



Understanding the reasons behind the rise of academic misconduct.

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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

In a previous white paper (Historic trends in academic misconduct, specifically plagiarism), a general trend of increased academic misconduct was shown to have emerged. Even when disregarding the significant increase that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic years, academic misconduct has continued to rise. In this white paper, the focus will be on gaining an understanding as to why this rise in academic misconduct has happened, and why it has persisted.

Student's understanding of plagiarism and paraphrasing.

When examining a wide range of articles on the topic of academic misconduct, students often claim that they commit plagiarism unintentionally, such as misunderstanding citation rules or by working together more than permitted. The difference between intentional and unintentional plagiarism has significant importance in relation to combating the increased level of plagiarism and preventing students from doing plagiarism for a number of reasons. First and foremost, punishment for academic misconduct would generally have limited effect on people who unintentionally commit this misconduct, or do so by mistake. Secondly, students in general might also argue it appears unfair and even too harsh to punish those unintentionally committing misconduct or doing so by mistake as opposed to deliberately and on purpose.

On the other hand, a stated “excuse” of unintended plagiarism may be seen as an easy or convenient route for students to avoid taking responsibility for non-acceptable academic behaviour. If a student is caught committing academic misconduct there are, in principle, limited explanations available to give. The student either admits his or her misconduct, argues that it was in fact not misconduct, or argues that if indeed it was misconduct, that it was not done deliberately. However, can exercising plagiarism be done unknowingly and can it really be considered a valid explanation for the individual student or even more an argument for the rising trend in academic misconduct altogether?

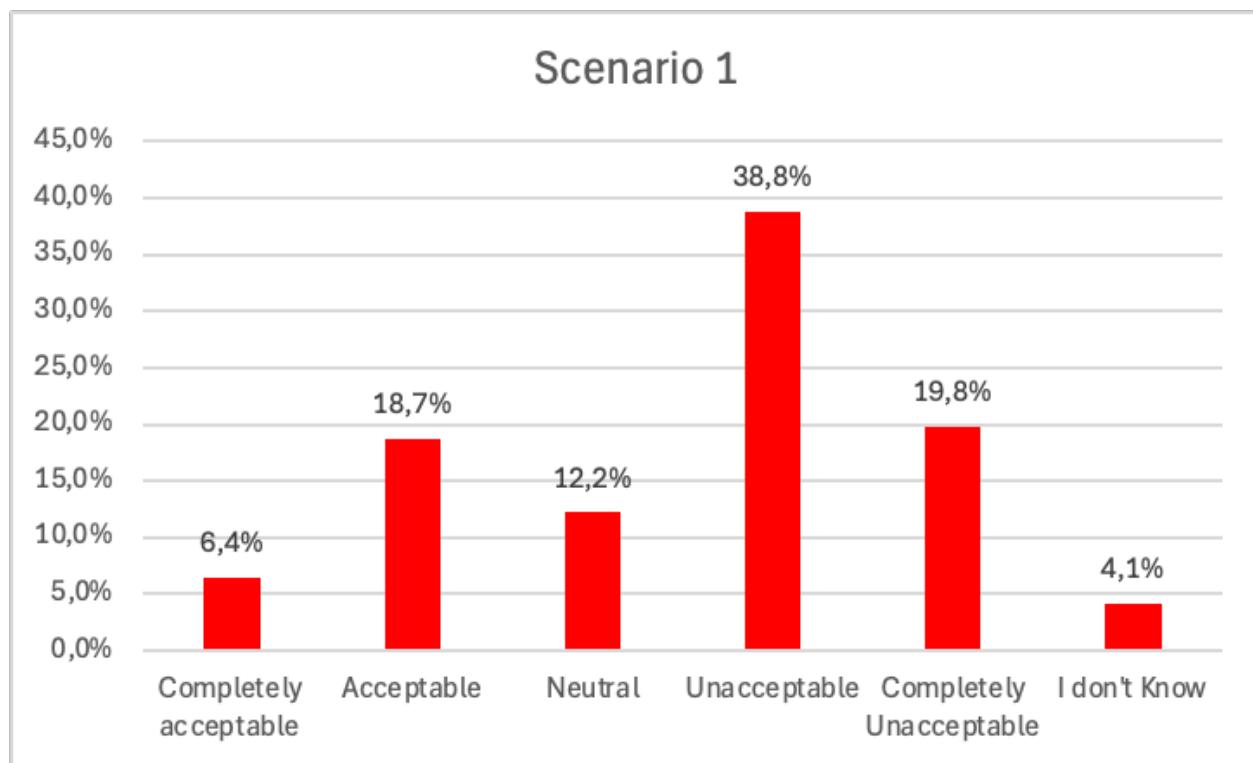
An international [study](#) conducted in 2022 by Mads Paludan Goddiksen attempted to see how well students were able to understand the “grey zones” of plagiarism. His findings were published in a 2023 paper in the journal of Ethics and Behavior. His article was based on a questionnaire survey, distributed to universities of which he received responses from 1,639 students across various European countries. The survey involved a series of misconduct scenarios that students were asked to classify on a scale of five levels, ranging from “Completely acceptable” to “Completely unacceptable.”

Some scenarios involved clear rule violations, and the vast majority of students were able to identify these as unacceptable. For example, over 90% correctly identified that paying someone else to write an exam essay was a clear violation. Similarly, more than 85% correctly identified copying an entire page from another resource without references or quotation marks as unacceptable.

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However, when the examples presented were less obvious, the students showed difficulty in determining what was acceptable or not - especially regarding plagiarism and paraphrasing. In the questionnaire, different scenarios relating to plagiarism are presented. These scenarios presented the students with a situation where a friend wanted to use a paragraph from a textbook in an assignment they were currently working on.

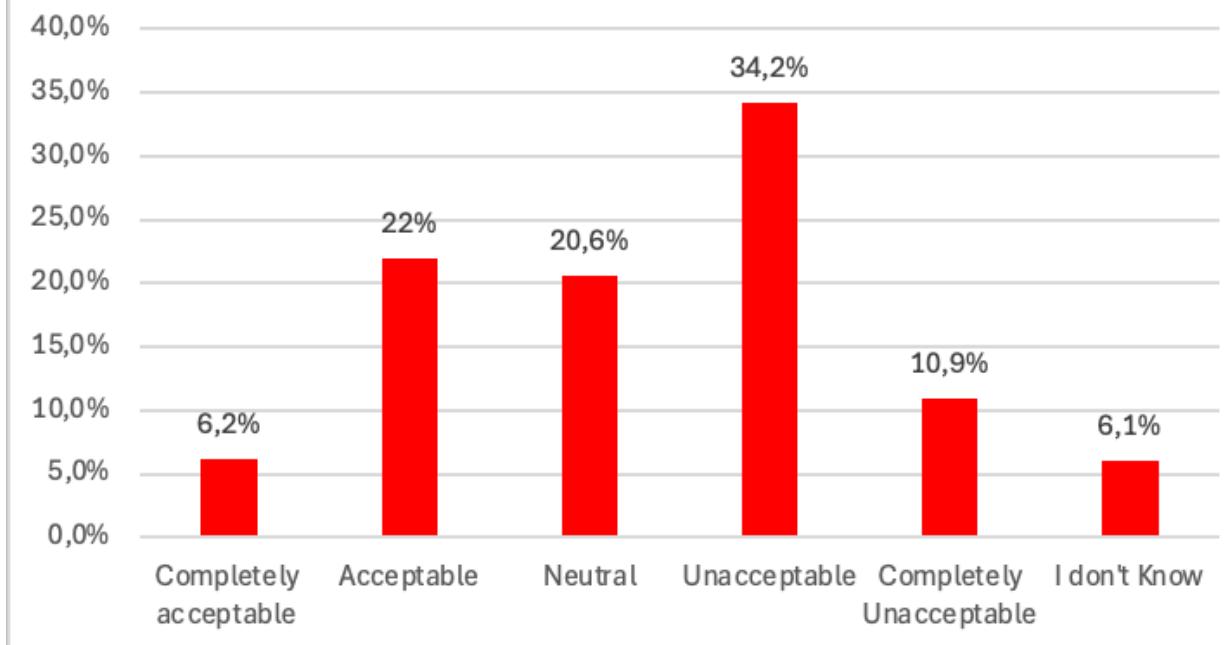
In the first scenario, the friend had directly plagiarised 42 words from the text with no quotation marks—a clear violation of general rules and guidelines regarding academic conduct. The student responses to this scenario can be seen below:



Despite the obvious case of academic misconduct presented, 25,1%, or one fourth of all students, stated this was “acceptable” or “completely acceptable.” another 12,2% also answered that they were “neutral” towards the example. When combining the students who answered, “completely acceptable” “acceptable” or “neutral,” it results in 37,3% of students being unable to identify a clear case of plagiarism.

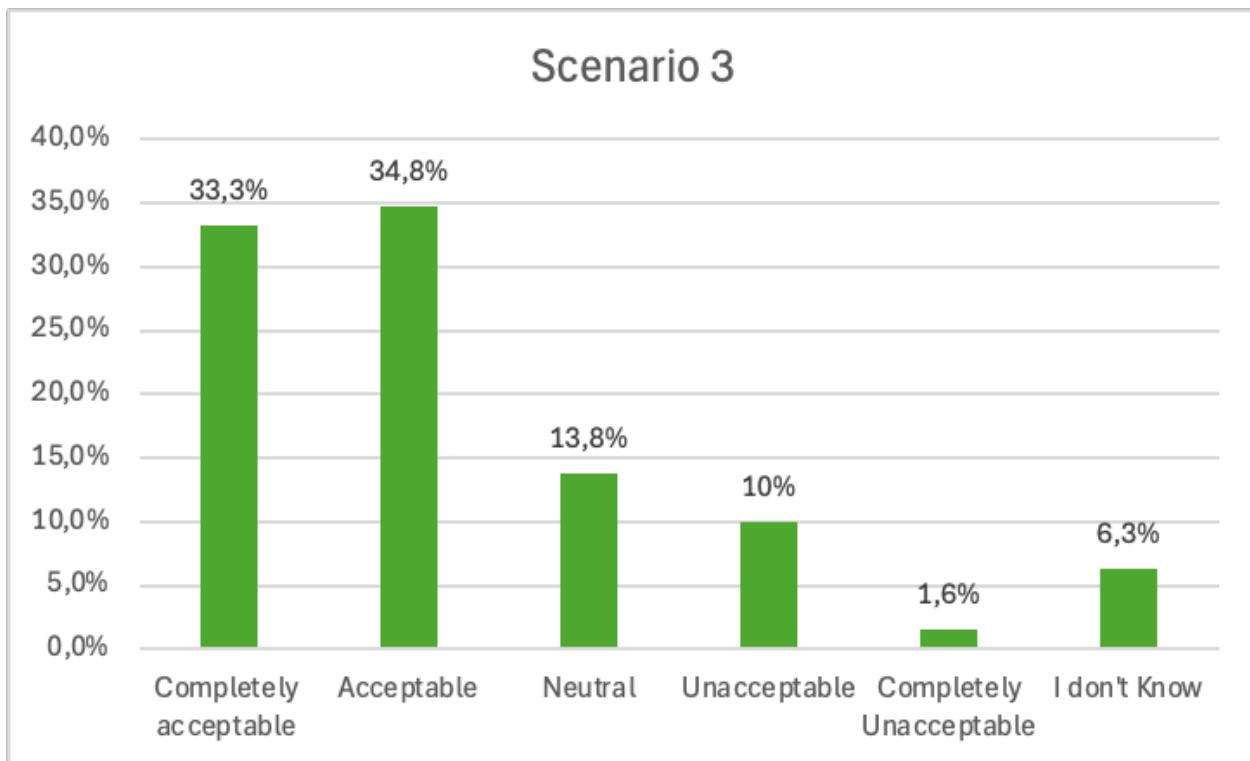
In the second scenario, the same 42 words was directly plagiarised but with a few insignificant words replaced with synonyms, and again with no reference to the original source. The student responses to this scenario can be seen overleaf:

Scenario 2



This change does not result in any actual difference in academic correctness compared to Scenario 1. Paraphrasing in this manner is just as unacceptable as plagiarism. Despite this, a shift in student perception can be observed. The most notable difference can be seen in the 8% rise in students who responded as being “neutral” towards this scenario. Additionally, there is a 4% increase in students who consider the scenario “acceptable.” When combining the students who responded, “completely acceptable,” “acceptable,” or “neutral” it results in 48,8% of them failing to identify this as a case of unacceptable paraphrasing.

In the third scenario, the material had been significantly rephrased, having very small resemblance to the original text and accompanied by appropriate citations even including a reference to the original. This scenario intended to give an example of clear acceptable academic practice. The student responses to this scenario can be seen overleaf:



Despite the intended clear display of good academic conduct, more than 10%, one in 10 students, argued it was unacceptable or completely unacceptable. From this it can be seen that students also struggle in identifying scenarios with acceptable academic conduct.

Mads Paludan Goddiksen thus established in his study that there were significant grey zones in how students perceived and understood the guidelines for academic conduct, when it came to plagiarism. Students seemed to struggle with cases on both sides of the spectrum. It would probably be misguided to argue that this on its own should warrant the rise in academic misconduct. However, this should be seen as a clear indication that maybe not all misconduct – and especially plagiarism – should be judged as a product of intended actions on the student side. Instead, it would seem suitable to view plagiarism as consisting of two different categories - unintentional and intentional misconduct.

Perspectives and learning points

A 2019 [study](#) from Sweden examining student knowledge regarding plagiarism found that students in their early years struggle more to understand the general guidelines and rules regarding academic conduct. This underpins that not only are there a general issue for students around understanding the principles and guidelines regarding academic conduct, but that this misalignment is even more prevalent in the beginning of student's careers. This also suggests that unintended plagiarism might best be tackled by increasing the education and awareness of academic norms and guidelines for students particularly from the beginning of their studies. Hereby institutions and students should be able to lower their level of plagiarism and claims of unintentional misconduct.

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:

Clearer instructions and higher awareness on acceptable conduct could likewise lower the stressful situations for students of being in doubt of their conduct and of course also reduce the labour of investigations and cases of misconduct for institutions. Similarly, it should provide more clear cases for institutions to disregard a student's claim of unintended plagiarism in the future.

Conclusion

When examining different Swedish and Danish reports on academic misconduct, a large portion of students argue that they plagiarise unintentionally. A broad European study has corroborated these findings, revealing that students often struggle to fully understand what constitutes acceptable academic behaviour and what does not. For this reason, it is likely that unintentional misconduct also can be regarded as contributing to the increased cases of academic misconduct that have been reported throughout higher education the last decade. Confusion as to the rules and guidelines of correct academic conduct amongst students, especially in their early years, can be seen as a major reason for this and may animate educational institutions to rethink or reinforce their approach to teaching and implementing the correct academic conduct amongst their students.

While lowering and ruling out unintentional misconduct and plagiarism by heightening student awareness, this also provides a clearer picture on what then constitutes deliberate and intentional misconduct. In our next white paper, we will explore the issue of intentional academic misconduct, investigating the underlying factors that drive students to indulge in such behaviour.

References

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