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## **Policy, preparation and prevention: Proactive minimisation of student plagiarism**

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Countless cases of plagiarism are detected across the Australian higher education sector each year. Generally speaking, policy and other responses to the issue focus on punitive, rather than on educative, measures. Recently, a subtle shift is discernable. As well as ensuring appropriate consequences for plagiarists, several universities are beginning to formalise the inclusion of learning and teaching strategies in anti-plagiarism related policy and practice, as well as paying closer attention to the communication of unambiguous definitions of plagiarism. This article outlines one example of the emerging educative approach and details the ways in which this approach has been implemented across an entire university. The necessity of evidence-based evaluation of approaches to reducing plagiarism in higher education is discussed.

The precise incidence of plagiarism in Australian higher education is unknown. Universities keen to capture their share of an increasingly competitive market are reluctant to highlight the existence of scholarly indiscretions within their institutions. As Devlin (2003b) points out, it is understandable that universities do not want to risk their reputations by admitting they have a problem with plagiarism. The unpleasant experiences of those few unlucky institutions that have had recent media interest in alleged incidents of plagiarism and cheating provides one likely explanation of why universities are maintaining silence on this pervasive phenomenon. However, despite the lack of open dialogue, it is becoming increasingly clear to even the most casual observer that most, if not all, all Australian universities appear to be grappling with the issue to some extent. Certainly, international evidence from the USA, South Africa and Finland reviewed by Park (2003) suggests that plagiarism by students is becoming both more common and more widespread, although there are variations between disciplines, countries and undergraduate and postgraduate students.

### **Approaches to plagiarism management in Australia**

One of the consequences of the culture of secrecy around responses to plagiarism within Australian universities is that it is difficult to determine the ways in which universities are tackling the problem and to share and build on best practice. An examination of plagiarism-related policy provides some indication of the most common approaches being used, although no measure of the relative successes of these approaches. The assessment policy of each Australian university was examined by the author as part of the national Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) project on assessment carried out over 2001-2002 (James, McInnis and Devlin, 2002). While this examination of policy was not formerly reported in the

outcomes, it did inform the advice on plagiarism prepared as a major part of those outcomes.

On the whole, this examination of policy revealed that Australian universities generally view plagiarism as an example of academic misconduct and policy tends to focus on outlining procedures to be followed should plagiarism be suspected and penalties to be applied should it be detected or 'proven'. In general, policy related to plagiarism contained little, if any reference to an educative approach to plagiarism. As Devlin (2003a) reports, while some *claim* that a 'catch and punish' approach to plagiarism has led to an apparent reduction in the number of incidents (see for example, Zobel and Hamilton, 2002), there is a paucity of reliable, evidence-based data about the effectiveness of such an approach to minimising plagiarism in Australia.

Devlin (2003a) adds that because it takes little or no account of the reasons students plagiarise nor of the effects of assessment regimes that may inadvertently encourage plagiarism, the validity of a primarily detection-focussed approach is questionable. St Hill (2004) and Devlin (2003a) argue that equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to use the academic and writing conventions expected in Australian higher education is essential to reducing plagiarism, particularly inadvertent plagiarism. In addition, Devlin (2003a) argues that, "...appropriately designing, pitching, pacing and spacing assessment tasks..." (p. 39) is an effective preventative strategy that may be used in combination with punitive strategies.

Recently, two accounts have appeared in the literature of Australian faculties that have begun to tackle plagiarism with a holistic approach encompassing changes to policy and accompanying foci on student education and preparation and the assessment regime, while retaining appropriate punishment for transgressions (Devlin, 2003a; St Hill, 2004).

The current paper adds to that growing body of literature reflecting a sea change in Australian higher education by providing an account of a whole-of-university approach to minimising plagiarism that aims to minimise and better manage plagiarism. Swinburne University of Technology (Swinburne) has recently begun to implement a multi-dimensional approach to the issue of plagiarism through a series of initiatives. The approach is based on advice from the recent national Department of Science and Education (DEST) project overseen by the Australian University Teaching Committee (AUTC) and conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. The project resources specify that, in relation to minimising plagiarism, a four- part strategy is the best way forward for Australian universities. This would ideally include:

1. A collaborative effort to recognise and counter plagiarism at every level from policy, through faculty/division and school/department procedures, to individual staff practices;
2. Thoroughly educating students about the expected conventions for authorship and the appropriate use and acknowledgement of all forms of intellectual material;

3. Designing approaches to assessment that minimise the possibility for students to submit plagiarised material, while not reducing the quality and rigour of assessment requirements;
4. Installing highly visible procedures for monitoring and detecting cheating, including appropriate punishment and re-education measures (James, McInnis and Devlin, 2002, p. 37).

### **Approaches to the management of plagiarism outside Australia**

The advice from the DEST/AUTC project is similar to that provided by Carroll (2002) for universities in the United Kingdom. To minimise plagiarism, Carroll advocates paying attention to course design; assessment; informing students; teaching students the skills they need; detection; punishment *and* policy. In considering how institutions should manage the issue in the United States, Mitchell and Wisbey (1995) argue that policy responses and both educational and developmental programmes should be used.

### **The institution-wide approach**

Using the model and rationale of description of an institution-wide approach outlined by Asmar (2002), each of the initiatives that Swinburne has implemented is described below separately for clarity but it should be noted that in practice they are integrated into a multi-layered, cross-School, cross-disciplinary, strategic approach to the minimisation and improved management of plagiarism. This approach was known formally as the Minimising Plagiarism Project and is here referred to as the Plagiarism Project or the Project and the author of the current paper was responsible for developing, implementing and managing the Project.

It is hoped that the approach described here may be of use to other universities in Australia, New Zealand and the western world that want to address the issue of plagiarism in a way that transcends a 'catch-'n'-punish' approach and an over-reliance on advertised penalties to act as a deterrent. The approach described here proactively addresses the issue of plagiarism through sound policy, strong student preparation for academic work and thoughtful prevention through education and appropriate assessment design. This paper does not advocate ignoring detection methods (including the use of commercially available software) but suggests that a wider approach incorporating policy, preparation, prevention and processes has at least equivalent, and possibly superior, merit. Ideally, the approach described below would be employed in conjunction with monitoring and detection systems that do not place significant workload on teaching staff.

### **Project Recommendations**

Eight general recommendations related to minimising and managing plagiarism at an institutional level were made in the Swinburne Plagiarism Project and these were used as a broad guide for all strategies employed as part of the Project.

#### ***1. A holistic approach***

The first recommendation was that a holistic approach to minimising and managing plagiarism be taken by the University. This recommendation was approved by the higher education Divisional Advisory Committee (DAC), provided the framework for the Project and was achieved through concurrent changes to policy, student preparation, staff preventative measures and consistency in process and penalties. Each of these aspects is described further below.

## ***2. A revised policy***

The second recommendation was that the university definition of and policy on plagiarism be amended toward five outcomes. The first of these was to provide greater clarity; the second was to remove the phrase, 'with the intent to deceive', which was seen by both staff and students as a loophole; the third was to include guidance on collaborative work; the fourth was to include guidance on enabling plagiarism and the fifth was to improve the informal process applicable when plagiarism was suspected so that there was greater consistency across the institution and so that the protection of student rights were retained.

This recommendation was approved by DAC and after significant consultation with several stakeholder groups as well as individual staff and groups of students, a new definition of plagiarism was approved by Academic Board. The process through which this occurred is detailed below. Further changes to the informal process to be followed when plagiarism is suspected have also subsequently been considered and approved by Academic Board.

## ***3. Hard copy dissemination of the student guide***

The third recommendation was that a hard copy of the 9000 word student guide on avoiding plagiarism written specifically for the Project by the author be made available to all new students from Semester 1, 2004 onwards. This recommendation was approved and all new undergraduate and postgraduate students now receive a hard copy in their enrolment pack. All students and staff at the university, including sessional staff also have access to an e-copy of this guide. This strategy is discussed further below under 'Website'.

## ***4. Specific scholarly requirements communicated***

Fourth, it was recommended that specific, assignment-related descriptions of plagiarism be given to students by staff. This was deemed necessary as it was clear that a wide range of operational definitions of plagiarism were in use across disciplines and teaching staff in the university. This variation was further complicated by the wide range of assessment tasks in use. A set of templates to be amended according to the particular requirements of the specific assessment task was developed (please see Appendix 1 for an example of one of these templates). The recommendation was approved and a number of Schools have begun using of these communication templates.

## ***5. A focus on assessment***

The fifth recommendation was that assessment be the 2004/2005 staff development focus for the university. Unfortunately, it was decided that this recommendation would not be supported. The university instead advised that a series of workshops for academic staff specifically targeting the minimisation of plagiarism accompanied by the significant number of other strategies and resources outlined below would be

sufficient to change staff assessment practices to minimise opportunities for plagiarism. A series of staff development workshops are currently underway and these are outlined later in this paper.

### ***6. An academic transition programme***

The sixth recommendation was that consideration be given by the University to a School-based first year transition programme. This recommendation was approved by DAC and has since been taken up by a number of key academic staff across the university. These Educational Development Coordinators (EDCs) have developed a transition programme proposal and are in the process of seeking funding.

### ***7. Proactive and strategic use of available student support services***

Seventh, it was recommended that proactive use of the Language and Academic Skills service available for higher education students be made. Prior to the plagiarism Project, the service had typically been used as a reactive source of instruction for individual students referred for assistance. It was recommended that discipline-specific group based endeavours be developed by academic staff in consultation with staff from this service.

The recommendation was approved by DAC in principle but referred to the current Curriculum Review Project (CRP) to be considered under its auspices. The reason for the apparent hesitation appeared to be a concern about the resourcing implications of the recommendations. The CRP is ongoing.

### ***8. A central register of plagiarism incidents***

Finally, it was recommended that a central register of plagiarism incidents be created and maintained. This was necessary to address both the issue of inconsistent record keeping in the Schools and the fact that growing numbers of students at Swinburne study across Schools either through double degrees or through subject selection. Under the previous arrangements, if a student were found to have plagiarised in one School, this information would not be available to another School.

The recommendation was approved and the feasibility of such a database is currently being considered and advice on issues such as access and privacy are being sought. Issues such as responsibility for updating the database and the ways in which the information in it may be used are also being considered.

## **Definitional clarity**

One of the first issues addressed by the Plagiarism Project was the university's definition of plagiarism. After reviewing the existing definition in light of those of other universities as well as through the views of staff and students through a series of interviews, a new definition was proposed. This was refined through further consultation through the Heads of Schools and other appropriate staff and through a number of student groups. The revised definition and the rationale for each of the suggested changes were included in a discussion paper that was widely circulated and discussed across the university. The paper was revised and then presented to the Academic Policy and Planning Committee (APPC), a standing committee of the Academic Board. After several further changes by the APPC, the Academic Board

approved the new definition in June 2004 and the process of alerting staff and students to the changes has begun.

It is now widely agreed by staff and student groups that the new definition has less ambiguity than the previous one, that it provides appropriate guidance on collaborative work, that it makes clear the nature and seriousness of enabling plagiarism and that it adequately addresses the issues of the intention loophole that had existed previously. Please see Appendix 2 for a copy of the new definition.

### **The Minimising Plagiarism website**

A website dedicated to the Plagiarism Project was developed within the university's Learning Management System (*Blackboard*). All students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and academic staff (ongoing, contract and sessional) are enrolled in the site as 'students'. In addition, a generic login is available for general staff who may wish to access and use the site, such as library and language support staff. The rationale for the location within *Blackboard* was a deliberate positioning of what was considered a teaching and learning, rather than a disciplinary, issue firmly within a teaching and learning context. Although the location within *Blackboard* caused some disquiet initially among some general staff who had perceived they had been excluded, the provision of the generic login coupled with the rationale resolved any potential issues.

In addition, the provision of a single site for both staff and students was a deliberate strategy designed to highlight the shared responsibility for the minimisation of plagiarism.

Website resources include:

- A clear definition of plagiarism;
- A quiz for students that asks them to answer light-hearted questions about their preparedness to avoid plagiarism and that highlights the need for them to take responsibility for their learning, start work early, manage their time well, seek appropriate help and so on;
- FAQs and answers related to referencing, definitions and so on;
- A link to an on-line plagiarism workshop developed by the University of South Australia;
- Other useful links
- A quiz for staff that points at the ways in which they can reduce opportunities and reasons for plagiarism;
- An anonymous feedback function for users to the site manager;
- Many resources, links and reading materials.

### **Student preparation improvements**

A number of changes to student preparation for academic and appropriate scholarly work have been made or are in the process of being made. Some of these are described under the sections, 'The Minimising Plagiarism website' above and 'Staff practice improvements below'.

In addition to the strategies described elsewhere, hard copies of the student guide to avoiding plagiarism were distributed to School offices, libraries and language and academic skills services. E-copies were also made available through a number of avenues. The university Information Technology service put an e-copy on their server to which several other areas then created links. These included the Orientation Committee who linked it to the Orientation Website and the library. A number of Schools created links to an e-copy through a range of avenues. However, the main way in which the guide was made available and promoted, as explained, was by including it in the Minimising Plagiarism Website.

### ***Academic Transition programme***

As mentioned earlier, a group of academic staff interested in teaching and learning issues and representing a range of academic areas in the university developed a proposal for a university-wide transition programme focused on academic matters, including plagiarism. An application for internal funding, under a strategic initiative fund has been lodged.

### **Staff practice improvements**

A staff workshop, termed ‘The Plagiarism ‘Quick Fix’ Series’ has been developed and is currently being held in disciplinary settings throughout the university.

Essentially, the workshop focuses on three key areas:

1. Raising student awareness of the issue, of the website and of resources such as the on-line workshop, library skills training in referencing and the like and the availability of language and academic skills (LAS) support;
2. Educating students about plagiarism through
  - a. Defining plagiarism precisely, on a task by task basis so that there is less room for ambiguity about what is, and is not, acceptable scholarly practice in the context of each subject task;
  - b. Modelling precise scholarship and referencing requirements to further clarify requirements and support novice (student) attempts at expert tasks through providing examples of what is expected;
  - c. Teaching, or having students taught – through collaborative endeavours with the LAS service and/or library – the skills they need to undertake scholarly work without resorting to plagiarism.
3. Designing assessment to minimise plagiarism through a selection of strategies developed specifically for the project and taken both from the AUTC/DEST project (James et al., 2002) and from suggestions from staff within Swinburne University.

### **Changes to the informal process in suspected cases**

Part of the second of the eight overall recommendations made included improving the informal process applicable when plagiarism was suspected so that there was greater consistency across the institution, without infringing student rights. Several changes in relation to the precise procedures to be followed if a staff member suspects plagiarism in students’ work have recently been approved by Academic Board and dissemination of these changes is happening through the ‘Quick Fix’ workshops, the



‘Minimising Plagiarism’ website and will be further addressed through a series of training initiatives for senior staff currently under development.

### **Advice on change management**

As part of the Project, the university was offered advice on how best to bring about the desired changes to minimise and better manage plagiarism. This advice was offered through meetings between the Plagiarism Project Manager and the Deputy Vice Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) and through a series of presentations by the Project Manager to DAC. In particular, the university was advised use an approach incorporating all eight recommendations as well as advice from the website, guides and workshops. The university was specifically warned not to ‘cherry pick’ the advice offered – that is, for example, not to simply rely on the distribution of the student guide or the existence of the website to educate students about plagiarism.

The university was advised that an integrated, strategic approach that recognises and counters plagiarism at every level from university policy, through student preparation through the provision of education and resources and ongoing student support, staff education of students and assessment design, to the uniform application of appropriate processes and consequences was recommended. It was emphasised that this was not to say that all changes had to be made simultaneously, but that they must all be made.

### **Implementation**

Like the faculty described by Devlin (2003a), and perhaps like many other faculties and universities, there are a number of obstacles to change around the management of plagiarism at Swinburne. These obstacles are inherent in staff perceptions, gathered through interviews conducted as part of the project, including:

- a fear by some staff of risking collegial relationships with students by seeming or becoming authoritarian through a highly visible focus on minimising plagiarism;
- a reluctance by some staff to become the one who ‘dares to differ’ where it has been somewhat common cultural practice to ‘turn blind eye’ to some relatively minor cases of plagiarism;
- a reluctance by some staff to process a case of suspected plagiarism due to the time and workload involved in ‘proving’ the plagiarism;
- a belief by some staff that the University may be reluctant to act on some cases of suspected plagiarism and that therefore the effort expended in bringing a case may be fruitless in terms of dissuading or punishing plagiarism;
- a concern by some senior staff 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 by some senior staff that such damage to reputation may result in reduced international enrolments.

As Devlin (2003a) argues, attempts to overcome obstacles to minimising plagiarism and to determine the effectiveness of these attempts are essential but both pose

considerable challenges. The Project outlined in this paper produced materials and recommended processes for the university to use and follow in order to minimise and better manage plagiarism.

Semester One in 2005 will be the first semester for which the recommendations are likely to be fully implemented and the strategies fully operationalised, so there is as yet no data on their impact. Further, many of the recommendations relate to subtle changes in student understanding and perception as well as to changes in attitude of staff. These may be difficult changes to quantify, especially in the absence of reliable data before the changes were made.

Nevertheless, it is essential that the processes of ensuring the effectiveness of recommendations and strategies such as those described in this paper both commence as early as possible and are ongoing. It may be necessary to institute formal evaluation processes to measure the impact of changes. Possible sources of data to this end could include, but would not be limited to:

- An audit of the number of recommendations implemented, either partially or fully;
- A mapping of the use of plagiarism-related materials provided through the *Blackboard* LMS;
- The perceptions of students about the clarity of the university definition of plagiarism (some pre-Project data on such perceptions exists);
- The perceptions of teaching staff about the clarity of the university definition of plagiarism (some pre-Project data on such perceptions exists);
- The number of documented cases of plagiarism across the university in semesters after the Project has been fully implemented and in place for some time compared to numbers in previous semesters (Devlin, 2003a).

The approach described in this paper and being implemented at Swinburne University is a practical, multi-layered approach that attempts to simultaneously address policy, student preparation for scholarly undertakings and staff practice that may prevent opportunities for plagiarism. This approach is quite different from an ethics based approach popular in the United States and Canada where honor codes and modified honor codes are common (McCabe, 2003; McCabe and Pavela, 2004). In essence, an ethics based approach is based on the assumptions that plagiarism is deliberate and that asking students (and staff) to pledge to conduct themselves ethically will adequately address the issue. There may be some merit to this approach but its effectiveness remains unexamined in Australian higher education to date.

In any case, in determining the effectiveness of approaches to minimising and better managing plagiarism, evidence-based evaluation is vital. Despite a longer history of attempts to tackle the issue, there has been little empirical work to examine the efficacy of plagiarism reduction strategies in America (Brown & Howell, 2001). Thus far, in Australian higher education, such evaluation in relation to plagiarism has not been apparent either. While St Hill (2004) states that changes made in the faculty of Business at the University of Southern Queensland are expected to reduce the incidence of plagiarism, it is not yet known whether this expectation will be realised, nor what contribution particular changes might make to any reduction in incidence.

Future work in this area should focus on evidence-based evaluation of the impact of changes to plagiarism policy, prevention and management on the relative frequency and seriousness of plagiarism incidents in the context under consideration.

## **Conclusion**

Swinburne has just completed a reorganisation of its higher education division and the process that led to the new structure has had significant impact on many aspects of the organisation's operations. The progress of the Plagiarism Project has been one of many aspects that have been interrupted and effectively placed on hold until staff settle into their new arrangements. Ordinarily straightforward issues such as collecting data on the number of cases of plagiarism that have come before formal panels in the last semester, for example, have not been possible. Some academic staff have noted the difficulty, and in some cases, impossibility of implementing strategies discussed in the 'Quick Fix' workshops due to the fact that their work environment has been disrupted. Hopefully these issues will be addressed as the new structure comes into effect and the uncertainties that are part of every reorganisation are resolved.

Indeed, there may be positive outcomes from the reorganisation in terms of evaluating initiatives such as the one described in this paper. For example, previous systems of managing suspected and detected cases of plagiarism and of collecting data in relation to the outcomes of cases that went before the university's formal plagiarism hearings were inadequate in some areas of the University. It is possible that a refined system can be set up as part of the fewer Faculties in the new organisational arrangements and such data be made more readily available.

As Park (2004) notes in describing the approach to dealing with plagiarism taken at Lancaster University in the U.K., there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to institutional responses to plagiarism, which must be informed by the culture and context in which they will be implemented. The approach described in this paper may encourage those in other universities to experiment with a holistic, multi-layered approach in their own contexts. In considering which approach they might take, it may be useful for universities to note the suggestion from Zangrando (1992) that inaction creates a haven for plagiarists.

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## Appendix: Plagiarism template example

**In addition to the behaviours specified in the Swinburne Assessment and Appeals policy, the ticked examples below related to using the work of others in your individual assignment are considered to be plagiarism in this subject. Note that this list is not exhaustive and broadly indicates the types of behaviour that are considered to be plagiarism.**

Buying or accepting an assignment from a past or current student (or another source) and submitting it as your own;

Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another past or current student and using it as a model for the structure and/or style of your own assignment;

Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another past or current student and using it as a model for the content of your own assignment;

Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another past or current student and copying it but making small changes - e.g. replacing a few verbs, replacing an adjective with a synonym and so on;

Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another past or current student and cutting and pasting one or more paragraphs by using sentences of the original but leaving out a small number and putting some sentences in a different order;

Taking verbal and/or written advice from another past or current student about what to include in an assignment.

**Important note: If you are not sure whether a behaviour constitutes plagiarism or not, please see the Subject Convenor.**

### **Figure 1: Template for specifying plagiarism behaviour related to students using the work of others in their individual assignments.**

Note: The template can be amended in whatever way(s) the Subject Convenor sees fit. Items may be deleted, edited or added. Three other templates exist, one each for specifying plagiarism behaviour related to

- behaviour within assignment groups when assignments are expected to be individual students' own, independent work ;
- behaviour related to students reusing your own assignments; and
- behaviour related to work across or outside assignment groups.