



## The Cost of Higher Education: Lessons from the Australian Context for Finland

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*Degree programs in Finland are free for international students – for now. In the Australian system, however, massive tuition fees for international students have been linked to plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct. This article examines the impact on education when universities become businesses.*

In November 2014, journalists from the Australian newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald* broke a story detailing academic misconduct by international students at several Australian universities (McNeilage & Visentin, 2014). The misconduct in question concerned the purchase of customised academic essays from the now defunct website *MyMaster*, an academic ghostwriting business run by Chinese-born, Australian-educated businesswoman Yingying Dou. The Sydney-based company advertised its services in Chinese and targeted university students with on-campus advertising in the Sydney area. Meticulously kept records revealed more than 900 assignments for students at 16 Australian universities had been purchased, with company revenue exceeding 100 000 Euros. The universities most heavily embroiled in the scandal, including The University of Newcastle, Macquarie University, University of Technology Sydney and The University of Sydney have since launched internal investigations into the affair. To date, students found guilty of academic misconduct under the individual university policies have been variously expelled, suspended, failed or had degree qualifications rescinded, though action is ongoing.

Before going into the specifics of why the *MyMaster* website proved so popular, it is worth considering the current context of higher education in Australia. All students at Australian universities pay tuition fees, with the amount being dependent on field-related scales. On a practical level, Australian citizens and permanent residents (referred to as *domestic students*) are able to defer the payment of these fees until after graduation and gainful employment, at which point the debt is repaid in instalments to the Australian government. The non-Australian *international students*, who make up almost a quarter of all university students in Australia, have the added burden of higher tuition fees for identical courses of study simply by virtue of their international status, and are not eligible for the government fee deferral program.<sup>[1]</sup> As such, international student tuition fees constitute part of a lucrative international education industry for Australia, worth at least AU\$15 billion annually.

The financial pressure weighs heavily on those involved in teaching and learning. For international students in particular, the high cost of tertiary education in Australia is a strong motivator to complete a degree as efficiently as possible and avoid accruing further costs by repeating failed subjects. Given the financial windfall international students provide universities, it is no secret in Australia that academics teaching international students are under pressure, both subtle and blatant, to advance the academic interests of their students. This has led to accusations of lowering of quality standards and unequal treatment of students. In my own capacity as a domestic student and later teacher at Australian universities, I have experienced these issues first-hand from both perspectives.

As to the reasons why so many international students resorted to using the *MyMaster* website, the *Herald's* investigation has cited cultural differences, lack of English language proficiency and financial burdens as the chief culprits. What I feel has been greatly overlooked here, however, is the nature of what actually occurred when students bought essays from *MyMaster*, variously referred to in the media as "cheating", "academic misconduct", "fraud" and lastly, "plagiarism". Most dictionaries would not define what happened as "plagiarism", but how universities define plagiarism is the issue. Individual universities have the power to characterise plagiarism, cheating and other forms of academic misconduct as they wish. The result is no universal definition of what is academically acceptable, but rather guidelines and interpretations.

A study of academic policies from 54 English-speaking universities concluded that most university definitions of plagiarism contain some or all of six elements: (1) material

that has been (2) taken from (3) some source by (4) someone (5) without (adequate) acknowledgement and (6) with/without intention to deceive (Pecorari, 2001, p. 235). Despite this overlap in plagiarism understanding, some of the documents examined in this study did not define plagiarism at all. In a more recent study, which included the policies of two Australian universities implicated in the *MyMaster* scandal, Sutherland-Smith (2011) concluded that plagiarism and associated academic misconduct was mainly parsed in unapproachable legal terms and treated as a crime – an approach ill-suited to the university context, where avoiding plagiarism is actually supposed to be taught. Both studies also highlighted the varied consequences for committing academic misconduct according to different university policies, which overwhelmingly involved punitive action rather than attempts to educate students about their violations. How then, can students be expected to adhere to “good academic practice”, if the concept itself is so unclear, poorly communicated and unfairly applied?

Despite enduring beliefs that “Asian” and particularly “Chinese” students are more likely to plagiarise (Phan Le Ha, 2006; Sowdon, 2005), research findings have not substantiated this, but rather a wide range of reasons for plagiarism in second language writing that are not culturally specific (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). Chief amongst the reasons that second language writers may commit plagiarism is the practice of textual borrowing or language re-use as a well-intentioned strategy to improve academic writing and/or compensate for inadequate language proficiency. In the Australian context, individual universities determine their own English language entry requirements, which can vary according to the field of study. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a widely accepted qualification for entry at Australian universities, though despite being touted as a test of English academic writing, IELTS does not require students to learn about plagiarism or use writing techniques that avoid plagiarism (e.g. citation).

The explosion of language-based tertiary preparation courses for international students brings us back to a blatantly obvious reason for buying essays: Money. Students are sometimes accepted to study in degree programs on the proviso that their English proficiency is first brought up to standard with intensive language study. A wide range of preparatory courses are offered to or required of such international students, creating further revenue for the university and more pressure on teaching professionals to advance their students into the degree program. When the stakes are so high, is it any wonder that students resort to less than scrupulous academic practices? An investment in the tens of thousands of dollars, often made by family or foreign governments on the student's behalf, certainly adds to the pressure to

succeed. Obtaining a study place in Australia is also sometimes the first step in a long process for students hoping to stay in the country long-term. Though I do not condone academic misconduct, I cannot fault students who approach their studies in Australia with business-like acumen, because the universities are businesses first, institutes of higher learning second. Academics face a similar dilemma: Complain about the academic misconduct they witness and the pressure they face to advance international students, or retain their jobs. With approximately half of all university teaching staff at some Australian universities employed only casually, i.e. on a semester to semester basis, loss of employment is a real and omnipresent fear for those who talk about academic misconduct amongst international students. Universities are under no obligation to renew the contracts of casual employees, even those with years of service, or to explain why a contract has not been renewed.

In summary, the notion that "cultural differences" are largely responsible for academic misconduct by international students in the Australian context is a misconception. Though lack of English language proficiency may be a significant problem for some international students, the real problems can be found at the institutional level, with inadequate descriptors of appropriate academic writing in a context that values money above educational enrichment.

Certainly, compulsory student fees will not automatically erase academic misconduct or the flux of businesses such as *MyMaster*, but as the Australian context shows, economic considerations can have a huge impact on educational outcomes. For this reason, I suggest that Finland continue its policy of tuition-free education for international degree students, particularly those from outside the EU/EEA area. Though I believe there are many similarities between the higher education systems in Finland and Australia, free education certainly puts Finland at an advantage. As such, I can only wonder whether my own experiences and those of my international students in Australia might have differed for the better if we had experienced free higher education.

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[1] According the *Herald's* investigation, international students typically pay between AU\$30 000 - AU\$40 000 for a degree.