

STUDENTS ON THE FRONTLINES OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY- WHO ARE THEY AND (WHY) DO WE NEED THEM?

Pegi Pavletić¹, Megan O' Connor², Sue Hackett³, Borna Nemet⁴

¹*European Students' Union, Brussels, Belgium*

²*Union of Students in Ireland, Dublin, Ireland*

³*Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Dublin, Ireland*

⁴*European Students' Union, Brussels, Belgium*

Abstract

The European Students' Union (ESU) is an umbrella organisation representing over 20 million students across Europe, with the goal to provide a unified student voice on different topics of students' interest. ESU is a member of the European Network for Academic Integrity since 2020, and during this time, the topic of academic integrity, as well as students' position from a stakeholder perspective in its promotion, has been debated. Many National Unions of Students (NUSs) claim that their national systems do not include active student participation in the development of policies and procedures in relation to academic integrity, and in particular when the academic misconduct has been identified.

Student participation in policy-making adds a dimension to the implementation of that particular policy, which cannot be substituted by any other stakeholder group, and failure to involve students can lead to a failure in the efficiency of its implementation. Students are also unable to develop an understanding or capacity to assess, criticise or provide input on the development of appropriate measures which are both robust and rigorous, and also fit for purpose, recognising that the student is not the key perpetrator but rather a victim. This non-involvement in the communal development of knowledge and capacity, means that the student is effectively excluded from the development and decision-making processes. Students could assess the effectiveness of policy

in practice, suggest new and innovative ways to assure academic integrity within the curricula, but they could also warn other stakeholders of new ways of misconduct and how to manage it, if they were included in the work of expert bodies on academic integrity.

Due to the lack of policy involving students, there are not many practices to involve them either, and the students sometimes lack the initiative to engage in the topic themselves. This lack of student interest can result in lack in general understanding and implementation of academic values in students' work and education, allowing the students to leave higher education institutions without the basis for their future work either in industry or in academia. Additionally, students are missing a key link between themselves and the experts working on the topic and upkeeping institutional integrity, that would broaden their ability to independently investigate and participate in spreading the academic integrity values among peers.

However, some countries, such as Croatia (Zakon o Studentskom Zboru i Drugim Studentskim Organizacijama, 2007) and Ireland (National College of Ireland, 2020) readily involve students in discussions about academic integrity, prevention of misconduct, and implementation of different methods to preserve academic values within the curricula. An example of student engagement and positive promotion of academic integrity involves the

work of The National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) in Ireland, established in 2019 by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. It functions as a peer-driven group of higher education stakeholders and experts, including students, who work on the topics of common interest in academic integrity (National Academic Integrity Network, 2021).

In this paper, we aim to define the role students should have in the scope of academic integrity in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and assess how the students can achieve their full potential through their role as “guardians” of the academic integrity- students’ ombudspersons. The methodology of our paper includes qualitative research on the role of students’ ombudspersons in Croatia and students collaborating with ombudspersons in higher education in Ireland, and compares the effectiveness of these two systems in practice. Our information sources stem from the National Coordinator of the Students’ Ombudspersons in Croatia- an elected representative of the Croatian Students’ Council (CSC), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). The results are based on consultations held with the students involved in academic integrity from these two organizations, and the evaluation of their workload and the need other students express for these positions, as well as the legal aspects of the establishment of their positions. Both of these national unions collaborate on the issues

of academic integrity at the institutional level, but also the national one. We aim to show that the students have an invaluable and core role in addressing academic dishonesty and promoting academic integrity among peers and that they must be involved in all levels of governance, regardless of their expertise (providing that the proper training is provided to them once they take up the position) to enable the optimal equitable outcomes for students.

The recommendations presented in the paper could help in redefining the role of students in academic integrity. Furthermore, our research stresses that the students’ involvement in academic integrity is necessary in spreading awareness of academic misconduct and promoting academic values among the student population.

This paper and the entirety of its research shall be used as a starting point for ESU’s work on enhancing the capacity on students’ rights to academic freedom through the reimagined role of students’ ombudspersons, according to ESU’s Plan of Work (European Students’ Union, 2021). Furthermore, we wish to support and encourage capacity building activities on the topic on an international level, where students would have the same opportunities to participate in academic integrity bodies and initiatives across all member countries of the European Higher Education Area.

References

European Students’ Union. (2021). *Plan of Work 2021-2022*. European Students’ Union. <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=plan-of-work-2019-2020>

National Academic Integrity Network. (2021). *Academic Integrity Guidelines* (pp. 1–30). Quality and Qualifications Ireland. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/academic-integrity-guidelines.pdf>

National College of Ireland. (2020). *Case Study 8: NCI Students’ Union Initiatives on*

Academic Integrity and Alternative Assessments (p. 2). <https://www.ncirl.ie/Portals/0/QA/COVID%20CASE%20STUDIES/Case%20Study%208.pdf?ver=2021-05-18-122531-030×tamp=1621874105094>

Zakon o studentskom zboru i drugim studentskim organizacijama, no. NN 71/2007, Croatian Parliament (2007). [/eli/sluzbeni/2007/71/2182](https://www.zakon.hr/z/eli/sluzbeni/2007/71/2182)