

# Students' use of digital translation and paraphrasing tools in written assignments on Direct Entry English Programs

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*This article considers the challenges heralded by digital technology in relation to the management of academic integrity on high-stakes Direct Entry English Programs in Australia. Firstly, a number of the ways in which students are using digital tools to complete assignment writing are examined. Secondly, findings from a review of academic integrity policies at a group of Australian universities and colleges are presented, showing that they fail to explicitly capture this emerging method of rule flouting. Finally, the implications of this emergent theme are explored as a learning and teaching issue for Direct Entry Programs that requires further investigation.*

## **Background**

Academic honesty is a time-honoured tradition in research and education. Since the end of the 19th century, when standards for citation and referencing first emerged, scholars, politicians, writers and students have been honour-bound to conform to the ethical codes mandated by the principles of academic integrity. However, in more recent years, technological advancements and the internet have taken the incidence of academic dishonesty to a new level world-wide. Anti-plagiarism software has gone some way toward reducing the incidence of plagiarism, but new technologies such as translation and paraphrasing tools are providing another set of challenges, with particular regard to monitoring the originality of student writing.

Direct Entry English Programs (DEEPs) are a prolific feature of Australia's vocational and higher education setting. Prior to the 2020 travel restrictions that resulted from COVID-19, upwards of 35,000 international students, for whom English is an additional language, were satisfying their English language requirement for tertiary studies by traveling to Australia to complete an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) DEEP (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019). Throughout 2020, when lockdowns and travel restrictions were imposed, DEEPs transitioned to remote delivery and ELICOS institutions have continued this mode of delivery into 2021. Now, rather than working

only with students who are onshore in Australia, DEEPs have a truly international reach, with students undertaking studies remotely from around the world.

The appeal of DEEPs is that they develop students' English language skills through a process of acculturation; raising participants' awareness of the social, cultural, and rhetorical norms that will aid their transition to tertiary studies. For the participants and administrators of these programs, the effective management of academic integrity is of prime importance. When an institution passes an English as an additional language (EAL) student successfully into tertiary study, they are making a claim about that student's level of language proficiency and readiness for academic study. By ensuring students who progress genuinely satisfy the requisite standard, ELICOS institutions establish their reputation as quality providers of DEEPs and set students on their path to success. Reputation and rigour are therefore important for ELICOS institutions in order to manage trusted relationships with university partners, with agents, and with the students themselves.

In my work with DEEPs, I am often called upon to adjudicate on alleged acts of plagiarism, collusion and contract cheating that teachers have identified in their students' work. In one case, a campus manager brought forward a student assignment which contained writing that was well above the student's own standard of in-class writing. Suspecting a case of collusion or contract cheating, we interviewed the student who denied receiving help from anyone. She was unable to recount the ideas contained within her essay, however, and explained that while she understood the content in her own language, she could not explain it in English. Eager to demonstrate that she had not contracted a ghost writer, the student displayed her internet search history, revealing the various translation and paraphrase tools she had used in preparing her essay. By piecing together the chunks of language from her search engine history, we were able to ascertain that although the text had passed through the plagiarism detection software without incident, less than 25% of the submitted work had actually been produced by the student. The majority of the writing comprised of chunks of text that had been copied directly from the paraphrasing and translation tools.

It was concerning that if not for the astuteness of the class teacher, this student's breach might have gone unnoticed. What became a more perplexing matter, however, was the student's adamant stance that she had not breached academic integrity norms. She had, in accordance with our plagiarism policy, used in-text citations throughout her work which included the names of the original authors and the years of publication, and she had changed the wording of the authors' original text. In this student's opinion, the fact that the writing she submitted was not the result of her own cognition, but rather, the result of an algorithm, did not constitute an academic

integrity breach. On review of the language centre's own plagiarism policy, we found that she actually had a point. The policy stated only that students must attribute the work of other writers and its references to collusion and contract cheating involved the use of work produced by other people, not algorithm-driven software. There was no mention of the inappropriateness of using text verbatim from translation and paraphrase tools, and although one might reasonably claim it is implied, it is clear that in this case implication was not enough. There was a need for our policies and our learning and teaching practices to be more explicit in addressing the use of digital translation and paraphrase tools.

This incident highlights student behaviours and perceptions about the use of digital tools that are not explicitly dealt with in our teaching and treatment of plagiarism. It also raises questions about how widespread the practice is and how frequently students are passing written assignments on DEEPs on the basis of digitally produced or digitally enhanced text. There is a considerable body of research around student values and beliefs when it comes to dishonouring academic codes (Blau & Eshet-Alkalai, 2017; McCabe et al., 2012). Ideas range from cultural groundings (Ison, 2018; Lin & Wen, 2006), to post-millennial values of pirating and illegal downloads (Jones & Sheridan, 2015) and the transactional nature of modern education (Bretag, 2016). For international students seeking to gain entry to university in Australia, there is sometimes financial pressure to breach academic codes because language preparation and testing takes time and can be expensive. DEEPs can range from 5–25 weeks in length and cost upwards of \$450 per week. On the other hand, perhaps this is not a matter of academic dishonesty, but merely the pragmatic application of existing tools. For many EAL students and L1 English speakers, the rigours of academic writing are challenging and the mastery of paraphrase and synthesis of other writers' words and ideas takes time. Students may not view their use of digital tools as flouting of academic integrity norms, but rather as a necessary scaffold, or in Dawson's words a 'cognitive offloading' to support their development of mastery (2020, p.40). The purpose of this paper, however, is to look more closely at what is happening, and the ramifications, rather than considering the why.

### ***How digital tools are being used***

A growing body of literature is emerging around the practice of cross-language plagiarism (Eshan & Shakery, 2016; Potthast et al., 2011; Ratna et al. 2017). This involves running original work from Language 1 through a translation tool to produce a translated piece of work in Language 2, then passing off that newly formed text as one's own. Cross-language plagiarism has emerged and proliferated in line with the advancement of digital translation tools and, undetected, is poised to become big business as increasing numbers of writers claim other people's work in

another language. Detection of cross-language, or translation plagiarism involves the development of algorithms to undertake complex sequences of mapping and graphing semantic similarities among texts or text fragments to identify cross-lingual similarity. These processes are not dissimilar to the more rustic, but no less effective, semantic-mapping processes taking place among DEEP teachers comparing and contrasting students' in-class written work against work of a questionably high quality submitted as assignment work.

In a study on the use of translation tools among students at an Australian university, Jones (2009) identified the intercultural technique of 'back translation'. Students undertaking back translation identify a sentence, paragraph or even a lengthy passage from an English text that they want to use and pass it through a translation tool to translate it into a foreign language. They then copy and paste the translated text back into the translation tool for reformulation into English. The resultant back-translated text passes undetected through plagiarism software. It may have some irregularities in form, although for English language students, such irregularities are an expectation and teachers are likely to spend time providing corrections and feedback on how students should amend their language systems.

Prentice and Kinden (2018) were alerted to the use of paraphrasing tools by undergraduate students on a Health Science pathway course when works submitted contained an array of flowery expressions that lacked coherence. On investigation, they discovered the prolific use of paraphrasing tools and were able to identify marked inconsistencies in the text they produced. In particular, the tools did not recognise or preserve medical terminology, but instead sought to substitute terms with synonyms, which altered the meaning of these technical terms substantially. Bailey (2018) explains that the technology behind paraphrasing tools began as 'article spinning', which is a method of turning old content into what appears to be new or original content by substituting words and phrases with synonymous expressions. He goes on to state that despite a recent resurgence among some students, the synonym-substitution algorithm is in essence a very basic technology that will soon be dead. As artificial intelligence develops, however, it is likely to generate a much higher quality of web writing than we have ever seen. Even today, Google Translate shows a fairly sophisticated approach to reformulating passages, largely preserving medical terminology and the integrity of the message (Prentice & Kinden, 2018).

### ***Definitions of academic integrity breaches***

It is understood that while many who commit academic breaches do so in a deliberate effort to cheat and subvert detection, there are also those, like in the case of the abovementioned student, who commit what many would consider a breach without

intent. There remains a question, however, on specifically what sort of breach has been committed. It could arguably be defined as plagiarism, or even a form of ‘digital collusion’. Yet, there is a distinct outsourcing behaviour that could qualify it as a type of contract cheating. In reality, the illicit use of digital translation and paraphrasing tools does not fit neatly into current definitions of academic integrity, highlighting the need for a broad review of policies and consideration of behaviours they may be failing to identify.

Australia’s Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) defines academic integrity as ‘the expectation that teachers, students, researchers and all members of the academic community act with: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility’ (2021). From this broad definition, TEQSA identifies a range of behaviours that breach the codes of academic integrity. Plagiarism is defined as the submission of work that ‘is not your own without acknowledging the original source of the work’ (TEQSA, 2021). Collusion involves ‘illegitimate cooperation with one or more other students in the completion of assessable work,’ and contract cheating involves ‘getting someone else to complete part or all of your work and submitting the work as if you had completed it yourself’ (TEQSA, 2021).

A review of academic integrity policies on the websites of 25 Australian universities and colleges (see Appendix) found the definitions of plagiarism, collusion and contract cheating generally prescribed to these definitions. Many included examples and scenarios to demonstrate cases of plagiarism, collusion and contract cheating, but no mention of the illegality of using chunks of text from digital translation or paraphrase tools was noted. Monash College (2020) defines an aspect of plagiarism as using the manner of expression from any source, including the internet, but makes no explicit reference to digital tools. UTS College states ‘copying words, or ideas, from websites . . . without acknowledgement’ (2021) is a part of plagiarism, but as long as the student includes a citation from the original text source, they can reasonably claim compliance with the plagiarism code, despite the fact that they may have limited understanding of the language that has been produced by the digital tool.

While our policies on academic integrity have evolved, to some extent, to encompass the digital world, the abovementioned articles on cross-language plagiarism, back-translation and paraphrase fraud are evidence that practice and misuse is evolving at a greater pace.

A search of the *English Australia Journal* on ‘academic integrity’ revealed two articles that are thematically related, but do not deal with digital tools. They do raise some interesting learning and teaching considerations, however, in the training of academic writers. Cheung refers to ‘textual borrowing (commonly known as plagiarism)’ (2021,

p. 20) and also discusses 'patchwriting' among novice writers, often EAL students. Patchwriting is an attempt at paraphrasing that produces text that is too similar to the original by simply employing a number of synonyms and slightly changing a few grammatical structures. The author notes that some institutions see patchwriting as forms of plagiarism, yet others see it as part of an important learning strategy that is not to be discouraged. Meanwhile, Liardet and Black (2016) note that integrating sourced material involves more than reworking information so that it sounds good. Rather, writers must be able to extract and synthesise critical information from a variety of sources. While the use of digital tools can go some way towards helping students to understand the material they are reading and checking the quality of their own writing, they cannot replace effective academic writing. Students' training must focus on using information, rather than merely reproducing it.

### ***Implications***

Students' use of digital tools for language enhancement needs to be a consideration in the design of DEEPs. Rather than banning students from using the tools, their ethical use should be a feature of learning and teaching. Our failure to inform and to train students appropriately in the ethical use of digital tools is a systemic failure with broad ramifications. It is problematic for the students who may be promoted prematurely into their further studies. It is also problematic for the credibility of ELICOS DEEPs responsible for promoting students prematurely into tertiary education; not to mention for the lecturers at the receiving institutions who must work with students with subpar writing and comprehension skills. Additionally, it is problematic for the tertiary education sector at large, which is under increasing government pressure to ensure that international students not only have appropriate levels of English on entry to university, but additionally, that they exit university with a 'work ready' level of language (Arkoudis et al., 2014).

When DEEP course developers are assessing students' readiness to enter university, they need to ensure the right skills and capabilities are being assessed, pursuant to the task. Students' use of digital translation and paraphrasing tools is a consideration that has impacted the tasks and measures of writing on DEEPS in a number of ways.

The University of Queensland Institute for Continuing & TESOL Education (ICTE-UQ) bases 100% of its writing assessment on writing produced in a controlled examination environment. For the Direct Entry Bridging English course (BE10) students write under strict examination conditions to produce two 300-word essays with a 60-minute time limit for each task (University of Queensland ICTE, 2021). A live writing task such as this allows the BE10 assessors to grade student language that has not been

enhanced by digital tools, which makes it an appropriate task to assess the range and accuracy of language production.

At the Macquarie University English Language Centre, student writing is assessed through a combination of a written assignment and writing produced under a controlled examination. The rating rubrics have been mindfully adapted for the specific writing types. The grading of live writing produced in examination conditions heavily weights proficiency measures of grammatical and lexical range and accuracy. The grading of written assignment work, however, focuses much less on such range and accuracy, and more on the integration of specific course-reflective language functions, such as hedging, boosting, or indicating stance, as well as appropriate use of citations and referencing. An additional criterion for the process of academic writing has been developed, which grades students' ability to engage in and reflect on drafting and feedback processes productively (F. Kollberg, personal communication, May 6, 2020). This shift in focus from language range and accuracy to more transferable academic skills is appropriate for a modern-day DEEP in which students want to, and should be encouraged to, utilise all tools available to them to produce the best work they can. This includes learning about paraphrase and the appropriate use of digital translation and paraphrase tools.

At UNSW Global, the research essay has become an integrated research project captured across a portfolio of tasks (M. Naidoo, personal communication, January 19, 2021). The tasks include an abstract, an annotated bibliography, a research presentation, an essay plan, written paragraph and a final written essay. Tracking the development of the research project in this way helps teachers to better monitor their students' progressive performances and ensure a much higher degree of academic integrity. It also allows for the targeted development of highly important academic literacy skills.

It must be noted that with the 2020 shift to remote delivery of DEEPs, and the resultant online testing, it is increasingly difficult to monitor student activity during 'controlled' examination events. There are a broad range of online proctoring and invigilation practices being employed across the ELICOS sector; however, in reality, it is highly likely that language from digital translation and paraphrasing tools, as well as language enhancement tools, are a feature of students' written work in both assignment and examination submissions.

## **CONCLUSION**

To ensure appropriate preparation for university studies, ELICOS institutions which offer DEEPs have a responsibility to engage students in researched assignment

work that provides scope for students to demonstrate appropriate use of academic language, skills and integrity codes. Banning the use of digital paraphrase and translation tools would be a thwarted attempt to manage academic integrity on written assignments and a missed opportunity to develop relevant, transferable skills.

This paper has investigated the ways in which digital tools of translation and paraphrase have the potential to impact the integrity and worth of DEEPs in Australia, unless mindful course development takes place which accounts for the use of these tools. The paper has demonstrated a number of illicit uses of translation and paraphrase tools identified by higher education professionals and has reviewed definitions of academic integrity to reveal a systematic failure to appropriately define it in light of technological developments. The review has also considered ways in which three ELICOS institutions, mindful of the threat these digital tools pose to the integrity of their DEEPs, are adapting the ways in which they teach and assess academic writing.

This silence on the appropriate use of digital tools in academic integrity policy needs to be addressed. Its absence impacts learning and teaching in ELICOS and higher education institutions, leaving learners less equipped to deal with the rigour of tertiary studies. To better understand the problem and clearly articulate appropriate responses, further research into the writing practices of DEEP students and their use of digital tools needs to be undertaken. This understanding will drive appropriate learning and teaching decisions for contemporary times.

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## APPENDIX

### LINKS TO ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICIES AT AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTIONS

- Australian Catholic University College: <https://www.acu.edu.au/handbook/handbook-2021/policies-and-general-information/academic-integrity-and-misconduct-policy-and-procedures>
- Australian National University: <https://www.anu.edu.au/students/academic-skills/academic-integrity/plagiarism>
- Bond University: <https://bond.edu.au/current-students/study-information/academic-integrity-information-students>
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- Curtin University: <https://students.curtin.edu.au/essentials/rights/academic-integrity>
- Edith Cowan College: <https://www.edithcowancollege.edu.au/policies>
- Eynesbury College: <https://www.eynesbury.navitas.com/policies>
- Flinders University: <https://students.flinders.edu.au/my-course/academic-integrity>
- Griffith University: <https://www.griffith.edu.au/academic-integrity/academic-misconduct>
- ILSC: <https://content.ilsc.com/pdf/colleges/australia/VET-student-handbook.pdf>
- La Trobe College: <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/admin/academic-integrity>
- Macquarie University: <https://staff.mq.edu.au/work/strategy-planning-and-governance/glossary/terms/plagiarism>
- Monash College: [https://www.monashcollege.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/1315620/Academic-Integrity-Policy.pdf](https://www.monashcollege.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1315620/Academic-Integrity-Policy.pdf)
- RMIT University: <https://www.rmit.edu.au/students/student-essentials/assessment-and-results/academic-integrity>
- Swinburne University: [https://www.swinburne.edu.au/media/swinburne.edu.au/current-students/docs/plagiarism\\_guide.pdf](https://www.swinburne.edu.au/media/swinburne.edu.au/current-students/docs/plagiarism_guide.pdf)
- UC College: <https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/l-and-t/attachments/UC-Academic-Glossary-v1.1-Oct-2017.pdf>
- University of Adelaide: <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/230/>
- University of Melbourne: <https://academicintegrity.unimelb.edu.au/>

University of New England: <https://policies.une.edu.au/document/view-current>

University of New South Wales: <https://student.unsw.edu.au/what-plagiarism>

University of Newcastle: <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/current-students/study-essentials/assessment-and-exams/academic-integrity/academic-integrity-module>

University of Queensland: <https://ppl.app.uq.edu.au/content/3.60.04-student-integrity-and-misconduct>

University of Southern Cross: <https://policies.scu.edu.au/document/view-current.php?id=141>

University of Sydney: <https://sydney.edu.au/students/academic-dishonesty.html#collusion>

UTS College: <https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/current-students-information-faculty-engineering-and-it/study-and-assessment-resources/academic-integrity-plagiarism-and-cheating>

University of Western Australia English Language Centre: <https://www.celt.uwa.edu.au/policies/academic-misconduct>

University of Wollongong: <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/governance/academic-integrity/students/avoiding-plagiarism/>