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Undergraduate students' views on academic dishonesty

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Abstract

Studies have shown that academic dishonesty is a complex and a growing problem worldwide. The aim of this study is to explain the personal philosophy and understandings of students about academic dishonesty. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with 26 undergraduate students. The results of the study indicate that undergraduate students mostly regard academic dishonesty as cheating on exams and giving answers to their fellow students. Participants inter alia mentioned reasons regarding academic dishonesty the indifferent attitude of university teachers who, as if, prompt and encourage students to cheat and who themselves also provide a negative model for students. The reasons behind academic dishonesty are associated with the widespread use of it in comprehensive schools and the internet makes participating in academic dishonesty easier for students. To reduce academic dishonesty the following option is mentioned: students should be interested in and should try to acquaint themselves with teaching methods of the members of university teachers. Understanding how undergraduate students think about academic dishonesty and their attitudes towards it could help reduce incidences of academic dishonesty.

Keywords: Academic dishonesty, plagiarism, undergraduate students, cheating, qualitative study.

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1. Introduction

The need to prevent academic dishonesty and have an institutional response to it has received more and more attention in the past years. Research has shown that academic dishonesty is a complicated and a growing problem around the world (Löfström & Kupila, 2013). Many individual and contextual factors may underpin the prevalence of it (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, 2002; Lambert & Hogan, 2004; McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001). Studies about academic dishonesty have involved various target groups, such as members of teaching staff, heads of higher education institutions, and students, (Beasley, 2014; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Understanding how students think about and what their attitudes towards academic dishonesty are might help to reduce incidences of academic dishonesty. The aim of this study is to gain a better insight into students' personal philosophy and understandings on academic dishonesty.

1.1 *Students' perceptions about academic dishonesty and reasons for participation in it*

Students often are not aware the meaning of academic dishonesty. According to Beasley (2014), for example, nearly one-third of students are unaware of their participation in academic dishonesty, as they do not have a clear understanding what exactly academic dishonesty is. Studies have indicated that students' knowledge about academic dishonesty depends on age: elder students know more about academic dishonesty than younger (Freire, 2014; Nazir, Aslam & Nawaz, 2011). Knowledge about academic dishonesty also depends on cultural space (Bretag, 2014). According to Jurdi (2012), the majority of students (about 80%) can define the types of academic dishonesty. Results of the same study, however, revealed that using a quotation without correct reference was regarded as academic dishonesty by only 65% of the students. According to the students' opinion, the most common methods of academic dishonesty are plagiarism and the use of external assistance (Olafson, 2014).

Earlier studies (Jones, 2011; Löfström & Kupila, 2013) have shown that there are different reasons for participation in academic dishonesty. In studies carried out among students, the most typical reasons brought out are ease of participation in academic dishonesty (Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013), not knowing how to plan time (Beasley, 2014; Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010; Heckler & Forde, 2014; Honsy & Fatima, 2014), and the desire to achieve success (Jones, 2011; Simkin & McLeod, 2010). In addition, the following reasons for academic dishonesty are often pointed out a lack of knowledge about current rules and the consequences when caught participating in academic dishonesty, a wish to receive higher grades, witnessing academic dishonestly committed by fellow students (Beasley, 2014), and influences of society (Heckler & Forde, 2014). According to Löfström and Kupila (2013), another reason for engaging in academic dishonesty might be students' intensity resulted from duties of university as well personal life.

In addition to the above mentioned reasons, Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2014) pointed out in her study that when students have a chance to participate in academic dishonesty then students untouchably seize the opportunity. According to Hamlin, Barczyk, Powell and Frost (2013), students rarely regard participation in academic dishonesty as negative when it helps them to achieve better results. Furthermore, Hsiao (2014) indicated that if a student experienced success after having participated in academic dishonesty, it results in positive emotions and the student is likely to repeat his/her behavior again.

Studies have demonstrated that one of the influencing factors for academic dishonesty is also the general academic culture as a whole (general practices and attitude towards e.g. cheating) (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). In a related cross-cultural research, several studies found that students' conceptions towards academic dishonesty differed when comparing students from the United States to students from Eastern Europe (e.g. Grimes, 2004; Lupton & Chapman, 2002; Lupton, Chapman, & Weiss, 2000; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Lupton, Chapman and Weiss (2000) and Lupton and Chapman (2002), for example, revealed that students from Eastern European countries were more likely to believe that students cheat on exams and out-of-class assignments, that cheating on one exam is not a serious crime, and that it is acceptable to inform another student in another class about an just completed exam. Yukhymenko-Lescroart's study (2014) also reached the same conclusion.

In addition to students' actions, it has been pointed out that members of teaching staff themselves give reason for academic dishonesty. For example, they might not pay enough attention to works submitted by students and give students uninteresting tasks (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010). Another reason for academic dishonesty is the unawareness of members of the teaching staff to teach the subject interestingly and understandably. If students' knowledge remains insufficient, as a result of this, they might decide to participate in academic dishonesty (Bluestein, 2015). In students' opinion the members of teaching staff are not competent enough to identify academic dishonesty which encourages widening of academic dishonesty even more (Heckler & Forde, 2014; Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013). Students have also pointed out situations where members of teaching staff left students unpunished for participating in academic dishonesty, which in turn encouraged students to participate in academic dishonesty (Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013).

1.1 Opportunities for reducing academic dishonesty

Various methods for reducing academic dishonesty have been pointed out by students. According to students, when the university's documents toward academic dishonesty would be more understandable and detailed the percentage of academic dishonesty might reduce as a result (Leonard et al., 2014). Students would participate less in academic dishonesty, if they have better and deeper knowledge about academic dishonesty (Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013), and if members of teaching staff informed them about the seriousness of academic dishonesty before completing the tasks (Beasley, 2014; Minarick & Bridges, 2015).

To facilitate reducing academic dishonesty, students pointed out making use of plagiarism recognition programs that would help them to better understand the nature of academic writing, teach them to pay attention to the right techniques of academic writing, and thereby reducing academic dishonesty. Using such programs would force members of teaching staff to teach academic writing more thoroughly (Löfström & Kupila, 2013). As such, in order to reduce academic dishonesty, it is also important that members of teaching staff themselves would be competent enough in the subject field of academic dishonesty. To improve teacher's knowledge, educational institutions should educate their teaching staff (Sonfield, 2014).

Intellectuals, members of teaching staff, and other educated persons can contribute most to reduce academic dishonesty (Leonard et al., 2014). According to students, when members of the teaching staff can teach the subject masterfully, it attracts students' attention and might reduce the number of students participating in academic dishonesty. In contrary, when the work of members of teaching staff is uninteresting, or members of teaching staff are too strict and inflexible, the number of participants in academic dishonesty might increase (Bluestein, 2015). In addition, according to

students, participation in academic dishonesty can be reduced when members of teaching staff constantly renew tasks and change them after having used them for some years. At the same time, tasks should concern the subject and should be created by members of teaching staff themselves. It is also important that members of teaching staff would take into account the correctness in their materials when referring etc. (Probett, 2011). As an opportunity to reduce academic dishonesty, studies of Hsiao (2014) and Minarick and Bridges (2015) revealed that university should provide better supervision while pass/fail tests, punish participants of academic dishonesty more severely, and make it compulsory to notify teachers about academic dishonesty.

In Estonia, academic dishonesty has only in the past few years publicly received the attention of the academic community. Exposed cases of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty have clearly pointed out the need for a more systematic approach towards the topic and thereby also for increasing related awareness amongst university teachers and students alike. Currently, in Estonia, no studies have been conducted on what students regard as academic dishonesty, what the reasons for academic dishonesty are, and to which extent these reasons are similar or contradictory to previous results found in related foreign studies. There is a clear need for more in-depth research on this topic.

Hence, the aim of this study is to determine what is regarded as academic dishonesty by undergraduate students and what could be done to prevent it in their opinion.

To achieve this aim, two research questions are formulated:

1. Which violations of academic traditions are considered to be academic dishonesty by university students?

Which measures do university students deem important to take for reducing academic dishonesty?

2. Methodology

The sample for this study consisted of 26 undergraduate students (second and third year university students) from the educational sciences from one university in Estonia. Students were selected based on the reason that they, as teachers-to-be, have to supervise student research projects in secondary schools and therefore set a particularly good example in the formation of academic values. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews in spring 2014. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. To protect the participants' identities, students were given pseudonyms.

Participants were asked to describe what they regard as academic dishonesty and what could and should be done to reduce it. In addition to general questions, participants were asked to give examples of their own or their fellow students' behavior with regard to academic dishonesty. The data was analyzed using qualitative thematic data analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If a disagreement about the identification of the themes was found, the authors discussed the transcribed data to reach a consensus (for more information about consensual validation, see Eisner, 1991).

3. Results

In the sections below, we present the results of the current study organized under three main sections: the nature of academic dishonesty, reasons for academic dishonesty, and opportunities for reducing academic dishonesty.

3.1. The nature of academic dishonesty

To determine what students regard as academic dishonesty, several aspects were mentioned: cheating, copying other student's work, plagiarism, consulting with fellow students. Cheating was the most often indicated topic. Different types of cheating were highlighted, such as paper cribs and the use of smart phones for looking at lecture notes. Common hiding places for cribs were also mentioned, for example pockets and bootlegs.

I think academic dishonesty is, for example, when people are cheating during tests or exams... or using phones where they have materials of certain work in written form... or paper cribs. (Mary)

Copying other student's work, which was indicated by several students, was considered as academic dishonesty. For example, students mentioned asking the right answers from fellow students and overall asking help with individual works. Plagiarism was regarded mostly as representing someone else's thoughts as student's own or using someone else's thoughts without referencing them correctly. Thereat, students' unawareness how to correctly include references was also mentioned as academic dishonesty.

When explaining academic dishonesty, students also indicated opportunities to consult with fellow students examples of which are prompting other students and asking for help from other students. According to the results, consulting with fellow students include sending letters or e-mails and distributing tests when photos have been taken of them. Acquiring previous years' pass/fail tests and studying from them was also regarded as academic dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty brought out many consequences. The results showed that the most well-known consequence of academic dishonesty, among students, was exmatriculation. There was also mentioned the circumstance that student doesn't acquire necessary material when participating in dishonesty. Finally, according to the data, the distribution of academic dishonesty is widening and younger students consider academic dishonesty as normal.

/.../ Consequences of academic dishonesty, well... exmatriculation... throwing out when you get caught. I know this is very rough... We were told already on the first university year that if you copy other student's work you'll be kicked out right away, no matter /.../. (James)

The results showed that the undergraduate students who took part in this research thought that their fellow foreign students participate more in academic dishonesty than students of the same nationality. This was justified with students' own experiences of what they had seen or heard.

For example, in my course I've noticed that Russian girls tend to cheat very much. This might not be true but this is my experience. (John)

The last consequence the students mentioned was failure of the course and then students mentioned that they will need to perform their work again.

In summary, students who participated in the research considered academic dishonesty mostly to be cheating, copying other student's work, plagiarism, and consulting with fellow students. At the same time students were aware of the consequences of academic dishonesty.

3.2. Reasons for academic dishonesty

Several reasons why students participate in academic dishonesty were found in this study. Reasons for academic dishonesty were divided into two groups: student's personal factors and factors related to organization of studies.

The most common personal factors students indicated as reasons for academic dishonesty in the research were laziness and the inability to manage time. Laziness was considered when students cannot be bothered themselves to solve tasks and thus seek answers from other sources. Concerning the inability to manage time, a too high study load and difficulty to find time to solve different tasks was considered a factor. In addition, students mentioned that students who have a job in addition to their studies struggle with time management and as a result participation in academic dishonesty makes studying easier. The inability to plan time also depended on students' schedule, the busier it was, the more complicated it was to find time for homework and independent work.

I think students are forced to cheat because of the lack of time. Certainly one reason is laziness or attitude 'what for do I need it, I never use this knowledge during my life'. People tend to be rather lazy and certainly they don't have much time, depends on your schedule, for example, how busy your semester is. If you really have little time you'll rather do important things first and think about copying if it is possible /.../. (Kate)

From the perspective of students personal factors reasons for participating in academic dishonesty are students understanding that academic dishonesty is normal and it has become a habit. Students indicated that the habit to participate in academic dishonesty comes from previous school levels where academic dishonesty is not considered serious. This habit continues to take place at university. Reasons for participating in academic dishonesty students also highlighted that academic dishonesty makes it easier to achieve a good grade and to graduate from university. In addition, as reasons for participating in academic dishonesty students stated factors which were family related, such as problems at home and pressure from family. Students do not want to disappoint family members who expect good grades from them.

According to results, the second interesting reason for participating in academic dishonesty was students' emotions and feelings. Students claimed that participating in academic dishonesty is exciting. Reasons for participation in academic dishonesty are related to the organization of studies and can be divided into three groups: 1) reasons related to feasibility of a course, 2) supervision and control of members of teaching staff during examinations, and 3) pass/fail tests and reasons related to the usefulness of studying.

The reasons considered in the group feasibility include what students indicated teacher required from them for final exams. Often too much knowledge and too many study materials were mentioned. In addition, students mentioned that studying at university is too theoretical and it causes students' desire to participate in academic dishonesty. Students also pointed out that when final exam questions require only factual knowledge then answers are easy to find and it is appealing to engage in academic dishonesty. Students also indicted that members of the teaching staff have too high demands from students. Under strict requirements, teachers provided very precise terms and volumes of homework which might be problematic for students to complete.

Results related to supervision of students' behavior during examinations and pass/fail tests were also a factor. A reason often mentioned by students is that teaching staff are often paying very little or no attention during examinations and pass/fail tests. As a result, members of the teaching staff

directly create opportunities for academic dishonesty if they neglect to observe students. According to the opinion of the students, members of teaching are rarely serious about punishing students who have committed academic dishonesty.

/.../ if during the whole exam or test member of teaching staff is looking at the computer only and is not looking around the classroom at all the cheating will be very easy. For example, if the exam is being carried out in large auditorium and member of teaching staff is only sitting at the table or standing in the back row then actually he/she is not able to see what's going on /.../. (Mary)

Finally, the third group, organization of studies, students mentioned that students see little efficiency for them in some courses. Quite often they think that they do not need this knowledge, and, as a result, students find possibilities to solve tasks rather than passing them by themselves. Similar opinions were provided about courses which were boring to students.

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, the readily availability of the Internet plays an important role in participating in academic dishonesty. Students see the Internet as a very easy method to find information (also during tests and examinations). The Internet facilitates prompting each other and forwarding information. Students also admitted that they have given Internet-based exams as group work. The Internet is easy to use and available for almost everybody.

3.3. Opportunities for reducing academic dishonesty

To reduce academic dishonesty, students indicated some ideas which in their opinion might help. These ideas are divided into two groups: opportunities for members of teaching staff and opportunities for students. Opportunities for members of teaching staff were related to providing better supervision during pass/fail tests and examinations and changes in the learning process. Students believe that one observer is not enough and more observers are needed during tests. According to the opinion of students, members of the teaching staff should check ID cards in order to exclude the chance that a third party would perform the test instead of the student itself. Students also mentioned that members of teaching staff could ask students who are performing a pass/fail test to put their bags and personal belongings (such as telephones) away. In addition, to reduce academic dishonesty, students pointed out that members of teaching staff could seat students in such a way that copying other student's work is reduced. Finally, placing video cameras in the classroom was suggested as an option to reduce academic dishonesty.

/.../ to seat people away from one another. To make it more difficult regarding space and place. And certainly to leave bags at the door and not to take the phone with him-/herself. (John)

To further reducing academic dishonesty, students suggest ideas for members of teaching staff to make changes in the learning process. For example, students suggested reducing the volume of pass/fail tests. It would make studying easier and more interesting. On the other hand, students were also of the opinion that it would help when pass/fail tests would be conducted as open books pass/fail tests. Considering pass/fail tests, students indicated that members of teaching staff could, already from the very beginning of the learning process, compose tests that make copying other student's work complicated or impossible.

The interviews also revealed that a member of teaching staff is considered an example for his/her students and, as such, he/she could explain the consequences of academic dishonesty clearly. Members of teaching staff can also contribute to change the attitudes of students and motivate them to study. According to the students, if members of the teaching staff raised their awareness about

these topics raised above, students would feel themselves more confident and competent to avoid participating in academic dishonesty.

Students also highlighted that students could do something to reduce academic dishonesty including changing attitudes and raising awareness. With changing attitudes students referred to actions such as presenting their thoughts honestly and properly referencing primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, the interviewed students mentioned that students should surround themselves with people and friends who do not tolerate academic dishonesty. Additionally, students should try to acquaint themselves with teaching methods of the teaching staff. Understanding how members of the teaching staff behave, what they expect from students, and on what topics they focus, would provide students with the knowledge what they are required to do. As a result, academic dishonesty would reduce.

./.../ well... (smiles) like you avoid another bad thing – you just don't cheat. You don't use cribs, you just do everything very punctiliously, you surround yourself with people who don't value academic dishonesty or in other words they value doing themselves ./.../. (James)

Results of the current research clearly show that students in Estonia know the topic of academic dishonesty and can verbalize it. Students can have a discussion about academic dishonesty and they can point out different reasons why academic dishonesty is so widespread. Results also show that students can fairly well discuss the opportunities for reducing academic dishonesty and can offer practical solutions.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Academic dishonesty has become an actual topic in higher education in the last decade. On the one hand, the reasons are related to the fast development of the digital world (the widespread use of smart phones) and better access to information on the Internet. On the other hand, several cases of plagiarism that have become public have resulted in questions about the awareness of students and members of teaching staff on this subject and what both parties could do for reducing academic dishonesty. As a consequence, the aim of the study was to explain students' personal philosophy and understandings of academic dishonesty.

Considering the results of earlier studies and the results of the current study, the following discussion is presented. Earlier studies (e.g. Olafson, Schraw, & Kehrwald, 2014) have revealed that, according to students, the most common form of academic dishonesty is using crib paper notes, followed by copying, and plagiarism. The result of this study confirms these findings. In addition, characteristic to the digital age, students also pointed out the use of smart phones, for example, as an access option to study materials during examinations. Olafson et al. (2014) also indicated in their research that nearly one-third of academic dishonesty cases are related to information obtained from the Internet. The severity of this problem, however, lies in the students' opinion that academic dishonesty committed via the Internet is not as severe as participating in academic dishonesty using old-fashioned methods, such as paper cribs (Heckler & Forde, 2014).

Investigating the reasons why students participate in academic dishonesty, a number of justifications emerged, which are comparable to previous studies. Firstly, the results of the current study overlapped with those of Simkin and McLeod (2010). They found that students used the following opportunities: the wish to achieve success by either passing the subject well or graduating in

general or too lenient punishments for avoiding academic dishonesty. Furthermore, the current study, similar to the study of Beasley (2014) and the results of others (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010; Heckler & Forde, 2014; Honsy & Fatima, 2014) have found that students lack time management skills, and this is often considered the reason why students engage in academic dishonesty.

The most valuable and thought-provoking part of this study might be regarding students' suggestions for reducing academic dishonesty in universities. According to the results of this study, it was surprising how much students emphasized the enhancement of supervision in order to reduce academic dishonesty. Students point out a greater need to observe students' behavior during tests and examinations, checking their ID-cards before examinations, or placing video cameras in the auditoriums. This occurs modestly in students' beliefs and therefore the universities have to work hard to raise students' awareness of the nature of academic dishonesty in general as well as the possible consequences of it. Students themselves, too, referred to need to be more aware of different nuances of academic dishonesty. This is also supported by Beasley's (2014) study that indicated that the majority of students lack the knowledge about this topic.

One possible method to raise students' awareness is by educating members of teaching staff. Members of teaching staff should be informed about different reasons why academic dishonesty is so widespread. In addition, they should be informed about why and how students participate in it. This intervention might hopefully increase awareness and would motivate members of the teaching staff to review teaching materials and change their teaching practice. For example, members of the teaching staff could include tasks that require skills involving the analysis and synthesis of materials instead of checking factual knowledge in pass/fail tests. Earlier studies (e.g. Probett, 2011) have also indicated that participation in academic dishonesty could be reduced by preparing new examination papers and interesting tasks every year. Students also pointed out that members of the teaching staff should pay more attention to students' works. They regarded receiving sufficient feedback about their work and efforts as very important. Insufficient feedback may cause a lack of motivation for students and the willingness to make efforts disappears. The same has also been confirmed in Comas-Forgas' and Sureda-Negre's (2010) study according to whom participation in academic dishonesty is caused as a result of a too large volume of homework. Students are unable to cope with such volumes. In addition, they are engaging in tasks which are not interesting enough for students.

The practical value of the current study lies in its results, which can be used to prevent academic dishonesty in higher education institutions. The study provides information about students' knowledge of academic dishonesty in general, the reasons for which they decide to opt for it, and the solutions they reckon could help prevent future cases. Based on the information obtained from the study, the spread of academic dishonesty could be reduced. However, this topic needs further research. For instance, one option would be to study lecturers' opinions on the topic, their teaching practices, and conceptions of academic dishonesty. Moreover, the way lecturers plan their activities and the measures they take to avoid academic dishonesty in higher education institutions could also be studied.

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