Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Publicly-Funded Universities in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on Contract Cheating

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Abstract

In this article we report findings from a review of universities' academic integrity policies in Ontario, Canada. The research team systematically extracted, reviewed, and evaluated information from policy documents in an effort to understand how these documents described contract cheating in Ontario universities (n = 21). In all, 23 policies were examined for contract cheating language. The elements of access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support were examined and critiqued. Additionally, document type, document title and concept(s), specific contract cheating language, presence of contract cheating definitions and policy principles were reviewed. Findings revealed that none of the universities' policies met all of the core elements of exemplary policy, were reviewed and revised with less frequency than their college counterparts, lacked language specific to contract cheating, and were more frequently focused on punitive rather than educative approaches. These findings confirm that there is further opportunity for policy development related to the promotion of academic integrity and the prevention of contract cheating.

Keywords: academic integrity, Ontario Canada, contract cheating, higher education, policy principles

Behaviour consistent with the values of academic integrity is inarguably foundational to the mission, values, and work of higher education. Activities associated with teaching, learning, and research, along with expectations for conduct, must be grounded in honesty and truth, and is a shared responsibility for the higher education community. Clear and accessible organizational policies help to communicate expectations for all members of the academy, including students, to the aspired work and behaviours expected and required in higher education settings (Stoesz et al., 2019). The benefits of a clear and transparent policy include the establishment of rules and boundaries that serve to establish the desired integrity ethos for higher education organizations across education and research (Tauginienė et al., 2019). Robust policy also provides a framework for fair processes and consequences.

The construction of academic integrity policy and the importance of regular and consistent review of organization policies have been emphasized in the literature as responsible and effective policy practice (Bretag et al., 2011a; Stoesz et al., 2019). Stoesz et al. (2019) and Stoesz and Eaton (2020)

reviewed academic integrity policy related to contract cheating in colleges in Ontario and universities in western Canada, respectively, and noted that specific contract cheating language was lacking. In addition, underlying policy principle definitions were often poorly explained (Stoesz et al., 2019) and details about educational resources to support academic integrity in the teaching and learning community were sparse (Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). The present research focused on the review of academic integrity policies across publicly funded universities in Ontario, Canada ($n = 21$) and how each addressed contract cheating to extend the earlier work completed by Stoesz et al. (2019) and Stoesz and Eaton (2020) and contribute to a national study currently underway (Eaton, 2019).

Literature Review

Contract cheating is a deliberate form of academic misconduct that is characterized by the outsourcing of academic work to a third-party (Bretag et al., 2019; Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Newton, 2018). The term contract cheating was coined by two academics in the United Kingdom to describe the practice employed by computer science students in purchasing services from a third-party, on the internet, to complete their academic assignments (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). The definition was later expanded to include outsourcing assignments to acquaintances, private tutors, and professional editing services (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016). In essence, the academic work is completed in part or whole by anyone other than students themselves (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). Contract cheating is not restricted to computer science; students across many disciplines in higher education engage in this practice (Harper et al., 2019). Lancaster (2020) found that students of the professional programs of architecture, computer science, and law were at the highest risk to use essay mills or companies "that provide pre-written assignments to students…commissioned on a (supposedly) bespoke basis from ghost writers" (Medway et al., 2018, p. 393). More recently, contract cheating has expanded to include online commercial businesses, which have been described as file sharing sites, and include instructors lecture notes, presentation slides, tests, assignments, research dissertations, lab reports, along with other services that students can purchase (Ellis et al., 2018).

Academics continue to debate whether contract cheating is a form of plagiarism. Although it is true that the work of others is falsely represented through contract cheating and is considered plagiarism, the most notable difference between the two is the consistent intentionality of dishonesty through the act of contract cheating (Ellis et al., 2018). An erosion of the competencies of higher education (e.g., learners' development of deeper knowledge, critical thinking, research skills, and global citizenship) is argued to be but one of the adverse outcomes of contract cheating (Ellis et al., 2018; Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020; Miron, 2016). Contract cheating also reduces the higher educational experience to transactions focused solely on end credentials (Harper et al., 2019). The scale and scope of use of contract cheating is disconcerting as it threatens the credibility of academic credentials (QAA, 2020).

The ubiquitous nature of the internet, ease of access to online services, and their rapid response rates have contributed to the appeal of contract cheating as a viable option to complete academic work. Research conducted by Clarke and Lancaster (2006) revealed that 12.3% of all requests sent to a specific online company over a three-week period originated from students who knowingly engaged in contract cheating and were often repeat offenders. Newton (2018) reviewed 65 studies focused on contract cheating, with findings from over 50,000 participants between 1978-2016. Newton estimated that an average of 3.5% of students self-reported engagement in contract cheating. Contract cheating rates, however, skyrocketed to over 20% in at least nine studies conducted in 2009 and later, suggesting that the act of contract cheating is on the rise (Newton, 2018). The gravity of this problem is only fully appreciated when considering the number of students involved in this form of academic misconduct. Using Newton's average prevalence of 3.5%, Eaton (2018) estimated that more than 71,000 post-secondary students in Canada potentially engage in contract cheating each academic year. Quantifying the problem and then considering the future professions of these students (e.g., nursing, engineering, medicine, law, business, education, aeronautics) adds meaning to the statistics and challenges all those in higher education to recognize the threat contract cheating poses.

Developing Effective Policy

One opportunity to effect change to prevent contract cheating is to develop and enact effective policy on academic integrity. Such policy provides clear expectations for members of learning communities and

serves to "substantiate university social responsibility" (Anohina-Naumeca et al., 2018, p. 2) and inform teaching responsibilities (East, 2009). Additionally, a well-developed academic integrity policy can serve to establish the credibility of educational organizations within society as ethical institutions committed to mandates of fair, equitable, and reliable education and research (Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b). Exemplary academic integrity policy has been described in terms of five interrelated elements: access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support (Table 1; Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b).

Table 1
Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy Elements

Element	Description
Access	The ability to easily acquire and understand the academic integrity policies within the academic organization by all members of the learning community (i.e., senior management, faculty/professional staff, students).
Approach	The organization's commitment to their description of the values for academic integrity. This includes the organizations' commitment to ensuring systematic practices that align with their described academic integrity values.
Responsibility	The identification and assurance that all members of the learning community are clear about their responsibility as it relates to academic integrity within their organizations (i.e., senior management, faculty/professional staff, students).
Detail	Descriptions that include what constitutes a breach of integrity. Detail should include processes to be followed and be formatted so that it is explicit but not excessive. Detail includes the clear articulation of how policy is enacted through practice.
Support	Organizations have systems in place that provide academic support to members in the learning community to learn correct processes and procedures for academic learning (i.e., scholarly referencing, academic writing, test-taking practices). Support also includes teaching related to the existing policies. Efforts in supporting should be proactive to the expectations of conduct and behavior consistent with academic integrity values.

Note: Adapted from Bretag et al. (2011b).

Academic integrity policy review is a multi-dimensional undertaking (Eaton, 2017, 2019). Although problem-solving theory provides an approach to the critique violations to academic integrity, it is equally important to consider critical theory as components of academic integrity are also social constructs (Sherratt, 2006). A critical perspective is important to consider when policy context frames policy development (Ozga, 2000). Additionally, there is limited research related to academic integrity policy review within the Canadian university context, as such, the findings from this study will inform our understanding and approach to policy review and development.

Morris notes that there is "widespread consensus for a holistic and multi-pronged strategy" (2018, p. 2) in effectively managing the threat of contract cheating across higher education learning environments. Policy and procedure is one important aspect of a systemic approach that helps ensure clarity for all members of the learning community to address contract cheating. Attention to contract cheating language within academic integrity policies or specific contract cheating policies are important. Shared understandings between faculty and students of contract cheating as an act of academic dishonesty can support efforts to promote learning environments that emulate integrity (Bretag et al., 2014; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Clegg & Flint, 2006). The ease of availability of online sites that offer affordable services in assignment completion for learners creates an urgency for action if we are to preserve quality and fairness across post-secondary learning environments. Additionally, the aggressive and polished marketing strategies for such sites have contributed to their attractiveness, and increased usage with learners, as evidenced through social media marketing strategies (Amigud, 2020; Lancaster, 2019). Newer, program-specific content specialties are now more common and intentionally target the potential needs of specific programs of study and specific learners (Lancaster, 2020).

Methods

This study aligns with and replicates the methods used in previous phases of the national policy analysis (Eaton, 2019). We adopted the research methodology outlined by Bretag et al. (2011a, 2011b) and Grigg (2010) and used in previous reviews of academic integrity policies in Canada (Stoesz et al., 2019; Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). The research team systematically extracted, reviewed, and evaluated information from policy documents in an effort to understand how these documents described contract cheating in the universities of the province of Ontario, Canada.

Document Search and Retrieval

Documents were collected from 21 publicly-funded universities. A complete list of the universities selected for inclusion in the study can be found on the project website, archived on the Open Science Framework (Eaton, 2019). Three researchers (Miron, McKenzie, Devereaux) conducted an online search for the relevant documents from each university's website. Searches were conducted through each institution's web search function or by inserting the university's name combined with the term 'academic integrity policy' into the Google search bar. Search and retrieval of documents was completed between June and September 2019. Twenty-three documents were selected for review, as two universities had separate academic integrity policies for undergraduate and graduate students. Documents included in this study were in English.

Data Extraction, Coding, and Analysis

We engaged in an iterative and ongoing process of data extraction and coding, following Saldaña's (2016) notion that "coding is analysis" (p. 9). The data from each document was extracted and coded independently by dyads from the group of researchers, with a third reviewer collecting data where gaps were noted (Miron). Our analysis included a two-step sequential process of extracting data first, followed by coding it.

The dyads for data extraction and coding consisted of six researchers (Miron, McKenzie, Devereaux, Persaud, Steeves, Rowbotham) who extracted the data from the 23 documents. Each researcher served as a primary coder for some of the documents and as a secondary coder for other documents. Infused throughout the process was iterative and ongoing dialogue among the research team members to ensure consistency, transparency, and credibility of the process itself. Data extraction and coding were completed between July and September 2019.

Data Extraction and Coding

Researchers extracted the date the document was first approved, date of most recent review, the next date of review, and the number of mouse clicks to access the document from the university's home page.

Information according to the five categories described in Table 1 was also extracted and coded: (a) document type (e.g., codes of conduct, policies, procedures, statutes, or regulations); (b) document title and concept(s) communicated within the title [i.e., single concept (e.g., Academic Honesty or Academic Integrity) or multiple concepts (e.g., Student Code of Conduct AND Academic Integrity)]; (c) specific contract cheating language (i.e., Yes or No); (d) presence of contract cheating definitions (i.e., Yes or No); and (e) policy principles (e.g., academic integrity values, procedural fairness, education, natural justice) (Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b; Grigg, 2010).

Researchers were attentive to how the policy principles connected to the underlying values in an effort to identify and understand the key messages core to the policies. The process of extracting and coding the data involved a detailed line-by-line analysis of each policy document to determine if certain characteristics were present, such the presence of a definition of contract cheating, which resulted in a "Yes" or "No" response from the researchers. Other elements required an evaluative approach to coding, such as whether the policy documents adhered to principles that were related more to justice, education or some combination. When evaluative judgement was needed as part of the coding process, researchers convened for collaborative dialogue to achieve consensus with those more experienced conducting policy analysis facilitating conversations among the research team.

We acknowledge that policy analysis is not a values-free endeavour, but rather one that is inherently values-laden (Ozga, 2000). We subscribed to Ozga's notion that policy analysis can be a form of

policy advocacy, and one of our goals with this work was to provide an evidence-informed foundation for a deeper dialogue about how to address contract cheating in higher education, specifically through policy and procedures.

Interrater Reliability

The process of using primary and secondary coders allowed for an estimation of inter-rater reliability. Overall, the level of agreement for extraction and coding was 91%. The level of agreement between two coders for a clear definition of contract cheating was 100% and 91% for the coding of policy principles. Frequencies were calculated for each type of information and trends were identified. Initial data analysis was completed between September and December 2019 (Miron, McKenzie). Conflicts were resolved through collaborative consultation among the coders. Final analyses were completed between January and March 2020.

Results

The coded data were analyzed using the five core elements of exemplary academic integrity policy (see Table 1; Bretag et al., 2011). These five elements were evaluated with a focus on contract cheating.

Access

The ease of access to academic integrity policies was determined considering logical terms that would most likely be inserted into a search bar and the number of clicks needed to reach the document. The number of clicks needed to access the policy documents ranged from 2-6 with the first click including a general Google search. The majority of clicks (52%) for accessing the policy document was three clicks, followed by two clicks (38%). Ten percent of the documents were challenging to access with a required 4-6 clicks.

The most common single-concept title across all 23 documents was *academic integrity*. The negative (i.e., dishonesty, discipline) vs. positive tone (i.e., honesty, integrity) of title themes was balanced (see Table 2). Our analysis revealed that single concept titles were used 78% of the time (n = 18), and nine different single-concept titles were used. Very similar to the college policy review findings of multi-concept titles, the combination of *academic integrity* and *student code of conduct* was the most common multiple-concept title. Multiple-concept titles were used 22% of the time (n = 5).

Table 2

Frequency of Single- and Multi-Concept Titles of Academic Integrity Documentation in Publicly-funded Universities in Ontario, Canada

Title/Concept	Intended Audience		
	Frequency	Students only	Students & Staff
Single-Concept Title			
Positive tone			
Academic integrity	8		8
Academic honesty	1		1
Negative tone			
Academic dishonesty	2		2
Scholastic discipline	2	2	
Academic misconduct	1		1
Student discipline	1		1
Academic conduct	1		1
Academic fraud	1		1

Title/Concept	Intended Audience		
	Frequency	Students only	Students & Staff
Multi-Concept Titles			
Student code of conduct AND Academic integrity	3	1	2
Student code of conduct AND Discipline	1		1
Undergraduate degree regulations and procedures AND Academic misconduct	1		1
Total Number of documents	**23**	**3**	**20**

Approach and Responsibility

As anticipated, all documents were categorized as policies and procedures. Only 16 of 23 documents listed the date of initial creation. Most documents were created between 2000 and 2019 (n = 14). The oldest policy on record was created in 1989 and the second oldest was 1996. Some universities reviewed their documents between 1 and 10 years (n = 8). For thirteen documents, there was a clear lack of information about creation and/or last revision dates, and which aspects of the policies or procedures were revised. Most policies (n = 19) also lacked a date to indicate their next scheduled review. The audience for the retrieved documents were typically students and staff (n = 20), although a few policies targeted students only (n = 3) (see Table 2). Despite the finding that policies' introductory remarks stated that all stakeholders of the institution were expected to act with integrity, close examination of the remainder of the documents revealed clearly that students are *most* responsible for maintaining academic integrity and avoiding academic misconduct.

Some of the values of academic integrity from the International Center for Academic Integrity (honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, courage) (ICAI, 2021) were included in 7 of 23 documents (see Table 3). Education was mentioned explicitly in 9 documents and penalty was identified in 13 documents. Ten documents contained only one identifiable policy principle, which communicated punitive or disciplinary approaches rather than educative approaches. The majority of policies (n = 13), however, communicated the intention of a blend of educational supports (e.g., remedial workshops or resources for students) and punitive discipline. Despite many having a blended policy, the punitive and sanctioning portions were typically longer and more descriptive than the educational portions. Overall, however, the principles used in the document were not well defined.

Table 3

Policy Principles identified in the Academic Integrity Documents of Publicly-funded Universities in Ontario, Canada

Policy Principle	Frequency*	%**
Penalty	13	56.5
Education	9	39.1
Academic Integrity Values	7	30.4
Procedural Fairness	5	21.7
Natural Justice	4	17.4
Balance of Probabilities	2	8.7
Standard of Proof	1	4.3

*More than one principle may have been identified in a single document.

**Percentage based on the total number of documents.

Detail

The term contract cheating is almost non-existent in universities' policies; however, reference to the behaviours associated with contract cheating are routinely embedded into policy. Only one document ex-

plicitly used the term contract cheating with accompanying definition: "Contract Cheating occurs when a third party completes work, with or without payment, for a student who then submits the work as their own, where such input is not permitted" (Ryerson University, 2019, p. 21). Examples of indirect language included: submit own work (do not submit work completed by another) (n =14); buying assignments (n = 11); and impersonation/fraud (n = 7). See Table 4.

Table 4

Language used to describe Contract Cheating Indirectly in Academic Integrity Documents of Publicly-funded Universities in Ontario, Canada

Indirect Language Used	Frequency*
Submit Own Work (do not submit work completed by another)	14
Buying of Assignments	11
Selling (Giving Away) of Assignments—with or without payment	5
Facilitation (Allowing Work to be Used by Others)	5
Theft/Bribery/Collusion	1
Impersonation/Fraud	7

*The language used in the documents was extracted for the frequency estimation. Most institutions are represented once; however, two institutions are represented twice.

Support

Support refers to whether policies contain information directing the intended audience to education and training for academic integrity or assistance during the disciplinary procedures. More than half of the documents did not list supports (n = 14). When mentioned (n = 7), support for students was described in terms of training and resources, such as a student success centre, ombudsperson, and/or teaching commons. Only two policies listed support for faculty and non-academic staff, and these were in the form of procedures and professional development training.

Discussion

Effective academic policy is important to establish and support organizational cultures of integrity. Our findings support and extend our current understanding of existing policy that addresses issues related to contract cheating within the Canadian context. Compared to the findings from the review of Ontario college documentation (Stoesz et al., 2019), the universities' documents were reviewed and revised with less frequency and were missing effective dates and review timelines more than colleges. The date of last review and date of next review were often missing from the university documents. This suggests that not all universities have a framework to cyclically review their policies.

The relevance for the number of clicks to the policy relates to the ease with which users can access information. Access to the academic integrity policies was reached within three mouse clicks at over half of the universities. Although this is not a discouraging finding, it indicates that a number of universities could improve the visibility of and access to their policies. If access to relevant information is too difficult, there is an increased risk that users will not seek it out or give up after a longer attempt to locate it. Research shows that difficulty navigating university websites can result in feelings of frustration, boredom, and disengagement (Coloma, 2012), and this is problematic when searching for a policy. The visibility of an academic integrity policy within an institution's website also speaks to the value placed on it by the institution.

The absence of the term contract cheating in policy is consistent with academic integrity policies and procedures documents for Ontario colleges (Stoesz et al., 2019) and universities of western Canada (Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). Educational organizations may have opted to detail the behaviours rather than introduce new terms; however, this practice does not align with the *Detail* aspect of exemplary policy (Bretag et al., 2011a). Using contract cheating language along with clear definitions of activities that

align with contract cheating provide opportunities for institutions to qualify these activities as cheating that run counter to academic integrity. The importance of policy is apparent now more than ever as contract cheating sites have skilfully marketed themselves to learners and created a false sense of normalcy in using these services as viable solutions throughout learners' educational journeys (Lancaster, 2019; Rowland et al., 2017; Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019).

Restorative practices applied to academic integrity is a relatively recent idea in provincially funded universities and may account for the absence of such language in policy (Kara & McAlister, 2010; Sopcak, 2020). Restorative justice was not part of any academic integrity policies of Ontario universities in contrast to the academic policy and procedures of two Ontario colleges (Stoesz et al., 2019) and two universities in western Canada (Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). Policy revision can include a challenge of the status quo, and a reconsideration of dominant systems and structures. Through this lens, some institutions are considering alternative or additional resolution practices, other than the dominant punitive model. Alternative models to resolve breaches of misconduct support inclusive frameworks and are an example of some growth of academic integrity ideology in Canadian postsecondary education. The principle of procedural fairness appeared consistently in both the college and university documents. The punitive and quasi-judicial approach to academic misconduct and dishonesty is longstanding in higher education and may explain the legalistic language in both university and college policies (Sutherland-Smith, 2013).

Similar to the college policy review, some universities included values and educational principles in the policies; however, there was a significant focus on penalties and dealing with misconduct. Although dealing with misconduct is important, one would expect that support for prevention and education would also be highlighted to help reduce the number of cases of misconduct. Moreover, the educational portions of these documents were sparse and did not provide insight into the rationale for their use or how they would help. Punitive approaches run the risk of fostering antagonistic relationships between students against faculty and staff in their educational institutions and may create a sense of tension and mistrust rather than collaboration. From a developmental approach to teaching and learning, an emphasis on punishment runs counter to an appreciation for students' academic and social development during the higher educational experience. Although research indicates that Ontario universities provide many educational elements, such as learning modules and tutorials on their academic integrity websites (Griffith, 2013), the alignment of policy and practice is critical to ensure continuity and accountability for a teaching and learning approach (East, 2009).

Also consistent with the Ontario college findings (Stoesz et al., 2019), explicit language about contract cheating was absent in all but one policy (i.e., Ryerson University). In addition, the principles used in the document were not well defined for the reader. Such ambiguity in policy language runs the risk of misinterpretation or misunderstanding around requirements and expectations in the educational environment (Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b; Bretag & Mahmud, 2016). There are a number of advantages to explicit and clear language in academic integrity policy. Tauginienė et al. (2019) note that a homogenous understanding can support all members in the higher education learning community to "make more informed decisions about maintaining normative standards" (p. 346). As well, clear language supports shared values across all members of the learning community in higher education.

Unlike the reported findings from the Ontario college policy review, we found that the intended audience of a large majority (87%) of the documents was both staff and students, and the remaining (13%) targeted students only. At first glance, it may appear that universities are approaching academic integrity policy in a more holistic manner than their college counterparts; however, a deeper examination of the university policies revealed that the general message remained that academic integrity is largely a student responsibility. This is a common theme threaded throughout academic integrity policies in Canada (Stoesz et al., 2019; Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). Holistic academic integrity strategies have been suggested to be the most effective for promoting a culture of academic integrity (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006), and a similar holistic approach to policy may send a strong message to all members of the higher education university community that they share responsibility for upholding the tenets of academic integrity. This more holistic approach to academic integrity may meet with better success at shifting our thinking of academic integrity as a promotive, educative opportunity, and appreciating that students are not "blank slates" (Bretag et al., 2014, p. 1164) but will benefit from a united and clear approach to explaining, teaching, and modeling academic integrity by all members of the higher education community (East, 2009; Jameson, 2014).

None of the academic integrity documents that were reviewed could be categorized as exemplary according to Bretag et al. (2011b) and suggest the continued need for modification or redevelopment as new research findings and practical knowledge about academic integrity and academic misconduct emerge (Beerkens, 2018). Ryerson's Policy 60 is the best example of a document that strives to meet all five elements developed by Bretag et al. (2011b). Despite including the six values of academic integrity (ICAI, 2014) and a section with an educational emphasis that states "One of the central values motivating this policy is that of education" (Ryerson, 2019, p. 5), the document does not provide in-depth details on how the policy will align with and support education activities and outcomes. Ryerson's policy does point to various supports for students, faculty, and staff such as the students' union for undergraduate or graduate students, Office of the Ombudsperson, Academic Integrity Office, or the Policy 60 Faculty Advisor, which is a positive and forward-thinking approach. These supports, however, focus primarily on assistance with academic misconduct rather than offering any learning or educational resource to correct or improve one's academic skills in an effort to prevent missteps related to academic integrity. Additionally, the policy is clear that all members of Ryerson's learning community have responsibility related to promoting, maintaining, and guarding academic integrity within the learning environment but does not outline specifics in this regard.

Developing an effective policy is a worthwhile endeavour and adopting a change process model may help to support its implementation (Bretag et al., 2011b). Due to the inherent challenges in making modifications to policy, organizational change models provide "direction and a sequence of steps that can help guide … change efforts" (Shane et al., 2018, p. 83). Shane et al. (2018) adopted a nine-step change model to the development and implementation of their academic integrity policy that included: determining the need for change, forming a guiding committee, creating a shared vision, establishing a tentative plan, carefully determining resistance as well as support, establishing implementation and communication plans, implementing the planned change, and evaluating its effectiveness. Deliberate approaches to policy-making for academic integrity are not only beneficial to the educational institution but may help to ensure that all appropriate stakeholders (administration, faculty, and students) are included in the process, which may ultimately increase buy-in and the chance that the policy will be successful.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, we acknowledge several study limitations. First, we limited our review to academic integrity documents of publicly-funded universities in Ontario, Canada. We excluded private universities and satellite campuses of American universities with operations in the province, such as Northeastern University. By broadening the scope of our review, it may have been possible to make direct comparisons between publicly-funded universities and other types of universities in Ontario. For example, comparing publicly funded to privately funded post-secondary institutions may be interesting to explore for similarities or differences.

Because our findings are limited to universities in Ontario, our findings may not generalize to other Canadian provinces and territories. The lack of a systematic approach to policy development across the province or across the country (Eaton 2018; Eaton & Edino, 2018) is unsurprising for at least two reasons. First, the broader research literature on academic integrity suggests that students, instructors, and administrators use a wide range of definitions for academic integrity and academic misconduct (McFarlane et al., 2012). Second, a lack of coordinated academic integrity policy across the country may also be due, in part, to the fact that provincial governments are responsible for education (Constitution Act, 1867, s 93), and the responsibility for the development of specific guidelines, policies, and procedures rests with each post-secondary institution.

The date range which we downloaded and retrieved the academic integrity documents was a limiting factor as we could have missed newer and more current relevant information. As well, it is possible that some documents were only accessible to members of each university's learning community so that using Google search would not allow us to locate all documents pertaining to relevant academic integrity policies and procedures. Additionally, we accessed only those documents that were written in English, due to the language limitations of the research team.

Future Research and Opportunities

Inconsistency in education policy is not a problem isolated to Canada. Inconsistencies in length, access, and readability of academic integrity policies across the United States are also issues that challenge promoting academic honesty across higher educational settings (Taylor & Bicak, 2019). We also know that higher education policy in Canada is affected by a number of extraneous factors like relationships between governing and quality assurance bodies that exist at the provincial level and relationships between federal and provincial governing bodies. Differing needs between provinces along with insecure and fluctuating financial support have created contextual stressors resulting in competition for students and resources. These differences between Canadian provinces and territories have in turn affected higher educational policy (Fisher et al., 2009). Additionally, the sometimes tense relationships between federal and provincial bureaucratic organizations have created a less than symbiotic and somewhat fragmented approach to post-secondary organizational policy-making (Axelrod et al., 2011, 2013; Hamsen & Tupper, 2017). As in Stoesz et al. (2019), this study did not delve into the identification, investigation, reporting, and sanctioning of academic misconduct, but instead focused on the inclusion of contract cheating in academic integrity documentation.

To better understand contract cheating policy in Canadian higher educational contexts, further research and dialogue are needed, both at regional and national levels. Additionally, a review of quality assurance as it intersects with academic integrity policy could inform our understanding of how the two could connect, complement, and help ensure consistency in academic integrity policy development across Canada. Comparing our national experience with what we know is happening in other countries who have reported their experiences, like Australia, could guide our current practices related to the development of exemplary academic integrity policy. Given that this research only touched on parts of the five elements of exemplary policy (Bretag et al., 2011a), we recommend that further work be undertaken to extend the analysis to dive deeper into these components in Canadian academic integrity documentation.

Conclusion

This research adds to the paucity of literature currently available on academic integrity policy in Canada (Dianda & Neufeld, 2007; Eaton, 2018; Eaton & Edino, 2018; Stoesz et al., 2019; Stoesz & Eaton, 2020). Ontario universities, like Ontario colleges, lack the use of current terms and clear language to describe contract cheating. We know that such language can provide clarity to understanding that contract cheating is dishonest and an act of academic cheating. We also know that such clarity is imperative given the increase in the incidence of contract cheating, the threats it poses to learning, and the quality of education for our learners. In addition, the underlying policy principles in the documents lacked a clear definition. Furthermore, policy and procedures could be written more proactively to promote education and awareness of academic integrity and be easier for instructors, professors, students, and staff members of the learning community to access readily. Conversely, there could be less focus on the punitive portions of academic integrity policy and procedures and more of a balance between education and penalties. An exemplary policy in Canada has yet to be developed when considering the exemplary practices described by our Australian colleagues (Bretag et al., 2011b).

Only one of the recently revised policies we reviewed was close to meeting the standards for exemplary academic integrity policy but still fell short of all five elements described by Bretag et al. (2011b). In the future, when policies are reviewed, it would be beneficial for universities to add more depth into each component, with a particular focus on how policies should intersect and complement other policies, such as quality assurance requirements, and emphasize education, support, and the promotion of academic integrity. We further assert that academic integrity policy should be reviewed regularly, even cyclically. To support the development and maintenance of a culture of academic integrity, cyclical policy review should be collaborative, include multiple stakeholders from across the institution, and be viewed as an opportunity to educate, create champions, and infuse institutional values into practice. The review process must be reflexive and acknowledge that policy is a product of the prevailing assumptions and ideologies at its time of creation. Policy revision must also pay attention to the ever evolving landscape of integrity and misconduct, and be informed by new research, high impact practices, new views, and marginalized perspectives.

These findings confirm that there is further opportunity for education, research, and advocacy related to the promotion of academic integrity and the prevention of contract cheating. Efforts to address contract cheating should be made at provincial and national levels, which would draw attention to this serious form of academic misconduct and encourage educational institutions across Canada to take decisive action to uphold academic integrity and deliver high quality education and training.

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Declarations

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Availability of Data
Academic integrity policy documents reviewed in this research study are publicly available online. Data can be shared upon request.