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Staff and Student Perceptions of Plagiarism and Cheating

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Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct are a significant issue in higher education. In this study, the attitudes of academic staff and students in a 3 year undergraduate nursing program to various forms of academic misconduct were assessed and compared. Forty- nine percent of staff and 39% of students thought that cheating on assessment tasks was common with "copying a few paragraphs and not citing the source" the most common form. Differences existed in beliefs about why cheating occurred with staff endorsing the view that students lacked an understanding of the rules. Students, on the other hand, felt that wanting a better grade and having too many assessment items were strong motivators for cheating. Students also tended to favor "lighter sentences" (e.g., warnings, resubmission) as penalties for plagiarism. This study has shown that while staff and students have similar overall perceptions about cheating and plagiarism there are areas where the differences in perception may be contributing to mixed messages about the seriousness of various cheating behaviors.

Plagiarism and cheating (e.g., copying from another student in an exam) are forms of misconduct that have become areas of increasing concern for academics in higher education. Clegg and Flint (2006), in their discussion of plagiarism in the United Kingdom, described it as a spreading moral panic. The seriousness with which academics view plagiarism is reflected in institutional policies that class plagiarism as a form of academic misconduct to be dealt with by a range of penalties which may, in the most serious cases, lead to expulsion from the institution. Examples of these policies and processes for Australian and New Zealand institutions are found at the CODE project website (http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/project/acode/index.html) and provide an overview of the range of strategies used to address student misconduct generally. As articulated by Howard (1995), plagiarism can be an academic death penalty resulting in severe penalties which can include exclusion from an academic program or loss of employment. Howard (1995), like many authors, also noted that plagiarism can be aided or hindered by assessment and teaching practices and there have been substantial efforts made to design "plagiarism proof" items. Combined with the use of educative tools and policies, this highlights to the student body the seriousness with which academics hold plagiarism (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; McInnis & Devlin, 2002).

Tearoom, corridor, and office discussions propose several reasons for student plagiarism, including failure to understand what is expected or confusion over differing expectations, a response to increasing assessment workload, or, in a minority of cases, a deliberate attempt to deceive markers. These "gut feelings" are reflected in the literature with a number of authors reporting the range of factors and reasons behind student misconduct. These include, but are not limited to, wanting to help a friend, not understanding referencing conventions, difficulty of assessment tasks, peer pressure, and equivocal messages from teaching staff (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Maramark & Maline, 1993; Sheard, Markham, & Dick, 2003; Thompson, 2006).

Furthermore, Howard (1995), with others, has defined different types of plagiarism ranging from outright cheating and fabrication of laboratory data to non-attribution and "patch-writing," where several pieces of borrowed material is patched together as a result of lack of understanding of the content (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Loui, 2002; Martin, 1994). Howard (1995) further suggests that patch-writing may be an attempt to re-synthesize difficult material and, in terms of learning, may actually assist in understand. In this context, what academics see as plagiarism, students may view as a legitimate study strategy.

Reasons suggested as factors influencing student misconduct activity are student age, gender, academic level and course difficulty, and cultural background (Culwin, 2006; Marsden, Carroll, & Neill, 2005; Sheard, Dick, Markham, Macdonald, & Walsh, 2002; Sheard et al., 2003; Sowden, 2005;). However, there is no consistent finding for any of these variables and the significance of these factors appear to be context dependent. For example, Sheard et al. (2003) in their study of undergraduates and postgraduate information technology (IT) students showed that undergraduates were more likely to have reported cheating, to have knowledge of another student who had cheated, and to see situations such as high workload and fear of failure as reasons to cheat. In contrast, Marsden et al. (2005) found postgraduate and higher level undergraduate students were more likely to admit to cheating and other academic misconduct. Bennett (2005) suggests that the probability that a student will plagiarize is predicted not by the variables describe above but by a set of attitudinal characteristics and their

interrelationship. These characteristics include attitudes towards plagiarism based on peer influences and religious and ethical positions; fear of failure or penalties if caught; and the intensity of institutional anti-plagiarism activities. Thus, personal ethics and belief systems of students become a significant consideration in any discussion of academic misconduct.

Given the significance of personal beliefs in this discussion it is perhaps not surprising that several authors have further suggested that a significant element of the plagiarism issue is a tension between staff and students with respect to beliefs about right and wrong, and the level of seriousness attached to specific instances of wrong-doing. A number of authors have explored this further (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2004; Dordoy, 2002) and their work supports the idea that students and staff think differently about cheating and plagiarism. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) in their study of staff and students at four universities in Queensland, Australia, found that across a number of scenarios, staff consistently viewed cheating as more serious than students. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) and Clegg and Flint (2006) also point out the importance of shared understandings of academic integrity and values between staff and students; without this shared understanding, educative and other programs designed to target academic misconduct are unlikely to succeed.

This study was designed to investigate the factors underlying cheating and plagiarism behavior within nursing students attending the Wagga Wagga campus of Charles Sturt University, Australia. Furthermore, I wished to determine whether student's attitudes to these issues were different than those held by teaching staff. Charles Sturt University is a regional, multi-campus university with approximately 34,000 students and 580 academic staff. This university, like many Australian universities, has engaged in a number of strategies, both punitive and educative, to minimize the occurrence of various forms of student academic misconduct. As many of these strategies focus primarily on plagiarism, this study also focuses on plagiarism; however, this is in the broader context of all academic misconduct.

Method

A questionnaire was developed based on that used by Dordoy (2002) and comprised two sections: (a) demographic questions including whether students lived with other students or came directly to University from school and (b) questions relating to referencing and misconduct activities. This second section contained questions designed to elicit information about the following:

a. frequency of cheating in assessment items (8 statements; responses from 1 = common to 5 = uncommon),
b. reasons why students might cheat (10 questions; yes/no responses)
c. perception of seriousness of a range of cheating and other wrong-doing activities (15 statements; responses from 1 = very serious to 5 = not serious)
d. personal experience and knowledge of staff plagiarism checking activities (6 questions; yes/no responses)
e. respondent's views on the appropriateness of various responses to detection of plagiarism (14 questions; yes/no responses).

Sections a to d above were taken from the instrument used by Dordoy (2002). A duplicate questionnaire was administered to academic staff with the questions about living with other students and whether they were school-leavers replaced by one asking how long they had worked in an academic position and the questions on experience of plagiarism rephrased to reflect a staff perspective. Approval for this study was granted by the Ethics in Human Research Committee, Charles Sturt University.

Staff from the five Schools of the Faculty of Health Studies (n=100) were invited to participate in this study via a letter, with questionnaire included, delivered via the internal mail system. Students enrolled in all three years of the Bachelor of Nursing (n= 254) were approached during on-campus classes with the questionnaires administered within the first 3 days of the first semester.

Completed questionnaires were coded and the data entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences; v14). Descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable with comparisons between groups assessed using the Chi-squared test and correlation with Pearson Correlation. Differences were deemed statistically significant if $p < 0.05$.

Results

The response rate for the various groups participating in this study were staff 48%, first-year students 90%, second-year students 67%, and third-year students 100%. Respondent characteristics are shown in Table 1. Consistent with data for the nursing profession as a whole the majority (> 89%) of students were female. As the numbers of males in this study was low, no attempt was made in the analysis to compare data based on gender. There was no statistically significant difference between the proportion of staff and students who thought that cheating on assessment tasks was

common when the student group was considered as a whole (39% vs. 49%, p = 0.186); however, when examined by year groupings only 23% of second and 29% of third year students thought cheating was common (Table 1, p = 0.019). For staff, the view that cheating was common was correlated with the number of years as an academic (p = 0.021, r = 0.328) but not with age, how confident they were at detecting plagiarism, or whether they had ever given a warning for plagiarism. For students, a correlation existed between thinking that cheating was common and being a school leaver (p = 0.048, r = 0.169); however, when each year group was examined separately, this correlation was only maintained for first-year students. There was no correlation between living on-campus or with other students and either thinking cheating was common or having received a warning for plagiarism.

Just over half of the staff (55%) and students (56%) felt confident that they could detect plagiarism in student work (Table 1). When examined by year groups, first-year students were less confident and more likely to be confused about avoiding plagiarism than those in third year (p = 0.011). While 90% of staff indicated they had given a warning for plagiarism, only 9% of all students indicated receiving a warning. There was no difference between the year levels (p = 0.088).

Table 2 shows responses to the question "How common are each of the following situations?" There were no statistically significant differences between the staff and students' responses to this question with both groups indicating that "copying a few paragraphs of an essay from a book or web site and not citing" and "working with another student on work that is meant to be individual" were the most common forms of cheating. "Downloading a whole essay from a cheat site or essay bank on the Internet" or "cheating in mid or end of semester exams" was the least common forms of cheating.

Among both staff and students, the most common reasons why cheating occurs was thought to be a lack of understanding about the rules of referencing and laziness or bad time management (Table 3). While there was consistency in responses between staff and students for two of the remaining items (easy access to the Internet, badly designed task), there were significant differences between the two groups for the remaining items. Students more frequently indicated wanting a better grade (73%) and too many assignment tasks (56%) as reasons for cheating, whereas staff indicated that it was unconscious and the student was not aware they were doing anything wrong (65%) and that students thought they were unlikely to be caught (63%). When analyzed by year groups, 71% of third-year students said cheating was result of too many assignments compared with 54% of first-years and 46% of second-years (p=0.002), while first-year students more frequently cited easy access to the Internet (first-years 72%, second-years 44%, third-years 49%, p=0.002).

Both staff and students felt that subject outlines (a document provided for all subjects and detailing subject objectives, timetable, assessment and subject related academic regulations) were clear about the penalties for plagiarism; however, there were significant differences in their response to questions about the guidance from staff and whether staff check for plagiarism (Table 4). There were some further differences based on year level of the students with 17% of third-years compared with 0% of first- and second-year students agreeing that most staff do not check for plagiarism (p = 0.001). In addition, only 57% of students indicated they had read the University Student Academic Misconduct statement; this was lowest amongst first-year students (50%) and highest for third-year students (77%) (p = 0.002).

When asked about the seriousness of various examples of wrong-doing, student and staff rankings were very similar (Table 5); however, the mean value for seriousness was generally higher in staff than in students. Situations which were ranked differently by staff and students were the items "copying the majority of an assignment from a friend but doing a fair bit yourself" and "making up data for a project or lab report" which were regarded as more serious by staff than by students.

The final question on the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate appropriate penalties for first and repeat offences of plagiarism (Table 6). For first offences, students generally opted for warnings and resubmission of the item, with or without loss of marks, while staff favored either warnings with no loss of marks or loss of marks for that item. With repeated offences, both staff and students agreed that zero marks be awarded for that item; however, a significant proportion of students also thought that loss of marks in the item (62% compared with 33% for staff, p < 0.0001) or resubmission with mark penalty (34% vs. 13% for staff, p = 0.004) were appropriate responses. More staff that students (90% vs. 65%, p = 0.001) thought that an official reprimand from the Head of School was warranted.

Discussion

While general concern for the level of plagiarism in assessment items is high, the results of this study found that less than half of both staff and students thought that cheating in assessment tasks was common. Furthermore, the very terms used (plagiarism and cheating) have no clear definition with some seeing them as synonymous, while others see plagiarism as a subset of cheating, or as separate issues (Flint, Clegg, &

Table 1
Summary of Respondent Characteristics

	Academic staff (n=48)	Students		
		First years (n=143)	Second years (n=39)	Third years (n=35)
Age (mean ± SD years)	45 ± 9	23 ± 7	27 ± 9	27 ± 9
Females	76%	89%	97%	97%
Males	24%	11%	3%	3%
Years in an academic position (mean ± SD)	9 ± 7 years (range 1-32 years)			
Living on-campus		24%	10%	9%
Living with other students		39%	28%	31%
Entered University directly from school		47%	46%	49%
% who think cheating on assessment tasks is common	49%	46%	23%	29%
Staff: How confident are you that you can detect plagiarism? Students: How confident are you that understand how to reference correctly to avoid plagiarism?				
Very confident	8%	8%	13%	11%
Confident	47%	40%	54%	69%
Not confident	45%	36%	31%	17%
Staff: I don't look for plagiarism Students: I am completely confused	0%	16%	2%	3%
Staff: % who have given a warning for plagiarism Students: % who been given a warning for plagiarism	90%	9%	3%	17%

Table 2
Responses to Question "How Common Are Each of the Following Situations"

		% of respondents				
		common		unsure		uncommon
Copying a few paragraphs of an essay from a book or web site and not citing	Staff	41.7	35.4	12.5	10.4	0
	Student	30.9	30.4	21.2	9.7	7.8
Copying most of an assignment from some source	Staff	4.3	4.3	12.8	34.0	44.7
	Student	6.0	11.5	21.1	30.7	30.7
Downloading a whole essay from a cheat site or essay bank on the Internet	Staff	2.1	2.1	21.3	8.5	66.0
	Student	3.8	5.2	26.8	21.1	43.2
Cheating in mid or end of semester exams	Staff	0	6.4	17.0	23.4	53.2
	Student	1.4	5.5	26.3	21.7	45.2
Cheating in quizzes or in class tests	Staff	6.5	21.7	23.9	21.7	26.1
	Student	12.6	26.0	24.7	20.0	16.7
Making up data for a project or lab report	Staff	8.7	23.9	34.8	15.2	17.4
	Student	16.1	27.6	33.6	10.6	12.0
Working with another student on work that is meant to be individual	Staff	26.5	42.9	16.3	10.2	4.1
	Student	32.1	40.8	15.6	3.7	7.8
Passing off others' ideas/images/designs as your own	Staff	17.8	22.2	24.4	24.4	11.1
	Student	16.6	27.6	26.3	18.9	10.6
Paying someone to write an essay for you	Staff	4.3	8.5	23.4	12.8	51.1
	Student	4.1	6.0	28.9	14.2	46.8

Table 3
Responses to Question Asking for Common Reasons Why Students Might Cheat on Assessment Items

	Staff (n=48)	Students (n=217)	P value
Common reasons for cheating:			
Not understanding the rules of referencing	82%	76%	0.373
Laziness or bad time management	78%	86%	0.153
Easy access to material via the Internet	69%	63%	0.388
It happens unconsciously & the student is not aware they are doing anything wrong	65%	48%	0.030
Not likely to be caught	63%	29%	<0.001
Wanting to get a better grade	51%	73%	0.003
Peer pressure to share material	49%	30%	0.012
Penalties for being caught are to small to be of concern	31%	6%	<0.001
Too many assignments to do during the session	31%	56%	0.002
Badly designed assessment tasks	22%	21%	0.835

Table 4
Responses to Statements about Plagiarism

	Staff (n=48)	Students (n=217)	P value
Students receive adequate guidance from staff about what is an isn't acceptable in terms of referencing in assignments	78%	57%	0.008
Most staff do not check whether or not work is plagiarized	33%	5%	<0.0001
I/students find the different approaches to plagiarism by staff confusing	27%	38%	0.121
Subject outlines are clear about the penalties for plagiarism	82%	73%	0.229
I have read the University"s statement on student academic misconduct	90%	57%	<0.0001

Table 5
Ranking and Mean Score for Seriousness of Various Examples of Wrong-Doing.

	Student		Staff
Violent and abusive behavior	1.16	Violent and abusive behavior	1.07
Cheating in an exam	1.16	Cheating on a partner	1.06
Downloading a whole essay from a cheat site on the Internet	1.19	Downloading a whole essay from a cheat site on the Internet	1.08
Cheating on a partner	1.27	Cheating in an exam	1.10
Copying most of an assignment from a book or Internet site without citing the source	1.59	Copying the majority of an assignment from a friend, but doing a fair bit of the work yourself	1.18
Stealing a small item from a large shop	1.67	Copying most of an assignment from a book or Internet site without citing the source	1.18
Submitting an essay or prac report obtained from a student who has already done the subject	1.86	Submitting an essay or prac report obtained from a student who has already done the subject	1.23
Passing off others' ideas/designs/images as your own	1.88	Passing off others' ideas/designs/images as your own	1.37
Taking recreational drugs	1.95	Stealing a small item from a large shop	1.44
Copying the majority of an assignment from a friend, but doing a fair bit of the work yourself	1.97	Making up data for a project or lab class	1.64
Obtaining a medical certificate from a doctor when you are not really sick in order to get an extension for an assignment	2.19	Taking recreational drugs	2.04
Copying a few paragraphs of an essay from a book or Internet site without citing the source	2.32	Fare-evasion on public transport	2.22
Making up data for a project or lab class	2.41	Obtaining a medical certificate from a doctor when you are not really sick in order to get an extension for an assignment	2.22
Fare-evasion on public transport	2.94	Copying a few paragraphs of an essay from a book or Internet site without citing the source	2.27
Working with another student on work that is meant to be individual	2.89	Working with another student on work that is meant to be individual	2.49

Note. Responses were indicated on a scale from 1 (very serious) to 5 (not serious).

Table 6
Staff and Student Responses to Question Related to Appropriateness of Various Penalties for First and Repeat Instances of Plagiarism

First offence	Student	Staff	P value
Written or oral warning from staff but no loss of marks	62	41	0.008
Student allowed to resubmit item with no mark penalty	46	12	< 0.001
Student allowed to resubmit item with some mark penalty	37	45	0.297
No penalty or warning	24	4	0.002
Loss of marks	24	51	< 0.001
Zero marks awarded for that assessment item	10	18	0.079
Official reprimand from Head of School	5	10	0.197

Repeated offences	Student	Staff	
Zero marks awarded for that assessment item	71	73	0.815
Official reprimand from Head of School	65	90	0.001
Loss of marks	62	33	< 0.001
Student allowed to resubmit item with some mark penalty	34	13	0.004
No penalty or warning	7	0	0.062
Student allowed to resubmit item with no mark penalty	5	0	0.118
Written or oral warning from staff but no loss of marks	4	2	0.460

Macdonald, 2006). In the absence of definitive data on the extent of plagiarism within this specific institution, or even in the sector as a whole, it is difficult to judge how representative this data is; it is, however, consistent with Pickard's (2006) work but lower than that reported for IT students at an Australian University (Sheard et al., 2002). More interesting was that students in their second and third years thought that the level of cheating was lower than staff and first-year students. Part of this difference appears to be related to whether the student was a recent school leaver but may also be a reaction to the intensive plagiarism awareness initiatives that take place in the orientation period for new students (this study was done 3-5 days after orientation). Perhaps not surprisingly, the longer a staff member had been working as an academic the more common they thought cheating was. The staff in this study teach several different students groups and while not all staff taught the students in this study, there is no reason to suspect that approaches to plagiarism would vary between the various health disciplines. Almost all academic staff had given warnings for plagiarism; however, only 9% of students admitted receiving a warning.

In contrast to the study by Dordoy (2002), both staff and students had similar views about the frequency of specific cheating/plagiarism behaviors with copying text without providing a citation felt to be most common behavior. This is perhaps a reflection of Howard's (1995) notion of patch-writing as a learning strategy to cope with difficult material. It may also be reflective of comments from students that they lack the necessary disciplinary language and thus fall back on the author's words rather than attempt to rewrite the material and risk getting it wrong. If this is the case, it points to the need for specific educative strategies that focus on engaging with disciplinary language as well disciplinary content. From a staff perspective, the high frequency of "copying of a few paragraphs" as a form of cheating may also be a reflection of the relative ease with which this type of plagiarism is detected. Disjointed text, inconsistent style, and changes in language complexity are readily detected by even the most inexperienced staff. With 45% of staff indicating they are not confident about detecting plagiarism, those forms of plagiarism that are most easily detected may appear more prominent.

While there was concordance between staff and students with respect to the occurrence of cheating/plagiarism, there was a separation when it came to the reasons why these occur. Lack of understanding about the rules of referencing combined with laziness appeared as a major reasons for cheating (Table 3); however, staff were more inclined to think that it happened unconsciously or that students did not think they would be caught, whereas students wanted better grades or used it as a strategy for coping with high assessment load. This is similar to the findings of other studies which have cited high workload, lack of time, and pressure to pass/fear of failure as reasons for cheating (Dordoy, 2002; Sheard et al., 2003). Interestingly, although no staff admitted to not checking for plagiarism, a third of staff as a whole thought that their colleagues do not check for plagiarism. Furthermore, 17% of third-year students, those with the most experience of staff practices, compared with no students in first or second year felt staff failed to check for plagiarism. This suggests that some staff may not be as visible or as vigilant about checking for plagiarism as others; this has the potential to seriously undermine institutional messages about this academic misconduct.

As in Dordoy's study (2002), on which the questionnaire used in this study was based, students and staff ranked various examples of wrongdoing similarly

with students rating the items as less serious than staff. The inclusion of non-academic items in this scale attempts to separate general wrong-doing from that solely associated with academic activities and hence enable better understanding of the underlying differences between staff and students. An item that showed differences between the groups was for making up data for a project or lab class with staff seeing this as moderately serious (means score 1.64) compared with students (mean score 2.41). This is also consistent with Del Carlo and Bodner (2004) who found that students viewed dishonesty in laboratory classes as less serious than in real-life laboratories and that data collection in a class setting was just a means to an end (i.e., a grade). Although Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) found that staff and students differed on all examples of cheating in their study, they also noted that the greatest differences were for items relating to falsification of research data and copying another student's work. This view may have serious consequences if students carry this view into their professions. Particularly, for those in health professions, the outcomes may affect patient care.

When asked about appropriate penalties for plagiarism, students tended to err on the side of lower penalties or penalties that did not result in a loss of marks. For example, for first offences students favored warnings with no loss of marks, in contrast to staff who favored a loss of marks. There was more similarity in responses for penalties for repeat offences; however, students still favored penalties that allowed reduced marks rather than give no marks for items. Staff responses to this item on penalties broadly followed University policy on responses to student academic misconduct; however, there was considerable variability. Under this policy, penalties for academic misconduct range from counseling by staff, significant mark reduction for the assessment item, to official reprimands, and failure in the subject (Charles Sturt University Student Academic Misconduct Policy, 2006). In this study, 38% of students agreed that the different approaches to plagiarism by staff was confusing ,perhaps reflecting Flint et al.'s (2006) suggestion that individualized responses by staff, while meeting the staff's personal beliefs about the seriousness of various forms of cheating and plagiarism, may actually undermine institutional policy and guidelines. Furthermore, in contrast to the 78% of staff who thought that students receive adequate guidance about what was and was not acceptable, 43% of students felt that were not gaining this information. Together, this suggests students may be receiving mixed messages about expectations and penalties and this may be contributing to students' failure to understand the rules of referencing and how to avoid plagiarism.

One of the significant limitations of the current study is that the student cohort was relatively homogenous with respect to both age and gender, and the results may not be applicable to other student groups. As age, gender, experience with academia, and other factors such as cultural background may also influence attitudes to academic misconduct, future studies using larger more heterogeneous student groups are recommended. Another issue which has arisen is the possible difference in terminology used by staff and students, and the meanings and significance attached to the terms *plagiarism*, *cheating*, and *misconduct*. Fundamental differences in terminology will result in miscommunication about the issues and may undermine educative programs designed to address academic misconduct in higher education.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study has shown that while staff and students share many perceptions about cheating and plagiarism, there are areas where the differences in perception may be contributing to mixed messages about the seriousness of various cheating behaviors. These data can be used to develop local and institutional programs to improve preventive and educative strategies to minimize plagiarism while also improving students' understanding of the academic culture. This is particularly important for students new to the academic environment, and good support programs will ease their entry into what is sometimes a very different world to high school or industry. In this study, there were few differences between the year groups; however, the number of non-first-year students was small and more data is needed to determine whether exposure to academic norms changes the way students think about academic misconduct. A longitudinal study of students' perceptions, and how they change during their course of study, is currently in place and will address these questions.

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