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Pathways to Academic Integrity: Supporting Students through a Community of Practice Approach

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Abstract

This paper charts the establishment and holistic development of a college-wide Community of Practice (CoP) on Academic Integrity at Hibernia College (HC), a Higher Education Institution (HEI) provider of blended learning in Ireland. The establishment of the CoP was initially motivated by a perceived need to address potential increased risks of academic misconduct in light of developments in generative artificial intelligence. However, a literature review, collaborative faculty discussions and facilitation of focus groups with students across HC programmes, re-directed the focus of the CoP towards addressing the potentially punitive nature of academic integrity policies, procedures and their implementation and co-creating student supports. This re-aligned the work of the CoP towards a collaborative academic integrity policy review informed by Bretag et al.'s (2011) five core elements of exemplary policy and towards co-creation of resources to support students in their own practices. This represents more holistic approaches to policy design and strategy which authentically engage students with academic integrity practices. The conceptual framework presented by Wenger et al. (2011) for promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks and the cycle of value creation is utilised by the CoP. In sharing this process, participants will learn how a co-creation, CoP approach to fostering and facilitating an Academic Integrity culture could be applicable to their institutions and support the deconstructing of ambiguous policy into accessible resources.

Literature Review

The literature speaks to a situation whereby university policies are broadly aligned in their educative and punitive approaches to academic integrity, however where scope exists for development in terms of policy access and supports (Möller, 2022). Möller (2022) calls for a continued internal review process to improve Academic Integrity cultures within institutions. Kaposi and Dell (2012) highlight the transitional nature of the HEI sector as focus starts to move away from punitively penalising academic misconduct and towards improving progressive supports. They argue for a rejection of assumptions of moralistic approaches towards suspected intentions of misconduct which impede the transparency of interpretation and result in overly simplified renditions of student identity as honest or dishonest. Bretag et

al. (2013), in conducting a large scale online student survey (n=15,304) on Academic Integrity across six Australian universities, find that while variances exist across student cohorts in levels of confidence on how to avoid academic misconduct (with international students expressing lower awareness and postgraduate students higher awareness), students across all cohorts indicated a need to move beyond the basic provision of information and towards more holistic approaches which authentically engage students with Academic Integrity practices. Bretag et al. (2011) go on to identify five core elements of an exemplary policy: access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. Reedy et al. (2021) find that when policy analysis and development are undertaken as top-down processes, they result in poor policy uptake. Their case study of a community of practice approach at a regional Australian university to deconstruct and translate potentially ambiguous academic integrity policy into accessible and intelligible resources for staff and students has informed the CoP for HC. While perceptions of online cheating (Khan et al., 2021) and contract cheating (Usick & Stoesz, 2021) can inform a didactic approach to Academic Integrity, with the struggling student side-lined to passive recipient of outcomes, Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'Community of Practice', focuses on situated learning in a safe and participatory space. Thus, a CoP approach can facilitate the sharing and testing of ideas with a focus on Academic Integrity to provide inspiration and energy to make positive impacts (Eaton et al., 2021). Policy review is an integral aspect of the quality assurance procedures of any institution with policies otherwise in danger of not being enacted as intended by original architects (Lipsky, 2010; Stoesz & Eaton, 2022) or failing to keep pace with changes in student profile, the institution itself and national or international developments. McNeill (2022) illustrates how the introduction of a 'pedagogy of integrity' has led to significant improvements in student and staff uptake of academic integrity both at theory and practice level. This educative approach highlights the importance of multiple stakeholders engaging with and in the implementation and planning of academic integrity guided by understanding of its value.

Methodologies and Academic Integrity Journey:

The steps in this CoP on academic integrity are broadly outlined as follows (guided by the Value Creation Framework of Wenger et al. (2011)):

Cycle One: Immediate Value: Activities and Interaction

January-February:

Cycle One began with the assembling of academic and support faculty facing similar challenges in academic integrity who could subsequently benefit from shared practice and understanding. An initial review of key personnel across the College was conducted by the Registrar and an invitation to join the CoP issued. The Academic Integrity CoP was

established as a forum to discuss difficult cases and challenges faced to date and for broader networking purposes.

Cycle Two: Potential Value: Knowledge Capital

February-March:

The potential spectrum of interest in the area of Academic Integrity is vast and the establishment of knowledge capital for values to be realised at a later date subsequently emerged as a priority. Consequently, sub-working groups were established on the following areas initially identified through an early review of National Academic Integrity Network resources (QQI & NAIN 2021a, 2021b):

- Upholding Academic Integrity
- Preventing Academic Misconduct
- Detecting Academic Misconduct
- Dealing with Academic Misconduct

Each sub-group conducted a literature review and presented their findings for discussion within the CoP, with the construction of iteratively emerging themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Key emerging themes included: addressing the prevalence of punitive outcomes, supporting students authentically, collaborative policy review and improving accessibility. Preliminary findings indicate a specific gap in providing structured and aligned supports to students identified as engaging with academic misconduct to prevent re-occurrences. In tandem with this finding, was a developing awareness of a need for more specific guidelines on what constitutes misconduct and how it can be ranked or classified at different levels.

Cycle Three: Applied Value: Changes in Practice

April-May:

The collective voice of the CoP informed an institutional decision to conduct a comprehensive review of Academic Integrity policies and procedures, commencing with data generation: 4 student focus groups, to ensure the inclusion of student voice. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was employed to identify themes and patterns from the focus groups. At the point of submission this process is ongoing however early themes include closing the gap between knowing what to do and engaging in good practice, language and terminology confusion, accepting negative assessment feedback and holistic approaches to Academic Integrity. Post focus groups, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with HC students and staff (guided by emerging themes) to focus more specifically on developing and implementing potential supports for students found to have engaged in academic misconduct and ways to move away from a punitive focus.

Concurrently, the Registrar working in collaboration with the CoP will conduct a risk point analysis of HC programmes and identify specific forms of misconduct which will then be mapped against the potential supports to students. Two sub-working group will lead the writing of policies and resource creation.

Cycle Four: Realised Value: indicators of performance improvement

June-July:

The reviewed policies and support resources will be presented to Academic Board for approval. Implementation and engagement across HC will then be reviewed guided by Bretag et al. (2011) five core elements of an exemplary policy as review criteria: access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. All students will be surveyed, and focus groups held with students and staff based on expressions of interest.

Cycle Five: Reframing Value: Redefining Success

August-October:

The last cycle of value creation occurs when social learning causes a reconsideration of the learning imperatives and the criteria by which success is defined (Wenger et al., 2011). This will include the reframing of strategies, goals and values regarding academic integrity in the publication of a new publicly accessible Hibernia Academic Integrity Strategy. This may involve the transforming of practices in line with new definitions of success as arrived at through this process. The co-creation of a specific strategy has significant implications for improving current practice by enabling improved student and staff awareness of and engagement with policy, identifying and implementing more focused supports for struggling students and facilitating a responsive and living culture of integrity. This model of CoP, including student perspectives, provides a replicable model of co-creation and design of policy, strategy and practice in Academic Integrity within an academic institution. The holistic approach to authentically engaging students in intervening in current established practices in Academic Integrity is applicable in most institutional settings and the resulting strategy and policies will be made publicly accessibly.

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