Plagiarism: An Original Explanation?

TERTIARY educators generally agree that student plagiarism is on the increase. Where disagreement occurs is over the cause. Recent commentaries, citing causes such as declining levels of honesty and intellectual integrity amongst students, the influence of post-modern relativism, and the Internet, miss the point. We argue that we must look more deeply at shifting societal and student attitudes to education, as well as changes in the culture of universities.

Much plagiarism we encounter is crude and poorly concealed. This suggests that it is not often the work of skilled and habitual cheats but of people of average honesty who are having greater than average trouble coping with university study, life in general, or both. Research in 2003 found that 79 per cent of undergraduates had engaged in some form of cheating. We contend that this has much to do with schooling experience, the new vocational orientation of universities, and student employment.

Students mostly arrive at university without an understanding of intellectual honesty, and often with poor research habits. Yet they face significant pressure to perform, without commensurate support to remedy these weaknesses. Participation in tertiary education grew by 40% between 1989 and 1999. Much of the growth in university participation is driven by the shift to a knowledge-based economy, where employment is increasingly dependent on tertiary qualifications. Students focus more on satisfying the assessment required to deliver their degree, and their job, than on scholarly engagement. Also implicated is the increasing hours worked by students in order to support themselves whilst studying, usually at the expense of time for study.

Universities and governments also share some responsibility. There are broader trends towards internationalisation and commercialisation in higher education, coupled with an increasingly vocational focus. These trends encourage students to adopt a pragmatic approach to learning, which is reinforced by a strong sense of entitlement derived from their status as consumers. The recent introduction of targets in many universities, to increase participation by international full fee paying students, can only emphasise this trend.

Within this context, tertiary educators must re-negotiate the learning process with students, taking account of these recent trends, and help them to cope honestly with the pressures they face. To achieve this, in an increasingly instrumentalist culture where the emphasis is on outcomes rather than intellectual honesty, will be a difficult but necessary task.

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