Universities may claim to believe in traditional ideals of academic freedom and social justice, but the real test of that is how fairly we treat our students.

We may signal our commitment to an inclusive academic community by referring to students as “partners” or “co-learners”, yet the evidence suggests that a series of double standards are in operation.

When students start at university, for example, they are bombarded with threats about the perils of plagiarism. They face severe punishment for failing to acknowledge their sources. But the very same lecturers who enforce such draconian policies routinely ignore referencing conventions when preparing their own PowerPoint slides and handouts.

The use of Turnitin anti-plagiarism software is ubiquitous, yet it is employed almost exclusively to catch out students. When academics submit journal articles or write books, how often are they subject to the same type of surveillance? This is rare in my experience, despite plenty of evidence that academics plagiarise too, and even copy and paste “teaching philosophy” statements into their own teaching portfolios. Why should the phrase “academic integrity” be virtually synonymous with rules governing students’ rather than everyone’s scholarship?

Another example of our double standards is the way many lecturers elicit responses from students in class by calling on individuals to answer questions or give an opinion. The use of clickers, hailed as an “innovative” practice, across the sector, has much the same effect. This enforced participation contrasts starkly with the way academics treat each other at conferences, where we generally grant our peers the right to reticence.

Some academic double standards have been with us a very long time, but others have emerged more recently. There are now strict rules on attendance at many university classes and growing use of “class participation” grades as a means of rewarding so-called student engagement. These are reliant almost entirely on crude indicators, such as turning up or asking questions, rather than harder-to-observe measures of genuine learning.

Such compulsory attendance rules represent an intergenerational hypocrisy, since they have been developed and implemented by baby boomers who were never subject to such restrictions on their own academic freedom. How many academics who were students in the 1970s or 1980s would have graduated if they were subject to these increasingly content to assess them on the basis of having the right attitude, rather than the right quality of scholarship?

We blame everything on students’ consumerist mentality, rather than simply admitting that we don’t like having our authority challenged. If students now act in a less deferential way and are brave enough to ask questions, this is all to the good.

Academics need constantly to remind themselves what it was like to be a student. It’s all too easy to forget. At the same time, it is not just academics who are under growing pressure. The demands on students are also much greater now in terms of attendance, participation and levels of assessment. This change makes it harder to draw comparisons on the basis of our own, sometimes distant, student days.

If we are really serious about treating students as members of an inclusive academic community rather than as customers, we need to be far more careful about practising what we preach.

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