Prevalence and trends in dishonest behaviour among Spanish Master's and PHD students

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PREVALENCE AND TRENDS IN DISHONEST BEHAVIOUR AMONG SPANISH MASTER'S AND PHD STUDENTS

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1. Introduction

The apparent lack of academic honesty in Spanish higher education has been a topic of interest to many researchers[32]: What types of fraudulent behaviour do students engage in?[*] Why do they do it? And what

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countermeasures can be taken? Ten years ago, Comas et al. (2011, p. 210) pointed out that the literature on the academic integrity of Spanish university students was very scanty, and little empirical effort had been made to examine this issue from different perspectives and for different groups. Because this is a recurring phenomenon, there has been a substantial revival of interest in this topic, as evidenced by studies by Espiñeira-Bellón et al. (2020), Cebrián-Robles et al. (2020), and Pérez-Crego et al. (2022) and by efforts directed at these practices by a range of academic sectors (institutions, faculty, students, etc.) to raise awareness within the higher education establishment.

These efforts take the form of regulations and institutional protocols penalizing this type of behaviour and laws aimed at reforming the guidelines for dealing with misconduct within the university community. These corrective mechanisms are intended to deter possible dishonest behaviour by students. Thus, the fact that an institution has academic regulations and codes of conduct addressing academic integrity that are public and known to the university community discourages students from engaging in improper practices (Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2022).

In addition to these advances in the rules addressing integrity, there are other instruments in the sphere of academic social responsibility (Bergadaà, 2020, ch. 6), such as implementing programmes to take action against academic fraud, creating integrity committees, and establishing good practices in the generation and transmission of knowledge. Actions of this kind should involve faculty members, researchers, and institutions collectively to ensure quality education. However, these academic stakeholders cannot necessarily always find common ground, because their priorities relate to "parallel worlds": "Students [may resort] to plagiarism to achieve the best grades; university teachers [are] concerned about

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publishing and being visible; and institutions [are] concerned with meeting the accreditation criteria and the reputation of their degrees" (Gallent Torres & Tello Fons, 2023, p. 72). As a result, their views on countering academic dishonesty may never converge.

Dishonest behaviour of any kind is unacceptable, regardless of the country, university, or academic discipline where it occurs, because, as Benghozi (2021, p. 93) put it, there is no version of "cultural relativism" that would make certain practices acceptable depending on the country or field. The principles and approaches put forward must therefore be the same for all academic institutions, regardless of geographic location or the specific discipline concerned.

The study discussed in this chapter presents an analysis of the prevalence and characteristics of misconduct disclosed in the past five years, especially in the postgraduate studies programmes at the University of Valencia. Postgraduate studies are the level for which the fewest empirical data are available. In this respect, heads of postgraduate programmes can be helpful as key informants, and their opinions can be excellent points of reference, since their roles as directors of master's and doctoral programmes, co-ordinators, and members of academic committees place them in a privileged position to gain insights regarding the programmes they supervise and to implement possible changes in those programmes.

The study is based on the results presented by the authors at the 2nd IRAFPA International Colloquium on Research and Action on Academic Integrity, held in Coimbra (Gallent & Comas, 2022).[33] In the following pages, we focus on analysing significant discrepancies in the participants'

[33] Readers can consult that article to check the descriptive analyses carried out and the frequency tables for the 24 dishonest practices identified, their prevalence, trends, variable distribution, and the most frequent response categories for each type of misconduct.

different academic fields and on categorizing the types of behaviour, their prevalence, and perceived trends.

2. The Study

The object of our study was to survey heads of postgraduate studies at the University of Valencia (UV) to ascertain the perceived prevalence of certain dubious student behaviours and trends in misconduct over the last five years. To this end, the following research questions (RQ) were posed:

RQ 1. What are the most prevalent types of misconduct according to the postgraduate academic heads, and what is the level of consensus among them?

RQ 2. Are there significant differences in perceived prevalence depending on the academic field?

RQ 3. According to those same informants, which dishonest practices have increased most and which have decreased most in recent years and what is the level of consensus among them?

RQ 4. Are there significant differences in the perceived trends depending on academic discipline?

To analyse the potential differences in participants' perceptions, the sample of academic heads was subdivided into two groups: heads in the Humanities and Social Sciences (abbreviated CSH in Spanish) and heads in the Health Sciences, Sciences, and Engineering (abbreviated SCI in Spanish). Student's t-test for independent samples was used to calculate significant differences between responses by the two groups.

The research protocol followed is described in Box 1.

Box 1

Research Methodology

1. Sample

This study sampled 237 academic heads responsible for postgraduate studies at the University of Valencia. Sample characteristics were as follows: 58.2% men and 41.8% women with a mean age of 53.4 years (SD=8.89). In terms of academic disciplines, 44.7% worked in social sciences and law, 19.8% in arts and humanities, 16% in health sciences, and 19.4% in science, engineering, and architecture. As for their university teaching experience, 94.1% had more than 10 years, 5.1% had 4 to 10 years, and just 0.8% had 1 to 3 years. Their experience managing postgraduate programmes was as follows: 75.9% had more than 10 years' experience, and 46.4% had 4 to 10 years.

Participants were recruited by first consulting the UV web directory to compile the contact details of the academic heads for all official postgraduate degree programmes (n=751). The academic heads were then sent an email inviting them to respond to the specially designed digitized survey questionnaire, together with an information document explaining the study and including information on the privacy policy and data processing.

Up to three reminder emails were sent between April and June 2021, and the questionnaire response period was closed at the end of June 2021. The response rate was 31.55%, an acceptable percentage according to the benchmark rates published by Kittleson (1997) and Sheehan and Hoy (1999).

2. Instruments and measures

The survey questionnaire focused on 24 forms of dishonest academic malpractice. These practices were compiled based on the questionnaires used in the earlier studies by Henning et al. (2020) and Sureda-Negre et al. (2020). The questionnaire was validated by 10 national experts in academic integrity. In a pilot test, the questionnaire was administered to 12 former postgraduate heads at three Spanish universities other than the one where the study was conducted.

The questionnaire consisted of blocks of questions on the prevalence of and trends in the practices to be rated by the participants according to the following scales:

a) The frequency scale for prevalence was 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = very often.

b) The scale for trends in the past five years was 1 = much less, 2 = somewhat less, 3 = no change, 4 = substantially more, and 5 = much more.

3. Analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out using the SPSS statistical software package, v. 24.

For data analysis, the data were recoded, and the responses were grouped into three categories in order to reduce dispersion and assess response trends more accurately. For "prevalence", responses 1 = never and 2 = rarely were grouped together, and responses 4 = often and 5 = very often into were also grouped together. The same was done for "trend": responses 1 = much less and 2 = somewhat less were grouped together, and so were

responses 4 = substantially more and 5 = much more. Thus, the combined scales used in the analysis were, for prevalence, 1 = never or rarely, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = often or very often, and for trend, 1 = much or somewhat less, 2 = no change, and 3 = substantially or much more.

We first analysed mean values for each response category for the 24 forms of misconduct considered. We then analysed the rate of consensus in the responses by calculating the percentage of agreement for each question and the free marginal multi-rater kappa for each dishonest practice as a measure of the degree of agreement among the academic heads (Warrens, 2010).

The most common interpretations of the kappa index are those provided by Fleiss (1981): values between 0.40 and 0.60 = average agreement, between 0.61 and 0.75 = substantial agreement, and greater than 0.75 = nearly complete agreement; and by Altman (1991): values less than 0.20 = poor agreement, between 0.21 and 0.40 = fair agreement, between 0.41 and 0.60 = moderate agreement; between 0.61 and 0.80 = substantial agreement, and greater than 0.81 = nearly complete agreement. In this study, a Fleiss kappa index value of greater than 0.40 was considered an acceptable degree of consensus. This corresponds to the Fleiss category of "average" and the Altman category of "moderate".

3. Survey Results

Most participants in the study considered many of the dishonest practices to be rare in postgraduate studies (Table 1). The five most prevalent practices were those related to exams, in descending order of frequency: (1) making up excuses as justification for late submission of work, absences, or non-performance of academic obligations; (2) quoting directly without citing the source or quoting indirectly (paraphrasing)

without citing the source in a graded assignment; (3) dividing work up into multiple publications ("salami slicing"); (4) using technology to copy in an online assignment; and (5) allowing another student to copy in a graded assignment.

At the other end of the spectrum, the least common dishonest practices were, in ascending order: (1) leaving the name of a classmate off an assignment they helped write; (2) stealing/obtaining the questions for a forthcoming exam; (3) falsifying official documents (language aptitude certificates, transcripts, diplomas, etc.) to meet assessment requirements; (4) obtaining favourable treatment from administrative or academic staff for personal benefit; and (5) copying in exams using specially prepared crib sheets.

For 11 of the 24 practices considered, there was broad consensus (above 60%) in the responses, especially for questions 8, 6, 18, and 11. The mean degree of consensus for all questions analysed was 45.4%.

Shifting the focus to a comparison of perceived prevalence by the heads of the CSH and SCI degree programmes, the first aspect that emerges is that, in general, the CSH postgraduate heads awarded higher scores for prevalence than the SCI heads for most of the dishonest practices considered (16 out of 24). However, the discrepancies between the two groups were not particularly large: for 9 of the 24 conducts analysed, there was highly significant agreement in the scores assigned by each group. The results suggest that practices such as letting one's work be copied, plagiarism and self-plagiarism, or downloading work from the internet occur significantly more frequently in the CSH degree programmes than in the SCI degree programmes.

On the other hand, practices such as using technological devices to cheat, identity theft, and falsifying or fabricating data are more frequent in the SCI degree programmes. The results nonetheless point to two different patterns for the two groups of disciplines: misconduct in CSH

fields is related to the more "traditional" forms of academic dishonesty, especially those involving writing assignments and submitting finished work, whereas in the SCI fields, the prevalence was higher for misconduct specifically connected to fieldwork or data collection and to using technology as a means to copy/cheat.

Table 1

Perceived Prevalence of the Dishonest Practices Considered

Practice	**Total mean**	**Consensus level**	**Mean CSH score**	**Mean SCI score**	**Two-way significance**
PREVALENCE of exam-related misconduct					
1. Copying in exams using specially prepared crib sheets.	1.19	70.5 %*	1.21	1.17	0.50
2. Copying in exams using unauthorized notes, books, or other material.	1.59	40.9 %	1.61	1.58	0.74
3. Copying from another student in a graded assignment.	1.54	42.2 %	1.63	1.46	0.08
4. Allowing another student to copy in a graded assignment.	1.77	35%	2.03	1.51	0.00**
5. Using technology to copy in an online assignment.	2.03	57%	1.63	2.44	0.00 *

6. Stealing/obtaining the questions for a forthcoming exam.	1.06	91.7 %*	1.05	1.07	0.70
PREVALENCE of course assignment–related misconduct					
7. Quoting directly without citing the source or quoting indirectly (paraphrasing) without citing the source in a graded assignment.	2.25	38.3%	2.48	2.02	0.00**
8. Leaving the name of a classmate off an assignment they helped write.	1.04	93.5 %*	1.02	1.07	0.13
9. Listing the name of a classmate on an assignment they did not help write.	1.66	38.9 %	1.69	1.63	0.59
10. Handing in an assignment already submitted for another course or in a previous year.	1.46	46.7%	1.54	1.38	0.11
11. Handing in an assignment already submitted by another student.	1.56	88.5 %*	1.77	1.36	0.06
12. Handing in an assignment downloaded from an online paper writing service (*El Rincón del Vago, Monografias* [two Spanish online paper writing websites], etc.).	1.73	56.9%	2.24	1.22	0.00**
13. Paying someone else to write an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation.	1.30	61.1%*	1.27	1.33	0.50
14. Writing an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation for another student for pay.	1.29	60.7% *	1.30	1.28	0.88
PREVALENCE of misconduct/ dishonesty in general					
15. Taking an exam for someone else.	1.21	77.8 %*	1.02	1.40	0.00 **

16. Submitting an assignment prepared by someone else as your own.	1.42	52.8 %	1.39	1.45	0.56
17. Obtaining favourable treatment from administrative or academic staff for personal benefit (e.g., obtaining a research grant, a better internship, etc.).	1.13	78.9%*	1.15	1.12	0.68
18. Falsifying official documents (language aptitude certificates, transcripts, diplomas. etc.) to meet assessment requirements.	1.08	88.8%*	1.06	1.10	0.39
19. Not reporting known cases of misconduct by other students in grading processes to faculty members or academic authorities.	1.59	43.4%	1.63	1.56	0.57
20. Making up excuses as justification for late submission of work, absences, or non-performance of academic obligations.	2.28	37.6%	2.33	2.23	0.67
PREVALENCE of research-related misconduct/dishonesty					
21. Duplicating publications or self-plagiarism in scientific publications.	1.63	70.5 %*	1.84	1.42	0.00 **
22. Dividing work up into multiple publications ("salami slicing").	2.09	47.2 %	2.80	1.38	0.00* *
23. Fabricating or making up research data.	1.51	54.1 %	1.22	1.81	0.00* *
24. Deliberately employing less rigorous or less suitable statistical analyses or data processing to obtain more favourable research results.	1.69	74.8%*	1.40	2.09	0.00**

** High level of consensus among responses. ** Two-way significance less than or equal to 0.05.*

According to the findings on trends in misconduct involving the 24 behaviours considered, the practices that have increased the most are,

in descending order: (1) using technology to copy in an online assignment; (2) paying someone else to write an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation; (3) deliberately employing less rigorous or less suitable statistical analyses or data processing to obtain more favourable research results; (4) writing an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation for another student for pay; and (5) dividing work up into multiple publications ("salami slicing"). Practices that have decreased or increased to a lesser extent are: (1) leaving the name of a classmate off an assignment they helped write; (2) stealing/obtaining the questions for a forthcoming exam; (3) obtaining favourable treatment from administrative or academic staff for personal benefit; (4) copying in exams using specially prepared crib sheets; and (5) taking an exam for someone else. A consensus among the responses on trending practices was reached for 3 of the 24 dishonest practices analysed. The overall (mean) consensus reached on the participants' responses for the 24 practices was 46%.

The responses concerning perceived trends in misconduct by academic heads in the two academic subdivisions showed certain similarities (Table 2). Academic heads in CSH fields perceived 12 behaviours to be increasing in the past 5 years, while those in the SCI fields also perceived an increase in 12 behaviours, but not the same ones. Here again, the practices that had increased the most according to academic heads in the CSH fields were plagiarism and self-plagiarism, while the opposite held true of using technology to copy, identity theft on tests, and falsifying or fabricating research data, which were reported as increasing the most by academic heads in the SCI fields.

Table 2

Perceived Trends in Dishonest Practices Analysed

PRACTICE	**Total mean**	**Consensus level**	**Mean CSH score**	**Mean SCI score**	**Two-way significance**
TREND in exam-related misconduct					
1. Copying in exams using specially prepared crib sheets.	1.85	42%	1.92	1.79	0.14
2. Copying in exams using unauthorized notes, books, or other material.	2.07	35.8%	2.20	1.94	0.01**
3. Copying from another student in a graded assignment.	2.01	45.8%	2.07	1.96	0.22
4. Allowing another student to copy in a graded assignment.	2.17	39.7%	2.39	1.96	0.13
5. Using technology to copy in an online assignment.	2.76	53%	2.63	2.90	0.00**
6. Stealing/obtaining the questions for a forthcoming exam.	1.81	57%	1.79	1.83	0.60

TREND in course assignment–related misconduct					
7. Quoting directly without citing the source or quoting indirectly (paraphrasing) without citing the source in a graded assignment.	2.34	40.3%	2.47	2.22	0.01**
8. Leaving the name of a classmate off an assignment they helped write.	1.80	65.3%*	1.77	1.84	0.35
9. Listing the name of a classmate on an assignment they did not help write.	1.98	52.3%	1.98	1.99	0.97
10. Handing in an assignment already submitted for another course or in a previous year.	2.05	50.8%	2.10	2.00	0.25
11. Handing in an assignment already submitted by another student.	2.15	54.3%	2.03	2.00	0.65
12. Handing in an assignment downloaded from an online paper writing service (El Rincón del Vago, Monografias [two Spanish online paper writing websites], etc.).	2.31	44.8%	2.50	2.13	0.00**
13. Paying someone else to write an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation.	2.45	44.7%	2.49	2.41	0.48
14. Writing an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation for another student for pay.	2.68	38.7%	2.60	2.77	0.168

TREND in misconduct/dishonesty in general					
15. Taking an exam for someone else.	1.97	45%	1.79	2.15	0.00**
16. Submitting an assignment prepared by someone else as your own.	2.04	43.9%	2.02	2.06	0.88
17. Obtaining favourable treatment from administrative or academic staff for personal benefit (e.g., obtaining a research grant, a better internship, etc.).	1.84	69.7%*	1.82	1.86	0.58
18. Falsifying official documents (language aptitude certificates, transcripts, diplomas. etc.) to meet assessment requirements.	1.99	54.5%	1.98	2.00	0.81
19. Not reporting known cases of misconduct by other students in grading processes to faculty members or academic authorities.	1.98	64.2%*	2.00	1.96	0.55
20. Making up excuses as justification for late submission of work, absences, or non-performance of academic obligations.	2.20	50.4%	2.24	2.17	0.40
TREND in research-related misconduct					
21. Duplicating publications or self-plagiarism in scientific publications.	2.23	50.8%	2.41	2.06	0.00**
22. Dividing work up into multiple publications ("salami slicing").	2.42	39.8%	2.81	2.04	0.00**

23. Fabricating or making up research data.	2.04	37%	1.81	2.28	0.00**
24. Deliberately employing less rigorous or less suitable statistical analyses or data processing to obtain more favourable research results.	2.5	47.9%	2.39	2.61	0.48

** High level of consensus among responses. ** Two-way significance less than or equal to 0.05.*

Based on the mean scores for each element in the two data sets, four types of misconduct were identified according to their perceived prevalence and trend. Accordingly, four groups were formed, shown in Table 3. The practices that have the highest prevalence and that have been increasing over the past five years are shown on a dark grey background. These are the ones that require the most attention by universities and preventive measures to eliminate or monitor them. Types of misconduct that either present a high prevalence but have been trending downwards in the past few years or low prevalence but have been trending upwards in recent years are shown on a medium grey background. These practices need to be monitored with a view to assessing future trends. Lastly, behaviours for which prevalence is low with a declining trend are shown on a light grey background. Within all the dishonest practices considered, these are the lowest priority.

Table 3

Prevalence and Trends Perceived by the Participants by Type of Misconduct

High prevalence and increase over the past 5 years	High prevalence and decline over the past 5 years
5. Using technology to copy in an online assignment. 7. Quoting directly without citing the source or quoting indirectly (paraphrasing) without citing the source in a graded assignment. 22. Dividing work up into multiple publications ("salami slicing"). 20. Making up excuses as justification for late submission of work, absences, or non-performance of academic obligations. 12. Handing in an assignment downloaded from an online paper writing service (*El Rincón del Vago, Monografias* [two Spanish online paper writing websites], etc.). 4. Allowing another student to copy in a graded assignment. 24. Deliberately employing less rigorous or less suitable statistical analyses or data processing to obtain more favourable research results.	19. Not reporting known cases of misconduct by other students in grading processes to faculty members or academic authorities. 9. Listing the name of a classmate on an assignment they did not help write.

21. Duplicating publications or self-plagiarism in scientific publications.	
Low prevalence and increase over the last 5 years	**Low prevalence and decline over the past 5 years**
14. Writing an assignment/master's thesis/PhD dissertation for another student for pay. 13. Paying someone else to write an assignment/master's thesis/ PhD dissertation.	8. Leaving the name of a classmate off an assignment they helped write. 6. Stealing/obtaining the questions for a forthcoming exam. 17. Obtaining favourable treatment from administrative or academic staff for personal benefit (e.g., obtaining a research grant, a better internship, etc.). 1. Copying in exams using specially prepared crib sheets. 18. Falsifying official documents (language aptitude certificates, transcripts, diplomas. etc.) to meet assessment requirements. 15. Taking an exam for someone else. 10. Handing in an assignment already submitted for another course or in a previous year.

4. Discussion, Conclusions, and Avenues for Future Research

The results obtained highlight the prevalence and trends perceived by academic heads with regard to dishonest practices in postgraduate programmes. Little use has been made of this group of informants in Spain. Their view of academic dishonesty is important, because their position of responsibility means that they are able to detect unprincipled behaviour and take potential corrective action. Their duties also require them to know what is actually taking place in the degree programmes they direct and make it incumbent on them to "create new democratic instruments designed to imbue, or bring back, integrity as a core value [of their institutions]" (Bergadaà, 2020, p. 99; our translation).

From an academic social responsibility perspective, what is important is the democratic debate that results of this type can kindle with the aim of promoting institutional dialogue about the repercussions of academic misconduct in master's and doctoral programmes. Individual stakeholders can therefore be motivated or stimulated to present proposals for action at their respective levels within their spheres of competence.

From a practical standpoint, based on our results, it seems that, while there are no significant differences regarding the prevalence of misconduct in the two groups of academic disciplines considered (CSH and SCI), such practices as plagiarism, self-plagiarism, improper citation of sources, improper paraphrasing, and salami slicing are perceived as more frequent in CSH degree fields. These are behaviours associated with academic writing—producing texts and reporting results—but are less involved with logical and mathematical reasoning, and describing processes, methods, or formulas. Conversely, in SCI degree fields, dubious practices detrimental to the rigour of research activities or scientific data collection are perceived to be more frequent. These include fabricating or inventing research data, deliberately employing statistical

analyses or data processing techniques likely to yield results that are more favourable in the research context, and using technology to copy in assignments done online. Thus, new technologies may influence the differences between these two groups of fields, since *a priori* it is easier for students to copy or take ideas from content found on the internet and use digital tools to conceal cheating in written work than it is in work consisting in product creation, process analysis, or problem-solving.

These data are consistent with the findings published in other studies on the perception of academic fraud by researchers in various disciplines. For example, in a study focusing on the field of ethics and philosophy, Feenstra et al. (2022) reported that 91.5% of respondents (n=201) believed that there was a growing lack of research integrity in Spain. The participants perceived a high prevalence of such practices as duplicate publications (66.5%), self-plagiarism (59%), and citation manipulation (44%), but not of ghost writing (20.5%) and data falsification (10%). Our study found that there were no significant differences in the prevalence of research fraud between the two groups of academic disciplines considered.

Our analysis of the prevalence of and trends in the practices considered has disclosed the types of misconduct that need to be prioritized and require preventive and monitoring measures. It has also revealed practices that appear to have decreased, though future trends cannot be known. These practices should therefore not be neglected and should continue to be monitored. The results have also identified a series of dishonest practices that appear to be of lower priority based on their low prevalence and a declining trend in the past five years. Still, it remains important to keep an eye on developments concerning these practices in the coming years, because in some cases the trend could reverse.

Empirical knowledge of the phenomenon of academic dishonesty among our students will allow us to design training and awareness-raising

mechanisms as part of their study programmes and to put in place stronger policies to reduce the incidence of these behaviours in higher education. It is therefore up to institutions, administrators, and academic directors to review and ensure compliance with internal policies, to encourage honesty and principled behaviour and to promote democratic debate about academic integrity, especially among postgraduate students. We also suggest conducting additional studies using different approaches and relying on the opinions of other informants to provide a more complete and differentiated overview of this phenomenon in Spain. Ignoring these issues can only weaken our educational system, and this would in turn impair the transmission of knowledge and values and therefore the quality of a university education.

According to the results on trends reported by the participants, such dishonest practices as using cheat sheets, stealing or obtaining exam questions, and not crediting a colleague for their contribution to an assignment or publication have decreased over the past five years. By contrast, salami slicing, duplicating publications, fabricating data, and paying someone else to do an assignment have increased. This might be ascribable to the pressure many future researchers feel to publish at all costs and advance their careers quickly.

Although a feeling of defeatism is quite pervasive throughout academia, we share Bergadaà's view (2020, p. 99) that we must break with the attitude "that consists in excusing academic offenders on the pretext that they are simply victims, slaves to the famous *publish or perish* rule" [our translation]. If we are to truly hold our students accountable, we must tear down the institutional wall of silence. If we are to inextricably join integrity and knowledge together and transform deviant behaviour into opportunities for education, we must question the system of production-based assessment in education.

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