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**Exploring university students' perceptions of plagiarism: A focus group study**

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**Abstract**

Plagiarism is perceived to be a growing problem and universities are being required to devote increasing time and resources to combating it. Theory and research in psychology show that a thorough understanding of an individual's view of an issue or problem is an essential requirement for successful change of that person's attitudes and behaviour. This pilot study explores students' perceptions of a number of issues relating to plagiarism in an Australian university. In the pilot study, focus groups were held with students across discipline areas, years of study, and mode of study. A thematic analysis revealed six themes of perceptions of plagiarism that are outlined under six main headings: confusion, fear, perceived sanctions, perceived seriousness, academic consequences, and resentment. The current study is the first in a research program aimed at exploring these relationships.

**Keywords:** Academic Integrity; College students; Education Higher; Plagiarism; Student (ethics); Universities (education); University Student

## **Introduction**

Since the 1960s, and particularly in today's technologically advanced society, academic dishonesty (for example cheating, collusion and plagiarism) continues to attract considerable attention from the media, academics, administrators, and students (Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne, 1997; Ashworth, Freewood and Macdonald, 2003; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995; McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 2001; Petress, 2003). Plagiarism, a type of academic dishonesty, is often conceived as fraudulent behaviour that diminishes the intellectual property of the original author and rewards plagiarists for their work (Petress, 2003). Indeed Petress (2003) describes plagiarism as a "plague on our profession" (p.624) that arguably, obliterates rewarding the ethic of hard work, eroding the moral value of honesty, whilst devaluing the role of assessment items within our educational establishments.

This characterisation of plagiarism is partly due to its historical roots, positioning plagiarism within a legal discourse, suggesting that plagiarism refers to an act of theft of the individual ownership of intellectual work (Ashworth, Freewood and Macdonald, 2003; Stearns, 1992; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). This construction of plagiarism assumes that knowledge has a history and that past authors must be acknowledged. Without due acknowledgment, it has been argued that one severs the ties between the creator of the work and the creation (Stearns, 1992). Indeed, Athanasou and Olasehinde (2002, p.2.) assert that; "The essence of cheating is fraud and deception", arguably a simple and direct characterisation of plagiarism.

At a broader social level, Marsden, Carroll and Neil (2005) stress that the costs to the public through inadequately trained graduates could pose a threat to public safety,

welfare, and financial decisions through inaccurate advice: the ramifications of which tarnish universities reputations and increase media scrutiny. Moreover, it has been suggested that academic dishonesty is growing, requiring universities to devote increasing time and resources to combat it (Carroll, 2005b; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995; James, McInnis and Devlin, 2002; Johnston, 1991; O'Connor, 2003; Park, 2003). In particular, the onus is on the academic managing the subject to correctly identify plagiarism and refer the matter to appropriate university processes (Sutherland-Smith, 2005).

My (first author) experience of identifying and managing instances of plagiarism occurred in the first semester of my appointment as an associate lecturer. Whilst the number of cases were low, I felt an overwhelming sense of disappointment and frustration. Two issues were evident: firstly investigating an allegation of plagiarism requires time and effort that can take a few hours of work to locate the original sources and cross reference with the student assignment, and longer to process the allegation and any subsequent misconduct panel and/or appeals. Secondly, and more importantly, good academic writing is contingent on developing sound skills in both research and writing; critically reading and comprehending appropriate sources, careful note-taking, paraphrasing, judicious use of quotations and giving credit to authors for their ideas and writing (Burton, 2007). As a consequence of plagiarism, students deny themselves an opportunity to master these skills, making academic writing increasingly difficult as they progress through their degree.

As psychologists we are aware that when attempting to modify peoples' attitudes or behaviours, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the target person's perceptions of, and attitudes towards the issue. In therapeutic situations, for instance, it is regarded as essential to obtain the client's perception and understanding of the issue or problem before

commencing therapy. This insight, or lack of, is likely to influence the individual's responsiveness to different therapeutic approaches (Cochran and Cochran, 2005; Egan, 2007; Kanfer and Schefft, 1988; Prochaska and Norcross, 2007). Similarly, when exploring attitudes and beliefs towards plagiarism, we can apply the same principles to gain a better understanding of student perceptions, and then develop appropriate strategies with an increased probability of effectiveness.

Likewise, literature from forensic psychology suggests that having some understanding of offender's perspective and motivation is important in order for positive to change to occur, and recidivism to decrease. For example Byrne and Trew (2005) argue "to be effective, interventions that aim to reduce or prevent offending behaviour need to be based on a sound understanding of what leads people to offend, and what leads people to stop offending" (p. 185). Comparable sentiments are expressed by Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne (1997) in relation to plagiarism. They argue that "...understanding the student perspective on ... plagiarism can significantly assist academics in their efforts to communicate appropriate norms" (p187).

From the above, we argue that there is merit in understanding students' perspectives regarding plagiarism in order to develop successful strategies to promote academic integrity and thereby prevent plagiarism. McCabe and Trevino (1993) identified a significant relationship between academic dishonesty and how students' perceived both student and faculty understanding of institutional policy. Higher levels of dishonesty were associated with lower levels of understanding. Another study by Roig (1997) clearly demonstrated that more than half of the students in their study could not identify clear examples of

plagiarism. Arguably indicating that whilst policy may exist, students have little knowledge or understanding of it.

It is apparent therefore, that universities can benefit from learning about their own students perceptions of plagiarism in order to develop appropriate strategies to promote academic integrity. In light of this, the aim of our research program is to systematically examine students' understandings of, and attitudes towards plagiarism, with the intention of informing the institution on approaches that may promote a greater awareness of plagiarism and therefore prevent its occurrence. This study is exploratory in nature and will form part of a much larger scale investigation.

### ***Literature review***

There is abundant literature on academic misconduct, most of which has been published during the last two decades. The literature on plagiarism offers many different reasons for student plagiarism. These include but are not limited to; time to complete tasks (poor time management), perceived disjuncture between award (grade) and effort required, too much work to complete over too many subjects, pressure to do well, perceptions that students not get caught, anomie, motivation, and individual factors (age, grade point average, gender, personality type) (Anderman, Griesinger and Westerfield, 1998; Anderman and Midgley, 1997; Calabrese and Cochran, 1990; Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing, 2000; Davis, Grover and Becker, 1992; Kibler, 1993; Love and Simmons, 1998; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes and Armstead, 1996; Park, 2003; Perry *et al.*, 1990; Roig and Caso, 2005; Sheard, Carbone and Dick, 2003; Whitley Jr, 1998). These studies tend to focus on individual student characteristics.

Focusing on individual student characteristics can be problematic as the emphasis is then placed on individual behaviour change process with little attention to socio-cultural and physical environmental influences on behaviour. McCabe and Trevino (1997) examined both individual characteristics and contextual influences on academic dishonesty. Their results indicated that decision making relating to academic dishonest behaviour is not only influenced by individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender and grade point average) but also to contextual influences (e.g. the level of cheating among peers, peer disapproval of cheating, membership of university initiated societies for male and female students [fraternity/sorority], and the perceived severity of penalties for cheating). Therefore, to better understand student perceptions of plagiarism, we need to take into account not only individual student characteristics but also broader contextual factors.

Only a few studies have been conducted to explore students perceptions of plagiarism and these tend to focus on the reasons why students plagiarise (Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne, 1997; Devlin and Gray, 2007; Marsden, Carroll and Neill, 2005) or utilise attitude scales that are developed with the assumption that all relevant stakeholders share the same meaning frame of how plagiarism is understood (Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995; Hasen and Huppert, 2005; Lim and See, 2001). The assumption that the term plagiarism has shared meaning is due to the institutions reliance on university policy to be an instrument to both define what plagiarism is, and possible consequences if breached.

It has been argued therefore, that having a good understanding of institutional policy reduced the risk of engaging in plagiarism. Jordan (2001) found that students classified as non- cheaters reported greater understanding of institutional policy than did the

cheaters. The apparent lack of knowledge of institutional policy on plagiarism, is further compounded by contradictory and often ambiguous information delivered by academic staff, as they also struggle to enforce an accepted and clear definition of plagiarism (McCabe, Butterfield and Trevino, 2003). For instance, in a study conducted by Burke (1997) over half of the academics surveyed not only reported a lack of familiarity with the universities policy on plagiarism, but also did not refer to the policy when dealing with incidents. As Carroll (2005b) suggests, it is this lack of clarity about plagiarism that influences how students perceive plagiarism.

In order to both understand how students perceive plagiarism and to develop and evaluate learning materials aimed at educating students about plagiarism, Breen and Maassen (2005) conducted two phase research that firstly explored student perceptions of plagiarism, and then developed learning materials to be embedded within courses. This was done by utilising four focus groups, consisting of thirteen undergraduate psychology students across first, second and third year. Their findings suggest that apart from a clear understanding of verbatim use of other peoples work without referencing, students had difficulty comprehending 'grey' areas (e.g. ability to comprehend and paraphrase work with due citation). The lack of familiarity with what required citation, was in part due to the inability to source adequate information regarding the subtlety of paraphrasing, inconsistency between staff, and the fear of inadvertent plagiarism. They also found that students reported an increasing understanding of plagiarism as a function of year level, with the associate skill development to complete assignments. Students also made suggestions for course improvement to focus on proactive strategies as opposed to the reactive nature of dealing with plagiarism once discovered.

Whilst Breen and Maassen (2005) aimed to explore students' understanding of plagiarism, their main focus was to develop resource material to embed within their courses. Consequently, only a small sample pool of 13 psychology students were utilised and questions centred specifically on students ability to define and avoid plagiarism. Though Breen and Maassen were able to elicit some understanding of student perceptions, based on how students define plagiarism and then avoid it, the current study aims to extend and build upon their work. It is proposed in this study, to sample across disciplines and delve deeper into student understandings of plagiarism.

McCabe and Trevino (1993) argued for a shift in our conceptualisation and examination of plagiarism, from one focused on individual factors that may inform an individuals propensity to plagiarise, to one of examining situational or contextual variables that can be utilised towards an integrated institutional response. Despite this exhortation, relatively little systematic research has been done on the topic of understanding student perceptions of what plagiarism is, and most of it that has been conducted in America or the United Kingdom. The aim of the present study is to develop a better understanding of how students construct plagiarism by using group discussion to explore the range of opinions regarding students' perceptions of plagiarism.

## **Method**

### ***Design***

This is a focus group study where our aim was to collect qualitative data by engaging groups of students in an informal group discussion 'focused' on their perceptions of plagiarism. Our study aimed to place students (who are typically aware of the rhetoric surrounding plagiarism), in the position of experts whose knowledge and experience is

essential to advance the theoretical discussion on student perceptions of plagiarism. It was intended, as suggested by Madriz (2000), that the interaction among group participants would reduce the interaction between the moderator and the individual members of the group. In this way, the role of the moderator was to actively facilitate discussion among the participants, by encouraging students to discuss their views with each other as opposed to directing it to the facilitator.

### ***Participants***

The participants were students recruited from a regional Australian university (urban centre population 25,000-99,999, [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2008)] ). A total of 41 students (25 female participants and 16 Males) who were either in their first or third year of study, took part across seven focus groups. Each focus group was homogenous with regards to discipline and year, as issues pertinent to understanding plagiarism may be discipline or faculty specific (e.g. referencing formats and emphasis placed on plagiarism) and would therefore impact on how students perceive plagiarism. The participants brought a rich variety of backgrounds to the discussions and represented four different discipline areas of psychology, policing, public relations and advertising. Wilkinson (2008) states that a focus group can involve as few as two, or as many as a dozen participants with the norm being between four and eight. The composition of each focus group is illustrated in table 1.

Table 1.

<table to be inserted here>

Focus group participants

### ***Materials***

An interview schedule was developed to provide an overall direction for the discussion. The schedule followed a semi-structured, open-ended, format to enable the participants to set their own agenda (Wilkinson, 2008)

Each focus group was asked the following questions:

1. What is plagiarism?
2. What are the causes of plagiarism?
3. How common is plagiarism?
4. How serious is plagiarism?
5. What are the chances of being caught?

The guide provided moderators with topics and issues to be covered at some point during the group discussion. Also, questions that were more important to the research agenda were presented early in the session.

### ***Procedure***

Following ethics committee approval, piloting the interview schedule occurred with Group 1. Following guidelines by Wilkinson (2008) our aim was to explore if the schedule was likely to engage the students in discussion, and whether the questions themselves flowed logically and allowed for a variety of viewpoints. We felt satisfied that students were engaged with the structure of the interview schedule and quite willing to openly discuss issues deemed relevant to them. Consequently, only minor changes were made to the wording of some of the questions so that they were more open and less ambiguous.

Potential participants were initially sought by contacting the subject co-ordinators for consent to approach students during tutorial sessions. This was followed by a small

presentation at the beginning of each class, or relayed by the subject co-ordinators.

Interested students contacted the research assistant, who then organised a convenient time and place for the group to meet. Four moderators (who were all employed by the university) were used in total, to ensure that students were not familiar with the moderator, thereby reducing any possible power dynamics within the focus groups. The duration of each focus group session was no more than 75 minutes. Each focus group discussion began with an introduction to explain the purpose, ground rules, and convey the expectation that everyone will contribute, all contributions will be valued and remain confidential, and the session will be digitally recorded. At the completion of each focus group, the moderator/s debriefed and noted initial impressions. The recording was then transcribed, pseudonyms assigned and preliminary ideas recorded.

### ***Data Analysis***

As suggested by Hayes (2000) each transcript was read several times to identify content topics, that is, similar threads interwoven throughout all the transcripts. This coding of the data continued for each transcript until no new categories were found. After this initial trawl, a search for patterns and commonalities among the categories were identified, and grouped into proto-themes. Hayes (2000) states that proto-themes represent the beginning of a theme and “will develop and change as the analysis proceed” (p.176).

Once an initial definition of a proto-theme was decided, the transcripts were re-examined for relevant material to that theme. The term ‘theme’ in this article refers to the patterns that repetitively occur, both within each transcript and across the focus groups. Once completed, the themes final form was constructed, named and defined. This is done

by re-examining related literature. By referring back to the literature, information was derived that would allow inferences to be made from the focus groups.

A technique used to increase confidence in the results was the use of credibility checks (Willig, 2001) within the research team, to see whether the analysis and interpretation of the data was credible. In this process the first author conducted the initial data analysis. Once completed, the second author and research assistant also read the transcripts and met to discuss the credibility of the six themes generated.

### **Analysis/Discussion**

From the focus group discussions, we identified six themes relating to the perceptions of plagiarism: confusion, fear, perceived sanctions, perceived seriousness, academic consequences, and resentment. Each theme is discussed in turn.

#### ***Confusion***

There is evidence that except for the verbatim copying of text, many participants were confused as to what behaviour constitutes plagiarism. This theme suggests that participants acknowledged an existence of a concrete and agreed upon definition of plagiarism somewhere “out there”, and were able to express some understanding of the more obvious instances of plagiarism. This is evidenced in the following discussion among two students;

P3: Simply, taking the words...like for example in an essay format, taking word for word out of paragraphs things that have been published, and not referencing it, and saying it's your own. Not referencing something basically, and just putting it in an essay.

P5: Passing off somebody else's work as your own.

P3: Exactly, that's it. (Group 4, 98 -105)

However, whilst the discussion between students did demonstrate some basic understanding of the behaviours that constitute plagiarism, there was also a degree of misunderstanding. This confusion appeared to extend on a continuum from some misunderstanding, to total misunderstanding as indicated in these two data extracts:

If you get someone else to do your assignment for you, because you are not doing the work for yourself, someone else is doing it for you. (P7, Group 5-370)

Paying someone to do your assessments? (P4, Group 5, 375,)

From an institutional perspective, it was clear from the focus groups, that despite our belief that students have access to detailed information regarding plagiarism; within subject outlines, access to the academic misconduct policy (held online), and online plagiarism guidelines, this access was not utilised by the participants. Amongst academics, there appears to be an assumption that by merely providing access to the academic misconduct policy, and plagiarism guidelines, that students would utilise these resources and therefore have a good understanding of plagiarism. But this was not the case as demonstrated in the following discussion between three participants, who are not only confusing the act of collusion as an instance of plagiarism, but that even the act of collusion is a poorly understood:

P7: There's also things under plagiarism, a thing about you are not allowed to show your assignment to another person in your class or something like that, because...

P1: Like you can work together on it, but you're not allowed to...

P2: You're not allowed to show it to anyone else.

P7: In your class.

P2: Before you write it. (Group 3, 1190)

The underutilisation of resources that provide information regarding plagiarism was apparent across all seven focus groups. Moreover, participants believed that academic writing was a learning process that needed to encompass not only having access to resources but also learning about plagiarism. According to the discussion between students, limited exposure to learning about plagiarism may in fact contribute to unintentional plagiarism:

Not fully understanding what plagiarism is, what are the different areas of plagiarism, and therefore, they'll do it inadvertently, just because they don't understand what plagiarism is. (Group 5, 521)

The main thing is that we aren't really getting a lot of feedback from our tutors to say that we're bordering... (P5)

We are or we aren't, yeah. (P4, Group 5, 710)

Certainly there was generally a clear understanding that downloading complete essays or copying large chunks of material without citing the source was not appropriate, but similar to findings in Ashworth et al. (1997), we also found that students were confused about what the term plagiarism actually encompassed. Consequently, there was great confusion over the 'grey area' as indicated in the following data extract that was endorsed by all the other members of the group:

Well, listen, I'm terribly confused what it actually means – I mean, that might sound stupid; there's a policy that ... the wholesale copying is obviously quite obvious, but there's a hell of a lot of grey area in between that I really still don't even understand - today's moved that fence further to one side than it ever was before. (P1, Group1, 45)

[Participants all begin to talk over each other and nod in agreement]

Research by Carroll (2005a) found that students experience difficulty in defining their own ideas, and being able to discriminate between common knowledge and knowledge that requires citation as expressed in the following data extract:

But I reckon that confuses me, because all my ideas come from other peoples' ideas, so you can't have just say... "I have an idea". (P6; Group 3-271)

P6: But then there's...I don't know how to actually quote a work.

P2: I think that really worries me as well, because what if I am doing an assignment and I'm...what if I think is my brilliant idea...do I have to actually go somewhere and check whether I have stolen it from someone else? (Group 3, 278)

Moreover, even when participants could identify instances of when appropriate citation would be required, there was a lack of knowledge on the conventions of citation. The following discussion was echoed throughout the seven focus groups, regardless of year or discipline:

P2: It's plagiarism if you don't reference the person. If you take someone else's knowledge, because it's not your knowledge that you're taking, you're taking someone else's knowledge, and rewording it...you didn't know it, it has come from them, so you need to reference it.

P6: It's not word for word.

P2: It doesn't even matter whether it's not word for word.

P5: If you had no knowledge and the knowledge you're getting is from somewhere else...

P2 ...exactly, you have to reference it if that is the case. (P2)

P6 ...in an essay, do we then have to reference every sentence? (P6)

P5: Well, that's it. How many times can you rewrite something? Every five or so words? (Group 4, 153-172)

Within this theme it was evident that participants were unclear on the university policy on academic misconduct. Examining the current practice at the university, students report being provided with online links to the academic misconduct policy via an electronic message sent to every student at the commencement of each semester. However, since a formal induction or transition into to the scholarship of academic writing is not available to students, the onus is on the student to search for relevant information pertaining to plagiarism, or to the initiative of each individual academic to ensure that students understand academic integrity.

### ***Fear***

The theme of fear represents the anxiety expressed by students regarding the possibility of committing unintentional acts of plagiarism. This fear appears to flow from the discussion threads on confusion. Similar findings in Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne (1997), and Breen and Maassen (2005) suggest that a combination of university expectations and sanctions, the difficulty in finding clear guidelines on minimising plagiarism along with the mistaken belief that the most minor errors could result in an allegation of plagiarism increase students' level of anxiety. Central to the fear is the belief that unintentional plagiarism results in the same consequences as intentional plagiarism:

There are people that intentionally plagiarise, like stealing others work instead of doing their own...and then there are people who just haven't referenced it properly, or done something the wrong way, so it is considered plagiarism but they didn't mean to...(P3,Group 3, 101)

Arguably, this anxiety can be traced back to when students commence university, and are overloaded with new information in their first week at university (McGowan, 2005)

The concept's ok. The concept sits up and says not to use other people's work without giving them their due credit... it does become a bit of a complex issue. When you first start to study, you, you are given the booklet, you're given the directions, and you're, you know, put under... it becomes a bit of a fear factor about, 'boy, I need to pick this up pretty quickly'. (P3, Group1, 60)

Moreover, participants report that 'education' about plagiarism is often presented as a set of rules and warnings that results in a 'sense of doom', which can be attributed to the legalistic discourse that positions plagiarism in a "language of crime and punishment". This is demonstrated in the following data extract:

...I have realised how broad and real it is...like just using someone else's concept without even realising can be plagiarism, like there's so many...you can plagiarise so easily without even realising. It's pretty scary. (P5, Group3, 82)

I think it is scary though because it is always in the background though – it's always in the back of our minds it is scary because it is something that I know I don't have a complete grasp on. (P3, Group 7, 422)

There appeared to be little understanding of scholarship and the relevance of citation and attribution in developing a position built on a sound foundation of evidence, rather the participants report focusing on the conventions of citation:

I was sitting there the other day thinking if I reference it right, I spend more time referencing than anything else in the assignment. Like the assignment is really difficult to research but just the formatting and the referencing at the end can take so long, so I am just worried that if I put the wrong thing in there then I will get a

'oh she's trying to get away with this' when really I just forgot it to include to cite it really. (P3, Group 6, 259)

Similar to Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne (1997), the participants indicated that despite making every effort to avoid plagiarism, there was a very real fear of inadvertent plagiarism. This was evident across all our focus groups, regardless of year of study or discipline. The participants perceived a relationship between the expressed fear and writing confidence as expressed by the following participant:

Yeah I quote way too much, like you are scared, I am scared to write my own words in case they are someone else's but I didn't know about it. (P1, Group 7, 215)

The loss of confidence implicit in the above quote may form a poor basis for learning. For instance, research investigating the impact of self-efficacy in learning, indicates that students who exhibit confidence and self-esteem are much more likely to be successful at mastering the academic conventions (Archer, Cantwell and Bourke, 1999; Ingleton and Cadman, 2002). Conversely, having a poor understanding plagiarism may create some uncertainty regarding the academic conventions of writing. Rumours appear to provide a source of information to the recipient, despite the inaccuracies, which may increase the perception of some control to avoid the threat of perceived sanctions. Fiske (2004) argues that in times of uncertainty, humans are motivated to try to control the environment in order to act effectively. Students report doing this by actively working towards avoiding plagiarism at all costs, even if it means resorting to poor writing strategies as demonstrated in the following data extract:

I think a lot of the time you have to, like we had to do an assignment last year on this practice in community events. So basically I had a whole heap of references

saying this is the best practice... and I had actually done community events so I knew what they told me, but I felt like my whole essay was just quoting other people and other people's ideas. And I thought, because traditionally quotes don't get contribute to your word count, so my two thousand word essay was probably five hundred words in my own words, because it was just jam-packed with so many quotes because they were everybody else's ideas, and I didn't want to, say yeah this is what I think you should do because I hadn't actually done it. So I didn't really know ... so I was just getting this information off other people. (P2, Group 7, 204)

Whilst fear appeared to be very strongly evident across all of our focus groups, the literature on plagiarism only gives this scant regard. Moreover, the fear expressed by the participants may have been augmented by an overestimation of the severity of sanctions discussed in the next section.

### ***Perceived Sanctions***

Interestingly, sanctions for plagiarism were often compared against sanctions for some types of criminal activity. This is not surprising given the legal discourse that frames plagiarism:

P4: At the end of the day, it is copying five or six words, as opposed to getting done for DUI [driving under the influence of ...]...

[participants talking over each other]

P5: That's the problem with this place, they... all they focus on is doing the wrong thing, it's just a small thing. (Group 5, 785)

Explicit in the previous quote is that relative to some criminal offences, plagiarism is perceived to be relatively minor. Therefore, if the sanctions of engaging in plagiarism are

considered to be disproportionately severe, a student may be less likely to engage in it. For instance, the following participants openly expressed their fear of possible sanctions:

Well, I've been at university for a long, long time, I think it's certainly become more prevalent now, and since I've been doing this course, which is two years, it's pushed all the time, and if you don't do this, you'll be – I don't know – hung, drawn, quartered, thrown out, and you think – blimey! (P1, Group 1, 224)

... Plagiarism is sold under [the] one verse, and that is that you are basically dealt with, with the sword hand. So, it's a very worrying concept that's chortling along in the background. (Group 1, 251)

Arguably, the fear expressed by participants not only related to inadvertent plagiarism but also to the often incorrect understanding of the penalties involved in the university academic misconduct policy. Noticeably, in the current study, fear was more apparent in disciplines where plagiarism would not only lead to academic sanctions, but also to sanctions that resulted in exclusion from career pathways, as is the case of police officer training:

Coming from a fire job, I have given up so much to be here, I've got a wife and two kids at home, fifteen week old baby, if I went back to them and got booted out for plagiarism, which I know myself...I'm not trying to prove anything to anyone...but I would never do. You know, I want to graduate and do it myself, I'd just be shattered. I'd be absolutely shattered. You know, the disappointment would be just unbelievable. (P4, Group 5,676)

Associated with the perception of severe consequences, there is also the perception that there is a high likelihood of being caught:

Moderator: ...what are the chances of being caught at plagiarism?

P2: A hundred percent.

Moderator: A hundred percent?

P1: It seems to be...

P2: Apparently, they all know the sources really, really well.

(Group 3, 1002)

These student statements hint to a possible factor underlying and influencing students' perceptions, and that is rumour:

Everyone keeps going on about how the lecturers know exactly what they are teaching, and they will just be able to tell straight away...(P2, Group 2, 367)

As previously alluded to, rumours can have a very important influence on behaviour. For instance, it may appear that rumour could be aggravating the confusion and fear expressed by the participants. The rumours regarding plagiarism could be perceived by the students to be ambiguous and potentially threatening. Consequently, instead of helping students reduce the confusion surrounding the term, such rumours tend to exacerbate their anxiety as shown in the following quotes:

And because this place is a beehive of rumours, right, and hype, that adds to your fear. You know, it adds to your fear, because you know what happens, a situation might happen, and it is this big...by the time it goes through two or three hundred people, it is that big. (P4 Group 5, 1029)

P5: People will get caught, eventually, even if it is three years later when they put it through the system before we graduate. So there is a chance of getting caught in the next three years.

P1: Imagine that!

P5: [laughs] You're going to worry about it for three years that you have accidentally plagiarised! (Group 5, 1011)

It has been suggested that the content of rumours act as ‘impoverished news’ when there is a lack of reliable information (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007). Consequently, as a collective group, students may try to make sense of plagiarism, and the threat of unintentional plagiarism, by trying to determine evidential basis of the information sourced.

Unfortunately, evident within discussions in the focus groups, much of the ‘information’ obtained regarding plagiarism is presented as factual, creating uncertainty and fear as demonstrated in the following data extract:

P1: So, is that really the consequence of plagiarism – you get expelled?

P3: It can ... well, that’s what’s stated.

(P1: yeah, that’s ...)

It’s stated that if it’s proven, that’s the end of your career at this establishment. That’s my understanding of it.

P1: Is that correct [looking at moderator], or is that ...? I mean, you mightn’t be able to answer that. (Group1, 595)

The nature of the rumours appears to have some implications regarding students obtaining clear information concerning plagiarism, adding to the inaccurate knowledge of the sanctions applied. Consequently, the perceived sanctions only add to the fear expressed.

### ***Perceived Seriousness***

Participants in the focus groups reported that unless a student had intentionally plagiarised, the perceived penalties for plagiarism, were considered to be too severe. For example the quote below reflects the participants’ perceptions that the act of plagiarism (in this instance limited by their own definitions) is not as serious as the university treats it:

I don’t believe it’s as serious as people make out, I think it’s a bit of a beat-up. Provided you’re not wholesale copying. (P1: Group1, 485)

Brimble and Clarke (2005) found evidence to suggest that students view academic dishonesty less seriously than academic staff, and tend to underestimate the prevalence of student dishonesty. There was some evidence of this among participants:

... in uni they are very particular if you put a comma in the wrong spot then you are in trouble. You lose marks on referencing and that is frustrating because it doesn't ... if they wanted to look it up they could still they can still see who wrote it, what article it came from, what year it was written the commas don't matter. But a lot of people [academics] are pedantic about it. (P1, Group 6, 150)

Ashworth and colleagues (1997) found similar views expressed by their interviewees and concluded "...plagiarism is a far less meaningful concept for students than it is for academic staff, and it ranks relatively low in the students system of values" (p.201). In the following quote the mismatch of expectations is evident:

I should imagine most of the plagiarism errors are errors, not purposely done, so it's a rather ... draconian for not understanding some rules and regulations. Sure enough, if they're wholesale just cut and copy, that's fair enough, but if it's just a lack of understanding of really what it means. It does appear to be a bit severe, what you ... the impression that you've got that will happen if you are caught for plagiarism. That's my impression. (P1:Group1, 224)

These findings are also consistent with Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, (1995) who found that in terms of academic dishonesty, plagiarism is perceived by students to be the least serious form. Moreover, McCabe and Trevino (1996) also found that copying without citation and collusion were not considered serious offences. Relative to this past research, our findings suggest that the penalties associated with plagiarism were perceived to be draconian, whilst the act of plagiarism itself is not perceived as serious (a 'beat up') relative

to other deviant acts. This may be augmented by a rumour mill operating, and not based on factual evidence.

The final two themes appear to reflect important consequences resulting from the four thematic areas discussed. Participants in all seven focus groups expressed resentment towards the institutions management of plagiarism, and the impact that this may be having on their ability to write an academic paper in the form of decreased self-efficacy (academic consequences) to write an assignment. These two themes will be discussed in turn.

### ***Resentment***

As outlined, participants articulated an inadequate understanding of plagiarism, hence the worrying possibility of inadvertently plagiarising. Moreover, participants perceived the sanctions for plagiarism to be too draconian, which was incongruent with the low level of seriousness placed on plagiarism by the participants. Therefore, the participants believed that the university treated plagiarism too seriously. As a result, the participants expressed resentment toward the institution, and the academic staff which they believed monitored plagiarism. This was expressed in the following quotes:

The problem with universities is that they are all at a higher level of education, and they are going to speak to people like...and that's how it should be. We're coming along as police officers, not as doctors or solicitors or anything, we're at the bottom level of all that. Make it easy for us to understand. (P1, Group 4, 1034)

I don't know ... I kind of see it as the lecturers taking it almost personally, like 'oh these people have tried to plagiarise and they think that I am really ignorant and don't realize that it is happening' that is what I get from the plagiarism speeches they give us. So yeah. (P1, Group 6, 310-313)

In both quotes participants perceive themselves as victims of institutional anti-plagiarism 'laws', that focus on stylistic requirements to be able to reference correctly. Consequently, plagiarism was perceived to be more about the mechanics of writing than about due acknowledgment to the creator of a piece of work:

Yeah, but that's stupid, everything I've done at uni is to do with referencing! (P3, Group 4, 420)

You don't even feel like you are getting your own work marked it is all about whether you can piece together other peoples' works (P2, Group 7, 237)

Ashworth and colleagues (1997) found similar sentiments expressed among their interview participants. They claimed that students were unaware of a broader discourse of scholarship in which they are important stakeholders. Within a community of scholars, participation requires the ability to correctly attribute sources of knowledge. Interestingly, this discourse is perceived to be shared amongst academics, but lies in contrast to the plagiarism discourse that is constructed by the participants. In fact some of the expressed resentment could be linked to the inability to generalise the importance of scholarship to the external work environment that students are working towards. The policing students in particular voiced some resentment towards the relevance of academic work to their future career. For example the following data extract was endorsed by all the students in the focus group:

I mean we are not going to be going and writing theses and all sorts of academic stuff, we are going to be writing reports, so I am not sure how plagiarism comes into that. (Group5, 754)

[students nodding and agreeing]

Much of the expressed resentment was demonstrated within the focus group environment, and manifested in the students' verbal and non-verbal language. Many of the students became quite animated in discussions, particularly with exchanges that centred on inadvertent plagiarism. Voices often became quite raised, and spoken rapidly. Students, tried to speak over each other to get their points across, whilst others became quite silent and still. It could be argued that the focus group method may have heightened the participants' anxiety and resentment.

### *Academic Consequences*

The theme of academic consequences manifested as a form of academic learned helplessness, reported as a decrease in confidence to write an academic paper:

But ... I'm just wondering, with all this ...is how much our creativity is cut down by all this? And ... in some papers that I've written in the past that I've wanted some licence to move ... to really express stuff, and I've been that fearful to do it, because of the ... that I worry about, is that I wonder how marks are going sometimes, in the respect of ... because we're all very cautious.( P3: Group1, 337).

Implicit within this quote, and within the participants' discussion was expressed fear that is arguably reminiscent of Seligman's theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), which McKean (1994) has applied to the academic situation. McKean suggested that learned helplessness can lead to negative academic consequences such as procrastination and poor performance. Certainly the students in the focus groups seemed to recognise some of these negative consequences as described in the following quotes:

Sometimes we do the assignments, worry about the plagiarism, and we forget about the issue in the assignment. (P2, Group1, 649)

P3: And I guess, in the end, are we spending too much time concerned about referencing and plagiarism than the actual outcome of the assessment?

P7: Mmm. It's like, what is it, five percent of your mark is the referencing but you probably spend forty percent of your time on it, and worry about it.

(Group 3, 702)

The implication of the above quotes indicates that participants were concerned of inadvertent plagiarism, and as discussed previously, a belief that this may result in punitive measures, instead of remedial intervention. For example students expressed concern that despite their best efforts there was a distinct probability of accidentally using a phrase or sentence from a book, lecture or journal without acknowledgment. These beliefs were also evident in other studies (Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne, 1997; Breen and Maassen, 2005). Consequently, participants reported a loss of confidence to write a paper:

P2: There's no real encouragement. There's no positive...

P7: Your confidence is just shot, like I would go home and say I'm going to fail, and then I get an assignment back and it is a good result and I'm really happy. The whole thing about you're going to fail, it's not good enough, you need to get twenty references for this, it sort of makes you lose your confidence about what you're doing? You're sitting there going...like with our essay, I am sure everybody had it, you don't feel like you are putting in anything of you...oh, I've just got to get twenty references and it's really difficult to get a high mark if you want to be critical of it and you want to put your own opinion into it. (Group 5, 842-857)

The perceived loss of confidence was evident within all seven focus groups, with the fear of failure being attributed to not understanding what the word ‘plagiarism’ meant:

P1: No one really knows what it [plagiarism] is...

P3: ...I think all the rigmarole, is with the issue. I reckon with people, about plagiarism, it is sort of like a dirty word (Group 7, 569)

It could be argued that students may eventually give up trying to write a ‘good’ academic paper and as a result may not invest as much effort or no effort at all, as predicted in the learnt helplessness model. There appeared to be evidence that some students felt an inhibition of learning that impacted on their ability to fully and freely express their ideas:

...And then they expect you to reference it. People...I think that dumbs people down at the same time. It really, really does. It doesn’t allow people to express their own creativity; it doesn’t allow people to express their own ideas, their own feelings, their own thought processes about a specific idea, a process, a methodology...anything. It inhibits a person’s understanding, it really does.  
(Group 5, 584)

Whilst we expected students having some difficulty with clear and explicit definitions of plagiarism, we were not prepared for the level of anxiety expressed or the amount of resentment. As previously discussed, this may have been an artefact of the focus group process. Nevertheless, students across the seven focus groups shared similar perceptions of plagiarism, with the participants in the policing focus group demonstrating extreme reactions. This could be due to the dire consequences of plagiarism for policing students, who believe they will be dismissed from the police officer training.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the results, that the university's approach towards plagiarism is not effective. Whilst students were able to clearly define cases of plagiarism, where verbatim text was inserted in a student assignment without due acknowledgement, they were unable to discern the more subtle aspects of attribution of ideas and paraphrasing of text. This confusion appeared to increase the fear of inadvertent plagiarism, which arguably appears to be related to the students' confusion. This fear appeared to be augmented by an overestimation of the severity of sanctions, along with the perception that the university treats the act of plagiarism very seriously in contrast to how students perceive plagiarism. The other concerning aspect was that students reported negative academic consequences that manifested as a form of academic learned helplessness. This was reported as a decrease in confidence to write an academic paper.

In order to address some of these issues, we can turn to McGowan (2005) who argues for a system that is twofold, and focuses on the intent of the writer. Penalties for deliberate academic misconduct are recognised as an important deterrent. However, she recognises a need to change the way that we talk about plagiarism or by-passing the term all together and instead focusing on *academic integrity*. Her recommended strategy is to acculturate students into university culture through a process of apprenticeship, thereby giving students the appropriate skills of academic writing. Our research would clearly support such a strategy, and is one recognised by our own participants:

P1: ... it's a bit like something's a crime, some things you go to jail for life, and some things you go to jail for a year – you know, not all crimes are equal, not all plagiarism is equal. I think that's going to be ...

P3...and then there's magistrate's discretion. Yeah, you're right, I mean, there are variables within ... within the process. It's not ... it's not as fully cut-and-dried, as one would like to have it down pat, probably understanding. (Group1, 507)

But then also if you get caught, if I get caught doing it accidentally, I want to know what I did wrong, because it is not intentional, I want to learn and do it right (P7, Group 3, 1112)

As a way forward, the institution may overcome some of the issues highlighted in the themes by exploring a holistic university wide and approach, where the onus of responsibility on academic integrity is shared by all stakeholders of the institution. A system is required where students are exposed to the principles of academic integrity that encompass the development of scholarship: learning about the principles of academic writing, the development of the authorial voice and with it, the place of attribution.

It has been evident from this research therefore, of the importance for institutions to develop an understanding of the perceptions of university students' understanding of plagiarism. We cannot assume to know that students entering university come with an understanding of the conventions of academic writing. Furthermore, we need to work toward an orientation to university culture that encompasses academic integrity that is not done in a haphazard or piecemeal manner as reported by participants:

Yeah, on one ... in one hand, you're forced or pushed in the direction, you've got to read masses of things, you've got to quote lots of things, you're not to use your own work, you're nearly forced into using a lot of that work, and then how you use it correctly is the problem, I find. Obviously, not as correctly as one should have done, in the past, but ... so there's that sort of contra. (P1:Group1, 84)

Drawing from Breen and Maassen's (2005) study, information on plagiarism needs to be specifically covered as a unit in the first semester of study in their first year at university. The students in Breen and Maasons' study also recognised that skill development in time management, critical reading, note-taking, paraphrasing, writing and referencing were also required to prevent academic misconduct. Skill development was also identified by our participants as an important factor to reduce the possibility of plagiarising:

It also comes down to... this is a learning institution and if you can't learn how to actually do an essay and do it...therefore they've got to give you some leniency, and show you...point you in the direction of where've you got that information from? Oh, I got it from here. Oh, but you didn't reference that. So, it's a learning experience as well. (P1, Group 5, 620)

Finally, while the results do provide a greater understanding of how students perceive plagiarism and the consequences of those beliefs, caution is needed in drawing strong conclusions due to the study's exploratory nature. We do not seek to generalise our findings as one would do in a representative survey, given that the only data collection method within this study was a set of one-time focus groups with a relatively small sample of self-selected students in one Australian university. It is proposed that further studies would extend this research, building on the six themes found.

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