Studies in Learning, Evaluation Innovation and Development
http://sleid.cqu.edu.au
3(2), pp. 37–47. October 2006

# Adapting to market conditions: plagiarism, cheating and strategies for cohort customisation[#]

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## Abstract

This paper commences with themes discussed in two papers, "An assessment strategy to help forestall plagiarism problems" (Kennedy, 2004) concerning how assessment strategies can be structured to minimise plagiarism and "Paradigm shift: From traditional to on-line education" (Gallie & Joubert, 2004) concerning the shifting focus between teacher-centred and student-centred learning. The themes raised are examined from the perspective of post-graduate course delivery to predominantly international students within the context of recognition of the specific needs of the student body. The themes are then extended by considering the outcomes of a case study that adapted methods of assessment with a view to improving outcomes and reducing plagiarism and cheating.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education.

ISSN 1832-2050

# Introduction

The current environment of higher education in Australia is a complex mix of competing ideologies and constraints placing pressures on academics and supporting infrastructures. Governments have responded to economic rationalism and forced universities to compete with one another (Milliken & Colohan, 2004), perform to variable performance indicators, and adapt to the needs espoused by professional bodies, corporate entities and various technologies. This, in essence, means responding to the market and is characterised by "the enterprise university" (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Whether these paths are desirable, useful or efficient is not debated. Rather, a pragmatic approach is taken to a particular student cohort of international students which accepts that they are enrolled students for whom a particular body of knowledge must be imparted in a manner which can be demonstrated as meeting a designated standard.

The remainder of this paper will discuss cheating methods and motivations followed by a case study of strategies used to achieve positive outcomes within operative constraints in an Australian metropolitan university for business studies. In particular, the paper focuses on the adaptability of post-graduate international

[#] The constructive comments of two anonymous reviewers are acknowledged.

students to on-line technologies and variation in assessment practices to combat cheating.

# Cheating (or lack of academic integrity)

Kennedy (2004) points out that plagiarism is a major problem in academe that has grown in recent times to epidemic proportions. Some plagiarism is characterised as unintentional due to ignorance or lack of understanding and some is characterised as deliberate. Unintentional plagiarism is not the focus of this paper. Universities all provide students with information about what constitutes plagiarism to a greater or lesser degree. And yet, instances of plagiarism are prolific. The rise in instances and methods of cheating supports a premise of intent. However, plagiarism represents only one facet of cheating. Students have become more adept at using a variety of techniques to enhance perceptions of performance, some of which have been significantly enabled by on-line technologies (Stoney & McMahon, 2004). In the past, deliberate cheating took the form of looking at another's exam paper, trying to take into an exam reference material or copying portions (or the whole) of another's assessment task. While the Internet may have made plagiarism easier to execute, the avenues now available to allow others to do a student's work have grown significantly. On-line technologies, in essence "cybercheating" (or cyber-pseudepigraphy as described by Page, 2004), can be harnessed to circumvent a variety of different assessment regimes and also as a means of communication to gain advantage (Stoney & McMahon; Phillips & Horton, 2000). Examples include allowing someone other than the enrolled student to:

- feign engagement in assessable on-line group discussion
- construct databases or web-based data for information technology-based courses of study
- access technologies and complete randomly generated case studies for assessment
- provide a completed assessment task as an economic transaction over the Internet (these may be individual rather than replicated; however, they are still the work of another).

Students can also gain advantage by speedy communication of information in test environments where resource constraints do not allow simultaneous testing across all campuses and cohorts, or even within test environments. In on-line testing environments, evidence has shown that email communication software was surreptitiously open while students were engaged in completion of the test, ostensibly to request some form of assistance. In many circumstances, just who is sitting behind the keyboard completing the task and who has acquired the skills and knowledge gained during assessments is questionable.

Software tools, such as *CopyCatch* or *Turnitin* used by many universities can detect plagiarism but not whether the enrolled student actually completed the work submitted. It is not unusual for international students to have a less than adequate command of spoken English, a perception supported by poor demonstrated literacy in student email or intranet correspondence, and for them to display exceptional standards of English competency in assessment tasks. It is acknowledged that domestic students also have the same opportunities without language barriers arousing suspicion; however, the pressures on international students to perform can be more significant. Zobel and Hamilton (2002, p. 24) confirm that international students were "a clear majority identified as plagiarists by software."

## Why cheat?

The issues contributing to the cheating epidemic can be categorised as a combination of traditional factors and also more recent developments in the education market. While the temptation has always existed, the opportunities to execute cheating using an indirect technology medium may offer an opportunity which is perceived as somehow less risky. Phillips and Horton (2000), together with Stoney and McMahon (2004), confirm that "simple opportunity" plays a role in cheating behaviour. The more traditional factors contributing to the propensity to cheat were enumerated by Kennedy (2004, p. 2) as including:

- not fully understanding university culture
- inappropriate study skills:
  - poor time management
  - inadequate assignment preparation and writing skills
  - inadequate examination and test preparation skills
  - assignment tasks not clearly understood
- no control over submission dates of assignments that coincide
- poor quality teaching by lecturers
- personal life issues (family, work, health).

To this list can be added reasons which are more prevalent among international students for whom the decision to study in Australia can involve significant financial sacrifices by the family and involve lifestyle as well as learning challenges. Additional reasons for cheating (Zobel & Hamilton, 2002; Hinton, 2004) may include:

- an inability to adapt to western style learning
- slow adaptation or inability to cope with Australian cultural diversities and differences including religious isolation and in some instances being unchaperoned
- poor English skills compromising comprehension, the ability to ask for clarification or support, and written tasks
- fear of failure and consequent:
  - financial hardship
  - loss of face either personal or by the family
  - inability to extend visas and complete the course of learning
- poor technology and computer skills.

Hamilton et al. (2003, p. 55) suggest that the rising volume of international students seeking an Australian education requires that the needs of this group of students be addressed. In particular, they identify that international students are not a homogenous group with the individual student having to "come to terms with not only the teaching style of an Australian academic but also a diversity of learning approaches among classmates."

## Shift from traditional to on-line learning

"Cybercheating" has been significantly enabled and has emerged as a consequence of the evolution of higher education under an economic rationalist agenda. The on-line revolution requires increasingly sophisticated technologies to administer student records, student access regimes, unit-specific material and research tools available through libraries. While these tools have facilitated access to education without the need to be on-site when engaged in the learning process, they increasingly require that academics be responsive, progressive and technology literate. These pressures challenge time management which must be balanced

within an environment of increasing class sizes, computer resource limitations and the need to maintain academic integrity.

### Enabling

The harnessing of technologies for learning has also fostered a corresponding innovation in assessment methods to generate efficiencies with more transparent tools and assessment criteria. This desire for greater transparency is in accord with the "market" perspective supporting a standardised (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 177), non-discriminatory approach to education which can meet professional requirements and is offered to all qualifying students on the same basis (Parker, 2005). There are now many assessment processes within business studies which take advantage of on-line technologies to either mediate or deliver a particular task. For example databases of randomly generated multiple choice questions can be made available to students for testing. Marginson and Considine (p. 60) provide evidence that student-staff ratios in business studies are significantly higher than in other academic areas which can mean that resource issues generate a less than desirable environment for testing. For example, if all students in one cohort cannot have access to computers in a controlled environment for testing at one time, then opportunities for "cybercheating" emerge.

### Consequence

The paradigm shift from academic-centred to student-centred learning discussed by Gallie and Joubert (2004) presumes to a significant extent that the majority of students have the requisite underlying skills to deal with challenges faced. The new paradigm requires that students are generally self-motivated to move through unit materials and initiate contact with academics. This style of learning supports a critical appraisal approach with emphasis on open debate rather than acceptance of the role of the academic as an expert. The importance of interaction in forms of flexible, on-line and distance education is well established (Wilson & Stacey, 2004, p. 33). Evidence suggests that international students from Asian countries are more likely to take information uncritically and not question authority figures, which is at odds with the student-centred learning paradigm (Hamilton et al., 2003). This form of learning environment alienation gives rise to reasons for cheating.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that certain cultural groups have varying competencies in self-mediated study and computer literacy. Learning styles that provide basic data to be rote learnt require little need for students to access technologies and seek information. A consequence of these variables is that students lacking confidence in using computers mine the same basic unit data for assessments, thereby increasing the propensity for plagiarism. Phillips and Horton (2000) have noted that certain disciplines, such as business, are more likely to have higher incidences of plagiarism.

## A case study of strategies to reduce cheating and improve outcomes

This case study represents a reflective analysis of changes that were initiated as a consequence of increasingly poor student outcomes for one subject in a post-graduate program. The case study is not part of a carefully constructed program of analysis for which justification of strategies can be supported by reference to best-practice techniques. Rather, the strategies adopted reflect the outcomes of a number of meetings between academics, teaching and learning development staff and student support experts sharing a concern for deteriorating performance. The

existence of an imminent window of opportunity to initiate change in assessment methods for the forthcoming semester provided limited opportunity for a more systematic and considered approach to the issues highlighted. It is acknowledged that longer timeframes and other strategies may have yielded more pedagogically defensible methods.

Discussions with colleagues from other institutions suggest that the following scenario would not be uncommon for post-graduate education in a number of higher education institutions. For a post-graduate core unit in business studies, international students represented approximately 80–90 percent of the student cohort. Students enrolled did not necessarily hold an undergraduate degree related to the course of study being undertaken and generally demonstrated an inadequate level of English proficiency. Incidences of reported and penalised plagiarism together with suspicion that many students did not prepare the assessment that was submitted increased substantially from semester 2/2003. Unit statistics also showed that although student outcomes for progressive assessments were satisfactory there was a high incidence of poor exam results, particularly for those that did well in progressive tasks. The assessment regime became the focus of attention as there had been no significant change to unit content or staffing over the period of review.

***Unit Statistics***

| | **2/2003** | **1/2004** | **2/2004** | **1/2005** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Enrolled | 165 | 189 | 216 | 249 |
| Staff-student ratio | 1:41 | 1:47 | 1.43 | 1:41.5 |
| Failure rate | 22 | 28.5 | 43.5 | 23.5 |
| International % | 70 | 75 | 85 | 85–90 |
| Average mark for progressive assessments (35%) | 26.3 | 24 | 26.7 | 21.8 |
| Average exam mark (100%) | 49.6 | 48 | 45.8 | 53.9 |

While the percentage of students who are designated as international above cannot be conclusively determined as a consequence of pathways of entry into particular university courses, the trend supports rising enrolments for international students across the whole Australian university sector. During the period of review it was generally perceived that students were not meeting the required standard for success. The content of the unit is subject to accreditation requirements with a professional body and thus, while content could not be significantly changed in the short term, the way in which it was communicated and assessed was able to be reviewed.

## Cultural awareness

During 2003 and 2004 awareness of cultural learning modes which impeded students' ability to generate positive outcomes within the case study institution began to occur. Discussions with individual students, within seminar groups, amongst academic staff in teaching and learning forums and as part of student-centred learning resource groups provided insights into differing learning approaches. These following comments are not empirically justifiable; however, discussion with numerous students and with many other academic colleagues, suggest that these issues are not unusual. While insights may help to explain poor outcomes to some degree, they are also recognised as part of a larger group of issues.

In certain international cultures, the level of tuition fees paid to a tertiary institution provides an indication of the level of effort that is required to obtain a degree. The more that is paid, the lower is the effort required to attain an outcome. One student (subsequently confirmed by many others) commented that "in our country we do not work at all during the semester, then study like crazy for three weeks at the end and so long as we get 35% on the exam, we pass." This suggested one possible reason why encouraging students to complete progressive assessment tasks by motivating them early produced very poor responses. The unfamiliarity of studying in a progressive manner also meant that some students did not appreciate that weekly topics required some preparation before class delivery and for this to be followed up with problem solving in their own time. Such poor appreciation of study requirements initially suggested that many students had become so far behind in just four weeks that they were unable to recover sufficiently to pass the unit. This may have been true; however, there is overwhelming evidence that many did exceptionally well in progressive assessment tasks and then produced very poor exam outcomes with many questions on the exam not being attempted at all. Such evidence suggests that progressive assessment tasks were either poorly retained by a large group of students, or that results obtained were not entirely a product of the students' own efforts.

Other students complained that when they logged onto intranet discussion areas that staff (who had been instructed to engage students and promote discussion) were "evasive and did not get to the point and provide the answer wasting people's time." These cultural groups wanted all materials to be provided and not to have to engage in discussion or group learning which would challenge their comprehension skills and perhaps embarrass themselves by evident poor written or verbal skills. Not engaging in more broad-based learning techniques meant that, where theoretical concepts were applied to new situations and case studies, students were unable to make the link between the theory and practical applications. The perception by students that exam questions should be written the same way as they had been the year before with perhaps only the numbers changing was symptomatic of this approach.

## Assessment tasks

Without addressing the merits or otherwise of particular forms of assessment in an accredited post-graduate environment, the following assessment tasks are discussed as a means of identifying the forms of assessment that existed within the case study unit and how and why they were changed. During 2003/4 the university was in the process of changing from one intranet based learning platform to another with the on-line environment generally characterised as a repository for stored material and for limited communication between students and academic staff.

For semesters 2/2003 and 1/2004 and 2/2004 the assessment tasks in this unit were:

1. 10% essay
2. 5% computer-based randomly generated case study in an uncontrolled environment
3. 20% assignment based on application of theory to a case study with calculated outcomes and an analytical component
4. 65% closed book exam with a hurdle requirement that students must pass the exam.

Task one was required to be submitted in approximately week four of a 13-week semester, with many international students enrolling late and not yet having access

to or being familiar with university infrastructures. Students in the majority of cases had only recently arrived and this was their first course of study in Australia. The task was submitted in hardcopy form, precluding the application of software such as *Turnitin* to detect plagiarism. However, the task was still the subject of many allegations and subsequent penalisation of plagiarism. Various issues that became apparent were:

- students were found to have copied from one another with only formatting type changes
- one had taken another's copy from a shared printer and submitted it as their own
- level of English comprehension and grammar was far in excess of perceived student abilities, and
- whole paragraphs from the text were constantly identified.

Task two required students to apply knowledge gained in seminars to a randomly generated computer-based case study, and to submit this case study for assessment. The task was essentially self-assessing so that where students did not attain full marks, they could attempt another exercise as often as they wished until the knowledge level increased and the final best effort was submitted. Most students were able to attain full marks for this assessment. Subsequent student efforts using these basic concepts cast significant doubt over the abilities demonstrated in assessments submitted. It became very clear in the exam that knowledge assumed, based on this task, was not held.

Task three was also submitted in hardcopy form with many calculations being identical, making it difficult to assess the presence of plagiarism. However, where calculations were consistently incorrect and written analysis demonstrated the same spelling errors on more than one submission, cheating was reported. Also worthy of note were the observations of a sessional staff member in the student cafeteria. Having been warmly greeted by a past student, it was observed that the student was "checking" (in effect preparing) many assignments for students in what looked like a small business operation. This task was worth 20% of the assessment in the unit and exam outcomes for questions relating to this topic cast significant doubt that knowledge demonstrated in submissions was held by students.

Task four was a traditional exam with a section containing multiple choice questions and then a number of theoretical and practical problems. It was evident in the statistical analysis that many students did not attempt whole questions for which they had attained high marks in progressive assessments. Students were also found to have performed badly on the multiple choice section and in theory responses which supported a perception of selective underlying knowledge. Despite repeated written and verbal instruction advising students that a passing grade was necessary on the exam, students believed that if they did well in internal assessments they could still pass the unit. Many failing students found it difficult to accept that marks were not cumulative and that the exam represented a significant hurdle which they were required individually to attain.

Much soul searching and analytical review of student outcomes was conducted after the failure rate for students almost doubled over 2003/04. It is important to note that at no stage was any pressure applied from any quarter to change or gild results. The poor outcomes and cheating behaviours were also being experienced in other units with the faculty administrative system being burdened with rising incidences of reported and penalised cheating. The processes of review identified that the assessments tasks as set were appropriate in relation to the content of the unit, and that assessment tasks and the criteria used to grade them were considered

to be reasonable. In essence, the task of assessment review became to identify how the needs of predominantly international students in terms of competencies and learning styles could be addressed in unit content (Hamilton et al., 2003). It was perceived that the most significant challenge was to encourage students to complete their own tasks so that knowledge was self-sustaining, providing students with the best opportunity to achieve a successful outcome.

## Changed assessment regime—semester 2/2004

On-line technologies and infrastructure had developed over 2003/04 to allow consideration of new methods of assessment which would foster a more conducive learning environment for international students. We could not hope to find solutions to all issues raised; however, there was sufficient motivation by education development personnel and academic staff to initiate change and to ensure the means to assess the impact of change was available. Wilson and Stacey (2004) point out that being a "competent, confident on-line academic is a new and different role" facing many academics particularly if they are not from a technology background. With support, staff adapted to this new role with evidence of significant positive results.

### Assessments eliminated

The essay in task one submitted in week four was not considered to be a useful measure of learning. Students were still arriving in week three. They were not significantly familiar with learning modes, where resources were available and multi-cultural assimilation had not yet been resolved. Requiring electronic lodgement and applying plagiarism software to a task set so early in the semester were not considered to solve the underlying issues of personal effort and students who were not prepared. This task was eliminated.

The random case study on computer software was also removed as subsequent efforts in the exam for related questions provided strong support for questioning the authenticity of assessment submissions. A student had also suggested that the task was a waste of time as he was aware of a person who knew how to operate the software and was completing multiple case studies registering in the name of various students for a fee.

Having eliminated the first two assessment tasks, and with significant doubts about the learning outcomes facilitated by assessment task three, all progressive assessments could thus be reconfigured and changed to reflect what was considered to be most supportive of individual student learning. The types of tasks selected to assess student learning were those that could be implemented within the short time frame available. It was understood that other alternatives may be equally or better able to achieve the desired results and the process of review would be continuous. The tasks to be used for assessment were determined by consensus between academics, student support specialists and teaching and learning development staff. The exam and percentage of assessment attributed to progressive versus external (exam-based) portions of assessment in the unit were published data that could not be changed in the short term. As a consequence, the value of the exam and structure of the exam paper remained unchanged.

### The new assessment regime

The new assessment tasks introduced were as follows:

1. 15% for a test-based case study using computer software in a controlled environment

2. 20% for a short answer and multiple choice test using controlled release infrastructure technologies in a controlled environment
3. 65% for a closed book exam.

Task one involved the use of a commonly used brand of proprietary business software applied to a particular case study in week eight of a 13-week academic period in a controlled environment. With additional funding made available to allow effective implementation, students were provided with dedicated tutorial support to become proficient in software usage. The tutorials were scheduled to ensure an appropriate basic level of knowledge had been constructed before the tutorial work consolidated their learning in a practical manner. Computer-based tutorials commenced in week 4 and concluded prior to the assessment task. All students were required to register for a particular limited number of test sessions that were controlled by staff. Resource constraints did not allow for all students to be tested at the one time. The test files were released to students only at the registered time for a one-hour window of opportunity and were electronically submitted at the end of the test session. While there were many teething problems associated with access to software, willingness of students to apply themselves to a task they deemed too difficult in the initial stages, and the need to develop a contingency plan for students that did not successfully submit the task, the average outcome was a grade of 75%.

For assessment task one, opportunities to cheat in terms of plagiarism were not present. Opportunities to "cybercheat" existed only for those with strong information technology competencies where the test operating environment may have been circumvented. Because the test was run in a controlled environment with the necessity for registration and checking of student identification, students were compelled to attend personally and complete the assessment task. It was recognised that those students leaving the controlled environment could verbally pass on information to students in another session and evidence of this appeared in the form of prepared pertinent notes brought into a later session which were confiscated. It was interesting to note that students were resorting to more traditional forms of cheating rather than "cybercheating".

Assessment task two was a short answer and multiple choice test, timed and designed to provide an early warning mechanism to students in week 10 about their level of knowledge in preparation for the exam. In seminar groups, random exercises to ascertain the level of ability to write an appropriate response to theory questions, or to attain an adequate result in demonstrated multiple choice questions, indicated a poor level of student preparedness. A database of questions for both the short theory and multiple choice questions was constructed which, via controlled release to individual students in registered session times, produced randomly generated questions for every student. Assessing in a controlled environment again compelled students to attend the test in person. As the time for this assessment task approached there was flurry of activity amongst some students with an observed concern for "catching up." The test also acted to dispel a level of over-confidence by a distinct group that had an optimistic view of their abilities. Outcomes were published in week 12 with an average mark of 55%. It was interesting to note that many students were not confident about their achievement in this test, with subsequent published outcomes confirming this perception. However, the early warning mechanism allowed sufficient time for students to address knowledge short-comings before the final exam.

For assessment task two, again opportunities to cheat in terms of plagiarism were not present. Opportunities to "cybercheat" existed only for those with strong information technology competencies. It was observed that one student surreptitiously had a form of email communication software open while completing the test, ostensibly to request answers from another person. Also, a number of issues associated with the integrity of the testing environment have been noted for resolution as part of further development.

The final exam was in content and format similar to that of past years. Results in semester 1/2005 showed a significant improvement in student outcomes with the failure rate being dramatically reduced. While we are very enthusiastic about this result, the reasons for such outcomes are to a significant degree speculative. Statistical analysis of student performance showed that while progressive assessment marks were less than during 2003/04, students performed significantly better in the exam. The impact of the need for personal completion of assessment tasks with limited opportunities for cheating is suggested as a substantial contributing factor to the improvement in results. In addition, the ability for students to get some feedback concerning demonstrated test outcomes allowed for a "wake up" call before the final exam.

Other factors which undoubtedly contributed to the improved outcomes were a concerted presence on the unit's intranet site, specific computer-based tutorial support and a team of administrative and academic staff co-ordinating infrastructure technologies to ensure that unforseen issues were quickly resolved. The use of progressive technologies seemed initially to make students uncomfortable; however, independently conducted student evaluations in semesters 2/2004 and 1/2005 provided strong student endorsement of the practical application and usefulness of on-line technologies. Students considered the unit was "well taught", were prepared to "recommend" the unit to others and considered it "very useful to their future". Ratings for these criteria averaged four on a five point scale.

# Conclusions

In the swing of the pendulum away from academic-centred learning to student-centred learning, it is acknowledged that the above case study involves a movement away from student-centred learning. This alone should not be cause for condemnation of the strategies adopted to improve unit outcomes. There is a place for flexibility in higher education, although it is acknowledged that comments from the minority group of domestic students were less than supportive of "being treated like under-graduates or school kids." The rising incidence of cheating in progressive assessment tasks was the catalyst for questioning the efficacy of applying a more teacher-centred learning model to a heterogenous student body. The strategies employed in the case study suggest that assessment regimes can be designed to be more relevant to a particular group of students with consequent beneficial impacts on student outcomes.

International (and other) students are faced with a myriad of reasons which may induce them to engage in conduct that is deemed to be cheating. However, the case study above suggests that while academics have little influence on the reasons for cheating, there is much that can be done to limit opportunity, a factor that Phillips and Horton (2000) and Stoney and McMahon (2004) confirm as being of significant relevance to cheating behaviours.

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