

# Tricky question on academic integrity

An expert provided an answer on a tricky question on academic integrity. It was previously published in the regular [ENAI newsletter](#) (April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

## What can I do if my colleagues ignore student cheating?

*The answer for all teachers who observe their colleagues not dealing with student cheating properly was prepared by dr **Irene Glendinning** from Coventry University (UK), a board member of ENAI.*

The consequences of academic staff ignoring or condoning student cheating are very serious for quality and standards in an institution. Even honest students could be tempted to cheat if they feel they are being disadvantaged when they see cheating students gaining higher marks than them, with impunity.

This is a question for institutional leaders to consider. It is worth asking the managers responsible to examine the process that has to be followed if an academic wishes to report a case of student cheating. If this process is too onerous, or such reporting not welcomed, then it would be unsurprising if busy academic staff feel disinclined or discouraged from engaging. In addition, any part-time or casual academic staff, paid on the basis of specific teaching duties, will be opening a “can of worms” by raising cases of student cheating. This is likely to be seen as beyond their remit. Finding ways to incentivise the reporting of student cheating, or at least not penalising academics for doing so, could encourage them to comply. Providing academic and administrative support for academics to help investigate and manage the cases can help towards this end.

However, academics first need to be convinced that student cheating is problematic. Research undertaken in Europe, led by researchers from Coventry and Mendel Universities, demonstrates that student behaviour considered to be unacceptable in some parts of the world is viewed as normal in some other countries and cultures (Glendinning 2013, Foltynnek et al 2018). But even where there are supportive, clear and robust policies and procedures, for many different reasons, some academic staff may choose to ignore them.

Another point to note here is that in many institutions academic staff are themselves responsible for making decisions about whether or not one of their students has been cheating and what sanction to apply. Usually where this type of informal arrangement applies, no records are maintained of suspicions, accusations or outcomes and there is no way of knowing whether there is fairness and consistency in process or any sanctions applied.

There are clear conflicts and tensions between different roles of an academic if they are expected to serve as educator and “judge and jury” for the same students. A much healthier situation is where the decision-making on academic misconduct cases is taken by a suitably trained panel or independent officer, working with a set of standard rules, procedures and sanctions. By removing the “judge and Jury” responsibility from lecturers, allows them to focus on educating and supporting the students. However, the onus still

rests with academics to identify and report suspicions of student cheating and put together supporting evidence.

There is a clear need for regular training involving all people in the institution with responsibility for any aspect of academic conduct (students, academics, administrative and management staff). Under certain institutional cultures the professoriate view themselves as experts and above any need for training, but this is clearly nonsensical. The main purpose of the training is to ensure all members of the academic community are aware of the value of academic integrity and gravity and consequences of academic misconduct to individuals and to the institution as a whole. Increasing awareness helps to underline the responsibilities resting with everyone and improves accountability, transparency and consistency. The regular contact with community members also creates opportunities for feedback that can allow policies and procedures to be modified if needed.

Only where there is strong institutional support for academic integrity, preferably led from the most senior level, perhaps with additional pressure from external sources such as quality assurance bodies, can there be any prospect of an institution-wide culture of academic integrity.

#### References

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- Glendinning, I. (2013) *Comparison of Policies for Academic Integrity in Higher Education across the European Union*, on-line <http://www.plagiarism.cz/ippheae> [accessed 22nd July 2018].