Plagiarism in a Cross Cultural Setting:
Educating and Acting

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Abstract

Matters to do with student misconduct and plagiarism are taken seriously in Australian universities. Most have well formulated policies, procedures and grievances processes which guide action. These processes may adopt educative and/or disciplinary approaches.

This paper focuses on plagiarism in a bilingual Master of Education program delivered in China. Here, Chinese students and staff have an understanding and attitude to plagiarism which highlights that simple, rule bound definitions are not shared. Cultural and linguistic considerations add to the complex nature of plagiarism and draw our attention to the learning and communication aspects of the 'problem'. The paper reports examples of student misconduct and outlines steps taken to educate stakeholders and discipline students so as to maintain Australian standards. In an Australian context where cycle 2 of AUQA visits will put international programs in the spotlight, our adherence to quality assurance will benefit the institution as well as the international students in the program.

Introduction

Matters to do with student misconduct and plagiarism are taken seriously in Australian universities. Implications for institutions and individuals include public humiliation, damage to reputation and legal action. The modern (Australian) university can not afford any of these consequences, and typically prefers to try and guard against related risk. To achieve this, most have well formulated policies, procedures and grievances processes which guide action. These processes may institutionalise educative and/or disciplinary approaches, with varying emphases on pedagogic prevention and electronic tools for detection. They may sit as distinct policies or be embedded within the university's quality framework. The issue of language and culture may or may not be overtly addressed in university documentation but is a key element in some of the recent Australian research on the issue.

International programs have a particular set of quality issues that include and extend beyond those associated with on shore delivery. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has made international quality a focus of review as demonstrated by internationalisation being one of two themes for the 2008 Cycle 2 audit. At the institutional level, an unduly high incidence of academic misconduct and plagiarism can be a symptom of declining quality or inappropriate systems (punitive) or inappropriate pedagogy (assessment).

In the following sections of the paper we briefly explain the context for the discussion and refer to relevant literature. We then focus the discussion around practical examples which have arisen during the teaching of the first five cohorts of students in a bilingual program in China, identifying the actions taken and the consequences of these. Finally we discuss lessons learned from our experiences.

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Context

The work reported in this paper relates to a bilingual Master of Education program (with a school leadership specialisation) delivered in partnership with a Chinese university. For each unit, students undertake an intensive teaching program in China delivered by an Edith Cowan University staff member, and sequentially interpreted. Thus students do not have to meet the usual English language entry requirements for the program. One team assignment is undertaken during the intensive program, the remaining assessments are an individual assignment and a two part examination. Students have responsibility for organising the translation of the individual assignment and one part of the examination. They submit the English and Chinese versions of these tasks. This introduces an extra stage in the assessment process which requires careful monitoring and the adoption of new educative and checking processes.

Students enrolled in the program come from three sorts of background. Some are school principals (from public and private schools), some are university and college staff (academic and administrative) and others are senior bureaucrats in Government ministries. All have considerable professional experience and status.

From the outset of the program there has been an ongoing determination to address quality issues – for ethical and commercial reasons (it is our view that the longer term success of the program is dependent on this commitment). This has required, amongst other things, vigilant attention to the potential for academic misconduct and plagiarism (including for example, Teaching @ECU, ECU Referencing Policy, Academic Misconduct Protocol).

A key aspect of the transnational quality discussion is focussed on the concepts of 'equivalence' and comparability'. While there is still much debate in the Australian university sector over the use and definition of these terms, we are coming closer to a shared use and understanding. Generally, there is widespread acceptance that while the quality of off shore programs must be of a high standard, they cannot be 'the same' (McLean, 2006).

Most academics agree that some variation to suit the local context and culture is required and in fact, desirable. Educators know the importance of connection and relevance to learning. But Carroll and Woodhouse (2006, p.74) ask: "How much of the content can be tailored before student learning outcomes will be substantially different?" The quality challenge is clearly to make the curriculum relevant and appropriate without jeopardizing the ability to reach learning outcomes common to onshore and offshore locations.

Literature

Attention to misconduct and plagiarism in the literature has grown in recent years demonstrating an increased awareness of the importance of recognition, action and reaction to specific cases. Often the importance is connected to reputation and/or to academic standards (or perceived standards). There also seems to be a 'maturing' of individual and institutional understanding which includes a shift from punitive to educative policy and practice. Another part of the maturation is a move away from clear stereotypical distinctions based on 'Eastern versus Western' ways of thinking and doing and perspectives on the ownership of ideas. Other common themes relate to an increased emphasis on understanding the reasons for plagiarism and the roles which appropriate pedagogy and assessment can play.

A number of authors (Walker, 1998; Darab, 2006; Green, Williams and van Kessel, 2006) propose that students – domestic and international - need to be first aware of, and then introduced to strategies which enable them to avoid plagiarising the work of others. The literature reports examples of courses, workshops and 'in unit' assessments which aim to help students' understanding and appropriate skill development. In many cases, students are not clear what 'counts' as plagiarism and therefore need support in developing the ability to avoid it. These efforts define the move to educative from punitive.

In the context of teaching international students, there have been a number of attempts to attribute or explain plagiarism in terms of national cultural characteristics (see for example Mathews, 2007). However the tendency to stereotype eastern versus western ways of learning as an explanation is increasingly being revisited. As far back as 1996, Biggs challenged simplistic explanations based on national or cultural characteristics (Biggs, 1996, 1999).
It is our position that resorting to a simplistic explanation based on cultural stereotyping is not helpful. However nor can issues of culture and language be ignored in a bilingual transnational program. Like le Masurier (2006), we see a partial answer in the setting of assessment tasks and use of authentic assessment as a strategy to minimise the likelihood of against plagiarism.

Examples from practice

In this section of the paper we outline actual examples of the different forms of academic misconduct encountered in the context of a bilingual Master of Education program in China. We outline the issues which have arisen when striving to maintain Australian standards, quality assurance practices, the steps taken to address them and the lesson learned.

The first example focuses on the education of stakeholders including students, but just as importantly key staff at both universities. The second example discusses specific challenges associated with the assessment of students in bilingual programs. Other examples which could have been discussed include the extent to which cultural differences may impact on the understanding of academic misconduct and pedagogical issues and strategies for assessment which reduce the opportunities for cheating.

Education: the key

From the outset, the program team recognised the importance of educating students about ECU's expectations in relation to referencing, plagiarism and also the importance placed on critical and analytical thinking. Hence this is taught in the first unit and re-emphasised in subsequent units. However we underestimated the importance of educating academic and administrative staff in our partner university about these issues and the challenges we would experience when superficially similar processes masked different understandings. The most obvious example of this situation occurred in the context of the end of unit examinations.

Examination answers appeared more polished than we are used to receiving from Australian students. Also, referencing in exam answers was better than in assignment work – again 'surprising'. Whilst isolated cases of cheating were expected, systematic differences such as these were not. So the program team decided it was necessary to audit an examination in order to gain a better understanding of what was actually happening.

When an ECU lecturer first audited one of the offshore examinations it immediately became obvious that the local expectations with respect to supervision were different from those of ECU. Intervention in the form of confronting one of the most obvious cheats sent a message

to the students and staff present – a palpable shock wave spread around the examination room. This had the immediate effect of minimising further cheating in that exam.

On return to WA, the specific cases of cheating were dealt with according to ECU guidelines. More significantly, we revisited the rules for the conduct of examinations which are normally provided for external supervisors, and modified these to include a specific section on examinations in bilingual programs. The revised rules were forwarded to our partners, who in turn made the commitment to forward these to students. We then reinforced the rules in an educative manner in the next and all subsequent teaching periods. We are continuing to insist on an ECU presence at examinations and will do so until such time that it appears routine for our rules to be enforced.

Re-working the invigilation information not only provided the Faculty with a new statement of policy for all its offshore programs, it also enabled staff to find a serious error in existing documentation – as one author commented 'sometimes a bad apple leads to cider!

We were approached by our counterparts in the Chinese university with the request that, if and when instances of academic misconduct occurred, we negotiate the consequences with their staff. This request was politely but firmly declined on the basis that as ECU gives the qualification it must be able to enforce its own standards.

This experience highlighted the value of a public demonstration of reinforcement of policy and rules, and that attention to offshore quality issues can actually improve institutional policy and procedures more generally. It also reinforced the importance of being clear about what is and what is not negotiable.

Bilingual delivery – new opportunities for cheating

In undertaking the bilingual Master of Education program the School of Education was moving into relatively uncharted waters. In our program the responsibility for (and cost of) translation is shared between the partner institution and the individual students. Associated with students taking responsibility for the translation of their work, come new opportunities for cheating. Our approach to this has been to anticipate the problems where we can, and to evolve new processes as unanticipated problems arise.

We started by requiring students to submit their assessed work in Chinese and English (except for those who wrote in English), and to name the translator. Given that any student, in any country, can get assistance with assignment work, we considered the risks associated with the translation of assignments to be acceptable.

We concluded that additional precautions would be needed in relation to examinations. Two different strategies are combined here. One is to split the exam into two parts and the second is to submit all papers to translation checking.

Part One of the examination is completed in class, during the intensive teaching program, Marking is outsourced to a Western Australian educator who is fluent in the Chinese language (but who does not teach in the course), using a complex rubric provided by the lecturer. This eliminates the need for translation for Part One. Part Two is conducted at the end of the unit and translation is required.

For Part Two, students complete examinations in Chinese. The partner university photocopies the exam answer booklets. The originals are immediately posted to WA and the student is

then given the photocopy, and gets this translated. One week after the exam the English exam answers are posted to WA and are subsequently marked by the lecturer. Translation checks are undertaken to ensure that students do not embellish their examination answers at the same time as getting them translated.

The first time we found enhanced English answers was in one of the earlier units. A small number of students had additional sentences and paragraphs in the English version of the answers. At the first available opportunity, these students were interviewed through the interpreter and asked to explain, then to put their explanations in writing. Typically the 'reason' given is that 'the translator did it' without the knowledge of the student! Unit outlines have been augmented with a clear statement specifying that it is the student's responsibility to check the translation. As all students have some knowledge of English, and superficial inspection allows for the pattern of Chinese and English to be verified, ignorance is not an acceptable excuse. Penalties for a first offence are generally zero marks for that question.

In one instance a low achieving student initially admitted to improving the answer, later denying this. The loss of marks caused the student to fail the unit. He appealed, but lost the appeal. Subsequently he repeated the unit and graduated six months later than his cohort. The message got around (again demonstrating the value of decisive action: word of mouth seems to have been very effective). There have been only occasional cases of embellished translations since this event. But rigorous monitoring will be an ongoing requirement.

There is postscript to this example: We are finding that students first type up their answers, giving the typed rather than the hand written copy to the translator. In the most recent exam at least three instances the typed version is grammatically and structurally better, although in two of these the content is essentially unchanged. This is causing us to revise our guidelines for translation.

Clearly, ongoing vigilance is needed and program staff in bilingual programs must factor in the potential for cheating to occur at the point of translation. However the students may be our best allies – educating each other provided the processes are sufficiently transparent for them to be aware of what is happening.

Concluding comments: the lessons learned

There are some recurring themes in our examples which resonate with the literature.

Ongoing education is crucial. Education is a broader issue than we originally anticipated. It includes education about plagiarism (prevention is better than cure), examination procedures, and other quality issues. It includes the education of staff at both institutions. Education is needed all the time, at all levels, for all stakeholders.

Education is necessary but not sufficient. It needs to be supported with appropriate reference documentation. Standard university documentation may need modifying to encompass the offshore bilingual context.

Appropriate decisive action is very helpful. When action is visible students take note. Consistent follow through with penalties and a quality focus, will do much of the work for you. Word of mouth is powerful; students educate their peers!

Universities can gain valuable insights into their quality assurance processes from off shore programs. A bilingual program may expose hidden issues. It is not that the issues are not present; it is that they become more obvious in the transnational setting to the point where they can not be ignored.

Relationships are pivotal (as anyone working in China must surely understand!). These include but are not limited to relationships with the interpreter, administrative staff of both institutions and students. As there is the potential for enforcement of quality to disrupt these relationships, it is essential to establish a strong foundation, nurture respect and continue to invest in the partnership.

We have concluded that it is unrealistic to expect to anticipate all of the quality issues, in part because of the changing nature of the contexts of university education in Australia and China, and our understandings of plagiarism and quality in transnational programs. However, it is realistic to expect that an ongoing investment in relationships at host and partner universities and in all levels of program management will deliver quality outcomes for students, staff and universities.

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