

## "You Wouldn't Steal a Car"

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February 2024

"YOU WOULDN'T STEAL A CAR". If you are of a certain age, you will no doubt recall this as the first line from a video anti-piracy campaign that ran in cinemas in the mid-2000's, and was later included on the loading screen of DVD film releases. Created by the Federation Against Copyright Theft and the Motion Picture Association of America<sup>1</sup>, the underlying message of the campaign raised such issues as why some forms of illegal behaviour (i.e. video piracy) are apparently socially acceptable whilst others (stealing a car) are not, and where do we as a society draw the line between what is 'ethical' and what is 'acceptable'.

Parodied for its overly-dramatic approach in the years since its initial release, "You Wouldn't Steal a Car" has become the basis of numerous popular memes. Indeed, the original campaign was widely judged to have failed to hit its mark. Nonetheless, when applied to a business education context, the underlying messaging of unethical yet acceptable behaviours which this and other anti-piracy campaigns raise, can provide educators some important insights into addressing academic integrity.

### *The concept and practice of academic integrity*

The concept of 'academic integrity' is variously defined throughout the Australian higher education sector. Among the numerous definitions formally in use, most coincide with the definition adopted by the national quality assurance agency and regulator, TEQSA, to include the principles of "honesty", "trust", "fairness", "respect", and "responsibility" in scholarly activity.<sup>2</sup> In practice these principles require students to actively avoid plagiarism, cheating, copying, collusion, and engaging with contract cheating services - among other behaviours that have become proxies for 'dishonesty', 'untrustworthiness', 'unfairness', 'disrespect', and 'irresponsibility'.

More recent debate has focused on the 'boogeyman' of generative AI (e.g. ChatGPT), and attitudes amongst higher education institutions in Australia remain divided as to whether or not students should be permitted to use generative AI, and under what circumstances its use would, and would not, threaten academic integrity. From a regulatory standpoint, much of this debate remains around institutions ensuring their assessment methods continue to be capable of assuring that the specified course and subject learning outcomes are achieved and that students' grades reflect their level of achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_Wouldn't\\_Steal\\_a\\_Car](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_Wouldn't_Steal_a_Car)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/students/understanding-academic-integrity/what-academic-integrity>

### *Institutions' perspectives of academic integrity.*

The concept and practice of academic integrity is deeply embedded in the Australian higher education regulatory framework<sup>3</sup> and as such, institutions have adopted a near homogeneous policy approach to managing academic integrity. Despite the prevalent inclusion of the principles of research-informed teaching in most higher education institution's learning and teaching plans, research integrity is considered separately at the majority of Australian higher education institutions and typically remains the domain of academic staff (for whom research is expected) and research students. Even though academic staff are usually also explicitly bound by their institution's academic integrity policy, said policy in most institutions is written primarily as a student facing document dealing with breaches of integrity in assessment and the academic penalties imposed. This approach to academic integrity policy leaves an implicit gap in respect to integrity in curriculum design and development, and student feedback. Academic staff, it would appear, do not need explicit policy guidance to inform these elements of their work.

Reflecting on the significant influence of the regulatory framework on academic integrity policy development in Australian higher education institutions, it is arguable this influence extends to the manner in which the majority of institutions communicate their expectations about academic integrity to students. Whilst nearly all institutions clearly define and describe the concept and practice of academic integrity to students outside of policy (e.g. via student-facing webpages), only few articulate to students why maintaining high standards of academic integrity is important. Of those few, some institutions identify possible threats for students if they breach academic integrity standards, though most attempt to articulate the importance of academic integrity in terms of respecting others' ideas, and with indirect regard for the student by stressing its importance for protecting the reputation of the institute itself.

### *Students' perspectives of academic integrity.*

Students' attitudes and experiences of academic integrity has been the object of considerable research since the early 1960's. Across multiple geographic regions and decades, research identifies that 70%-75% of tertiary students admit to having engaged in at least one form of academic misconduct (e.g. plagiarism, cheating, copying, collusion, etc.) throughout the duration of their studies (Bretag et al, 2014), with plagiarism identified as the most common breach.

The most commonly cited reasons students report they engage in academic misconduct include poor time management skills; lack of understanding of the task assigned, including under-estimating the time to completion; language and cultural barriers – particularly among international students – that may impede their ability to properly paraphrase; believing they will not be caught; and a lack of appreciation of the consequences of their actions.

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<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021

Examining students' perceptions of higher education and the role of institutions, Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) contest that higher education institutions are nowadays perceived by most students to be 'credentialing' more so than 'educational' institutions, and that this perception effectively allows students to more easily rationalise their engaging in academic misconduct. Reflecting on my own experiences in higher education over nearly the last 40 years – firstly as a student, then academic, and more recently manager – it is not difficult to understand the basis of current students' perception of the role of institutions. Modern technology means that knowledge is ubiquitous, and as such higher education institutions have long ceased to be custodians of knowledge, which is now effectively 'free'.

The perception that higher education institutions are 'credentialing' rather than 'educating' raises a tension for the motivations of students who engage in academic misconduct. The expectation of institutions and their stakeholders (students included) is that awarded credentials align with students' level of achievement. However, students cannot simultaneously rationalise engaging in academic misconduct on the basis that their institution's role is 'credentialing', and expect their credential to be perceived credibly.

In a business education context specifically, Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) also examine the relationship between ethics and academic misconduct, citing U.S. research claiming that whilst more than 85% of students believed that academic misconduct is unethical, nearly 50% believe it is nonetheless acceptable. Students were additionally reported to believe that business people sometimes had to act unethically for career advancement. These beliefs, it appears to Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, are born from the myriad of real-life examples of unethical business behaviour reported by the media (e.g. Enron, VW, Amazon etc.). This author would further posit that Hollywood's celebrating of anti-heroes including (the very real) Jordan Belfort – immortalised in the *Wolf of Wall Street* – and *Succession's* Logan Roy (albeit fictional) only reinforces these beliefs among business students.

Commenting on ethics and academic misconduct in business education, Ketchell (2015) points to data that business students are singularly more likely to engage in academic misconduct than students in other disciplines and goes on to claim that when presented with an ethics case, some 20%-30% of business students are unable to identify the ethical issue. Corporate financial teachings that frequently ignore ethical considerations to emphasis the mission of the corporation is to generate a return to shareholders, Ketchell posits, has a lot to answer for.

*"You Wouldn't Steal a Car", would you?*

Consonant with anti-piracy campaigns, the manner in which academic integrity standards and their importance is communicated is critical to how the messaging is ultimately received. As duly acknowledged by Bretag et al (2014), communicating academic integrity standards can be hindered if institutions assume that students share their understanding of the concept of academic integrity and why it is important in practice.

Commenting on the general failure of anti-piracy messaging – including “You Wouldn’t Steal a Car” – to resonate with its target audience Grolleau and Meunier (2022) provide some behavioural insights for improving the effectiveness the messaging that may also be applied in the context of academic integrity.

Among the relevant insights Grolleau and Meunier share are to focus on a well-identified and relatable victim who is worthy of assistance, and to tailor messaging for targeted subgroups. For the relative few higher education institutions that attempt to articulate the importance of academic integrity, this may mean messaging that focuses academic misconduct in terms of the impact on the student themselves beyond just the academic penalty imposed, as opposed to the relatively abstract concept (especially for commencing students) that breaching academic integrity standards disrespects ideas and harms the reputation of the institution. For business students as a targeted subgroup, this means too challenging students’ preconceived notions that unethical behaviour (in both academic and professional contexts) is acceptable, commonplace, or indeed necessary. Significantly, for the greater number of higher education institutions that do not currently articulate the importance of academic integrity, these behavioural insights may be used to inform how they frame new messaging.

Really though it’s time we *all* changed the messaging entirely and stopped talking about staff and student academic, research, and professional integrity and ethics as if they were separate and distinct concepts, and instead focus on personal integrity. You might persuade yourself that stealing an idea is a victimless breach but you wouldn’t steal a car, would you?

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