The procedures of investigating academic misconduct:

Perspectives from academic staff at a UK Russell Group University

Abstract:

This article sociologically explores the issue of students" academic misconduct at a UK Russell Group University, specifically through how academic staff are tasked to investigate, evidence, and sanction it. Reaching unprecedented levels due to the massification and marketisation of Higher Education (HE) and the recent emergence and success of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), academic misconduct threatens the integrity of HE. Drawing on qualitative research consisting of semi-structured interviews (n=10) conducted with academic staff involved in the academic misconduct panels (AMP) between late 2022 and early 2023, this article deploys grounded theory to examine how the investigation and sanctioning of academic misconduct effectively occurs in practice, in relation to staff interpret and follow the policy and guidelines in place. The article accounts for the different strategies developed by staff to deal with the increasing number of cases, the evidence brought forward by markers and students, and the sanctioning of academic misconduct. It also examines how staff perceive their administrative task, in relation to broader issues within contemporary HE, which are seen as further fostering breaches to academic integrity.

Keywords: academic integrity; academic misconduct; academic staff; contract breach; grounded theory; plagiarism.

Introduction:

The issue of misrepresenting authorship in writing is a longstanding one. What was long termed "cheating" is said to be dating back to the very invention of writing itself (Park, 2003). In the context of Higher Education (HE hereafter), the misrepresentation of authorship on the part of students is understood as a form of either "contract breaching" (Morris, 2018), "contract cheating" (Lancaster & Clarke, 2017; Curtis & Clare, 2017; Curtis et al., 2025) or "academic misconduct" (see Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Perry, 2010; Luck et al., 2022). Those phrases have replaced the term "cheating" for two reasons: first, they encompass a whole range of practices and degrees of "contract breach" that students engage in, which have expanded over time both in proportion and in forms; second, while "cheating" infers intentionality on the part of the culprit (Jiang et al., 2013), the phrases "contract breaching", "contract cheating" and "academic misconduct" cover a range of practices that can be caused by students" ignorance of, or inattention for, the rules of academic integrity (which tend to be formalised in policy featured on websites, in student handbooks, and in trainings), as well as by their intentionality. Academic misconduct refers to all forms of contract breach and therefore, to the failure to abide by the rules of academic integrity. In this article, the phrase "academic misconduct" is preferred to "contract breaching" (which will only be used in relation to the literature that refers to it) to align with the policy of, and practices at, the HE institution that are investigated below.

Since the turn of the 21st century, academic misconduct is said to have reached "epidemic proportions" in HE (Duggan, 2006), and to have been constantly on the rise (Curtis et al., 2025). Several reasons can be attributed to such an epidemic. First, the massification of HE (see Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Sulkowski, 2023), which brings an increasing number of students at universities. Second, the marketisation of HE, which "... recast the relationship between academics and students along the model of a service provider and customer" (Furedi, 2011, p. 2; see also Gow, 2018). Third and more recently, the integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI hereafter) and machine learning in teaching and learning environments (see Luan & Tsai, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2023), which poses a threat regarding the authenticity of authorship of assessments and renders HE institutions more vulnerable (Newton, 2025). In that context, academic staff often find themselves charged with the role of investigating and sanctioning cases of academic misconduct to preserve the overall integrity and quality of the degrees they teach on within the context of increasing pressures on their workload (see Vostal, 2015). Therefore, at times of "accelerated academia" (see Vostal, 2015; McLennan, 2008) – characterised by increased and diversified demands on academic staff"s times and constant tracking of performance – academic staff are faced with mounting challenges to process cases of potential academic misconduct while giving them sufficient attention and following due process. Despite such responsibility, there remains little scholarly evidence as to how academic staff approach such an administrative task (bar a few notable exceptions – see Nadelson, 2007; Bertram Gallant, 2018; Crossman, 2019, Luck et al., 2022).

In deploying a sociological perspective that draws on grounded theory (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to explore how staff investigate suspected cases of academic misconduct cases within their everyday working lives, this article explores the challenges associated with identifying, evidencing, and sanctioning potential cases of academic misconduct. It thus asks: how do academic staff approach the investigation, evidencing and sanctioning of academic misconduct? This article draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in late 2022 and early 2023 with 10 academic staff working in the humanities and social sciences disciplines at the University of York in the UK. Its aim is to interrogate a) how academic staff approach cases of potential misconduct, b) how they investigate, identify, and sanction them; and c) how they perceive academic misconduct more broadly.

This article is structured as follows: first, the next section provides a short literature review on academic misconduct to identify the proportion of the issue and the potential solutions that are offered to counter it. Second, relevant University of York policy and procedures are discussed with regards to academic misconduct. The third section discusses the empirical approach deployed in this article. The fourth section introduces the three key themes that have emerged from the analysis of the empirical data – workload and induction, investigating and evidencing cases, and calibration within and across departments. Lastly, the fifth section inscribes the investigation of academic misconduct within two broader issues – the overreliance of UK HE institutions on international students and the increasing suspected use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI hereafter) in assessments.

1. Academic integrity in the age of marketisation, massification and GenAI

Academic misconduct has been a systemic issue in HE for quite some time (see Hendershott et al., 2000; Duggan, 2006; Perry, 2010; Jiang et al., 2013 Newton, 2016; Curtis et al., 2025). There is a consensus in the scholarly literature

on academic misconduct that the issue is only becoming a) more complex in the forms it takes, and b) more systemic over time, with an increasing number of cases, most of which remain undetected and therefore unsanctioned. Many scholars adopt specific theoretical models, which they test through empirical research, to understand the root causes of academic misconduct and provide guidelines as to how to tackle it (see Perry et al., 2025 for a discussion of five models of explanations).

Academic misconduct is a complex issue that intersects the overall HE and political and cultural context within which it occurs, the different contemporary forms it takes, students" approach to education, their ignorance of rules of academic integrity and/or intention to infringe them, and institutional policies in place to preserve academic integrity, and academic staff's approach to evidencing and sanctioning academic misconduct cases. In this article, I develop a sociological perspective of academic misconduct and its investigation by academic staff by drawing on grounded theory and by contextualising the issue of academic misconduct investigation within all those intersecting elements that explain the contemporary. What this means is that the investigation of academic misconduct is explored within contexts rather than located within an analysis of the motivations of the perpetrators for example (see Curtis et al., 2025). The purpose of this literature review is therefore to briefly explore the different dimensions of contemporary academic misconduct to situate the extent of the issues that academic staff face when tasked with investigating it, evidencing it, and sanctioning it. The four subsections below pose the broader context of contemporary academic misconduct, most of which is familiar to many of the academic staff interviewed for this study (see sections 4 and 5).

1.1 What is academic misconduct and why does it matter?

Academic misconduct refers to a range of practices that breach academic integrity. Jiang et al. (2013, p. 377) argue that there is a difference between academic misconduct and cheating on the basis of the intentionality of the culprit: "'Cheating' infers an intentional behaviour, yet […] a proportion of plagiarism cases are unintentional, from naivety about authorship attribution conventions". The term plagiarism is also sometimes used to refer to all forms of academic misconduct. Although plagiarism – defined as "wrongfully tak[ing] another's words or ideas" (Barnhart, 1988, p. 801) – is often discussed as the main form of academic misconduct, it is only one of different forms of academic misconduct, namely breaching (gaining an unfair advantage), collusion (working with others without permission), commissioning work (from a third party – person or GenAI), and fabricating (empirical data, evidence, etc.). At the time of writing, the difference between intention (to cheat) and ignorance (of the rules) is not explicitly set out in the policy and procedures at the University of York, the case study for this article (see section 2).

The multiplication of academic misconduct in forms and volume over time questions the foundational logic of HE. The prominence of academic misconduct can be understood both as a product of and damaging to the very market-based logic of contemporary HE (see Gow, 2018). Assessments require students to complete work as the authors (or potentially co-authors) of said work. Grades are awarded with the assumption that students have completed the assessments themselves (see Piascik & Brazeau, 2010; Singh & Remenyi, 2016; Bertram Gallant, 2017; Lancaster and Clarke, 2017), and therefore, that academic staff mark the actual work of the students (rather than a piece of work commissioned from an essay mill or generated by AI). Academic misconduct practices present an issue of unfairness and can "discredit the degrees that are awarded" (Singh and Remenyi, 2016, p. 4).

Interestingly, students tend to demonstrate knowledge of what constitutes a breach of academic integrity. In a survey conducted with 622 students in which he presented specific scenarios of academic misconduct, Newton (2016, p. 488) notes that "[t]he majority of students recognised transgressions of academic integrity when presented in the scenarios". However, he continues, "a substantial majority of students consistently thought that these behaviours should be dealt with through the application of a penalty less severe than that which would be imposed by the university" (Newton, 2016, p. 488). Students" leniency towards cases of academic misconduct was particularly surprising when they were presented with the purchase of an essay (from an essay mill) (Newton, 2016, p. 492). Newton (2016, p. 495) concludes that "most students: (1) are able to identify plagiarism, although a significant minority can't; (2) recognise that plagiarism is wrong; and (3) would impose a more lenient penalty than that imposed by staff". His findings suggest that most perpetrators would be knowledgeable of the rules of academic integrity that they choose to break and, therefore, that breaches are likely to be intentional.

Academic misconduct is difficult to map, with limited evidence regarding the actual levels it reaches (as reported figures are likely to be underestimated). Moreover, the issue has been largely exacerbated since the advent of AI chatbot ChatGPT at the end of 2022 (see Rudolph et al., 2023) and then Google Gemini in early 2023, which has only further emphasised a recurring and systemic issue faced by all HE institutions in the UK and worldwide.

1.2 Contemporary contexts of academic misconduct – understanding the broader issues

There is a consensus in the literature on academic misconduct that it represents a systemic issue, with the assertion that there are more students violating the rules of academic integrity than students who are eventually sanctioned (see Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Perry, 2010; Newton, 2016; Singh & Remenyi, 2016). Duggan (2006, p. 151) writes that the issue has taken "epidemic proportions" in the 21st century (see also Curtis et al., 2025). Nearly two decades later after Duggan's assertion, academic misconduct has certainly become a more complex issue. The broader context of contemporary HE contributes to the increase in academic misconduct and is discussed in this section.

Since about the start of the 21st century, economic pressures have further intensified competition between universities at domestic and international levels (see Burawoy, 2005), leading to what some call the massification of HE (see Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Gow, 2018). Although universities have long competed for resources (Furedi, 2011), they have had to fully convert to market-driven ideologies to respond to those economic pressures (Burawoy, 2005; Calhoun, 2005; Furedi, 2011), which have in turn (further) "commodified" HE (Furedi, 2011). This has posed challenges to the idea of "the university as a public good" (Calhoun, 2005, p. 5) and turned students into consumers (Furedi, 2011; Gow, 2018). The consequence for learning environments is that student satisfaction has become the primary indicator of a university"s "performance", which is monitored nationally and can impact recruitment. To Furedi (2011, p. 5), students are now the "… personification of market pressures on an otherwise archaic and unresponsive university". In addition to the rise of tuition fees introduced by the Conservative government in the UK in 2012, students have increasingly perceived themselves as "consumers" (see Tomlinson, 2017). Tomlinson (2017, p. 466) concludes his investigation of students" consumer approach to HE by writing: "The equation of teaching time to monetary value implies that the financial nexus between students and institutions is framing many students" expectations of how their institutions are performing in a context of increased personal stakes". In this context, the

massification and marketisation of HE has led to paying tuition fees for a degree being viewed by students as a means to an end, thus potentially furthering the risks of engaging in academic misconduct to attempt to maximise returns. Piascik and Brazeau (2010, p. 1) concur when they write

> As long as students view [university classes and assessments] as just more hoops to jump through on the way to their degree, a culture of academic integrity will be difficult to establish in […] educational programs.

In addition, the emergence of GenAI and its potential to be used to generate assessments (see Luan & Tsai, 2021; Vincent, 2022; Rudolph et al., 2023; Newton, 2025) further questions regarding the authenticity of student assessments. While commissioning work is not new and was already discussed since the start of the 21st century with the availability of numerous online sources and essay mills (Kenny, 2007; Lancaster, 2020), the use of GenAI is assumed to have quickly become "mainstream" in learning and teaching environments (Vincent, 2022). Through GenAI, students can generate entire assessments automatically, with a few prompts, and within a few seconds. The mass availability and immediacy of GenAI potentially turns academic misconduct into a more concealed and convoluted issue. Rudolph et al. (2023) note that anti-plagiarism software is at this stage unable to identify AI-generated text. GenAI has been received by some scholars with enthusiasm regarding its potential to enhance learning environments (see Aad and Hardey, 2025). Nevertheless, other scholars (Rudolph et al., 2023; Yeo, 2023; Newton, 2025) note that the existence and proliferation of GenAI chat bots like ChatGPT pushes us to rethink student assessment. As a tool that continuously and rapidly evolves, GenAI and its use by students pose critical questions about the future of HE (see Newton, 2025), notably regarding the fundamental expectations of assessment authorships as the procedure through which students are evaluated. As detailed below (see sections 3 and 5.2), at the time of the research, GenAI (through ChatGPT) had been recently launched. AI detectors are now available, but uncertainty remains regarding the extent to which various use of GenAI can be efficiently and undoubtedly detected. Those questions are for example addressed by Newton (2025) in a recent article. At the time of the fieldwork inquiry conducted for this article, GenAI had only emerged as a disruptor in HE. Academic staff's approach to GenAI (see section 5.2) at the time of the inquiry further contextualises the range of pressures placed on universities and staff to preserve the overall integrity of HE.

1.3 What are the factors that explain academic misconduct and how can the issue be tackled?

Scholarly literature on academic misconduct attempts to identify the profiles of the culprits and attempts to identify the reasons as to why they engage in academic misconduct. While temporally and culturally situated within different HE contexts, such research highlights interesting insights over the perpetrators of academic misconduct and thus provide potential guidelines as to how to prevent the issue.

Conducting a review of the scholarly literature (n=65) on the "influences" of academic misconduct, Jiang et al.(2013) attempt to identify the "how" and subsequently the "why" of academic misconduct. Jiang et al. (2013) note no clear differences between the ages and genders of offenders. They however observe that undergraduate students tend to "cheat" more than postgraduate students. They also identify several reasons that explain why students commit academic misconduct: individual morals/beliefs; if students come from a different cultural/HE backgrounds; access to technological tools; and time pressure. Among the groups identified as more likely to commit academic misconduct,

Jiang et al. (2013, p. 374) note that international students noticeably violate academic integrity more often than domestic students because many "… students from a non-English speaking background have often never had to write an essay independently" (see also McGowan, 2005; Gow, 2018). The marketisation of HE has in the 2010s made the sector "addicted" to international student fees (Gow, 2018; Tannock, 2018). In fact, Tannock (2018) argues that international students are marginalised because they are not adequately followed in their studies, making them "cash cows" for contemporary HE institutions. Another reason cited by Jiang and colleagues (2013) for academic misconduct is the pressure that students experience, with many assessments due at the same time and difficulties to meet deadlines (see also Gow, 2018). This points to how the precepts of accelerated academia – with pressures on performances and results – applies not only to academic staff but also to students (see Topham & Moller, 2011; Vostal, 2015). In their conclusion, Jiang et al. (2013, p. 378) argue in favour of a multivariate analysis, as "... [such] analysis would determine the relative dominance of factors, as well as explore the suspected correlation or confounding between factors". More recent studies have responded to such a call.

Rettinger et al. (2024) explore behaviours of academic misconduct by drawing on a survey asking 2,329 students to self-report. Their aim is to test different explicative factors of academic misconduct. They test the following variables in particular: academic integrity culture, perception of peer norms, moral attitudes (acceptability and disengagement), and academic motivation. They provide a robust confirmation of what was previously observed, for example, when concluding that "… academic misconduct is negatively associated with perceptions of a strong academic integrity climate and positively related to observing peer misconduct and holding neutralizing attitudes that disengage personal responsibility (Rettinger et al., 2024, p. 15). Similarly, Curtis et al. (2025) test theoretical models to predict students" intention to infringe rules of academic integrity. Their results point to psychopathy (a personality trait associated with rule breaking and reduced guilt and shame) to be positively correlated with the intention to perpetrate academic misconduct. Perry et al. (2025) review and test five analytical predictive model of academic misconduct. Their findings suggest that… "moral attitudes and peer norms are consistently related to self-reported academic misconduct in theoretically anticipated ways" and "… that the more students perceive cheating as a moral wrong and that their peers disapprove of the behavior, the less likely they are to engage in academic cheating" (Perry et al., 2025, p. 11). In return, "the more students disengage from their perceived moral responsibility for cheating and perceive that their peers are engaging in academic dishonesty themselves, the more likely they are to self-report that they cheated" (ibid).

Those studies draw on large-scale surveys and identify broad trends regarding the profiles of the perpetrators. From such discussions, possible solutions are offered and situated on a continuum between education/pedagogy and sanction/punishment. On the latter, Singh and Remenyi (2016, p. 5) note for example that "[t]here might even be certain proven or known incidents where the transgressors should be named and shamed (2016, p. 5). Such an extreme response is rare in the literature that searches for a potential solution or deterrent. Indeed, it has been suggested that "the focus on punitive consequences as a reason for not cheating appears to be related to higher levels of cheating" (Miller et al., 2011, p. 180). Most researchers advocate for education and development as a solution to academic misconduct. Bertram Gallant and Stephens (2020) point to punishment as a failed solution that highlights the lack of provided opportunities for learning and growth. A developmental approach considers academic integrity to be about

education rather than ethics (see Blum, 2009). Within this approach, some argue that honour codes promote awareness of academic integrity (Nadelson, 2007; Jiang et al., 2013). Others contend that "student engagement" prevents cases of academic misconduct (see for example McCabe & Treviño, 1997; Hendershott et al., 2000). McGowan (2005, p. 52, italics in original) concurs when she writes that "[students] need to engage in "active learning" to help them recognise how their *reading* can inform their *writing*". What both "student engagement" and "active learning" denote is the processual nature of academic learning. Assessments are then not perceived nor conceived (by students) as a means to an end, but rather as a more efficient means to mobilise the knowledge that students have acquired in their courses. Similarly, Bertram Gallant (2008, 2017) argues for a focus on enhancing the process of learning. This would also require lecturers to know their students (Singh & Remenyi, 2016), which is particularly challenging in the context of the massification of HE with lecturers sometimes teaching hundreds of students. Bertram Gallant and Stephens (2020, p. 64) go further in providing a "call for action" that would consider "… a restorative justice process instead of the current judicial process or using existing resources on campus (like the writing or learning center) to create educational opportunities that students could take after an instance of cheating". While in agreement with such a call for action, I note that such an approach comes into contradiction with broader trends that have continuously discredited HE since the 2010s (see Furedi, 2011).

Based on what I have discussed in this literature review, academic misconduct reveals itself as a complex and multifaceted issue that has largely evolved with the massification and marketisation of HE, and which takes on more pernicious forms with the advent and success of GenAI. While there is a suggestion that most students do indeed recognise what constitutes forms of academic misconduct (Newton, 2016), the solutions advocated by authors – from preventing with honours codes and student engagement to punishing by naming and shaming – cannot fit all instances and situations of academic integrity breach. This is the context within which this research is embedded. In the next section, I discuss the particular case study – the University of York – that this article is based on.

2. Policy and procedures at a UK Russell Group University

While there is a relative consensus in the academic literature on the definition and extent of the issue of academic misconduct, the approaches developed to tackle it (see section 1.3) and how they are implemented in policy are situated within HE contexts and therefore differ across universities in the sector (see, for example, Bennett, 2005). Policies also evolve over time, sometimes on a yearly basis. The case study for this research is the University of York (UK). Established in 1963 in the city of York (North Yorkshire), the university is an elite research-driven institution that joined the Russell Group in 2012, a self-selected group of twenty-four "research intensive" universities in the UK (see Russell Group, 2025). At the University of York (2022, pp. 4-5), academic misconduct is defined as covering practices of plagiarism, collusion, breach/cheating, commission/incorporation, and fabrication. The policy and procedures are quite complex and place the responsibility on both students (to respect the rules) and staff (to investigate and sanction cases of academic misconduct). At the University of York, the policy and procedures put in place are multiple and

reevaluated on a yearly basis. In this article, I discuss the 2022-23 policy and procedures (University of York, 2022), as they were the ones in place at the time of the interviews with academic staff (see section 3).

The policy document highlights that "The student shall be considered responsible for the academic integrity of all work they submit for assessment" (University of York, 2022, p. 6). Moreover, "The aim in all assessed work should be for the student to make a clear distinction between their own ideas and those drawn from other sources" (University of York, 2022, p. 6). Upon starting their studies, students complete a virtual "academic integrity tutorial", which goes onto their record. The tutorial emphasises the responsibility for students to know the different forms of academic misconduct: "Not being aware of the types of academic misconduct is not an acceptable defence" (University of York, n.d.). The approach therefore aims to prevent as well as punish (if/when necessary). Academic staff can assume that students have a good sense of what constitutes academic misconduct. However, training is undertaken at the beginning of the first year of the degree programme and assessments are completed at the end of the year. At the end of the chain, Faculty-based academic misconduct panels (AMP hereafter) are charged with investigating and eventually sanctioning breach to academic integrity. In that sense, academic staff are responsible for preserving the integrity of HE programmes.

In each academic unit, several academic staff are allocated to AMP as part of their administrative workload. This means that they specialise in actioning the policy and procedures. Contrary to what is observed elsewhere (see Nadelson, 2007; Thomas & De Bruin, 2014; Crossman, 2019; de Maio et al., 2020; Luck et al., 2022), this administrative task is reserved to permanent members of staff. The process to investigate suspected cases of academic misconduct is as follows: markers and/or moderators report suspected cases of academic misconduct via a case file accompanied by any evidence, which are communicated to AMP via the administrative staff of a department. An AMP panel – consisting of three academic staff – are appointed by the central academic misconduct team to investigate each case, identify whether there is "a case to answer" and the severity of the case, and sanction it. Communication with the potential offenders occurs through templated letters, often via department administrative staff. The students have the possibility to respond to an investigation in written form or by requesting a meeting with the AMP panel. Cases are judged on the basis of the evidence presented to the AMP panel by the marker/moderator and the student's response. Conclusions are reached on "the balance of probabilities" rather than "beyond all possible doubts". This means that… "[AMP] needs only believe that it is likely that misconduct occurred, rather than the process requiring that the evidence be indisputable that misconduct has occurred" (University of York, 2022, p. 5).

3. Methods

The aim of this article is not to evaluate the adequacy of the University of York"s policy and procedures to tackle academic misconduct but, rather, to investigate how academic staff understand and enact the policy and procedures within their daily workload and in relation to the investigation, evidencing, and sanctioning of cases of academic misconduct. In developing a grounded theory approach to academic misconduct through interviews with academic staff, this article contextualises academic misconduct within "accelerated academia" (Vostal, 2015) and the various pressures on academic staff to perform a range of tasks during their working days. The aim is therefore to explore how

the investigation of suspected academic misconduct occurs *on the ground*. Previous research conducted with academic staff has pointed out their understanding and approach to academic misconduct (see Nadelson, 2007; Thomas & De Bruin, 2014; Crossman, 2019; Luck et al., 2022). The aim of this article is to contextualise the approach, strategies, and practices deployed by academic staff in their investigation and sanctioning of academic misconduct. This therefore places their administrative task in relation to not only their understanding and application of the policy, but also in relation to other demands and pressures of their employment.

For this research project, I draw on semi-structured interviews (see Mason, 2002) conducted with academic staff from the arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines who were recruited using purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011). This method and population enabled me to interrogate how the investigation of academic misconduct cases occurred in practice, with reference to the policy and procedures in place, and with regards to the challenges of day-to-day academic life. I recruited 10 participants, five of whom identify as men and five of whom identify as women. All participants are either of white British or white European heritage. They bring in different experiences of AMP work (see table 1).

Participants were approached based on previous interactions, as I was myself an AMP member at the time of the research. All the academic staff recruited for this project had between one and five years" experience of investigating academic misconduct cases as part of their administrative remit at the time of the interview. Ethical approval was received from the University of York and all participants signed a consent form. All participants have been anonymised and no information other than the length of their experience as AMP members has been indicated in the article, in order to further protect their anonymity, and as per the ethical approval that was granted for this project. The interviews all lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. They took place face-to-face or on Zoom, depending on what was most convenient for the participant. There were no noticeable differences in terms of data collection between face-to-face interviews and interviews on Zoom. Thus, Zoom interviews provided neither a benefit nor a concession (see Oliffe et al., 2021). This can be attributed to the following reasons: the shared experience between the researcher and the participants of the institution and of AMP work, the targeted nature of the interviews, and the experience of participants in research data collection. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed (Mason, 2002).

Table 1: list of participants and key themes from each interview

Pseudonym	AMP member at the time of the interview for…	Main themes that emerged in the interview
Anna	1 year	Induction/training; workload; strategies to deal with cases.
Patrick	3 years	Evidence; Turnitin; plagiarism.

Helen	1.5 years	Workload; induction/training; Turnitin; cases involving international students.
Denis	4 years	Strategies to deal with cases; workload; Turnitin; evidence; cases involving international students
Howard	2 years	Turnitin; evidence; ethics and data collection; training; calibration across departments.
Jayne	1 year	Induction/training; workload; strategies to deal with cases; Turnitin; calibration across and within departments.
Norma	5 years	Induction/training; strategies to deal with cases; COVID19; Turnitin; cases involving international students.
Sarah	3 years	Calibration across and within departments; the use of GenAI; number of cases increasing over time.
Matthew	4 years	Evidence; Turnitin; cases involving international students; the use of Gen AI.
Eric	5 years	COVID19; cases involving international students; calibration across and within departments.

The next section details those themes and focuses on how AMP members engage with the work of investigating and sanctioning academic misconduct, as well as on their perception over the role they play.

4. Doing AMP work: investigating panel members" approaches and perceptions

Investigating academic misconduct is embedded within a whole ecosystem of policies, procedures, and processes. In developing a grounded theory of how academic dishonesty is investigated and sanctioned by academic staff, I intend to inscribe the issue of academic misconduct within the broader contemporary context of HE, and how it manifests within the working lives of academic staff. Participants acknowledge that academic misconduct is "a systemic problem" (Helen), as evidenced by the number of cases they have to process in AMP, and that this problem is explained by "a product of a set of institutional factors" (Denis). Although some question a process that they find "a bit clunky" (Sarah), due to the different bureaucratic steps that need to be taken, most also acknowledge that they play "a valuable role" (Denis) to preserve academic integrity and more widely, the integrity of the degrees that are awarded at the university. This section examines the key themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, namely, how academic misconduct cases are investigated within staff workload (4.1), the strategies deployed by staff to investigate and evidence academic misconduct cases (4.2), and the importance of calibration within and across departments (4.3).

4.1 Investigating academic misconduct as a workload issue

The scholarly literature on accelerated academia highlights the increasing pressure experienced by staff on their workload (see McLennan, 2008; Vostal, 2015). At the University of York, academic members of AMP undertake this work as part of their administrative provision (as explained in section 2; see University of York, 2022). This means that staff have hours dedicated to investigating academic misconduct in their workload. The issue is how those play out in practice. A first theme discussed by participants concerned their AMP member induction. Some staff highlight how they were not properly inducted in the role and hence felt unprepared: "I joined AMP partway through the year and they weren"t running any training at that point" (Jayne). Likewise, when asked about her initial impression of AMP work, Anna described it as "totally baffling. Really really confusing". While induction cannot realistically be run multiple times throughout the academic year, many staff had to learn on the job. Norma says: "in the beginning, I didn't have a clue what I was doing". Many participants felt initially unprepared, especially considering the different steps of the process and bureaucratic trail that each case entails. Jayne elaborates on this:

> I remember the very impression I had, going, "What am I supposed to do with this email? With this document? With this case document?" […] I didn't know a huge amount about the process, but I felt, "gosh, I can imagine that this will be time pressured, and I need to prioritise it".

Many participants highlight how they learned the role by doing it: "… just by experience, I got the hang of it, but I didn't feel that training was quite adequate" (Helen). The impression of being thrown into the deep end of academic misconduct investigation was reinforced by the fact that some see this administrative role as not being highly valued within a department and with regards to promotion applications: "the impression I got is that it's a role that is often given to quite junior members of the department" (Anna).

The role of being an AMP member requires a specific knowledge base, both in procedural terms (how to process a case file) and in technical terms (what indeed represents a form of academic misconduct). In that sense, all participants discussed a range of strategies to process the cases that pop in their mailboxes: entering cases into a task manager (Denis); keeping a record of all cases on a spreadsheet (Patrick); keeping many tabs open on a web browser (Norma). AMP members eventually find their pace and tactics to deal with academic misconduct cases. However, with the number of cases perceived by AMP members to be increasing over time, those strategies need to be adjusted for cases to be processed in due time, but also with due consideration. Norma says that "it's intensifying", and this has "… certainly been exacerbated by COVID" (Eric). This means that AMP members "… are always in responsive modes" (Denis). Helen admits: "I don't spend the time that I should spend on it". As an administrative role, investigating academic misconduct has changed over time, notably through the demands that are placed on staff time.

Although cases to investigate emerge after a marking period, they tend to be sent rather unexpectedly, and sometimes staff would receive numerous cases to review and investigate within a short period of time. A couple of participants used the same term to describe how they deal with this – "firefighting": "I think I was firefighting with anything" (Anna); "when those 10-13 [cases] came in all at once, I was just firefighting" (Jayne). For Denis, an AMP member for over 4 years at the time of the interview, "the amount of work […] licenses a certain amount of frustration" and it poses the risk of providing "snap judgements". When facing a number of cases with a limited time to process them, many participants adopt an approach that consists of processing cases rather than trying to "do it right". This

poses a threat to the integrity of the process of investigating potential cases of academic misconduct. When discussing the underpinning precepts of "accelerated academia", Vostal (2015, p. 82) argues: "the competition–excellence nexus manifests as the multiplication of tasks, increasing bureaucratic burden and the growing net of surveillance mechanics which all result in the commonly reported experience of distraction and temporal interruption". The contemporary investigation of academic misconduct cases certainly confirms what Vostal (2015) observed 10 years ago. Although AMP members do not directly criticise the workload allocation model, they point to a broader context that makes their administrative task more challenging, both in terms of the time spent on it and in terms of the intricacies of the cases they investigate.

4.2 The challenges of investigating and evidencing cases

When presented with a suspected case of academic misconduct, AMP members receive a case file that details reasons for suspicion and evidence to support such suspicion. For AMP members, the issue lies in what constitutes credible evidence. The University of York subscribes to the plagiarism detection software Turnitin, a similarity detection service applied to all assessments that are submitted to the University system. Turnitin provides percentages that represent the level of "matches" between an assessment and other sources, but it does not give access to other essays identified as the source of a match. Those percentages are colour coded - green under 30%, light orange between 30 and 50%, and dark orange above 50%. However, those are only indications: a highlighted reference list can bring the total match to a high level, which is not indicative of any plagiarism on the part of the student. At the time of the empirical research, Turnitin had become the main tool to evidence cases. AMP members acknowledge that Turnitin reports are a tangible piece of evidence in cases of plagiarism: "I think it's a tool" (Helen). However, all participants concur that Turnitin reports were themselves not displaying any truth. Denis says that "it should only be an indication". Patrick elaborates: "I don't think you can prosecute, as it were, just on the basis of the Turnitin report". He argues that AMP members should be "… treating Turnitin more as a starting point rather than the absolute evidence" (Patrick). The percentages that are displayed in Turnitin reports require more investigation: "it's not just a quantity issue with the Turnitin scores, it is a quality issue that the staff pick up on something not quite right" (Norma). In that sense, many AMP members use the Turnitin report to conduct more research: "… if something really didn't strike me right, I might be talking to Google" (Howard). This then enables them to find the source behind a match and confirm potential plagiarism. This however requires further steps to be taken. Jayne regrets the lack of interactivity of Turnitin:

> My biggest issue with what we're presented with a PDF of the student's work as it's saved by Turnitin and that to me doesn't provide me with everything that I would want to look at. For example, you've got part of it highlighted in pink and that means that it's potentially been taken from a source. But you've got it as a PDF. You've got no ability to click on that and look at the source. […] I do feel quite strongly that we should have access to Turnitin to be able to look at the full functionality because there's an awful lot there by putting it into context, it really helps. I've found the way I'm presented with the PDF is quite restrictive.

Turnitin reports are treated with caution by AMP members. The reports, however, remain the most tangible pieces of evidence to investigate academic misconduct cases: "It's just like if we don't have the Turnitin report as evidence, it's almost like we've got pretty much nothing" (Anna).

Besides the limited functionalities of Turnitin reports, AMP members regret that these reports are insufficient to identify a whole range of academic misconduct practices. In the case of commissioning for instance, "… if the person who's writing it on behalf of another student isn't plagiarising, then I don't see how it can be detected" (Patrick). Evidencing commissioning then relies on the impressions of markers, moderators, and AMP members. However, "my impression of commissioning is that, a lot of the time, without an essay mill price tag and a stamp on it, people were very reluctant to rely on a linguistic analysis" (Matthew). The hesitancy to pursue cases on the basis of less tangible evidence (than Turnitin reports) was widespread among the sample of AMP members. Of course, with the use of GenAI, cases of academic misconduct become even more difficult to evidence and sanction (see section 5.2).

4.3 Calibrating within and across academic units

The policy at the University of York (2022, p. 33) indicates that "The intention of the AMP system is to encourage intra- and inter-departmental sharing of good practice". This aims to harmonise a broader approach to academic misconduct and ensures consistency. Nadelson (2007, p. 69) noticed in her research with staff that they experienced "... uncertainty regarding best practices that promote moral behavior". Calibration is a key principle of AMP work, and it ensures that academic misconduct cases are judged with consistency. Such calibration is, however, not formalised. It instead occurs informally through conversations with other panel members via email, directly on the case file, or eventually in video calls.

> I have found that in the majority of cases I've been in line with what others have thought and it was almost like a benchmarking exercise of calibration to get to the point where I was happy that I was approaching it in the right way. (Jayne)

For Jayne, calibration was integral to understanding how to approach the task. However, other AMP members noted that panel members can have different approaches: "One person's notion of what a lot of matches [on Turnitin reports] are and another person's notion of what a lot of matches are different" (Matthew). These differences in report interpretation were present across academic units. One example of different approaches across departments relates to ethics breaches. While some departments raise those as academic misconduct cases, some AMP members think these should be dealt with differently: "I don't think we as an academic misconduct panel should be investigating ethics breaches. I think they should be dealt with elsewhere [at the marking stage]" (Howard). Such discussion about the process poses the risk of a lack of calibration between departments, resulting in some cases not being submitted to AMP and investigated by AMP members. It also poses another risk, which is one of a disconnect between the policy in place and academic staff's approach to misconduct cases (see de Maio et al., 2020).

For some participants, the issue of calibration goes far beyond AMP work. Sarah notes that "the threshold of a number of staff members is pretty poor", in this she argues that many cases should be dealt with at the marking stage rather than being escalated to AMP. An assessment that displays poor paraphrasing, for example, can be sanctioned with a poor mark and does not necessarily require an AMP investigation. To Sarah, this is an issue of triaging, which should involve the central AMP team:

"… the AMP [central] team, why can't they have a quick cursory look at [cases]? […] I think they could do that easily and that would actually calibrate much better […] And I think there would be far less discrepancy between committees" (Sarah).

This approach would address the two issues identified by Denis regarding the role of the central administrative team in allocating cases of academic misconduct to staff members, one of "oversight" and one of "quality control". On the other hand, Sarah also notes that many cases do not reach AMP panels, posing yet another question regarding calibration: "there's a real issue of calibration or standardisation, where some students are going to be picked up and then go like, "oh, how come, you know, I got picked up when actually I worked on this with my friends and they used the same quotes?!"" (Sarah). Calibration matters to ensure that all potential perpetrators are investigated rather than a sample of them. This requires all academic staff to be knowledgeable of the issues and able to identify them (see Nadelson, 2007; Thomas & De Bruin, 2014; Crossman, 2019; Luck et al., 2022). In the case of the University of York policy and procedures, this involves the markers and moderators of assessments who decide to escalate potential cases of academic misconduct to AMP.

In this section, I have reviewed the different strategies that AMP members develop to approach their administrative task of investigating and evidencing suspected cases of academic misconduct. What their accounts demonstrate is the tension that only further increases over time between the necessity to follow due process and conduct the work seriously on the one hand and the amounting number of cases and difficulties to evidence such cases on the other hand. The shared perception that the role becomes more challenging over time certainly questions broader issues that contemporary HE faces, such as workloading of staff and the integrity of learning environments and degrees awarded. The next section explores how AMP members consider their role in tackling academic dishonesty within the broader context of contemporary HE.

5. Academic misconduct investigations in the broader context of contemporary HE

Academic staff that participated in this research are aware of the role they play in investigating and sanctioning cases of academic misconduct. Although they emphasise the importance of what they do (see section 4.1), they also acknowledge that the broader context of contemporary HE plays a significant part in not only the number of cases they are asked to process but also in terms of the complexity to investigate and evidence them. The massification and marketisation of HE has resulted in an increasing number of students attending universities, many of whom are international students.

5.1 Managing cases involving international students

The massification and marketisation of HE has turned universities into businesses that attempt to attract a large number of students (see Furedi, 2011; Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Gow, 2018; Sulkowski, 2023). For AMP members, there is a direct correlation between the recruitment of students and the number of cases they must investigate. Many participants echo what is found in the literature regarding the marketisation of HE (Gow, 2018; Tannock, 2018), with Denis arguing that students are "treated as customers" by HE institutions. Matthew for example used the phrase "over

recruiting" at Masters' level, to explain how academic misconduct cases surge. International students are seen as an "economic driver" (Eric) for the HE sector, but they are also the ones more likely to commit academic misconduct (as noted by McGowan, 2005; Jiang et al., 2013; Gow, 2018 and discussed above). This is confirmed by AMP members: "you can have a look at the stats about the increasing numbers of students and then that pretty much predicts that there will be an increase in academic misconduct cases" (Eric). Likewise, Helen says: "a lot of these cases, at least in my experience, are students who struggle with English". Denis talks about a "lowering of language skills" by universities as the basis for more suspected cases of plagiarism, collusion, and commissioning.

Many of the participants mentioned some students" limited language proficiency, which explained either their lack of understanding of the academic integrity rules, and/or their reliance on external sources to complete their assessments. However, rather than considering the issue of academic integrity through the lens of intentionality (see Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Jiang et al., 2013), AMP members understand those cases in relation to the limited time that students spend within the UK HE environment and the subsequent pressure they experience to adapt to it and complete assessments in a different language. Norma says:

> the university lowers the standards for English level proficiencies. And then at the end of the day, you get more people through the system, but then you say, well, actually, there"s this thing called plagiarism, and we take it very seriously.

Many shared Norma's concerns relating to the overreliance of the HE sector on international student fees and the lack of leadership reflexivity concerning rises in cases of academic misconduct, which in turn lead to increases in staff time to investigate and sanction. Eric concludes that "there's a real tension between the massification of higher education and academic integrity", which ultimately make universities "less academic". He sees the current focus as "more about the economic integrity of institutions than it is about the academic integrity" (Eric). AMP members are well aware that they are at the frontlines of issues created through the current economic model of HE.

5.2 Dealing with the use of GenAI.

At the time of data collection, GenAI was rapidly entering teaching and learning environments, with ChatGPT launched in late November 2022. Its success quickly questioned the consequences that GenAI would have on learning and teaching environments (see Luan & Tsai, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2023; Newton, 2025). Because of the timing of the launch and subsequent scholarly, journalistic and vernacular discussions that ensued, ChatGPT and other GenAI models were only discussed by staff in the last four interviews in the project. This section is therefore not about assessing staff approaches to GAI in general, but rather capturing staff responses to the moment of its launch and rapid adoption.

The conversations that broke about GenAI since late 2022 have exposed the responsive nature of academic integrity enforcement in contemporary HE: "We"re talking about this ChatGPT stuff a lot and I think it is going to be a problem […] students are probably starting to use it to write essays now" (Sarah). Eric concurs when he says "I think it really is a complete change […] this decade is going to be interesting". AMP members discussed the challenge that GenAI presented in terms of evidencing cases of academic misconduct. Sarah fatalistically concludes: "we"re

fighting a losing battle with academic conduct". At this stage, the AMP members that discussed GenAI saw it primarily as yet another element that would make their task more time-consuming and difficult in the future, particularly in relation to the evidence that are needed to investigate and sanction cases. At the point of the data collection, Turnitin did not include GenAI detection for example. At the point of writing, the University of York does not have access to a GenAI detection option on Turnitin.

At the time of the research, GenAI was perceived as a threat by AMP members. At the time of writing this article, the issue has certainly not been resolved but has rather developed (see Marron (ed.), 2024; Newton, 2025). While the literature has so far focused on how ChatGPT invites us to reconsider how students are assessed (see Rudolph et al., 2023), a more holistic approach about the present and future of HE was also discussed by Matthew: "there"s the bigger sort of more philosophical issue [as to] why students plagiarise". In inscribing the issue of the introduction of GenAI in learning environments and assessments into a broader context, Matthew raises a question that invites us to consider such issues within the future of HE. With convoluted forms of academic misconduct that are increasingly difficult to evidence and sanction, the fundamental assumption as to whether students are awarded degrees on the basis of their individual merit is increasingly questioned. The situation of academic misconduct described in this article contributes to discussions regarding how students approach HE and what they expect from it, and in return how academic staff respond to such a situation. The value of HE is eroded by academic misconduct and staff can only do so much to attempt to limit it. In an increasingly hostile environment for HE (in the UK and elsewhere), further discussions regarding the benefit of education ought to be imposed onto any policy agenda.

Conclusion: chasing an issue that becomes ever more complex

This article has examined how academic staff at a UK Russell Group University deal with their administrative remit of investigating and sanctioning suspected cases of academic misconduct. In doing so, this article has provided a grounded theory perspective on how academic staff approach academic misconduct. Such an approach inscribes the issue of academic misconduct within the everyday practices of academic staff tasked to investigate it. At times of the massification and marketisation of HE, of the suspected increasing use of GenAI in assessments, and of the overall increase of academic dishonesty, such an approach explores how those broad issues manifest in everyday working contexts. Put simply, the article has examined how academic staff approach the cases of academic misconduct that are presented to them, in relation to the evidence at their disposal, but also with regards to the increasing pressures on their times to complete such tasks and subsequent ones within their working lives. In that sense, academic staff find themselves in the trenches of academic integrity, while also having to fight other battles as part of their working lives (regarding teaching excellence and research excellence frameworks for instance).

The University of York has developed a policy that is enforced by some academic staff as part of their administrative remit. In specialising in investigating and sanctioning academic misconduct cases, those staff develop a perspective over several academic years on what constitutes breaches of academic integrity, and they see the development of new forms of academic misconduct. However, those roles also turn over and some staff will only be in the role for a year or two (such as the author of this article). In interviewing 10 academic staff from the humanities

and social sciences, I have attempted to capture how they approach the administrative task and the strategies that they deploy to deal with the number of cases and with evidencing them. Many staff interviewed for this research express their frustration in facing the many challenges and tensions that they experience when investigating academic misconduct. With the limited time they can allocate to cases and the (often insufficient) evidence at their disposal, AMP members feel like they are chasing an issue that becomes more complex over time due to the increasing number of suspected offenses and the more convoluted ways to violate academic integrity.

Although the policy and procedures at the University of York (2022) are quite detailed, academic staff must adapt it to the contexts of contemporary HE and "accelerated academia" (McLennan, 2008; Vostal, 2015): they are responsive to the cases assigned to them and to the evidence they are presented with; they recognise the importance of the role they play to ensure the overall integrity of HE; and they know full well that they are fighting a losing battle. As one AMP member noted during their interview, regardless of the efficiency of the policy and procedures in place, their mission as AMP members hides broader issues brought about by the massification and marketisation of HE, and more recently by the introduction of GenAI. The procedural work that AMP members conduct creates bureaucratic trails, catches some perpetrators, but ultimately only smooths over a problematic context that fosters more breaches to academic integrity. Whilst eradicating academic misconduct is certainly idealistic, the contexts that nurture it require further investigation and intervention.

In the current climate of uncertainty surrounding the present and future of HE, preserving academic integrity ensures the integrity of HE processes, but this is made challenging by the increasing demands on academic staff (see Vostal, 2015). At the time of writing, for example, the (initially governmental and now institutional) imposition of an employability agenda (see Decker-Lange et al., 2024) also requires a greater diversification of forms of assessment to make students employable. Nevertheless, within this context, and in conclusion, academic staff and HE institutions certainly have levers to pull in order to fight and mitigate academic misconduct. I am in agreement with Curtis and colleagues (2025, p. 5) when they argue that "… researchers could attempt to influence students" attitudes, subjective norms, and anticipated guilt to help counteract the growing threat to educational integrity of contract cheating", and with Bertram Gallant and Stephens (2020) when they advocate for education and development rather than punishment. Overall, HE institutions and academic staff can foster a culture of integrity, which treats students as learners rather than customers, and which highlights the critical importance of higher education for their place within wider society. However, such a perspective not only lies in the hands of academic staff and HE institutions, but also encapsulates wider societal institutions and governments, which seem to have largely ignored if not attacked HE institutions in the 2010s and 2020s, in the UK and elsewhere. Academic misconduct is a disease of contemporary HE; it only further spreads via increasing political attacks on HE.

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