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Investigation of students' attitude to academic honesty – empirical study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify students' attitudes to academic honesty. The investigation of students' opinions on plagiarism in reports, license papers, copying at bachelor exam or semester exams, copying methods, was pursued. The present paper presents the results of a study run on the students in the educational sciences field. The results of the research provide relevant data for the necessity of students' awareness of the importance of academic honesty for obtaining the competences of the attended study program.

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1. Paper Rationale

Although the academic honesty problem is not a new subject, in our country there is not a rich literature on this subject. The students' team has a well-defined attitude to copying and builds norms deciding on the deviation opportunity and dimension. Such norms supplement and/or change the rule of the professorial authorities prohibiting copying.

Copying falls in the category of school deviations due to the fact that it is a behaviour prejudicing teachers, students and pupils as beneficiaries of education, but also the mission of education on the whole - Waugh [1]. This practice of copying contravenes to the rules imposed by the authorities in the school and university environment.

The tolerant deviation is a concept referring to the individual's tendency to allow the breach by the other group members of a rule issued by an authority - Boncu [2].

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2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

The consequences of copying at exams affect both the education act on the whole and each student, taken individually: the occurrence of tensions between the teacher and students, the frustration of students feeling aggrieved, the deterioration of the affective climate of the group, the impossibility of discovering students' lacunae by the teacher and the loss of the evaluation role, the diminishment of students' motivation for learning and the discouragement of those not copying - Eisenberg [3], Gherasim et al. [4].

Thus, copying at exams is a complex situation - Hutton [5], in which students allow the breach of an explicit rule, acting in their interest, complying with an implicit rule, which is to their disadvantage. Although falling in the category of non-serious deviation, copying at exams has negative effects, which takes us to the conclusion that it should be removed or at least minimized - Gherasim et al. [4].

The group of students has a well-defined attitude to copying and builds rules deciding on the opportunity and extent of the deviation. Such rules supplement and/or change the rule of teaching authorities prohibiting copying. The cheating context is characterized by the following elements - Boncu [6] p. 276:

1. the rule promoted by a general authority with coercive power;
2. the group in which this rule shall govern;
3. the person deviating from the authority rule;
4. the reaction of the group allowing or even encouraging the deviation from the rule; the group makes a rule from this action;
5. the reaction of the non-deviating group member who complies at a manifest level with the group rule, expressing a positive attitude to the deviating act, although it can create a handicap to it. Such a situation can be described through the tolerant deviation concept.

The results of a study Simkin and McLeod [7] suggest some potential prescriptive action for college faculty and administrators. For example, because cheater's perceptions of "getting ahead" appear to significantly affect their attitude toward cheating, studying cases involving individuals who cheat to get ahead but who subsequently suffer negative consequences might be useful. Another avenue could be reinforcement of an intolerant collegiate culture about cheating – i.e., build a moral culture that encourages students to "do what is right" rather than "do what seems personally best".

The study from Molnar et. Al. [8] emphasis that undergraduate students in general find cheating using IT more acceptable than cheating without the use of IT, at least in terms of intellectual property violations. Students seem to find it more acceptable for them to personally cheat when using IT than when not using IT. However, students do not perceive that same difference for others. They seem to regard cheating for others the same with or without the use of IT.

In a study, Malone [9] discovered that accounting students report they will not engage in unethical behavior, including cheating, if they know that these kinds of behaviors will result in harm to themselves or others. Helen A. Klein et al. [10] found that cheating behavior is common and there is no cheating behavior that at least some students have not participated in. The most common cheating behaviors by business students, as shown in Table IV, include copying (or allowing the copying of) homework/assignments, collaborating with other students on assignments/exams that were supposed to be done alone, and finding out and sharing information about exams before taking them.

Bernardi et. Al [11] analysis indicates a highly significant association among students' attitudes on cheating, academic integrity, and academic honesty/dishonesty. The research produces some intriguing and as well as disturbing facts that include: 1. The research suggests that cheating behaviors are a function of situational factors, which appear to be either independent of or are at least poorly correlated to the level of moral development measured on the Defining Issues Test. 2. Business majors tend to score lower on measures of moral development and moral reasoning than some other majors, which has also been found in other studies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objectives of the research

The purpose of the study is to identify students' attitudes to academic honesty. The investigation of students' opinions on plagiarism in reports, license papers, copying at bachelor exam or semester exams, copying methods, was pursued.

3.2. Hypotheses of the research

If exams are perceived as important for students' evolution, then they manifest negative attitudes to copying. Plagiarism is accepted in the case of homework but not in the case of license papers.

3.3. Description of the instrument

The method used in this investigative quantitative approach is the questionnaire structured based on the following dimensions:

- the obtainment of information from students as regards the opinions on copying at semester exams at the faculty and the bachelor exam;
- attitudes to plagiarism in homework, articles from scientific communication sessions, license papers;
- the most used copying methods;
- the factual data – general average, material family resources, specialization, year of study.

The themes approached within the semi-structured interview applied to the selected group referred to students' perception of the concept of academic honesty.

3.4. Target group

The quantitative study was carried out on a group of 60 third-year and second year students of the University of Pitești, in the educational sciences field.

The qualitative study based on the focus-group method was made in two sessions for 24 students in the IInd and IIIrd year in the education science field.

4. Results and discussion

The results were processed and interpreted through the statistical descriptive and inferential analysis. In order to test hypotheses, the chi-square test was applied.

Table 1. To what extent do you agree to copying activities during university bi-annual exams?

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
To a high extent	11	20.0	-9.0
To a small extent	30	20.0	10.0
To a very small extent	19	20.0	-1.0
Total	60		

Further to applying the chi-square test, $\chi^2(2) = 9.100$ is insignificant, $p > 0.01$, which means that there is no clear opinion in our sample as to the attitude to copying during license study exams

Table 2. To what extent do you agree to copying activities during the license exam?

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
To a small extent	3	30.0	-27.0
To a very small extent	57	30.0	27.0
Total	60		

Further to applying the chi-square test, $\chi^2(1) = 48.600$ is significant, $p < 0.01$, which means that there is a very clear opinion in our sample on the negative attitude to copying during the license exam.

The obtained results confirm the hypothesis according to which students manifest negative attitudes to copying during study completion exams. The opinions to copying during bi-annual exams vary, however those not accepting copying during these examinations are more.

Table 3. To what extent did you present in a seminar a web project and pretended it was drafted by you?

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
To a very high extent	8	15.0	-7.0
To a high extent	22	15.0	7.0
To a small extent	18	15.0	3.0
To a very small extent	12	15.0	-3.0
Total	60		

The application of the chi-square test highlighted that $\chi^2(3) = 7.733$ is insignificant, $p < 0.01$, which means that there is no generally valid attitude in our sample as to presenting itself as the author of the projects downloaded from the web.

Table 4. To what extent do you agree to the plagiarism of the license paper?

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
To a small extent	4	30.0	-26.0
To a very small extent	56	30.0	26.0
Total	60		

The calculations resulted further to applying the chi-square test reveal that $\chi^2(1) = 45.067$ is significant, $p < 0.01$, which denotes that the students in our sample have a very clear opinion on plagiarizing the license paper.

The statistic analysis of these answers confirmed the hypothesis according to which plagiarism is accepted in the case of homework but not in the case of license papers. By inspecting the data in table 3, we can see that students' opinions vary in terms of plagiarism of homework, while the data in table 4 highlight that all investigated students have negative attitudes as to plagiarizing license papers.

The analysis of the answers given by students within the focus-group highlighted that academic honesty has different representations depending on the importance given by them to each exam. Important exams in a future hierarchization are approached with more responsibility by students.

Several students distinguish themselves, also analyzing the academic honesty concept from the teacher's perspective "*teacher's honesty supposes exigency and correctness in evaluation*" – this is a point of view underlining the partnership nature in the educational act.

Another student distinguished itself by a trenching, optimist attitude, with obvious volitive emotional introspections. It wishes "*for us to adapt to each situation, to express freely, not to lie to ourselves*".

According to part of the students, this component of academic activity as a priority condition in their demarche of having solid knowledge including several informational areas. A significant part of the investigated students have self-esteem by reference to the active, fully aware participation in the act of learning and training. "*I prefer not to copy, get a lower grade than a higher grade I do not deserve*".

The answer "*in certain cases, when the subject matter is not very important I think it is OK to copy*" triggers an alarm signal for the staff as to the presentation of the role of each discipline in the curriculum in shaping the necessary competences to successfully exercise the profession conferred by the license diploma.

Only a small part of the students in the sample accept copying during bi-annual exams by resorting to various copying methods: the course material, copying from colleagues' papers, hand-free. Most of the students show positive attitudes to university deontology. Leaving from this premise, they are fully aware that at the end of studies they assume a very important role, *i.e.* teachers, who shape characters.

5. Conclusions

The performed investigation clarified several aspects regarding the approach to the university rules and regulations concerning the academic deontology by students. The results of the research provide relevant data for the necessity of students' awareness of the importance of academic honesty for obtaining the competences of the attended study program. Thus, the words of Constantin Noica [12] "who gives and who receives" are reiterated.

There is a large range of students' opinions as to the concept of academic honesty: honesty is synonymous to responsibility, to the need for knowledge and training, honesty is a moral figure, a model of intellectual conduct. All these opinions form the profile of the student at the license program in the education science field. The teaching staff, who must correctly evaluate students' activity but also sanction when necessary, have an important role in shaping this profile.

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