Wits Framework for Academic Integrity

30 November 2022

BACKGROUND

For any higher education institution, it is important that the qualifications it offers and the students who are awarded the qualifications are perceived to be of good quality by all stakeholders, including the students themselves, their families, communities, employers and the general public. There are numerous processes required to ensure the integrity of the educational process, including the evaluation and certification of students' academic achievements. In this context, "integrity" refers to processes that are ethical, quality-assured, consistent, fair, reliable and trustworthy. Unethical or fraudulent practices that compromise the value of an institution's awards or undermine the quality of students' education are a threat to an educational institution. That is one reason why higher education institutions put great effort into ensuring that processes are in place to prevent such practices. This includes encouraging students to uphold academic integrity and preventing them from committing academic misconduct in their assessments.

Yet academic misconduct, including cheating, plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, can never be completely prevented, nor is it a recent phenomenon. Thirty years ago, in 1992, the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) was founded, "to combat cheating, plagiarism and academic dishonesty in higher education" (https://academicintegrity.org/about/about-the-center). In the years since then its focus has shifted from preventing academic dishonesty to promoting academic integrity. In the Third Edition of the ICAI's *Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity* (2021),

> ICAI defines academic integrity as a commitment to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. By embracing these fundamental values, instructors, students, staff, and administrators create effective scholarly communities where integrity is a touchstone. Without them, the work of teachers, learners, and researchers loses value and credibility. More than merely abstract principles, the fundamental values serve to inform and improve ethical decision-making capacities and behavior. They enable academic communities to translate ideals into action.

> Scholarly communities flourish when community members "live" the fundamental values. To do this, these communities must invoke them, regularly inviting staff, students, faculty, and administrators to consider and discuss the role of ethical values and their ability to inform and improve various aspects of life on and off campus.

Academic integrity is much more than a counter to academic dishonesty. It is an ethos, a values system, a mindset and a way of being and working that characterises an entire institution.

RECENT CHALLENGES TO ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Of the various forms of academic dishonesty, one of the best known is plagiarism. It is tempting to think that wide-spread plagiarism is a recent problem, arriving alongside the novel SARS-2 coronavirus. Yet Turnitin, whose similarity detection software is widely used internationally, grew out of the work of four doctoral students at Berkeley in 1998. In 2000,

> Turnitin.com introduces and launches similarity checking, leveraging database pattern-matching technology developed from the Berkeley students' doctoral research. (https://www.turnitin.com/about)

It is true, however, that the number of "essay mills" – companies that provide ghost-writing services to students – has proliferated wildly in the past few years, with services from over 1000 providers available to students in the UK alone. As a result, licenses for Turnitin's similarity checking software, which some institutions use as a tool to help detect plagiarism, have been acquired by universities across the world, Wits included. But such software is not fool-proof, both because similarity does not necessarily imply plagiarism[1] and because companies that provide essay-writing services are now boasting that their products can evade similarity checkers. (As a result, a similarity score that is too low is now also a flag for potential cheating!)

Plagiarism is not the only form of academic dishonesty. In 2006, Robert Clarke and Thomas Lancaster[2] coined the term "contract cheating" to refer to the outsourcing of students' work to someone else, which is then submitted as the students' own work. The essay mills mentioned above are one type of contract cheating company. But in the past few years other types of contract cheating companies have emerged, and some have grown into billion dollar companies. The most notable of these is Chegg, which will provide students with answers not only to homework questions but also to exam questions during an exam (https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2021/01/28/this-12-billion-company-is-getting-rich-off-students-cheating-their-way-through-covid/?sh=6e0d8a26363f). Because of its dramatic financial success, there are numerous reputable companies, and even pension funds, investing in it. Other companies, such as CourseHero, will post online copies of course materials, including tests and assignments, that students send to them from their own courses at their own institutions. In the case of Wits course materials, this is a breach of copyright regulations. Students also sometimes breach internal security arrangements when they provide external companies with their usernames and passwords to enable access to the institutional Learning Management System (LMS).

While the number of contract cheating companies and their users had been increasing for some time, 2020 was a watershed year. As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly encircled the world, higher education institutions, Wits included, were forced to move rapidly to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), often in an online mode. Assessments were also conducted remotely. This created unprecedented opportunities for contract cheating. Universities tried to come up with clever ways to prevent cheating in online assessments and contract cheating companies tried to come up with ways to get around them.

And contract cheating companies are not necessarily benign. These companies, while worrying for educational institutions, are increasingly worrying for students, as they may blackmail or extort students who sign up for their services and then decide to terminate their subscription. Draper et al[3] write:

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[1] Turnitin explicitly states that its similarity checker does not detect plagiarism. See https://www.turnitin.com/blog/does-turnitin-detect-plagiarism, accessed 14 November 2022.

[2] Clarke, R., and Lancaster, T. (2006). Eliminating the successor to plagiarism? Identifying the usage of contract cheating sites. In *Proceedings of 2nd plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policy Conference 2006*. Newcastle, UK: JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service.

[3] Draper, M, Lancaster, T, Dann, S, Crockett, R and Glendinning, I (2021). Essay mills and other contract cheating services: to buy or not to buy and the consequences of students changing their minds. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 17:13.

> The contract cheating industry is such that it preys on vulnerable students, leaving them positioned to becoming victims of unfair or illegal actions. Immediately someone makes an enquiry about using a third party to complete their assessments, they become open to threats of exposure. Extortion threats that some of the authors have encountered involve students who have not actually purchased anything or not submitted the work provided.

At the level of countries and international networks of countries, efforts are being made to deal with contract cheating companies, including making them illegal. In October 2022, the Global Academic Integrity Network (https://globalacademicintegrity.network/) was launched, which is, "a consortium of education quality and integrity agencies worldwide joining forces to fight the rise of commercial academic cheating services targeting students". The Council of Europe established the Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED) (https://www.coe.int/en/web/ethics-transparency-integrity-in-education).

With such large players working to tackle contract cheating (and other forms of education fraud), it is clear that it is futile for institutions to focus their efforts to maintain the integrity of their qualifications on trying to restrict contract cheating. Other approaches are needed.

COMMON REASONS STUDENTS COMMIT ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

There are a number of reasons why students commit academic misconduct. Among the most common are:

1. Poor time management resulting in insufficient time to prepare for, or complete, an assessment;
2. Fear of failing, for example, because of the financial costs, the possibility of being academically excluded, or not wanting to let other people down;
3. Anxiety or mental health issues;
4. Not knowing that certain practices constitute academic misconduct;
5. Thinking that they will not get caught, or, if they do, the misconduct will not have serious consequences;
6. Perceiving academic misconduct as widespread and therefore tolerated;
7. Having fairly easy access to opportunities to commit academic misconduct.

Each of these reasons requires different mitigation strategies.

Student support

The first three reasons can be addressed through various forms of student support, including: developing students' time management skills, helping students learn to evaluate their own understanding, strengthening students' agency in seeking help, ensuring that students know what help is available and can access it easily, using course and institutional data to continually monitor student performance and provide support proactively, and monitoring student wellness through peers, mentors, student advisors, tutors and support staff and providing appropriate support.

Education

To address reason 4, the University has a duty to educate students about what academic practices are and are not acceptable in which contexts. Some practices are universally unacceptable, such as using contract cheating companies, falsifying information or committing other forms of fraud, or impersonating another student.

Plagiarism is also universally unacceptable, but it has many manifestations, and students are unlikely to be familiar with all of them unless they have had them explained. For example, students may read a text, paraphrase it slightly, submit the paraphrased work as their own without attribution, and be surprised when accused of plagiarism. Turnitin has identified 10 types of plagiarism, based on an international survey (https://www.turnitin.com/static/plagiarism-spectrum/). These are:

- Clone- submitting another's work, word-for-word, as one's own
- CTRL+C- contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations
- Find-replace – changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source
- Remix – paraphrases from multiple sources, made to fit together
- Recycle – borrows generously from the writer's previous work without citation
- Hybrid – combines perfectly cited sources with copied passages without citation
- Mashup – mixes copied material from multiple sources
- 404 error – includes citations to non-existent or inaccurate information about sources
- Aggregator – includes proper citation to sources but the paper contains almost no original work
- Re-tweet – includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text's original wording and/or structure

We need to educate our students about what constitutes plagiarism. This needs to be done not only at institutional level but also at course level.

There are other practices that students may not know are not allowed in some contexts. For example, students may be encouraged or even expected to work with peers on assignments during a course but not in final assessments. Therefore, for each course, academics need to explicitly state what is and is not allowed, such as peer collaboration and use of the internet or other resources, and for which course activities.

Effects of academic misconduct

To address reasons 5 and 6, the University needs to use multiple channels of communication to educate students about the University's *Student Academic Misconduct Policy*, and familiarise them with its content, including the consequences of academic misconduct. An important channel of communication is through other students, including elected student leaders at institutional, school and faculty levels, as well as other students who may act as academic integrity ambassadors and peer educators.

Another important strategy for addressing the notion that academic misconduct does not have serious consequences is to educate students about the harm that is done, not just to themselves, but to their classmates, their lecturers who may have to do additional work to create a new

assessment task (let alone spending time on disciplinary procedures), and the University itself, as employers and members of the public could lose confidence in the quality of the University's graduates and the value of the degrees it awards. Academic misconduct is not a victimless crime. Paul Sopcak from MacEwan University in Canada advocates for the use of a restorative justice approach to academic misconduct for students who are willing to take responsibility for their actions. (If they are not, then the standard "quasi-legal" processes need to be followed.) Sopcak[4] writes:

> The key is to focus on the harms resulting from academic misconduct in a collaborative process that holds students accountable and collaboratively explores how harms can be repaired, as well as what needs to be put in place to avoid misconduct in the future. In a fairly formalized procedure, a trained restorative conference facilitator guides the responding student (responsible party), the faculty member (harmed party), and a student association representative (harmed party), through a set of questions that forces students to listen to the impacts of their actions (material, emotional, on the community) and helps them take responsibility.

Reducing opportunities for academic misconduct

One of the most effective ways to reduce the opportunity to commit academic misconduct is through assessment design. This is addressed in the next section.

Specific suggestions for addressing contract cheating can be found at https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education-third-edition.pdf.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND ASSESSMENT

Assessment and academic integrity are intertwined, as it is in assessments that breaches of academic integrity are often most visible, while the design of assessments and the feedback given to students can play an important role in educating students about, and embedding the principles of, academic integrity into academic courses.

Course design, including designing assessments, can significantly affect the likelihood of, and opportunities for, academic misconduct. In the *Academic Integrity Guidelines* developed by the Irish National Academic Integrity Network (https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/academic-integrity-guidelines.pdf), three of the guidelines for preventing academic misconduct are:

> 3.2.10
> Staff are aware of how to develop assessment methods which are appropriate and less susceptible to cheating practice. These are developed and shared with staff through training.

> 3.2.11
> Opportunities to engage in academic misconduct are minimised though creative, responsive, timely and innovative course and assessment design.

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[4]https://academicintegrity.org/resources/blog/53-2020/april-2020/149-restorative-practices-for-academic-integrity. Accessed 11 November 2022.

3.2.13
Innovation is encouraged in teaching methodologies and assessment strategies to minimise the risk of academic misconduct. Steps are taken to reduce learner stress by appropriately managing the assessment schedule and by adequately preparing and equipping learners with the knowledge and tools required to engage with assessment methods.

In 2022 the Wits Senate approved new Senate Standing Orders on the Assessment of Student Learning (SSOASL). The new standing orders include a section on academic integrity, which begins:

Institutional practices, policies, processes and the institutional culture as a whole should promote and uphold academic integrity and sanction breaches. Both staff and students need to be well-informed about key concepts associated with academic integrity, such as intellectual property, the need to give correct attribution to sources of information in any format, e.g., images, text and music, and the importance of honesty in claiming intellectual products as their own work. Education should precede, and often accompany, sanctions.

It is important to note that staff, as well as students, need to be well-informed about academic integrity, and for staff to model practices that embody academic integrity principles. For example, staff need to ensure that correct attribution is given to the work of others, such as text and images, when they develop educational materials.

Assessment design needs to be an integral part of course design. Fear of academic dishonesty should not lead us to default back to invigilated written examinations if they are not the best way of assessing student learning. Our assessments need to be appropriate and valid means of promoting, monitoring and measuring students' achievement of learning outcomes. Diverse learning outcomes for diverse courses and diverse students will need to be assessed in diverse ways. Our challenge is to enable and embrace diversity while promoting academic integrity. In the *Wits Learning and Teaching Plan 2020-2024*, diversifying assessment is one of the seven focus areas:

Diversifying assessment methods aligns with international trends to move away from a reliance on sit-down, high stakes, end-of-semester examinations and towards a range of types of assessment, which are undertaken at different points in a student's learning journey and capitalise on the affordances of technology.

Moving away from single, high-stakes assessments reduces the pressure on students to cheat, as does providing multiple opportunities to have their work assessed, engage with constructive feedback and improve over time.

Since 2020, when the requirement for all courses at Wits to have a site on the University's Learning Management System (LMS) was introduced, students and staff have had greater access to technology as a tool for learning and for teaching. As the developers of our LMS continue to add new features, and Wits continues to acquire additional tools to interface with the LMS, there are increased opportunities for diversifying the forms and timing of assessments. For example, using the Studio feature of ulwazi (Canvas), both students and staff can use audio and video recordings for assessment. Some features of our technology ease the time required to mark student work and provide feedback, such as Gradescope, which enables staff to mark online and create reusable feedback related to specific errors that students can

view. This includes feedback on work that students have handwritten, such as in response to tasks that require them to draw diagrams or solve equations.

Where it is practical to collect several pieces of students' work during a course, it becomes possible to identify students' writing style and progress over time, which reduces the opportunity for them to contract their assignments out to someone else. It can also increase students' ownership of, and investment in their work, as creating their own body of work and seeing their own growth become valued parts of a personal learning journey.

The new SSOASL define a new form of assessment, cumulative assessment, which is a combination of formative and summative assessment, as follows:

> An assessment that monitors and measures students' growth over time in component knowledge and skills, as well as other relevant attributes, such as specific values and dispositions, culminating in a product/performance. It comprises an accumulation of demonstrations of learning over a period, which could be an entire course.

Some types of assessment lend themselves more easily to cheating, such as questions from textbooks, which are readily available on the internet. Recycling assessments, especially test or examinations questions, also increases the likelihood of cheating[5]. By contrast, other types of assessment are less prone to academic dishonesty, such as authentic assessment. Authentic assessment includes tasks that relate to the real world, specific contexts or students' own experiences. Authentic assessment often requires students to respond in ways that are unique or at least expressed uniquely.

In addition, there are ways in which assessments can be explicitly designed to promote academic integrity. For example, Dublin City University developed 12 principles to guide the design of assessments to promote academic integrity (https://www.dcu.ie/teu/academic-integrity). These are:

1. Set high academic integrity standards which value university, programme, and student/graduate reputation.
2. Provide detailed information and direction on how students might avoid breaches of academic integrity and ensure consistency across a programme team.
3. Regularly update and edit assessments and programme assessment strategies.
4. Use clear marking criteria and rubrics to reward positive behaviours associated with academic integrity.
5. Design assessments that motivate and challenge students to do the work themselves (or in assigned groups/pairs).
6. Ensure assessments are authentic, current and relevant.
7. Adopt a scaffolded and integrated assessment strategy across a programme, including multiple feedback points throughout the assessment process.
8. Consider assessment briefs that have open-ended solutions or more than one solution.
9. Include elements for students to record their individual pathways of thinking demonstrating students' own work.
10. Develop assessments which allow students to prepare personalised assessments (either individually or group based).

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[5] Recycled test and exam questions may also be accessible on the internet, as an internet search engine can quickly reveal.

11. Build in a form of questioning or presentation/viva type defence component.
12. Co-design assessments or elements of assessment (e.g., rubric) with students.

AN INTEGRATED, INSTITUTION-WIDE APPROACH TO ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

As stated earlier, academic integrity is much more than a counter to academic dishonesty. It is an ethos, a values system, a mindset and a way of being and working that characterises an entire institution. Integrity is a graduate attribute we want all Wits graduates to have, and academic integrity is one aspect of that. That means that everyone in the University, staff and students alike, needs to be actively involved in promoting and practicing academic integrity in all of our activities.

In addition, there are specific, structured activities and processes the University should undertake. These include:

1. Developing academic integrity as part of our institutional culture

   While the need for academic integrity is implicit in all we do at Wits, it is not often spelt out. As part of ensuring that academic integrity is part of the institutional culture, we need to make explicit reference to academic integrity in University documents, such as newsletters, reports, plans and policies, and be explicit about our commitment to it as an institution.

2. Education for staff and students

   The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee should exercise oversight of educational activities to promote and support academic integrity.

   For students, every course needs to include explicit information about academic integrity, what it is and how it is practiced (or breached) in the context of the course, both at the beginning of, and during, the course. There should also be University-level educational resources on academic integrity, such as information and short courses on ulwazi, and other educational activities, such as workshops and interactive learning experiences.

   For staff, there need to be educational resources on how to model and implement practices that support and promote academic integrity in both their courses and research. Learning opportunities should also be available to staff to support the design of assessments that are not readily prone to cheating and that support the application of academic integrity principles.

3. Awareness campaigns

   The International Center for Academic Integrity has an annual day of action against contract cheating, on which institutions are encouraged to hold high profile campus events. Dublin City University expanded their awareness campaign initially to one week and then to year-long activities. This includes a "declarations" site on the LMS, in which students and staff post notes on what academic integrity means to them (https://www.dcu.ie/teu/academic-integrity/declarations).

At Wits, in the past few years, the SRC and Academic Affairs Office have collaborated to send out flyers to students on email, ulwazi and social media before final assessments on what academic integrity is and why it is important not to engage in academic misconduct. More campaigns are needed, led both by students and by partnerships between students and staff, to create awareness of, and buy-in, for academic integrity. When academic integrity is perceived as the norm among peers, breaching it becomes less acceptable and appealing.

4. Consequence management

Academic misconduct must have consequences. Wits has a *Student Academic Misconduct Policy*, developed by the Legal Office. Students and staff need to be well-informed about the content of this document at the beginning of each year, and the policy needs to be readily accessible. Staff and student leaders need training in implementation of the policy.

When students commit a first offence or an offence based on lack of understanding of what constitutes academic misconduct, in addition to appropriate sanctions, students need to be educated about the consequences of their actions not only for themselves, but also for their peers, their lecturers, and the University in terms of reputational damage. Some form of community service may be appropriate.

Repeat offenders, in addition to sanctions, may need additional interventions, such as psycho-social support or career counselling.

Staff must also be held accountable for academic misconduct. Wits has a *Staff Plagiarism Policy* and a *Research Integrity Policy*. As with students, in cases where academic misconduct stems from an inadequate understanding of acceptable practices, such as some forms of plagiarism, education, in addition to sanctions, is needed. In more serious cases, disciplinary action is needed.

Oversight of the Academic Integrity Framework as a whole should be the responsibility of the Senate Academic Planning and Development Committee, which deals with various quality-related matters.

Implementation of the framework should primarily be the responsibility of the Quality and Academic Planning Office, working in collaboration with stakeholders across the University.

The *Wits 2033 Strategic Framework* (https://www.wits.ac.za/about-wits/vision-and-mission/) states that:

> Our purpose is to make a positive impact on society through:
>
> - creating and advancing global knowledge; and
>
> - fostering graduates to be leaders with integrity

To achieve this purpose will require that everyone at Wits plays their role in upholding, supporting and promoting academic integrity.