Briefing Paper

Summary of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's 'Good Practice Note: Addressing Contract Cheating to Safeguard Academic Integrity'

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Background

In October 2017, the Australian Government's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)[1] published a document aimed at exploring best practice protocols for tertiary institutions to observe to minimise 'contract cheating' in assessment, and to safeguard academic integrity.

The impetus for TEQSA's Good Practice Note was increasing detection of so-called 'contract cheating' across Australian universities. 'Contract cheating' is defined in the report as "contract cheating occurs when students employ or use a third party to undertake their assessed work for them".[2] Contract cheating has been both highly reported in the media,[3] and investigated by a growing body of scholarly research.[4] TEQSA has focussed its Practice Note on already identified areas it believes requires further attention by tertiary institutions, including:[5]

- The need for higher education providers to take a holistic approach to academic integrity.
- The value of consistent academic integrity education for both staff and students.
- The importance of innovative assessment design which goes beyond invigilated examinations.
- The requirement for text-matching software to be used consistently for both education and detection.
- The necessity of training and professional development for academic integrity decision-makers.
- The need to use academic integrity breach data for quality assurance and improvement.

In the Practice Note, TEQSA summarises the research landscape as it pertains to contract cheating and sets out several actions institutions may adopt to potentially reduce the number of students engaging in contract cheating, and to reinforce academic integrity among its cohort.

This briefing paper touches on this research, and summarises the practices TEQSA recommends to the sector and how they may or may not be adopted by The University of Melbourne (Table 1). The paper also identifies opportunities for Office Bearers and UMSU to make representations on behalf of

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[1] A copy of the report can be accessed online at <http://www.teqsa.gov.au/news-publications/good-practice-note-addressing-contract-cheating-safeguard-academic-integrity>.

[2] TEQSA, *Good Practice Note: Addressing contract cheating to safeguard academic integrity*, p.6 <http://www.teqsa.gov.au/news-publications/good-practice-note-addressing-contract-cheating-safeguard-academic-integrity>.

[3] See 'MyMaster Essay Cheating Scandal: More than 70 University Students Face Suspension' March 2015 <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/mymaster-essay-cheating-scandal-more-than-70-university-students-face-suspension-20150312-1425oe.html>; 'High Degree Cheating' April 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/why-students-cheat/6384716>; 'Deakin University students kicked out for contract cheating' May 2016 <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/deakin-university-students-kicked-out-for-contract-cheating-20160517-goxm1y.html>; and 'Six Percent of Uni Students Cheat on their Studies, research shows' April 2017 <http://www.news.com.au/technology/gadgets/six-percent-of-uni-students-cheat-on-their-studies-research-shows/news-story/78918253fb9af5c775c7bc556427a5d8>.

[4] See Macfarlane, B., Zhang, J., & Pun, A. (2014). Academic Integrity: A Review of the Literature. *Studies in Higher Education, 39*(2), 339-358 and the Cheating and Assessment website <https://cheatingandassessment.edu.au/> which is an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching Strategic Priority Project.

[5] Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, Good Practice Note: Addressing contract cheating to safeguard academic integrity – October 2017, 2.

affected students. Finally, this paper makes several recommendations UMSU may pursue to encourage the University to take a holistic, and fairer approach to safeguarding academic integrity.

Contract Cheating and Academic Integrity

Recent research has focussed on the reasons students resort to contract cheating. The Office of Learning and Teaching Strategic Priority Project[6] surveyed 15,000 students across eight Australian universities and four non-university providers and found that students were more likely to cheat if they spoke another language other than English at home, if they were dissatisfied with the teaching and learning environment and if they perceived that there were more opportunities to cheat. In this context, the TEQSA Good Practice Note encourages universities to consider their own responsibility to thoroughly educate students on the importance of academic integrity. This means not only ensuring that individual cases of contract cheating are detected and penalised, but also taking institutional responsibility for assessment design[7] and proactively and regularly educating students on the importance of academic integrity and the consequences if it is breached.

TEQSA's literature review provides a succinct overview of the frequency of academic cheating across the sector.[8] Generally, incidences of self-reported cheating[9] varied from 46% to 67% to 72% according to the literature. More specific forms of academic misconduct were self-reported at a lower level, from 19% to 26% to 81%[10]. Students across Australian universities self-reported that they engaged in contract cheating only 6% of the time.[11]

According to the literature, male students self-reported engaging in academic misconduct more often than female students. Young students tended to report higher participation in academic misconduct, and particularly collusion, than mature aged students. In terms of discipline, self-reporting indicated that students undertaking studies in business were most likely to cheat, followed by engineering students, then science students, with humanities students self-reporting the lowest incidences. Students who had a lower GPA self-reported engaging in academic misconduct more often than students with higher marks. Students with English as a Second Language were also found more likely to breach academic integrity rules, and have particular trouble with plagiarism.[12]

Finally, and of note, education environments that were more goal orientated than learning orientated (that is outcome focussed) were more likely to foster an environment where there were higher levels of academic misconduct.[13] Here TEQSA observes that commercial necessities have meant that "shifting emphasis from tertiary education as a transformative learning experience to one that focuses on credentials for employment has also had an impact on the values and practices of academic integrity".[14] Other environmental factors include peer influence, and the perceived probability of being detected. Poor understanding of exactly what constitutes academic misconduct also plays a part in informing student behaviour.[15]

The Practice Note references the research of Dr Patricia Bertram Gallant, the Director of Academic Integrity of University of California San Diego, whose research focus is on integrity and ethics in education. Dr Bertram Gallant strongly advocates for a 'moral response' to contract cheating making the case that contract cheating is vastly different to its previous incarnation of 'ghostwriting'. Dr Bertram Gallant contends that contract cheating threatens to undermine learning outcomes for students and the high standing of universities throughout the community and even threaten public

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[6] A Government funded research group located at James Cook University. See < https://www.jcu.edu.au/learning-and-teaching/awards-grants/grants/office-for-learning-and-teaching-strategic-priority-commissioned-projects>.

[7] There are currently government funded research groups which have been set up to explore how assessment design can be used to combat high incidences of breaches in academic integrity. See < https://cheatingandassessment.edu.au/>.

[8] op. cit., 3.

[9] Behaviors include copying and using unauthorized materials in exams

[10] op. cit., 3.

[11] ibid, 4.

[12] ibid, 5.

[13] ibid, 4.

[14] ibid, 5.

[15] ibid, 5.

safety.[16] She advises 'harried and reactive' University responses should be reviewed with this perspective.

Taking into consideration that teaching and professional staff, as well as students, are operating under various institutional and market constraints, the Good Practice Note recommends that universities need to re-focus on fostering an environment that promotes academic integrity. This requires senior management in tertiary institutions to work collaboratively with teaching and professional staff, and students, to create a positive culture of academic honesty.[17] The Good Practice Note then lists examples of policies, procedures and actions that might promote such a culture.

Encouraging a strong culture of integrity

TEQSA's recommendations are listed in Table 1. Next to the recommendations is a column titled 'UniMelb Example'. Lilac colour in this column denotes areas in which this University may be lacking, and an opportunity for UMSU to steer the University towards matching these best practice recommendations, rather than pursue a purely reactive agenda.

Table 1

Examples of Good Practice	UniMelb Example
Ensure contract cheating is plainly and explicitly defined in policy[18]	
Include information regarding academic integrity and contract cheating on the website, in course outlines and core subject materials[19]	
Post frequent reminders to students online and around campus that contract cheating is not accepted[20]	
Encourage activities run by students for student that promotes a culture of academic integrity[21]	
Use statistics to detect contract cheating hot spots[22]	
Ensure that processes for referring contract cheating cases are simple[23]	
Ensure contract cheating cases are dealt with consistently and fairly throughout the university[24]	
Communicate outcomes for contract cheating to staff and students[25]	
Train all academic and professional staff on how to identify contract cheating, including librarians, academic developers, learning advisors, counsellors and other support staff[26]	
Establish an office responsible for promoting academic integrity and responding to breaches[27]	
Update all stake holders on contract cheating incidences[28]	

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[16] op. cit., 8.

[17] ibid, 9.

[18] ibid, 11.

[19] ibid, 12.

[20] ibid, 13.

[21] ibid, 14.

[22] ibid, 15.

[23] ibid, 16.

[24] ibid, 17.

[25] ibid, 18.

[26] ibid, 19-20.

[27] op. cit., 21.

[28] ibid, 21.

Promote consistent messaging about academic integrity throughout all year levels[29]	
Ensure academic staff have support to address incidents of contract cheating. For example, if workloads are manageable, then academic staff will be able to deal with breaches to academic integrity when they occur[30]	
Use assessment design to deter contract cheating[31]	
Use text-matching software to identify breaches and to assist students in educating themselves on academic misconduct[32]	
Encourage personalised teaching and learning relationships[33]	
Acknowledge and proactively meet the specific needs of international, LOTE, and other 'at risk' students[34]	
Foster conversations between staff and students concerning contract cheating[35]	
Cooperate across institutions to minimise and curtail contract cheating throughout the tertiary sector[36]	

Table 1 suggests a number of areas where the University can make improvements to foster a community that encourages an holistic approach to academic integrity. General areas of improvement include:

1. Frequently reminding students visually around campus and on digital platforms throughout the year and at different points in their degree of the policies regarding academic misconduct and the potential penalties.

2. Collaborating with different stakeholders throughout the University, including UMSU, to ensure that the message of practicing academic honesty has a wide reach.

3. Ensuring consistent processes across faculties for dealing with academic misconduct.

4. Use and dissemination of data so responses to high levels of academic misconduct can be dealt with an understanding of why they occur.

5. Proper, consistent and regular training of academic and professional staff across the University.

The threats inherent in increasing incidence of academic misconduct and contract cheating are high on the agenda at both the Federal Government level, and within the highly competitive tertiary market. The University of Melbourne's responses to date would be largely classed as reactive, rather proactive; which is inconsistent with the best practice approaches identified in the research. UMSU should itself be proactive in informing the University of the student perspective, to encourage a more holistic approach to academic integrity in accordance with TEQSA's recommendations.

Recommendations for UMSU

UMSU has opportunities to promote the more community driven suggestions provided by TEQSA, including submissions which appeal to the University to incorporate the best practice principles

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[29] ibid, 22.

[30] ibid, 23.

[31] op. cit., 24.

[32] ibid, 25.

[33] ibid, 26.

[34] ibid, 27.

[35] ibid, 28.

[36] ibid, 29.

endorsed by TEQSA. UMSU's focus should be protecting students from the University's reactive practices which can be unnecessarily invasive, inconsistent, and ultimately unfair.

Accordingly, it is recommended that:

1. UMSU requests the inclusion of a student representative on key decision making groups or ongoing projects established to deal with academic integrity, academic misconduct, contract cheating and Cadmus.

2. Student representatives involved in the FlexApp decision making groups should flag that the proposed two-week intensive program for all first-year undergraduate students would be an excellent opportunity to begin to promote the ideals of academic integrity in students and to inform them of the University policy and practices in relation to academic honesty.

3. UMSU continues to provide evidence based recommendations and student feedback to the University regarding the Cadmus test pilot which will be conducted in 2018.

4. UMSU invites collaboration with the University in its efforts to take a less reactive and more holistic approach to academic integrity.

5. UMSU requests information on how de-identified data regarding academic misconduct is being used to understand why breaches to academic integrity appear more prevalent in certain groups and disciplines.

6. UMSU requests information on how 'at risk' groups are being provided with education regarding academic integrity, and supported with academic skills and/or English language support.

7. UMSU requests information on how the University is utilising best practice assessment design to dissuade academic misconduct, and encourage academic engagement among its students.

8. Student representatives participating in any university governance committees or working groups related to Cadmus or academic integrity should continue to:

   a. Advocate for robust consultation with key stakeholders over the life of the projects and prior to the implementation of any change; and

   b. Provide regular reports to the Advocacy and Legal Student Advisory Group, and the Student Representative Network to ensure up to date information is provided to students and the organisation, and communication channels remain open for timely and informed feedback.

9. Education (Academic) Officers are responsible for consolidating progress reports and providing advice and information to Students' Council.