

Academic Integrity as an Education Quality Improvement Tool

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Abstract: The overall quality of higher education is closely related to the academic integrity, whose breach represents enduring international concern. Although students are the group most affected by academic integrity rules, they are generally applied in such a way that students are rather passive recipients of initiatives in this field. The two basic strategies to maintaining academic integrity in higher education institutions involve a policy-based approach and an integrity approach. Focus on the educational aspect supports the idea that rather than force students to be compliant, schools should create environment and further develop students so that the students can not only choose to comply but also have the opportunity to learn and grow from ethical failure.

Keywords: academic integrity; quality; plagiarism; education

1 Academic Integrity and Quality of Education

Academic dishonesty and plagiarism are certainly no longer an unknown phenomenon. In today's digital world, there are countless opportunities for easy access to information of any kind, which also increases opportunities for plagiarism and other forms of unethical behavior. In the academic field, we encounter plagiarism almost every day and it is not an unknown phenomenon in other spheres of our lives, including government institutions and their representatives. There is no doubt that plagiarism negatively affects the quality of education since it reduces the credibility of particular work. Besides, a person who does something like copying information without giving a credit to the source is depriving himself of learning important skills, such as research, citing, structuring an essay or basic communication skills in general. Also, the reputation of an institution that does not repel plagiarism effectively is put at stake. Academic dishonesty cases can reduce the value of a degree earned at a particular institution, which then negatively affects the chances of being hired by a dreamed company or accepted to a program of further study.

It is difficult to talk about the quality of education if students receive grades or even a college degree by fraud. According to a study conducted in Slovakia by MESA 10 that focused on defining the reasons for the unfavourable situation in the Slovak education system, plagiarism appears to be one of the most common ways of cheating. Only 16% of students think that their classmates have never submitted a plagiarized paper. One reason for plagiarism is that students do not know what plagiarism is. "As many as half of the respondents stated as a reason for plagiarism that the student is not such an expert to write the original text. However, in order to avoid plagiarism, it is sufficient to mention sources when reviewing the literature," says analyst Stanislav Lukáč. Other answers suggest that plagiarism may also be caused by the absence of sanctions. Students believe that their classmates plagiarize because of the fact that in the seminar work plagiarism is not monitored (37%) or that teachers do not read their work (25%) (todarozum, 2019).

2 Fighting Plagiarism in Slovakia

One of the reasons for plagiarism in the academic sphere is its difficult detection. Without IT support, it remains the responsibility of teachers to reveal copied text and to use their knowledge of the texts that students use to create their work. So, how is plagiarism in the education system being combated? Foreign experience suggests that introduction of any anti-plagiarism measures leads to its reduction. Many higher education institutions use plagiarism detection systems, and some even provide services to others. There are several commercial companies providing such services. Slovak higher education institutions do take steps to support the fight against plagiarism using information technology as well. Thanks to the initiative of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic with the aim to implement a comprehensive solution of the system for detection of plagiarism at the national level, the Central Registry of Theses and Dissertations was created in 2010 (cms.crzp.sk, n.d.). It collects the graduate publications and compares them with each other and against selected Internet resources through an anti-plagiarism software system. The result of the check is an electronic document showing identical or similar parts of the text compared to other work or documents stored in the system's databases.

Higher education institutions in Slovakia use and used other systems for plagiarism detection before the creation of the Central Registry of Theses and Dissertations. These are systems that work more consistently, due to their extensive database, long-term practice and continuous development based on the requirements and suggestions of the users themselves. One of these systems is Turnitin by the American company iParadigms LLC, which is the world leader in anti-plagiarism systems. It works on a similar principle as the mentioned system used by Slovak institutions. However, its database consists of over 250 million archived works, 24 billion websites, 90,000 periodicals and e-books and is used by 15,000 educational institutions in 126 countries (iParadigms, LLC, n.d.). Nonetheless, such and similar electronic systems also have their drawbacks. Electronic systems, however perfect, are not yet able to clearly determine whether the work is plagiarism. They only indicate textual correspondence with other documents, which may contain generally known facts or cited information and, last but not least, are limited by the scope of their databases. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to be able to devote time to determining the originality of the text for a large number of students and their work. However, the human factor still plays an irreplaceable role. This creates a requirement for the allocation of human resources, which would systematically be devoted to the control of work identified by electronic systems as suspicious. It is questionable whether schools are interested and able to provide such resources. In schools with thousands of students, we are talking about tens of thousands of papers per year when not only final theses but also seminar and course papers are to be examined. The credibility of such an initiative is enhanced by the fact that there is a specific person or team of people involved in the fight against plagiarism, and not just anonymous individuals in the background, or a committee that meets only when necessary and not regularly. The existence of such so-called departments raises the attention of students and leaves them in no doubt that the school is really trying to take the issue of plagiarism and academic integrity seriously and expects it to be taken the same way by the students and staff themselves.

The author has interviewed higher education institutions in Slovakia with the question whether they use any system of education and prevention in the field of academic integrity. Out of a total of 35 public, state and private universities, we were able to obtain a statement from 25. We found that in addition to the disciplinary order, codes of ethics and use of the

already mentioned CRZP system, our universities do not pay increased attention to education and prevention. The only exception is Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, which, according to prof. Fobela, the director of the Center for Ethical Counseling, is active in the Ethics Committee, which is currently working to develop technical prerequisites, methodology, and ways of working to raise awareness of academic ethics. The College of International Business ISM Slovakia in Prešov, the Academy of Police Force and the School of Management in Trenčín are the only higher education institutions that, in addition to the CRZP system, use other systems for detecting plagiarism not only in students' final theses but also in seminar papers. It is the already mentioned system Turnitin used at the School of Management in Trenčín, the system Ephorus at the Academy of Police Force and the system Odevzdej.cz, which is used by ISM in Prešov.

3 Approaches To Building Academic Integrity Environment

Approaches to cheating students vary from highly decentralized to highly centralized, and most schools fall somewhere in this spectrum. The more decentralized the school's response to cheating, the more dangerous, and probably more unjust and inconsistent, it is. At schools with highly decentralized responses, faculty members deal with cheating at their discretion. Institutions with centralized responses require the faculty to report to the academic chairman or an academic integrity office, which then manages it.

There also tend to exist two dominant strategies to maintaining academic integrity at higher education institutions. The policy-based approach tells students what they should not do while the integrity approach gives students guidance on what they should do. The two strategies differ according to the goal, method and tone. However, both attribute the cause of the problem to the nature of an individual student who is considered to be acting inappropriately. The Rule Compliance approach has a disciplinary focus as opposed to development. In other words, it seeks to increase the cost of breaking the rules. The aim of this approach is to create an environment where students follow the rules. The primary method used is discipline, and its tone is usually very legal and adversarial. There is a great deal of administrative involvement. The other strategy is to create an environment where students choose to act ethically. So, the school is responsible for students' ethical development. This Integrity approach is primarily developmental and uses discipline only as a tool. It means that penalties are used if they help the student to develop as a human and not just punish him/her. The tone is generally more about forgiveness and second chances. Schools that use an integrity approach rely heavily on the involvement of faculties and students. Raising awareness of the academic integrity is done through discussion, events or other activities (Gallant, 2012).

Twomey (2009) also supports a holistic approach to prevention in the field of academic ethics, which includes academic integrity education instead of the threat of sanctions. Another author (McCabe, 2005) found that a pedagogical, educational integrity approach increased the likelihood that the pedagogical staff reported students' offenses to the personnel in charge, compared to a repressive or rule compliance approach. Proponents of the pedagogical approach to academic integrity do not disapprove of the repressive approach in this area but promote the link between clear sanctions with education and prevention. Several authors agree that simple and understandable definitions of unethical behavior are not as effective as educational description of what plagiarism is and ways to avoid it. Such information should be accessible both physically and digitally. Researchers at universities in Ontario (Canada) have recommended greater consistency in addressing the so-called unintentional plagiarism and the application of sanctions, as well as the attitude of educators to this issue in their own

publications, in which they should lead by example. One way of learning in this area is webinars, which should be preferred to traditional lectures as students can return to them at any time if necessary (Griffith, 2013). A study by Jacob and Dee (2010) found that students who had had the opportunity to go through an online tutorial on the rules of academic ethics reduced the level of plagiarism through education. They concluded that the tutorial had taught students how to adhere to the rules of academic ethics compared to the expectation that they would increase their belief in the possibility of being caught in violation. Simply put, the Internet provides educational opportunities in academic integrity in a more accessible way than paper. Many academic portals abroad provide students with textual information about academic ethics, but most of them also use the Internet as a dynamic medium to provide quizzes, interactive tutorials, power point presentations, student or teacher videos, links to other sites on this topic, Word and Pdf documents. Such sites also allow educational institutions to provide education in this field to different groups.

Price-Mitchel (2015) considers Integrity to be the basis of social harmony and action. Despite societal forces that test integrity, young people deserve a world that values truth, honesty, and justice. Linked by research to self-awareness, sociability, and the five other abilities on the compass (Compass Advantage Model below), integrity is one of the 8 pathways to every student's success.



Fig. 1 *The Compass Advantage Model* (Price-Mitchell, 2015)

There are five ways teachers develop a culture of integrity:

1. Fill integrity into class culture.

Teachers should clearly express the expectations of academic integrity and the consequences of cheating. But they should go beyond cheating and create a culture that rewards success beyond borders. If students only have grades to measure themselves, then cheating is often a rational strategy to defeat the system. If students are also rewarded for their courage, hard work, dedication and respect for classmates and colleagues, they see and understand that the learning process comes first. This kind of culture promotes integrity.

2. Develop moral vocabulary.

The five core values of academic integrity are:

- responsibility
- respect
- fairness
- credibility
- honesty

Incorporate the teaching of these five values into the curriculum and help students use vocabulary to discuss different historical topics and current events. Students should be guided to find examples of how individuals stood up for their beliefs and values in a way that made a difference to themselves or to the world.

3. Respond appropriately to cheating.

While teachers cannot control student behavior, they can respond consistently to enforcing school and learning policies. Dishonest behavior provides an opportunity for teaching. To help internalize learning, teachers should encourage students to think about and gain meaning from their behavior. Listen to their suggestions, respect and then reiterate expectations that dishonesty is never acceptable in the class.

4. Use quotes to start meaningful conversations.

Famous quotes can be used as discussion starters to help students reflect on topics related to integrity, moral development and other attitudes that will help them develop positive work habits and respectful relationships. They can be used as starters for journal or essay-writing projects.

5. Help students believe in themselves.

Students who adhere to the principles they believe in have a high degree of self-efficacy. The students who developed integrity said that their teachers had helped them to believe in themselves through their:

- Passion for teaching and giving back to the next generation
- Modeling a clear set of values and acting in a way that supported these values
- Commitment to freely giving their time and talent
- Selflessness and acceptance of people different from each other
- Ability to overcome obstacles and showing students that success is possible

When young people learn to believe in themselves, dishonesty and disrespect no longer make sense. Life with integrity becomes a way of life (Price-Mitchell, 2015).

4 Conclusions

Thus, to develop an efficient academic integrity environment in order to fulfill the purpose of fighting acts of dishonesty, the system must clearly define the rules and, consequently, the penalties for violating them. Most higher education institutions have such rules or codes. How consistently the students are informed about how their compliance is monitored is questionable, though. Every system is as good as the people responsible for its functioning. If compliance is not closely monitored and violation is not penalized, the academic integrity program loses its ground.

It is also important to inform students about academic dishonesty, i.e. prevention. Students should be made familiar with the rules of academic ethics and, hence, with the issues it addresses, such as plagiarism, at the beginning of their studies in plenary sessions, which should be compulsory. It is also important to remind students of the existing rules and how to follow them at the beginning of each subject. Supporting literature in the form of brochures clarifying the issues and ways to avoid plagiarism is also important and should be easily accessible. The creation of academic writing courses and their inclusion in the curriculum right from the start of their studies is an important aspect, too. There should be clearly defined penalties for violating the rules. Last but not least, student involvement in all educational activities and events focusing on the benefits of academic integrity should be supported.

The aim of any institutional program fighting academic dishonesty should be to make the students aware that the value of an academic degree depends upon the academic integrity of the institution awarding it and that academic honesty is mandatory for that integrity. Achievement of a degree through the use of dishonest practices lowers the value of the degree and the whole value and pursuit of the educational process. Exams, tests, and papers should be an individual work since the grade a student receives shows the value of the author's own work, not the work of someone else. The academic integrity program should teach the students think and work ethically. Still, the ultimate goal is not to catch and punish cheaters but to build a name of institutions whose graduates are people with high ethical standards. This reputation will make the graduates more competitive on the labor market and more attractive in the eyes of all businesses that value ethical principles of their employees.

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