ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ACROSS CULTURES

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Abstract



Academic integrity is a cornerstone of higher education, ensuring that students engage in honest and ethical practices in their pursuit of knowledge. The implementation of academic integrity policies varies across countries, reflecting the unique cultural, societal, and educational contexts of each nation. This article compares academic integrity policies in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada to those in Bulgaria, highlighting the similarities and differences that exist between these diverse educational landscapes. The study applies the well-known methodology by Bretag et al. (2011) whereby an exemplary academic integrity model is evaluated on the basis of five components, namely access, approach, responsibility, detail and support. This methodology is enriched by a modification suggested by Perkins and Roe (2023) in which a sixth component is added – technological explicitness, which involves the necessity to include and constantly update information and provide guidelines about new technologies.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, HEIs, cross-cultural models, university integrity policy

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Rationale of the study

The article focuses on the initial stage of the research project "The gravity of academic plagiarism in the perception of scholars, students, and academic policy makers in Bulgaria"¹, which started in 2022 with the overarching aim to monitor the overall perception of academic misconduct amongst all parties involved – students, academics, policy makers and the general public. This stage involves a detailed study of academic integrity policies at higher educational institutions in Bulgaria: what imprint they have on the education process, whether they are sufficiently transparent, who the stakeholders are and how the Bulgarian context compares to different academic cultures and practices.

Academic dishonesty has been a topic for discussion in academic circles (and not only) over recent years, leading to questioning current institutional policies and procedures in place in higher educational institutions. Undoubtedly, such efforts should be an indelible part of an overall institutional academic integrity strategy which is developed conjointly by students and staff based on mutual objectives and standards (Morris, 2018).

The focus in this paper is on the convergence and divergence of academic integrity policies in New Zealand, Australia and Canada on the one hand and Bulgaria on the other. The study explores the cultural, educational, and technological contexts of these countries and examines the development, application and effectiveness of academic integrity models, which are evaluated on the basis of how they address academic misconduct, promote ethical behavior, and adapt to the challenges of the digital age.

It is expected that in the course of the study cross-cultural discrepancies will arise, engendered by the different world view between the English traditions and approaches to plagiarism and other types of academic cheating, and the attitudes of Bulgarian students and faculty. The role of institutions and individuals will be highlighted along with the importance of local beliefs and values.

Academic integrity policy is an under-researched topic in Bulgaria but one which has recently been gathering momentum. The onslaught of novel digital technologies

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coupled with the requirements that academics publish research articles and that students hand in numerous papers has brought this issue to the fore. However, so far there have been no extensive and comprehensive studies of academic misconduct or academic integrity policy in the Bulgarian context, much less so comparative ones. The few publications that exist concern as a rule specific cases of misconduct, are mostly written in Bulgarian, and are thus not widely disseminated.

The ultimate aim of the study is to highlight whether there could be a uniform, standardized policy across different institutions, countries and cultures or if each separate higher education context needs a multifaceted, idiosyncratic solution to the challenges posed by current developments and increasing current global concern towards academic misconduct.

The research questions can be formulated as follows:

- What are the core elements of academic integrity policies in Bulgarian higher education institutions as per Bretag at al.'s (2011) model, in comparison with policies adopted in Australia, Canada and New Zealand?
- Can cross-cultural discrepancies so far as they exist be clearly pinpointed?
- Is a standardized policy across different institutions and cultures possible or does each separate higher education context need an idiosyncratic approach?

Answering these research questions will hopefully establish the gaps in university policies related to academic integrity in Bulgaria resulting in a list of recommendations to remedy the situation.

Methodology

Academic integrity is a fundamental aspect of higher education, encompassing honesty, responsibility, and ethical behavior among students and educators. Models designed to promote and maintain academic integrity are essential for creating an environment where learning and scholarship thrive. This paper will apply an exemplary academic integrity model based on Bretag et al.'s (2011) five components: access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. Additionally, the analysis will incorporate a sixth component, technological explicitness, proposed by Perkins and Roe (2023), which highlights the importance of addressing new technologies and their implications within the model.

Bretag et al. (2011) present a comprehensive academic integrity model that encapsulates the following five key components:

- Access: This component focuses on the availability and ease of access to academic integrity information. It emphasizes the need for clear, easily navigable resources to educate students and educators about academic integrity.
- 2. **Approach**: The approach component underscores the strategies and methods used to foster a culture of academic integrity. It involves the proactive promotion of ethical behavior and the prevention of academic misconduct.
- 3. **Responsibility**: Responsibility encompasses the accountability of students, educators, and institutions. It highlights the importance of clear policies, expectations, and consequences for breaches of academic integrity.
- 4. **Detail**: Detail refers to the level of specificity and clarity in academic integrity guidelines. Clear definitions of academic misconduct and well-defined procedures for reporting and addressing violations are essential.
- 5. **Support**: This component highlights the provision of support mechanisms for students and educators. It involves the availability of assistance, counseling, and guidance to help individuals navigate the complexities of academic integrity.

These five interrelated and non-hierarchical core elements can be illustrated by the following diagram:



Figure 1.

Bretag et al.'s (2011) exemplary academic integrity model

A recent addition to this model was conceived and proposed by Perkins and Roe (2023), who enriched Bretag et al.'s conception by adding a sixth component, technological explicitness. In an era of rapidly evolving technology, this component recognizes the necessity of addressing the impact of new technologies on academic integrity "to ensure that the model remains responsive to the ongoing evolution of digital tools" (Perkins and Roe, 2023). It encompasses two key elements, the first being *Inclusion of Technological Information*. This aspect requires academic integrity models to incorporate information about new technologies and their potential implications for academic misconduct. As the landscape of academic misconduct evolves with technological advancements, students and educators must be aware of the latest trends and risks. The second element is *Continuous Updates and Guidelines*. Technological explicitness mandates the constant updating of academic integrity resources to keep pace with emerging technologies. Guidelines for using technology ethically, detecting technological misconduct, and reporting violations should be readily available and regularly revised.

Results and analysis

Australia, New Zealand, and Canada share a common thread of English-speaking, Western-style higher education systems. These nations have strived to develop rigorous academic integrity policies that, where existent, emphasize the importance of honesty, originality, and fairness in all academic pursuits.

Australia upholds stringent academic integrity standards. The Australian National University, for instance, maintains a Code of Academic Integrity that delineates expectations and the consequences of academic misconduct. The emphasis is on fostering a culture of trust, where students are expected to demonstrate respect for the learning process and their peers. With its diverse educational landscape, Australia has embraced academic integrity models to nurture ethical behavior among students and educators.

Similarly in New Zealand, some institutions like the University of Auckland have adopted comprehensive academic integrity guidelines. Plagiarism and cheating are strictly prohibited, and students are ideally provided with resources to understand and adhere to these policies. A strong sense of individualism underscores the significance of unique and original work, and students are encouraged to respect and acknowledge the contributions of others in their academic endeavors.

In Canada, some higher education institutions, e.g. the University of Toronto, have well-defined policies on academic integrity. These policies focus on the importance of maintaining trust within the academic community and place a strong emphasis on academic honesty, originality, and ethical behavior. Consequences for breaches of these policies in some universities range from academic penalties to expulsion.

But have these scholarly ideals and underlying philosophy been transposed into clear, transparent and definitive university policies, procedures and teaching practices in these countries or is there still an institutional and academic void to be filled?

A case study, carried out at a regional Australian university (Reedy et al., 2021) examined whether and how ambiguous academic integrity policy is transposed into tangible, lucid resources for students and faculty and transformed into comprehensible practical rules ensuring uniform and fair response to academic dishonesty. The authors

found variability of approaches and inconsistencies in the process of prevention and curtailment of academic misconduct even withing the realm of one institution.

If the first component of Bretag et al.'s model is considered, that of *Access*, and applied to data from the three English-speaking countries, it can be seen that 6/39 (15%) Australian Universities, 7/8 (87.5%) New Zealand higher education institutions and 5/24 (20%) of Canadian universities demonstrated policies that were difficult to locate on their websites, with the average number of clicks to reach the main policy document in New Zealand being 4.6, while documents in Australian universities were accessible within 2-4 clicks². In other words, academic misconduct policies are not as easily accessible as they should be, provided that the effortless retrieval of such documents is the starting point on which to build the other components of an exemplary academic integrity policy. This is in keeping with similar studies which also emphasize accessibility issues with regard to relevant university policies (cf. Suryani & Sugeng, 2019, Miron et al., 2021, among others). It is clear that a direct route is needed, one that would ensure swift access and informativity for all stakeholders – students, faculty, prospective students and future employers.

Besides being visible and easily retrievable, an exemplary model of an academic integrity policy should be regarded as an educative process that provides a background. Therefore, the *Approach* component referring to how the policy communicates the significance of academic integrity and the educative measures (if any) in support of its values is an important aspect, which highlights the strategy of the institution – whether it is mostly punitive, slanting more towards educative or both. In Australia, in 28% of the studied documents both educative and punitive elements were present, in New Zealand the percentage is 61, in Canada – 37%. In general, in these countries, the tendency is a shift of focus from purely punitive to educative measures, although most documents contain extensive texts dedicated to penalties in cases of academic misconduct. The particular institutional approach has a definite bearing on how interested parties view academic integrity.

² All data in this part cited from Bretag et al. (2011) for Australia, Stoez & Eaton (2020) for Canada, Möller (2023) for New Zealand.

Responsibility is the next component that specifies the roles of each stakeholder and their accountability, what their conduct should be, what their function and prerogatives are. A clear definition of responsibility is an integral and indelible part of the academic integrity policy which identifies the boundaries: is responsibility confined to the university or does it stretch beyond school education and extend to public life? In 18% of the studied Canadian university documents the target audience was students, faculty in 30%, and all members of the community – 35%. Most universities in New Zealand demonstrated that responsibility lay with the institution itself – 63%, while in Australia 21% the responsibility was considered to be with students and only one university's policy stated that all stakeholders are responsible.

An extremely important aspect of academic misconduct is identifying what it entails, its precise definition, its severity, its various manifestations, or the *Detail* to which it is described in the university policy. This component also includes how breaches are detected. The abundance of terms such as academic misconduct, academic dishonesty, contract cheating, plagiarism, inappropriate collaboration, collusion, fraud, personation, among others, make a university's academic integrity policy confusing and imprecise, so rather than broad descriptions, accurate definitions are required for a policy to be clearer, more comprehensive, and better and enforceable. In the Canadian documents under study there was a marked variety in the terms used even within one document. Only 10 universities include precise definitions of contract cheating but categorized under different terminology. In most documents the language was hazy and indirect. The findings for New Zealand universities showed that academic misconduct is referred to by non-standard terminology, which leads to confusion about specific types of breach, while universities in Australia lacked a clearly articulated vision.

Concerning the component *Support*, university policies in New Zealand demonstrated a marked orientation to students, with little to no support provided to other participants in the academic integrity concept, such as faculty or general staff. Most Canadian universities under study offered support for the disciplinary process and very few documents (only 4) envisaged teaching and learning support as a deterrent to academic dishonesty. Some provided students with guidelines on how to get support from faculty, from educational resources, libraries, awareness campaigns. The research team examining the support provided in connection to academic integrity in Australia did not

consider the division of support to students and to staff, although they acknowledge that the different groups need different and purposeful assistance, specific to each. Rather their conclusion was that support should be an integral part of the policy, marked by a tight interconnectedness between drafted policy and actual practice.

Since the data so far comes from research based solely on Bretag et al.'s (2011) model which includes the mentioned five components, there was no data included about the sixth component, namely technological explicitness.

To sum up, academic integrity in New Zealand, as guided by Bretag et al.'s model enriched by Perkins and Roe's modification, is marked by an emphasis on access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. Academic institutions there are proactive in promoting ethical behavior and fostering a culture of trust and responsibility. By providing students with accessible resources, guidelines, and continuous support, New Zealand ensures that academic integrity remains a core value in its higher education landscape. However, policies are not always of the exemplary standard, no ease of access is manifested, there is a marked lack of insufficient restorative practices, non-standard terminology is used in policy documents, and a deficiency of clear and specific support can be observed. This approach should also not only address current challenges but also prepare students and educators to navigate the ever-changing digital environment with integrity and ethical conduct.

Australia places an emphasis on academic integrity, and there is an aspiration for the principles outlined in Bretag et al.'s model to be followed. A large number of the Australian institutions under study demonstrate easier access to academic integrity policies, one third provide for both educative and punitive measures, and there is a wide variability of approaches to policy with different sanctions envisaged.

Canada, like New Zealand and Australia, emphasizes academic integrity and follows the principles of Bretag et al.'s model. Overall, academic integrity is a cornerstone of Canada's educational system, reflecting the country's commitment to excellence, fairness, and ethical conduct in learning and research. By upholding and promoting academic integrity, Canadian universities support the values of scholarship and ensure the integrity and credibility of their academic programs and degrees. However, the

studied institutions in Canada focus on policing, reporting, investigating, sanctioning student misconduct. The policies are based on morality, or more specifically, lack of morals; no clear or explicit definition of contract cheating is detected, relevant documents are not easy to access.

From the above results and discussion, it can be deduced that academic integrity is not well conceptualized in university policies even in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, in whose academic cultures the principles of academic integrity are deeply upheld and embedded in the way of thinking and modus operandi. But it is still a challenge for most higher education institutions there to translate into practice these higher morals and the relevant support for academic misconduct to be prevented or at least minimized.

Applying Bretag et al.'s (2011) model of academic integrity with the added technological explicitness component to Bulgarian universities reveals several challenges and problems within the academic integrity landscape³. Here are some issues identified based on each component of the model:

Bulgarian universities face challenges in providing equitable access to resources and to support services related to academic integrity. Smaller or less-resourced institutions struggle to offer comprehensive education and support programs, leaving students with limited guidance on ethical academic practices. Most policy documents if present are hard to find on the respective website and can usually be found by applying the search function.

There are inconsistencies in how academic integrity is approached across different faculties or departments within Bulgarian universities. While few departments prioritize education and prevention, others focus more on punitive measures. This lack of consistency can lead to confusion among students and faculty about expectations and consequences for academic misconduct.

Clear delineation of responsibilities among various stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and academic support staff, are lacking in Bulgarian

³ Some of the data about Bulgarian HEIs is from Vassileva & Chankova (2023) who studied 52 institutions.

universities. Most Bulgarian university policies include students, faculty and staff, but some do not mention students at all. Without clear guidelines and communication channels, it can be challenging to hold individuals and institutions accountable for promoting and upholding academic integrity standards.

Academic integrity policies and procedures in Bulgarian universities commonly lack detail or specificity, leaving room for interpretation and inconsistency in enforcement. Clear and transparent guidelines are essential for ensuring fairness and accountability in addressing academic misconduct cases. Only six HEIs opted for a definition of academic integrity, most of the others do not specify clearly what constitutes academic dishonesty.

Generally, no specific support is provided in the academic policies that could guide students, staff or faculty in the process of combatting academic dishonesty, nor are any strategies laid down for upholding integrity. While some Bulgarian universities may offer support services for students, such as writing centers or academic counselling, these resources are not widely available or adequately promoted. Students who are struggling academically or facing challenges related to academic integrity may not receive the support they need to navigate these issues effectively.

With the increasing use of technology in education, Bulgarian universities face challenges in addressing academic dishonesty facilitated by digital tools and platforms. There is a lack of awareness or guidance on ethical practices in digital environments, such as online plagiarism or unauthorized collaboration.

As compared to the English-speaking countries above, Bulgaria has a unique cultural and educational background that influences its approach to academic integrity. Bulgarian institutions, such as Sofia University, have also established academic integrity policies, but they often reflect the broader societal and educational context of the country.

In Bulgaria, the historical and cultural significance of collective effort may influence a more lenient approach to collaboration among students. Group work and sharing of knowledge are often more acceptable than in Western countries. The focus is not solely on individual originality but also on mutual learning and support.

When comparing academic integrity policies in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada to Bulgaria, several key differences and similarities emerge:

1. Approach to Plagiarism and Cheating:

 In New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, there is a strong emphasis on the prohibition of plagiarism and cheating, with strict consequences. In contrast, Bulgaria is more tolerant of collaborative work.

2. Consequences and Enforcement:

 Consequences for academic misconduct in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada are more severe, including failing courses or even expulsion. In Bulgaria, penalties may be less severe and vary by institution.

3. Cultural Influences:

 The cultural context in Bulgaria allows for more acceptance of collaborative learning. In contrast, Western nations stress the importance of individualism and original work.

4. Global Alignment:

 Bulgaria's academic integrity policies are increasingly aligning with international standards as it integrates more deeply with Western educational systems.

By comparing the approaches of Bulgaria, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, it becomes evident that cultural, educational, and technological contexts influence the application of academic integrity policies. Although it is not always easy to determine which discrepancies are specifically cross-cultural, we would like to differentiate between the shared issues and the inconsistencies that have arisen in this study. The common problematic aspects that can be detected in both contexts are vague definitions of academic integrity and its breaches; the focus more on sanctions rather than educative measures; the reality that not all stakeholders are included; and the lack of support.

However, there are some cross-cultural variations which are translated into the approach and formulation of the academic integrity policies in Bulgaria, such as society's greater tolerance to plagiarism; higher lack of transparency; insufficient recognition of the importance of academic dishonesty. Therefore, the idiosyncratic cultural, social and educational backgrounds should be acknowledged when devising a university policy. Academic integrity policies across New Zealand, Australia, and Canada share commonalities grounded in the promotion of individualism, originality, and the prohibition of academic misconduct. In contrast, Bulgaria's policies reflect a cultural heritage that traditionally values collective efforts and mutual learning. However, as Bulgaria aligns more with Western educational systems, there is an increasing emphasis on academic integrity and individual work.

In order to conform to global educational standards, Bulgaria must navigate the complex interplay between its cultural heritage and the global norms of academic integrity. In doing so, it can draw inspiration from the strict academic integrity policies of New Zealand, Australia, and Canada while respecting the unique cultural and historical aspects that make Bulgaria's approach distinct. The ultimate goal is to foster a culture of trust, respect, and integrity in academia, regardless of the specific cultural context.

Conclusions

Academic integrity models play a pivotal role in shaping the ethical behavior of students and educators in higher education. Bretag et al.'s five-component framework provides a strong foundation for these models, emphasizing access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support. By enriching this model with the sixth component, technological explicitness, as suggested by Perkins and Roe (2023), academic institutions can better address the challenges posed by ever-evolving technology and uphold ethical conduct in the digital age. The addition of technological explicitness represents a forward-looking approach to adapt to the ever-evolving challenges of the digital age and promote a culture of academic honesty and trust within educational institutions. It recognizes the evolving nature of academic misconduct and the critical role of technology in both enabling and preventing such misconduct. By emphasizing the need for updated information and clear guidelines, it nurtures a proactive approach to addressing technological challenges. Incorporating technological explicitness ensures that academic integrity models remain current and pertinent. It empowers students and educators to navigate the complex technological landscape with a strong sense of ethical responsibility. Moreover, it highlights the imperative of considering technological

advances when crafting and enforcing academic integrity policies, ultimately promoting a culture of trust, honesty, and fairness within educational institutions. This holistic approach ensures that academic integrity models remain relevant and effective, nurturing a culture of academic honesty and trust within educational communities.

By addressing the challenges within the framework of Bretag et al.'s model, Bulgarian universities can strengthen their commitment to academic integrity and maintain the credibility of their educational programs.

Addressing these problems requires a concerted effort from Bulgarian universities, policymakers, and stakeholders within the academic community. Strategies for improving academic integrity may include:

• Developing comprehensive academic integrity policies and procedures that are clear, detailed, and consistently enforced.

• Investing in education and awareness campaigns to promote ethical academic practices among students and faculty.

• Enhancing support services for students, including academic advising, writing support, and counselling, to address underlying issues that may contribute to academic misconduct.

• Incorporating technological solutions, such as plagiarism detection software and digital literacy training, to mitigate the risks associated with online academic dishonesty.

To promote a culture of academic integrity that respects cultural diversity, HEIs in Bulgaria can consider the following approaches that although not solely restricted to the Bulgarian context are nevertheless particularly valid:

- 1. **Cultural Sensitivity Training**: Provide training to educators and students about the cultural nuances of academic integrity to nurture understanding and compliance.
- 2. **Clear Communication**: Clearly communicate academic integrity policies and expectations, especially to international and culturally diverse student populations.

- 3. **Alternative Assessment Methods**: Develop assessment methods that are less susceptible to cheating, such as open-book exams or project-based assignments.
- 4. **Support Services**: Offer support services to help students with the transition to new cultural and academic norms, particularly for international students.
- 5. **Inclusivity and Diversity**: Foster a diverse and inclusive academic environment where students from various cultural backgrounds feel valued and understood.
- 6. **Peer Review and Oversight**: Encourage students to be involved in the oversight and enforcement of academic integrity policies, fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

It is important for HEIs to balance the need for academic integrity with an understanding of cultural differences and work towards a fair and respectful approach to academic conduct.

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