

Exploring Academic Integrity in Online Higher Education: Sensemaking Through a Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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General topic

In the context of **online higher education** institutions, there is a lack of understanding of how **institutional documents** contribute to the **sensemaking of academic integrity**.

Previous literature

Conceptual definitions of academic integrity are rarely found.

Approaches

- *Punitive*: rule-breaking behaviours (e.g., contract cheating, plagiarism).
- *Institutional-technological*: to prevent or detect misconduct (e.g., remote supervision).
- *Institutional-pedagogical*: to promote academic behaviours (e.g., teacher training, student profiling, improve teacher-student interaction).
- *Values-based approach*: integrity as a shared, collaborative value (ICAI, ENAI).

Why to investigate this topic?

- **Different interpretations:** Academic Integrity / Academic Dishonesty
- **Responsibility:** Individual / Individual's context (culture)
- **Institutional strat.:** Control, detection, sanction / Formation, prevention, preservation
- **Limited research** on how the meaning of academic integrity is culturally constructed in online settings.
- Norms, values, assumptions, and practices **rarely analyzed together.**

Results may offer **valuable insights for**

- designing context-sensitive interventions.
- enhance institutional effectiveness
- promote a more holistic perspective on academic integrity.

Aim: To understand how the meaning is constructed in an online context through the communications that the university shares with its community

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28 bachelor's degrees, 54 master's degrees,
and 9 doctoral degrees
+600 **faculty members** and research staff,
and +6500 **affiliated teaching staff and
counsellors**

Students: +52,000 bachelor, +22,000 master
Majority are women
More than 80% are employed
Significant presence of students with
disabilities
Students from 130+ countries

Institutional Transition:

From a partially online assessment model
to 100% online evaluation.

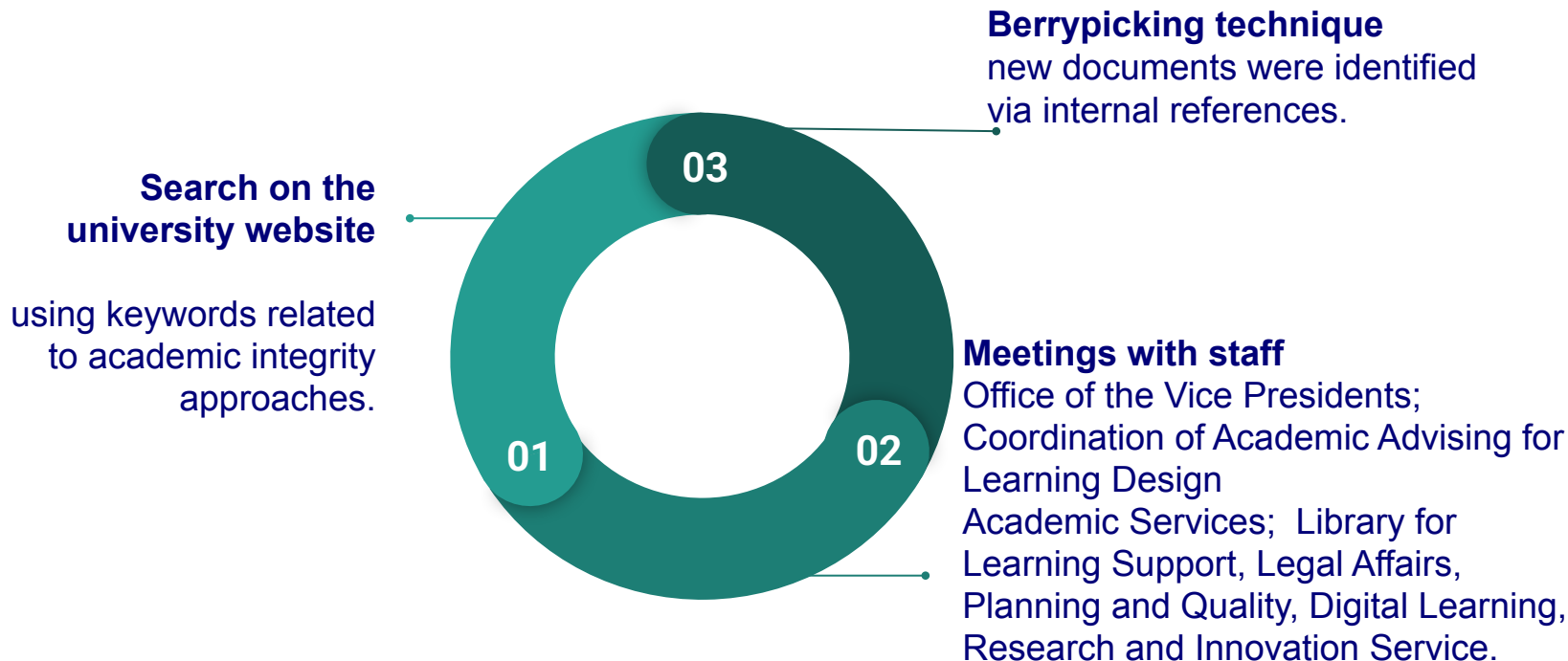
Institutional Challenges:

- Student training
- Verification of learning outcomes
- Promotion of Academic Integrity
- Coordination between
administrative, teaching, research,
technological, and management
teams.

**A suitable context to explore how
academic integrity is constructed in an
online environment, through the
documents shared with its community.**

How **institutional documents** contribute to the **sensemaking of academic integrity**?

Document collection, three phases:



Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

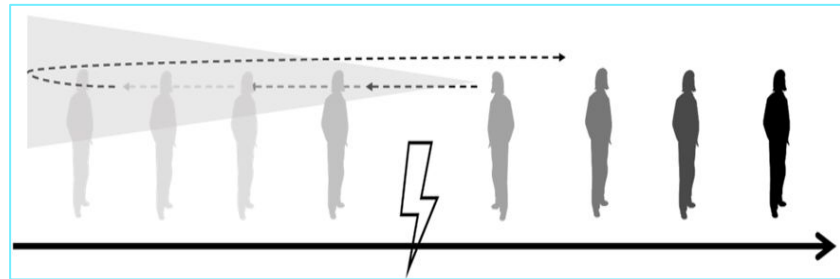
Themes later interpreted

- Academic integrity approaches
- Culture in Higher Education Institutions (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).
- Sensemaking properties: change, retrospection, interactions, extracted cues, plausibility, enactment, identity (Weick, 1995).

Culture

The mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, and assumptions that guide the behaviour and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus.

Sensemaking



Source: Author's own illustration

After carrying out the field work, we have obtained **104 documents**

Types:

- University system regulations
- Policies and guidelines (regulations, processes and procedures)
- Support materials for faculty and students
 - Guides for course and assessment design.
 - Guides for communication with students.
- Quality and accreditation documents and reports
- Library resources (guides, infographics, link repository, “How to cite”)
- Institutional communications and news.

- Norms framed within the regulations of the higher education system.
- No explicit definition of academic integrity in policies.
- Focus on “irregular behaviours in assessment”.
 - Emphasis on control, detection, and sanction.
 - Examples include plagiarism, identity fraud, cheating, misconduct.
 - Infractions may lead to disciplinary actions.

- Framed within the regulations of the higher education system: "to ensure the student's identity and to detect plagiarism and copying"
- Student identity authentication systems (proctoring) : "Identity recognition systems. To verify the student's identity and authorship, the UOC reserves the right to apply identity recognition systems."
- Faculty responsible for integration of authoring software. Report validation. Sanctions. "a comprehensive digital assessment model (...) one that ensures the validation of authorship and student identity (...) it is essential to work within the courses (...) to incorporate elements that guarantee the authenticity and authorship of students' work".

Values at the UOC

Ethics

Commitment, regulates behaviour, supports artificial intelligence use, prevent plagiarism.

Rigour

Ensures reliable evaluations, prevent plagiarism.

Honesty

Foundation of excellence, shared by all, prevent plagiarism.

Responsibility

Guarantees individual authorship (in artificial intelligence use).

Respect

Promotes diversity, confidentiality, and sustainability.

Critical Thinking

Guides ethical artificial intelligence use in learning.

Website “What is Plagiarism?” – Targeted at Students:

- Regulations, illustrative examples (such as library citation guides), reasons, artificial intelligence, resources.

Three Working Groups:

- Assessment: Focused on evaluation strategies and informing and detecting academic misconduct.
- Artificial Intelligence: Integration of AI into teaching, learning, and assessment practices.
- Feedback: “Understood as the mechanism through which students receive information regarding the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning objectives”.

Digital Assessment Strategies: “To guide the design of assessment toward critical reflection and the application of knowledge, reinforcing mechanisms to ensure student identity and authorship, and promoting academic integrity.”

Instructional Design:

- Metacognition, peer assessment, progressive assessment, authentic assessment, and the integration of AI into evaluation practices.

Course and Assessment Design – Main Validation Mechanism:

“The Virtual Assessment project aims to carry out all assessment processes virtually, applying strategies to ensure student identity and authorship.” “To guarantee these two aspects in course design, we present this instrument...”

Institutional Sensemaking of Academic Integrity Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Documents.

- Assessment model shift disrupts routines and prompts reflection.
- Meaning is built from experiences and institutional capacities.
- Policies, tools, and practices guide responses to misconduct.
- Framed by the broader governance system, focus on identity and authorship.
- Resources reinforce trust in degrees, both practically and symbolically.
- Academic integrity is shaped through guidelines, communications, and illustrative examples related to plagiarism, contract cheating, and generative AI.
- Without a collective institutional definition, interpretations of academic integrity vary according to actors' roles, assumptions, and contexts.

Limitations and future research

- The analysis covers the period from 2020 to june 2024 and does not include developments that may have occurred beyond this timeframe.
- It is also important to acknowledge the possibility that some relevant documents were not accessible during the data collection process.
- Future directions include continuing the exploration of how the meaning of academic integrity is constructed within the culture of the online university under study, through in-depth interviews with its own students.

Thank you
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