

# Policy, preparation, prevention and punishment: One Faculty's holistic approach to minimising plagiarism

Marcia Devlin  
Swinburne University

**Abstract:** *Most Australian universities have made attempts of various kinds to address plagiarism. Some have responded in recent times with a primary focus on catching and punishing plagiarists, often assisted by computer software packages. Others have taken a more holistic approach incorporating foci on policy, assessment regime and student preparation and education as well as on ensuring appropriate consequences for plagiarists. This paper outlines one example of the latter approach in one Australian university faculty and details the outcomes in terms of policy recommendations and resources to support the approach. The necessity of evidence-based evaluation of attempts to reduce plagiarism in higher education is argued.*

**Keywords:** Plagiarism, Policy, Prevention, Punishment, Higher Education, Assessment

## Background

Many Australian universities have made attempts to address a perceived increase in plagiarism in recent years. Whether the internet with its readily available sources has led to an increase in plagiarism and indeed whether such an increase has occurred are not the subjects of this paper. Neither are the merits or otherwise of 'software solutions' debated here. This paper outlines the attempt, based on current Australian research on best practice, made by one Australian university faculty ('Faculty G')<sup>1</sup> to minimise and better manage plagiarism.

While some claim that an approach focussed primarily on 'catching and punishing' plagiarists has led to an apparent reduction in the number of incidents of plagiarism (see for example, Zobel and Hamilton, 2002), there is a paucity of reliable, evidence-based data about the effectiveness of such a focus to minimising plagiarism in Australia. Certainly, the face validity of a primarily detection-focussed approach is poor as it takes little or no account of the reasons students plagiarise nor of the effects of assessment regimes that may inadvertently encourage plagiarism. Equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to use the academic and writing conventions expected in Australian higher education and appropriately designing, pitching, pacing and spacing assessment tasks are but two of the myriad of preventative strategies that may be used in combination with the punitive ones.

A recent national project, funded by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) through the federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), sought to gather and disseminate best practice in assessment, including minimising plagiarism, in Australian higher education. The project included a literature overview; the conduct of case studies incorporating interviews with staff and students across Australia; discussion forums in most states; the collation of exemplars of good practice and the development of a set of resources for use in Australian universities. These resources included a guide for academic staff on ways in which they could minimise plagiarism among their students. See [www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessing\\_learning/](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessing_learning/) and [www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessing\\_learning/03/plagMain.html](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessing_learning/03/plagMain.html).

In summary, in relation to minimising plagiarism, the project researchers concluded that 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;

---

Please reference as: Devlin, M. (2003). Policy, preparation, prevention and punishment: One Faculty's holistic approach to minimising plagiarism. In Marsden, H. and Hicks, M. (Eds). *Educational Integrity: Plagiarism and other perplexities*. Refereed proceedings of the Inaugural Educational Integrity Conference, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia 21-22 November, 2003, pp. 39-47.

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).

## The 'Faculty G' project

The Australian university faculty of interest in this paper, Faculty G, recently approached a higher education consultant and requested advice on and resources to support the minimisation of plagiarism among their students and the management of plagiarism when it did occur. The consultant was required to manage a project that gathered data from a range of sources and produced resources the faculty could use to improve its management of plagiarism. Based on the advice from the national AUTC/DEST project conducted by James, McInnis and Devlin (2002), it was decided that it was appropriate to incorporate elements from both the preventative and punitive approaches, rather than to rely on one or the other. A comprehensive, holistic approach to minimising and managing plagiarism was therefore designed for Faculty G. In summary, this approach incorporated recommended changes to:

- faculty policy;
- the coordination of the management of plagiarism;
- staff induction;
- assessment;
- student education;
- student preparation;
- student academic and language support; and
- the ways in which cases of suspected plagiarism be handled.

This paper outlines the ways in which these recommendations were developed and presented as well as a summary of their content. Given the short time span since the presentation of the recommendations, a suggestive rather than definitive discussion of the ways in which the effectiveness of the approach could be measured is presented.

## Sources of data for the project outcomes

There were two broad sets of data gathered for the project: university data and faculty data. Each of these provided the basis of the outcomes of the project and is detailed below.

### *University data*

University data sources included existing University policy on plagiarism and related matters such as assessment and appeals as well as interviews with four staff external to the faculty but familiar with the faculty's students and with typical plagiarism practices among those students.

An examination of existing University policy on assessment was undertaken to provide the context for the advice on faculty policy and practice to be developed. The examination incorporated the inspection of university policy on the management of the assessment process; the assessment processes as they relate to the student; the process for review of unsatisfactory academic progress of a student; the processes to appeal an outcome of the review processes within the policy and the processes for reporting breaches of the assessment policy.

Three interviews with four relevant staff external to the faculty were conducted. The three interviews sought observational and other data on common and typical plagiarism issues not otherwise available to the faculty. The interviews also sought the interviewees' views on the reasons students in the faculty plagiarised and their suggestions for how some of the issues inherent in these reasons might be minimised and overcome. The first interview was with two University support staff providing language and academic skills support to students from the faculty. The second interview was with a staff member with some responsibility for providing general and academic support to international students in particular. Both these interviews were conducted face-to-face and took 50 minutes and 40 minutes, respectively. The third interview was with a Student Union staff member experienced in supporting students from the faculty in plagiarism investigations. This was conducted over the phone and took 25 minutes.

### **Faculty data**

Faculty data came from four sources: (i) a critical examination of the preparation and education in relation to plagiarism currently provided for students; (ii) interviews with key faculty staff; (iii) informal conversations with other faculty staff and (iv) an interview and other data directly from students.

(i) A critical examination of the current preparation and education available to the faculty's students in relation to plagiarism included examining both the orientation program and plagiarism-related advice provided through the Subject Guide provided for each subject. Specifically, the orientation program was analysed in order to determine the extent to which plagiarism was featured, defined, explained and the extent to which students were offered opportunities to test out their understandings of the concept. The information on plagiarism included in Subject Guides was examined from the student point of view in terms of its clarity and usefulness to a student seeking to avoid plagiarism.

(ii) The second source of faculty data came from interviews with key staff. Five interviews with academic leaders in the faculty were conducted. The interviews sought the views of these staff on

- a) the main plagiarism-related challenges faced by the faculty;
- b) the most effective strategies for managing these challenges in terms of assessment design and other aspects of the teaching and learning process;
- c) processes that should be followed if plagiarism is suspected or detected.

The interviews were conducted by phone at mutually agreeable times and lasted between 22 and 47 minutes.

In addition to the formal interviews, the consultant had a meeting with a sixth senior staff member about the issues. This staff member was the person with whom the consultant liaised to arrange and conduct the project and is the staff member within the faculty with responsibility for coordinating educational development. Although the meeting included the discussion and resolution of a wide range of issues related to the consultancy, there was the opportunity to seek the staff member's views on some the specific aspects of plagiarism targeted in the formal interviews. The consultant kept notes from this meeting and the views of this person were included in the data used in developing the outcomes.

The consultant also had a brief meeting with the Faculty Dean<sup>ii</sup> to determine his views on the issues and to seek his approval for the interviews outside the faculty and with students as these were not part of the initial project brief.

(iii) The third source of faculty data came from informal conversations with administrative staff within the faculty that occurred in the process of arranging the student interview. This was an accidental but a valuable source of data. A number of administrative staff summarised the plagiarism-related issues within the faculty in a straightforward manner that the more senior staff were unable, or unwilling to use.

---

Please reference as: Devlin, M. (2003). Policy, preparation, prevention and punishment: One Faculty's holistic approach to minimising plagiarism. In Marsden, H. and Hicks, M. (Eds). *Educational Integrity: Plagiarism and other perplexities*, Refereed proceedings of the Inaugural Educational Integrity Conference, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia 21-22 November, 2003, pp. 39-47.

(iv) The fourth and final source of faculty data came from a focus group interview with eight students (all male; four international and four local; all year levels of the courses were represented) and emailed views received from a further two students (both male; both local). This interview centred on the students' definitions and understandings of plagiarism; their perceptions of why it occurred and their views on the ways in which it could be better minimised and managed. The interview lasted approximately 50 minutes.

## **Project Outcomes**

The outcomes for the project were a series of materials that included a set of recommendations and four written guides, which were prepared based on the data gathered through the project and also on the work of James et al. (2002). For example, the first recommendation detailed below evolved from the interview with language and academic skills advisors (University data) and two of the five interviews with key staff (Faculty data). For the sake of brevity, the results of the data gathering are shown in their ultimate form – the recommendations made to the faculty and the guides developed for their use.

The final outcomes are outlined separately below for the sake of clarity. They were intended, however, to be integrated into a multi-layered approach to minimising and managing plagiarism that included changes in the practices and approaches of both management and 'coal-face' staff in the faculty. This intention was outlined to the faculty in change management advice provided to accompany the materials. This advice is also summarised below.

### *Recommendations*

Eight general recommendations related to minimising and managing plagiarism at a faculty level were made.

The first recommendation was that the faculty ensure student language proficiency through adhering to its policy related to English language competency rather than to compromise on International English Language Testing System (IELTS) band levels of commencing students as it had done previously. The faculty were strongly advised not to accept students who did not meet the minimum English language criteria, even if they were very close to meeting them. The risks to ensuring equity for students who had been admitted without the requisite language capabilities and to external perceptions of standards and therefore of the faculty's reputation were highlighted.

The second recommendation was to make the current academic preparation for the course provided as part of the orientation program compulsory rather than voluntary. It was noted that this section of the program contains excellent advice on avoiding plagiarism that includes discussion, a question and answer session and practice exercises to begin the process of adequately preparing students for appropriate scholarship practices.

Recommendation three was for the faculty to minimise the number of assessment tasks per student per subject per semester for the simple reason that overassessment contributes to plagiarism (Langsam, 2001). The faculty was also advised to consider coordinating the timing and number of assignments horizontally so that students were not tempted to plagiarise in order to meet the workload requirements.

The fourth recommendation was to ensure all sessional staff were adequately inducted into the policy and practices of managing and minimising plagiarism. In particular, the faculty has a very large number of sessional teaching staff and the current induction processes are conducted on an *ad hoc* basis. Ensuring that all sessional staff are given the guides resulting from this project will help to avoid confusion between staff and to ensure all students are treated equitably.

Recommendation five was to make the Subject Guides the central place for communicating with students about plagiarism. Currently the University definition of plagiarism is included in each Subject Guide. It was recommended that each Subject Convenor add a checklist to indicate specifically which behaviours constitute plagiarism in each subject and provide clear, unambiguous structural models of each assignment. This recommendation was supported by material in Guide 1, as explained below.

The sixth recommendation was for the faculty to make fuller use of the language and academic skills advice services available at the University. As well as asking staff from these specialist services to conduct the component of the compulsory orientation related to plagiarism (as advised in Guide 1), it was recommended that the faculty work closely and collaboratively with staff from these expert services to provide ongoing tailor-made student education on plagiarism once they have commenced formal study.

Recommendation seven was to create a central register of plagiarism incidents where the details of all proven incidences of plagiarism be kept to assist on keeping track of 'repeat offenders' and in deciding penalties.

The final recommendation was to appoint an Academic Honesty Coordinator, a senior academic staff member would be responsible for ensuring that:

- sessional staff receive all necessary information about plagiarism and the way in which the faculty now manages the issue;
- when cases come to the attention of the faculty, the appropriate processes are followed;
- when cases come to the attention of the faculty, the necessary administrative work is undertaken;
- and
- the database is kept up to date by the appropriate administrative staff.

### *The Guides*

Four ready-to-use guides were prepared – three for staff and one for students. Two of the three guides for staff relate to minimising the likelihood of plagiarism through student education about plagiarism (**Guide 1**) and assessment design (**Guide 3**). **Guide 2** is a user-friendly guide for students related to understanding and avoiding plagiarism. **Guide 4** contains advice on appropriate processes to follow if plagiarism is detected.

**Guide 1** provides advice and ideas for staff on how to educate students effectively about plagiarism through the Orientation program, in class and using the student guide (**Guide 2**). A particular feature of **Guide 1** is the set of proforma checklists included. Please see Figure 1 for an excerpt from this set of checklists. It was recommended that Subject Convenors clearly indicate which activities/behaviours from those listed constitute plagiarism in that subject in a number of circumstances. Subject Convenors are free to remove and add any activities/behaviours if they choose to do so.

**The following ticked examples are considered to be plagiarism in this subject within one's syndicate group:**

- Buying an assignment from a fellow student and submitting it as one's own;
- Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another student and using it as a model for the structure and style of one's own;
- Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another student and using it as a model for the content of one's own;
- Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another student and copying it but making small changes - e.g. replacing a few verbs, replacing an adjective with a synonym;
- Borrowing or looking at an assignment from another student and cutting and pasting a paragraph 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 student about what to include in an assignment;
- Taking ideas from another/other student(s) following a syndicate group discussion about the task/assignment and including those ideas in one's own assignment.

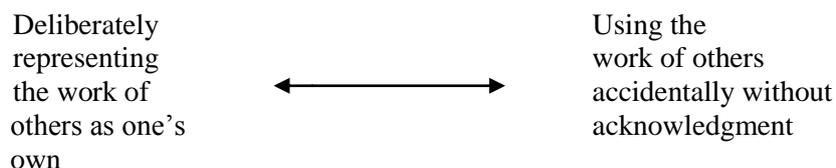
**Important note: If you are not sure whether a behaviour constitutes plagiarism or not, please see me.**

**Figure 1: Excerpt from the checklists included by the subject convenor in each Subject Guide in the Faculty.**

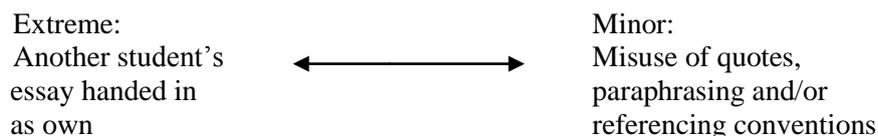
**Guide 2** provides advice to students on avoiding plagiarism. The guide is targeted at commencing students but is relevant for all students. The guide explains in simple terms what plagiarism is and means; outlines the consequences of plagiarism in the faculty; advises students on how to avoid plagiarism and directs them to useful resources.

**Guide 3** was based on the findings of the national AUTC/DEST assessment project and provides advice to staff on designing assessment to minimise plagiarism. Strategies related to the design of the assessment regime and to the ways in which students should be asked to verify that their work is their own are included. Rather than being prescriptive, this guide provides a number of options from which to choose depending on the student profile in a particular subject and on the assessment task(s) in question.

**Guide 4** provides advice to the faculty on processes to follow should plagiarism be detected. It advises an approach compliant with University policy on dealing with plagiarism and an approach that is consistent across the faculty. This guide also advises the faculty to consider the issues of intent and extent when determining responses to plagiarism. Specifically, staff were advised to consider the following two continuums:



**Figure 2. Intent to cheat continuum** (Devlin, 2002)



**Figure 3. Extent of plagiarism continuum** (Devlin, 2002)

*Advice on change management*

In a letter to all staff in the faculty accompanying a copy each of the materials, the consultant offered advice to the faculty about implementing the advised changes. Specifically, the faculty was advised use an approach incorporating all eight recommendations as well as advice from all four guides. The faculty was specifically warned not to 'cherry pick' the advice offered – that is, for example, not to simply improve student education about plagiarism nor to focus solely on penalties.

An integrated and holistic approach that recognises and counters plagiarism at every level from faculty policy, through staff induction, assessment design and procedures, individual staff practices, student education and ongoing student support to the uniform imposition of appropriate consequences and

penalties was recommended. This is not to say that all changes had to be made simultaneously but that they must all be made.

To assist the faculty in taking this advice on board, the consultant has been asked to continue to work with a senior staff member to develop an Action Plan to be put to the faculty Executive Committee with the support of the faculty's educational development champion. This process is current.

Simultaneously, it seems, wider changes may be afoot. The Student Union for the University contacted the consultant and asked for permission to use the resources as a basis for revising the University's policies on plagiarism with the University Secretariat.

## Discussion

There are a large number of perceived obstacles to change around the management of plagiarism in this faculty, some common to many faculties and some specific to this one. Some of the perceived obstacles to changes to plagiarism management that this faculty shares with many others include:

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

In addition to those listed above, the perceived obstacles to implementing the advice that may be specific to the faculty include:

- fear of harassment from the student(s) accused of plagiarism and/or from their friends (such harassment occurred previously in the faculty);
- fear of student complaints if accusations of plagiarism are made (this had been an issue for some sessional staff who were concerned that a student complaint might mean the end of their employment);
- a commonly held view that any approach to minimising plagiarism would simply not work because as one senior staff member put it "...you're *never* going to stamp it out, we may as well learn to live with it".

Attempts to overcome obstacles to minimising plagiarism are essential, as are efforts to determine the effectiveness of these attempts. Both are significant challenges. The consultancy discussed in this paper produced materials and recommended processes for the faculty to follow in order to minimise and better manage plagiarism. The second semester in 2003 is the first semester for which the recommendations and materials have been available so there is as yet no data on their impact. Further, many of the recommendations relate to changing student preparation, attitudes and behaviours. These are difficult concepts to quantify. In any case, it has been argued that changes to teaching and curriculum may take between five and ten years to show in terms of measurable improvements (Ramsden, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is essential that the processes of ensuring the effectiveness of interventions such as those described in this paper both commence as early as possible and are ongoing. Formal evaluation processes

to measure the impact of changes may be necessary. In the case outlined in this paper, specific sources of data to these end could include, but would not be limited to:

- An audit of the number of recommendations implemented partially or fully;
- The perceptions of staff about any changes to students' attitudes or behaviours around plagiarism;
- The perceptions of students about the clarity of the definitions of plagiarism (previously perceived as contradictory, unclear and confusing);
- The perceptions of later year students about changes to attitudes or behaviours around plagiarism;
- The number of documented cases of plagiarism across the faculty in one semester compared to previous semesters.

In any case, in determining the effectiveness of approaches to minimising and better managing plagiarism, evidence-based evaluation is vital. Future work in this area should focus on the impact of changes to plagiarism policy, prevention and management on the relative frequency and seriousness of plagiarism in the environment under consideration.

## References

Devlin, M. (2002). Minimising Plagiarism. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/plagMain.html>

James, R. McInnis, C. and Devlin, M. (2002). Assessing Learning in Australian Universities. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning>

Langsam, D. (2001). Copy and paste no more. The Age, (25<sup>th</sup> July).

Ramsden, P. (2003). Student surveys and quality assurance. Paper presented at the Australian Universities Quality Forum. Melbourne: June 11-13, 2003.

Zobel, J. and Hamilton, M. (2002). Managing student plagiarism in large academic departments. Australian Universities Review, 45 (2), 23-30.

---

<sup>i</sup> The term 'faculty' here refers to a group of discipline-related departments/units. The faculty and university have requested that they remain anonymous.

<sup>ii</sup> The term 'Faculty Dean' is not the staff member's actual title but does accurately reflect his position and responsibilities.