BERJ British Educational Research Journal

BERA BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

British Educational Research Journal
Vol. 45, No. 2, April 2019, pp. 388–406

DOI: 10.1002/berj.3504

The social anatomy of 'collusion'

Charles Crook[a,*] and Elizabeth Nixon[b]

[a]*School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK;* [b]*Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, UK*

This article offers a conceptual analysis of collusion, the often overlooked relative of plagiarism in debates on academic integrity. Considered as an inherently social phenomenon, we present the results of a systematic effort to understand the anatomy of collusion. The term's meanings and associated governance practices are compared for contexts outside higher education. These are considered alongside a thematic analysis of publicly available UK university academic integrity documentation that specifies for students what counts as collusion. We indicate how current guideline practice can (1) *appear incomplete* by concentrating on classroom peers, (2) create *blurred boundaries* around useful collaboration, peer review and dishonest practice and (3) be so *unrealistic* as to have unwelcome, unintended consequences for students and staff. Taking an ecological perspective on the conditions of collusion emphasises how these guidelines—by seeking to constrain social interactions around assignment work—may create an uncomfortable incoherence between their prescriptions and well-established patterns of study.

Keywords: academic integrity; collaboration; collusion; higher education

Introduction

One issue dominates current academic integrity research in higher education: namely, student dishonesty in contexts of assessment (Bretag, 2016; Velliaris, 2017). For coursework assignments a recurring offence is that of plagiarism. While its nature and management can be contested matters (cf. Howard & Robillard, 2008), most commentators define plagiarism in terms of individuals claiming ownership of material reproduced from unattributed sources. Concern over this practice has encouraged the development of digital tools thought to mechanically detect such material. Where an unattributed source can be established as existing in some public domain, this offence may be termed the 'cut-and-paste' version of plagiarism. In such cases, the discussion of academic offence is usually pursued more confidently, simply because borrowed material has been rendered visible. However, sources for some unattributed ideas may not be so readily detected. They may be taken from the hidden interactions students have with other people, rather than from their encounters with published documents or internet pages. Indeed, such sources may exist only as episodes of verbal conversation.

That possibility is captured by the term 'collusion'. Plagiarism of this variety is a much more slippery matter to define and manage (Barrett & Cox, 2005; Sutton & Taylor, 2011; Sutherland-Smith, 2013; Fraser, 2014; Velliaris, 2015). The same

*Corresponding author. School of Education, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK. Email: charles.crook@nottingham.ac.uk

actions may, on one occasion, be judged 'collusion' (which observers condemn), while, under different circumstances, they may be judged 'collaboration' (which observers celebrate). The management of source attribution is a key responsibility for students to exercise in preparing their coursework. Yet understanding exactly which sources need to be acknowledged may be a significant challenge; collusion may awkwardly overlap with apparently legitimate occasions of 'mere collaboration'.

There is little understanding of how far the proscriptions in collusion guidelines serve to constrain or direct students' collaborative study. It is known that students' recognition and reading of these guidelines is limited (Ashworth *et al.*, 1997; Barrett & Cox, 2005; Adam *et al.*, 2017). However, even where guidelines *are* known, their proscriptions may not align with students' native understanding of appropriate study or assessment practices. In this article we do not interrogate students' perspectives on such guidelines directly. However, we complement McGowan's (2016) analysis of institutional guidelines and, more specifically, her call for attention to the contextual and social nature of collusion. Our analysis serves to illustrate institutional perspectives on the nature of collusion and identifies challenges of interpretation that students therefore may face.

It is important to be clear about the meaning of key concepts that organise relationships within educational practice. For example, Eriksen (2018) has illustrated the significant impact of differently understood meanings for the term 'bullying'. Accordingly, in the next section we examine the term 'collusion' with reference to its formal definition and identify three core features: sociality, intent and concealment. However, we recognise Austin's (1961) observation that *sentences* have 'meanings'—not words. In the third section we therefore respect this advice by considering the social and cultural dynamics active in situations where such sentences are uttered, rather than actually pursuing a strictly linguistic analysis. By comparing the status of collusion in such different contexts, we can consider more carefully the educationalist's predicament with 'collusion', highlighting how the conditions of university study create distinctive challenges for defining it. By doing so, we find a wide range of tensions that individuals may experience within an act of 'collusion', and considerable diversity of emotional valence and psychological impact for those involved. We then follow McGowan's (2016) lead in examining the current management of collusion in university settings by thematically analysing a sample of guidelines that seek to govern it. The present approach adopts an ecological perspective by locating the actions and motives of the individual student in their institutional contexts.

This approach affords a general definition of 'collusion', identifying within it three elemental constituents. The examples we recruit from familiar cultural contexts illustrate how examining particular acts of collusion can highlight a number of relationship tensions arising within the framework of these constituents. We go on to identify three such tensions that are particularly salient for the case of student collusion around coursework. We show how current guideline practice suffers a number of shortcomings that arise from failing to engage with these tensions. Furthermore, we suggest that these guidelines manifest different forms of *incoherence* between institutional proscriptions and well-established study practices. A more informed understanding of the status quo can guide policy on how collusion should be governed in the best interests of students.

Defining collusion

The etymology of this term integrates two elements: 'play' (*lūdere*) and 'together' (*col*), such as to 'have a secret agreement' (Hoad, 1993). However, while such concealment may entail a playful quality for some colluding actors, that feature will fit less comfortably with other actors in the examples to be discussed here. The second etymological element of 'togetherness' indicates that acts of collusion have a *social* quality, and this fits well, for they take place within joint activity (it would be unusual to speak of colluding with a machine). As McGowan (2016) notes, this sociality is the source of this concept's complexity; one that renders the case of 'assignment collusion' particularly hard to judge and hard to anticipate.

The etymological roots of 'play' and 'togetherness' might suggest the generally positive connotations of collaborating. So, if 'colluding' and 'collaborating' are equally social in nature, they need to be distinguished on different grounds, and motivation might supply those grounds. For instance, everyday understanding of 'colluding' suggests actions with more negative valance than the activities of collaborating. Many informal definitions invoke cheating, illegality and deceit. Unfortunately, such inherent negativity of intent cannot be a necessary defining feature; the act can sometimes bring about very positive outcomes, such as individuals 'colluding' to spring a surprise birthday party.

This example illustrates two senses in which acts of collusion rely on *sociality*. First, their conception—planning a party in this case—is something that takes place between people. Second, the impact of any such constructed plan includes a significant social consequence: some other person, or persons, will not experience things as they really are or as they were expected to be. So, in the birthday example, one person has their expectations disturbed by the planning of others. A normatively quiet Monday evening is violated by unexpected balloons and friends on the doorstep. However, note that it is *intent* that makes what the planners do a collusion, as opposed to it being a 'mere' collaboration. If they happened to get the date wrong and their oblivious friend had just left the country, their planning would still be a collusion.

If a plan entails consequences intended to disturb someone else's expectations, then that plan must involve *concealment*. Therefore, collusions will require secrecy, from at least some of those persons affected by its consequences. Surprises arising from plans that were never intentionally concealed do not count. If two friends plan a party for a third but simply do not get a chance to tell them about their plan, then the event may be a surprise but, with no intent, its planning can hardly be called a collusion.

In sum, the term 'colluding' describes how two or more people act intentionally to undermine the transparency of some state of affairs as understood by others. Its elemental constituents are sociality, intent and concealment. However, the birthday example reminds us that these collusions need not be hostile or unwelcome. Nevertheless, they are often the objects of judgement. In cases such as surprise parties, judgement will dwell on the rectitude of violating the expectations, the interpretations or the theories of those who are surprised or misled. Such everyday episodes might be termed 'local collusions' (cf. Borg, 2009); they can only be judged confidently through understanding the local circumstances and expectations of those actors

involved. By contrast, what may be termed 'institutional collusions'[1] is less idiosyncratic. In these cases, the 'understandings' or 'expectations' being violated exist as a set of external rules or principles defined, shared and required by some institutional community, such as a university. The occurrence and judgement of collusion directed at these rules may be of great concern to such communities, for it may undermine precious goals or values.

It might seem that collusions are easier to judge when what is violated is the explicit and formalised expectations of institutions, rather than the uncertain and personal expectations of individuals. Indeed, institutional contexts are useful to study because they offer stable frameworks of regulation within which any complexity in the social dynamic of colluding can be more carefully considered. However, we believe that this does not necessarily make acts of collusion within them easy to judge. Accordingly, the examples discussed in the next section illustrate how the elemental trio of sociality, intent and concealment create tensions around responsibility and offence when they are enacted in various contexts of institutionalised cultural practice. We identify three such points-of-tension that can arise in an act of collusion before considering how far one particular context (higher education) effectively addresses them in governance.

Institutionally embedded collusion

Table 1 illustrates collusion practices for cases drawn from contexts that are socio-culturally structured: namely, politics, business, game-playing, matrimony and healthcare. A definition of one representative act of collusion is shown in each case (column 1). Columns 2–4 identify three key features around which analysing acts of collusion can be organised. 'Actors' refers to the collaborating partners but also to any individual or community from whom the consequences of collusion need to be concealed. 'Outcomes' are those consequences. 'Governance' concerns the external rules or principles that specify the protocol that is disturbed by the act of collusion.

Comparing these cases suggests a recurring pattern of socio-cultural structure for collusions, but one in which the features of that structure operate with differing intensity or significance. This variation will lead to a collusion being felt differently (and perhaps judged differently) in these various circumstances. We distinguish here just three such tensions that are generated depending on particular configurations within the sociality/intent/concealment construction.

First, colluding actors will exist within the sociality of *partnerships*. Yet the depth and character of the relationship between partners will vary. They may be equally committed to a shared goal, as in the cases of matrimonial deception or gaming. Although gaming illustrates how mutuality is something that can simply evolve between partners, such that collusion occurs at a subconscious level: the momentary frown of a Bridge partner can (innocently perhaps) undermine otherwise transparent game rules. In other situations, commitment may be strong for one partner and not the other, perhaps because the rewards are uneven: the beneficiary of information in a political collusion may feel no loyalty to the informant's (betrayed) community. Moreover, such imbalances may arise by exercising differences in power relations, as when such political collusion is forced through unwanted pressure. Such

Table 1. Contexts of collusion (colluding partners in italics, target individuals in plain font)

Example act of collusion	Actors	Outcomes	Governance
Politics: An individual shares information via allegiance with others from some community in conflict with their own (Davies, 2014)	- *Informant* - *Foe* - Own community	Betrayal	Citizen loyalty
Business: Companies secretly coordinate to fix prices and thus constrain competition (Harrington, 2017)	-*Managers* -Competitors -Customers	Sales advantage	Trading laws
Matrimony: Married partners knowingly orchestrate one member into a sham romantic association, to secure legal dissolution of their own relationship (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006)	- *Married couple* - Judge	Divorce	Divorce law
Gaming: Players share concealed information on their game status, for personal benefit at the expense of fellow players (Vallve-Guionnet, 2005)	- *Partners* - Fellow players	Competitive win	Game rules
Healthcare: A therapist endorses the preferred practices or attitudes of a client, contrary to that therapist's professional judgement (Hak et al., 2000)	- *Clinician* - *Client*	Misdiagnosis	Professional ethics

circumstances can arise in educational contexts; a student's colluding partner may exist outside that student's institution and so be indifferent to its governance. Moreover, the colluding partner may act unwillingly on the basis of some invoked debt to the student.

Second, collusions may differ according to the *victimhood* that can be ascribed to those affected. Cheating at cards or market fixing may have severe (financial) impacts on those against whom the deception is played. In other situations, the offence identified may be felt as victimless, as when a 'mere' judge is deceived in a divorce case. Alternatively, colluding partners may simply lack awareness of potential victims. So, a clinician acting against their professional judgement in colluding with a client's optimistic prognosis is an act that may have hidden effects on the patient's friends and family. Arguably, students may also have a poor conception of their acts having victims, for their impacts may go beyond anonymous tutors and reach, for instance, peers or employers.

Third, collusions are enacted with varying degrees of *propriety*. For example, in political collusion what counts as betrayal may be contested by individual actors. Thereby, governance intended to be robust (or 'institutional') can become 'local', as individuals make it a matter of personal judgement and assert their own principles of loyalty. Similarly, Lauer (2015) notes how we still speak of collusion when individuals

acting in concert do not openly acknowledge (or perhaps reflect upon) the consistency in their purpose. She illustrates how collusion can perpetuate racial discrimination, even in communities that, outwardly, deplore it (Lauer, 2016), thus furnishing a discursive underpinning to critical race theories (Gillborn, 2008). In short, social contexts can be host to a whole range of norms that community members have routinely chosen to adopt. Doing so may sometimes place them in conflict with their own propositional beliefs (e.g. about racism), as well as those norms specified by their institutional contexts. Similarly, the norms articulated around academic integrity will not be encountered in some vacuum of self-regulation: their relationship with other felt norms of appropriate conduct needs to be considered.

Partnership, victimhood and propriety may not exhaust the list of tensions arising when collusions are enacted within socio-cultural practices. However, the varying dynamic they illustrate through these examples highlights the nuanced nature of collusion. It is therefore important that institutions address this complexity when designing governance. In the remainder of this article we consider how thoroughly universities achieve this as they discharge such responsibility. However, critical reflection is not intended to condone (or promote) any particular form that collusion may take among students. By examining the meanings given to collusion in this way, we aim to inform how this offence of academic integrity is best represented to those who may be vulnerable, considering also the terms in which students themselves might understand a claimed offence.

University guidance around collusion: Method

A selection of guideline documents referring to 'collusion' was gathered from UK university internet pages. While referring only to the UK may limit the generality of findings, there is some advantage to be gained from the coherence afforded by a national sample. The Google search engine was employed using the keyword 'collusion', coupled with a search constraint on '.ac.uk' sites. It was judged important to contain this search to documents that were available on the open internet, as this identified them as current and deemed available for public scrutiny. However, implicit critique of their contents would be inappropriate here, as statements by individual institutional units do not necessarily enjoy overarching endorsement. Moreover, the aim was not to report a representative sampling of how 'collusion' was managed in the sector, but rather to convey the general terms in which 'collusion' is presented to students, considering the diverse meanings which this entails.

To this end, sampling proceeded until saturation was detected in the range of elaborations that were set around definitions of 'collusion'. Thirty-two documents were downloaded, generating 382 references to collusion from 11 institutions. It is important to make available the sources of extracts that are quoted below. This has been achieved by notes in the form of abbreviated URLs.[2] The addresses are conveniently shorter, but this strategy also partially obscures the institutional sources. Of course, sources can be detected; however, it would be unreasonable to facilitate tracing particular views found in these extracts and associating them wholesale with parent institutions. Many extracts come from local academic sub-groupings or support services; the positions they promote may not be widely endorsed by their institution.

Moreover, the sampling is arbitrary rather than systematic. It intends to illustrate the *range* of guidance that is given and will include such items as quizzes, frequently asked questions and draft documents. The sampling will be concerned thereby to identify inevitable tensions that arise. The texts extracted from guidance documents were entered into NVivo software for thematic analysis, following the method of Braun and Clarke (2006). In the following section we organise our findings based on the particular emphasis of student guidance that emerged from our analysis of these documents: ownership, independence of study, place of collaboration, peer review and proofreading.

University guidance around collusion: Findings

Typically, the first task of assignment guidelines is to translate some generic definition of collusion into one that fits the actors and context of educational practice. Immersion in documents of this kind leaves a strong impression of authors battling with a concept that resists easy recasting. Sadly, in the background of their efforts will be students struggling to understand how they should act appropriately. The task difficulty is illustrated by examples of the following kind, explaining how the university defines collusion as being when:

> a student or students collaborate with another student or students, as an individual or group to gain a mark or grade to which they are not entitled.[3]

Note that this is not strictly a general definition of 'collusion': it implicitly accepts that definitions have to be cast in terms of particular socio-cultural scenarios, such as educational assessment. Nevertheless, attempts to be contextually precise ('another student or students') are undermined by the actual range of social support available for assignment writing. This careful definition does not make it clear whether the student is allowed to pursue interactions with those who are not students—freelance writers, parents or tutors, for example. It also raises further questions: How is 'entitled' to be understood? How does the warning implied in using this term complicate an understanding of when it is *otherwise* appropriate for students to 'collaborate'? Attempts to articulate more finely the nature of collusion are often grounded in the notion of 'ownership'. This makes it necessary for authors to clarify what is meant by working 'independently'. However, that in turn creates obligations to reconcile such prescriptions with other modes of joint working that are often prized, such as collaborative discussion, peer review and proofreading. The management of these concepts in the present sampling of documentation is considered later, in that order.

Ownership

To collude on an assignment is often explained in terms of an assumption of exclusive ownership of its content, although definitions may indicate that this is a restriction that need not apply to *all* assessments:

> . . . to work with someone else, or a group, to produce assessed work when the work in question should be entirely your own for the purposes of that particular assessment.[4]

In the following extract, this underlying assumption of 'exceptions' to a strict ownership rule is hinted at with the term 'unauthorised', thereby acknowledging other socially organised working pattern(s) for 'presented' work that can be acceptable or authorised—and so suggesting how such 'co-operation' must be approved by some authority:

> Unauthorised co-operation between a student and another person in the preparation and production of work which is presented as the student's own.[5]

This extract also ventures a more precise definition as to the target of a co-operation: applying to both its 'preparation and production'. This marks a difficult but recurring separation between, first, the research work necessary in understanding and *preparing* a response to some assignment and, second, the material *production* of that response—perhaps as a written essay or performed computation. Collaborative planning is distinguished elsewhere as something 'not normally acceptable', namely to:

> . . . discuss plans for essays, the general argument you will make, the evidence you will use and the structure of the report with another student.[6]

Sometimes this strict limitation on discussion is qualified by a reminder that, while it is possible for personal ownership to be compromised by the input of others, any such activity comes with a responsibility to acknowledge this:

> Students are reminded that when they submit work for assessment they must sign a Declaration of Academic Integrity which asserts that they are the sole author of the work unless otherwise stated. . . If in doubt, state that the work has been peer reviewed, when and by whom, and be prepared to furnish proof of the extent of the contribution of the reviewer.[7]

> Collusion is any agreement to hide someone else's individual input to collaborative work with the intention of securing a mark higher than either you or another student might deserve.[8]

In the second of these excerpts, the core elements of sociality ('any agreement'), concealment ('to hide') and intent to disturb an expected situation ('the intention of securing a *higher* mark') are evoked. Yet, the identification of other voices in a piece of work and the documentation of its extent is a daunting challenge (as is the syntax of the second extract). One must wonder how often this challenge is respected. Nevertheless, integrity guidelines frequently appear to risk undermining their own credibility with such demanding requirements. The worry would be that these challenging demands more generally erode the respect given to guidelines by students.

Independence of study

Achieving confidence regarding ownership leads to prescriptions for ways of studying. The easiest way to remain secure about your ownership of an assignment is to work apart from others, to study independently. This is made explicit in some guidelines:

> Collusion means working on an assessment with someone else. Unless it is made explicitly clear that you have been given a joint assessment, you should never work directly with other students on your module or anyone else when creating your work.[9]

Again, a frequent qualifier is invoked here in acknowledging that you may 'have been given a joint assessment'. The term 'explicitly' seems important, although one wonders how generously it will be interpreted by students. Aside from such qualifying terms, the prescription may seem less severe if 'creating your own work' is taken to mean only the creative act of writing (i.e. the assignment 'production' discussed above). However, in guidance that is so important, clarity of reference is a problem for such a contested concept as 'collusion'. In the next extract, there is no doubt that the target of improper joint activity is a broad one, as indicated by the colourful terms in which it is expressed:

> In many instances we actively encourage students to work together. Often students learn best from their peers, chatting over a coffee about some work problem can often help. However when it comes to assessed work it is imperative that this work is your own.[10]

Yet it is a harsh imperative that excludes scholarly chat over coffee. So much other university promotional rhetoric celebrates the opportunities afforded by becoming a member of a learning *community*. Much political and business rhetoric urges that universities should develop in students a capacity and willingness to work together (CBI, 2009). And much educational research develops the case for collaborative practices (Barkley *et al.*, 2014). Some guidelines acknowledge this but insist on lone working practices when engaged with projects to be assessed:

> Group work is a reality of working life and is seen by many module leaders as an important part of learning. When working on individual assessments, however, it's vital that you work alone and that the work you produce hasn't been seen or discussed in detail with another student.[11]

The next sections consider how guidance directs students on ways to manage various recognised forms of social support, starting with collaborative discourse exercised for learning.

The place of collaboration

The pressure to study independently is explored in this theme as an acknowledged tension given advice to collaborate emanating from authorities such as those identified above. The tension is made explicit in the following extracts. On the one hand:

> Sharing ideas with others is often an excellent way to learn, as you can bounce ideas off each other and find alternative points of view that you wouldn't have thought of yourself.[12]

Yet, on the other hand, it is added that this is all very well as long as the fruits of such collaboration do not leak into the written assignment that is later submitted. There is an implication that, for some judges of these matters, the measure of collusion will be found in an overlap of students' *written* expression. This leaves those students uncertain as to how far they should massage the expression of ideas collaboratively developed, such that they do not get written down by others in the same way:

> However, there's a fine line between sharing ideas in this manner and colluding. If you produce common ideas, common structures or common words and quotes, then you make it more likely that your assignments will be seen as similar, and therefore more likely that you, and the rest of your group, will be penalised for collusion. Similarity in assignments would not occur if you studied independently.[13]

Moreover, some advice warns that students are not necessarily very careful in finding distinctive expressions for shared ideas:

> Collusion could occur if you and your peers discuss an assessment you are doing in too much detail. The marker will notice something wrong when they come to mark your work, and they notice it is very similar to the work of others.[14]

More worrying, such awkward overlaps of textual expression could come about almost accidentally, following the most casual of conversations. Thus, a highly conservative separation of effort is encouraged by some:

> Do not discuss an assignment in detail with other students if you are working on the same question. Even if they do not work directly alongside you, they may come to exactly the same conclusion following a conversation they had with you, and this could be classed as collusion.[15]

The sanctity of the written copy is again implied in the following scenario, which draws closed examination answers into the space of collusion:

> However, discussing your work and ideas with others after you've all received your results may help with deeper understanding and revision of the topic. This is acceptable and encouraged – but you must not, for example, jointly produce model answers to exam questions based on these discussions.[16]

Authors of guidance are clearly struggling with the tension between stimulating productive collaborative discussion and protecting the student from accusations of cheating. Indeed, the authors of such guidance may be at some distance from other staff who have closer and more frequent contact with students. One recurring (but not universally expressed) boundary defining this difficult space is the distinction between planning and producing an assignment. Yet this is not an easy distinction to respect (or to police). If students are permitted (even encouraged) to discuss ideas before committing to writing, how cleanly can this be decoupled at the point of writing? The students may even have made notes during their discussions. Moreover, the 'others' involved in collaborative discussion are assumed here to be peers rather than those with potentially more expertise or even freelancers.

Apart from the stress of resolving these tensions, there are other side-effects of such guidance that represent unwelcome social dynamics in a student community. For example, such a community could, on some occasions, serve as an audience for a student's work and perhaps thereby a source of pride. Yet:

> It is obviously unwise to make assessed work that you have produced on your own available to other students for any reason. It may be difficult to establish that your own work was the original source and that it has been copied.[17]

> Do not let other people see your code. In the real world it is good to share code, but for an assignment it could lead to you being accused of collusion.[18]

On other occasions during their academic apprenticeship, students will have been encouraged in the practice of sharing and publication and perhaps alerted to the opportunities of the 'participative web' (OECD, 2007). Such guidelines also seem to miss their responsibility for commenting more specifically on the practice of posting or drawing from external document-sharing sites.[19]

However, advice of the kind given above encourages instead a protective attitude towards creative activity, but also risks questioning or eroding traditions of community trust:

> Do not lend your work to course-mates, or leave it where they can access it. It is an offence to knowingly allow others to use your work. Even if you trust them, you could get a nasty surprise if it turns out they copied some of your ideas.[20]

> If your friends ask you how to approach an assignment and you give them a copy of your work, the chances are they will copy it, even if they claim they won't. YOU and the other student(s) can be penalised if this happens.[21]

Peer review

The concept of peer review is perhaps more common in postgraduate work and in some university departments it is institutionalised as 'peer mentoring' or 'critical friends'. For undergraduate students this concept is more likely to be invoked to address tensions that arise for students when they get help from their own tutors. Can this ever be a collusion?

> It is entirely appropriate and frequently beneficial for students to subject their work to peer review. This may involve their supervisors; other academics at the University . . . or elsewhere; and, where they possess the necessary expertise to be able to offer an informed judgment, fellow students. . . The University expects that the process of peer review will result chiefly in the provision of comments and advice regarding the content, logic and clarity of the arguments advanced in the work under review. It should not include directly writing, re-writing, editing or amending the work.

> Students should be aware that collusion in the preparation of work for assessment is regarded as academic malpractice, thus they must ensure that the contribution arising from peer review does not compromise their role as the sole author of the work.[22]

In the first section, distinguishing and ruling out proofreading creates an impression that shared discussion around 'work' (assessments?) is acceptable, at least until matters reach the point of writing things down. Such directives may leave students very uncertain about how best to manage this risk of compromising their status as 'sole author'.

Proofreading

It may be unsettling that—as with open discussion, peer review, critical friendship, and so on—proofreading is yet another tradition normally pursued by academics but

which can be presented as troublesome for their students. Browsing guidance documents suggests that policy on both its definition and legitimacy can be variable. The line that is difficult to draw serves to separate superficial changes of language expression from deeper changes of meaning.

> But you should never accept help from anyone in creating new content for your work. As a general rule, the person helping you should not change the meaning of what you have written.[23]

In some cases the nature of editing that might bring about 'material changes' is left unspecified:

> It is not appropriate or acceptable for a student to ask or to allow someone else to make material changes to their work, for example by rewriting passages of text or making adjustments to formulae or code.[24]

Finally, some guidelines deal with the proofreading relationship by ruling a blanket prohibition:

> In a University context responsibility for proof-reading student work prior to its submission for assessment rests with the individual student as author. This long-standing principle cannot be compromised by the spread of professional proof-reading services advertised to students or any ambiguity amongst students and staff as to what constitutes acceptable practice.[25]

This seems a particularly robust ruling on practices that are otherwise considered routine for academic authoring and which would surely raise feelings of unease among international students who may struggle with minor details of expression in a second language.

Guidance given by institutions concerning the concept of 'collusion' has been sampled here through academic integrity documents published by universities. Illustrations drawn from this corpus may sometimes appear contradictory—in a way that might not flatter the sector. However, this material is assembled from different institutions and from various service or academic units within them. Although the parochial nature of such guidance is understandable, it reveals a diversity of meaning that must be challenging for students.

Discussion

The diversity in this guidance complements well the findings of McGowan (2016) in her review of guidelines sampled from other countries. The present material will be considered below in relation to the three particular points-of-tension identified earlier: partnership, victimhood and propriety. Variation around these can shape the experience of collusion differently and thereby direct how its governance needs to be both complete and realistic. We invoke the concept of 'coherence' to help characterise such goals for governance. Specifically, we suggest that incoherence arises when there are mismatches between practices proscribed by guidelines and robust practices enacted within interpersonal relationships, student communities, curriculum design and patterns of personal study.

(i) Partnership

The dynamic of partnership suggests three challenges for addressing the refinement of collusion governance: recognising the scope of these relationships, acknowledging differences of mutual engagement within them, and aligning any advice on collaborating with the realities of other long-established study practices.

Despite a deep search engine probe, it remains striking that the advice reviewed here lacks perspective on the scope of those partnerships that might be a threat to academic integrity. So-called 'essay mills' and their opportunity for 'contract cheating' are the most striking oversight—given evidence indicating their widespread availability (Bretag *et al.*, 2018; Ellis *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, such assignment-purchasing services are not constrained to the industrial anonymity of 'mills'—coursework help is also available from within a community of independent freelancers (Newton & Lang, 2015), often advertising on campus noticeboards. These services can be more than a troublesome source of cut-and-paste plagiarism, whereby students simply appropriate ready-made text, just as they might from any external source. In this fast-emerging form of plagiarism there is a partnership 'contract' between author and student and while it may often involve no more than the student supplying a title and task description, many sites emphasise that their agents will work to a more detailed and conversational specification. Some sites are quite explicit in offering coursework support that stresses tutorial contact or that involves collaborative working on student drafts.[26,27] Moreover, services are versatile. They can, for example, even include collaborating to write assessed posts for online discussion boards.[28] In sum, the guidelines sampled here are problematic because of the diversity of their directions to students but also because they lack the scope needed to confront partnerships drawn from an increasingly sophisticated practice of outsourcing.

The partnerships of collusion need not be characterised by an evenly matched engagement, motivation or pressure to proceed. Two students requested to tackle the same assignment clearly create a strong mutuality of intent: they both wish to do well. This is something echoed in Table 1 by colluding game players seeking to win, or married partners seeking divorce. However, a freelancing essay tutor helping a student is a partnering relationship at the other extreme: one partner seeks a successful grade, the other seeks a monetary reward. The cases in between may be those that are the most troublesome: these might include a parent collaborating with their offspring over a coursework assignment. Here, the investment is more 'complementary' than matched. The student again seeks a good grade and better understanding, while the parent may have a freer conception of the goal—perhaps that their offspring should be relieved of stress or that their general academic confidence should flourish. Guidelines should be careful not to totalise advice on study partnerships: they could also do more to address directly the possible constraints on those who have long-standing (and well-meaning) habits of supporting a student, as friend or family.

Finally, in these examples, guidelines that are prohibiting collaborative work around assignments may also be felt as incoherent with the accumulated experience of study partnering and shared purposes of mutual support. Collaborative relationships of all sorts come with histories of engaging around meaningful personal goals (even if the partners' goals are not always strictly identical). Study-related

collaborations are particularly distinctive in that they occur within the trajectory of an academic journey: one upon which there may have been a *succession* of study tasks around which the same student partners naturally coordinated. In a similar pattern, a parent will often have a long-standing and general sense of help-giving responsibility built into their very identity as a caregiver. The guidelines reviewed insist on constraining social interactions around assignment work: proscriptions that may disturb the felt coherence of such relationships.

(ii) Victimhood

The sociality of collusions such as those in Table 1 involve partnership but also a second interpersonal relationship: they exist in an association with those colluded against. Cheating gamblers act in card-playing communities (Table 1), where successful collusion is self-evidently at the expense of the other members. They are thereby rendered victims. Similarly, collaborating students act within a community of peers and tutors. Guidance reviewed here on assignment collusion does not often highlight the identity of those who may be termed its 'victims', or invite colluding partners to consider how their actions affect them.

An evident dimension of difference among the cases in Table 1 is the intimacy of association between collaborators and those who are misled by their actions. A sense of responsibility for action may be undermined if victims seem remote. Therefore, guidance needs to challenge such a loss of felt responsibility. For example, mutually disrespecting a community's divorce law may feel a more abstract and innocent offence than falsely taking winnings from opponents in a card game. Indeed, neutralisation theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957) identifies how individuals who violate protocols can protect themselves from blame or guilt by recruiting justifications based on tenuous readings of victim circumstances. Such justifications may allow individuals to retain respect for norms (such as academic integrity) while acquiring a bounded rationality for their own (perhaps intermittent) disruptions of them. 'Denial of victim' is a common neutralising strategy in criminal contexts. For instance, it is one that may be recruited to justify a collusion to violate divorce law. It is a weakness of the guidelines reviewed that they do not invite students to consider victimhood in relation to integrity offences. Students might reflect on how their peers, parents, future employers and the tax payer might have the status of victims for these offences. In practice, any rationalising may be based not simply on denying that a victim exists (potentially a tutor), but also on their perceived *anonymity*. Elsewhere (Crook *et al.*, 2006), it is reported that undergraduates can be troubled by the increasing distance between themselves as authors of assignments and their tutors as readers. It is therefore possible for a discontinuity of relationship with tutors to erode respect for imperatives around collusion. Assignment guidance may not be the best place to remediate such felt remoteness, but other institutional initiatives could be recruited do so.

(iii) Propriety

In the healthcare example of Table 1, a doctor considers whether to endorse a client's false optimism regarding life expectancy as opposed to sharing a realistic, but grim, prognosis. The former path has been termed 'collusion with the patient' (Hak *et al.*, 2000). The doctor faces a dilemma of propriety involving the protocol of

medical ethics versus a human judgement as to what is in the best interest of the patient (and perhaps their family) regarding quality of life. It is such competing norms that can create a further incoherence within the circumstances of the colluding student. Conflicts of interpersonal responsibility may be felt by colluding partners who were recruited as sympathetic friends, committed partners or family members—all of whom may face reconciling their well-practiced urge to support the other with the apparent proscriptions of academic integrity. Assessment guidelines may therefore need to confront and remediate (rather than ignore) certain norms of human relations.

Acting with propriety entails respecting the standards and conventions of the community with which one is aligned. Yet, in practice, the identity and responsibilities of 'membership' may not be experienced in a singular manner. Allegiances will exist to multiple communities and, moreover, guidelines for the regulation of different aspects of community life may be in conflict—or, as expressed here, may create forms of felt incoherence. For example, some of the guidelines reviewed seem to provoke an attitude of suspicion towards the intentions of one's peer community. Guidelines that urge independence of study need to reconcile this message with the promotional rhetoric of university life, which stresses the classroom as community (Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017).

The terms of collusion guidelines also create tensions of propriety when their demands do not cohere well with how a curriculum is presented or with its expected study practices. Assignments are often set early: perhaps they are declared in a course handbook distributed at the outset. There then follows a journey of study. Reading and listening episodes get organised. Writing and reporting tasks must be executed. Perhaps computations have to be performed or artefacts constructed. On such a trajectory, it may not be clear to the student when preparation for the assignment *starts*. It is fanciful to suppose that some assessed piece of exposition has, once set, a distinct moment when the work is initiated (and collaboration around the topic stops). Some guidelines in the previous section hint at the idea that this boundary can be defined by launching the act of writing, or 'production'. But a 'text' cannot be contained in that way: it will be an embedded process. Task explorations that are conversational cannot be decoupled from explorations that are executed with the 'pen'. The act of writing cannot be decoupled from the act of thinking (Oatley & Djikic, 2008), whether private or conversational.

Conclusions

The present project complements that of McGowan (2016), who also reports a diversity of advice in university guidelines that address collusion across several countries. Whilst our focus on UK university guidance limits the findings to this context, we have emphasised a narrowness of institutional vision concerning what is judged to count as collusion even within a national environment. The apparent shortcomings of current guideline practice may be summarised under three headings. First, they can appear *incomplete*: proscriptions concentrate on classroom peers—ignoring families, freelancing tutors and online services. Second, they can create *blurred boundaries*: assignment tasks may or may not be open to collaborations, some are even required

to be so—where work (and therefore discussion) on an assignment starts can be unclear, distinctions between planning and producing a draft is uncertain, academics themselves celebrate peer review and proofreading yet may selectively forbid it around assignments. Finally, the demands of guidelines may simply be *unrealistic* and, thereby, a source of resentment; procedures for formally acknowledging help obtained are expected but unspecified, staff may be left responsible for defining the limits of collaboration, and the perception of peer culture can become one of suspicion.

The analyses here yield some suggestions for how universities should approach their advice on collusion. In terms of definition, we have offered an analysis of how the term is commonly used; identifying its elemental constituents as sociality, intent and concealment. Then we have argued, through reference to familiar examples, that this trio of circumstances allows collusion to be enacted in a variety of socio-cultural patterns. Three particular tensions were highlighted as sources of trouble within such patterns: they concern the construction of partnership, the status of victimhood and the understood propriety of action. Academic guidelines should be written to anticipate such trouble and help students negotiate it. However, we have suggested that guidelines can easily fall short in this responsibility. A priority should be that the integrity conditions should not, as far as possible, contradict well-established patterns of social interaction, programme design, or those practices of private study that otherwise support effective and genuine progress. In short, we propose that current guidelines, as sampled here, manifest various forms of 'incoherence' in relation to these established norms. Apparently competing values and institutional practices should be identified and tensions around them avoided.

What matters is not the act of some study partnership, but how students understand the status of its outcome; that is, what emerges as a *product* of working together. Integrity advice should not demonise collaboration itself. Legal realities beyond education are relevant here: collusion is not a crime—unless what partners plan together is itself a crime (and thereby a 'conspiracy'). By comparison, in managing academic integrity, the challenge thus resides in judging not the collaboration but whether the product of students working together is to be considered an offence. While it is not the only questionable product of collusion, socially mediated plagiarism—presenting someone else's ideas as one's own—is the one that attracts most concern in the guidelines. Indeed, it sometimes seems to define 'collusion'. Yet it is troublesome to circumscribe and to detect. Moreover, its very existence can be contested (Jenkins, 2010; Allen, 2011). A clumsy solution to avoid would be a guideline that limits the presence of such products only through warnings against the risks of working together.

What is required is deeper, and more difficult to realise. Institutions would do well to work harder with students on two challenges: community membership and motivation. Together, these require cultivating students' sense of academic identity or belonging; that is, creating an authentic sense of membership in a community whose standards all members wish to uphold. This may entail strengthening forms of legitimate participation, but also finding ways in which the products of study can be critiqued, valued and circulated with the same care that is expected more widely in academic life. With a shared, community-decided model of offence, those students

may thereby develop greater confidence and certainty in the authority of their creative work but also a more mature sense of responsibility and transparency towards peers and tutors in the academic community.

Universities must be free to define the terms under which they give credit to assessed work. Quite properly, they publish guidelines that identify their perspective on various forms of collaborative working. Our own exploration of this is not intended to suggest that 'collusion' has no place in these matters. However, in those guidelines that clarify its place, close attention must be given to the tensions between what is proscribed and the consequences of other well-established practices around curricula, study and social relationships. If this is not achieved with criticality and consideration, the sector risks too many unwanted integrity investigations and too many dispirited students.

NOTES

[1] We note, however, that in practice students may be more attentive to local tutor responses to collusion than institutional prescriptions, so that our demarcation is blurred. We are indebted to one of our reviewers for this point.
[2] All URLs cited were last accessed on 22 September 2018.
[3] https://bit.ly/2l9ptbb
[4] https://bit.ly/2JNHAOL
[5] https://bit.ly/2lbBQUr
[6] https://bit.ly/2JRWczT
[7] https://bit.ly/2sXZDLL
[8] https://bit.ly/2O1gPvD
[9] https://bit.ly/2HPYFWo
[10] https://bit.ly/2HR0Ngz
[11] https://bit.ly/2yeGR7U
[12] https://bit.ly/2yeGR7U
[13] https://bit.ly/2JVlFZh
[14] https://bit.ly/2HPYFWo
[15] https://bit.ly/2HPYFWo
[16] https://bit.ly/2yeGR7U
[17] https://bit.ly/2JNJHCb
[18] https://bit.ly/2JXYYDX
[19] For example, www.studocu.com/, www.stuvia.co.uk/
[20] https://bit.ly/2HPYFWo
[21] https://bit.ly/2yeGR7U
[22] https://bit.ly/2ld4GUi
[23] https://bit.ly/2HPYFWo
[24] https://bit.ly/2tauMuD
[25] https://bit.ly/2ld4GUi
[26] For example, https://studyfaq.com/
[27] For example, www.homeworktutoring.com/online_tutoring.shtml
[28] For example, http://essaystore.net/online-discussion-board-post-tutorial

References

Adam, L., Anderson, V. & Spronken-Smith, R. (2017) 'It's not fair': Policy discourses and students' understandings of plagiarism in a New Zealand university, *Higher Education*, 74(1), 17–32.

Allen, G. (2011) *Intertextuality* (London, Routledge).

Ashworth, P., Bannister, P. & Thorne, P. (1997) Guilty in whose eyes? University students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment, *Studies in Higher to Education*, 22(2), 187–203.

Austin, J. L. (1961) *Philosophical papers* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P. & Major, C. H. (2014) *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).

Barrett, R. & Cox, A. L. (2005) 'At least they're learning something': The hazy line between collaboration and collusion, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(2), 107–122.

Borg, E. (2009) Local plagiarisms, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(4), 415–426.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101.

Bretag, T. (2016) Defining academic integrity: International perspectives – introduction, in: T. Bretag (Ed.) *Handbook of academic integrity* (Singapore, Springer), 1–3.

Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Rozenberg, P. *et al.* (2018) Contract cheating: A survey of Australian university students, *Studies in Higher Education*, in press.

CBI (2009) *Future fit: Preparing graduates for the world of work* (London, Confederation of British Industry Higher Education Task Force).

Clarke-Stewart, A. & Brentano, C. (2006) *Divorce: Causes and consequences* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press).

Crook, C. K., Gross, H. & Dymott, R. (2006) Assessment relationships in higher education: The tension of process and practice, *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(1), 95–114.

Davies, P. (2014) *Dangerous liaisons: Collaboration and World War Two* (London, Routledge).

Ellis, C., Zucker, I. M. & Randall, D. (2018) The infernal business of contract cheating: Understanding the business processes and models of academic custom writing sites, *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 14(1), https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-017-0024-3.

Eriksen, I. M. (2018) The power of the word: Students' and school staff's use of the established bullying definition, *Educational Research*, 60(2) 157–170.

Fraser, R. (2014) Collaboration, collusion and plagiarism in computer science coursework, *Informatics in Education*, 13(2), 179–195.

Gillborn, D. (2008) *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* (London, Routledge).

Gottschall, K. & Saltmarsh, S. (2017) You're not just learning it, you're living it! Constructing the 'good life' in Australian university online promotional videos, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38(5), 768–781.

Hak, T., Koëter, G. & van der Wal, G. (2000) Collusion in doctor–patient communication about imminent death: An ethnographic study, *British Medical Journal*, 321(7273), 1376–1381.

Harrington, J. E. (2017) *The theory of collusion and competition policy* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press).

Hoad, T. F. (Ed.) (1993) *The concise Oxford dictionary of English etymology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 526.

Howard, R. M. & Robillard, A. E. (2008) *Pluralizing plagiarism* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann).

Jenkins, H. (2010) Transmedia storytelling and entertainment: An annotated syllabus, *Continuum*, 24(6), 943–958.

Lauer, H. (2015) The anatomy of collusion, *Phenomenology and Mind*, 9, 182–191.

Lauer, H. (2016) How collusion perpetuates racial discrimination in societies that ostensibly promote equal opportunity, *Philosophical Papers*, 45(1&2), 75–101.

McGowan, S. (2016) Breaches of academic integrity using collusion, in: T. Bretag (Ed.) *Handbook of academic integrity* (Singapore, Springer), 221–248.

Newton, P. M. & Lang, C. (2015) Custom essay writers, freelancers and other paid third parties, in: T. Bretag (Ed.) *Handbook of academic integrity* (Singapore, Springer). 249–272.

Oatley, K. & Djikic, M. (2008) Writing as thinking, *Review of General Psychology*, 12(1), 9–27.

OECD (2007) *Participative web and user-created content: Web 2.0, wikis and social networking* (London, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Available online at: http://browse.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/pdfs/free/9307031e.pdf (accessed 19 September 2018)

Sutherland-Smith, W. (2013) Crossing the line: Collusion or collaboration in university group work? *Australian Universities' Review*, 55(1), 51–58.

Sutton, A. & Taylor, D. (2011) Confusion about collusion: Working together and academic integrity, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(7), 831–841.

Sykes, G. & Matza, D. (1957) Techniques of neutralisation: A theory of delinquency, *American Sociological Review*, 22(6), 664–670.

Vallve-Guionnet, C. (2005) Finding colluders in card games, *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Technology: Coding and Computing 2005 (ITCC 2005)* (Vol. 2) (Piscataway, NJ, IEEE), 774–775.

Velliaris, D. M. (2015) A clearer pathway to institutionalising academic integrity: Distinguishing between collaboration and collusion, *26th International Education Association (ISANA) Conference* (Melbourne, Pullman on the Park).

Velliaris, D. M. (2017) *Handbook of research on academic misconduct in higher education* (Hershey, PA, IGI Global).