

ENABLING SKILLS AT UNSW

RESOLVED AB04/92

ENDORSED AT ACADEMIC BOARD MEETING 3 AUGUST 2004

1. That the Academic Board approves that all commencing UNSW students will complete within their first session, a generic online information literacy program that is broadly contextualised to disciplinary domains, commencing Session1, 2005.
2. That the Academic Board approves in principle and authorises the conduct of trials of the following processes:
 - (i) For all commencing UNSW students, early feedback on a written task within the program is to be completed by week 5 or equivalent. This would allow identification of students requiring substantial assistance, as well as areas of particular difficulty for whole classes, so that students can be assisted and difficult areas addressed; and
 - (ii) students identified as requiring substantial assistance in academic literacy and academic English-language skills will be allowed to enrol in credit-bearing courses in English and academic literacy.
3. That a report be provided to the Academic Board at the conclusion of the enabling skills trials on the implications and implementation of the recommended processes.

Enabling Skills at UNSW: A Discussion Paper

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE ENABLING SKILLS?

Enabling skills encompass the following set of interrelated skills: basic computer and information technology skills, academic literacy, academic English language skills, and fundamental information literacy (see Appendix A for definitions of these terms). Enabling skills are essential for the effective commencement of academic study; in other words, they *enable* a student to undertake university study.

Significant mastery of enabling skills undergrad students' ability to engage in their disciplinary contexts. In the North American, British and Australian higher education sectors, it is widely believed that inadequacies in these skill domains have contributed significantly to the current upsurge in instances of plagiarism. Although the apparent increase in plagiarism can be linked to the ready availability of online information, it is also occasioned by two other factors related to academic literacy and academic English language skills. First, many students lack an awareness and understanding of the role and function of referencing and citation in academic writing. Second, students' academic English language skills are often underdeveloped in the areas of paraphrase and summary. Finally, inappropriate assessment design may also contribute inadvertently to student plagiarism.

In relation to these issues, it is useful to consider together the following areas:

- information literacy
- deterring and avoiding plagiarism
- academic literacy and academic English language skills.

It is equally important to consider the provision of enabling skills that might facilitate student transition to academic study, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

In the UNSW context, it should also be borne in mind that **46.8 percent** (n=18,994) of UNSW students in 2003 (including ADFA) spoke a language other than English at home. Of these, 18.2 percent (n=7384) were international and 28.6 percent (11,610) were local students¹ A significant number of the international students at UNSW have had no prior exposure to the contemporary Australian academic environment and its expectations. In addition, many local students who have grown up within this environment find the transition to the academic environment at university challenging. Certainly, there is no level playing field for students from radically different educational and library traditions when they begin their studies at UNSW.

Basic computer and information technology skills are not discussed in this document. A separate working party is looking at needs and support provision for both staff and students in this area.

This paper includes a set of issues for discussion on which future action could be based. The focus of the discussion is the need for information literacy enabling skills for all commencing students and academic language and literacy enabling skills for some of our students. However, the online information literacy tutorial and the enhanced support for students identified as needing additional academic language and literacy development that are proposed in this document also address the issue of deterring plagiarism. Specific measures to deter plagiarism and enhance academic integrity are not discussed in this document as these were discussed by the Academic Board at its 5 August 2003 meeting. Appendix B contains the decisions noted at that meeting. The options under discussion in this document are summarised in Figure 1.

¹ UNSW Equity & Diversity data 2003.

1. ENABLING SKILLS FOR ALL STUDENTS

INFORMATION LITERACY

Is there a problem?

Students arrive at UNSW with widely varying skill levels in and understandings of information literacy. Universities Admission Index (UAI) and Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) scores give some indication of academic abilities, but the university has no hard data on information literacy levels among new students. In addition, there is no process to assess or diagnose levels of information literacy knowledge or skills as part of normal entrance. It is clear, however, that many students, regardless of UAI, experience significant difficulty with information literacy, as evidenced by:

- the widely acknowledged high incidence of plagiarism and apparent lack of understanding of ethical issues involved
- students' difficulties with critically evaluating information from a diversity of sources
- students' poor grasp of referencing.

We need to ensure that our students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, have a level of information literacy that is sufficient for them to use as a basis for further developing the more contextualised and embedded skills necessary throughout their course of study and beyond. If academic and library staff knew that students coming into first-year subjects had, at the very least, a common basic understanding of information literacy issues, this would assist staff in developing information literacy aspects of courses and programs within the disciplines. It would also assist students who currently experience the frustrations of covering and re-covering very basic material multiple times – or not at all – depending on their choice of courses.

A tool designed to develop enabling skills in the area of information literacy would be relevant both to mainstream students entering the university and to students transferring to the university, entering it in later years, or entering through alternative admission procedures.

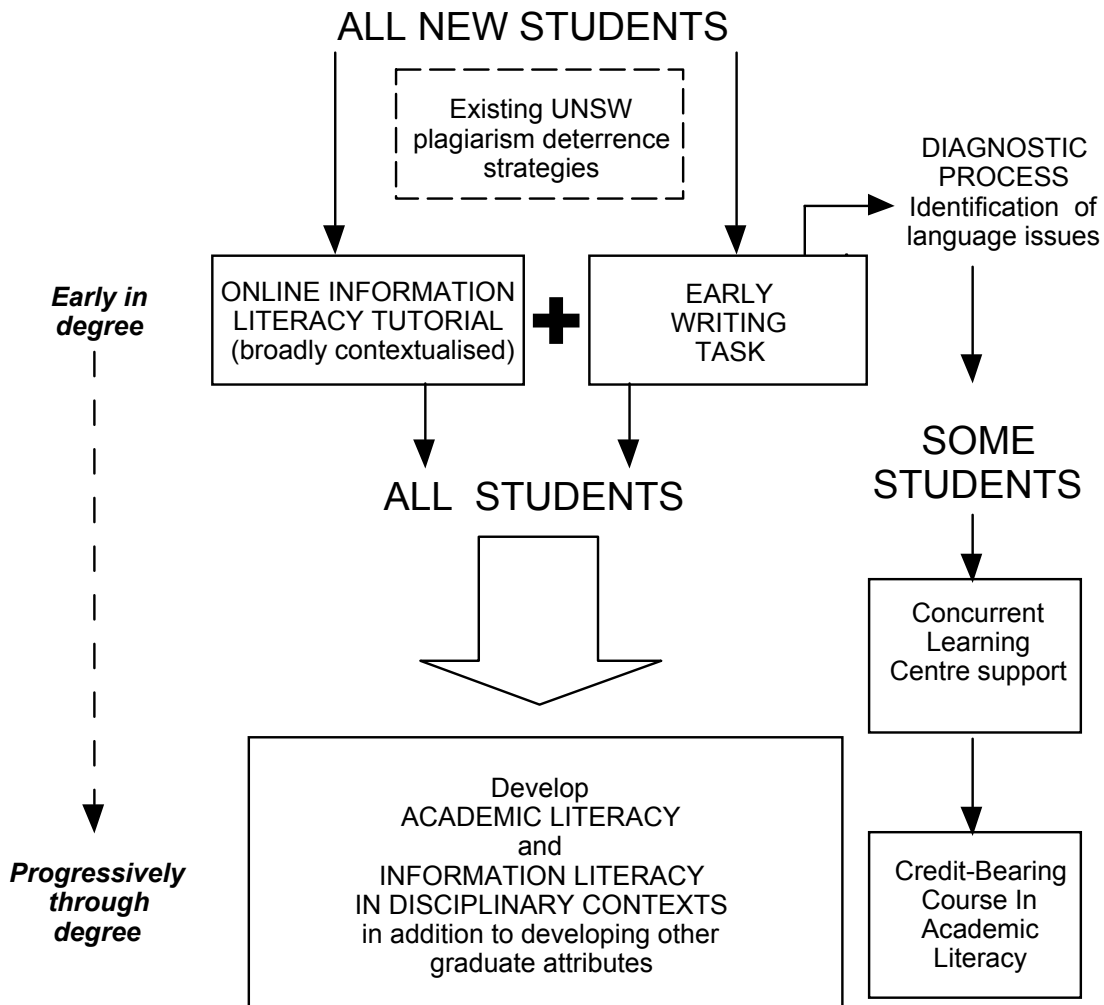
Can we require students to complete an information literacy prerequisite?

The University of Adelaide offers a precedent for requiring students to complete an information literacy prerequisite. Its pre-program online library tutorials are accessed through the University's online learning management system (Blackboard), which is badged as the MyUni portal. The tutorials are made available from O-week. Commencing students are enrolled by the MyUni support team, and the Blackboard quizzes are used for the quiz exercises, while the Blackboard Gradebook records performance and completion. The decision about the compulsory status of the tutorial is made on a faculty-by-faculty basis, and the majority of faculties do make it compulsory. (One faculty dropped the compulsory element but is considering reversing the decision.) The standard tutorial is slightly contextualised for each faculty setting. The Library is responsible for queries and follow-up on non-completion.

Similarly, the University of Wollongong provides both a policy precedent and a functioning mechanism for a compulsory information literacy prerequisite. All first-year students and postgraduate coursework students complete the online

Figure 1

Helping Student Develop Enabling Skills



Information Literacy Introductory Program (ILIP) within the first six weeks of their first session. A student must achieve a score of 100 percent in the online assignment in order to complete the information literacy requirement and must repeat the ILIP until successful. It is estimated that completion may take between 15 minutes and 2 hours, depending on the student's prior knowledge of information literacy.

The intention of the requirement that all students complete an online information literacy program is to ensure that all students have the same base on which to build and that they are not disadvantaged in respect of access to information resources. This should not be seen as a burden for students' learning but rather as a true enabler of learning. The time commitment for students is minimal, the online nature of the mechanism provides maximum flexibility, the burden on academic staff is virtually non-existent, and the benefits in terms of enhanced abilities to cope with academic requirements are extensive. Moreover, as at the University of Wollongong, completion of an ILIP-type online tutorial can provide initial evidence of student acquisition of one of the University's graduate attributes.²

² See the University of Wollongong's statement on graduate attributes and tertiary literacies: http://cedir.uow.edu.au/programs/literacies/Tertiary_Literacies.pdf

How contextualised does this introductory requirement need to be?

The University of Adelaide library tutorials are contextualised on a broad faculty basis, because the decision to commit to a compulsory tutorial completion during the early weeks is a faculty-based decision. The contextualisation relates primarily to the examples within the tutorials and the quizzes students must complete.

The University of Wollongong ILIP has two initial series of questions depending on whether students are undergraduates or postgraduates and a further set of questions that are contextualised to the student's Faculty (for example, the questions on databases in the program will relate to Law databases if the student is a Law student). The program is therefore not entirely without context. Contextualisation needs to be understood as a continuum. Having completed an initial information literacy requirement, students may then move on to more advanced information literacy materials, which are contextualised to varying fields of study.

Online information literacy programs at UNSW

The experience of the University of Wollongong suggests that the implementation of such an online initiative is not only feasible but the most resource-effective, scalable method of achieving an outcome across large student numbers. UNSW is well placed to adopt a similar strategy because the Library already has functioning online basic tutorial with which to initiate such a process. Several Library staff are skilled in this area, and an organisational mechanism exists to undertake refinements required within a specified time frame. Existing programs such as the Library Information Literacy Tutorial (LILT) have already undergone extensive development and refinement.³ Some development work would be required for further contextualisation of these programs.

Experience with current modules of LILT suggests that around two and a half hours might be required for a reasonably competent student to complete a UNSW tutorial. Students with real difficulties would need longer to review and retry assessments, but they would benefit most from the experience.

Quizzes associated with LILT could be answered within WebCT (as is currently the case where LILT is used within courses). With WebCT, feedback on quiz questions can be automated and common student queries can be placed with answers in Frequently Asked Questions. WebCT also allows tracking of student activities and identification of students who have completed the LILT quizzes.

Recommendation 1

All commencing UNSW students should complete, within their first session, a generic online information literacy program that is broadly contextualised to disciplinary domains.

³ See http://www.info.library.unsw.edu.au/~psl/itet_lilt/intro/enter.htm

2. ENABLING SKILLS FOR THOSE STUDENTS REQUIRING ACADEMIC LITERACY AND ACADEMIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

BACKGROUND

There are several ways in which students can be supported in their ongoing acquisition of academic literacy and academic English language skills. The group primarily needing support in this area are students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), both international and local, commencing both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. A recent survey by the PVC (Education & Quality Improvement) found that students' poor skills in the area of academic literacy and academic English language were viewed by postgraduate coursework coordinators as the biggest problem the coordinators faced. Large numbers of local students would also benefit from more explicit teaching of the academic literacy expectations of their fields of study but this can be done within the contexts of their fields of study.

Entry pathways

It should be remembered that students enter UNSW via many pathways, with proficiency tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) representing only one of many. The university needs to regularly track and monitor student performance in relation to point of entry, and these pathways should be subject to ongoing review.

Diagnosis

Ideally, all responses to academic literacy and academic English language issues should involve some initial diagnosis of students' academic literacy and academic English language levels. Refer to figure 1 For example, the Universities of Sydney and Wollongong have successfully used the Measuring Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS) diagnostic procedure for some time. MASUS is a flexible instrument that is easily adaptable to different disciplinary contexts and can be used by learning advisers and subject specialists after initial training. The procedure is typically applied to a written communication task submitted early in the session. It has recently been successfully adapted for use in a first-year Geography course at ADFA.

MASUS is used to produce a group profile, which shows the strengths and weaknesses of the particular cohort as a whole. Students also receive individualised feedback. The procedure can be repeated to measure improvement over time and after intervention. Diagnosis should take place in the first few weeks of session. This is consistent with the UNSW Assessment Policy, which recommends early assessment and encourages the notion of formative as well as summative assessment.⁴

Diagnostic assessments such as those produced by MASUS can be fairly rapidly graded by PhD students or tutors, who can be trained by the Learning Centre.

⁴ For the UNSW Assessment Policy, see

http://www.studentadmin.unsw.edu.au/academiclife/assessment/assessment_policy.shtml
Formative assessment refers to formal or informal assessment designed for the purpose of giving feedback and suggestions for improvement to students. Formative assessment should occur early and often in a course. Summative assessment refers to assessment designed for the purpose of measuring students' performance in relation to an identified standard. It should occur at the end of a course. In practice, many assessment tasks set during a course are both formative and summative in nature.

Post-diagnostic intervention

Intervention in the form of additional support for students diagnosed with some weaknesses in academic literacy and academic English language skills can take several forms. The nature of the intervention should take into account the extent and severity of the problems identified. Possible interventions include:

- referring some students to Learning Centre workshops on specific topics and requiring their attendance
- requesting the Learning Centre to offer specific workshops to target identified needs of specific students and requiring attendance
- inviting the Learning Centre to deliver workshop(s) to a whole class on specific areas of need.

Credit-bearing courses

Another future option for post-diagnostic intervention is the introduction of credit-bearing courses in academic literacy and academic English language skills for students who are diagnosed with low skill levels. The English language working party has canvassed this option and found strong Faculty support for similar initiatives that are in operation at several other Go8 universities. In fact, one such initiative already exists at our own University: UNSW@ADFA currently offers two credit-bearing courses: Intensive English Language skills AENG7339 and Academic Discourse 1 AENG7337 to international postgraduate coursework students. Our proposal, however, is not limited to international students. The *Quality in PG Coursework Infrastructure* report has recommended the development and delivery of faculty-specific and discipline-specific induction and academic literacy courses, which could be mandatory and substituted for an academic elective. A precedent for this arrangement exists in the academic skills course for international postgraduates in Public Health & Community Medicine (4 units of credit). Skills in academic literacy and academic English language develop over time and require a sustained input with multiple opportunities for practice and feedback. For this reason, credit as reward for learning is suggested.

Investment in the credit-bearing course strategy is seen as having longer-term benefits to the institution and to individual students because it enables students to engage with the disciplinary content of their studies throughout the degree at a higher level. We therefore argue that the credit-bearing course should be substitutable for another course in the degree program, either a General Education course or an elective.

A credit bearing undergraduate course that would enable students to produce work demonstrating academic literacy in relation to specific fields of study in, for example, Arts and Social Sciences, could take the following form.

Theme – for example: globalisation, migration, identity (faculty related)

Assessment tasks – an evaluative academic essay; short papers; an oral presentation; participation in class discussion

Learning outcomes: Students will be able to:

- identify the dominant expectations and conventions of the Australian academic community in regard to written and spoken academic discourse

- reflect on and compare and contrast modes of academic discourse from other cultures
- demonstrate an understanding of the role and function of critical thinking, argument, and evidence within the Australian academic community relative to their chosen field of study
- apply an understanding of academic honesty and the ethical use of information within this academic community to their own academic work
- apply critical thinking processes and skills of academic argument to their own academic work.

A similar course could be developed for postgraduate coursework students.

Recommendation 2

All commencing UNSW students should be given feedback on a written task within their program by week 5. This would allow identification of those students requiring substantial assistance, as well as of areas of particular difficulty for the whole class so that the students can be assisted and the areas addressed.

Recommendation 3

Those students who are identified as requiring substantial assistance in academic literacy and academic English language skills be allowed to enrol in credit-bearing courses in English and academic literacy.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

All commencing UNSW students should complete, within their first session, a generic online information literacy program that is broadly contextualised to disciplinary domains.

Recommendation 2

All commencing UNSW students should be given feedback on a written task within their program by week 5. This would allow identification of those students requiring substantial assistance, as well as of areas of particular difficulty for the whole class so that the students can be assisted and the areas addressed.

Recommendation 3

Those students who are identified as requiring substantial assistance in academic literacy and academic English language skills be allowed to enrol in credit-bearing courses in English and academic literacy

REFERENCES

Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL) & the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), 2004, *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework: Principles, Standards and Practice*, 2nd edition, ANZIIL & CAUL, Adelaide, viewed 22 March 2004, URL: <http://www.caul.edu.au/info-literacy>

Scoufis, M. 2000, *Integrating Graduate Attributes into the Undergraduate Curricula*, Centre for Academic Development and Flexible Learning, University of Western Sydney.

APPENDIX A

DEFINITIONS

Throughout this document, the following key terms are used according to the definitions below.

Academic English language skills

These include knowledge of and skills in paragraphing; summarising and paraphrasing; sentence structure; academic vocabulary; and grammar, punctuation, and spelling appropriate to written academic English. Academic English language skills also include the oral communication skills needed for successful academic interaction. For example, a student who was competent in academic English language would be able to paraphrase accurately and appropriately key ideas from a secondary source.

Academic literacy

Academic literacy may be understood as the ways of knowing, thinking, and communicating that are valued in a particular discipline (Scoufis, 2000, p.48). Academically literate students produce writing that conforms to the intellectual expectations, rhetorical and structural standards, and referencing conventions of a particular discipline and that also has due regard for the ethical use of information. For example, using the referencing conventions of their discipline in an essay or report, a student who was academically literate would be able to structure an academic argument drawing on the work of other writers to provide evidence for this argument. They would be able to make a distinction between their own ideas and those paraphrased from a secondary source. Academically literate students have also developed the capacity to contribute to and participate in seminars and discussions in ways that are appropriate to specific disciplinary expectations

Basic computer and information technology skills

These include the skills needed to use word-processing, e-mail, and spreadsheet and presentation programs, and to use the Internet (Scoufis, 2000, p.48).

Information literacy

“Information literacy is an understanding and set of abilities enabling individuals to recognise when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (Australasian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy and Council of Australian University Librarians 2004, p. 3). Fundamental information literacy skills include those needed to develop effective search strategies, locate and retrieve relevant information sources, analyse and critically evaluate information, use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and access and use information ethically and legally (Scoufis, 2000, p.49).

Plagiarism

Plagiarism involves using the work of another person and presenting it as one's own. It is a form of intellectual theft. Acts of plagiarism include copying parts of a document without acknowledging and providing the source for each quotation or piece of borrowed material.⁵

⁵ This definition draws on the definitions of plagiarism provided by the Learning Centre at <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/plag.html> and by MyUNSW: Academic Misconduct and Student Misconduct Section 2.3.1 at <https://my.unsw.edu.au/student/academiclife/assessment/AcademicMisconductStudentMisconduct.html#2AcademicMisconduct>

APPENDIX B

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY - POLICY ON DEALING WITH PLAGIARISM

APPROVED AT ACADEMIC BOARD MEETING 5 AUGUST 2003

RESOLVED AB03/36

That the Academic Board:

- (i) notes the points raised in the discussion paper *Academic Integrity – Policy on Dealing with Plagiarism*; and
 - (ii) endorses the acquisition of a University-wide plagiarism detection tool with specifications as outlined.
- (File: 2002/2205)

Points for Noting - Committee on Education

The following points were drafted by the Committee on Education's plagiarism working party and discussed at the Committee on Education 14 July 2003, with a view to presenting them at Academic Board. In its discussion on plagiarism, the working party continually emphasised that any forthcoming recommendations should focus on enhancing academic integrity. We agreed that strategies to deal with plagiarism should be designed in a manner that develops students' skills and integrity in the use of a range of materials in their academic and related work. These strategies, therefore, are to be considered as part of 'teaching and learning' development at UNSW. The word 'plagiarism' is used in this draft document for simplicity, but it should be read as incorporating the issues of teaching and learning about ethical use of scholarly and other materials.

The committee endorsed the following points:

With respect to ethical use of scholarly material

1. The university provide a dedicated web page presenting information on plagiarism.

1.1. The major owner of the web page would be the Learning Centre, and all other material include links to this site. Faculties and schools would need to contribute discipline specific examples.

2. There be ongoing work to publicise existing areas of expertise in matters of teaching and learning about plagiarism at UNSW.

2.1. The Committee on Education and the office of the PVC (Education and Quality Improvement) will work with the Learning Centre to increase the opportunity for students to participate in workshops that deal with plagiarism. Similarly, faculty will seek to enhance students' awareness of and participation in the Library's literacy workshops that deal with skills in using and evaluating academic sources.

With respect to developing skills related to use of scholarly material

3. Academics and other staff have access to material to assist teaching about plagiarism.

3.1. The working party agreed the office of the PVC (Education and Quality Improvement) would take responsibility for incorporating issues on plagiarism in programs for new staff, explore ways of developing similar information sessions for existing staff and contribute to a website that offers support to academics in dealing with plagiarism. The working party agreed that while policies and materials address UG and PG coursework, there was a risk that the incidence of plagiarism in PG research thesis might go unattended. It was agreed that discussion and development of PG matters related to plagiarism include research students. The committee agreed that plagiarism should be discussed at PG student inductions and in initial documentation to the students.

4. Students are fully informed about plagiarism and have access to the plagiarism detection tool (see point 7).

4.1. The working party appreciated much of the information exists, but wanted to emphasise the need for students to be fully and identifiably informed for the plagiarism policy to work optimally. Thus, plagiarism needs to be discussed and defined in materials for students, such as course guidelines, web links and the like. It is particularly important that course coordinators present links to the learning centre when discussing plagiarism with students. It was also agreed that students could learn about plagiarism by using the plagiarism detection tool themselves.

5. In Year 1 of both UG and PG courses an appropriately 'early' assignment addresses the matter of plagiarism.

5.1. We propose that this occurs by requiring all students to submit their first assignment through the plagiarism detection tool. The feedback from the tool is to be discussed with the students. If there is no suitable assignment at this stage of the program, an example could be used or a later assignment used for this submission. This first run through the tool would not involve the usual penalties, but the potential penalties could be discussed. The aim is to educate students in ethical use of scholarly and other materials, as well as the consequences of breaching an ethical as well as an academic code of conduct. Such discussions may be embedded in those relating to graduate attributes.

6. Following the checking of the 'early' assignment, students are informed that subsequent checking will be on the basis of a random sampling of assignments across their academic program.

6.1. While the working party agreed most students appear to have access to computers, provision will be made for students who are unable to submit electronically to be included in the sampling. That is, handwritten or typed assignments should not be excluded from checking. The proportion of these at UNSW is estimated to be small, so at the most a very small number of assignments may need to be scanned. A pilot run of the tool and checking process is suggested so that matters related to the pragmatics of using the tool can be fully appreciated. The impact on academic workload should be monitored.

With respect to a plagiarism detection process and policy

7. UNSW acquire a university-wide plagiarism detection tool.

7.1. Our discussions focussed on two contenders. First, Turnitin, which has been adopted by several universities in Australia. Turnitin sponsors workshops and conferences on plagiarism, and together with research in this area has contributed to an increased awareness of plagiarism, particularly cyber-plagiarism, in the general community. Second, a local product developed by at ADFA. Our discussions focussed on the cost, in terms on money, time and effort, to buy and also sustain the use of a tool across the university and into the future, as well as the suitability of the tool across other specifications.

8. The draft specifications for a plagiarism detection tool be accepted.

8.1. These specifications have been circulated to the Committee on Education, and are attached. It is understood any decision will incorporate the UNSW IT acquisition process.

9. UNSW offer a clear policy on penalties for plagiarism.

9.1. The working party agreed that this information currently existed, for example in the student handbooks and the UNSW website, which also offered examples of plagiarism. We discussed whether the discussion of penalties should be more specific. This matter is still under consideration. The working party agreed that some discretion should remain for dealing with students on a case-by-case basis.

Carmen Moran,
Committee on Education
28 July 03