

Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund: Final Report

Title of Project: Exploring Academic Misconduct for GEM Students: Some Insights into Student Behaviour and their Attainment in Higher Education.

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This report is intended to provide an opportunity to reflect on your project, with an emphasis on impact (actual and potential) and also on the process itself. It will be used to inform future developments in learning and teaching stemming from the project and the development of the Innovation Funds generally. Thank you for your work on the project and we look forward to helping you disseminate and build on your findings.

Please return the completed report, either using this form, or if you prefer as a video or audio file, to Marie Graham (marie.graham@northampton.ac.uk) by 30th June 2023. Please also make a copy of the report available on your project blog in your preferred format.

1. Briefly describe your project, with particular reference to the impact on learning and teaching practice – yours, your colleagues and for the wider university. This could be immediate or potential impact.

Academic studies on ethnic differences in UK HE have been persistent over the years with magnitude, varying across institutions. Some studies suggest it could be the result of teaching and assessment practices while others claim that under-representation of ethnic minority students has implications for their ability to adapt to different teaching and learning styles. The main objectives of this project were as follows:

1. To determine the reasons for committing academic misconduct among GEM students.
2. To identify the academic challenges faced by GEM students in higher education.
3. To explore the strategies employed by GEM students to cope with their academic challenges.
4. To investigate the overrepresentation of GEM students in academic misconduct.
5. To provide recommendations to the University on how to better support GEM students and prevent academic misconduct.

Throughout the duration of the project, we conducted in-depth interviews with five academic misconduct officers, delving into their perspectives and experiences in handling cases related to GEM students. These interviews provided valuable insights into the underlying factors contributing to academic misconduct among this student population.

I am pleased to inform you that the findings of our research were recently presented at a prestigious conference in Spain, further disseminating the knowledge gained from this study. This conference allowed for fruitful discussions and knowledge exchange among researchers, educators, and stakeholders in the field of higher education.

Regarding the impact on learning and teaching practice, the findings of our research hold significant potential. By understanding the reasons behind academic misconduct among GEM students, the university can develop targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address the root causes. This, in turn, can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students, promoting ethical behaviour and academic integrity.

Moreover, our research sheds light on the specific academic challenges faced by GEM students. This knowledge can guide curriculum development, instructional strategies, and student support services to better cater to the unique needs of this student group, thereby enhancing their overall learning experience and academic attainment.

The immediate impact of this project has been observed through the engagement and collaboration of our colleagues, who have shown great interest in incorporating the research findings into their teaching practices. Furthermore, the wider university community has recognised the significance of this research, opening avenues for further dialogue and collaboration to address academic misconduct and improve support for GEM students.

Some of the reasons why students committed academic misconduct at university were:

1. Cultural Differences: Cultural differences were among the factors that influenced students' understanding of academic integrity. Many international students came from educational systems with different norms and expectations, leading to potential misunderstandings about referencing, collaboration, and originality.

"I think one of our biggest problems is that we're trying to make an academic system fit an international audience of students who have come from an incredibly diverse range of academic institutions across the world, some of which actively encourage their students to write in a way that is verbatim from their teachers and students, give you a really good example. Two students who I've seen this week, actually one of them from Nigeria. She was very, very clear that the best grades and marks that she would get were the ones where she would copy what the professor or the doctor said to her word for word into her writing. And so. The outcome to that is you get a high similarity score and she'd done her undergrad and her postgrad lots of studies in Nigeria and had arrived in the UK [...] So within a couple of months, six months of arriving in UK, she's in a new education system that has different educational standards and it's these different educational standards that end up penalising her for something that's not her fault. (P1)

2. Language Barriers: Language barriers contributed to academic misconduct. Many international students, particularly those for whom English is not their first language, faced challenges expressing ideas and academic writing, which then tempted them to engage in unethical practices.
3. Academic Pressure: High levels of academic pressure, such as heavy workloads, strict deadlines, and intense competition, also contributed to academic misconduct among both international and home students. Students resorted to cheating or plagiarism to cope with the demands of their coursework.
4. Lack of Understanding: Some students, regardless of their background, had a limited understanding of academic integrity principles and the consequences of engaging in misconduct. This lack of awareness led to unintentional violations or a disregard for ethical standards.
5. Accessibility to Resources: Unequal access to resources, such as libraries, online databases, and academic support services, created disparities among students. This imbalance may have pushed some students to engage in misconduct as a means to level the playing field.
6. Peer Influence: Peer pressure and social norms within student communities contributed to academic misconduct. Students were influenced by their peers to cheat, share answers, or engage in other unethical behaviours.

7. Lack of Institutional Support: Insufficient support and guidance from universities in promoting academic integrity and educating students about misconduct have contributed to its occurrence. The system was more punitive than supportive.

[...] "I think we'd need uh. Definitely need to rethink about the rigor of the tutor induction into the system, so lecturers and that would have to be done not. So you could start that by starting when people start and they do get that in the induction lot more. But the key problem we probably got so make that would be revisiting that making sure that's fit for purpose I think it is but it's always a good starting point but you don't want to keep adding to the pile of people that we've got. Because it isn't part of the mandatory training. So like we do fire safety and you know we've got like display cream equipment and make sure we don't get bad backs and all of that well maybe we need to think about plagiarism as one of the mandatory courses for all staff so that we do this initial training" [...] (P2).

8. Perception of Low Consequences: If students perceive that the consequences of academic misconduct are minimal or unlikely to be enforced rigorously, it may further encourage unethical behaviour.
9. Stress and Time Constraints: Students experiencing high levels of stress or facing time constraints may be more inclined to engage in misconduct as a shortcut to meet deadlines or improve their grades.

It is important to note that these characteristics are not exclusive to international or home students but can be observed across diverse student populations in UK universities. Addressing these characteristics requires a comprehensive approach that includes educational interventions, support systems, clear policies, and fostering a culture of academic integrity within the university community.

In conclusion, this research project has provided valuable insights into the complex dynamics of academic misconduct among GEM students and has the potential to drive positive change in learning and teaching practices at our institution and beyond.

2. Describe how you have, or intend to, disseminate your findings. What would help you with this activity?

During the course of our research project, we have taken several steps to disseminate our findings and ensure they reach a wider audience. The dissemination of our research findings is crucial to maximize the impact of our study and contribute to the existing body of knowledge. The following are some of the methods we have employed or intend to utilise for disseminating our findings:

1. Conference Presentations: As mentioned earlier, we have already presented our research findings at a conference in Spain. Such conferences provide an excellent platform to share

our work with researchers, educators, and other stakeholders in the field. We plan to continue presenting at relevant conferences in the future.

2. **Publication in Academic Journals:** We aim to publish our research findings in peer-reviewed academic journals. By publishing in reputable journals, we can reach a broader academic community and ensure the long-term availability and visibility of our work.
3. **Reports and Whitepapers:** We intend to create comprehensive reports summarizing our research findings, methodologies, and recommendations. These reports can be distributed to universities, educational institutions, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders to inform their decision-making processes and encourage action.
4. **LLS Workshops and Training Sessions:** We plan to organise workshops and training sessions targeted at faculty members, academic advisors, and other professionals involved in student support and academic integrity. These sessions will provide an opportunity to discuss the implications of our research and explore practical strategies to better support GEM students and mitigate academic misconduct.
5. **Collaboration with Stakeholders:** We recognise the importance of collaborating with key stakeholders, such as university administrators, faculty members, and student organisations. By engaging in dialogues and sharing our findings with these stakeholders, we can foster a collective effort to implement changes and policies that promote academic integrity and support GEM students effectively.

To enhance our dissemination activities, we would greatly benefit from the following support:

1. **Funding Support:** Additional financial support would enable us to attend more conferences, publish in prestigious journals that may have publication fees, and organise targeted workshops and training sessions.
2. **Access to Networks and Platforms:** Assistance in accessing relevant networks, platforms, and professional communities would help us reach a broader audience and facilitate collaborations with stakeholders interested in our research area.
3. **Media and Communication Support:** Support in crafting press releases, media coverage, and utilising social media platforms would aid in effectively communicating our research findings to a wider audience, including policymakers, education professionals, and the general public.
4. **Institutional Support:** Collaboration and endorsement from our institution, including support for organising dissemination events, access to mailing lists or newsletters, and recognition of our research within the university community, would significantly enhance our dissemination efforts.

By receiving support in these areas, we can maximise the impact of our research findings, raise awareness about the challenges faced by GEM students, and contribute to the development of evidence-based practices and policies in higher education.

3. Please reflect on the research process. What was most enjoyable and interesting about it? What barriers if any did you encounter? What would have made the project easier to complete? How did the mentoring relationship help and what would make it more useful in future?

Reflecting on the research process, there were several aspects that were enjoyable and interesting, as well as some barriers encountered. The mentoring relationship played a significant role in supporting the research team, but there were also opportunities for improvement. Here are the key points:

Most enjoyable and interesting:

1. Engaging with staff during interviews: The conversations held during interviews with staff members provided valuable insights and made the research process engaging and intellectually stimulating.
2. Dissemination at the conference: Presenting the findings at the Learning and Teaching conference in the form of a workshop allowed for fruitful conversations with the audience, enabling knowledge exchange and further exploration of the research topic.

Barriers encountered:

1. Difficulty recruiting student participants: A notable barrier was the challenge in recruiting student participants for the focus groups. The lack of student interest impacted the representation and perspectives within the research, potentially limiting the breadth of insights obtained.

Making the project easier to complete:

1. Enhanced student recruitment strategies: Identifying alternative methods or approaches to engage and encourage student participation could have facilitated a more diverse range of perspectives and enriched the findings.
2. Streamlined administrative processes: Simplified administrative procedures, particularly for ethical approval and participant recruitment, could have expedited the research process and alleviated logistical challenges.

Role and impact of mentoring:

1. Practical advice and support: The mentoring relationship with Prof. Pauline Kneale provided the research team with practical advice, encouragement, and guidance throughout the project. This support contributed to increased social and academic confidence, facilitating decision-making and future planning.
2. Learning from mentor's experience: Drawing upon the mentor's extensive experience in similar projects allowed the team to benefit from insights and lessons learned, ensuring a more informed approach and strategy for the research.
3. Identifying goals and direction: The mentor's guidance helped the team establish goals, gain a sense of direction, and align the research with the broader strategic plans of the university.

Overall, while the research process had enjoyable and interesting aspects, it also encountered barriers, particularly in student recruitment. The mentoring relationship proved beneficial, but increased frequency and tailoring of the mentorship approach could further enhance its impact on the research team's development and future projects.

4. What other reflections on the project do you have that will make the scheme better for participants and the university community?

Reflecting on the project, there are several areas to consider for improving the scheme for participants and the university community:

1. **Participant Engagement and Recruitment:** Enhancing efforts to engage and recruit participants, particularly students, is crucial for obtaining a diverse range of perspectives and ensuring the relevance and applicability of the research findings. Exploring alternative recruitment strategies, such as leveraging student organisations, faculty support, or incentives, could help increase participation rates.
2. **Participant Support and Well-being:** Prioritising the well-being and support of participants throughout the research process is essential. Clear communication about the purpose, expectations, and potential impact of the study can foster trust and transparency. Implementing measures to safeguard participant confidentiality and providing resources for any concerns or emotional support are important considerations.
3. **Dissemination and Knowledge Exchange:** Building upon the conference workshop experience, further efforts can be made to disseminate research findings widely within the university community. Utilising various channels such as newsletters, online platforms, and targeted presentations to faculty, administrators, and student representatives can help raise awareness, promote discussion, and encourage the implementation of recommendations.
4. **Integration into University Policies and Practices:** Collaborating with key stakeholders, such as university administrators, faculty, and student services, is essential for integrating the research findings into university policies, practices, and support systems. Engaging in ongoing dialogue, sharing the research outcomes, and seeking opportunities for implementation within strategic plans can enhance the project's impact and ensure its long-term sustainability.
5. **Collaborative Partnerships:** Strengthening partnerships and collaboration with other universities or external organisations working on similar issues can provide additional resources, expertise, and a broader perspective. This collaboration can facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by GEM students and enable the development of collective solutions that extend beyond individual institutions.
6. **Long-term Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establishing a framework for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the project's recommendations and interventions is crucial. Regular assessment and feedback loops can help identify areas of success, areas requiring further attention, and potential adaptations to improve support for GEM students and address academic misconduct.
7. **Continual Mentoring and Professional Development:** Sustaining the mentoring relationship beyond the completion of the project can support ongoing professional development for the research team. Continued mentor engagement, periodic check-ins, and guidance on future research endeavours can strengthen the team's expertise and contribute to their growth as researchers and educators.

By addressing these aspects, the scheme can be enhanced to benefit participants by ensuring their active involvement, support, and well-being, while also creating a positive impact within the university community through the integration of research findings into policies, practices, and strategic plans.