

The Myth of Integrity in the Modern Academic World

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HAMLET

What's the news?

ROSENCRANTZ

None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest.

HAMLET

Then is doomsday near: but your news is not true.

William Shakespeare. Hamlet, Act II, Scene II

This chapter discusses questions around different behaviours and understandings that cloud clear thinking around matters of integrity.

Academic Integrity: An important standard or an unachievable aspiration?

It is hard to find evidence of (or imagine) any mainstream society successfully flourishing within an environment absolutely lacking a notion of integrity. Long before the Dungeons & Dragons franchise laid claim to the expression 'Honour Amongst Thieves' it has been well understood that even gangs of rogues and criminals actually need a set of *clan rules* to abide by and the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero noted as much. Rules like never stealing from each other would be necessary and sensible to ensure that criminal gang members could (at least) trust each other. Yet everywhere dishonesty prospers.

Logically, in order for cheating and dishonest practices to thrive you first need the integrity of honest practices to be established so that cheats can take advantage of them. All viable, developed societies have concepts of honour, integrity and maintain values by which they seek to flourish. Lacking integrity always has to be seen as unacceptable otherwise everyone would constantly steal, cheat, lie and deceive. Such societies would collapse and life and human progress in them would be unbearably difficult. We know this because it sometimes happens in parts of the world during periods of war, famine and economic strife. In such environments, bribery, murder and violent crime become the norm.

Obviously, that is the extreme end of the spectrum and clearly a long way from issues of integrity in university settings. However, once established as a set of moral parameters, integrity does not become negotiable and it applies to all decisions and actions no matter how great or small they seem.

What is integrity?

Ultimately, behaving with integrity means more than just telling the truth and behaving honestly. It implies ensuring that everything within your sphere of control and existence is ethically devised and maintained with complete integrity.

Universities place high emphasis upon their institutional reputations- prizing them for their reliable integrity and proven academic quality. It is important that they do this. Just as you wouldn't wish to unwittingly buy a Rolex watch for \$20,000 only to discover it was a cheap \$50 copy, nobody sensibly seeks to employ those who have gained fake academic qualifications or who have cheated their way through their degree courses. Yet, as we know, fake watches and student academic misconduct remain common place.

Not only students cheat

And it is not just the students who are implicated in matters of failed integrity (Louise Burke, The West Australian, 02/09/2010). Sadly, in extreme cases even some academic staff have also been embroiled in accusations of offering to improve vulnerable students' grades in return for sexual favours or cash. Alarmingly, although such incidents have repeatedly been reported over the years, they do not seem to be that commonplace in western institutions. And, thankfully, when caught, wrongdoing staff are usually swiftly dealt with.

Whilst universities seek to ensure academic integrity in all matters there are no guarantees that integrity is upheld in all instances and at all levels. There are many points of difficulty and complex fogginess in sustaining the moral high ground here. Some decades ago, I recall an American business academic (who was somewhat problematic with both colleagues and students) being frogmarched off an Australian university campus when it was discovered that the academic qualifications he'd presented (in order to gain employment) were not his own.

Full marks to the university for removing the fake scholar but he had been teaching business subjects for a number of semesters. No mention was ever made in respect to the grades he'd awarded to students during the time he'd operated as a bogus academic. Their papers might later have all been 'remarked' by other (qualified) staff. Those who had been 'failed' by the fake might have subsequently even been awarded pass marks. Those who'd received pass marks would probably not have been insisting on their papers being reassessed. Undoubtedly, some level of adjustment would have been employed to ensure that students wouldn't be disadvantaged by the university's error in commissioning the academic imposter. But what of integrity?

- I. Surely student learning must have been disadvantaged by having to engage with an imposter whose academic competencies were highly questionable?
- II. Were these students, perhaps, 'academically' short-changed because the university possibly sought the matter to be quietly resolved? Students had paid to receive competent teaching. Did they receive it?

As you can see, raising issues of integrity can result in unforeseen and variable complexities. **Integrity brings with it rewards but sometimes it carries an unexpected price.**

Truth and integrity

The murkiest of all waters are those around the use of Generative AI and contract assignment arrangements – issues which now plague the global academic venture. And, no matter where you are from or the family, school and religious values you were instilled with as a child, your practical orientation towards being incorruptible, honest and virtuous may reflect a complicated relationship with your own personal situation and notions of the true costs of integrity.

I have previously heard, in student misconduct cases, claims that 'students didn't understand or know that they were committing academic misconduct' or that they 'simply couldn't afford to fail because of family pressure so they were obliged to cheat'. In some of these committee hearings I had no doubt that the students were telling the sad truth - but that doesn't change anything in terms of maintaining integrity as a requirement.

Immutable Truth

The truth is, always, logically immutable. Often, people these days speak of 'their truths' or of 'his' or 'her truth' being different to 'my truth' or the 'Authority's' truth (as if there are multiple truths between different people). What they, more accurately, should be declaring is that 'their perspectives' or 'interpretations' of certain events are different to other people's. There is only ever one truth which may be viewed from many different perspectives, but the truth doesn't change – only its interpretation can vary.

So, if a student has cheated because they didn't fully understand the rules around plagiarism the truth remains that they cheated. Their explanation might allow us to be lenient and ensure that they now clearly know all of the academic integrity requirements, but they have still cheated.

Integrity and culture

Having lived and worked for many years in Europe, West Indies, Middle East and Asia, I have witnessed first-hand the challenges faced by lecturers, students, and institutions in respect to ensuring academic integrity.

- In some parts of the world, it is not cheating that is considered shameful – but getting caught.
- Some cultures see more shame in a student failing than in them cheating their way to success – this is especially important when families are committing scarce financial resources to supporting their children's' educations or if 'failure' is considered to bring 'shame' upon the family.

Consequently, understanding the constraints and pressures upon students who feel obliged or inclined to cheat is important and complex. But there are also those who simply wish to take the easy path and try to cheat the system because they believe they will not get caught.

Integrity is integrity

And there are no blurred lines or grey areas here. **Integrity in matters of scholarship and academic achievement is not only anticipated – it is always demanded of students in good academic enterprises.** Without integrity university qualifications will become worthless. Your degrees will be devalued. Your qualifications will become marginalised and set aside by employers.

Can integrity be measured and ensured?

Integrity is hard to measure and almost impossible to guarantee across all assessment situations. Moreover, academic integrity seems increasingly to be an 'aspirational concept'. Difficult to detect Generative AI; copied and purchased assignment writing and 'gaming the assessment system' approaches are all ways in which students may negatively impact the 'integrity aspirations' of their universities. And even if caught, are the academic penalties imposed severe enough to act as deterrents to others? That is debatable. Integrity can be sought but not guaranteed.

Has international student revenue compromised university integrity in any way?

In today's university, international student income is seen as the 'Holy Grail' for institutional wellbeing. International student income has led to Australian VCs being the highest paid in the world (Julie Hare Education editor Jan 25, 2024. AFR) with even the VC of lowly Canberra (ranked a modest joint 421st globally) earning \$1,045,000. This is the same salary level as the VC of the world's top ranked University of Oxford! And many Australian VCs quietly take home much greater salaries than that.

Is the increasing wealth accrued from large international student numbers raising questions of Institutional Integrity?

Unfortunately, it appears so. In the UK, the Russell Group's leading York University is now *reducing its academic threshold standards* to allow in even more international students whom they will give extra support to so as to bring them forward with their studies. York, like number of other UK unis, is in deep economic strife with a \$50M deficit this year (THES 24/01/2024). University financial shortages are also now commonplace across Australia, New Zealand, North America and the UK.

The ABC (15.01.2024) has recently returned to one perennial question asked of universities which is whether or not the entry requirements for international and domestic students are the same?

As usual, from across the Sector multiple answers are given:

- Some institutions labour the notion that as international students and domestic students come from different schooling and language systems assessment approaches need to be different.
- Others prefer to say that academic judgements are made in respect to the student's perceived ability to succeed in any given program.
- The University of Sydney requires all students to meet ATAR requirements – although the required ATAR is slightly lower for international students in some offerings than in others.
- Over the years much effort has been expended in trying to ensure that international students possess the academic and linguistic skills necessary to study Australian tertiary courses successfully.

The question remains: **If both international and domestic cohorts are studying for the same awards in the same university – should there be any difference at all in the height of the requirement's bar set for students to enter a program?**

And students continue to seek to arrive in Australia – not just for education but for economic benefits leading to claims of 'visa rorting'.

In The Australian Newspaper (24/01/2024) Mike Ferguson (PVC International Charles Sturt) notes:

'By prioritising and giving a light touch to visa applications for supposedly low-risk providers, the government is explicitly signalling where the system's weak spot is, and consequently which providers non-genuine students should target – some of whom will be poorly equipped to handle this. This could create new visa rorts, together with increased rates of "course-hopping", where students transfer from universities to cheaper providers after arriving in Australia'.

Although Mike Ferguson is alluding to visa rorts with students entering lower ranked Australian universities and then swapping to cheaper vocational education providers, he is nudging the tip of the international student iceberg which embraces the very firm alignment of work and residency visas being a significant part of the drive for students to enter not only Australian institutions but also those of the USA, UK, South Korea and several European nations.

Moreover, the Chair of University Australia, Mark Scott, is vehemently decrying the possibility of the billions in revenue being bought to our universities by international students being taxed (The Australian, 24.01.2024). The GO8 universities constantly argue that international student revenue allows them to do cutting edge research and maintain high academic standards. That said, the foreign student revenue does not seem to be entirely expended on research activities.

Naturally, the GO8 grouping is also horrified by the suggestion of their international student revenue being taxed. Yet, nobody seems to be raising the term 'integrity' in respect to University Australia's position on tax. With major impacts on national rental housing shortages, declining post study work possibilities and a huge cost of living increase for all, why wouldn't the revenue glut afforded by international students bringing money to universities attract tax? With leading Australian VCs mostly drawing salaries in excess of \$1.4M, plus other perks, in what way should our universities be treated as non-taxable charities rather than the corporate (high wage) environments that they are? And in what ways wouldn't the lure and requirement for ever larger international student numbers create a downwards vortex of pressure upon student entry standards, readiness, and suitability?

So, in terms of thorough institution-wide integrity there are a few enigmas:

Our institutions are in the midst of a Kantian deontological versus utilitarian/consequential debate (Hirschheim R and Klein HK, 1989) where the decisions made in order to seek ever greater social, moral good are made against a spiralling demand for a utilitarian pragmatism in growing international student revenue which needs to be appraised in respect to potential impacts upon the business cases of each university. Essentially, the utilitarian approach would accept softening international student entry requirements to allow greater access and therefore higher revenue- which would be good for the financial health of their organisations. However, the Kantian position totally rejects the notion that morality is about calculating consequences. It espouses that standards cannot be varied just because you need the money.

Short term leadership thinking?

What we are not (currently) seeing from our \$1M+ per annum salaried VCs is any alternative models put forwards to support our current institutions into a sustainable future. Therefore, is it possible that university leaderships are more interested in maintaining their own personal financial well-being than in ensuring a more sustainable future for their institutions? I hope that is not the case.

International student growth is wonderful and (hopefully) culturally and socially beneficial for all nationalities and nations involved. But the financial benefits bought with it are not just benefits – they've become essential to the entire sector.

The necessity to continue the inflow of international revenue (via onshore and offshore Australian entities) represents a fragile dynamic. Currently Australia (and the western world) are at the cutting edge of this student revenue mountain. But for how much longer?

Integrity challenges

In 2023 the Australian Government's ATO has taken more revenue (\$4.9 billion) from the 7.1% interest rate now charged on the \$74 billions of student HECS & HELP-SFSS loans than it has from the petroleum resource rent tax (\$2.2 billion). Consequently, Richard Denniss (*Exec Director of Think Tank the Australia Institute Australia*), has commented at the National Press Club that Australia subsidises the fossil fuel industry whilst charging kids a fortune to attend university.

Should students be saddled with higher taxation and ever-growing HECS debts to a level greater than the tax debts of the fossil fuels industries? Is that an ethical or acceptable scenario?

Conclusion

Seen in those terms, both domestic and international higher education strategies in Australia need a radical re-think as neither appear sustainable. Academic integrity, for tertiary students, will remain a hill that they must all climb. As Australian public universities continue to become more corporate enterprises than public good education providers in their focuses-their institutional integrity and ethical dealing with fee paying students (which is all of them) will need even closer scrutiny. So too will the salaries and status-seeking behaviours of their leadership. Conversely, various smaller private degree education providers have (largely) adjusted to the requirements of providing students with value for money educations and qualifications. Our larger public sector universities now need to actually change their business approaches and meet the future by constructively changing. Fortunately, university providers like UBSS made the necessary transition long ago and already firmly focus upon integrity, value for money and service to students rather than salary inflation.

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