

ENHANCING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY THROUGH A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE - QUO VADIS? AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY LENS

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"The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them... where insanity refers to doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The important thing is not to stop questioning." - Albert Einstein

Keywords

Academic integrity, Appreciative inquiry, community of practice, higher education, transformation.

Abstract

In valuing the expression by Albert Einstein, rethinking academic integrity in a changing higher education (HE) landscape has become eminent, especially in the context of online teaching, learning, and assessment. Against this backdrop, the North-West University (NWU) has established a Community of Practice for Academic integrity (CoPAI) towards curbing the prevailing 'academic misconduct insanity' phenomenon, going beyond the ordinary thinking performed in normal science. This novel approach to enhance academic integrity through a CoPAI and an appreciative inquiry lens replaces the ordinary thinking about academic integrity at our institution. Prior to the CoPAI, academic integrity was valued from a segregated approach, where (i) not all levels of the institution including all management levels, all academic and support staff, and students across all faculties and campuses were brought together as a community, and (ii) the valorisation of institutional aspects, engagement, and empowerment of the lecturers, as well as engagement and empowerment of the student were treated as separate initiatives in enhancing academic

integrity. This novel approach to CoPAI in the South African context, and globally, is evident from literature.

To this extent, the overarching paradigm, the philosophical assumptions, basic beliefs that define CoPAI, and values adopted by CoPAI, are vested in a pragmatic worldview. The pragmatist worldview offers an alternative epistemological paradigm acknowledging that any attempt to produce knowledge occurs within a social context, and that knowledge is not about an abstract relationship between the knower and the known, but rather refers to an active process of inquiry by valuing different approaches as research communities (Morgan, 2014). This worldview defines how a CoPAI is thinking about academic integrity and how a CoPAI makes sense of the complexities of academic misconduct. The purpose of CoPAI is encapsulated in the establishment of a CoPAI identity at the NWU, striving to achieve actionable insights, and is the birth of a coherent and cohesive vision for academic integrity at NWU. It is the beginning of a long-term project in which CoPAI will strive to diversify and grow. Its aim is to engage in exploratory and critical

conversations in driving and promoting academic integrity on all levels at the NWU and is represented by a voluntary and spontaneous group including all NWU Faculties and Support Departments. A purposive, snowball sample was employed following the spontaneous and voluntary nature of a community of practice. CoPAI greatly benefited from the effectiveness of a community through invaluable engagements and feedback from its members. The pragmatist paradigm further afforded CoPAI the opportunity to use a methodological approach that works best to investigate how a community of practice can enhance academic integrity at a HEI. This approach is aligned with the appreciative nature of the research methodology in sharing best practices, creating, and sharing of knowledge in the form of research and practical (teaching and learning) outputs, and ultimately fostering national & international collaboration on academic integrity. This approach frames CoPAI in a conceptual structure and represents the aim and design of the study.

CoPAI adopted an appreciative inquiry as methodology. Appreciative inquiry embraces principles and theories underlying a strengths-based change approach which assumes that each social system has a positive core of strengths. Moore (2021) defines appreciative inquiry as an innovative problem-solving approach, instilling self-determined change, that focuses on solutions rather than problems only. Appreciative inquiry further embraces the constructionist nature of reality where relationships and conversations describe what is real (Watkins, 2008). This approach is deemed necessary to investigate how a CoPAI can enhance academic integrity in HE. Appreciative inquiry further promotes positive psychology and positive organisational scholarship as a theoretical framework and includes three concepts: appreciation, inquiry, and wholeness. These concepts are briefly explained taking the CoPAI approach into account.

Appreciation entails that we appreciate and recognise people (as well as their valuable contributions), building on their strengths. These collated strengths become the foundation for positive change. Within the CoPAI context, appreciation is the result of the

establishment of a community of practice. CoPAI thus attempts to embrace this community where CoPAI anticipates building relationships and engaging in conversations about the realness of academic misconduct, and how to increase and protect the integrity of qualifications at the institution. This leads to the second concept of inquiry. Inquiry is to ask questions to learn from one another and to collaboratively identify a shared vision. The auspice of inquiry drives curiosity and a desire to discover. CoPAI relies on the appreciative methodology which includes specific techniques and operational steps used to bring about positive change in the HE system driven by the 4D cycle or model. CoPAI adopted this 4D model to thematically analyse the contributions of members through hosting various forum discussions. The third concept includes wholeness. This tenet of wholeness encourages participation on all levels of an institution. In this vein, CoPAI adopted a holistic approach which includes a range of institutional aspects, empowering of the lecturer and empowerment of the student. CoPAI envisaged participation, following this holistic approach, on all levels of the institution including all management levels, all academic and support staff, and students across all faculties and campuses.

In this context, CoPAI further adopted the basic principles underlying appreciative inquiry. Firstly, the constructionist principle emphasises that appreciative inquiry is a collaborative process that assumes that when people engage in conversations, they co-construct knowledge, structures, strategies, and processes needed for a shared understanding to succeed. This principle is directly aligned with the establishment of the CoPAI. The second principle refers to simultaneity, which suggests that inquiry leads to change and generates conversations that can potentially lead to action. The third principle is referred to as the poetic principle responsible for enforcing choice. This principle holds that we choose to make a difference. These principles are specifically enacted upon through the initiative of NWU academics towards the establishment of CoPAI, envisioning transformative change in the institution. Under the CoPAI leadership, the members of CoPAI are encouraged and

motivated to collaborate and create positive and optimistic solutions to the challenges of academic integrity. Furthermore, the anticipatory principle suggests that our current actions or behaviour are shaped by the visions we hold of the future. CoPAI strives to bring about positive change in the institution by the visions we hold for academic integrity. Lastly, the positive principle suggests that lasting change is dependent on social interaction and connectedness. CoPAI strives in this regard to sustain valuable relationships and the continuity of CoPAI forum discussions on both staff and student platforms.

CoPAI hosted six discussion forums during 2021 with a strategic focus to enhance academic integrity at the NWU. Data were generated from written and spoken narratives that emanated during the forum discussions and analysed through the identification of emerging themes and conversational analysis. Ethical approval was not necessary at this stage as the data collected through the application of

appreciative inquiry were used to inform institutional practices. The ethical considerations of this study also permits presenting at conferences since it constitutes institutional research. The findings and insights of these forums helped the NWU to strengthen their effort to enhance academic integrity on different levels. This will be expanded on in this paper.

Through the adoption of an appreciative inquiry, CoPAI succeeded in identifying some crucial needs for enhancing academic integrity at the NWU. It further enabled CoPAI to ensure that our institution remains relevant, responsive, and agile within an overarching transformational framework towards student success when faced with disruptions in the HE landscape. It is also clear that this is an ongoing task and that pertinent shortcomings regarding academic integrity processes (e.g., development of SOPs) at this institution should be prioritised and addressed.

References

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