



Historic trends in academic misconduct, specifically plagiarism.

By UNIwise, Oliver Kjøller & Rasmus Blok

UNIwise have compiled a series of white papers focused on examining trends in academic misconduct and seeking to inform and raise awareness of its evolving patterns.

The information presented in these papers will serve a general educational purpose as well as provide knowledge and draw attention towards ways to counter academic misconduct.

Introduction

Academic misconduct remains a serious and fundamental issue for educational institutions, as it threatens the very foundation of them both in terms of securing and providing learning and as an institution validating and certifying that learning.

This white paper establishes a quantitative foundation of the problem of plagiarism, the most common action of academic misconduct. This is done by compiling data from several countries, focusing on trends within Scandinavian nations (Sweden, Norway, Denmark) and the United Kingdom. By identifying key quantitative trends in academic misconduct, specifically plagiarism, this white paper lays a foundation for further research into subsequent white papers of why and how academic misconduct is carried out.

This white paper first examines data from Sweden, Norway, Denmark and finishes off with the United Kingdom. At the end of the white paper a summary of the findings will be presented, together with key and common trends highlighted.

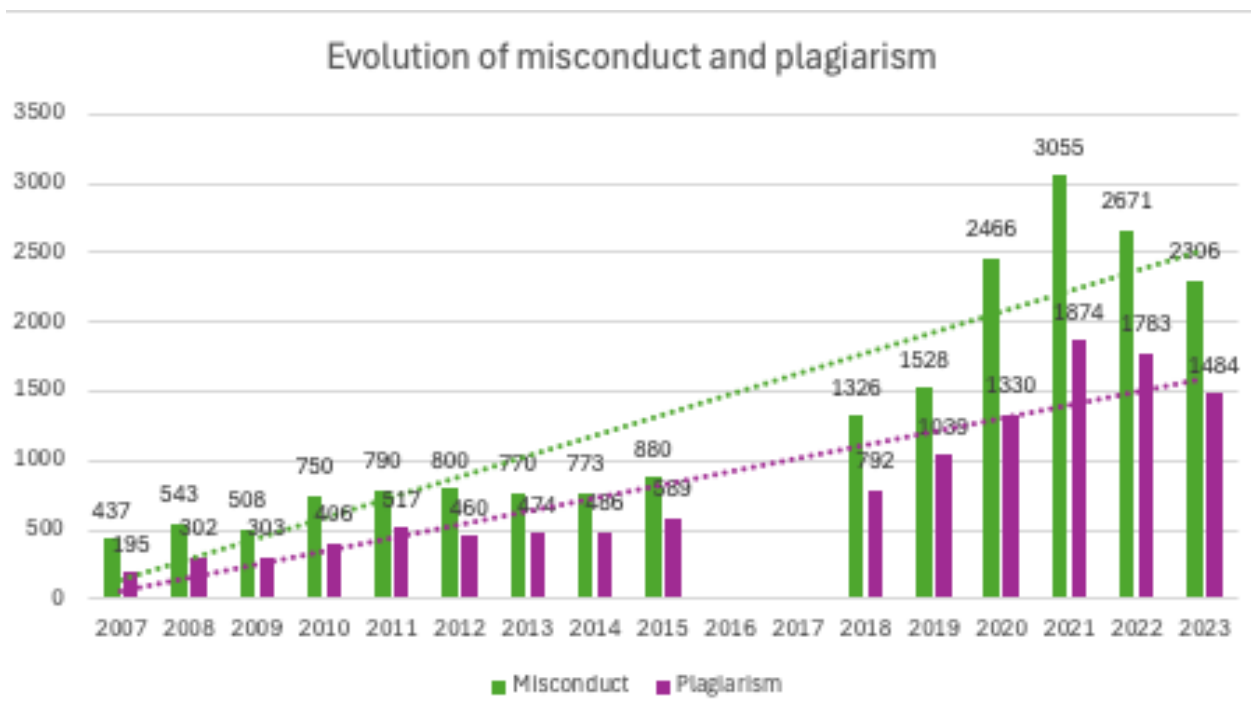
Plagiarism as main contributor to academic misconduct

The topic of the white papers produced will primarily focus on plagiarism. However, we were unsuccessful in attaining specific data regarding plagiarism for all countries. For this reason, it was necessary to rely on yearly disciplinary cases against students, as these are more frequently reported. As a general trend, plagiarism tends to be the biggest contributor to cases of academic misconduct, by a significant amount.

Sweden

Every year since 2001, UKÄ, the Swedish Higher Education Authority, has published their findings on academic misconduct. The organisation reports on the yearly cases of punishments handed out by universities and other higher educational institutions. In the report, the cases are separated into six different groups, these being: usage of cheat sheets and unauthorized aids, unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, document falsification, general disturbance and sexual or ethnic harassment. Given the purpose of this paper, only plagiarism and total cases of academic misconduct are presented.

The reporting started from the year 2000 and has continued yearly since, with the exception of the years 2016-2017, where data was not requested from universities. The report reflects clear rising patterns in academic misconduct and plagiarism. When graphing the numbers of yearly disciplinary cases against students, as well as plagiarism, the data is represented as follows:



The graph can be divided into four different stages:

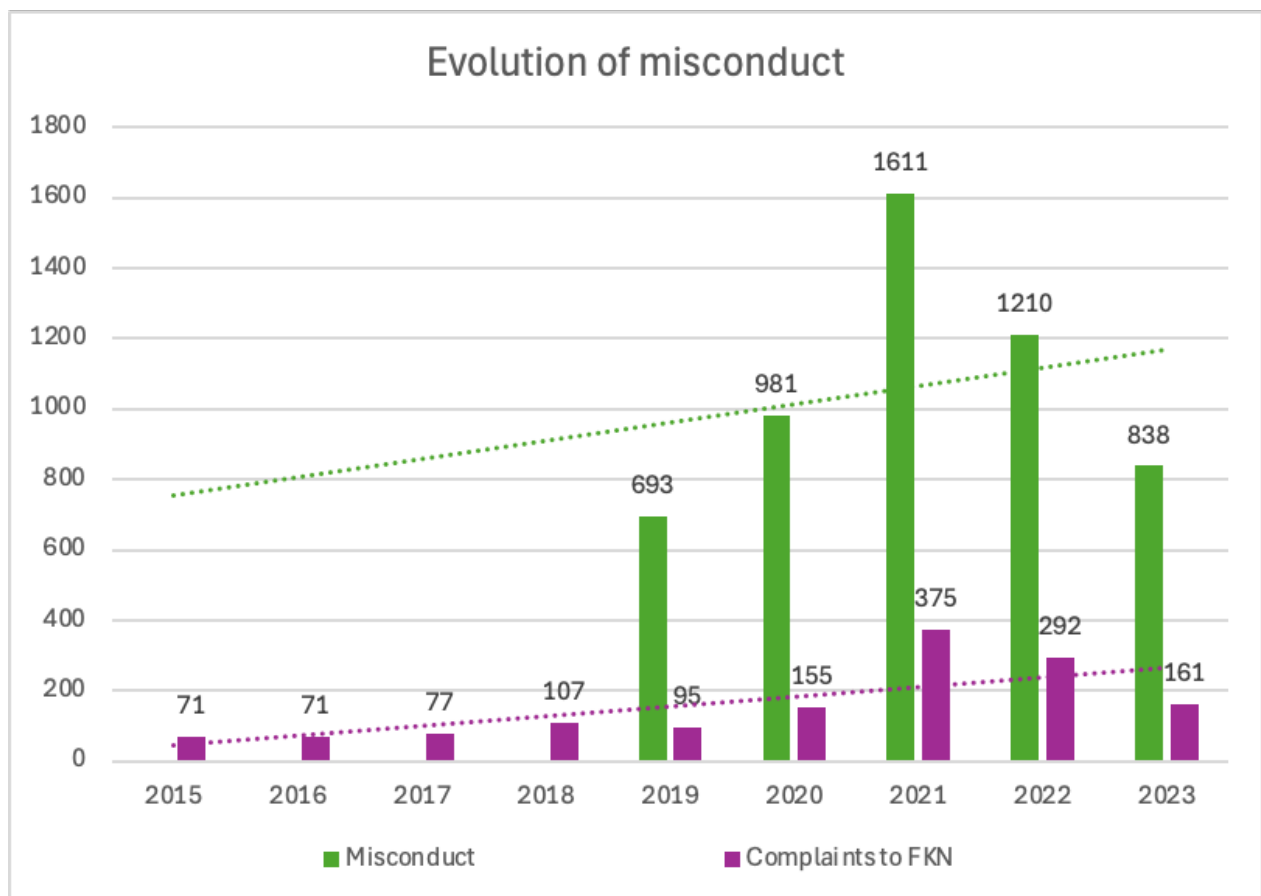
1. A steady but modest increase from 2007 to 2015. Starting at 437 cases of misconduct in 2007 and rising to 880 in 2015.
2. A significant increase from 880 in 2015 to 1528 in 2019. A 74% increase over a four-year period even without the 2016 and 2017 numbers. This indicates that even before COVID-19, there was already a significant upward trend in cases of yearly disciplinary actions and plagiarism.
3. An extreme increase from 2019 to 2021 when COVID was at its highest and many educational institutions were forced to hold exams online and/or from home, misconduct reached an all-time high. In 2021, the amount of misconduct is over 7 times what it was in 2007, for plagiarism the number is almost 10 times higher.
4. A slight decline from 2021 to 2023 can be examined. With COVID and lockdown ending in 2022, misconduct and plagiarism has also fallen. Despite the data showing the level falling, Sweden still has not returned to the same levels as pre-pandemic. With the ending of lockdown in 2022 the expected result for 2023 might have been a steep decline to numbers more like 2018 or 2019, but this is not the case.

When examining the reported data, it reveals that plagiarism is the biggest contributor to disciplinary cases against students by a significant margin. Over the examined period plagiarism accounts for roughly 60% of the examined cases. Given the extensive data reported in Sweden, it may be fairly assumed that plagiarism is similarly the main contributor of academic misconduct in those countries where only misconduct is broadly reported.

Norway

In 2024, a report was published based on a request from the Norwegian Ministry of Education, with the purpose of assessing cases of student misconduct. This report was prompted by an expected increase in cases of misconduct, as a result of the online exams during COVID, igniting public debate and interest. Unfortunately, the published report only gathered data from universities on misconduct back to 2019 and is therefore limited in creating longitude statistics. However, in the report the authority also included data from FKN, the Norwegian Complaints Board, as an attempt to get a clearer picture since their data go back to 2015. It is important to note that complaints to FKN are only generated when a student appeals a university's decision, making this data count less significant statistically. However, it can still be used to get an overview of trends.

When graphing the numbers of yearly disciplinary cases against students and the yearly complaints to the Norwegian complaints board, the information is represented as follows:

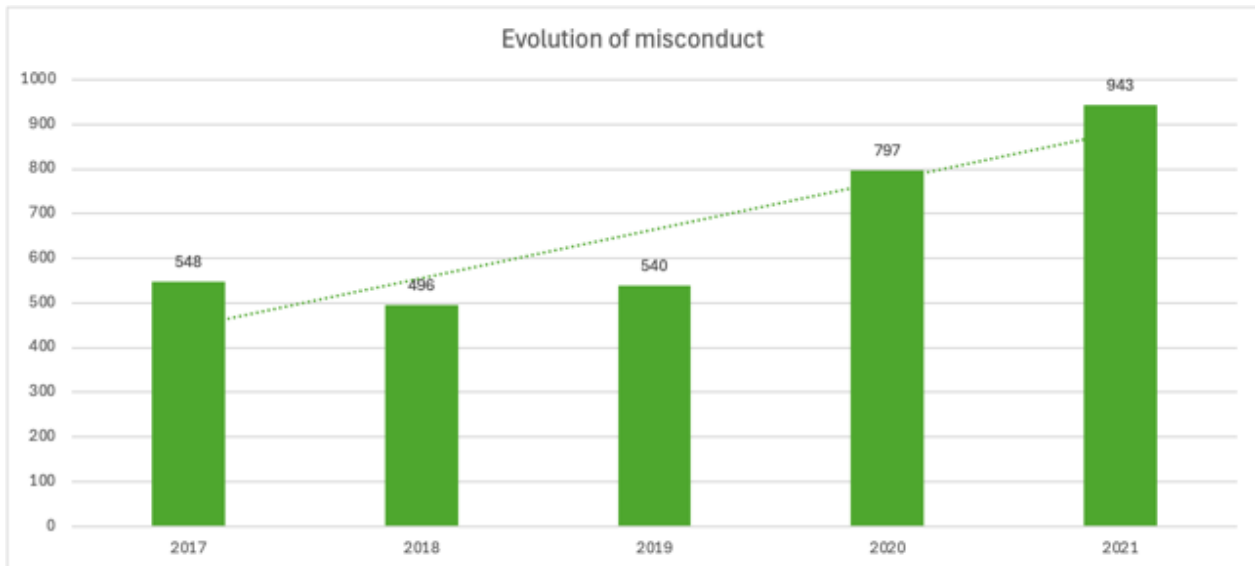


The report also mentions that some cases of misconduct from 2023 are still being handled, and for this reason were not included in the final numbers and represented here. For this reason, it should be assumed that the 2023 number could be higher.

In Norway, COVID-19 also led to a significant increase in the yearly disciplinary cases against students. Although the numbers for 2023 are significantly lower than those for 2022, they remain considerably higher than the pre-COVID figures from 2019, suggesting a rise in academic misconduct. Due to the earlier mentioned correlation between misconduct and plagiarism, this in return should also indicate a rise in plagiarism.

Denmark

Denmark has not officially published their findings in the same way as Sweden or Norway. However, a Danish [article](#) from the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) reached out to different universities and compared the years from 2017 to 2021. When graphing the numbers of yearly disciplinary cases against students the data is represented as follows:



Denmark, just like the other Scandinavian countries, had a rise in academic misconduct. Based on the data, it would be possible to argue that COVID properly was the main driver for the increase, especially considering that from 2017 to 2019 the numbers of cases are quite aligned.

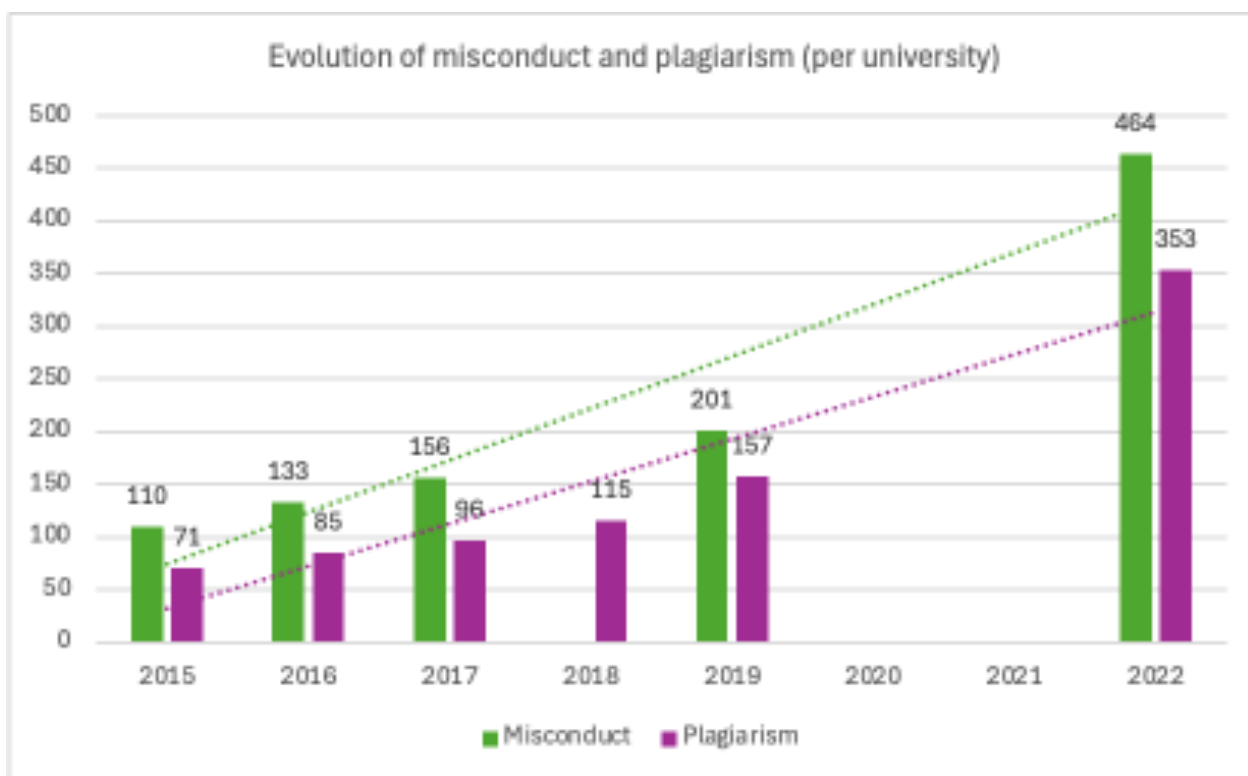
An [article](#) from 2023 asserts that there had been an increase in yearly disciplinary cases at Copenhagen University (KU), from 54 cases in 2017 to 93 in 2023. At Aarhus University (AU), in 2017 there were 163 cases of yearly disciplinary cases as portrayed in this paper from [omnibus](#). In another article from [omnibus](#), it is stated that there were 72 yearly disciplinary cases in the summer and 151 in the winter resulting in 223 cases. A rise from 163 cases in 2017 to 223 cases in 2023. The data from AU and KU in 2023, in combination with the trends from Norway and Sweden, should be a valid indication that academic misconduct is still higher than pre-COVID numbers.

Furthermore, in a different Danish [article](#) from 2018, it is brought forward that plagiarism cases have risen from 2013 to 2017. Based on this it can be assumed that academic misconduct and plagiarism has also been on the rise pre-pandemic.

The United Kingdom

There is no official database compiling statistics regarding academic misconduct in the UK. However, an [investigation from](#) The Times investigated the Russell Group universities and their reported cases of yearly disciplinary cases during COVID. From the article, reported cases of misconduct for 2018 and 2022 can be extracted. The article also contains data regarding plagiarism in 2018, 2019 and 2022. The Guardian likewise published an article in 2018 tracking the reported yearly disciplinary cases from 2015-2017.

The Russell Group is an association of 24 universities in the United Kingdom most of them being among the top-ranked universities in UK and worldwide. The data provided for the years, 2019-2022 are presented as an average per university. To make the two articles comparable, the 2015-2017 numbers have been divided by 24. When graphing the data the following result can be found, noting that data does not exist for 2020 and 2021:



Similar to the Scandinavian countries, there is a massive uptake during COVID for both plagiarism and general misconduct. When looking at pre-COVID numbers, a significant increase can still be seen, for both plagiarism and academic misconduct. For these reasons, an increasing trend of misconduct and plagiarism can be seen clearly.

Emerging trends

Based on the above findings the following trends emerge and can be argued from them:

- 1) Plagiarism is the main reason for academic misconduct
When examining the data from Sweden and the UK, plagiarism and cases of misconduct show very similar trends and seem correlated. For the same reason, it could be fairly assumed that plagiarism is the main contributor to academic misconduct.
- 2) Significant increases in academic misconduct and plagiarism during COVID
During COVID, every country examined saw significant increases in academic misconduct and plagiarism, often attributed as a byproduct or consequence of the move to online and/or home-based exams. Below the variance in percentage from 2019 pre-COVID to 2021 peak-COVID can be seen:

Evolution of cases of academic misconduct during covid	SWE	NO	DK	UK
2019	1528	693	540	464
2021	3055	1611	940	201
VARIANCE	99,9%	132,5%	74,6%	130,8%

Since only specific data regarding plagiarism from UK and Sweden are available it is only possible to compare these directly from 2019 to 2021:

Evolution of cases of plagiarism during covid	Sweden	UK (Average across 24 universities)
2019	1039	157
2021	1874	353
VARIANCE	80,4%	124,8%

Since only specific data regarding plagiarism from UK and Sweden are available it is only possible to compare these directly from 2019 to 2021:

As mentioned, plagiarism is by far the biggest contributor to cases of academic misconduct, therefore it comes as no surprise that cases of plagiarism have also risen which is evident in the data.

3) Long-term upward trend in academic misconduct and plagiarism, even pre-COVID.

In the countries presented, pre-COVID numbers of academic misconduct were still trending upwards. In countries where post-COVID data was available, the cases have remained higher than pre-COVID. If we compare the UK and Swedish numbers from 2015 to 2019, an increase pre-COVID can still be observed:

Evolution of cases of misconduct pre-COVID	Sweden	UK (Average across 24 universities)
2015	880	110
2019	1528	201
VARIANCE	73,6%	82,7%

Evolution of cases of misconduct pre-COVID	Sweden	UK (Average across 24 universities)
2015	589	71
2019	1039	157
VARIANCE	76,4%	121,1%

4) Cross-country similarities in misconduct trends

Based on the available data, it's clear that the figures are consistent across the examined countries, adding to their credibility. While this data doesn't provide direct insight into other countries, it might be reasonable to assume that similar patterns would apply there as well.

5) Academic misconduct is a topic often met with limited transparency

Many universities and educational institutions do not report and publish data on academic misconduct openly, or separate and make data on the different types of academic misconduct available for the public. To some extent it can seem that this issue is generally surrounded by a degree of secrecy and limited transparency.

When investigations came forward highlighting the rise of academic misconduct at the Russell Group universities in UK, the institutions responded with apologies or statements of regret, as this somehow was considered shameful. This has also been the case in Danish media where responses have been likewise apologetic. This likely stems from concerns about reputational damage to the universities brand, as academic misconduct may be seen as a violation of honour codes and neglect to secure academic principles. However, greater openness about the data and the challenges institutions face with these issues could be beneficial and create a better understanding of it in order to help in the development of preventive measures.

6) AI usage is not decreasing the act of plagiarism

When examining 2023 data, there is no significant decrease to be observed as a result of AI. Despite a rise in AI adoption and significant discussions regarding its potential role in academic misconduct, these trends are not reflected in the data. Conversations with institutions reveal that many of them expected an increase in cases of misconduct and a decrease in cases of plagiarism as students were expected to switch to using generative AI when shortcutting academic principles instead of the traditional ways of conducting plagiarism. However, this has not been the case when examining the data. Instead, the data indicates that students do not stop plagiarising despite the availability of generative AI.

Conclusion

To summarise, in this paper we have found a clear, upward trajectory in academic misconduct over the past decade, where plagiarism counts for the majority. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant increases in cases of disciplinary actions against students.

While levels have declined post-COVID, they remain notably higher than pre-2020, indicating that the issue cannot only be pandemic attributed. The analysis showed consistent patterns across countries, suggesting that trends regarding academic misconduct are similar across other countries and educational systems.

The limited transparency in reporting academic misconduct makes it challenging to address the issues. Greater transparency could foster a better environment for understanding and combating the causes of academic misconduct.

Finally, while some institutions might have anticipated that the availability of generative AI would lead to a decrease in students committing plagiarism, the data does not reflect this belief. From this, it can be underlined that academic misconduct using generative AI does not have an impact on students committing plagiarism. Thus, plagiarism still remains the most common form of academic misconduct.

In a following paper, we will take a closer look at the underlying reasons for the growth of academic misconduct.

References

- ‘Disciplinärenden 2023-2001 vid universitet och högskolor’ (2024) Uka.se [Preprint]. Available URL:<https://www.uka.se/om-oss/nyheter/nyhetsartiklar/2024-03-11-antalet-avstangda-och-varnade-studenter-minskar>
- ‘Kartlegging av studentsaker ved norske universitet og høgskular’ (2024) hkdir.no [Preprint]. URL: <https://hkdir.no/rapporter-undersokelser-og-statistikk/kartlegging-av-studentsaker-ved-norske-universitet-og-hogskular>
- Orry, F. (2022) Studerende snød Ekstra Meget til eksamen under Coronaepidemien, DR. URL:<https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/studerende-snoed-ekstra-meget-til-eksamen-under-coronaepidemien>
- Nguyen, V. (2023) 93 sager Om Eksamenssnyd på ku: ‘Det er nede i småtingsafdelingen’, Uniavisen. URL:<https://uniavisen.dk/93-sager-om-eksamenssnyd-paa-ku-det-er-nede-i-smaatingsafdelingen/>
- Ravn, L. (2018) Færre Studerende bliver taget i eksamenssnyd, Omnibus. URL:<https://omnibus.au.dk/arkiv/vis/artikel/faerre-studerende-bliver-taget-i-eksamenssnyd>
- Beck Petersen, L. (2024) 77 Indberettede Sager om snyd ved sommerens eksamener: 3 studerende bortvist, Omnibus. URL:<https://omnibus.au.dk/arkiv/vis/artikel/77-indberettede-sager-om-snyd-ved-sommerens-eksamener-tre-studerende-bortvist>
- Huss, T. (2018) Flere tages i plagiat: Mange Studerende ser ikke afskrift som snyd, Information. URL:<https://www.information.dk/indland/2018/11/flere-tages-plagiat-studerende-ser-afskrift-snyd>
- Kendix, M. (2023) Cheating at universities doubles since start of online exams, The Times & The Sunday Times. URL:<https://www.thetimes.com/article/cheating-at-universities-doubles-since-start-of-online-exams-k7c6hvv8k>
- Marsh, S. (2018) Cheating at UK’s top universities soars by 40%, The Guardian. URL:<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/apr/29/cheating-at-top-uk-universities-soars-by-30-per-cent>