Student Perceptions of Academic Integrity: a qualitative study of understanding, consequences, and impact

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Author Note

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Abstract

Background: Academic integrity (AI) is of increasing importance in higher education. At the same time, students are becoming more consumer-oriented and more inclined to appeal against, or complain about, a penalty imposed for a breach of AI. This combination of factors places pressure on institutions of higher education to handle alleged breaches of AI in a way acceptable to students that motivates them to continue to engage with their studies.

Method: Students (n=8) were interviewed to discover their perceptions of the process for dealing with breaches of AI. All students were based in one university in a very diverse area of London which has many first-generation students from non-traditional academic backgrounds.

Results: Students reported strong emotional reactions featuring high levels of anxiety and stress. Some found the process to be threatening and demotivating and questioned continuation on their course of study, while others used more adaptive coping strategies. Students also went to great pains to make it clear that their own, and their friends', breaches of AI were unintentional, while expressing the view that other people were deliberately cheating and should be penalised.

Key recommendations include: support for students to re-engage after the intervention; support for students to develop effective self-regulatory learning strategies and time management; provision of specific examples to clarify what is, and is not, acceptable academic practice; recognition of the strong emotions likely to be invoked, especially if accompanied by declarations of unintentionality.

Key words: academic integrity, plagiarism, intentionality, emotion, self-regulation

Introduction

Maintaining academic integrity is a serious issue in higher education. Institutional leaders and other academic staff are concerned about the threat to the public welfare of graduates entering the professions without the skills and knowledge their degree award would suggest and the consequent damage to the reputation of higher education in general (QAA-HE, 2020). If academic integrity cannot be assumed then the qualifications issued by an institution have less value, as the skills, competencies, and knowledge of graduates cannot be relied on. Academic integrity can be defined as the commitment to uphold the key principles of responsibility, respect, and fairness, on the part of the academic community (e.g., International Centre for Academic Integrity, 2022). This definition includes students, for whom observing the values of academic integrity is a part of their becoming members of the academic community.

The recent widespread move to online learning has led to increased opportunities for breaches of academic integrity (e.g., Bretag et al., 2019; Curtis & Clare, 2017; Holden et al., 2021). The extent of breaches of academic integrity is shown by studies in which the majority of students engaged in some form of academic dishonesty at institutions in Canada (Ternes et al., 2019), Sweden (Trost, 2009), and Australia (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005). At the same time, students are becoming more aware of their power as consumers (Raaper, 2020) and more aware of their levels of student debt (Callender & de Gayardon, 2021) and may be more inclined to appeal or to withdraw from their course if they are penalised for breach of academic integrity (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). The challenge to institutions of higher education is how to protect the integrity of their degrees while retaining and motivating students. In response to this challenge, the present study focused on students' views of institutional responses to identified breaches of academic integrity (AI) at a university in London, UK.

Students' understanding of AI was an important focus of the present research. Previous research has suggested that students may not be fully able to identify instances of plagiarism. For example, Bretag et al. (2014) in a study of over 15,000 students, reported that students would benefit from more support to enhance their understanding of the rules. The results of other studies similarly indicate that students may plagiarise because they do not fully understand what plagiarism is (e.g., Busch & Bilgin, 2014; Chen & Chou, 2017).

Another important focus was students' perceptions of the process for dealing with breaches of academic integrity. Sustained motivation and engagement in students could depend on their confidence in the process and acceptance of the outcomes. A warning comes from Newton (2016) who reported students' views that breaches of AI should be penalised to a lesser degree than was the case in their institution, for example, if the institution recommended failing the module, the student might recommend a mark reduction or failing the single assessment. Gullifer and Tyson (2004) similarly reported that students in their study found the penalties too severe in the absence of deliberate intent. Students in the present study were explicitly asked if they thought the outcomes were fair.

Previous experience has suggested that students can experience a range of strong emotions during the process for dealing with breaches of AI, so the interviews were designed to allow students to express their emotions. This may be especially true for students who are sensitive to punishment (e.g., Carver & White, 1994). Protestations of innocence are common, and while no explicit question was asked, students were given the opportunity to claim unintentionality. Relevant to this, the 'fundamental attribution error' states that one's own actions, especially misconduct, are likely to be attributed to the circumstances and situation (Ross, 1977; Gilovich, 2022). Thus, an individual student whose work is deemed to be in breach of AI may insist that it was a genuine mistake, perhaps exacerbated by time pressure.

Considerable observation by the author suggests that students have different coping styles. The basic two coping styles proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) were problem-focused and emotion-focused; avoidance-focused was added by Ben-Zur (2009). The problem-focused or task-focused style is considered to be an adaptive coping style (Valenti & Faraci, 2021) and is associated with academic success. Observation suggests that some students employ an adaptive style, engaging positively with the process, and learning valuable lessons. Other students show a lack of willingness to engage, suggesting an avoidance-focus, or display resentment and denial, suggesting an emotion-focus. It was expected that students would display different coping styles in their interviews.

The present study was conducted in an institution of higher education based in an ethnically diverse part of London, UK, with a high proportion of mature students and first-generation students. The study was designed to discover students' understanding of AI, their experiences of the process for dealing with breaches of AI, and their interpretation of these experiences. The process for dealing with breaches of AI has two main stages in which the student is involved: the initial email to the student informing them of the allegation, and a meeting with academic members of staff to explain the problem and offer guidance on avoiding a repetition. Both the views of students who have been through the process, and those who have not, were sought, to provide a more complete understanding. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was chosen as an appropriate method for exploring the personal experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to events.

Approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the analytical method because of its suitability to answer the questions addressed in the research. The key concepts of IPA are exploring the lived experiences of participants and understanding how they interpret their experiences. The interview allows a bond to be formed with the interviewer which facilitates the exchange of personal information. The interview process is oriented around the participant and allows them to freely express themselves as they see fit (Alase, 2017). IPA permits the understanding and description of subjective, personal experiences and attitudes. IPA thus reflects a critical realist epistemology, accepting that the knowledge generated is not a

direct account of reality but is an interpretation of a version of reality presented at a particular time and place. IPA allows the discovery of interactions between the individuals and the social and academic structures in which they are embedded.

The role of the researcher is to make sense of the participant's account of their experiences, understanding that people are "self-interpreting beings" actively seeking to make sense of their experiences. IPA is an inductive approach, starting from a bottom-up analysis of the data to extract themes from the data. When analysing an individual's lived experience, IPA is useful as it enables the investigation of complicated issues (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

In the present study, the assumption was made that students hold consistent and sufficiently stable attitudes towards AI and experiences of the system for dealing with breaches of AI. At the same time, it is acknowledged that the means of gaining access to these attitudes and experiences are imperfect and necessarily limited. The researchers acknowledge their role in creating knowledge in a reflexive process. One of the interviewers had been through a breach of AI process and so had personal experience, enabling her to interact in a sympathetic and understanding way with participants. The other had not and so approached her interviews with an open mind.

The lead researcher was a member of academic staff responsible for the detection of breaches of academic integrity and for application of appropriate remedies. All contact with participants was through the two student interviewers so the lead researcher had no knowledge of, or contact with, the participants. The researchers were aware of the power imbalance within the interview process (Anyan, 2013) therefore no student with a breach was interviewed by someone known to them.

Method

It is important in IPA to represent the diversity of the target population. In the present research, some participants had been through the formal process for dealing with a breach of Academic Integrity regulations while others had not. This enabled the researchers to access the views of participants from various perspectives. Those participants who had not been through the process of dealing with a breach could contribute their views about the education and guidance offered to them; could describe their understanding of AI; and could discuss their knowledge of and use of support services. They could also describe and interpret their feelings about AI and any anxiety at the prospect of a breach or its consequences. Those participants who had been through the process could contribute all this information and in addition discuss their experiences of the process and their reactions to it; how it affected their motivation and engagement; and their views on the fairness of the process and penalties.

A sample size of 8 is considered to be adequate for IPA (e.g., Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The participants were from two schools within the same

institution and represented a range of age, gender, and ethnicity. All were first-generation students.

The research used semi-structured interviews to offer commonality of approach while allowing for interesting lines of discussion to be followed up. Open-ended questions were asked as generally recommended (Smith & Osborn, 2003) along with probe questions to encourage the participants to express themselves and provide longer answers. The interview schedule was created by the lead researcher and evolved in discussion with the two interviewers. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, were conducted online in accordance with restrictions imposed due to the covid-19 pandemic and were recorded on Microsoft Teams. The initial automated transcription contained some errors and so it was supplemented and corrected by the interviewer.

IPA was used to analyse the interviews following the method of Smith and Osborn (2003) and guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first step, the transcripts were read several times to gain familiarity and understanding of common thoughts, feelings, and reactions. In the second step, initial codes were developed and noted alongside the corresponding passages of the transcripts. In the third step, codes were grouped into larger themes based on similarity and conceptual fit, and the themes were allocated tentative names. In the fourth step, the process of grouping codes into themes was consolidated over the set of interviews. In the fifth step, a table of themes was created, with each theme illustrated by extracts from the transcripts. At this stage some codes were dropped or moved to a different theme. In the sixth and final step, the superordinate themes were documented as a narrative account.

Participants

The characteristics of the participants are documented in Table 1. The presence of dependent children was included because it was potentially relevant to issues of time pressures and competing priorities experienced by some students. All participants were first-generation students. The participants are labelled sequentially from A to H and the second letter Y or N indicates whether they had experienced a breach of AI or not. All the breaches were a first occasion for the student.

The study was approved by the institution's ethical review board. Participants were volunteers and were not paid for their participation. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any point, to withdraw their data, and that their participation would be entirely confidential and anonymous. Participants were not obliged to answer any question. If the participant became emotional during the interview they were asked if they would like to take a break and the interviewer checked that the participant was happy to continue. At the end of the interview, participants were referred to support services inside and outside the institution.

Pcp	Breach?	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Year	Dependent Children?
AY	Yes	Male	White	Mid 30s	Level 4	No
BY	Yes	Male	Black	Mid 40s	Level 7	No
CY	Yes	Female	Black	Late 40s	Level 7	No
DN	No	Female	White	Late 30s	Level 6	Yes
EY	Yes	Female	White	Early 30s	Level 4	No
FY	Yes	Female	White	Late 30s	Level 6	Yes
GN	No	Female	White	Late 50s	Level 6	No
HN	No	Female	White	Mid 30s	Level 6	Yes

Table 1: Participant characteristics.
Note: The terms "Black" and "White" are used as categories of ethnicity in line with the UK census that uses these terms. Participants selected these terms to identify their ethnicity.

Results and Analysis

Five superordinate themes were developed: Emotion, Intentionality, Understanding, Fairness, and Self-regulation. These bear some resemblance to the themes reported by previous researchers, for example, the emotion of fear, poor understanding of AI, and unhappiness with the process and consequences (Gullifer & Tyson, 2004) though with additional sub-themes not found in the earlier literature.

Each of these has interconnected sub-themes that collectively define and describe the superordinate theme. The first superordinate theme of *Emotion* has sub-themes of anxiety, shock, intimidation, catastrophising, and demotivation vs. relief. The second theme of *Intentionality* had sub-themes of unintentional breach of AI by the self, intentional breach by other students, and self-presentation. The third theme, *Understanding* addressed the quality of understanding of AI. The fourth theme of *Fairness* considered perceptions of procedural fairness and the appropriateness of the penalty. The fifth theme of *Self-Regulation* encompasses sub-themes of engaging with support and coping styles.

Theme 1: Emotion

All the interviewees mentioned experiencing strong emotion either during the process for dealing with a breach of AI, in the case of those who had received an allegation, or at the prospect of being involved in the process, for those who had not. Typically, an interviewee returned to the theme of emotion several times during their interview.

Anxiety: A common emotion was anxiety, fear, or even panic. Students who had not received an allegation of breach of AI expressed a concern about accidental plagiarism:

> I would be so scared (shocked voice, gasping). I really would be like really scared because not only would I know what's gonna happen at the university... like you know… in which ways am I gonna get told off or disciplined for this? (DN)
>
> I think it's very right you shouldn't copy other people's work… I am paranoid about copying… inadvertently copying because we had talks… (GN)
>
> … I would be really scared. My anxiety is really bad and then I'd be worrying about all sorts of things…I was kinda worried that would happen me for the last assignment I handed in even though I know I was honest, I just worry. (HN)

Shock: For those who had received an allegation there was a mixture of emotions including shock. This suggests that students were not expecting to find their work was in breach of AI regulations, possibly due to poor understanding of academic integrity.

> Uh, I was shocked because, Uh, it's something that I've never experienced before. (AY)
>
> Shocked, disappointed, I was so angry because I worked so hard on my assignment (CY)
>
> … you know it was a shock to get it especially during lectures as well (EY)

Intimidation: Some students specifically mentioned finding the process daunting or intimidating or felt that they had been accused of something reprehensible. One student who had not been through the process expected a student in this situation would feel judged.

> I've never done it before, and yeah, they made me feel like I'd done something really wrong (AY)
>
> So, I got a letter by email, and I felt terrible they let make me feel as if I've done something horrible. (BY)
>
> I was disappointed because the lecture was accusing me throughout the whole process… Shocked, disappointed, I was so angry because I worked so hard on my assignment. (CY)
>
> It was pretty daunting, this one person I've never met, a lecturer who I've hardly had a conversation with. (EY)
>
> I think it's very intimidating in that sense because you're just going to feel judged, aren't you? (HN)

These emotions of anxiety, shock, and intimidation could be related to a general lack of confidence observed in first-generation students (Phillips et al., 2020). The university system prevalent in western industrialised nations expects students to develop their own voice as authors but this is intimidating for first-generation students who may lack the fundamental confidence to start to develop their writing skills. This fear of unintentional plagiarism was also

reported by Gullifer and Tyson (2004) from students who were uncertain about where the boundaries lay between acceptable and unacceptable academic behaviour.

Catastrophising: Anxiety was sometimes connected with unrealistic fear of the consequences. Several students mentioned their fear of being expelled from the course or forced to repeat an entire year.

> … I thought I was gonna get kicked off the course. Not really, just put the fear of God into me, really. (AY)
>
> I'd be really, really scared that I'd have to redo the whole year. No, I can't think of anything more frightening than having to redo the whole year. (DN)
>
> … they gonna say oh you're not, you know… fit to do this course, like this is not good enough… you never know. I've got no in previous experience of university (EY)
>
> I think it's just a really scary thing, isn't it? You just straight away think of the worst… (HN)

These students clearly experienced the phenomenon of catastrophising, also known as magnification (e.g., Ellis, 1962), defined as an exaggerated cognitive and emotional schema that can arise during contemplation of a negative outcome. In fact, the consequence for a first breach of AI regulations is to fail the individual component of assessment and proceed to re-sit the component with the mark capped at the pass mark. Students are informed of this. This is not described as a penalty but the inevitable consequence of submitting work that cannot receive a pass. Both the expectation of being withdrawn from the course, or being required to re-do the entire year, are magnifications.

The perception by students from non-traditional academic backgrounds that they are not valued members of the institutional community may lead them to expect worse outcomes than is in fact the case. Catastrophising has been associated with anxiety and depression (Garnefski et al., 2002) and so could be related to general stress in students which is likely to be higher in first-generation students (Phillips et al., 2020). It seems plausible that this catastrophising stems from a fundamental sense of inadequacy and lack of fit in higher education. Students who feel a strong sense of entitlement, and who are more confident of acceptance, are less likely to be anxious and to catastrophise.

Demotivation vs Relief: Students who had experienced the process for dealing with a breach of AI revealed ways in which the process had a long-term impact on their engagement with their studies. For some, the process led to demoralisation, demotivation, and a sense of not being supported by the institution.

> I asked for a delay in my next course because I just felt really demotivational. (BY)

> The meeting was not supportive; all it did was tarnish my character and demotivated me … I left feeling sad and depressed… I felt like the University neglected me. (CY)

Others perceived the meeting to be supportive and the outcome generated relief:

> Well, I mean, I felt relieved 'cause I thought I was going to be kicked off the course 'cause I know that's what I said to them, you know, and they were like no, no, no. - … You know, I felt more. I felt better doing the interview, you know, 'cause they explained to me, and they understood, you know why some students do it. (AY)

> I can see the silliness of it now, it's quite funny really. (EY)

Demotivation is potentially serious as it could lead to a student withdrawing from their studies. Care should be taken to present an understanding and non-judgmental approach (Bond, 2014) and to encourage students to remain engaged or to re-engage with their studies. Offering additional academic support may be of utility in this regard.

Theme 2: Intentionality

Intentionality, sometimes named as cheating, was a recurring theme for all eight participants, presenting itself through two distinct contexts: intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Most interviewees referred to plagiarism committed by others as deliberate cheating, while plagiarism committed by themself, or a close friend, was regarded as unintentional. It is worth noting that the standard allegation letter makes no explicit assumption of intentionality though it appears it may sometimes be received in this way.

Unintentionality: Some participants made an explicit appeal to the good character of the self or the friend and insisted they were unaware of wrongdoing. This is consistent with studies suggesting that individuals make excuses and justifications for behaviour that could attract social disgust (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979).

> I did it without realising that I was doing it. (AY)

> I think there's something also very different between cheating and poor referencing, which is what I think I did. Whereas the breach refers to intentionally using somebody's material for my own benefit, and they are two different things. (BY)

> … I just know she's too honest to cheat… and she worked really hard. If it happened, it would have been an accident, it wouldn't have been that she just copied and pasted. (FY)

> Not that I would do it anyway, I'm very honest. (GN)

Social desirability may have played a part and it is possible that students presented their own (and their friends') actions as unintentional from a desire to present themselves in a

positive light. It is not possible to be certain, though there are reasons for thinking that participants spoke openly and honestly about their actions. The interviewers were students and not academic staff, and the participants were assured of anonymity, both of which factors would have encouraged honest accounts. Participants acknowledged not using support resources and not using time effectively so were not entirely concerned with presenting a good self-image. Students also mentioned their friends, who were entirely unknown and unknowable to the interviewer, hence there was no need to defend them.

Intentionality: In contrast, when contemplating breaches of AI by other students in general, there was a far more judgmental attitude, and an assumption that students must have known they were doing wrong. It is interesting that one student (FY) claims to have read essays by other students, which would be, in itself, a breach of AI.

> I did suspect there were people that paid to have their essays done, after reading some of them. (FY)
>
> I would have thought they know they've cheated, and they know they won't be able to write a second one. They must know they can't weasel their way out of it (GN)

These attitudes towards cheating are consistent with the 'fundamental attribution error' (Ross, 1977) in which people tend to overstate the influence of personality, but understate the influence of situational factors, to explain the socially unacceptable behaviours of other people. In contrast, the behaviour of the self is attributed more to circumstances and constraints and less to personality traits. Similar patterns have been found in education research (e.g., Bogle, 2000). This could arise from over-attribution of causality to the most salient stimulus (Lassiter et al., 2002). When another person performs an action, the person is at the focus of attention, so the behaviour is attributed to their personality. In contrast, the individual themself is focused on their situation and circumstances, and so would attribute behaviour to these factors.

It is worth considering that the boundary between intentional and non-intentional breach of AI may be blurred. A student may regard their own breach as non-intentional in the sense that it was not planned but arose from carelessness. For example, a student may cut and paste a passage of text, intending to paraphrase it, but then run out of time; they did not plan to run out of time and in this sense their breach was unintentional. It is consistent with the fundamental attribution error that students would forgive their own mistakes as being due to situational factors but regard the same mistakes in others as intentional.

Self-presentation: Some students indicated concern about being negatively viewed by others. Even students with no breach of AI were anxious about the hypothetical prospect of being judged.

> … the thing is, I had to book a day off work, I had to give him (my boss) the letter to say that I had a breach of regulations at university as he wanted to know why I was off … I'm pretty sure it got around. (EY)
>
> Mortified! Just mortified. Because I'm a very honest person and it would be very innocent. I would hate people to think I copied anything even if it was a mistake. (GN)
>
> I'd be worrying about all sorts of things… like Oh my God they must think I'm a cheat. I don't want people thinking that of me. (HN)

These comments suggest that the attempt to make a good impression on other people by displaying only positive self-relevant information (Schlenker & Pontari, 2012), could be leveraged to encourage students to avoid breaches of AI. Positive self-presentation enables the individual to retain social rewards and avoid social penalties (Baumeister, 1982).

The sub-themes of (un)intentionality and self-presentation suggest that perhaps students could be encouraged to think about how their behaviour might be viewed by others. Though they may regard their own breach of AI as unintentional, they could be asked to realise that other people could not be so certain. If students were to take a step back and view their own behaviours objectively, they might realise there was a potential problem. Then their motive for positive self-presentation could encourage them to devote more time and attention to avoiding a breach of AI.

Theme 3: Understanding

A key aspect of promoting academic integrity is providing information to students regarding how to avoid a breach. There were mixed feelings about whether the information provided had resulted in a good understanding of AI. Some students expressed confidence in their ability to avoid a breach, although their confidence was not absolute and there was still anxiety about the possibility of making a mistake.

> So yeah, I think I understand the rules quite well (confident sounding).
> I'm… I'm well, I'd probably say about 80% confident because like I said I do always, you know, make sure I reference everything. (DN)
>
> I'm pretty confident! I'm very confident because I'm honest but I'm paranoid that I might have done something by mistake… so yeah very confident (GN)

Other students were still confused about what constitutes plagiarism. A key point was confusing over the difference between poor referencing and plagiarism:

> Uhm, I think there's a bit of confusion between what is poor referencing and what is plagiarism. (BY)

> … all these words like plagiarism and stuff like that I guess I'm not really aware what they actually meant yeah… or they should give examples of what it would it (plagiarism) be…(EY)
>
> I don't even think I know what the rules are (FY)
>
> Even I'm confused in my final year, all I know is don't have any similarity, but I don't know what else to look out for anymore (HN)

Several students appreciated access to Turnitin, a similarity detection software facility, to check their work against other sources. Early submission was also mentioned as good practice because it allows time to rewrite problematic sections.

> Turnitin is there and you can check your similarity … it alerts students if there are some parts in their work that you know… are massively highlighted then they have the opportunity to, you know, change it, and lower their similarity score. (DN)
>
> Well, I use Turnitin properly now (laughing) and I submit early. I don't play around with that now. I don't, I've not procrastinated for a while now, so basically, I submit early check it (on Turnitin). (EY)
>
> Well first of all I make sure I use own my words and I submit early… and I go look at my similarity. If there is like one sentence in there that's highlighted, I change it. I check the percentage. (FY)

The lack of confidence and confusion around what constitutes plagiarism is consistent with previous research suggesting that students' understanding may be limited (e.g., Bretag, 2014; Busch & Bilgin, 2014; Chen & Chou, 2017). The students who breached AI regulations had received all the same guidance as those who did not, but it did not appear to have been incorporated into their practice. This might reflect an early stage of learning, sometimes known as "unconscious ignorance". Students often lack metacognitive ability (Penn, 2019) and fail to recognise when their level of understanding is inadequate. Hence, they do not seek out sources of guidance to enhance their competence. According to the Dunning Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) the students whose understanding is most lacking may have the least insight into their shortfall in comprehension. The likelihood of a breach of AI has been associated with lower levels of understanding of AI (Gullifer & Tyson, 2004) or poorer understanding of institutional policies (e.g., Jordan, 2001).

These observations suggest the provision of specific examples, and access to similarity detection software, would be helpful in communicating to students what constitutes plagiarism, the most common breach of academic integrity. Boehm et al. (2009) note that specific examples are helpful in promoting academic integrity and enabling students to develop their understanding. This would add a concrete level of information to the general explanations of AI. Along similar lines, Kwong et al. (2010) noted that breaches of AI can arise when

instructions from tutors are not entirely clear to students, which reinforces the utility of providing concrete examples, especially regarding complex cases (Childers & Bruton, 2016).

The question of how much information to provide, and when it should be offered, received mixed responses. Some students took the view that there was too much emphasis on AI, and it was repeated too often, while others tended to the view that refreshing the information was useful.

> … we learn it in first year you know they talk about it throughout so you know I don't think any student could say they've never heard about it. So yeah, it's drummed into our heads, isn't it? (DN)
>
> Maybe if they put a bit more emphasis on you know… on what is important instead of overloading us with all the information. (EY)
>
> Honestly it felt like every other week was a lecture on plagiarism. People stopped showing up, people stopped caring, people switched off! (FY)
>
> It was rammed home to us in foundation year. I don't even know if we had a whole lecture covering it, we must have done… but they always went into great detail about it. (GN)
>
> … spend 15 minutes on it each year as a refresher. Tell us what plagiarism is and what you are not supposed to do because it is easy to forget. (HN)

These varied opinions suggest that perhaps the principles of AI don't need to be repeated for every assignment. It could be sufficient to issue a brief reminder and to refer students to the location of specific examples. Simple repetition on its own seems likely to be less helpful than timely and targeted information.

Theme 4: Fairness

There were mixed feelings on the question of fairness and consistency. Some thought the process was fair, and that it was right to act against students who had breached AI. Regarding the consequences, some students agreed these were fair though others had dissenting views.

> (interviewer) Do you think the penalty was too severe? (AY) It was alright
>
> I think it's a good thing, because obviously it's not fair, you know to plagiarise and steal somebody else's hard work, so I think it is good that you to go through that process... Um, yes because you know you shouldn't be doing it (serious tone). You shouldn't be plagiarising or copying other people's work. It's not fair, and it's not fair to yourself like why you would want to do any kind of course and then cheat like… that means that you know at the end of the day, you can't really take the credit for

> the work that's been done…because it was done by somebody else. So yeah, I think the rules are fair. (DN)
>
> … they're giving somebody options, which if it was a genuine mistake then that person has the option to rewrite rather than just being kicked off the course straight away… so yeah that's fair (GN)
>
> (interviewer) Do you think the regulations are applied consistently and fairly? (CY) When I spoke to my friends, some had made similar mistakes, but they only had like 5 per cent taken off their original grades. So not at all. (CY)

The perception of uneven treatment is of some concern as students' motivation and engagement could be adversely affected by perceived lack of fairness in the AI process. For example, Chory-Assad (2002) reported that college students' perceptions of procedural justice were correlated with their motivation for learning. Of course, we do not know whether CY's friends had indeed submitted work with a similar degree of similarity. CY may be underestimating his own level of similarity to published work, perhaps as an example of unconscious ignorance (e.g., Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Penn, 2019) or as an act of self-presentation. This comment does, however, point to the need to maintain every appearance of consistency and to be explicit that this is an important aspect of the process.

Turning to the consequences, and the appropriateness of the penalty, the standard practice on the first occasion is to ask the student to resubmit the component of assessment, for which the mark awarded is capped at the pass mark. Students thought that the penalty should vary depending on whether the breach of AI was intentional or not. It is worth noting that the standard approach depends on an assumption of unintentionality, and there is more severe penalty where intentionality is obvious, e.g., a purchased essay. Some also thought there should be a lower penalty in the first year and a higher penalty at a more advanced level of study.

> I think if it is an accident and it's a one off and you can clearly see that it was an accident within the work. You know, maybe just a little slap on the wrist … But if you can see that you know the work is clearly being copied from somebody else, or somebody else has done it, then yeah, I think you know the punishment should be different because you're actively choosing to do that (DN)
>
> Yeah, if it was an accident of plagiarism then yeah definitely but it's just how would they prove that? It is very hard to prove that I'd say but if they could prove it, then yeah 100% they should be treated differently. They shouldn't get punished severely. (HN)
>
> Obviously the higher up it is, when the marks count maybe that's when you need more severe talking to … maybe just not so harsh to begin with, gently nurture

> us. Yeah but, if you're higher up a level, and you're plagiarising, then there's something clearly not right. (EY)

This is consistent with the findings of Gullifer and Tyson (2004) and of Newton (2016) whose participants regarded the penalties for plagiarism as too severe in the absence of deliberate intent. Indeed, there is a common belief in society that premeditated intent should be considered when deciding on the level of a penalty. Some students even appear to equate a breach of academic integrity with deliberate intent, and in their interpretation an accidental breach is not really a breach at all. It is debatable whether an institution should take this view, but it seems clear that students' acceptance of the principles and practices of AI may depend on the application of lesser penalties for a breach that is not clearly intentional.

The view that students at lower levels of study should be penalised less severely presumably depends on the assumption that these students have had less opportunity to develop full understanding of AI. This assumption is supported by the findings of Locquiao and Ives (2020) and of Newton (2016) that students at the start of their higher education lack understanding of AI. The belief that new students require more nurturing is an intuitively appealing view and may be worthy of consideration.

Theme 5: Self-Regulation

Students in higher education are expected to be self-directed learners who take charge of their learning strategies. In order to set and meet goals, students must take responsibility for their learning and be motivated to improve themselves (English & Kitsantas, 2013). The process of being able to delay gratification, pursue goals and avoid procrastination all while dealing with the constant demands of studying requires self-regulation and engagement with support services (Rahat & Ilhan, 2016). Other studies concur that students with strong self-regulation tend to have a better grasp on time management and are more inclined to double-check their work (McAllister & Watkins, 2012; Pintrich, 2004).

The interviews in the current study illustrate two of the key concepts involved in self-regulated learning according to Thibodeaux et al. (2017). These two concepts, discussed separately, are engaging with relevant support and coping style.

Engaging with support: A self-regulated learner is aware of their weaknesses and typically engages with resources to strengthen their academic abilities (Thibodeaux et al., 2017). In the present study, although students acknowledged the provision of support, they did not use the services fully, sometimes due to poor time management.

> I think that resources are there; I just didn't use them ….
> (interviewer) Were you given sufficient information about academic integrity?
> (student) I probably didn't have time to read it (BY)

> I think all the services are there, it's up to the individual to manage their time and use them because everything is there you know … you can send off your work and someone can check it. I think I just never used it. I probably should have or could have but didn't…probably due to lack of time (DN)
>
> Uhm, yes, the support is pretty good, I just never use it. (GN)

These findings resemble those of McNaught and Beal (2012) who found that although students agreed that the academic support was good, they did not always engage with it. These students who didn't make use of the support offered are perhaps not displaying the most effective learning strategies. Utilising educational support programmes is considered an effective learning strategy as it can improve academic performance, reduce the risk of plagiarism, and decrease student drop-out rates (Peach, 2005). However, research shows that providers can struggle to engage many students on these programmes. Users of such programmes are frequently high-ability students looking to improve their grades, rather than those who are low-ability and at risk of difficulty (McNaught & McIntyre, 2011). The reasons for this are unknown though, it could be attributed to a lack of confidence among first-generation students in asking for support (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007). To apply effective learning strategies, the student must be able to assess their academic competencies; without this, students find it hard to understand where they need help (Thibodeaux et al., 2017).

This analysis suggests it might be beneficial to highlight to students the match between their learning needs and the support offered. Flexibility of provision will also be important to students who have significant time constraints, for example, by reason of caring responsibilities or paid work. This shifts the emphasis from penalty to enabling students to enhance their academic skills, using the intervention to promote students' learning and confidence in writing assignments. The focus turns to providing support to students and helping them to develop their meta-cognitive skills – what they need to know and how they can learn it (Bertram Gallant, 2017). This proposes a policy of "sustainable reform" (Sutherland-Smith, 2010) rather than retribution.

Coping style: Turning to the issue of coping styles, there are clearly differences among the students in this study. Coping is defined as the ability to respond and adapt to the heightened arousal that comes with unfavourable situations (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016). When faced with hardship, a person may employ either an adaptive or maladaptive style of coping. Problem-focus or task-focus is considered to be an adaptive style of coping and is associated with academic success. Emotion-focus and avoidance-focus are considered to be maladaptive coping styles and are negatively associated with academic achievement (ansarisadr & Shirazi, 2022; Khedmatian et al., 2022; Valenti & Faraci, 2021).

In an academic context an *adaptive* coping style (problem-focused style) includes the tendency to engage positively with feedback and make plans to improve based on experience. There was some evidence of an adaptive coping style in students who had been through the

breach process; they resolved in the future to use Turnitin, manage their time well, and take personal responsibility for their work.

> I'm not complacent now about it I'm always checking you know. I check everything as much as I can. I'm very careful about everything you know … Well, I use Turnitin properly now (laughing) and I submit early ... I mean it is up to me. I mean, at the end of day, I didn't have an argument because it is up to me to look and understand it, I suppose. (EY)
>
> Well first of all I make sure I use own my words and I submit early… and I go look at my similarity. If there is like one sentence in there that's highlighted, I change it. I check the percentage ... So, for me personally it was important to do my own work. (FY)
>
> Clearly now I understand it is wrong … Now I know that I need to paraphrase his definition (BY)

There was also evidence of students who had been through the breach process becoming demotivated, not accepting personal responsibility, not engaging with the support available to them, and not enhancing their understanding of AI; these are all examples of avoidance. This is of concern because of the risk of non-continuation for these students.

> I asked for a delay in my next course because I just felt really demotivational … I think that resources are there; I just didn't use them. (BY)
>
> Overall, the process was negative. I wasted my time, to say the least. (CY)
>
> I don't even think I know what the rules are (FY)

There is evidence that students who have adaptive coping skills are more likely to have high academic ability (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019) though cause and effect are difficult to determine. It could be either that the employment of an adaptive coping style leads to greater academic success, perhaps through perseverance and engagement in problem-solving (Moore et al., 2011) or academic success encourages a student to employ an adaptive coping style. Students with an adaptive coping style also tend to have stronger self-regulation (De la Fuente et al., 2015) and students with stronger self-regulation were found to be more likely to avoid plagiarising as they tend to be more aware of regulations within their university (McAllister & Watkins, 2012; also Jordan, 2001).

Limitations of the study

Most of the breaches of academic integrity handled in this institution are cases of plagiarism, and this was the case for all the students interviewed in this study. Other issues may pertain to the purchase of essays, or the impersonation of a student in an exam, which could not be seen as unintentional.

Eight students were interviewed from two schools within one institution of higher education. This is considered to be an adequate sample size for an IPA study (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Nonetheless, it should be noted that the implications may not apply equally to other institutions.

The students in this study do not represent the typical student population and over-represent mature students and first-generation students. Consequently, they may have relatively weak understanding of how to navigate the rules and regulations of higher education. Some themes may have been exaggerated as a result. For example, the emotions of anxiety, shock, and intimidation, are theorised to depend on unfamiliarity with higher education and a lack of confidence. Similarly, the tendency to catastrophise may be related to a sense of inadequacy and perception of a lack of fit in higher education. First-generation students may also have a weaker understanding of AI and weaker skills of self-regulation. Finally, lack of confidence may deter first-generation students form asking for help.

The attribution of the findings to psychological concepts of self-regulated learning, coping styles, attribution bias, catastrophising, etc, are all inferred, as students were not asked directly about these concepts. These various theories are advanced as likely explanations for the attitudes and beliefs advanced by students.

The participants in the present study mostly defined their ethnicity as White which is not representative of the population at the institution. It may be that students of colour were less confident about coming forward to be interviewed. The preponderance of students at higher levels of study may also stem from increased academic confidence of students who had already successfully navigated one or more years of study in higher education. Students at early stages of their courses might have been less confident about taking part in a research study. This would suggest that the entire population of students at the present institution might experience more negative emotion, less effective self-regulation, and poorer understanding of AI compared to the sample in this study.

Action Points

The following action points are suggested for institutions in general to consider. Some may not be applicable in particular cases but all would appear to have broad, general relevance in HE.

Students should be treated as though their breach of AI was unintentional wherever plausible. A suggestion of intentionality could lead some students to employ a defensive coping style, or a tendency to withdraw, which would hamper their ability to benefit from the intervention and decrease their likelihood of continuing to engage strongly with their course of study. This is important, as the retention of students is increasingly a priority for many institutions of higher education.

Explicit confirmation of the maximum penalty that can be awarded would help to avoid the phenomenon of catastrophising. Support after the intervention could also be offered to promote re-engagement and to enhance the perception that the institution cares for the individual student.

Some students would benefit from specific help with time management and self-regulatory strategies in general. The assumption that adult students are all competent self-motivated learners may overlook systematic and individual factors that hamper the development of effective learning strategies. Students could be offered guidance on effective studying at an early stage in their programme of study.

To assist in understanding of academic integrity regulations, and where the boundaries lie, specific examples of work that is or is not acceptable could be offered. This would be of particular help to students who are less familiar with the standards of higher education. Clarification of the difference between plagiarism and poor referencing would also be beneficial. Similarity detection tools should be made available, or even compulsory, and students should be taught how to use them, for all assessed work.

The content, and timing, of information about academic integrity should be carefully planned. Overloading of information can lead to less effective learning and to disengagement. Key points should be identified for the presentation of focused material with clear examples. Students at risk of breaching academic integrity could be signposted to academic support. The personal approach has been shown to work in previous research (e.g., McNaught & McIntyre, 2011) and the use of motivational words like “aspire” may be more effective.

Conclusions and key themes

The potential for a breach of academic integrity is a concern to many students and a cause of considerable anxiety. Clear guidance and examples to inform students would offer reassurance that an accidental breach can be avoided.

The principles of academic integrity have broad acceptance and there is agreement that breach of AI should have some consequence. It is important to distinguish between intentional and unintentional breaches of academic integrity, and to be clear that unintentional breaches are dealt with less harshly, to promote acceptance of policy and regulation.

Students are clearly concerned about self-presentation and the ‘fundamental attribution error’ (Ross, 1977) was apparent. Personal attributes were invoked to explain cheating by ‘others’ whereas breaches of academic integrity by selves or close friends were justified and explained by contextual reasons. To overcome this, students could be encouraged to think about how their work would look to other people.

Students vary in their self-regulation, particularly in their engagement with academic support, their understanding of academic integrity principles and policy, and generally in their

acceptance of responsibility for their own learning. Some guidance and assistance in developing the skills to adopt self-regulated learning would be of benefit. To the extent that it is possible to assist students in developing effective coping styles, this could also be of benefit.

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