

Counting Beans in the Degree Factory

(Some Practical Meta-Ethical Reflections on Academic Integrity in Australian Universities)

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Abstract: This paper examines how material conditions constrain the capacity to act with academic integrity, particularly in the context of severe resource limitations within Australian higher education. It describes the current situation in Australian universities drawing on statistics as well as the authors' experiences. Drawing on the recent report on plagiarism at the University of Newcastle produced by the St. James Ethics Centre, it shows how policies and procedures can run aground due to resource scarcity. It also explores the breakdown of traditional academic culture and its impact on integrity making reference to the University of Maryland Student Honor Code. Finally, the paper raises the question of what constitutes ethical action when resources become stretched to the breaking point.

Keywords: academic, integrity, higher, education, reform, university, plagiarism

Preamble

We were invited to facilitate a workshop on ethical dilemmas arising from situations involving questions concerning academic integrity at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Educational Integrity Conference. At the outset let us state that neither of us has any special expertise in the field of academic integrity, at least not in the sense of having dedicated enormous amounts of time researching and publishing in the specific area. However, as professional philosophers, we naturally have a strong commitment to pondering the question Socrates asked in the *Gorgias* "How should one live?" In ancient Athens, as arguably it should still be now, this issue was of paramount importance to the academy. So, whilst we are not specialists in ethics, as such, both of us teach courses with a substantial ethics component. Most of our combined forty years of academic experience has been teaching at the coalface: as lecturers and tutors in sessional and contract work. Our academic experience provides ample material upon which to construct realistic scenarios for such a debate.

Our discussions in preparation for this paper revealed a wide range of concerns. However, two major issues seemed to underlie them: structural changes (somewhat euphemistically labelled as "reform") over the past decade-and-a-half increased both the occurrence and the difficulty of ethical dilemmas concerning academic integrity, and current strategies aimed at addressing these problems expeditiously may, paradoxically, compound the growing crisis in the long term. Thus we have produced these "practical meta-ethical reflections" as a prolegomenon to any future discussion of these issues in an Australian context, including our workshop. The irony of such a label is not lost on us. In contemporary philosophic discussions "meta-ethics" concerns foundational issues, e.g. what is the basis for ethical reasoning. However, this is not our concern here. In our view, applied ethical judgment requires a *practical* meta-ethics as well. That is, we must understand the current state of play of our practical situation in order to make sound ethical decisions. It is on these practical foundations that we will focus.

Introduction

The changes that have taken place in Australian higher education over the past 15 years are well documented. A good overview was presented in the recent ABC *Four Corners* documentary “The Degree Factories” (see Fullerton 2005). Trends over the last decade (1990-2000) and their implications are discussed insightfully in the 2001 report to the Chifley Research Centre, *The Comparative Performance of Australia as Knowledge Nation* (Considine, Marginson and Sheehan 2001). Insofar as the ABC documentary reflects the current reality, the trends identified in the Chifley Centre report have at best continued, but most likely have accelerated. In the first section of this paper we will present a schematic of this situation supplemented by observations from our experience of this transition.

No doubt the “WIRA incident” at the University of Newcastle has been a provocative stimulus to initiating the discourse about academic integrity in our context. Although it does display features that would be grist for our mill, the notoriety of this event is one of the reasons we do not want to *especially* focus on it. The other reason is its extremity: we hope that most of us will never be involved in a situation that will land us in front of ICAC. Instead we want to focus on issues concerning academic integrity that we all face periodically. Nevertheless, one of the results of the Newcastle episode was a report which the university commissioned the St. James Ethics Centre to produce, *Independent enquiry: plagiarism policies, procedures & management* (Longstaff *et al.* 2003). Given its ethical orientation, the report raises many of the problems we have experienced. The second section of our paper will show how a selection of the issues raised in the St. James report can only be addressed in the context of the higher education reforms cited earlier.

Recently in Australia there has been interest in creating and enforcing plagiarism policies, as well as improving plagiarism detection (Carroll 2004; Eckersley & Stokes 2004; McCabe 2004). In contrast to these “enforcement strategies” there is the rather quaint notion, common in some US universities, called an “honor code” (sic). Whilst we do not necessarily advocate an honour approach to academic integrity for Australia, we do think that aspects of that system are worth more than a passing inspection. *Prima facie* from an ethical perspective, honour codes have two advantages: they are based on “honour”, arguably a fundamental human value, and secondly, they give students ownership (through participation) of process of enforcement. Section three of our paper will briefly examine the *University of Maryland Student Honor Council Code of Academic Integrity*.

We do not seek to suggest how to redress the many and complex problems concerning academic integrity in contemporary Australia, trying to pin-point just a few of them is our major focus. What we do hope, however, is that this paper will provide some background that will aid discussion of these issues in the future. The paper will conclude by raising one crucial question for academics: How can we be ethical in the face of diminishing resources?

The Changing Face of University Education in Australia

Here we are forced to be schematic, nevertheless most of our audience will be familiar with this story. Since the Dawkins’ reform of higher education in the late 1980’s universities in Australia have been in a perpetual state of “re-organisation”. In general, total student numbers have doubled, whilst government expenditure in the university sector declined. The difference has come from several sources. The largest new contributions to university funding have come from the introduction of HECS and a massive increase in full-fee paying

students from overseas. The proportion of staff involved in teaching has declined. There has been a trend toward increased numbers of casual teaching staff. Student/staff ratios increased dramatically.

Here are a few statistics to fill out the picture:

- Total student numbers: 485,066 (1990) rose to 695,485 (2000)
(Considine *et al.* 2001, p. 16)
- Government Funding per student: \$8724 (1989) fell to \$6826 (1999)
(Considine *et al.* 2001, p. 27)
- Percentage of Funding from Government sources: 1989: 70% 1999: 49%
(calculated from data from Considine *et al.* 2001, p. 27)
- Overseas student Numbers: 1990: 24,998; 2000: 95,607
(Considine *et al.* 2001, p. 16)
- Proportion of Staff involved in teaching: 1990: 42.7% 1999: 37.6%
(Considine *et al.* 2001, p. 18)
- Proportion of teaching staff time provided by casual labour: 1999: 21%
(Considine *et al.* 2001, p. 18)
- Student staff ratio: 1987: 12:1 2004: 21:1¹

To some extent the numbers speak for themselves, but they do not tell the whole story. The ways in which these structural reforms have been implemented have placed pressures on delivering education in ways not immediately obvious from the numbers. Take the experience of one of the authors as typical. He joined the lecturing staff in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Newcastle in 1994 when the Dawkins' reforms were well underway. In 1997, in order to rein-in costs, the university was restructured (in the corporate sense) by offering approximately 200 academics early voluntary retirement. In 2001-2 another "restructure" was undertaken. Whilst this time no staff were lost, the actual structure of the university was radically reformed: faculties were re-organised going from eleven to four but, more significantly, departments were abolished replaced by schools. It was not entirely clear what the purpose of the reform was. If it was designed to save money, it failed miserably: in 2005 a deficit of more than \$20 million² was reported at the same time it was announced that another restructure was imminent, this time requiring over 400 job losses.

This sort of incessant change causes a certain amount of stress for a university's staff, and this stress inevitably will have some impact on individuals' ability to tackle issues of integrity. In this case, and we do not believe the experience at Newcastle was atypical, repeat reform, and its accompanying on-going administrative burden, has clearly impeded the accomplishment of academic tasks and this, we argue, has led to an undermining of academic integrity. The most significant example was restructuring departments into

¹ This statistic reflects the view from a number of sources. It can be extrapolated with some certainty from Considine 2001; Cf. Marginson 2005.

² The exact amount is unclear. University documents have stated a range from \$15 million to \$28 million on various occasions.

schools. Prior to the amalgamation into schools, the department was the fundamental administrative structure for dealing with such day to day academic activities as teaching documentation, examination, curriculum, workload, etc.. Plagiarism cases were generally handled through informal consultation with the head of department with (rare) serious cases referred to the dean of the faculty. This process appeared satisfactory, particularly in a small department with a solid sense of community and with sufficient familiarity between its members to enable consistent judgements on departmental policies. But as a result of the 2000 reform the academic unit of the department no longer existed. Despite a massive effort creating procedures and documentation – mostly documentation – for necessary administrative functions dealing with teaching, how to carry out these once straightforward activities was now unclear. It was during this time that many of the policy documents - sharply criticised for their inconsistency in the St. James report - were created.

We feel this strikes to the heart of the problem. “Formalised strategies” quite clearly are convenient for policing: they create a paper trail and offer certain high-ranking administrators a level of protection from litigation or the charge that they may not be doing their duty. Yet the very creation of these policies has undermined the general perception of the academy as being a community for the community and reinforced the perception that academics are now just out for whatever they can get (presumably just like everyone else in the business world?). Contrast this with the, admittedly piecemeal, communal and informal approach which preceded it. For all its weaknesses it appeared to be working and, even if less than perfect, at the very least was more effective than current solutions or even more radical proposals such as plagiarism detection programs.

Thus we can identify several factors from the structural reform of higher education that can and have impacted on academic integrity, particularly on plagiarism detection and enforcement:

1. The increase in student/staff ratio places more burden on staff.
2. High numbers of overseas students may not be familiar with Australian standards of scholarship.
3. Casual staff may have less experience in detection of plagiarism.

These are compounded by restructuring that increases staff administrative workloads, at the same time making policies less clear and procedures more difficult. The most intangible, but perhaps most significant, factor could be a radical change in academic culture in Australia during the past two decades. Simon Marginson describes the situation this way:

In Australia, especially when per student public funding declined after 1996, business functions became the driver of development, more than academic capacity. Attention focused on revenues, efficiencies, marketing, administrative modernisation and economies of scale. Institutions grabbed every potential source of public and private finance. When HECS-place funding for domestic participation stopped growing, institutions (even sandstones like Melbourne and Sydney) stepped up high volume medium quality coursework programs for international students in business and IT (Marginson 2005).

Of course here Marginson is focussing on the instrumental aspects of the reform. But was this shift in emphasis from education for its own sake to education for profit perhaps not also accompanied by a shift in *ethos*? We will revisit this issue of institutional norms in the final section, but first we will look at some issues raised by the St. James review.

Ethics in Action

Section “3.3 Finances and Universities” of the St. James enquiry (Longstaff *et al.* 2003) briefly canvasses some of the issues raised in the earlier section of our paper. They (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p. 43) state, “A number of allegations regarding plagiarism at the University of Newcastle and within the University [*sic*] domain in general relate to funding / financial distress.” Then in four paragraphs they make the following points:

- This situation brings about the temptation to use questionable means to bring about desirable ends.
- “Tight fiscal constraints”³ may play a part in “questions from the media about double standards in relation to the treatment and assessment of international students.”
- “Australian Universities [*sic*] are becoming increasingly under-resourced ... yet have maintained a reputation for high quality courses and graduates.”⁴
- The universities are a huge asset to Australia with overseas student revenue worth \$947 million (10% of the 2000 total student revenue); “the cost of failure” (of under-qualified overseas students) can negatively impact on the reputation of Australian universities. (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p. 43)

Despite the obvious ethical focus of their document, they fail to explicitly note the ethical issue that concerns us here: material conditions can often constrain the capacity to act ethically. These constraints occur in a variety of ways for there can be no doubt that in an under-resourced environment there is both more motivation and more opportunity to act unethically. Also under certain material conditions other forms of unethical behaviour other than plagiarism may be present for example, fraudulently presenting, or *inventing*, experimental findings. Lack of resources can lead to overwork, and overwork can limit one’s ability to detect, and hence react appropriately to, unethical behaviour.⁵ Furthermore, cultural change, e.g. a shift in focus to efficiency and competition from such traditional academic values as truth and honesty, can erode — or at least alter — the basis for ethical action.

Within the comments made in the focus groups forming the basis for much of the St. James enquiry, the issues we address here were raised. However, the report never flags the impact resource limitation has on individual ethical action with respect to academic integrity as an issue. In particular, whilst it canvasses the issue of “Finances and Universities”, the report does not cite the fact that student/staff ratios have grown from 13:1 to 21:1 in just over a decade. Obviously, and *a fortiori*, it fails to raise the ethical implications of such growth. We cannot hope to provide an exhaustive review of the focus group comments here, but we will provide a few examples before moving on to address the larger ethical point in more detail.

³ Here citing a document by Brendan Nelson.

⁴ The second part of this passage sourced from a report by the Group of Eight.

⁵ It is perhaps ironic that the WIRA incident, which was the main reason for the St. James enquiry, is a counterexample of the issue we are raising here. If not for the diligence of the lecturer involved in spotting and referring on the allegedly plagiarised work in the first place there would have been no problem. Had the lecturer been so overworked that he overlooked the transgression, there would have been no WIRA incident at all.

Exploring the issue of “gaps between stated policy and lived reality” the St. James enquiry evoked the following comments⁶:

“The issue of plagiarism is difficult and involves a serious amount of stress for staff and students involved. In addition it will involve a serious amount of time, effort and paperwork. It is probable that in a living situation a plagiarism situation can be either ignored or diluted to the extent that it can be passed over. This could be done to limit the stress/workloads involved.”

“wonder [*sic*] how much plagiarism either goes undetected or ignored particularly by part-time or casual lecturers. This could explain why students in senior years are angry when they are asked to account for or explain why their work or parts of it are plagiarised. They often ask why no one else has raised this with them when they have been preparing assignments like this the whole time they have been at University [*sic*].” (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p.52)

Of course our ethical response to these statements varies depending upon material context. One set of responses is appropriate if the individuals involved are being well looked after by the institution; another is appropriate if this is not the case.

In another section the report states, “The groups [composed of both lecturers and students] were asked to summarise the high-risk areas [of plagiarism]...” (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p.59) Three of the issues on a long list were:

Teachers handing out the **same** essay **topics** and assignments **every year**. “It’s easy for them to mark and easy for us to cheat.” (student)

Large classes, heavy work load—“Students know the lecturer is not going to check every word and every reference—he/she has three hundred assignments to mark—There is a perception in the student culture that its easy to get away with it.” (student)

“Academic remuneration is not earth shattering — you need outside work — how much time can you spend checking every reference or following up on your suspicion.” (lecturer)

(Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p.59)

When evaluated from within a material context, the situations described here could, depending upon point of view, be indicative of individuals cutting corners or the institution cutting corners. Our ethical assessments toward the individuals involved would vary accordingly. In the course of the enquiry, staff were surveyed on the following question: “What are some of the obstacles (e.g. situations, politics, procedures ambiguities and complexities) which make it difficult to achieve best practice and policy in the management of plagiarism?” (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p.63) Some responses were:

“high teaching loads (currently 14 hours of face to face teaching plus administration in the department in which I work), heavy marking loads (I marked 400 items of assessment in the month of June)”

⁶ This material is a bit tricky to reference. In the responses the St. James report mixes summary with direct quotation, using inverted commas to distinguish the quotes. Hence we will indent responses from the report (whether they are long or not), and inverted commas in the indented sections are from the original document.

“Ludicrously heavy workloads BOTH staff and student”

“It is time-consuming to track down evidence to support a case of plagiarism and workload pressures increasingly limit the time available to do anything but the bare essentials to keep the place afloat.”
(Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p.63)

These responses reinforce some of the points addressed above. Additionally, the comment indicating that students currently suffer additional workloads under the new regime serves to emphasise a vicious positive feedback cycle: overworked students have more incentive to cheat whilst overworked markers are less likely to detect their efforts. It is worthwhile to perform some rough calculations to illustrate the point:

Assume you are responsible for marking the work of 50 students (i.e. 12.5 student/staff ratio) in one semester. Further, assume a plagiarism rate of 1%. If it takes 6 hours on average to investigate, document and enforce a plagiarism case, you will correspondingly spend 6 hours per year or <1% total teaching time⁷ so doing. Contrast this with the situation many of us find ourselves in: 200 pieces of marking, with say (very) conservatively, 5% plagiarism rate. This yields 60 hours per year (or 6.5% total teaching time – no doubt actual figures will be considerably higher!).

The St. James report (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p. 4) opens with the following observation:

An important part of [the] context [of the enquiry into plagiarism policies procedures and management controls at the University of Newcastle] is the high degree of popular scepticism (if not outright cynicism) about the conduct and motives of individuals and organisations. In general the public tends to assume that the demands of self-interest are often opposed to and ‘trump’ the consistent application of principle. Given this, there has been, in recent years, a growing acceptance of increased regulation and surveillance in the hope that such measures will be a practical alternative to untrustworthy and unreliable regimes of self-regulation.

This is a succinct account of public perception. However, regulation and surveillance we believe can never eliminate the need for human judgement. Regulation may require academics to report all instances of plagiarism. But what if the academics do not see them? Turning a blind eye is most efficacious at the chalkface. Perhaps surveillance will help? If we take the words of the focus groups seriously resources are so stretched at the University of Newcastle (and there is no reason to believe Newcastle is unique in this regard) that markers hardly have time to track down *any* cases of plagiarism they suspect. Where will Australia find the resources to invigilate the invigilators? This is a serious problem. However it gets worse: as the focus groups have pointed out, when systems of regulation and surveillance become cumbersome and unwieldy individuals subject to them are even less likely to cooperate with them. When a system becomes dysfunctional, at what point does it become un-ethical to turn a blind eye? When does ethics give way to pragmatism and when does such pragmatism begin to undermine traditional institutional values?

One more remark from the St. James focus groups is worthy of mention. One “of the obstacles ... which make it difficult to achieve best practice and policy in the management of plagiarism” was

“Treating education as a marketable commodity” (Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p.63)

This remark, coupled with the foregoing discussion, lead us to a final point.

Honour vs. Enforcement

Resource scarcity *per se* causes problems for the detection of plagiarism and the enforcement of integrity policies. By now we hope that we made clear that government education policies, particularly those aimed at funding, have decreased resources available for higher education. However, here we want to revisit the issue of the change of *ethos* that has occurred within the academy over the past two decades. Not only has the Australian government cut its per student contribution to higher education, it has put into place policies that encourage, to borrow the words of our earlier anonymous focus group participant, “treating education as a marketable commodity”. These policies, as well as their results and implications, have been discussed at length in the documents cited above and elsewhere. So, more damaging to integrity than lack of funding is the response of universities to scarcity. Australian university education has been aggressively marketed overseas to such an extent that it has become a thousand million dollar export commodity. Such effort engenders a specific value system. Academic excellence gives way to economic efficiency. Plagiarism detection and enforcement policies and strategies now become seen as sensible ways to preserve the value of the Australian university brand, at least as it is currently being promoted. What these stated aims conceal, though, is an underlying malaise.

Some universities in the United States employ a different strategy. Based on a tradition, dating at least back to 1784 at the College of William and Mary, many universities adopt an honour code. The *University of Maryland Student Honor Council Code of Academic Integrity*⁸ is prefaced as follows:

The University is an academic community. Its fundamental purpose is the pursuit of knowledge. Like all other communities, the University can function properly only if its members adhere to clearly established goals and values. Essential to the fundamental purpose of the University is the commitment to the principles of truth and academic honesty. Accordingly, *The Code of Academic Integrity* is designed to ensure that the principle of academic honesty is upheld. While all members of the University share this responsibility, *The Code of Academic Integrity* is designed so that special responsibility for upholding the principle of academic honesty lies with the students (University of Maryland Student Honor Council).

This may seem a rather quaint statement. However, it illustrates two points:

1. It is still possible to at least create the illusion that academic integrity at a large state university is based on traditional academic values.
2. Students can be (and *are* in some communities) entrusted to play a role in upholding academic integrity.

Students are required at the University of Maryland to sign an honour pledge and there are clear procedures for penalising violators. However, students actually make up a majority of the voting members of the board

⁷ Based on 924 total teaching hours per year (35 hrs/wk X 48 wks/yr X .55, where the expectation is that 55% of a full-time academic's job is teaching). Readers may substitute their own numbers if they feel they are more representative. The general point remains the same.

⁸ We have chosen the University of Maryland rather than say the more traditional College of William and Mary as an example quite consciously. Whilst William and Mary is a small elite private institution, Maryland is a large public university.

that enforces the code. Perhaps the highest value in a free market system is competition. Certainly competition plays a healthy role in traditional educational systems. Nevertheless a system based on market values alone, in the absence of traditional academic values, we think is a recipe for disaster. Economic efficiency can lead to pedagogically dubious practices. Perhaps a threshold has already been crossed whereby economic efficiency has overtaken educational integrity. The question needs to be asked whether this transition is reversible and, perhaps more pragmatically, whether it is sustainable?

One central value in traditional academic communities is the student-teacher relationship. In the section entitled “Student Lecturer Relationship Distance” of the St. James enquiry report (Longstaff *et al.* p.80) is explored the hypothesis that “the wider the distance between student and lecturer the greater the temptation to plagiarise.” After canvassing a few opinions on the issue they summarise as follows:

It seems to make sense that plagiarism is more likely if you do not personally know your lecturer: students are less likely to ask for guidance; teachers are less likely to know they need it; and being found plagiarising by a “stranger” is perhaps not as great a concern as being discovered by someone you know and respect.

So... this *simply means* more care and caution is needed in these situations.(Longstaff *et al.* 2003, p. 80⁹)

Of course, no one would deny a duty of care with respect to academic integrity within the context of the delivery of any course — independent of the “distances” involved. However, the issues raised by over-reliance on large classes and distance delivery, compounded by a material culture which trivialises the student-lecturer relationship, is not a simple matter of exercising extra care and caution. Care and caution require financial resources. Individuals ought not to be put in a position where they must perform beyond the call of duty on a continual basis. Without proper resourcing this is what institutions of higher education require of their academic staff. This is an ethical issue for individual staff members. It also gives rise to an ethical dilemma at the institutional level: *ceteris paribus*, large classes and distance delivery are efficient, in the economic rationalist sense, so long as all goes well. Even if we leave to one side issues of intellectual quality and academic values, universities are stuck in a bind: without pushing the envelope on economic efficiency they risk failing due to competition from institutions willing to cut corners.¹⁰

There are obvious questions of political economy raised by our analysis. However, addressing those in detail is beyond our brief. We want to raise a narrower question of personal importance to practitioners within academe: on the assumption that our characterisation of the material situation is roughly accurate, how does one act ethically within such a system?

⁹ Ellipsis in original; emphasis ours.

¹⁰ Perhaps a marketing niche opens for some of those academies that chose not to go down this path, but currently this would be a very risky strategy to all but the highest profile institutions.

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