

## Chapter 6.1

# Prevention is Better than Cure: Addressing Cheating and Plagiarism Based on the IT Student Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter adopts a four-aspect model to address cheating and plagiarism in universities: education, prevention, detection, and consequence. The research focussed on the two aspects of education and prevention as the authors feel that this area has not been considered in detail by the research. Building on past research, a series of eight focus groups (72 students) were conducted with students from information technology degrees at an Australian university. The students were asked to comment and discuss the phenomenon of cheating from their perspective. The chapter presents in detail the responses of the students as analysed by the researchers and then builds a set of guidelines for educators to use in the areas of education and prevention in relation to student cheating.

### INTRODUCTION

The problem of cheating is a long-standing one. Despite recent claims that the Internet and a decline in moral standards has caused a large increase in cheating, the evidence is that cheating has been a problem in universities over many decades (see for example: Bowers, 1964; Hetherington & Feldman, 1964; Stern & Havlicek, 1986). Yet most universities have not seriously addressed the problem unless forced to by events. The WIRA incident at the University of Newcastle in Australia where a blatant cheating situation was ignored by senior management as long as was possible is an exemplar of this approach and which led to an inquiry by the New South Wales Independent Commission against Corruption and the condemnation of the relevant senior management (Cripps, 2005; Longstaff, Ross, & Henderson, 2003).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-503-2.ch601

Where universities have addressed the issue of cheating, the predominant approach has been one of punishment. Taking a broader view, we see the process of addressing cheating as having four aspects:

- **Education:** putting in place educational processes that provide students the necessary skills and knowledge to allow them to avoid cheating and to understand why cheating is undesirable. It also covers the education of academics to ensure that they understand the processes of the university in relation to cheating and that they implement good educational practice that will reduce cheating.
- **Prevention:** designing assessment so that cheating is both difficult to do and counter-productive for the student to attempt.
- **Detection:** establishing processes that allow academics to detect cheating when it occurs and also establishing processes for students to identify problems with their work prior to submission, for example, allowing students to submit work to a plagiarism detection service.
- **Consequence:** creating fair and equitable processes for dealing with cheating situations appropriate to the circumstances of individual cases.

We believe that in order to properly address these four areas, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the major actors in the situation, that is, the students, the academics and the university. We address in detail only the first group of actors, the students, as this chapter intends to provide assistance to individual academics in their approaches to reducing cheating as opposed to the development of general university policy. Subsequently, the chapter examines the aspects of *education* and *prevention* because the aspects of *detection* and *consequence* have been covered in

detail in previous work (see Jude Carroll's work [Carroll & Appleton, 2001] for an excellent and comprehensive discussion of the policy issues surrounding cheating and plagiarism). The aspects of *detection* and *consequence* are more appropriate to the strategic approach needed in the policy area as opposed to the tactical approach needed in the teaching area. In addition, dealing with cheating once it has been detected is both time-consuming and difficult in the best of situations. By focusing on *education* and *prevention*, the overall time and effort required to manage cheating is reduced.

*Education* and *prevention* are not sufficient lenses in themselves to understand the student perspective. It is also necessary to determine the student's understandings of, and motivations for cheating. From this framework we aim to develop guidelines for educational curriculum and for designing assessment for academic programs.

## BACKGROUND

This section addresses four questions that are raised by the current discussions of cheating in the community and which are necessary to inform our understanding of the student perspective:

1. What is cheating?
2. Should we be concerned about cheating in the university sector?
3. What influences students to engage in cheating?
4. How are universities currently addressing this problem?

### What Is Cheating?

There are many ways that tertiary students may cheat, making it difficult to arrive at a simple definition of cheating. A search of the literature has shown that cheating is often defined using multiple dimensions. These typically are described

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