CHANGING TRENDS IN ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR POST-COVID ERA

Salim Razı[1], Irene Glendinning[2], Shiva Das Sivasubramaniam[3], Sarah Elaine Eaton[4], Özgür Çelik[5], Zeenath Reza Khan[6]; Sonja Bjelobaba[7], Teddi Fishman[8], Lorna Waddington[9]

[1]*Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey*
[2]*Coventry University, United Kingdom*
[3]*University of Derby, United Kingdom*
[4]*University of Calgary, Canada*
[5]*Balikesir University, Turkey*
[6]*University of Wollongong in Dubai, United Arab Emirates*
[7]*Uppsala University, Sweden*
[8]*Consultant on Academic Integrity, United States of America*
[9]*University of Leeds, United Kingdom*

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Abstract

As adherence to academic integrity standards is one of the most important aims of academia, many institutions develop academic integrity policies which should be regarded as a core element by quality and qualification assurance agencies. A well-developed policy should reveal responsibilities of stakeholders and provide guidance on investigating suspected cases and delivering sanctions (Razı et al., 2021). Bretag (2013b) also remarks on the importance of a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach in the establishment of a culture of academic integrity. Policies are seen as documents providing guidance to institutions to develop a culture of academic integrity by helping them define their standards, prepare related guidelines and procedures for their stakeholders. Keeping the policies up-to-date is as important as developing them; otherwise, an out-of-date policy may bring more harm than benefit. It is therefore essential to address the changing trends during the COVID-19 pandemic in academic integrity policies by carefully blending what was already in place from pre-COVID era literature. Thus, this presentation aims to first highlight the general framework for academic integrity policies, and then present examples of the changing trends in academic integrity policies during COVID-19.

Paine (1994) suggested two approaches: rule compliance strategy and integrity strategy. The former corresponds to the punitive approach to academic integrity, whereas the latter refers to the educative approach. Although earlier conceptions of academic integrity or responses

to academic misconduct focused on how to prevent academic malpractice and what sanctions should apply to different academic integrity breaches, Bretag (2013b) spoke of an educative approach to academic integrity where proactive measures are prioritized over detection of and reaction to academic misconduct. Such developments fundamentally changed how we formulate our questions from "how do we stop students from cheating?" to "how do we ensure students are learning?" (Bertram Gallant, 2017).

A good, robust, and holistic policy can help build a culture of integrity in an institution by emphasizing the values of integrity (Khan et al., 2019). Policies also serve the purpose of "affecting the way [values are] taught and embedded in curricula" (Bretag, Mahmud, East et al., 2011, p. 1) and good policies can help in reducing misconduct (Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). If policies are not clear, comprehensive, easy to understand or inconsistent, these can raise serious doubt on the quality of the institution's programs, teaching and learning (Bretag, Mahmud, East et al., 2011; Tennant et al., 2007). Policies serve the purpose of contributing to quality and quality management at an institution, which will help to develop shared values stemming from genuine commitment by all stakeholders (Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace et al., 2011; Exemplary Academic Integrity Project – EAIP, 2013).

Fundamentally, integrity is based on ethical principles and values of being honest, consistent, transparent and fair to the participant, public and scientific community. Ethics provides and underpins these principles as guides for research, whilst integrity makes us practise (or carry out) these principles in our day-to-day academic lives (Malan, 2007); therefore, both ethics and integrity collaboratively support appropriate and responsible behaviour in education and research. Organisational policies are usually based on ethical values (Polowczyk, 2017), but they should be written to suit all the different discipline (or subject) areas of an institution. Policies should consider the deviations and/or exceptions to the basic ethical principles.

Academic integrity policies are meant to be holistic, inclusive, and educative (Peters, 2019). Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace et al. (2011) list five core elements to be addressed in an academic integrity policy: access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. Access refers to the ease with which the policy can be accessed or located, read and understood by all stakeholders of the institution, be it staff, students, or faculty. Approach refers to the manner in which the concept is approached or addressed. Responsibility refers to the roles played by all stakeholders involved and what is expected of them in those capacities. Detail refers to the depth of information provided in terms of types of misconduct, severity levels, approach to deal with allegations and processes. Finally, support refers to how the process is implemented, the type of training available for all stakeholders to understand the policy, and on how the process works.

Consulting existing policies might be an effective strategy as a point of departure for those who are either writing or revising policies. Researchers involved with the EAIP identified exemplary policies in Australia that others could use as a reference point (Bretag & Mahmud, 2016; Bretag, Mahmud, East et al., 2011, Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace et al., 2011; EAIP, 2013). Although consulting exemplary policies is an approach we recommend, we caution against lifting text or passages from other policies verbatim without acknowledgement as it could be considered plagiarism. Policies themselves can model ethical decision-making and behaviour that they wish constituents to follow. Policy documents that obviously plagiarise from other sources could lead to public outrage and negative media reporting.

Institutional policies can vary according to the institutional view about academic integrity, academic misconduct or cheating. A reactive approach might be the most primitive form of policy as each academic takes individual responsibility for identifying the misconduct and its consequences. Another approach adopted by some institutions is a formal, almost judicial stance towards handling breaches of academic integrity, seeing cheating as an aberration to be punished. Detection policies focus on catching

and generating evidence about academic integrity breaches. Proactive, deterrent or preventative approaches are designed to discourage and reduce cheating in academic work. Policies that have an educative focus are based on the premise that developing skills and knowledge related to academic integrity is at least as important as punishing students for academic misconduct.

This presentation mainly aims to present examples of the changing trends in academic integrity policies during COVID-19. Despite ill-designed assessment practices during COVID-19, responsible academics and administrators were forced to rethink, redefine, and reassess common policies. For example, invigilated examinations were not viable, and they were replaced by online open book tests, short answer questions, timed assessments etc. Some institutions have tried to introduce new preventive measures such as the controversial 'e-proctoring' (Hollister & Berenson, 2009; Kharbat & Abu Daabes, 2021; Reedy et al., 2021;) which itself created additional challenges to the integrity policies. Therefore, it is essential for the integrity policy to holistically consider the ethical principles, their exceptions, national/international legislation that underpins integrity, and most importantly the situational changes, their needs and implications.

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