
Academic integrity: The gap between university's policy and practice in the study process

Alla ANOHINA-NAUMECA, Ilze BIRZNIECE, Tatjana ODINĒCA
Riga Technical University, Latvia

Typically, higher education institutions that care about honest, responsible and trustful conduct of academic and research activity introduce a relevant academic integrity policy as a part of their set of core university policies. According to Tauginienė et al. (2018), academic integrity refers to “*compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards, practices and consistent system of values, that serves as guidance for making decisions and taking actions in education, research and scholarship*” (pp. 7-8). The academic integrity policy usually specifies the university's ethical principles and values, forms of honest and dishonest academic behaviour, penalties for academic malpractice, and procedures for handling violations of academic integrity. Different organizational and technical means like responsible bodies, text-matching software, reporting forms, training activities, and other tools support the policy. Prenshaw et al. (2001) emphasize that the policy on academic integrity alters “*the culture and social dynamics of the university*” (p. 204). However, the critical question is either such a policy remains only a declarative one, or it is consistently and effectively applied and implemented, or, in other words, if the everyday practice aligns with the policy defined by the university.

While the academic integrity policy typically concerns all members of the university's community, students are those who determine the reputation of the university in society to a large extent. East (2009) points out that a university approach to academic integrity should be multi-pronged and systematic: it is not enough to inform students that the policy exists, but it is also necessary to take actions with the aim of applying the policy. Morris and Carroll (2011) pay attention that students will not necessarily read and understand the policy. Thus, nowadays the policy is attributed to the broader institutional approach that informs and educates students about academic integrity through workshops, induction events, forums, and specially developed handbooks (Devlin 2003; East 2009; MacDonald and Carroll 2006; Morris and Carroll 2011). McCabe et al. (2001) even stress that it is necessary to create an “*ethical community*” in university campuses where the code of conduct is firmly embedded in the student culture. Prenshaw et al. (2001) emphasize that the academic integrity policy not only manages violations of academic integrity but also frames students' perceptions of them. In this context, it is quite surprising, that studies on student awareness of the university policy on academic integrity have received little attention so far. Gullifer and Tyson (2013) point out that “*no research to date has actually asked students if they had read the institution's policy*” (p. 1203). In reality, there are few research works concerning this aspect.

Prenshaw et al. (2001) have studied if student perception of cheating could be related to the characteristics of a university policy (the level of details, accessibility and existence of legalistic structures). The series of McCabe's surveys conducted in North American universities and colleges (McCabe and Trevino 1993; McCabe et al. 1996, 1999) and similar research works that adopted his approach, for example, one described in (Florida State University 2015), have asked students about the ways they are informed about academic



integrity policy and have provided useful insights into institution-level variables that influence student cheating behaviour. Bretag et al. (2014) have surveyed six Australian universities (n=15304) by asking students about their awareness of academic integrity policy and satisfaction with the way of communicating the policy to students. On the one hand, they found that the majority of students have a good awareness of academic integrity and relevant policy and are satisfied with the information they receive about them. On the other hand, the researchers have also highlighted the need for a more broader approach that incorporates effective support and training about academic integrity. Gullifer and Tyson (2013) conducted a survey of all domestic students in one Australian university (n=3405) with the aim of investigating how well the students understand plagiarism as defined in their university policy. One of four questions defined in research is relevant to the study presented in this paper - how many students have read the policy on academic integrity? The researchers have found that only half of the students had read the university academic misconduct policy.

The research presented in this paper applies a case study approach with the aim of studying to which extent the policy defined by one of the Latvian largest universities is put into practice in informing and educating students on academic integrity. On the one hand, it addresses the question of student awareness of the university policy on academic integrity and adopts some questions from the previous research works. On the other hand, it extends the already acquired knowledge base as it focuses also on a relationship between student awareness level and student tolerance towards breaches of academic integrity, as well as student perception of academic integrity as an important aspect both for the academic community and student personal life. Moreover, such research presents a kind of unique experience for the country as academic integrity issues typically are not discussed widely in Latvian society.

We start by providing a detailed description of the university's policy and presenting tools and mechanisms that apply primarily to the study process and students' academic behaviour in the institution. The university's legislation regarding academic integrity includes Study agreement, Code of Ethics, University's Internal Rules for students, availability of Ethics commission, and Code of Academic Integrity. The most comprehensive document is the Code of Academic Integrity. Its main goal is to strengthen the academic culture and honesty in the university's academic environment, to clarify the concept of academic integrity and the related activities and to define main procedures used when considering breaches of academic integrity.

After that, we go ahead with the results of the quantitative research that was performed by surveying by surveying two groups of respondents: domestic students of the 1st year bachelor studies (914 respondents from 47 study programs that comprise 33.5% from the survey population) and directors of corresponding study programs (20 respondents that comprise 48% from the survey population). Both surveys were based on the authors' developed questionnaires that were delivered to both groups of respondents electronically through the university's internal portal and e-mail. We asked for the response from students to understand how much they are aware of the university's policy in the field of academic integrity (7 questions) and what are their own attitude towards academic integrity (3 questions).

Surveying the directors of study programs allowed us to learn out if a specific study pro-

gram uses general university's tools and mechanisms for defending academic integrity and to identify other means used for the same purpose. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first one was intended for revealing director's standpoint about the necessity to inform and educate students about academic integrity and time most appropriate for such activities, as well as about the responsibility of different groups of academic community (university's administrative staff, faculty administrative staff, director of the study program, and academic staff) in this process (3 questions). The second part of the questionnaire examined the experience and practice of a particular study program concerning mechanisms used to inform and educate students in the field of academic integrity (3 questions).

However, it is necessary to take into account also serious limitations of this research: it focuses on the first few months after the beginning studies in only one Latvian higher education institution and therefore the results acquired are not generalizable to a wider context. However, results of the research make a foundation for a wider discussion of academic integrity issues in the country. They can also serve as an impulse for similar studies in other Latvian universities and especially research taking an international comparative perspective.

In general, the paper is structured as follows. Introduction presents our motivation to undertake the research and define the aim of the research. After that, a literature overview is provided with the focus on related work, as well as significance to inform and educate students about academic integrity and a necessity to align university's efforts with the defined policy. Further, we describe a methodological approach in detail (sample, research questions, methods of data acquisition and processing, and other aspects) and present our findings together with their interpretation. At the end of the paper, conclusions are provided.

Keywords: academic integrity policy, plagiarism, higher education.

References

- Bretag, T., Mahmud, S., Wallace, M., Walker, R., McGowan, U., East, J., et al. (2014). 'Teach us how to do it properly!' An Australian academic integrity student survey. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(7), 1150-1169.
- Devlin, M. (2003). Policy, preparation, prevention and punishment: One faculty's holistic approach to minimising plagiarism. In H. Marsden, & M. Hicks. (Eds.), *Educational integrity: Plagiarism and other perplexities* (pp. 39–47). <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30006770/devlin-policypreparationprevention.pdf>. Accessed January 5 2019.
- East, J. (2009). Aligning policy and practice: An approach to integrating academic integrity. *Journal of Academic Language & Learning*, 3(1), A38-A51.
- Florida State University (2015). Academic Integrity Survey. <https://fda.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/imported/storage/original/application/ba4467157e26476a3b47dfc6448cb24b.pdf> Accessed January 5 2019
- Gullifer, J. M., & Tyson, G. A. (2013). Who has read the policy on plagiarism? Unpacking students' understanding of plagiarism. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(7), 1202-1218.
- MacDonald, R., & Carroll, J. (2006). Plagiarism – A complex issue requiring a holistic institutional approach. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(2), 233–245.
- McCabe, D. L., & Trevino, L. K. (1993). Academic dishonesty: Honor codes and other contextual influences. *Journal of Higher Education*, 64, 522–538.
- McCabe, D. L. et al. (1996). The influence of collegiate and corporate codes of conduct



on ethics-related behavior in the workplace. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 6, 461–476.

McCabe, D. L. et al. (1999). Academic integrity in honor code and non-honor code environments: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Higher Education*, 70, 211–234.

McCabe, D.L. et al. (2001). Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research. *Ethics & Behavior*, 11(3), 219–232.

Morris, E., & Carroll, J. (2011). *Policy Works - Recommendations for Reviewing Policy to Manage Unacceptable Academic Practice in Higher Education*. UK: Higher Education Academy.

Prenshaw, P. J. et al. (2001). University academic dishonesty policy and student perceptions of cheating: And exploratory content analysis across fourteen universities. In J. L. Thomas (Ed.), *Advances in Marketing* (pp. 203-208). Jacksonville, AI: Association of Collegiate Marketing Educators.

Tauginienė, L. et al. (2018). *Glossary for Academic Integrity*. ENAI Report (revised version). http://www.academicintegrity.eu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Glossary_revised_final.pdf Accessed March 25 2019