

Why students cheat (in their own words as well as those of others)

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a questionnaire and interview study of student cheating in H.E. Williams (2001) contends that there are two main reasons for the proliferation of cheating, and for plagiarism in particular: the increased use of assessed coursework, and rapid advances in technology that have led to information being readily available and not always traceable to its source. Only a few authors, such as Ashworth et al. (1997) and Le Heron (2001), have identified changing patterns of assessment as a contributory factor in cheating. Motivation theorists such as Dweck (2000) and Anderman & Midgely (2004) suggest that students' goal orientation provides underlying reasons for some students choosing to cheat.

The student sample for the study was drawn from one UK university, where 159 students across three programmes completed anonymous questionnaires and 10 volunteered to be interviewed. Questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS, and interviews through content analysis. The paper focuses on the student perspective, presenting findings that provide an insight into the most frequently self-reported behaviours, the reasons chosen to explain cheating, the perceived impact of university deterrents and the student view of how to discourage cheating. A notable result is student perceptions that academics are unwilling to investigate cheating behaviours. Results will be of interest to academics and administrators who seek to reduce opportunities for cheating.

Williams (2001) contends that there are two main reasons for the proliferation of cheating, and for plagiarism in particular: the increased use of assessed coursework, and rapid advances in technology that have led to information being readily available and not always traceable to its source. Only a few other authors, such as Ashworth et al. (1997) and Le Heron (2001), have identified changing patterns of assessment as a contributory factor in cheating. The answer to student cheating is not however as simple as reverting to unseen examinations; evidence from the USA and Australia demonstrates similar rates of self-reported cheating in both coursework and examinations, despite examinations being the most frequent mode of assessment (McCabe et al., 2001, Marsden et al., 2006).

This paper reports a selection of the results from a larger study in which students completed anonymous questionnaires, and students and academics from the same programmes were interviewed. The focus here is on the student perspective, presenting findings that provide an insight into the most frequently self-reported behaviours, the reasons they cite, the impact of university deterrents, and some student views on how to discourage cheating.

Methods and sampling

The student sample comprised third year undergraduates drawn from 3 subject areas in one UK university. One hundred and fifty nine students completed anonymous questionnaires distributed by the researcher at the end of scheduled teaching time; 10 of the students volunteered to be interviewed at a later date. Third year students were selected because they had experienced at least two years of university assessments and observation of their peers' behaviour; they would also be expected to graduate before the research was completed, which it was hoped would effect a higher level of participation. Cohorts were sought that would be large enough to allow for non-participation of some while at the same time enabling the study to remain viable. Twelve academics from the same subject areas were interviewed as part of the same study.

The questionnaire focused on a list of 27 'cheating behaviours' based on an original list of behaviours compiled by Franklin-Stokes and Newstead (1995) who reported on the first large-scale research into student cheating. From the list of 'behaviours' students were asked firstly to rate the frequency with which 'students on a course like theirs' would use each behaviour and, in the next question, to self-report the frequency of their own behaviours. The frequency ratings ranged from 'very common', through 'quite common' and 'rare' to 'not known to happen'. The term *cheating* was not used in the questionnaire so that there was no inference of moral judgement being made.

The purpose of the individual interviews was to verify, where it was possible to do so, early findings from the analysis of student questionnaires, and to explore staff and student attitudes towards cheating in assessments. The purpose of the qualitative interview has been said to be to contribute to "a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewee", (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006: 315). The interview style was influenced by the interpretive paradigm with its emphasis on "seeking understanding of the meanings of human actions and experiences, and on generating accounts of their meaning from the viewpoints of those involved" and by the intention to use the interview as an exploration of issues identified in the student questionnaire responses (Fossey et al, 2002: 718). Given the sensitivity of the subject, the preferred style was informal and conversational, and a semi-structured interview schedule was devised to facilitate this aim.

Analysis

In order to identify any differences between perceptions and self-reports, questionnaire data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Content analysis was used to analyse transcriptions of interviews.

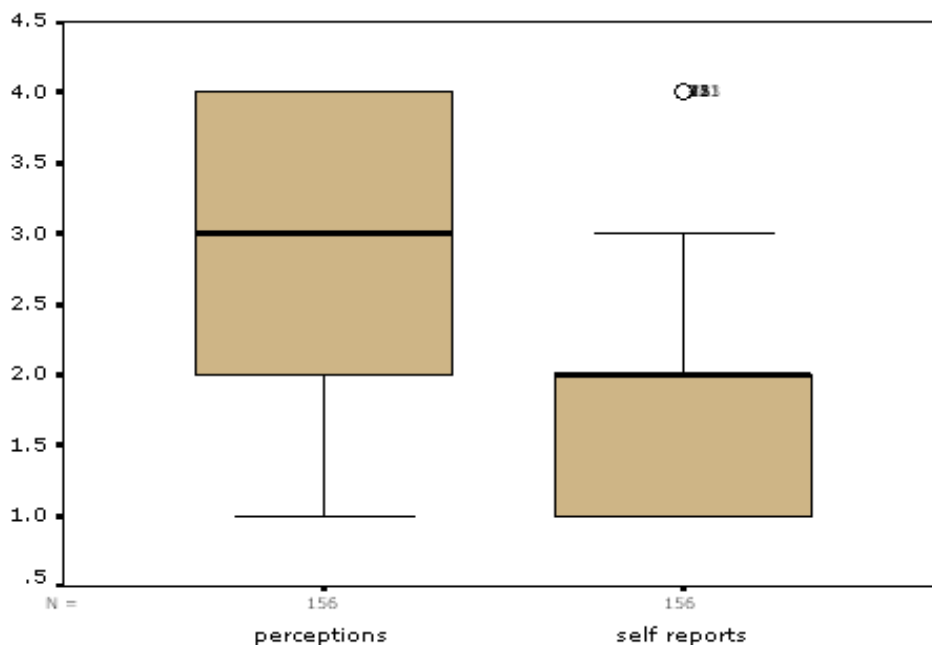
Discussion of findings

The ways in which students gain unfair advantage (and think others do)

More than ninety percent of students thought that students on a course like theirs engaged in behaviours such as not contributing a fair share to group work, signing as present a fellow student on a course where obligatory attendance is required, and paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author. Over seventy percent rated those behaviours as either very common or quite common. Despite student perceptions of frequent 'cheating' in their peers, their own self-reports indicated significantly less frequent use of the behaviours in the list.

A Wilcoxon related samples, signed ranks test was conducted to identify differences between student perceptions of other students cheating and their self reports of cheating behaviours. The results for all cheating behaviours showed a significant difference beyond the 0.005 level, with the perceived frequency of cheating being greater than that self-reported. Figure 1 shows the results for *paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author*. The mean of the ranks in favour of perceptions was 53.34, while the mean of the ranks in favour of self-reports was 31.50 ($z = 8.717$, $p < 0.005$). The distributions for the perception of cheating and self-reports are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author*: student perceptions v self reports



Paraphrasing without acknowledging original author

The behaviours self-reported as being most frequent were those related to coursework. The behaviours with the lowest levels of self-reporting included

cheating related to examinations or to behaviours that would be seen as unethical or immoral such as lying, bribery or seduction. The percentages were notably higher however when all ratings were taken into account (that is, the analysis included all ratings from rare through to very frequently) for example:

- *paraphrasing without acknowledgement* (68.6%),
- *signing as present a fellow student on a course where obligatory attendance is required* (60.4%)
- *copying material without acknowledging the source* (59.7%).

These findings are consistent with those of Franklin-Stokes and Newstead (1995) who found that over 60% of students self-reported cheating in some way and Dordoy (2002) who reported self-reports of 74%, identifying as common practice *copying a few paragraphs without acknowledgment*. Table 1 presents self-reports for the very or quite common ratings for all 27 behaviours.

Table 1: Self reported cheating

Cheating behaviour	% self reporting behaviour as very common or quite common	% self reports including 'rare'
Signing as present a fellow student on a course where obligatory attendance is required	30.2	60.4
Inventing data (e.g. entering non-existent results for a project)	26.3	49.6
Copying material for coursework from a book or other publication without acknowledging the source	24.5	59.7
Paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author	23.9	68.6
Altering data (e.g. adjusting data to obtain a significant result)	23.2	49
In a situation where students mark each other's work, coming to an agreement with another student or students to mark each other's work more generously than it merits	20.8	46
Fabricating references or a bibliography	18.2	45.2
Continuing to write in an examination after the invigilator has asked candidates to stop writing	17.6	48.4
Not contributing a fair share to group work	8.8	35.8
Allowing own assessed coursework to be copied by another student	8.8	33.3
Reducing the availability of books or journals in the library by deliberately mis-shelving them so that other students can not find them, or by cutting out the relevant chapter or article.	6.3	17
Copying another student's assessed coursework with their knowledge	5.7	21.4
Submitting a piece of coursework as an individual piece of work when it has actually been written jointly with another student or students	3.7	17.5
Submitting as their own a piece of work derived from another source (essay bank; former students; other)	3.7	17.5
Copying from a neighbour during an examination without them realising	2.5	11.3
Doing another student's coursework for them	2.5	15.1
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get an extended deadline or exemption from a piece of work	1.9	6.9
Keeping silent about a tutor's misbehaviour or misuse of his/her		

position in order to get approval in a test or to gain a higher mark	1.3	1.9
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get special consideration by examiners (e.g. extra time to complete examination; sympathetic consideration of extenuating circumstances)	1.2	6.2
Taking unauthorised material into an examination	0	5.7
Copying another student's coursework without their knowledge	0	6.9
Illicitly gaining advance information about the contents of an examination paper	0	2.5
Taking an examination for someone else or having someone else take an examination for them	0	0.6
Premeditated collusion between two or more students to communicate answers to each other during an examination	0	3.8
Attempting to obtain special consideration by offering or receiving favours, for example bribery, seduction, corruption	0	0.6
Using SMS mobile phone texting in an examination	0	1.3
Extracting electronic information from pocket pc or similar devices during formal examinations	0	1.9

Cheating in coursework was more frequently self-reported than cheating in examinations. In interviews, students rated the seriousness of all the cheating behaviours. Comparison of the seriousness with the self-reports revealed an inverse relationship between the two, with the behaviours rated as most serious (for example, cheating in examinations) being self reported as very infrequent or not at all. This too is consistent with the findings of Franklin-Stokes & Newstead (1995), Newstead et al. (1996) and Lim & See (2001).

Student comments in interviews included:

I think anything to do with exams, because everyone is in the same environment ... that to me is the worst kind of cheating because everyone is stressed and you are blatantly cheating, lying to get better grades
Student S06

I think in exams it's there, I think that everyone knows what cheating is but in assignments not so strongly.
Student S08

Student S08 suggests a reason for the differentiation between cheating in examinations and in coursework: gaining unfair advantage in examinations is unambiguously cheating whereas cheating in coursework is more difficult to define both for students and for academics. On the question of plagiarism, findings from this study showed that neither students nor academics were clear on the line to be drawn on either the extent of cheating or on its definition. This is not consistent with the findings of Barrett and Cox (2005) who state in their reporting of a questionnaire survey of academics and students that plagiarism seemed to be 'well understood' as cheating but that collusion was not. Closer examination of the detail of their findings indicates that many academics, as found in the study reported here, differentiated between poor academic writing and deliberate attempts to copy, this differentiation resulting in inconsistencies of investigation and thus, potentially, of penalty.

Major reasons for cheating and not cheating

More than fifty percent of students identified as major reasons for other students cheating: *pressure to pass, laziness, bad time management, lack of subject knowledge and ineffective study skills*. These findings were confirmed by students in interviews who stated that *pressure to pass* and *poor time management* were the two foremost reasons.

In the questionnaire, students were offered a variety of reasons for cheating and not cheating, in multiple choice format. There was no limit on the number of reasons that could be selected in these two multiple response questions. Tables 2 and 3 present the percentage of positive endorsements for each reason.

Table 2: Perceptions of major reasons for students cheating

	% of students selecting reason
Pressure to pass	92.5
Laziness	87.4
Lack of time due to bad time management	83
Lack of subject knowledge	74.8
Ineffective study skills	60.4
Lack of time due to part time work	54.1
Low confidence in own ability	50.9
Ready access to downloadable web information	44
Peer pressure	32.7
Assessment design enabling cheating	30.2
Lack of perceived deterrent	29.6
Desire to impress tutor	17
Poor health	10.1
Lack of awareness of university regulations on cheating	6.9
Other	3.8

With the exception of *pressure to pass* and *part time work* the reasons most highly rated indicate negative perceptions of other students, in line with attributional bias theories (Kelley, 1971). The findings reported here are consistent with other studies. Davis et al. (1992) reported on several studies dating from as early as 1941 where 'stress and pressure for good grades' were identified as important factors in students cheating, and McCabe et al (2001) report on their own studies that have identified pressure to get high grades, and laziness as well as "poor self image" and "lack of character" as major influences.

Less than four percent of respondents (n=6) identified 'other reasons' in the space provided. The other reasons identified were:

- 1 *"parental pressure"* student 35;
- 2 *"friends offer information, e.g. share sources or offer help with writing a section of work – like using study skills"* student 45;
- 3 *"learning difficulties"* student 69;
- 4 *"thick"* student 90;
- 5 *"the environment of university places great emphasis on performing well academically"* student 117;
- 6 *"don't think going to get caught"* student 134;

All reasons except the fourth, *"thick"*, were in fact covered by the questionnaire categories provided: numbers one and five fall into the 'pressure to pass' category, and two and three into *lack of subject knowledge* and *ineffective study skills*. Number six lies within *lack of perceived deterrent*. "Thick" is outside the categories provided and represents the attitude of only one respondent.

Ready access to internet materials may be a *factor* in cheating (Szabo & Underwood, 2007; Groark & Oblinger, 2001), but it is only one of several factors. Student opinion on the importance of the internet in cheating was not unanimous, with 44% of students in this study rating *ready access to downloadable web information* as a major reason for cheating, and another forty percent as a minor reason. A number of reasons could account for this, including the variety of ways other than the internet in which students perceived and self reported cheating to be taking place.

Other surveys have shown some agreement between students and academics on the *unimportance* of the internet as a factor in cheating. Delegates at an Oxford University conference on plagiarism (*Beyond the Search Engine: 2007*) voted overwhelmingly against the motion that “new technology is undermining the traditional values of integrity and rigour in academic research and study”. There was general acceptance of the potential for the internet to “facilitate plagiarism” but the U.K. academic press reported that “the consensus was that it is not to blame for the apparent rise (in plagiarism) in recent years”, there being a range of contributory factors including the pressures of assessment in modularised courses, a view supported by Devlin (2007: 19) and Norton et al. (2001). Walker’s view is that “students can demonstrate exceptional research skills and ingenuity in finding ways to cheat the system, with or without technology” (1998:244).

Respondents were asked to select as many major reasons as they wished for *some students not cheating*. Table 3 presents the percentage of students that selected each of the multi response categories.

Table 3: Perceptions of major reasons for *some students not cheating*

	%
Hard work	89.9
Personal motivation	89.3
Personal moral code	83.6
Effective study skills	77.3
Good time management	74.2
Perceived deterrent of university penalties	66.7
High confidence in own ability	40.9
Lack of awareness	10.7
Lack of IT skills	6.3
Other	2.5

With the exception of *perceived deterrent of university penalties* the major reasons for not cheating are associated with positive personal qualities such as diligence and motivation. This finding is supported by theories of ‘essentialising’ individuals into categories – in this case cheating students who possess negative traits or non-cheating students who choose not to cheat because of their innate positive qualities (Gaudelli, 2001; Hunter et al., 2000).

Only two students identified ‘other reasons’ for not cheating, as follows:

“People want to do it honestly”

Student 123;

“Want to do well off own merit”

Student 19;

Both of these responses could be categorised as 'personal moral code'.

Interviews offered an opportunity to further explore student perceptions of reasons for other students cheating. What emerged were indications of uncertainty in some students about what was and was not acceptable practice in assessments, as in the following examples:

and I think making up data, you know, is it really cheating if you change a 7 to an 8, that kind of thing? ... it all gets cloudy again when you talk about references, sometimes you can't find a reference so you think you might make up a couple of dates, you are not really cheating, you're just kind of expanding the truth I suppose.

Student S06

Well the one about making things up on bibliographies, I've done that, added a few extra.

Interviewer: Oh, I'm not asking what you've done.

Student: But (pausing) yes, I don't think that's really cheating. But, em ... mmm it's difficult isn't it?

Student S03

There is evidence that the extent of cheating in the U.K. varies according to the level of study, ability, motivation and gender (Newstead et al., 1996). Their findings support those of Marsden et al. (2006) who found in Australia that male students under the age of 25 and studying full time reported higher levels of cheating both in examinations and in coursework. Marsden et al. also reported that first year students were significantly less likely to cheat than were students at all other undergraduate stages. Marsden et al.'s Australian findings resonate with USA studies that found that cheating decreased significantly between high school and college (Davis et al., 1992).

The findings of Marsden and Davis (ibid) were not consistent with those of McCabe et al. (2001), who investigated individual and contextual influences in US student cheating. They suggested that age itself was less of a predictor of cheating than the stage of the course, with first and second year students cheating more than third or fourth years who spoke of the academic relationships that had developed with their tutors making it more difficult to consider cheating. Focusing on the previous decade they concluded that, as well as there having been a dramatic increase in some forms of cheating ("significant increases in the most explicit forms of test or examination cheating") a major contextual factor was students' perceptions of their peers' behaviour, with self reports increasing in line with increased perceptions of cheating.

Motivation has been shown to influence student learning and assessment behaviour, although much of the literature on motivation is based on work with school children. Jacobs & Newstead (2000: 243) wrote: "Surprisingly little is known about what motivates university students: why they embark on their studies in the first place, what changes take place during the course of their studies and what factors influence their motivation."

Table 3 has shown that almost 90% of the students in this sample identified 'personal motivation' as a major factor in their peers choosing not to cheat. Dweck (2000) and others have suggested a relationship between performance orientation and maladaptive strategies such as avoidance, in contrast to mastery orientation conditions where students are less likely to engage in avoidance. Anderman & Midgley (2004: 502) describe the situation where "a student who

uses an avoidance strategy most likely will not obtain a higher grade in class; however, the student who successfully cheats will unfairly obtain a higher grade". Student reasons for cheating, self-reported in this study and others, are wide-ranging but do include factors that institutions can influence.

The evidence on the influence of factors such as age and gender and subject discipline is inconsistent, However, studies of different disciplines all find significant levels of self-reported cheating; there is consistent evidence of higher levels of self-reporting in subjects such as Business Studies (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Beauchamp, 2006; Mangan, 2006).

University deterrents?

As shown in Tables 4 and 5, almost 60% of respondents (n=95) believed that students were only rarely investigated for cheating, and almost 63% (n=100) of respondents believed that students were only rarely found guilty.

Table 4: Results for the question: *How commonly do you believe students are investigated for behaviours such as those listed in questions 1 and 2?*

% of students	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	3.1	36.5	59.7	0.6

Table 5: Results for the question: *How commonly do you believe students are found guilty of behaviours such as those listed in questions 1 and 2?*

% of students	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	3.8	32.1	62.9	1.3

Student comments in interview indicated that students gained advantage through cheating because academics did not investigate.

Cos I think there is a lot of, kind of false threats made a lot of the time, and nobody bothers following it through because it is too much trouble.
Student S01

I think if university penalties were enforced, or people saw them being used more often, they would be a big deterrent. But I don't think you very often, well I certainly haven't heard of anybody who has been accused of and followed through for cheating. ... But because it is so hush hush if it is happening, I don't know how much it is happening, then it's not going to put people off, it's a risk they are prepared to take obviously.
Student S04

Roig & Ballew (1994) reported Forsyth's (1985) findings that students who cheat are "likely to engage in external attributions in an effort to excuse their behaviour". Students in the study reported here were in no doubt that universities had a responsibility to ensure that opportunities for cheating were minimised, and suspicions investigated rigorously. These views are consistent with Davis et al.'s findings (1992: 19) that one of the key factors in students cheating was 'condoning teachers'. Students may, even subconsciously, attribute cheating behaviours to the fact that they can get away with it.

Barrett & Cox (2005) reported that 51% of academics in their sample admitted to ignoring their suspicions of cheating. McCabe et al. (1993; 2001) found that academics prefer not to become involved in bureaucratic investigations of student malpractice and that observant students can take advantage of such loopholes, believing that they could otherwise be disadvantaged since their peers are doing the same. Newstead (2003) identified increasing workloads, higher staff : student ratios and "the assessment load" as factors in the increasing levels of stress observed in academics, all likely contributory factors in many academics preferring not to engage in formal institutional investigations of student cheating.

Barrett & Cox (2005) highlighted one aspect of the dilemma for academics:

"But plagiarism is rarely a clear-cut case of theft and there are many situations that can make academics uncomfortable"

Barrett & Cox (2005: 109)

In another study, out of almost 500 U.S. university professors surveyed, 20% admitted that they had not taken action in obvious cases of cheating (Keith-Spiegel, 1998). Given the potential for student motivation to be affected by observing their tutors turning a blind eye to cheating students, Keith-Spiegel et al. (ibid) hypothesise that "some students inclined to be honest may be faced with an unwelcome moral dilemma: should they cheat to keep up with the class or maintain their honesty and risk getting a lower grade". Their findings included the assertion of academics that "dealing with cheating is among the most onerous tasks of the profession".

All students and many academics in this study agreed that it was very difficult to discourage cheating. Students did however suggest ways in which cheating opportunities could be minimised. They identified:

- i) that there was insufficient checking both in examinations and during the progress of writing essays:

... the written exams, having people, more people in the exam hall might put people off a bit more.

Interviewer: more invigilators?

Yes ... and in course work essays maybe have things checked more often, people's references properly checked, and make people aware that people are doing that.

Student S07

Provide a certain amount of information ... so that you can see a natural progression between ... (drafts) ... to your final draft kind of thing ... Maybe ten percent could be chosen at random ... the threat almost of that would make people think that they'd better do that one properly. It would make me more organised and much more careful of references as you go along rather than wait until the end.

Student S06

- ii) that there should be greater enforcement of penalties and that that fact should be communicated to students as a deterrent. In addition, that universities and academics should take a firmer line, investigate their suspicions and inform students of outcomes.

'Cos I think there is a lot of, kind of false threats made a lot of the time, and nobody bothers following it through because it is too much trouble.

Student S01

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Student S07

iii) that awareness of cheating should be raised across both the student and the academic communities:

.... maybe staff need to be made more aware of it and look out for it more.
Student S02

kind of educate people what cheating is more I think there should definitely be more education on what is gonna happen if you're cheating and what is cheating, that the University classes as cheating.
Student S08

I think the key, I think something that I have learned from this course particularly, is that there are certain types of assessment in which cheating is made really difficult and I think rather than attempting to abolish cheating, because I think in certain situations, certain people will maybe cheat, I think for this particular course the fact that the practical assessments make it really, really hard to cheat shows that there is a way of assessing people without having to worry about cheating because it's not really possible to cheat ... the best way would be to have deterrents for the cases where you can't design out cheating but other than that design assessments where cheating is impossible
Student S02

Conclusions

The fact that some students will, for a range of reasons, seek to gain unfair advantage in assessments, is widely accepted. Student reasons for cheating, self-reported in this study and others, are wide-ranging but do include factors that institutions can influence. This paper has presented a range of reasons based on student views and the research literature. The study reported here found the student view of university measures designed to deter cheating to be that they are ineffective, insufficient numbers of students are investigated, academics rarely have time to investigate and that cheating in assessments is a risk worth taking. In other words, the overriding theme from students is that cheating occurs because many academics allow it to happen.

Students' advice to H.E. institutions is simple: there needs to be:

- i) clearer guidance for both students and academics on what is acceptable academic practice;
- ii) assessment design that reduces opportunities for cheating;
- iii) regulations need to be enforced (and be seen to be so).

Declaration

This paper has not been submitted for publication elsewhere. Some of the quotations from student interviews have also been used in other papers written by Smith and Ridgway on related themes.

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