The collection and sharing of Australian universities' academic misconduct data – some issues

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Academic Integrity Standards: Aligning Policy and Practice

Stage 2: What responses to breaches of academic integrity are actually implemented in practice?

Purpose of collection and analysis of academic integrity breach data

- determine how universities actually respond to breaches of academic integrity in practice
- identify examples of good practice in responding to breaches of academic integrity
- identify (and propose strategies to address) inconsistencies between policy and practice
- compare with policy directions (Stage 1)
- collect information on how each of the universities record, store and manage their academic integrity data

A complex task

Collation and comparison of the different types of information collected, where it was collected (centrally or distributed) its granularity, whether information was categorised (or entered into the database in narrative form) and the way in which information was categorised revealed the complexity of the task.

Diagram 1: Characterising approaches to collection of student academic misconduct data
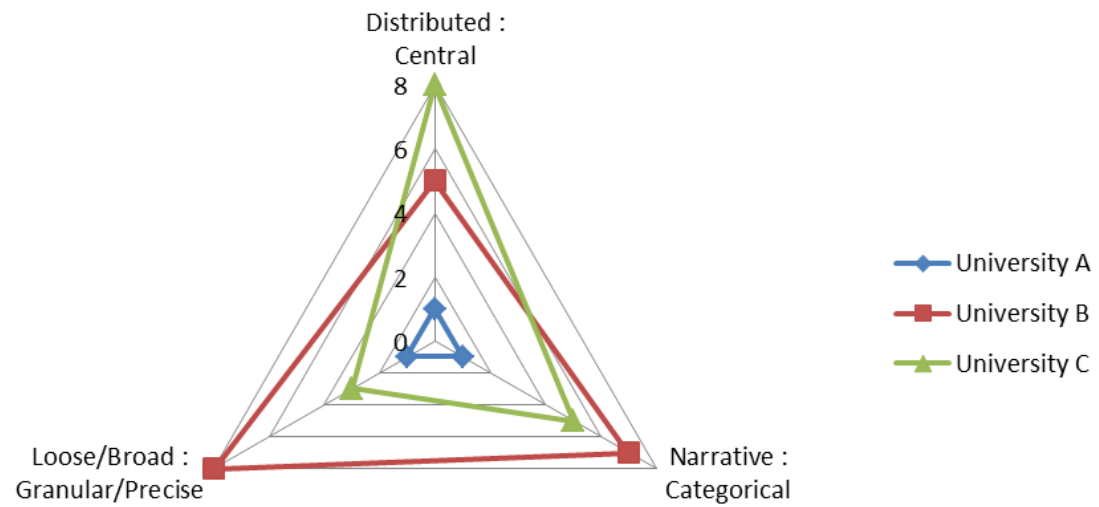
Result of Stage 2

- universities do not maintain comparable databases of these types of data
- academic integrity breach data at each of the project partner institutions is not in a form that can be meaningfully compared

Others have encountered challenges

Alexander, H 2006, 'Black marks: plagiarists swarm unis', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November, p. 1.

- *'It is difficult to establish a total number of plagiarism cases across all universities because collection methods vary' (p. 1)*

Lindsay, B 2010, 'Rates of student disciplinary action in Australian universities', *Australian Universities Review*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 27-32.

- *noted the tendency for the management of student misconduct matters to be dealt with at the level of individual academic units, rather than centrally*

Risk Management Approach

TEQSA Regulatory Risk Framework

- identifies several risk indicators which relate to academic integrity

- underscores the risk posed by a weak academic quality assurance program / culture

- notes a '[l]ack of internal processes for ensuring quality course design and delivery, academic integrity, and quality of research output puts at risk the learning of students and standing of the provider' (p. 24).

Issues related to data

- Matka (1990) and Weatherburn (2011) has identify a number of issues that should be considered to help ensure that data related to student academic misconduct is meaningful within and across institutions and therefore encourage institutions to be more willing to share their data.

Issues

- Is there a difference between 'real incidents' of a student academic misconduct and reported incidents?

- What is a reportable matter?

- What are factors surrounding staff (or student) decisions to report a suspected student academic misconduct matter?

- What is the level of scrutiny being applied to student academic misconduct?

- How should data about cases of student academic misconduct be reported and what does this data mean?

A way forward

Benchmarking is

'first and foremost, a learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/ activities/products in order to identify their comparable strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self improvement and/or self regulation'

(Jackson & Lund 2000, p. 6)

A shared responsibility

- Responsibility and stewardship of academic integrity is shared
- Other stakeholders - student, employers – included
- Well-informed scrutiny of data
- Attention paid to 'lead' as well as to 'lag' indicators

Conclusion: Why Data is Important

- Without good 'lagging' data universities are not able to make well-informed judgments about the effectiveness of their activities.

- In the absence of trend data it is not possible to address concerns that student academic misconduct (and in particular plagiarism or cheating) is increasing.

- Unless universities collect data that can be compared because is categorised and dealt with in similar ways it is not possible to undertake any sort of useful benchmarking or comparison of performance (or to learn from those institutions whose performance is exemplary).

Recommendations

- benchmarking relationships between universities needs to be seen as a way of assessing risk and of finding viable ways of improving university policy and practice

- the recommendations of Jackson et al. (2009) in relation to data collection would be a useful first step for universities.

References

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