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Understanding academic integrity: stakeholders' perspective

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Abstract

The paper addresses the academic integrity as the key pillar of quality in higher education and the threats it currently faces. The authors analyse academic integrity from the perspective of higher education institutions, students, authorities and quality assurance agencies. The examples from the national and international practice are used as evidence. The authors conclude by suggesting measures to counter contract cheating.

Introduction.

Rapid development of mass open online courses (MOOCs) that started a decade ago as a result of the advancement of information technologies skyrocketed worldwide during the global pandemic thanks to massive financial contributions and the necessity to meet the ever-increasing demand in education. It was additionally supported by the growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) that has invisibly penetrated all the spheres of our lives and transformed them irreversibly. In many spheres these transformations are regarded as purely positive. However, the system of education seems to stand out from the list and suffer rather than benefit from these advancements. There is currently a lot of debate around the «moral code of academia» [Student Academic Integrity Policy, 2020; 4] more commonly defined as academic integrity and the challenges it faces.

The International Center for Academic Integrity defines it as «a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage» [International Center for Academic Integrity]. In the most general sense, academic integrity «complies with ethical and professional principles and standards» [Tauginienė, L., et al. 2018; 8]. It is fundamental to ensure high standards and credibility of higher education at all levels and in all jurisdictions.

Even though academic misconduct has had a long history and has taken a wide variety of forms (academic fraud, contract cheating, ghostwriting, etc.), the notion of academic integrity nowadays is under more serious threat than ever before. In the nearest past, the instances of academic misconduct were mainly local and took place at some physical and usually well-known educational institutions with the relevant reputation. Modern contract cheating providers are greatly flexible virtual entities without any national identification, able, if trapped, to resume their activity almost immediately.

This threat is already in place. According to Newton (2018) in samples from 2014 to 2018 the number of students admitting to paying someone else to undertake their work was 16%, which amounts to 31 million students around the world. However, even this impressive number may be underestimated. Not all instances of cheating are revealed in the first place due to a lack of the relevant tools and competencies, and a very small share of students are ready to confess cheating even after graduation. The severity of the consequences of academic integrity breaches is even harder to evaluate. The challenged quality of education and consequent employment on the labour market without properly developed skills or qualifications may cause significant damage to all the stakeholders involved.

In order to address threats to academic integrity, the joint efforts of all the stakeholders are needed: students, higher education institutions (HEIs), authorities, and quality assurance agencies (QAAs).

1. Students/HEIs' perspective

The incongruity of the academic integrity problem lies in the fact that the most interested stakeholders are, actually, the worst violators. This is partly because many students do not consider contract cheating to be illegal in chase of a fast and effortless outcome. According to Turnitin's survey [Turnitin.n.d.], 20% of students do not understand that contract cheating is wrong, and 25% of the respondents claim that their educational institutions do not have contract cheating policies at hand. Among other drivers that push students towards breaching the academic integrity standards are numerous external pressures that make students vulnerable to contract cheating. These may include financial, time, language, family, and peer pressures or else dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning [INQAAHE Toolkit..., 2020; 19] on the one hand and powerful marketing and persuasive methods applied by contract cheating service providers on the other.

Even though students should be responsible for their education and should be interested in its quality, these are HEIs that must ensure that the principles of academic integrity are communicated to and upheld by their entire academic community. [INQAAHE Toolkit, 2020;5]

The reasons why it does not happen are varied in nature. The tools that counter contract cheating have restricted functional capacity. For example, the Antiplagiat service in Russia identifies plagiarism and AI input in the work but cannot identify the involvement of contract cheating service providers. At the same time, the academic staff of the university may lack relevant knowledge to identify the instances of contract cheating. If a contract cheating instance is identified, they often do not know how to proceed with it. Legislation does not have proper punishment, reprimands, or reporting mechanisms to deal with violators. Moreover, the HEI itself does not want any negative publicity, thus trying to conceal the fact that cheating has occurred. [INQAAHE Toolkit, 2020;16]. Contract cheating service providers, on the contrary, promptly adjust their strategies to the changing circumstances. Some even promise «to mimic a student's unique writing style to ensure a 100% quality outcome.» [Gorenko, 2020] or offer some form of plagiarism — free guarantee

2. Perspective of authorities

Even though education authorities in some countries do not provide guidance or oversight for policies relating to academic integrity, mainly because people responsible for drafting the legislation are not familiar with or do not take seriously the problem of contract cheating, assuming that it is the responsibility of HEIs or QAAs, there are good practices in some countries that should be taken as a benchmark by other countries. For example, a person or a company providing or advertising cheating services in New Zealand «is liable on conviction to a fine up to 10 000 NZD (about 6000 USD or 500 000 RUB) (NZ official legislation website. 2020; 292E). We believe, the amount of the fine should be considerable, as low fines for academic integrity breaches may be considered as service costs by contract cheating providers. The rough estimates of revenue gained by one contract cheating provider on one micro-outsourcing site amount to \$92,001 USD, while the actual industry income is likely to be substantially higher.» [Lancaster, T. 2020]. There are currently no laws that would impose fines on cross-border contract cheating service providers. Therefore, cross-country cooperation is an essential component of protecting academic integrity.

3. Perspective of quality assurance agencies

Quality assurance agencies play a central role in ensuring academic integrity by assessing the provider and documenting its compliance with the predetermined standards and criteria. The certificate of accreditation serves as evidence of the relevant quality of the accredited study programmes or educational institutions that meet stakeholders' expectations. The certificate is issued by a credible accreditation agency based on careful evaluation, transparent procedure, and published documents, which altogether serve as an indicator that the educational institution can be trusted.

The National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA) has been a strong advocate of academic integrity in its activities since its establishment. Forming a quality culture in educational institutions is part of NCPA's mission [ncpa.ru. (n.d.) Mission]. NCPA is recognised at the national level by being registered in the list of accrediting bodies of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. It voluntarily subjected itself to several external reviews carried out by ENQA (2014, 2019), EQAR (2014, 2019), and APQR (2017, 2023) thus proving its procedures are compliant at the international level. NSPA's standards and criteria used to evaluate HE programmes address academic integrity in its documents (Regulations of public accreditation and Standards and criteria for public accreditation) [ncpa.ru. (n.d.). Documents]. The main goal of the credible accreditation agency is to protect accreditation integrity and provide expert advice and guidance to the sector.

Credible accreditation agencies also face unfair competition as diploma mills have stimulated the emergence of accreditation mills offering fake quality assurance documents. The increasing demand in education requires more sophisticated systems of quality assurance to meet the needs and expectations of students and keep the reputation of educational institutions.

Knowledge sharing on the measures that are taken by QAAs to encourage HEIs to adhere to the academic integrity, on how the academic integrity is reflected in the standards and criteria of accreditation is essential to ensuring the adherence to the values. It might also help prevent the academic misconduct when the accreditation agency publishes the identified instances and maintains a database of academic cheating service providers and users.

4. Countering contract cheating

HEIs, authorities and QAAs should join their efforts to develop a collective approach to disrupt the activity of contract cheating service providers. In order to develop measures against contract cheating, institutions should first and foremost develop and publicize clear academic integrity policy that can be effectively and consistently implemented. Ongoing training should be in place for students and staff about the value of academic integrity, the risks of academic misconduct and how it can be avoided. There should be serious punishment for academic misconduct, but at and support of those who follow the policy. Checking the rough drafts of students' works along with early detection of students who need extra support might reduce the risk of contract cheating. HEIs should understand what type of students are targeted and what methods cheating service providers use to address these students.

Authorities' responsibility is to develop and implement systemic policies and legislation in order to promote academic integrity in education.

QAAs ensure the quality of education therefore it is their primary responsibility to safeguard the reputation of HEIs by introducing the academic integrity component in their standards and criteria. Moreover, QAAs recommendations for HEIs to counteract these actions. QAA's fair share is to develop more sophisticated systems of quality assurance that could provide guidance and support for HEIs, students, and authorities for a better future.

Conclusion

It was digitalization that boosted the breach of academic integrity, and it is digitalization that should prevent academic misconduct. «When used responsibly, AI has the potential to support and enhance the learning process» [Turnitin]. The continuous development of new powerful IT tools is bound to prevent education fraud. However, digitalization advancements are purely instrumental. A clear education quality assurance and ethical strategy always come first. In order to work that way, it should be backed with the properly established «moral code of academia» being an integral part of the internal quality assurance system of HEIs, guiding principle of the work of authorities and the foundation of QAAs' standards and criteria. Only joined efforts will help to bring up a new generation of ethically responsible professionals. Authorities' responsibility is to develop and implement systemic policies and legislation in order to promote academic integrity in education.

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