

Online degrees – academic dishonesty and misconduct, why is happening?

Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of universities have offered online degrees. Along with this new method of completing degrees comes new forms of academic dishonesty and misconduct. Academic dishonesty and misconduct among students is not a new phenomenon. In 1990, the American Council on Higher Education reported that cheating at was on the rise at universities in the United States (U.S). Following this, researchers started to more intensely investigate the issue of cheating (Kerkvliet, 1994). In recent years, there has been a great deal of research in the area of academic dishonesty (Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009; Stack, 2015). However, much of the research that has been conducted on academic dishonesty and misconduct has almost exclusively focused on the United States (US).

This paper contributes to the limited research literature on online programs and online exams and academic dishonesty and misconduct at Australian universities by taking a closer look at what academic dishonesty and misconduct is, how it is happening and how it may be minimised. It is important that these questions be understood because, as found by Smyth et al. (2009), students who cheat at university are more likely to become professionals who in the future will engage in illegal, unethical or immoral behaviours in the workplace.

Background

The ever-increasing body of research on academic dishonesty and misconduct reflects widespread concern about these practices (de Lambert, Ellen and Taylor, 2003; Teixeira and Rocha, 2010). Glater (2006) warns of the alarming magnitude of cheating among university students, the increasing pervasiveness of the phenomenon within academia and the detrimental impact it might have on the 'real world,' as the decisions student make once they leave university and commence working are influenced by their perception of what comprises ethical behaviour (Lawson, 2004; Teixeira and Rocha, 2006). Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2006) find that not only is academic dishonesty widespread, it is also often underestimated by universities. In 2010, Brown, Weible and Olmosk's research found that 49% of students in undergraduate marketing classes admitted cheating in 1988 versus 100% of the students in an undergraduate management class in 2008.

This paper uses the definition of Sheard et al. (2003, p. 92) of cheating as “*a series of practices, which cover a range of areas that can be defined as illegal, unethical, immoral or against the regulations of the course or institution.*” This definition identifies the long-term problems that occur when students engage in academic dishonesty: if cheating is illegal, unethical or immoral, what will stop a student who engages in this type of behaviour (for example, cheating on their exams or falsifying a term project) from falsifying records or cheating on an expense account when they enter the workforce?

According to Rokavski and Levy (2007), cheating at universities is growing at a rampant rate. Researchers find that academic dishonesty and misconduct at universities around the year 2000 was even more prevalent than in the past due to technological advances, relatively scarce resources and understaffing at universities (Treviño and Butterfield, 1999; Maslen, 2003). The most common and widely used notion of academic dishonesty and misconduct at universities is copying and/or cheating on an exam (Teixeira and Rocha, 2010), hence, this paper examines academic dishonesty in relation to online exams.

These global findings also apply to Australian universities. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2006) conducted one of the largest studies on this topic that focuses on Australian students. In their research, they surveyed 1,206 students and 190 academic staff across four Queensland universities. They find that academic dishonesty and misconduct is widespread and that universities are not doing enough to limit it.

The corruption watchdog (Australia) said that in order to deal with academic dishonesty and misconduct, universities must separate their compliance functions from their business development functions and limit the number of overseas agents they deal with, arguing that when these functions are combined, there is less incentive for universities to address academic dishonesty. The paper said:

The gap between student capabilities and academic demands increases the likelihood that students will offer inducements to academics in order to pass courses and conversely, makes students more vulnerable to improper demands from academics . . . With universities in NSW financially dependent on the success of international students, academics may be encouraged to admit students they would otherwise reject, to turn a blind eye to cheating and to mark the work of poor-performing students favourably to enable them to pass. (Independent Commission Against Corruption (I.C.A.C), NSW, 2015).

There have been documented examples of academic dishonesty at Australian universities. In 2015, there was an academic scandal in the medical faculty at the University of Sydney, where students were caught falsifying records and ‘interviewing’ dead patients. The students involved in this scandal, most of whom were in their final year of their medical degree, were given the chance to “reflect” on their conduct (Smith, 2015). Cheating at medical schools is very concerning, as it may constitute a predictor of fraudulence in future medical practice (Hrabak et al., 2004). Another Australian study conducted on postgraduate Information Technology students by Sheard and Dick (2003) found that 9% of students admitted to being involved in severe forms of cheating, which included students paying someone to do their assignments.

According to Bushway and Nash (1977, p. 624) a “*majority of studies indicated that students who are lower in school achievements may cheat more frequently.*” According to researchers such as Hrabak et al. (2004) and Bisping et al. (2008), attitudes to cheating could be linked to a low grade point average (G.P.A). The G.P.A is a numerical calculation, weighted by credit points, of the mean of the grades received by a student over a defined study period (e.g. a semester) or over an entire program (Federation University Australia). Research shows that students with a higher G.P.A. are less likely to cheat as they have less to gain and more to lose if they caught when compared to students who have a lower G.P.A. (Nowell and Laufer, 1997). This is supported by Kerkvliet’s (1994) research, which indicates that cheating is related to the perceived costs and benefits of cheating Kerkvliet and Sigmund (1999).

More recently, researchers have found that technology has enabled students to cheat in a number of different ways (Etter et al., 2006; Howard and Davies, 2009; Simkin and McLeod, 2010). The author has noticed that some current online programs at Australian universities send invigilators hardcopy exams which are supervised by invigilators whose identities are not verified. Which makes it easier on students to cheat, and widespread cheating can tarnish the reputation of universities and demean the worth of the degrees granted at them. Additionally, students who cheat to gain their qualifications may not be able to adequately perform the task they were hired to do (Knowledge, 2004).

According to research conducted by Lawson (2004), there is a strong relationship between students’ predisposition to engage in unethical behaviour, such as cheating in an academic setting, and their attitude towards such behaviours in the business world. Furthermore, research suggests that students who engaging in dishonest behaviour, for example cheating

on exams, were found to be less likely to believe that people in the business world act ethically. They are also more accepting of unethical behaviours in business than those who did not engage in academic dishonesty (Lawson, 2004; Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2006).

Methodology

This paper is a literature review with an observation case study overarching it. The author conducted observation case studies at one university in Victoria and one in New South Wales. Both universities offer a number of online postgraduate degrees. Even though the programs are online, most exams are still in paper format. The exams are posted to a nominated exam invigilator and once the exam is completed by the student, the invigilator mails it back to the school.

Both of these universities conduct examinations for online subjects using a system where students are asked to nominate an exam invigilator. No reference checks are conducted on the invigilator. In practice, the exam invigilator could be fictional, as they are never interviewed and in most cases none of the university's professional staff see or speak to the exam invigilators. The problem this poses is that there are no methods in place to ensure that the students and the exam invigilators are behaving correctly and honestly. The students could get someone else to sit their exam, take prohibited material into the exam, or even take the exam over a few days rather than completing it in the set exam time. Checks supposed to be done, but no one actually does them because of staff shortage.

Additionally, not only does no one perform a background check on the exam invigilators, the invigilators do not get paid. Therefore, there is no financial benefit for the exam invigilators to organise an exam room/office and supervise an exam for at least two hours. This leads to the question of why individuals would give up a couple of hours of their life to supervise an exam for no financial gain.

One of the motivations for this research is the personal experience of the author invigilating online exams. In 2009, the author was approached by a student and asked to invigilate the student's exams. The student had just started her online postgraduate studies through an Australian university based in Victoria. To the author's surprise, after the university was notified the author would be the exam invigilator, the only contact university had with the author was an email asking where they should post the exams. The university did not verify

the existence of the author (the exam invigilator); for all they knew, the author could have been a made-up person. In her first semester the student enrolled into two subjects. The university posted the exams two weeks prior to the exam date. The night before the exams were due to be given, the student called the author, explaining that she was not ready to sit the exam as she did not study for it. She asked the author if she could be given the exams so that she can finish them in a couple of days. The exams were not take-home exams, exams that student can take home, usually for a day, to complete. They were open book exams with time restrictions. The inference from the student's actions were that she planned to use the honesty-based online system to cheat.

The author decided that it was for the best if the student found a different exam invigilator, which she did. She was supervised by a friend, with no exam invigilating experience and a conflict of interest. This particular student ended up cheating on her whole degree, graduating with a Juris Doctor (graduate-entry professional degree in law) and is now an admitted legal practitioner of the High Court of Australia and the Supreme Court of New South Wales

Although the author does not draw widespread conclusions from anecdotal experience, there is evidence that cheating on online degrees is up to four times higher than cheating in a traditional class setting (Moten, Fitterer, Brazier, Leonard and Brown, 2013). While there are many students that do the right thing and do not cheat, the students that do cheat, more often than not, get away with it.

Results

Although the findings concerning the possibility and amount of cheating in online courses is concerning, there are a number of measures universities can take to minimise cheating. Penalties and minimising opportunities for students to engage in academic dishonesty and misconduct can be highly effective (Haswell, Jubb and Wearing, 1999). Haswell, Jubb and Wearing (1999) researched students from universities in Australia, the United Kingdom and South Africa to examine how the willingness of students to engage in a variety of forms of plagiarism in a risk-free environment decreased dramatically when the detection risk increased and substantial penalties were introduced. They find that the size of the penalty has to exert a greater influence than risk of detection in order to be an effective deterrent. According to Woessner (2004), universities failing to apply heavy penalties can be tantamount to encouraging academic dishonesty and misconduct, as it presents an excellent gamble to students. Those findings, in conjunction with evidence that academic misconduct is

highly prevalent in Australian universities, present a worrying picture of student behaviour and the performance of universities in terms of teaching, learning and producing ethical employees.

Academic dishonesty and misconduct have serious and negative consequences for the quality of learning in Australian universities and it will have flow-on effects on industry and in society. If there are no major changes to policies ensure universities enforce strict penalties and minimise opportunities for students to engage in academic dishonesty and misconduct, the current situation will prevail.

Research in the area of online classes' shows that most online degrees will give examinations with little or no supervision, compared to traditional classes where examination is supervised (Stack, 2015). There is also evidence that cheating on online degrees is up to four times higher than cheating in a traditional class setting (Moten, et al., 2013). Furthermore, data in this area indicates higher self-reported instances of cheating in online classes compared to traditional class settings (Lanier, 2006; Moten, et al., 2013). According to researchers such as Means, Toyama, Murphy et al., (2010), students perform better in an online setting, which may indicate that some students are cheating.

Recommendations

There has been little research in Australia in the field of online degrees and cheating. Online education has thrived in the last decade, with a growing number of students taking online classes and degrees. With this increase comes an increase in academic dishonesty (Allen and Seaman, 2013; Stack, 2015).

Some research suggests than cheating can be addressed by using biometrics to identify students based on physiological and behavioural characteristics (Rabuzin, Baca and Sajko, 2006; Asha and Chellappan, 2008; Gao, 2012). Biometrics commonly uses soft traits like gender, age, high, weight and ethnicity, physiological characteristics such as face, eye and hands and behavioural characteristics such as keystrokes, signature, mouse movement, voice, gait and pulse to recognise individuals. Two or more of the listed biometrics can be combined to improve the recognition accurateness.

The way this would work is that the student first needs to register a biometric in a system, where biometric templates would be stored. The student then needs to provide the same biometric at registration. The new biometric will then be processed with the same algorithm

as those at registration and then compared to the stored template. Some of the biometric systems currently used in universities are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Biometric

Name	Securexam Student (SES)	Webassessor™	ProctorU
Description	Securexam Remote Proctor is a small device with a fingerprint scanner, microphone and a video camera with a 360-degree view. To start an exam, students need to provide their fingerprints for identification. During the exam, the microphone and video look out for anything suspicious like an unknown voice or movement on the camera.	Kryterion's Webassessor uses face images captured by webcams, and keystroke biometrics (typing styles) captured by software to authenticate the test taker and alerts the proctors if there is a change when somebody else has taken over	The system gathers some personal data from a variety of databases, including criminal files and property records, and uses the data to ask students a few questions, such as address, employers, etc. Students need to answer the questions correctly before they can start the exams. In order to use ProctorU, each student also needs to reserve a time slot for an exam and have a webcam ready that can monitor the exam environment. Using a webcam, a human proctor would remotely guide a student in the process of starting an exam.
College	Troy University, New York University	Penn State University	Swinburne Online
Cost	\$25.00 USD per student annually	\$50~\$80 USD per student	\$175 USD per student annually
Company	Software Secure Inc.	Kryterion Inc.	Axicom Corp.
Web	www.softwaresecure.com	www.kryteriononline.com	www.proctoru.com

Adapted from Qinghai Gao, 2012

Researchers in this area have proposed that different biometric traits should be combined and used in the field of online learning. However, for biometrics to be effective, universities must

give exams online rather than on paper. This is a logical extension to online studies; if students are doing an online degree, then their exams should be online too. Another tool that can be used with online exams is identified by Gao (2012), who suggests using IP addresses as assisting tools to identify collusions.

If universities choose to post hard copies of exams to exam invigilators so that students can do the exam off site, then universities need to do a background check on the exam invigilators. Universities have the reputation of moving at glacial pace, which means that any change may take some time to be introduced. However, if more universities are offering more and more online degrees and courses, then universities need to ensure that they do due diligence. Universities also need to look at the size of the penalty for academic dishonesty and ensure that it exerts a greater influence than the risk of detection. Research shows that students' willingness to engage in a variety of forms of plagiarism in a risk-free environment decreases dramatically when detection risk and substantial penalties are introduced.

Conclusion

Academic dishonesty and misconduct is an enduring problem for tertiary institutions worldwide and one that directly impacts on the performance attributes of universities. A growing pool of research shows evidence that suggests that dishonest behaviour by students around the globe is predominant and ever increasing. The literature presents a worrying picture of students' behaviour and in turn of the performance of Australian universities in term of teaching, learning and the worth of the degrees completed by students and scholarship.

There are numerous ways of dealing with the problem of academic dishonesty and misconduct. Based on the literature and the observation case study in this paper, the following suggestions are made:

- Do not enrol students with a low G.P.A. (in Australia, often represented as a tertiary entrance ranking), as research suggests that students' attitudes to cheating could be linked to a low G.P.A. Research shows that students with a higher G.P.A. are less likely to cheat as they have less to gain and more to lose if they are caught in comparison to students with a lower G.P.A.
- Strengthening the teaching of ethics in program curricula

- If universities insist/prefer to use a paper exams, then they should supply and pay an exam invigilator instead of leaving it up to the student to find an exam invigilator and not doing any background checks on the exam invigilator.
- Offer take-home exams.
- Consider having online exams for online degrees instead of hard copy exams that need to be posted to an exam invigilator and supervised.
- Employ the use of biometrics to identify students.
- Employ the use IP addresses as assisting tools to identify collusions.

Those are only a few suggestions, and the author suggests that an in-depth case analysis with a large sample size should be conducted to identify what may and what may not work when it comes to the fight against academic dishonesty and misconduct.

As universities around Australia and the world are offering an increasing number of courses and degrees online, it is important to plan how to deal with the problem of academic dishonesty and misconduct. This paper only looked at one type of cheating - other sorts of academic dishonesty, for example plagiarism or employing assignment writing companies, are beyond the scope of this paper. With many courses using an end-of-subject exam for up to 60% of the student's overall mark for the subject, it is vitally important that cheating in exams be addressed.

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