



Falsification and plagiarism

Target audience: Subject coordinators, research supervisors, academic integrity decision makers

Key issue being addressed: How to design out opportunities for falsifying data

Purpose of the case: To assist research supervisors and course/program and subject designers to consider strategies to reduce the risk of students falsifying data

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.
- Boud, D & Falchikov, N 2006, 'Aligning assessment with long term learning, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 31, no. 4, , pp. 399-413.

The case

Abstract

Despite designing an 'authentic' assessment based on a work related task, Bonnie discovers that one student fabricated the data for his report. As the student has already graduated, she is advised not to pursue the matter.

Bonnie¹, the subject coordinator in a postgraduate coursework program, designed the subject assessment to be authentic and offer students the opportunity to undertake assessment tasks that are similar to those that will form part of their work role on graduation. To this end she asked that student apply a particular framework of problem identification, analysis and evaluation to a real organisation. Those students in current employment often nominated their employing organisation as the one they would select for this case study. The subject coordinator offers to assist international students with introductions to local organisations.

Bonnie follows up with one particular international student, Edgar, who had few local contacts. However he reassures Bonnie that he has found a suitable local organisation, which he names. He indicates that the staff are very helpful and is able to provide Bonnie with the signed agreement from the organisation that she requires that all students submit well in advance of the assignment due date. Bonnie is vaguely familiar with the nominated organisation and is pleased that Edgar has demonstrated much more resourcefulness and initiative than she had anticipated.

¹ All characters in the case are pseudonyms

Edgar submits the completed report on the assignment due date. It is thorough, well-written and meets all of the assessment criteria for the assignment. Edgar graduates and leaves Australia to continue his career with a qualification accredited by a national and international organisation.

One year later Bonnie comes across a report in one of the professional journals she subscribes to that looks remarkably like the report submitted by Edgar in the previous academic year. Closer examination reveals that the publication date preceded Edgar's assignment submission date by some months, Edgar was not the identified author of the published report and that Edgar's submitted assignment matches the published report apart from the substitution of the name of a local organisation in place of the one identified in the published report.

Bonnie considers that she has evidence of Edgar's falsification of data and of plagiarism. She seeks the advice of the program director. He dissuades her from pursuing the matter. He points out that the student has now graduated and is no longer in Australia. He indicates that he is concerned about the risk to the reputation of the program should an investigation reveal how easy it was for a student to falsify data for a research report and to plagiarise undetected.

Without the support of her program director Bonnie decides forego any further investigation of the matter. Instead she considers how she might re-design the subject's assessment in order to reduce the incentive and opportunity that students have to falsify research data and to plagiarise.

Questions for discussion

1. What does your university policy say about designing the assessment of student learning to support student learning?
2. What does your university policy say about 'work-integrated learning', 'work-based learning' or 'authentic learning'?
3. What other strategies could Bonnie implement to reduce the incentive to, and risk of, students falsifying data?
4. Bonnie did try to obtain some assurance that students were authentic in their claims to have an agreement with a local organisation for the purposes of their research data collection. Were there any additional steps she could/should take?
5. What does your university policy say about dealing with evidence of/allegations of academic misconduct that occur after the student has graduated?
6. Does the program coordinator's recommendation that Bonnie not pursue an investigation into her evidence and suspicions of Edgar's misconduct accord with your own expectations of the university's educational integrity?
7. Does your own university's policy indicate that every suspicion of academic misconduct related to falsification, fraud or plagiarism must be reported or investigated? How does this accord with what you know of custom and practice in your own university.
8. Do you have any suggestions for how your university's policy could be improved to better support the subject coordinator (Bonnie) or the program director?
9. Is there any conflict of interest here?

Suggested readings

- Gibbs, G & Simpson, C 2004-2005, 'Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning', *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 1, pp. 3-31.
- Jackson, J, Fleming, K, Kamvoumias & Varnham, S 2009, *Student Grievances and Discipline Matters Project: Good Practice Guide for Handling Complaints and Appeals in Australian Universities – Good Practice Guide* (ALTC Funded Project), Southern Cross University, Lismore.
- Macdonald, R & Carroll, J, 2006, 'Plagiarism: A complex issue requiring a holistic approach', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 233-245.

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