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Crisp, GT (2004), 'Plagiarism and the reputation of the university: how to distribute effort between educating students on attribution and rigorous detection of cheating?', in Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum 2004: Quality in a Time of Change, ed R Carmichael, Australian Universities Quality Agency, ACT, pp 52-56.

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23 May 2012

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/28615>

Plagiarism and the Reputation of the University: How to Distribute Effort between Educating Students on Attribution and Rigorous Detection of Cheating?

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During 2003, the University of Adelaide convened a Plagiarism Working Party to review the policies, procedures and documentation related to plagiarism, to review staff and student development programs related to preventing plagiarism, and to assess the suitability of software services for the detection of plagiarism. The fundamental question faced by the university community was whether plagiarism should be considered an educational issue or a disciplinary issue. The final documentation was written in a way that emphasised both an educational and disciplinary approach, with formal faculty and school committees seen as having a responsibility for the disciplinary approach, and individual teaching staff having a responsibility towards the educational approach. A survey of students in early 2004 indicated that while students were well aware of plagiarism issues and policy documents, they were unsure as to their effectiveness in reducing plagiarism. Students were also unsure of the educational resources and assistance available to them in how to meet expected standards related to academic integrity and methods for attribution and referencing.

1. Introduction

All universities expect a high level of professional conduct from their staff and students, and are committed to development activities that support academic integrity as an essential component of scholarly activity (Larkham & Manns, 2002). Plagiarism policies for most universities describe a commitment to educational support for students and an increased effort directed to the detection of those who, intentionally or unintentionally, fall short of the required standards (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002). During 2003, the University of Adelaide convened a Plagiarism Working Party to review the policies, procedures and documentation related to plagiarism, to review staff and student development programs related to preventing plagiarism, and to assess the suitability of software services for the detection of plagiarism. After considering much of the literature and various approaches taken by other universities in Australia and the UK (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Carroll, 2002), it became clear that the fundamental question faced by the university community was whether plagiarism should be considered an educational issue or a disciplinary issue. This question was repeated in various forms throughout the 12 month review phase, and tended to dominate the approaches taken in formulating recommendations to the university community. This dichotomy was also seen to influence the approach students would take to the plagiarism issue. There is a continuum of effort and resources that staff and students can expend to uphold the standards and reputation of the university, and the issue for those involved in policy writing and implementation is how to maximize the benefits to the university from this effort. This paper discusses some of the approaches the University has taken in dealing with plagiarism prevention from an educational and disciplinary perspective, and presents some of the issues still to be resolved with respect to a survey of student opinion on plagiarism information and issues.

2. Outcomes from the Review Process

The Working Party on Plagiarism was constituted by the University Learning and Teaching Committee, and formally reported their recommendations to the Academic Board. The process associated with the deliberations of the committee and its recommendations (adopted by the Academic Board, November 2003), were similar to those for many other universities who have recently undergone this review process.

As part of the consultation process with staff, a series of lunchtime seminars was held. The seminar series generated considerable discussion and a series of questions was posed for staff and students concerning the tone of the official policy documents. Should plagiarism prevention be considered an educational issue or a disciplinary issue? There was continuous tension in discussions between different staff and student groups across the university on where the emphasis should be placed. The final documentation

was written in a way that emphasised both an educational and disciplinary approach, with formal faculty and school committees seen as having a responsibility for enacting the disciplinary consequences of the plagiarism policies, and individual teaching staff having a responsibility for enacting an educational approach.

2.1 What should be the Responsibilities of Schools, Staff and Students in Regard to Plagiarism?

The formal plagiarism policy for the university indicated that schools should:

- ensure each course guide will contain information on the requirements for citation, together with the (areas) required (or preferred) referencing style
- ensure that each course coordinator provides information to students that contain specific warnings about plagiarism and refers to the university policies

The words used to describe the role of teaching staff were quite different. This indicated that all staff involved in teaching would assist in providing a learning and teaching environment that upholds academic integrity. It is the teaching staff's responsibility to:

- provide clear instructions regarding assessment requirements, including group activities and/or collaborative work
- provide resources and feedback, as appropriate, to assist students to practise and learn the academic language and conventions required for their assessment tasks
- set, as appropriate, assessment tasks that minimise the opportunities for plagiarism
- provide marking criteria and an 'Assessment Cover Sheet' for all summative assessment tasks, and require the signature of the student declaring that all cited works have been acknowledged
- take reasonable steps to detect plagiarism and collusion

Additionally, when submitting works for publication or for research grants, it was the staff member's responsibility to uphold the discipline standards of academic integrity in relation to the use of the works of others.

The emphasis for students was intended to convey the fact that engaging in plagiarism impedes a student's ability to learn; however, the policy documents tended to be legalistic and appeared as a list of 'do's and don'ts'. It was each student's responsibility to:

- submit for assessment, whether by examination or otherwise, only their own piece of work, except where either the works of others are appropriately acknowledged, or the assessor has required, or given prior permission for, group or collaborative work to be submitted
- not allow a student to copy another student's assessment work with the intention to deceive the assessor
- not produce all or part of an assessment work for another student with the intention to deceive the assessor

2.2 Should there be Mandatory Formative Assessment so that Students have an Opportunity to Practise their Assessment Tasks?

The principal methods that were to be used to reduce plagiarism were educative and involved ensuring that students were aware of the expectations and standards associated with assessment work for a particular discipline. It was important that students were presented with examples of accepted academic conventions for acknowledging another person's work, and opportunities to obtain feedback on their written work before summative assessment tasks were undertaken. Another issue that was discussed,

especially in relation to comments from students, was how to reward students for expressing ideas in their own words (at an appropriate standard)?

2.3 Should Students be Penalised for Plagiarism if they are new to Tertiary Studies?

What does it mean to be a learner in higher education? At research-intensive universities it means an induction into research-based learning, being an apprentice to the conventions of a specific discipline. This apprenticeship involves learning the language of the discipline and a commitment to academic integrity. Commencing students should therefore be introduced explicitly to the concept of academic integrity and why this is important for student learning.

2.4 How Serious should the Penalties be for Plagiarism?

All teaching staff members were expected to be involved in the prevention and detection of plagiarism. The detection methods vary depending on discipline, and include either systematic or random sampling of assessment submissions to manual scrutiny or copy detection software (such as Turnitin); being aware of significant differences in a student's performance across a number of tasks, and using more than one assessor. Penalties for confirmed cases of unattributed works in an assessment submission vary from resubmission without penalty in cases of inadvertent omissions, to receiving a result of zero, failing the course, expulsion, and/or the imposition of a financial penalty.

3. Outcomes from the Trial of a Plagiarism Detection Service (Turnitin)

A review of documents outlining relevant trials that had been conducted in Australia and in the UK was undertaken and the Joint Information Systems Committee (<http://www.plagiarismadvice.org/resources/briefing-papers>) report on plagiarism was consulted. On the basis of these reports, and after discussions with a number of university staff engaged in plagiarism detection and assessment, a trial of Turnitin (<http://www.Turnitin.com>) was conducted. This trial involved six departments within the university, including some with large introductory classes and some with advanced undergraduate or honours classes. The trial was conducted with minimum support for staff in order to test the ease of use of the Turnitin product and to determine, in a realistic manner, problems that staff and students would encounter when undertaking a process of using digital files for the detection of plagiarism. On the whole, most of the trial participants found the Turnitin web-based service relatively straightforward to use. One staff member was not satisfied and experienced considerable frustration and disappointment with using Turnitin. The issues that arose from the trial are outlined below.

3.1 Electronic Submission of Assessment Work

Students are required to submit digital versions of their assessment work if it is to be entered into the Turnitin database. It is too resource intensive to scan paper copies of assessment work and use optical character recognition (OCR) to generate digital files. The two recommended options for digital submission of assessment files were for students to use the 'Digital Dropbox' in the University Learning Management System (Blackboard) or to upload their assessment work directly into the Turnitin database. The training that students require in order to load digital versions of their assessment work into Blackboard or Turnitin is minimal, but some form of induction is necessary.

3.2 Copyright

Staff and students in all Australian universities are becoming increasingly aware of the consequences of the Commonwealth of Australia Copyright Act 1968 (and amendments). Students own the copyright to their assessment work, and recent press coverage has highlighted legal opinion on the right of universities to enter student assessment work into a database service, such as Turnitin (Caval Collaborative Solutions – plagiarism detection service, http://www.caval.edu.au/prs/eprod/pd/141563593_Summary%20of%20advice%20WEB.PDF).

Most universities are now requiring students to complete an assessment cover sheet explicitly granting the right to reproduce the work and submit it to a database for the purposes of assessment and plagiarism detection.

3.3 Student Learning

The major benefit to be derived from the use of Turnitin was expected to be a significant increase in student awareness of plagiarism issues and the standards expected for acknowledgement and referencing. This aspect was highlighted during the university seminar series, and by a number of the staff in the Turnitin trial.

3.4 Will Turnitin Detect all Cases of Plagiarism?

The use of the Turnitin service did not lead to the detection of all cases of suspected plagiarism. Only certain resources are available in digital format and Turnitin will only detect material that exists in a public space. Material that exists behind password protected web sites will not be available for comparisons. The frequency with which the Turnitin database is updated by regular visits to web pages on the internet or other databases will impact on the efficiency and depth of the comparison between new and existing material. Teaching staff were not able to rely solely on Turnitin for the detection of plagiarised material.

4. Student Survey on University Information, Policies and Procedures on Plagiarism

An online survey on plagiarism was made available to all students at the university in March 2004. Over 1,000 responses were received to the 10 Likert style questions and one open-ended question. The survey questions sought feedback from students on their access to information on the university's plagiarism policy, on resources that were provided to assist students in appropriate referencing and attribution, and their awareness of the use of Turnitin. The majority of students (~90%) indicated that they were aware of plagiarism issues before commencing their university studies, and a similar percentage were reasonably well informed about the university's plagiarism policy. The major sources of information for students on plagiarism issues were (in decreasing percentage) course handouts, lecturers, tutors or demonstrators, university student guide, orientation week program, other students and the Student Association; however, almost two thirds of students either did not know, or were unsure, where to go for assistance with quoting and referencing in written assignments. Almost 60% of students disagreed, or were unsure, whether university policies were effective in minimising plagiarism, and a similar percentage disagreed, or was unsure, whether the university provided effective support for students in how to avoid plagiarism. Almost two thirds of students were not aware that the university was using Turnitin.

5. Conclusion

Although universities have been confronted with issues of academic integrity and discipline specific standards and expectations with respect to attribution for a long time, it is only recently that community interest in these issues has been widespread. Universities are aware that their reputations depend significantly on the public perception of the quality and integrity of their programs and qualifications. Commercial services, such as Turnitin, rely on universities acting to protect their reputation in the marketplace. The University of Adelaide continues to commit significant resources to both educational programs aimed at raising the standard of learning outcomes for students and for the detection of intentional cheating; however, the survey results indicated that while students were well aware of plagiarism issues and policy documents, they were unsure of their effectiveness in reducing plagiarism. Students were also unsure of the educational resources and assistance available to them in how to meet expected standards related to academic integrity and methods for attribution and referencing.

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