common knowledge, and to drawing on, analysing, and synthesising forms of evidence?'

(Morris, 2016, p. 1041)

Academic and teaching staff have, of course, a vital role in promoting academic integrity, including enacting policy and following institutional procedures to address student academic misconduct. Research has shown, however, that there is variation in staff understanding of academic integrity issues and differences in how staff may engage in the issues, including whether they decide to report potential cases (Morris and Carroll, 2016). For example, they may think that formal reporting of a minor form of plagiarism is unnecessary, reasoning that a student will learn to appropriately use and cite sources through more practise. This approach may, in turn, have an impact on students' understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and their skills for academic writing, as they may not learn what is required in their work regarding assessment standards. del Mar Pàmies and associates (2020) draw on studies to highlight the importance of preventive actions relevant to staff: developing their own awareness and understanding of plagiarism; redesigning assignments to comprise of stages, so that the process of learning can be assessed; and ensuring that their students have opportunities to enhance their writing skills.

Through comprehensive surveys involving students and staff, Bretag and her colleagues have also explored whether particular contextual factors are related to the likelihood of students' sharing or outsourcing their work (Bretag et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2018). These researchers have emphasised that institutions should focus on enhancing key aspects of the teaching and learning environment for students, fostering strong partnerships amongst educators and students as it has been found that 'dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment' and the student view 'that there are lots of opportunities to cheat in subjects' were significant contributory factors to student outsourcing behaviours (Bretag et al., 2018, p. 14).

Situational and contextual factors may well influence the possibility that some students under pressure may engage in unacceptable academic practice or make poor decisions and share or outsource their assignment. Institutional research and evaluation of academic integrity policy and practice, and its impact, can help determine possible patterns of academic misconduct in relation to student groups, subjects or programmes.

KEY POINTS

- The reasons for student academic misconduct are varied and complex, and include individual, situational and contextual factors.

- Individual factors contributing to academic misconduct include insufficient appreciation of the importance of academic integrity values, under-developed writing skills, and students not fully understanding what constitutes acceptable academic behaviours and practices.

- Situational and contextual factors contributing to academic misconduct include stress and mental health issues, subject or discipline of study, and dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment.

Conclusions

It is well recognised that academic integrity issues and student academic misconduct may arise as a result of a complex interplay between individual, situational and contextual factors. It is vital that students are supported throughout their experiences in higher education to develop their academic literacies and understand the importance of practices derived from the principles of academic integrity. An understanding of why students engage in plagiarism, collusion or assignment outsourcing is essential in determining appropriate strategies as part of a holistic institutional approach. These strategies should be informed by evidence and developed in response to current and institutional concerns.

This synthesis has considered evidence about the factors that help explain student academic misconduct. Companion syntheses on the extent of 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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