Academic Integrity Policy Development and Revision: A Canadian Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: The goals of this project are: (1) Identify existing components of academic integrity policies and procedures related to contract cheating; (2) identify gaps in existing academic integrity policies and procedures related to contract cheating; (3) evaluate the policies and procedures against existing standards for post-secondary education policy; (4) compare supports available for undergraduate students and graduate students; and (5) develop and communicate recommendations for policy reform. The research question that informs this study is: How do post-secondary institutions in Canada address contract cheating in their academic integrity policies and related documents?

Methods: We used a qualitative policy analysis, using Bretag et al.'s (2011) five core elements (access, approach, responsibility, detail, and support) of exemplary academic integrity policy as a framework for analysis. Policy documents were collected through public websites of publicly funded colleges and universities in Canada (n=67).

Results: Policies from post-secondary institutions in five Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario) have been analyzed thus far. These include publicly-funded colleges (n=22) (Ontario) and universities (n=45). Results showed that policies lacked consistency and fewer than 5% (n=3) used the term "contract cheating" explicitly. None of the policies could be considered exemplary according to the Bretag et al. (2011) framework.

Implications: There is a need for Canadian higher education institutions to improve their academic integrity policies to address contract cheating more explicitly and also to focus on providing more educational supports to students to learn how to uphold academic integrity at their respective institutions.

Keywords: academic integrity, Canada, higher education, policy

Introduction

Thank you, Dr. Razi, for the invitation to join your class today. Welcome, everyone. My presentation today will focus on academic integrity policies in Canada. I will tell you a little more about Canada and its provinces and territories in a minute.

For now, I begin with the customary acknowledgement of the traditional Indigenous territories on which we are situated. I join you today via video conference from the traditional territories of

the people of the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta, the province I call home. The Treaty 7 region includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, the Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations.) The City of Calgary, where I live, is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.

Introduction

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- 2020 national research award, Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE)
- Co-Founder, *Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity*
- Editor-in-Chief, *International Journal for Educational Integrity*
- Co-Editor: *Academic Integrity in Canada* (Eaton & Christensen Hughes, eds.) (Forthcoming, Springer, 2021)
- Book series editor: *Ethics and Integrity in Educational Contexts* (Springer Nature, 2021)
- Forthcoming book: *Plagiarism in Higher Education, Tackling Tough Topics in Academic Integrity* (ABC Clio, 2021)

I am an associate professor in the Werklund Werklund School of Education and the Educational Leader in Residence, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary. I am a research professor, and my scholarly expertise is in academic integrity and ethics in higher education contexts.

Education in Canada: Background

In my talk today I will tell you about a national academic integrity policy project we have been undertaking in Canada since 2018. First, it will be helpful to have a little background about our educational system. As you know, Canada is a young country. We entered into Confederation in 1867, which established us as a country. At that time, the politicians decided what would be the responsibility of the federal government and what aspects of governance would be the responsibility of the provinces. It was decided at that time that education would be a provincial responsibility.

Since then, Canada has evolved to include ten (10) provinces and three (3) territories. Education continues to be governed at the provincial or territorial level, with no formal federal oversight or funding. There are many differences between education in Canada and the United States, one of which is that there is no federal oversight for education in Canada. There is no Canadian equivalent to the United States Department of Education, for example. Instead, in Canada each region has its own ministry responsible for education. Some regions have two ministries, one for primary and secondary education and another for higher education. Others have a single ministry responsible for education at all levels. Sometimes, ministries can change or be reorganized, according to government preferences. For example, in the province of Alberta where I live in the west, the ministry has undergone several reorganizations:

Table 1: Province of Alberta, Administrative Changes to the Government Ministry responsible for Higher Education[1]

Title	Years
Ministry of Advanced Education	2004–Present
Ministry of Learning (including primary, secondary and advanced education)	1999–2004
Ministry of Advanced Education and Career Development	1992–1999
Ministry of Advanced Education	1983–1992
Ministry of Advanced Education and Manpower	1975–1983

I offer this as one example of how provincial governments can undertake administrative re-organizations to their ministries relating to education. All provincial and territorial governments in Canada have the right to undertake such changes for their respective regions.

Another important difference between education in Canada and the United States is that the majority of post-secondary institutions in Canada are publicly funded. Although there are a few privately-funded universities and colleges, the majority are funded through taxpayer dollars. There are approximately 100 universities and 135 colleges. Although there are some exceptions, the main difference between universities and colleges is that universities grant degrees and colleges focus more on trades and careers requiring more of an applied education.

This provides you with some basic background about how education is organized and governed in Canada.

Lack of Academic Integrity Research in Canada

I spent 22 years teaching in Canadian universities before securing a full-time, tenure-track appointment. In Canada we call these *sessional* appointments, while in the United States they are called *adjunct* faculty. In both countries we refer to this as precarious academic employment, as people are hired from one semester to the next, without a permanent salary, health insurance or a pension. As with many individuals with precarious academic employment, and particularly women, I was not in a position to move to another city for a permanent job, due to personal and family circumstances. And also job market conditions. There were very few full-time academic jobs in my field available. And so, I did not have the luxury of a secure job from 1994 until 2016 when I was finally hired into a permanent job as a research professor at the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary.

When one has precarious employment, ,we are not permitted to apply for grants or get permission from the research ethics board (REB) to conduct our own research. As a result, most people who are in a sessional teaching role are unable to undertake their own programs of research. This is why my research into academic integrity did not begin until later in life. As

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[1] For more information: An Administrative History of the Government of Alberta 1905-2005. https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/4ed54c63-8f0d-49b9-b83e-34b0c177952e/resource/1c436497-eb04-469b-948b-7b13e73ceca0/download/administrative-history-of-government-of-alberta.pdf

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soon as I was successful in getting a full-time position, I began my research program on academic integrity.

One of the first things I did when I was hired was to apply for internal research grants. I received one small grant from my faculty, but when I applied at the university-level, I was rejected on the basis that academic integrity 'is an administrative issue, not a research topic'. One of the reviewers commented that if I really thought it was a topic worth studying, that I should start by publishing a literature review on academic integrity in Canada in a peer-reviewed journal. I immediately began the literature review, together with a graduate student, Rachael Edino.

We published, "Strengthening the research agenda of educational integrity in Canada: A few of the research literature and call to action" (Eaton & Edino, 2018) in the *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, the journal co-founded and edited by Dr. Tracey Bretag. In our review we found that Canada lagged behind other countries in terms of academic integrity research, with very few individuals up to that point who had maintained a program of scholarship over time. There was also a distressing lack of large-scale research and collaboration among researchers across provinces.

Following the publication of the article, I had the pleasure of meeting with Dr. Tracey Bretag via Skype to talk about the article and get her advice on how to improve the state of educational integrity research in my country. She generously met with me to provide advice and mentorship. She advised me to start with a policy study, as it does not require ethics review. She pointed me in the direction of research she had undertaken some years earlier (Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b) as a model for how I could set up a similar study in Canada.

She offered me two key points which shaped the national study that I developed as a result of her mentorship.

Firstly, she advised me to break the study into small and manageable phases. Dr. Bretag spent a year living in Canada in her late teens, so she was familiar with the educational system here. She advised me not to try and study all the institutions at once, as the project would be too overwhelming.

Secondly, she advised me to work with a team, but to keep the team small, not more than six people. The reason is that a smaller team can work faster and more efficiently. This proved to be wise advise (see Eaton et al., 2020).

As we talked further, I also realized that focusing on contract cheating would be important, as there had been no research at all conducted in Canada on that topic. And so, the project was born.

Contract Cheating in Canada: A National Policy Analysis 2018–2023

I designed a national study, just as Dr. Tracey Bretag had recommended, and registered it on the Open Science Framework (see Eaton, 2019).

Project Objectives
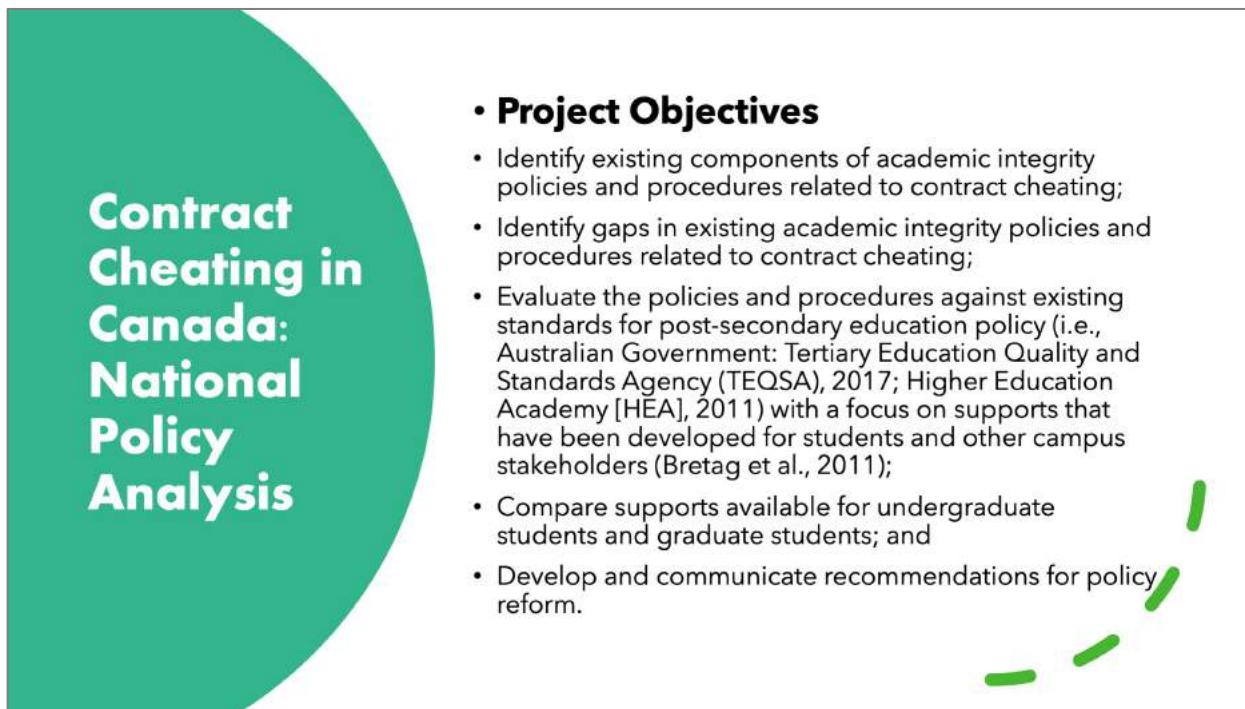
The goals of the project are as follows:

- Identify existing components of academic integrity policies and procedures related to contract cheating;
- Identify gaps in existing academic integrity policies and procedures related to contract cheating;
- Evaluate the policies and procedures against existing standards for post-secondary education policy (i.e., Australian Government: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), 2017; Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2011) with a focus on supports that have been developed for students and other campus stakeholders (Bretag et al., 2011);
- Compare supports available for undergraduate students and graduate students; and
- Develop and communicate recommendations for policy reform.

In addition, I also wanted to build research capacity through the development of collaborative research teams, by including individuals from different regions to give them exposure to working on an academic integrity research project as part of a team.
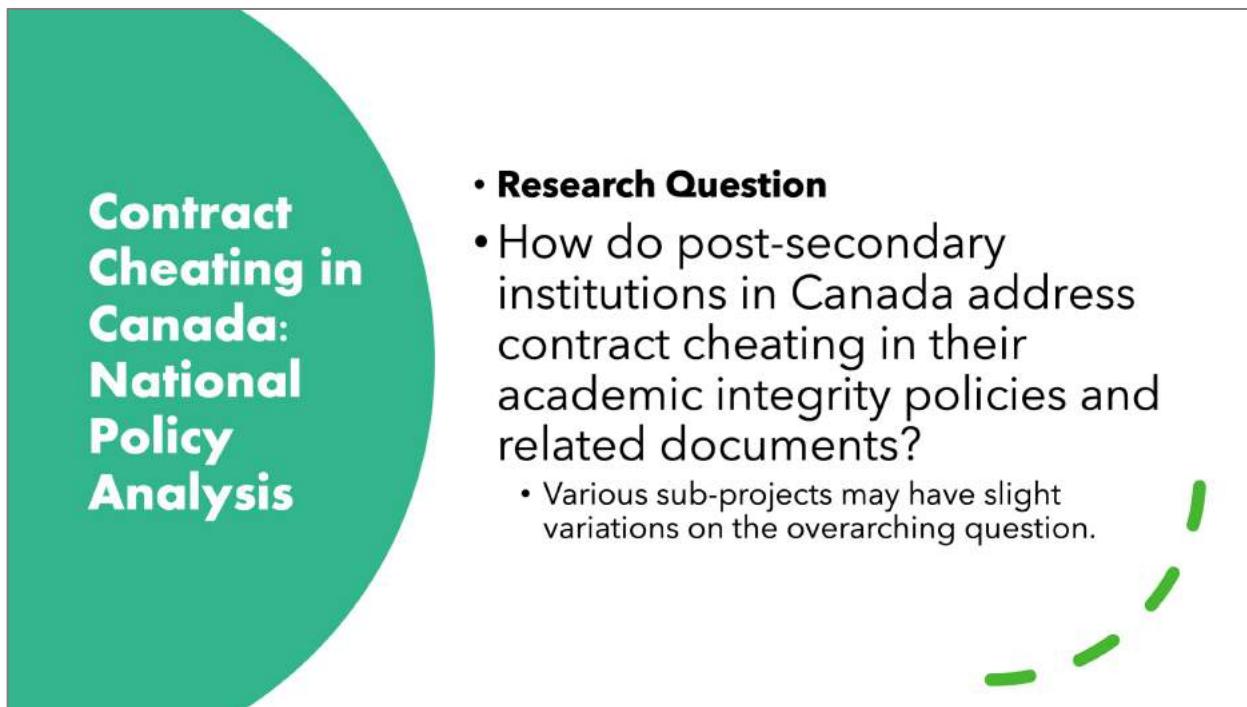
Research Question

The overarching question that guides the study is: How do post-secondary institutions in Canada address contract cheating in their academic integrity policies and related documents? We acknowledged that the question may need to be adapted slightly for depending on the regional sub-project.

Project Architecture

This national project is sub-divided according to regions of Canada and types of post-secondary institutions (e.g., colleges and universities). Different teams have been involved with each of the smaller sub-projects, with individuals from a particular region studying the policies from their own regions. As this is an unfunded project and we are also developing novice researchers in different regions with each phase of the project, our progress has been somewhat slow. Nevertheless, from 2018 to 2020 we have been able to complete the first three phases of the project, which is what I will report on today:

> **Completed Sub-Projects (2018-2020)**
> > Ontario Colleges
> > Ontario Universities
> > Western Canada Universities

The next phases of the project are planned as follows:

> **Planned Sub-Projects (2021-2023)**
> > Atlantic Canada Colleges
> > Atlantic Canada Universities
> > Western Canada Colleges
> > Northern Canada Colleges and University

I am currently in the process of recruiting individuals to work on policies from institutions in the Atlantic region, which will include the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland. We also expect to undertake a review of the college policies

in Western Canada, as well as colleges and the one university in Canada's north over the next two years.

Conceptual Framing

Contract Cheating in Canada:
National Policy Analysis

Conceptual Framing

Five Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy (Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b)

- Access
- Approach
- Responsibility
- Detail
- Support

Image Source:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265843969_Core_elements_of_exemplar_academic_integrity_policy_in_Australian_higher_education
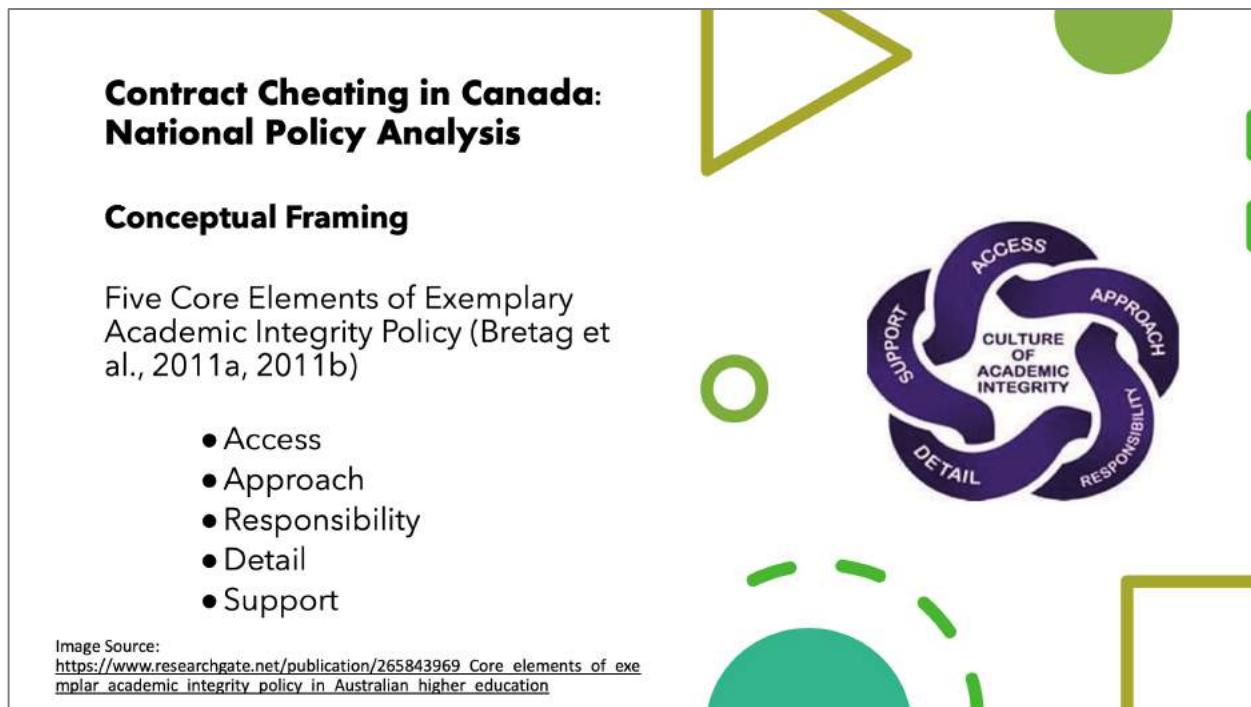
For the conceptual framing of the project we used the five core elements of exemplary academic integrity policy (Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b):

- Access
- Approach
- Responsibility
- Detail
- Support

Method

We followed the method undertaken by Bretag et al. (2011a, 2011b), who had drawn on the work of Grigg (2010). Members of our research team read all of these works before undertaking any data collection of our own. Then we followed this method:

1. Data collection: Policy and procedure documents from websites of publicly-funded institutions.
2. Data extraction: Details relating to document type, audience, title, language and principles. (Coding performed by 2 researchers, with inter-rater consensus achieved through collaborative dialogue.)
3. Analysis: Extracted data were analyzed using the Bretag et al. (2011a, 2011b) conceptual framing.

Results to date

To date we have analyzed the policy documents from five provinces (*n*=67), as follows:

- 22 colleges (Ontario)
- 45 publicly-funded universities
    - Ontario: *n*=21
    - Manitoba: *n*=4
    - Saskatchewan: *n*=2
    - Alberta: *n*=7
    - British Columbia: *n*= 11

Using Bretag et al.'s (2011a, 2011b) framework of five core elements of exemplary academic integrity policy, I offer a high level synthesis of our results thus far:

- **Access:** Most policies were accessible within 2-4 clicks from an institution's publicly available website home page.
- **Approach:** Mostly judicial in nature. Focus on procedural fairness. Inconsistency with regards to incorporating educational approaches or academic integrity values.
- **Responsibility:** Most documents focused on students as being responsible for avoiding academic misconduct, rather than on upholding academic integrity. (Deficit-based focus). Very little focus on faculty responsibilities.
- **Detail:** Indirect language and unclear definitions. Few policies (n=3) explicitly used the term *contract cheating*: (MacEwan University, Alberta; Ryerson University, Ontario; and Seneca College, Ontario)
- **Support:** Inconsistency with regards to providing or suggesting additional learning supports for students.

Discussion

None of the documents from any of the 67 institutions studied thus far could be considered exemplary (as per Bretag et al., 2011a, 2011b). We found that access to information about contract cheating is generally limited, with the language used in policy documents often being indirect or vague. Absence of specific terms (e.g., contract cheating) and unclear definitions can create confusion for students, faculty and administrators.

Most policies would benefit from providing additional learning supports to students (e.g., tutorials, teaching and learning supports, improved student resources).

The term "contract cheating" was not used, except in the cases of three institutions. So less than 5 five percent of the institutions studied thus far demonstrated willingness to tackle the issue explicitly. Among those that used the term "contract cheating" directly, two were teaching universities (MacEwan University, Alberta; Ryerson University, Ontario) and one was a college (Seneca College, Ontario). Of particular note is that both universities that used this term in their policy documents were previously colleges that had been awarded an upgraded status to that of a university. Ryerson was designated as a university in 1993 and MacEwan was designated as a university in 2009. Prior to that, both were colleges. Now, they are considered teaching universities, which means that they focus mostly on undergraduate education; with limited if any focus on graduate education and neither has a medical school affiliated with it.

Our analysis this far has shown that none of Canada's top research universities have included an explicit focus on contract cheating in their academic integrity policies or procedures.

Limitations
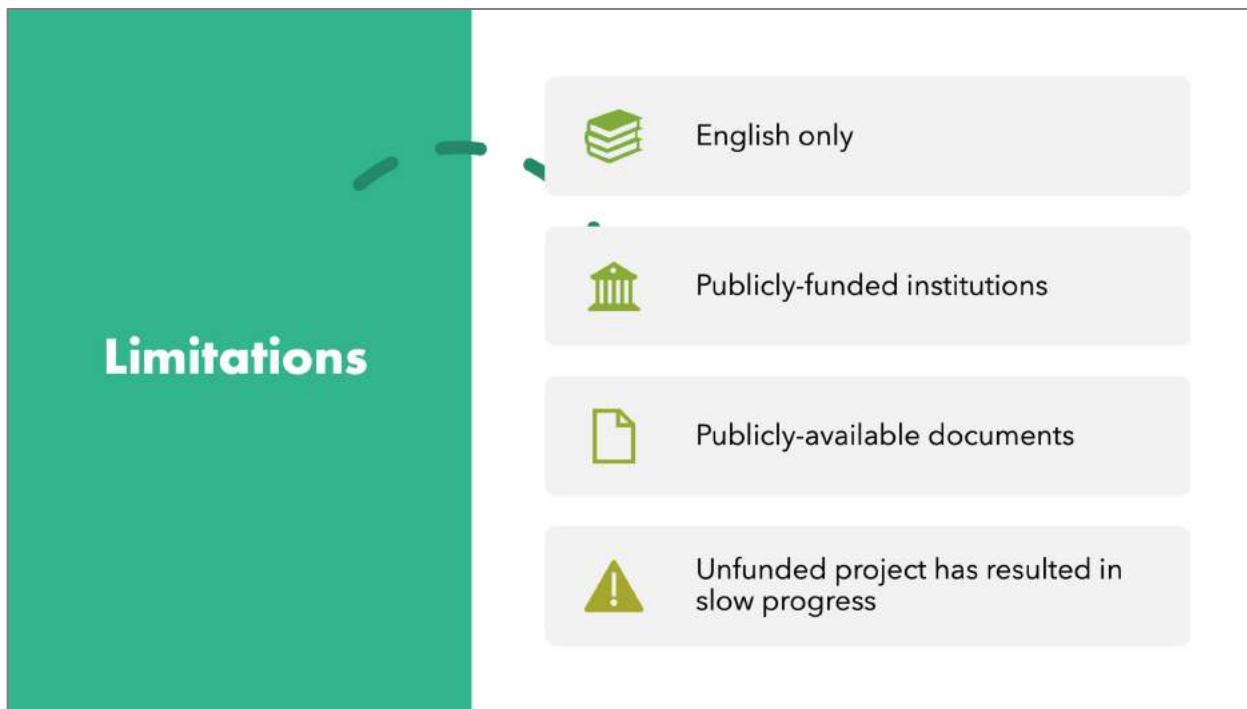
This project is not without its limitations. An obvious one is that the project has been limited to English-speaking institutions. Although Canada is a bilingual country, the reality is that fewer than 20% of the population is fluent in both official languages, English and French. To expand this work to include Francophone institutions would be an additional project in and of itself.

Second, we are focusing the work on publicly-funded institutions, as these are subject to the most government oversight and quality assurance.

Third, we are using publicly-available documents that are easily retrieved through an Internet search. We acknowledge that there may be additional documentation available through institutional portals that are limited to those directly associated with an institution.

Finally, as this has been an unfunded project, those involved have undertaken the work on a voluntary basis, in addition to their regular workloads. As a result, our progress has been slow, but remains ongoing.

Recommendations

Even though we are only about halfway through our analysis of policies from institutions across the country, we can offer some preliminary recommendations based on what we have learned thus far:

- Need to advocate for contract cheating to be more explicitly addressed in policy.
- Need for increased support for students so they understand what is expected of them and what the consequences are.
- Need for increased clarity of definitions to prevent idiosyncratic interpretation across an institution.
- Need for provincial and national academic integrity policy frameworks.
- Need to more explicitly connect policy to quality assurance in higher education.

Conclusions
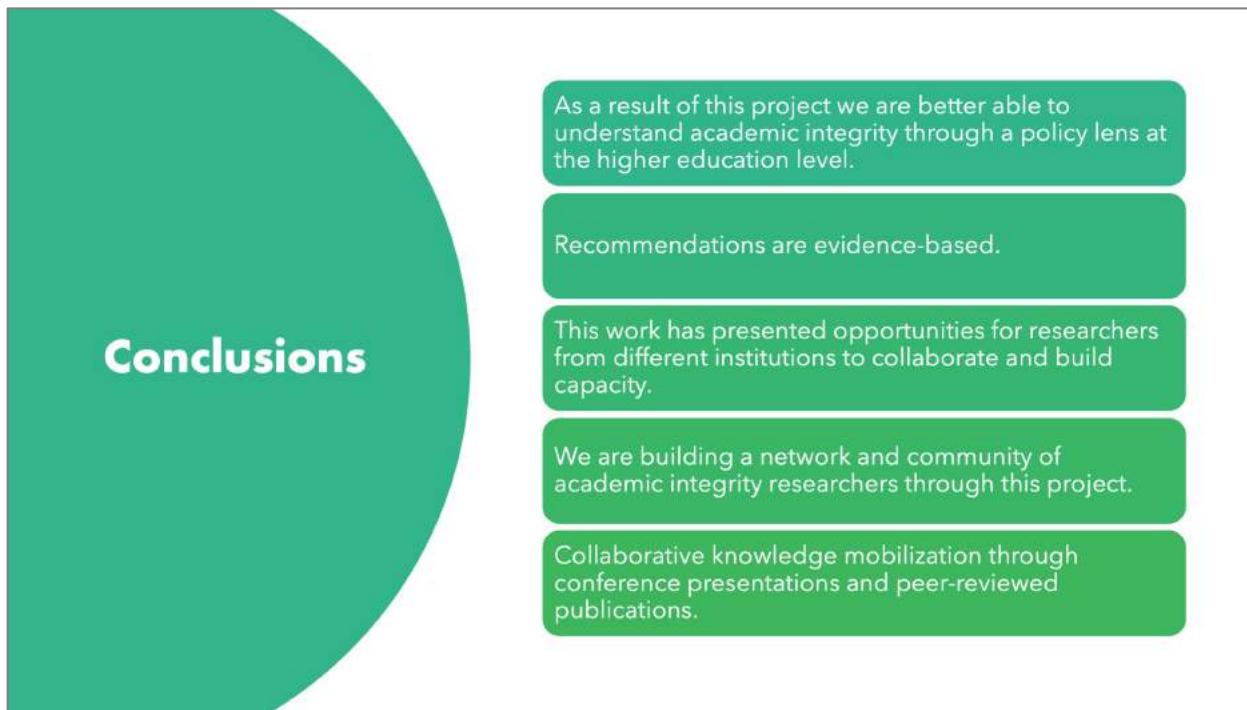
Through this project we have been able to better understand academic integrity in higher education in Canada through a policy lens. As a result, the recommendations we make are evidence-based and data driven.

This project has presented opportunities for researchers from different institutions to collaborate and build capacity. Through that, we are building a network and community of academic integrity researchers. Finally, we are mobilizing our learnings through conference presentations and peer-reviewed scholarly journals. This will help to further develop policy research for academic integrity in our country.

I hope this session has been useful for you to understand how we are undertaking academic integrity policy research in Canada. More importantly, I hope it provides inspiration about the kinds of projects one can undertake with a small, but dedicated team and little to no funding. These are the kinds of projects that help us to build research capacity and professional community, as well as provide the foundation for evidence-based policy decisions.

Thank you again for the invitation to join your course today. I wish you all the very best for a happy and healthy 2021.

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