Dr Alex Buckley

Academic literacy and good academic practice
The fault lines of student academic misconduct

Context

- Medium-sized, pre-1992 university
- Global university
  - Edinburgh
  - Dubai
  - Malaysia
  - Galashiels
  - Orkney
- Challenges around academic misconduct during Covid
  - 'Take-home exams': 24-hour open-web online remote assessments
- Creation of an Academic Integrity Working Group
  - Sub-group exploring the causes of academic misconduct at HWU

Aims

- To better understand the causes of academic misconduct

- …via the perceptions of staff dealing with disciplinary cases (Chairs of Discipline Committees, and staff providing advice to students)

- …as a preliminary step to exploring the perceptions of students

Project team

- **Dr Alex Buckley (Learning & Teaching Academy)**

- Hannah Copeland (Vice-President: Education, Heriot-Watt Students' Union)

- **Professor Neil Dunse (School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society; Chair of Discipline Committee)**

- Dr Tom Farrington (School of Social Sciences; Chair of Discipline Committee)

Some relevant literature

- Plagiarism as
  - … a moral issue
    - "deliberate and dishonest behaviour"
  - … a policy issue
    - "something to be regulated"
  - … an issue of learning to write in academia
    - "students' struggles to become competent academic writers"

(Adam 2016)

- Plagiarism as
  - … intentional
  - … unintentional
  - … contextual
    - "intentional, though not as a general strategy, but rather as a response to being overwhelmed"

(Lofstrom and Kupila)

Some more relevant literature

Academic integrity as culturally-dependent

- "These results suggest **cultural differences in the conceptualization of plagiarism**. A plausible explanation of such conceptual differences may lie in the prevalent Chinese literacy practices, whereby memorization, repetition, and imitation of authoritative texts are valued as legitimate learning strategies for acquiring a canon of privileged knowledge." (Hu & Lei 2011)

- "Absolutist claims about the **acceptability of plagiarism in certain cultures** are misleading and run the risk of ethnocentrism" (Hu & Lei 2011)

Method

- Semi-structured interviews
- 11 participants
  - Current and past Chairs of School Discipline Committees
  - Staff from the Students' Union Advice Hub
- Preliminary questionnaire (open and closed questions)
- Data collection during 2022-2023

Survey results (n=11)

In your experience, how frequently are the following issues factors in cases of academic misconduct? Please rank in order of frequency, from 1 (most frequent) to 4 (least frequent)
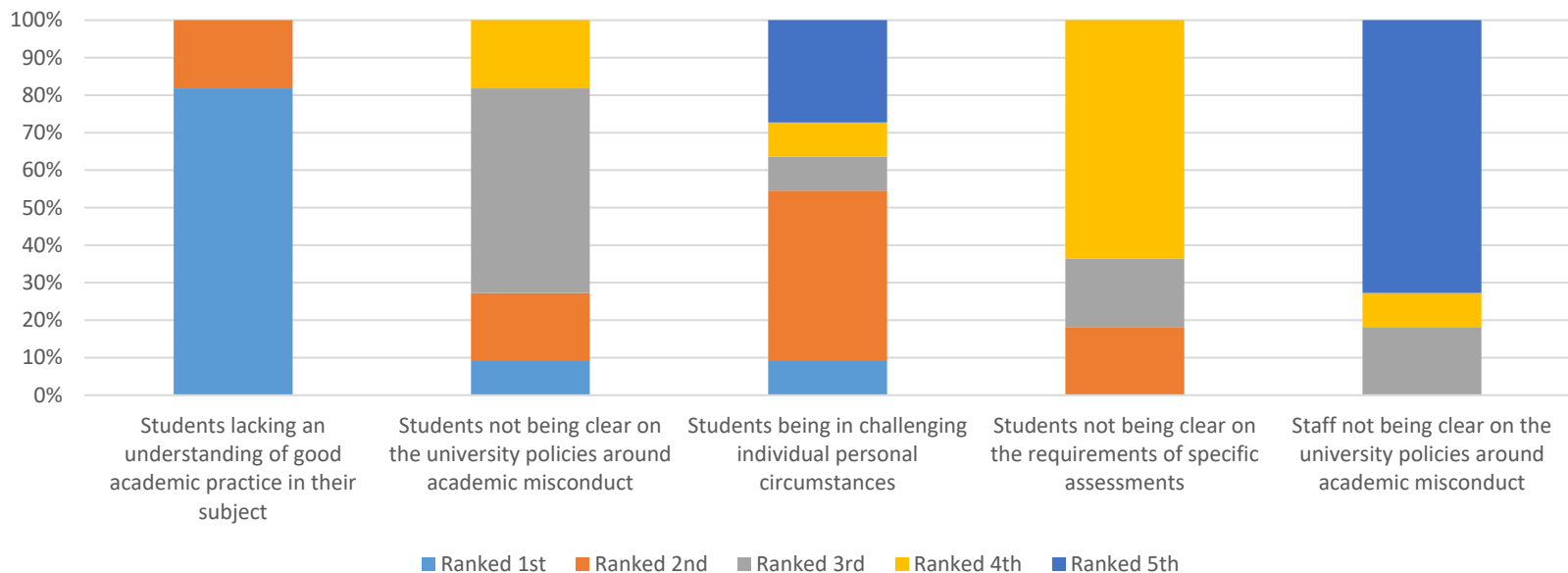
Key theme 1: Cheating vs poor scholarship

- Many cases of academic misconduct are seen as not being intentional cheating
  - "So there are there are cases where, you know, we can say that it's not cheating. It's extremely poor scholarship."
  - "A lot of the time it is just poor academic practice."

- But some are…
  - "Have I had the wool pulled over my eyes by somebody who cried and told me about all the trauma in their life, only to find out they were actually cheating? Yes, I probably have"

Theme 2: Understanding of good academic practice

- Misunderstandings
  - "Sometimes with collusion, they've maybe worked with a friend to try and get the perfect answer, and they don't understand that what they've actually done is created something that is a type of cheating, and that's a genuine misunderstanding"

- Complexity
  - "When we spoke with the students, they said the programme team was saying, you know, collaboration is very important, working out problems together. That's how it is in the workplace. If you've got a problem, you go and talk to one of your colleagues and you work through it together. So they had colluded, there was no two ways about it. But that was quite a difficult one to decide because it was unintentional."

- Not prioritising academic skills
  - "The big problem is getting the student to actually engage with the information. And I actually believe it doesn't matter how creative and wonderful you are with some of this information. They just don't engage with it. And it's a frustrating thing."

Theme 3: Adjusting to new educational systems

- Different not wrong
  - "Sometimes it seems to be because students are coming from different cultures where they do things differently. Which is understandable. And they just sometimes made an assumption that it will be the same as wherever they've come from. Which I get in some respects."

- Broader than just referencing
  - "They don't seem to realise that, even in first year, that what we're looking for is the synthesis of their thoughts and their views and their interpretations of a question. Which has to be supported rather than simply presenting the views of others as their own."

- Impact of personal circumstances
  - "They're presumably in a bit of a rush to sort out housing and all of these other things. So they just haven't caught up on these things and they haven't actually gone to these introductory sessions. They haven't gone to any kind of induction. They're sort of plonked there in the middle of semester. They might have an assessment due the next week, you know, and so they're just scrambling and they don't really know what to do."

Theme 4: Where responsibility lies

- It's a university responsibility
  - "So they're having to learn in a new country and a new system, with new assessment methods that they won't be familiar with, and I do wonder if we prepare them well enough for that."

- It's a student responsibility
  - "The first thing they will say is 'this is not how I was taught in my country'. And then our response has to be, but that is not how you're assessed here and you have been told by your discipline how you are assessed here. And it is your responsibility to take that on board and to work with the library, with the Skills Hub to make sure that you do things in the right fashion."

Implications?

- We need to try and untangle a) the impact of coming from a different educational culture, from b) the experience of being an international student (cf Ehrich et al 2016)

- We need to think about 'contextual' scholarship issues: "not as a strategy, but rather as a response to being overwhelmed" (Lofstrom and Kupila 2013)

- Poor scholarship as 'rational ignorance': "[T]he available evidence clearly suggests that students have a generally poor understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. However, they may also have weak incentives to educate themselves about this illicit behaviour" (Dee and Jacob 2010)

References

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