Taking action on academic integrity at one Australian university

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Abstract Despite all the work put into writing policies to reduce academic misconduct, all the writing of guidelines for how to acknowledge, and all the declarations of how academic integrity is valued, few Australian universities could say with confidence that they have a holistic, integrated approach to dealing with academic misconduct and academic integrity. One Australian university, for example, has a well-written policy which clearly outlines lecturer responsibilities, yet that university has not monitored whether staff are aware of these responsibilities and if they are implementing them. Given the heavy workload of lecturers, why would lecturers seek out policy and/or bother to carefully read it when it seems peripheral to their research and teaching? Engaging lecturers in the topic of academic integrity requires more than a good policy and a check list. Through a distributed leadership initiative, an action research project in one faculty of this university was set up to engage lecturers in taking on their responsibilities in ways that are appropriate for their practice. In this paper I review the actions taken by the lecturers and reflect on the progress of the project.

Key Ideas

- Academic integrity can enable the discrimination between academic dishonesty and errors of academic convention
- La Trobe University has a well-written policy, but not all lecturers are aware of their responsibilities, eg Faculty of Education
- An integrated approach assures implementation of academic integrity processes
- Policy, practice, resources, assessment, penalty, monitoring, reviewing are aligned
- Action research is a project tool for taking action
- An action research project has been set up in the Faculty of Education
- Reflection reveals what worked and what didn't work.

Discussion Question 1 With regard to academic integrity, at your institution what is done to ensure:

- students and staff are aware of their responsibilities?
- resources available for staff and students are appropriate and effective?
- decisions about suspected breaches of academic integrity are consistent?

What does it take to implement academic integrity in a university? A number of universities might make claim to academic integrity. It sounds good, with a statement of values more appealing than punitive approaches, and the opportunity for education more reasonable than the frightening edicts which tell students to 'be aware of plagiarism' and to 'never do it'. In North America, an academic integrity approach can emphasise a moral position, and in some universities this involves student honour codes (McCabe & Pavela, 2005). In Australia, the practice is more likely to be limited to rhetoric which focuses on 'values'. La Trobe University, in Australia, has a statement of values in its policy and emphasises honesty in its academic integrity definition (www.latrobe.edu.au/learning/integrity).

The University can make claim to supporting academic integrity in a number of ways. It has an academic integrity site for students, which links to resources about how to avoid plagiarism, how to reference, and how to use references for evidence. It has resources for staff, and it advises using Turnitin 'to determine plagiarism and to teach students how to properly acknowledge quotations' (www.latrobe.edu.au/turnitin). The University also has a policy which defines academic misconduct, details staff and student responsibilities and acknowledges the need for education; for example,

> students will be advised on effective methods of academic writing, particularly the requirements in quoting, summarising, and paraphrasing the sources they use… This will form part of first-year training of students in how to analyse issues, think critically, synthesise ideas, use sources, and incorporate evidence into their written assignments. (The Academic Misconduct Policy, 2007)

So why not end the story here? From a distance, we could imagine a neat world of resources, tools and policy taking care of the problem of student academic misconduct, but in reality there is little impetus to integrate policy and practice. Staff have no reason to be aware of their responsibilities as identified in the Academic Misconduct policy, and processes to implement the University's policy are limited.

An integrated approach would assure implementation of academic integrity processes, so that policy, practices, resources, assessment, penalty, monitoring and reviewing are aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2007; East, 2009; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). La Trobe University might be on the road to implementing an integrated approach to academic integrity, but there is a way to go. In workshops with staff, I am yet to see anyone raise a hand to show that they are aware of their responsibilities as listed in the La Trobe University Academic Misconduct policy. There is no impetus for staff to align their practices, and how they assess and penalise with the policy. The 'Plagiarism Road Map', developed in 2005 by the U.K. based Plagiarism Advisory Service, shows that, in addition to a good policy, a university also needs ways to actually implement policy, and then review and evaluate its effectiveness. The Road Map has a number of questions about practices which would indicate whether or not policy is likely to be implemented, for example:

> Is there a named person responsible for enhancing and improving the institution's response to plagiarism? (p. 12)

> Are the mechanisms chosen for conveying information to staff the most likely to be effective? (p. 13)
> Are the procedures in place designed to ensure criteria are applied consistently across the institution? (p. 18)
>
> Is a named person responsible for ensuring that staff have the appropriate knowledge and skills? (p. 26)

Responding in the affirmative to these questions would indicate top down support for implementation of academic integrity. A whole of university approach would be demonstrated through support at a number of levels.

In the rest of this paper I describe an action research project, which rather than being a top down approach is about the people working at the coal face taking action at the level of practice. The project aimed to engage lecturers with the issue of academic integrity and also with their responsibilities as identified in the University's Academic Misconduct policy.

In 2009, I was awarded a Distributive Leadership Project to integrate academic integrity into the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University. Distributive leadership is promoted as a way that the enactment of leadership can take place without reliance on hierarchical position, so that a person with expertise but not in a formal leadership role can interact in the organisation and even bring about organisational change (Harris, 2009). The interaction happens at the level of practice where people share knowledge and review their practices.

I chose an action research approach to implement my distributed leadership project, because it provided a tool for people to share and review practices and to decide on appropriate actions, and not being a member of the Faculty, I did not have insider knowledge of practices. Action research involves a cycle/s of identifying a problem, finding out what is happening or what is not happening, deciding how to improve the situation, implementing an action and then reviewing that action. I invited Faculty to join the Academic Integrity Group, and in March, 2009 we had our first meeting.

Despite my enthusiasm and the University's support, the Academic Integrity Group meetings didn't always go to plan, and I spent much time reflecting on what to do next. I was pleased that from the outset there was Faculty interest and support for the project. Those who came to the first meeting talked about a range of concerns they had in dealing with student plagiarism, and then they set their outcomes for the project. Actually achieving those outcomes was another matter, and subsequent meetings came close to being talkfests. Even agreeing on what was the Faculty's preferred referencing style was frustrating: the homepage directed students to use Harvard but most staff claimed APA as the Faculty's style. In one meeting, my call for consistency led one person to respond "Consistency? What about creativity?" At that time, I was often found, head in hands, sighing frequently and muttering anxiously about my shortcomings and ineffectual management of the project. After much reflecting, I realised that I needed to provide evidence of inconsistent practices and the impact of these on students, and then if the group members were to take action it needed to be in small defined tasks. I showed clips of students talking about their concerns and confusions about plagiarism, and got people to compare the information they put in their subject guides about plagiarism. The group consensus was that the information not only needed to be the same, it should be educational and should

move away from the current punitive, unfriendly texts. Currently, the group is developing a common statement about academic integrity for students and a recommendation for how Turnitin will be used. An important breakthrough in the last meeting was the realisation that students are being assessed on skills - such as acknowledgment, use of sources for evidence and synthesis of ideas - which are not being taught. With this awareness there is the possibility of action to bring change in practices.

In setting up the Academic Integrity Group I had assumed that when people realised that they were not complying with policy they would see the need to change. In an early meeting I showed a checklist of staff responsibilities (see Appendix) which received virtually no interest. No one was shocked that they were not complying with the policy; no one was interested. I have since realised that people can be shown policy and they can know that it exists, but unless they really feel the need for direction they will not see a value in engaging with policy, and they will choose to ignore policy guidelines. In the Academic Integrity Group, only when people realised the impact of their (unfair assessment) practices did they see the need for any action to change these practices, and only then were they open to looking at policy direction. I conclude from this that the nexus between policy and practice will be unnoticed unless people feel the need to be aware of their practice and are open to change and direction. Perhaps only then will policy have meaning.

References

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Appendix

La Trobe University

Language and Academic Skills

A guide to implementing the Academic Misconduct Policy in a Subject: Checklist

The students in this unit	**Yes**	**No**	**Action to be taken**
Are aware of the Academic Misconduct Policy			
Have been given access to the approved definition of plagiarism			
Have been given access to resources about academic integrity and how to avoid plagiarism			
Know that the university will use tools to detect plagiarism			
Understand the use of any electronic tools (for example Turnitin) in the ascertaining of plagiarism			
Have been given clear information that the university will penalise plagiarism			
Understand the conventions of attributing sources			
Have the appropriate referencing guideline			
Are aware of the expected academic writing standards			
Will be given handouts in which any references follow the standards of the recommended referencing style			
Have been presented with clear assessment requirements			
Have workloads commensurate with subject credit point values			
Have been set major assessment tasks, essay topics and examinations which differ from those of previous years			
Have received information about where they can access learning advice (Resources and Language and Academic Skills units can be found at the Learning website http://www.latrobe.edu.au/learning/)			