

Academic integrity myths encountered by the project team

academic integrity

TEQSA

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During the course of the work 2019 academic integrity workshops, the project team members encountered some “academic integrity myths” raised by participants. Below is a summary of some common myths and our myth-busting responses to these.

Myth 1

It is impossible to catch a student who has engaged contract cheating services for their submitted assessment response without a confession.

Response: Contract cheating has been the elephant in the academic integrity room for quite a while. Traditional detection processes for plagiarism relied heavily on text-matching software (e.g. Turnitin, Urkund, PlagScan), which does not usually detect an individualised assessment response written by another party. There can also be lack of institutional support mechanisms for detection and enacting consequences, which has discouraged educators from proceeding with these cases. More recently, however, new tools have become available for educators to use, such as guidance for markers in detecting contract cheating and available ways to collect evidence. The workshops enabled discussion and information sharing about shifting the mindset to making a sound and justifiable case, rather than having indisputable proof of the student’s cheating. Further, the workshops presented a range of resources available to collect evidence, hearing from other participants a collaborative sense of encouragement in addressing this issue.

Myth 2

Text-matching software produces “false positives”.

Response: Text-matching software indicates when text in a student’s assignment matches a source that the text-matching software has access to like a book, journal article, website, or another assignment. It may be a false positive to conclude that such as match is plagiarism when it is a match to a generic phrase, reference, or a correctly-cited quotation. The software itself does not produce false positives, if anything, it has occasional “misses” by failing to detect all text-matches. The conclusions about whether or not a text-match constitutes plagiarism has to be made in relation to referencing conventions and academic integrity rules with the application of judgment from markers and academic integrity investigators.

Myth 3

To stop cheating, we should only have exams.

Response: Despite many safeguards that invigilated exams provide, self-report studies of students indicate that cheating can both occur and go undetected in exams. Academic integrity is a concern in any type of assessment. Assessment drives student learning and students need to learn skills other than just exam-taking skills, which may focus on content memorisation. Continuous assessment tasks such as essays and reports allow students to develop skills in clear expression, writing, deep analysis, and editing that are valuable for many real-world situations.

Myth 4

Text-matching software is sufficient for detecting academic misconduct.

Response: Text-matching software may detect some instances of plagiarism, but some strategies exist that may subvert the ability of text-matching software to detect some instances of plagiarism. Similarly, some providers of contract cheating services advertise 'zero similarity', thus, a low text-match percentage may be a flag for investigation in itself. Analysis by a trained investigator is important in the investigation.

Myth 5

Assessment design does not influence contract cheating.

Response: While assessment design cannot guarantee universal academic integrity, the research indicates that authentic tasks may reduce the likelihood and improve detection. In addition, tasks such as reflections and voice vivas are much for students to outsource than some other kinds of assignments. Therefore:

- Encourage personalised learning and teaching environments where students understand what is required in tasks, receive feedback to build their learning and can approach the instructor for guidance.
- Provide early low stakes practice activities to build student confidence in what they need to do for the task.
- Use a range of assessment tasks.
- Avoid high-stakes and short turnaround times for assessments.

Myth 6

Having a good academic integrity policy is all that matters

Response: On a couple of occasions, workshop participants expressed frustration and disappointment with their own institutions' lack of will to effectively enact policies. There was a sense that some providers consider their key task is to write good policies (to comply with Higher Education Standards), but then do not adequately resource or support staff and students to create a genuine culture of integrity. Some workshop participants said they were 'sick of talking' and wanted to see real action. If the policy says that 'x is a breach' and that same policy indicates a particular outcome for that breach, staff and students want and need to see that the outcome is applied consistently and fairly by a trained decision-maker. And, the breach process should be transparently documented and used for evaluation and quality improvement.

The workshop had a strong focus on reiterating the importance of a holistic approach to academic integrity. As per the Academic Integrity Standards Project (www.aisp.apfei.edu.au) an exemplary policy requires attention to five key elements – access, approach, responsibility, detail and support – but much more is needed to effectively implement even the most exemplary policy. This involves regular review of policy, identifying and resourcing academic integrity champions, academic integrity education for all stakeholders, engaging students, robust decision-making systems and record keeping for evaluation (www.unisa.edu.au/EAIP). We reminded workshop participants that although good policy is critical, it is only the first step towards building a culture of integrity on campus.