

# Academic Integrity in Education in the Context of Sustainable Development of Society

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## Abstract

It is beyond argument that education is a cornerstone of the sustainable development of any society and state. The more educated society and its individual members are, the more capable the state and its economy and security and technology systems are of giving a targeted response to challenges of today's world. However, education should not be seen as an end in itself. Certain quality requirements and standards should be respected in the educational process, one of them being academic integrity. Academic misconduct is firmly condemned both at educational institutions and in society, and occasionally the lawfulness of acquired education may be questioned. This kind of misconduct represents a phenomenon leading to several threats, and it can be interpreted as an intellectual property theft, which compromises the quality of education, thereby reducing a state's capacity for development, and undermines confidence in educational institutions and persons who have committed misconduct, adversely affecting society in general. It should be emphasised that, if ignored, academic misconduct facilitates legal nihilism in the long term. Therefore, one of priorities in education should be associated with solidifying academic integrity as a component of sustainable development. In the light of the above, this article analyses the understanding of academic integrity and how students can be punished for academic misconduct in the context of sustainable development, for which purpose internal regulations of major higher education institutions of the Republic of Latvia have been examined.

*Keywords: academic integrity, liability for academic misconduct, right to education, sustainable development of the state*

## 1. Introduction

The evolution of any state is driven by educated society. Education – as both a process and a result – is linked with each individual's interests to improve and acquire knowledge and skills that would be useful on the labour market/in life and with society's interests to acquire members who can maximally contribute to common good and ensure reproduction and sustainable development of society. It is therefore evident that the right to education is a fundamental human right. The right to education is protected by Article 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) and Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2016), and similar provisions are incorporated also in national legislation, including the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, 1922). Education is dealt with by laws of several branches. The purpose of the laws is to create equal, transparent and predictable

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conditions so that everyone may have access to high-quality and sustainable education. The educational process is two-way, requiring involvement of not only the state/educational institutions but also students. Students have a duty not to exercise their right to education in bad faith and prevent any misconduct in the study process. This is why academic misconduct may directly jeopardise both the process and quality of education, posing a long-term threat to sustainable development of the state and society. (B.S.Nikolova, 2021) It should be emphasised that this has become an issue not only in Latvia but also in other countries. (Y.-C. Cheng & al, 2021) Issues at stake include types of academic misconduct and their identification and classification, the prevention of academic misconduct, penalties applied for academic misconduct, including expulsion from an educational institution in the context of the right to education.

In the light of the above, this article analyses the understanding of academic integrity and how students can be punished for academic misconduct in the context of sustainable development, for which purpose internal regulations of major higher education institutions of the Republic of Latvia have been examined.

## **2. Research**

### **2.1 Academic integrity as a component of sustainable development**

As a set of procedures promoting higher standards of academic, scientific and study work from both legal and ethical standpoints, academic integrity is one of the cornerstones of today's high-quality higher education.

It is generally recognised that high-quality education is an imperative for development of a modern state/society. Education is not only a process of acquiring knowledge, skills and competences for improving a learner's personality but also a type of economic activity, namely a way of producing intellectual and tangible assets, which affects economic growth. This clearly follows from Commission Regulation No 29/2002 of 19 December 2001 amending Council Regulation (EEC) No 3037/90 on the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community. (EC Regulation 29/2022, 2001)

It should be noted that one third of Latvia's people are now related to education directly (as educatees, teachers, etc.) or indirectly (as parents of minor educatees), which clearly demonstrates the significance of education for sustainable development of the state. That is why awareness of the key components of education, including academic integrity, is important. It should be noted that academic misconduct essentially compromises the lawfulness and quality of education, thereby reducing a state's and society's capacity for development, undermining confidence in educational institutions and persons who have committed misconduct, adversely affecting society in general. (Chalmeta R., Ferrer-Estevéz M., 2021) It should be emphasised that, if ignored, academic misconduct facilitates legal nihilism in the long term.

The understanding of the scope of academic integrity has been developing over time. (Akadēmiskā godīguma terminu vārdnīca, 2020) As regards Latvia, it should be noted that at present, namely at the beginning of 2022, educational quality assurance systems of several Latvia's higher education institutions are being supplemented with regulations and procedures dealing with academic integrity, which is part of a project of the European Social Fund, (Cabinet, 2018) there is a debate going on about rules and practice concerning

the legally correct revocation of diplomas of higher education for academic misconduct (Briede, 2021), and the issue of expulsion of students from higher education institutions for breaching academic integrity rules has come to the fore. (Par plaģiātismu augstskolā studentus soda ar izslēgšanu, 2022)

This misconduct, or academic dishonesty, is most frequently characterised not only by plagiarism (Veikša, 2021)<sup>1</sup> but also by fraud, fabrication, false representation, the use of unauthorised methods and aids, cheating (cribbing), etc. in studies and research. (Mihailovs, 2018) In addition, there are still no uniform models of how such misconduct can be detected/how higher education institutions and their representatives should act. (Lejnieks, 2011)

Such misconduct can be committed not only by academic staff or researchers, other (support) staff, including general personnel, in their work but also by students. Justified accusations of academic misconduct in a teacher's or researcher's work directly affect the person's reputation and the ability to perform the person's duties, and may lead to dismissal. (Torgāns, 2009) Meanwhile, commensurate punishment of students, in particular, as experience of the authors of this article shows, those who have just begun their studies at a higher education institution and are in fact becoming acquainted with various requirements applicable to academic and research work, still remains a topical issue, and little research has been done in this area so far.

The research is based on internal regulations concerning academic integrity adopted by Latvia's leading state-owned higher education institutions – universities (the University of Latvia, Riga Technical University, Riga Stradiņš University, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies). For comparison purposes, internal academic integrity regulations of two major private higher education institutions – Turība University and RISEBA University of Applied Sciences – have been used as well. It should be noted that 4.5 thousand students holding bachelor's degrees (i.e., almost 70% of the total number of bachelor's degree graduates) on average graduate from these universities each year (Statistikas dati, 2020) and emerge on the labour market, contributing significantly to state's growth.

Education should be regarded as phenomenal because it is a means and a consequence simultaneously, namely: educated people who have learned certain professions make an economic contribution to the state, while education as a process represents “goods” consumed by students. For example, “people with higher education have 48% greater income than people without such education” and “people with higher education are less exposed to the risk of unemployment, which becomes particularly evident in times of crises” (Krasnopjorovs, 2021). It is especially important nowadays, in the context of the globalisation of education. According to Professor Aigars Pētersons, Rector of Riga Stradiņš University, higher education export by RSU will reach EUR 438 million during the period from 2021 to 2024 (Pētersons, 2020). Internationalism of students and different approaches to academic integrity in different cultures may hinder the elimination of academic misconduct in education. We should agree with the opinion of Bank of Latvia's economist Oļegs Krasnopjorovs that education export should not become an end in itself

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of plagiarism has been sufficiently examined in the academic environment, and that is why it is not analysed in depth in this article.

because student mobility may compromise the quality of studies (Krasnopjorovs, 2021). Using state-of-the-art technologies in the educational process should also be stressed as having a dual significance. Unquestionably, various platforms for checking academic integrity, such as Turnitin<sup>2</sup>, offer ample possibilities for detecting plagiarism, thereby preventing the use of plagiarised works in the study process. However, remote learning, when students are not present in a university, i.e., not controlled by a lecturer, has risen greatly nowadays (in accordance with Article 1(1<sup>1</sup>) of the Education Law, remote learning is a component of the full-time education process where educatees learn without being physically present in the same room or venue as the teacher, which also includes the use of information and communication technologies (Education Law, 1999)), with the result that students are more free to use unauthorised means in executing their tasks independently during their studies. According to scientific literature, “[...] Technologies are becoming an integral component of work and study processes in a digitalised world [...]” (Kudeikina & al, 2021). Nevertheless, the uptake of any new tool requires relevant legislation and application methodologies. This also refers to the introduction of technological tools for checking academic integrity in the study process. It should clearly be defined what technological tools are acceptable, how the degree of their reliability can be determined, and what legal consequences will be faced by students for academic misconduct.

## **2.2 Classification of types of academic misconduct and types of liability**

The Regulation of Academic Integrity at the University of Latvia (hereinafter also – the UL) of 24 April 2021 not only defines plagiarism but also recognises as academic misconduct on the part of a student the following: offering any items of value, financial or other benefits for performing, or refraining from, some activities in the study process, plagiarism or use/attempted use of unauthorised aids (information sources or methods), participation in academic misconduct, including presenting the results of a collective work as one’s own, impersonation of another student in an examination, falsifying another student’s signature on the attendance sheet or other documents, furnishing false information about oneself and one’s work, obtaining examination questions or examination tasks in an unauthorised manner, impeding or interfering with the academic work of the academic staff or students, other deliberate actions that impede or interfere with the study process and academic work.

Academic misconduct is categorised as follows:

- **unwelcome practice** – “minor infringement committed due to ignorance or without malicious intent, which causes neither significant consequences to the academic activity of an UL community’s representative or nor harm to the UL”. If such misconduct is detected, the student may face a reprimand or downward revision of the examination grade, or may be assigned to take the examination repeatedly on another topic or perform another task;
- **serious violation** – “inadmissible behaviour in the academic environment, which causes adverse consequences to the academic activity of an UL community’s representative or harm to the UL, regardless of its volume and intent”. In the case of such misconduct, the student may be assigned to perform the examination task repeatedly or suspended from

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, visit <https://www.turnitin.com/>

the final examination of the study course, with a relevant entry made in the examination record sheet, or annulment of the grade may be recommended to the dean of the UL faculty;

- severe violation – “inadmissible malicious behaviour in the academic environment, which causes significant adverse consequences to the academic activity of an UL community’s representative or serious harm to the UL”. In the case of such misconduct, it may be suggested that the UL management warn the student about expulsion or expel the student. (Regulation of Academic Integrity at the University of Latvia, 2021)

Similar types of academic misconduct are referred to in the Code of Academic Integrity of Riga Technical University of 29 February 2016, and namely: a student who has committed academic misconduct may face downward revision of the examination grade, or may be assigned to perform the examination task repeatedly, suspended from the examination, with a relevant entry made in the examination record sheet, or suspended from the final examination of the study course (in which case the student may be requested to repeatedly undertake a course, fully or partly), or a course grade may be annulled, or it may be recommended to warn the student about expulsion or expel the student. In assessing an instance of academic misconduct and deciding on applicable penalty, the following is taken into consideration: the gravity of the misconduct, the type of the examination, the quantity and scope of plagiarised abstracts and their significance for the work, and, if plagiarism is detected in a student’s work, previous instances of plagiarism and other breaches by the student (Code of Academic Integrity of Riga Technical University, 2016)

The Academic Integrity Policy of Riga Stradiņš University of 16 June 2020 defines types of plagiarism in more detail compared to the UL and recognises as academic misconduct not only copying, use of unauthorised aids, inaccurate presentation/falsification of research data/results, obtaining examination questions/tasks in an unauthorised manner, and offering any benefits for a certain action but also unequally low participation in group’s work, transferring one’s own work to others, agreeing to its use, use of ghostwriter services, and use of one’s position or personal circumstances to influence academic staff. Each instance of misconduct is assessed in the context of all available information, including the gravity and circumstances of the misconduct, a student’s attitudes and explanations provided. Penalties for such misconduct are identical with those applied by the UL, plus reproof and reprimand. (Academic Integrity Policy of Riga Stradiņš University, 2020).

According to the Regulation of Studies of Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies of 12 May 2021, a student may be expelled for “dishonest studying methods, i.e., plagiarism, use of unauthorised materials during examinations, breach of academic ethics and other rules”. (Regulation of Studies of Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, 2021)

The Code of Academic Integrity of RISEBA University of Applied Sciences of 25 June 2018 provides a detailed and, compared to other universities, more comprehensive explanation of academic misconduct, which is categorised as follows:

- 1) plagiarism;
- 2) cheating, including an unauthorised action when a person tries to use information, research and other materials, academic assignments and exercises which belong to another person, submitting them as one’s own work;

3) violations of intellectual property rights, including copyright – an action when a person intentionally tries to use any copyrighted materials, including copying and duplicating computer software, duplicating and/or reproducing audiovisual materials, films, videos, architectural designs, schemes or any other creative or innovative results which belong to another person, submitting them as one's own work;

4) falsification or fabrication of data – an intentional attempt to use false or fictional data for any purpose;

5) dishonesty and inappropriate collaboration – an intentional attempt to conceal, or refusal to acknowledge, a collaboration;

6) hiding an engagement with another educational institution;

7) non-compliance with Latvian laws and regulations – the “spirit and letter of the law” must be respected in every oral or written expression, including research papers, coursework, radio and television programmes, interviews, or any other types of academic activity (Code of Academic Integrity of RISEBA University of Applied Sciences, 2018).

Depending on the gravity of misconduct, the following penalties may be applied to a student caught for plagiarism:

“1. The work presented is not evaluated, the student is assigned with developing a work repeatedly on another topic, applying another complexity level and scope; the maximum grade which can be awarded for such work is 6 (almost good);

2. The work presented is evaluated with grade 0 (zero), without the right to re-write the work. That means that the student shall repeat the whole course during another term, subject to additional payment;

3. The whole term or study year is annulled (not admitted as passed), with the right to take it repeatedly;

4. The student is expelled with the right to resume study not earlier than in one year;

5. The student is expelled without the right to resume study”. (Regulation on the Control and Prevention of Plagiarism of RISEBA University of Applied Sciences, 2011)

The study process, academic integrity and anti-plagiarism regulations of Turība University also lay down various penalties for plagiarism and academic misconduct, including expulsion with the right to develop and submit for defence a thesis repeatedly within three years or expulsion without the right to defend a thesis. (Veikša, 2021)

Consequently, external laws currently existing in Latvia neither define academic misconduct nor establish any liability in this respect. Hence, academic misconduct is governed by internal regulations of higher education institutions. Though, it should not be forgotten in striving to combat academic misconduct that the right to education is a fundamental right, which can be restricted proportionately and only on a legitimate basis, unless a less restrictive remedy is applicable.

### **3. Conclusion and Implications**

Nowadays, academic integrity is becoming a cornerstone of the educational system, transforming student-teacher relationships at universities. It can be assumed with certainty that academic integrity is a principle of law, which should underpin a legal framework. Plagiarism is possibly most well-known type of academic misconduct, but not the only one. It is important to bear in mind that academic integrity embraces a wide range

of matters, from use of unauthorised aids to use of other authors' intellectual property. Subjects of requirements concerning academic integrity are just as diverse, from students to academic staff and researchers. As regards the study process, academic integrity requirements are attributable to all persons involved, regardless of their status and academic achievements.

Respect for academic integrity should not be viewed only as a tradition-based intangible value. As a result of academic misconduct, the person can enjoy unfair advantages over other persons involved in the same study process or unlawfully employ other persons' achievements, thereby gaining tangible or intangible benefits. Therefore, these are specific requirements, an established algorithm of actions, owing to which society can be sure of the quality of education. From the legal viewpoint, the prevention of academic misconduct and the punishment of perpetrators are of administrative nature. As regards academic integrity control, the university-student relationship is top-down, where universities may demand conformity with academic integrity requirements because they are responsible for the lawfulness of diplomas they issue. At present, the involvement of universities in assuring academic integrity is limited to publishing internal regulations.

Based on an assessment of the analysed set of internal regulations of higher education institutions, it should be established that:

- 1) The higher education environment still lacks a uniform view and approach for defining academic misconduct, with the result that academic misconduct of a student may be tolerated by one higher education institution and regarded as a violation by another. Therefore, the authors believe that a basic list of types of academic misconduct should be provided in the Law on Higher Education Institutions or higher education standards, thereby consolidating, to the maximum extent possible, the uniform understanding and the requirement to respect principles of academic integrity within the academic community.
- 2) Awareness of academic integrity, including plagiarism and unacceptability of plagiarism, should be developed and strengthened as early as at primary and secondary schools, thereby ruling out any possibility for wrongdoers to plead ignorance. It should be noted that, for instance, the secondary education standard sets forth that an educatee must "respect copyright and intellectual property rights, quoting authors verbatim and carefully providing references to sources" and "respect intellectual property rights and act responsibly in using digital technologies". (Cabinet, 2019)
- 3) Assigning grade 0 (zero) to a student's work in the event of academic misconduct does not conform to the 1-10 grade scale to be applied to study results according to higher education standards. (Cabinet, 13.05.2014; Cabinet, 26.08.2014)
- 4) There are grounds for criticising as disproportionate expulsion of students without the right to resume studies. This formulation undoubtedly has moral significance. Nevertheless, given the development of higher education, it should not be regarded as an absolute prohibition for a person to continue/resume studies at another higher education institution in Latvia or other countries. Also, based on the case-law of the Constitutional Court, anyone should have a right to change and improve in spite of having committed a serious or particularly serious crime (Constitutional Court, 2017; Constitutional Court, 2021). Accordingly, a higher education institution should have a duty to assess whether the person concerned has changed and can meet academic requirements.

It is good that higher education institutions of the Republic of Latvia have introduced their internal academic integrity regulations, which is evidence that parties involved in the educational process are aware of the significance of academic integrity for providing education that would contribute to the growth of the state/society not only formally but also in practice.

Based on the above, there is still room for improving the existing academic integrity regulations formulated by higher education institutions, including raising public awareness about academic integrity as a component of sustainable development of the state/society. It is also evident that academic misconduct should not be eliminated only by moral and ethical means. Academic misconduct is not treated as an administrative offence in Latvia as yet, and public condemnation of such misconduct is weaker than it should be. Some parts of society regard academic misconduct as insignificant.

Clear support is necessary from the government, which should define the substance and types of, and liability for, academic misconduct in legislation. As follows from the Guidelines of Latvia's Development Plan 2021–2027, the goal of the government in the field of education is “to frame a uniform state policy and strategy concerning education, covering all types and degrees of education, namely general education, vocational training and adult education, and higher education, focusing on the aspects of quality, effectiveness, availability and collaboration” (Cabinet Order; 2021). The goal cannot be attained without designing legal mechanisms for preventing academic misconduct and incorporating them in external laws. Effective mechanisms for combatting academic misconduct are worthy of discussion. Academic integrity should not be interpreted differently by different universities. It should be stressed that it is not only that uniform understanding should be achieved at national level by universities but, considering education export and import, the approach to academic integrity should be identical also at international level so that students of universities of certain countries may not be given undue advantages. First, the scope of academic integrity and the type and measure of liability for academic misconduct should be defined clearly. Penalising should indeed not be left to the sole discretion of universities. Academic misconduct is not only a matter of reputation, it produces a specific, although not always measurable in financial terms, impact on society/the state and national economy. The quality of education has undeniably a complex structure, meanwhile offering innovative approaches to the solution of a situation. Similar precedents can be found in other sub-branches of law: for example, environmental protection, where environmental damage cannot always be determined accurately but the importance of environmental protection for the welfare and development of society is not disputed. According to scientific literature, “the protection of the environment requires an interdisciplinary approach, in which private rights, public rights and international rights should be reflected as a specific rights area” (Kudeikina, Kaija, 2019). A similar legal framework is also necessary for the protection of academic integrity: multi-level legislation that would define types of academic misconduct (the body of an offence) and specify liability of perpetrators, with administrative liability established for more serious violations.

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