

Implementing plagiarism policy in the internationalised university

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Abstract: This paper reports on the findings from interviews with 14 academic staff members from 10 Australian universities regarding the implementation of student plagiarism policies, particularly in relation to international English as a Second Language (ESL) students, within the context of internationalisation. Emerging from the data were two sets of factors, institutional and personal, which need to be considered for the development of effective plagiarism policy. In this paper, institutional factors will be discussed. These included: the importance of separating academic issues from financial considerations; the need to provide clear definitions and explicit procedural guidelines; the requirement that academic staff are involved during the Appeals process; the responsibility to provide adequate training, staff development and support to staff; and the need to recognise workload and stress issues for staff involved in pursuing cases of plagiarism. Respondents unanimously agreed that international ESL students are more likely to be accused (although not necessarily penalised for) plagiarism.

Keywords: academic integrity, plagiarism, international students, commercialisation, internationalisation

Research context: Internationalisation of Australian Higher Education

The term “internationalisation” is both contextual and contested. However, writers generally agree that it is the combined effect of a range of international activities relating to students, staff, institutions and curricular (see Back and Davis cited in de Wit 1995 p. 121). It is a process that ideally infuses all aspects of higher education, with the aim of “fostering global understanding” (Francis 1993, cited in Savage 2001, p. 1).

In practical terms, “internationalisation” in Australia has been a direct result of decreased federal funding on education in the tertiary sector. Matthews (2002) claims that the recruitment of fee-paying students “has generated far more investment, interest, and enthusiasm than policy appeals for associated structural, curricular, and pedagogical change”. In his analysis of the context of Australian higher education, Marginson (2003) is also sceptical of any rationale for policy changes in the higher education sector beyond a “faith in markets and the business model”. Other writers agree that the focus on students as a means of financial income has provided the framework for the internationalisation of higher education in Australia (Alexander & Rizvi 1993; Dobson 1998; Stark 2000; Feast & Bretag 2005). Despite rhetoric alluding to the teaching and learning environment, it could be argued that generally the institutional focus has been on recruiting students for the fees they will provide (more than \$3 billion worth in 2001 according to Matthews [2002]), rather than for the potential two-way educational exchange.

Literature review: Perspectives of plagiarism

A number of researchers claim that many instances of “plagiarism” in student academic writing is the result of poor academic literacy, particularly for students struggling in a second language (Green, Williams & Van Kessel 2003; Counsell 2003; Raj & Jayathurai 2003). Other researchers argue that plagiarism occurs when students, regardless of linguistic background, lack the academic skills necessary to synthesise a range of texts into a coherent argument. Most educators agree that plagiarism can be significantly reduced if students receive adequate training in academic literacies (Chanock 2003; Bell and Cumming-Thom 2003; Clerehan and Johnson 2003).

There is a generally held perception in Australian higher education that Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) students do not understand plagiarism because the concept does not exist in their culture (Ballard & Clanchy 1997; Leask 2004; Singh 2003). However, Bloch (2001) is sceptical of commonly held stereotypes about Chinese learners of CHC background. Research by Bloch and Chi (1995), and Li and Xiong (1996) indicates that plagiarism is as repugnant in China as in the West, especially in academic research (cited in Bloch 2001, p. 215). Belcher and Hirvela (2001) conclude that there is “contradictory evidence about the influence of culture that makes any definitive statement about ESL students’ attitudes to plagiarism rather difficult to defend”. Another perspective is that some people use the recognition of “cultural differences”, when discussing plagiarism, to denigrate students’ learning backgrounds or even to be discriminating or racist (Bradley 2003; Leask 2004).

Plagiarism is most often viewed as an issue of academic integrity. Deller-Evans, Evans and Gannaway (2003) refer to plagiarism as a “fraudulent educational practice” (p. 105) and Kennedy and Hinton (2003) state that it is a “basic concept of academic honesty” (p. 138). Pecorari’s (2001) plagiarism policy survey of 140 universities (with 54 responses) from USA, UK and Australia found that nearly all of the policies examined assumed a universal view of plagiarism as an academic crime. This “crime” has become “scandal” with the media at the forefront in reporting of plagiarism cases in recent years (Buckell 2002; Illing 2003; Karvelas 2003). In 2003, the subject of numerous media reports was a scandal at an Australian university where a contract lecturer “blew the whistle” when senior colleagues overturned his “fail and resubmit” penalty to a group of offshore graduate students who had plagiarised significant portions of an assignment (Giglio 2003; Sinclair 2003). The Nine Network reported the story on the *Sunday* program (3 August 2003), contextualising the issue within the corporatisation/marketisation of Australian higher education.

Some researchers are beginning to focus on issues of university governance in universities increasingly characterised by managerialism. Pyvis (2002) highlighted a case at Curtin University where the media reported that an international student had graduated despite the fact that she had failed a course (as a penalty for plagiarism). The Director of Teaching and Learning had over-ruled the academics’ decision, ostensibly because of the fee-paying status of the student. How to manage plagiarism is the subject of a

significant body of literature. Devlin (2003) makes nine recommendations to prevent plagiarism relating to language, academic preparation, assessment, training, information, support and administration. Carroll (2003, p. 19) provides a useful framework for determining penalties for plagiarism, with four criteria, given in descending order of priority: extent of the plagiarism, the student's year level, the student's knowledge of the institution's academic conventions and regulations, and the rules of the specific discipline. Researchers have provided practical recommendations at the institutional level, and strategies at the individual teacher level to deal with plagiarism, and many of these suggestions overlap. However, there are many obstacles to managing plagiarism. Carroll (2003, p. 16) has provided a list of commonly cited reasons for not pursuing plagiarism formally:

the time it takes to pursue a case; fear of looking bad compared to a colleague; feeling it isn't fair to punish if students haven't been taught the skills; lack of confidence that senior management will support them; the pressure of all the other tasks they must take on as teachers/lecturers; [and] not wanting the often negative feelings which cases generate to impact on their relationships with students.

Devlin (2003) has also reported on the perceived obstacles to changing plagiarism management, including a concern that following through with cases of repeated plagiarism that may lead to student expulsion might damage the international reputation of the faculty or university and a further concern that such damage to reputation may result in reduced international enrolments.

Method

This research project explored the issue of plagiarism in Australian higher education, in the context of internationalisation and particularly in relation to international ESL students. The research used semi-structured interviews of between 40-60 minutes with 14 academics from 10 universities representing all Australian states, plus the Australian Capital Territory (please see the Appendix for the list of questions which guided the interviews). The participants included an equal number of men and women, six lecturers, four support staff (three learning advisers and one instructional designer) and four Deans. Staff were approached because of their expressed interest in plagiarism issues and their experience with international students. All interviews were taped, transcribed and then imported into a central database using the qualitative data analysis software program Nud*ist (N6). Interviews were then coded into themes and sub-categories in an attempt to draw out the major issues. Throughout this paper, interviewees are referred to by an abbreviated number. For example, Interviewee 1 is referred to as Int01, Interviewee 2 is Int02 and so on.

Findings

The findings are discussed in full in my Doctor of Education research portfolio (Bretag 2005 unpub). For reasons of brevity, the key findings as they relate to the literature review are summarised in the table below.

Table 1. Summary of findings

Literature review	Respondents' views
Plagiarism as an ESL issue (Counsell 2003; Raj & Jayathurai 2003; Green et al 2003)	All respondents agreed that international ESL students generally do not have adequate English for tertiary level study, and that this potentially impacts on issues of plagiarism.
Plagiarism as an issue of academic skills (Chanock 2003; Bell & Cumming-Thom 2003; Clerhan & Johnson 2003)	All respondents agreed that inadvertent plagiarism is an issue of academic skills, although Int05, who had taught a foundation course covering these skills, still found that students plagiarised.
Plagiarism as a cultural construct (Ballard & Clanchy 1997; Leask 2004; Singh 2003)	This topic was raised by every respondent, with 13/14 interviewees stating that different cultural backgrounds played a role in issues of plagiarism. Int03 stated that this idea was “patronising” to international students.
Accusations of plagiarism as a form of racism (Bradley 2003; Carroll 2003; Leask 2004)	This issue was raised by two respondents: Int06 and Int14. It was not a common theme throughout the interviews.
Plagiarism as an issue of academic integrity (Deller-Evans et al 2003; Kennedy & Hinton 2003; Pecorari 2001)	The issue of academic integrity was raised by 50% of the respondents (Int02, 06, 08, 09, 11, 12 & 13). These same respondents, plus Int01 also talked about “cheating”.
Plagiarism as media scandal (Buckell 2002; Illing 2003; Karvelas 2003; <i>Sunday</i> program 2003)	Only three respondents discussed the role of the media (Int 02, 09 & 11). Despite the fact that the first 11 interviews took place at around the same time as a publicly debated university controversy, this did not emerge as a central concern.
Plagiarism as an issue of governance (Pyvis 2002; Senate Committee Enquiry 2001)	50% of respondents were critical of university processes, stating that the process of dealing with plagiarism broke down at the Appeals level (Int 03, 06, 09, 10, 11, 12, 14). Int11 spoke of senior managers intimating that he should “turn a blind eye” to plagiarism, particularly by fee-paying students.
Responses to plagiarism (preventative & punitive) (Carroll 2003; Devlin 2003)	13/14 respondents agreed that both local and international students should be treated in the same way for inadvertent plagiarism (education), and deliberate plagiarism (serious penalties). Only Int06 suggested that the issue was especially complex for international students and may require specialist investigation.
Obstacles to managing plagiarism (time and effort; lack of support; emotional work). (Carroll 2003; Devlin 2003)	10/14 respondents agreed that workload was an impediment to pursuing plagiarism; 8/14 stated that they did not have enough support from their institution (only Int07 stated that she felt

	supported); 7/14 respondents discussed institutional pressures to pass fee-paying students (every respondent mentioned the issue of money or fees in the course of the interview, despite there being no direct question about this topic); and all of the respondents who had pursued plagiarism (8/14) discussed stress-related issues.
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Discussion: Institutional issues for developing effective plagiarism policy

The interviews used as the basis for this research explored the implementation of plagiarism policies in Australian universities in the current context of internationalisation. The ultimate aim of the research was to develop guidelines for policy that is culturally sensitive to the needs of international students, but firm, fair and transparent so that Australian academic standards are not undermined. While the issues for the development of such a policy can be divided into two aspects, institutional and personal, the constraints of space permit discussion of only the first aspect. The following discussion and recommendations therefore draw on the last three categories tabled above (plagiarism as an issue of governance, responses to plagiarism, and obstacles to managing plagiarism).

1. Separation of academic issues from financial considerations

One theme that clearly emerged from the data was the context of commercialisation in higher education and how this has a direct impact on the ability and/or willingness of institutions to implement plagiarism policies. Every respondent stated that international ESL students are more likely to be accused of plagiarism, but those respondents with experience in pursuing suspected cases of plagiarism (even the most blatant academic misconduct) stated that the fee-paying status of the student directly affected the outcome of the process, particularly at the appeals level. This outcome is perhaps not surprising, given the argument presented by De Vita and Case (2003) that inherent to the increased commercialisation of education is a new paradigm of students as customers of education.

The findings in this research demonstrated that lower English language proficiency and plagiarism are inextricably connected. When Australian universities accept students with less than adequate English to complete tertiary study, they are opening the door to academic practices that also fall short of the appropriate standard. If students are not provided with the necessary support to improve their linguistic and academic literacy, staff may feel compelled to take the pragmatic approach advocated by Int01, and simply turn a blind eye to falling standards and even academic misconduct.

2. Clear definitions and explicit procedural guidelines

Interviewees spent considerable time attempting to distinguish between deliberate and unintentional plagiarism. Clearly, as Carroll (2003, p. 12) states, “definitions matter and agreeing to a good one is harder than you think”. What emerged from the data was the need for academics from a range of

positions and disciplines to spend time discussing and formulating workable definitions, and then communicating these to both faculty and students.

A definition however, is only the beginning. With the exception of Int06 (arguably the most experienced person in the sample, in terms of following plagiarism policy to the highest level), all respondents (including Int01 who refused to engage with the policy) expressed the need for clear procedural guidelines. Carroll's reasons for not pursuing plagiarism (2003, p. 6) were corroborated by the interviewees, with time it takes to pursue a case at the top of the list. A step-by-step guide, beginning with the first suspicion of plagiarism through to the Appeals committee, needs to be provided to staff during their first semester induction.

3. Adequate training, staff development and support to staff

Both Devlin (2003) and Carroll (2003) highlight the need to provide adequate training to staff once a university policy has been developed. However, as Int13 stated, staff development requires more than an understanding of plagiarism policy. Inherent to the process of reducing student plagiarism is the need for academics to have training and support in designing curriculum and assessment. Qualified instructional designers, working respectfully and collaboratively with academics, could facilitate improved curriculum and reduce the opportunities for students to plagiarise.

Most importantly, in addition to induction and training, those academics who identify cases of plagiarism must be supported, encouraged and guided by their supervisors and heads of departments. This was a key theme to emerge from those respondents who had actively followed their institution's plagiarism policy, but who felt that their efforts were undermined by senior staff with a different agenda. Even more disturbing were the experiences highlighted by Int09 and Int11, both of whom had been admonished by their supervisors and told that their continuing vigilance would be regarded negatively.

4. Recognition of workload and stress issues for staff involved in pursuing cases of plagiarism

A key theme to emerge from the data was the need to recognise the workload inherent in pursuing a suspected case of plagiarism. As those who had followed their own institution's policies reported, completing the necessary paperwork and attending the numerous meetings associated with a plagiarism case required many hours of (unrecognised) work, which one respondent likened to "torture". Furthermore, Int09, a respondent who had scrupulously followed his own institution's policy, was skeptical that he would ever succeed in implementing fair penalties for deliberate plagiarism, because of his belief that there would always be a technical detail on which the student could appeal (and win). This sense of powerlessness led to high levels of stress for Int06, Int09 and Int11, who intimated that they were constantly doing battle, not with plagiarising students, but with their own institutions.

Another type of stress, which largely goes unrecognised as an occupational health and safety issue, was the anxiety experienced by staff members who were concerned about their students' situations.

Respondents spoke about the student behaviour they had witnessed, which included crying, pleading and emotional entreaties. However, as noted by Int06, throughout the inquiry and appeals process students receive advocacy but the staff are not protected. If pursuing a case of plagiarism takes upwards of 20 hours of unrecognised work, causes the staff member to feel anxious or intimidated and results in an inconsequential penalty for the student, it is little wonder that some staff are reluctant to follow up suspicions of plagiarism.

5. Academic staff need to be involved during the appeals process

Finally, the data suggests that students who deliberately plagiarise will ultimately not be penalised if they appeal (and according to the audit at Int06's institution, appeals are made almost exclusively by international, fee-paying students). Interviewees with experience of the appeals process agreed unanimously that it was at this level that policy failed, largely because the staff member making the charge of plagiarism had little or no input. It was noted by respondents (particularly Int06, Int10, Int09 and Int11) that the fee-paying status of the student has a direct impact on the outcome of the appeals process. This perspective is supported by Pyvis (2002) (and the Senate Committee Enquiry 2001 cited in Pyvis), who is openly critical of university governance processes that enable senior staff (such as Deans or Registrars) to overturn academics' decisions, largely for commercial reasons. It was generally agreed that the Appeals Committee to date has taken a student-oriented approach, being careful to allow advocacy for the student (including an interpreter where necessary), and access all pertinent information concerning the student's personal circumstances.

Conclusion

Priest and Quaipe-Ryan (2004) blame the imperatives of commercialisation for the focus on cost-effectiveness, efficiency and market reach in Australian higher education, and call for educators to look critically at the culture of the university in which they work, and "identify...policies and practices that foster enchantment and those that stifle it" (p. 305). This research was an attempt to do just that by exploring how universities around Australia manage the issue of student plagiarism in the highly complex internationalized and commercialised environment of higher education in the new millennium.

What has emerged from this relatively small but representative sample, is that plagiarism policies in Australian universities have undergone a radical overhaul in the last three years or so, and are now largely well developed, and generally culturally sensitive. The findings indicate that lecturers working with international students conscientiously try to balance Australian academic standards with recognition of students' diverse cultural and learning backgrounds. However, according to seven of the fourteen respondents in this research, these efforts are too often undermined by a system that has at the heart of its internationalisation a short-sighted commitment to filling funding shortfalls.

With international students comprising up to 50% of many Australian university courses, all respondents spoke openly of the need for a genuine understanding of international students' learning needs and the

concomitant resources and infrastructure to support them. All respondents agreed that international ESL students are more likely to be accused of plagiarism, largely because second language writing makes plagiarism easier to identify. However, the research findings indicate that these fee-paying students are also more likely to have their penalties reduced on appeal than are local students, even for serious cases of deliberate academic misconduct.

The data indicates that the commercialised imperative of internationalisation is one factor that hinders the effective and equitable implementation of plagiarism policies across the higher education sector. The first response to the recommendations of this paper needs to be for universities to reclaim their traditional role as places of research, teaching and learning rather than as profit-making businesses.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Have you personally had any involvement with cases of plagiarism at your institution? Please provide details and/or examples.
2. In your professional role, are you satisfied with the institution's *policy* regarding plagiarism? Please provide details and/or examples.
3. In your professional role, are you satisfied that the institution *consistently follows its own policy* in relation to plagiarism? Please provide details and/or examples.
4. In your experience, are international ESL students more likely to be accused of plagiarism than local students? Why/why not?
5. Do you perceive any differences between the way that your institution deals with international and local students regarding plagiarism?
6. In an ideal world, would you have any suggestions for improving the institution's policy and/or processes in relation to plagiarism?
7. In your opinion, are there any special considerations that need to be given to international students in relation to plagiarism?
8. How might these considerations be incorporated into policy/processes?
9. Any other comments?