Policy is not Enough: a Holistic Approach to Promoting Academic Integrity among Students

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Abstract: This paper shows how one Queensland university has responded to increased student cultural and socio-economic diversity by adopting a whole of institution strategy to ensure consistency and equity in administering responses to student academic misconduct. The approach adopted took account of the literature and practice in the field and led to the development, trial and implementation of a framework for promoting academic integrity among students. Results show an increasing level of engagement by academic staff together with the provision of a rich source of data to inform learning and teaching practices.

Keywords: academic integrity, academic misconduct, student diversity, academic dishonesty

1.   Introduction

The Bradley Review affirmed that the reach, quality and performance of this nation's higher education system is central to Australia's economic and social progress. (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System, 2009)

Quality and performance of universities can be compromised if academic integrity is not maintained across the institution and breaches of academic integrity are not handled consistently and equitably. This can present difficulties for a large multi-campus university without a centralised system of managing and recording incidents of academic misconduct. It also provides fodder for the newspapers with headlines such as 'Uni cheating rife' (Sunday Telegraph, 12 April 2009). Griffith University became acutely aware of its shortcomings in late 2006 when responding to a request under the Freedom of Information Act to document all cases of academic misconduct dealt with by the University over the previous two years. The information was not centrally recorded but was maintained by the individual faculties and schools and was 'patchy' to say the least.

2.   Background

The management of cases of academic misconduct in an institution depends on a number of factors, such as policy, student diversity, assessment design and available resources. (Crisp, 2007) A survey of Griffith academic staff in late 2007 found that most staff were aware of university policy relating to academic misconduct but had varying degrees of agreement as to how and when it was to be applied. Some were reluctant to report it and others were dissatisfied with the penalties applied when they did. There was a general consensus that staff wanted more support in dealing with academic misconduct and more resources for educating students about academic integrity.

Currently, student populations are diverse including overseas students and students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB). These students can have very different perceptions of what constitutes academic integrity. (Bertram Gallant, 2008) Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) surveyed students across four Queensland universities and found that students and staff had quite different perceptions about the seriousness of academic misconduct. They found that students were most influenced by their peer's behaviour when it came to academic dishonesty.   Griffith's student population is diverse with international students comprising 25% of the student population, together with large numbers of NESB

students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and 70% of its students 'first in family' to attend university. This group of students do not have the benefit of absorbing 'cultural capital' from their families.

Griffith's own survey of students was carried out by PhD student, James Ogilvie (2007) who confirmed the earlier findings of Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) that detection methods and penalties were not necessarily a deterrent to students and that students were influenced by the attitude of their peers as to the acceptability of engaging in academic misconduct. He also found that "*low academic self-efficacy was found to be predictive of self-reported engagement in serious plagiarism*". (Ogilvie, 2007) This latter finding has been confirmed by data collected at Griffith since 2007 that shows that the majority of students with a finding of academic misconduct have a Grade Point Average (GPA) between 3.5 and 4.5.

3.   Developing policy

University policies are not developed in isolation but within a global context and O'Regan (2006) posits that significant influences can be "*educational, political, economic, cultural, technological, ideological*". This paper will give some insight into just how Griffith went about developing a new policy on academic misconduct, within the context of the above influences.

In April, 2007, after recommendations from the Learning and Teaching Committee, an Academic Integrity Reference Group, with representation from all the academic elements and administrative and support elements, was formed under the leadership of an academic who was an experienced criminologist. The recommendations from this Committee included: establishing an institutional framework, appointing an academic integrity manager, emphasising educational responses to student academic misconduct, implementing a centralised tracking system, introducing a two-tiered response structure (at school and faculty level) and forming a high level committee to ensure consistency in the application of the framework.

In order to develop the required framework, the Reference Group focused on the standards based Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Advisory Services Roadmap (2005) and assessed itself against the five stages of development of a sustainable model of academic integrity practice. The JISC themes underpinning the framework were:

- Transparency and fairness
- Teaching the skills
- Reaching a consensus
- Creating a culture of honesty
- Acknowledging cases

The Reference Group further engaged in sector based benchmarking by reviewing policies at other Australian universities (Curtin University, University of New South Wales, University of Newcastle, Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Good Practice Database) as an approach to determining the key elements in good practice. International benchmarking included visits to Oxford Brookes and Lancaster universities and achieving agreement from Lancaster University that Griffith could adapt their institutional framework.

From the end of 2007, the new Institutional Framework for Promoting Academic Integrity among Students was trialled, firstly in three faculties and then university-wide. During this time data was collected and the framework was evaluated, both internally and by an external evaluator. The principal question that the external evaluation sought to address was: *Has the adoption of the Academic Integrity Framework and its implementation across the University been an effective response to the problem of student academic misconduct?* The principal recommendation was that the Framework *should be adopted as the policy and processes for dealing with student academic misconduct across the university.* (Holman, 2009)

Subsequently, minor changes were made to the processes, and in response to recommendations in the evaluation report, an overarching Student Academic Misconduct policy was written and the Framework was revised as a companion document to the policy. Input to these documents was requested and received from senior academic staff. By the time the new policies were approved by the University Council for implementation at the end of 2009, the Framework had been thoroughly tested over a two-year period.

3.1   Academic staff engagement with the Framework

In the two years prior to the trial of the Framework, 2005 and 2006 respectively, the reported total cases of academic misconduct were 257 and 109. However, anecdotal evidence from staff was that the Academic Misconduct Policy was too bureaucratic and, therefore, it was common for academic staff to deal with cases informally as they were reluctant to report them through the formal process. The number of cases being reported has increased markedly since the Framework was trialled university-wide from the beginning of Semester 2, 2008. In the 2009 academic year, 723 cases were reported. Most of these cases were managed by Course Convenors with the outcome being one or more educational/developmental responses. See Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of outcomes 2009

No. of Tier 1 cases – Course Convenor	No. of educational responses (more than one possible)	Tier 2 cases – Institutional level	No. of penalties*
586	1324	137	192

*(Explanatory note: Prior to December 2009, Course Convenors were able to award a nil mark, now defined as a penalty and only awarded at the institutional level, hence the number of penalties awarded is greater than the number of cases decided at an institutional level.)

4.   Systems and processes

The processes are administered by the Student Academic Integrity Coordinator (SAIC) and are designed to be transparent, easy to use and to be finalised in a timely manner (28 days maximum). The following is a brief overview of the processes:

- The Course Convenor raises a concern and submits online.
- The SAIC assigns it to the decision-maker, based on the level of seriousness and the student history.
- The decision-maker is provided with a draft letter for notifying the student.
- The student is given 14 days to respond and is provided with support, if required.
- The decision-maker investigates the matter, makes a decision and enters the details into the online system.
- The decision-maker finalises the matter. If previous breaches are recorded on the system, then, the decision can be revised.
- The student then receives the final letter advising them of the outcome and any right of appeal and the matter is closed.

At all times in the process the SAIC is available to provide assistance for academic staff. The information is stored separately from the student's official record and, to ensure procedural fairness, only the SAIC has access to the student's history of academic misconduct. Academic staff are provided with a matrix to help them decide on the seriousness of the academic misconduct. This was adapted, with permission, from one used by Curtin University (Yeo and Chien, 2007) and was in response to concerns expressed by academic staff about difficulty in defining the level of seriousness. Resources have been made available to staff, such as access to text-matching software (SafeAssign) and professional development in designing out the opportunities for academic misconduct in assessment. Staff have access to a professional

development workshop on *Designing Assessment to Promote Academic Integrity and Reduce Plagiarism,* together with two Good Practice Guides on *Developing Effective Assessment* and *Issues of Academic Integrity.* Students are able to submit a draft assignment to SafeAssign and half of the students in an initial trial of the software reported that they found it useful and assisted them with their academic writing. An online academic integrity tutorial and referencing tool have been developed for students, international students have access to EnglishHELP (assistance with English) and the SAIC maintains websites for staff and students so that they have access to up-to-date information.

4.1   Data management and reporting

Data is stored in a secure environment in the PeopleSoft system and decision-makers have access to information relating only to the case that they are presently managing. Every semester, the Deans, Learning and Teaching, receive a summary report of the number of cases across the University. These reports include types of academic misconduct, level of seriousness, case outcomes, number re-offending and number referred up to Tier 2 broken down by school and faculty. Table 2 below shows other available data.

Table 2: Student demographic – Semester 2, 2009

Total no. of cases	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	Probation/Warning academic performance	Male	Female	Transfers / entry via pathway programs	International students
360	308	52	42	176	184	115	170

The above supports the statement made by Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) that empirical studies show an increase in female cheating although it is noted that more females are enrolled at the university. It would also appear to support the contention that academic misconduct is more widespread among international students, however, 108 of those international students were in one faculty that has a large cohort of international students. In the other faculties, they make up no more than 33% of the cases.

Data is reported to the University's Assessment Committee, so action can be taken to support vulnerable groups of students and recently the University has introduced a number of strategies to support low performing students (Amber Risk Strategy) and improve the English standards of international students (English Language Enhancement Course). Although, these strategies are not the direct result of the introduction of the Academic Integrity Framework, the data collected from the academic integrity management system provides another source to inform these strategies.

5.   Quality Assurance

After analysing 125 published papers on academic integrity, Fielden and Joyce (2008) came to the conclusion that most of the writers held a view that incorporated moral or value judgements about academic integrity. These dominant views can influence the implementation of academic integrity policies. In adopting a more holistic approach to academic integrity by situating it within a framework for promoting academic integrity, Griffith has attempted to take account of external factors affecting students and to place it within a learning and teaching context. Just by raising a concern with a student, Course Convenors, have the opportunity to open a dialogue with the student to not only raise awareness of academic integrity but to give them appropriate assistance and guidance. The Holman review report (2009) included feedback from a sample of staff and students. Staff reported that using the academic integrity process to identify and address problems in essay writing led to those students who completed the requirements writing substantially better essays. Staff respondents (n=74) commented favourably on the roll out of the framework and were appreciative of the information packs for staff, briefings and presentations. They were also adamant that the role of a central coordinator was critical to the operation

of the Framework, as was the importance of centralised tracking of students across programs. The overwhelming majority of students interviewed (n=142) reported that they had received information about academic integrity and academic misconduct. They were generally satisfied with the actions of academic staff to prevent student academic misconduct and with the support for academic writing skills and there was a surprisingly high level of awareness of the use of the text-matching software (SafeAssign). One of the most pleasing results was the finding that students who had only been at the university for two or three weeks had received information on academic integrity. Prior to the trial of the Framework, the University Appeals Committee received approximately 40 appeals from students against findings of academic misconduct each year. In the two years of the trial there have only been 11 appeals.

AUQA conducted a second cycle quality audit of Griffith in 2008 and noted the improvement in policy and procedures in the area of academic integrity and the importance placed on communicating these to students as early as possible. Griffith received a commendation for "*the adoption of an evidenced-based approach to academic integrity underpinned by research literature and practice*". (AUQA, 2008). Given that the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) will "*carry out audits that focus on particular areas of risk for the higher education system*" (TEQSA Fact Sheet), and that the academic integrity of the students in an institution poses a risk to reputation and academic standards, Griffith is well placed to protect and promote the University's academic integrity.

6. International dimensions

At present in Australia, quality assurance for international students is based on quality assurance for domestic students (Moodie, 2009). University policies are written to apply to all students and this is the case with Student Academic Misconduct Policy at Griffith. Much has been written about the diversity of student populations and the different perceptions that overseas students can have about academic integrity. (Bertram-Gallant, 2008) Student responses to plagiarism concerns at Griffith confirm this. The Academic Integrity Framework allows for a case to be handled by a decision-maker who is close to the student and who can take mitigating circumstances or differences in cultural understanding into account. Previous decisions, reasons for decisions, student responses and outcomes are recorded in the student academic integrity management system and this information can be made available to a decision-maker by the SAIC at the time of decision-making. Overall, the data collected over the last two years shows that the students who have a finding of academic misconduct recorded against them are students with low GPAs. This applies equally to international and domestic students and often the inability of international students to apply the conventions of academic writing or to paraphrase a concept is the result of a lack of English skills rather than a different cultural perception about citation and attribution. The University's response has been to focus on effectively preparing students for assessment through support in academic writing skills, referencing, and use of paraphrasing; as well as providing opportunities throughout the semester for academic advisement on assessment items. As a result systematic assessments of all students' academic performance are made throughout each semester on a number of risk factors. The first of these is conducted by the Course Convenor through the provision of feedback focused on writing and referencing skills in a formative item conducted early in the semester. This approach is aligned with the University's strategy for enabling a student-centred success culture.

7. Conclusion

How successful has our holistic approach to academic integrity been? In order to answer this question one can only rely on academic engagement and feedback from academics and students and that has been extremely positive. The number of serial instances of student academic misconduct is very small, student appeals against findings of academic misconduct are significantly reduced as are the number of appeals being upheld. What we have learned from this process is that for policy to be effective in changing staff and student behaviours clear identification of the issues based on 'institutional research' and contemporary literature is required. Effective analysis of the research data is essential to identify key issues and possible responses for trial, consultation and communication with the academic community. Throughout the entire process from issue identification to evaluation, the development of key support systems for staff and students is essential to implementation of the policy and incremental implementation

gathering local champions is better than a 'big bang'. It is critical to gather evaluation data at every step and be prepared to modify the policy and process. Lessons learned through this policy implementation are being applied to a larger assessment policy project at Griffith. Data gathered is continuously reviewed to identify changes in student behaviours and to determine where resources need to be placed to assure the University's academic integrity. We continue to ensure that students are aware of the importance of academic integrity and the processes for managing it, most recently using social networking tools. Placing academic integrity within a framework that supports student learning and provides learning assistance through a formal channel of referral is a step on the way to improving student self-efficacy and their consequent ability to succeed without having to resort to academic misconduct.

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