

Addressing the Wandering Naïve: The development of an online resource to educate students about a university-wide academic integrity policy

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Abstract: This paper outlines the process undertaken to inform new entry tertiary students of the implementation of a recently developed policy on academic conduct. Following cross-faculty consultations, a WebCT online resource was developed for use amongst new entry students. In addition to informing students of the policy's existence, the module developed served a number of other purposes including the introduction to general issues of ethical scholarship and ways it may impact on both the students' academic and future careers. It stated the University's expectations of their students with respect to ethical scholarship, informing them of the likely consequences that might result from instances of academic misconduct and providing them with advice and sources of assistance in matters concerning correct academic conduct. In so doing it sought to be both supportive and clear about student responsibility. Students' response to the initial implementation of the module was surveyed, assessing its success in addressing the relevance to new entry tertiary students.

Keywords: ICT, WebCT, academic integrity, undergraduate students, new entry students, equity of process

Introduction

Issues of academic integrity have been brought to the fore in policy making in higher education, particularly in the context of the recent vigorous debate surrounding plagiarism. While the issue of ethical scholarship is not new, it is now believed to be a critical issue within the academic environment (Bradley 2004). The currency of the issue necessitates not only a transparent response within the university sector, but proactive approaches to the induction of students to the academic environment. In effect the 'wandering naïve' group of students first entering university (Carroll 2003) must be exposed to specific educational experiences which familiarize them with the expectations of their own particular academic institution. This paper discusses the development of a resource intended to introduce entry level students to both the broader issues of academic conduct as well as expectations and sanctions associated with ethical scholarship at The University of Western Australia.

Background: Developing a student focused online resource aligned to policy

The University of Western Australia has recently developed a policy on academic conduct which takes into account ethical scholarship and academic misconduct. Of concern in the development of this policy was the need to address, in a sufficiently detailed manner, locally relevant issues within a devolved institution marked by wide disciplinary diversity (The University of Western Australia 2003a). As plagiarism and other aspects of academic misconduct may not be defined universally (Briggs 2003) and may indeed differ across disciplines (Taylor 2003) it is imperative to educate students about the meaning of these terms within specific university contexts. As part of a four point plan of action to address issues of academic conduct, a package of integrated materials about academic literacy and academic misconduct were to be made available to students and staff alike (The University of Western Australia 2003a). The priority was to develop an online resource for students to be used as part of a broader induction to issues of ethical scholarship and academic conduct. This kind of resource helps socialize students to work in academic communities and to avoid unintentional academic misconduct (Paterson et. al. 2003). Although the online resource was to be used primarily at the time of entry to university, it also was to serve as an accessible guide to be used by students when needed and as a repository of information about further advice and information (Carroll 2004b).

Cross faculty consultations were carried out prior to the development of the online resource. Issues of particular concern were canvassed in an effort to ensure no significant or common problem failed to be addressed in the content of the resource. Most interest related to cases of plagiarism, yet academic dishonesty is far broader, encompassing, for example, cheating and falsification (Marsden 2004). While there existed some faculty specific concerns, particularly in the sciences where labwork provided the opportunity for students to fabricate results or inappropriately collaborate in the construction of reports, generally the issues raised were consistent across faculties. Apart from the more obvious and intentional forms of academic misconduct such as cheating in exams, inadvertent instances of academic misconduct, which may have been due to a lack of understanding on the part of students, were common across the faculties. These included instances of plagiarism and the difference between appropriate and inappropriate collaboration, particularly in faculty sanctioned group work activities.

Designing *Academic Conduct Online*

The self paced *Academic Conduct Online* module was constructed via WebCT, the centrally supported learning management system used at the University of Western Australia. A number of priorities informed the structure and content of the module. It needed to:

1. be accessible to the students
2. be informative with respect to aspects of academic conduct generally and the University policy specifically
3. provide information on additional sources of assistance to students
4. be a functional and educative resource be short and user-friendly enough to encourage student engagement

The Structure

Content of the module was broken into manageable and sequential sections. The sub-modules can be seen in the homepage illustrated in Figure 1. A general introduction, pre-quiz and exposure to the University policy and guidelines were followed by a number of sections, each addressing a different aspect of academic conduct. These were: Cheating in Exams, Fabricating Results, Collusion and Plagiarism. Each sub-module had a self-test which students could use on completion.

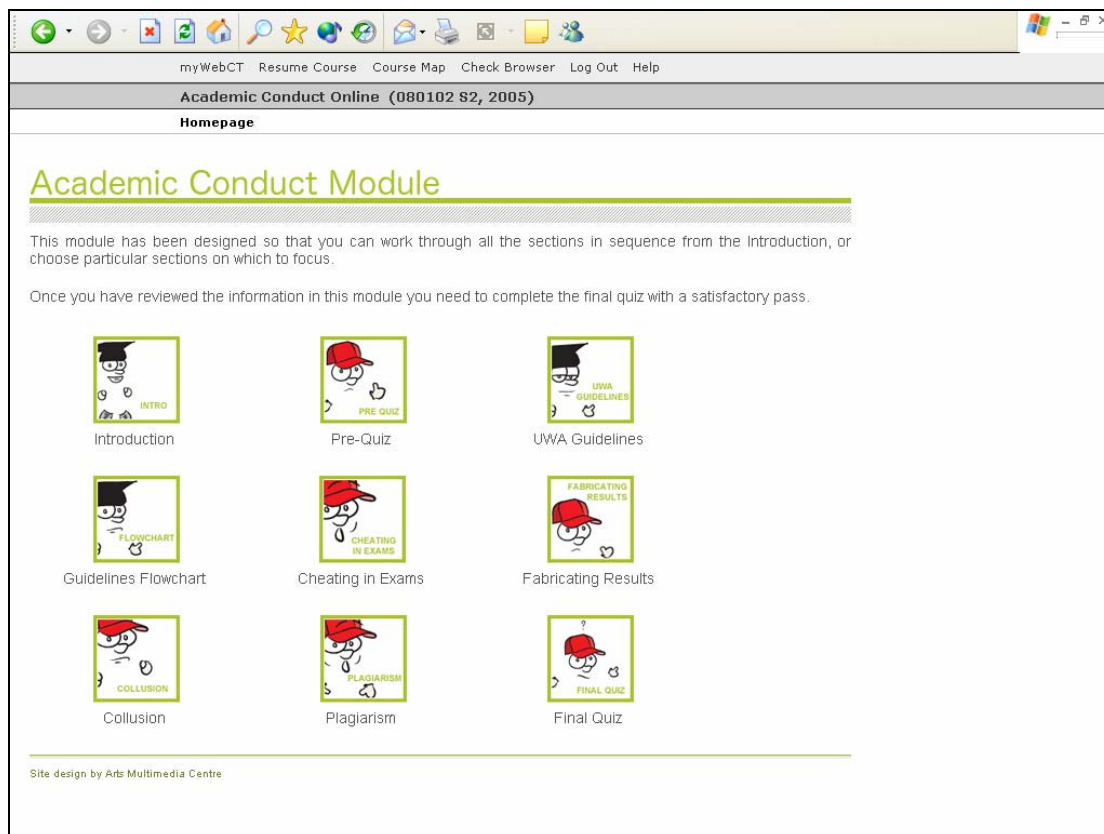


Figure 1. Homepage of the *Academic Conduct Online* developed on WebCT illustrating the various submodules

The Content

Most of the sub-modules had a section of background content followed by a student focused scenario, and a short quiz that required the students to be familiar with the University policy. Students were encouraged to refer to the policy at anytime in order to ascertain the potential consequences of the varying forms of academic misconduct described. By engaging in the various quizzes throughout the module and by being able to revisit different sections within the resource, the intention was to maintain the level of interactivity and student engagement. Page length was limited, with the largest of the sub-modules ten pages in length. Students were required to 'click' rather than 'scroll' to progress through each sub-module.

Formal, academic language was used sparingly, being reserved for when aspects of the policy were being quoted. To differentiate and help identify formal and informal content delivery, two illustrated characters were used throughout the module. These characters, one representing an academic and the other representing a student, can be seen on the homepage in Figure 1. When the rules and regulations were being explained or advice was being given, the figure of the academic was used. To indicate student scenarios or quizzes, the image of the student was employed.

The quizzes at the end of each section were intended for self-evaluation and were not graded. These consisted of either true or false, or multiple choice types questions. Instant feedback, which included explanations, was given on the selection of the answers. The final quiz, however, was designed to check their overall understanding of the entire module and was graded and recorded. Small banks of questions were constructed covering each aspect of the module and a random choice was made from these to construct a different ten question quiz each time a student attempted the final quiz. Students were permitted to attempt and submit this quiz as many times as they wished.

Trialling the unit and seeking student feedback

One first year unit from each of six faculties across the University was chosen for the trial. Students enrolled in the units ranged from between 93 and 645. The students were given WebCT access to *Academic Conduct Online* and asked to participate in the trial. Functions of WebCT allow the tracking of student participation and engagement with the module. A series of reports were produced which itemised student time online, number of times were quizzes attempted and submitted and the scores achieved on each attempt. Student feedback was collected initially in a short survey and subsequently in a series of small group interviews.

The survey was a Likert rating scale questionnaire consisting of 14 statements which are listed in Table 2. Each statement was rated on a five-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Opportunity was also provided for students to write short comments. The results obtained from these surveys provided the basis for the discussions within the interviews. Six small group interviews with representatives from all faculties involved in the trial were conducted. A total of 23 students were interviewed in groups of between two and five participants.

Results

Student participation and engagement with the module

Aspects of student participation in the trial can be seen in Table 1. The student involvement ranged from 5 - 24% of the total enrolment in each course, with an overall involvement of 16% across the entire student cohort. The feedback received via the initial survey was from 5% of the potential trial population with students from two faculties providing no feedback at all.

Of those that did complete the module a substantial proportion attempted and submitted the final quiz more than once, with up to ten attempts being recorded on several occasions. Most students scored well on the final quiz with the average top score being greater than 8 out of 10 for all but one faculty (Economics and Commerce). On average the time taken by students to complete the quiz was between 3 minutes, 5 seconds and 4 minutes, 18 seconds.

Table 1. Student participation in *Academic Conduct Module* trial by Faculty

Faculty	Total student enrolment in each unit	Students completing WebCT module (percentage)	Students completing feedback survey	Average top score (Average time taken in mins:secs)	% of students attempting final quiz more than once
Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences	93	13 (14%)	6	8 (4:18)	30%
Life & Physical Sciences	579	138 (24%)	81	8 (3:06)	30%
Engineering, Computing & Mathematics	397	20 (5%)	0	8.75 (3:38)	40%
Natural & Agricultural Sciences	223	36 (16%)	0	8.1 (3:32)	19%
Economics & Commerce	645	79 (12%)	13	7.6 (3:05)	21%
Law	339	80 (23%)	9	8.4 (3:17)	44%
TOTAL	2276	366 (16%)	109 (5%)		

Achieving the design objectives

The ratings received for the various statements in the survey provided good feedback on the overall acceptance of the module by the students. Table 2 lists the ratings by students across the University for each of the statements in the survey. The figures have also been presented as the percentage that agreed (rating = 4 or 5), the percentage that was neutral (rating = 3) and the percentage that disagreed (rating = 1 or 2).

The priorities listed earlier that formed the basis of the design objectives for the *Academic Conduct Online* will now be considered in the light of the student feedback received from both the survey and the interviews.

Priority 1: To be accessible to the students

Notwithstanding the low rate of participation in the trial, distribution of the module through the students' already established WebCT accounts proved effective. Several of the interviewees commented that as soon as they logged onto WebCT to access other course materials they noticed the *Academic Conduct Online* module. This was facilitated, although not originally by design, by the alphabetical listing of resources on WebCT. Some students described being intrigued by the discovery of the new resource and therefore decided to explore it further. An example of this was described by one student who recalled that he "logged onto WebCT and it just popped up. It wasn't usually there". With some time to spare he thought he "might as well look though it".

Discovering the *Academic Conduct Online* module by chance was not an uncommon experience. Few students remembered their lecturers or tutors actively encouraging them to participate in the trial or stressing the relevance or significance of the concepts to their academic future. Some were motivated to participate though the incentive of the chance to win an MP3 player, others through presuming that it was compulsory. As one student put it when asked why he had completed the module, "I was dumb enough to think it was compulsory".

Students stressed that, in their opinion, the reason for the low participation rate was the fact that it was not compulsory. One student observed of his peers "to be honest a lot of people doing my unit are slack". Another participant in this interview agreed. Quoting his tutor he said, "they don't bother to research topics, they cram the night before an exam and it shows in their results so because this wasn't compulsory, probably that's why not many students did it". None of the students expressed any opposition to the possibility that the module might be made compulsory in the future.

Others commented on their workload and several suggested that if it was going to be introduced to new entry students, to do so as early as possible in the academic year would be advantageous. In addition several students reported that having done the module caused them to reflect on assignments they had already submitted.

Table 2. Total of student ratings of items with breakdown of percentage agreeing, neutral and disagreeing for each item.

Item	Average Rating *	% agree	% neutral	% disagree
1. I have been taught a good deal of factual material.	3.81	80	16	4
2. I have been encouraged to act in a professional manner.	3.88	75	20	4
3. this unit has been relevant to my future.	3.77	73	21	6
4. this unit has been relevant to my other studies.	3.96	83	12	5
5. clear and concise instructions have been given.	4.04	87	13	0
6. material has been presented in an interesting way.	3.37	48	37	15
7. good use has been made of examples & illustrations.	3.87	75	18	6
8. students have been shown broad issues.	3.71	69	29	2
9. the amount of material covered has been reasonable.	3.82	81	12	6
10. the amount of work required has been reasonable.	3.92	82	13	4
11. I have generally understood the material presented.	4.09	87	12	1
12. I have gained a greater understanding of the issues of academic misconduct	4.10	90	6	4
13. doing the module's activities has been a valuable learning experience	3.60	60	36	4
14. I have learnt much as a result of completing this module	3.61	64	28	8

*Ratings: 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree

Priority 2: To be informative with respect to aspects of academic conduct generally and the University policy specifically

The student sentiments about the central priority of the module are reflected in Item 12, *I have gained a greater understanding of the issues of academic misconduct*, and Item 2, *I have been encouraged to act in a professional manner*. Both items received the high levels of agreement with Item 12 being rated the highest at 4.01 of all the items in the survey and receiving a 90% approval from the students. This high degree of acceptance indicates that the central focus of the module and the prime design objective has been adequately achieved. One student summarised the module's impact upon him by saying that he "came out a bit wiser, a bit more aware that there are consequences [for academic misconduct]". While other students claimed an already existing knowledge of ethical scholarship they mostly agreed that completing the module had "brought it to the fore". One student expressed it by saying, "I am now aware of it all the time".

Priority 3: To provide information on additional sources of assistance to students

Scattered throughout the module were examples of sources of additional assistance and advice that students could access if they needed. These included describing the role of the Academic Conduct Advisor [ACA] as not only dealing reactively with instances of academic misconduct, but also proactively by offering suggestions and counselling to students on matters of ethical scholarship. Students were also informed of courses run by Student Services on Academic Literacy and encouraged to seek clarification from lecturers and tutors when they were uncertain of assessment details or expectations. For the most part this aspect of the module's design was not readily apparent to students. This may be due to the manner in which some students addressed the module. One student explained when asked if he had been aware of this feature, that "[the role of the ACA and other sources of advice] went over my head, probably because I skim read it". Only a few students demonstrated an awareness of the overall role of the Academic Conduct Advisors.

Priority 4: To be a functional and educative resource

The functionality and educative value of the module are reflected in Items 1, 7, 8, 13 and 14. Overall the students believed that they had *learnt a good deal of factual material* (rating = 3.81, 80% approval) through *the good use of examples and illustrations* (rating = 3.87, 75% approval) and being *shown a broad range of issues* (rating = 3.71, 69% approval). However they were slightly less convinced that *the module's activities had been a*

valuable learning experience (rating = 3.60, 60% approval) or that they had *learnt much as a result of completing this module* (rating = 3.61, 64% approval). When asked to explain this, a number of the students said they felt that much of what was presented they already knew in general. Ethical issues surrounding academic misconduct were regarded by many of the students as "common sense". However, there were reported examples of students being surprised to learn some of the consequences of less commonly known types of academic conduct such as fabricating results and inappropriate collaboration. Individual student responsibility in ensuring that their work was not copied or used by others was also a revelation to some. Generally the students agreed that the University's specific consequences for instances of academic misconduct were well explained and useful.

Despite the fact that some students believed they already had a good knowledge of the issues surrounding academic misconduct they still rated Item 12, *I have gained a greater understanding of the issues of academic misconduct*, higher than any other in the survey. When asked to account for the apparent discrepancy between the high rating of Item 12, and the relatively lower rated Item 13, *doing this module's activities has been a valuable learning experience*, one student explained it by saying,

They might have understood it better but whether they thought it was valuable depends on whether they thought they needed to know it. They might have considered that 'OK, I've learnt a lot about academic conduct but so what?' They might never have been planning to cheat so it might not have seemed relevant to them so they didn't think it was valuable.

Priority 5: To be short enough and user-friendly to encourage student engagement

Survey item 9, *the amount of material covered has been reasonable*, (rating = 3.82, 81% agreement) and survey item 10, *the amount of work required has been reasonable*, (rating = 3.92, 82% agreement) confirmed the overall belief that the module was of reasonable length and required involvement.

Students reported engaging with the module in a variety of ways. While some skim read all or selected sections, others revisited different sections more than once to confirm understanding. One student reported printing the entire module because, as a mature age student, he preferred this to reading the information on the screen. The following illustrates some of ways students engaged with the module.

- S45: I skim read it. I wasn't really that fussed. There were some bits like on plagiarism that I wasn't so sure about so I did read those through but I skim read most of it ...
- S41: I remember doing one section once a week and then I did the quiz after. I probably did it a couple of times...
- S43: I sort of skimmed over it first then went back and read the things I didn't really know but I don't think I really absorbed it very well so I did the quiz twice I think.
- S44: I did it in about two or three sittings. It took probably 30-45 minutes altogether and I did the quiz once.

The average and most commonly reported time spent completing the module was 20 minutes.

While students commonly reported that they liked the layout of the module, the form of language, the ease of use and the scenarios employed, they rated survey item 6, *material has been presented in an interesting way*, lowest (rating = 3.37, 48% agreement). When asked to elaborate on this result and offer suggestions of ways that the material could be more interestingly presented, students generally agreed that the subject matter that was "very dry". The general consensus was expressed by one student as "I think for what it is, it couldn't be more interesting".

Overall students believed that the module was well designed and informative. One student summed up his impressions of the module and its impact by saying, "this is the best one I've seen so far because there are quite a lot of policy things that we have to read but this is the only one I've actually paid any attention to".

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that most of the priorities for the design of the *Academic Online Module* have been achieved. Student feedback shows the module to be appropriate, student focused and generally accessible. The resource raised awareness within the students of both broader issues of academic conduct as well as the specific issues concerned with the University policy. This is particularly important as the intention of the resource was to address the challenges brought about by the diverse educational experiences that students may have in the

university sector. As noted earlier in the paper, students at entry level to university are often the 'wandering naïve' (Carroll 2003). The variation in student background and experience – particularly at entry level, the differing demands of faculties, schools and disciplines, and the number of students who now complete double degrees means that ensuring students are well informed is a matter of student equity. Herein lies a significant challenge in the University wide implementation of the *Academic Online Module*. The content of the module must reach all students regardless of whether they "intend" to plagiarise, cheat, collude or fabricate or whether they actually commit acts of academic misconduct through "ignorance, indolence or arrogance" (The University of Western Australia 2003b).

With the very low participation rate in the trial of the module it is debatable that the module would be used if it were not compulsory. A study in student use of online resources has highlighted that students will not generally use the resources unless there is a very good reason for them to do so (Deller-Evans et al 2004). It also appears to be vital that academic staff support and promote the module for most leverage in combating plagiarism and other academic misconduct is achieved through what academic staff do within the classroom (Taylor 2003). With academic staff support the module could be used in multiple ways – as a compulsory aspect of orientation; as a resource for staff who may want to prepare students for the challenges of group work or laboratory work where results could be fabricated; and as a remedial resource for students who may have engaged in academic misconduct.

As the use of the module moves from trial to full implementation within the University a clearer indication of the way forward will likely emerge. What is currently apparent is that, in order to effectively address the dilemmas of the 'wandering naïve', a consistent, whole of university approach is required. The module described in this paper represents just one aspect of that greater holistic strategy.

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