



Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity: the Role of Institutional Policies among Portuguese Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In the framework of an international research project (Portugal, Spain and Brazil), we launched a research agenda to assess students' behaviour and their perception of the limits of morality in the academic context. In acknowledgement of their relevance to ethical reflection, students' views on the reasons for fraud and the factors inhibiting such behaviour were also studied. However, this research agenda, which aimed to be innovative in the context of its application, also studied how much behaviour is effectively stimulated, inhibited or ignored. As such, it sought to discover the patterns of tolerance of fraud exhibited by higher education teachers and institutions, notably by characterising preventive and punitive action with regard to academic fraud that is put in place by teachers or brought into play by institutions. The same criteria and instruments used to collect students' views were also used to collect teachers' views on the motives and factors inhibiting fraud. In this paper we scrutinise particularly the policies of Portuguese higher education institutions in order to promote a culture of academic integrity.

Recent studies suggest that academic fraud by higher education students has increased which means that promoting academic integrity is one of the major challenges of higher education institutions. This phenomenon has a relevant impact on social equity, social welfare and on the fairness of social institutions. Thus, the role of higher education institutions in promoting a culture of integrity has accentuated following the changes that have taken place in higher education systems and present-day societies.

What are these institutional policies regarding this academic fraud? Are these policies effective? How codes of conduct and disciplinary regulations can be sufficient mechanisms in order to combat academic fraud among students of higher education institutions?

In order to answer these questions, we will present here the limitations and the most significant and pertinent institutional policies and noteworthy examples of good practices within the Portuguese higher education system concerning academic fraud.

It is our awareness in order to be more effective that the combat against academic fraud implies an articulation of students' actions along with teachers' practices and institutional policies of higher education institutes. Thus, in order to contribute to create a culture of academic integrity, codes of practice / codes of conduct should be considered as part of a broader and integrated anti-fraud institutional policy.

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1. A culture of academic integrity

Academic integrity is not a recent concern of higher education institutions. Moreover it assumed different natures, raising distinct issues, throughout history [1]. But it is, certainly, one of the greatest and more complex worries and challenges of the current academic world and developed societies [2].

When university was planned to form elites, academic integrity was centred in the personal sphere, as it had to do with values of duty, honour and individual good reputation. Since the twentieth century, especially with the diversification of roles of universities and the massification of higher education, academic integrity assumes new dimensions and gains institutional contours. More recently, the increased use of technologies, competition among institutions and affirmation in the labour market through the possession of academic degrees give another extent and depth to the concept.

Academic integrity is a transversal phenomenon because it can be injured by students, teachers, other employees in higher education institutions, outside agents or the institution itself within the scope of its educational policy. Highlighting this complexity, Gallant [1] identifies four dimensions of academic integrity: an internal dimension (student character); an organizational dimension (peer norms and classroom dynamics); an institutional dimension (academic systems); and a societal dimension (broader societal forces). It means academic integrity it's not an individual and an isolated phenomenon, but a social fact that is multifaceted as well as his infringement can be often imperceptible. Academic fraud committed by students, as we considered it in Almeida *et al* [3], is a fine illustration of the unrevealed character of forms of violation of academic integrity. Appropriation of another person's work, simulation of work not produced (self-plagiarism or falsification of data and results), facilitation of fraud committed by others and concealment of fraud (failure to denounce fraud committed by others) are, all of them, types of fraud committed by students that evidence the density of the concept of academic integrity. This density obviously became even stronger in the measure we consider other agents than the students and other subjects than learning.

Briefly, a culture of academic integrity has to be developed in societal context and also in the scope of an institutional strategy aiming to identify, to prevent and to punish different forms of violation of academic integrity. Michelle Bergadaà [4] proposes an integrated institutional project in order to render academic integrity effective. This project is based in 12-point action plan: implicate the management; operationalise a working group; promote the debate about the value of knowledge; raise awareness for the need of good use of the Internet; promote debates about ethics; have a plagiarism detection software; elaborate a pedagogical deontology; form and inform students; inform teachers; formalise a complaint system; follow up with teachers; and specify and apply sanctions.

2. Methodological approach

The analysis model departs from an approach structured into 4 types of analytical tool. The institutional view, in which are considered and typified regulations developed by institutions of higher education. The students' perspectives, drawn from a survey carried out on a representative sample of students from different higher education subsystems. The questionnaire allowed us to analyse the students' perception about the various dimensions of academic fraud, its incidence, inhibiting factors and facilitating factors in their courses and institutions. The inquiry was supplemented by focus groups consisting of students. The third analytical tool consisted of a survey with teachers in higher education and allowed us to gather the opinions and perceptions of teachers about the frequency of academic fraud in their respective institutions, the main reasons that contribute to the occurrence of fraudulent behaviour among students, and factors enhancing and inhibiting academic fraud among students in higher education. The last analytical tool, which is not considered in the analysis of the results presented here, focuses on the discourses of institutional managers.



3. Policies related to academic fraud among Portuguese higher education institutions

Generally the institutional policies among Portuguese higher education organisations aiming to create a culture of academic integrity are recent, partial and generic. They result mainly from the legislative modernization and from adaptation of the agendas of Portuguese institutions to international institutional frameworks of governance of universities. They not result from an assumed policy towards the promotion of academic integrity. They merely enunciating common principles, generally included in the Mission of the institutions, on the importance of academic integrity. They are primarily a policy of combating academic fraud and only secondarily a stimulus policy to promote academic integrity. In addition, they tend to focus the issue of academic integrity in the conduct of students, but this is precisely one of the main obstacles to the development of an integrated policy for the promotion of academic integrity. On the other hand, there is a significant disparity in terms of the importance that institutions confer to institutional policies targeting to promote academic integrity.

3.1 The formal dimension of academic integrity in Portuguese higher education institutions

In order to analyze and to capture the core elements of academic integrity culture, institutional documents likely to include measures and tools which are constitutive of that integrity culture were collected and typified. This analysis has been carried out on public and private higher education institutions and at the university subsystem and the polytechnic higher education subsystem, as well.

Taking as a departure point a systematized look upon the set of regulations developed by institutions in the period between 2011 and 2013, trends were identified and, in some cases, inconsistencies were found on internal policies. Identically, it was possible to understand different ways of action among institutions toward academic integrity, especially, regarding students' practices.

This level of analysis sought to focus on institutional perspective, taking into account the rules evenly disseminated by all institutions of higher education (mainly through the implementation of the Legal Regime of the institutions of higher education-RJIES) and, on the other hand, the institutionalization of rules, norms and behavior patterns.

Referencing the existence of institutional documents which outline the academic integrity is an arduous task as typifies them. Public disclosure of these documents is not a widespread practice among Portuguese higher education institutions.

Since there are no general guidelines, typifying turns out to be a difficult challenge and each institution draw and define documents that fit the academic integrity in whatever manner they choose. Even though, it was possible to list seven types of different documents (*Cfr.* Table 1). Thus, the distinctions among them were not always very clear and the same measures to promote integrity can be found in different types of documents. Some of these documents make reference to broader measures and others make reference to more specific measures.

Table 1 – Reviewed documents

Documentos	UPU	UPR	PPU	PPR
Codes of conduct	6	0	2	1
Academic and Pedagogical Regulations	9	3	12	1
Student Disciplinary Regulations	6	1	1	2
Course and Assesement Regulation	29	7	38	3
Statutes	17	2	8	1
Charters of rights and duties of the academic community	1	0	0	0
Student's Guide	0	2	0	0

Legend:

UPU- Public Universities

UPR – Private Universities

PPU – Public Polytechnic Institutions

PPR – Private Polytechnic Institutions

3.2 Some perceptions of students and teachers about academic integrity in Portuguese higher education institutions

Notwithstanding the institutional policies formalised in codes and regulations, established practices and organisational culture limit the promotion of a culture of integrity. In this context, it is worth highlighting some opinions and perceptions of students and teachers.

One of the most relevant data obtained through the survey conducted among 7017 Portuguese higher education students is the fact that 56.3% declare not knowing if the institution where they are studying have or does not have some kind of code of ethics or regulation. In addition, 68.8% of those who claim that the institution has this kind of code confirm that they never read it. It is also relevant that 45.7% consider that fraud occurs with some frequency in its institution. Especially if we take into account that 33.9% share the opinion that academic fraud is acceptable as long as it doesn't offend anyone directly.

Furthermore, as the majority of the students considered fraud to be a frequent practice, they reveal a culture of tolerance towards academic dishonesty that neither legitimises nor encourages its denunciation. The students appeared not to categorise fraud according to its nature but in terms of the type of assessment situation in which it occurred – *exams* or *course work* – condemning actions that implied access to differentiated socio-economic resources – such as buying work or getting help from relatives – significantly more.

In terms of preventive factors of fraud, the Portuguese students claim more punitive actions, putting in the background unavoidable instruments of an integrated policy for the promotion of academic integrity.

Most of 2849 Portuguese higher education teachers who responded to the questionnaire considered that in its institution students commit frequently or regularly some kind of academic fraud. Teachers' perceptions regarding academic fraud committed by students vary depending on the type of fraud. Also the attitudes and practices of teachers seem to underlie a multidimensional conception of fraud, considering on the one hand the gravity and on the other the type of assessment - essays vs. exams. Teachers emphasise the importance of academic institutional culture in the explanation of the occurrence of a greater or lesser frequency of fraudulent behaviors.

The existence of a culture of fraud in higher education institutions enhances fraud. This culture of fraud is reflected in a sense of impunity associated with the perception of the existence of some significant penalties and the regularity of habit of fraudulent behavior committed vis-à-vis the passivity of the teachers. Generally speaking, teachers, when confronted with academic fraud, tend to deal with the situation in a personal and informal way try to solving the situation with students or penalizing the student in his assessment. Teachers have a moderate level of satisfaction with institutional policies regarding academic fraud, and only slightly more than 1/3 states that its institution has a code of practice and/or formal disciplinary regulations.

4. Conclusions

Portuguese higher education institutions have adopted, within the framework of its legal and administrative modernisation, formal instruments for promoting academic integrity. These instruments, even if necessary, collide with an established culture that hinders their acceptance and effectiveness. Students tend to accept academic fraud since it is socially accessible, reprimanding only those forms of fraud that only the wealthiest can access. Also, availability to denunciation is very low. Besides they attach little relevance to non-punitive aspects of a policy of promotion of academic integrity.

Teachers do not rely in institutional policies, considering them blind and too much uniform. In this context they prefer to deal individually and informally with the issues of academic fraud, but are little aware and available to get involved in other aspects of the promotion of an integrated policy of academic integrity.

In this general context it is clear that the path of the Portuguese higher education institutions towards an integrated policy of academic integrity is still a very long one. In addition to the obstacles posed by students and by teachers, institutional policies are still very formal and little instrumental. Formal instruments need to be operationalized in order as not becoming symbols of a politics without expression.

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