Academic integrity: An interview with Tracey Bretag

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Michael Peters: I note from your biography that you have been Director of the UniSA Business School Office for Academic Integrity since 2015 and that you are the Founding Editor of the *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (2016). Can you explain why and when you became interested in this topic? Is there any significance that this initiative came from a business school?

Tracey Bretag: My interest in academic integrity began in 2001 when I was teaching a large course in the UniSA Business School entitled 'Business Communication Skills for Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) Students'. The aim of the course was to induct second language learners, most of whom were newly arrived international students, into the Australian academic culture, and there was a strong focus on the development of academic integrity and business writing skills. To my dismay, a very large number of students simply cut and paste from Internet sources when writing their assignments, even when those assignments were highly authentic and personal such as reflective journals and autobiographical writing. To my further consternation, there was no formal process for dealing with even the most blatant forms of plagiarism, other than to refer the matter to a senior manager. I became interested in researching two particular problems: (1) Plagiarism by international English as an Additional Language (EAL) students and (2) Institutional policies to prevent and address plagiarism.

As part of my doctoral studies, I interviewed 14 teachers from across the Australian higher education sector and discovered that this problem was not unique to my own university or to the Business School. In the course of my studies, I also learned that plagiarism and other academic integrity breaches are more common in three particular disciplines: Business, Engineering and Information Technology. So it made perfect sense for me, as an educator based in a Business School, to continue researching this topic.

In 2003, with other colleagues at the University of South Australia, I convened the first conference on 'educational integrity' – this conference has continued to be held every two years at various Australian universities with the 8th Conference held in Sydney in 2017. With no journal dedicated to this emerging topic, my colleague Helen Marsden and I founded the *International Journal for Educational Integrity* in 2005. Since 2006 I have been the sole Editor, with BMC (SpringerNature) most recently taking over as publisher.

Over the years, my interest in this topic has evolved and I have led three large national research projects funded the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching:

- 2011 Academic Integrity Standards: Aligning Policy and Practice in Australian Higher Education, www.aisp.apfei.edu.au.
- 2013 Exemplary Academic Integrity: Embedding and extending exemplary academic integrity policy and support frameworks across the higher education sector, www.unisa.edu.au/EAIP.
- 2016–present: I am currently co-leading (with Rowena Harper) the *Contract cheating and assessment design: Exploring the connection* project. This project has included the largest survey to date of students and teaching staff about their attitudes towards, and experiences with contract cheating. www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au.

Dr Harper and I have also recently made a submission for further funding to the Australian Research Council to explore the topic, 'Cheating cultures in engineering: A new perspective on gender inequality'.

Michael Peters: Student cheating is not a new problem. I know you have written on the origins. Can you say whether and how the problems have changed?

Tracey Bretag: As I have noted elsewhere (see Bretag, 2018) academic dishonesty has long been a topic of research, beginning in the 1960s, with William Bowers' seminal survey research on students' cheating behaviours. Based on responses from 5422 students from 99 US colleges, Bowers (1964) reported that at least half of the respondents had engaged in some form of academic dishonesty. In 1992, McCabe collaborated with Bowers to revisit the data and conduct comparable research. The results, based on responses from 6096 students from 31 US colleges, found no overall increase in students' self-reported cheating behaviours, although there had been a rise in unpermitted collaboration on written assignments (McCabe, 1992; McCabe & Bowers, 1994).

More recent research, particularly my own research based on large Australian data sets (see Bretag et al. 2018; also see the special collection on contract cheating in the *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 2017), suggests that while student cheating itself is by no means a new problem, the *ways* that students cheat have dramatically changed in recent times. Marketing savvy commercial cheat sites target vulnerable and naïve students, offering 'plagiarism-free' assignments for a relatively modest fee. Time poor students, often managing competing priorities coupled with inadequate academic or linguistic preparation, may be tempted to use these services rather than engage in the effortful but potentially transformative process of genuine learning. And undergraduate students are not the only ones tempted to take such short-cuts. Masters and PhD students can purchase their entire dissertations from such services. Researchers and scholars at all levels can similarly purchase journal articles, grant applications, and just about every written task needed as part of their professional roles. In the sharing economy, anything goes and students and academics are subject to new and increasing competition and daily pressures, along with the option of outsourcing virtually every aspect of learning and/or research.

An additional and recent challenge to academic integrity comes in the form of online paraphrasing and translation tools (commonly referred to as 'article spinners') which enable scholars to submit an article to either a free or relatively inexpensive online tool and 'spin' it so that it appears to be an original contribution (see Rogerson & McCarthy, 2017). The *International Journal for Educational Integrity* has a current Call for Paper on the topic: Machine-based plagiarism: The death of originality in the digital age?

Michael Peters: Could you give us some idea of the three research projects you are involved with related to academic integrity?

Tracey Bretag: The *Academic Integrity Standards Project* (AISP 2010–2012) analysed the 40 academic integrity policies of Australian universities and developed the 'five core elements of exemplary academic integrity' (see Bretag et al., 2011). In addition to conducting interviews with 28 senior managers, the project collected responses from over 15,000 Australian university students to determine their understandings of academic integrity and how they would like to be educated about the topic (see Bretag et al., 2014).

The *Exemplary Academic Integrity Project* (EAIP 2013) aimed to extend the lessons from the AISP and develop a Plain English definition of academic integrity, along with a framework for implementing the 'five core elements' of academic integrity policy (see Bretag & Mahmud, 2016).

The *Contract Cheating and Assessment Project* (CCAD 2016–present) aimed to investigate the prevalence of contract cheating (where a student outsources their work to third party) from both student and staff perspectives, and explore the potential link between this type of cheating and assessment design (see Bretag et al., 2018; and Harper et al., 2018). To our knowledge, the

project has collected the largest data sets on this topic in the world to date (survey responses from over 15,000 students and 1200 teaching staff, along with large procurement and breach data sets).

Michael Peters: Is there a definition of 'academic integrity'? Does it cover forms of cheating and infidelity committed by faculty?

Tracey Bretag: Most academic integrity researchers cite the definition of academic integrity which was developed as part of the Fundamental Values Project in 1999 by members of the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) and updated in 2013:

> Academic integrity is 'a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. From these values flow principles of behavior that enable academic communities to translate ideals to action'. (ICAI, 2013)

The Australian Office for Learning and Teaching funded *Exemplary Academic Integrity Project* (Bretag et al., 2013), developed a Plain English Definition based on the themes which emerged from 28 interviews with senior managers in Australian higher education (as part of the previous OLT *Academic Integrity Standards Project* [Bretag et al., 2010–2012]), and which underscored the broader aspects of academic integrity, beyond the immediate responsibilities of students:

> Academic integrity means acting with the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility in learning, teaching and research. It is important for students, teachers, researchers and professional staff to act in an honest way, be responsible for their actions, and show fairness in every part of their work. All students and staff should be an example to others of how to act with integrity in their study and work. Academic integrity is important for an individual's and a school's reputation. (Exemplary Academic Integrity Project, n.d.)

More recently, Macfarlane, Zhang, and Pun (2014) defined academic integrity as the 'values, behaviour and conduct of academics in all aspects of their practice' while noting that the term has often been misappropriated to refer to the conduct of students, particularly in relation to behaviours such as plagiarism and cheating (p. 340).

From my perspective, having explored this topic for a very long time, I maintain that it is absolutely critical that every member of the academic community takes responsibility for academic integrity within their specific spheres. For too long, we have placed all the responsibility for upholding academic integrity on the shoulders of students, often expecting a higher standard from them, than we do of faculty or the institution. It's time to recognize that students take their cues from their mentors and academic leaders. We all need to recognize that academic integrity is a positive and ethical approach to learning, and one that requires a shared understanding across all stakeholders, developed through induction, ongoing training, mentoring, collegial conversations and institutional commitment. Let's stop talking only about the opposite of academic integrity (misconduct, fabrication, cheating, plagiarism, etc.) and focus on the much more important process of developing cultures of integrity.

Michael Peters: Can we focus for a moment on the question of self-citation? I recently read an article by Jamie Callahan (2017) with the wonderfully ironic title 'The retrospective (im)moralization of self-plagiarism: Power interests in the social construction of new norms for publishing' She argues: 'little has been done to problematize self-plagiarism as a concept and how, and why, it came to occupy such a central role in the academic discourse' (p. 1).

Tracey Bretag: Self-citation and self-plagiarism are too very different things! Self-citation is what we do when we legitimately and transparently cite our previous work so that the reader can be directed to the original source. Self-plagiarism, as I've defined it elsewhere and using Australian copyright guidelines, involves '10% or more textual re-use of any one previous publication by the author without attribution' (Bretag & Carapiet, 2007 – see, we need this self-citation so that you can go and read our previous paper and see what we wrote nearly a decade ago!).

Although it's a really common practice for researchers to recycle/re-use ideas and text from previous publications (in fact, I'm doing this right now), and arguably it's a strategic approach to building a body of work, self-plagiarism (where large chunks of text are re-used over and over without attribution) is potentially problematic because the author is presenting the text as 'original' when in fact it's little other than cobbled together chunks of text with little or no new insights. Why waste funding, journal space and readers' time if the paper has nothing new to say (see Bretag & Mahmud, 2009 for a full discussion of the difference between legitimate textual re-use and self-plagiarism).

Unlike Jamie Callahan, I don't find the idea originating from Latin of 'kidnapping' or 'theft' useful in defining plagiarism – this doesn't explain why plagiarism is inappropriate academic practice. I think a more useful, and less emotive or moralistic way to define plagiarism is simply 'the use of others' words or ideas without acknowledgement'. It makes sense then to see 'self-plagiarism' in the same non-judgemental way – it is simply the use of one's own words or ideas without appropriate citation. So, why does it matter? Why can't we just cut and paste our own work endlessly, creating a long list of pseudo publications to add to our CVs? Given the currency that publication holds in academe and the power it wields for promotion, funding, grants and international reputation, as well as the potential impact of publications on policy and practice, I think self-plagiarism *is* problematic. It's not a 'scourge' invented by power interests in publishing as Callahan suggests – the main issue at stake is that self-plagiarism has the potential to undermine the originality and value of scholarly publication.

Michael Peters: I wonder whether I could propose a typology that speaks of academic in terms of staff or faculty, university administration, students and publishers. Would you accept this typology? Are there forms of academic integrity and forms of the lack of it that involve these different groups? Would you accept that academic integrity is a set of norms that applies across academic divisions?

Tracey Bretag: I absolutely would accept such a typology and in fact, the idea that academic integrity is a multi-stakeholder, multi-faceted concept that applies to everyone in an educational institution underpins all of my research as well as my daily practice as Director of the Office for Academic Integrity at the University of South Australia. As I wrote in 2013:

> … to nurture a community with shared academic values of integrity would require a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach encompassing educational policy makers, senior managers, teaching academics and advisors, students at all levels, researchers, funding bodies, editors, and reviewers. A genuinely holistic approach would involve promoting integrity in every aspect of the academic enterprise: including university mission statements and marketing, through admissions processes, to nuanced and carefully articulated policy. It must include assessment practices and curriculum design, information provided during orientation, and frequent and visual reminders on campus. There must be embedded and targeted support in courses and at every level for students, professional development for staff, and research training. Finally, the use of new technologies to both assist students to avoid academic integrity breaches, and as a tool to detect breaches when they occur, must be adopted. (See Bretag, 2013 for the references to other researchers who support my approach)

Such a holistic approach has provided the foundation for a new online training Academic Integrity Program (2019) I have been developing with Epigeum/Oxford University Press. The program aims to assist a range of diverse stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of academic integrity, and to demonstrate how it might be put into practice within specific contexts and roles. The program provides a scaffolded approach for students, beginning with relatively simple concepts for students entering higher education, moving through to increasingly complex modules that cater for the needs of later year students. The program supports both teaching and administrative staff, providing clear instructions around curriculum and assessment design plus practical advice for non-teaching roles ranging from learning advisors and librarians right through to front office, facilities and security staff. For example, teachers are reminded that they are responsible for academic integrity by ensuring that they develop innovative, engaging

assessment tasks that reduce opportunities for cheating, and that they take the time to identify and respond appropriately to breaches when they occur. Non-teaching positions such as facilities/grounds staff are rarely included in academic integrity conversations but the program reminds them that they can demonstrate integrity by removing advertisements for cheating services on campus, and notifying the relevant department/s to ensure that such sites are noted and online access blocked.

The program takes a novel approach to the topic, beginning with the concept that we are all responsible for academic integrity, but how we demonstrate academic integrity will depend on our institutional roles.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Tracey Bretag is an Associate Professor in the School of Management at the University of South Australia Business School. She teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, while her research focuses on higher education policy and practice, and academic integrity. Since 2015, she has been the Director of the UniSA Business School Office for Academic Integrity. Associate Professor Bretag has an interdisciplinary background, she holds a Bachelor of Arts (BA – English and History) from James Cook University, an Honours Degree and a Master of Arts (MA) by Research in English from the University of Adelaide, and a Doctor of Education (Ed.D) by research from UniSA. She is the Founding Editor of the *International Journal for Educational Integrity* and is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (2016). Associate Professor Bretag has received a number of awards throughout her career, including UniSA Scholarly Teaching and Postgraduate Lecturer of the Year Awards in 2003, supported Teacher Awards from UniSA from 2005 to 2009, an Excellence in Teaching Award from UniSA Division of Business in 2010, an ESL Educator of the Year Award by the English as a Second Language Educators (SA) Inc. in 2004 and a Certificate of Commendation for Research Excellence from UniSA Business School in 2014. Associate Professor Bretag has also received numerous grants from the Office for Learning and Teaching to improve academic integrity across Australian universities and to help prepare students for intercultural learning in Asia. Associate Professor Bretag has published over 30 refereed academic journal articles and book chapters and has presented her research at conferences across the globe. She is the former Chair and Founding Member of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Educational Integrity, the Former President of the Executive Board of the International Center for Academic Integrity, and an Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) Peer Reviewer. http://people.unisa.edu.au/tracey.bretag#About-me

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