

## VIEWS OF ACADEMICS ON ACADEMIC IMPROPRIETY: WORK IN PROGRESS

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**Abstract:** *As part of an ongoing investigation into levels of cheating amongst university students, the authors have surveyed the opinion of university lecturers on various practices that may be considered academic impropriety. This paper presents some of the early results of this "Work In Progress". The intermediate findings of the work indicate that there is still much work to be undertaken to identify exactly what constitutes unacceptable academic practices. Furthermore, there is a lot of work to educate academics on current definitions of academic impropriety.*

**Keywords:** *Academic impropriety, academic staff, opinions.*

### INTRODUCTION

All forms of academic impropriety are areas of growing importance within Higher Education Institutions internationally. The present study forms part of a large-scale survey aiming to address the prevalence of a range of forms of academic practice in universities. The present article addresses lecturer's views regarding: the acceptability of a range of academic practices; whether such practices provide students with an unfair advantage; and, university policies and processes.

There is a growing body of evidence that University students do 'cheat', that is, engage in academic practices considered improper by the University [1]. There is also considerable belief (for example, [2]), and some empirical evidence ([3] & [4]) that such cheating is on the increase. Of all the practices of academic impropriety, the one that causes most puzzlement amongst students is plagiarism, since they are often confused as to what does and does not constitute plagiarism. Thus, a clear definition of plagiarism is extremely important to have: an appropriate source is the Oxford English Dictionary which states:

*"To take and use as one's own the thoughts, writings or inventions of another" (OED)*

Some key features of the definition are: (a) it is not just "borrowing" someone else's work, but also "pass it off" as one's own; and (b) it is not limited to textual material, but any 'works' including music, art, diagrams, design, software code, and so on. The definition also covers close paraphrasing as well as verbatim copying. One would expect that University lecturers would not be subject to this confusion, however the authors' informal discussions with colleagues would suggest otherwise. Furthermore, there appears to be little published material addressing this issue. This provided the rationale behind this work.

### QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The three page questionnaire designed asked staff for their views on a set of statements. The first page provided a list of practices which might be considered as forms of cheating, with respondents answering Yes, No or Unsure. The second page addressed whether the aforementioned practices provided students with an unfair advantage over their peers, with response choices of Yes, Sometimes, Unsure and No. The final page dealt with broader issues such as beliefs, policies and procedures, with respondents selecting from a five point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Strongly Disagree, Disagree).

The staff sampled came from departments of Electrical Engineering and Psychology at a UK university.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As with many institutions across the world, universities in the United Kingdom have published regulations on assessment, stating practices that are deemed unacceptable at that particular campus. While each university has its own unique criteria, analysis of the regulations shows certain common themes. The most regular unacceptable academic practices are listed in Table 1. This listing provides an interesting base-line against which the following results can be contrasted.

**Table 1 Practices Deemed to Constitute Cheating (Taken from [5]).**

<p>Plagiarism: <i>A student incorporates another person's or body's work by unacknowledged quotation, paraphrase, imitation or other device in any work submitted for assessment in a way that suggests that it is the student's original work</i></p> <p>Collusion: <i>The collaboration without official approval between two or more students (or between student[s] and another person[s]) in the presentation of work which is submitted as the work of a single student; or where a student(s) allows or permits their work to be incorporated in, or represented as, the work of another student.</i></p> <p>Falsification: <i>Where the content of any assessed work has been invented or falsely presented by the student as their own work.</i></p> <p>Replication: <i>Where a student submits the same or similar piece of work on more than one occasion for assessment to gain academic credit.</i></p> <p>Taking unauthorized notes or devices into an examination.</p> <p>Obtaining an unauthorized copy of an examination paper.</p> <p>Communicating, or trying to communicate, with another student during an examination.</p> <p>Being a party to impersonation in relation to an examination.</p>
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Table 2 illustrates the percentage of academic staff who consider the particular practices as being academic impropriety: the results are presented in descending order. Table 3 presents staff views on whether a particular practice provides students with an unfair advantage in their assessment. The table shows the percentage of respondents who consider the action definitely provides an advantage or provides some advantage, as well as the percentage who are unsure if any advantage is conferred (for convenience of cross-reference, the results are presented in the item order of Table 2). The views of staff on issues related to academic impropriety, such as university procedures, personal and colleague attitudes, and so on are provided in Table 4 (the results are presented in descending order).

The questionnaire also asked whether staff believed if students cheat, and if so at which level was cheating most prevalent. An unsurprising result was that all staff surveyed considered that students do cheat, and that all levels of undergraduates and postgraduate students were engaging in the activity. Similarly, the first five items in Table 2 are predictable as being cheating. There are certain items whose responses are extremely surprising, if not alarming. For example, only 78.9% of staff believe that "*Copying some sentences out of a text book into an assignment without crediting the source*" is an example of academic impropriety even though it is a perfect example of the definition of plagiarism (given above). Another item is "*Using unauthorised material in an examination*" where 5.3% of respondents were unsure if this provided an unfair advantage. Additionally, the practice of "*Swapping assignments with a friend prior to submission so that you can both improve your marks*" is a clear case of collusion, however only 47.4% of staff consider it cheating. This is defined as 'Collusion' in Table 1.

Careful comparison of the tables highlights some interesting contrasting views, for example some 63.2% of staff consider that “*Taking credit for the work of a group when you have not contributed*” is academic impropriety, while 100% of staff say that the practice confers an unfair advantage. This seems to go against the general list of unacceptable practices given in Table 1, which implies that this action is ‘Falsification’.

**Table 2** Is This Practice Cheating? (% respondents saying Yes)

	<b>% Yes</b>
Copying from another student in an examination	100.0
Making up references to make an assignment look more impressive	100.0
Using unauthorised material in an examination	100.0
Making up some data for a research project	100.0
Cutting and pasting material from an electronic journal into an assignment without crediting the source	100.0
Copying from a friend’s coursework assignment	94.7
Offering incentives to a friend to write an assignment for you	94.7
Asking a graduate friend for feedback on a draft assignment	89.5
Copying material found on the hard drive in the computer room/library into an assignment	89.5
Cutting and pasting material from a website into an assignment without crediting the source	89.5
Using an unauthorised calculator in an examination	88.9
Asking a friend to more or less do a statistical test for you	84.2
Copying parts of a friend’s old assignment into a current assignment	84.2
Copying some sentences out of a journal article into an assignment without crediting the source	84.2
Allowing a friend on your course to read your coursework assignment prior to submission	78.9
Asking your parent(s) to provide feedback on a draft assignment	78.9
Copying some sentences out of a text book into an assignment without crediting the source	78.9
Making up excuses in order to gain a coursework extension	68.4
Making up excuses in order to defer an examination	66.7
Taking unauthorised material into an exam but not using it	63.2
Taking credit for the work of a group when you have not contributed	63.2
Reproducing material from an old assignment and submitting it in a current assignment	57.9
Citing references you have not consulted	57.9
Providing undue assistance to a friend in the production of their coursework	52.6
Swapping assignments with a friend prior to submission so that you can both improve your marks	47.4
Failing to cite references you have consulted	35.3
Mailing an Internet site/discussion forum for help with an assignment	26.3
Knowing that another student has plagiarised and not reporting it.	15.8
Asking a tutor unconnected to the coursework for help with an assignment	11.8
Working with friends to produce an assignment.	10.5
Knowing of collusion between two students but not reporting it	5.3
Seeing another student look at unauthorised material in an exam and not reporting it	5.3

Some of the results shown in Table 4 are of concern, primarily for University administrations. When 22.2% of staff think that “*Cheating is a risk worth taking*”, 31.6% believe that “*Tutors know that cheating goes on but are not motivated to address it*” and an overwhelming 84.2% sense that “*Most plagiarism goes undetected*”, then there must surely be some lack of motivation on the part of academic staff to identify and accuse

cheating students. Furthermore when one considers that “*The University takes little action even when cheating is established*” is believed true for over a third of staff (36.8%) and only 61.1% agree that “*The penalties for plagiarism are serious*”, then there is room for improvement on the part of University administration.

**Table 3** Does This Practice Provide An Unfair Advantage? (% respondents)

	<b>Yes/ Some</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
Copying from another student in an examination	94.7	5.3
Making up references to make an assignment look more impressive	94.7	5.3
Using unauthorised material in an examination	94.7	5.3
Making up some data for a research project	84.2	15.8
Cutting and pasting material from an electronic journal into an assignment without crediting the source	94.4	0.0
Copying from a friend's coursework assignment	89.5	10.5
Offering incentives to a friend to write an assignment for you	89.5	10.5
Asking a graduate friend for feedback on a draft assignment	63.2	10.5
Copying material found on the hard drive in the computer room/library into an assignment	89.5	10.5
Cutting and pasting material from a website into an assignment without crediting the source	84.2	10.5
Using an unauthorised calculator in an examination	89.5	5.3
Asking a friend to more or less do a statistical test for you	94.7	5.3
Copying parts of a friend's old assignment into a current assignment	78.9	15.8
Copying some sentences out of a journal article into an assignment without crediting the source	84.2	10.5
Allowing a friend on your course to read your coursework assignment prior to submission	52.6	10.5
Asking your parent(s) to provide feedback on a draft assignment	36.8	31.6
Copying some sentences out of a text book into an assignment without crediting the source	78.9	10.5
Making up excuses in order to gain a coursework extension	78.9	10.5
Making up excuses in order to defer an examination	78.9	10.5
Taking unauthorised material into an exam but not using it	57.9	21.1
Taking credit for the work of a group when you have not contributed	100.0	0.0
Reproducing material from an old assignment and submitting it in a current assignment	68.4	15.8
Citing references you have not consulted	84.2	15.8
Providing undue assistance to a friend in the production of their coursework	78.9	10.5
Swapping assignments with a friend prior to submission so that you can both improve your marks	57.9	5.3
Failing to cite references you have consulted	57.9	21.1
Mailing an Internet site/discussion forum for help with an assignment	47.4	10.5
Knowing that another student has plagiarised and not reporting it.	27.8	16.7
Asking a tutor unconnected to the coursework for help with an assignment	42.1	31.6
Working with friends to produce an assignment.	52.6	15.8
Knowing of collusion between two students but not reporting it	21.1	26.3
Seeing another student look at unauthorised material in an exam and not reporting it	47.4	5.3

It is interesting to note that there are some practices that staff are not convinced are forms of academic impropriety or provide an unfair advantage, even though they seem to fall within the definitions of Table 1. A typical example of this is “*Asking your parent(s) to provide feedback on a draft assignment*”, which can only be problematic if the parent(s) are specialists in the subject area – which is highly unlikely for the vast majority of students.

**Table 4** Opinions on Issues Related to Academic Impropriety (% Agree)

	%
Tutors give credit for the quality of ideas as much as for writing skills	94.7
Assignments with a high standard of written English get better marks	89.5
Cheating establishes bad habits for the future	89.5
Most plagiarism goes undetected	84.2
Cheating does not help your academic development	77.8
The penalties for plagiarism are serious	61.1
Tutors know how to identify internet sites used by students	61.1
Tutors are not willing to check sources to establish plagiarism	47.4
People who cheat in exams get higher marks	42.1
The University takes little action even when cheating is established	36.8
Taking unauthorised material into an exam is unlikely to improve performance	36.8
Assignments with extensive reference lists get better marks	33.3
Tutors know cheating goes on but are not motivated to address it	31.6
Tutors do not credit sources in their lecture materials	31.6
Cheating is a risk worth taking	22.2
If the data analysis is wrong, the assignment will fail	21.1
It is acceptable to 'recycle' work if tutors cannot be bothered to update assignments	11.1
Material on the web is open access and so you do not have to credit the source	10.5
You have to have a lot of data to produce a satisfactory project report	5.9

## **DISCUSSION**

The results seem to show a discrepancy, in certain areas, between accepted definitions of academic impropriety (such as those provided in Table 1) and the views of some academics (Table 2).

Estimated detection rates are woefully low, around 1.3% and a significant proportion of University academics choose to ignore obvious indications of plagiarism [6]. This is hardly surprising given the resource implications and emotional energy required to pursue suspicions of academic impropriety. Universities might empower academics to work more potently with respect to cheating by focusing on the promotion of academic integrity and clarity of shared values than by focusing on detection and punishment.

University officials have a responsibility to prevent academic impropriety on their campus. The university’s policy on academic impropriety should be specific and direct, should define practices that are considered academic impropriety and should provide a process for handling charges of academic dishonesty/ The university should ensure that the policy is published and available widely to both staff and students. University administrators should support any staff who charge students with violations of the academic impropriety policy. University administrators should educate students on what constitutes dishonest practices, as well as providing sessions for staff to discuss the ways in which students are engaging in academic impropriety.

## CONCLUSIONS

For those academics who are not wholly in favour of identifying and pursuing instances of academic impropriety, Ryan [7] provides a convincing response:

*“Often lost in the discussion of plagiarism is the interest of the students who don’t cheat. They do legitimate research and write their own papers. They work harder (and learn more) than the plagiarists, yet their grades may suffer when their papers are judged and graded against papers that are superior but stolen material. Students have a right to expect fairness in the classroom. When teachers turn a blind eye to plagiarism, it undermines that right and denigrates grades, degrees and even institutions.” (Ryan, 1998, p.1)*

There is still much work to be undertaken in this study: surveying additional staff members, reviewing university staff training, exploration of why some staff have views which seem to be against the grain.

At this stage of the work there are few conclusions that can be drawn. One thing that does stand out is that the views of staff on what constitutes academic impropriety are not consistent and sometimes clearly wrong. Thus, staff need to be educated on academic impropriety, and universities need to clearly define what actions are considered cheating. Further, universities administrators need to provide staff with the incentive to identify possible breaches of academic impropriety, and then follow-up with support during the investigation period.

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