

## PRAXIS Scholarship Research Full Project Report Form – 1 Year Term

## 1. Project Details

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Project title:** | How can we work with students to promote and develop good academic conduct? | | |
| **Project number:** | **2021/22 08 JM** | | |
| **Project lead name:** | Jackie Musgrave | | |
| **Project start date:** | September 2021 | **Project end date:** | June 2022 |
| **Date of project approval:** | May 2021 | **Date of full project report:** | 27 September 2022 |
| **Final project summary:**  *This should be only 2 or 3 sentences and will be shared on both the PRAXIS internal intranet and external website* | | | |
| Plagiarism remains a significant threat to all HEIs, both nationally and internationally and as Curtis and Tremayne (2019) assert, it is important to continue to prevent and detect plagiarism, as well as continuing the education of students and academics in this endeavour. There is a pressing need to explore this area to identify ways of working with students to promote and develop ‘sound academic conduct. | | | |
| **Research questions:**  *These will be shared on both the PRAXIS internal intranet and external website* | | | |
| 1. What are students’ understanding of the terminology used in relation to academic conduct? 2. What has/does help students to develop ‘good’ academic conduct? 3. What are students’ experiences of being referred for investigation into academic conduct? To include events or circumstances that lead students to plagiarise, either intentionally or unintentionally 4. How can staff and students work together to promote and develop ‘good’ academic conduct?   The findings will contribute to our knowledge of how we support students to develop ‘good’ academic conduct  help us to understand what students’ level of knowledge is about the terminology and processes  shine a light on students’ understanding of the importance of avoiding plagiarism | | | |

## 2. Project Team Details

Please add more members if required.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Project member 1:** | **Full name** | **Role/responsibilities within project** | | |
| Dr Jackie Musgrave | Co-lead – writing reports and making HREC and SRPP application. Analysing data, chair of the student focus group | | |
| **Job title** | **AL?** | **External contractor?** | **No. of research/ study days** |
| Associate Head of School: Learning and Teaching | N | N |  |
| **Project member 2:** | **Full name** | **Role/responsibilities within project** | | |
| Diana Hardie |  | | |
| **Job title** | **AL?** | **External contractor?** | **No. of research/ study days** |
| Curriculum Manager, WELS | N | N |  |
| **Project member 3:** | **Full name** | **Role/responsibilities within project** | | |
| Sadaf Rizvi |  | | |
| **Job title** | **AL?** | **External contractor?** | **No. of research/ study days** |
| Associate Lecturer, wrote the Lit Review | Y | Y | 5 |
|  | Helen Perkins, Associate Lecturer who recruited students | y | y | 2 |

### 

## 4. PRAXIS Funding

## Please complete the below budget detailing your actual project spend.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Resource/number** | **Description** | **Unit cost** | **Number of units** | **Actual spend** |
| **AL support/consultants:** | | | | |
| *e.g.* |  |  | *1* |  |
| 1 | AL to write literature review 5x£157.40=£629.60  +15% |  |  | = £724.04 |
| 2 | AL to contact potential participants in targeted phone calls 2 x £157.40 |  |  | 314.80 |
| 3 |  |  |  |  |
| 4 |  |  |  |  |
| 5 |  |  |  |  |
| **Total project spend:**  *Please calculate the precise total of the above four sections. Do not include the red example costs.* | | | | £1,038.84 |
| **Total project funding amount:** | | | | £1,038.40 |
| **Underspend/overspend:** | | | | £0.00 |

## 5. Declaration and Signatures

Please answer the questions below giving details of activity or why the activity has not yet been completed.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * A presentation has been made at the PRAXIS Festival of Scholarship or alternative internal OU event. | | Not Yet |
| Comment: |  | |
| A project poster has been produced and sent to the PRAXIS team | | Not Yet |
| Comment: |  | |
| The project has been uploaded on the Scholarship Exchange and/or ORO  *This should be within 3 months of the end of the project (full project report submission) or within 3 months of acceptance (other publications e.g. journal papers), in line with REF Open Access Policy* | | Not Yet |
| Comment: |  | |
| Link(s): |  | |

Please tick below to let us know where you are happy for us to share your project.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * I am/We are happy for my project details (including project title, project lead name, summary and research questions) to be shared on the PRAXIS intranet (internal) |  |
| * I am/We are happy for my project details (including project title, project lead name, summary and research questions) to be shared on the PRAXIS website (external) |  |
| * I am/We are happy for the full project report to be shared on the PRAXIS intranet (internal) |  |
| * I am/We are happy for the full project report to be shared on the PRAXIS website (external) |  |
| * I am/We are happy for the project poster to be shared on the PRAXIS intranet (internal) |  |
| * I am/We are happy for the project poster to be shared on the PRAXIS website (external) |  |
| * I/We commit to communicating details of any publications that result from this PRAXIS funded project with PRAXIS |  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Project lead signature: | Project lead name: | Date: |
| \\userdata\documents5\ca3935\Desktop\Jackie.JPG | Jackie Musgrave | 3 October 2022 |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| PRAXIS Director’s signature: | PRAXIS Director’s name: | Date: |
|  |  |  |

**Please return your completed application to WELS-PRAXIS@open.ac.uk.**

**Acknowledgements**

Our grateful thanks to all who contributed to the project. In particular, the students who participated and to Dr Helen Perkins for her contribution in recruiting students.

# **Abstract**

This qualitative study included a survey (completed by 26 students) and a semi-structured interview to explore students’ knowledge and understanding of academic conduct. The findings reveal that students use a range of resources, not just one. The role of their tutor is instrumental in supporting students to develop their academic skills, especially for students with low previous qualifications, and the role is highly valued by students. The findings have implications about the importance of guiding and reminding students about good academic conduct throughout their studies. there are also considerations about staff knowledge and understanding about the difference between poor academic conduct and plagiarism, suggesting that there is a need for a consistent approach to training to develop a shared understanding of the complex issues relating to academic conduct.

**Introduction**

The Open University (OU) invests significant resources into the prevention and identification of plagiarism and the development of ‘good’ academic conduct, an important aspect of assessment and the awarding of credit. However, there is a paucity of research available to enlighten our knowledge about students’ understandings of and motivation to plagiarise. Therefore, this proposed piece of scholarship will explore students’ perceptions and experiences of academic conduct processes at the OU.

This project is important because ensuring academic rigour and upholding standards is a critical aspect of higher education institutions’ academic reputation. To uphold academic rigour and standards and to ensure that students do not gain credit for work that is not their own, it is a requirement that HEIs have policies that support this aim. However, plagiarism remains a significant threat to all HEIs, both nationally and internationally. As Curtis and Tremayne (2019) assert, it is important to continue to prevent and detect plagiarism, as well as continuing the education of students and academics in this endeavour. In the school of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport, (ECYS), each programme has a colleague who is a named Academic Conduct Officer (ACO), this group of colleagues meets regularly to discuss and develop ACO work in the school. We are supported in this work by colleagues in other departments of the OU.

Despite our efforts to promote ‘good’ academic conduct in our students, as well as responding to cases of plagiarism, there continues to be a significant number of students who are referred for investigation following their work having been detected as potentially not their own by plagiarism detection software, or referral from their tutor. The number of cases has increased during the period of lockdown, in particular, the number of cases that have been identified as originating from essay mills has increased. Since 2019, there has been an annual increase in the number of students referred for investigation. In the academic year 2019/20, there were within ECYS, 160 cases were allocated to Academic Conduct Officers to investigate; this increased to 313 in 2020/21 and a further increase to 523 in 2021/22.

The increase is so significant within all HEIs that the QAA urges HEIs to review the options that are available to tackle the threat (QAA 2016), conducting scholarship such as the project proposed here is one option to tackle the problem. In addition, there is an increase in the number of students who are falling foul of software detection because of sharing their work with other students, usually via social media, such as via WhatsApp groups. Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate students’ knowledge and awareness of what can be seen a blurring between collaborative working versus collusion.

The next section reviews literature relevant to academic conduct, it includes sources from peer-reviewed journals, the OU scholarship repository and grey literature.

**Literature review**

Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are perceived as a threat to the academic integrity of students as well of the institutions within which they take place (Hill, Mason and Dunn 2021, Rowland et al., 2018, Lancaster, 2017, McCabe et al., 2012). Much existing literature on academic integrity offences indicates a rise in this practice in the universities across the world (Newton, 2018, Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, Cameron et al., 2012), thus making it a global threat. In a This increase has significantly increased during the pandemic, not just in our own institution, but globally. The shift has promoted the use of diversified types of services, including contract cheating and the use of essay mills services. Research emphasizes the need for universities to find solutions to curb such unethical practices, and to prevent the adverse consequences of academic dishonesty (QAA, 2017).

This literature review explores 3 main themes. First, it discusses the diverse understandings of plagiarism and different forms of academically inappropriate practices observed today. It briefly explores students’ perception of plagiarism and of the institutional processes in relation to academic misconduct. Second, it analyses students’ circumstances that lead them to plagiarise either intentionally or intentionally and highlights the factors that facilitate their engagement in academically dishonest behaviours. This is significant as an understanding of the causes is vital for designing ways to identify and prevent the problem. Third, the literature review explores ways to address this challenge and focuses on how students, staff and universities can work together to promote good academic conduct.

**Terminology and definitions of terms used**

Academic conduct is described using a diverse range of terminology to discuss the phenomenon, depending on its nature and how students engage in academically inappropriate behaviours. Theoretically, the concept of plagiarism is complex and has multiple interpretations. Scollon (1995, cited in Simpson, 2016, p.114) suggests, ‘... *plagiarism is fully embedded within a social, political and cultural matrix that cannot be meaningfully separated from its interpretations’*. Plagiarism at the Open University is described as ‘using the work of others as your own’(QAC 2021, p 6). Other concepts related to academic conduct are ‘contract cheating’, (Walker and Townley, 2012, Rogerson, 2017, Mahmood 2009, Hill et al., 2021), ‘self-plagiarism’ (Hill, Mason and Dunn 2021), ‘use of essay Mills’ (Bartlett, 2009) and ‘Custom essay writing services’ (QAA 2016) are some of the many phrases used in the discourse of academic misconduct. In addition, students share their work through social media, recycle previously submitted work, or ask family members or friends to do their assessments. All these practices are seen as academic integrity offences and place demands on universities to detect and prevent them (QAA 2016). All of the terms are referred to in the OU Academic conduct policy (QAC 2021).

Students my engage in plagiarism unintentionally, without necessarily realizing they are committing an offence. This may happen due to students’ lack of understanding about plagiarism, lack of referencing knowledge (Lofstrom, 2011), poor academic writing skills (Smith et al., 2013) or accidental transgression such as due to poor paraphrasing (Lynch et al., 2021). Further, it involves some effort on part of the students to pull together information from different sources. In contrast, contract cheating means students are consciously contracting out assessment tasks or purchasing them through different sources, such as essay mills or commercial ghost writers. Moreover, it involves no or minimal effort from students to produce the assessment tasks and in most cases involves financial dealings (Ellis, et al., 2018, Bartlett 2009).

Students can have varying interpretations of academic dishonesty based on their identities, cultural differences and world view. The western understandings that consider plagiarism as un-acknowledged or un-authorized use of an author’s ideas as one’s own is not always perceived as plagiarism. For example, Lin and Wen (2006) suggest that some Asian cultures promote learning through memorization, collectiveness and group work. Students from such cultures may find it challenging to consider an un-authorized use of an author’s work as plagiarism. They may also find it difficult to identify themselves as ‘autonomous individuals’ (Scollon 1995), an ideology dominant in the west.

A thin body of literature available on students’ understanding of academic misconduct terminology and processes suggest that students’ knowledge of what constitutes misconduct is not consistent (Baetz, 2011) and varies significantly across contexts. In most cases, students are not aware, wholly or partially, of the penalties involved. The perceived responsibility of reporting or representing academic integrity also varies. Gullifer and Tyson (2010) explored students’ perception of plagiarism in an Australian university through focus groups and found that most participants were confused about what plagiarism encompassed. While the participants exhibited a significant degree of fear for being caught, they compared plagiarism against other criminal activities and perceived it as minor.

Despite the variations in the understandings of plagiarism, there has been a consensus on the idea that academic misconduct of any form and type can have serious implications both for students and the society at large

**Why plagiarism? Students’ motivations and institutional factors**

The reasons why students engage in poor academic conduct are complex. A significant number of studies have been conducted to understand the causes of students’ involvement in plagiarism (Guo, 2011, Gullifer & Tyson, 2010, Bennett 2005; Devlin & Gray, 2007). Social, cultural and financial pressures on students are documented as well-known drivers of plagiarism. The pressure of meeting deadlines and stress experienced due to lack of time (Smith et al., 2013) push students to find quick solutions and short cuts. Teodorescu and Andrei (2009) argue that pressure from peers and families to perform well is a significant factor that lead students to plagiarise. Literature identifies several factors that increase students’ likelihood to plagiarise. This includes age, gender, ethnicity, discipline studied, pressure to get an employment. In addition, studies highlight low motivation (Park et al., 2013), lack of understanding about what plagiarism constitutes (Devlin and Gray 2007). A lack of clear institutional policies concerning academically unethical behaviour and its consequences (Simpson, 2016, Lofstrom, 2011) are other contributing factors. Lack of academic writing skills and an absence of the required academic support to students in expressing ideas is indicated as another contributing factor (DeJager and Brown 2010, Smith et al., 2013, Simpson, 2016). This is particularly seen in the case for students studying in a second language (Ledesma, 2011). Even though such students have a good understanding of the taught content, their lack of skills to conform to the required standards of formal writing lead them to plagiarise (DeJager and Brown 2010).

Students’ values and moral capabilities are considered to have some influence on their academic behaviour (Medway et al., 2018, Guo 2011). Minocha (2021) suggests that the values reflected by parents, families and peers shapes the way students behave academically. McCabe et al. (2012) identify personal and situational factors as well as culture of groups, where dishonesty is common, as reasons of academic misconduct.

Technological developments, increasing strength of commercial writing services and gaps in plagiarism softwares are seen to have an alarming effect on increased academic misconduct (Walker and Townley, 2012, Devore-McDonald & Berger, 2020, Heckler et al., 2013, Newton, 2018, Selwyn, 2008. Minocha (2021) contends that the ease with which the materials can be bought or obtained in recent years has clearly accelerated unethical academic practices. Newton (2018) conducted an analysis of 65 studies and identified a rise from 3.52% historical average to 15.7% post 2014, suggesting that the availability of more services have a substantial effect on students’ cheating behaviour.

Heckler et al (2013) suggests that plagiarism detection softwares like Turnitin are not sufficient to address this ever-increasing challenge. The gaps in plagiarism software capabilities (Hill et al., 2021), and their perceived and actual effectiveness may itself be a barrier in preventing plagiarism. While such softwares have made it easier for academics to detect plagiarism to a certain extent, they are not successful in detecting contract cheating where the work produced is often original and written by an essay mill writer (Walker & Townley, 2012). Moreover, as students become aware of plagiarism softwares, they use tricks like minor paraphrasing to bring down the chances of detection (Warn 2006).

Lack of clear institutional policies concerning academic behaviour is seen as a potential cause of rising plagiarism. Medway et al. (2018) assert that a lack of clear and visible policies limits the understanding of plagiarism for both staff and students and can make unethical academic behaviour more likely to occur. Similarly, Simpson (2016) suggests that unclear policies not only make it difficult for institutions to promote good academic conduct but also makes it difficult for students to adjust to the academic standards of the universities. In most cases, such policies fail to consider the diverse needs of the students. Further, Lynch et al (2021) suggest that a disparity between policy and practice and a lack of severity of sanctions for students who repeatedly breach the policies, prevent the universities to instil the principles of academic integrity.

The next section explores some ways that literature identifies as potentially effective in preventing plagiarism and upholding universities’ academic standards.

**How can we support students to develop ‘good’ academic conduct and avoid plagiarism?**

Turning to the literature relating to the over-arching research question, this section examines the literature relating to how students can be supported to develop good academic conduct. Most researchers propose the use of a holistic approach towards addressing academic conduct concerns and emphasize a collective role of faculty, students and staff (Bretag et al., 2014). In the same way, Amigud & Dawson (2019) and Hill et al., (2021) emphasize the need of a multi-level approach entailing the collaboration of academics, universities and global community to curb illegal practices. Some of the key strategies proposed relate to developing a value-based approach, clear, obvious and consistent polices, training and professional development of academics, revisiting and assessment practices, using online resources for invigilation, restricting essay mills, developing students’ academic skills, involving students in developing academic conduct policies and in academic misconduct processes and providing guidance and support to students involved in academically dishonest behaviours.

**Using a value-based approach:**

Much existing literature emphasizes the need of a value-based approach, suggesting that universities should embed the values of trust, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage into their culture (ICAI, 2021). Minocha (2021) argues that universities can only expect students to develop and implement these values if staff exhibits them in all forms of communication.

Simpson (2016) suggests that as a first step, universities should support students to adapt the standards of higher education and understand the academic values of the institution they attend. This could be facilitated by including the information on academic integrity in the materials supplied to students prior to joining the universities, in students’ orientations, meetings with advisors and postings on frequently visited websites. Academic misconduct penalties (Baird and Claire, 2017) could also be made more visible to students through these means. Similarly, McCabe et al. (2012) advocate the need of orientation and training sessions and including chapters in student handbooks to explain the codes of conduct and establish the consequences of cheating. Further, Blum (2009) emphasizes the need of embedding academic integrity materials into courses and assessment designs. Minocha (2021) suggests these could be reiterated through regular reminders through visuals and infographics.

**Developing clear, consistent, and visible policies, sanctions and laws**

Scholarship, both within the UK and abroad, emphasize the need of clear, consistent and visible policies that result in a clear and visible understanding of plagiarism for both staff and students. The policies should provide a clear specification of academically dishonest behaviour, technologies employed to combat cheating, and resolution procedures and consequences for academic dishonesty (Medway et al., 2018, Hill et al., 2021, Whitley and Keith-Spiegel, 2002). Martin (2005) suggests that if students are aware of the polices, such as that their work will run through plagiarism softwares, they will be less likely to plagiarise. However, Gullifer and Tyson (2010) warn that availability of information on policies is not sufficient as in many cases students, as well as academics, do not utilize this access. Considering this, the polices and guidance need to be reiterated and evaluated from time to time to assess their effectiveness and impact (Minocha 2021).

Lynch et al. (2021) emphasize the need of ‘celerity’ which means ‘*the swiftness or speed at which a punishment or sanction is imposed after a student is caught for academic dishonesty’* (no p.no). The nursing faculty they researched felt that managing the cases of misconduct often took long due to policy constraints and by the time an outcome is made, the details of a transgression are forgotten. This has implications for the effectiveness of management of academic misconduct. The authors also recommend the need of ‘severity’ of sanctions, such as expulsions, for students who deliberately and repeatedly engage in academic offence.

**Training, professional development and institutional support to academics**

Training and professional development of academics is seen as vital in ensuring the academic rigour of universities (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith,2019, Minocha, 2021). Amigud & Dawson (2019) and Hill et al., (2021) assert that academics need to be aware of academically dishonest practices as they can be at the front line of preventing, detecting and investigating academic misconduct. Minocha (2021) highlights the need of professional development but also emphasizes the need of sharing of good academic practices with regards to the experiences of dealing with academic misconduct.

**Designing and revisiting teaching and assessment strategies**

The need for designing teaching and assessment materials and strategies has been highlighted by several scholars as means to promote academic integrity. Hill et al. (2021), Newton and Lang (2016) and Baird and Clair (2017) assert that effective assessment strategies can increase the effort required for cheating as well as make it easier to detect. Further, Minocha (2021) suggests that designing both process and product-oriented assessment strategies that feed forward into the next assessment tasks can help mitigate the problem.

**Guidance and support to students involved in academic misconduct**

Students involved in academically dishonest behaviours need to be provided with detailed guidance, for example, through case studies revealing how dishonest behaviour could have serious legal implications and affect career. Minocha, (2021) argues that such students need support in addressing shame and guilt and should be assisted in how to move forward with confidence.

Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan (2019) suggest that students also need to be made aware of the risks of using cheating sites. Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2019) assert that findings from the research on academic integrity should be integrated in student focused campaigns to make them aware of these risks and potentially reduce the misconduct.

Smith et al.’s, (2013) research on undergraduate students in United States indicate that students’ academic shortcomings increase the chance of cheating. In such cases, training and programmes to support students develop their academic skills will be influential in preventing academically unethical behaviours. Further, the involvement of students in development of academic conduct policies and in academic misconduct processes (Bretag et al., 2013) will help develop a more holistic approach towards addressing academic integrity concerns.

**Summary**

The dynamics involved in plagiarism and academic misconduct are complex. Students’ engagement in plagiarism can be inadvertent, forced by extreme circumstances or deliberate. There is a significant body of literature that has explored the reasons of academically inappropriate practices. Scholarship also exists on the detection of misconduct and its policing by the universities, staff and systems. Some studies have focused on the supply side perspective, such as how the contract cheating industry operates. However, there is limited research on students’ understanding of the terminology and processes in relation to managing academic misconduct, students’ experiences of being detected or how students and staff can work together to promote academic integrity. Existing literature highlights the need of more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon to come up with feasible solutions for students, educators and the society.

**Methodology**

The following sections outlines the design and ethical considerations in relation to the project.

**Research design**

The research was designed to be conducted in two stages:

**stage 1** was a questionnaire to students which was made available via a JISC online survey (see Appendix 2). the questions were linked to the over-arching research and field questions. The aim was to recruit a sample of 100 students to complete the survey. The participants in stage 1 were invited to indicate on the survey if they were willing to participate in a focus group, and if willing, their contact details were requested. Personal data was collected for the purpose of contacting participants to invite them to participate in stage 2, the focus group.

**Stage 2**: was designed as a focus group of up to 8 students who had indicated that they would be willing to participate.

The survey and focus group were designed to be conducted online, which was partly to comply with the restrictions that were in place at the time of the submission of the project application (May 2021), but also to make participation in the research more accessible to all potential participants.

**Participants**

As this proposed scholarship involves OU students, an application to the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) was made to support the recruitment of students; the application was approved by SRPP.

As the project focused on students within the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport, Students studying modules in the school, that is E102, E103, E109, E110, E117, E119, E212, E209, E229, E219, E235, E236, EK313, E313, E314 and E309 were selected.

At the time of submission to SRPP for support to recruit participants, there 13,068 students registered on one or more of the modules of interest in 2021J. Of these, 9,017 were available to be approached to participate, SRPP suggested that this number should be slimmed down to 1,000 students.

**Table 1: Availability Report**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **available** | **Frequency** | **Percent** | **Cumulative**  **Frequency** | **Cumulative**  **Percent** |
| Available | 9017 | 69.00 | 9017 | 69.00 |
| Not available | 4051 | 31.00 | 13068 | 100.00 |

***The request for participants to respond to the survey went live in December, however, responses were very slow. Despite there being more than 9,000 students who were available to be invited to participate, the recruitment of 100 participants proved to be problematic. To give more time for respondents to come forward, the survey was left open for a longer period.***

***In March 2022, the PI sought advice from Praxis and SRPP about ways to boost the response and encourage students to complete the questionnaire. Contact was made with other colleagues who had experienced similar difficulties and it was suggested that students could be approached via telephone to explain the aim and purpose of the project. SRPP agreed and provided us with the list of eligible students which was 1,000. Therefore, we applied for funding to pay an AL colleague to use 2 days to approach students on the list. During the phone contact, the appointed AL mentioned that some of the students who engaged in a conversation with her were asked if they would be willing to be part of the focus group, some agreed to do so, and an invitation will be sent separately to the students, however it will be pointed out that they can of course change their mind***

***Ethical consider*ations**

An application was made to the Human Research Ethical Committee in October 2021, The risk of harm to participants was assessed as being minimal. As part of the ethical scrutiny, the information sheet for participants, the consent form and the questionnaire were submitted. Following a request for some clarifications and amendments, a favourable decision was given on 2 November 2021 (HREC/4090/Musgrave).

**Information to participants and consent - Stage 1**: participation in the survey was voluntary. The online JISC survey tool was used for the questionnaire survey. An information letter (Appendix 1) explained the purpose of the scholarship research. Students gave their consent electronically. Students who agree to complete the survey were not required to give personal details unless they wished to proceed to stage 2, the focus group, this was so that they could be contacted to be invited to take part. Students were informed of a date up until they could withdraw their data.

**Stage 2**: written details about the focus group were designed giving details about consent. The details included the following points that were to be made clear to students:

* They will be asked to consider the discussion as confidential.
* They will not be required to reveal their identity.
* They can withdraw from the focus group at any point without explanation,
* They are not obliged to speak
* the discussion will be recorded with audio, but not video, the content will be transcribed (anonymising participants names) and the recording will be deleted following transcription.

The lead PI was to reiterate the information at the start of the focus group meeting. All focus group data was to be anonymised, including any responses that may identify an individual. Permission was to be sought to record the focus group; the recording would be deleted after transcription of the data.

A date was given to participants to let them know the latest point that they will be able to withdraw consent for their anonymised data to be included.

**Changes to the research design**

By March 2022, the response to the invitation to complete the questionnaire was slow, ***there were 20 participants who had completed the survey, against a target of 100. Therefore, In March 2022, an amendment to the HREC application was submitted for consideration. The amendment was to reflect the need to employ*** an Associate Lecturer colleague to contact the students on the list and to ask if they were willing to complete the survey. SRPP supplied the AL colleague with the contact details in a password protected spreadsheet. The AL colleague who was appointed to contact the students made 100 telephone calls to students, leaving voice messages with another 20 students. The students who answered their phone and engaged with the AL, were informed about the focus group.

Another unexpected change to the research design happened because there was only one participant who agreed to join what would have been the focus group. This part of the research became a semi-structured interview and was not recorded.

**Analysis of data**

The aim of achieving 100 participants for part 1, the online survey, was not achieved, and despite exhaustive efforts, there were only 26 participants. The response to the focus group was even more disappointing, despite 8 participants offering to joint he focus group, only one participant joined on the evening of the meeting. The themes that emerged from the literature, namely what students and staff understand about the terminology and definitions relating to academic conduct; students’ motivation and institutional factors and ways to support students to develop good academic conduct. The data was scrutinised for words and phrases that could be allocated to the themes

During the semi-structured interview that replaced the planned focus group, notes were taken by the interviewer, the notes recorded the key messages given in response to the questions.

**Findings**

Despite the lower than planned response to the survey, the data collected from the 26 participants revealed some valuable findings, as did the participant who took part in the semi-structured interview.

In relation to the responses to the multiple-choice questions which sought to find out participants’ understanding of key terms that are used in relation to academic conduct, such as plagiarism, enabling plagiarism and so on, there were several incorrect responses selected. None of the questions were answered correctly by the participants.

Participants were asked: *why is it important that students are able to develop good academic conduct? Please list as many reasons as possible* was a particularly revealing finding. The responses fell into three main themes. Firstly, the value-based motivations for students demonstrating good academic conduct described by Medway et al., (2018) and Guo (2011) were identified in the responses from the participants. Secondly, the participants cited motivations linked to motivations that aimed for success and a fear of failure. The third theme was described as development of self, and the comments related to students’ development from an academic and personal perspective. Table 2 summarises the participants’ comments.

**Table 2: reasons given by participants about the importance of good academic conduct**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Value based motivations** | **Aiming for success and/or fear of failure** | **Development of self** | |
|  |  | Academically | personally |
| Do not cheat  To gain an honest result  Because you have to be graded authentically  Moral obligation  Ensuring integrity and fairness when working towards a qualification  To do the best work possible  To show authentication  To give credit and acknowledgement to those who have come up with ideas | So that they can pass their course  So they can prepare to enter a professional arena without fear of malpractice  To avoid possible misconduct | Proud of their work  Professionalism  Develop a good learning  Academic development attitude  Good academic conduct leads to motivations, skills and interests  To be able to utilise study skills in future professional development  To effectively take in info  Prepare their own words and work  To learn  To provide their own thoughts and ideas  To extend their essay writing skills | Raise their confidence  Increase confidence |

The participants were asked if they knew how plagiarism is detected, and this revealed a range of responses; 7 were confident that they did know, 4 didn’t know and 4 gave ambivalent responses.

Participants were asked about the sources of information they used, and which were most useful:

* the module content – 16
* the module website – 16
* their tutor – 13
* the OU library - 11
* student home – 10
* other students – 6

The participant who joined the focus group emphasised the importance of the role of his tutor in supporting the development of good academic conduct

Participants were asked if they had ever been referred for academic conduct investigation, just one of the participants disclosed that they had been referred. The response to the outcome was ‘It was deemed plagiarism. Although I didn’t knowingly write my essay in that way, it was more I forgot to quote key things thing increased the likeness.’ Clearly this participant had struggled with including references in the work that was investigated, stating that ‘I tried to quote and reference accordingly but wrote it wrong’. It is of interest, and possibly relevance that this participant had previous qualifications that were less than 2 A levels.

**Discussion and recommendations**

The data revealed findings that fitted with the themes that emerged from the literature, which were:

* students and staff understanding about the terminology and definitions relating to academic conduct
* students’ motivation and institutional factors
* ways to support students to develop good academic conduct

**Terminology and definitions relating to academic conduct: staff and students**

The data revealed that the participants had mixed, and inaccurate understandings of the terminology used in relation to academic conduct. This has implications for how students are encouraged to engage with resources that are aimed at developing their knowledge and expertise. Participants suggested that there was a need for a variety of ways to help students to learn about the terminology used and the definitions.

In relation to staff understanding of academic conduct, although staff were not participants in this research, the data raised some areas for consideration about their level of understanding. This links to the participant who had been investigated for academic conduct who stated that the outcome of the case was found to be as a result of inaccurate referencing and difficulties with the process of including references, rather than having deliberately copied others’ work. As many of the academic conduct cases that are referred for investigation are found to be attributed to poor referencing or a lack of paraphrasing, this raises questions about the processes that is followed prior to referral. The software that is used to identify matches between students’ work and other sources that are available on the internet produces reports which are used to identify high matches. The interpretation of what is an acceptable level of match is not an exact science, and it in order to interpret reports, it is essential that staff are trained to do so. if staff are interpreting a high match as being plagiarism, this is likely to lead to unnecessary referrals for investigation, because the more likely outcome is that a student had inaccurately referenced their work or has yet to develop their academic writing skills. The use of materials produced by the Open University as the main source of learning for students creates another way that students can inadvertently produce work with a high match.

**students’ motivation and institutional factors**

Table 1 summarises participants responses to why the data revealed that students were aware of many reasons why good academic conduct is important. This reflects the view that emerged in the literature of the need of a value-based approach, suggesting that universities should embed the values of trust, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage into their culture (ICAI, 2021).

**ways to support students to develop good academic conduct**

The findings reveal the need for students to be provided with information relating to academic conduct in a variety of ways, because it appears that there is not one format is unanimously identified as being most helpful. The module website, content and their tutor were the 3 highest sources of information. Exactly what the module content was that was cited as being helpful is not known, but it is known that modules where study skills such as referencing and other activities that develop good academic conduct are well received by students (Parry and Shrestha 2018)

The participant who had been referred for academic conduct investigation had previous qualifications equivalent to less than 2 A levels. This point is a reminder that many of our students have low previous qualifications and may need more time and support to develop their understanding of how to produce work that is academically robust.

It is interesting to note that the least useful source of information is cited as being other students. One participant wrote ‘Student WhatsApp groups are full of people ‘over sharing’ it’s a significant issue’. Clearly students cannot be prevented from forming their own informal support and communication systems, but it is important to warn students about the sharing of information which can lead to high matches between students’ work which may be inadvertent plagiarism or collusion.

The role of tutors in relation promoting good academic conduct was identified within the data. The participant who was interviewed made it very clear how his tutor was instrumental in developing his understanding of academic conduct and preventing plagiarism. He made the important point that this process started in induction and was then ‘drip fed’ throughout the module. This highlights the importance of students being reminded about how to ensure their work complies with good academic conduct.

Participants made comments that suggest that they experience a lack of consistencies between approaches used by modules and also by tutors. This point highlights the need for the OU to develop a more consistent approach during module production and during presentation to the way that academic conduct is taught to students.

**Recommendations for recruiting participants**

The research raises some considerations for recruiting participants who are students. Despite seeking ways to reach the aim of 100 students, only 27 were recruited. The relatively low number may be due to a range of reasons, perhaps the focus of the research did not pique interest, or the survey may have been too lengthy, whatever the reason, it appears that recruiting participants can be problematic. Given the importance of including students in our research in order to develop the evidence base for pedagogy, as well as how we listen to the student voice and respond to their comments, recruitment of students as participants in research is an area for consideration.

**Summary**

The following is a summary of the findings from this project:

* Students need consistent guidance to a range of resources that help to build their knowledge and understanding of the need for good academic conduct
* The resources need to be accessible, both in terms of language used, as well as easily located within the module website and materials
* The role of the tutor is critical in developing students’ knowledge and understanding.
* Teaching students about good academic conduct starts in induction, this is especially important for students with low prior qualifications.
* Teaching students about good academic conduct needs to be ‘drip-fed’ throughout the period of study, especially prior to the submission of assessments
* Training for all staff who are involved in interpreting software reports is likely to help identify students who have less developed academic skills, such as referencing and para-phrasing, thus avoiding unnecessary investigation for plagiarism

**Further research:**

The under-researched area of academic conduct requires more research to inform practices that reduce the possibility of students being referred for investigation. Current processes tend to be reactive, meaning that students are identified as having poor academic conduct following scrutiny of software reports, or in some cases when their work is marked. There needs to be a move away from a reactive and punitive approach, to one that is preventative and proactive, further scholarship that explores the interventions that students find are most supportive is an important next step.. A clear link between carefully developed policies that inform evidence-based processes will be very helpful to reducing the number of referrals, many of which are inappropriate. Research into assessment design that reduces the risk of students producing work that is more likely to encourage students to not engage with the skills of good academic conduct will be helpful. Careful consideration of how modules are produced, for example reviewing the use of language and embedding activities that help students to develop their academic skills.

**Conclusion**

This project has skimmed the surface of academic conduct practices and policies within the OU. The findings reflect the views identified in the literature review by Amigud and Dawson, (2019) and Hill et al (2021) that there needs to be a multi-level and holistic approach towards addressing academic conduct concerns and develop a collective role of faculty, students and staff (Bretag et al 2014). Implementing the academic conduct policy and supporting students to develop the skills associated with sound academic integrity should be a responsibility that is shared by all colleagues. Such responsibility includes all colleagues increasing their knowledge about academic conduct and what constitutes academic integrity and the ways that this can be promoted at each stage of the lifecycle of the student.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix 1: information to participants**

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Research Study Participant   
Information Sheet

Study title:

How can we work with students to promote and develop ‘good’ academic conduct?

Contact details

Principal Investigator: Dr Jackie Musgrave [jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk](mailto:jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk) Diana Hardie [diana.hardie@open.ac.uk](mailto:diana.hardie@open.ac.uk) Dr Michael Boampang [Michael.boampang@open.ac.uk](mailto:Michael.boampang@open.ac.uk)

Dear Student

I am the Associate Head of School with responsibility for learning and teaching in the school of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport. I lead on the academic conduct work within the school. Along with my colleagues, Diana Hardie and Michael Boampang, we are contacting you to ask you if could take 20 minutes to participate in a brief survey to support research which seeks to find out more about your ideas and experiences about what is meant by ‘good’ academic conduct.

What is the survey about?

We have been funded to carry out a piece of research to find out the following:

1. What are our students’ views about the information and resources that are available about academic conduct, and how can we improve the information and resources?
2. If you have been referred for an investigation into academic conduct, what was the reason and what was the outcome of the case?

Why is this research important?

The findings from your participation in this research will help us to review and improve the processes and policies about academic conduct across the Open University. If you are willing to help us with this research, you will be invited to complete a questionnaire.

Taking part in the research

Taking part in the research and completing the questionnaire is entirely optional and it’s up to you if you chose to take part. No tutor or other staff member will know who has participated and who has not, and there will be no consequences of whether you choose to participate or not.

Funding and permission for the research

This project has been approved and has received a small amount of funding to cover some of the costs associated with carrying out the research by ‘Praxis,’ this is the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies centre for scholarship. Praxis funds scholarship projects to improve our students’ learning and teaching experience, in this case, in relation to Academic Conduct. The research project has been reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/4090/Musgrave)

What does the research consist of?

The research is in two parts, **stage 1** is the survey which will be available for all students in the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport from November 2021 until January 2022. All the contributions to the survey will be analysed. S**tage 2** is a focus group which will be held in February 2022. The focus group will involve up to 8 students who have volunteered to take part. The 8 participants will be selected following analysis of the data and the identification of themes that arise from the data, so at this stage, it Is not possible to give further explanation about the selection criteria.

Stage 1: is a survey which asks you to complete a questionnaire.

There are 15 questions in the questionnaire, this could take around 20 minutes, depending on the level of detail you would like to include in the answers which ask for a more extensive response.

Taking part in the research and completing the survey is entirely voluntary and can be completed anonymously.

You can withdraw from completing the survey at any point by clicking on the ‘withdraw survey’ button.

You can ask for your data to be removed after your participation in the study by contacting Jackie Musgrave, [jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk](mailto:jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk), you can request your response to the survey to be removed up until the end of January 2021. You can ask for your participation in the forum group to be removed up until the end of March 2022, after this date, all of the data will have been aggregated and analysed, so withdrawal will not be possible after this point.

At the end of the questionnaire, you will be offered the opportunity to register your interest in progressing to stage 2 of the research. If you are willing to be contacted, please give your details where you are asked to do so.

Stage 2: is a focus group discussion of your views and experiences of academic conduct.

The aim of the focus group is to explore in more detail questions relating to the themes that have arisen from the students’ responses to the survey in stage 1.

The questions for the discussion will be made available to the 8 focus group volunteers ahead of the focus group meeting.

The focus group meeting will be no more than an hour long and will be held online

The people who will be present at the focus group meeting will include the researchers and the 8 students who have offered and been selected to join the focus group.

The members of the focus group will join teams, the video will not be turned on, only audio.

The members of the focus group can join the teams meeting anonymously, instructions of how to do this will be given to you ahead of the focus group.

Any data that is included in the research will be anonymised to ensure that the participant is not identifiable.

The focus group discussion will be recorded so that it can be typed up to help with analysis of the data. The recording will be deleted after the discussion has been transcribed.

You will be asked to give your consent to participation in the focus group and for your contributions to be used as anonymous data. You will be able to withdraw your consent about the inclusion of your data until the end of March 2022.

You can leave the focus group discussion at any point without explanation.

Your responses to the research

Your responses to the research will be the data that we use to give us answers to the questions about how we can learn more about working with students to develop ‘good’ academic conduct. If you choose to take part in the survey, your responses will be given on a secure server. The focus group discussion will be recorded so that it can be typed up to help with analysis of the data. The recording will be deleted after the discussion has been transcribed

What happens after the research project is completed?

The data will be stored by the university on a safe server for up to 10 years. Your responses to the survey (and for those taking part in the forum group) will help us to identify the findings from the research. The findings will be written up into a report for Praxis, this will be available on their internal website. The findings will also be presented at the Praxis conference. The findings may also be written up into an article for a journal, this would be available externally. Your responses will be anonymised and you will not be identified in reports, articles or presentations. If you would like to see any of the outcomes from the research, please contact Jackie via email.

Next steps

We would be very grateful to you for participating in this research, you can do this by visiting the online survey link and complete the details to if you have any queries, please contact [jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk](mailto:jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk) (one of the researchers) or Eleonora Teszenyi [Eleonora.teszenyi@open.ac.uk](mailto:Eleonora.teszenyi@open.ac.uk) (another colleague you can contact if you have any queries)

Many thanks for taking the time to read the information about this research project.

Best wishes

Jackie Musgrave, Diana Hardie and Michael Boampang

The Open University

**Appendix 2: questionnaire to students**

**Revised version of questionnaire 4.11.21 Diana Hardie**

n.b. options highlighted in yellow tbc by Jackie/Michael

Red text to be used for JISC Survey set up.

Changing question 1 into multiple choice or match up

1. **What are students’ understanding of the terminology used in relation to academic conduct?**

**Please look at the terms listed below and select the definition that you think most closely matches the term**

1. Plagiarism
2. Self-plagiarism
3. Enabling plagiarism
4. Academic misconduct
5. Contract cheating
6. Collusion
7. Collaboration
8. Summarising or paraphrasing
9. Quoting
10. Essay mill
11. Any comment
12. **Plagiarism**

* Offering your work to another person for them to use as their own. A: Collusion and plagiarism
* Using the work of another student as your own assessment. A: Collusion and plagiarism
* Using module materials without in-text citation/reference. A: Plagiarism
* Using the work of other people to gain some form of benefit without fully acknowledging that the work came from someone else. A: Plagiarism
* using someone else's words or ideas without giving them credit or acknowledging that it isn't your own work. A: Plagiarism.

1. **Self-plagiarism**

* The reuse of significant, identical, or nearly identical portions of your own work without acknowledging that you are doing so or citing the original work. A: Self plagiarism

1. **Enabling plagiarism**

* Knowingly making any of your academic work available to others, online and social media. A: Enabling plagiarism
* Discussing assignment questions and answers. A: Enabling plagiarism

1. **Academic misconduct**

* Using material that is not your own original work to gain some form of benefit or enabling others to do so. A: Academic misconduct

1. **Contract cheating**

* A student submits work to a university for assessment, where they have used any services provided by a third party. A: Contract cheating

1. **Collusion**

* Knowingly making any of your academic work available online and social media. A: Collusion and enabling plagiarism
* Offering your work to another person for them to use as their own. A: Collusion and plagiarism
* Using the work of another student as your own assessment. A: Collusion and plagiarism
* Knowingly making any of your academic work available or offering it to another person for presentation as if it were their own or using the work of another student as your own for assessment.

1. **Collaboration**

* Working together with other students to complete a task or achieve a goal. A: Collaboration
* Sharing notes and diagrams from the course itself – A: Collaboration

1. **Summarising or paraphrasing**

* Using your own words to express someone else’s ideas or message without changing the meaning of the original text. A: Paraphrasing

1. **Quoting**

Using the exact sequence of words that appear in the source.

1. **Essay** **mill**

* Using services which offer a repository of answers to assessment questions, A: Essay mill
* Using services which enable you to upload or share assessment questions, A: Essay mill
* Using other services which allow you to obtain tailored or automated answers to assessment questions. A: Essay mill
* A business that allows customers to commission an original piece of writing on a particular topic which they present as their own work. A: Essay mill

1. **Any** **comments**

*The options in yellow are the ones I suggest we go with as these match with the new policy. I now need to see how I can add these to the JISC survey.*

Which of the following are acceptable ways of developing ‘good’ academic practice? Please select Y/N

1. Plagiarism
2. Self-plagiarism
3. Enabling plagiarism
4. Paraphrasing
5. Academic misconduct
6. Contract cheating
7. Using quotations
8. Using an essay mill
9. Collusion
10. Collaboration
11. Any comment

*Add Y/N drop downs or options in survey.*

* 1. Why is it important that students are able to develop good academic conduct? Please list as many reasons as you can think of

*Add free text box in survey for answers. – check what max text is*

* 1. Are you aware of the ways that the Open University look for work that is not a students’ own and how it is detected?

*Add free text box in survey for answers. – check what max text is*

1. **What has/does help students to develop ‘good’ academic conduct?**

2.1 When you started your studies with the Open University, where did you find information for students about academic conduct? Please tick those that apply to you

1. Student home
2. The module website
3. Module content
4. Tutor
5. The Open University library
6. Other students
7. Developing time management skills
8. Other (please specify)
9. Any other comment

*Add options and tick box option.*

2.2 Can you list what was most helpful to you in developing good academic conduct?

*Free text box option or put in 8 boxes to type in? or do another tick exercise - depends on how data is fed back*

1. **What are students’ experiences of being referred for investigation into academic conduct? To include events or circumstances that lead students to plagiarise, either intentionally or unintentionally**
   1. Have you ever been referred for an investigation about your academic conduct? Yes/no – if your answer is ‘no’ please go to question 4

*Add yes/no options here and a go to option for each answer yes to 3.2 no go to 4*

* 1. ‘Has your case been investigated by the university? If so, what was the outcome?

*Free text box*

* 1. If yes, were you aware that you had included work that was not your own in your TMA/EMA?

*Free text box*

* 1. Please briefly describe the reasons why you think that your work was investigated for plagiarism

*Free text box*

* 1. If you were aware that you had intentionally included work that was not your own, please explain the reasons why you included someone else’s work

*Free text box*

* 1. Has another student used your work and passed it off as their own? Yes/no

*Add a yes/no option here plus navigation to 3.7 or 3.8*

* 1. If yes, please could you explain how this happened

*Free text box*

* 1. How did the investigation into the academic conduct referral affect you?

*Free text box*

1. **How can staff and students work together to promote and develop ‘good’ academic conduct?**
   1. In relation to information about academic conduct, how easy or difficult was it to understand and follow the information about academic conduct that is available? 1 = very easy 2= easy 3= quite easy, but there is room for improvement 4 = not at all easy

*Put in options 1,2,3,4*

Please explain the reason for your answer

*Free text box*

* 1. How would you advise a student who is new to the Open University the best way to develop good academic conduct?

*Free text box*

* 1. What suggestions do you have for staff at the Open University about how to make information about academic conduct as clear and straightforward as possible?

*Free text box*

*Add following to end of survey.*

Many thanks for completing this questionnaire, your responses will help us to improve academic conduct.

If you are willing to be part of a focus group to discuss your suggestions about how to improve academic conduct, please give your Open University email address here \_\_\_\_\_\_

**Survey structure and suggested text:**

1. Introduction text used is from example from Jisc Survey amend as required
2. Start – landing page – add note to complete survey in one go
3. Finish – add note that once submit button clicked can no longer go back.

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