

Plagiarism: Learning from our challenges

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Abstract

Plagiarism or academic dishonesty is not a simple issue. According to Piety (2002), plagiarism appears subjective and context sensitive. Plagiarism is almost always a symptom of other educational problems (Turnitin, 2003). There have been growing concerns in Australia that there is an increase in deliberate plagiarism among international students (Elliot, 2003). Staff at Central Queensland University (CQU) are greatly concerned about the academic integrity of the students and programs. The focus of this paper is on how tackling the issue of plagiarism or academic dishonesty involves a consideration of staff and student differences and pedagogy when establishing standards within the academic community. This is the challenge.

Introduction

Central Queensland University (CQU) now delivers more than 1,310 courses and 227 programs (most available in flexible-learning mode) to almost 20,000 students from 99 countries. CQU is Australia's first-ranked public university in terms of international students as a proportion of total student numbers: 42.2% in 2002 (Central Queensland University, 2002). The staff at CQU are greatly concerned about the academic integrity of its students and programs. The challenge is how to be vigilant against plagiarism whilst at the same time thinking about student learning and what students gain as a learning experience from their educational experiences. One of the ways to deal with this process is to consider plagiarism not solely from a moral standpoint but also from a learning difficulty view and to seek to find a solution to this difficulty. When a student plagiarises, faculty staff become upset because standards have been compromised and the moral standpoint surrounding the process has been challenged. Issues of wrongdoing, poor academic performance, lack of acknowledgment, academic writing conventions, punishment and action taken, fairness and equity must be dealt with. Plagiarism is context specific and involves the staff, the university, the student and the curriculum. Many academics take a punitive stance from the outset, rather than examining plagiarism as a larger issue involving many complex variables. The focus of this paper is on how tackling the issue of plagiarism or academic dishonesty involves a consideration of staff and student differences and pedagogy which should be considered when establishing standards within the academic community. This is the challenge.

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Difficulties in defining plagiarism

Is plagiarism cheating? The Oxford dictionary identifies plagiarism as an attempt to use another person's thoughts, writings, inventions and so on as one's own. McNaughton (2002) highlighted the changing nature of learning, students and the classroom experience whereby plagiarism is about gaining advantage for oneself, to fool someone into thinking that one wrote, thought or discovered something which in actual fact someone else wrote, thought or discovered; this is literary theft. This definition also needs to be extended to the use of numeracy and computing language. However, many disciplines have different notions of defining, understanding and penalising plagiarism. This is problematic when trying to come to some agreement about a centralised approach. Tenner (cited in Genzlinger, 2002) suggested that students probably burn more brain cells concocting ways to cheat than they would have done by simply learning the material. It is a game: students versus faculty. Plagiarism is not a simple issue any longer; the world, students, academics and knowledge acquisition have all changed. Cheating in the author's view is the extreme end of plagiarism if one considers the whole issue on a continuum.

There are two main categories of plagiarism. The first category involves unintentional plagiarism within the academic writing genre, which stems from a student's lack of knowledge about conventions and/or about what is acceptable in sourcing reference material from other writers. Moore (1995) depicts this type of writing as

...patchwriting, a textual strategy that has traditionally been classified as plagiarism. Patchwriting involves copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes.
(p. 788)

Patchwriting may be readily corrected by good teaching and other learning support. More serious examples can require extensive remediation and may place students at risk of severe penalties. These examples may include a group of students who study together and each of whom submits individual assignments, with the results being almost identical, or a student taking slabs of work from published work without attribution.

The second category of plagiarism involves a student who deliberately, consciously and intentionally makes a choice to cheat by attempting to conceal the endeavour. Patently there is an overlap between the two categories; for example, continued sloppy referencing that has gone undetected may be at the lower end of deliberate plagiarism.

Factors affecting plagiarism

From a broader perspective, Piety (2002) identified that student plagiarism can be attributed to a number of causes: ignorance, fear and/or moral bankruptcy. Fears listed by Piety (2002) included poor performance because of factors like burdening responsibilities outside university, lack of preparation or poor command of English in the written and oral forms, to name a few. Norton, Tilley, Newstead and Franklyn-Stokes (2001) highlighted the link among students' behaviour, their perceptions of the relative seriousness of the offence and their understanding of punishment and penalties should that offence be detected.

There have been growing concerns in Australia that there is an increase in intentional plagiarism among students (Elliot, 2003), especially among international students. Arbor and Sector Gomez (2001) talk of students rationalising their behaviour when they cheat because it is perceived as a victimless crime, even though it may be framed in Western academic terms as an appropriation of intellectual capital. There are those international students who believe this to be true because they may not appreciate the wider important concept of intellectual honesty in the Australian academic setting and beyond. Students may also fail to appreciate what cheating would mean in the broader context of a future work environment, and how it would affect them and others around them. The academy is a 'safe' environment away from market orientations. Hinkson (n.d.) reinforced this point by stating that "...when the academic world intersects with the market and careerist orientations, distortions in the intellectual ethic quickly appear". Hinkson alluded to the loss of academic integrity within an environment (the academy) that has changed because of market forces. This decline, in turn, may be because of changed values or a failure to implement clear rules and expectations rigorously – that is, to allocate proper resources to their policing.

From the moral standpoint of the student, it remains unclear if plagiarism reflects moral development problems or if it is simply a behavioural problem. The troubling issue remains that many academics are reluctant to identify and report plagiarism (because of time, effort and unsatisfactory outcomes), and the result is a student population who are not particularly concerned about the perceived limited consequences of being 'caught in the act' (Hickman, 1998; Phillips & Horton, 1998). Other factors correlated with cheating have been identified as lack of maturity and commitment and the impact of neutralising attitudes (Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff & Clarke, 1986). Simple opportunity is also believed to play a role in this behaviour.

There are many variables that are likely to affect the academic success of students who enter university. Variables like certain demographic and cultural characteristics have also been associated with higher reported incidences of plagiarism. These include culture, age, marital status and gender. According to Australian Education International (2000), the population of international students at Australian universities has grown substantially over the past decade. The number of international students enrolled with Australian educational providers during 2000 was 188,277, an increase of 16% over the revised 1999 figure of 162,865. It would be easy to associate deliberate plagiarism with a student's cultural origin, but this is an oversimplification and even at its core level racist (Bradley, 2003). Students studying in Australia are potentially under great pressure and, while some of this can be related indirectly to their culture, rarely, if ever, will a culture promote intentional plagiarism. The same could be true of countries which provide the student with little experience in critically appraising information from reputable sources.

Other variables like age, gender and specific disciplines reflect that males, younger students and single people (Haines *et al.*, 1986) tend to report higher levels of academic dishonesty. Haines *et al.* go further and suggest that family support for university expenses reduces personal involvement and responsibility for the educational process. This is somewhat contradictory because international students in Australia are often working like their resident counterparts in order to offset their family's financial responsibilities. It has been noted that certain disciplines are more likely to have higher incidences of plagiarism. Phillips and Horton (2000) respond to this assertion by stating that business, computing and engineering

students are more likely to plagiarise than students enrolled in liberal arts, sciences and human service programs. Variables such as these need to be explored at CQU.

Promoting an atmosphere of academic integrity at Central Queensland University: A challenge?

With issues related to plagiarism, it is important to understand that there is more than one way to obtain a solution to the issue and that the author's viewpoint may differ from that of the institution or its policy directives. The author contends that there are three points of responsibility and accountability for plagiarism: staff, student and the university. This list below is not exhaustive but highlights areas viewed as important and challenging by the author.

Staff responsibilities

1. Challenging beliefs and values about plagiarism

It is important to recognise that there have been changes in the way the organisation operates which have encouraged greater student diversity and more public accountability of actions and outcomes. If one were to ask academics what was their understanding of plagiarism, the range of responses would illustrate the difficulty in defining such a term. It would seem prudent to obtain a general consensus on a definition and parameters institutionally that are not only known by all but also documented, easily accessible and transparent. Stefani and Carroll (2001) identified that academics need to be united in taking responsibility for improving the teaching and learning atmosphere. Enlisting the help of the Student Association to assist with raising and dealing with plagiarism concerns and zero tolerance is useful.

2. Cultural awareness training

Comprehensive cultural awareness and training are required to explore the underlying paradigms that lead to hidden agendas like racism within curriculum and policy (Bradley, 2003). As well, academics need to transpose this awareness into the curriculum so that assessment, criteria and design account for student diversity.

3. Assessment and criteria

It is important that assessment be a focus of responsibility for all academics. It requires sound pedagogical skills, curriculum knowledge and design in order to minimise plagiarism. Assessment design, construction and changes should focus on reliability and validity and be peer reviewed. It is imperative that assessment items vary both in timing and in type throughout the term so that learning outcomes can be achieved by students and marked appropriately by academics. Orsmond, Merry and Reiling (1996) indicated that staff and students have very different conceptions of what is expected of, or what is meant by, published or documented assessment criteria relating to assessment tasks.

Giving greater assessment choices that reflect different learning styles and clear criteria are useful ways of reducing the need to plagiarise. As well, it is important to obtain and respond to student feedback from both an academic and a student perspective.

It is important for academics to come from the perspective of students achieving learning outcomes rather than proving information retrieval, acquisition and presentation. The academic must require the student to do more than collect information but go further to analyse and evaluate information. As a result, it is imperative that the academic be efficient and effective in marking by giving emphasis to analysing and evaluating rather than structural performance of the item. Also students may need to be given an opportunity to learn how to analyse and evaluate within their programs. The challenge is to balance student learning outcomes within the time constraints of a term and an already full curriculum.

4. Quality assurance to reduce plagiarism

Staff need to be constantly vigilant by documenting, following up and sharing incidences of plagiarism in terms of occurrences of where, when, why, penalties and measures to reduce. It should not be the responsibility only of the Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) (ADTL) in a faculty to assure this. Incidences of plagiarism within a course may demonstrate inadequate educational design, validity and reliability and it burdens those in other positions (like program coordinator, head of school and ADTL) who are responsible for the process once it has commenced. An atmosphere of quality and standards needs to be promoted by all staff.

5. Time

Academics need to consider through appropriate risk assessment what time is available to reduce plagiarism within the learning experience. Student guidance in whatever form, electronic, face-to-face or written, is imperative and academics must ensure that information is available to and known by all students. Time is also required for detection and monitoring of standards and making students aware of this detection and monitoring (Phillips & Horton, 2000).

6. Training and development

Academics who do not have formal training or perceive they have a lack of knowledge in remaining current in academic conventions, educational design, assessment and use of information technology in educational delivery should identify annually their need for training and development. This process could be through self-identification or determined by the head of school.

7. Role modelling academic integrity

Academics must take responsibility for role modelling sound academic integrity. Stefani and Carroll (2001) identified that students watch staff in modelling behaviours. This becomes evident when multiple perspectives are given about plagiarism, where rules are 'bent' in assignments or in class and consistency is not followed through among academics. It is important to be consistent in communicating and maintaining transparency about expectations and rules. Not following up on plagiarism sends a message to students that non-conformity is acceptable. It remains the responsibility of each staff member at CQU to follow through on any reports of questionable behaviour.

8. Working collaboratively

Academics need to 'border cross' and to work collaboratively with others within the institution, especially those trained in elements of reducing plagiarism: Student Services, the Equity and Diversity Office, the Communications Learning Centre, the Mathematics Learning Centre, Communications and Support for distance

education students and the various academic advising units within CQU. These services are there to provide assistance and help to students. Often staff forget (in the busyness of life) their usefulness in assisting with optimising the learning outcomes of students, which in turn can assist in reducing the incidence of plagiarism.

Student responsibilities

1. Responsibility for learning

It is necessary as part of being an independent learner to take responsibility for one's learning situation and experiences. Stefani and Carroll (2001) suggest that plagiarism is a pragmatic option that students choose as part of their learning experiences. Students need to understand that guidance and support are available and to be able to access resources when required in order to reduce the poor judgement and decisions that lead them to plagiarise. Responsibility also means learning from mistakes and feedback.

A student charter (Central Queensland University, 2003) currently exists at CQU. This was passed at Academic Board in 2003 and highlights student responsibilities within their learning experience. This charter needs to be promulgated and promoted more widely to the academic and student community. As part of the charter and protecting scholarship and intellectual property, students need to feel comfortable about reporting questionable behaviour in a manner that protects them from reprisal. They need to forgo the 'mateship' concept to see that plagiarism devalues their learning experience and the work that they undertake. It is the view of this author that students know who plagiarises within the student cohort and the subsequent outcomes. If the plagiarism is not dealt with, this knowledge becomes tacit consent to an act which seeks to undermine academics' efforts to address the plagiarism. Plagiarism needs to be explored from this understanding by students and academics openly within the curriculum and at orientation.

2. Learning the academic rules and procedures

As part of any workplace induction and orientation, it is imperative that all employees know the rules of the organisation. It is the view of this author that students should also know the rules and procedures of the institution, including those relating to the learning experience. Students need to be able quickly to access the rules, which should be written in plain English. Learning these rules should start at orientation and be revisited frequently as part of the students' learning experience.

3. Understanding plagiarism and knowing the penalties

As part of knowing rules and procedures, students should be fully conversant with the concepts of plagiarism and cheating and with the associated penalties. Staff and students must be clear about assessment expectations and consequent rules that assist with ensuring the quality of the assessment task. It is important that students seek clarification and know the expectations. This should be done in writing so that misunderstandings can be reduced.

Penalties for plagiarism range on the spectrum from remedial work to exclusion. However, it is the author's view that the penalties must fit the crime and that, if there is a perceived lack of consistency or transparency in the penalties given, this sends a clear message that certain types of plagiarism are tolerated. Deakin University (2003) has a comprehensive student honour code defining plagiarism

and a list of penalties that include reprimands, a monetary fine, zero marks for the assignment and/or the course, suspension and exclusion. This is the first reported instance that the author has seen where a monetary fine may be given for such an offence. Maybe CQU should consider this class of penalty.

4. Understanding the real world application of plagiarism

As previously mentioned by Arbor and Sector Gomez (2001), the victimless crime of plagiarism seems far removed from a real world application. It is important that students understand the value of courage, honesty and integrity by avoiding such actions. Students believe that taking information from the Internet does not constitute theft, so they need to understand the significance of breaching intellectual property rights from a 'real world perspective'. It has been the author's experience when this application is relayed to most students who have plagiarised that they have a different view of its importance. This could be explored at orientation and throughout the curriculum.

University responsibility

1. Standardised policy, procedures and penalties

It is important that the university maintains consistency and transparency by establishing a clear policy direction and sets of procedures in plain English and that it provides assistance for those students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The continuum of plagiarism ranging from unintentional to intentional requires clear systematic explanation. According to Phillips and Horton (2000), all faculties and schools must have a well thought through plagiarism policy and adhere to the central policy and set of procedures.

As mentioned above, penalties need to fit the crime, with lesser offences given remediation and training in academic conventions, while severe penalties are given for cheating in examinations and for buying or recycling papers. It is important to relay information about plagiarism cases and subsequent penalties to the academic and student communities so that the message of zero tolerance of such acts is promoted. This can be done ethically to protect the privacy rights of students and academics in each case.

Allowing student participation at disciplinary hearings is one method of ensuring that the actions of the university are accountable and known by the student body. Disseminating this information across the student body encourages conformity (Phillips & Horton, 2000). CQU has always had student representation on student affairs committees.

2. Developing a system of record keeping of offences

A central system of record keeping of offences allows those offending students studying across faculties to be known to relevant staff. Phillips and Horton (2000) suggest that, without such a system, the repeat offenders continue to minimise each episode as a situational issue rather than as a series of continuing acts demonstrating a pattern of unethical behaviour.

3. Support for a system of monitoring and detection

The university should support whatever systems of detection and monitoring are required. These systems should be known by the student community, and academics should undertake a systematic monitoring process during each term for each course. This becomes part of the faculties' and the schools' quality assurance

process, whereby it not only monitors but also reports, follows through and disseminates results to both the university and student communities as part of each faculty's teaching and learning plan.

4. Promoting climate of academic integrity

The university should encourage staff members to follow through on detection of plagiarism. If staff know that plagiarism breaches those values of integrity, honesty and courage that underpin the institution, then detection is essential to its core business. A climate of academic integrity and achievement should be promoted where pride in one's individual accomplishment and performance become primary. This should be relayed to the student community. The university needs to promote and reward quality processes related to assessment involving appropriate committees who test items and ensure that they are contemporary and educationally sound. Promoting academic integrity is the responsibility of all members of the university.

Conclusion

Investigations into students' academic integrity is nothing new. Plagiarism concerns, cheating in examinations and failing to cite factual information have been serious concerns to educators for decades. Recent studies have indicated that student dishonesty at universities is widespread (Allen, Fuller & Luckett, 1998; Davis, Grover, Becker & McGregor, 1992), with upwards of 50 per cent (Bowers, 1964; Stannard and Bowers, 1970) to 75 per cent (Baird, 1980) of students indicating an increased level of participation in academic dishonesty (Karlins, Michaels & Podlogar, 1988).

Unfortunately, these figures show no indication of declining in frequency (Haines *et al.*, 1986). The terms "rampant" and "pervasive" (Karlins *et al.*, 1988) have unfortunately become associated with declining levels of academic integrity and increasing complaints of cheating. The time honoured issues of tradition and integrity as elements of academic life no longer exist. So it is important that faculty, students and the institution come to an understanding that plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be dealt with. Plagiarism should be seen as a symptom of an educational problem, rather than overlaid with heavy emotional and moral baggage. It is important that there is consistency and expectations are clearly identified and known by the student body. It is also imperative that staff are a part of the teaching-learning contract and as such are fair and equitable in their dealings with students. Student diversity and difference must be accounted for but not excused as a way to circumvent allegations of misconduct.

One needs to see plagiarism as a multilayered and complex issue that can be dealt with easily if suitable policies and procedures are in place. If the problem recurs, suitable penalties are applied for lapses in judgment, leading to poor decision-making. In an academic environment in which many students feel that cheating is rarely noticed and staff members are reluctant to act upon a particular episode, students seem more predisposed to engage in questionable behaviour. The real dilemma facing academics is how to change the environment and the motivation to cheat. The focus should be on the importance of an ethical approach (honour codes, etc.) to scholarship.

There should be reliable systems for monitoring assessment and detecting plagiarism, which may serve to limit the opportunity, and deter students from attempting, to plagiarise. Early detection of student attempts is required so that they

are detected and dealt with promptly, hopefully preventing recurrence and above all minimising unnecessary pressure on students by anticipating their needs.

As Price (2002) noted

...plagiarism is not stable. What we think of as plagiarism shifts across historical time periods, across cultures, across workplaces, even across academic disciplines. We need to stop treating plagiarism like a pure moral absolute ("Thou shalt not plagiarize") and start explaining it in a way that accounts for these shifting features of context. (p. 88)

The academy should not simply dismiss plagiarism as an artefact of a student's value system or training, but acknowledge that the institution and its staff have a responsibility to establish a responsive learning environment which reduces the unnecessary stress placed on all students in transition from their own pre-existing learning patterns to those used in higher education, as well as the associated pressures of expectations placed upon them by staff members, students' support systems and society. This is the challenge.

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