

Academic Culture in Transition: Are Honour Codes a Viable Solution?

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Abstract

The continuing advancement of electronic technology poses increasing challenges for ensuring authenticity in student academic work. Along with important changes to academic *practice* proposed within the holistic framework of addressing plagiarism (Carroll and Appleton, 2001; Carroll, 2002), a more global change to academic *culture* as a whole might be overdue, a change that would safeguard student (and staff) adherence to core academic values irrespective of advances in information technology and sophistication of information handling tools.

At the 2006 JISC Second International Plagiarism Conference, the focus among the academic community was clearly on moving towards a culture of academic integrity, which implies a positive representation of the ideas behind the avoidance of plagiarism, and an institution-wide emphasis on upholding these principles and promoting good academic practice.

The US honour code model might provide useful pointers as to how the transition towards a culture of academic integrity can be implemented. This model seems to offer a viable alternative to more traditional top-down approaches to ensuring proper academic practice among students.

So far, the research-grounded UK response to the idea of honour codes has been very limited. This paper reports on a recent cross-institutional study undertaken at the University of Leicester, whose purpose was to explore staff and student attitudes to the concept of academic integrity and the elements of the US honour code system, and to elicit participants' views on the feasibility of applying this system in the UK setting.

Introduction

Recent academic debate on plagiarism has led to a call for adopting a holistic approach in addressing this issue (Carroll and Appleton, 2001; Freewood, Macdonald and Ashworth, 2003; Park, 2003; JISC Briefing Paper, 2005; Duggan, 2006; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006). Some of the practical suggestions within a holistic framework have been reviewing assessment mechanisms to 'design out' and deter plagiarism (Carroll and Appleton, 2001; Carroll, 2002; Irons, 2005; Walden and Peacock, 2005; Relph and Randle, 2007; Quinsee, Baughan and Boylan, 2007), improving study skills provision to foster appreciation of good academic practice (Carroll, 2004; Quinsee *et al.*, 2007), introducing systematic screening of student work through plagiarism detection software (Carroll, 2004; Heap and Woolls, 2007; Badge, Cann and Scott, 2007) and exploring its pedagogic potential (Barrett, 2007; Flint, 2007; Haigh and Meddings, 2007; Irwin, 2007; Peacock and Sharp, 2007), as well as a clear and urgent need to standardise plagiarism-related policies within and across institutions (Carroll and Appleton, 2001; Freewood *et al.*, 2003; Baty, 2006; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006; Jones, 2007).

The continuing advancement of electronic technology, however, poses increasing challenges for ensuring authenticity in student academic work. Along with the important changes to academic practice outlined above, a more global change to academic culture as a whole might be overdue, a change that would safeguard student (and staff) adherence to core academic values irrespective of advances in information technology and sophistication of information handling tools.

At the 2006 JISC Second International Plagiarism Conference, the focus among the academic community was clearly on moving towards a culture of academic integrity (e.g. Clarke and Aiello, 2007; Gourlay, 2007; Joice, 2007; McCabe, 2007). Such an academic culture implies a positive representation of the ideas behind the avoidance of plagiarism, and an institution-wide emphasis on upholding these principles and promoting good academic practice. Academic integrity has been a priority at a number of US institutions for some time (McCabe and Trevino, 1993; McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 2002), and the commitment to promote it is being increasingly accepted by a growing number of US campuses (McCabe, 2007). The emphasis on academic integrity is often manifested in the adoption and use of *honour codes*, either in their traditional or modified form, which entrust students with significant responsibility for maintaining academic standards.

The US honour code model might provide useful pointers as to how the transition towards a culture of academic integrity can be implemented elsewhere. Being quite a new phenomenon in the UK HE context, honour codes became a focus of a recent project undertaken at the University of Leicester. This paper describes the ethos and the elements of the US honour code system, reports on our cross-institutional study which explored the attitudes of Leicester staff and students to

this system, and discusses possible implications for introducing honour codes in the UK context.

What is the 'Honour Code' System?

In general terms, it is a trust-based system that promotes academic integrity and student responsibility for maintaining academic values and standards. Academic integrity is defined as 'a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility' (Center for Academic Integrity, 2007).

US honour codes vary from institution to institution, but are broadly known as either *traditional* or *modified*. Within the traditional honour code system, students take a pledge to uphold the principles of academic integrity and in return are awarded certain privileges and responsibilities. These may include examinations that are not invigilated by staff, a student judiciary (sometimes exclusive) that polices the honour code, and, at the extreme end of a spectrum of practice, an obligation to report cases of academic dishonesty among their peers (McCabe and Trevino, 2002). In recent years a number of US universities have also introduced modified honour codes on their campuses. These incorporate some elements of the traditional honor codes, notably the involvement of students in the disciplinary procedures for plagiarism. However, what is instrumental in effective functioning of modified codes is placing campus-wide emphasis on academic integrity and student involvement in the organisation of training and promotion of academic integrity (ibid).

Research evidence points to reduced levels of academic dishonesty in institutions that use traditional or modified honour codes (McCabe and Trevino, 1993; McCabe and Trevino, 1997; McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 2002). Other contextual factors have also been found to influence levels of academic cheating, perception of peer behaviour being the most notable one (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). A large-scale qualitative investigation by McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (1999) has shown differences in conceptualising academic integrity between students from non-code and code institutions, the latter viewing it as an integral part of academic culture on their campuses. It is believed that a strong institutional culture that promotes core values of academic community, and students' active involvement in this system have positive influences on students' moral development (McCabe and Trevino, 2002) and provides them with a clear ethical stance in the workplace following their university career (McCabe and Trevino, 1993).

Since the honour code model seems to offer a viable alternative to more traditional top-down approaches to ensuring proper academic practice among students, it is important to explore the potential use of honour codes in the UK context. The scarce debate in the UK public arena has reflected mixed reactions. Dr Mike Reddy who is on the JISC PAS (Plagiarism Advisory Service) steering committee has expressed skepticism about the idea of adopting honour codes in the UK, justifying this by his view that UK students, unlike their US counterparts, are more concerned with individual learning rather than being part of the university community (Shepherd, 2007). Isabel Nesbit, the director of Regulations

and Standards at the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority), does not approve of rejecting the idea of honour codes just because they have come from the US, and believes that such codes can be adopted in UK schools (ibid).

So far, the research-grounded UK response has also been rather limited. One of the few exceptions has been an exploratory study by Clarke and Aiello (2007) from Liverpool John Moores University. They investigated student perceptions of the idea of learning contracts and honour codes by conducting focus groups with home and international students. Although their participants appreciated the idea of a positive value-based approach to their academic practice, they felt that honour codes might not be easily adopted in the UK setting because of their 'too American' tone and style. A recent initiative at Northumbria University has been to draft 'an academic values agreement' for new students in the form of statements describing the university's and the students' commitments to each other. This agreement is not binding at this primary stage (Shepherd, 2007).

It is obvious that further academic and public discussion of the idea of honour codes and their potential use in the UK setting is highly necessary. In order for this debate to become productive and influential, it needs to be underpinned by sufficient UK-based research. Therefore, the aim of our cross-institutional study was to explore staff and student attitudes to the concept of academic integrity and the elements of the US honour code system, and to elicit participants' views on the feasibility of applying this system in the UK HE context.

Methodology

A series of focus groups with staff and students of the University of Leicester was conducted in the academic year 2007-2008. Recruitment of participants was carried out primarily through the lists of staff and student representatives¹, who were invited to attend focus group discussions and encouraged to inform other staff or students from their departments about our research project. Every attempt was made to ensure consistency in the sampling procedure in order to allow for meaningful comparisons between the staff and student samples.

Overall, 21 staff and 20 student participated. These participants were placed into three subject-specific groups, since anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be significant variation in how plagiarism is viewed within different subject disciplines. The five Faculties of the University of Leicester were assigned to three subject-specific groups in the following way: 1) Faculty of Arts, 2) Faculty of Sciences and Faculty of Medicine and Biological Sciences, and 3) Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Law. There was a staff and a student group for each of these three broad subject areas and each group had two sessions, with a total 12 focus groups conducted between November 2007 and February 2008.

¹ University of Leicester TEF (Teaching Enhancement Forum) and TAN (Teaching and Assessment Network) circulation lists in the case of staff, and the Student Union directory of course and faculty representatives in the case of students.

The focus groups were carried out in exactly the same manner for staff and students. The first session sought to investigate participants' views on plagiarism and its prevention through a brainstorming activity and a number of short discussions...Without making any mention of academic integrity or a 'positive' approach to plagiarism on our part, we as investigators and moderators were interested in observing whether our participants would express any ideas or sentiments of this kind of their own accord. Participants were then asked to participate in an exercise comparing and responding to eight written statements about two systems of positioning the issue of plagiarism in the educational context (based on the comparative framework developed specifically for this study).

The second session was more specific and aimed to investigate participants' views on the US Honour Code system and whether they could envisage it working in a UK university. The eight written statements were presented again, this time allocated into two groups, a traditional (current UK practice) and an alternative system (US Honour Code system). The concept of academic integrity was then introduced to the participants. The ethos and the elements of the US Honour Code system were presented in very general terms, by discussing three main areas: values, community approach and student involvement. Along with discussions, a wireless electronic voting system (Keepad/Turning Point) was used to ascertain participants' views on specific aspects of the Honour Code system. Participants were asked to vote to register their views on whether certain aspects of this system were acceptable in principle and whether they felt that they would work in reality in the UK context. The voting process was anonymous but the participants could see their group results immediately after each question they voted on. The purpose of using the electronic voting system was two-fold: as a means of facilitating discussion, and as a means of obtaining some basic numerical measures.

Results and Discussion

One of the key findings that emerged from our research is that both staff and students generally welcome the ideas of framing the issue of plagiarism in more positive terms and of promoting good academic practice as means of plagiarism prevention, which is consistent with Clarke and Aiello's (2007) findings. The participants' feeling was also that not everything can be effectively transferred to the UK setting, due to the differences between the US and UK education contexts.

Although this study was exploratory in nature, its findings have a number of important implications for future research and practice. The fact that our staff and student participants have welcomed the ideas of a positive approach to academic norms and of student involvement in the promotion of academic integrity, points to the need for considering effective ways of implementing these ideas, and some of the elements of the honour code model might be a realistic possibility. Research and practical action in this area would go in line with the work of the

newly established AJAIS (Academy JISC Academic Integrity Service) jointly run by HEA and JISC, which seeks to promote a culture of academic integrity (The Higher Education Academy, 2008) and foster the adoption of honour codes in the UK context (Baty, 2007).

It is hoped that our project will stimulate a debate on the issues of academic integrity and honour codes in the HE and the 14-19 sector, provide impetus for engaging both teachers and students in promoting good academic practice, and serve as a catalyst in the process of transforming current practice of addressing plagiarism in light of the ethical principles that govern effective functioning of the academic community.

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