

Academic Integrity and Online Assessment

Faculty and student perspectives

This article explores academic integrity in relation to online assessment. It describes a UCD-based study that explored students' experiences of online assessment and their perspectives on various forms of academic misconduct. It reports the study findings and suggests ways to best safeguard academic integrity in future online assessment.

Introduction

This article explores academic integrity in relation to online assessment, in the context of a University College Dublin (UCD)-based study funded by Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) Anniversary Funded Proposals to support assessment and confidence in higher-education qualifications in 2023. The project explored the interrelationship between online assessment and student academic integrity. It aimed specifically to enhance our understanding of students' experiences of online assessment and their perspectives on academic misconduct, such as plagiarism, contract cheating, collusion, unauthorised use of artificial intelligence (AI) generators, and exam cheating.

Literature

Interest in academic integrity and the prevention of academic misconduct has expanded significantly in the past 20 years. Early research focused on plagiarism (Drinan & Bertram Gallant, 2008), while more recent literature has focused on contract cheating or 'essay mills' (Bretag et al., 2018) and online learning and assessment (Watson & Sottile, 2010). There is widespread consensus that higher education institutions (HEIs) should take a holistic approach and embed a culture of academic integrity at every stage of the student journey. This is not without challenges (QQI, 2021).



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A number of legal approaches have been adopted in Ireland (2019), Australia (2020), England (2022), and the EU (2023) to minimise the risk to academic integrity. The EU AI Act took effect in the 27 member states without needing to be transposed into national laws (McElligott, 2023). There is greater international cooperation by quality assurance agencies, national regulators, and academics to address this issue. The European Network for Academic Integrity brings together researchers, educators, and policymakers to promote academic integrity. The European Network for Quality Assurance has fully engaged in the issue. Since legislation was introduced in Ireland in 2019, the National Academic Integrity Network was established and Academic Integrity Guidelines and Academic Integrity Principles and a Lexicon of Common Terms were published.

Online assessment

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Since Covid-19 there has been considerable interest in academic integrity as it applies to online assessment. Holden et al. (2021) identify particular forms of academic misconduct which are common online, including tampering with a user device or test management system, impersonation, leaking test material, using prohibited resources, conducting internet searches, communicating with others, buying answers, accessing local or external storage, or accessing a book or notes.

Tsigras and Fesakis (2021) argue that focusing on technical solutions to prevent misconduct is not as productive as developing new teaching and alternative assessment methods. The benefits and drawbacks of proctoring online assessments (using video summarisation [AI] software or web invigilation, both live and recorded) to counter misconduct is well considered in the literature. While proctoring is viewed as an important feature of online assessment, criticism has centred on the ethical aspects of student privacy and possible discrimination. As an alternative, Cluskey et al. (2011) propose online exam control procedures to minimise misconduct.

There is concern at the potential impact of AI tools on online assessment. While software has been developed to detect the use of AI, there is little confidence in its effectiveness (Share, 2023). Discussions on how HEIs should respond include options such as revising assessment methodologies and incorporating AI into teaching and learning strategies. With knowledge and experience expanding rapidly in this area, further guidance and discussion on how HEIs may best respond to AI generators while safeguarding academic integrity are emerging and being continually updated.

Study context

This research was part of a suite of initiatives introduced in UCD focusing on academic integrity and ethical practice. It began with a consultation with the Teaching & Learning Committees at 37 schools in UCD on faculty experiences of, and perspectives on, the move to online learning in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study surveyed students to explore their experience of online assessment and academic integrity, collecting data from programme stages and demographic profiles across all six colleges in UCD.

A total of 1,972 students undertook the survey, representing a 77% response rate and 6.5% of the 21,979 taught undergraduate and 8,560 taught graduate students enrolled on the Dublin campus in 2023/24. Approval was granted by the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Faculty observed an increase in academic misconduct with the shift to online assessments during the pandemic, and attributed it to factors such as lack of knowledge about academic integrity, excessive assessment demands, time pressure, external pressures, and limited assessment time frames. They recommended increased and obligatory education and training on academic integrity for students, stricter penalties for misconduct, and measures to ensure the integrity of online assessments, such as physical invigilation, monitoring of UCD-owned devices, and e-proctoring.

The vast majority of survey participants had engaged in online assessment, mostly quizzes and submission of assignments. Similarly, students across all categories expressed strong knowledge and understanding of academic integrity and the majority of related terms, with the exception of collusion and contract cheating. Most students considered exam cheating, plagiarism, and contract cheating to be unethical, to varying degrees. They perceived cheating to be uncommon in in-person exams but extremely common (14%) or very common or common (48% combined) in quizzes and short exercises. Time pressure (tight or concurrent deadlines), lack of knowledge on academic integrity and what constitutes misconduct, lack of confidence in own ability, and perception that other students are cheating were identified as the factors most likely to induce a student to engage in academic misconduct.

Asked what resources, guidance, or information UCD could provide to reduce academic misconduct, students highlighted a need for improved assessment design and delivery; better, more, or repeated academic-integrity guidance and training; better guidance on assessment requirements and how to address them; mainstreaming of use of AI tools; better spread of assignments and

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reduced assessment load; improved assessment feedback; and greater clarity and consistency of academic integrity rules and regulations.

Conclusions

The UCD Academic Integrity Policy approved by Academic Council in March 2024 provides clear guidance for faculty and students on issues such as assessment requirements and institutional expectations around the use of AI.

This research indicates that, in line with international findings, online assessment – particularly exams and quizzes – is more likely to be the subject of academic misconduct than in-person assessment modes, especially when unsupervised. As a result of these findings, UCD is developing new approaches to online assessment.

Mitigating and addressing academic misconduct is possible by modifying assessment design and delivery (within a wider reflection on course design and content), including assessment spacing and timing and direct and continuous student-facing messaging on all aspects of assessment, academic integrity, and related processes in the university. Collusion, sharing work, or selling past work, and the unauthorised use of AI tools are areas where students lack both knowledge and understanding.

Students requested greater clarity on assessment requirements and institutional expectations around the use of AI. The UCD Academic Integrity Policy approved by Academic Council in March 2024 provides clear guidance for faculty and students on these issues so that a holistic approach is adopted in learning and online assessment contexts.

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Traveller Pamela Cullotty graduates from SETU with a Bachelor of Arts degree



Leanne Duffy,
Pamela Cullotty
and Marie Moylan

Pamela Cullotty was among the 26 An Cosán graduates who received a BA Degree from South East Technological University (SETU)

Pamela Cullotty is among the 1.4% of Travellers who complete third-level education.

In 2024, she graduated from South East Technological University Carlow (SETU) with a BA in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development.

A native of Donegal, Pamela undertook the degree with *An Cosán*, Ireland's largest community education organization. *An Cosán* provides blended and flexible adult community education programmes to adults across Ireland. Its higher education programmes are accredited by South East Technological University (SETU) and are delivered online, enabling them to be undertaken from anywhere in the country.

An Cosán's BA in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development, along with its BA in Leadership and Community Development, aims to equip graduates with the necessary knowledge, competencies and skills to enable them to make a professional contribution to communities, groups and organisations in a local community context.

Pamela was one of twenty-six An Cosán graduates from thirteen counties who celebrated their achievements in Carlow, joined by proud family members and friends, as well as members of An Cosán staff. Many of the graduates, including Pamela, are already involved in their local communities.

Pamela paid tribute to the unwavering support of An Cosán staff members.

"I felt An Cosán never gave up on me and, compared to experiences I have had with other education settings, I never ever felt anything but high expectations for me. I wasn't just a part of a class, I was also an individual."

An Cosán Chief Executive Officer, Heydi Foster, expressed her gratitude to SETU Carlow for their ongoing support of An Cosán and their dedication to adult learners.

"This dream that has been realised for our 26 graduates today would not have been possible without our collaborative partnership with South East Technological University dating back to 2008," she said.