Reimagining Academic Integrity in Irish Further Education and Training

Introduction

The idea for this article resulted from a series of modules taken as part of a postgraduate research project. The modules addressed ethics and academic integrity in higher-education research, which led to the question of the role of academic integrity and what it means for learners in further education and training (FET): What might academic integrity look like in a context such as FE or FET?

This article takes academic integrity to mean a set of moral, social, and educational principles that fosters ethical conduct. It takes the view that the journey of exploring academic integrity for learners in FE/FET settings begins by instilling academic integrity principles from a non-punitive perspective, preparing learners for future skills and the world of work, and fostering a culture of social responsibility as a fundamental part of supporting transitions from education to employment.

An established field of study

Academic integrity publications can be traced to the early 1900s and cover a range of disciplines (Barnes, 1904; Lancaster, 2021). The emergence of 'academic integrity' as a field of scholarly research in the early 1990s was attributed to Donald McCabe ('the grandfather of academic integrity', according to the International Centre for Academic Integrity). Searches conducted for this article yielded a predominant focus on higher education; research exploring the subject in Irish FET, FE, or tertiary education remains limited.

FET provision offers diverse programmes to a wide spectrum of cohorts. *Future FET: Transforming*

Touria Jouilla McKee
FET Quality Development Officer, Education and Training Boards Ireland

This article looks at the understudied topic of academic integrity in further education and training and tertiary education in Ireland. It highlights the educational and personal importance of integrity, and it describes how a culture of integrity could be instilled and advanced in the sector.

Learning, the FET strategy for 2020–2024, is framed around providing pathways that support social mobility, lifelong learning, and skills, and is a blueprint for driving economic and social development through education. Integrity is an essential element in the learning journey, because it is an indicator for the future self, and this in turn aligns it with FET strategic goals.

Prospects of gaining currency in FET

In order for academic integrity to gain currency in FET, there must first be an established awareness-raising construct that approaches it from a non-punitive angle by showing its benefits to the learner's journey. Despite many studies on the subject, much of the research in the last 20 years has been on academic misconduct, plagiarism in particular (Mahmud & Ali, 2023), due to concerns about widely available services that encourage misconduct, such as cheating services and essay mills. In particular, forms of misconduct or dishonesty have been observed as a serious concern during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the world unexpectedly moved to virtual learning environments (Hidalgo, 2022). On the risks associated with misconduct, Carruthers (2019) goes as far as suggesting that 'Academic integrity appears fragile in our era, and frequently the Internet is held responsible' (p.1).

The focus on the risks of cheating or plagiarism is not new, however, as shown by an early work by Earl Barnes (1904). Barnes discussed a case in which students were asked their views on misconduct, specifically exam cheating. He made reference to social responsibility and how it collides with self-interest. His article discusses dilemmas that students ponder against moral judgement and societal obligations, subjects that continue to resurface in literature on academic integrity today.

Other research suggests that appropriate conduct is associated with honourable behaviour (Hidalgo, 2022), a way of acting, a code or set of codes to be upheld. Creating a culture of social responsibility can be a rewarding step in developing learner identities: 'One of the best ways to uphold academic integrity is to create a culture of academic integrity throughout the school' (Çelik & Razı, 2023, p.3). In particular, before addressing cheating or misconduct, learners should first and foremost be oriented towards a culture of integrity to establish and build upon a mental and moral framework.

Instilling and developing a culture of integrity

The value of instilling ideals of appropriate conduct, if aligned with realistic 'messages' (McCabe, 2005, p.31), can have an impact on learners because it can orient them towards social responsibility. For example, where a career path leads to a profession that relies strongly on trust and ethical values, a learner

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could be presented with messages that emphasise the implications of integrity when it comes to the job of a carer, a medical practitioner, a social worker, etc. In fact, integrity is part of every profession, and for programmes with practical or work-based components, for instance, professional integrity intersects with academic integrity.

Relating appropriate learner conduct to professions can evoke considered thought on the part of the learner. Imagine a house built by a professional: if the skill involved in building its foundation came into question, one might think twice about credentials, honesty, and accountability. Or imagine a surgeon who may have cheated in exams; would you trust them to perform a life-saving operation on you?

Other approaches to putting this message across can involve trialling good practices as a support for transitions into industry. For example, Ruddy and Ponte (2019) discuss the value of an micro-credential on academic integrity that prepares new university entrants for academic and employment transitions. One such micro-credential was trialled in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2019, aiming to align the course with the provider's 'emphasis on providing industry connections and experience'. Though this example refers to a university, it also offers vocational training.

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The integration of academic integrity as a micro-credential builds on the support for industry and learners with a skill that not only applies to learning but equips people with attributes and knowledge that prepare them for the world of work. This approach reflects unique foresight and takes a meaningful step towards aligning integrity with the learning journey. One might consider it a leap towards repositioning academic integrity, fitting it around the learner and the context of learning.

Conclusion

The Irish FET sector serves a large and diverse learner population. It is a context in which professional and academic conduct intersect, and it is a conduit for pathways spanning an impressive spectrum of disciplines and awards. The reimagining of academic integrity might involve considerations for apprenticeship and traineeship programmes, work placements, or skills demonstration. In fact, it is an essential part no matter what the level of study or subject.

Research on academic integrity in tertiary and FE/FET contexts has yet to progress in terms of raising awareness of its benefits to learners. Integrity is not an element that can operate in isolation from career pathways. It is important for learner identities, and it follows individuals through every facet in their careers and lifelong learning. This is why developing a culture that upholds

academic integrity benefits learners not only in their studies but also in their role as future professionals and members of society.

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The 'Skills for Jobs' seminar and panel discussion 'Skills for Jobs' took place at Europe House in Dublin on 22 November 2023.