

A CONDUCTIVE ALLOY: A 'WHOLE INSTITUTION' APPROACH TO STUDENT (MIS)CONDUCT

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Abstract

Student academic (mis)conduct is a source of significant organizational, strategic, and local risk, both to an educational institution and to the individual. While a university must uphold both its academic standards and its moral responsibilities, an individual student also needs to take responsibility for the originality of their work and the honesty of their degree outcome. The risk for a student can range from a lowered outcome to expulsion, while an academic institution lives or dies by its reputation. However, the general model of managing academic misconduct in a university setting is often fragmented and lacks clear ownership: often teaching and research staff educate their students on disciplinary standards, units for academic literacy provide centralized academic practice provision and can offer remedial support, and an academic standards division will manage the process of penalizing those students whose misconduct has been identified. The realities of large and complex academic institutions, often with high levels of devolved authority, often preclude a more holistic view.

For example, at the stage of reprimand and redress, intentionality is not taken into account: a mistake in referencing or attribution without an intent to mislead is nonetheless still an instance of submitting the work of others for credit. This is a process issue often not appreciated fully by some academics involved in advising students, who focus on the idea of a student having planned or not to deceive a marker. Therefore, at the pre-offence stage, where a student is being inducted into new academic practices, care must be taken to bring the knowledge of the team in charge of imposing penalties directly into the process of training and advising students.

In response to this, the present paper describes work undertaken at the University of Glasgow to develop a new integrated culture to tackle issues of academic integrity across the institution. We describe a partnership between colleagues in academic departments, our academic literacies/Learning Development team, our Student Conduct Team and colleagues from academic standards and policy to focus on a wide-view approach to student conduct, in order to shift the focus from reprimand and redress to 'before the offence'. We therefore propose a joined-up model that brings together this centralized teaching of good academic practice, systems and processes managing academic misconduct cases, and academic staff working within subject areas. This model places academic integrity, ownership of responsibility, and good academic practice at the centre of the student experience.

Keywords: *Student conduct, educational policy, student experience, plagiarism, strategy.*

1. Introduction

Writing almost a decade ago, Macfarlane et al. (2014) established that, with the expansion of a global Higher Education market, the debate and discussion around the area of academic integrity was 'a growing area of academic research'. In the United Kingdom, the subsequent rapid expansion of student numbers, alongside changing technology and an increased awareness of the scale of the challenges facing policy-makers and academic misconduct investigators, has brought the issue of tackling 'cheating' to the fore of university and public attention (Ali, 2016; Marsh, 2018). The move to many forms of online assessment and online examination as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns further highlighted the need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to have robust anti-plagiarism policies and educational, developmental practices in place (Henderson et al., 2022).

This paper discusses the ways in which the University of Glasgow, a large, research-intensive Russell Group HEI in Scotland, has adapted its approaches to handling student academic misconduct. Drawing on the combined work of subject-based academics, the institution's academic literacies/Learning Development team, the Student Conduct staff, and policy makers, we discuss the ways in which a renewed focus on academic misconduct that aims to shift institutional focus to embed more 'before the offence' provision, reduce numbers of students referred for academic misconduct, and smooth the processes involved in handling cases.

In particular, our paper discusses our theoretical framework and then the practical steps undertaken at the University of Glasgow. Through combining the work of the teams and staff mentioned above, we propose a model that aims to improve the student experience (through targeted educational materials, resources and learning opportunities for all our students) and increase efficiency in dealing with individual cases of academic misconduct (by providing joined-up service provision, a clarity of procedure for staff to follow, and a clear pathway through the process for our students to understand). With the above in mind, our key research question, then, is: to what extent and in what ways does adapting an institution-wide approach to academic misconduct affect student satisfaction, student outcomes, and student understanding of academic misconduct?

2. Our framework

We use the terms 'academic misconduct', 'plagiarism' and 'academic integrity' throughout this piece. We take the view that academic misconduct and plagiarism are interchangeable: both refer to our students breaching the University's regulations on academic integrity (see *University of Glasgow - Plagiarism Statement*, 2022). Academic integrity we take to mean the 'values, behaviour and conduct of [students] in all aspects of their practice', notably, their assessed work – in any format – submitted for degrees (Macfarlane et al., 2014) and how student work follows the rules of 'ethical scholarship' as outlined by Bretag et al. (2011). In practical terms, this can 'include cheating in exams or assignments, collusion, theft of other students' work, paying a third party for assignments, downloading whole or part of assignments from the Internet, falsification of data, misrepresentation of records, fraudulent publishing practices or any other action that undermines the integrity of scholarship and research' (Bretag, Mahmud, East, et al., 2011).

We draw further on work by Bretag in how we define our underlying principles when dealing with student academic misconduct. We echo Bretag's view that there has to be an equality of attention to, and provision for:

- student access to policy and procedure details;
- an approach that is consistent in its wording, its action, and its philosophy, and which is consistently applied in all cases;
- a clarity of responsibility for all stakeholders that 'incorporates academic integrity at the individual, organization, education system and social levels';
- a level of easily accessed information on practice, procedure and processes; and
- a range of support systems – academic and pastoral – that encourage best practice in academic integrity (Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace, et al., 2011).

The key priorities of our approach – access, approach, responsibility, detail, support – have, as a result, guided our practice. We detail the ways in which this practice has been enacted below.

3. Our approach

The University of Glasgow is a large, complex organization. We have over 35,000 students at undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research level. As a research-intensive university, we aim to equip our students with 'skills and newfound knowledge to education, to heal, to fight for justice and equality, to advance global society and to flourish as purposeful individuals with the power to make a difference' (*University of Glasgow - Strategy 2025*, 2020). Promotion of academic integrity is central to this strategic mission. The combination of effort from teams across our large HEI has allowed us to enact the principles outlined above.

Specifically, through work between our subject-based academic colleagues and the Learning Development team, we have been able to provide scaffolded, level-specific and targeted educational pieces that teach our students our rationale and philosophy surrounding academic integrity. This educational piece is crucial to the success of our work: we better equip our students for their studies, their research and scholarship, and their future careers through providing the principles of academic integrity (Bornsztajn, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2022). Through compulsory institution-wide courses run by the

Learning Development team and subject-specific, targeted educational pieces developed between the Learning Development team and the subject-based academics, our students are provided with sector-leading, academic literacies-driven pedagogical approaches to understanding academic misconduct (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Street, 2010).

Similarly, work between our Student Conduct team, our Learning Development team and our policy colleagues has allowed us to clarify, explain and detail the nature of the processes involved in cases for academic misconduct. Moving from an opaque system that left many students unaware of their progression through the handling of their case, and oftentimes with little understanding of the underlying errors in their academic conduct, to a clearly articulated and codified process has allowed our students to take increased responsibility for their actions and for their learning. We have, furthermore, been working to lead the institution in the adoption of new assessment practices to design out opportunity for academic misconduct.

4. Conclusion

These approaches have allowed for a holistic, institution-wide approach to tackling issues of academic misconduct; utilizing the various areas of expertise from across the university, we have been able to provide increased 'before the offence' educational pieces for our students that better equip them to study and research. Importantly, the approach outlined here allows for us as an institution to bring together often disparate pieces of work – with different areas of the university having different focuses, priorities, approaches and philosophies – into one coordinated and collaborative effort.

Our paper presents discussion on our theory and practice, and aims to encourage ongoing reflection on the process of equipping our students to meet the challenges of researching in an era of fake news, essay mills, and Artificial Intelligence. With this work, we aim to meet the challenges of our institution's Learning and Teaching Strategy, wherein we seek to work on prevention of academic misconduct through enhanced education, through intra-institution collaboration, and through innovative approaches to assessment design. Our paper therefore provides one element of the discussion – but, importantly, not the full answer to – our research question of adopting an institution-wide approach to academic misconduct and plagiarism.

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