Academic integrity in higher education – who is responsible?

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Academic integrity is not well understood by first year students who are often unaware of the subtleties of plagiarism and collusion. This paper focuses on the design, delivery and evaluation of an online academic integrity resource for all first year students, using a coordinated, university-wide ‘third generation’ approach. Designed to complement the implementation of text matching software across the university, the online resource uses distinct categories of plagiarism to improve awareness of the need for critical thinking, referencing and writing in university study. The aim of the resource was to develop a common understanding amongst transitioning students in relation to the ethics underpinning academic integrity. With a focus on enabling students to choose their own learning journey, a design team comprised of major stakeholders responsible for ensuring academic integrity within the university collaborated to create a series of modules. An eclectic-mixed methods-pragmatic paradigm methodology was applied to evaluate its design and implementation.

Academic integrity can be considered as an academic ethical code of conduct. This conduct includes finding, using, creating and communicating academic information in a way that is honest, and ethically responsible. For first year university students, however, the definition of academic integrity, and the skills required to work with integrity are often unclear. In a study conducted by Goldingay et al. (2014), first year social work students have a general belief that critical thinking, academic writing and referencing are important skills, however confidence in their ability to perform these skills was rated as low. As Devlin and Gray (2007) point out, achieving academic integrity is a problem for more than just the stereotype of students taking first year subjects; even final year students or those undertaking research are often unaware of the subtleties of plagiarism or collusion. This paper focuses on educating first year university students about academic integrity for tertiary study.

Many first year units of study embed one-off presentations on topics such as ‘finding academic resources’, ‘academic writing’ and ‘citing and referencing’ or refer first year students to library and academic skills orientation programs. There is often an underlying assumption that students can avoid plagiarism after one-time delivery of relevant information, however plagiarism and its causes are more complex than a single presentation can describe, and skill development takes time and practice. As stated by Hammer, Agnello, Kiser and Osaghae (2012), at a time when information is freely available on the internet “the idea of what constitutes originality is blurred.” It could be argued that obvious and common examples of plagiarism are already recognised by first year students, such as submission of another individual’s work, or copying and pasting significant portions of text from one or more sources without acknowledging original authors (Turnitin, 2012). However, international students transitioning to a new nation, institution, and academic culture may not necessarily perceive copying and pasting text as a serious form of plagiarism. Different cultures and learning experiences create different ethical perceptions of academic integrity. As a Turkish physics professor accused of such plagiarism writes: “For those of us whose
mother tongue is not English, using beautiful sentences from other studies on the same subject … is not unusual” (Yilmaz, 2007, p. 658). This highlights that, unless the institution’s ethical principles, academic expectations and all subtleties of plagiarism are repeatedly discussed and well understood, perceptions of academic integrity will vary greatly.

Whilst part of the problem lies in differences in understanding, there are other reasons for unintended academic misconduct by first year university students. Unintentional plagiarism can occur when students do not have adequate skills to successfully express others’ ideas in their own words. Such writing might demonstrate correct use of citations and references, but the text may contain phrases that are too similar to those used by original authors (Turnitin, 2012). The reasons for this are diverse. First year students new to a discipline may feel they have no authority to voice their own interpretations of the information they are learning, or lack the academic vocabulary to do so. Vardi (2012) explains that academic integrity, when taught with emphasis on writing and referencing conventions and the consequences of failing to adhere to these rules, conveys a message to students that they lack authority on the topic. Students may therefore not feel empowered to challenge the opinions presented to them, even to paraphrase an idea. Another reason for inadequate paraphrasing by students may be lack of time to produce good quality work, whether due to poor time management or unreasonable work demands in a number of subjects being undertaken. Social work students surveyed by Goldingay et al. (2014) indicated that time management was critical to success in their first year, and all agreed that self-management (making better choices regarding study) was an underdeveloped skill. Being time-poor may result in a student taking shortcuts; reading without note-taking, writing without planning, pasting sections of original texts into their work and changing some words to make it read slightly differently, all of which can eventuate in varying degrees of plagiarism in written work.

Institutional policies generally demand that academic integrity should be upheld by all students, despite growing recognition that new university students have a variable understanding of academic integrity and often lack the necessary self-management or academic skills to achieve it. Gill, Lombardo and Short (2013) explain that best practice to achieve an institution-wide aim, such as academic integrity, involves a coordinated, multidisciplinary, multidisciplinary approach. Academic integrity or ‘plagiarism and cheating’ policies often focus on action should be taken in cases of academic dishonesty or misconduct, but rarely address how academic integrity will be developed, and who should be responsible. As such, policy alone does not achieve a coordinated approach to ensuring that commencing students can understand and fulfil the academic expectations placed upon them. Nonetheless, policy developers at Monash University recognised the current ad-hoc processes in place to facilitate and support the previous academic misconduct policy (Monash University, 2013). When the new academic integrity policy was under development, engagement with stakeholders was given high priority in order to determine policy revisions required, and encourage a coordinated approach to implementation. Our project began here, upon initial engagement with policy developers, with the idea of adopting a ‘third generation’ approach (Kift 2009, as cited in Gill et al. 2012) to developing an understanding of academic integrity in all commencing students, and the need to identify all stakeholders in this process.

Unless a course of study is completely integrated or run in a very small department, developing an understanding of academic integrity is usually left in the hands of individual academics running each component of the program. This can often mean that teaching staff responsible for classes during the first few weeks of first year become responsible for educating students on academic expectations. This view is expressed by Lofstrom (2011) who posits that the responsibility for training students in research skills lies with teachers,
who need to be able to better understand student conceptions of plagiarism in order to recognise and address common misconceptions. This can be a reasonable solution if the staff have a good understanding of the topic, the issues, and the skills required, and if time (and marks) are dedicated to the idea, but often subject content is prioritised over more generic material, with academic guidance limited to instructions for assignments, directions to read policies, and advice to ‘avoid plagiarism’, rather than identifying and building the skills required to achieve this goal.

It has been suggested that text-matching software can be of some assistance in developing students’ academic integrity in writing (Chaudhuri, 2008; Zimerman, 2012). Such software has recently become popular to assist academic staff in identifying plagiarism. Implementation of such packages places some responsibility for academic integrity upon staff involved in sourcing educational technologies for university-wide use, and developing training to support its implementation. Used carefully, text-matching software can assist educators to detect text matches in submitted work which might indicate plagiarism, however common sense needs to be applied when considering text matches. For example, matches may be identified in appropriately repeated text such as long government department names or report titles. Further, should the submission contain unattributed images, musical scores or computer code, these will often not be identified. Turnitin® is one such piece of software, and can be set up to allow multiple re-submissions of the same assignment (Turnitin, 2013). Students can therefore edit sections of their work which may require a reference where none was inserted, or which may require better paraphrasing. Unfortunately however, such feedback can be misused. For example, matched text may indicate an un-referenced quote which has been matched to a secondary resource located in the software’s repository, which the student might interpret as the original source and include as a citation without considering its credibility. It is therefore important that adequate assistance is available for both academic staff and students on the uses and limitations of this software.

At Monash University, assistance with the use of Turnitin® is available via online resources, formal training and personal advice from teaching and learning advisory teams and from librarians and learning skills advisers in the library. Indeed, these groups are often mentioned in university policies as having an important role in teaching students how to work with integrity (Monash University, 2013; Sydney University, 2012; Victoria University, 2012). To fulfill this role, the library at Monash University target core first year units of study or first year units attracting large student numbers, and collaborate with unit coordinators to create programs developing academic skills required for specific assessment tasks. Via their direct interaction with students in skill development programs or at advice service points, library staff fully understand the complex nature of academic integrity and are familiar with common student misconceptions (Zimerman, 2012). Zimerman’s paper positions the library as being far more holistically involved in understanding and educating students on all aspects of plagiarism, and he advocates that faculty collaboration with the university library is a key factor for success in this endeavour. Whilst collaboratively developed programs can be effective, attendance is usually voluntary and many students choose not to attend. Further, such programs are targeted only to core units or units with high enrolment, leaving smaller or elective first year units without equivalent co-curricular skill development.

To summarise, key stakeholders in academic integrity include academic staff who can give students the necessary information to work with integrity for their assessments, and teaching and learning teams who can provide different approaches to integrating this into the curriculum. Educational software teams can provide text matching and other tools to support

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academic staff, and librarians and learning skills advisers can develop programs and resources to scaffold and teach students academic literacy skills. None of these stakeholders, however, address a primary problem in relation to academic integrity: developing a common understanding in relation to the ethics underpinning academic integrity. Unless this is achieved, new students cannot be certain that they fully comprehend the concept as defined by the university, or meet the university’s academic expectations.

A comprehensive online resource addressing the ethical underpinning of academic integrity, as well as key skills required to achieve integrity in academic work, was the solution to this problem at Monash University. The online resource was designed to be accessible to all commencing students in all faculties. We deemed that the resource should fully define academic integrity, ethics and the practical and cognitive skills required to work with integrity, as well as advise students of the consequences of academic misconduct and direct students to appropriate staff and relevant resources. Our philosophy was that academic integrity should be viewed as a process of learning rather than fear of punishment. The online resource should therefore be able to be accessed as often and frequently as necessary, to allow revision, consolidation and understanding as and when needed.

Having identified a number of departments involved in ensuring the academic integrity policy was implemented, an educational design team was selected to reflect all stakeholders. The team included librarians, learning skills advisers, and e-learning professionals from the Library, educational designers from the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), staff responsible for implementing educational software (Turnitin©) and policy developers. Academic staff and policy developers were not represented on the core design team, but were regularly consulted on the detail and design of individual modules. The design team implemented an ‘eclectic-mixed methods-pragmatic paradigm’ (EMMPP) as an evaluation framework for the project (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). This framework enables designers to be flexible in relation to design, implementation and the formative evaluation of the online learning resource. A flow chart demonstrating this framework is shown (Figure 1).

The design team adopted an active learning and situation-based approach to development of the online learning resource. As such, it was agreed that students would be presented with both information and scenario activities, but would not be graded on the tutorial activities. Immediate detailed explanations would be provided in either red (to signal an incorrect choice) or green (correct). Students would be allowed to select their pathway through the tutorial to allow for prior knowledge, and could move freely back and forward through each learning module, repeating activities as often as necessary until concepts were understood. To remain relevant and inclusive for all students, current students from a range of backgrounds were photographed and their images used to present the various modules in the tutorial.
The design team identified ethics as a key element to help define and rationalise academic integrity and to help align students’ understanding with policy expectations. Practical skills (such as time management) and cognitive skills (like critical thinking) were identified, and viewed as vital to complement a common ethical understanding. These three knowledge areas defined the three core elements underpinning the academic integrity resource, and were developed into major online learning modules. These large modules then formed the cornerstones upon which further learning modules could be developed. A range of small lessons to explain plagiarism were created to identify distinctly different problems leading to plagiarism, always referring back to ethical understanding, practical and/or cognitive skills to solve these problems. ‘The plagiarism spectrum’ (Turnitin, 2013) provided the basis for our categorisation of different types of plagiarism, and terminology from this paper was used with permission. Learning modules explaining plagiarism were specifically designed to appeal to students studying particular disciplines, and helped to demonstrate plagiarism in different formats (for example, plagiarism of computer code by an information technology student). A similar approach was taken to explain collusion, its relationship to plagiarism, and to the three core elements of academic integrity. Two final small modules were created, firstly to direct students to various university services providing further assistance, and secondly to explain the consequences of intentional academic misconduct.

Once developed, two focus groups were consulted to determine the relevance and usefulness of the online learning resource. The student focus group consisted of 18 international and local student volunteers including participants from undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The staff focus group consisted of 24 academic teaching staff from a broad range of faculties across multiple campuses of Monash University. Focus group facilitators from the design team recorded observations of individuals in each focus group working through online learning modules, responses to structured open questions about the resource, and any further open discussion that ensued. Feedback from focus groups was used to modify modules to better address concerns of students and staff alike.

The project team is now undertaking a second phase of evaluation and testing according to the EMMPP framework (Figure 1) to determine its effectiveness. In this phase, a framework for university-wide implementation of the learning resource was discussed and agreed with policy developers. The framework allows flexibility for academic teaching staff on the timing and choice of modules to use in their courses coupled with a quantitative analysis tool to test students understanding if so desired. Final changes to policy documents have been made in order to clarify staff responsibilities and to generate a proactive and educative approach to unintentional academic misconduct. This ensures that two-way communication is established between academic and library staff where further training for a student is deemed necessary. Currently, academic teaching staff coordinating first year subjects are being recruited as volunteers to use the online academic integrity modules in appropriate ways relevant to their unit. Students completing the academics’ selected tutorial modules will be pre- and post-tested on their understanding using the quantitative analysis tool, to investigate how effective different modules are in improving first year students’ understanding of academic integrity.

There are three questions arising from our study to date which we would like to put to our audience at this conference:

1. **Who is responsible for academic integrity at your institution?**
2. **Will an online learning resource be effective in achieving a unified understanding of academic integrity amongst first year students?**
3. **How would you implement a resource like this?**

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References.


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