

The Introduction of Ethics and Academic Integrity Discipline in the Romanian Higher Education System: A Study on Perception and Reception

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Abstract

The introduction of the compulsory Ethics and Academic Integrity course in Romanian higher education (2018) marked a pivotal shift in academic culture. This study uses Critical Narrative Inquiry to assess its impact, focusing on students' perceptions and institutional challenges. Based on teaching experience and student feedback, it examines policy effectiveness, obstacles in ethical education, and persistent gaps in academic integrity. While students recognize the course's value, many remain unaware of reporting mechanisms, and a culture of silence endures. External factors, such as international collaborations and university rankings, also shape ethical enforcement. Findings suggest that academic integrity requires more than mandatory courses—it demands a comprehensive institutional strategy. Recommendations include refining reporting procedures, integrating faculty training, and enhancing transparency. Ultimately, fostering a strong ethics culture necessitates not just regulations but a deep institutional and individual mindset shift.

Keywords: academic integrity, ethics education, higher education, institutional culture, Romania, student perceptions, policy implementation

INTRODUCTION

In Romania, 2018 was a turning point in terms of ethical culture in Romanian higher education. By Order of the Minister of National Education number 3131/2018 of January 30, 2018, the discipline of study Ethics and Academic Integrity (EAI) was introduced in the curriculum of all universities, regardless of the specialization. At the master's level, the discipline is laid down as compulsory, while at the bachelor's level, it is optional, students can choose this academic subject from a set of other

subjects. Why the Ministry has chosen such a regime for the subject of Ethics and Academic Integrity is hard to understand. Based on our experience as professors teaching this subject at the Polytechnic University of Timișoara, most students believe that academic ethics should not only be a mandatory course at the undergraduate level but should also be introduced as a compulsory subject in the first year of university. The standard question they ask in the opening lecture is: why only now? However, it can be seen that student perception is positive. Not only do they not consider discipline unnecessary, but they find it a revelation: it is the kind of education that sows values, awakens consciences, and grounds principles. These values and ethical principles, when they find fertile soil, radiate into all spheres of life. This is because “the values and principles of academic ethics represent a type of moral knowledge and action that reaches beyond the academic world. Once appropriated and internalized, this axiological constellation establishes itself as a landmark for professional and personal life. Academic ethics thus represents a crucible for the formation and completion of the character of young people, with a powerful impact on the morals of society. The mission of a university is not only to create specialists in the various fields of science, technology, arts or humanities but also to form personalities and propose human role models” (Suciu, Băiaș, Luminosu, 2018, pp. 6-7).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: A QUALITATIVE AND REFLEXIVE APPROACH

Our study adopts a qualitative research methodology, rooted in autoethnography and Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI), to explore the complex and often invisible cultural and institutional dynamics surrounding the introduction of the Ethics and Academic Integrity (EAI) course in Romanian higher education. Rather than seeking to measure attitudes through statistical means, our goal is to understand how students and educators make sense of ethics and integrity, and how these values are internalized – or resisted – within specific institutional contexts. We acknowledge the value of quantitative approaches in assessing trends and generalizations. However, our object of study – lived experiences, perceptions, and ethical reasoning of students – requires interpretive depth rather than numerical breadth. As Clifford Geertz famously argued, culture should not be examined as a set of abstract variables, but as “webs of significance” that people themselves have spun and in which they are suspended (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, academic ethics is not merely a codified norm, but a cultural field, a space of negotiation, silence, and often power imbalance. To access this space, statistical instruments alone are insufficient.

Autoethnography is a qualitative method in which the researcher reflects on their own lived experience to explore larger cultural, institutional, or political phenomena (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). As university professors directly involved in teaching the EAI course across multiple faculties, we have engaged in systematic and critical reflection on our teaching practices, institutional constraints, and the evolving attitudes of students. Our insider position enables us to document both structural dynamics and subtle, everyday interactions that would otherwise remain hidden from external analysis. The authors of this article have a philosophical and legal background, in humanities or fields at the intersection with the humanities, where qualitative research is predominant.

Critical Narrative Inquiry complements this approach by focusing on the stories people tell about themselves and their environment—not only as expressions of personal identity, but as responses to dominant discourses, power structures, and institutional norms (Chase, 2011; Holman Jones, 2005). In our case, we analyze both personal observations and student-produced narratives (such as argumentative essays written in the EAI seminars) to uncover how students experience, narrate, and challenge ethical violations within the university.

The study pursues the following objectives: to document, through reflective and narrative analysis, the implementation process of the EAI course at Politehnica University of Timișoara; to analyze how students perceive and engage with academic integrity, both as a normative framework and as a lived reality; to identify cultural and institutional obstacles that hinder the internalization and practical application of ethical values; to provide context-sensitive recommendations for enhancing ethical culture and institutional responsibility in Romanian universities.

Research Questions

- How do students perceive the relevance and effectiveness of the EAI course?
- What ethical violations have students witnessed, and how do they respond?
- Why do students often refrain from reporting ethical misconduct, and what institutional or cultural factors explain this silence?
- In what ways does the asymmetrical professor-student relationship shape students' ethical reasoning and behavior?
- What role does the EAI course play in shifting attitudes and promoting moral responsibility within the academic setting?

The primary data sources include the authors' own teaching experiences, documented through reflective journaling and institutional records, student essays submitted as part of EAI coursework (in which students anonymously narrate and analyze real-life ethical dilemmas) and public institutional documents (e.g., the university Code of Ethics, Ethics Committee reports), used to compare official discourse with lived experience. These data are interpreted using hermeneutic and critical methods, with attention to context, meaning, and narrative construction.

As for the epistemological position, our research does not claim neutrality in the positivist sense. Instead, it embraces reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher is embedded in the field of study and that subjectivity, when made transparent and critically analyzed, is not a limitation but a source of epistemic insight. As feminist and critical theorists have long emphasized, "the personal is political"—and in our case, pedagogical as well (Hanisch, 1970; Holman Jones, 2005). Numerous researchers (e.g., Britzman, 1991; Pelias, 2004; Custer, 2014) have successfully applied autoethnography and narrative inquiry in the study of academic culture, integrity, and ethical dilemmas in higher education. These methods allow for a deeper understanding of how ethical values are lived, negotiated, and challenged within the university setting, especially in contexts marked by structural tensions, asymmetrical power relations, and institutional inertia.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, as a qualitative inquiry based on autoethnography and narrative analysis, the findings are not statistically generalizable. Instead, they offer contextual and interpretive insights grounded in specific institutional realities. Second, the dual role of the authors as both instructors and researchers may have influenced students' narratives, despite anonymity assurances. Third, the absence of quantitative data limits the ability to measure broader trends or correlations. Finally, the data set—comprising reflective essays from a single university—may not capture the full diversity of student experiences across Romania's higher education system. Nonetheless, these limitations are inherent to the methodological approach and are balanced by the depth and authenticity of the narratives collected.

UNIVERSITY ETHICS BEFORE EAI

Before the introduction of Ethics and Academic Integrity in 2018, the ethical landscape of higher education was marked by a series of structural problems and public scandals that undermined the credibility of Romanian universities. Although these scandals targeted specific situations, the subject of blame was the entire university system. This is because the media acts as a stimulating factor for hasty generalizations. As for structural problems, these mainly concern the lack of formal education on academic ethics. Most universities had no compulsory courses on ethics and academic integrity for students. Universities were obliged to assume codes of ethics, but these operated at the disciplinary level and not as part of an organized educational approach. Issues related to plagiarism or the ethics of scientific research were dealt with superficially, and ethics education was left to the discretion of professors or was at best included in research methodology courses. In most universities, bachelor's, master's or doctoral committees did not have clear regulations and a rigorous system for checking the originality of papers, and anti-plagiarism software was either missing or not used systematically and effectively. There were also cases where some universities preferred to hide cases of plagiarism to preserve the image of the institution. One could trace the structural lack of education in ethics back to the communist totalitarian rule, where the entire system of ethical principles and values, not only in the field of academia was completely distorted. The so-called period of transition to democracy did show little care to rebuild any type of ethical value.

Plagiarism scandals have not been lacking and have played an important role in unfolding events. Thus, one after another, cases of political figures, prime ministers, and ministers, whose doctoral or other scientific papers (some written in prison by convicted politicians to reduce their sentences) turned out to be plagiarized, appeared in the public domain. These nonethical situations have quickly reached the press and have been the subject of journalistic investigations, not without risks and threats. Some of them have been the subject of books (Şercan, 2017, 2022; Cincea, 2018) and are now case studies discussed in university classes. However, none of the accused politicians have suffered during their time in office. Plagiarism review committees have been at will replaced by political power to prevent or delay decisions on plagiarized papers. All this demonstrates a culture of silence and compromise imposed from the top down through political and administrative mechanisms.

The higher education system lacked an ethical culture, and this is largely the main reason for the proliferation of plagiarism cases and the corresponding scandals. The prevention of ethical misconduct was a quasi-absent thing. Things worked along these lines: the deficient "anything goes" culture led to the acceptance of doctoral theses containing obvious plagiarism. Although universities have autonomy, they are overwhelmingly dependent on state subsidies. Thus, none of them had any interest in bothering the political class eager for academic titles and honors serving as a guarantee of professionalism and expertise for image-seeking politicians.

Of course, what also mattered were indirect pressures from outside. The intensification of collaborations with foreign universities, participation in international projects, academic exchanges, Romanian universities' ranking in international rankings, all were constraints for promoting academic integrity. The ministerial order issued in 2018 introducing the compulsory discipline Ethics and Academic Integrity came in response to these pressures.

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY ETHICS AT THE POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY OF TIMISOARA

At the Polytechnic University of Timisoara (PUT), from a formal point of view, university ethics is ensured from three directions: (i) there is a code of ethics and deontology of the university; (ii) there is a central ethics committee; (iii) and, since 2018, there is a compulsory discipline at master's level and optional at bachelor's level, which deals with ethics and academic integrity. In Romania, university codes of ethics were introduced as a legal obligation by the National Education Law 1/2011. The law stipulates that each higher education institution must adopt a code of university ethics and deontology regulating ethical principles and rules of conduct and a university ethics committee to ensure compliance with the ethical rules laid down in this code. In the case of PUT, the first code of ethics was adopted by the University Senate in 2014. Previously, the conduct of academic actors was regulated by general legal provisions, not specific to higher education, such as the already mentioned National Education Law no. 1/2011 or Law 206/2004 on good conduct in scientific research and technological development.

A first observation is that in Romania, the university ethical culture has been shaped from the top down, through regulations such as the laws of 2011 and 2018. Before these laws, there were no clear standards of academic conduct for plagiarism, abuse of power, conflict of interest, etc. Plagiarism issues were more difficult to manage due to the lack of clear and effective procedures. Thus, some universities set out their ethical values and principles in acts such as the University Charter but lacked enforcement mechanisms and procedures for sanctioning or withdrawing titles. In addition, although some universities had established their ethical codes of their initiative, these were not set up to conform to uniform standards at the national level. Practices such as plagiarism, favoritism in promotions, abuses, or corruption in exams were not effectively tackled and misconduct was rarely sanctioned, except when it went public through the media or when it became a criminal offense. Ethics committees were at that time an exotic and ineffective presence. Their role was marginal, more symbolic, and without real sanctioning power. The ethical culture of that period was contingent, dependent on the particular initiatives of the professors supervising graduation papers and on the latitude of the university administrations.

In the case of the PUT, these three instruments, the code, the commission, and the discipline have certainly had an impact on university ethics. But the relevant questions are: how big is their impact on the ethical climate and to what extent has the ethical landscape of the university improved as a result of their application? What is the students' perception in this respect and to what extent do they take ownership of ethical principles and expect them from their professors?

As we mentioned earlier, the subject Ethics and Academic Integrity is taught in all 64 master's specializations of the 10 faculties of the Polytechnic University of Timisoara. With one exception, all these courses are taught by a team of three professors. Two of us have a philosophical background and the third has a legal background. This is reflected in the structure of the course, which includes chapters on ethical issues as well as chapters on legal issues concerning intellectual property and misconduct in the academic sphere. In addition to conceptual clarifications and ethical theories, the course includes sections on plagiarism (with a focus on the different types of intellectual theft), ghostwriting, contract cheating, or data falsification. By contrast, we introduced in the course a section on academic writing because we wanted to provide our students with an ethical model for designing a scientific paper.

Ethics is a field of study that has developed over time as an integral part of philosophy and its attempts to answer questions about man, and the human condition. Ethical theories proposed by philosophers have sought to provide both an explanation of human behavior and ways of solving ethical problems to create a world based on the values of good and justice. Applied ethics, as in the case of EAI, developed and gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century in response to advances in new fields that raised unprecedented ethical issues. Therefore, we considered that in the case of our discipline, "The teacher's role is to mediate and facilitate the process of moving issues from the abstract sphere of norms or code of ethics to the concrete area of the particular case" (Băiaș, Luminosu & Suciu, 2021, p. 1684-1689). The methods we used in working with the students included problematizations, case-based discussions (including cases of plagiarism in the public sphere), and argumentative debates in which we discussed dilemmatic situations or situations of violation of ethical norms the students had witnessed. The dilemmatic situations are useful ethical exercises that place students in complex, difficult situations where they have to make a choice based on accepted ethical values. We have aimed to develop argumentative critical thinking on ethical topics so that when students encounter violations of ethical norms, as laid down in the Code of Ethics, they can recognize them and act to protect their rights.

We found that most of the students were unaware of the existence of the code of ethics and the ethics committee at the university. Although it turned out that they had witnessed violations of academic ethical rules, they did not know that there were specific rules for those cases and that there was a procedure for reporting them to an ethics committee whose task was to analyze and, if necessary, to sanction them. Thus, most of these ethical breaches (some of them committed by professors) went unreported. There are several explanations for this. One of them is the fact that in the previous cycles of study (middle school, high school) ethical misconduct was dealt with at parent-teacher or parent-teacher-headmaster level. This was the case when the misconduct was not so serious that it involved the police or the school inspectorate. This was a by-proxy resolution where the pupil, being a minor, was represented by the parents.

Another explanation relates to power dynamics. The professor-student relationship is perceived as an asymmetrical one, in which power is unevenly distributed—one party holds more influence than the other and can even shape their future. As a result, behaviors such as arbitrary grading, intimidation and humiliation, favoritism, discrimination, inappropriate comments, harassment, and exclusion are often tolerated and endured by students who believe that justice lies where power resides. In other words, they perceive professors, including those on ethics committees, as forming a caste that protects and supports each other. On the other hand, the dysfunctional operation of the justice system at the national level during the transition to democracy, along with its subordination to political power, has fostered a deep distrust in public institutions. This sentiment has persisted to the present day, even though the situation has somewhat improved.

Regarding plagiarism—one of the most serious academic violations, to which students may fall victim either intentionally or due to a lack of awareness—we have observed a significant shift in their understanding. Things that once seemed ambiguous or uncertain to them have now become clearly unacceptable after studying the dedicated chapter in the EAI course. For instance, using Wikipedia to write a high school geography paper by extensively copying content and images without citing the source constitutes plagiarism, even if at the time the teacher did not penalize it as such. The same applies to "forgetting" to use quotation marks and assuming a voice that is not one's own. Or to minimize intellectual theft by reducing it to a harmless practice that shouldn't be troubling, based on the reasoning

that information is abundant and that claiming an idea as one's own is far less serious than theft of physical property. Discussions with students about plagiarism have clarified this ethical dimension of their academic work and have filled a gap that, in their secondary education, had remained a no man's land. It should be noted in this context that in 2024, the lawmaker decided to act in a decisive manner by means of Law 199/2023 on higher education. This new law clearly defines plagiarism and self-plagiarism as deviations from the rules of ethics and deontology in teaching and university research (art. 168), as well as rules governing academic discipline and good research and academic conduct. Sanctions are provided by the law for most types of breaches of the rules of university ethics and deontology as well as related institutional procedures.

Without relying on quantitative data, we can assess that the EAI course has been well received. Between 2018 and 2024, students actively participated in discussions and debates, asking insightful questions and engaging critically with the material. Even during the pandemic, when teaching moved online, they remained involved, reflecting on ethical dilemmas specific to that period. At this stage in their lives, as they gain full civil and political rights, they have shown a clear understanding that academic integrity is maintained through adherence to ethical standards that apply equally to both professors and students. More than just acknowledging these norms, they recognize the need to internalize them, seeing them as part of a broader set of moral values that uphold the primacy of ethical principles in society, far beyond the academic sphere. In a world driven by competition—where the ends too often justify the means, and some so-called models of success are later exposed for their unethical and even illegal practices—this awareness represents an oasis of normality. It reinforces the idea that success is not simply about avoiding detection and that the corrupt top-down model promoted by unscrupulous politicians is fundamentally flawed.

At a theoretical level, such an ethical system envisions a perfect world of Academic Good, serving as an ideal model against which reality should be shaped. The challenge arises when the real world bears little resemblance to this ideal realm of Ethical Forms or Ideas, in the Platonic sense. In the Allegory of the Cave (Republic, 517b-c), Plato vividly illustrates the arduous journey from the knowledge of the Good to the reality of human existence: "And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away and take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?" Just as, in Plato's philosophy, the sensory world is but an imperfect reflection of the world of Ideas—where perfect and immutable Forms reside—so too, in academia, reality often falls short of the moral ideal. Students perceive this gap as profound. Faced with the ethical complexities of real-life situations, the professor may be accused of contradiction: what is taught in class does not always align with what unfolds in practice. This divide between the normative-prescriptive and the descriptive realms poses the greatest challenge to the credibility of Ethics and Academic Integrity as a discipline.

To illustrate how this theoretical adversary operates and how it undermines the relevance of the discipline, we will draw on an example from my seminar work with students (Băiaș, Luminosu, Suciu, Stanici, 2024). One of the key methods we have extensively employed in these seminars is the argumentative essay. In this assignment, students were asked to present and analyze an instance of ethical misconduct they had encountered during their time as students. The case had to be one in which they were either direct victims or at least witnesses. All identifying details—such as the individuals

involved, the courses where the incidents occurred, and the specific circumstances—were anonymized to ensure an accurate yet fear-free account from the students. Our role, as professors of Ethics and Academic Integrity, was not to act as an ethics committee, passing judgment or determining sanctions. Rather, our pedagogical objective was to equip students with the ability, based on the knowledge acquired in our course, to recognize ethical breaches when they occur and to categorize them according to the relevant provisions of the university's Code of Ethics. In these student essays, we encountered a broad and troubling spectrum of serious and overt violations of academic ethical norms. However, we will not present a quantitative statistical analysis of these infractions, as this is not the focus of the present study. As previously stated, our approach is qualitative—rooted in critical narrative and cultural interpretation. The fundamental premise of this methodology is that, while it may lack statistical precision—a common critique of qualitative research—it cannot be dismissed as lacking objectivity. This is because, despite its qualitative nature, it remains firmly empirical. In other words, the researcher's interpretation is consistently grounded in evidence: narratives, documents, factual records, and other verifiable sources.

Approximately one-third of the students reported instances of ethical violations within the university. They were given the option to present a case from either the university, their workplace, or society at large. The ethical issues described and analyzed in their essays varied widely and included offenses such as offensive and threatening language, discriminatory remarks, favoritism, abuse of power, intimidation, humiliation, bullying, plagiarism, the offering and acceptance of gifts, lack of respect or professionalism, inappropriate comments, and harassment. This exercise of writing argumentative essays continued over several academic years, yielding consistent results, with only minor variations. In contrast, if we examine the reports from the PUT Ethics Committee during the same period, the number of cases brought to its attention remains disproportionately low: in 2019, there were only two complaints; in 2020, no complaints were made; in 2021, two complaints were filed; and in 2022, just one complaint was recorded. A shift occurred in 2023 with the number of complaints rising to seven, alongside one request for a GDPR compliance certificate. Although the number of complaints in 2023 increased—likely in part due to the efforts of our course in raising awareness about the Ethics Committee—the total remains surprisingly low when compared to the range of ethical issues reported by students in their essays.

CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of the "Ethics and Academic Integrity" course marked a significant step towards enhancing the university's ethical culture. However, for this initiative to be truly effective, further actions are necessary, including heightened awareness, the strict enforcement of standards, and the cultivation of an academic climate rooted in integrity. While the establishment of an ethics code and an ethics committee is a notable advancement, many students remain doubtful about the efficacy of these instruments. Unfortunately, the reporting of ethical breaches remains limited, particularly when the violators are faculty members. Thus, the integration of academic ethics should be viewed as an ongoing process. Building a robust ethical culture requires not only formal regulations but also a shift in mindset at both the institutional and individual levels. Despite the fact that students report a wide array of ethical violations in their essays, the number of formal complaints submitted to the PUT Ethics Committee remains disproportionately low compared to the issues raised in their writings. This disparity suggests that students may be hesitant to report ethical breaches officially. This reluctance may stem from fears of retaliation, a lack of trust in the reporting system, or the belief that no meaningful action will be taken.

The increase in the number of complaints in 2023, although still modest in comparison to the concerns expressed by students, could signal a growing awareness among students about the existence of the Ethics Committee and the significance of reporting ethical violations.

To strengthen the academic ethical culture, it is crucial to enhance the procedures for reporting ethical violations and to optimize the functioning of the Ethics Committee, ensuring clear and efficient mechanisms for identifying and addressing issues. Another vital step is the incorporation of ethics modules into the initial training of university faculty, so that professors are better equipped to uphold and promote academic integrity, passing these values on to their students. Furthermore, at the institutional level, establishing the position of a legal advisor specialized in ethical matters and the fight against plagiarism would be highly beneficial. This role should also include the capacity to mediate conflicts and provide support to both students and faculty in difficult situations. Additionally, organizing workshops with professionals from the legal and journalistic fields, particularly those involved in the national fight against plagiarism, could significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and solutions in this domain.

An additional key area is the implementation of campaigns to raise awareness about academic integrity. These campaigns could encompass competitions, the creation of informative materials such as brochures and websites, as well as the development of user-friendly guides for both students and faculty. Such initiatives would help familiarize the academic community with ethical values, principles, and standards, making them a continuous point of reference in university life. Furthermore, it is crucial to initiate efforts aimed at amending legislation to make the "Ethics and Academic Integrity" course mandatory starting from the first year of undergraduate studies. As part of this initiative, students should be well-informed about the existence and role of ethics committees, ensuring that they understand the rules and mechanisms in place to protect academic integrity from the outset. In addition, incorporating topics related to academic and professional ethics into a wide range of disciplines would contribute significantly to the development of a robust ethical culture. This approach would ensure that ethics is not confined to a single course but is consistently integrated throughout students' academic journey. Lastly, the introduction of periodic audits to assess compliance with ethical standards within universities would provide an ongoing mechanism for monitoring and enforcing rules, thus strengthening the ethical climate and helping to prevent violations.

An academic culture based on the values of integrity and responsibility is cultivated over time, with every step taken advancing the university toward becoming a place where excellence is a tangible reality. Academic integrity is not merely an accessory but a fundamental requirement for developing future specialists and fostering innovative research. The creation of an authentic academic ethical culture is not just essential, but a collective responsibility, crucial to the credibility and future of higher education.

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