Chapter 16
A Clear Pathway: The Hazy Line between Collaboration and Collusion

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ABSTRACT

The educational institution participating in this research is a pre-university pathway college in South Australia. Specific to this study are the international students who enter this educational organization to undertake a Diploma in Business, Information Technology (IT) or Engineering, which constitutes the ‘first-year’ of a Bachelor’s degree at the partner university. In response to a mandatory online questionnaire, 106 responses were gathered from new students to the open-ended question—What is the difference between ‘group work’ and ‘collusion’? Faculty are taking greater responsibility for elucidating the ‘line’ between authorized and unauthorized collaboration. Deep(er) understanding of students’ views/notions of these two concepts are indispensable if institutions with diverse student populations are to develop effective policies and procedures for increasing Academic Integrity (AI) among all members of the teaching and learning community.

INTRODUCTION

An essential part of orienting students to tertiary-level studies is to communicate how ethical principles or ‘Academic Integrity’ (AI) can be applied and upheld in an academic community. Grades in Higher Education (HE) are largely based on students’ individual effort and results, so when learners are instructed to work in groups, it may contradict the emotional and cognitive approaches they are used to. The concept of ‘collusion’ is not easy to demonstrate and/or articulate and is usually presented as ‘inappropriate or unauthorized collaboration’. Collusion is also harder to prove than other academically dishonest practices such as blatantly falsifying data, accessing restricted assessment-related materials, or ignoring examination instructions.

Actions and issues surrounding collusion raise real challenges for HEIs espousing learning outcomes that enable their graduates to be successful at working independently as well as collaboratively. Being
institutionally (more) consistent in the design, application, and assessment of collaborative work ensures that students have a clear(er) understanding of the objectives and procedures of tasks, which should in turn, reduce the incidence and prevalence of unauthorized collusion. For all students, explicit guidelines depicting what tasks are deemed to be authorized collaboration and what actions would cross the line into the forbidden realm of unauthorized sharing of work is warranted. Preserving the academic credibility and reputation of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) is ‘paramount’ (Batane, 2010) and requires a holistic, unified and ‘collaborative’ institutional response i.e., academic advisors, administration, counsellors, faculty, key stakeholders, and the leadership team.

**Background**

The Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) is one of a growing number of private providers linking up with partner universities to establish pre-university diploma programs. Pathways attract international students and secure their tertiary destination prior to them meeting ‘direct’ entrance requirements (Velliaris & Breen, 2014; Velliaris & Coleman-George, 2015a, 2015b; Velliaris, Willis, et al., 2015a, 2015b; Velliaris, Willis, & Pierce, 2015). The participating educational institution offers diplomas comprising the same—or deemed equivalent—eight courses that constitute the first-year of a Bachelor’s degree in Business, Information Technology (IT), or Engineering at the destination university. Learners are generally between the ages of 17-27 years and represent more than 20 different nationalities at any one time, including [alphabetical]: Bangladesh; Cambodia; China [mainland, Hong Kong and Macau]; East Timor; Egypt; Fiji; India; Indonesia; Iran; Kenya; Lebanon; Malaysia; Nepal; Nigeria; Oman; Pakistan; Saudi Arabia; Singapore; South Korea; Sri Lanka; Turkey; Uganda; and Vietnam.

Referred to as ‘second chance’ institutions for students who have not meet initial university entrance requirements, the partner university moderates diploma program delivery and grants advanced standing for first-year courses if students achieve an overall minimum entry-level Grade Point Average (GPA) upon graduation (Bode, 2013; Fiocco, 2006; Velliaris & Willis, 2014; Velliaris, Willis, et al., 2015a, 2015b; Velliaris, Willis, & Pierce, 2015). Pathway academic staff, however, have the pedagogical challenge of acculturating students who are lower-level in terms of their English language proficiency and/or academic performance, and preparing them for second-year degree-level studies. It should be noted, that significantly, at least one-third of the student population are ‘At-Risk’ of not passing or not transitioning to either the University of Adelaide (65% average grade requirement) or University of South Australia (55% average grade requirement). Rather than relying on the chance that ‘pathway’ students will miraculously advance, faculty are taking a systematic approach to modelling and training them about AI conventions and providing resources to ensure consistent messages are being circulated (refer to Appendix).

Throughout this chapter, the collocation ‘collaboration’ is mostly unfamiliar to new learners at the participating Institute and so a more accessible and meaningful choice of word i.e., ‘group work’ was used in the research question and interchangeably throughout this chapter. The term ‘international students’ or ‘students’ is specific to individuals enrolled in EIBT on Australian temporary student visas and who are predominantly from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB). Given the growing importance of partner HEIs amidst the rising number of international students seeking HE in Australia, this study makes a valuable contribution to the scant body of knowledge on Australian ‘pathways’.
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