Embedding a culture of academic integrity through programme design

What is academic integrity?

The University-wide statement on working with academic integrity states that:

‘Academic integrity’ describes the values held to be essential in university study in the UK. The five core values have been identified as:

- **Accuracy** – making sure that your work is free from errors.
- **Honesty** – being truthful about which ideas are your own and which are derived from others, and about the methods and results of your research.
- **Fairness** – not trying to gain an advantage by unfair means: for instance, by passing off others’ work as your own.
- **Responsibility** – taking an active role in your own learning: for instance, by seeking out the information you need to study effectively.
- **Respect** – for your fellow students, your tutors, and the work of other scholars.

Adapted from International Center for Academic Integrity (1999).

What are the barriers for students in working with academic integrity?

All cultures have implicit assumptions which are challenging for outsiders to decode, and the culture of UK Higher Education is no exception.

Whilst working with academic integrity is second nature for researchers and tutors, students encountering UK academic culture for the first time can find the rules and expectations associated with academic integrity extremely confusing. Although these rules and expectations appear to be made explicit though such mediums as guidelines found in student handbooks and instructions given within lectures and assignment briefs, for students, the cultural and institutional assumptions underpinning the practices needed for academic integrity are often much less explicit.

Implicit assumptions about effective practice can raise barriers for new students in the following areas:

- understanding the importance of independent reading and research, and the role of sources and scholarly ideas of others in good academic writing;
- understanding the reading-to-write process, including the need for note-taking;
- understanding why some sources of information are appropriate within an academic context whilst others are not;
- understanding why and how to reference the work of others.

These areas can be even more challenging to students entering UK Higher Education through non-traditional routes and international students coming from different academic cultures and operating within their second language.

Additional hurdles to working with academic integrity can include: difficulties with time management and organisation; shame, fear of failure, and unwillingness to seek help; and, lack of sufficient lexical resource or writing skill to paraphrase effectively. It is therefore not surprising that some students may inadvertently demonstrate poor academic practice.
What are we currently doing?

Students have access to a range of support and guidance needed to study with academic integrity, for example:

- University wide-statement on [academic misconduct](#) and [indicative scale of penalties](#)
- University-wide statement on [working with academic integrity](#) and information on developing good learning practices in [Programme Handbooks](#)
- [Study Smart: Your Essential Guide for University](#), a free online, pre-arrival course for new undergraduates
- [Study Advice](#) study guides, video tutorials, seminars and individual advice sessions
- [Academic English Programme (AEP)](#) courses and tutorials (free to fee-paying international or EU students)
- [Academic Integrity Toolkit](#), a suite of materials for academic tutors to use in class or as self-help tools for individual students

In addition, many programmes provide their own sources of excellent guidance which can include stand-alone skills modules, workshops, formative assignments and feedback, Week 6 activities, opportunities to seek advice from academic tutors, and embedding discussion of academic integrity within module teaching.

Despite all this support available, poor academic misconduct, and plagiarism in particular continue to be a regular concern for academic tutors.

What else can we do?

Working with academic integrity is fundamental for students to demonstrate acquisition of the University’s Graduate Attributes¹ and working together with staff ‘within a community of scholars’ (UoR Curriculum Framework). Honesty and integrity are also qualities employers are looking for.

As apprentices in this community it is important that "students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice” (QAA, 2013).

This goes beyond teaching students ‘how to reference’ or ‘how to avoid plagiarism’ towards a broader, more integrated, appreciative approach focusing on:

1. more fully embedding the teaching of academic integrity into the curriculum;
2. providing more ‘safe’ opportunities for students to practice and receive formative feedback on the complex skills required; and
3. being more proactive in ‘designing out’ opportunities for plagiarism.

Such an approach necessitates a structured and coordinated approach to programme/ assessment design. This takes time, however it has the potential, if planned and executed well, to reduce the amount of time staff spend detecting and dealing with potential cases of academic misconduct. In addition, the process of curriculum review and enhancement can be a valuable developmental process for both individuals and programme teams, leading to a stronger programme team ethos and programme identity.

¹ The University of Reading Curriculum Framework articulates the knowledge, competencies and skills that we want our graduates to attain. These include: mastery of their discipline; skills in research and enquiry; personal effectiveness and self-awareness; and global engagement and multi-cultural awareness.
Evaluating your practice

The following questions may be useful in prompting programme teams to reflect on how the programme/assessment design supports a culture of academic integrity, and allow the team to identify elements that are working well and prioritise areas for enhancement.

Developing students’ understanding and skills

- Are students introduced to what it means, and why it is important to have integrity in the context of their discipline?
- How clear are you about what skills students need to develop good academic practice in the first year of their studies to equip them for the challenges they will face in the rest of their degree? To what extent is this list shared and agreed among the programme team? To what extent is the list made explicit to students?
- Are opportunities to teach academic integrity and the skills students need to develop good academic practice embedded in the core curriculum? Are these front-loaded at the outset and proactively scaffolded throughout the programme?
- To what extent are students provided with ‘safe’ opportunities to work on developing the more challenging skills?
- What opportunities are there for students to see, raise questions and engage in dialogue with staff and peers on what good and unacceptable academic practice looks like?
- Are referencing guidelines consistent and made available in the student handbooks?
- What consideration is given to students on joint programmes or those taking modules in different disciplines where referencing conventions might differ?

Assessment design

- Are assessments planned across a programme to help avoid over assessment and bunched deadlines which might result in students taking shortcuts?
- To what extent do you make use of authentic assessment methods across the programme?
- To what extent are assessment titles (or the context) reused from one year to the next?
- Are there similarities between assessments across different modules which may provide opportunities for students to self-plagiarise?
- To what extent do the assessment tasks emphasise higher order thinking skills (e.g. synthesis/application/evaluation) rather than gathering/recalling content?
- Are there opportunities within the programme for formative feedback (from staff and peers) on work in progress e.g. an annotated bibliography, essay plan etc.
- Are academic skills and referencing explicit in assessment criteria?
- What activities (e.g. use of exemplars, peer assessment, opportunities for dialogue between students, staff and peers etc.) are used to engage students with the assessment task/criteria and the standards expected of them?
- Are the criteria for assessing group work and the difference between collaboration and collusion transparent and clearly understood?
- Is it clear how marks will be allocated for group work? (e.g. group mark and/or individual mark).
- Are there opportunities for students to submit drafts of assessments to Turnitin and revise their work based on the report generated? What guidance are students given on interpreting Turnitin Originality Reports?

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2 Authentic assessment methods are those which more closely resemble the ways in which skills and knowledge are used in the real world. E.g. creating a website, writing a grant proposal.
And finally…

- Do tutors model best practice that they seek to engender in students? E.g. do all sources acknowledged on learning resources make consistent use of the referencing style required of students?
- Do the programme team have a shared understanding of what constitutes poor academic practice, and is this applied consistently when marking and dealing with possible cases of academic misconduct?
- What process is in place for monitoring cases of academic misconduct on the programme? Does this capture the reasons why students may demonstrate poor academic practice (which may provide an evidence-base for prioritising change)?

References and further resources


