DEGREES OF CHEATING:
AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENT ACADEMIC DISHONESTY IN
AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

by

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Abstract

It can be argued that perceptions of the quality of the nation's universities are fundamental to Australia's economy. At a time when universities are competing more and more in a global marketplace, reputation is a key factor in attracting students, and therefore funding. When reputations are called into question, the sustainability of institutions becomes uncertain.

Scandals surrounding academic dishonesty in Australia have not been uncommon in recent years. In response, universities have demonstrated an increasing awareness of the problem and a move toward updating or instigating policies to deal with it. However, the evidence base for such policy development is scant. Outside the USA, there have been few studies of academic dishonesty and virtually no large-scale, multi-campus research.

The present research was designed to provide such an evidence base. Three studies were conducted to explore the extent and nature of dishonest academic behaviour, together with an investigation of factors which might precipitate students' engagement in these activities. In addition to variables which had previously been shown to be related to cheating, it was theorised that factors identified by General Strain Theory as being related to delinquency and general deviance, may also be associated with student cheating.

A large-scale multi-campus survey was conducted ($N = 9543$; 11 universities). Findings were analysed to assess the extent of cheating amongst students and identify factors
which contribute to these behaviours. Two qualitative studies followed which were
designed to tap the experiences of, and understandings about, academic dishonesty of
both staff and students. Overall the research established that levels of dishonest academic
behaviours by the students in this study, while still worryingly high, are somewhat lower
than those reported in the international literature. A number of risk factors for student
engagement in dishonest behaviour were identified. Chief amongst these were the
experience of stressful life events and the presence of dishonest peers. To a lesser, but
still significant extent, were factors related to student age, year of enrolment, and field of
study. Implications for addressing the problem at the level of policy development and
strategic response are discussed.
Acknowledgements

Almost everyone writes on this page that the journey has been long, and it is true; yet the length of the journey is not measured in years alone. I think the most important thing I have learned over my years within these pages is that undertaking a PhD is about so much more than writing a thesis. Along the way I have been helped by, literally, thousands of people; I have fulfilled many roles; and I have made lifelong friends.

To those who helped me, I offer my heartfelt thanks. Firstly to Debra Rickwood and Michele Fleming who graciously took over responsibility for supervising my research when Chris and I brought our family back to Canberra. To Tony Winefield, Bruce Johnson, and Rob Ranzijn at the University of South Australia, for helpful supervision in the early days. To each Deputy Vice Chancellor who took the risk and allowed me to ask these questions in their university, and to all the wonderful academics and students who willingly gave their time to answer those difficult questions.

Somewhere along this journey, I also hitched up with a fabulous bunch of people who shared some of my thoughts about the importance of academic integrity, and shared my dreams for a way forward. We started something that I hope will eventually grow beyond us. Tracey, Heather, Margaret, Colin, Ingrid, Julianne, Martin, I’m really proud to be associated with you all. We’ve achieved so much, and there’s so much more to do!

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1 Early work on the research was conducted in the School of Psychology at the University of South Australia (UniSA) and initial approval for the research and the individual studies was granted by the UniSA Human Research Ethics Committee. Following family relocation, the latter part of the researcher’s candidature was held in the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of Canberra. Ethics approval for the continuation of the research was granted by the University’s Committee for Ethics in Human Research.
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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother, Bette, in her 95th year.

Mum; you taught me to believe there was nothing I couldn't do, or be.

Thank you.
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Glossary of terms

To assist the reader, some of the key terms used in the following pages are presented. Some words and phrases carry a particular meaning in Australia that may be distinct from those definitions held in other contexts and environments. For the purposes of the current research, the following definitions/uses apply:

*Academic Dishonesty*: behaviour in which a student makes a decision to deceive in an effort either to gain an unfair or undeserved academic advantage or to avoid a deserved academic sanction. The behaviour can be designed to benefit the individual directly, or to assist a fellow student. It breaches the rules of the institution and includes cheating in tests or examinations, deliberate plagiarism and various other forms of academic misconduct, such as false-excuse making.

*Academic Staff Member*: a university employee with responsibility for academic content, e.g. a lecturer, tutor (learning assistant), or academic skills advisor.

*Cheating*: the term *cheating* is used interchangeably with the term academic dishonesty.

*Invigilator*: a person employed to supervise examinations (US = proctor).

*Plagiarism*: most parsimoniously defined as the use of another’s words or ideas without appropriate attribution. It is important to distinguish between inadvertent and deliberate plagiarism. For the present research, only deliberate plagiarism is of interest.

*Secondary Institution*: a high school (children aged approx 12 to 18).

*Tertiary Institution*: a post-high school institution.

*University*: for the purposes of this thesis, university is defined as a higher education institution which is authorised to confer academic degrees at all levels (bachelor, master, and doctorate). Used synonymously with the US term “college”.

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Epigraph

"But the kids who are serious cheaters, I think, are usually kids who are in serious trouble for one reason or another. They're either out of their depth or they're having to deal with a whole heap of stuff which is not academically related. And so it pulls on their time and it pulls on their resources and it pulls on their emotions and they end up having to just make do with their assignments and having to just pull bits and pieces together from wherever they think they can get them."

(Participant, Study 2).