

Using Assessment on the front-line in the battle against plagiarism

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Abstract

There seems to be a consensus that academic offences are endemic in the US system and on the increase within the UK Higher Education system (Bull et al 2001 in Carroll 2002), to the point where Furedi (2003) considers plagiarism to have become a widespread practice.

In recent years there has been a sharp increase in the number of academic offences (cheating and plagiarism) reported amongst students in the Business School at UH.

The Business School Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee has acknowledged that addressing any one of these issues alone will not solve the problem and an integrated approach is required. This idea of a holistic approach is recognised by Joyce (2004) who recommends a three pronged attack combining education, detection and institutional responses. The Teaching and Learning Committee at UHBS considers an additional element addressing teaching and learning strategies is essential, thus an holistic approach comprises:

informing staff and students about what constitutes an academic offence

designing out opportunities to commit offences through revised teaching, learning and assessment strategies identifying academic offences where they occur

constructing effective procedures combined with appropriate penalties for dealing with offences

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This paper seeks to address this vital second step. However, while there is evidence that assessment design can help counter plagiarism (Carroll, 2002; Irons 2004) it is unlikely to eradicate plagiarism altogether.

Our research, carried out in 2005 and funded by a UH Teaching and Learning Committee grant, shows that staff feel there are many reasons why students commit academic offences and these are not going to be solved easily. However, there have been widespread moves towards institutional policies on penalties and both institutional and national initiatives on detection. Some of this leaves teachers subject to imposed external controls which can have the effect of both increasing the administrative burden associated with processing academic offences and invoking a culture of blame. There is anecdotal evidence of staff choosing to ignore cases of misconduct where the time and effort involved exceeds the perceived benefits of operating the prescribed procedure.

Such evidence in the Business school has one Departmental Academic Conduct Officer reporting that they were aware of at least one academic who had not proceeded with a plagiarism case because the “lecturer couldn’t be asked [or arsed?]to fill in the paperwork”.

Larkham and Manns (2002) discuss the time implications saying that reluctance to report cases may be due to one of three things: (1) an effort to meet the required turnaround time for a piece of coursework (2) there maybe a timescale for raising the question of plagiarism and (3) the administrative time required. All of these may prove to be deterrents.

Another lecturer stated that although they did report several cases of plagiarism discovered by the use of the electronic detection system Turnitin the Academic Conduct Officer responsible

declined to pursue the cases. Furedi (2004) tells a similar story of a lecturer in a university advised to “treat the essays as "poor work and mark them down” and in addition to avoid disciplinary action as it is a "messy business". This author goes on to comment that “reluctance to lose students or draw attention to poor teaching practices, and keen to avoid appeals and litigation, universities are hesitant about taking a robust stand”.

Another concern with the increased reliance on the use of electronic methods of detection was observed by Introna and Hayes (2004:84) who note that the use of such systems “could lead to the unfair and unjust construction of international students as plagiarists”. Perry(2004:152) found in his institution that the difficulties international students faced with their writing “made students vulnerable to the charge of plagiarism”. A survey of the students that had been found guilty of committing offences found that all had plagiarised. However there was an interesting difference between the rationale for this for the international students (who all said that they had failed to understand the guidelines and had referenced poorly) and the home students (who said that it was due to laziness, a lack of time due to having to other work commitments and an inability to reach their full academic potential).

In this paper we will focus on the one area that puts teachers back at the forefront of the process, empowers them and gives them an opportunity to prevent malpractice rather than reacting to it afterwards - assessment. The aim of this paper is thus to investigate why assessment is so important in the fight against plagiarism by reviewing the pedagogical theory that exists in this area, considering primary data obtained from a series of staff questionnaires and staff interviews and then to provide some practical recommendations for how assessment can be designed to minimise opportunities for academic offences.

Introduction

There seems to be a consensus that academic offences are endemic in the US system and on the increase within the UK Higher Education system (Bull et al 2001 in Carroll 2002), to the point where Furedi (2003) considers plagiarism to have become a widespread practice and Burkill and Abbey (2004) suggest that up to 80% of students plagiarise someone else's work. Carroll (2004:2) argues that "there is evidence to support widely expressed concerns that student plagiarism in the UK is common and is probably becoming more so".

Evidence (largely anecdotal to date) has suggested that some disciplines are more prone to misconduct than others (Business, Law and Computer Science are frequently mentioned). In recent years there has been a sharp increase in the number of academic offences (cheating and plagiarism) reported amongst students in the UHBS and procedures have been put in place to address this. However, while this may be taken as reflective of the situation described above we would add a note of caution; by taking the issue of academic misconduct seriously institutions may prompt an increase in the number of reported cases simply because staff have become sensitised to the issue and begin to look more carefully for plagiarism and become more inclined to report it.

The research upon which the paper is based was supported by a UH Teaching and Learning Fund grant and involved firstly a questionnaire to staff in the Business School and a number of interviews to generate primary data. This was followed by a

comprehensive analysis of the assessment used in postgraduate modules over the course of one semester. This latter exercise was designed to gain an overview of assessment methods being used in the School and to enable us to identify where assessment methods were providing opportunities for misconduct. It further allowed us to identify examples of best practice in designing robust assessment which could be disseminated within the School.

In the sections which follow we firstly define types of misconduct for the purposes of the paper and then go on to describe the ‘holistic’ approach to addressing misconduct adopted by UHBS. Further sections of the paper consider why assessment is a key element in addressing plagiarism and then we suggest practical steps which may be taken to improve assessment practice. Finally some conclusions are drawn.

Academic Misconduct: Plagiarism and Collusion

For the purpose of this paper the definitions that will be used are:

‘Plagiarism is passing off someone else’s work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit.’ (Carroll, 2002)

The meaning is clear; it is not the student's own work but they are 'pretending' that it is. However, Carroll goes on to suggest that precise definitions are also dependent upon the discipline, the context, the level, the institution and any associated professional body.

University of Hertfordshire Policies and Regulations define plagiarism as:

the representation of another person's work as the student's own, either by extensive unacknowledged quotation, paraphrasing or direct copying.

Our guidance to students states that plagiarism and collusion **carried out deliberately to gain unfair advantage** are forms of cheating and carry the most severe penalties.

Examples of plagiarism are provided:

- Copying from the work of other students without their knowledge. For example, by stealing or borrowing a disk or hard copy of their coursework without permission.

- Copying or taking ideas from the work of others as presented for example in journal articles, books or websites without acknowledging this as someone else's work and giving the source of the ideas.

Examples of collusion are also provided in the UPR's:

- Working with others on a problem where the assessment is individual to the extent that there are strong similarities between the work of two or more students

- Co-operation between students (encouraged) can sometimes become collusion (an offence) unless the work presented shows sufficient evidence of having been 'independently produced'

These definitions inform this work.

An holistic approach

The Business School Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee has acknowledged that tackling academic misconduct requires an integrated approach. The idea of a holistic approach is recognised and supported by many researchers (see for example Carroll (2004), Joyce (2004)). The Teaching and Learning Committee at UHBS approach comprises of four elements:

1. informing staff and students about what constitutes an academic offence
2. designing out opportunities to commit offences through revised teaching, learning and assessment strategies
3. identifying academic offences where they occur

4. constructing effective procedures combined with appropriate penalties for dealing with offences

The third step (detection mechanisms) has been the focus of the majority of research in this area to date (Carroll, 2004). However as Carroll (2004:8) suggests ‘using the tool on it’s own, without adopting a range of measures to ensure a holistic and supportive institutional framework, is not good practice and could threaten both students’ engagement with their learning and their relationship with the institution’.

This paper aims to address this vital second step. While there is evidence that assessment design can help counter plagiarism (Carroll, 2002; Irons 2004) it is unlikely to eradicate plagiarism altogether. However it is the element of the overall approach that puts teachers back at the forefront of the process, empowering them and giving them an opportunity to prevent malpractice rather than react to it after the event.

The Staff perspective

If we consider an holistic systems approach there are both internal and external functions, the former relates, for example, to the use of detection methods and the latter to, again for example, student recruitment. With regard to the internal functions there have been widespread moves towards institutional policies on penalties and both institutional and national initiatives on detection. Some of this leaves teachers subject to imposed external

controls which can have the effect of both increasing the administrative burden associated with processing academic offences and invoking a culture of blame.

The literature reports anecdotal evidence of staff choosing to ignore cases of misconduct where the time and effort involved exceeds the perceived benefits of operating the prescribed procedure. Bjorklund and Wenestram (1999) (in Bennett [2005:140]) suggested that around 20% of lecturers ignored cases of plagiarism because of ‘the stress and discomfort likely to result from dealing with the matter’.

Our survey of staff showed that whereas 77% felt that the Business School procedures for dealing with academic offences were easy to understand, only 48% felt that they were easy to operate. With less than half of the respondents reporting that they can actually operate the system this does question its efficacy.

In addition to this 33% of respondents did not think that the penalties were severe enough, and 35% felt that the penalties would not make students less likely to offend. Given this information, are staff likely to report suspected cases? Barrett and Rainer (2004) found that of the 70 staff in their faculty, 50% had ignored suspected plagiarism.

Larkham and Manns (2002) discuss the time implications suggesting that reluctance to report cases may be due to one of three things: (1) an effort to meet the required turnaround time for a piece of coursework (2) there maybe a time limit for raising the question of plagiarism and (3) the administrative time required. Borg (2003) (in Barrett

and Rainer (2004)) found in his research that the cost was in time, tedium and emotional drain.

Staff need to understand the rationale for whether a case is pursued or not. Failure to understand the procedures can have a demoralising and disincentive effect on the staff concerned, leading to a drop off in the number of cases reported.

Furedi (2004) tells a story of a lecturer in a university advised to “treat the essays as poor work and mark them down” and in addition to avoid disciplinary action as it is a "messy business". This author goes on to comment that ‘reluctance to lose students or draw attention to poor teaching practices, and keen to avoid appeals and litigation, universities are hesitant about taking a robust stand’. Barrett and Rainer (2004:4) also note that ‘lecturers are deterred from taking action because of the burden of proof in instigating institutional plagiarism procedures’.

A further concern with the increased reliance on the use of electronic methods of detection was observed by Introna and Hayes (2004:84) who note that the use of such systems ‘could lead to the unfair and unjust construction of international students as plagiarists’. Perry (2004:152) found in his institution that the difficulties international students faced with their writing ‘made students vulnerable to the charge of plagiarism’. It is important here to try to explore and understand student ‘intent’ when determining whether the ‘technical’ offence of plagiarism also constitutes cheating.

Barrett and Cox (2005) raise several further points which demonstrate the complexity of practices aimed at penalising the student thought to have plagiarised;

There is [as suggested above] a difference between poor academic practice and deliberate cheating – so should the same penalty be exacted? How do you determine whether an offence receives a standard university penalty, or whether a piece is even investigated? The penalty will have different effects depending on the level of the work and the proportion of the module it accounts for.

We conclude from the above that there is: firstly, considerable difficulty associated with the reliance on the use of detection methods to deal with plagiarism; secondly, evidence that staff are not actually convinced by the success of the methods; thirdly, that there is significant cost and time associated with their use; and finally, that students who have poor academic skills are penalised by their use and that their application is not equitable. It is these considerations that bring us back to the role of assessment as central in the battle against plagiarism.

Why do students commit academic offences?

Our research, carried out in 2005, shows that staff feel there are many reasons why students commit academic offences:

Student focus

- Desire to achieve by any means / laziness
- Lack of interest in the subject
- Lack of understanding about the offence
- Thinking they can get away with it
- Students struggling to keep up
- Not too bothered about being caught or the punishment itself
- English not the first language of many students
- Other time pressures like having to work

Staff and Institution Focus

- Poor assessment design
- Lecturers ignoring it because it is easier to do so
- Large class sizes mean less of a relationship with the lecturer
- Widening access to HE = inappropriate prior qualifications / experience

External Focus

- Not enough teaching about it at A' Level
- Differing cultural understandings of what is acceptable
- Ease of access to information via the internet

- Better detection methods
- Different learning style to previous educational experience

A survey of the students that had been found guilty of committing academic offences found that all had plagiarised, none had colluded. However there was an interesting difference between the rationale for this given by the international students (who all said that they had failed to understand the guidelines or had referenced poorly because they had not paid enough attention to the referencing system) and the home students (who said that it was due to laziness, a lack of time due to having other work commitments and an inability to reach their full academic potential).

Carroll (2004) says that there are certain characteristics to those students who plagiarise and these are: being new to HE, a poor academic record and/or a history of plagiarism. She goes on to say that international students are over-represented in statistics on plagiarism and that this is probably due to the fact that there is such a reliance on electronic detection mechanisms. Barrett and Cox (2005) see the cause as being more to do with a lack of appropriate study skills than of a deliberate intent to 'cheat'.

Assessment – why the need to change?

Our research suggests that because the reasons why students commit academic offences are many and varied, they are not going to be easily remedied and therefore it appears

that a change in the way students are assessed is the next natural step to take. There is, however, some concern that this should be done in such a way as to avoid the loss of any of the necessary competences that must be achieved via the assessment and not least the need to avoid ‘dumbing down’.

Carroll (2004) argues that mechanisms for deterring plagiarism have to be effective and that what she calls the ‘catch and punish’ method involves a great deal of staff time and can lead the students away from learning to a culture of avoiding rule-breaking. She goes on to suggest five actions to encourage academic integrity but surprisingly, none of these suggest that the lecturer reviews their assessment with the aim of reducing the number of academic offences.

Barrett and Rainer (2004) consider a change in lecturer behaviour to be necessary in addition to student behaviour to reduce academic offences; Leask (2006) also sees academic staff development as central to tackling the problem. Dick et al (2003:180) note that ‘without support from all academics, an institution’s policies are limited in their effectiveness’. They go on to suggest that it is the creation of appropriate assessment that can help achieve a reduction in academic offences.

There is little in the academic literature about the assessment side of dealing with the issue and mostly the focus is on detection (Carroll, 2004). One important source of information is the guidelines provided by the QAA (2006) on assessment, in particular

that the institutions need to ‘encourage students to adopt good academic conduct in respect of assessment’.

Part of the research we carried out comprised a review of the assessment set in Semester A 2004/5 for all 28 Post Graduate modules in the Business School, the profile of assessment is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Profile of assessment types, UHBS postgraduate modules, Semester A 2004/2005

Assessment Types	Count
Open book exam	7
Closed book exam	11
Report about a distributed Case Study	1
Presentations	8
Theoretical essay ¹	5
Theory with general application ²	4
Theory with specific application ³	10
Theory with individual application ⁴	7
Case Study	1
Literature review	2
Practical piece of work	9
Total	65

¹ e.g. Critically evaluate the view that *a famous theorist* had about *a famous theory* in the field. OR Critically examine the role of *a subject area* in organisations taking into account international considerations. OR Outline the roots of *a subject area*, where it is now, and evaluate where it is likely to go.

² e.g. Consider the role of a *subject* and what developments may occur in the future.

³ e.g. Critically analyse *an area* and produce a report suggesting how improvements may be made in this area at your organisation. OR Analyse *something* in your organisation and then appraise that in another organisation / country and say what aspects can be applied in your organisation.

⁴ e.g. A narrative exploration your experience of *something*

There are four types of essay listed above – working from the top to the bottom of the list, from the general to the more specific, the opportunities to commit an academic offence are reduced:

Table II: Opportunities for plagiarism and collusion in essay type assessments

	Purchase from database	Cut and paste from web	Collusion	Plagiarism
Theoretical essay	✓	✓	✓	✓
Theory with general application	Not very likely	✓	✓	✓
Theory with specific application	Very unlikely	Not very likely	✓	✓
Theory with individual application	No	Very unlikely	Not very likely	✓

Source: based on information in Carroll (2002)

So a consideration of current practice together with this information suggests that nearly a third of the assessment set (i.e. 19/65 assessments, representing the first three types of essay listed above) has the considerable potential to allow collusion or plagiarism. Of the remaining assessment types some of the individual work required in the more number based subjects are very open to collusion where the range of possible correct answers is limited.

While the capacity for plagiarism in some form is difficult to eradicate, around half of the assessment set has a relatively high vulnerability to academic offences. This would suggest that it is time for a change.

Assessment – making changes

We have argued that an ‘holistic’ approach to addressing misconduct is essential and that there are a number of drawbacks to a strategy of over reliance upon electronic detection methods. We have also provided evidence from our research that the assessment used at UHBS (and arguably likely to be used in Business Schools elsewhere) is open to academic abuse

The remainder of the paper will be devoted to suggestions of practical steps which may be taken to improve assessment practice.

We outline here two stages we would propose in introducing practices to improve assessment; firstly, a review of the current assessment used, as it may be possible to make minor changes informed by an awareness of the types of assessment that are most easily plagiarised and the sources of the information available to students. Secondly, a consideration of some innovative assessments used at UHBS together with a list of suggestions that could be adopted.

Reviewing current assessment:

In reviewing current assessment used, Carroll (2002) suggests a team activity. The team may be organised around a single subject group or a more diverse set of subjects. Each member is asked to bring a current piece of coursework and this is exchanged in pairs or

reviewed by the whole group one piece at a time. Ask the group to look for opportunities for the student to commit an academic offence.

Typically the areas that are discovered include:

- Very broad essay titles
- Flexibility in the source of information that can be used
- Topics that are repeated year after year
- Giving all students the same data sets to work with

As already mentioned above the type of assessment most likely to encourage plagiarism offences is the traditional essay, for example:

“Critically assess *[named person 's]* view on *[named topic]*” – is easily purchasable.

To test whether an essay is particularly prone try inputting the essay title in a web search engine such a Google to look at the number of essay banks offering pre-prepared or written-to-order essays on the topic. Alternatively, inputting the question ‘Where can I buy an essay from?’ into a standard search engine returns an alarming number of essay banks.

1. Innovative assessment and suggestions to help design assessment to reduce the occurrences of academic offences:

If a change to the current assessment is deemed most appropriate following the exercise above then it is useful to consider good practice adopted elsewhere in the faculty / university. Some of the best and most innovative assessments found in the Business School are provided below:

SUBJECT	ASSESSMENT
Strategic Leadership	Requires a narrative exploration of the student's experience of leading or following.
Comparative governance	Asks for a standard report comparing governance structures of an organisation and another country but with a group presentation / debate / discussion / role play to communicate the group experience and findings.
The International Business Context	Uses role plays, playing either a government official from the foreign investment department or a foreign investor.
Operations Management	Requires a literature review of 5 academic articles (two from the last year) on a student selected topic that is approved by the lecturer.
Ebusiness Processes and Strategies	Student is required to develop a research portfolio for use in the final open book exam.
Human Resource Development	There is only one summative piece at the end of the semester but several formative assessments lead up to that piece.
The Effective Manager	Uses an individual, reflective report of the students' learning on the module and a critical evaluation of the complex nature of managerial work and how organisations are changing. The students are also asked to do a group presentation using an appropriate medium to make a learning point about effective management.

Suggestions to help design assessment that deters plagiarism along with other generic pointers are provided by four sources, Carroll (2002), Harris (2002) and Brown (2001), and suggestions that have been provided by Business School staff ascertained during the interviews and questionnaires and are provided in the appendix.

Conclusion:

Because of the increasing volume of students passing through our Higher Education institutions and the increasing number of international students there is a need to establish effective and equitable means of ensuring that academic misconduct is reduced to a minimum.

The aim of this paper was to consider the place of assessment in the fight against plagiarism, as opposed to a heavy reliance on detection mechanisms. Detection mechanisms will only be successful, we conclude, if they are applied and supported equally by all academics. However, there are many factors which militate against this happening, ranging from the amount of additional, often tedious work, it generates for academic staff, through to institutional practices which, while paying lip-service to the seriousness of academic misconduct, sometimes fail to follow through from detection, through due process to the application of appropriate penalties. We have further acknowledged that even where such follow through does occur, processes are likely to penalise the international student.

A focus on assessment (which for many remains traditional and therefore vulnerable) is arguably long overdue. Academic staff are central to confronting plagiarism in detecting and reporting incidences but more importantly they hold the key to a reduction in the opportunities for misconduct through innovative assessment design. While assessment, like the incidence of plagiarism, is discipline specific we believe that there may be many practices that can be generic across disciplines. Our main intention here has been to make suggestions to our Business and Management colleagues, but we hope that some of these may be of value to colleagues elsewhere in the system.

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Appendix A:

Suggestions to help design assessment that minimises the likelihood of academic offenses:

1. Give students specific instructions (use peer review and student feedback to help write these) (Carroll, 2002) this is supported by Harris (2002) who says to make the assignment clear (be specific about your expectations)
2. Place greater emphasis on the skill of analysing and evaluating information as opposed to simply finding it (Brevik (1997) in Carroll and Stefani (2001))
3. Use a signed statement of originality (we have such a statement on the top of the assignment assessment form) (Carroll, 2002)
4. Ask for a draft (possibly alongside the final submission, or reduce the number of summative submissions to allow the time for feedback) (Carroll, 2002)
5. Use of peer review (assign students a number of pieces to grade and mark the quality of the student's feedback and use of marking criteria), (Carroll, 2002)

6. Assess the process as well as the product, (Carroll, 2002), again supported by Harris (2002) who suggests you require process steps (set a series of due dates)
7. If using group work to deter collusion consider asking for individual records of what the group did (logs, online discussions, minutes), individual retrospective reflections of group work, (Carroll, 2002)
8. Set criteria for assessment that take collaboration into account (tell the students what is / not acceptable e.g. asking for comments, but not corrections) (Carroll, 2002)
9. Reconsider essay titles (avoid general or standard topics, instead ask for recent events to be considered, comparisons to be made between specified theories / people etc., reflect on events that could have occurred not those that did) (Carroll, 2002)
10. Use defined requirements and narrow task specifications (e.g. require the student to use one or more sources from the last year, a specified book / article, or incorporate information provided). Ask for photocopies of a few of their key source materials (Carroll, 2002). Harris (2002) develops this, suggesting that you provide a list of specific topics (change them regularly, make them unusual or narrow) or require specific components in the paper (specify a number of particular sources or references to use or date of references or specific references).

Brown (2001) also maintains that you should not give the same assessment year in year out

11. Use assessment to verify authenticity (a random viva of a percentage of the students, an open book test, an in-class or supervised task e.g. a meta-essay) (Carroll, 2002). Harris (2002) adds to this by suggesting that you require oral reports of students papers (in-class presentation or one-to-one meeting). With the presentation you could provide formative feedback and then the student could submit a graded report following this.
12. Harris (2002) suggests that you require a meta-learning essay (an in-class essay about what they learnt, problems, strategies, sources, their best learning outcome etc.)
13. Use of timed assessment (anything from a few hours to a day)
14. Brown (2001) argues that it is good practice to involve students in the design of the task and the setting of criteria.
15. Some academics suggest moving to assessment via 100% exam, although this has the disadvantage of making it more difficult to achieve a wide range of learning outcomes.

16. To minimise cases of collusion give the students individualised pieces of assessment.

17. Clear statements should be provided to the students as to what constitutes an academic offence and the likely penalties that the student can be expected to face, in addition to this students should be well versed on academic referencing

18. Carroll (2002) has a list of other methods of recording learning for assessment: such as:

- An annotated list of sources with comments on reliability and relevance, (Harris (2002) agrees and says ask for a summary of the source, where located and evaluation of usefulness)
- An outline or list of resources that would have been useful
- Skills based assignments with evidence of competency
- Use of case studies or scenarios
- Reflective journals and critical incidence accounts
- Posters can be constructed and displayed

- In addition Harris (2002) suggests that you require most references to be up-to-date (e.g. less than 5 years old)

19. Have open book exams and ask for a bibliography.

20. If using group presentations over a series of weeks get all students to submit their slides at the same time.

21. Randomise data sets to be analysed in quantitative modules, or get them to gather their own data.

22. Use management reports with appendices with quantitative assessments.

23. Finally if in doubt try and plagiarise it yourself! Put the main question into Google and see what comes back!