

Understanding and developing implementable best practice in the design of academic integrity policies for international students studying in the UK

University of Warwick with support from University of East Anglia, University of Leicester, Loughborough University



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University



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1. Introduction

The issue of academic malpractice is understood by many names (eg, unfair practice, academic misconduct, academic dishonesty), and encompasses a range of behaviours in which students might engage, such as plagiarism, collusion or disallowed cooperation, and commissioning or 'contract cheating'. Some reports in recent years have drawn attention to the idea that the incidence of such academic malpractice is growing or evolving (eg, Marsh, 2018) and, moreover, that this may be driven by an increasing number of students turning to essay writing companies – particularly amongst international students. Despite several progressive industry recommendations (eg, QAA, 2017), the overarching response to this perceived threat to academic integrity has been to enhance penalties; notably, as far as criminalisation (in Australia).

Increasing penalties to dissuade deliberate misconduct is intuitively accompanied by the increased risk of damage to individuals who engage in malpractice unintentionally. This highlights the importance of ensuring that students understand the parameters of what is acceptable, and what is not.

In the context of academic integrity, much of the mainstream reporting talks about international students, but rarely engages with international students. To redress this imbalance focus groups and surveys were carried out at a number of UK universities, focussing on Business and Economics owing to the incidence of overseas students studying these topics.¹ The findings of this research have provided a clearer picture of students' understanding (or lack of) around academic malpractice and support they have received in this area, with a number of implications for the design of future policy and training.

2. Motivation for research

There is a developing ideological link between the nationality of a student, and their propensity to engage in academic malpractice. Whilst in many cases this link is anecdotal based upon the suppositions of teaching professionals (McKie, 2019), in other cases universities have reported higher instances of misconduct amongst their overseas cohort relative to 'home' students (ibid). Whether this claim is true is somewhat peripheral to the more fundamental question of how universities engage with their overseas cohort and prepare them for the particular requirements of the UK educational system, except, in part, to motivate policy reform.

The publication of such statistics around contract cheating and the link with international students

does, however, promote a particular moral-centric discourse, which is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, it implies a narrative that students who engage in cheating simply suffer some degree of moral shortcoming, or suffer some sort of deficiency in moral development. This approach is evident in policy and research which promotes the idea that students cheat when provided with the opportunity (leading to notions around 'cheat-proofing' assessments (eg, Olt, 2002)), or that cheating simply represents some sort of cost-benefit analysis undertaken by students. This is heavily linked to the expectation that undergraduates possess a uniform and pre-developed moral code and understanding of malpractice in line with some stated (idealised) standard of behaviour (Newton, 2017) – an approach which loads responsibility onto the individual and absolves institutions of their responsibility to provide support and leadership in this issue, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Second, very often the notion of 'cultural difference' is applied as some sort of well-meaning blanket explanation. This is problematic for two reasons:

- i) It supports tropes around the idea of fundamental differences in education and presents a misguided view of what is expected under some educational regimes (the most infamous concept being that East Asian education rewards students for copying) (Mostrous, 2016; Sowden, 2005 and its response in Ha, 2005).
- ii) It promotes and supports the emergence of simplistic and potentially discriminatory stereotypes around students and/or people from particular countries (Ha, 2006).

Third, and linked to the idea of nuanced differences in individuals' academic background, the promotion of unforgiving penalties denies students the experiential learning opportunity associated with experimentation around the boundaries of the expectations in the UK education system (Introna and Hayes, 2007).

Finally, there is the issue of resources. The dominance of policies focussed on detection and punishment of malpractice bears the hallmarks of an 'arms race'. As universities introduce increasingly complex policies and mechanisms for detection of malpractice, so those who deliberately engage in such behaviours turn to more sophisticated methods of deception. Recent calls for the criminalisation of malpractice (Rahim, 2019) represent not only idealised thinking on the matter (one can only imagine the necessary burden of proof), but also simply the next step in an ongoing escalation.

Developing a better understanding of international students' views and experiences of their UK education, and particularly academic integrity, will provide evidence to support the introduction by universities of more nuanced policies which, while maintaining an appropriate capacity for penalisation (where appropriate), support the ongoing needs of overseas students who are adapting to a new education system.

3. Summary of research outcomes

This study used both focus groups and surveys to try to gain an understanding of student understanding and attitudes toward both academic misconduct and associated support; detail on these approaches is outlined in the following section.

Whilst the two approaches were designed to elicit slightly different information, they yielded similar results in that students (both home and overseas), overall, are hungry for more support in terms of their understanding of the specifics of malpractice, and also in terms of developing the necessary academic skills to avoid inadvertent misconduct.

The survey results suggested that relatively few students consider that the engagement with unfair practices, particularly collusion and plagiarism, to be the product of a desire to cheat, or dishonesty – notably amongst international students. Only in terms of commissioning and exam-based misconduct was the finding of dishonesty more crystallised, especially amongst home students where over 50% considered that these practices were the product of an overt desire to cheat.

These findings around plagiarism and collusion were also reflected when talking face-to-face with students in focus groups. In the context of these types of malpractice, most participants exhibited a degree of anxiety around what constituted misconduct, the boundaries of such behaviour, and the risks of being incorrectly accused. Many pinpointed what they perceived to be a shortfall in training, or that the training they had received had been ineffective.

Overall, contrary to many narratives around academic malpractice and those students who engage in it, participants in this study did not view cheating students as inherently dishonest. On the contrary, students expressed concerns about their own knowledge around misconduct, and saw their own anxieties in others who might engage in misconduct.

Section six of this report proposes several relatively easily implementable policies which universities can pursue, based around some of the key outcomes

from the survey and focus groups, and also presents several avenues for further research.

4. Research methodology

Working with three other UK universities², this research project took two main approaches to its research: an anonymous survey administered during one or more lectures at each partner institution, and focus groups which were carried out on site. Given the nature of the subject matter, anonymity was prioritised throughout avenues of study. This section outlines the objectives and methods of each approach, details of measures which were put in place to protect participants, and an explanation of how the approaches complement each other.

In total, seven focus groups were carried out at the various participating institutions, with between one and three taking place at any given location (based around the ease of recruitment of students). At each university, an email advertising the research was circulated, prompting students to contact the organiser (Dr Tim Burnett) directly, which resulted in the recruitment of around eight students per group with each student compensated for their time with a £20 Amazon voucher.

Throughout the entire process, multiple measures were put in place to safeguard the anonymity of participants. These included the protection of students' identities from their own institution, the use of pseudonyms in the focus group itself, and the absence of direct references to particular universities in the results in the following section. The original experimental design aimed to recruit groups consisting solely of either overseas students or home students. The rationale for this approach was twofold:

- Segregating students according to their status provided the opportunity to elicit potentially nuanced differences in tone or content of responses.
- Several questions within the focus group asked students to comment on their interactions with home students (for international students), and vice versa for home students. It was considered that mixing the profiles of the groups may have impacted on the candour with which students were willing to answer, especially if responses were negative.

Ultimately, there were three groups, each of which consisted solely of international or home students, with one mixed group.

Within each group students were engaged in a conversation regarding a number of issues including their general university experience, their interactions with students of different nationalities, their

confidence in a range of academic skills, and, crucially, their knowledge and understanding of academic misconduct.

In order to develop an environment of trust, students were repeatedly encouraged to confer with each other, and sessions were designed such that confidence was built up by discussing quite general topics around university experience, which progressively became more specific and focussed on the core topic of malpractice. Crucially, to avoid jeopardising accumulated trust, participants were not asked directly whether they had engaged in any sort of misconduct. Instead, students were encouraged to be honest in their responses, and inferences from their experiences would be drawn more generally from their responses to the range of questions posed for discussion.

Throughout the focus groups, after asking initial broad questions, the interviewer was conscientious about not introducing bias or guiding the conversation beyond asking questions such as “thank you, that was an interesting point; does anyone else have a similar experience or a different one”, or “did anyone want to say something about this ...?”.

The complete focus group script can be found in Appendix 1 in the online version of this report.

The second strand to the research concerned the completion of a short anonymous survey by students at each participating university; a task designed to take no more than five to 10 minutes. In order to maximise the response rate this was implemented during lecture time, under supervision³. Like the previous approach, anonymity and trust were paramount, and no information was collected which could positively identify respondents.

Each participating institution was asked to nominate one or more large lectures at which the regular lecturer was willing to give up lecture time to allow the completion of the questionnaire. In the specified class the project was introduced by the researcher and students were asked to log onto an online survey (optimised for either computer, tablet, or phone access) and fill out the questionnaire either before, in the middle, or at the end of the lecture (according to the preferences of the lecturer).

Unlike the focus group, which aimed to tease out potentially fairly nuanced information, this exercise was premised on being completely anonymous and did ask students directly about engagement in academic misconduct. One key issue with this approach is that, common with survey methodologies, self-reported measures of misconduct might underestimate true levels. To

remedy this (as can be observed in Appendix 2), the survey asked respondents whether they or *anyone they knew* had engaged in behaviours; this was designed to elicit the idea that students may be reticent to admit malpractice themselves, but more willing to report on others.

Other questions in the survey asked respondents why they felt students engaged in particular types of misconduct, about academic support they had received (either compulsorily or voluntarily), and what academic support they feel would help them improve their understanding of academic malpractice and policies around the topic.

The full survey can be found in Appendix 2 in the online version of this report.

5. Key research findings

This section first introduces the empirical results of the survey, before reporting on the highlights of the focus group discussions.

5.1 Survey results

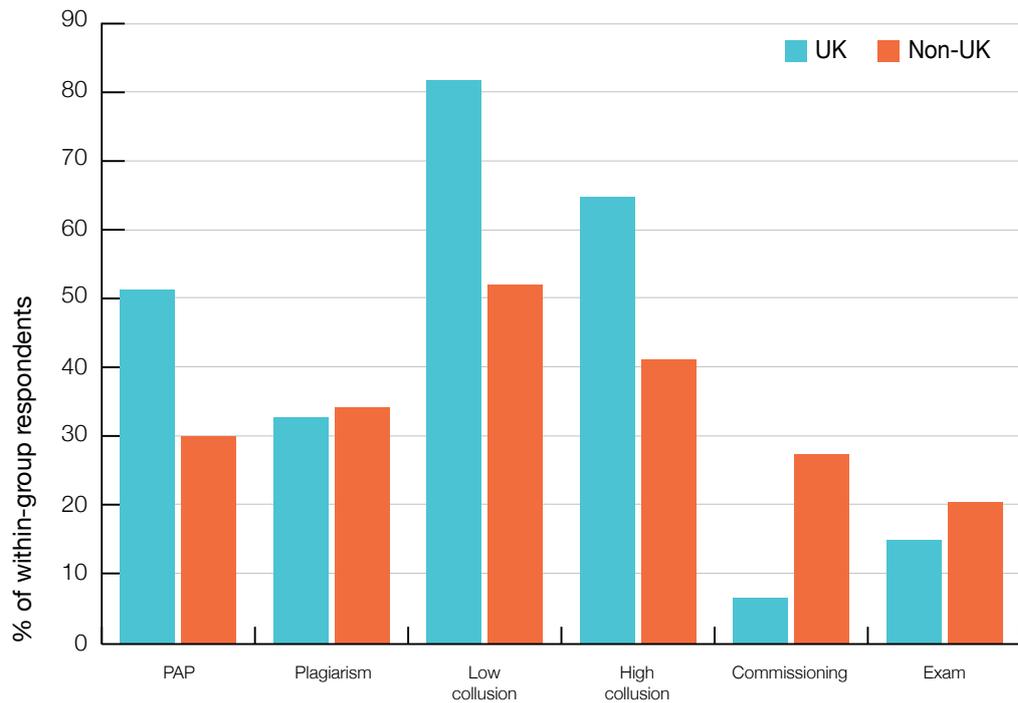
The various surveys resulted in a dataset of 192 individuals, of whom 119 declared they were from the UK, with 73 declaring themselves non-UK. The survey resulted in a very rich dataset which offers insight into a range of issues around conduct, attitudes, and provision of, and engagement with, academic support.

This section reports on a selection of salient headline results from the dataset. The reported findings steer clear of attempting to draw causal inference from any of the results, but instead focus on broader patterns in the data, specifically any distinctions which emerge between home and overseas students.

5.1.1 Engagement with academic malpractice

One pervasive idea with respect to academic misconduct concerns the likelihood of overseas students engaging in malpractice, relative to their domestic counterparts. Figure 1, below, reports the proportion of home and overseas students who reported *either* engaging in malpractice, *or* knew someone who had, whether detected or undetected. Results are reported in terms of the proportion of students within each group (home and international) providing a positive response to each question.

The results on self-reported conduct must clearly be taken with a pinch of salt for reasons associated with self-reporting, introduced in the previous section. Regardless of any study coordinator’s pleas for honesty, students have little personal incentive to self-confess to engagement in malpractice, nor is it possible to verify results in an

Figure 1 Engagement in misconduct either by students or someone they know (or both).

anonymous setting. The inclusion of questions around the conduct of ‘someone you know’ were designed to try and correct for this. While this might still result in unreliable estimates, the continued study of partial observability in misconduct indicates a lack of consensus on the superiority of any alternative approach.

Notwithstanding, the results do suggest that, contrary to apparent dominant stereotypes, the overall incidence of self-declared misconduct was higher amongst home students than overseas. This was especially true for issues around collusion, and low-level poor academic practice (PAP)⁴. Only for commissioning of academic work and exam-based misconduct was the incidence higher for overseas students.

5.1.2 Why do students engage in academic malpractice?

A second tranche of questions asked respondents why they thought students engaged in the various stated forms of malpractice, providing a list of six possible reasons. Figures 2a and 2b, below, illustrate the distribution of responses, again divided by home and international students. Students were asked to mark all explanations they thought were appropriate to each type of misconduct.

The results demonstrate that, in almost all cases, the perception of students is that ‘laziness’ is associated with almost all forms of misconduct, similarly (to a lesser extent) time management. Interpreting ‘laziness’ is challenging, since the relatively open phrasing of the option means that different students may have interpreted it in their

own way (eg, laziness associated with acquiring knowledge around referencing, or laziness in assessment completion?). Laziness may also represent a manifestation of lack of positive motivation amongst students (Dowson and McInerney, 2003), in which case (much like the present case of academic malpractice), there may be implications for the way universities design teaching and learning activities. The concept of ‘laziness’ is considered in relation to future research.

For low-level offences, all students (home and overseas) ranked a lack of referencing knowledge as a relatively important association; this was similarly extensively reflected in discussions in focus groups, later in this section.

An interesting result from home students (Figure 2a) was the generally low response around ‘desire to cheat’ amongst practices such as plagiarism and low-level collusion, whereas the same students considered that desire to cheat was much higher amongst students who bought essays (commissioning). This suggests a qualitative difference in the way home students view these offences. For overseas students, the association between ‘desire to cheat’ remained low across all type of conduct, notably also for commissioning and exam-based misconduct.

As alluded to earlier, the link between desire to cheat, skills, and misconduct was discussed extensively in the focus groups.

Figure 2a Why do students engage in malpractice? (UK responses)

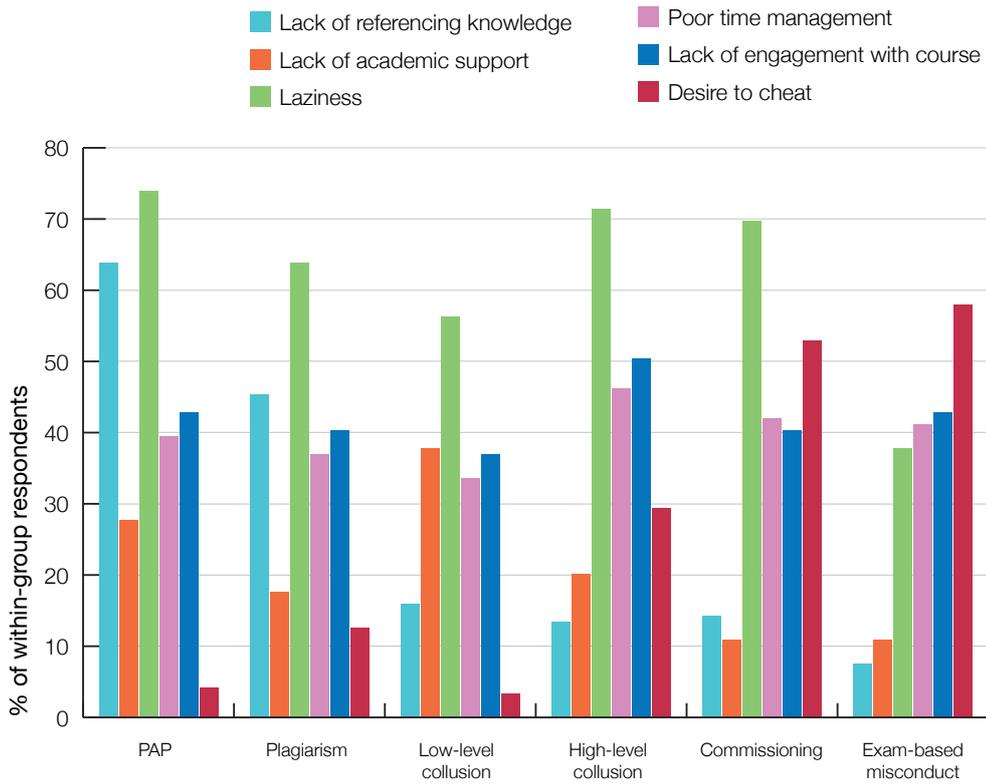
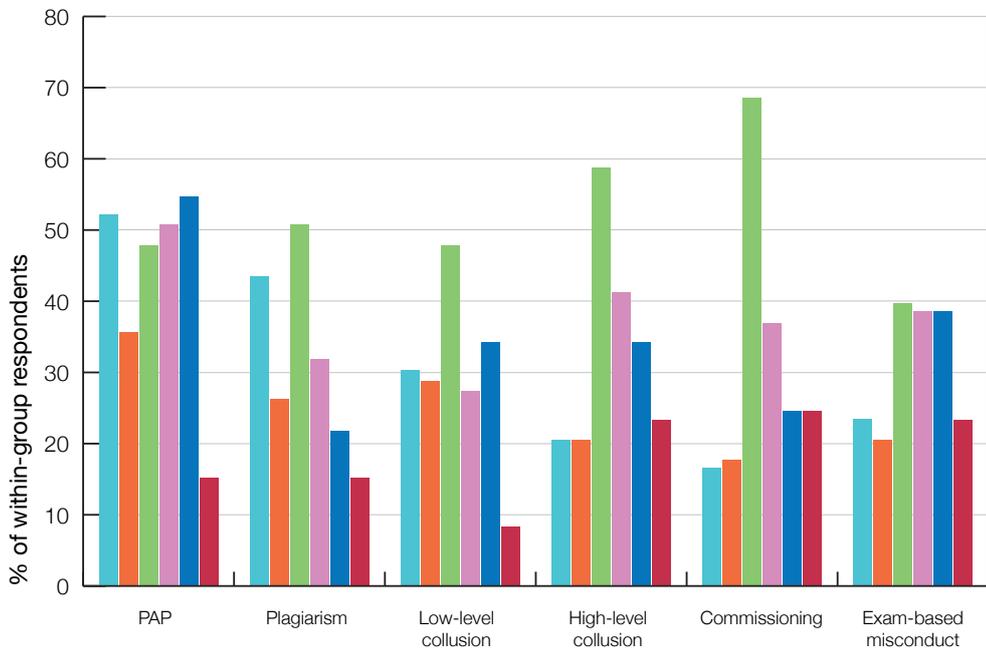


Figure 2b: Why do students engage in malpractice? (Non-UK responses)



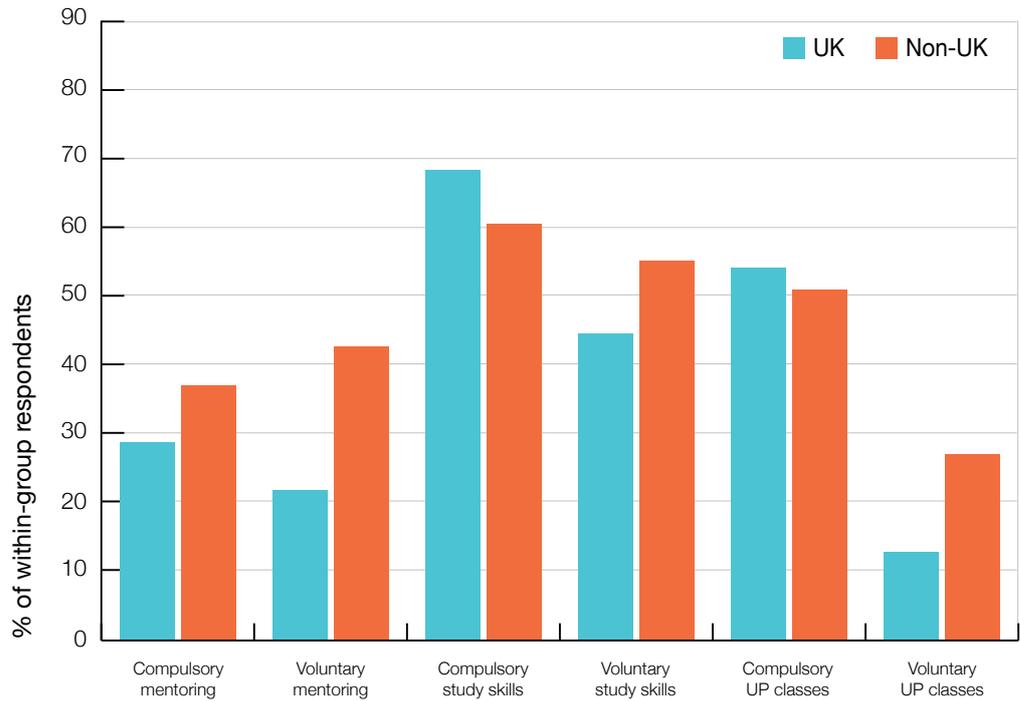
5.1.3 Engagement with support

The results concerning students’ engagement, or desired engagement, with academic support suggested that, at a general level, overseas students share a similar propensity to home students to engage with academic support (in terms of those activities in which they have engaged). Rates of engagement with mentoring (or buddying) was higher for international students, likely as a result of specific targeting programmes.

Similarly overseas students were more likely to engage in voluntary skills classes (both generally and specifically around academic misconduct). Engagement with compulsory training around study skills and malpractice was marginally higher for home students. See Figure 3.

Students were then asked the question “thinking about how universities can encourage good academic practice, which of these do you think

Figure 3 What support have students received?



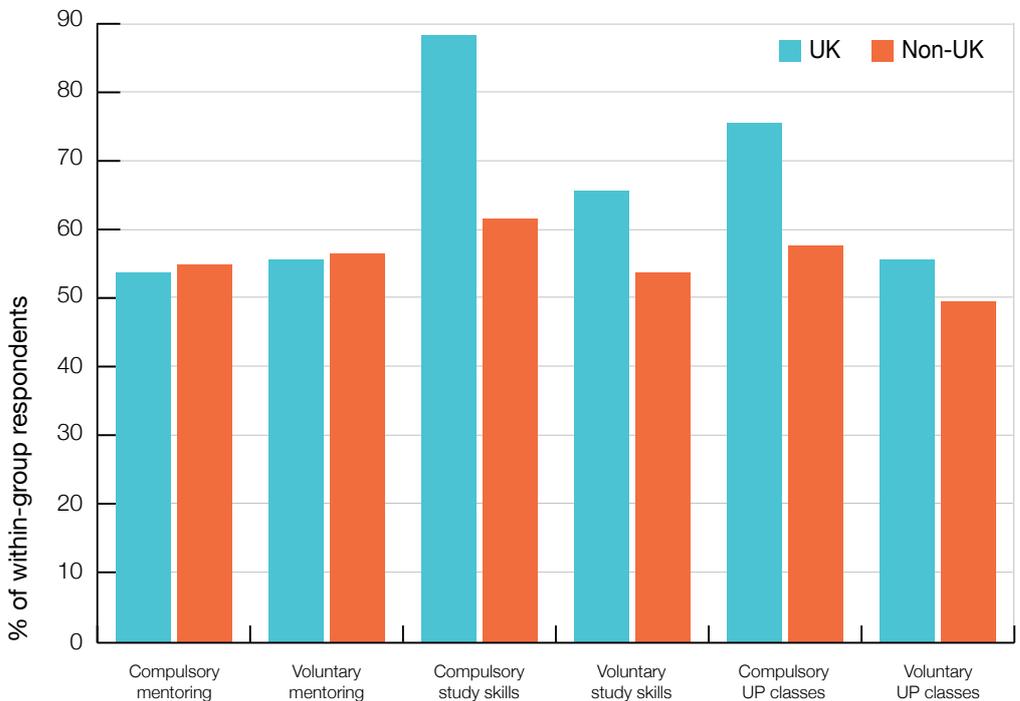
would be effective?”, and offered the same set of academic support opportunities. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 4.

In general, home students were more responsive to the possibilities of the different types of support, though there remained a (very) slight preference for buddying amongst overseas students. The response rates around compulsory classes in study skills and academic misconduct reflected the discussions held in focus groups where, in the smaller setting, students were very forthcoming

about their desire to feel more confident in their ability to avoid inadvertent misconduct. Of all the support types, students were least enthused about the usefulness of mentoring/buddying in education around academic misconduct.

Part of the questions around academic support were optional text entry fields, inviting respondents to comment on the support they had received and support they felt they would benefit from. Many of these text responses around support which had been received aligned with the themes which would

Figure 4 What support would help students understand academic malpractice?



“We always got told things the first few weeks and it never really goes in so when it comes to actually referencing for example I don’t know what I’m doing.”

later be explored in the focus groups, such as referencing education being front-loaded and concentrated in the early weeks of the university experience and issues with limited ongoing support:

“We always got told things the first few weeks and it never really goes in so when it comes to actually referencing for example I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Information about referencing is quite brief leading students to become confused”.

With specific reference to support which students thought would be helpful, students commented on issues such as the need for ongoing support (“[students should have a] small amount of lecture time allocated to academic misconduct explanations. If it was a whole lecture I think it’s unlikely students would attend.”) and an ambivalent attitude toward optional classes (“at uni, I feel people are less likely to attend optional classes so they wouldn’t tend to help” and “optional classes aren’t usually attended by students as they feel like they think it’s not important”). These last comments illuminate the way students see optional classes and their content.

With regard to buddying schemes as a tool to improve knowledge of academic misconduct, students were ambivalent. Some responses in the free text fields were negative (“mentoring isn’t helpful”), while others expressed positive (though qualified) views (“one to one buddying could help a lot of people but it is very time consuming”).

5.1.4 Summary

The survey yielded a number of interesting findings which complemented and supported the results of the focus groups. It demonstrated several nuanced differences between the attitudes of home students and those of overseas, particularly with respect to why people engage in malpractice. The depth of the dataset also means that further analysis may shed light on nuanced, contextual issues which are likely to mean that students’ approaches to malpractice, and their understanding of different terms, are likely to be highly individual and, thus, will reduce the treatment of ‘overseas’ as a uniform block (which can lead to the danger of stereotyping).

5.2 Focus groups

The focus groups took place at University of Leicester, Loughborough University, and University of East Anglia, and were designed to elicit general feelings around university experience, engagement with academic support, and knowledge around unfair practices. The approach was to open with more benign and general topics, before becoming more specific. Because the conversations were quite wide-ranging, this section focusses on key areas of interest.

“Working with international students means working with people with different points of view, and allows you to approach problems from lots of different angles.”

5.2.1 General university experience

There were substantial differences between the declared university experiences of different groups of students at the different universities. Positivity (or otherwise) at this point was generally reflected throughout the remainder of the discussion. For example, students who declared themselves most happy with their general experience also tended to be more satisfied with the levels of academic support they had received. Activities which tended to engender positive emotional responses included well-organised induction weeks, attitudes of staff and ease of accessing support, whereas poor organisation, inattentive staff, and difficulties in accessing services were common in students who held relatively negative views of their experience.

“When it comes to international students they are with us during the induction which lasts a whole week; my first week experience was amazing.”

“The lecturers; it’s always obvious how much they care. They come to the lecture and they have this energy. It really makes it more fun.”

5.2.2 Integration with home/ international students

The discussions around interaction with other students were included in an effort to understand the transfer of academic skills and knowledge between students. In general, most students exhibited positivity to the potential afforded by interactions with overseas students – though students who had a mixed friendship group were relatively rare.

“Working with international students means working with people with different points of view, and allows you to approach problems from lots of different angles.”

Numerous students commented that cementing and solidifying of friendship groups over the course of a degree meant that early interactions were very important, and that this was particularly relevant if overseas students had direct entry into second-year.

Several students highlighted that most of their home/overseas interactions came about through randomly allocated group work and were broadly positive about the experience, but segregation of international students (see below) made this task harder. Of particular interest were several comments that acknowledged that poor integration may impact on knowledge exchange between home and overseas students.

“If you don’t have integration, you’re kind of limiting who [international students] can talk to about things and where you can get knowledge from.”

Segregation of home and international students was seen as universally negative – particularly the segregation of Chinese students through centres such as INTO. Non-Chinese students felt this impacted on their ability to make friends with this group and that it negatively impacted when it came to group work (unfortunately the study was not able to recruit any Chinese students to focus groups, which remains a priority for future research).

“If you’re struggling with a foreign language that you need to speak at the university, and you know all these people that live in the same place as you, speak the same language as you, that there’s the same culture – it’s more likely that students will push toward that and stay inside their comfort zone. That’s how I can see how some students end up a bit cut off.”

Finally, there seemed to be some degree of interaction between the organisation of extra-curricular activities which created mixed groups (such as through organised sports) and general levels of interaction.

“When I was playing sport I’d always be socialising with international students, and now when I see my old sports friends they’re still in the same mixed (home and international) groups.”

5.2.3 Academic skills

Students were asked to rate their knowledge of and competency in a range of academic skills. Almost universally, referencing and citations were an area of concern for students; this included confusion over citation style, limited support classes, poor timetabling of these events (mainly right at the start of the university experience), lack of concrete examples, and inconsistent application of rules around referencing. Common trends included dissatisfaction with centralised provision of support, and most focus groups, irrespective of university, stated that they would prefer regular workshops or assistance organised around their lectures.

Although some students mentioned the idea of having their work proof-read by colleagues, there was limited mention of skills transfer between peers – this may be an area on which to focus more attention in future.

For other academic skills there existed variation between students and/or institutions, though with little pattern.

5.2.4 Academic malpractice

Students exhibited a range of understanding of different forms of academic malpractice. Several common themes and suggestions which emerged included:

- Confusion over the boundary between cooperation and collusion, and the need to clarify this for students.
- Confusion about the difference between plagiarism and paraphrasing in essays, and a general lack of self-confidence in avoiding plagiarism. For both plagiarism and collusion, students felt that the provision of concrete examples would aid their understanding.

“If they were to have examples of essays saying “this is plagiarism”, “this is where it can be a grey area”, and “this isn’t plagiarism” it would definitely be helpful.”

- Students generally felt there was a qualitative difference between commissioning and exam-based misconduct, and plagiarism or collusion – based largely around certainty of intent. Most students expressed a moral objection to the purchasing of essays, stating they would be willing to report this behaviour but were uncertain how to do so. Some students made the suggestion that commissioning of essays could be related to time management.

“I do think some of it is black-and-white, like examination room misconduct. We know this is wrong, but other stuff like collusion and plagiarism has grey areas which need to be explained to us.”

- Specific penalties were often not clear to students. Some students suggested the idea that all assignments might be issued with an information sheet outlining the expectations around conduct, with examples of what constitutes misconduct, and what doesn’t. Participants remarked that they considered overly harsh regimes of penalties as being unfair, being that most felt that students who engaged in misconduct may have done so inadvertently due to a lack of knowledge.

“I think the idea of a cover sheet would be helpful, explaining plagiarism is ‘this’ and ‘that’ and the consequences. But there should be an extensive, well-explained, booklet or something which you can read so you actually understand this stuff for what it actually is because most students don’t actually know what constitutes plagiarism or examples.”

“It’s difficult, there’s so much out there that it’s hard to make your own words a lot of the time. You might get picked up without even realising it – to say you’re not allowed to progress at uni would be really unfair.”

6. Conclusions and reflections on learning points for UK institutions

This study, carried out by the University of Warwick in partnership with three other UK universities², engaged with a range of both home and overseas students regarding their university experience and their knowledge of and attitudes to academic malpractice. Through an online survey and wide-ranging focus group conversations, several key ideas emerged which could be relatively easily integrated into university policies.

6.1 Information for students

Students repeatedly raised the issue of uncertainty around what constituted particular practices. Universities should consider the publication of a student-centric guide to misconduct featuring plain-English explanations, examples of misconduct, and the likely penalties arising from such behaviour. Similarly, terms-of-reference cover sheets for assignments outlining expectations will help reinforce those expectations.

6.2 Training

Participants repeatedly commented that formal face-to-face training tended to be focussed in the early stages of their first year, a period where students have many interests competing for their time. Universities may consider either running multiple workshops throughout the year (around the time of major assignments), or (since students commented that non-credit classes tended to be poorly attended) integrating malpractice education within other modules.

To improve integration of home and international students (as highlighted as a problem area by a number of students) institutions can incorporate malpractice education in assignments. In the interests of sharing best practice, cultural exchange, and understanding the boundaries of conducts characterised as a 'grey area' such as collusion, universities may consider low-stake assignments which involve pairing home and overseas students. Such a strategy can be implemented as a 'repeated game' with increasingly tight criteria.

6.3 Policy

Universities should focus on the rehabilitative aspects of policy and building policy which permits experimentation by students around the boundaries of what is expected of them. Participants in both parts of the study expressed anxiety around inadvertently engaging in malpractice – allowing a forgiving sandbox for experiential learning around misconduct enables students to discover for themselves what is appropriate, and what is not.

6.4 Further research

This study has also opened up further avenues for research including gaining a better understanding of student 'laziness' and motivation, and how to include groups who were not engaged by the present study, for example, Chinese students.

7. Notes

1 HESA report that 37% of students studying Business and Administration (subject area D) come from overseas, with a figure of 36% for Economics (L1), compared to an average across all subjects of 20%.

2 University of East Anglia, University of Leicester, Loughborough University

3 Implementing the survey remotely, via the sharing of an internet link, resulted in zero responses at University of Nottingham.

4 Poor Academic Practice (PAP) was explained to students as "for example, including small amounts of material from other sources without recognition or quotations", a catch-all term to describe very low-level offences which (if discovered) might be expected to result in a warning, rather than more significant disciplinary action.

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11. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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