Academic Integrity – fighting plagiarism, academic misconduct and fraud in higher education

Concept note for Peer Learning Activity
Cyprus, 24-25 October 2019

The aim of the PLA

Academic integrity is an essential ingredient for trust in quality higher education and the **path towards European Education Area**. Without trust in the higher education system of the other Member State and the authenticity of the results of education and research, it is not possible to achieve this ambitious goal. Achieving **automatic recognition** of qualifications and learning periods abroad is only possible if quality and authenticity are ensured. Trust is also a key element for the **European Universities initiative**, where universities create close alliances with a joint long-term vision and joint delivery of innovative learning, teaching, and where relevant research opportunities through deep cooperation at all levels. The ambitious goals of the future **Erasmus+ programme** will cover new forms of online and blended mobility, which may also raise new challenges to academic integrity.

The aim of this Peer Learning Activity (PLA) is to explore **how higher education authorities and institutions can enhance academic integrity**, and discuss, share and assess the effectiveness of related policies and practices. By exchanging on the recent developments and reforms, the PLA will examine the relevant national and institutional strategies, policies and tools as well as their implementation in practice. While the PLA will touch upon different aspects of academic integrity, including research integrity, a particular focus will be on academic misconduct related to students and their learning process.

What is academic integrity?

Academic integrity refers to "commitment, even in the face of adversary, to the fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage"[i]. It implies "compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards and practices by individuals or institutions in education, research and scholarship"[ii]. In contrast, academic dishonesty or misconduct "denotes any attempt to subvert or evade the fundamental values of academic integrity"[iii].

Challenges in academic integrity and misconduct in education, research and scholarship affect all higher education systems and institutions as well as their students and staff. They cover a wide range of issues[iv], among others:

- Academic misconduct in research, such as: fabrication, falsification and plagiarism; predatory publishing; authorship abuse; data manipulation to obtain a desired result; representing observations as genuine when they are not; issues in review mechanisms;
- Academic misconduct related to students, such as: plagiarism and failures of correct acknowledgement practice; contract cheating or paying for a third party to prepare an assignment[v]; submitting for assessment of review work prepared by a third party; collusion between students, such as unauthorised collaboration in preparation or presentation of work (e.g. allowing personal work to be copied by others); cheating in examinations and other assessment tasks; using forged or altered certificates or transcripts e.g. false academic qualifications of authentic higher education institutions from diploma mills; offering bribes for admission or for grades, fabrication or falsification of information or student identity[vi];
- Institutional misconduct including governance issues such as conflict of interest arising from for-profit affiliation of public officials responsible for higher education with universities; complacency, bribery, nepotism.

Why academic integrity is important, and what are the risks?

Trust is a crucial building block of the path towards European Education Area by 2025. Academic integrity is an essential ingredient for trust in the quality of higher education and research.

Breaches to academic integrity are increasingly driven by technological advances and internationalisation as well as pressures on students and staff and the competition for prestige and resources. The prevalence of academic misconduct and dishonesty is impossible to quantify precisely, because they exist in many different – often hidden – forms[vii] . Internationalisation of higher education has increased the need to tackle fraud and dishonest practices, given the global threats such as diploma mills, contract cheating, 'predatory' publishing and global communications. A 2017 paper in the Journal of Academic Ethics estimated that 3.5% of students worldwide engage in contract cheating (ranging from 0.3% to 7.9% across the samples) while 62.5% of these students would cheat again[viii].

A failure to address academic misconduct and dishonesty or the challenges to academic integrity may have serious results. It erodes public trust in the quality of higher education and institutions and decreased the value of higher education qualifications. It may also undermine the willingness to support higher education from the public purse. Reputational damage to one provider may lead to the damage on the whole national higher education system[ix]. A recent survey found that, on average, 34% of Europeans believe there is corruption in their national education system, with country-by-country results ranging from 6% to 72%[x]. Contract cheating firms do not only risk the reputation of higher education, and students' academic and professional careers; they also pose a risk to employers and even public safety given that students might graduate without appropriate skills and qualifications. In clinical studies, academic misconduct can endanger lives[xi].

International frameworks and national policies

Protection of fundamental values in higher education, such as academic integrity, is taken up by international organisations as well as higher education institutions. It is

referred to in the **Paris Communique** of the European Higher Education Area, together with other fundamental values like academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public responsibility of and for higher education. The **1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel**[1] describes the rights and obligations of academic staff, including duties and responsibilities concerning academic integrity. The **Magna Charta Universitatum[2]**, signed by 889 universities from 88 countries of the world, contains principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as a guideline for good governance and self-understanding of universities in the future. The **Magna Charta Observatory**, the signatories' association, undertakes work to ensure the integrity of intellectual and scientific work in institutions and society, thus reinforcing trust in relationship between universities and their communities.

Comparable national data on academic integrity in Europe is limited but shows significant room for improvement in preventing, detecting, tackling and monitoring academic misconduct. The results of the [European project on anti-plagiarism policies](#)[xii] highlighted the variation across higher education systems and institutions in terms of:

- the attitudes and approaches to corruption, malpractice, cheating and plagiarism;
- standards, pedagogy and policies; and
- expectations for student assessment, achievement and conduct.

National and institutional policies are key to raising awareness and creating solutions to academic integrity challenges. International evidence shows that effective responses rely on a conjoint action by the authorities and the higher education community, but increasingly also stakeholders, such as employers and student organisations[xiii]. Effective approaches rely on mobilising all available means to address academic integrity (legislation; quality assurance; awareness raising about and research into academic integrity; training provision for higher education staff and students; use of technology; monitoring and publishing the results), but so far only few countries in Europe have developed such approaches.

Focus of the PLA

This PLA aims to bring together representatives of higher education institutions as well as national authorities. It builds on the previous peer learning seminar by the ET 2020 Working Group on Higher Education in Brussels in December 2018 (Towards a European Education Area by 2025: creating trust and accountability in higher education systems: the topic of 'academic integrity and the fight against plagiarism').

The PLA will seek answers to the following questions:

Setting the scene: current state of academic integrity

- What evidence is available on academic integrity and the current risks and problems? Have there been baseline studies, surveys, audits? Is academic integrity systematically monitored, reported and recorded?

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[1] http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

[2] http://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/read-the-magna-charta/the-magna-charta

- What is the impact of technological advances to academic integrity? What threats and risks does digitisation pose on academic integrity? How can digital technologies promote academic integrity and address academic dishonesty (analytics for text similarity and linguistics, secure digital qualifications etc.)?
- What practical steps has been or can be taken at national and institutional levels (for example by introducing new assessment methods)?

Role of higher education institutions and other stakeholders

- What type of guidance and training for staff and students is effective in promoting academic integrity? How could stakeholders such as employers, parents and the wider public be 'educated' about the importance of academic integrity?
- To what extent have higher education institutions developed institutional strategies for academic integrity? To what extent methods of deterring and detecting are in place in pedagogy, education and training? What role does the institutional culture play in promoting academic integrity?

Role of national and European policymaking

- What policy levers national authorities can use to promote academic integrity and address academic dishonesty? Are higher education regulatory processes fit for purpose?
- What mechanisms can countries use to ensure that higher education institutions have policies to promote and uphold academic integrity and address academic misconduct and dishonesty? Are relevant policies, strategies and sanctions in place at all levels?
- How could quality assurance systems and recognition processes help to improve academic integrity and reduce fraud?
- Where could European cooperation bring added value?

Discussions at the PLA will feed into the discussions at the Directors General for Higher Education meeting under the Croatian Presidency.

END NOTES

[i] See The International Centre for Academic Integrity: https://academicintegrity.org/fundamental-values/

[ii] See European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI): https://www.academicintegrity.eu/wp/

[iii] See The International Centre for Academic Integrity: https://academicintegrity.org/fundamental-values/

[iv] For details on issues see: http://www.academicintegrity.eu/wp/glossary/

[v] Contract cheating covers essay mills, homework completion, impersonations for exams and coursework.

[vi] TEQSA (2017). Guidance note on Academic Integrity: https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/guidance-note-academic-integrity

[vii] Council of Europe: Education for democracy. Tackling today's challenges together: Corruption in education. https://rm.coe.int/16806cc3f7

[viii] Curtis, G.J. & Clare, J. (2017). How Prevalent is Contract Cheating and to What Extent are Students Repeat Offenders? Journal of Academic Ethics (2017) 15: 115. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-017-9278-x

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2013. www.transparency.org/gcb2013/report/

[xi] See Guardian: "We need more investigations into research misconduct", 11 July 2018, by Norman Lamb. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jul/11/we-need-more-investigations-into-research-misconduct

[xii] "The Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe" IPPHEAE, http://plagiarism.cz/ippheae/

[xiii] "Strategies for Promoting Academic Integrity". Powerpoint presentation by Dr Irene Glendinning in the meeting of ET 2020 Working Group on Higher Education in Brussels in December 2018 (PLL 'Towards a European Education Area by 2025: creating trust and accountability in higher education systems: the topic of 'academic integrity and the fight against plagiarism')