

Student disciplinary policies at a distance and online university in South Africa**Ingrid Estha Marais**

ORCID: 0000-0001-8180-8092

Centre for Professional Development, University
of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Maraie@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Academic integrity is at the core of the academic project and is threatened if universities and the academics and students in them, do not take the quest of achieving academic integrity seriously. If other universities, businesses, and the general public lose trust in a specific university due to a perceived lack of academic integrity in the institution and its qualifications, this creates a threat to the sustainability of the university. In this paper I evaluate the student disciplinary policies and codes of a distance education university against the core elements of an exemplary academic integrity policy (Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace, Walker, James, Green *et al.*, 2011). The five core elements identified by Bretag *et al.* (2011) are access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. The university's policies were evaluated against these elements and rated on whether each one has been achieved or not. This analysis is done at the policy level and also encompasses the policy experiences of this university during COVID-19, by unpacking how these policies played out when a major challenge was applied to them. Apart from the policy analysis, this paper is based on 10 months of fieldwork undertaken during 2021 when 28 people were interviewed; an analysis of policies; and an analysis of five years' worth of records from student disciplinary procedures. I argue that the five elements for effective student disciplinary policies need to be present for the institutionalisation of academic integrity to occur.

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Introduction

Academic integrity is at the core of the academic project for universities, and cheating is seen as a risk to the ethical norms of universities (Bajinath & Singh, 2019). Universities must not only act with academic integrity, but there must also be a perception that the university holds academic integrity as being of utmost importance, with all role players, academics, students, and university management working together to achieve its academic integrity goals (Mitchell, 2009). The blending of technology and education introduces ethical issues for universities, and in particular for those involved with online education, who may encounter unique dilemmas that have university-wide implications. For ethical decisions to be made regarding online education, universities must cultivate a culture of trust, explicitly define the correct and incorrect usage of electronic material, and develop a clear understanding of privacy in the university's online environment. "The ethical academy, nominally, is one in which individual members (i.e., students, faculty, and staff) are provided a 'healthy ethical environment...' that supports ethical over unethical or corrupt decision making and conduct", (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:32). In the ethical academy individuals take "individual responsibility to recognize situations characterized by ethical or moral questions", and additionally the academy recognises people who put the university community before their own goals (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:33).

An ethical academy has institutional integrity, which "means that the institution always attempts to do what it promises to do" (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:34). The "institution responds to problems when they are identified, not first to punish the 'bad actors' but to correct systems so as to mitigate factors that may be, in part, responsible for shaping the problems" (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:34). "The ethical academy is not necessary[il]y a perfect one, but [it] is focused on building policies and processes that make ethical conduct and [the associated] choices possible, and [it] allows for reflection when something went wrong" (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:35). An ethical environment not only comprises of the kind of ethics the university has, but it also attempts to cultivate an environment where the university is open about the problems that exist. Focusing on individual training has not led to less misconduct, as, understandably, focusing on individual training is not a panacea to stopping unethical conduct.

One aspect of academic integrity is the policy landscape of the institution, and what the policies and their implementation reveal about the academic integrity of that specific university. Several studies have been done to assess policies at the institutional, state, and continental levels (Bretag *et al.*,

2011; Foltýnek & Glendinning, 2015; Glendinning, 2017; Stoesz, Eaton, Miron & Thacker, 2019; Miron, McKenzie, Eaton, Stoesz, Thacker, Devereaux *et al.*, 2021). Glendinning (2016b) led studies in 27 European countries as part of a European Union project to understand how higher education institutions (HEIs) have responded to increasing levels of plagiarism. One phase of the project focused on how institutions set, applied, and updated their policies. In their national surveys they found many disparities between countries in terms of the maturity of a policy and its practice, with most countries being found to have inadequate policies and processes in place (Glendinning, 2016b:39). As a result of this research, a model for measuring the academic maturity of institutional policies was developed (Glendinning, 2016a). In the Australian context, a study of policies led to the identification of five elements that should be present in academic integrity policies (Bretag *et al.*, 2011).

While several studies exist on academic integrity and cheating, especially plagiarism in the South African context (Singh & Remenyi, 2016; Baijnath & Singh, 2019; Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019; Verhoef & Coetser, 2021), studies of policy and policy implementation around academic integrity at HEIs in South Africa are scarce. One exception is a study by Magaisa (2013) that looked at the process of policy implementation of a plagiarism policy at a rural South African university, where she found that despite having a new policy at the university that suggested using a developmental approach to reducing plagiarism, most lecturers ignored this. She discovered that some lecturers never engaged with the policy itself, leaving a “chasm between the approval of the policy and its implementation by lecturers” (Magaisa, 2013:81).

In a previous article I argue that the institutionalisation of academic integrity is an incomplete project due to contradictory positions between academics and the institution (Marais, 2022). This article looks specifically at the policy landscape and uses a framework developed by Bretag *et al.* (2011) to analyse the academic integrity policy landscape at a certain university. I argue that while there are some aspects that the university meets, there are many aspects that can be improved upon to have a mature policy landscape for the university. It confirms and further extends my argument that, at this university, academic integrity is not yet institutionalised.

Academic integrity and policy

Bretag and Mahmud (2016), define institutional policy as “formal statements of principles which provide the overarching rationale for actions, procedures, or operations. Policy is complemented

by...instruments such as procedures and guidelines” (Freeman (2013) quoted in Bretag & Mahmud, 2016: 465). The role of policy is to help establish an institutional culture of academic integrity at an institution (Morris, 2016:409). The establishment and reviews of academic integrity policies should be collaborative, with working groups on the different aspects and strategies, and an emphasis on education rather than punishment, with resources, commitment, and time allocated to the process (Morris, 2016: 411). For staff to feel that they own an academic integrity policy, there needs to be a discussion of the policy, staff development, regular reviews of academic misconduct cases, and awareness campaigns around the policy (Morris & Carroll, 2016: 456). Policies cannot simply be decided on by senior management and presented to staff since the policy will not be owned by the staff who are the primary implementors of these policies (Morris & Carroll, 2016: 458). Good policy not only defines the negatives but includes the ethical values that underpin the policy, and including both aspects is a teaching and learning opportunity that shows students what to aspire to rather than what to simply avoid doing (Wangaard, 2016:434).

One issue that stands in the way of successful policy implementation is how staff understand, experience, and act upon it; this is underpinned by the attitudes and beliefs that they hold about student learning and cheating (Morris & Carroll 2016:451). A divergence of attitudes may affect policy implementation. Different groups of staff members, from senior management, support, and professional staff to teaching academics, need to be engaged around the policy because each group is affected by decisions the other group makes (Morris & Carroll, 2016:452-453). Concomitantly with engaging staff groups, a framework and decision-making tool should be developed to help staff in deciding the seriousness of the offences, the penalties, and the actual offences to ensure that there is consistency within the university’s approach. Doing this can lead to positive views of policies related to academic integrity (Morris & Carroll, 2016:455). Policy reviews should be informed by evidence and data, both in evaluating the effectiveness of a policy and also unpacking what changes should be made (Morris & Carroll, 2016:457).

Students often do not read and engage with academic integrity policies and thus are confused about what is meant by the elements outlined in the policies, such as what constitutes plagiarism (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014). While one strategy is to have the policies readily available to students, some students may not know that they should access and read these policies. In one survey of a university in Australia that offers both distance and in-person education, distance education students were more likely to have read the policy, as were male students (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014:12). As the study found that academic integrity policies were lost in a deluge of information, the researchers

recommended that not only should the information be readily available, but that students should be specifically educated on university policies through workshops and other educative approaches (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014).

Students and universities may draw on different discourses to explain academic integrity policy. In a study of a Canadian university, the policy documents revealed a moral and regulatory position, while interviews with students found four types of discourses, namely: ethico-legal (which reflected the university's discourse), (un)fairness, confusion, and learning (Adam, Anderson & Spronken-Smith, 2017). The mismatch between the discourses and policies could lead to confusion. Another study found that while punitive policies may lead to compliance, they also elicit fear in students and do not lead students to think about the underlying principles and moral grounding of the policies, which in turn does not lead to "fostering an ethical position of integrity" (Young, Miller & Barnhardt, 2018:14).

Academic integrity policies also need to be cognisant of the culture in which they are embedded. A study comparing students' perceptions of plagiarism policies found marked differences between the United Kingdom (UK) and Eastern European countries, which the researchers ascribed to the differences in national cultures using Hofstede's cultural dimensions scale (Mahmud, Bretag & Foltýnek, 2019). Further, in countries where politicians and corporate leaders act with impunity and corruption is rife, academic cheating is more prevalent (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011: 41) and accepted both as a cultural norm and in society. Cultural and societal norms create the context in which academic integrity policies need to operate.

Framework for evaluating policy maturity

The way that "a university defines and explains the role of academic integrity in its policy will affect the way it is taught and embedded in the curriculum. It therefore follows that policies, procedures, teaching and assessment practices should be interconnected" (Bretag *et al.*, 2011:3). Citing and extending East (2009), they show that to create a culture of academic integrity, a cycle of four elements needs to be present; these elements are: policy, teaching and learning, review of policy and process, and academic integrity decisions. Narrowing down from 39 policies at Australian universities, Bretag *et al.* (2011:6) found 12 exemplary policies. Through an iterative process, Bretag *et al.* (2011) identified the five main elements of an exemplary academic integrity policy. These elements are:

- Access: referring to how easy a policy is to access and read.
- Approach: “where academic integrity is viewed as an educative process” with a “clear statement of purpose and values with a genuine and coherent institutional commitment” (Bretag *et al.*, 2011:7).
- Responsibility: the policy outlines who is responsible for what and names the various stakeholders, from students to senior management. In this section Bretag *et al.* (2011) also refer to the institutional nature of academic integrity.
- Detail: description of cheating and a classification of severity, including how cheating is identified, and the “reporting, recording, confidentiality and appeals process” (Bretag *et al.*, 2011:7).
- Support: training and awareness in various forms to sensitise staff and students to what academic integrity is. For Bretag *et al.* (2011), “enabling strategies enact the policy. Without long-term, sustainable and practical support resources, a policy will not be enacted, no matter how well it is articulated” (Bretag *et al.*, 2011:6–7).

Bretag *et al.* (2011) also compared their five elements with the UK’s HE Academy (HEA) recommendations on good policy. The HEA’s recommendations consist of 12 standards that have been mapped onto the five elements in the table below:

Bretag <i>et al.</i> 's core elements	UK HEA recommendations
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a central web area on the institutional website
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a cross-institutional group or committee • Include statements about the importance of academic scholarship and honesty in the policy and related guidance for unacceptable academic practice where the principles and values for academic integrity and academic practice are considered
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a cross-institutional group or committee • Be explicit about the responsibilities of the institution, staff, and students
Detail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be explicit about the strategies used to identify possible instances of unacceptable academic practice • Develop documentation for policy and procedures that are well structured, and easy to understand, use and follow • Carefully consider terminology, definitions, and associated examples • Provide clear and detailed procedures for reporting and managing cases of unacceptable academic practice • Establish a set of available penalties that are fair and proportionate • Establish a centralised system to record and monitor cases of unacceptable academic practice
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure a variety of strategies and mechanisms to inform and educate students • Develop strategies for staff engagement and development

Table 1: Comparison of Bretag *et al.*'s five elements and UK HEA recommendations (Bretag *et al.*, 2011:8-9)

Research has used this framework for academic integrity policy in ways that are beyond the scope of the original work. Stoesz *et al.* (2019) applied the framework to a study of 22 Canadian universities, specifically looking at contract cheating (a further study looked at universities in Ontario, Canada) (Miron *et al.*, 2021)). They found that policies were largely silent on contract cheating, and that policy documents in general did not “provide clear explanations of the principles, or why or how these principles were foundational” (Stoesz *et al.*, 2019:11). A study that evaluated academic integrity policies in universities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) used the same framework and found that, in general, the sampled universities did not meet the criteria and that further studies need to be conducted to establish the maturity of academic integrity policy in the UAE (Khan, Khelalfa, Sarabdeen, Harish & Raheja, 2019).

Background to the university

This research was conducted at an open distance university in South Africa. This is a publicly funded university. The university is one of the oldest in South Africa and has been offering ‘postal education’ since 1946. Over the last 20 years, but especially within the last five years, the university has increasingly started to move towards fully online education. There is more emphasis on the submission of assessments online, and on a diversification of assessment methods, including using more continuous assessment. The advent of COVID-19 forced the university to change their entire examination system from a venue-based model to an online examination model. Post COVID-19, the university made the decision to only use online examinations going forward.

Policy evaluation against Bretag *et al.*'s five elements of policy, and how the institution stacked up against them

How policies are evaluated against the framework developed by Bretag *et al.* (2011) is described in detail in the table above.

Access

The policies¹ are available on the student portal under a section named *Student support and regions*, on a subpage called *Student policies and rules*. This page exists outside the university log-in system (i.e., students do not have to be logged in to access the policy).

However, on this page there are a number of policies, namely, a student disciplinary code, guidelines for a student disciplinary hearing, 2022/2023 rules for students, a copyright infringement and plagiarism policy, postgraduate policies, procedures and form documents, a link to an announcement about students using their student emails to communicate with the university, and a privacy statement document². I looked at the first four documents and the last document since these are the official rules and policies applicable to undergraduate students. I used the Microsoft Word built-in tool to check their readability and used the Flesch-Kincaid Score for readability. Several other studies have used this when assessing the readability of documents (Paasche-Orlow, Taylor & Brancati, 2003; Stockmeyer, 2009; Williamson & Martin, 2010). The assessment is as follows:

- The *student disciplinary code* is a 15-page document. The Flesch-Kincaid Score is 36, which is classified as difficult to read.
- The *guidelines for a student disciplinary hearing* consists of a web page with subsections. It was converted into a three-page word document. The Flesch-Kincaid score is 34, which is classified as difficult to read.
- The *rules for student documentation* are 25 pages in length with a Flesch-Kincaid score of 25, which is classified as very difficult to read.
- The *copyright policy* is three pages with a Flesch-Kincaid score of 35, which is classified as difficult to read.
- The *privacy statement document* has seven pages with a Flesch-Kincaid score of 26, which is classified as very difficult to read.

The documents are relatively easy to access for students, but all of them are either difficult or very difficult to read. Historic research at this university has shown that undergraduate students in general read slowly, are English second language readers, read with low comprehension, and have low inferential skills (Pretorius, 2000). The fact that these vital policies are written in language that is largely inaccessible to the general undergraduate population renders these policies inaccessible. The

¹ Policies were accessed on 31 March 2023.

² This document is a legal document based on South African legislation called the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) 4 of 2013.

policies are also out of date, with some dating back nine or more years, and thus not up to date with the current mode of examinations being followed. I expand on this in the section below.

Approach

In this section I consider the approach needed to support students. I want to dwell on the idea of a “genuine and coherent institutional commitment to academic integrity” (Bretag *et al.*, 2011: 7), and I believe that the university in question is failing its students in this aspect. Students, and perhaps the general public, have poor perceptions about the university. I make this argument based on observations made from social media, where students often complain that National Student Foundation Association (NSFAS) grants are not being received, queries answered or grants paid out in a timely manner; that feedback for assessments is not received in time for examinations; that problems with Information Technology (IT) systems affect student submissions; that students are not receiving examination marks; and that lecturers are non-responsive (which at times also includes non-responsiveness from administrative departments). Students describe these situations as frustrating, but some have also made the connection to this being due to the university being unethical.

In 2022 and 2023, the Minister of HE for South Africa appointed an independent assessor to report on the perceived mismanagement and corruption at the university. The report was scathing regarding the university’s management and council. In the report two issues were highlighted: (1) that the university’s policies are out of date (Mosia, 2023:89), and (2) that the disciplinary policy was specifically highlighted as not being fit for purpose. In addition, there is a lack of student support. The assessor highlighted the problems with the examination process and student disciplinary processes. The assessor found it concerning that students were taken to disciplinary hearings based on a disciplinary code that predates the advent of online exams. Around 11 000 students were flagged as having cheated and consequently had their results withheld, but out of these 11 000 students, only 200 have been found guilty. In summation the assessor found that the disciplinary office “...does not seem to have the required staff capacity to deal with the amount of work being generated” (Mosia, 2023: 118), and that the process is not clear to students, or even staff members.

It is painfully clear from the assessor’s report that this is an institution in crisis that finds itself at a juncture where its ethicality and administration are questionable. It seems clear that the institutional commitment to ethical behaviour is in doubt, both from external role players and from

students themselves. And while the assessor's report is being challenged through the court system, it does not take away from the issues highlighted regarding outdated policies and unclear processes for staff and students.

Looking specifically at the approach that the Student Disciplinary Policy takes, it is clear that the policy is not underscored by values of academic integrity, but rather it is aimed at "maintaining order" and ensuring the integrity and quality of academic and assessment processes (Student Disciplinary Code, 2014: 3). The Policy for Copyright Infringement and Plagiarism does start by defining "academic dishonesty as a denial of ethical values...and...a negation of sound academic practice" (Policy for Copyright Infringement & Plagiarism, 2005: 1). However, there is no explanation of what these academic values are. The policy does mention moral rights being infringed if work is not acknowledged and economic rights being infringed if copyright is not acknowledged. During my interviews, a legal scholar indicated that:

"I believe it is clause 4.1.3., Plagiarism policy, which states specifically that the fair use of work, a copyright work. That is so the policy is actually titled Policy on Copyright and Plagiarism or something to that effect...And the reason that it is incorrect is firstly, they use the term fair use which is foreign to the South African law. ... So in that respect, the policy is not like vague or misleading, it's just wrong..." (interview academic in law).

This legal scholar had doubts on the formulation of the policy and deemed it as being inappropriate according to South African law. This means that apart from it not being written in a way that is accessible to students, its approach to the law may be incorrect. There is no educative process indicated in this policy, and while students are made aware of plagiarism, mostly at postgraduate level, the intricacies of the policy might elude them.

Responsibility

In the five elements, responsibility refers to the policy outlining who is responsible for what, and in terms of what. This responsibility ranges from students to senior staff. Responsibility is indicated as the establishment of institutional working groups and making the responsibility of the institution, staff and students explicit. The Student Disciplinary Policy includes the composition of the student disciplinary committee and the appeals committee but makes no mention of any working groups or committees other than these. It identifies the responsibility for investigating claims (a person appointed by the Registrar), and who is responsible for keeping records related to the disciplinary process, but it does not identify other stakeholders in the process beyond this. The Copyright and

Plagiarism Policy is also silent on this matter. The only mention of responsibility is that it is the responsibility of staff and students to acknowledge copyright or other people's work, but the policy does not include joint working groups, training, remedies, or detection.

In writing about responsibility, Bretag *et al.* (2011) identified the systems approach by Betram Gallant and Kalichman (2011) as a useful systemic approach to 'think with' in terms of responsibility. Betram Gallant and Kalichman (2011) identify three levels in their systems approach – the individual, educational, and societal levels. On an individual level they identify the individual responsibility to recognise ethical questions and to choose community before self. In their formulation, an ethical academy is one that supports and awards people who act above their self-interest (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:33). They identify institutional integrity as an institution which has the ability to address identified problems, "not by punishment [only] but by correcting systems that might be responsible in part at least for creating problems", (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:34); and as one that takes the opportunity for honest self-reflection when problems arise. An ethical academy acknowledges the necessity and multiplicity of relationships between academics and students, students with one another, and administrators with staff and students. This relationality leads to an emphasis on institutional culture. A focus on changing the institutional culture can have a greater effect on behaviour than mere training (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:39).

At a systemic level, "an ethical academy has ethics as a strategic priority and has implemented the support structures, processes and resources as a foundation for this prioritization" (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:39-40). While individual action might be important, a systemic view of academic integrity recognises that the education system values influence individual action, for example, with grades. When short-term gains are valued, people will act in ways concomitant with this, by inflating grades and changing answers to test keys (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:40-41).

Societal factors are another component of the system, including whether a country or society is seen as encouraging corruption amongst its politicians and corporate leaders. This failure to hold leaders accountable will cause academic integrity to flounder as "societal factors can operate as models of accepted, or at least not unacceptable, behaviours" (Betram Gallant & Kalichman, 2011:41).

Considering then the societal factors I have highlighted, what are the implications for responsibility and academic integrity at this university? At a societal level, South Africa is a country where corruption is rife, with little to no punishment for corruption when it is exposed. In terms of the

education system, and especially as articulated at this university, there has been an increasing emphasis put on moving up in the various rankings through increasing publication outputs. Apart from the assessor's report, a previous report by the Department of HE and Training (DHET) found that the university had lost some of its focus by admitting students fresh from school without offering adequate support or provision, and found that "[t]here has been a deliberate and systemic plan, over a sustained period, to establish a corrupt network which has resulted in institutional capture" (DHET, 2022:43). This highlights that at an educational level, the set expectations seem to emphasise research rather than teaching. And while individual responsibility has been emphasised (or is emphasised for students), the university has been slow to act in addressing systemic issues, which is why so many students are flagged for cheating but so few students have been found to be in transgression (Mosia, 2023).

Detail

When reading the student disciplinary policies and the related policies, it becomes clear that the details are lacking. Firstly, most of the detail is related to behaviour in a face-to-face setting, concerning using abusive language, damaging property, drinking on university property, carrying drugs and weapons on campus, perpetrating racism, and committing indecent acts. I am not dismissing the seriousness of these or of copyright offences (which include plagiarism and distributing the university's intellectual property rights). When the policy refers to examinations, it specifically mentions venue-based examinations, which is a mode that the university has not used for the last three years. It makes no mention of the various proctoring solutions and what would happen if students do not use them. Neither the student disciplinary policy nor the copyright infringement policy describes the use of software to survey students. Therefore, a student would not know at or before registration that the university uses surveillance software.

There is no classification of severity, no details on how cheating is identified, and no guidelines included on what the various punishments would be for students should they be found guilty of a transgression. Students have no way of knowing whether what they did is a serious offence or not. And while the disciplinary and appeals processes are described and include student representation, the committee has modified its process, which now consists of issuing a warning letter and the student getting a zero grade for that module, unless the student specifically contests the charges. Thus, if a student contests a charge, it is automatically considered as being serious and could carry a serious penalty, and if they do not, it is considered as being less serious. Alternatively, in the same

policies, the same transgression can carry a penalty of either a simple warning letter or a suspension. This warning letter process is not described in any of the policy documents as it came about as a response to the proliferation of cases described in Mosia (2023).

Additionally, over the years, the university has taken on a more or less punitive stance to the student disciplinary process. In analysing five years' worth of student disciplinary data, including data from pre-COVID-19 and online examinations, students may face very harsh penalties, or very lenient penalties, and have no way of knowing why as they move from one meeting to the next in the process.

Support

In terms of the institution and training for staff, interviewees felt that they received little to no training on pedagogy (which would include setting good assessments) or academic integrity per se, or on information on the available training on research ethics³. Academics who had been at the university for a longer time recalled attending assessor and moderator training, and skills training (using the learning management system), but they generally felt that there is a lack of training around what academic integrity is.

“The training that I had, would, I can really closely link it to the use of the Turnitin software especially for testing plagiarism in essays, theses and dissertations. Otherwise, there isn't much of training that has been, that I received you know, to detect dishonesty” (academic in a business focused college).”

“One, what one would want to cover is how well staff in general and not necessarily me are trained in that area. What can be done to avert elements of dishonesty amongst both students and staff you know. Which boils down to training I think that deliberate efforts must be made first at institutional level” (academic in a business focused college).

Despite a large portion of the academics I interviewed raising issues of ghost writing, there is no training offered for academics on how to identify and deal with it. In the same period, several invigilation applications were instituted for examination purposes, which means that the university is aware of the threat.

Institutionally, students do not have to complete any centralised training on academic integrity as there is an open course that is available for students which was developed by a set of the university's academics. This module focuses mostly on avoiding plagiarism, referencing correctly,

³ I offered training in late 2022 and early 2023 as part of a larger group tasked to offer upskilling for lecturers in digital skills and in designing assessments for academic integrity.

and academic writing. A special unit⁴ in the university focuses on teaching students digital skills, including preparation for online examinations. As part of this, students are sensitised to academic integrity in a broader sense, and not just with regard to writing and plagiarism. However, because it is presented as part of examination preparation (and in terms of technology), the training only tends to happen towards the end of the semester and is linked explicitly with examinations. This is a shortcoming because it might be creating the impression that academic integrity is something to consider only before examinations. While many students have been trained through this programme, they still account for a small number of the total student population.

On a module level some individuals may have included training or statements to their students around what academic integrity is. When academic staff include something around this, it can be found in their study guides or tutorial letters, and it almost always narrowly focuses on plagiarism. For this study I reviewed 66 documents, including policies and procedure documents and the study material prepared by academics. There were 45 documents prepared by academics and of these, 28 documents do not make any mention of academic integrity in any form. It was only at the end of 2022 that the university changed their standard template for tutorial letters to include a comprehensive statement on academic integrity, but the statement does not include a link to training or the resources available for students. Some academics did indicate in their material that there is more institutional information available for matters related to academic integrity and ethics.

“There would be references in tutorial letters and so on, you know, to plagiarism and things like that. And, I think also in the last few years, there’s been a bigger focus on ethics generally, from a, from a staff perspective, and we also incorporating more student training in terms of ethics, you know, in recent times, the last two, three years particularly and so I think the whole academic integrity is also part of, of those types of communications that, that, you know, is taking place a lot more regularly and a lot more coordinated, as, as, as what it had happened when I was a student, perhaps, or even when I had just joined [the university] in 2012” (academic in a business focused college).

“Actually, I’m not aware of any except for the Turnitin training that they make available to the students. In the accounting discipline, I think the teaching on something like plagiarism is very limited ... we never taught our students about academic honesty or dishonesty for that matter. We would warn the students on the assignment instructions to say, do not plagiarize, but we never really teach our students that and the big concern because we assume that the students are taught what cheating behaviour is from high school. So we just assume they know and we assume that they know the policies, but they don’t. And there’s a lack of awareness and understanding and I think even some of the cheating cases is not intentional, it’s just that they don’t know what they don’t know” (academic in a finance focused field).

⁴ I have been working with the unit since 2020.

One aspect of support that should be included in the education and training of academics is that when academics share enthusiasm for their subject, and are perceived as being fair, caring, and concerned with student success, students tend to cheat less; the converse also holds true (Wangaard, 2016: 432).

Lessons learnt and conclusion

For academic integrity to be real, institutions need to think and act about it at an institutional level. However, “institutions tend to avoid thinking about institutional integrity because to do so acknowledges that institutional structures, procedures, and cultures contribute to the problem and, therefore, must also contribute to the solution” (Betram Gallant, 2016: 980). Considering the institutional muddle in which this university currently finds itself, it is no wonder that the policy framework is both outdated and not fit for purpose. Additionally, for the policy framework to be improved, there needs to be visible institutional cultural improvement so that the institution becomes one where academic integrity – in all its aspects – is at the heart of the academic project. Building an ethical institution starts by placing ethics and ethical decision making at the centre of every decision being made at the institution, and where everyone, from the staff and students, to administrators and management, is trained in ethical decision making, with a re-examination of the reward systems being used (Betram Gallant, 2016: 988-990).

Bretag and Mahmud (2016) propose a framework for exemplary academic integrity policy with the aim of building a culture of academic integrity at universities. This framework consists of a regular review of policy and process; academic integrity champions; academic integrity education; student engagement; robust decision-making systems; and record keeping for evaluation (Bretag & Mahmud, 2016: 473).

To improve on the policy framework and institutional academic integrity culture, a starting point would be to use the Academic Integrity Policy Toolkit which was developed for Australian university usage to comply with their regulatory framework (Bretag & Mahmud, 2016: 474), or any other suitable fit for purpose tool or process. The South African Statutory Independent Body, Quality Council, and the Council for HE could develop similar guidelines for South African HEIs.

To help build a shift towards a culture of academic integrity there should be a shift in language, from negative to positive. Champions at all levels of the university should be identified, students must be

seen as partners in the academic integrity project, and records should be kept for monitoring and evaluating the successes and changes needed, and for reviewing the on-the-ground experiences and practicalities (Bretag & Mahmud, 2016: 475- 477). The university on which this experience draws is an important institution, not only due to its long history, but also due to the number of graduates it produces.

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