

**‘Factors integral to the case’:
Categorising qualitative factors used to determine
academic integrity outcomes**

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Abstract

This paper analyses a subset of data from the Academic Integrity (AI) Database of a school within a health sciences faculty at an Australian university, to investigate the ‘factors integral to the case’ used in determining outcomes for AI breaches. Based on qualitative data from 112 cases (out of a total of 171) the authors found 11 main categories which the Academic Integrity Officers (AIOs) had used to adjudicate AI breaches. The categorisation process identified that ‘poor referencing skills’ represented the largest category (21.4% of cases) and ‘blatant academic integrity breach’ represented the smallest category (3.6%). These findings challenge much of the literature on academic integrity which has most often suggested that it is a lack of training which accounts for students (inadvertently) plagiarising and contests the misconception that blatant breaches of AI are common.

Keywords: academic integrity outcomes; categorisation; decision-making; policy.

Introduction

Using currently available data from the Academic Integrity (AI) Database of a Health Sciences faculty at The University¹ it is possible to determine consistency of AI breach outcomes with University policy. Previously, we have matched the type of breach with its perceived severity and the outcome of the breach (Bretag & Green 2009). However, the

¹ We refer to the institution from which this data is drawn as ‘The University’ because we do not wish to imply that the situation there was unique in terms of its application of an academic integrity framework, but that the lessons learned from analysis of the data may be applicable to other institutions of higher education.

currently available data does not permit analysis of ‘factors integral to the case’ to see if these qualitative factors have affected the outcomes determined by the Academic Integrity Officer (AIO)² because this qualitative data is not coded in a usable format. The University policy does acknowledge certain factors that are important to consider when determining outcomes for AI breaches (see Appendix 1), and based on our experience and practice we know that AIOs take into account a range of other factors which may or may not fit precisely with the current policy, although it could reasonably be argued that the factors that are considered are in keeping with the spirit of the policy.

As early as 1967, researchers have understood the value of coding data as a means to collate information in order to manage large data sets effectively (Bain & Spaulding 1967). We believe that it is important to code the ‘factors integral to the case’ data because we will then be able to look for how these factors may impact on outcomes or the perceived severity of the case, and identify potential relationships between factors and student groups (eg international or first year students). This then has the potential to improve consistency between the individual AIOs from across the various faculties of The University, and enable us to ensure (as much as possible) that students receive both consistent *and* fair outcomes (Bretag & Green 2009).

As part of the introduction of the AIO system in 2006 the University identified the need for a systematic approach to collecting data on student plagiarism and, as such, developed a comprehensive database into which AIOs provided information about each case. Appendix 2 shows the data that is collected.

The identification of common ‘factors integral to the case’ has the potential to influence policy development and practice at all levels (curriculum and program design, training, learning and teaching practice and AIO decision-making). It is our intention that such developments will ultimately result in the reduction of AI breaches, not just in the School which provides the data for this paper, but in other faculties at The University and elsewhere.

² The system of Academic Integrity Officers at The University has been adapted from the Academic Conduct Officer model at Oxford Brookes University, U.K. Further information about the model can be found at <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/publications/bejlt/volume1issue2/perspective/carroll.pdf>

Our backgrounds

Both authors are Academic Integrity Officers (AIOs) in our respective disciplines (Management and Health Sciences). We came to our AIO roles with a strong motivation to use our own experience and knowledge to implement best practice. As we have written elsewhere, our commitment to the principles of academic integrity is coupled with our genuine concern for our students' learning and lives (Bretag & Green 2009). We are not disinterested researchers – with Edwards (2002) we believe that our prolonged engagement with the topic and context provides us with 'insider knowledge' in our multiple roles as teachers, AIOs and AI researchers. This, we maintain, provides us with access to knowledge that would otherwise be undiscoverable to outsiders, and acts as an aid to the validity of our research.

Literature Review

The literature reporting on academic integrity policy appears to be contradictory at times. On the one hand, writers discuss the importance of considering a range of factors during AI decision-making; on the other hand, the same writers make the case that to do so potentially threatens consistency.

Macdonald & Carroll (2006), in referring to the review of policy at Oxford Brookes University, quite rightly stated that:

Consistency is really important yet each case has to be approached individually...It was only possible to compare decisions by creating a shared set of criteria for arriving at a suitable tariff because all decisions are highly contextual and ACOs must consider a wide range of factors rather than conform to a simple match of action and punishment. (Macdonald & Carroll 2006, p. 238).

However, in both policy and practice, only four factors are taken into account when determining the appropriate 'tariff' (penalty or outcome for AI breach) at Oxford Brookes University: extent, level, knowledge of U.K. academic regulations, assumptions and rules, and rules of the discipline. Academic Conduct Officers (ACOs) receive extensive training in

applying these four criteria to ensure consistent decision-making, “where two people apply the same level of penalty when presented with cases with similar characteristics and contexts” (Carroll & Seymour 2006, p. 2).

Interestingly, Carroll and Appleton (2005), in their previous evaluation of the system of ACOs at Oxford Brookes University from 2001-2005, reported that “lenient treatment of misconduct [was]...noticeable” largely due to ACOs taking into account “extenuating circumstances” and at the time defended this apparent inconsistency on the basis of ensuring fairness (Carroll & Appleton 2005, p. 10). Their study did not report investigating the factors considered nor coding of this data to look for relationships, and thus it is unclear which factors had led to the apparent inconsistency. A later study by Carroll and Seymour (2006) collected qualitative data from ACOs at Oxford Brookes University and reported consistency in the application of tariffs largely because ACOs *disregarded* mitigating circumstances such as personal problems, financial difficulties and stress.

Yeo and Chien (2007) described the development and evaluation of a classification framework at Curtin University, Australia which aimed to ensure consistency in the adjudication of student plagiarism cases. Like Oxford Brookes University, the plagiarism classification at Curtin University includes four factors in a continuum from least to most serious: experience of students (junior or senior), extent, intent, previous incidents. This scheme also takes into account “other factors that might reduce (mitigate) or increase (aggravate) the degree of seriousness of a given act” (Yeo & Chien 2007, p. 189). These include: cultural considerations; specific instructions for the completion of the assessment task, premeditation, student remorse, offence committed under duress (pressure from other students), a lesser role played by a student in cases of collusion. However, in the proforma for collecting data about an AI cases, factors outside the key four are not explicitly considered.

Thus, it would appear that The University may be alone in collecting this information through a central AIO database. The current study attempts to code this data in order to understand how these factors impact on the AI process. A coding system may also enable other Universities to code their data similarly, thus enabling comparisons to be made across sites. Park (2003), made the case that “a cohesive plagiarism framework requires penalties that are

appropriate (in nature and scale), fair, transparent and applied consistently” (2003, p. 301). Ultimately, consistent coding may assist this process.

We have previously argued that “a rigid adherence to a rules-based approach in dealing with breaches of academic integrity will not necessarily ensure fairness” (Bretag & Green 2009, p. 1), and further advocated for the importance of taking into account ‘extenuating circumstances’ when determining outcomes for academic integrity breaches. We concluded that “consistency *and* fairness occurs when those in charge of determining outcomes *consistently* take into account the full range of factors, as well as the action itself” (Bretag & Green 2009, p. 12).

In order for the information on the database to be utilised to its full potential this paper aims to:

- Identify the ways that AIOs document the factors they have considered in determining outcomes for AI breaches;
- Cluster these factors into core categories that are indicative of current practice;
- Use these identified categories to develop codes based on international best practice and theory that will assist AIOs to clearly, fairly and consistently document their decision-making process.

Methodology

The methodology in this project used elements of the analytic approach of grounded theory to explore how AIOs at one university determine outcomes for breaches of academic integrity. While we were not necessarily seeking to generate a ‘theory’, we did hope to reach an understanding of how decisions are reached, which might then be useful to inform both policy and practice. As AIOs ourselves, we agree with Bowers (1988) that our task as researchers was not to “remain neutral, detached, and objective...[but rather] to become immersed in the world of the research...” (p. 43).

A comprehensive student academic misconduct data set related to a health science faculty was provided by the Academic Integrity Database of The University, with permission from the Pro-Vice Chancellor: Academic. The authors coded one particular aspect of the database, a section entitled ‘factors integral to the case’, the only space in the database which allows

AIOs to provide commentary on aspects of the case that were taken into consideration in determining an appropriate outcome for the particular breach of academic integrity. Unlike other parts of the database, which require only ‘tick the box’ information, AIOs use the section ‘factors integral to the case’ to write short or extensive notes, in no particular format.

Method

The AIO database included 171 cases of which 112 contained qualitative data in the text box entitled ‘factors integral to the case’ (See Appendix 2, Field 10). We used a manual coding process based on the qualitative information provided from the 112 cases in Excel format from this database. Each qualitative comment in the section ‘factors integral to the case’ was separated from the database and placed in a preliminary category. Both researchers initially worked together to code these notes into 17 broad categories. The researchers then coded the notes separately and finally together as an aid to validity, before finally agreeing after three rounds of coding on 11 main categories. Throughout the process of multiple coding, memos were kept as a reminder of the rationale for the thematic codes.

The process of agreeing the final codes was illuminating in itself, because our separate, individual attempts at coding (using our 11 agreed categories) resulted in a 26.7% discrepancy. That is, in 31 out of 112 potential codes, we allocated different codes to a specific AI breach, most often because the information provided in the section did not give enough information for an external party to interpret clearly without viewing other sections of the database. This clearly has ramifications in terms of ensuring consistency between large numbers of AIOs, operating in geographically and academically diverse locations. We were surprised that such a discrepancy occurred, and it became evident that criterion for each of the codes would need to be made very clear.

In the fourth and final coding round, we worked together, discussing each discrepancy. To reach agreement on the final codes, we needed to go back to the full database in order to access all the relevant information, which often occurred in the ‘tick the box’ categories. The most useful part of the database was in fact another text-based option, ‘Brief description of occurrence’ (see Appendix 2, Field 7). We found that often crucial information could be located here. In three particular cases, after accessing the full database details, coupled with detailed discussion, we agreed on a completely different category than either of us had originally allocated to the breach.

Findings

Table 1 below summarises the identified codes and categories, plus the factors used to determine the codes/categories. The final column represents the percentage of each code of the total number of cases analysed. Numerical codes have been allocated in order of prevalence. As indicated, the category with the highest percentage of cases was ‘poor referencing skills’, and the factors related to both the mechanical details of referencing, plus a lack of attention to correct referencing, despite evidence of prior training (the issue of lack of training was addressed in the third category). The second most prevalent category was ‘impact of year level’ (17.9%), and this may have affected the outcome in either a positive or negative way. The top two categories accounted for almost 40% of all cases; all other categories accounted for less than 10% each, with the final category of ‘blatant breach of academic integrity’ accounting for just 3.6%.

Table 1: Coding categorisation

Code	Category	Factor/s	% of total
1	Poor referencing skills; Student knows how to reference correctly, but chooses not to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Page numbers missing [in in-text reference] Quotations shown as paraphrases Not enough attribution throughout paper Course completed on academic writing so has no excuse re “didn’t know how” 	21.4
2	Impact of year level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This was the only information presented The more senior the year potentially the more severe the outcome. 	17.9
3	Lack of training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student was able to demonstrate they had not completed a course on academic writing Student who had transferred in from another University, Division or pathway 	9.8
4	Responsibility accepted by student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student acknowledged/didn’t acknowledge AI breach 	8.0
5	Personal circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life events such as relationship breakdowns, death, ill health Lack of prioritisation of personal commitments. 	8.0
6	Previous academic integrity breach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A previous record on the AI database 	8.0
7	Minor plagiarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small component of the work affected Student demonstrated that most of the work was their own (eg drafts) 	6.3
8	Collusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two or more students shared work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboratively, where each may have an equal understanding of the content Direct lend Coercion 	6.3
9	Exam breach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breach committed during an examination, regardless of severity 	5.4
10	Other	For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion about the role of the tutor during the drafting process Professional requirements breached Lecturer hadn’t followed AI policy 	5.4
11	Blatant academic integrity breach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear evidence of large sections of cut and paste Past student’s assignment submitted, unchanged Intentional reformatting of downloaded information to indicate original work Theft of another student’s work 	3.6
Total			100.0%

Discussion

As indicated in the Findings section, we identified eleven main categories by analysing 112 cases (from a potential 171 cases) from the Academic Integrity Database of a Health Sciences faculty at The University. The findings indicate that the most common category (21.4%) used to determine outcomes for breaches of academic integrity was ‘poor referencing skills’, a category which related to both mechanical detail and lack of attention, despite previous training. This finding seems to contradict perceived wisdom by a range of Language and Learning advisers who have consistently argued that plagiarism most often occurs because students lack the skills due to inadequate training and induction to Australian academic conventions (see for example, Handa & Fallon, 2006; McGowan, 2005; Chanock, 2003; Wilson 1997). Interestingly, the third most common category identified was ‘lack of training’, but this only accounted for 9.8% of cases. Our findings seem to suggest that lack of training is not the main issue. It was clear from the data that it was not the case that students did not know how to reference, but that they did not do so in their assessment tasks. The reasons for this are unclear.

The second most common category identified in the data was ‘impact of year level’. It should be noted that this category could have provided an ameliorating influence (for example, if students were in the first year of their program, the outcome tended to be more of an educative one such as resubmitting the assignment) or a more disadvantageous influence (for example, if students were in the final year of their studies, the outcome was potentially more severe for the same apparent breach). While authors such as Carroll (2003) make the case the year level is just one factor to consider, our data demonstrates that it is highly influential in the decision-making process.

The next most common category was whether students accepted responsibility for their actions (8% of cases). During the process of coding the data, we began to question the integrity of this category as an appropriate element in the decision-making process. Unlike Curtin University, which includes “remorse” as a valid reason for minimising an outcome (Yeo & Chien, 2007), The University does not specifically include this factor in the policy. However, it was evident from the data that this factor *was* considered in the decision-making process. We are apprehensive about this factor because we believe it has the potential to encourage students to “fall on their swords” in order to (a) achieve a lighter penalty or (b) to

get through the process quickly, whether or not they have actually committed the alleged AI breach.

‘Personal circumstances’, although considered by many to be a threat to consistency in decision-making (see Carroll & Seymour, 2006) only accounted for 8% of the cases analysed. This is in keeping with our previous research (see Bretag & Green 2009) which showed that personal circumstances are only rarely used to determine the outcome of an AI breach, and are in fact, important considerations if fairness as well as consistency is to be achieved.

Students for whom there was a record of a prior breach of AI accounted for only 8% of the cases analysed. This relatively low percentage could be interpreted to be an indication that the educative component of the AI policy is effective. It might also indicate that once students have been through the formal AI process, they are apprehensive of going through it a second time. This little researched area has begun to be explored by Mahafferty (2009) who interviewed 13 students following their involvement in the AI process at The University of California, San Diego to determine how they made meaning from the experience. This is an area for further exploration.

A cluster of less prominent categories including ‘minor plagiarism’, ‘collusion’, ‘exam breach’ and ‘other’ (a category which included various issues which didn’t easily fit standard categorisation) accounted for a total of 23.4% of all cases, almost equivalent to our main category of ‘poor referencing skills’. Anecdotally, many AIOs at The University often express concerns about students inappropriately (even fraudulently) sharing work, but the findings demonstrate that ‘collusion’ represented only 6.3% of cases and therefore this concern may be unfounded. Similarly, the hysteria (on campus and in the community) about exam breaches appears to be unsubstantiated in this data set as this category accounted for only 5.4% of cases.

The final category identified in the data was ‘blatant breach of academic integrity’ which accounted for just 3.6% of cases. Cases were allocated to this category if there was a clear indication of intent to deceive, such as stealing another student’s work (see University policy in Appendix 1). Even though the literature indicates that cheating is endemic in higher education (see Davis, Drinan & Bertram Gallant 2009), and some studies have reported that nearly two thirds of tertiary level students have engaged in academic dishonest behavior

(McCabe, 2007), the data in this study suggests that most breaches of AI could be described as relatively minor in nature. This is not to suggest that we believe these breaches are not serious, but rather that we need to be aware that the majority of students are not serial cheaters who need to be ‘punished’, shamed or excluded from their program of study. In fact, the cases identified as ‘blatant breaches of AI’ are usually the easiest to deal with in terms of determining outcomes based on University policy. Blatant breaches most often receive serious penalties such as those outlined in Appendix 2.

Our analysis indicated that, in some instances, an AI breach might have more than one code. We would argue that most AIOs rarely use just one ‘factor integral to the case’ when determining outcomes; in fact, the categories often (and necessarily) overlap and even merge. It is clearly important that AI policy allows decision-makers to use such nuanced judgement. In this research, determining the most appropriate code required careful consideration of all the qualitative information available, plus respectful collaboration which enabled each of us to reflect on and share our own experiences and interpretation of policy. This fits with Yeo and Chien’s (2007) research which indicated the importance of having two decision-makers involved in determining outcomes, and Carroll and Appleton’s (2005) recognition of the importance of a community of practice.

Limitations of study

There were a number of limitations in this study. Analysis was based on breaches of AI in just one School within one faculty. Within this school students require very high Tertiary Entrance Rankings (TER), and are generally domestic, onshore and internal. Unlike other courses at The University, assessment by examination is not the norm. Hence the sample used in this study may not be representative of the general student cohort.

Conclusion

This research has coded the data relating to ‘factors integral to the case’ which were used as part of the process of determining outcomes for breaches of academic integrity in one school within a health science faculty at an Australian university. Eleven main categories were identified, with ‘poor referencing skills’ representing the largest category (21.4% of cases) and ‘blatant academic integrity breach’ representing the smallest category (3.6%). The first category challenges much of the literature which has often suggested that it is a lack of training which accounts for students (inadvertently) plagiarising. Our analysis of the data

demonstrated that in fact only 9.8% of students breached AI as a result of lack of training. With just 3.6% of cases, Category 11 also contests the misconception that blatant breaches of AI are common. Despite the challenges of determining students' intentions (Yorke, Lawson & McMahon, 2009), cases were allocated to this category when intent was clearly deliberate (see Appendix 2, Field 9).

It is evident that any database of AI breaches needs to include the ability to categorise factors integral to the case. We believe that the codes identified in this research have the potential to facilitate ongoing analysis of sub-sections of such databases, in a bid to uncover relationships which can then be used to help ensure overall fairness and consistency between AIOs within and across universities. It is our intention to use the coding system identified in this paper as a means of analysing other sections of The University's AIO database. We will determine if the coding categories work across disciplines and identify the impact of 'factors integral to the case' in determining outcomes for breaches of academic integrity.

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Appendix 1: Example of an Academic Integrity policy

The University recognises that academic misconduct can occur through unfamiliarity with academic conventions and all issues of academic misconduct will be considered in light of:

- a) the extent of the misconduct
 - b) the student's intention and/or motivation
 - c) contextual factors such as:
 - i. stage/level of program
 - ii. number of previous offences
 - iii. student's learning background
 - d) convention of discipline
 - e) the impact of a particular outcome on a student's progression
 - f) information provided to the student about academic integrity as part of their course
 - g) where applicable, information about the student held on the academic misconduct database
- (University of South Australia 2008)

Appendix 2: Fields and options for AIO database at time data was collected (UniSA 2009).

Field		Options
1	Student ID	
2	Misconduct Record ID	
3	Program Code	
4	Study Period	
5	AIO name	
6	Type of academic misconduct/breach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plagiarism – direct quote • Plagiarism – close paraphrasing • Plagiarism – other student’s work • Plagiarism – lack of acknowledgment or referencing • Plagiarism – written for student by third party • Plagiarism – copying computer files, algorithms or computer code without clearly indicating their origin • Plagiarism – another student’s’ work by mechanical transformation • Plagiarism – imitating ideas or manners of expression • Copied, falsified or improperly obtained data • Significant assistance from a third party • Providing assistances as a third party • Falsification or misrepresentation of academic records • Examination breach – academic misconduct • Examination breach – not academic misconduct • Other
7	Brief description of occurrence	<i>Text based</i>
8	Date of contact with student	
9	Factors taken into account	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent of severity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Severe ○ Medium ○ Not severe • Level of information provided in the course <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Specific ○ General ○ None • Level in program at UniSA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ PG ○ UG later year ○ UG first year • Previous recorded offences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ >2 ○ 2 ○ 1 ○ 0

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student's learning background <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Aware of convention ○ Not aware • Intent/motivation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Deliberate ○ Inadvertent ○ Unknown • Convention of discipline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Specific requirements ○ N/A • Impact on progression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Severe (visa) ○ Serious ○ Minimal
10	Other factors integral to the case	<i>Text based</i>
11	Level of misconduct determined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Refer to Head of School ○ Zero for component in the course (no supplementary assessment allowed) ○ Zero for component in the course (supplementary assessment allowed) ○ Resubmit for a maximum of 50% • Medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Zero for component in the course (no supplementary assessment allowed) ○ Zero for component in the course (supplementary assessment allowed) ○ Resubmit for a maximum of 50% ○ Loss of 10% from original mark • Not severe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Loss of 10% from original mark ○ Resubmit for full marks ○ No loss of marks
12	Outcome determined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe • Medium • Not severe
13	Date student notified	
14	Date student agreed	
	Formal inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tick box if case referred for formal inquiry

Highlighted section represents the text-based data coded for this paper