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Speaking their language: a student-centered approach to translating university policies into interactive practice

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Abstract. How can university policies and procedures dealing with academic integrity be successfully translated into an interactive online environment? In 2012 an institutional online academic integrity course was developed at The University of Auckland to transform University academic integrity policies into interactive student practise. Over 10,000 students are enrolled in the course in 2013 and it will be compulsory for all new students (approximately 10,000) from 2014.

The course was designed by the University Library in collaboration with subject matter experts. A key outcome was the contextualisation of institutional policies, rules, and procedures for a student audience. This paper describes the process undertaken to achieve this.

At the start of the project, relevant University of Auckland documents were identified, analysed, and organised into five sections based upon common themes. Subject matter experts were consulted in order to validate content and ensure the accuracy of assessment questions. This was then translated into a paper prototype before being converted into an online environment.

Five rounds of student usability testing were conducted to inform the online course design. Key findings from usability testing include students’ preference for ‘learning by doing’, multimedia, and interactivity, rather than large sections of text. Based on these findings, text-heavy content was replaced by interactive online activities, scenarios, and multimedia. For example, interactive exercises were designed for students to understand the university graduate attributes and a comic strip was used to explain third party copyright.

The course was piloted in Semester Two of 2012. Feedback from the survey and focus groups was very positive. Students found the course to be an informative, engaging and fun way to learn about University policies and what is expected of them as university students.
Our experience demonstrates that policies can successfully be translated into practice in an online environment using a student-centred approach. Furthermore, collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders had the added benefit of initiating conversations on the subject of academic integrity across the University.

**Keywords:** academic integrity, online course design, policy into practice, student-centred pedagogical approach, usability studies

1. Introduction

Policies and guidelines related to academic integrity are common in most higher education institutes. Generally these focus on broad definitions of plagiarism and cheating, and the penalties for misconduct. Given the importance higher education institutions attach to the principles of academic integrity, it is crucial that they have clear and consistent policies and processes available to staff and students.

However, simply making policies available is not sufficient to ensuring students fully understand academic integrity and meet institutional expectations. Relevant information is often dispersed across multiple university documents and webpages with many variations in the terminology used. A student wishing to be fully informed of their obligations would have to access, read, and synthesise information from several sources. Furthermore, the information tends to be text-heavy and may not be easy for students to understand and apply in practice. The risk here is that without appropriate contextualisation and support, a student may not fully understand university policies and expectations.

Therefore, the following issues need to be considered: how are polices communicated; how are they translated and understood by students; and how can students’ understanding of policies be assessed?

Literature on academic integrity over the last decade has seen a call for a more holistic and educative approach (East, 2009; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006), and one in which policy and practice are aligned (Bretag et al., 2011; East, 2009). There is also a need for students to actively engage with discussions around academic integrity through active learning opportunities (Carroll & Appleton, 2001).
Engaging students in issues of academic integrity goes beyond simply transmitting information to students. Consideration of how this information is delivered to students is important. This is illustrated in the results of a survey undertaken by Bretag et al (2013). In this study, students expressed an awareness of academic integrity and institutional policies. However they also indicated a desire for this information to be delivered in a more interesting and engaging way, perhaps utilising media, stories and narratives.

As educators, one of our challenges is how to present academic integrity and policies surrounding it in a way that engages students and facilitates their understanding. In addition, how can we centralise access to policies so that they sit alongside appropriate support material? What are the practical steps involved in translating policy into practice rather than merely transmitting the information to students? How can we bring “policy to life”? (Arko, McAllister, & Goss, 2005, p. 5).

This paper adds to scholarly discussions around academic integrity by presenting the process undertaken at The University of Auckland to translate policy into an interactive online course. The course was designed to ‘speak’ to students in their language and encourage them to be active rather than passive recipients in their learning.

2. Background

The University of Auckland is the largest university in New Zealand with 40,784 students. As a highly reputable teaching, learning, and research institute it is committed to academic integrity. The University has detailed policies and guidelines around academic integrity, the conduct expected of its students, and penalties for academic misconduct. These include Guidelines on Conduct of Coursework, Student Academic Conduct Statute, and Examination Regulations (for full list of all policies and documents see Appendix 1). These policies and guidelines are available on various University web pages.

Though these policies and guidelines are comprehensive, previously there was no mechanism in place to check if students had read and understood them. Also, anecdotal evidence and discussion with lecturers, academic advisors, copyright experts, and examination officers indicated that despite the existence of these high-level docu-
ments and resources, students still experienced difficulties in understanding their responsibilities in regard to academic integrity at the University.

There was a strong need to develop a resource at the institutional level that would present students with the essentials of academic standards and expectations; good academic practice; and the principles of academic integrity. This was recognised by the University’s Teaching and Learning Quality Committee (TLQC). In August 2008 the TLQC formed a working group to consider the introduction of a compulsory academic study skills resource for incoming students. A scoping paper was undertaken in 2009 to determine the feasibility of this. Faculties were then consulted in 2010 to gauge level of support at faculty level.

After consultation with faculties and other key stakeholders it was agreed that a compulsory academic integrity course for all new students should be developed. The University Library was granted a Vice Chancellor’s University Strategic Development Fund to develop the course and a project team was established to undertake development in August 2011.

The sections below will discuss how the online course was designed to translate university policies into practice.

Translating Policy into Practice

Several steps were involved in the translation of University policies into practice in an engaging and fun way that would appeal to students.

a. Identification and Analysis of Relevant Institutional Policies, Regulations, Guidelines and Information

The first step was to identify and review all existing academic integrity related policies, guidelines, and information provided by The University of Auckland. This required a thorough search of the University web pages and discussion with key people (including the Examination Office; School of Graduate Studies; relevant faculty members). Reviewing University policies and guidelines also helped
identify some issues and gaps. For example, there was a lack of information at the time on copyright for undergraduate students.

b. Review of Past Literature, Other Online Academic Integrity Courses, Conference Attendance

Literature and other institutional academic integrity resources were reviewed and analysed. Key trends in developing academic integrity online resources were also identified. These resources emphasised pedagogy, values, and ethics.

Some useful examples were found. The most engaging sites utilised a range of methods to communicate information, such as scenarios, quizzes and humour. These include University of California, LA (UCLA, n.d.); University of Technology, Sydney (University of Technology Sydney, 2013); Victoria University, Melbourne (Victoria University Melbourne, n.d.) and University of Texas at Austin (University of Texas at Austin, 2013). Other sites incorporated a holistic and educative approach framing academic integrity in a positive manner, such as the Open University UK ‘Developing Good Academic Practices website (The Open University, 2013).

In September 2011, two project team members attended the 5th Asia Pacific Educational Integrity Conference in Perth (Atkinson & McBeath, 2011, September). The conference was timely and provided an excellent opportunity to discuss best practice, including discussions with some of those involved in the design and delivery of academic integrity sites. Key take-home messages from the conference, and from discussions with experts, included the importance of embedding different learning styles within online tutorials; utilising a holistic approach to academic integrity; ensuring policies are simple and easily accessible; and providing opportunities for students to develop scholarly practice. These were taken into consideration in the design of our academic integrity course.

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8 It is worth noting that one of the outcomes of the academic integrity course project was the recognition of the need to develop and provide this information for students. A web page with copyright information has since been developed by the University’s in-house copyright lawyer.
The knowledge gained from this conference, and the review of academic integrity literature and resources, provided the project team with a good starting point for developing the course. However, there was a gap in terms of how some online academic integrity courses translated policy into practice. For example, many online courses provide links to, and information on, their institution’s policies but did not provide any means to engage students with those policies. In addition, many sites still relied heavily on text as a means of conveying information rather than utilising other formats to translate policy information into an engaging and interactive format.

Another gap identified was an absence of information on copyright for students. In the digital age, it is vital that students have some knowledge about copyright. Given the complexity of the topic, and the legal language used in copyright documents - there was a need to explain copyright in a clear manner using examples that contextualise the information. This was a challenge, but it was evident that students needed such information and a whole module was included in the course to address this need.

c. Content Development – Draft Phase

Key points related to academic integrity from University policies and guidelines were extracted, collated and recorded in a Word document. Based on the literature review, exploration of existing academic integrity tutorials and websites, and a review of University policies and guidelines, the course content was organised and structured into five core themes or modules. These five modules formed the initial academic integrity course:

- Module 1: Academic integrity at university
- Module 2: Ensure your work fairly reflects your learning
- Module 3: Using & acknowledging the work of others
- Module 4: Fair use of copyrighted material
- Module 5: Safeguarding the quality and integrity of your success

In order to ensure the course content accurately reflected the University’s academic integrity policies and guidelines, subject matter ex-
erts were consulted throughout the course development. These included lecturers from different faculties; student learning advisors; the University lawyer; the Examination Office; the University Disciplinary Committee; Maori and Pacific advisors to ensure appropriate cultural context; English language experts; the Disability Office; as well as the Teaching and Learning Quality Committee. In addition to ensuring accuracy of content, they also provided the project team with discipline specific examples related to University policies which were integrated in the course. A further benefit of having a wide range of people involved from across the University was that it initiated conversations on the subject of academic integrity which in turn raised awareness of the issue.

After the content was developed and finalised, the project team started the process of moving content into the online environment. In order to understand students’ needs, and to ensure policies were translated in a way students could easily comprehend, a student-centred learning approach was taken. This was underpinned by constructivist theory which was explained by Allen (2008, pp. 30-31) as:

Constructivist theory contends that the learner brings to the learning environment knowledge from past experience, and that knowledge has a strong influence upon how the learner constructs meaning and acquires new knowledge from new experiences.

As well, in order for learners to integrate and remember this learning, they must be actively engaged in the process and encounter relevant and meaningful examples, such as those they might encounter in their own lives (Allen, 2008).

With its emphasis on active learning and engagement, constructivist theory supports a student centered approach. A student-centered approach refers to a learning approach which allows students greater autonomy over what, where and how they learn (Gibbs, 1992). Consideration is given to multiple learning styles and preferences and emphasis is placed on active rather than passive learning. This approach has been used in other academic integrity sites such as Queensland University of Technology (Arko, et al., 2005) and the
Open University (UK) (The Open University, 2013). A student-centred approach underpinned the overall design of the course including the development of personae and usability testing.

Actively engaging students in an online learning environment can be challenging, so a subject matter expert in human-computer interface design and usability testing was consulted to assist the project team. Under her guidance, the following student-centred methodologies were applied to the entire course development: developing personae, conducting usability testing, online survey, focus group studies, and a pilot study.

d. Developing Personae

In consultation with staff from various areas, the team developed five personae to represent typical university students. At every stage of the course development, each persona’s needs were considered. The personae were used throughout the online course to assist in translating policy information (for example as characters in comics) and to provide characters students could relate to.

The five personae are:

- Lisa, a 1st year undergraduate Kiwi (NZ local) student
- Jian, a 1st year undergraduate international student
- Niko, an international Masters student
- Banika, a research Masters student
- Ursula, a Kiwi returning PhD student

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e. Paper Prototype

A draft version of the online course was initially developed on paper. Four students were asked to participate in the first round of usability testing. Students were given tasks to complete and encouraged to think out loud, interact with functions of the paper prototype, and
then provide feedback on the functionality. Students commented that there was too much text and complained that it seemed “like a chore”. This initial stage of testing proved very useful in informing course development and how the project team translated policies into online activities.

f. Online Prototype and Usability Testing

Based on the initial paper prototype, initial feedback, and consideration of personae, an online prototype was developed. One online module with different types of activities was initially created. A second round of usability testing was then conducted to get feedback. Based on this feedback, the remaining modules were developed.

A further three rounds of usability testing were conducted at various stages of the course development. Each round of usability testing was followed by informal discussion with students to elicit more feedback and to further inform content and design. A concerted effort was made to include participants who matched the personae and therefore represented the diversity of the University student body. Screen action recording software was used during the usability testing to record how students interacted with different types of online formats. This software also recorded verbal feedback and proved very useful in understanding students’ perspectives. Content continued to be revised and more activities were developed.

3. Findings from Usability Testing

The following represent some of the key findings from the various rounds of usability testing:

- Students disliked reading large sections of text. This was the case even when text was associated with different formats (for example text within the comic format).
- Students liked the use of humour. For example, videos created by a fellow student incorporating humour as a way of translating dry content proved very popular.
- Students liked the inclusion of activities as a way of reinforcing their learning.
- Students liked the use images to translate difficult information into a more easily digestible format.
• Students liked the mix of multi-media and text and found the course to be engaging and informative.
• Students appreciated the use of real-life scenarios to explain how policies applied to them.
• Many students commented that the course was a fun way to understand policies. It also helped them learn how to write and reference correctly.

The following are some examples of how policy was translated into practice based on the usability testing findings (see Figure 1 below):
• University Graduate profiles – presented in brief summary format, highlighting key messages. An activity is included to ensure students understand the profiles.
• Exam conduct – rather than using text, a visual image with hover-over text was created based on examination regulations. This is followed by a scenario-based activity to check understanding.
• Major versus minor offense - translated into an activity where students choose the likely outcome based on scenarios.
• Copyright - presented in comic format (using personae characters).

Fig.1. Examples of formats used in the Academic Integrity online course
4. Pilot

Based on all the feedback received, final changes were made to content and activities developed. The course content and activities were checked against the Oxford 3000 text checker and proofread by staff from the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) team to ensure language and terminology used would be understood by students with English as an additional language.

The course was piloted with six groups, with over 1600 students drawn from a range of disciplines and levels (including undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate level students; Arts, Creative Arts and Industries, Science, Engineering). The pilot ran for five weeks and students were asked to complete an online survey upon completion of the course. 206 students completed the online survey and 18 students took part in the follow-up focus group sessions.

Comments from the usability testing, online survey and focus group studies included:

- “It is a good mix of engaging video clips, exercises, readings, tests, cartoons to deepen understanding. A succinct and helpful way for students to access/acquire this info.”
- “It is not boring at all” (question: “Is the course boring?”).
- “It was great to emphasise in the course site that students can ask tutors or lecturers for help as I didn’t know that I could do that”.
- “I really like the difference between high school and uni”.
- “This course is helping me a lot to understand the regulations & rules in university. This knowledge is not only useful right now but also good for my future. Thank you!”
- “An excellent course - very clear and informative! We have been warned about plagiarism in our undergrad programme, but that was done quite vaguely”.
- “Creative and highly informative. A well-presented overview of key points, made simple but pertinent to all study”.

Feedback from teaching staff who participated in the pilot was also very positive. All indicated that they would refer their students to the academic integrity course and they were willing to provide the project team with other examples that could be included as scenarios in
the course. The project team also undertook a ‘road show’ to promote the course to faculty. Much interest was shown by teaching staff who indicated that they were keen to use the course to help their students understand academic integrity and improve their academic writing.

5. Faculty-Based Implementation in 2013

Although it was the TLQC’s intention to have the course available as a formal academic course in 2013, it was not possible to develop the required automatic enrolment functionality and associated processes in time for the 2013 academic year. This was due to the complexity of the tasks, volume of work and the current commitments of the development teams.

As a result the course was implemented on a faculty by faculty basis across the University in 2013 for all new students. All doctoral students were also required to complete the course as part of their compulsory provisional goals. Some faculties such as the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences opted to encourage all their students, including returning students, to complete the course. Currently there is no regulation requiring completion, therefore there is no penalty for non-completion. This will change in 2014 with centralised implementation and regulatory changes meaning completion will be compulsory for all newly enrolled students.

Completion rates varied across the faculties with an overall completion rate of 48% at the end of Semester One, meaning nearly half of those required to complete the course had done so. Those who had not completed by the end of Semester One were re-enrolled for Semester Two.

6. What Next?

A study is currently underway to assess the impact of the course on students’ knowledge, awareness, attitudes and behaviour regarding academic integrity. It is also intended that this study will explore whether the course has had any impact on reducing staff time spent engaged with academic misconduct procedures. It is expected that the results will be made available at the end of 2013.
7. Conclusion

In this project, a student-centred learning approach has been effective in translating policy into practice. Designing an online course using this approach needs to involve students from the very beginning stages of development so that content and design are informed by students. Although usability testing is time intensive, it is a valuable method to find out students’ learning preferences and in ensuring that content ‘speaks their language’. The process undertaken in this project and the findings obtained from usability testing can be applied to any online course design.

The benefits of collaboration across the university should also not be underestimated. Working with subject matter experts in the development process meant policy was accurately translated into practice. It also increased the likelihood of the course being well-received by faculty because they had been involved in the consultation process from the start. The project team also noted that involving a wide range of staff gave rise to an institution-wide conversation on academic integrity bringing greater awareness to the issue. This will inevitably have positive implications in how the University as a whole approaches academic integrity.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Rachel Torbett for proof reading this paper and providing valuable comments.

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### Appendix 1 – University of Auckland policies and guidelines

- The Graduate Profiles - http://www.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/teaching-learning/principles
- Student Charter prepared by the Auckland University Students’ Association (AUSA) - http://www.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/for/current-
Use of Third Party Assistance in Undergraduate and Postgraduate Coursework: Guidelines for Students -

Code of Conduct for Research

Guide to Theses and Dissertations -

Third Party Copyright (Copyright Material Other Than Your Own) -

Intellectual Property Created by Staff and Students Policy -

Intellectual Property Policy: A Guide for Students -

Examination Regulations -
http://www.calendar.auckland.ac.nz/regulations/academic/examination.html

Student Academic Conduct Statute -