

Cheating to cope in the hothouse

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Student plagiarism is on the rise, most tertiary educators will agree. Where disagreement occurs is over the cause. Recent commentary has cited causes such as declining levels of honesty and intellectual integrity among students, the influence of postmodern relativism and the internet. We argue that these accounts miss the point -- we must look more deeply at shifting attitudes to education, as well as changes in the culture of universities.

Are students today less honest than they were when we began teaching in the mid-1990s? Students in some of our courses recorded 10 per cent or 20 per cent rates of plagiarism in 2003. While the internet doubtless accounts for some of the increase, it is unlikely to be the only significant factor. What is novel about the increasing incidence of plagiarism and other forms of cheating in universities are the underlying reasons and motivations that lead students to cheat.

Much plagiarism we encounter is crude and poorly concealed. This suggests that it is often not 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. A further study established that there was no distinction between levels of student plagiarism in classes where issues of academic honesty were discussed and those where they weren't. This suggests deeper issues underlying the present university experience.

We contend that this has much to do with schooling experience, the new vocational orientation of universities and student employment.

Students arrive at university mostly without an understanding of intellectual honesty and often with poor research habits. The growing competition for university admission puts significant pressure on students to perform -- participation in tertiary education grew by 40 per cent between 1989 and 1999. Recently, students doing Year 12 in Victoria were

shown to be exceeding state guidelines on homework requirements by an average of 15 hours a week. The temptation to contain these hours through cutting corners and poor research practices is inevitable.

Much of the growth in university participation is driven by a shift to a knowledge-based economy, a shift that requires higher levels of formal education. Students are more concerned with passing the assessment required to deliver their degree, and their job, than with engaging in scholarly discourse.

Also implicated is the increasing working hours students engage in as a way of funding their study. Arguments in favour of academic integrity find little purchase when students have little time to read, little energy to reflect and a pile of impending assignment deadlines.

Universities and governments also share some responsibility. There are broader trends towards a user-pays and commercialisation ethos in higher education, coupled with an increasing focus on employment-based outcomes and away from notions of traditional scholarship. These trends ensure that students increasingly adopt a pragmatic approach to learning and a strong sense of entitlement derived from their status as consumers.

Within this framework it is difficult for students to see themselves as part of a scholarly community with not only rights but also a moral obligation to adhere to prescribed standards and expectations.

International students have come in for particular attention in commentary on increasing plagiarism. The recent introduction of targets in many universities to increase participation by international full-fee-paying students has not always been accompanied by increased funding to services. These services once helped a much smaller number of international students cope with a difficult cultural and intellectual transition.

To explain rising plagiarism in this way is not to excuse it; students still need to be encouraged (and helped) to cope honestly and corrected when they decide otherwise.

But just as people in 19th-century England stopped stealing loaves of bread once decent wages enabled them to buy their own, so students may feel less pressured to steal text when they once again have the time and the financial security, as well as the teaching and learning support, to confidently write their own.

There is an urgent need for universities to renegotiate the learning process with students to reintroduce dialogue, engagement and intellectual honesty.

How to achieve this in a culture where the emphasis is on vocation and where teaching is an undervalued commodity, despite increasing dependence on fee-paying students to underwrite universities, is a question that remains troublingly unanswered. However, unless we can answer this question, we are not only short-changing students, ourselves and our institutions, but ultimately the societies in which students will make their professional and civic contribution.