Students on the Frontlines of Academic Integrity in Ireland and Croatia: Who Are They and (Why) Do We Need Them?

Pegi Pavletić
The European Students' Union (ESU), Belgium

Megan O'Connor
Union of Students in Ireland, Ireland

Abstract

The standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), define, within the standard 1.1, that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to have public internal Quality Assurance (QA) policies that effectively support academic integrity and are battling academic fraud, among other points (ENQA et al., 2015). On a national level (standard 3.6), QA agencies need to assure the integrity of their activities, in that way assuring that the national higher education (HE) systems are reliable, resilient and fit for purpose. When it comes to student involvement in QA, students are becoming increasingly engaged in QA activities as equal partners (ESU, 2020); however, the extent of their involvement in the matters of academic integrity on a national level still varies based on the national legislation and the activities covered by national QA agencies.

Some countries, such as Ireland and Croatia, do involve students in discussions about academic integrity, prevention of academic misconduct, and implementation of different methods to preserve academic values within the curricula. In this paper, we have described the differences between the two mentioned national systems in terms of legislation, practices in preserving academic integrity within the Quality Assurance (QA) of higher education, and students' reflections based on the information available at the webpages of the respective NUSs (Union of Students in Ireland and Croatian Students' Council).

In Ireland, the national QA Agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, has formed a National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), and is directly involved in monitoring academic integrity practices and preventing academic misconduct, with the possibility of persecuting said misconduct. NAIN's members include students who engage through their NUS - Union of Students in Ireland (USI), and who actively contribute to co-creation of policies and practices related to academic integrity. The student members receive appropriate training and are able to train and organise capacity-building activities for other students. The students also organise different activities on their own, to raise awareness on the need for battling academic misconduct such as contract cheating.

In Croatia, the national QA Agency, Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), is monitoring academic integrity through institutional self-assessment reports within internal QA evaluations, while the Law on Students' Council and Other Students' Organisations defines the position of students' ombudspersons at each HEI, independently from the QA system. Students' ombuds are students who do not receive training, but are able to request institutional reports.

They are selected for a period of 1 year by the institutional students' representation body, and they can help other students in protection of their rights in disciplinary processes.

QQI and ASHE were interviewed as part of this research, and the findings indicate that QQI was much more successful in terms of engaging students in academic integrity-related topics, while ASHE does not have a responsibility to independently work on this topic with students, although they periodically participate in activities related to academic integrity. Students involved in QQI's NAIN Network are independent and they understand the academic integrity policy well. Both the agencies reiterated the importance of students' involvement in academic integrity and the need for educating students on these topics within their study cycles. Students who are overall most engaged in academic integrity are already active students' representatives, which means that additional efforts need to be made in order to ensure all students understand this topic.

Introduction

Understanding the Role of Students in Higher Education

Contemporary European higher education (HE) would not be the same without students' involvement in aspects of quality assurance (QA) and governance of higher education institutions (HEIs), as prescribed by *The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* (ENQA et al., 2015). The ESGs address the need for effective academic integrity policies at the HEI level, as well as the need for combating academic fraud within the part concerning internal QA practices. They also mention that students are equal to other stakeholders in higher education and that their involvement is necessary in QA policies and practices. National QA Agencies have to assure their integrity of work according to the same document.

The establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the Bologna Process in 2010 has drastically changed the way we look at European higher education today and students' involvement in it. Aside from the transparent QA systems, EHEA has established a common three-cycle education system (Bachelor, Master and Doctorate degree), and is actively working on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention for the mutual recognition of HE degrees and competencies (Gvaramadze, 2008). The European Qualifications Network (EQF) was developed to further contribute to comparable HE qualifications in EHEA, based on learning outcomes. Although students are reporting becoming increasingly involved and valued in the QA processes in higher education (ESU, 2020), their role and influence within the European HE landscape varies based on different national contexts and regulations.

In some instances, it was noted that students do not act as partners in co-creation of the HE landscape, but are perceived as consumers in HE, in economic terms on a national or international level. However, this characterisation of students' roles can prove to be detrimental to students' pursuit of knowledge (Brooks, 2018). The European Students' Union (ESU, formerly known as ESIB), an umbrella organisation consisting of 45 national unions of students, has strategically opposed this form of HE commodification, as well as its member unions (ESU, 2019), aiming to limit such perceptions of students as merely the users in HE systems. Additionally, commodification could lead to students treating education as a good rather than a right, negatively impacting the idea of learning outcomes-based education and the process of learning.

Students can also be political actors within student activism bodies, and they can closely collaborate and co-create in the field of HE with their national governmental systems, if the systems themselves allow it, such as in Nordic countries (Brooks, 2018). On the other hand, there are systems in which students take on a consultatory role, and are not as actively engaged in political decisions regarding higher education, as in Croatia (Brooks, 2018). Inconsistencies in student involvement in HE processes can be seen as limiting to students' political influence

in HE policymaking (Bienefeld & Almqvist, 2004), especially since the students' organisations are so vastly different in their nature and functions.

The Role of Students in Research Activity and Preserving Academic Integrity

When it comes to research in general, HE students usually become interested and involved in scientific activities and production by performing practical tasks themselves, aside from receiving training as a part of their formal education in undergraduate and graduate courses (Feldman et al., 2013). Additionally, research in HE is conducted by HEI employees (i.e. teaching staff) or the HEIs who provide learning opportunities on the topics of their expertise, offer spaces and facilities, as well as lead and coordinate scientific and research projects (Briggs et al., 2019). This could lead to students' lack of understanding of research process and practices. Additionally, students' short involvement in research projects during their education, especially at undergraduate and graduate studies, could lead to the projects being abandoned after they leave.

In 2017, Lamanauskas and Augienė demonstrated that students perceive research as a multi-layer process consisting predominantly of active work, but also working with tutors and studying process (Lamanauskas & Augienė, 2017). A total of 30.6% of students in that study said that research was a compulsory element of their education, but only 18% believed that this research activity formed part of their professional development. As general reasons for their lack of interest in research, students mentioned being unmotivated and unwilling to improve, as well as facing challenges in the study process, with insufficient help from tutors and lack of resources, while 17% said there was not enough time as they needed to work to earn money (Lamanauskas & Augienė, 2017). Students indicated that their interest in research could be improved by a more favourable study environment with appropriate help and support from tutors, working on their professional and career development, understanding their future prospect and acknowledgement of their work (Lamanauskas & Augienė, 2017). Another study from 2013 mentions that students are generally involved in research in the role of apprentices, although this is not explicitly mentioned within their research groups (Feldman et al., 2013). If the research group is tightly organised (multiple researchers at different levels of education and with different roles within a team) and conducts regular meetings (such as Journal Clubs or Progress Reports), the students will learn more about their field of studies. Short-term research experiences contribute to students' understanding of methodology, but do not substantially contribute to their intellectual proficiency in their field/topic, which is relevant for students' learning and research independence (Feldman et al., 2013).

Students' research work cannot be separated from the values of academic and research integrity. In 2005 a study found that among several thousands of United States scientists, 33% engaged in fabrication, falsification or plagiarism in their research activities (Martinson et al., 2005). That study found that on average mid-career researchers engaged in such behaviours more often than early-career researchers. Additionally, in a study from KU Leuven it was demonstrated that Ph.D. students who took a 3-hour course on research integrity engaged further in conversations about it with their colleagues and supervisors, and that they applied information from the course in their research, despite the long-term knowledge retention not being particularly high (Abdi et al., 2021). Consequently, this means that even though academic misconduct in research does happen, there are ways of mitigating it.

However, if we look at the connection between those students engaged in research work (predominantly doctoral students), and those students engaged in student activism within ESU, we can note that not many doctoral students decide to participate in the student movement. The reasons for this include lack of time to dedicate to this work and such activities not being a priority in their learning process. Therefore, ESU (and, presumably, the majority of its member unions) does not conduct independent activities related specifically to doctoral students or research, that would help to raise awareness on the need for incorporating academic and research integrity values in the process of education (ESU, 2022a, 2022b). It rather acts as a consultative partner on these matters.

Research Objectives

In order to understand the role of student representatives (and students in general), in the promotion, preservation and active engagement in academic integrity policymaking and policy implementation in their respective national systems, we decided to compare two different national examples: Ireland and Croatia. Ireland is a Western-European country, while Croatia is an Eastern-European country, and these two regions generally have a very different approach to involving students in the topics of HE, such as academic integrity. Our main research objectives were to:

1) Analyse the national policies on academic integrity;
2) Investigate whether academic integrity is evaluated as a part of the national QA systems;
3) Compare the student engagement between the two systems.

We expected that the national system in Ireland would provide more opportunities to students for participation in policymaking processes, and that QA systems in HE would be more quality-enhancement oriented. This assumption is based on the data obtained through ESU's publication - *Bologna With Student Eyes 2020* - where several good practices were listed in students' participation in the higher education system (Hovhannisyan et al., 2020). For example, there was a National Student Engagement Programme with the goal of increasing student participation in institutional processes. Additionally, the pool of experts in Ireland is governed both by the national QA agency and the national students' union, indicating cooperation between different governing bodies and students. In contrast, we believed that in Croatia, students' participation in academic integrity would be lower, and that the QA systems will be more oriented on the assessment of existing practices, rather than enhancement. This is based on the results from the same publication, where no evidence of good or innovative practices between students and policymakers was noted in the field of QA.

Methods

The analyses of the national policies on students' involvement in academic integrity for both Ireland and Croatia were performed by collecting national laws on higher education and student organisations and marking the areas of student involvement. Qualitative comparative analyses were performed for investigating research objectives 2 and 3. We contacted the national QA agencies - Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, Ireland) and the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE, Croatia) - to assess whether they evaluate academic integrity in their QA practices, and to what extent students are involved and imperative in addressing academic integrity. A total of 8 identical questions were posed to both agencies (the list of questions is presented in Appendix 1). These questions served for understanding whether academic integrity is addressed through the QA systems and to what extent students are involved in these activities. Finally, by comparing the national legislation and the responses from the Agencies, we obtained a full image of the difference between the systems and their effectiveness in practice.

Analysis of the information collected led to recommendations on how to improve systems in both countries for the benefit of students and their participation in academic integrity policies and practices. Additionally, we suggest how the students' unions can involve students more in these topics and how they can work more proactively on building a culture of academic integrity.

Results

National Academic Integrity Policies and Practices in Ireland and Croatia

Previous research showed that the Republic of Ireland was implementing practices for maintaining academic integrity (Glendinning, 2013), and was making important progress on a national level (Bretag, 2016), despite the practices not being consistently applied in all HEIs.

In 2019, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act included legislation allowing QQI to prosecute companies facilitating student cheating, on a statutory basis. This means that nationally academic integrity falls under the QA system that oversees Ireland's further and higher education. The same year, a National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) was formed under QQI, with the mission to: "effectively engage with the challenges presented by academic misconduct; embed a culture of academic integrity among providers and develop national resources and tools for providers to address the challenges presented by academic misconduct" (QQI, 2021a). The Act defined an offence as any facilitation of learner's cheating or advertising and publishing cheating services. NAIN has also defined their common terms and national principles in academic integrity that the HEIs can use and adapt for their own needs (NAIN, 2021b). Students' representatives from the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) are members of NAIN. In order to protect academic integrity, the information about avoiding academic misconduct is included in student handbooks, codes of conduct and course materials, as well as in the Learning Management System of Ireland (NAIN, 2021a). More recently NAIN has created a set of guidelines for the use of generative artificial intelligence in HE, which shows that the network is following developments in the field, and is reacting in a timely manner to prevent the misuse of technology in HE and further education (FE) (NAIN, 2023b). They have also created a framework for the investigation of academic misconduct, which can additionally contribute to consistency of practices on the national level (NAIN, 2023a). QQI's Strategy for 2022-2024 reiterates the Agency's dedication to academic integrity through QA, and preventing academic misconduct (QQI, 2022b).

NAIN involves students in all aspects of their work on academic integrity. Some of the activities student representatives reported to us are described in section 4.2. Student representatives are involved in the governance of QQI, and the students co-chair the Communications sub-group of the NAIN, together with an academic staff member. They participate in targeted communication strategies and enhancement initiatives including the "My Own Work" Campaign (QQI, 2021b) and National Academic Integrity Week (QQI, 2022a). Students also participate in connecting stakeholders by creating national or international partnerships and participate in projects on academic integrity. They also promote international networks to combat cheating services collaboratively. USI has a dedicated a web page designed to educate students on contract cheating and 'essay mills', and they offer the students the possibility to contact them to ask for help, either USI directly, or one of the local student unions that are USI members (USI, 2022).

The Croatian system is vastly different from the Irish system. In 2007, the Croatian Parliament approved a Law on the Students' Council and Other Students' Organisations, "cro. Zakon o Studentskom Zboru i Drugim Studentskim Organizacijama", under which the selection and the activities of the students' ombudspersons were defined, among other matters (Zakon o Studentskom Zboru i Drugim Studentskim Organizacijama, 2007). The ombuds have the right to be given a space to work at their HEI, have their activities co-financed and be given administrative and technical help. The ombuds are appointed by the respective students' council (the Croatian equivalent of a student union), based on the Council's Statutes, for a mandate of 1 year. The ombuds must be students who comply with the election criteria for the members of the Students' Councils. Their role is to collect students' complaints regarding the protection of their rights, and to communicate about these complaints with the HEI bodies; to provide consultancy to students regarding their rights; to participate (if necessary) in disciplinary procedures against students for the protection of their rights and to perform other duties as regulated by the general acts of HEIs. The National Union of Students in Croatia, called Croatian Students' Council (CSC) has their own Rules of Procedure in which they named a Coordinator of Students' Ombuds a Body of CSC (Poslovnik o Radu Hrvatskog Studentskog

Zbora, 2014). The Coordinator can propose councils, expert groups or working groups to help with the coordination of the ombuds on a national level, during their mandate, and they submit a report on their work to CSC at the end of their one-year term of office. These reports do not seem to be publicly available on the pages of the CSC. However, we were able to see on CSC's website that the students' representatives discuss the roles of students' ombuds, mentioning several key issues the ombuds have: poor visibility among the student population, not understanding the responsibilities of students' ombuds, not knowing the HE hierarchy and whom to contact for help (Croatian Students' Council, 2022).

The Croatian legislation on quality in higher education and science stipulates the inclusion of students in QA processes and in the Accreditation Committee of the National QA Agency-ASHE. However, there is no mention of academic integrity in the legislation (Zakon o osiguravanju kvalitete u visokom obrazovanju i znanosti, 2022). Additionally, ASHE's Statute has no mention of activities related to academic integrity. However, it is stated that ASHE must adhere to Croatian legislation, and also respect European practices and ESGs (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2023). Despite the lack of legislation on the matter, ASHE does participate in and promote activities that tackle academic misconduct and address academic integrity, in which the role of students is mentioned. Examples are sharing of documents like 'Guidelines for effective international practice in combatting corruption in higher education' (CHEA/CIQG, 2016) or 'Policies and Actions of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Bodies to Counter Corruption in Higher Education' (Glendinning et al., 2019) on ASHE's website. ASHE also organised a Conference on the academic honesty of students in Croatia, in which students participated, showing that there is an interest from ASHE's side in the topics of academic integrity (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2022).

Analysis of the Feedback from QQI and ASHE

Both the agencies were asked how academic integrity is integrated into QA processes they conduct. QQI responded that the NAIN Network was formed by the Agency, and that the Network comprises membership from all public higher education institutions and private independent providers, students and student representatives from USI. QQI coordinates and supports the work of NAIN, and it is currently developing a regulatory framework for the implementation of its regulatory function in respect of academic integrity. QQI is encouraging all education providers to report any threats to academic integrity they might know of (e.g. websites promoting contract cheating). It collects that feedback and releases it back to the education providers as alerts on the activities observed. QQI also engages with platforms that can be misused by contract cheating service providers to advertise to learners and has established processes with some of these platforms to report items such as advertisements, commercial or private posts as well as profiles offering cheating services, etc., infringing section 43A and by QQI to arrange for removal by those platforms. On the other side, ASHE, in all its QA evaluation procedures, implemented the standards and indicators that point out academic integrity both in higher education institutions and/or scientific organisations (such as institutes). Academic integrity is embedded in the internal QA evaluation mechanisms in Croatia, aiming to ensure that all the partakers in evaluation process conduct accordingly, and work toward self-assessment and improvement in the field of academic integrity. ASHE also provides the institutions with educational activities and expertise in the field of QA, in case they would need help with writing the reports or understanding more about the standard addressing academic integrity.

QQI and ASHE reiterate the role of academic integrity in institutional reputation and the impact on HE landscapes on a national level, as well as in terms of educating students with those values in mind for the benefit of society. It is well accepted that those engaging in academic misconduct threaten the quality of education, the fairness, responsibility and the trust in HE, and they are a threat to societal values as well (i.e. academic misconduct could potentially lead to other problems with disregarding the law). Neither of the two agencies deals with academic misconduct directly; this is dealt with at the institutional level through internal QA processes. QQI relies on the reports coming from the HEIs to inform the development of its regulatory framework and to take action against threats to academic misconduct. By providing

professional support to HEI staff to recognise the types of support needed by students, QQI is assuring that the system is running smoothly and that the requirements from such a system are noted and improvements are conducted. ASHE specifically noted that they were able to identify some points for improvement in academic integrity through internal QA processes at HEIs, such as a necessity for establishing or improving the efficacy of institutional policies and mechanisms in the area of academic integrity. Efficient academic integrity policies should engage every stakeholder group, including students.

Students are an integral part of evaluating academic integrity within QA systems. QQI and ASHE state that student representatives are generally more familiar with which forms of academic misconduct are widespread, which commercial services are approaching students and how this is happening, as well as personal and cultural reasons for students' engagement in academic misconduct. Student representatives are also able to effectively communicate with other students on the risks of engaging in academic misconduct and share the dangers of such a behaviour on a long-term basis in Ireland. Therefore, students' feedback to NAIN is crucial in developing and co-creating effective assessment frameworks and cultures of QA assessments and academic integrity within institutions. ASHE considers that students may recognize the common situational factors of potential academic integrity conflicts and contribute to ethical decision-making frameworks.

Even for such a QA system with wide opportunities for student participation, like the one in Ireland, the number of students aware of the national academic integrity systems and standards is below the Agency's expectancy. QQI is optimistic about the future growth of interest due to their collaboration with USI, the dissemination plans targeting students at key points during the year, and the plans for integrating the training on academic integrity into HE study cycles. ASHE believes that students are aware of academic integrity and misconduct, but a more systematic approach to the promotion of academic integrity on an individual, institutional and systemic level should be applied. Generally, QQI thinks that a sufficient number of student representatives are involved in the activities of promotion and upkeep of academic integrity values, both on the local and the national level. They do so by organising activities for raising awareness and providing feedback to NAIN; however, there is no basic understanding and knowledge on academic integrity, which should improve. As ASHE collects feedback through the QA evaluations, they were able to note that there is an increase in students' participation in academic integrity activities in different areas of HE. Nonetheless, improvement and promotion of these values among students should be broader and systematic.

QQI and ASHE shared some of the best practices of students' involvement in academic integrity. QQI mentioned the co-chairing of the Communications working group as described above. Its membership is made up of QQI representatives, staff from institutions and student representatives. Within NAIN, students are consistently acting as members of working groups, and USI is also organizing training for students with a session on academic integrity. This is seen as a valuable opportunity for NAIN/ QQI and USI sabbatical officers to exchange experiences, highlight emerging trends, etc. Initiatives within individual HEIs are also addressing academic integrity, and students' participation there is considered invaluable. ASHE could not provide a specific initiative; however, they reiterated that students' participation in each evaluation review team and accreditation decision-making bodies supports accountability and promotes, among other points, academic integrity.

To further promote academic integrity, QQI and ASHE believe students' organisations could organise capacity-building activities, continue empowering students to be proud of their own work, communicate academic integrity values, and raise awareness on academic misconduct. ASHE further stated the possibility of inviting Alumni students to talk about the importance of academic integrity and HEIs providing students with explicit instruction on academic integrity. Furthermore, putting an emphasis on learning and improvement of students was considered more relevant than the performance orientation approach, as ASHE states.

Conclusions

From the analysis of the national policies pertaining to academic integrity and its relation to quality assurance, we were able to note that the two systems in question: Republic of Ireland and Republic of Croatia, have a very different approach to academic integrity. Ireland's legislation has allowed the national QA agency, QQI, to form the NAIN Network and investigate and promote academic integrity practices on a systematic and continuous basis on a national level, with the full involvement of students in these practices. In Croatia, students act as ombuds, but there is no national legislation determining the approach to building and enhancement of academic integrity practices. The Croatian QA agency, ASHE, does not specifically address academic integrity, but this topic is covered through the internal QA processes at the level of HEIs. This means that in Croatia, there are two separate systems addressing academic integrity: one that is not subject to national coordination and tracking (student ombuds) and one that is, but it does not specifically evaluate academic integrity (QA processes conducted by ASHE). Furthermore, the Croatian system does not seem to provide education or training for students' ombuds, leading to students' own confusion about their roles, the impact they can make or how to perform their tasks. This is particularly concerning, considering that the student ombuds can help students who are going through academic conduct hearings, which could result in a negative impact on the very students they intend to help. In contrast, NAIN provides students with sufficient support and allows them to contribute to the co-creation of activities and NAIN's direction and practices, leading to a much better preparation of students, as well as a better understanding of their role and the sharing of academic integrity values within the student community. Despite the challenges students face in Croatia regarding their roles as students' ombuds, and the fact that ASHE does not dedicate a special discussion or work-space to academic integrity, the importance of student participation is still underlined. Both the evaluated national QA systems provide the space for discussions about academic integrity, with Ireland even having an active role in which the institutions can report suspicious practices that might support academic misconduct.

Generally, students seem to have some opportunities to engage in academic integrity, and students taking most interest seem to be the students' representatives. In Ireland, much effort is put on attracting students to join NAIN and advocate for academic integrity values, while in Croatia, it is a legal requirement that assures students' participation. So, we can say that the students on the frontlines of academic integrity are mainly student representatives who specialise in understanding, not only students' rights and academic integrity values, but are able to understand the legislation and are active in promoting those values inside and outside of the academic community. It is becoming universally understood that student participation is necessary in academic integrity, and that the other stakeholders benefit from their engagement, but the students need to be taught the values of academic integrity within their formal study programmes to assure that these values will be adopted within the academic community.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, we believe that recommendations can be divided into those for students' representative bodies (i.e. student unions) and those for HEIs. The recommendations for students' representative bodies include:

- Reach out to stakeholders in the field of academic integrity and consistently organize training in the field of academic integrity for representatives;
- Perform capacity-building activities to educate other students on academic integrity values and avoiding academic misconduct;
- Organise campaigns on preventing academic misconduct;
- Work on attracting doctoral students to students' representation to attain knowledge on academic and research integrity in practice.

The recommendations for HEIs include:

- Organise training for student ombuds, or for student representatives within institutions, teaching them about academic integrity values;
- Offer consultations to students in need of advice on academic integrity;
- Offer elective courses on academic integrity where national legislation for HE does not require such education;
- Pay attention to your academic integrity policies and make sure to document them within self-assessment reports as a part of internal QA processes.

Finally, we believe that policymakers have a big impact on how academic integrity is addressed within the national HE systems. Having an ineffective system is just as harmful as not having a system. QA agencies and bodies already collect information on systems within HEIs, so they could also monitor and support academic integrity practices on a national level.

Acknowledgements

Appendix 1

Supplementary information

The list of questions asked of both academic integrity agencies:

1. How is academic integrity integrated in quality assurance processes in your agency?

2. Why is academic integrity important in higher education from your perspective?

3. How often do you encounter academic misconduct, and which stakeholder group (students, teaching staff, external experts, other staff members etc.) seems to be involved in academic misconduct the most?

4. Are students relevant in addressing academic integrity and why?

5. From your perspective, are enough students aware of academic integrity and misconduct?

6. Do you find the number of students involved in the upkeep of the academic integrity values to be sufficient and why?

7. Can you offer us some examples of good practices in students' involvement in academic integrity?

8. Can you offer any advice on how student organisations could do more to promote academic integrity?

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