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Everyone has a role to play: academic integrity, professional development and third space

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Abstract

Academic integrity is fundamental to many aspects of higher education, including ensuring the validity of degrees, the quality of academic work and the development of academic literacies. Everyone has a role to play in this area but it also requires dedicated academic integrity roles to lead this work. Often, individuals directly employed in this field are positioned as third-space professionals with responsibilities for policy, procedure and/or training, education, and pedagogical support. When approaching academic integrity from the educational and pedagogical perspective, it can be a challenge to reach everyone (from this third space) with best practice guidance on fostering academic integrity across an institution. This article presents a case study of a micro-credential course, 'Fostering Academic Integrity in Learning and Teaching'. This course was developed in collaboration with academic and professional staff and is offered as a professional development opportunity to all who support student learning. The course, and its impact, not only demonstrate the success of third-space collaboration but also the importance of third-space expertise (with time dedicated to specific research areas, like academic integrity) for informing the practice of academic colleagues at an institution.

Keywords: academic integrity; professional development; collaboration; pedagogy; third space.

Introduction

Academic integrity is fundamental to higher education (HE), not only for ensuring the validity of degrees and quality of academic work, but also for ethical practice and professionalism more broadly. Essentially, 'it is critical to every aspect of the educational

process' (Bretag, 2016, p.3). As such, academic integrity is applicable across all areas of the higher education institution (HEI), and everyone has a role to play in supporting it. At the same time, it is important to have roles dedicated to this area to avoid diffusing the responsibility to the point where aspects of promoting or upholding academic integrity are missed and challenges are not responded to. Eaton (2024) illustrates a holistic approach to academic integrity with her comprehensive academic integrity (CAI) framework that brings together everyday ethics, professional and collegial ethics, student academic conduct, publication ethics, research integrity and ethics, instructional ethics, ethical leadership, and institutional ethics. The CAI framework helps highlight the full scope of academic integrity. It evidences that those with defined roles in this area can find themselves working across and in between several academic and professional spaces. Individuals in these roles are frequently strategic drivers of both policy and pedagogy, though often not from leadership positions within institutional hierarchies. Academic integrity work, therefore, tends to be situated in the liminal third space, which can afford both opportunities for creativity but also risk and uncertainty (Whitchurch, 2013). Academic integrity professionals, therefore, benefit from collaborating with colleagues across different units and functional areas (i.e. academic departments, student support services, policy developers, senior leadership) in their HEI and with those in similar positions at other institutions in order to both increase the impact of their work and establish networks that increase a sense of community, belonging, and support.

This article presents a case study of one such collaboration to create a professional development opportunity for all staff who support student learning in the form of a micro-credential course, 'Fostering Academic Integrity in Learning and Teaching'. This course was created in partnership with academic and professional staff. The process of developing the course, and its impact, demonstrates the benefits of such collaboration and highlights the importance of third-space expertise (with time dedicated to specific research areas, like academic integrity) for enhancing academic colleagues' practice. The following sections expand on the field of academic integrity, provide national and institutional context for this case study, and detail the process of building a network, collaborating on the development of the course, and its overall impact.

Situating academic integrity in the third space

The field of academic integrity is transdisciplinary and encompasses several perspectives and focuses (i.e. teaching and learning, ethics, policy, and detection). Individuals across a range of roles, including academic and professional staff working in student support, staff development, quality assurance, policy, and disciplinary contexts to name a few, contribute to this field (Vogt and Eaton, 2022). Recently, this field has gained increased attention as a result of the challenges that the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has posed to assessment security and originality (Luo, 2024). These challenges have highlighted the importance of academic integrity and our ability to encourage learning and evaluate if it has occurred. Academic integrity is vital to ensuring that we prepare students to use GenAI tools responsibly and with a critical lens, and that also we do this ourselves.

While some HEIs have dedicated Academic Integrity Offices, the number of staff employed in these varies and can be as few as one or two. Equally, those HEIs without dedicated offices may have one or more members of staff across different units dedicated specifically to academic integrity matters (either procedural, pedagogical, or both). Academic integrity professionals often span various functional areas of the HEI, working with academics, students, senior leaders, and administrators, and sometimes holding dual roles with responsibilities in other areas. As such, this field of work is complex and can, at times, feel isolated and lack standardisation in terms of roles and expectations (Ahuna et al., 2023). Ahuna et al.'s (2023) qualitative research with academic integrity professionals confirms that the third-space paradigm captures their experience carving out unique spaces full of uncertainty but also dedication and possibility underpinned by 'both/and also logic' rather than 'either/or' (Soja, 2009).

Potential challenges of working in an in-between space, in addition to uncertainty and isolation, are a lack of visibility and recognition if that work is not brought to the fore, and aligned with and supported by institutional strategy (Hall, 2022). Collaboration across functional areas within an HEI as well as inter-institutional networks can help reduce feelings of isolation while also centralising the work, increasing its visibility. In the case of academic integrity, several national and international networks, including Ireland's National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), the Australasian Academic Integrity Network (AAIN), the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI), the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) and the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN), bring

together professionals working in this space. These networks offer a system of support for those individuals and serve as spaces of collaboration that enable the sharing of good practice, and the development of open resources, guidance, policies, and research. They also establish academic integrity communities outside of individual HEIs. However, it is also important to build networks (formal or not) and work collaboratively within an HEI, empowering and strengthening the voices of those involved (Abegglen et al., 2023), thus increasing the reach and impact of the work.

The national context

In recent years academic integrity has become a priority in Ireland at the national level. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the state regulatory agency, established the NAIN in 2019 to support Irish HEIs to develop a national understanding of academic integrity, share good practice, embed a culture of academic integrity, and develop resources (QQI, 2021). The network, which consists of academic, professional and student representatives from across HE in Ireland, including related agency representation, has subsequently published national principles, lexicons, guidelines and frameworks. In 2022, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in partnership with the National Forum, included academic integrity as one of three key focus areas for the allocation of €6.4 million of Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) funding for Irish HEIs (O'Shea, 2022).

This SATLE funding supported both projects and the establishment of (temporary) academic integrity roles across Irish HEIs. As new roles, with varied responsibilities from policy to education across different functional areas, these can easily be located within the third space and have the potential for isolation. However, the NAIN, and a subgroup within this comprised of those in these new roles, provides a network of support in the third-space environment as well as the opportunity for transdisciplinary and interinstitutional collaboration with colleagues (NAIN representatives) that share similar goals regarding academic integrity. Having this access to working together across institutional and departmental boundaries, with the support of collaboratively developed frameworks and guidance, lays a foundation for truly embedding these roles to effectively reach out across their individual institutions. Equally, because of the national prioritisation of academic integrity and reporting requirements for SATLE funding, these roles benefit from increased

visibility and alignment with institutional strategy. As an example, my own institution, University College Cork (UCC), refers to academic integrity in its current strategic plan under goals one and two: research and innovation, and student success (UCC, 2023). Prior to this strategic plan, extensive work was undertaken at UCC to promote a culture of academic integrity, including the creation of a formal professional development opportunity for staff, detailed in the case study presented here.

Establishing networks of academic integrity champions

The plan to develop a micro-credential professional development course for UCC staff began with myself, an academic integrity professional responsible for establishing an educational approach to academic integrity across the university (for both students and staff). My role at the time was situated within both the university's student support and learning and teaching centres. The positioning of my role in a third space between these two units acted as a useful bridge for staff and student perspectives on academic integrity and allowed for consistent, but tailored, messaging on the topic across both cohorts. Colleagues and I in these units also recognised that it would be beneficial to bring together additional academic and professional staff, and students, from across the university when developing this course. This allowed us to draw on their expertise, experience, and examples of practice in order to ensure the course's relevance and reach. The first step was to establish staff and student networks of Academic Integrity Champions who I could collaborate with on this and other projects, and who could act as additional voices for academic integrity across the university. As highlighted in the previous section in discussion of the NAIN, having a formal network with a shared goal when working from the third space enables collaboration and can help increase the visibility and relevance of the third-space work. Therefore, establishing this champion network within my own institution, bringing together the expertise and support of colleagues and learners from across disciplines and units, was an important first step in my aim of promoting a culture of integrity at UCC and developing resources to support this.

Champions for academic integrity can come from any role or level and may not always be formally recognised as 'champions', but generally demonstrate a commitment to the area, willingness to effectively communicate it and connect with others in the HEI about it (Gallant and Drinan, 2006). In our case, to establish our staff champions and to ensure representation from across the university, the Head of College from each of UCC's four

Colleges (College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences; College of Business and Law; College of Medicine and Health; and College of Science, Engineering and Food Science), and the Directors of Adult Continuing Education and Student Experience were asked to nominate two staff members. This formed our group of twelve Academic Integrity Champions with roles ranging from lecturers to Vice Deans for Learning and Teaching, and professional staff working in student services. This brought together a diversity of perspectives to strengthen the work I was doing, ensuring aspects particular to certain disciplines or cohorts were not overlooked. It also involved colleagues in senior positions and with membership in further networks, including working/steering groups and committees, who could act as an additional voice of support to effect change in a way that may not be achievable when working in isolation from the third space.

On the student side, initially volunteers were sought from undergraduate and postgraduate tutors working in our student academic support centre. As these students work directly with their peers, delivering workshops and one-to-one sessions covering a range of academic skills that support academic integrity, they were ideally positioned to act as champions, and were provided with additional training on academic integrity to support them in this position. Now, all tutors in the centre serve as Academic Integrity Champions to ensure that consistent information regarding academic integrity is shared with their peers and to offer a student perspective on developments in this area, including GenAI.

These formal champion networks are provided with updates and called upon to collaborate on projects and communicate and promote academic integrity across the university. Additionally, as the staff network brings together champions from both academic and professional staff, at various levels, it bridges potential divides between these areas, instead creating a more holistic space to establish unified approaches for fostering academic integrity. Indeed, QQI's (2021, p.6) national principles state that academic integrity 'belongs to all academic and professional staff and learners within the higher education community and requires active commitment by all stakeholders', something these champion networks help to achieve.

Developing an academic integrity micro-credential

The decision to create an academic integrity micro-credential for staff was informed by several factors. In 2008, Gallant argued for a teaching and learning approach to academic integrity, identifying that a shift in focus was needed from preventing cheating to ensuring learning, arguing that this could be achieved by 'fostering a learning-oriented environment, improving instruction, [and] enhancing institutional support for teaching and learning […]' (2008, p.89). This approach is supported by QQI's (2021, p.6) national principles which include: 'the institution develops the capacity of staff to support learners to follow good academic integrity practices'. Focusing on academic integrity within the teaching and learning space highlights the role of those who support student learning in fostering the same, ensuring responsibility for upholding academic integrity is not placed solely 'on the shoulders of students' (Peters, 2019, p.753). Creating this course therefore, offered the opportunity to add to the University's professional development opportunities while also bringing together key stakeholders to work towards the shared goal of promoting and upholding academic integrity in the institution.

Collaboration builds connections between institutional stakeholders, including educators and students, creating environments of solidarity and trust that lessen feelings of competitiveness, isolation, and burnout that are increasingly felt in the neoliberal HEI (Abegglen et al., 2023; Asher, 2023), and which negatively impact academic integrity. Centring this collaboration around a tangible outcome, in this case a micro-credential course, established a clear purpose for 'disparate groups [to] come together under the aegis of a common project and learn from each other in a third space environment' (Whitchurch, 2023, p.29). Sharing perspectives from across what can traditionally be seen as divides (for example, educator and student, academic and professional staff) in the development of this course embraced the opportunity for creativity and agency found in the third space. In doing this, we created an educative, supportive space that instead positively impacts academic integrity with a developmental approach (Gallant and Stephens, 2020).

The micro-credential course that we designed in support of this developmental approach, 'Fostering Academic Integrity in Learning and Teaching', is offered as a digital badge in UCC. Digital badges are largely online courses that must contain at least 25 hours of learning content. These courses are not formally accredited but go through an approval

process, and participants are awarded a digital credential upon completion. ‘Fostering Academic Integrity in Learning and Teaching’ is aimed primarily at academic staff and those who support student learning in HE, but is relevant for all who support student learning, with some modules being particularly useful for professional staff.

When designing the course, I began with a scoping exercise of content included in existing academic integrity training for staff and, with colleagues, established five key learning outcomes, all broadly aimed at enabling course participants to recognise their roles and responsibilities in relation to academic integrity and to take an active role in establishing an environment supportive of this for their students:

1. Identify the core principles of academic integrity.
2. Describe key points of engagement or intervention throughout the student journey in relation to academic integrity.
3. Analyse reports from plagiarism detection software from different disciplinary perspectives.
4. Evaluate responses to potential academic misconduct examples based on your understanding of relevant policies and procedures.
5. Reflect on your role in fostering a culture of academic integrity in the university.

Working backwards from these, we split the learning content necessary to achieve these outcomes across six modules:

1. Introduction to academic integrity (including situating academic integrity in relation to professionalism, academic freedom, graduate attributes, and key challenges from contract cheating and GenAI).
2. Mapping for success: the student journey (split into how we can support students across key stages: starting well, keeping on track, and crossing the finish line).
3. Perspectives of understanding (exploring learner diversity).
4. Using plagiarism detection software as an educational tool.
5. Policies, procedures and suspected misconduct cases.
6. Incorporating UCC student resources – recap, reflect, commit.

The course was designed with a learner-oriented approach (Laurillard, 2010). This includes a range of accessible content delivery (reading, videos, interactive activities to

reflect and apply knowledge) and flexibility in how learners approach these, for example, personalised time to complete the course and optional ‘live’ sessions. Further learning and application outside of the course were encouraged with the inclusion of additional reading and viewing content. Finally, activities were scaffolded throughout the course to build towards a future-focused final assessment to encourage continued action. The end of each module is marked with a short quiz or reflective task that asks learners to apply their knowledge (scenario-based quizzes requiring evaluation) and create a community of practice through shared reflections (on Padlet). The final assessment for the course is a short essay in which learners are asked to reflect on their role in fostering academic integrity and to identify a key intervention that they will implement in their practice, encouraging them to take their learning further and enact change. The course is offered asynchronously through open enrolment and is self-paced to allow those with limited time the opportunity to access the resources as needed and progress when they are able. However, there are opportunities for learners/colleagues to engage with one another and share perspectives throughout the course (Padlet and live sessions) to build on the exchange of perspective/knowledge woven throughout the course.

The collaboration to develop this course functioned in several ways. As a third-space professional sitting between the staff-facing teaching and learning centre (academic) and the student-facing academic support centre (professional), I worked with colleagues from both these units. We designed the framework for the course, the assessment tasks, the content of the first and last modules, and all other introductory sections. Beyond this, I drew on the expertise of those working in relevant areas across the university, including across disciplinary perspectives to fill in the gaps with concrete examples from practice. This primarily involved the Academic Integrity Champions, but also included additional academics who had demonstrated exemplary practice in a range of areas that support academic integrity, the Student Union Education Officer, and individuals with particular expertise or perspectives (i.e. policy, student appeals, library, international office, and research integrity). The contributions from these collaborators formed the bulk of modules 2 to 5 and generally took the form of recorded case studies of practice supportive of academic integrity and interviews. Topics covered in the case studies include setting clear expectations, providing feedback, designing rubrics and inclusive assessments, and a walk-through of policy and procedure. The interviews share student perspectives and highlight the diversity of learners and pathways to education. Each of these contributors was able to offer something I could not – a unique, specific example or perspective from

within their disciplinary or professional context. Together these formed a holistic view of academic integrity with demonstrable concrete practices for course participants to follow, noting similarities and differences in what colleagues were doing across functional areas and considering how these could be applied in their own contexts. Finally, all collaborators then participated in a pilot of the course, receiving the first digital badges and offering feedback that was implemented before the formal launch, ensuring the content was clear, engaging, well-scaffolded and relevant across the university. The collaborators were also then able to act as champions of the course, sharing it across their departments/units after the launch to promote engagement, particularly as it is not a required course and we wanted to encourage participation across a wide range of colleagues.

Importantly, the multitude of perspectives and expertise included in this course, perhaps best exemplified through the module ‘Perspectives of understanding’, all serve to open minds to new approaches and considerations for how we can each best support academic integrity. In particular, they inspire new or revised academic practices informed not only by other academics but also by professional staff and students. Professional staff are experts in a variety of fields and practices that directly relate to and can inform academic pedagogy including, of course, academic integrity. Equally, as the phrase teaching and learning suggests, students are a core partner in HE. Teaching and learning work in dialogue and bringing students in as partners in considering pedagogy opens this dialogue further, sharing power (Cook-Sather et al., 2018) and positioning educators and learners as a team in maintaining academic integrity rather than on opposing sides trying to catch each other out in an environment focused on cheating. Ultimately, this course is better able to inform good pedagogical practice through the inclusion of this diversity of perspective from stakeholders across the university. Importantly, the way it was developed also serves as an example of practice that supports academic integrity through open dialogue, transparency, agency, and collaboration between academics, professional staff, and learners, placing value in the unique perspectives, experiences, and expertise of all.

Reflections on impact

The ‘Fostering Academic Integrity in Learning and Teaching’ course was launched in October 2022 and its impact since then can be evidenced in a few ways, relating both to the visibility of the third-space professional and on pedagogical practices supporting

academic integrity. Whitchurch (2023, p.30) notes that while HEIs should work to highlight and recognise third-space work, including through progression pathways, ‘the onus is also on those who work in third space to harness their agency and activism to promote the value-added of their work as part of the overall academic offering, and to combat any sense of invisibility’. Knowledge creation is one way to do this as ‘recognition in third space environments […] is likely to be closely linked to recognition of the type of in-practice knowledge they create’ (Whitchurch, 2023, p.27). This course serves as a tangible output of academic integrity knowledge creation, increasing the visibility of both the topic and the third-space academic integrity professional. This is not only achieved through the continued promotion and running of the course, but also through its collaborative development and the formation of a champion network to enable this, all of which support the building of connections with colleagues across the university. While working from the third space opens the potential for the academic integrity professional to become isolated, ‘lost’, or not listened to within the institution, it also presents an opportunity to act as a bridge between academic and professional staff, senior leaders, and educators and students, all of whom need to work together to foster academic integrity. This requires the academic integrity professional to be actively engaged in collaboration with these stakeholders, through formal networks or projects such as this one, increasing the visibility of their role (encouraging colleagues to prioritise academic integrity, come to them for advice and with questions, and to include them in committees and working groups) and driving strategic and pedagogical approaches to cultivate academic integrity.

The varied expertise that informed the development of the course through collaboration with academic and professional colleagues, and students, has directly impacted academic practices. These impacts are evidenced through the practice interventions that course participants identified in their final assessment. 197 individuals have participated in the course to date, with 70 of these completing all the components required for the Digital Badge, including these interventions. The interventions can largely be grouped across three key areas: integrating academic integrity in teaching practice; focusing on the learning process and students-as-partner approaches; and systematic or programmatic level change. Summarised examples from these include:

- Incorporating academic skills toolkits in class resource pages on Canvas and embedding academic integrity workshops into core classes.

- Ensuring academic integrity resources in the University are highlighted and accessible for students.
- Using an academic integrity worksheet (included in the course) with students to prompt discussion, set goals, and identify challenges and skills to learn.
- Co-creating a rubric with students to aid clarity and increase student agency in learning.
- Checking in on and scaffolding skill development through learning journals, in-class conversations, drop-in sessions and discussion groups.
- Redesigning assessment (authentic, inclusive).
- Raising the issue of overassessment at department/programme meetings.
- Creating working groups to coordinate an integrated approach to teaching academic integrity across a department.

Conclusion

This case study positions academic integrity professionals in the third space, while noting that this particular group of third-space workers can benefit from increased visibility due to the nature of academic integrity and its potential alignment with national and institutional priorities. It argues that third-space collaboration with colleagues and students across an HEI, particularly on tangible outputs of knowledge creation, is beneficial not only for increased visibility and recognition, but also for building and establishing connections and networks of support, and for sharing expertise in ways that usefully inform academic practice. The development of an academic integrity micro-credential discussed in this case study serves as a successful example of this, bringing together a range of academic, professional, and student collaborators to create a professional development resource for both academic and professional staff that has increased the recognition of academic integrity and the academic integrity professional and directly influenced academic practice, evidenced through interventions identified in the course assessment.

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