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Abstract

As academic integrity is fundamental to assessment practices, it is critical that it is dealt with consistently by staff and taught to students. How a university defines academic integrity in its policy will affect the way it is taught and embedded in the curriculum. While Australian universities all have policy, teaching and learning practices, decision making and review processes relating to academic integrity, these aspects do not always align in a way that reflects a shared understanding of standards of academic integrity, either at intra or inter-university levels. This paper reports on the methodological journey undertaken by researchers in six universities in analysing online academic integrity policies at 39 Australian universities, and some preliminary findings from this analysis. Our study has found that while a significant proportion of academic integrity policies have a punitive element in their approach, a similarly significant proportion of universities do provide an educative approach and/or attempt to frame their policies with a broad commitment to academic integrity. We have also found that the majority of academic integrity policies fail to make a clear statement of responsibility of the University for academic integrity. These findings have implications for Australian universities' efforts to create a shared understanding and commitment to academic integrity standards. This is the first stage of an ALTC funded project, Academic integrity standards: Aligning policy and practice in Australian universities set to conclude in June 2012. This project seeks to develop a shared understanding across the Australian higher education sector of academic integrity standards with the aim of improving the alignment of academic integrity policies and their implementation.

Keywords

academic integrity, policy analysis, academic integrity standards

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Academic Integrity Standards: A Preliminary Analysis of the Academic Integrity Policies at Australian Universities

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Abstract

As academic integrity is fundamental to assessment practices, it is critical that it is dealt with consistently by staff and taught to students. How a university defines academic integrity in its policy will affect the way it is taught and embedded in the curriculum. While Australian universities all have policy, teaching and learning practices, decision making and review processes relating to academic integrity, these aspects do not always align in a way that reflects a shared understanding of standards of academic

integrity, either at intra or inter-university levels. This paper reports on the methodological journey undertaken by researchers in six universities in analysing online academic integrity policies at 39 Australian universities, and some preliminary findings from this analysis. Our study has found that while a significant proportion of academic integrity policies have a punitive element in their approach, a similarly significant proportion of universities do provide an educative approach and/or attempt to frame their policies with a broad commitment to academic integrity. We have also found that the majority of academic integrity policies fail to make a clear statement of responsibility of the University for academic integrity. These findings have implications for Australian universities' efforts to create a shared understanding and commitment to academic integrity standards. This is the first stage of an ALTC funded project, Academic integrity standards: Aligning policy and practice in Australian universities set to conclude in June 2012. This project seeks to develop a shared understanding across the Australian higher education sector of academic integrity standards with the aim of improving the alignment of academic integrity policies and their implementation.

Key words: academic integrity, policy analysis, academic integrity standards.

1. Introduction

A study of the academic integrity policies from Australian universities reveals much about the range of understandings of and commitment to academic integrity in the Australian higher education sector. The complexity and importance of academic integrity has become a widely discussed and researched topic in Australasia (Bretag & Mahmud, 2009; East, 2009; Green, Williams & van Kessel, 2006; McGowan, 2008), North America (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Howard & Robillard, 2008; McCabe, 2005) and Europe (Carroll, 2002; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). Academic integrity breaches are most often associated with student plagiarism. Grigg (2010) conducted a comprehensive review of plagiarism policies at the 39 Australian universities and found that even within this one aspect of academic integrity, there is wide variation across the sector. However, academic dishonesty may also include cheating in exams or assignments, collusion, theft of other students' work, paying a third party for assignments, downloading whole or part of assignments from the Internet, falsification of data, misrepresentation of records, fraudulent publishing practices or any other action that undermines the integrity of scholarship and research.

In this research project, although the focus is on student breaches of academic integrity, we use the broad definition of academic integrity as follows:

Academic integrity is about mastering the art of scholarship. Scholarship involves researching, understanding and building upon the work of others and requires that you give credit where it is due and acknowledge the contributions of others to your own intellectual efforts. At its core, academic integrity requires honesty. This involves being responsible for ethical scholarship and for knowing what academic dishonesty is and how to avoid it. (University of Tasmania, 2010)

Academic integrity policy documents should ideally enshrine core principles such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Center for Academic Integrity, 2010). We interpret these principles to be standards of academic integrity and maintain that they need to be embedded in the curriculum implicitly as learning outcomes, or explicitly as assessment marking criteria (e.g. students' own work, independent research, acknowledgement of sources). While the principles need to be upheld in policy, they also need to be enabled in practice via teaching and learning activities and formative feedback on the success or otherwise of student's academic writing, as well as administrative processes that respond to breaches of academic integrity. The focus of this process can vary depending on the contextual interpretation of the procedures relating to the policy at a particular university, as either educative or punitive. Some research shows that a positive, encouraging and educative policy is likely to persuade

adoption of academic integrity in students more than punitive and threatening practices (Carroll, 2002; Bertram Gallant, 2008).

Aligning policy, practice and process is important for teaching and learning, for a university's reputation and the value of its research outputs. Students can be concerned about inconsistent standards, and they can fear arbitrary or even unjustifiable punishment for errors (see Breen & Maasen, 2005). Teaching staff can also be concerned and even cynical when decisions about breaches of academic integrity are not appropriately and consistently administered (Lim & Coalter, 2006).

Our ALTC project will (1) investigate the range of Australian universities' academic integrity policies and practices, (2) identify examples of good practice in responding to breaches of academic integrity as well as instances where inconsistencies between policy and practice might usefully be addressed, (3) develop exemplars of good practice that can be adapted across a range of learning, teaching and policy contexts, and (4) provide teaching and learning resources to enable universities to foster a culture of academic integrity that will both pre-empt breaches, and in the case of misconduct, ensure consistent and clear responses.

This paper is aligned with the Australian Quality Forum 2011 theme of 'Quality' with the sub theme 'Defining and achieving standards'. The paper provides detail of the first stage (policy coding and analysis) of the project, and includes some preliminary findings which have implications for Australian universities' understandings of and commitment to academic integrity standards.

2.0 Research Methodology

The first task in our 18 month project has included analysing publicly available online academic integrity policies at each of the 39 Australian universities. We first had to identify and locate the appropriate policy at each of the universities (not a simple task when many universities often have multiple, related, overlapping but not always linked or updated policies), and do a preliminary coding based on the literature, with particular attention to Grigg's 2010 doctoral work on Australian universities' plagiarism policies, and our own experience.

Grigg (2010) found that information relating to student plagiarism could be located across a vast range of policy documents. For the purpose of this project we applied a simple rule to analysis: We located what we determined to be the *main* document relating to academic integrity, and then only looked further for relevant additional documents if embedded links to them were provided in the original policy. Unlike Grigg we did not explore every document that potentially included information relating to academic integrity. In addition to being constrained by such pragmatic issues of time and resources, the rationale for this decision was that other stakeholders (in particular, students) would be unlikely to seek out related documents that were difficult to find or access.

As a team we were each allocated a specified number of academic integrity policies to code, with at least two coders responsible for every policy. We then teleconferenced issues or points of dispute, revisited our allocated policies to check codes, and then the Project Leader and Project Manager collated and further refined all responses into one Excel spreadsheet. A total of 20 preliminary categories were used in the analysis that included, for example, the purpose of the policy, approach or 'spirit' of the policy, key terms, statement of the responsibility of key stakeholders, identification of what constitutes a breach, penalties for a breach, recording of breach data and confidentiality of any records.

In the next stage of the analysis, the team identified 12 academic integrity policies that could be potential exemplars. It was noted that while some policies did have a number of positive elements such as a strong overarching statement/purpose, clear and consistent message and a focus on education, they were not necessarily included in the shortlist. The positive elements of policies not shortlisted were noted in the analysis table for the 39 policies.

As a consequence of team discussion and further review, two new elements were included for analysis: (1) consideration of context, mitigating circumstances and factors integral to the breach; and (2) ‘enabling implementation’ i.e. procedures, resources, modules, training, seminars, and professional development to facilitate staff and student awareness and understanding of policy. For each potential exemplar policy, a summary of the policy, its strengths and weaknesses and a rating on a five point scale was also provided by two coders for each policy, and then further checked by the Project Leader and Project Manager, with the result that five exemplars were identified. These five exemplars will provide the basis for the practical resources that will be developed as one of the major outcomes of the ALTC project.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Our study found that although 20 of the 39 policies on academic integrity (51%) had ‘misconduct’ and the same percentage had ‘plagiarism’ as one of the key terms, a large minority (16/39 or 41%) of the policies had ‘academic integrity’ as a key term. These findings concur with Grigg who found that the most commonly used term for universities’ plagiarism policies was ‘misconduct’ (Grigg 2010, p. 54). However, it is apparent that an ideological shift is gradually taking place. Many universities are beginning to focus less on the negative, punitive side of the issue, and are starting to place more emphasis on instilling positive scholarly values in students (see for example, Twomey, White & Sagendorf, 2009). It might be argued that when discussing plagiarism it is inevitable that the focus will be on ‘misconduct’ because plagiarism is generally perceived to be a breach of student academic conduct guidelines. By simply reframing the policy so that it focuses on what is *right*, rather than what is *wrong*, the spirit of the policy can take a dramatically different and more positive direction. As Davis, Drinan and Bertram Gallant (2009) convincingly argue, this reframing, as part of the “institutionalisation of integrity” has the potential to alter levels of cheating and other academic misconduct.

To analyse the approach of academic integrity policies, our study categorised the integrity policies according to the approach or ‘spirit’ of the policy: whether to punish, educate, minimise risk, or develop integrity. As Table 1 illustrates, 41% of the AI policies were framed by a commitment to the positive value of integrity and/or education. Alternatively 21% of the AI policies had an obvious punitive approach.

Table 1: Approach of Academic Integrity Policy

Approach	N=39	%
Integrity	15	38
Mixed (Punitive & Educative)	11	28
Punitive	8	21
Risk management	4	10
Mixed (Integrity & Educative)	1	3
Total	39	100

Interesting to the research team was the finding that 28% of policies had a mix of both educative *and* punitive elements. We were fascinated to read policies that may have begun by talking about the need to educate students about appropriate acknowledgement practices, for example, but then proceeded to take a very punitive approach when students had breached those guidelines. Similarly, some policies had stern and apparently punitive titles, but when read in their entirety, clearly provided a strong educational framework with many opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes. Such mixed messages have important ramifications for the way that academic integrity is perceived by students and staff, and the way that breaches are dealt with by teachers, administrators and academic integrity decision-makers. We were also interested to note that 10% of policies were primarily focussed on risk management (that is,

safeguarding the university’s reputation). We argue that this position is unlikely to result in fewer academic integrity breaches, and in fact has the potential to drive the issue underground and therefore remove the possibility of developing academic integrity through pre-emptive teaching and learning strategies.

We also categorised the policies according to which academic integrity stakeholders were identified as being responsible (see Table 2).

Table 2: Responsibility Statement in Academic Integrity Policy

Stakeholder group	N=39	%
Staff and students	14	36
University, staff and students	14	36
Students	8	21
Staff	2	5
Everyone*	1	3
Total	39	100

*includes university, staff and students and any person, either inside or outside the university

We found that students were mentioned in 95% of policies, while staff were mentioned in 80% of the policies. The institution of the university was identified as being responsible for academic integrity in only 39% of all policies. In 21% of policies only student responsibilities were detailed, with no mention made of the complementary staff responsibilities. When Australian academic integrity policies make students the major (and sometimes the only) stakeholders in upholding academic integrity, there is the potential for other stakeholders such as teaching, administrative and senior management staff not to take responsibility for creating and upholding a culture of integrity on campus.

Bertram Gallant (2008, p. 11) maintains that academic integrity needs to be viewed “beyond student conduct and character to the teaching and learning environment”. Similarly, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Educational Integrity (2010) uses the term ‘educational integrity’ in an attempt to encapsulate a “multidimensional commitment to the key values of honesty, trust, equity, respect and responsibility, and the translation of these values into action by all those in the educational enterprise, from students to parents, instructors and administrators” (APFEL, 2010).

Research by Hall (2006) and Yeo and Chien (2005) suggests that penalties for academic integrity breaches are not consistent across Australian universities. However, many university policies fail to include even basic information relating to types of breaches and their associated outcomes/penalties. Grigg found that even in policies specifically dealing with plagiarism, only 82% had a definition of plagiarism in their policy document (Grigg 2010, p. 61).

In our study, only 44% of the policies provided detail relating to the severity of academic integrity breaches by classifying them, for example, as major/minor, or according to levels or frequency. The majority of policies (56%) did not provide this distinction, putting all academic integrity breaches, most of which were not defined adequately, into one category. Furthermore, in 18% of policies, the outcome or ‘penalty’ for a breach of the policy was not stated at all.

If universities’ policies do not clearly define the various types of academic integrity breach and their associated outcomes/penalties, it is not surprising that both staff and students are often confused about the academic integrity requirements at their universities. Our preliminary analysis concurs with previous research by showing that there is inconsistency in the way that Australian universities present information about academic integrity and how they say they will respond to breaches.

4.0 Conclusion

This paper has provided a glimpse of the preliminary findings from our ALTC project, *Academic integrity standards: Aligning policy and practice in Australian universities*. Our analysis of academic integrity policies from 39 Australian universities indicates that while there has been a move away from a negative and punitive approach to a positive focus on integrity, more needs to be done, particularly in relation to policies with mixed messages. Our preliminary findings also point to the need for academic integrity policies to clearly indicate responsibilities for all academic integrity stakeholders, from an institutional perspective and beginning at the highest level (senior management), to teaching and professional staff and students. We maintain that academic integrity is not solely a student issue or responsibility. Finally, our preliminary analysis has concurred with previous research which has suggested that there is inconsistency in the way that academic integrity is both represented and responded to in university policy. The examples of good practice which are currently being identified will provide the basis for policy exemplars which will have the potential to influence future iterations of academic integrity policies in Australian higher education. It may be the case that not any one policy is an exemplar in its own right, and that a final exemplar is likely to be a combination of exemplary elements from a number of academic integrity policies.

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