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Factors of Committing Academic Dishonesty among Students in a Malaysian Public University

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Abstract:

Academic dishonesty among higher education students is a well-known issue and the phenomenon has caused hot debate in most part of the world. Even though the act of dishonesty is governed by the university regulations, but there are students who still commit to it (Caruana, Ramaseshan, & Ewing, 2000). This study therefore was conducted to identify the most influencing factors for committing academic dishonesty among the students in a Malaysian public university. The respondents of the study consisted of 289 students. The students were self-reported on the reasons for committing such acts of dishonesty. The students mostly reported that they committed academic dishonest to help their friends (235 or 81.9%); followed by the assessment was too difficult with 228 responds or 79.4% and the assessment was too time-consuming (222 or 77.1%). As such, the results illustrated that low prevalence rate of academic dishonest should be tackled at university level by looking at the seriousness of the matter and convey the messages to the students deliberately.

Keywords: *academic dishonesty*

1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty is becoming one of the major problems in the twenty-first century since the widely use of information and communication technology (ICT) in learning area (Eckstein, 2003). To date, there are no exact definitions for academic dishonesty. Different people have different view of what academic dishonesty is. Von Dran, Callahan, and Taylor (2001) stated that academic dishonesty "is defined in the literature as intentionally unethical behavior" (p.40). Weaver, Davis, Look, Buzzanga, and Neal (1991) described academic dishonesty as "a violation of an institution's policy on honesty" (p.302). Lambert, Hogan and Barton (2003) identified academic dishonesty "as any fraudulent actions or attempts by a student to use unauthorized or unacceptable means in any academic work" (p.1). As the descriptions are varied from one to another, the view is still within the circle of misconduct behaviour. As such, there are broad ideas that can be drawn as academic dishonesty such as cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, plagiarism, and unauthorized collaboration.

Academic dishonesty is endemic in all levels of education and it has become a major concern in the institution of higher learning. Academicians are facing with problems to overcome with the matter as there is a culture around the world which students tend to cheat in their tests, examinations or even assignments. Academic cheating is recognized as a highly prevalent and ongoing problem at all grade level (Finn & Frone, 2004). McCabe and Trevino (1996) found that two out of three students admitted to dishonest academic behaviour in a study of 6,000 students at thirty-one highly selective colleges and universities. In a sample of 1,800 students at nine state universities, seventy percent of students admitted to cheating on exams, eighty-four percent to cheating on written assignments, and almost half to inappropriately collaborating with others on assignments (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). There have been many researches and studies conducted in order to understand the nature of academic dishonesty, in what ways the students commit the misconduct, the perceptions rendered by the faculty as well as the students regarding the policies of academic misconduct and not forgotten the strategies to curb this endemic from ever continuing.

Researchers have provided evidence of a recent increase in academic dishonesty. Kleiner and Lord (1999) found that 90% of those admitting to cheating had never been caught, and 50% believed that cheating was not necessarily wrong. Schab (1991) reported that the number of students who admitted to cheating on tests increased from 34% in 1969 to 68% in 1989, while the number of students who plagiarized increased from 67% to 76% and the number of students who admitted to letting others copy their work grew from 58% to 98%. McCabe (1992) reported that cheating at colleges had doubled since the early 1960s; furthermore, Koch (2000) reported that between 20% and 30% of college students cheated regularly. These irresponsible acts could put the value of education at risk where it is part of the business and economic world, as well as undermining the prophecy of producing honest, responsible and honorable professional in the future (Naghdipour & Emeagwali, 2013). When academic dishonesty is seen as an unethical behavior during learning in higher education, the practice may be continued in any state, and therefore it is important to study the students' perception towards academic dishonesty (Chun-Hua & Ling-Yu, 2006).

Research have found out that students were influenced by certain individual characters in committing academic misconduct such as age (Antion & Michael, 1983; Haines et al., 1986) and gender (Antion & Michael, 1983); which reported that women cheat more than men. Younger students, traditional college students, and underclassmen are more likely to engage in cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty (Crown & Spiller, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Whitley, Melson & Jones, 1998). Furthermore, research findings on the relation between academic achievement and academic dishonesty have been consistent in the sense that by using grade-point average as a measure, students of lower achievement have been found to cheat more than students of higher academic achievement (Antion & Michael, 1983; Haines et al., 1986; Lipson & McGavern, 1993). Nevertheless, some studies managed to show that in certain perspective, grade negatively related to cheating (Nowell & Laufer, 1997). Pino and Smith (2003) further investigated that some factors had no importance at all in determining academic dishonesty including age, social class and working for pay whereby students who worked for pay not usually negatively impact academic performance. Moreover, a research by Bedford, Gregg and Clinton (2011) investigated that individual and psychological factors; gender, low GPA, age, self-importance, and competitive achievement; and contextual factors; honor code of ethics, disciplinary rules and learning background affected the students' involvement in cheating.

In addition, a number of contextual factors including the number of cheating among peers, peer disapproval of cheating, and the perceived severity of penalties for cheating are also the influential factors when committing academic misconduct (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). The behaviours and attitudes of peers influence student decisions regarding academic misconduct. McCabe and Trevino (1997) found that students' perception of peer disapproval was the strongest predictor of reduced cheating behavior. In another research, Crown and Spiller (1998) reported that students are more likely to cheat if they observe other students cheating or if they perceive that cheating is commonplace or acceptable among peers. On the other hand, the high prevalence rate of academic dishonesty maybe also due to social environment that promote team and group orientation, therefore, the social pressure to cheat or assist others in cheating maybe too much for students to resist (Lin & Wen, 2007).

There are reasons why students do not feel guilty or they do not notice that they have conducted academic dishonesty. Thus it is relevant to understand whether students are given lecture on academic dishonesty policies, how often students encounter with academic dishonesty and the likelihood for them to report about it. Students are more concern about their peer view and behavior rather than concerning about what the faculty or administrator thinks of proper behaviour (McCabe, 2005) that they should practice to prevent them from engaging in academic dishonesty. Students will assume that academic dishonesty is a must for them to compete with others to obtain good grades (McCabe, 2005) as peer behaviour provides normative support for them to commit such act (Che Ku Hisam, Noor Emilina & Suraya, 2015). If the chance of getting caught is low, and penalties imposed are not **setimpal**, such conduct can become more severe as no well-taught lesson given (Che Ku Hisam, Noor Emilina & Suraya, 2015). Thus, students' attitudes toward learning and their surrounding influence them to cheat even though they know it is immoral (Nonis & Swift, 2010).

This study explored the four main aspects in academic dishonest behavior that are cheating on test, cheating on coursework, plagiarism and others. According to Jeergal et al. (2015), cheating can be classified as an attempt to permit or get any unauthorised aid in academic work. In addition, cheating may consist of intention acts of using unauthorised sources to complete any given assignments or projects (Burke, Polimeni & Slavin, 2007). As for plagiarism, the term is so common in academic world. A copy paste work without citing the source appropriately, and claiming the work or idea as if there are theirs can be referred as plagiarism (Che Ku Hisam, Noor Emilina & Suraya, 2015). Given different aspects of academic dishonesty to be explored, the common terms associate with academic dishonesty may help in identifying the reasons why the students commit this misconduct. As such, this study was conducted to identify the most influencing factors for committing academic dishonesty among the students. The findings may help the institutions developing students that can accept responsibility for their own action and at the same time producing reasonable citizen in the future (McCabe, 2005).

2. Research Methodology

This study was conducted at a Malaysian public university in the central of Malaysia. The population involved in the study was undergraduates in five education programmes at one campus of the university. The study employed a well-structured self-report survey questionnaire. Self-report questionnaire is the most frequently used method for assessing cheating and other dishonest behaviours and has been shown to provide practically precise estimates (Finn & Frone, 2004, as cited in Lin & Wen, 2007). The convenience sample comprised of 289 undergraduates. The survey questionnaire consisted of five sections with one section comprised of demographic data form, included five questions that were Gender, Semester, Programme, CGPA and GPA. Section A consisted of the students' views on their behaviours engaging with academic dishonesty; Section B of the questionnaire measured the perceptions on the university's policies of academic dishonesty; Section C discussed the likelihood that the students would report on academic dishonesty incidents; and Section D considered 19 options for students to respond on the reasons for committing such acts of dishonesty.

3. Result and Discussion

The respondents of the study consisted of 72 (24.9%) male students and 217 (75.1%) were female. Based on their CGPAs, the students were categorised into three groups with following distributions; weak students (three respondents or 1.1%), good students (39 or 13.9%) and excellent students (240 or 85.4%). In terms of year of study, only five students (1.7%) were in the second year and 54 students (18.7%) were in the third year. Most respondents (230 or 79.6%) were in their final or fourth year of study.

	n	%	Cheating on test		Cheating on coursework		Plagiarism		Others	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Sex										
Male	72	24.9	2.0690	.66717	1.6785	.55333	2.1884	.66764	1.5000	.46031
Female	217	75.1	1.8209	.53592	1.4389	.38469	2.1256	.67816	1.3014	.42355
GPA										
Weak (0.00-2.49)	3	1.1	1.2963	.33945	1.7576	.68835	2.4000	.28284	1.1333	.11547
Good (2.50-2.99)	26	9.8	2.2899	.88302	1.7841	.55123	2.0833	.75967	1.4960	.59475
Excellent (3.00-4.00)	237	89.1	1.8393	.51755	1.4578	.42578	2.1191	.64941	1.3345	.42843

Table 1: Demographic data with mean scores of dishonest academic behaviour

The students were self-reported on the reasons for committing such acts of dishonesty and the results explained that the students mostly reported that they committed academic dishonest to help their friends (235 or 81.9%); followed by the assessment was too difficult with 228 responds or 79.4% and the assessment was too time-consuming (222 or 77.1%). Likewise, most of them also agreed that it is not easy to copy during exam (225 or 77.9%) and it is wrong to commit academic dishonest (200 or 70.2%).

No	Reasons for committing academic dishonest	Yes		No		Rank
		n	%	n	%	
1	I wanted to help a friend	235	81.9	52	18.1	1
2	The assessment was too difficult	228	79.4	59	20.6	2
3	The assessment was too time-consuming	222	77.1	66	22.9	3
4	I was not likely to be caught	169	59.3	116	40.7	8
5	It was unintentional	168	58.9	117	41.1	9
6	I didn't think it was wrong	85	29.8	200	70.2	18
7	The due date was too soon	189	66.1	97	33.9	6
8	The due date coincided with other assessment due	209	72.8	78	27.2	4
9	I was under pressure to get good grades	195	67.9	92	32.1	5
10	The lecturer hadn't taught me well enough	139	48.6	147	51.4	11
11	I had a personal crisis	102	35.8	183	64.2	17
12	I thought if I helped someone else, they might help me	185	64.7	101	35.3	7
13	Other students do it (or urged me to do it)	162	56.4	125	43.6	10
14	The content of the assessment was not of interest to me	139	48.6	147	51.4	11
15	It was easy-the temptation was too great	122	42.7	164	57.3	15
16	I hadn't heard of other students being penalized before	124	43.4	162	56.6	14
17	I thought the assessment was unfair	122	42.5	165	57.5	15
18	It was easy to copy during the exam	61	21.3	225	156	19
19	Cheating is a victimless crime-it doesn't harm anyone	130	45.5	78.7	54.5	13

Table 2

This study explored the four main aspects in academic dishonest behavior that are cheating on test, cheating on coursework, plagiarism and others. From ranking the students self-reported on reasons for committing such acts of dishonesty, the top three most applied reasons specifically 'I wanted to help a friend'; 'The assessment was too difficult', and 'The assessment was too time-consuming' provide evidence of how behaviours and attitudes of peers influence and self-motivation on decisions regarding academic misconduct. As situational and environment factors are unavoidable, Lim and Wen (2007) suggested that ,the social pressure to cheat or assist others in cheating maybe too much for students to resist and the sense of belongings towards others, the team spirit might acceptably contribute to conduct such dishonest. Regarding to completing assessment, procrastinating is such a popular behaviour among students and additionally, this academic serious illness could be harmful to students. This result offers vital information on the learning scenario in a higher education. Essentially, faculty members could communicate the danger of such behaviour to students as any form of unserious attitude could make worse to the current issue of academic dishonesty in higher education (Lim & Wen, 2007).

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study revealed the top three reasons for committing academic dishonest are: 1) 'I wanted to help a friend'; 2) 'The assessment was too difficult': and 3) 'The assessment was too time-consuming'. Academic dishonesty has denied the real reason for students entering the higher education that is to learn new things without using other people finished product. Students who commit dishonesty do not go through real learning, which they do not hold to the basic information and skills that they have learnt.

As most researchers focused their studies on how to curtail dishonesty (McCabe & Pavela, 1997), some studies proposed discussing the importance of integrity with the students, while others proposed that students should monitor themselves. Miller, Shoptaugh and Wooldridge (2011) found out that academic integrity responsibility has close relation with less cheating in which students whose reasons related to the value of learning, personal character, and/or it being simply not right reported less cheating and took more

responsibility for academic integrity. By exposing to the students on ethics and moral education (Che Ku Hisam, Noor Emilina & Suraya, 2015), students can learn to be more responsible and professional during their academic year. Thus, academic integrity can be upheld and sustained.

Lack of implementation of the policies may cause the seriousness of academic dishonesty. Therefore, other recommendation is a structured program should be designed in tackling academic dishonesty amongst the students (Che Ku Hisam, Noor Emilina & Suraya, 2015). Effective communication of policies and increased student awareness of penalties and enforcement tend to reduce dishonest behaviour (Aaron, 1992; Crown & Spiller, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Therefore, higher learning providers especially should provide their own definitions on academic dishonesty. Any definition should include clear explanations with several examples for the students to fully embrace the meaning. Once a definition of academic dishonesty is developed, universities can then develop their academic dishonesty policies. These policies should be reviewed and assessed whether the policies are adequate and suitable in the context. Thus, the enforcement of the policies could enhance and strengthen the initiative in dealing with this issue (Che Ku Hisam, Noor Emilina & Suraya, 2015).

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