

Case Study 8: NCI Students' Union Initiatives on Academic Integrity and Alternative Assessments

Introduction and Context:

Academic Integrity is not a new threat that suddenly hit the doorsteps of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) when COVID-19 disrupted our daily life; but rather the crisis shone a spotlight on how critical it is for HEIs to ensure that all staff and students understand the importance in maintaining a high standard education in everyday teaching and learning. This case study elaborates on initiatives implemented, ideas developed and collaborations between management, academic staff and the Students' Union of the National College of Ireland (NCI) in addressing this, and includes new approaches taken on alternative assessments as a result of the pandemic.

Academic Integrity (AI) comes in many different forms, as explained by Students' Union President in [her blog on the NCI website](#): *"...an act of Academic Misconduct involves instances where students plagiarise, cheat, collude, or purchase academic work online. While Academic Integrity questions the honesty and originality of the academic submissions that account towards a degree."*

In 2019, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) introduced the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Amendment Act 2019. Since this new legislation, which enables QQI to prosecute anyone who assists those in academic misconduct, the topic has been a point of focus for many HEIs around the country.

As with many other HEIs, NCI disciplinary boards reveal that plagiarism is the most common form of academic misconduct. For that reason, the NCI Students' Union took the initiative to try to curb this sort of behaviour among the student body in 2020 and educate everyone on the dangers of contract cheating and plagiarism, the importance of academic integrity, and the supports that are available within the College for any student who may be finding their studies a challenge.

Summary of Initiatives Undertaken by the NCISU:

- **Orientation:** Raised awareness by highlighting the importance of Academic Integrity and the support services available, while reinforcing the message of 'Don't suffer in silence'.
- **Participation:** NCISU is an active member of the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), and the National Academic Integrity Communication Working Group. NAIN provides advice and guidance to academics and learners in upholding and supporting a culture of academic integrity in higher education and training.
- **#MyOwnWork:** Directly fed into the development of a [National Campaign](#), which highlighted the dangers and consequences of contract cheating.

- **National Academic Integrity Week**: Actively participated in the workshops and conferences of this inaugural campaign, hosted by different HEIs both nationally and internationally.
- **Collaboration**: A group was established within the College to focus on National Academic Integrity Week, including members of the college management team and the Students' Union. The first initiative was the launch of an integrated social media campaign, leveraging NAIN hashtags, and featuring **videos** from programme coordinators, the library helpdesk and members of NCISU.
- **Blog**: The Students' Union President highlighted the threats and consequences of contract cheating in her **blog** to mark the National Campaign Week.
- **NCISU Academic Integrity Week**: The schedule of events included an online information campaign in partnership with the College to highlight all the support services available to students and reinforce the importance of Academic Integrity; an Online Quiz; a live session with the Library, discussing referencing, research, avoiding plagiarism, and highlighting supports; and a **video launch**, with prizes offered to encourage participation.
- **Examination period**: Further emphasis was placed on Academic Integrity and supports available to students during these challenging times.

Alternative Assessments:

As a result of the pandemic, traditional ways of assessing and supporting student learning needed to be adapted to maintain high standards in our HEIs and ensure qualification validation. The NCI Students' Union actively engaged with national bodies, such as the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), by directly feeding into a national approach to alternative assessments. At the same time, the Students' Union also engaged with NCI to develop a 'No Disadvantage Policy' during the COVID-19 period, to take into consideration the additional challenges faced by students engaging with online learning and assessments. This corresponded with an increase in queries from students on the new arrangements related to alternative assessments and the need for further communication strategies to align with other HEIs. NCI and NCISU also collaborated on various policy proposals, which include **support services**, guides and FAQs.

Class-representatives also played a vital role throughout the crisis in being the medium to engage with students on issues that affect them during these unprecedented times. The student voice continues to play an integral part in driving change, upholding academic quality assurance, and supporting peers through their journey in higher education. In this particular **exam** period, the Students' Union continued to promote information relating to online timed exams and guidance on alternative assessments, so that students are well informed about new processes and policies, which directly impact their learning experience.

Conclusion:

While we continue to adapt in this ever-changing environment, the needs of the learners and the quality of education provided must remain of paramount importance for all HEIs. This is why further attention is required in continuing to promote, inform and educate on the issue of academic integrity, as well as providing support to cultivate good practices: prevention is better than any cure.