

Academic Integrity: Pots and Kettles?

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A broad review of university academic integrity policies and practices mirrors much of the plagiarism research and literature in concentrating almost totally on students as the target audience (see McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 2001). This appears to indicate an assumption that a culture of academic honesty exists and that it is maintained and safeguarded by the universities and academia. The academic process aims to ensure that students are socialised into this assumed culture of honesty.

This paper challenges the assumption of an existing culture of honesty and questions whether the expectations and treatment of students by academics might be a case of the pot calling the kettle black. It does so through the examination of a number of illustrative case studies. These suggest that the rhetoric of academic honesty might be more realistically represented in the proverbial 'Do as I say, not as I do'.

Much of the plagiarism literature analyses cases and consequences, or debates structures and procedures. This paper's focus is on aspects that are relatively unrepresented - the impact of academic dishonesty incidents on the 'victims' and on the contextual culture. The cases also portray variations on the theme of reported types of academic dishonesty, revealing that academic malpractice can be much more of a pervasive, ingrained, 'non-discussable' presence than a 'culture of honesty' assumes.

There is an established case history of high-profile plagiarism in academia, from the 'Burt Affair' to other reports of academic malpractice ranging from the globally sensational to the everyday, culturally-embedded. These include the participation of senior academics in falsifying research data to fabricate results and plagiarising in higher degree theses, in publications and in speeches.

Baty and Marcus writing in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (April 15th 2005) report that "[D]ozens more cases have emerged in the US", adding support to the belief that the known cases of plagiarism by academics are "only the tip of the iceberg" (Carroll 2002, p. 13).

Australian academia, the context of this paper, is not exempt from academic dishonesty. Probably the best-known case is that of a world-renowned medical researcher in fertility who was found to have falsified key scientific data and based publications and recommended medical procedures on them. Also attracting significant international attention was the case of the Vice-Chancellor of Monash University and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia who resigned in 2002 in the face of plagiarism charges.

Martin (1984; 1989) has been persistent in analysing and commenting on a broad range of Australian academic dishonesty cases and in suggesting structures and processes for preventing or managing them. Cases he has cited include:

- plagiarism in a text by a professor and Dean at La Trobe University;
- protracted allegations of academic malpractice in the doctoral thesis of a University of Newcastle professor;
- fabrication by a Deakin University professor of data underpinning publications; and
- plagiarism in the doctoral thesis and associated publications of an Australian academic.

Martin (1984; 1989) detailed the frustrations suffered and 'deafness' encountered by 'whistle-blowers' in these cases. He also reported his own similar experiences in attempting to publish about them and perceived a general unwillingness to engage with the issues he raised. He concluded that plagiarism was a taboo topic in academia (Martin 1984), an 'undiscussable'. This belief might have influenced his summation that "plagiarism is generally considered a clear cut transgression . . . and because it is much more widespread than normally acknowledged, publicity on this topic is assiduously avoided by academics" (Martin 1984, p.87), explaining why "its occurrence has received scant attention in public forums and hardly any in the scholarly literature" (Martin 1984, p.83).

Shepherd (2007) conferred with academics specialising in academic integrity matters and concluded that, while much attention has been devoted to student academic integrity matters, disproportionately less meaningful enquiry has been conducted into the honesty of academics.

Scandalous academic dishonesty cases will always have the media 'sexiness' to attract attention and publicity. In contrast, relatively absent from the list above and less likely to stimulate 'outrage' are the low-level, persistent incidents that can have massive impact on the 'victims' and eat holes in the fabric of a culture of honesty. As Zigmond and Fischer (2002, p. 229) put it, "equally deserving of our attention are the misdemeanors that also can occur", what they refer to as the "little murders".

The research on which this paper is founded uses a narrative approach as it interprets a number of case studies. These case studies were selected on a convenience sampling basis since they arose from 'conversations' with colleagues in three Australian universities. The researcher's role as Academic Integrity Officer was the starting point for respondents raising concerns about their own experiences as 'victims' of academic dishonesty. These informal initial discussions led to semi-structured interviews which were recorded, summarised and checked for accuracy. Such an interpretive approach was particularly apt because of the subjectivity of the topic.

The findings of the case studies support the claim that publicly-reported cases of plagiarism by academics might, indeed, be the tip of the iceberg. Plagiarism, especially the unacknowledged use of others' ideas and work, is prevalent and embedded in everyday academic culture. It manifests itself in a variety of types that are characteristically low-level, persistent and destructive.

The reactions of 'victims' of such plagiarism varied in intensity and duration, but common to all were emotional turmoil and the corrosion of professional trust. Another recurring theme that emerged

consistently was the iniquitous prospect of 'whistle-blowing'. This was seen by all victims as having, for them, much greater potential for harm than good. Thus, it was not an option to be pursued, so the perpetrators of academic dishonesty were not confronted. This, perhaps, affords some explanation why plagiarism by academics is able to malingering behind the veneer of a culture of honesty.

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