UNIVERSITY OMBUDSMEN ANNUAL REPORTS AS A BAROMETER OF THE INCIDENCE OF STUDENTS' ACADEMIC DISHONESTY ON CAMPUSES

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KEY WORDS

The use and implementation of internal dispute and conflict resolution mechanisms is a growing organizational phenomenon since the middle of the last century (Sutton, et al., 1994). The emergence and implementation of these elements of conflict arbitration within organizations are considered to be linked to: increases in litigation, activism and the requirements imposed by the regulations of each country (Shubert and Folger, 1986). Currently, internal dispute resolution devices can be found in organizations such as public administration bodies, universities, prisons, banks, healthcare organizations, and large corporations (Ziegenfuss and O'Rourke, 2014).

In Spain, the country where the study was carried out, the figure of the university ombudsman (UO) is regulated by Organic Law 6/2001 (LOU, 2001) and has the following characteristics (Ballesteros, 2020):

- They enjoy autonomy and independence, within the framework of their actions, within the organizational framework of the university
- They have attributes of inviolability and immunity in their performance
- No cause or litigation concerning the rights and freedoms of the members of the university is alien to them.
- Must accommodate the specific legislation of each University
- Their actions are established and safeguarded by the principle of confidentiality

One of the main tasks of UO is related to the arbitration of issues and disputes pertaining to research integrity, academic integrity and fraud in evaluation processes (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020). The present study[1] advocates an innovative approach for the analysis of academic integrity and misconduct strictly related to students' assessment: the content analysis of the annual reports of the Spanish UO.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does the subject of academic fraud (dishonesty in evaluations by students) reach the Spanish UO?

2. What are the issues of dishonesty/fraud in student evaluations dealt with by the UO?

3. What decision have the UO made regarding these cases? What recommendations do they establish?

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[1]Results of this study are part of an article been reviewed to be published in an academic journal.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is a discrete research method that tries to examine documents or communicative elements to understand how a certain person or organization constructs their reality (Ceresola, 2019).

In practice, the investigation began with an online search to obtain the annual reports of the Spanish UO that would be the object of the analysis. For this, the total number of university defenders assigned to the State Conference of University Defenders (https://cedu.es/) was established as an initial sam-ple, who, at the time of fieldwork (April-May 2020), were 54. For each UO, the list of reports published on the internet was accessed and the last 3 annual reports published with a maximum age of 5 years were downloaded; In the cases in which three reports were not available, 1 or 2 were downloaded and in 5 cases no report or annual report could be accessed, so the final sample of reviewed reports is made up of 136 documents from 49 Spanish UO.

RESULTS

Actions related to dishonest behaviour by students rarely exceed 5% of the total number of proceedings carried out annually by Spanish UO. If data is analysed from a global perspective, we find that the percentage of interventions associated with issues related to the academic integrity of the students, reported in the analysed reports, is very low (less than 0.6% of the total actions carried out).

Data collected show that the greater volume of interventions carried out by UO, related to dishonest behaviour among students in their assessment and evaluation activities, are connected with malpractices during evaluation tests or exams. Regarding the interventions described in the annual reports of the Spanish UO that are linked to misconduct in the elaboration of essays (both undergraduate and graduate), plagiarism stands out far above the rest.

A total of 16 recommendations, made by the UO in the reports analysed, have been identified around the following thematic categories:

- Exercise extreme precautions in mass examinations
- Act legally against fraud in evaluation processes
- Apply anti-plagiarism systems and programs. Take precautions when dealing with the subject
- Consider plagiarism in the evaluation regulations
- Elaborate guides of good practices of the students. Train students and faculty staff
- Have clear protocols to act in cases of dishonesty in evaluations

CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis carried out, the first thing that stands out is the low frequency of actions and demands that reach the Spanish UO related to dishonest practices carried out by students (less than 1% of the whole litigation processes). Of the actions and lawsuits related to dishonesty in the evaluation processes that have reached the UO, the practices related to academic plagiarism and copying during evaluation tests stand out, far above the rest. On this point we would like to draw attention to the non-existence or low presence of actions and lawsuits related to other dishonest behaviours that have experienced a significant boom in recent years such as: contract cheating, the impersonation in evaluation processes, the "fabrication" or invention of data and information in essays.

In the annual reports analysed, it is very clear that Spanish UO emphasize the existence of a context of legal uncertainty when solving some of the conflicts they have to face related to fraud in the evaluation processes. Resolving this question is of great importance since the existence of clear institutional regulations and policies, agreed upon and known by the members of the university community, acts as a containment dam for dishonest behaviour by students (LoSchiavo and Shatz, 2011).

In addition, UO suggest the adoption and improvement of certain strategies aimed at reducing dishon-

est behaviour by students, highlighting above all: improvements in the teaching-learning and teaching processes, the implementation of detection systems and control of improper conduct and carry out training activities aimed at students and teachers on the subject of academic integrity in evaluation processes.

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