

MPA submission recommending an amendment to the Student Academic Integrity Policy

The objects of Monash University¹ include a commitment that students will be treated fairly in an environment which is supportive and fosters learning, that recognises student diversity and “provide(s) and maintain(s) a teaching and learning environment of excellent quality offering higher education at an international level”.²

The Monash University educational framework allows for students to participate in, and be assessed, by way of group work.

Role of the MPA

As part of our representative role, the MPA³ looks at various University processes and in the event of an area of concern being identified, provides feedback to the relevant decision-making entity.

Group Work

The rationale for having group work is explained in various central and faculty based Monash University documents, including but not limited to, the following:

<http://www.eng.monash.edu.au/current-students/download/groupwork.pdf>
<https://www.monash.edu/rlo/study-skills/learning-in-university-classes/working-in-groups-and-teams>
www.monash.edu/_data/assets/word_doc/0009/.../18-a-guide-to-group-work.doc

Current Policy

The [Student Academic Integrity Policy](#) stipulates that, among other requirements, students must "take reasonable steps to ensure that other students are unable to copy or misuse their work". The [Student Academic Integrity: Managing Plagiarism and Collusion Procedures](#) state in clause 5 that:

"Students are required to submit, with their work to be assessed, an Assessment Cover Sheet for non-examination assessment which includes:

- *the approved definition of plagiarism;*
- *a statement on collusion;*
- *the approved Privacy Statement;*
- *a declaration by the student:*

¹ Monash University Charter

² *Monash University Act 2009* section 5(a)

³ MPA is an incorporated association, recognised by Monash University as the representative body for all postgraduate students at Monash Australia. See *Monash University (Council) Regulations section 66 and schedule I*

- a. that plagiarism, collusion or any other breach of requirements in the Student Academic Integrity Policy has not occurred;
- b. whether the assessment task is original or has been previously submitted as part of another unit/subject/course;
- c. that proper care to safeguard their work and all reasonable efforts to ensure it could not be copied were taken;
- d. that the assessor of the assignment may for the purposes of assessment, reproduce the assignment and:
 - 1. provide it to another member of faculty and/or any external marker; and/or
 - 2. submit it to a text matching/originality checking software; and/or
 - 3. submit it to a text matching/originality checking software (which may then retain a copy of the assignment on its database for the purpose of future checking of plagiarism);
- e. that they [the student] understand the consequences of engaging in plagiarism as described in Part 7 of the [Monash University \(Council\) Regulations](#)."

Case Study

Student X, a high achieving international postgraduate in her first year at Monash, was tasked with working in a group with one other classmate, student Z. The pair did not know each other particularly well, but collaborated as necessary. The assignment was neither a hurdle nor worth many points to the unit's overall marks, and student X found the assignment quite easy, finishing the work a week early. The assignment was submitted on time, and student X waited for the results, expecting a good grade. A few weeks later, student X received a Notice of Allegation of Student Misconduct. Much to her dismay, the allegation was that she had engaged in plagiarism and collusion, since her group had ostensibly worked together with another group. Specifically, the collusion was said to have occurred:

“...when your group worked together with another group enrolled in the unit to develop your assignments to gain an unfair and unjust academic advantage.”

Student X attended a hearing with the responsible officer of her faculty. Her group-work mate, student Z, was also in attendance. During the interview, student Z admitted to having participated in collusion, but testified that she had done so in secrecy and without alerting her group-work partner, student X.

Student X was found guilty of having engaged in plagiarism and collusion. The conclusion was reached based on the presumption that, as this was a group assignment, all members were equally responsible for its submission. The decision stated:

“I have reached this conclusion as your group member has admitted their guilt to the Chief Examiner and as this is a group assignment all members are responsible for the submission.”

Student X had worked diligently on an assignment, in accordance with all university guidelines, and had submitted the work in good faith, believing her partner to have done the same. When this assumption turned out to be false, her partner Student Z, freely admitted that she had acted independently and without the consent or knowledge of student X, in that she shared her work with another group. Student X pleaded her ignorance of her partner's actions, and expressed her disappointment at the betrayal.

The issue

There are no reasonable steps a student can take to avoid another student in their group assessment situation from colluding. While there is an onus on students to take reasonable steps to prevent collusion it is unreasonable to expect them to predict the intent or behaviour of others. It is patently unfair to hold them responsible for the actions of others.

There was no evidence presented at any stage by Student X or Student Z to indicate Student X knew of or participated in, collusion. Student X understandably felt let down by the university's decision-making process and questioned:

- what reasonable steps could she have taken to prevent her partner from colluding with another group; and/or
- what reasonable steps could she have taken to become aware of collusion by any member of the group when it was being deliberately withheld from her.

Group assessment protocol

Group members are expected to complete a cover sheet⁴ and appose their signature, indicating their personal understanding of, and certifying their compliance with, the university's regulations regarding collusion and plagiarism.

In essence, every member of the group is asked to vouch for the veracity of the assignment notwithstanding having potentially worked on only a portion of the assignment. Students must therefore put a degree of blind trust in their group colleagues. We appreciate that most faculties ask students to rate the other members of the group. However this is after the fact and most students do not wish to provide negative feedback on their peers and as they are likely to have to work together again.

Recommendation

It is our belief that the situation presented above exposes a gap in current university policy in regard to academic integrity in group assignments. It is arguable that students should share the responsibility for the quality of their work, as students working in a group can and should readily be able to access the work of their group colleagues. However, if a student maliciously or recklessly engages in collusion or

⁴ Or, as outlined in sections 6 and 7 of this same procedure, a substitute thereof deemed acceptable by Monash

plagiarism without the knowledge of their group, it is difficult to argue that other group members should somehow be able to detect and prevent this from occurring.

For this reason, we propose the following amendment to the Student Academic Integrity Policy:

Unless evidence can be provided to the contrary, a student who can demonstrate on a balance of probabilities that they were

- *not involved; and*
- *unaware; and*
- *did not consent to*

an act of plagiarism and/or collusion by one of their group members as part of a group assignment, then that student cannot be held accountable for the breaches of policies of other members of their group.

For tabling at the Monash University Learning and Teaching Committee
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