

## Academic fraudulence in online degrees and exams at Australian universities

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### Introduction

In recent years an ever increasing number of universities have started to offer online degrees. In Australia most universities offer online degrees, there however currently there is one leading online higher education provider, which this study will be referred to as 'online degree providers' (ODP).

Along with this new method of completing degrees comes new forms of academic dishonesty and misconduct. Academic dishonesty and misconduct among students is not a new phenomenon. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2006) find that not only is academic dishonesty widespread, it is also often underestimated by universities. Additionally, researchers have found that technology has enabled students to cheat in a number of different ways (Etter et al., 2006; Devlin and Gray, 2007; Howard and Davies, 2009). For example, students now can access information online via their phones while sitting in a closed-book exam (Kuntz Butler, 2014).

This paper contributes to the limited research literature on academic dishonesty and misconduct in online programs and online exams at Australian universities by taking a close look at what academic dishonesty and misconduct is and how it is happening. It is important that these questions be understood because, students who cheat at university are more likely to become professionals who in the future will engage in illegal, unethical or immoral behaviours in the workplace. Even though this paper considers academic dishonesty broadly, the focus of the paper is on cheating in online exams.

### Background

The widespread concern about academic dishonesty and misconduct is reflected in the ever-increasing body of research on these practices (Kerkvliet, 1994; de Lambert, Ellen and Taylor, 2003; Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Teixeira and Rocha, 2010; Wilkinson, 2009; Allen et al. 2013; Stack, 2015). Glater (2006) warns of the alarming magnitude of cheating among university students, the increasing pervasiveness of the phenomenon within academia and the detrimental impact it might have on the 'real world,' as the decisions

student make once they leave university and commence working are influenced by their perception of what comprises ethical behaviour (Lawson, 2004; Teixeira and Rocha, 2006).

Research conducted by Brown, Weible and Olmosk (2010) found that 49% of students in undergraduate marketing classes admitted cheating in 1988 versus 100% of the students in an undergraduate management class in 2008.

This paper uses the general definition of cheating from Sheard et al. (2003, p. 92), who defines cheating as “*a series of practices, which cover a range of areas that can be defined as illegal, unethical, immoral or against the regulations of the course or institution.*” This definition identifies the long-term problems that occur when students engage in academic dishonesty: if cheating is illegal, unethical and/or immoral, what will stop a student who engages in this type of behaviour (for example, cheating on their exams or falsifying a term project) from falsifying records or cheating on an expense account when they enter the workforce?

According to Rokavski and Levy (2007), cheating in general at universities is growing at a rampant rate. Researchers such as Stack (2015) find that academic dishonesty and misconduct at universities nowadays is even more prevalent than in the past due to technological advances, relatively scarce resources and understaffing at universities (Treviño and Butterfield, 1999; Maslen, 2003; Stack, 2015). The most common and widely used notion of academic dishonesty and misconduct at universities is copying and/or cheating on an exam (Teixeira and Rocha, 2010). Hence, this paper examines academic dishonesty in relation to online exams.

Australian universities are not an exception to this phenomenon. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2006) conducted one of the largest studies on this topic that focuses on Australian students. In their research, they surveyed 1,206 students and 190 academic staff across four Queensland universities. They found that academic dishonesty and misconduct is widespread and that universities are not doing enough to limit it. This was confirmed by Wilkinson (2009) and Eriksson and McGee (2015), who conducted research on cheating at Australian universities. These researchers found that more proactive strategies need to be implemented by universities to prevent student involvement in academic dishonesty.

According to research conducted by Lawson (2004), there is a strong relationship between students' predisposition to engage in unethical behaviour, such as cheating in an academic

setting, and their attitude towards such behaviours in the business world. Furthermore, research suggests that students who engaging in dishonest behaviour, for example cheating on exams, are less likely to believe that people in the business world act ethically. They are also more accepting of unethical behaviours in business than those who did not engage in academic dishonesty (Lawson, 2004; Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2006). Given the ongoing implications of academic dishonesty, it is important that this subject be further investigated.

## **Methodology**

This research project began with an examination of the existing literature on academic dishonesty and misconduct in online programs and online exams. The literature review was followed up by open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interviews, which asked 13 interview questions of the study participants who have been involved in online exam supervisions. The interviews lasted approximately one (1) hour, to generate valuable knowledge that will be used to address the objectives of the study.

As the interviews were semi-structured, the order of the questions asked depended on the answers the researcher received. The interview participants were Special Local Invigilator (SLI) or people who had worked as administrators in the area of online degrees in Australia between 2005 and 2016. In this research, 27 SLIs were interviewed and 5 online degree administrators.

After the interviews were transcribed they were analysed using the content analysis method. Berelson (1952:18) describes content analysis is a “*research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of manifest content of communication.*” This method focuses on the actual content and internal features of an interview. It is a very useful tool for semi-structured interviews, since this method can be used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes and phrases within a transcript, so that the investigator can quantify their presence in an objective manner. In order to be able to conduct a content analysis on the interviews, the interviews were audio-taped, then transcribed and then broken down in to manageable categories and then examined using content analysis (Thomas, 1994). For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on conflict of interest and how and why students cheat on online exams, five of the interview questions will be analysed and discussed in detail.

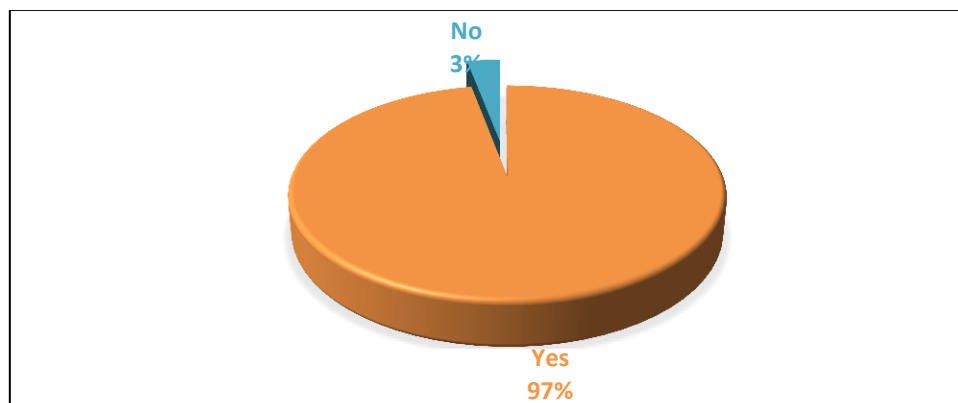
## **Results**

Overall the ODP has a good framework, and it runs the online courses for many different universities. ODP offers two ways for students to take exams. For those who live within 150km from an examination venue, they can sit their exams at the examination venue. Students who live outside the examination venue area must find an SLI. The exams are posted or emailed to the nominated SLI and once the exam is completed by the student, the invigilator mails it back to the university.

ODP on their website says that if a student lives more than 150 kilometres from the nearest network examination venue, or the student has a medical condition or disability which precludes travel to a network exam venue they may apply to sit their examinations with a Special Local Invigilator (SLI).” Students are asked to nominate a SLI and they are also told that “The nominated invigilator must NOT be a relative, friend or have any vested interest in the student's studies. In theory, this system should mean that students are taking exams in an environment similar to that of a traditional university examination; however, according to our research, in most cases ODP does not check who the SLI is and whether they meet the set criteria to be an invigilator.

In this research, SLIs were asked “*Did the relevant university check with you if there is a conflict of interest?*”? As indicated by Figure 1, most (97%) of the participants told us that did not contact the SLI at all, not even to verify their identity.

**Figure 1 Conflict of interest**

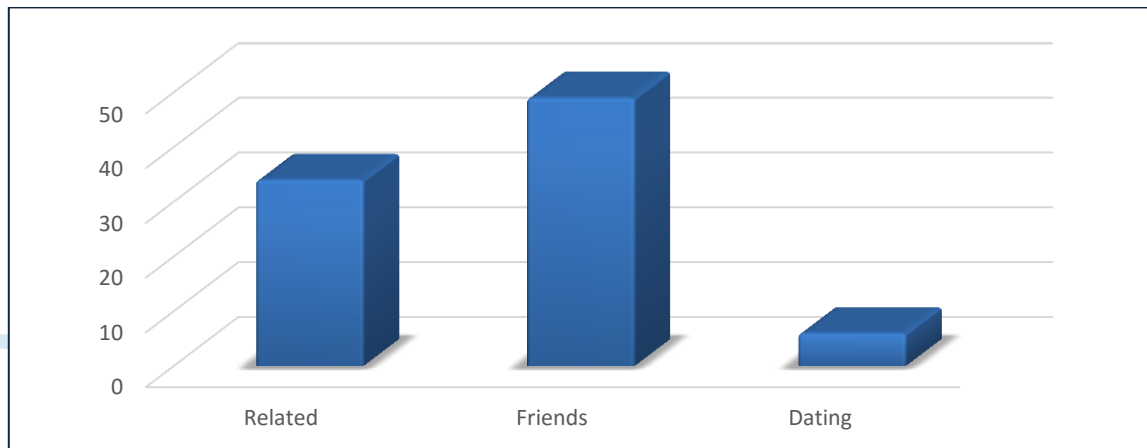


In the ODP guidelines, SLIs checks are supposed to be conducted but this research findings indicate that in most cases no one actually does them. In practice, the exam invigilator could be fictional, as they are never interviewed and in most cases none of the university’s professional staff see or speak to them. The problem this poses is that there are no methods in place to ensure that the students and the exam invigilators are behaving ethically and

honestly. The students could get someone else to sit their exam, take prohibited material into the exam or even take the exam over a few days/weeks rather than completing it in the set exam time.

When the SLIs were asked if they had a conflict of interest and in what way, 85% said that there was a conflict of interest (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 SLIs connection to the student their supervising**



As highlighted in Figure 2, 35% participants were related to the student they supervised, 44% were friends and 6% were dating. Yet, they all were approved to work as SLIs for ODP exams.

According to our participants, ODP did not verify the existence of the author (the SLI). ODP also did not check if there is a conflict of interest or whether the SLI had any prior experience in invigilating exams.

This research's findings show that SLIs report that there is little identity checking. This was supported by the administrators, who report that due to short staffing they do not have time to fulfil all of the specified checks.

One is left wondering, that since most (85%) of the SLIs who took part in this research were either related to the student and/or were a close friend and/or are dating – if SLIs do follow all the exam rules.

The participants were asked: “*In your experience, have any of the students whose exam you invigilated tried to cheat? If yes, how?*” A summary of their responses are outlined in Table 1.

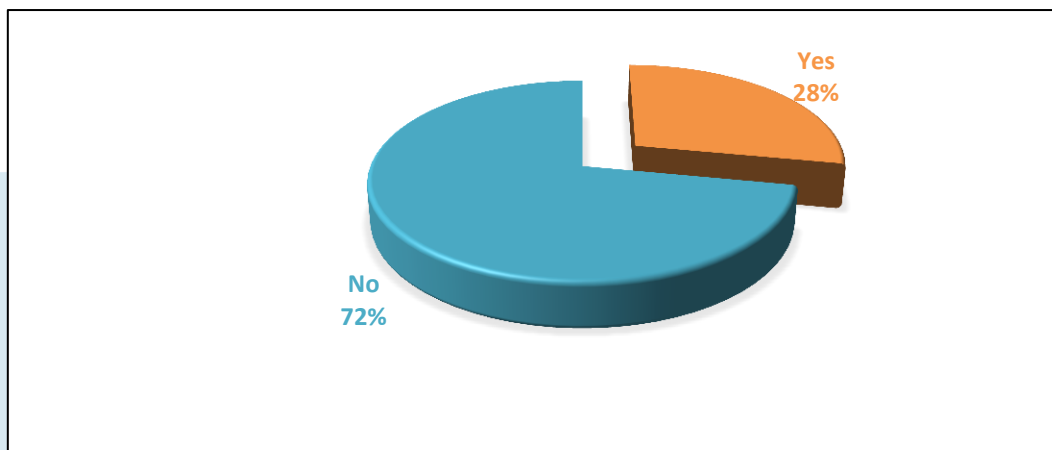
**Table 1 How and why do student cheat on online exams**

Participant 2	“ODP posted the exams two weeks prior to the exam...I then would give the exam to my friend [the student], who would have two weeks to do the exam...then we would post it back to ODP.”
Participant 9	“I usually would give the students enough time to finish the exam...even if it’s over the set time limit.”
Participant 11	“I had a student who I had to watch like a hawk...he would try to Google the [exam] answers.”
Participant 14	“One of my students who would take toilet breaks at least five times during one exam...I am sure that he was looking up the answers on his phone or maybe called a relative or friend for help.”
Participant 23	“I supervised my wife’s exams and also my friends’ exams...I use the word ‘supervised’ loosely here...I usually would give them the exam as soon as it arrives from the uni...they had at least a week to do each exam.”
Participant 29	“I didn’t get paid to supervise my friend’s exam and I was too busy with my own studies, so I would just give her the exams...so that she can do them [the exams] in her own time.”
Participant 31	“...my friend was absolutely hopeless in her undergraduate degree...failing most subjects...she seemed very depressed and told me her father will financially cut her off if she was to fail her Juris Doctor and she had no job...so, when she got into the Juris Doctor via ODP...she begged me to give her more time [to do the exam]...I guess I felt sorry for her...she isn’t very bright and there was no way she would pass any of her exams...and I didn’t want here end-up on the street...as soon as ODP posted the exams to me, I would give them to my friend and she had about two weeks to do each of her exams...she still took about five years to complete her JD.”

As demonstrated in Table 1, some of the SLIs reported that they let the students they supervised cheat on the exams. This supports the current literature, which states that there is strong evidence that suggests that cheating on online degrees is up to four times higher than cheating in a traditional class setting (Moten, et al., 2013).

The SLIs were then asked “*Do you know firsthand of any students who have completed their online degree who have cheated?*”

**Figure 3 Firsthand knowledge of a student who completed their online degree by cheating on it**



As indicated in Figure 3, 72% of the SLIs who took part in this research knew firsthand of students who had cheated while completing an online degree. This is a concerning finding, as widespread cheating can tarnish the reputation of universities and demean the worth of the degrees granted at them. Additionally, students who cheat to gain their qualifications may not be able to adequately perform the task they were hired to do (Knowledge, 2004).

When the participants were asked “*If you have supervised both students who study the traditional way (face-to face) and students who are doing on online exam – in your experience who were more likely to cheat or try to cheat on an exam?*”

Most (76%) of the SLIs answered this question and 96% of the SLI that answers this question said that in their experience students who are doing online exams – away from major testing centres – were more likely to cheat or try to cheat on an exam.

This research indicates that most online degrees will give examinations with little or no supervision, compared to traditional classes where examination is supervised (Stack, 2015;

Cerimagic). Furthermore, data in this area indicates higher self-reported instances of cheating in online degrees compared to a traditional university settings (Lanier, 2006; Moten, et al., 2013). According to researchers such as Means et al., (2010), students perform better in an online setting, which may indicate that some students are cheating.

### **Recommendations**

Although the findings regarding the possibility and amount of cheating in online courses is concerning, there are a number of measures universities can take to minimise cheating, such as ensuring that there is no conflict of interest between the student and the SLI. Introducing penalties and minimising opportunities for students to engage in academic dishonesty and misconduct can be highly effective (Haswell, Jubb and Wearing, 1999). Haswell, et al., (1999) researched students from universities in Australia, the United Kingdom and South Africa to examine how the willingness of students to engage in a variety of forms of plagiarism in a risk-free environment decreased dramatically when the detection risk increased and substantial penalties were introduced. They found that the size of the penalty has to exert a greater influence than risk of detection in order to be an effective deterrent. According to Woessner (2004), universities failing to apply heavy penalties can be tantamount to encouraging academic dishonesty and misconduct, as it presents an excellent gamble to students. Those findings, in conjunction with evidence that academic misconduct is highly prevalent in Australian universities, present a worrying picture of student behaviour and the performance of universities in terms of teaching, learning and producing ethical employees.

If universities choose to post hard copies of exams or email the exam to exam invigilators so that students can do the exam off site, then universities need to do a background check on the exam invigilators. The findings of this research show clearly that under the current system, invigilators and students are not following guidelines concerning bias and time requirements. In addition, ODP should not post or email the exams weeks ahead to the SLIs (so that they only have three days to return the exam, rather than two weeks). Having an online SLI exam log where invigilators register on a website the start and finish time for the exam, which both the SLI and the student sign – so when the invigilator starts invigilating, it is recorded on a university website. They might be less likely to bend the rules if they were required to do more reporting. Universities have the reputation of moving at glacial pace, which means that



any change may take some time to be introduced. However, if more universities are offering an ever increasing number of online degrees and courses, then universities need to ensure that they do due diligence. Universities also need to look at the size of the penalty for academic dishonesty and ensure that it exerts a greater influence than the risk of detection. Research conducted by Haswell, Jubb and Wearing (1999) shows that students' willingness to engage in a variety of forms of plagiarism in a risk-free environment decreases dramatically when detection risk and substantial penalties are introduced.

## **Conclusion**

Academic dishonesty and misconduct is an enduring problem for tertiary institutions worldwide and one that directly impacts on the performance attributes of universities. A growing pool of research shows evidence that suggests that dishonest behaviour by students around the globe is predominant and ever increasing. The literature presents a worrying picture of students' behaviour and in turn of the performance of Australian universities in term of teaching, learning and the worth of the degrees completed by students.

There is also a lot universities can do right now to help minimise cheating on exams. Instead of just having guidelines that state that there should be no conflict of interest between the SLIs and the student - checks should be conducted. Otherwise, ODP run the risk of having SLIs that could be fictional or who have a conflict of interest – as this could devalue the degree the student receives and it could be damaging to the university. Currently the emphasis is on the student to act ethically and find a SLI who has no conflict of interest, as suggested by this research - this method is not working. Right now, there are no methods in place to ensure that the students and the exam invigilators are behaving ethically and honestly. The students could get someone else to sit their exam, take prohibited material into the exam or even take the exam over a few days/weeks rather than completing it in the set exam time. With many online courses using an end-of-subject exam for up to 60% of the student's overall mark for the subject, it is vitally important that cheating in exams be addressed.

In attrition, universities should not accept enrolments from students with a low grade point average (GPA) (in Australia, often represented as a tertiary entrance ranking) as research suggests, students' attitudes to cheating could be linked to a low GPA. Research shows that students with a higher GPA are less likely to cheat, as they have less to gain and more to lose if they are caught in comparison to students with a lower GPA.

Additionally, universities should apply heavy and tough penalties for students who cheat – as the degree of the penalty has to exert a greater influence than risk of detection in order to be an effective deterrent.

Universities also need to strengthen the teaching of ethics in program curricula, thus minimising unethical behaviours such as cheating on exams. Research also shows that it is teaching students about what constitutes ‘cheating’ and ‘plagiarism’, may minimise it (Devlin and Gray 2007).

Findings of this research suggest that if universities insist/prefer to use a paper based exams, then they should supply and pay an exam invigilator (SLIs) instead of leaving it up to the student to find an exam invigilator and not doing any background checks on the exam invigilator.

In addition, universities that provide online degrees, should consider having online exams for online degrees, instead of hard copy exams that need to be posted to and supervised by an exam invigilator.

Academic dishonesty and misconduct have serious and negative consequences for the quality of learning in Australian universities and will have flow-on effects on industry and in society. If there are no major changes to policies, if universities do not enforce strict penalties and minimise opportunities for students to engage in academic dishonesty and misconduct, the current situation will prevail.

Those are only a few recommendations and are proposed by this research. However, an in-depth case analysis with a large sample size should be conducted, to identify what might and what might not work when it comes to the fight against academic dishonesty and misconduct.

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