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'It's not fair': policy discourses and students' understandings of plagiarism in a New Zealand university

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Abstract Plagiarism is a concept that is difficult to define. Although most higher education institutions have policies aimed at minimising and addressing student plagiarism, little research has examined the ways in which plagiarism is discursively constructed in university policy documents, or the connections and disconnections between institutional and student understandings of plagiarism in higher education. This article reports on a study that explored students' understandings of plagiarism in relation to institutional plagiarism discourses at a New Zealand university. The qualitative study involved interviews with 21 undergraduate students, and analysis of University plagiarism policy documents. The University policy documents revealed moral and regulatory discourses. In the interviews, students predominantly drew on ethico-legal discourses, which reflected the discourses in the policy documents. However, the students also drew on (un)fairness discourses, confusion discourses, and, to a lesser extent, learning discourses. Notably, learning discourses were absent in the University policy. Our findings revealed tensions between the ways plagiarism was framed in institutional policy documents, and students' understandings of plagiarism and academic writing. We suggest that, in order to support students' acquisition of academic writing skills, plagiarism should be framed in relation to 'learning to write', rather than as a moral issue.

Keywords Plagiarism · Discourse · Policy · Higher education · Cheating · Academic writing · Academic literacies

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Plagiarism is a difficult, if not impossible, concept to define. Howard (2000, p. 473) declared that plagiarism is 'inherently indefinable', and Gullifer and Tyson (2014, p. 2) concluded that 'a standard definition does not exist'. Yet most higher education institutions have a distinct plagiarism policy, necessitating a definition (Grigg 2009). In order to achieve a definition for policy purposes, institutions 'present plagiarism as something fixed and absolute' (Price 2002, p. 89). However, this is problematic given that plagiarism is a constructed phenomenon (Howard 1999, pp. xviii–xxi); understandings of plagiarism differ between contexts and individuals.

Plagiarism is often presented as an increasing problem in higher education (Wilkinson 2009, p. 98). Considerable academic literature has explored the topic of students' plagiarism and how it should be dealt with. However, only a small proportion has considered students' perspectives (e.g. Blum 2009; Bretag et al. 2014; Dawson and Overfield 2006; Gullifer and Tyson 2010; Power 2009; Wilkinson 2009). Even fewer studies have considered the connections between institutional policies and documents, and students' understandings of plagiarism, and most of these rely on questionnaire or survey data (e.g. Gullifer and Tyson 2014). Thus, there is a paucity of in-depth analyses of students' understandings of plagiarism and plagiarism policy. Researchers have hinted that there may be discrepancies between institutional expectations in regard to plagiarism and its avoidance, and students' understandings of acceptable academic practice (e.g. Blum 2009, p. 27; Bretag et al. 2014, p. 1165). For example, some students may not understand the importance of avoiding plagiarism (Gullifer and Tyson 2010; Power 2009), and some may believe plagiarism can only happen through deliberate deception regarding authorship, thus failing to recognise that they may inadvertently plagiarise (Valentine 2006). Other students may understand the need to acknowledge when they have quoted another author's words, but lack an understanding that they must also acknowledge ideas (McCabe et al. 2001). To understand such discrepancies, the aim of this article is to explore students' discursive constructions of plagiarism, in relation to institutional plagiarism policy discourses. As well as contributing to the literature, it is hoped the findings can be used to examine the implications for student learning and inform institutional plagiarism policies, with a view to better supporting students in this area.

Plagiarism as a discursive construction

In this article we use the term 'discourse' to reflect a view of plagiarism as a social construct: a set of understandings that are constructed through language and social interactions (Gee 2005). In broad terms, 'discourse' refers to the words and phrases that people use in conversation or texts, and the images or ideas this language draws on or invokes (Gee 2005). The discourses that students draw on in their conversations reveal how they view plagiarism. However, the discourses that students draw on (as well as the discourses in the institutional policy) also indicate what knowledge is available to them (or what they can and can not think) within the constraints of the institution. In this way, discourses both reveal and construct knowledge (Foucault 1980). Furthermore, as plagiarism is a 'discursive construction', we consider it as embedded within relations of power (Foucault 1980). Therefore, in referring to 'plagiarism discourses', we signal a view of knowledge as constructed, and of the language used in relation to plagiarism as revealing and creating relations of power.

Plagiarism discourses in the academic literature

The broader plagiarism literature can be read as revealing three plagiarism discourses. The first constructs plagiarism as a moral issue; the second as a regulatory issue; and the third as an academic writing issue (Adam 2016; also see Flowerdew and Li 2007; Kaposi and Dell 2012). Moral discourses dominate the higher education literature on student plagiarism. Literature that constructs plagiarism primarily as a moral issue focuses on reporting the prevalence of plagiarism, identifying those most 'guilty' of plagiarising, and determining which detection and disciplinary measures are most effective for reducing or responding to incidents of plagiarism (e.g. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke 2005; Devlin and Gray 2007; East 2010; Wilkinson 2009). Moral discourses are revealed through the use of law- or crime-related language (e.g. theft, breach, copyright) or through references to immorality or illegality (e.g. dishonest, unethical, misconduct). Within moral discourses, plagiarism is constructed as cheating, and as involving deliberate and morally reprehensible behaviours (also see Kaposi and Dell 2012).

In previous research exploring students' understandings of plagiarism, students have drawn mainly on moral discourses to construct plagiarism (Adam 2016). For example, university students have constructed plagiarism as a dishonest or disgraceful act, or indicated an awareness that plagiarism is constructed as such within their educational institution (Ashworth et al. 1997, 2003; Gullifer and Tyson 2010). In particular, students' responses have suggested a view of plagiarism as serious behaviour that warrants sanctions or academic consequences (Gullifer and Tyson 2010). However, constructing plagiarism through the use of moral discourses may be unhelpful to students (East 2010), particularly if the goal is to teach acceptable academic practice (Valentine 2006).

A second way of constructing plagiarism is as a regulatory issue. Literature that draws on regulatory discourses represents plagiarism as something that can be done either intentionally or unintentionally, and emphasises the need to determine whether or not the student intended to deceive in order to identify how an instance of plagiarism should be responded to (Howard 1999; Kaposi and Dell 2012). Regulatory discourses emphasise the need to regulate, usually through institutional policy, in order to reduce plagiarism and provide guidelines regarding how incidents of plagiarism will be responded to. Consequently, literature that constructs plagiarism as a regulatory issue focuses on developing institutional policies around plagiarism (East 2010; Grigg 2009), and emphasises adherence to policy (including guidelines around paraphrasing, summarising, and referencing and citation), as the means to avoid plagiarising (Hutchings 2014; Roig 2001). Regulatory discourses are revealed in language associated with rules, guidelines, and academic traditions. Plagiarism is positioned as a breach of academic traditions and institutional policy, which students are assumed to understand and apply unproblematically to their written assessments (Kaposi and Dell 2012).

In the research literature, regulatory discourses are often evident in students' statements where they conflate plagiarism and referencing (e.g. Hutchings 2014). Students have reported that they are unsure about the rules of citation and paraphrasing (Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke 2005; Devlin and Gray 2007), and are reported as displaying insufficient referencing skills in their written work (Hutchings 2014; Park 2003). Students reportedly request more information about, and support with, citation and paraphrasing, along with clarification on what plagiarism is and how they can avoid it (Bretag et al. 2014; Gullifer and Tyson 2010; Power 2009). Despite students' requests for more information, many do not read their institution's plagiarism policy (Gullifer and Tyson 2014; Power 2009) or

access the information provided to them regarding citation or how to avoid plagiarising (Gullifer and Tyson 2010). In addition, research has revealed that most students can articulate a definition of plagiarism, but when asked to identify plagiarism in a text, many have difficulty doing so (Dawson and Overfield 2006; Power 2009).

A third set of discourses constructs plagiarism in relation to students' development as academic writers. This literature focuses predominantly on unintentional plagiarism. Academic writing discourses problematise straightforward notions of plagiarism; in particular, they question taken-for-granted definitions of plagiarism, and represent it as a textual feature rather than a behaviour (Howard 1999; Kaposi and Dell 2012). From an academic writing perspective, 'plagiarism' includes multiple and complex practices, and requires multiple possible responses, with an emphasis on supporting students' learning. An academic writing perspective acknowledges the discipline-specific nature of academic writing, and argues that writing is not a separate skill; rather, students learn to write for and from within the discipline they are studying (Lea and Street 1998; Vardi 2012). From this point of view, unintentional plagiarism that has occurred as a consequence of a student piecing together words and phrases from other texts in their writing, can be regarded as 'textual borrowing' (Flowerdew and Li 2007, p. 164). Howard (1999, p. xvii) terms the practice of 'copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another' as 'patchwriting', and considers it as a step in the developmental process of learning to write in an academic way.

An academic writing perspective also highlights the complex nature of authorship and how it relates to plagiarism (Hutchings 2014; Valentine 2006; Vardi 2012). Plagiarism is acknowledged as a construction based on 'Western' concepts of sole authorship that ignore

Table 1 Demographic data and code names for the research participants

Code name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Carl	Male	≤19	Other European
Danielle	Female	≤19	Māori and NZ European
Emily	Female	≤19	NZ European
Justine	Female	≤19	NZ European
Karina	Female	≤19	Asian
Lisa	Female	≤19	NZ European and other European
Lydia	Female	≤19	NZ European
Marie	Female	≤19	NZ European
Monica	Female	≤19	NZ European
Vanessa	Female	≤19	NZ European
Christian	Male	20–24	Not stated
David	Male	20–24	Middle eastern
Katie	Female	20–24	NZ European
Kirsten	Female	20–24	Other European
Leon	Male	20–24	Asian
Matt	Male	20–24	NZ European
Penny	Female	20–24	Other European
Eric	Male	25–35	Not stated
Hannah	Female	25–35	NZ European
Aaron	Male	45–54	Pacific Islander
Hugh	Male	45–54	NZ European

how academic writing is inherently intertextual or collaborative (Howard 2000). Consequently, this literature debates that some students, particularly those from 'non-Western' cultures, may struggle to understand 'Western' understandings of authorship and plagiarism (Flowerdew and Li 2007; Price 2002, p. 94).

Previous research hints that some students construct plagiarism in relation to academic writing. As well as voicing confusion, resentment, and fear that they might inadvertently plagiarise (e.g. Gullifer and Tyson 2010), students have called for opportunities to practice their academic writing and receive formative feedback on how to avoid plagiarising without fear of being sanctioned (e.g. Power 2009). Drawing on this view is a body of plagiarism literature that situates plagiarism prevention as part of the educative process of teaching academic writing to students (e.g. Howard 1999, 2000; Lea and Street 1998; Valentine 2006; Wingate et al. 2011). This literature calls for the development of pedagogical approaches and teaching resources to support students' development as academic writers (Flowerdew and Li 2007; Howard 1999; Kaposi and Dell 2012; Vardi 2012; Wingate et al. 2011).

Research methods

This qualitative study involved interviews with 21 undergraduate students at the University of Otago, a research-intensive university based in New Zealand. Ethical approvals were gained from the University's Human Ethics Committee prior to the study's commencement, and the students were recruited through verbal invitations at large first-year lectures. The final participants ranged in gender, age, and ethnicity (see Table 1), but were representative of the broader student population in these respects. The participants also represented a variety of previous university study experiences. Twelve of the students had entered university straight from high school or foundation year (a single-year certificate programme designed to prepare students for university study), one had a Bachelor's degree, and another had a Master's degree. Two others had previously completed a year at university before taking one or more 'gap' years.

The interviews were conducted by the first author and ranged in length from 37 to 90 min. Interviews were semi-structured and based around a loose set of questions pertaining to learning, assessment, the purpose of a university education, and plagiarism. The questions regarding plagiarism were based around three specific questions: Can you give me an example of what you think plagiarism is?; why do you think a student might plagiarise?; and what do you think happens to students who plagiarise? The students were prompted to expand on their answers with questions such as 'how do you know this?' The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and the students were invited to check their transcript and choose a code name. This article focuses on the students' responses to the questions regarding plagiarism. We read the interview transcripts alongside the University's plagiarism policy and related documents using a discourse analytic approach (Gee 2005).

At the time this research was undertaken, plagiarism fell under the University's Dishonest Practice Procedures (University of Otago 2011a, hereafter 'Procedures'). The Procedures functioned as a policy document within the University, covering all academic dishonesty, including unauthorised collaboration, impersonation, fabrication of data, use of unauthorised materials, and assisting another student in academic dishonesty. The Procedures gave a definition of academic dishonesty and listed the consequences. For this study,

the Procedures were analysed alongside the dishonest practice and plagiarism information for students on the University website (University of Otago 2011b). The website explained the Procedures in less formal language, and gave examples of behaviours that were considered dishonest practice, and listed possible consequences. In our analysis, we were interested in the connections and disconnections between the students' understandings of plagiarism and the plagiarism discourses evident in the institutional documents.

For the purposes of this study, discourse analysis involved close attention to the specific language that the students used when they talked about plagiarism; the meanings expressed or implicit in their language; and the rhetoric devices they drew on in their explanations (Gee 2005). It also included attention to dominant discourses and contradictions that emerged in the students' talk (Cameron 2001) and how the students constructed plagiarism, themselves, their lecturers, and the university more broadly in relation to plagiarism (Gee 2005). By considering institutional discourses alongside the students' understandings of plagiarism, we hoped to gain insights into the power relations at play in the university context, their implications in terms of student learning, and how the students positioned themselves in relation to these.

Plagiarism discourses in the University policy documents

As mentioned above, at the time of this study, plagiarism fell under the University's Dishonest Practice Procedures (University of Otago 2011a) and as such, revealed a moral and regulatory view of plagiarism. Moral and regulatory language was intertwined throughout both the Procedures and the website. A warning tone was evident; the website information on the University's policy position stated that plagiarism was taken 'very seriously' at the University, and that it was the individual students' responsibility to ensure they were aware of what plagiarism is and to avoid it (University of Otago 2011b). The website emphasised the consequences of dishonest practice, including plagiarism, and listed a number of possible penalties ranging from reduced or zero marks for the particular assignment to 'exclusion from the University' (University of Otago 2011b). There was notable overlap between the penalties for unintentional and for intentional plagiarism; the only listed penalty that could not be applied to unintentional plagiarism was exclusion. The wording on the website thus constructed plagiarism either as a consequence of a student's lack of morals, or lack of academic skills, resulting in a lack of adherence to rules and regulations, thereby intertwining a moral and a regulatory view. For example, students were warned of the need to familiarise themselves with 'the rules of dishonest practice', as 'being involved in dishonest practice' would 'subject' them to 'penalties' (University of Otago 2011b). The information clearly indicated that if students plagiarised they would be sanctioned, regardless of whether or not the plagiarism was intentional. The website constructed plagiarism as definable and recognisable; and warned that 'plagiarism is easy to detect and the University has policies in place to deal with it' (University of Otago 2011b), thus indicating that plagiarism was (morally) unacceptable and the University regulated it. Plagiarism was also aligned with copyright laws, as the website information advised students to be 'aware of the rules about copyright and the use of information at Otago' (University of Otago 2011b). Plagiarism was presented as a set of behaviours rather than as a textual feature, and students as *plagiarisers*—people who contravene expected 'good student' behaviour. Both the Procedures and the website stated that it was each student's responsibility to learn how to avoid plagiarism in all of their written work.

Alongside this message, the website listed links to online information on referencing, and informed students they could seek independent help at the University Library, The International Office, or the Student Learning Centre.

Plagiarism discourses in the students' interviews

Four dominant sets of discourses emerged within the interview data. We have labelled these ethico-legal, (un)fairness, confusion, and learning discourses. The discourses were often intertwined within each interview but, for analytical purposes, in this article we consider each individually. Each set of discourses is introduced below and illustrated by quotes or examples that best encapsulate the breadth of perspectives articulated in the interviews.

Ethico-legal discourses

Ethico-legal discourses dominated the students' interviews. These echoed the moral and regulatory framings of plagiarism that were evident in the Procedures and website information (see previous section). When drawing on ethico-legal discourses, students constructed and defined plagiarism in relation to a set of rules; particularly university policy, the law, and/or referencing rules. Ethico-legal discourses were often recognisable through participants' use of moral or legal language. We read this language as reflecting and perpetuating a view of plagiarism as a criminal act; constructing plagiarism as a moral or ethical problem; and implying that students who plagiarise are bad/dishonest, whereas students who do not plagiarise are good/honest (after Valentine 2006).

The students often drew on ethico-legal discourses when they talked about why students might plagiarise. When asked why a student might plagiarise, most of the participants focused their response on *intentional* plagiarism—that is, they seemed to interpret the question as asking why students might *decide* to plagiarise. Often their responses were couched in judgmental tones. For example, Monica labelled plagiarism associated with last-minute assignment writing as 'stupid' and 'dumb', and she expressed little tolerance for this practice. She stated: 'well it's pretty stupid. I mean if you leave it that late then it's pretty dumb. You should plan more ahead and start your assignments earlier so that you don't have to resort to that'. Monica's judgment of plagiarism as deliberately lazy indicated a moralistic view of students having behaved irresponsibly.

Often, when students took up ethico-legal discourses, they described plagiarism and its avoidance in terms of university policies and procedures, and the need to follow a set of rules. As in previous research (e.g. Gullifer and Tyson 2014; Hutchings 2014), some of the students spoke of the need to follow referencing rules in order to adhere to the institutional rule of avoiding plagiarism. For example, Maria stated:

> You know, they always put in the booklets for each subject guide, 'you must source where this all comes from. You must use quote marks, you must even source it when it's a paraphrase'. So that's kind of what I think. I honestly don't have a great understanding of what plagiarism is outside of that. That's kind of as far as my understanding goes.

Danielle also expressed the view that avoiding plagiarism is about simply following the rules of referencing. When asked to define plagiarism, she responded, ‘people not referencing a work properly or just not referencing them at all’. Maria and Danielle’s comments seemed to reflect the information available to students on the University website, where plagiarism is linked with referencing rather than with authorship. The linking of plagiarism avoidance with the rules of referencing seemed to situate citation as a mechanical act, rather than as an essential aspect of authorship.

Some students directly aligned plagiarism and referencing with legal requirements. For example, when asked why universities require students to reference their assignments, Eric responded, ‘I’d say it’s probably a law or something’. Similarly, Hugh explained intentional plagiarism as ‘something that could be judged in a court of law’. This perception of policy as law is understandable in light of the perception of plagiarism policy as providing a set of rules, particularly as the website information specifically aligns plagiarism with the legal issue of copyright, as discussed earlier.

Carl drew on ethico-legal discourses in his explanation of plagiarism as ‘stealing’. From this perspective, Carl seemed to view the Procedures as a document relevant only to dishonest students. He explained that he was ‘not going steal anybody’s work’, and therefore he had no need to familiarise himself with the plagiarism Procedures. Similarly, Danielle claimed that she ‘tune[d] out’ in lectures when warnings against plagiarism were voiced, as she had ‘no intention’ of plagiarising. Danielle and Carl’s statements indicated a view of plagiarism as a deliberate, recognisable, and morally reprehensible act, and themselves as good/honest students to whom the policy bore little relevance.

Ethico-legal discourses were also evident in the students’ explanations of the consequences for plagiarism. As in other research (e.g. Gullifer and Tyson 2010), the students viewed punishment as the consequence of plagiarism. For example, Aaron explained that students who plagiarise ‘get dragged up in front of some star chamber of some description and read the riot act’. Emily stated her view that ‘punishments’ imposed by the University were overly harsh and suggested that students ‘should get a rap around the knuckles first to put them in line’. Many of the students, including Emily, thought expulsion was the consequence of plagiarism, even though the Procedures listed a number of other possible outcomes, including lesser penalties such as a reduction in marks, and educative responses such as attending an appointment with an academic skills advisor. Ethico-legal discourses seemed to construct the university as a powerful institution that imposed rules and punishments, and students as either rule-abiding or dishonest.

(Un)fairness discourses

The second set of discourses the students drew on focused on plagiarism and its treatment as either ‘fair’ or ‘not fair’. (Un)fairness discourses tended to construct the University Procedures as either strict or lenient. Although (un)fairness discourses were not evident in the University plagiarism documents, students’ use of (un)fairness discourses typically positioned the University as having or not having the right to impose the plagiarism Procedures, particularly in relation to unintentional plagiarism.

Marie explained her thoughts on the University plagiarism Procedures: ‘I think it’s fair because you come to university to learn and you’re not learning anything if you’re using someone else’s words because it’s not your own ideas’. Marie expressed the idea that deliberate plagiarism inhibits learning and, therefore, the University Procedures that punish plagiarism are ‘fair’. Monica also viewed the policy on intentional plagiarism as ‘fair’, although she did not articulate a reason. She said, ‘If you’ve plagiarised quite a large part

of an assignment or something, you know, knowingly, then it seems fair enough that you would get a zero for the paper'.

Some participants drew on (un)fairness discourses when discussing students who plagiarise, describing such students' behaviours in terms of a lack of fairness. Justine stated: 'It's not fair that I did that work and got that grade on my own merit and somebody else did it on somebody else's merit'. As well as indicating the unfairness of students receiving undue credit, Justine's view of plagiarism as unfair behaviour also reflected the view that sanctions for intentional plagiarism are fair. Monica, who expressed her opinion that it is fair to penalise students for intentional plagiarism, stated: 'Everyone should have to put in the same amount of, or a similar amount of effort, if they're going to get the same degree, especially if they're getting good marks, having plagiarised. You know, it's not really fair'.

Although some students in this study stated their view that the plagiarism policy was fair, our reading of the interviews revealed other students' views were not so clear-cut. Some of the students struggled to determine if the way the University deals with plagiarism is fair or unfair. Emily spoke of the necessity for students to correctly reference everything as 'pretty tough… particularly [for] first year students that don't really know how to cite very well'. However, she immediately countered this with 'but I mean fair enough. Like, you've got to set a standard and if you've set the standard, you can't exactly chop and change it for Tom, Dick and Harry'. Emily seemed to be struggling to decide if it was fair to require the same standard of citation for all students, regardless of their level of study.

When taking up (un)fairness discourses in their interviews, some students overtly disagreed with the implementation of the Procedures, and questioned the need to take responsibility for avoiding unintentional plagiarism. For example, Hugh and Christian both spoke at length about their respective beliefs in the University's responsibility to teach and foster lifelong learning practices rather than impose a set of rules and regulations. Echoing Price (2002, p. 102) both Hugh and Christian expressed a view that rules and policies on (unintentional) plagiarism are barriers to student learning as they encourage students to focus on rule-following rather than learning.

When drawing on (un)fairness discourses students seemed to be constructing those who plagiarise, particularly when the plagiarism is unintentional, as *victims* of university plagiarism procedures. For example, Hugh expressed a view that students would not intentionally plagiarise; his perception was that all plagiarism is unintentional. Hugh used the word 'draconian' to express his view that sanctioning students for unintentional plagiarism is unfair, saying, 'I think it's unfortunate to be overly draconian on punishments which are just pure oversights and not intentional, because that serves no benefit'. He went on to state that in the interests of fairness, people who sanction students for plagiarism should themselves be sanctioned:

> If such people have expelled students for accidents, for unintentional plagiarism, I think those people should really be held to a court of law and the same standard should be applied and expulsion from the university should be applied for them. In other words, tit for tat. Just desserts.

Although in the statement above Hugh was expressing his views on fairness, his statements also reflected moral/legal language, thus also drawing on ethico-legal discourses to suggest that the *University* be held to account for its apparently punitive stance on plagiarism.

Some students expressed the view that readers/markers either overlooked plagiarism completely, or judged writing as 'plagiarised' when there was no intent to plagiarise. From this perspective, what makes plagiarism policy 'unfair' was the possibility that a student

might either 'get away' with plagiarising, or be judged as a (dishonest) plagiariser regardless of their intent. Justine alluded to this in her interview:

> I guess I could be put in a very awkward scenario if I unintentionally plagiarised and you know, like just forgot to cite a reference or something and then you know, it's like, umm, hi, you've plagiarised. Do you know the consequences of your decisions? You can be kicked out of uni.

By describing plagiarism as a 'decision', Justine seemed to be expressing a view that all plagiarism was considered intentional. This may be reflective of the plagiarism website, which did not clearly distinguish between responses to intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Justine seemed to believe that plagiarism was determined by the text, and regardless of intent, the student was punished if plagiarism was present in their work. David expressed a similar view:

> You are trying, really trying, honestly trying, to do homework or do an essay and you will just get something by mistake or something that you don't know, and you will just do it wrong and then you will just be penalised or expelled for plagiarising. I don't think that's fair.

Justine and David seemed to be confused regarding why unintentional plagiarism was regarded as dishonest practice alongside intentional plagiarism and other forms of cheating.

Confusion discourses

A third set of discourses evident in the students' interviews was confusion discourses. When drawing on confusion discourses, the students expressed their lack of understanding of what plagiarism is, and why it needed to be avoided. Consequently, confusion discourses constructed plagiarism as problematic, unclear, and something to be anxious about, highlighting the troubling possibility that one might plagiarise unintentionally and be sanctioned as a consequence. Confusion discourses were often characterised throughout the interviews by contradictions, ambiguity and uncertainty within students' comments, such as 'umming' and 'aaahing', and responses such as 'I'm not sure', 'it's ambiguous', and 'it's really confusing'.

When the students drew on confusion discourses, they commonly constructed students as learners who did not know how to avoid plagiarism, and teachers as knowing, but seemingly unwilling to make their knowledge explicit. For example, in his interview, Carl spoke about how different lecturers seemed to have different expectations regarding acceptable citation and whether plagiarism has occurred: 'It all depends on the individual lecturers or examiners' interpretation of what's been written'. Similarly, other students expressed a view of the rules and processes around plagiarism as difficult to understand and 'get right'. Lisa spoke at length about her perception that the expectations around avoiding plagiarism were unclear, particularly in regard to what was seen as an acceptable paraphrase. Lisa seemed to hold the view that everything she wrote at university was a paraphrase of someone else's work, and expressed her struggles to understand the 'grey areas' of what needed to be referenced and why. Similarly, Lydia said, 'there's just too many ways of doing it wrong'.

Some of the students spoke about the differences in writing and referencing styles between the multiple disciplines they were studying. For example, Monica stated, 'how you write it depends on what subject you're doing'. These students seemed to be aware of

the discipline-specific nature of academic writing, but displayed confusion regarding why they needed to learn multiple styles of referencing. Lydia voiced this with her comment, ‘they just make it so ridiculously complicated’.

Some students were confused about why plagiarism was treated seriously at university, in particular, why it was treated differently to how they recalled it being treated at school. Carl explained that ‘in high school a small amount of copying and pasting were allowed’. He described instances of students’ cut-and-paste behaviours in high school assignments, and teachers’ apparent lack of concern that this was happening. When asked what he thought of this, he responded:

> Well because it was only a few sentences, it was like, like 50 words out of a thousand-word essay, so I’d say that wasn’t too significant seeing as it fitted, it did fit in. There are some times that you find research and there’s just no other way to word it but how it’s already been worded. So sometimes lecturers, teachers, really just have to let something slide.

It is interesting to note that Carl had expressed earlier in his interview a view of plagiarism as a transgression of the rules, and plagiarisers as needing to be sanctioned. The tension between these two views can be read as indicating Carl’s confusion surrounding what should and should not be considered plagiarism.

Some students held the view that they needed to reference everything they wrote. Kirsten explained: ‘You’re not allowed to just have your own ideas. You’ve got to have proof of every single sentence, and usually finding references is the hardest part of the essay’. When asked how students could avoid plagiarising Kirsten responded: ‘By referencing every sentence they write’. Hannah also expressed this view: ‘We have been told… even if you didn’t read something, that if you’ve written something that someone else has said, it’s plagiarism’. This was a cause of confusion and anxiety for Hannah as she contemplated inadvertently plagiarising simply because she had not read an obscure text.

One of the main areas in which the students expressed confusion was when they were asked to define plagiarism. The definitions the students gave ranged from very black and white understandings of plagiarism as simply copying and pasting text, to more problematised understandings acknowledging the difficulties in determining factors such as collusion and intent. Often, individual students displayed confusion about their understanding of what is plagiarism. Danielle initially gave a fluent definition of plagiarism, clearly stating that plagiarism ‘covers outright copying other people’s work, and it also covers just accidental plagiarism, and people not referencing a work properly or just not referencing them at all’. However, further questioning revealed an underlying confusion about why unintentional plagiarism is labelled cheating. Danielle seemed to be working out her understanding as she spoke, indicated by halting responses that included pauses, umming, and phrases such as ‘I suppose’, all of which we read as reflecting uncertainty. When asked why she thought there is so much concern about plagiarism in universities, Danielle was unable to give a reason, and eventually responded with: ‘If I think about this long enough, then I may be able to come up with an answer’.

When drawing on confusion discourses, students often expressed a level of voicelessness within the University, describing a sense of fearfulness or stating a lack of opportunity to clarify questions around plagiarism and the Plagiarism Procedures, again constructing themselves as victims of the Procedures. Consequently, confusion discourses seemed to position the students as weak, and teachers and the institution as powerful, with the authority to survey students’ practices and punish them for unacceptable practice. When expressing confusion, the students seemed mindful that it was their responsibility to avoid

plagiarism, but also indicated that they were unsure of how to avoid unintentionally plagiarising.

Learning discourses

A final set of discourses evident in the students' interview conversations constructed plagiarism and its avoidance as part of the learning process—as learning how to cite, reference, and write in an academic way. When drawing on learning discourses, students constructed plagiarism and referencing as situated within the broader skill of learning how to be part of an academic discipline; specifically, learning discipline-specific citation and referencing conventions. In the interviews, learning discourses were mainly evident when students spoke of how they thought plagiarism *should* be dealt with, rather than how they thought it *was* dealt with. Many of the students expressed a belief that plagiarism could or should be viewed in terms of development, or that students should be scaffolded and supported through learning to avoid plagiarism, or to reference correctly, and becoming 'good' academic writers. These students were unknowingly echoing the academic literature that calls for plagiarism to be framed in relation to academic writing skills more generally (e.g. Howard 1999; Lea and Street 1998; Vardi 2012).

In the students' interviews, learning discourses positioned students as learners or apprentices within their respective disciplines, and emphasised joint (student and institutional) responsibility for learning. For example, Justine spoke of learning to reference as a process that involved responding to feedback on successive assignments: 'In my first semester of uni, probably we didn't reference everything that we should have. I guess you just start off little and get bigger'. When drawing on learning discourses, students expressed a view of the University as partially responsible for ensuring that students are given the relevant information and support to properly learn the knowledge and skills required to avoid plagiarism. Hugh clearly articulated this view: 'They have a social responsibility. They have an educational responsibility, and that's what they should live up to'. Further, some of the students emphasised a view that education is a logical response to plagiarism–either skills teaching aimed at avoiding plagiarism, or education around what plagiarism is and why students should avoid it. Emily explained that avoiding plagiarising is 'just a matter of getting better and sort of actually learning more about where things go and how it's meant to be displayed'. Many of the students seemed to think that unintentional plagiarism due to lack of academic or referencing skills should be treated as a writing or citation issue rather than as a plagiarism issue, and should be dealt with using educative rather than punitive measures. In this sense, students' use of learning discourses extended the use of the (un)fairness discourses which constructed punishment for unintentional plagiarism as unfair.

Students' use of learning discourses often positioned people who (deliberately) plagiarise as not learning. For example, David said:

> [Plagiarism] just make[s] you get a lower grade than what you're supposed to, because if you use your brain you'll get a better grade and if you use your brain, you'll understand and learn something new that you might use in the future or you might use somewhere else in life.

Other participants expressed a view that students may plagiarise as a consequence of not having learned or understood the course material. Danielle articulated this view:

> A student can plagiarise a resource if they don't understand a subject. Like if they don't understand what they're talking about, then they will just copy words from a paper which explains the subject and they won't cite it just so they appear to know what the subject is about. Because if they don't, then the marker can see pretty quickly that they don't know what they're talking about, so they use the information or the words from other papers to try and make them sound smarter, I suppose, or just make them sound like they understand what's going on.

Not plagiarising, therefore, may be read as an indication that a student has learned the material. Eric expressed this view: 'If you agree with the ideas, you sort of need to be able to put it in your own words or else you haven't really learnt anything. If you can understand it, you can write about it'. Vanessa explicitly referred to her difficulty understanding and writing about the unfamiliar material she was learning. She said, 'There's so many big words and I don't really understand it properly so I find it hard to re-word and put it in my own words. So, yeah, it's difficult'. When asked what should happen if a student inadvertently plagiarises in such a situation, she responded, 'just point it out to them then they'll fix it'. Vanessa's perspective aligned with the literature framing plagiarism as patchwriting or textual borrowing (e.g. Howard 1999).

Discussion and implications

The discourses that the students in this study drew on in their conversations about plagiarism broadly reflected the framings of plagiarism in the academic literature; namely, plagiarism as a moral issue, as a regulatory problem, and as an academic writing issue. The ethico-legal discourses in the students' interviews echoed the moral and regulatory discourses in the plagiarism literature, while the (un)fairness and confusion discourses they drew on both reflected and critiqued the moral and regulatory views. When the students drew on learning discourses they indicated an understanding of plagiarism that moved beyond a moral or regulatory view of plagiarism. Learning discourses reflected the trend in some academic literature towards a focus on plagiarism in relation to students' development as academic writers. The discourses the students drew on in their interviews revealed tensions between the way plagiarism was framed in the University Procedures and plagiarism website, and students' understandings of plagiarism and academic writing.

The moral and regulatory framing of plagiarism in the University Procedures and website was reflected in the students' use of ethico-legal and (un)fairness discourses. In particular, the students' use of ethico-legal discourses revealed an awareness of power relations within the University; the students constructed the University as an institution that imposes rules, and punishes those who break the rules. The plagiarism literature emphasises that a moral (or ethico-legal) framing of plagiarism is unhelpful towards resolving the plagiarism problem (Adam 2016; Brown and Howell 2001; Howard 1999; Kaposi and Dell 2012; Valentine 2006), and this was further reflected in the confusion discourses the students drew on in their interviews in this research.

The learning discourses the students drew on highlighted discrepancies between the moral and regulatory discourses prevalent in the Procedures and the website, and the educative framing of plagiarism that the students indicated they desired. Despite the dominance of ethico-legal discourses in the students' interview responses, it became evident throughout the interviews that confusion about plagiarism, alongside a desire for a more educative approach to plagiarism, underlined many of the students' responses.

Students drew on learning discourses when they called for more information and education about plagiarism. As discussed earlier, many of the students' responses highlighted that they did not fully understand what plagiarism is, why they needed to avoid it, or indeed how they could avoid it. This was exacerbated by the consideration of two quite distinct sets of behaviours under the label plagiarism; namely, intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism. The students' confusion and sense of unfairness regarding why unintentional plagiarism was treated as dishonesty echoed other literature that suggests that a policy that appears to judge and regulate unintentional plagiarism alongside dishonest behaviour is not helpful for students (e.g. Howard 1999; Price 2002).

The students' views highlighted a need for opportunities to receive feedback in order to improve their writing without the risk of sanctions, such as losing marks or more severe punishment. For example, this was evident where students aligned 'plagiarism avoidance' with 'referencing', noting that referencing, paraphrasing, and learning to write in an academic way takes practice. In their requests for mentoring and practice, the students were unknowingly echoing the literature that constructs plagiarism as an academic writing issue, and acknowledges the discipline-specific nature of academic writing (e.g. Lea and Street 1998; Price 2002, p. 93; Wingate et al. 2011). Given that academic writing is learnt (and judged) in discipline-specific contexts, it seems likely that students can best learn 'correct' writing conventions (including how to cite others' work), within their particular discipline (Howard 1999; Lea and Street 1998; Vardi 2012; Wingate et al. 2011). This means that generic advice on academic skills, such as that provided on the University's website, may be of limited use to students. In addition to accessing generic information, students require more personalised, contextualised interactive support (Bretag et al. 2014, p. 1161).

A moral framing of plagiarism reflects a view of writing as a product; as something to be assessed summatively. Our research findings suggest that, in order to encourage students' academic writing competencies, writing needs to be viewed as a process, or something that can be constantly improved. When students' writing is viewed as a process, textual features that could be considered (unintentional) plagiarism (e.g. patchwriting) become an opportunity to work with the student to enable them to learn how to take their patchwritten text and re-work it into original, correctly cited text. Learning to draw on sources in the production of knowledge, and learning to write in our own discipline, takes a lifetime of practice.

Concluding comments

Our study explored the connections and contradictions inherent in a University's plagiarism policy documents, and students' understandings of plagiarism. Our findings showed that students viewed unintentional plagiarism as distinct from deliberate cheating. Consequently, the moral and regulatory framing of the University Plagiarism Procedures seemed to be a cause of confusion for students in relation to unintentional plagiarism. Subsequent to this research, the University revised its Dishonest Practice Procedures and relabelled them an Academic Integrity Policy. The information on plagiarism provided to students now focuses on what makes for good academic practice, rather than on the punishments for dishonest practice. The process of designing and developing complementary educative resources and support for students and staff at the University is ongoing. We suggest that other institutions may wish to consider their plagiarism policies and how

these may influence or confuse students in counterproductive ways. We further suggest that, in order to support students' learning, unintentional plagiarism should ideally be addressed within embedded processes that focus on students' development as academic writers.

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