

# **Examining Student Perceptions of Academic Irregularities and Essay Writing Services**

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# Why is academic integrity important?

- Increase in academic integrity concerns in recent years (Hu & Lei 2012; Newton, 2015; Mostrous & Kenber, 2016).
  - Particular concern over the electronic educational resources available to students and also the increasing availability of resources designed to aid students avoid plagiarism detection (Kauffman & Young 2015; O'Mally & Roberts, 2012).
  - High potential cost to for students and staff
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# How common are academic integrity issues?

- Difficult to pin down!
  - Type of issue examined
  - Reliance on staff detection rates and self-report data from students
- Overall stats range from 3% of students cheating to around 80%
- Perception of increasing rates in recent years (Newton, 2015)
  - Students see exam cheating as clearly wrong
  - Copying and pasting material very common (and sometimes endorsed)
  - Very common to see collaborative learning
  - Possible link to 'commodification of education'

# Academic Integrity Strategies

- Two possible strategies – rule compliance and academic integrity
- Rule compliance strategies:
  - Strong focus on discipline
  - High costs for problematic behaviour
  - Very limited focus on development or pedagogy
  - Bureaucratic approach
  - Very mixed evidence on effectiveness and staff more hesitant to enact
- Academic integrity strategies:
  - Errors are seen as part of pedagogic development
  - Student-focused approach
  - Associated with Honor Codes
  - Strong discipline for repeated issues

# Student motivations for academic irregularities

- Based on my experience of ~300 School Academic Irregularity Panels (SAIPs) at NTU, three main motivations:
  - Deliberate attempts to cheat
  - Lack of training / skills / awareness
  - Personal circumstances
- Two studies undertaken:
  - Exploring the specific psychological predictors of academic integrity
  - Exploring student perceptions of custom-essay writing websites



# Study 1

- **Aim:** To create a model of predictor variables that can explain perceptions of academic integrity among UK HE students.
- **Criterion variable:**
  - Understanding academic integrity
- **Predictor variables:**
  - Academic Expectations
  - Academic Self-Efficacy
  - Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation
  - Student Attitude towards Grades
  - Academic Procrastination
  - Time Management
  - **Neutralisation Attitude**

# Neutralisation

Table 1. Method of neutralization theory

Method	Explanation	Example
Denial of responsibility	The offender will propose that they were victims of circumstance or were forced into situations beyond their control	"It wasn't my fault"
Denial of injury	The offender insists that their actions did not cause any harm or damage	"It wasn't a big deal. They could afford the loss"
Denial of the victim	The offender believes that the victim deserved whatever action the offender committed.	"They had it coming"
Condemnation of the condemners	The offenders maintain that those who condemn their offense are doing so purely out of spite, or are shifting the blame off of themselves unfairly	"You were just as bad in your day"
Appeal to higher loyalties	The offender suggests that his or her offence was for the greater good, with long term consequences that would justify their actions, such as protection of a friend.	"My friends needed me. What was I going to do?"

Meng, C. L., Othman, J., D'Silva, J. L., & Omar, Z. (2014). Influence of neutralization attitude in academic dishonesty among undergraduates. *International Education Studies*, 7(6), 66.

# Methodology

- Data collected via online survey using established psychometric measures (124 item survey).
- Sample composed of 216 participants in total:
  - 27 male; 189 females
  - Age 18-50 years (Mean= 20.45, *SD*= 5.40)
  - 92.6% (N=200) UK students, 7.4% (N=16) international students
  - 94% undergraduates (N=203). 6% postgraduates (N=13)

# Results

## Overall model's prediction of Attitudes Towards Academic Integrity

Model	R square	Significance (p)
Attitudes to Academic Integrity	.437	0.00

## The unstandardized and standardised regression coefficients for the variables in the model

Variable	B	SE	Beta	p
Academic expectations	.22	.10	.12	<b>.04</b>
Academic self-efficacy	-.12	.08	-.11	.15
Intrinsic motivation	-.09	.34	-.02	.79
Extrinsic motivation	-.19	.23	-.04	.42
Attitudes to grades	-.17	.61	-.02	.78
Procrastination	.32	.10	.21	<b>&lt;.01</b>
Time management	-.06	.12	-.04	.59
Neutralisation	.86	.09	.52	<b>&lt;.001</b>

*Please note. All significant values <0.05 are presented in bold*

# Discussion

- Neutralisation a very strong predictor of negative attitudes towards academic integrity
- Academic expectations (pressure to succeed) and academic procrastination are weaker, but still significant, predictors of negative attitudes towards academic integrity
- Limited predictive value of other variables, although self-efficacy has some association compared to other variables

# Study 2 - Custom-essay writing websites

- **Variables:**

- Academic Self-Efficacy, Academic Procrastination, Neutralisation Attitude, Attitudes to Academic Integrity

- **Custom-essay writing websites**

- Frequency of use (“How often have you...”)
- Acceptability of using websites (“How acceptable is it for you...”)
- Examined student’s own use and their perceptions of other students using the services

- **Different behaviours:**

- Obtaining freely available work
  - Using proof-reading services
  - Buying work to use as a reference
  - Buying work to submit as your own
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# Study 2

- Data collected via online survey using established psychometric measures (107 item survey).
- Sample composed of 121 participants in total:
  - 18 male; 100 female; 3 non-binary
  - Age 18-39 years (Mean= 21.10, *SD*= 4.42)
  - 88.4% (N=107) UK students, 11.6%(N=14) international students
  - 80.2% undergraduates (N=97). 19.8% postgraduates (N=24)

# Results

## Overall model's prediction of Attitudes Towards Academic Integrity

Model	R square	Significance (p)
Attitudes to Academic Integrity	.578	0.00

## The unstandardized and standardised regression coefficients for the variables in the model

Variable	B	SE	Beta	p
Academic self-efficacy	-.41	.18	-.20	<b>.026</b>
Procrastination	.19	.13	.08	.35
Neutralisation	.86	.11	.57	<b>&lt;.001</b>

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*Please note. All significant values <0.05 are presented in bold*

# Have you ever used a custom essay-writing company to:

Obtain work that is freely available to use as a guide for your own studies?



Pay for proof reading your work?

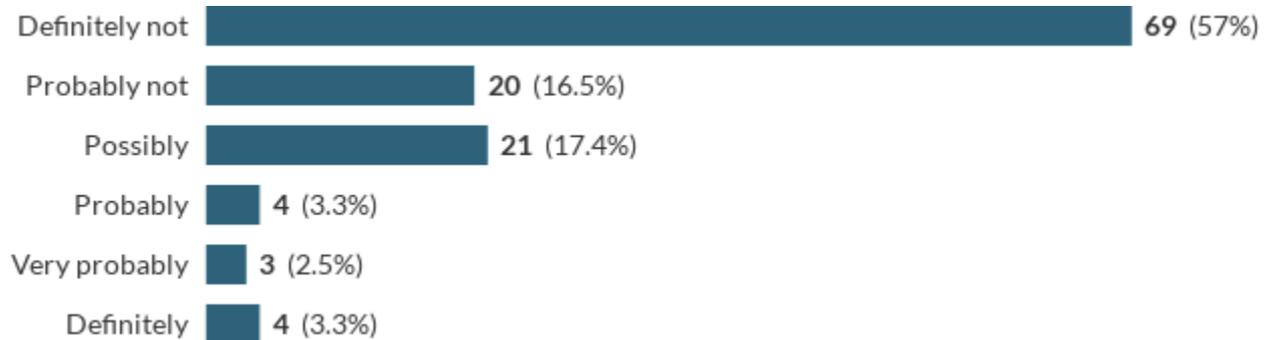
Pay for work to use as a guide for your own studies?

Pay for work you then submitted as your own?



# How likely do you think it is that you will use custom essay-writing companies in the future for the following reasons:

Obtain work that is freely available to use as a guide for your own studies?



Pay for proof reading your work?

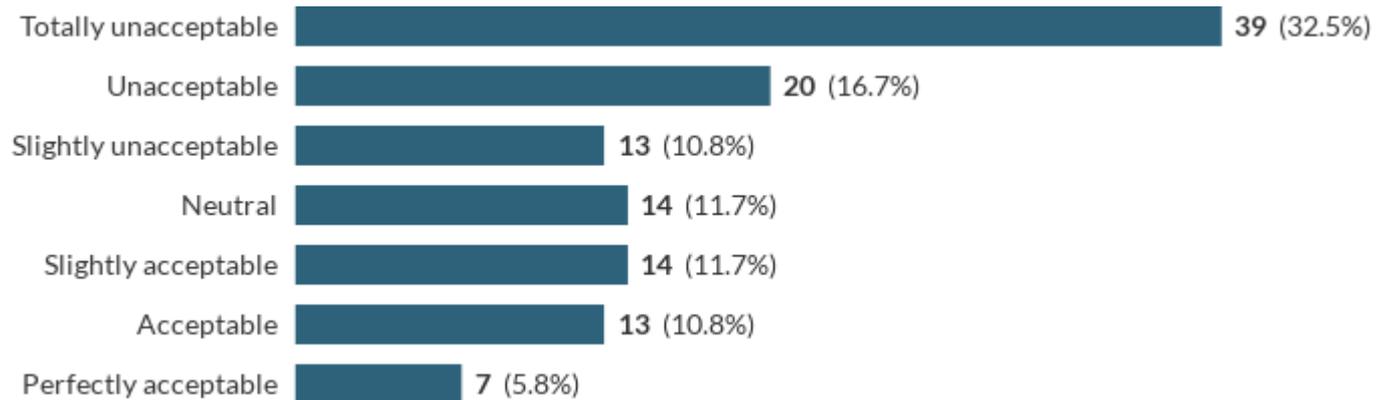
Pay for work to use as a guide for your own studies?

Pay for work you then submitted as your own?

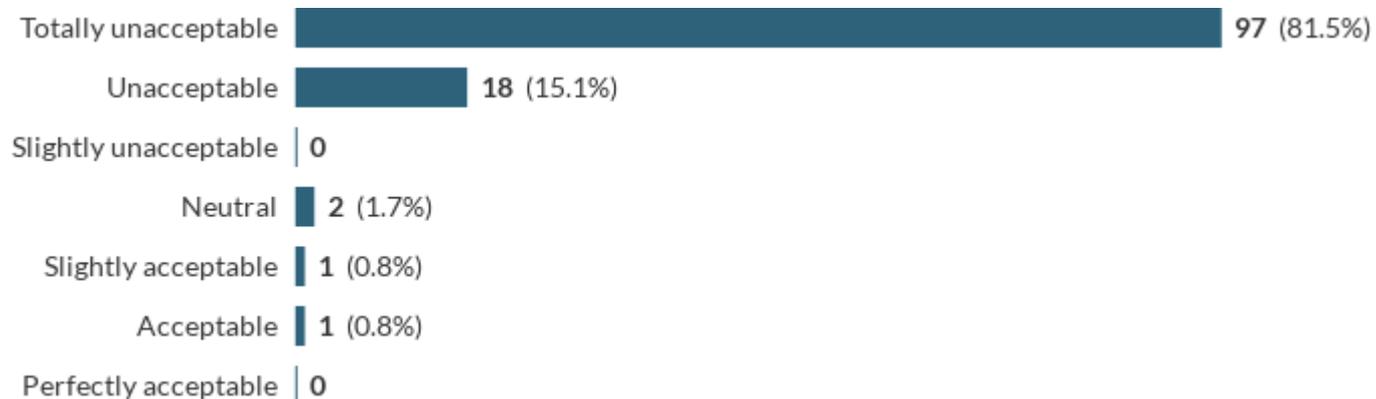


# How acceptable (in terms of issues like honesty, integrity and fairness to other students) do you think it is for you to use custom essay-writing companies to:

Obtain work that is freely available to use as a guide for your own studies?



Pay for work you then submitted as your own?



# Perceptions of different services available on custom-essay writing websites

Variable	Mean	SD
Obtaining freely available work as a reference	13.73	5.88
Paying for proof-read	12.85	5.70
Paying for work as a reference	10.60	5.14
Paying for work to submit	5.78	2.73

Variable	F (df)	SD
Service type	108.87 (3, 360)	<.001

# Perceptions of different users and uses of custom-essay writing websites

Variable	Mean	SD
Using websites for yourself	9.17	4.91
Other students using websites	10.06	4.99

Variable	Mean	SD
Using work for formative assessments	12.84	3.55
Using work for summative assessments	10.89	3.99

Variable	t(df)	p
Yourself vs. Other students	-3.75 (1, 120)	<.001
Formative vs. Summative assessment	7.86 (1, 120)	<.001

# Results

Overall model's prediction of Attitudes to buying work, and submitting it, from websites

Model	R square	Significance (p)
Attitudes to buying work to submit	.119	0.005

The unstandardized and standardised regression coefficients for the variables in the model

Variable	B	SE	Beta	p
Academic self-efficacy	0.07	0.05	.16	.18
Procrastination	0.04	0.04	.11	.33
Neutralisation	0.01	0.04	.03	.83
Attitudes to academic integrity	0.07	0.03	.33	<b>&lt;.01</b>

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*Please note. All significant values <0.05 are presented in bold*

# Summary of findings

- Neutralisation is the key predictor of attitudes towards academic integrity
- More limited predictive value of procrastination, academic expectations and academic self-efficacy
- Student perceptions of custom-essay writing websites are generally negative:
  - Using freely available work as a reference received neutral perceptions
  - Buying work to submit as your own very negatively perceived
  - Using proof-reading services and buying work for reference purposes seen as somewhat more acceptable
- Perceptions of using custom-essay writing websites slightly more positive for 'other' students and for formative work

# Implications for policy and practice

- Procrastination:
  - Difficult issue to address – very common coping mechanism!
  - Time management training in academic tutorials
  - Highlight the effects of unexpected issues and emergency planning
  - Delivering clear and consistent information about NEC policies
- Academic self-efficacy
  - Highlighting the developmental process of education
  - Clearly summarising what skills students have already developed
  - Explaining assessment criteria in a clear manner
  - Explaining how the assessments build on student's existing skills
  - Confidence building exercises in academic tutorials

# Implications for policy and practice

- Neutralisation

- Highlight the issue of neutralisation and the problems with this reasoning
- Specifically address the issue of 'everyone else is doing it'
  - Offer information on the impact of academic integrity
  - Highlight issues of personal responsibility and ownership
- Alter perceptions of the cost-benefit analysis
  - Make the costs appear high
  - Highlight the longer term impacts on development of skills
  - Highlight the severe penalties for repeated academic irregularities

# Implications for policy and practice

- Custom essay-writing websites
  - Ongoing challenge in higher education
  - QAA Guidance on this emphasises a strong focus on assessment design and regulation
- Directly addressing neutralisation will be beneficial here:
  - Marketing strategies used by the websites
  - Targeting behaviours seen as more acceptable than purchasing work
  - Mythbuster pack developed for students
- Beware of the 'Streisand effect' (aka the 'Ryan Giggs effect')



**Thank you for listening!**

**Any questions?**