Case studies on academic integrity

Enabling strategies enact academic integrity policy. Without long-term, sustainable and practical support resources, a policy will not be enacted, no matter how well it is articulated.

The cases in this resource cover a range of academic integrity issues in Australian universities with application for a wider audience. These case studies have been developed by the Academic Integrity Standards Project.

"...I suspect that every senior manager needs to have some training in the issue of academic integrity principles. I learnt mine on the job, so I think that needs to be worked through so that the policy and the implementation and the people who have that power understand those principles ...So I think the case study models really useful. How would you deal with someone who had this story; you know, what would you do, and then work out what you'd do pragmatically versus where the policy fits from there."
(Senior Manager, University B, Academic Integrity Standards Project)

Although they may be based on real life stories, they have been adapted and anonymised for the purposes of this project resource; pseudonyms are used in every instance. The case studies are designed to be used as triggers for discussion in group seminars and primarily target teaching staff, although they could be used for discussion with students or other academic integrity stakeholders.

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Understanding of academic writing

**Title of case:** EAL\(^1\) / ESL student’s lack of understanding of text ownership in academic writing conventions

**Target audience:** Academics addressing inadvertent plagiarism in students’ written work

**Key issue being addressed:** Appraising and addressing students’ lack of understanding of ‘text ownership’ and ‘acknowledgment’.

**Purpose of the case:** To scaffold students’ understanding of text ‘ownership’ and academic conventions of text re-use.

The case

*Abstract*

An international English as an Additional Language student has difficulty understanding why copying text is not appropriate scholarly practice.

A lecturer at an Australian university interviews a student (Hua) during stage 1 of following up an academic integrity breach. She is an international student, in her second year of a Bachelor degree. Her written English is comprehensible but marked by non-idiomatic expressions and grammatical errors that characterise writing examples of students at an International English Language Test Score (IELTS) level of 6. However, there are several paragraphs that are written in perfect academic prose with sophisticated word choice and sentence complexity, that clearly indicate to the lecturer that these passages are not the student’s own writing.

The lecturer points to one of these paragraphs

Lecturer: This is not your own writing, is it?
Hua: Yes it is.
Lecturer: But you took it out of a book, didn’t you?
Hua: Yes I did.
Lecturer: Then it’s NOT your own, is it?
Hua: Yes it is. I believe it.

**Questions for discussion**

1. What is incongruous about the student’s response from the academic’s perspective?
2. How can Hua’s answer be understood in her own terms? (e.g. her educational background)
3. Is it likely to be an educational or disciplinary matter? What further questions must be asked to determine this?
4. How can the tutor explain the notion of ‘text ownership’ in this situation?

\(^{1}\) EAL – ‘English as an Additional language’ is used as a more respectful term than ESL. ‘English as the Second Language’ when applied to Australian universities’ international and immigrant students, many of whom have several languages other than English.
Designing out plagiarism

Title of case: Assessment design to discourage copy-and-paste assignments
Target audience: Academic teaching staff, Academic staff developers
Key issue being addressed: Assessments that invite copy-and-paste plagiarism
Purpose of the case: To assist academic staff in “designing out” plagiarism opportunities

The case

Abstract
Jennifer does not allow enough time to write her assignment and so copies and pastes from internet sources. She is found out and receives an outcome for a ‘first offence’.

Jennifer is a 2nd year Bachelor of Education student. The topic of her first assignment was: ‘School Bullying: What are some causes of bullying in schools? What are the effects on the persons involved? What interventions are possible?’

The timing for submission coincided with two other assignments. She had put off starting on these during the earlier part of the semester, and had run out of time as the deadlines loomed. She remembered some personal experience of being bullied in her middle years of high school and so decided to put her effort into the other two assignments and ‘wing it’ with this one.

When she came to write it, there was very little time left. She scanned two readings on the topic, copied and pasted relevant passages together into a patchwork, with suitable linking texts of her own. She modified the downloaded material, changing sufficient amounts of the downloaded wordings to blend them in with her own style and felt that she had made a fair job under the topic’s three headings.

However, her lecturer is suspicious, puts the assignment through text-matching software. Jennifer’s short-cut is found out and receives the prescribed outcome for a ‘first offence’.

Points for consideration
- Assignment question asking no more than re-stating facts and ideas that are easily found and downloaded
- Coordinating the timing of assignments to avoid bottlenecks
- The use of Turnitin or other text matching software on individual assignments rather than the whole class

Questions for discussion
1. What would the outcome have been for Jennifer’s blatant short-cut, according to your university’s academic integrity policy?
2. Should the lecturer submit all the assignments to the text-matching service, rather than just the one that looked suspect? What action would she take if she found that Jennifer’s approach was more widespread than first thought?
3. Would you agree that the assignment was “just asking for students to plagiarise”? (James et al 2002, p.47) (Check your own assignments against this point).
Falsification and plagiarism

Target audience: Subject coordinators, research supervisors, academic integrity decision makers

Key issue being addressed: How to design out opportunities for falsifying data

Purpose of the case: To assist research supervisors and course/program and subject designers to consider strategies to reduce the risk of students falsifying data

The case

Abstract

Despite designing an ‘authentic’ assessment based on a work related task, Bonnie discovers that one student fabricated the data for his report. As the student has already graduated, she is advised not to pursue the matter.

Bonnie, the subject coordinator in a postgraduate coursework program, designed the subject assessment to be authentic and offer students the opportunity to undertake assessment tasks that are similar to those that will form part of their work role on graduation. To this end she asked that student apply a particular framework of problem identification, analysis and evaluation to a real organisation. Those students in current employment often nominated their employing organisation as the one they would select for this case study. The subject coordinator offers to assist international students with introductions to local organisations.

Bonnie follows up with one particular international student, Edgar, who had few local contacts. However he reassures Bonnie that he has found a suitable local organisation, which he names. He indicates that the staff are very helpful and is able to provide Bonnie with the signed agreement from the organisation that she requires that all students submit well in advance of the assignment due date. Bonnie is vaguely familiar with the nominated organisation and is pleased that Edgar has demonstrated much more resourcefulness and initiative than she had anticipated.

Edgar submits the completed report on the assignment due date. It is thorough, well-written and meets all of the assessment criteria for the assignment. Edgar graduates and leaves Australia to continue his career with a qualification accredited by a national and international organisation.

One year later Bonnie comes across a report in one of the professional journals she subscribes to that looks remarkably like the report submitted by Edgar in the previous academic year. Closer examination reveals that the publication date preceded Edgar’s assignment submission date by some months, Edgar was not the identified author of the published report and that Edgar’s submitted assignment matches the published report apart from the substitution of the name of a local organisation in place of the one identified in the published report.
Group work: Assessment at stake?

Target audience: Students, tutors, lecturers and academic integrity decision makers

Key issues being addressed:
- Responsibility for academic integrity
- Poor scholarship or academic misconduct
- Task expectations and group assessment

Purpose of the case: To build awareness of the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, in supporting academic integrity and dealing with misconduct in the context of group work.

The case

Abstract
Five students struggle to work together on a group assignment. Four of the students are concerned that the fifth student has plagiarised her part of the assignment and so rewrite her section. The Subject Coordinator is called in to adjudicate.

Five students in their first semester at university are working on a group assignment. Trying to find time to meet in their busy schedules of university classes, paid work and family commitments has been a challenge, hence they have only had one face-to-face meeting and some email exchanges. Now close to the deadline, four of the students are worried that one student’s contribution is a copy and paste. They have asked the student to rewrite her draft, explaining that they could all be penalised for plagiarism. One of the group members even offered to help her with the text, but she does not respond. Her final contribution contains chunks of unattributed copied text interspersed with sentences that don’t make sense.

The four students meet with their tutor to request that they not be penalised because of the copyst’s poor work. The tutor explained that, in this course, being able to work as a team was an important competency which they needed to master in order to demonstrate a required professional standard. The students are told to return to their ‘working in a team guidelines’ and to use these to resolve the problem. The students feel this is unfair and that the problem is insurmountable.

The group assignment is submitted, with the plagiarised section hastily rewritten by the other students. After receiving a poor mark for this section, the four students appeal to the subject coordinator who reviews the case and calls the copyst in for a chat about her copied text.

She breaks down and says that she should not be seen as a ‘cheater’. She says she was excluded by the group, that they lacked integrity because they did not follow the guidelines and had not developed a proper team, and that, although some of her work had been copied it was not cheating because she had understood the texts, and had found the best answers. She acknowledged that academic writing was a struggle for her.
Learning advisors and confidentiality

Target audience: Learning advisors, learning developers, supervisors
Key issue being addressed: Role of learning advisors in supporting research students

The case

Abstract
A learning advisor is concerned that a postgraduate student she has been working with has submitted a plagiarized research proposal.

Harriet is a learning advisor who works in the student learning support unit. She sees students from across the university in individual consultations. Sometimes these students are referred to by their tutors or lecturers, and sometimes they make bookings on their own initiative, bringing with them a copy of their latest assignment and requesting advice on how to improve their writing or meet a particular assignment's marking criteria.

This year, Harriet sees one particular postgraduate student fairly frequently in individual consultations. He is in his first year of his PhD and when he first turned up at the student support unit, he was very confused about academic writing expectations. Over the year his writing, referencing and critical analysis has gradually improved, but like many first international students, he is still struggling with academic writing and was very concerned about meeting a departmental deadline for a formal thesis proposal of 10,000 words. During the consultations Harriet works with the student to improve his English grammar, while also helping him to refine and articulate his thesis' research questions and navigate through a literature review.

Frequently, the student brings in drafts of the thesis proposal. This includes poorly written material with inadequate referencing and uneven writing, some of which has clearly been copied directly from the source. A lot of the discussion in the consultations focuses on how to incorporate references and paraphrase source material.

At a meeting toward the end of the year, just before his first year thesis proposal submission, the student appears with an almost immaculate thesis proposal which includes research questions that are similar but somewhat different to those discussed in earlier consultations. Harriet is convinced that this student has not produced this document on his own. She is told that he has already submitted it to the department.

Questions for discussion:
1. What would you do at this point if you were Harriet?
2. Would you:
   a. Contact the supervisor/department and advise them that you suspect the student has plagiarised?
Plagiarism of computer code

Target audience: Subject coordinators, academic integrity decision makers
Key issue being addressed: Issues surrounding the 're-use' of unacknowledged sources of computer code
Purpose of the case: To illustrate some of the contexts of plagiarism beyond the copying of text

The case

Abstract

A subject coordinator is dismayed to find that many of his applied programming students have submitted assignments containing copied source code.

Jonathan is the subject coordinator in an undergraduate subject on applied programming. The assessment tasks in this subject require students to design, implement, test and debug simple programs using a specific programming language. The assignments require students to submit program source code. Jonathan knows that students can be tempted to copy code from friends, the Internet, or a 'private tutor' rather than create their own source code. Jonathan tries to design the subject and the assessment tasks to reduce the opportunities to do this because he recognizes that if students do not acquire the skills to manipulate the programming language they will not really have met the intended learning outcomes of the subject.

When one of Jonathan’s colleagues, Amy, asks if she can trial the program she has developed to test for shared code on some of the assignments submitted by Jonathan’s students Jonathan agrees, not thinking that any plagiarism of code would be detected. He is astonished to find over 15% of the students in his subject have submitted assignments containing code which Amy’s program indicates contains shared code. In Jonathan’s mind this means that students have copied.

Questions for discussion

1. What does your university policy say about designing the assessment of student learning to support student learning?
2. What does your university policy say about the copying and translation of computer code?
3. What does your university policy say about the copying and translation of computer code from one computer language into another (also called ‘porting’ or ‘inter-lingual plagiarism’)?
4. What other information would Jonathan need in order to make sound interpretations of the meaning of Amy’s findings?
5. What other strategies could Jonathan implement to reduce the incentive to, and risk of, students copying code?
Considering extenuating circumstances

**Target audience:** Academic integrity decision makers (AIDM) – those with the responsibility of determining outcomes for breaches of academic integrity by undergraduate students.

**Key issue being addressed:** Difficulty of making a decision on an academic integrity breach when multiple extenuating factors are involved.

**Purpose of the case:** To assist academic integrity decision makers to work through their own policy to address a complex case.

**The case**

*Abstract*

An international student with poor English language skills is struggling to complete her degree. Her resubmission of a failed assignment is found to have been plagiarised and her case is passed on to the university’s Academic Integrity Decision Maker (AIDM) to determine an appropriate outcome. Despite a number of extenuating circumstances and the likelihood that this will result in a fail for the whole course, the AIDM determines that the student should receive a zero for the assessment.

*Background*

Vivienne is a 20 year-old business student from Mainland China, in her final semester of study at an Australian university. Although in her third year, Vivienne completed the first two years of her degree at the University’s Beijing campus. Her spoken English is tentative and she has been struggling to pass her courses since arriving in Australia six months ago. She is currently taking an extra course concurrently with her already full program, because she failed a course last semester. The feedback on her assignments suggest that her tutors are being generous in awarding (bare) pass grades in recognition of the dramatic learning she is currently undergoing in terms of language and discipline knowledge. Her last assignment in ‘Organisational Behaviour’, worth 15% of the overall course grade, scored a grade of 45% (F) and her tutor gave Vivienne the opportunity to resubmit as she had clearly not understood the topic. The tutor spent considerable time explaining the concepts to Vivienne, plus gave an extra week to resubmit the assignment. The second submission was virtually copied word for word from an Internet source, without acknowledgement, and the tutor passed the case on to the Academic Integrity Decision Maker (AIDM) as per University policy.

*The student meets with the AIDM*

Having received a standard letter from the AIDM asking Vivienne to explain the high text-match in her assignment, Vivienne has now gone back to the tutor and asked that the original grade of 45% stand, and that the resubmission be disregarded. The tutor explains that in addition to University policy which states that in the case of resubmissions, the second mark stands regardless of whether it is higher or lower, the process is out of his hands. Vivienne reluctantly attends an initial meeting with the AIO. She arrives late, appears nervous and immediately repeats her request for the resubmission to be disregarded. The AIDM has met with a number of students during the week, and is inclined to take a firm line with this student. The usual type of penalty that would apply in this case would be a zero for the assignment, particularly given the extensive induction that all students receive in this particular program regarding academic integrity and academic
Workload implications for tutors

Target audience: Subject coordinators, tutors, sessional staff
Key issue being addressed: The role of tutors in fostering a culture of academic integrity; implications to workload of investigating breaches of academic integrity.

The case

Abstract

A new staff member on a casual contract encounters plagiarism in some assignments. The procedure to address breaches of academic integrity at her university is so onerous and time-consuming that the other tutors advise her to handle the matter herself via a reduction in marks.

Susan is a new tutor on a casual contract at this university. She is paid by the hour for teaching a number of tutorials per week in a core undergraduate subject, marking three assessment tasks, and a couple of meetings with the subject coordinator and the other tutors. In common with many other new tutors, she spends a lot more time than the hours allocated in preparing for her classes and marking the assessment tasks.

In order to meet a departmental deadline Susan marks up to one hundred essays within one particular week, and she finds eight essays that she considers contain serious and different breaches of academic integrity. She completes her marking of all the essays, and annotates the suspect essays with comments aligning with the marking criteria but doesn’t give these essays a final mark. Instead, she contacts the subject coordinator to let him know the final marks for her entire student cohort but says that she still has eight essays that she is confident have been plagiarised in some way and that she would now like him to assess these.

The subject coordinator emails her back saying he is shocked by the high number of students plagiarising in Susan’s tutorials. He asks her to write a report about each individual suspect essay, and to track down ‘proof’ that each essay contains plagiarism. After she has done that, he will contact the plagiarism investigative officer in the department to launch a case. This evidence is necessary because at this particular university the investigation officer is not responsible for assembling the evidence only for making a decision about the allegation in collaboration with the subject coordinator. The university policy indicates that a staff member must bring an allegation of academic misconduct by a student to the attention of the subject coordinator once the misconduct has been identified and provide the Subject Coordinator with relevant information and evidence relating to the allegation.

Susan has already spent more time per suspect essay than any other piece of marking, and knows that it will take her more hours of extra time per essay to trace the sources and write a brief report. She is distressed that she has been regarded to be at fault for not instilling appropriate academic integrity standards in her classes.