

2010 Teaching Improvement Project – Academic Honesty: Supporting student learning and quality teaching through best practice use of text matching software

Preliminary Report: 8 December 2010

One of the aims of this project was to support the University in its efforts to develop clear guidelines and provide effective support to staff and students in the use of text matching software to foster academic honesty in written work. The project has been facilitated through contributions from members of the Associate Deans Learning and Teaching group, Chair Academic Board, Institute for Teaching and Learning, Learning Centre, and the Student Representative Council (SRC).

The first phase of the project was a scoping of the current use of text matching software across the University. This involved a brief online survey of unit of study coordinators in participating Faculties.

Most Faculties chose to participate in the survey. One faculty (Economics and Business) provided a faculty response to the survey questions based on their own analysis of their current use of text matching software. Three Faculties (Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, Architecture, Design and Planning, Sydney Medical School) and one School (Psychology) chose not to participate in this phase of the project.

In the second phase of the project, data from focus groups and interviews with students explored implications of the different uses of text matching software for student learning experiences. The student focus groups were run in collaboration with representatives of the SRC and faculty student associations. There are staff interviews still to be completed which will explore staff experiences and intentions in using text matching software.

The Project will not be completed until March 2011, however this preliminary summary of some of the data gathered is provided to support the work of those currently exploring the use of text matching software in the University.

Phase 1: Online survey

An email containing a link to an online survey was sent to unit of study coordinators (N=881) in all participating faculties in late September 2010. A reminder was sent three weeks later. The overall response rate was 27% (N=238).

- About half of unit of study coordinators (51%) who responded, across all participating Faculties, reported using a text matching tool if they suspected plagiarism when marking a piece of student work. The tool used by 91% of these unit of study coordinators was Google™.
- The only faculties where responding unit of study coordinators reported using proprietary software if they suspected plagiarism when marking a piece of student work were: Education and Social Work (1 out of 29); Health Sciences (1 out of 19); Law (2 out of 10); and Veterinary Science (1 out of 14) and Economics & Business (see below). All of these unit of study coordinators use Turnitin®; in addition, 1 person in Engineering and Information Technology uses custom code-checking software.
- The vast majority (98%) of the responding unit of study coordinators did not routinely use a text matching tool to screen assignments prior to marking. However in addition to these respondents, from Semester 2, 2010 the Faculty of Economics and Business reported using Turnitin® (<http://turnitin.com/static/>) to screen assignments prior to marking in all units of study.
- Only 6 respondents (less than 1%) required students to check their work for plagiarism prior to *submission* of their assignments. All these coordinators required students to use Google™. The Faculty of Economics and Business does not require students to check their work for plagiarism prior to submission of their assignments.
- A majority of unit of study coordinators (71%) reported assuming that students had been previously taught about academic honesty in written work but did not report teaching it themselves or integrating a suitable learning activity in their unit. In many cases respondents did not know the details of the preceding instruction or were unclear if students had definitely completed this, for example reporting that students may have taken a unit e.g. English in Academic settings – or may have completed a skills module.

- The most common methods used by teachers who did report teaching academic honesty were either including information about academic honesty in unit of study or course outlines; giving students links to the University policy on academic honesty; and/or verbally advising (telling) students about academic honesty in lectures.
- One respondent reported using modules in the Write Site to help their students learn about academic honesty in written work. Several respondents reported using 'discussion' of academic honesty in class. The most significant investment in teaching was one respondent who reported that students "spend two full sessions on this (2 hours each); are referred to tasks in identifying plagiarism, and in complete a reflection about plagiarism".
- The Faculty of Economics and Business faculty response reported that students are required to complete a generic online module about academic honesty. Other strategies reported by the Faculty to help students learn about academic honesty included telling students about plagiarism "via unit of study outlines, verbally in classes and via the online Administration Manual for Students".¹ In addition to these strategies, in units of study in which relatively high rates of academic dishonesty had been detected in previous years, academics "set small assessment tasks early in semester in which skills in accurate referencing were developed, and devoted considerable time in class to discussing the importance of and means to ensuring academic honesty".²

Phase 2: Student focus groups and interviews

A key theme in the student focus groups and interviews was that students perceived a need for their learning about academic honesty in written work to be more integrated with their discipline-specific learning in units of study. In the Faculty of Economics and Business in particular, several students perceived little connection between learning about academic honesty or the actual use of text matching software and their learning about the discipline.

The Academic Writing units of study in the Faculty of Arts (WRIT 1001 and 1002) were mentioned by some students as positive examples of integrating disciplinary writing and referencing practices and academic honesty within a relevant curriculum. Another positive example reported by students was the Faculty of Education's provision to first year students of the "little blue book" which functions as a discipline-specific referencing guide and includes University policy on academic honesty.

A second key theme in the student focus groups and interviews was the punitive nature of some academic staff responses to students' suspected of writing in an 'academically dishonest way'. Students reported feeling distressed by academics' punitive approaches. For example; in one case, the student reported that an academic called out names of those students who were suspected of plagiarism and made the students file down to the front of the lecture theatre and stand in front of the entire class. Another student described how they felt publicly shamed when the academic asked the 'accused' people to stay behind. Another student described the personalised, accusatory tone of an email that s/he had received after her/his assignment was flagged using a text matching tool.

Some students reported that punitive approaches to academic dishonesty escalated their anxiety about assessment and negatively impacted their assessment performance. Students used words like 'terrified', 'afraid', 'panicked' and 'hyper-aware' to describe their feelings of having their work scanned by text matching software:

"While you should be conscious of where you are getting your ideas from and reference appropriately, being hyper-conscious and having this anxiety about whether you're plagiarising and whether you're going to be prosecuted for it and it's going to be the end of your academic career, is actually not at all helpful. It's terrifying."

"They really scare you. I think that's not something that works for students, because ultimately all the university achieves is you don't learn anything, you're just scared and you either over-reference or you do a completely crazy form of referencing which doesn't help you, which has no practical application. And isn't that what our degree is supposed to be? Practical application."

A full report will be available in March 2011.

¹ Report on Academic Dishonesty 2008-2010 in Faculty of Economics and Business to the Academic Standards and Policy Committee 2010.

² Ibid.