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# Exploring academic misconduct: Some insights into student behaviour

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## Abstract

Academic research and newspaper stories suggest that academic misconduct, including plagiarism, is on the increase. This apparent increase coupled with new internet enterprises selling 'pass' papers and customized research are worrying trends. Academic misconduct is deeply harmful in a number of ways by devaluing awards, frustrating academics and demotivating 'honest' students. Despite the heightened attention given to it, the entire subject seems to be clouded in uncertainty, not least what students themselves think. This article addresses student attitudes and understandings of academic misconduct. Findings from a study conducted within a large business school indicated that teaching on plagiarism was ineffective and there were many misunderstandings, which had coincided with high levels of unintentional plagiarism, bogus referencing and collusion. First-year students in particular experienced difficulties. As part of this article a theoretical framework for understanding student behaviour is proposed which may suggest various improved learning and teaching strategies.

## Keywords

academic misconduct, collusion, higher education, plagiarism, student perceptions, student typologies

## Plagiarism: definitions and interpretations

Academic misconduct is a topic under the spotlight, occupying the thinking of ordinary academics and institutions, and proving a rich source for researchers and journalists looking for headline stories. Despite this heightened attention, the entire subject appears clouded in uncertainty from interpretations of the word 'plagiarism' to the variations in extent of offence reported. For the purposes of this article, plagiarism is defined as 'passing off someone else's work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit' (Carroll, 2002: 9). The broader term 'academic misconduct' (including cheating and collusion) is also used where appropriate.

Successive surveys of higher education students point to an increasing incidence of academic misconduct accompanied by heightened frustrations and concerns amongst academics (Park, 2003). Duggan (2006: 151) acknowledges that, whilst plagiarism has always been an issue, lecturers feel that problems that were once manageable one-offs are now taking on 'epidemic proportions'. Rosamond (2002) believes this 'epidemic' is being fuelled by online enterprises that now sell 'pass' papers and customized research. Given such attention, it is curious that only relatively

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recently have institutions attempted to define and understand what is meant by plagiarism (Stefani and Carroll, 2001). Even with definitions and policies, confusion still exists. Bennett (2005: 138) explains that ‘conventions relating to what does and does not constitute plagiarism are formulated and interpreted differently across institutions’; others suggest different interpretations amongst academic groups and subject areas in the same institution (Dahl, 2007; Leask, 2006). By extension different interpretations between individual lecturers are also likely to exist. Carroll and Appleton (2001: 4) observe that academics may feel sure that they ‘know what plagiarism is when they see it’ but discussion soon reveals ‘considerable variation in understanding’. This lack of precision and ambiguity contributes to a general vagueness in this area (Liddell, 2003). By way of illustration, institutional definitions of academic misconduct lend themselves to subjective judgement by using words such as ‘significant’ when referring to unattributed direct quotation and ‘substantial’ when referring to unattributed paraphrasing of another’s work. Exactly what ‘sense’ students make of this is unclear from existing literature.

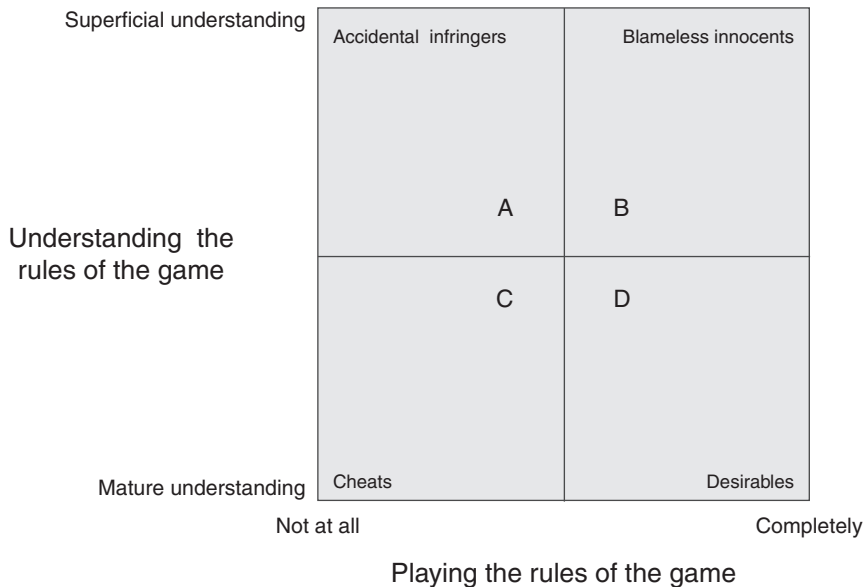
Institutional interpretations of misconduct may involve distinctions being drawn over both scale (from minor, insignificant infringements to major offences that are felt to be substantial) and intent (accidental or deliberate). Bennett (2005) describes minor plagiarism as sloppiness, such as small amounts of unacknowledged ‘cutting and pasting’, a sentence or two of paraphrasing without citation, or fictional references, etc. Major plagiarism by comparison represents a ‘significant part’ of a work written by someone else. Such distinctions still fail to clarify a grey area which is reliant on individual interpretation. This confusion, coupled with the apparently rising incidence and the manifold opportunities that internet technology offers for malpractice, makes for a worrying cocktail (Hart and Friesner, 2004; Leask, 2006).

## Student perceptions, understandings and attitudes

There is a fast expanding literature in the general area of academic misconduct (well summarized in Stefani and Carroll, 2001; Tookay, 2002). Within this literature there seems to be an undue emphasis on detection, levels of offending and punishment. Other valuable contributions deal with broader considerations of minimizing and deterring malpractice (Carroll, 2004; Carroll and Appleton, 2001), and staff attitudes (Shapira, 1993). Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995) first highlighted levels of offence, and many other studies have followed this pattern since. By comparison there is only a limited literature dealing with student perception, understandings and attitudes. Pickard’s (2006) investigation of attitudes to plagiarism recognized that staff and student understandings can differ. As if to reinforce the point, a study conducted by *The Times Higher Education* based on an extensive poll of more than 1,000 students at over 100 UK institutions seemed to show that copying from friends was widespread, and the potential to look for assignments online was an irresistible temptation for a significant proportion of students (Opinionpanel Research, 2006; Shepherd, 2006). Bennett’s (2005) research concentrated on possible factors associated with undergraduate plagiarism based on attitude, personal traits and situational factors. His study revealed some of these factors to be insignificant and others to be drivers of both minor and major plagiarism.

In summary, a substantial and growing literature on academic misconduct covers several dimensions of the topic. Nevertheless, certain aspects of student behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and understandings deserve greater attention than has previously been the case (such as the impact of a student’s stage of study, the incidence of unintentional plagiarism, attitudes towards and reasons for ‘minor’ misconduct, and the effectiveness of institutional practices in helping students avoid misconduct).

Whilst synthesizing existing literature and interpreting data arising from this study a theoretical model was conceived, reflecting ‘shades’ of infringement and levels of understanding (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The ABCD academic misconduct matrix: a framework for understanding student typologies

This theoretical model offers a framework of understanding student behaviour and proposes at the extremes four student typologies.

- ‘A’ students who become accidental infringers of the rules. Park’s (2003) review of literature on plagiarism identified nine reasons why students plagiarize including a genuine lack of understanding of scholarship requirements.
- ‘B’ students who also only have a superficial understanding of the ‘rules of the game’ but by the exercise of commonsense and good fortune do not commit academic misconduct.
- ‘C’ students who knowingly cheat. Devlin and Gray (2007) speculate on the reasons for this behaviour and believe it might even include a desire to achieve notoriety for ‘beating the system’. Carroll (2004) speaks for many when she asserts that such behaviour threatens the values of academic work, devalues the integrity of awards and has a negative impact on other students and staff who become reluctant police officers. For good reason therefore most academic attention has previously been directed to this group.
- ‘D’ students who are confident about how to avoid academic misconduct and how to reference their work. They understand the rules and abide by them.

Research confirms the validity of this theoretical model. For example, in a study of student use of plagiarism detection software, student types were identified as those lacking in knowledge and insecure about plagiarism and what is acceptable (A and B students), those who deliberately set out to cheat (C students) and those confident of how to avoid plagiarism and how to reference sources correctly (D students) (Dahl, 2007).

Despite this heightened attention to academic misconduct, the entire subject appears clouded in uncertainty, from interpretations of the word ‘plagiarism’ to the variations in extent of offence reported. Information on how students themselves view this is also lacking. In an attempt to see

issues from a student viewpoint, the study described below sheds light on individual student experiences of academic misconduct and their understandings and attitudes towards it.

## Background to the study and research methods used

The nature of learning approach that students are familiar with and the assessment methods that they are exposed to are of some relevance in understanding the local context within which a study is conducted (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Resnick, 1987). The University of Wolverhampton is a large modern institution with a strong regional commitment and a policy of extending student access. One of the University's ten schools is the University of Wolverhampton Business School (UWBS), which exposes its 2,500 students to student-centred learning approaches including extensive groupwork. An assessment policy encourages innovation and variety, and although some examinations are used the emphasis is upon coursework, some group-based, but mainly individual.

A questionnaire was developed which was strongly influenced by three previous studies, which gave the clearest insights into student thinking (specifically *The Times Higher Education* study referred to earlier; Bennett, 2005; Pickard, 2006). The questions posed and potential variables to be explored were agreed as appropriate with interested colleagues, and the questionnaire was piloted with a few classes at different levels of study.

The questionnaire comprised three sheets of A4 paper, took about ten minutes to complete, was anonymous and contained five distinct elements. The first profiled the student in terms of age range, gender and extent of employment. The second was an attitude survey whereby respondents graded their feelings about certain statements based on potential variables which might influence attitudes (Bennett, 2005). Students' attitudes included ethical positions (for example 'sometimes it is acceptable to bend the rules in order to get an advantage') and fears (for example 'failing this course would be a disaster for me'). Traits covered levels of goal orientation (for example 'I am only interested in learning things that will help my future career') and levels of academic integration (for example 'I have made friends with other students easily'). A third section involved a 'tick which applies' sequence. This included incidences of misconduct and similar, and asked if the student had ever engaged in these activities when undertaking individual coursework during the past year. A fourth 'yes/no/not sure' category was incorporated mainly related to training in prevention. Finally, a space was left for narrative responses.

Despite no incentive being offered, nobody declined to complete the questionnaire; responses from 355 undergraduates and 122 postgraduate students were received. Although unplanned, there was a near equal gender split of responses (see Table 1).

## Results

### *Deliberate plagiarism*

Students were asked 'when undertaking coursework over the past year, which of the following have you ever done' and examples of academic misconduct were identified. Of all students surveyed, 58% claimed not to have engaged in any of the listed activities. While only 6% of undergraduate students and 4% of postgraduates explicitly admitted plagiarizing work themselves, 20% of undergraduates knew of someone who had (compared with 8% of postgraduates).

The temptation for internet abuse was reflected by 14% of undergraduates and 6% of postgraduates admitting to having looked for essays online. Only 28% of first-year students identified copying

**Table 1.** Study profiles of students completing questionnaires

Level of study		No.	Gender	
			Male	Female
Level 1	Number	232	126	106
	%		54	46
Level 2	Number	78	40	38
	%		51	49
Level 3	Number	45	20	25
	%		44	56
<b>Undergraduate subtotal</b>	Number	355	186	169
	%		52	48
<b>Postgraduate</b>	Number	122	52	70
	%		43	57
<b>Total all</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>239</b>
	%		50	50

from someone else as plagiarism (compared with responses in excess of 80% at all other levels), and only 23% believed copying ideas without identifying the source was cheating. Only 24% of first-year students thought word-for-word copying without mentioning the author constituted plagiarism (unlike 71% at level 2 and 80% and 81% at other levels). A mere 27% of first-year students apparently thought handing in coursework found online was plagiarism. Relatively few students (only 6%) were challenged by a tutor who suspected plagiarism.

### *Unintentional plagiarism*

In terms of the potential for unintentional plagiarism, apparently 14% were unsure whether they had plagiarized work or not. Overall students were 'unsure' whether copying only one or two sentences into their own assignments without acknowledging the source was acceptable or not.

### *Collusion*

Of first-year students 14% submitted work as their own but worked on it with others, and there were even higher incidences amongst other undergraduate groups (see Table 2). In addition, 15% of undergraduates had allowed someone to copy their work, one explaining: '(I) gave them the work to help them out as they were struggling but they ended up copying parts of my work.'

### *'Minor' infringements*

Despite using basic textbooks 10% admitted not referencing them. Furthermore, 13% of undergraduates admitted to both changing dates and fabricating references to impress the lecturer (only 1% of postgraduates had changed dates and 4% had fabricated references).

**Table 2.** Reported levels of collusion

Q When undertaking individual coursework over the past year ... have you ever submitted work as your own but worked with others on it?	
A Yes	
Level 1	14%
Level 2	26%
Level 3	31%
Total undergraduate	19%
Postgraduate	7%
Total	16%

### *Reasons and prevention*

A lack of understanding and a need for help was the most popular explanation (at 13%) given for academic misconduct (see Table 3). Significantly 10% (mainly undergraduates) colluded in order to maintain a good working relationship with fellow students. A substantial minority of students (46% undergraduates and 33% postgraduates) did not recall or were unsure whether they were taught about plagiarism. In addition, overall 48% either did not remember or were unsure whether they had been taught how avoid it.

## **Discussion of results**

### *Deliberate plagiarism*

Deliberate plagiarism was highest amongst undergraduates, although reported admissions appeared grossly understated (6% of undergraduates admitting plagiarizing work, compared with 20% who knew of someone who had). The level of students who claimed not to have engaged in the forms of academic misconduct listed might compare favourably with 'results' from studies conducted elsewhere but precise levels emerging from this section of the questionnaire should be treated with caution. In some cases these claims seemed to be contradicted by responses in other sections of the questionnaire.

**Table 3.** Reported explanations for engaging in academic misconduct

	Undergrad. %	Postgrad. %	Overall %
I did not understand, I needed more help	15	7	13
A situation beyond my control (for example illness)	5	2	4
To maintain a good working relationship with fellow students	12	3	10
I did not have enough time to do the work myself	6	6	6
I couldn't be bothered to do it all myself	4	1	3
Other	10	7	9

Assignment briefs used for more than one year evidently offered an opportunity for exploitation, as explained by one student: 'I do not like it that first year students take assignments from second year students . . . It is not fair . . .'

Although a relatively small number of students were challenged by tutors suspecting academic misconduct, the majority of such students were apparently deterred from plagiarizing in future.

### *Unintentional plagiarism*

Accidental plagiarism was apparently rife thanks to many misunderstandings and uncertainties. These were reflected in a number of narrative comments, some even expressing anxiety: 'Sometimes I feel "what if I have" and get somewhat stressed . . . because I think I might have forgotten to reference a piece of the work.'

Plagiarism, whether intentional or not, is unacceptable but high levels of unintentional plagiarism suggest systemic failings in this respect.

### *Collusion*

Comparable with levels reported elsewhere (Shepherd, 2006; Opinionpanel Research, 2006), 15% of undergraduates allowed someone to copy their work. This figure was, however, at odds with those admitting to submitting work copied from someone else (apparently understated at 2%)! Collusion, or the potential for it, is clearly a major area for concern.

Most academics view group work as a vital component of enlightened learning strategies and one that aids effective academic integration. There is potential for contradictions to arise when learning is collaborative but assessment is individual (Resnick, 1987). Further, individual learning might be conceived as a cultural process of participation as a team member by gradual stages and interacting according to socially negotiated norms (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Matters of friendship, interpersonal trust and peer loyalty can make certain forms of academic misconduct appear justifiable (Ashworth et al., 1997). The findings suggest that messages making clear the acceptability of group discussion about the requirements of coursework whilst stipulating an absolute requirement for an individual to work on the task alone are either unclear or unheeded. One student illustrated the apparent confusion as follows: '(in) some subjects students are advised to help one another but it is not plagiarism . . .'

Ironically it might be that the positive teaching practice of using groups and the encouragingly high levels of student integration may to some extent help drive collusion.

### *Other infringements*

Bogus referencing is a common problem and if reported levels (10%) are understated to the same degree as other admissions of misconduct the true figure may be considerable. For some students the practice may be due to misunderstandings, for example, 'I didn't think small text books had to be put down, didn't think it made a difference'. An alternative explanation may be that this behaviour is due to faulty communication. For instance, one postgraduate student asked:

Why are textbooks not allowed to be referenced . . . despite [the fact that] they are academic work done by somebody. Why are we restricted to school academic journals alone?

(The assignment brief had reminded students that there was a requirement to access contemporary journal articles rather than just rely on standard textbooks.) One student explained more sinister motivations for the practice:



I have personally heard first year students laughing about the fact that they haven't put down the correct website address as the lecturer would see that their work was copied straight from the web.

This seems to render Bennett's (2005) description of bogus referencing as 'minor' inappropriate.

### *Internet abuse*

A significant proportion of all students admitted to copying ideas (10%) and some text word for word (5%) from the internet without acknowledging the source. One student explained: 'Left it too late, I didn't want lecturer to know I had only done it in three days.'

Undergraduates were more likely to look for essays online than postgraduates (14% compared with 6%). It is difficult to equate these figures with those admitting to handing in essays sourced online (of 477 respondents only 7 admitted to doing so).

### *Reasons and excuses*

Other studies have identified multiple reasons for plagiarism including time constraints, too much module content, fear of failure, chances of remaining undetected or simply 'beating' the system (Devlin and Gray 2007; Park 2003). In this study, however, students identified a lack of understanding and a need for help. Consistent with earlier comments, 10% (mainly undergraduates) engaged in collusion in order to maintain a good working relationship with fellow students.

### *Levels of understanding of 'the rules of the game'*

Misunderstandings amongst first-year students are at odds with other student groups. Only one in four identified copying from someone else as plagiarism or believed copying ideas without identifying the source was cheating. Worryingly, a similarly low proportion thought word-for-word copying without mentioning the author constituted plagiarism. This indicates that first-year students do not understand the 'rules of the game'. Furthermore, it is evidently dangerous to assume that students enter higher education with any understanding of these matters. More positively, another interpretation might be that enlightenment is gradual, and the 'penny does not drop' until one year or more of study is completed. It is of some relevance that in the author's university, as in most institutions in the UK as far as is known, the penalty for plagiarism is less severe for a first offence at undergraduate level (and by inference involving a confused or inexperienced scholar) than for a second offence or for a postgraduate student (University of Wolverhampton, 2008).

### *Effectiveness of teaching on plagiarism*

One in two of all students either did not remember or were unsure whether they had been taught how to avoid plagiarism. (In fact all students had been exposed to such teaching in one form or another.) Comments included:

No-one has ever taught us about plagiarism. And I think there will be hardly anyone who doesn't copy one thing or the other . . .

I have not been shown what plagiarism is . . . I often seek research on internet and try to put it into my own words.

Briefing sessions on academic misconduct are often left to individual module leaders to deal with on a piecemeal basis, or accommodated as part of an already crowded induction programme. These briefings, which were felt to be important by academics, were clearly unmemorable or considered unimportant by students. Evidence from elsewhere suggests that the seriousness with which academics regard plagiarism is often not shared by students (Ashworth et al., 1997; Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Pincus and Schmelkin, 2003).

## Conclusion

The study has gone some way to adding to existing knowledge of literature in the field of academic misconduct from the perspective of the student, and many interesting and some disturbing findings have emerged from it. Firstly, it is clear from this work that understandings and behaviour vary depending on the student's stage of study. In particular the likelihood of deliberate plagiarism is highest amongst undergraduates, who are also most likely to look for essays online. Secondly, the study suggests that, as well as deliberate misconduct, a general confusion also gives rise to unintentional plagiarism. There are also unacceptable levels of collusion, to some degree a product of student misunderstandings and a lack of clear guidance. The UWBS emphasis on team working may help academic integration but it also appears to be encouraging collusion. Thirdly, bogus referencing is rife, possibly owing to misunderstandings and poor academic scholarship, or perhaps to conceal malpractice. Finally, it is clear that current 'awareness strategies' to avoid or minimize this problem are ineffective as evidenced by a general failure of students to internalize the ground rules of academic work, and the fact that almost half of all students either did not remember or were unsure whether they had been taught how to avoid plagiarism.

The findings of the study underlined the validity of the theoretical framework proposed in Figure 1 earlier. The perceived complexity associated with understanding plagiarism is not unlike the 'off side' rule in football, that is, it is obvious to the enthusiast but a complete mystery to the outsider and there exist many degrees of understanding between these extremes. In the same way that someone might say 'I just do not understand football' one student expressed their confusion over academic misconduct by saying 'I am not familiar with university ways.'

Not unnaturally some students are keener than others to gain a mature understanding of the rules. At the same time the degree to which students are prepared to bend or break the rules when completing their assessments is also obvious. A further spectrum is evident, from those who falsified bibliographies and references in order to impress the lecturer to those who were prepared to submit work as their own even though they had acquired it from the internet. Extending this thinking and the sport analogy, student behaviour becomes a product of both knowledge of the 'rules of the game' and playing the 'rules of the game'. Student malpractice out of a desire to impress lecturers with proficiency of scholarship has been alluded to earlier. The comment by one student that 'it is a waste of time unless you want to be an academic' suggests that for some students this whole area represents something of a game played by academics that students engage in with varying degrees of success and enthusiasm.

Some of the narrative responses gained as part of this study confirm some of the feelings of category A students (accidental infringers), such as: 'Harvard referencing is not easy to use and this leads to accidental plagiarism' and 'Sometimes you are plagiarising but not really aware of it.'

It is acknowledged that these findings have limitations. Some of the claims and admissions made by students have been questioned in the discussion of findings. It may be therefore that some results appear more encouraging than actually is the case. When interpreting and discussing results, acknowledgement needs to be made that respondents may have answered untruthfully

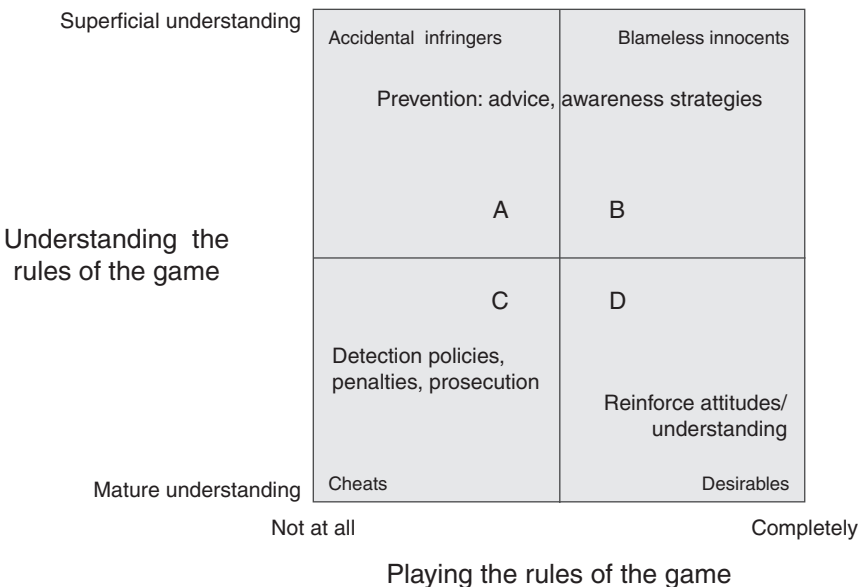
either out of guilt or in order to conceal past malpractice. The findings from the survey may be partially attributable to the context of the academic organization, its student population and its approaches to learning and assessment. The study is based on one school within a single institution, and findings may be peculiar to it and the student population it serves. It would be interesting to extend the survey to other institutions, with differing contextual conditions in order to determine whether similar results emerge.

# Implications for practice

Acknowledging the framework put forward in Figure 1, an institution might pursue policies appropriate to each category. Most institutions already target category C (cheating) students with their detection policies and systems, scheme of penalties and prosecution procedures. Prevention strategies through practical advice and raising awareness of the ‘rules of the game’ might also be devised for students in categories A and B. Acknowledging and rewarding category D students might usefully reinforce such behaviour in a positive way (see Figure 2).

Plagiarism, whether intentional or not, is unacceptable (Carroll, 2004). This places great responsibilities on those who manage programmes to provide student support and communicate messages on academic misconduct. High levels of unintentional plagiarism suggest systemic failings in this respect. Recommendations for improved practice arising from this study might reasonably include:

- attempting to ‘design out’ plagiarism by altering assignments every year, and designing assignments that have fewer generic solutions available on the internet
- challenging students early in their studies over suspicions of plagiarism



**Figure 2.** The ABCD academic misconduct matrix: potential institutional responses or strategies

- strengthening mechanisms to give positive messages about the value of accurate referencing and data presentation as a feature of good scholarship (for instance students might be discouraged from internet browsing to get 'short cuts' in favour of carrying out appropriate searches and fully referencing the sources of materials accessed)
- making students aware of the potential of modern detection software and the consequences of malpractice
- organizing compulsory, dedicated briefing sessions particularly for first-year students
- providing clear briefings on the acceptability of group discussion but the requirement for students to work on individual tasks alone.

The attention given to certain aspects of student behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and understandings in this article has offered some balance to the emphasis of existing literature on academic misconduct. The exploration of the impact of a student's stage of study, the incidence of unintentional plagiarism, attitudes towards and reasons for 'minor' misconduct, and the effectiveness of institutional practices represent worthwhile contributions to knowledge in these areas. In addition, the academic misconduct matrix proposed as part of this work provides for the first time a cohesive theoretical framework for understanding academic misconduct. The findings of this study have contributed to curricula redesign at the author's own institution. It is hoped that others will also gain useful insights from this article thereby assisting the review and design of learning, teaching and assessment strategies elsewhere.

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### Biographical note

**Bob Perry** is a Principal Lecturer at the University of Wolverhampton Business School. He enjoys his current role of Learning and Teaching Coordinator very much. He has 20 years' experience of teaching in higher education, currently in the area of strategy and change management. Bob's recent research includes assessed group work and developing positive practices to overcome unintentional academic misconduct. He is also interested in using football as a source of examples and metaphor in teaching management concepts. *Address:* University of Wolverhampton Business School, Compton Park Campus, Compton Road West, Wolverhampton WV3 9DX, UK. [Email: R.Perry@wlv.ac.uk]