

‘Academic intelligence versus artificial integrity’

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Extended abstract: Academic integrity can be conceived both as a requirement for, and as priority of, a deep approach to learning in higher education. As such it must form a key pursuit of HE institutions, and must be fostered through all aspects of academic practice and education management. The various senses of the temporal dimension of this effort are also important to stress. Firstly from the viewpoint of an individual student’s or cohort’s progression and overall experience throughout their studies; secondly in the sense of a cycle involving interrelated and mutually supported stages (such as awareness-building, prevention, detection, substantiation, treatment and back to awareness building and prevention); and thirdly as a continuous effort aimed at making gradual progress across cohorts. A long-term approach is therefore essential in mapping all the opportunities for instilling academic integrity values, and in developing appropriate and effective mechanisms for supporting students, faculty and staff in their engagement with academic work.

The above description highlights the inherent complexity involved in dealing with the issue of academic integrity at an institutional level. For reasons related either to lack of knowledge or experience on the issue, or to practical matters such as staffing and costs, academic integrity is often treated in relative isolation, i.e. not as part of strategic academic planning. Moreover, academic integrity mechanisms are often primarily concerned with handling suspected cases of academic unfair practice, i.e. focused more on treating breaches of academic integrity than on awareness-building and prevention.

A related potential weakness, which this presentation focuses on, is the tendency by some institutions towards adopting a mechanistic, procedural approach towards academic integrity. There seems to be a (it is argued) flawed contention that the use of plagiarism-detecting software, and a focus on uniformity through the adoption of concrete criteria in treating suspected cases, are sufficient in addressing the issue of academic integrity. The presentation argues that this model may be centred more on creating efficiencies than on ensuring fairness and establishing integrity as an imperative. In contrast, academic judgement in dealing with individual cases of suspected unfair practice is often seen as a weakness, or as subjective (and therefore problematic) in relation to ‘objectively’ implemented specified standards and procedures.

This approach may offer some sense of safeguarding against arbitrariness and inconsistencies that may result from biased or non-qualified faculty or staff members. However, an emphasis on the letter rather than the spirit of institutional policies, and over-reliance on tools rather than judgement, may also impair the ability or propensity of faculty to engage with academic integrity in a more meaningful way than simply addressing suspected cases. Seen through the prism outlined by the starting paragraphs, this would constitute a significant caveat. Academic integrity as a value and priority should infiltrate all academic and administrative functions of an institution. Ongoing, consistent and persistent awareness-raising and academic support are essential. The presentation argues that involving, training, and empowering faculty and staff to engage with this part of their role can make a critical contribution towards instilling academic integrity values.

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