

Embedding academic integrity at the University of Wollongong

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Abstract This paper provides a preliminary report on a project designed to determine how effectively values associated with academic integrity have been embedded in the learning and teaching environment at UOW. Five key values have been formally identified at UOW: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. These values are based on those espoused by the Centre for Academic Integrity (CAI) at Duke University in North Carolina and are recognised as central to academic honesty. Academic staff at UOW, charged with responsibilities for shaping educational policy and implementing, monitoring and reviewing processes that support the development of academic integrity across the student population, have taken part in the project. Through their responses to surveys and focus group discussions, a broad understanding of academic integrity and the ways in which it may be supported is emerging.

Key Ideas

- A shared understanding of the complexity of the term “academic integrity” is a necessary pre-requisite for developing a framework that rests on ethical principles and that will support a culture of honesty.
- Rather than a punitive approach, our focus must be on a learning environment that encourages critical thinking and that gradually supports the development of the skills this involves.
- Two useful approaches to encouraging academic integrity involve teaching discipline-specific language and acknowledging the importance of written communication, whilst shaping assessment tasks to reduce the likelihood of dishonest behaviour.
- Procedures for managing alleged academic misconduct should clearly discriminate between actions based on ignorance and those stemming from malice.

Discussion Question 1 How can learning experiences that support the development of academic integrity be structured across the courses offered at UOW?

Discussion Question 2 What strategies can be employed by educational institutions to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse student body – is it possible for primary, secondary and tertiary institutions to collaborate in this endeavour?

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Introduction

The current focus on academic integrity combined with a suggested decline in standards with which it is associated is not new as a review of the literature reveals. In fact, in a monologue dealing with the topic, Tricia Bertram Gallant (2008) notes that claims associated with a deterioration in academic integrity in American postsecondary educational institutions have been made on a regular basis for many years. These claims are not reserved for the northern hemisphere and Australian newspapers have carried stories similar to those in the American press highlighting dishonest practice in the academy. That these claims are often publicised through press reports perhaps gives impetus to a general state of alarm about academic standards that ensue, verging on what Bertram Gallant (2008) refers to as "moral panic".

It is within this context that the Academic Integrity Project at UOW was established in 2006. The aim of the project was to develop a framework to support academic honesty and to embed the values of academic integrity in learning, teaching and research at the University. A range of specific objectives was identified, including a review of the Rules for Student Conduct and Discipline. This review led to changes in the Student Misconduct Policy and, with regard to academic misconduct, the revised policy now reflects a move away from what was regarded as a punitive process to one that encourages faculties to take an educative approach to academic integrity.

A number of outcomes related to the original project have been identified:

1. In supporting a culture of academic integrity, UOW became a member of the Centre for Academic Integrity (CAI) based at Duke University, North Carolina. The Centre provides a basis for developing discussion, gathering and disseminating resources and developing pedagogies that promote the values associated with academic integrity. Five key values related to academic integrity at UOW and based on the CAI values were identified: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility (<http://www.academicintegrity.org/>).
2. An Academic Integrity Project Intranet Site was established at UOW (<https://intranet.uow.edu.au/projects/aip/>). This site provides a brief background to the project as well as the details of reference group, with links also provided to resources (CAI), relevant UOW policies and the Student Conduct Rules.
3. A major review of Rules for Student Conduct and Discipline led to changes in procedural aspects of the management of student misconduct investigations. A Student Conduct Rules package was developed that comprised Student Conduct Rules, Procedure for Managing Alleged Academic Misconduct by a Coursework Student and Procedure for Managing Alleged General Misconduct by a Student, effective from 1 January 2008. The revised rules represented a move away from the "catch and punish" approach that had previously applied to one with a focus on providing a supportive learning environment.
4. As part of a separately funded but complementary project, an Academic Integrity Symposium was held at UOW in 2007. A focus of the discussions that took place at the symposium involved ways of preventing plagiarism.

5. A range of UOW policies and practices related to academic integrity were also explored and are of continuing interest to relevant UOW committees. These include a Student Charter, text matching/plagiarism detection systems, Acknowledgement Practice/Plagiarism Policy as well as various activities to promote academic honesty and prevent academic dishonesty through curriculum design, assessment design and teaching practice.

Continuing discussion related to these outcomes and the development of resources aligned with them is important if the University is to maintain its ranking as a premier institution.

Exploring issues of academic integrity across faculties at UOW

In 2009, the University Education Committee (UEC) charged the Student Support for Learning Subcommittee (SSLS) with the responsibility for exploring the implementation by faculties of outcomes of the Academic Integrity Project. Two key questions were defined by a working party drawn from members of SSLS:

1. How have faculties embedded academic integrity outcomes into their courses?
2. How are students being educated about issues of academic integrity?

A two-stage plan was designed by the working party to explore these questions. The first stage directly addressed the two key questions (above) through surveys and focus group interviews with key members of academic staff. The second stage rests on outcomes of the first stage (to be determined), but it is anticipated that an exploration of broader issues related to student and staff experiences of academic honesty and academic misconduct will be pursued.

Stage 1: Responses from Academic Staff

The first stage is currently well underway with online surveys and the majority of focus group interviews already completed. Three groups of staff were contacted from each of the nine faculties and slightly different survey questions were used for each of the groups. Group 1, Chairs of Faculty Education Committees (FECs), assume responsibilities related to shaping and communicating educational policy. Group 2, Chairs of Faculty Investigative Committees (FICs), are responsible for investigating serious matters of academic misconduct. Group 3, Primary Investigation Officers (PIOs), consult with and advise subject co-ordinators who suspect that plagiarism may have taken place and they also investigate matters that are deemed to be of a low or moderate level of severity. Their investigations may lead them to dismiss a case, impose a restricted penalty or refer a case to the FIC where a more severe penalty appears warranted.

Some common questions were included for all members of the three groups. The focus of these questions was on personal understandings of academic integrity, the understandings of other faculty members and the nature of students'

understandings. Other questions were aligned with the particular responsibilities of staff in each of the three groups. Rather than an account of each question and response, a number of preliminary themes have been identified and these will be addressed (below) and opened for discussion.

Academic Integrity – What does it mean?

The definitions of academic integrity provided by responses from the three groups were similar as expected. Having said that differences were also identified. Chairs of FECs, for example, tended to provide broad definitions that looked beyond acknowledgement practice and included notions such as moral and ethical principles underpinning behaviour, respect, compassion and accountability. FIC Chairs mentioned acknowledgement practice, honesty, the maintenance of appropriate academic standards and a limited tolerance for inappropriate behaviours. PIOs referred to similar factors and included ideas associated with professional standards, and the need for students to abide by principles and rules typically associated academic integrity.

Encouraging Critical Thinking

In the focus group interviews with PIOs, there was agreement that it is necessary to encourage the development of skills so that students are clear about appropriate behaviours. Punitive measures, whilst endorsed by many for “intentional” cases of plagiarism or cheating, were viewed as less productive in the long run. Suggestions about how to develop these skills ranged from requiring students who had breached the rules to take specifically designed courses, to ensuring that all students were provided with the foundations necessary for understanding what is involved in academic integrity. Some responses indicated that this could include more than simply learning how to avoid plagiarism but that it might involve the development of critical thinking skills that would enhance the student’s ability to engage with complex content. This could be achieved by ensuring that appropriate resources and learning experiences are provided at different points throughout a course of study.

Language, Communication and Evaluation

Providing a learning environment that equips students with the skills they need to negotiate the demands of their courses is vital. Whilst there are many elements that make up an ideal learning environment, two in particular are worthy of discussion. Ursula McGowan (2009), in a review of a recent book on approaches to academic integrity, notes that an acknowledgement of the importance of written communication, particularly with regard to discipline-specific language, is necessary if we expect students to engage academically. She also mentions the need to ensure that assessment tasks are shaped in ways that will reduce the likelihood of dishonest behaviour.

Although less attention was given by responses from academics at UOW to the former suggestion, mention was made of it. Providing opportunities for students to learn how to convey information through the written word, using the language of their discipline, is recognised as a skill that develops over time. An introductory session at Orientation or in the first week of session will not suffice. Staged support that provides the novice with opportunities for the gradual development of the skills involved is necessary and this requires careful planning across the course of a degree.

Reference to evaluation tasks and the ways in which they can be shaped to reduce the likelihood of academic dishonesty was mentioned by a number of staff in the course of responses to the surveys and also during the focus group interviews. Some good examples of how this can be achieved were discussed. One example involved providing first year students with a limited range of references to be used in the construction of an essay. This meant that those who lacked skills in searching for appropriate material were not disadvantaged or seduced into using online resources that may be less than desirable. Rather, everyone was provided access to reputable sources – their task was to learn how to use them effectively in the production of an extended piece of writing.

Ignorance or Malice: How do we manage the difference?

The responses of PIOs in particular suggested that there are some instances of suspected plagiarism in which the student appears more as a victim of the system because he or she is unaware of the requirements of academic integrity. In these cases, students benefit from an educative approach, although exactly what the elements of that approach should be is open for discussion. On the other hand, there are occasions where the misconduct is quite deliberate but the situation may not be as clear-cut as one would expect. Some students appear driven to plagiarism because of the demands placed on them by their work, personal lives and study. Are they in a different category to students whose life experiences are less demanding but who plagiarise deliberately for other reasons? An argument can be made that each case must be judged on its merits but as an institution we value consistency and parity. Many staff mentioned the provision of guidelines for decision makers and of opportunities through networking, training and other resources that would help them to make fair decisions.

Stage 2: Taking a Broad Approach

The second stage of this project will be shaped to a large degree by an analysis of the information gathered through the surveys and interviews conducted in Stage One. Exploring the broader issues is important and information gathered through the literature as well as through discussions generated in response to papers such as this will contribute to the development of an informed approach. Including feedback from students, librarians and those involved in learning development, would also provide information that can be used to shape a productive learning environment.

Conclusion

This paper outlines a project that is currently underway to explore the experiences and understandings of academics with specific responsibilities for supporting the ideals of academic integrity. The information they have provided, both through surveys and in open discussions as part of a series of focus group interviews, is greatly appreciated. It will be interesting to see how the next stage unfolds!

References

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