



Considering extenuating circumstances

Target audience: Academic integrity decision makers (AIDM) – those with the responsibility of determining outcomes for breaches of academic integrity by undergraduate students.

Key issue being addressed: Difficulty of making a decision on an academic integrity breach when multiple extenuating factors are involved.

Purpose of the case: To assist academic integrity decision makers to work through their own policy to address a complex case.

Materials and preparation needed to answer case:

- Remind participants to find and access appropriate policy and academic integrity resources at own institution prior to coming to session.
- Copy of university academic integrity policy and procedures.
- Separate PowerPoint for facilitator based on 1 or 2 hour session.
- Bretag, T. (2008) [Responding to plagiarism: The need to engage with students' 'real lives'](#), refereed paper presented at the *ATN Assessment Conference: Engaging students in assessment*, University of South Australia, 20-21 November. (Note: the following case has been adapted from this paper)

The case

Abstract

An international student with poor English language skills is struggling to complete her degree. Her resubmission of a failed assignment is found to have been plagiarised and her case is passed on to the university's Academic Integrity Decision Maker to determine an appropriate outcome. Despite a number of extenuating circumstances and the likelihood that this will result in a fail for the whole course, the AIDM determines that the student should receive a zero for the assessment.

Background

Vivienne¹ is a 20 year-old business student from Mainland China, in her final semester of study at an Australian university. Although in her third year, Vivienne completed the first two years of her degree at the University's Beijing campus. Her spoken English is tentative and she has been struggling to pass her courses since arriving in Australia six months ago. She is currently taking an extra course concurrently with her already full program, because she failed a course last semester. The feedback on her assignments suggest that her tutors are being generous in awarding (bare) pass grades in recognition of the dramatic learning she is currently undergoing in terms of language and discipline knowledge. Her last assignment in 'Organisational Behaviour', worth 15% of the overall course grade, scored a grade of 45% (F) and her tutor gave Vivienne the opportunity to resubmit as she had clearly

¹ All characters in the case are pseudonyms

not understood the topic. The tutor spent considerable time explaining the concepts to Vivienne, plus gave an extra week to resubmit the assignment. The second submission was virtually copied word for word from an Internet source, without acknowledgement, and the tutor passed the case on to the Academic Integrity Decision Maker (AIDM) as per University policy.

The student meets with the AIDM

Having received a standard letter from the AIDM asking Vivienne to explain the high text-match in her assignment, Vivienne has now gone back to the tutor and asked that the original grade of 45% stand, and that the resubmission be disregarded. The tutor explains that in addition to University policy which states that in the case of resubmissions, the second mark stands regardless of whether it is higher or lower, the process is out of his hands. Vivienne reluctantly attends an initial meeting with the AIO. She arrives late, appears nervous and immediately repeats her request for the resubmission to be disregarded. The AIDM has met with a number of students during the week, and is inclined to take a firm line with this student. The usual type of penalty that would apply in this case would be a zero for the assignment, particularly given the extensive induction that all students receive in this particular program regarding academic integrity and academic conventions. The AIDM discusses the various penalties with the student and explains the rationale for zero. The student is visibly upset and explains that with marks to date only averaging 50%, a zero for the assignment may in fact cause her to fail the whole course.

Extenuating circumstances

The AIDM is in a quandary. Other students in the same course, and in similar academic circumstances, have received zero penalties for plagiarised assignments. But failing the whole course would be an unreasonable outcome for a student with no prior breaches of academic integrity. The AIDM asks if there are any extenuating circumstances that might be taken into account. At this point, the student breaks down and details the months of anxiety she has endured since discovering that her widowed mother has been diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. Vivienne is an only child and feels an overwhelming responsibility to return to China to care for her mother. However, her mother has insisted that Vivienne stay in Australia and complete her studies. By now Vivienne is heaving and crying and in terrible distress. This is no attempt to hoodwink the AIDM, but a genuine outpouring of emotion. Vivienne is desperate to return to her home country, is finding it difficult to concentrate on anything other than her mother's illness, and is struggling to manage an increasingly overloaded academic program with arguably less than adequate English skills.

The outcome

After careful consideration of both the policy and previous academic integrity cases, as well as consulting with other AIDMS via the university's AIDM Discussion Board, a determination is made that Vivienne should receive a zero penalty for the assignment.

Questions for discussion

1. Does your university's policy allow for the consideration of 'extenuating circumstances' when determining an outcome for an academic integrity breach?

2. How would you determine if particular circumstances warrant deviation from usual practice?
3. Does your university offer opportunities to discuss academic integrity breach cases with other academic integrity decision makers? (e.g. discussion list; formal or informal mentoring, regular professional development, etc)
4. What support services are available at your university to support AIDMs to deal with potentially stressful situations?
5. Does your university offer other referral services for students like Vivienne? (E.g. counselling, English language support, international student support, etc). Are all staff aware of these services and how to refer students identified as being 'at risk'?
6. Based on your own university's policy, do think that the correct decision was made in this case?
7. Quite apart from your university's policy, do *you* believe this outcome was fair? Why/why not?
8. Do you have any suggestions for how your university's policy should deal with complex cases like this one?

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