

## Bespoke Student Consultation Forum

# CONSULTATION ON THE ACADEMIC CONDUCT REVIEW

19 – 30 October 2022

A complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the [forum](#). Below is a summary of key points made by students.

### Record of contributions

In total there were **317** posts by **53** students, with **475** like/favourite ratings. There were at least **283** independent readers of the forum. Below are extracts from most 'liked' posts.

I do think that it is important to distinguish between accidental and deliberate breaches of the rules. And I also think it important to remember that everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty. If a breach of the rules is accidental and quite unintentional then I would call that poor academic practice rather than academic misconduct. The student has failed to learn the rules of good academic practice rather than deliberately broken them.

If misconduct has been detected, the student should be provided with additional support for good academic conduct. This could be in the form of 1-2-1 support for writing in their own words or other methods that involve support from someone appointed by the OU, rather than being signposted to online materials. Following this, it should be noted that misconduct was detected and that a warning is in place. If misconduct is detected after the initial intervention, more serious consequences should follow.

It is simply unfair that a student can get a higher grade than a fellow student who has played by the rules.

It's important because the OU must be seen to uphold academic rigour, underpinning the integrity of the qualifications it awards.

## **1. What do the terms 'good academic practice' or 'academic integrity' mean to you as a student and which of these terms do you find most helpful?**

- Some students felt that good academic practice and academic integrity are interchangeable terms but most felt that there were differences.
- Some students discussed how academic integrity was linked to ethics and philosophy in a personal sense and within the HE sector. By acting with academic integrity, you are presenting yourself to be a credible and reliable academic.
- Some students commented that academic integrity was about good practice in the widest sense of the word but good academic practice was about the practical elements, such as referencing and not colluding. Academic integrity is an approach and a value, where good academic practice is what the student practices day-to-day.
- Students confirmed that these terms related to more than plagiarism and stated that it included adhering to taking effective notes, working within the guidelines of policies such as social media policies, ensuring that you do not ask for help inappropriately, that you do not share copyrighted material and ensure that you do not contribute to any form of cheating as well as not cheating yourself. An example of the latter, is not sharing TMA answers with students who are struggling and directing them towards their tutor.
- Some students discussed how the opposite of good academic practice was not academic misconduct, due to its wider meaning. Therefore, you could not be practicing good academic practice but still not committing academic misconduct, as poor practice without intent is not academic misconduct.
- Students discussed the term of good academic conduct as a mixture of both academic integrity and good academic practice.
- Some students felt that these terms should be used consistently from Level 1 and beyond, to ensure students not only understand the practice of academic integrity but understand the terminology. This would also help students who do receive notification of alleged academic misconduct as the terminology will not be new to them.
- Students talked about the importance of inclusion in relation to academic integrity. All students need to have the opportunity to understand good academic practice and embed it into their approach to study. Students were clear that where academic integrity was not inclusive, there would be disadvantaged students at danger of committing academic misconduct.

**Follow up question: Where would you find information about what these terms means? You obviously all have good insight into them, so are there any specific places, resources etc, where you have learnt more about them?**

Students referenced these places for finding out what these terms means:

- From their first OU module
- By looking up academic conduct on the OU website
- Within the resources section of the Library
- Official bodies such as the Office for Students (OfS) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
- Search Engines
- By searching the OU Help section (but students also stated that they found this hard to navigate)

**Follow up question: How would you practice these skills when writing an assignment?**

Students stated that they:

- Take effective notes when reading and ensuring they have all information to reference.
- By checking any section of their work that doesn't have a reference to make sure it does not need one.
- Leave enough time to draft the assignment and undertake reference checks prior to submitting.
- By putting all references read into a list and then deleting the references not used within the assignment – not leaving reference to the end.
- By ensuring good practice of time management, organisation, presentation skills and collaborative working.

**2. Why do you think it is important that the Open University encourages all students to write in their own words and rigorously investigates instances of cheating or academic misconduct?**

- Students commented that the OU must uphold academic rigor as this underpins the integrity of the qualifications it awards.
- Students also commented that this would affect the reputation of the OU as an Higher Education institution in the UK, and beyond.
- Students stated that the hard work of those with good academic practice will be devalued by those who participate in academic misconduct.
- Some students commented that this could have financial implications for the OU. Students could ask to be refunded for qualifications (or similar) if they feel that their study has been

devalued. The OU could also lose prospective students to other Higher Education institutions.

- Students shared a common view that the majority of students would expect the OU to investigate such matters, in a sensible, fair and appropriate manner.
- Some students said that these investigations are a source of anxiety. These students commented that they worried that one small mistake could lead them to fail.

**Follow up question: What behaviours would you consider to be academic misconduct?**

Students stated the following behaviours:

- Using information that is not common knowledge, without referencing.
  - Copying from text without appropriate references.
  - Copying another student's work or collaborating with another student to write an answer.
  - Purchasing essays, answers to questions, exam questions or editing services.
  - Collaborating in student groups (such as on WhatsApp) that moves beyond general discussion or helpfulness.
  - Downloading PDFs of papers/books without borrowing them through the OU Library or purchasing them
- Asking someone else to write your assignment.
- Pretending someone else's work is your own.
  - Using a crib sheet (or similar) in exams when not permitted.
  - Getting someone else to sit an exam for you.
  - Self-plagiarism – copying large extracts of work already completed and submitted, and pretending it is new.
  - Not referencing correctly.
  - Requesting an extension and then using marked work or tutor's responses to help you complete your assignment.

**Follow up question: What do you think would be the impact on your degree if other students cheated/plagiarised?**

Students stated the following impacts:

- It can interfere with learning, such as tutorials.
- It could lead to the module/qualification you are on being reviewed which could cause anxiety for the students still studying.
- It devalues students hard work and could even result in their work being of a lower grade.

- It can devalue a qualification held by a Graduate and could even result in difficulty in further study or applying for jobs.

### **3. What resources have you used that have helped you to develop your study skills and your ability to write in your words? Which of these were particularly helpful?**

- Students referenced that they used the Library resources and found them really helpful.
- Some students commented that their tutor was approachable and supported them to develop their study skills and academic writing skills.
- Students mentioned using the marking criteria to help guide them in their assignments.
- Some students commented that these were included in the modules they were studying.
- Some students commented that guidance on these skills are in different places and that some students find it hard to locate them all and amalgamate the guidance in a way that makes sense to them.
- Students mentioned that the various references styles (e.g. CiteThemRight and Harvard) was confusing, particularly for students studying across different subject areas.
- Students suggested that the OU needs to help students become more digital literate, for example, how to search module sites or the OU website, in order to find information and guidance.
- Many students referenced the “Student Handbook” (now known as the Assessment Policies) and confirmed that it was very helpful.
- Some students referenced external guidance that helped them with their study skills and academic writing skills.
- Students shared their fondness for Student Hub Live, stating it has been a really helpful source of study skills and academic writing skills information and guidance.
- Students discussed the ‘Being an OU Student’ course on OpenLearn as being a really relevant and helpful source of guidance.
- Students also stated that taking on feedback from their tutors helped them develop.

**Follow up question: Are there certain types of study skills/academic conduct resources or activities that you don’t (or didn’t) find helpful? In what way are they (or were they) not useful to you?**

Students stated the following:

- Online collaboration activities where engagement by students was low. Students commented that they found it hard to contact students in the group work teams as the main source of communication is through forums.
- When referencing is not commented on within TMAs. Students want feedback on referencing in order to do it correctly in future assignments, particularly EMAs.

**Follow up question: Is there anything else that you think could be improved in terms of support or resources on academic conduct or developing good academic practice skills?**

Students stated the following:

- Level 1 modules discuss good academic practice a lot but it would be great if it is referenced (even just a little) at higher levels as well.
- Promote the fact that you can chat to the Library via the chat function and on the phone. They can give you information and support in good academic practice.
- Promote Student Hub Live more widely.
- Keep a consistent approach to what reference style is used and whether module material needs to be referenced.
- Consider how CiteThemRight disadvantages students as it does not feature on Microsoft Word's referencing features or reference manager software.
- Consider how more formative assignments can be used within modules, so the student can receive feedback before sumitting work for official marking.

**4. What do you think should happen to students who are found to have committed academic misconduct?**

- Students discussed how students should be provided with additional support for good academic practice. This would help students who are too afraid to ask for help in the first place.
- Students stated that would like to see a change in approach on first instances of academic misconduct in regards to communication and to discuss with students *if* the misconduct has been done and whether there was intent, before the formal 'talk' is adopted. Students suggested this could be done by an informal chat with their tutor.
- Students commented that students should be given a first warning where only support is given. If another instance of academic misconduct is detected then more serious consequences should follow.

- Students discussed again how intent to cheat (or similar) should have the most serious consequences.
- Students stated that they had read the OU Code of Practice for Student Discipline.
- Students discussed how the *when* of the academic misconduct should be taken into consideration. If a student commits academic misconduct early in their OU studies, they most likely don't understand and intent is less likely.
- Some students commented that particular types of academic misconduct should be addressed differently, such as self-plagiarism and collusion.
- On collusion, students did state that collusion in terms of discussion with other students, is always through a written medium whereas students at brick universities can have verbal discussion, and this does affect the way this type of academic misconduct should be viewed and addressed.
- Students also wanted to highlight that the Students Association offers support to any student facing an academic misconduct investigations.

**Follow up question: How do you think academic misconduct may impact a student's further studies or future employment opportunities?**

Students stated the following:

- It could have devastating impacts on future employability, chances of promotion and even other study with the OU or other universities.
- It could have an impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- It may feature in an academic reference from the OU.
- It may cause the student financial difficulty, as they may pay a lot towards a module/qualification they are ultimately expelled from for academic misconduct.
- It could also affect disadvantaged students more so than other students.

**5. What situations do you think may lead a student to copy work or engage in other forms of academic misconduct and how can the Open University support students in these situations?**

- Students discussed how it easy it could be to use conversations on forums or other groups (like WhatsApp) to inform work which could be ascribed to be collusion.
- Students commented that where students feel like they do not have enough support from their tutor, they may turn to academic misconduct.

- Students suggested that where tutorials (or similar) are not recorded can disadvantage some students, particularly those with competing commitments.
- Students stated that time pressure, fear of failing or not receiving the desired grade can be a precursor to academic misconduct.
- Some students suggested having a 'deputy tutor' or an alternative contact if they are struggling to contact their own tutor.
- Students commented that a lack of understanding of what the 'rules' of good academic practice are and how to put them into practice.
- Students discussed how some students are under immense pressure to succeed, either by parental pressure, employer expectations, financial pressures or own personal expectations.
- Students stated that some students do not know how, are afraid of, or anxious about asking for help.
- Students discussed how working full-time, having caring responsibilities, young children, having a disability or a combination can be a factor in academic misconduct.
- Students discussed how previous feedback and a lack of detailed grading can have an impact on future submissions. Without detailed feedback and a number grade, it can be hard to gauge your level of work.
- Students commented that the length of module can also have an effect. Students may feel more pressure in modules that have a short presentation. This also related to an understanding of how much time it takes to complete assignments within the modules.
- Students also commented that the amount of modules can also have an effect and that the OU should monitor if students have the ability to complete the amount of modules in the given time-period.
- Students stated that there can be peer pressure from their fellow students and that this can have an effect on some students' confidence in their own ability.
- Students agreed that desperation was one of the most important factors in academic misconduct.

## **6. Can you tell us what you know about how academic misconduct is detected and investigated at the Open University?**

- Students confirmed that they knew that the OU used Turnitin and CopyCatch.
- Students discussed that they assumed that human methods would be used alongside these software.
- Students stated that they knew from OU policy that an Academic Conduct Officer will investigate matters.



- Some students noted that there is a Task and Finish Group on Turnitin at the OU starting next year, which is recruiting student representatives.

**Follow up question: If you were going through an academic conduct investigation, what information would be most useful to you?**

Students stated the following:

- The precise reasons they were being investigated for, including what areas of work.
- A time-scale for the process.
- How and when the student could appeal, with links.
- How to access someone to support them in this process.
- How the investigation was triggered.
- A copy of the Turnitin or CopyCatch report and report of a staff member who has reviewed their work.
- The full process, potentially in the form of a flow chart, for the student to understand clearly.
- Students also commented that there are instances where students find out on results day that previous TMAs are being investigated, which does not appear to be fair or timely.

**Date: November 2022**