Academic integrity: differences between design assessments and essays

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Abstract

Perceptions of plagiarism and collusion in essays have occupied much research in academic integrity. This project explores such perceptions in relation to both text-based assessments such as essays and non-text-based assessment such as visual designs. The principal research instrument was an Australia-wide survey of academics and students who use non-text-based assessments.

We find substantial differences between perceptions in the text and non-text environments. With design assessments, participants are less likely to think that basing work on that of another student, or using freely available material without referencing it, is plagiarism or collusion; but they are more likely to think that discussing tasks with others or asking others to improve their work is plagiarism/collusion. Some participants deemed particular practices acceptable despite identifying them as plagiarism/collusion, and some regarded practices as unacceptable despite not considering them to be plagiarism/collusion.

As well as substantial differences in perceptions of plagiarism/collusion between text and non-text assessments, we find greater uncertainty regarding plagiarism and collusion in design assessments. This suggests a need for clear definitions of plagiarism and collusion for design assessments, and for universities to incorporate these definitions into their academic integrity policies and to implement appropriate educational strategies for academics and students.

Keywords
Plagiarism; collusion; academic integrity; visual design; visual plagiarism; non-text-based assessment

There is a pervasive view that plagiarism is common and becoming more prevalent due to a number of factors: the influence of the internet (Park, 2003; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Joyce, 2007; Yeo, 2007); the rapid expansion of higher education (Joyce, 2007; Garrett & Robinson, 2012); increased class sizes (Sheard & Dick, 2011); and commodification of education and casualisation of the workforce (Atkins & Herfel, 2006). Moreover, the increased use of group work blurs the boundaries between acceptable collaboration and unacceptable collusion (Pickard, 2006).

Plagiarism and collusion are considered to undermine the value of education, to be detrimental to the individual involved and to other students, and to potentially damage the reputation of the institution and the degree (Atkins & Herfel, 2006; Baker et al., 2008; Brooks & Ellis, 2005; Dick et al., 2003; McCabe & Pavela, 2004; Stappenbelt, 2012).

While there is an extensive body of literature on academic integrity issues in higher education in relation to prose text, there is a dearth of literature dealing with non-text assessments, particularly in the disciplines of visual art and design (Blythman et al., 2007;
Porter, 2010; Robinson, 2012). This paper reports on research that has investigated the perceptions of plagiarism and collusion among academics and students in visual design, in relation both to essays and to design assessments.

**Background to the research**

Increased interest in cheating, including plagiarism and collusion, has generated extensive research into the perceptions of students and academics in higher education. However, the overwhelming emphasis of the current body of literature is on prose text, where the concepts have been well defined and have been communicated through institutional policies designed to prevent, detect, and deal with plagiarism and collusion. There is a smaller body of literature relating to non-text-based assessments such as computer code, but very little relating to visual design (Blythman et al., 2007; Robinson, 2012; Porter 2000). This section briefly reviews the results of previous research relating to perceptions of plagiarism and collusion in relation to text-based assessments such as essays and to visual design assessments.

A continuing theme in the literature is that students have a poor understanding of plagiarism. Students are generally found to understand more extreme examples of plagiarism but lack the skills to discriminate with less clear-cut plagiarism scenarios (Marshall & Garry, 2005; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; McCabe, 2005; Gynnild & Gotschalk, 2008; Curtis & Popal, 2011; Forster, 2010). Some studies have found that a majority of students thought collusion was an acceptable practice (Owunwanne et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2008), while other studies found that only a minority viewed collusion as serious cheating (Gynnild & Gotschalk, 2008; McCabe, 2005). Similarly, the majority of students surveyed in numerous studies did not consider the resubmission of work previously submitted elsewhere to be plagiarism (Curtis & Popal, 2011; Owunwanne et al., 2010; Marshall & Garry, 2005; Forster, 2010).

Some studies suggest that academics also struggle to recognise plagiarism in particular circumstances (Foltýnek et al, 2013), although there is general agreement that academics have a more consistent and stricter interpretation of what constitutes acceptable academic behaviour, and view breaches of academic integrity more seriously than do students (Gynnild & Gotschalk, 2008; Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Park, 2003; Gururajin & Roberts, 2005; McCabe, 2005; Foltýnek et al., 2013).

While a number of authors have acknowledged the need for discipline-specific standards (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Lampert, 2004; Marshall & Garry 2005; Yeo, 2007), this issue has not as yet been extensively explored. The different nature of assessments completed by art and design students brings into question whether academics and students in these disciplines regard practices such as reusing the work of others in the same way as those who use text-based assessments (Simon et al., 2013).

Plagiarism is frequently viewed as less of an issue in the visual arts since the nature of the work itself generates a subjective desire for originality (Economou, 2011; Blythman et al., 2007; Garrett & Robinson, 2012), thus providing the objective conditions for minimising plagiarism (Blythman et al., 2007). Blythman et al. (2007) explain that even where students base their work on existing works, they develop the work into their own. Furthermore, in contrast to the situation with text, the process of development involves various stages that are typically monitored by academics, thereby minimising opportunities for plagiarism and enabling any concerns to be addressed as they arise (Blythman et al., 2007; Garrett & Robinson, 2012).

Despite this optimism, visual design assessment gives rise to a number of salient issues: the difficulty of defining plagiarism and thus the increased complexity involved in educating students in referencing and copyright issues (Porter, 2010); the lack of citation guidelines (Huffman, 2010; Robinson, 2012); the ease with which images may be copied from the
internet and manipulated (Shaughnessy, 2004; Porter 2010; Berman, 2010; Economou, 2011); and the difficulty of detecting plagiarism given the rudimentary nature of visual detection tools (Garrett & Robinson, 2012; Porter, 2010).

There is little research pertaining to the perceptions of academics and students regarding plagiarism and collusion in visual design. There are a number of reasons why defining plagiarism in relation to visual design is less clear-cut than is the case for text. First, the artistic traditions of collage, appropriation, referencing and homage blur the boundaries (Blythman et al, 2007; Garrett & Robinson, 2012; Porter, 2010; Robinson, 2012) so that it becomes difficult to ‘distinguish between copying and appropriation; between respectful homage and infringement of copyright’ (Shaughnessy, 2004: 12). Second, there is the tradition of copying as an integral component of learning and honing technique (Blythman et al, 2007; Garrett & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2012; Walker, 2009; Porter, 2010). As a consequence, acceptable practices vary according to the specific requirements of each assignment and ‘the boundaries set will probably vary with the stage/year of the course and, by implication, the publicity that the work might receive’ (Porter, 2010: 11).

Recent research in the UK has explored the issue of visual plagiarism using an online survey of creative arts academics from UK universities (Garrett & Robinson, 2012). The research confirms the differences between the creative arts and text situations, with academics pointing to the increased complexity in defining plagiarism in the visual arts due to the incongruence between the concept of originality and the artistic traditions mentioned previously.

The survey asked respondents whether they had encountered student work that they thought had been plagiarised, and how frequently they had encountered academic integrity issues with student work. While participants expressed the view that plagiarism was relatively rare in visual assessments, 6% indicated that they encountered it frequently. In written submissions, on the other hand, 42% of participants felt that visual images were frequently not referenced properly; and in relation to presentations, 46% felt the same thing. The attitudes of academics were noted as a barrier to dealing with plagiarism, with some participants stating that their colleagues did not take visual plagiarism seriously, and some pointing to poor standards such as not referencing visual images used in teaching (Garrett & Robinson, 2012).

A greater awareness of perceptions is necessary before we can begin the process of codifying acceptable practices, enabling the development of comprehensive academic integrity policies that incorporate non-text-based assessments, and then the development of effective educational tools to impart this knowledge to students. The research reported here enhances awareness of perceptions of plagiarism/collusion and of the acceptability of particular practices. By identifying some of the grey areas acknowledged in the literature, the findings will contribute to the debate on establishing boundaries of acceptability and developing policies and guidelines for design assessments. With this purpose in mind, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do academics and students perceive plagiarism and collusion in regard to essays and to visual design assessment items?
- Are there differences between the perceptions of students and academics?
- Are there differences between the perceptions of each group between essays and visual designs?
- Are there differences between perceptions of plagiarism/collusion and acceptability?
Method

The research employed an Australia-wide online survey to gain insights into the perceptions of academic integrity of academics and students who use non-text-based assessments in areas such as computing and design.

The survey was preceded by a small number of focus groups, of which the main intention was to clarify the questions to be asked in the survey. Focus group participants emphasised that plagiarism and collusion are more difficult to define in the visual arts, and that the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable practices are more blurred than with text. This was attributed primarily to the artistic traditions of homage, appropriation, referencing and assemblage as well as practices such as developing technical skills through copying other artists. A further complication is the lack of clear referencing techniques that would enable references to be located near the quote or the ideas, as can be done with prose text. While references in visual designs may be included in notes, this is not generally visible to those viewing the work, who might therefore be led to think that the work is the product of the artist's original ideas.

The major focus of discussion was on plagiarism; collusion was seen as much less of a problem because students guard their ideas in order to demonstrate originality.

Following the focus groups, the project team developed the questions for the online survey, informed both by the focus group findings and by other surveys reported in the literature. The first section of the survey dealt with academic integrity issues in relation to text-based assessments such as essays. The next section explored similar issues in relation to non-text-based assessments. The third section explored academic integrity policies and how breaches of academic integrity are detected and dealt with, and the final section collected basic demographic information. The remainder of this paper presents an analysis of the survey responses from design academics and students in relation to their perceptions of plagiarism and collusion.

The survey presented fourteen specific scenarios relating to essays and similar scenarios for visual design, and asked respondents to indicate whether the scenarios constituted plagiarism or collusion and also whether they were acceptable practices (see Figure 1). Both the plagiarism/collusion question and the acceptability question were answered on a three-point scale: no, unsure, yes. The survey did not define text-based assessments such as essays, or non-text-based assessments such as visual designs, or the differences between the two, leaving the survey participants to respond according to their own understandings of these items. Further, while the survey gave reasonably clear definitions of plagiarism and collusion, it did not ask respondents to distinguish between the two, asking instead whether or not each scenario represented ‘plagiarism or collusion’.

The survey was conducted online between July and September 2013, and academics at all Australian universities were asked to invite their colleagues and students to complete it. By way of encouragement, participants could enter a draw to win one of four iPads or comparably priced devices. The survey attracted participants from all Australian universities, though the spread was by no means even and probably reflected the enthusiasm with which the survey was presented at different institutions. A total of 1315 responses were received, with a final sample of 990 after eliminating inappropriate and incomplete responses. The sample consisted of a computing and a design cohort, and this paper reports the results for the 117 design academics and 317 design students who responded to the survey.
Fig. 1. Scenarios used in the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Scenarios</th>
<th>Design Scenarios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Copying or paraphrasing the words of others and fully referencing them.</td>
<td>Basing a design on images that are freely available from some source, such as the web, and referencing the sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Copying or paraphrasing the words of others and not fully referencing them.</td>
<td>Basing a design on images that are freely available, without referencing the sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Purchasing an essay from the internet and submitting it as one’s own work.</td>
<td>Purchasing images produced by others to incorporate into one’s own designs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Paying another person to write the essay and submitting it as one’s own.</td>
<td>Paying another person to create the design and submitting it as one’s own work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Basing one’s essay largely on an essay that one wrote and submitted for a previous course, without acknowledging this.</td>
<td>Basing one’s design largely on a design that one created and submitted for a previous course, without acknowledging this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Posting one’s essay to an online forum and asking for feedback on it.</td>
<td>Posting one’s design to an online forum and asking for feedback on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Incorporating the work of another student without their permission.</td>
<td>Incorporating the work of another student without their permission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Borrowing another student’s essay and rewriting it in one’s own words.</td>
<td>Borrowing another student’s design and changing it so that it looks quite different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Borrowing an early draft of another student’s essay and developing it into one’s own.</td>
<td>Borrowing an early draft of another student’s work and developing it into one’s own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Discussing with another student how to approach an essay and what literature to read, then researching and writing the essay independently.</td>
<td>Discussing with another student how to approach a design and what techniques to use, then completing the design independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Discussing the detail of one’s essay with another student while working on it.</td>
<td>Discussing the detail of one’s work with another student while working on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Showing one’s essay to another student and asking them for advice on how to improve it.</td>
<td>Showing one’s design to a friend and asking them for advice on how to improve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Giving one’s completed essay to another student and asking them to improve it.</td>
<td>Asking another student to take one’s work and improve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Completing an essay and then expanding it to include an issue that one found out about by reading another student’s essay.</td>
<td>Completing an assessment and then adding features that one noticed when looking at another student’s work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey results
It is not possible to present all of the findings from the survey in this paper, so we shall focus on the findings that we found most interesting.

Practices considered to be plagiarism or collusion
There was good agreement between students and academics in their assessment of whether particular scenarios constituted plagiarism/collusion. Figure 2 shows the results for scenarios that were considered by a majority of respondents to be plagiarism or collusion.
In relation to essays, some scenarios were perceived almost universally as plagiarism/collusion (e.g., scenario 7, incorporating the work of another student without their permission), while others were classified this way by a smaller majority (e.g., scenario 5, using an essay that had been written and submitted for a previous assignment).

The results for the non-text scenarios largely mirror those for essays, although most practices were identified as plagiarism or collusion by a smaller proportion of respondents (in Figure 2, the Design bar on the right of a pair is generally lower than the Essays bar on the left). The substantial difference between the essay and design perceptions for scenario 3 is discussed later.

**Practices not considered to be plagiarism or collusion**

For most of the other scenarios, only about 10% of students and 5% of academics considered them to be plagiarism or collusion. This includes, for example, showing completed work to a friend and asking for advice on how to improve it (scenario 12), and posting work to a forum and asking for feedback (scenario 6).

For both essays and designs there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of academics and students for scenario 11, with a higher proportion of students agreeing that it was plagiarism/collusion to discuss the detail of the work while working on it. Similarly, students were almost twice as likely as academics to consider that asking for advice on how to improve a design was plagiarism/collusion (scenario 12). This finding is contrary to previous research involving text, which has found that academics generally adopt
stricter definitions of plagiarism and collusion than are held by students; and suggests that students are overly cautious to ensure that they stay on the right side of a blurred distinction.

**How much uncertainty was there?**

In response to concerns with the level of plagiarism, Australian universities have progressively introduced initiatives to educate students to understand plagiarism, predominantly in relation to prose text. This has involved, for example, voluntary or compulsory academic integrity modules. Given the abundance of education for text situations compared with the dearth of information and education in relation to non-text situations, we would expect that academics and students would be much more accomplished at recognising plagiarism in essays than in visual designs.

This view is not fully supported by the findings of this research (see Figure 4). Relatively high proportions of academics and students were unsure whether some scenarios were plagiarism/collusion, in the essay as well as the design contexts.

In relation to essays, for example, more than a third of both academics and students were unsure whether it was plagiarism/collusion to post an essay to an online forum and ask for feedback on it (scenario 6). For the design assessments there was a great level of uncertainty, for example, about purchasing images to incorporate into one’s design (scenario 3).

**Are perceptions different for essays and designs?**

A central objective of this research is establishing whether there are differences in perceptions of plagiarism and collusion between text-based assessments and non-text-based assessments. Figures 2 and 3 above show that different proportions of respondents categorised scenarios as plagiarism/collusion depending on whether the scenarios related to essay or designs. We used a McNemar-Bowker Test to determine whether differences in answers to the essay and design scenarios, for plagiarism/collusion and for acceptability, were statistically significant. Figure 5 reports the McNemar-Bowker Test statistic and indicates statistically significant differences between design scenarios and the comparable essay scenarios.

Each number in Figure 5 represents the magnitude of a difference between essay perceptions and design assessment perceptions: the bigger the number, the greater the difference. An asterisk with a number indicates that the difference is significant; that is, it is unlikely to be due to chance alone. For example, the bottom left number, 21.4, tells us that there was quite a big difference in the perceptions of academics about the acceptability of...
altering an essay after completion, and the acceptability of altering a design after completion, to incorporate features noticed while looking at another student’s work. The asterisk tells us that this difference is significant. By contrast, the 3.2 immediately above it tells us that academics saw little difference between asking another student to improve a completed essay and asking another student to improve a completed design, and that the difference was not significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Plagiarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Copying and fully referencing</td>
<td>22.6*</td>
<td>12.8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Copying and not fully referencing</td>
<td>10.0*</td>
<td>11.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Purchasing work from the internet</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>54.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Paying a person to do the work</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resubmitting work (Self-plagiarism)</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Seeking help from online forums</td>
<td>16.9*</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Using another student’s work without permission</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Borrowing and changing another student’s work</td>
<td>21.3*</td>
<td>28.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Borrowing and reworking another student’s work</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Discussing the task then working alone</td>
<td>7.5*</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Discussing the detail of the work in progress</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Seeking advice from another student after completing the work</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Asking another student to improve completed work</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>10.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Completing the assessment and adding something from another student’s work</td>
<td>21.4*</td>
<td>9.0*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant p<0.05

Fig. 5. McNemar-Bowker test statistics for differences between essay and design scenarios. The blanks indicate where the statistic could not be calculated due to zero counts in some cells.

Scenarios 1, 10, 13, and 14 were perceived as less acceptable and more likely to be plagiarism/collusion in the design context than for essays. While the vast majority agreed that scenarios 1 and 10 were acceptable and did not constitute plagiarism, participants were still more likely to categorise these as unacceptable and as plagiarism/collusion in the design context than in the essay context. Respondents were more likely to consider it unacceptable to ask another student to improve their completed work (scenario 13) when the context changed from essays to design. For example, of the 17% of academics who said this was not plagiarism for essays, 32% thought it was plagiarism or collusion in a design context and a further 42% were unsure.

Scenario 14 displayed a big difference between the essay and design contexts. For example, more than half of the 33% of students who said this practice was acceptable for essays changed their opinion for design, with 19% of these being unsure and 24% saying it was not acceptable. Academics were more likely to categorise scenario 14 as plagiarism in relation to design, with 27% of those who said it was not plagiarism in essays and 31% of those who were unsure indicating that they thought it was plagiarism in design assessments.
Conversely, scenarios 2, 3 and 8 were viewed as more acceptable and less likely to be categorised as plagiarism in design assessments than in essays. Over 80% of both academics and students thought that scenarios 2 and 8 were unacceptable and plagiarism/collusion for essays, but somewhat lower proportions agreed in relation to design. Scenario 3 was highly significant in all cases, with only around half of those who thought the practice was unacceptable or was plagiarism for essays expressing the same opinion in relation to design assessments. However, the scenarios in this pair are not as comparable as in the other pairs, and therefore the results should be interpreted with caution. The essay scenario refers to purchasing a completed essay from the web, whereas in the parallel design scenario the purchased images are incorporated into the student’s design rather than being presented as the final product.

**Differences between what is perceived as plagiarism/collusion and what is perceived as unacceptable**

By asking respondents to rate both plagiarism/collusion and unacceptability for each scenario, the survey provided an opportunity to determine whether participants thought that some scenarios were plagiarism or collusion but still considered acceptable, or were unacceptable despite not being perceived as plagiarism or collusion.

We used a McNemar-Bowker Test to determine for significant differences between perceptions of plagiarism/collusion and perceptions of unacceptability. The results are shown in Figure 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Essays</th>
<th>Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Copying and fully referencing</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>16.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Copying and not fully referencing</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Purchasing work from the internet</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Paying a person to do the work</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resubmitting work (Self-plagiarism)</td>
<td>25.1*</td>
<td>38.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Seeking help from online forums</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Using another student’s work without permission</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19.8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Borrowing and changing another student’s work</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>19.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Borrowing and reworking another student’s work</td>
<td>11.0*</td>
<td>16.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Discussing the task then working alone</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>10.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Discussing the detail of the work in progress</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>9.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Seeking advice from another student after completing the work</td>
<td>44.6*</td>
<td>18.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Asking another student to improve completed work</td>
<td>16.0*</td>
<td>33.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Completing the assessment and adding something from another student’s work</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant p<0.05

Fig. 6. Comparison of plagiarism/collusion and acceptability. The blanks indicate where the McNemar-Bowker test could not be calculated due to zero counts in some cells.

For both essays and design assessments, student respondents considered scenarios 11 and 12 to be plagiarism/collusion and yet to be acceptable. For scenario 11, of the 12% of
students who thought discussing the detail of an essay in progress was plagiarism, 27% identified it as acceptable. Similarly, for design assessments, of the 13% who thought it was plagiarism, 30% said it was acceptable. Scenario 10 was similarly perceived, with 52% of students who identified it as plagiarism still finding it acceptable.

There is more support for the converse position, scenarios that were not perceived as plagiarism/collusion but were nevertheless considered to be unacceptable in an academic environment – and with much greater differences. Student responses show this difference for seven of the essay scenarios and one design scenario. Academic responses show the difference for two essay-based scenarios and six design-based scenarios.

In relation to essays, both academics and students felt that scenarios 5 and 13 were unacceptable but not plagiarism/collusion. For scenario 5, generally referred to as self-plagiarism, of the 17% of academics who said it was not plagiarism, two thirds said it was unacceptable; and of the 22% of students who said it was not plagiarism, a third considered it unacceptable. Student responses indicated the same perception about scenarios 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 in relation to essays.

In relation to design assessments, both students and academics felt that scenario 5 was not plagiarism/collusion but was nevertheless unacceptable. Of those who indicated that this scenario was not plagiarism/collusion, 73% of academics and 28% of students said it was unacceptable. Academic responses indicated the same perception about scenarios 3, 4, 8, 9 and 13.

It is not clear whether these findings indicate confusion as to what constitutes plagiarism/collusion, or whether respondents are clear that some practices constitute misconduct but nevertheless consider them to be acceptable, and vice versa.

**Conclusion**

The academic integrity literature has focused on prose text when examining the perceptions of students and academics into what constitutes cheating, plagiarism and collusion. In contrast, this research investigates whether there are differences in perceptions of plagiarism and collusion between text-based assessments such as essays and non-text-based assessments such as visual designs. The survey asked whether certain practices constituted plagiarism or collusion and whether these practices were acceptable, thereby providing further insights into the ethical judgements individuals make about their actions, including possible reasons why students breach academic integrity rules and how academics’ attitudes may influence their decisions to pursue breaches.

The results of the survey confirmed previous research findings relating to text-based assessments that there is a general consensus on more extreme examples of plagiarism/collusion but a high level of uncertainty regarding others. Practices that involved little effort on the part of the student – such as copying without referencing, copying from other students or purchasing work – were overwhelmingly categorised as plagiarism. On the other hand, practices such as discussing aspects of the work with other students, while still contributing substantial individual effort, were less likely to be thought of as plagiarism/collusion.

We found a high level of agreement between academics and students in their assessments of whether particular scenarios constituted plagiarism/collusion. The only significant differences were for scenarios 11 and 12, with students more likely to consider these to be plagiarism/collusion.

There were substantial differences between perceptions in the text and non-text environment. In relation to design assessments as compared with essays, participants were more likely to consider that discussing tasks with others or asking others to improve their work was
plagiarism/collusion. The importance of originality in design may be responsible for the stricter interpretation for these practices. Conversely, practices such as basing work on that of another student or using freely available material without referencing were less likely to be classified as plagiarism/collusion in design assessments than in essays.

In general, scenarios that were more or less likely to be considered plagiarism or collusion were respectively less or more likely to be considered acceptable. However, there were scenarios that participants found acceptable even though they categorised them as plagiarism or collusion, and others that they found unacceptable even though they did not view them as plagiarism/collusion.

The overwhelming message from this research is that there are substantial differences between prose text and non-text assessments such as visual designs with regard to perceptions of plagiarism and collusion. Future research could explore the reasons for these differences, which may emanate both from real differences between the textual and non-textual contexts and from a lack of clarity and education in relation to design assessments. The research also confirms findings from previous research that despite attempts to educate students and academics in relation to text, there remains a high level of uncertainty as to whether some practices breach academic integrity policies; and that there is therefore a need for further and more effective education. The level of uncertainty is higher for design assessments, where less effort appears to have gone into educating students and academics about academic integrity. It is evident that there is a pressing need to develop clear definitions of plagiarism and collusion as they pertain to design assessments. Academic integrity policies need to be expanded to explicitly incorporate non-text-based assessments, including clear and consistent definitions, effective educational resources, and guidelines on detecting and dealing with breaches of academic integrity.

The world of professional design is beset by issues of copyright, intellectual property, and related matters. If design academics are themselves unsure about various aspects of academic integrity in the design disciplines, and are therefore unable to educate their students about these matters, how can we expect those students to become professionals with a clear idea of the issues and how to deal with them?

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**References**


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Simon is a Senior Lecturer in IT at the University of Newcastle, Australia. During eight years in which he was responsible for handling cases of academic misconduct across a range of disciplines, he formed the impression that the rules of academic conduct do not apply in the same way across all disciplines. He then led a team that successfully applied for funding to investigate questions of plagiarism, collusion, and related matters in assessments not involving text, with a particular focus on the visual design and computing disciplines.

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Beth Cook has worked as a researcher and teacher with the University of Newcastle for the past eight years. During that time she has been involved in a wide range of major research projects, including some funded by the Australian Research Council grants and others commissioned by government departments and trade unions. In her teaching role she has provided students with advice and guidance regarding academic integrity requirements.

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Prof Mario Minichiello has in the past twenty years served on a number of national and international learning and teaching boards, which are required to validate new programs and assessment systems. In these roles he has observed that curriculum and assessment
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Chris Lawrence has spent the past ten years as a lecturer contributing to the graphic design and visual communication programs at the University of Newcastle. During this time he has been a major advocate for the clarification of academic standards regarding the submission of visual material. He has recently taken a break from the academic sector to assume a quality control position with iStockphoto reviewing the integrity of digital illustrations from its international community of contributors.