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Academic Honesty and Ethical Learning Practices among University Students: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The main aim of this study was to identify the importance of academic honesty in promoting integrity learning among university students concerning aspects of organization and improvement. The study was based on a qualitative approach where semi-structured interviews with students, lecturers, and academic managers in various universities were conducted. From this study, it was evident that academic honesty was conceptualized based on its values, such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility. However, it was realized that it was quite high academic pressure, coupled with a lack of knowledge regarding whether your subject belongs to or not, and access to technology that led to this behavior among students, such as plagiarism, cheating, and collaboration, among others. It was also realized that academic honesty was based on its values, such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility. However, it was realized that it was quite high academic pressure, coupled with a lack of knowledge regarding whether your subject belongs to or not, and access to technology that led to this behavior among students, such as plagiarism, cheating, and collaboration, among others. It was also realized that academic honesty was based on its values, such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility. However, it was quite high academic pressure, coupled with a lack of knowledge regarding whether your subject belongs to or not, and access to technology that led to this behavior among students, such as plagiarism, cheating, and collaboration.

Keywords: Academic Honesty, Academic Integrity, Ethical Learning, Higher Education, Plagiarism Issues, Institutional Challenges, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis.

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Introduction

In academics, integrity means academic integrity, a core principle in higher education (Bloomfield et al., 2021; Maral, 2024), and values principles for teaching and learning and research, such as trust, fairness, responsibility, and honesty. The relevance of integrity in academics can be considered central to the legitimacy and integrity of educational institutions and knowledge production. However, the prevalence of academic dishonesty in contemporary higher education (Dineen & Goff, 2024; Kazem, 2024), fueled by a variety of technological revolutions and ubiquitous availability of information and an insatiable portfolio space requirement in academics, has the potential to undermine learning environments with ethical integrity.

Earning a degree means much more than ensuring that the graduate does not engage in cheating or plagiarism; rather, it means ensuring that they acquire a new perspective on the ethical framework in which knowledge can be created, shared (or not), and evaluated (Davies et al., 2021). This means academics and teachers do actual academic work, give credit for intellectual property when they use them, and follow a code of conduct within an institution. Thus, universities, as places for intellectual and moral development, ought to be places for developing and providing systems for rewarding good behavior. To phrase this differently, academics and teachers are moral agents and exemplars of integrity, fairness, and accountability in professional life (Putri et al., 2024; Ossai et al., 2023).

Academic dishonesty, therefore, remains a major issue affecting various higher education systems, especially in developing environments. Academic dishonesty, in this case, involves various acts such as plagiarism, data fabrication, use of unauthorized materials, and exploitation of examination procedures, among others (Sudradjat et al., 2024). Academic dishonesty, therefore, not only affects the quality of education, but students' ethical reasoning and professional values are also negatively impacted. Moreover, cheating has major implications, especially in students' future lives and contributions to society (Adam, 2024).

The complexities associated with academic dishonesty have been further complicated by various factors, including the poor implementation of academic dishonesty policies, which has led students to be more concerned about plagiarism and other dishonesty issues (Brown et al., 2019). In addition, the introduction and application of diverse digital technologies have resulted in a wide range of tools available for students to cheat (De Weerd et al., 2024), leading institutions at higher education level struggling to control cheating behaviors.

Theoretical frameworks, stage theories (e.g., Kohlberg's stages of moral development), provide important conceptual insights into the moral development and shaping part of integrity as integral to a quality of life for how people are both developingly whole and functioning as moral decision-makers throughout the lifespan (Kohlberg 1981). Nonetheless, cultivating and teaching higher levels of moral reasoning in educational environments rely on the will and efforts from institutions of education themselves. To develop ethical learning habits, it is important to consider the methods and strategies that educators adopt in order to provide an environment that encourages critical thinking, self-inquiry, and independence of thought (Sefcik et al., 2020). Academic integrity is not only about doing the right thing; rather, it is an important transformative process that helps in the development and growth of the personality and intellect of the student.

The onus is on the educators to develop and promote an academic culture that is based on integrity. Teaching is not only about imparting knowledge, but it is also about being honest and fair in the evaluation process and creating an academic culture that is conducive to the growth and

development of the student (Strike & Soltis, 2015). Students learn from the example set by the educators, and they are often motivated to follow the academic integrity policies and principles promoted by the educators themselves. However, the faculty is also considered to be the potential cause of dishonesty among the students, as they are not accountable (Cowan & Nurse, 2024).

In the last few years, the emphasis on the inclusion of moral learning concepts in the academic arena of higher education has been on the rise. The emphasis is based on the recognition that the role of higher education is not only to ensure the success of the student but also to ensure that the student is morally prepared to face the challenges that are to be encountered in the professional arena. The importance of ethical learning habits, such as the pursuit of honesty in academic studies, the display of respect towards the academic contributions made by other individuals, and the self-management skills exhibited by the student while participating in group assessments, is important in the development of lifelong learning skills among the student and the creation of responsible citizens who are actively involved in the pursuit of advocating positive change in the academic and social communities (O’Kane et al., 2024).

In this regard, the exploration of academic honesty and its ethical dimensions is an important topic that has attracted considerable attention and academic discourse. However, little attention has been given to the exploration of the definitions of ethics and integrity as perceived by the student and the academic institution (Zhang & Yin, 2020).

This research, therefore, focuses on the importance of maintaining academic integrity as an important factor in the development of ethical learning habits among student veterans. Moreover, the challenges that are encountered by academic institutions in the pursuit of academic integrity are also explored in the following sections. The exploration of the importance of academic honesty and the challenges encountered by academic institutions is an important factor in the provision of data analysis that is instrumental in the development and exploration of the concepts that are being presented in the academic arena.

Research Questions

1. How do university students, faculty members, and academic administrators perceive academic honesty in higher education?
2. What are the common forms of academic dishonesty practiced by university students?
3. What factors contribute to academic dishonesty among university students?
4. How does academic honesty contribute to the promotion of ethical learning practices in higher education?
5. What institutional challenges do universities face in promoting and enforcing academic honesty?
6. What strategies can be adopted by higher education institutions to strengthen academic honesty and enhance ethical learning practices?

2. Literature Review

Academic integrity is becoming a major focus point of higher education since it has a strong correlation with ethical learning and academic outcomes. It is often defined to be the adherence to moral principles like integrity, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility in all educational activities (i.e., teaching-learning-research) (Bloomfield et al., 2021; Maral, 2024). Although grounded in institutional policies, academic honesty transcends such agreements; it reflects a general ethical approach within which students function and develop intellectually. The proliferation of

technological access to information in modern higher education has made it difficult to sustain academic integrity, resulting in a generalization on the parts of faculty and universities alike for concerns about academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism as well as cheating, fabrication, and collusion (Dineen & Goff 2024).

Ethical learning can be revolved around academic honesty, as it ensures that students haven't plagiarized or practiced shoddy work. Ethical learning is more than following rules; it requires actualizing values that help students not only comply with guidelines but also encourage independent and honest academic work. Studies have shown that students understand academic honesty as indicating increased engagement and meaningful learning, accountability, and professional ethics, which extends even after they leave room (Sudrajat et al., 2024). On the other hand, academic malpractice hampers learning as it encourages shallow understanding and compromises the integrity of scholarly accomplishments. It emphasizes the importance of developing such classrooms where students learn honesty and commit to practicing what they have learned in their daily lives.

The literature outlines several types of academic dishonesty including classic cheating in examinations, sophisticated methods from digital technologies. According to (Adam, 2024), the most common issues reported in universities around the world are: plagiarism, contract cheating, falsification of data and unauthorized use of materials. As resources on the internet and A.I tools have become readily available, this problem has been compounded, and students can pull dishonest tricks with ease, and these practices are getting easier to conceal. Although these changes have caused concern, especially with near-daily headlines about misconduct in the academic community, which, regardless of how improved institutional policies and ethical-mindfulness programs are, won't do enough to combat malfeasance.

This means that, from a theoretical perspective, academic integrity has an easy analysis in terms of a structural ethics development theory* as presented by Kohlberg (1981), in terms of how individuals do and/or do not act ethically. This theory implies that how academic integrity is approached by a student is a result of the level of moral development they are currently in, from an obedience to authority, which is the lowest, to a principled ethical reasoning, which is the highest level. This means that, from a perspective on what academic integrity fundamentally means, it is not in terms of a penalty, but in terms of reinforcing Kleiberian higher-order moral reasoning through its educational practices. The role of universities in this evolution has always been central, in terms of providing a space for ethical reflection, discussion, and sense of responsibility.

It is widely believed that academic institutes contribute significantly in fostering the academic integrity (i.e., Jansen and van der Meer, 2006). Transparent assessment can be attained by establishing clear policies that aid students in comprehending and fulfilling the requirements associated with their coursework (Brown et al., 2019). Faculty play a crucial role in fostering academic integrity through their attitudes, teaching methods, and evaluation approaches, which can impact students' conduct (Schwartz, 2023). Studies have demonstrated that when instructors effectively communicate their expectations, offer ethical guidance, and exemplify integrity in their professional conduct, there is a reduced likelihood of student cheating (Cowan & Nurse, 2024). But the success of institutional efforts often depends on whether policies have been adhered to and how embedded academic integrity in culture is within educational institutions.

Despite a plethora of policies and campaigns for awareness, educational institutions have found it painstakingly difficult to uphold academic honesty. They include large class sizes, absence of

monitoring, pressure for academic performance and inadequate training in relation to the faculty's management of academic misconduct (De Weerd et al., 2024) Furthermore, cultural and contextual aspects heavily impact on understandings of academic integrity among students but more so in developing states characterised by systemic over-bureaucratisation and resource deficiencies which creates leeway for maladaptive conduct (Kazem, 2024). These complexities provide the impetus for context-specific approaches to academic integrity that encompass both individual and systemic structures in higher education.

Some recent research has also focused on the influence of academic integrity on teaching approaches. Evidence of effective teaching practices (that is, when students are engaged in critical thinking and authentic assessment) reduces the likelihood of academic dishonesty (Sefcik et al., 2020). In this regard, they are more likely to succeed from an ethical perspective if they sense movement and interpret fair (valid, meaningful) evaluations, etc. On the other hand, a strict and competitive testing system may prompt individuals to engage in cheating behavior, especially when they sense an outside pressure for them to perform in the top tier academically. This, therefore, points to a sense of alignment between teaching approaches and ethical learning outcomes in developing a culture of integrity in higher education institutions.

Not only institutional and pedagogical factors, but also the role of educators as moral agents are important in affecting students' ethical behavior. Teachers are obligated to show integrity, fairness, and professionalism in interactions with students that serve as examples of ethical behavior (Putri et al., 2024) Along with being an instructor, they serve as a moral compass and can help to influence students' perspectives on academic integrity and encourage sustainable habits of responsibility. Research shows that the relationships between teachers and student, based on trust and respect, promote greater adherence to academic integrity among students by lowering both involvement in dishonest actions (Kim & Uysal 2021).

While the topic of academic integrity has been thoroughly investigated, little is known about students and educators' experiences of ethical learning practices in their lives, particularly from a qualitative research perspective. The majority of studies have only employed quantitative methods and have generally sampled the combination of academic dishonesty, rather than seeking to uncover views, perceptions and contextualizing associated with it. Thus, the lack of qualitative research that establishes university stakeholders' perceptions of academic honesty and explores how it is interpreted, practised and challenged within university settings indicates an influential avenue for scholarly investigation. This study fills this gap through a qualitative approach aimed at explaining the role of academic honesty in improving ethical learning practices while highlighting some previous challenges and suggesting solutions faced by higher education institutions.

3. Research Methodology

This study explores the barriers and facilitators of enacting ethical teaching at the institutional level in universities as it relates to academic integrity. We use qualitative methodologies to probe participants' perceptions of academic integrity in authentic educational settings, giving them a voice to express thoughts and feelings about the nature and meaning of academic integrity. Qualitative research provides more in-depth and detailed insights necessary for the ever-more complex social problems and moral questions we face than quantitative research, which is inherently more rigid and number-focused.

Participants were selected purposefully, and data was collected through a qualitative exploratory approach with semi-structured interviews; systematic exploration of processes to understand the beliefs and experiences from participants. This is just one of the many studies that sheds light on modern perceptions and practices around academic integrity, and some of the challenges faced by educational institutions in improving ethical learning environments. Interview-based qualitative research enabled the capture of a broad range of perspectives in these areas that may have been missed through structured survey methods.

It involved a small number of students, faculty and staff members from colleges and universities reporting on the quality of academic integrity at their institutions. The research looked at how stakeholders deal with institutional policies, issues and enforcement mechanisms related to academic integrity through conversations with these individuals. Individuals were selected for inclusion because of their knowledge and experience related to academic integrity and research ethics. Sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where no new themes/insights are identified in interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow participants freedom in expressing their views while ensuring that core topics were addressed across the interviews. An interview guide was developed according to the study aim and a review of literature about academic honesty and ethical-learning behaviors. The guide included open-ended questions about their understanding of academic honesty, common reasons for academic dishonesty, why such unethical behavior may occur in practice, institution efforts to foster integrity and the way forward. We also kept the interviews open-ended and followed up with probing questions and requests for more information. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (with consent of the respondents) for analysis.

The data collected were analysed thematically, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The specific analysis process included repeated familiarization with the data, open coding of transcript excerpts, clustering codes into 8 higher level themes and iteration on these until they made sense as coherent middle-level themes with coded quotes surrounding them. Data was first open-coded to identify significant data units that could be grouped into categories according to similarities and connections. The main themes represented general categories of sincere academic and ethical learning behaviors. The analysis was conducted iteratively, enabling adjustments to themes as insights from the data unfolded.

Multiple approaches were employed to guarantee the credibility and robustness of the study. Credibility was established through member checking in which participants had the option to review and confirm that their responses and interpretations accurately reflected their experience. Research procedures of data collection and analysis were documented clearly in a systematic way to ensure the dependability. Confirmability was established by minimizing researcher bias via reflexivity and through contextualizing interpretations in the data. Moreover, thick descriptions were presented to reinforce transferability with the aim of helping readers analyse the contextual applicability of findings into other settings (Statler et al., 2021).

All ethical considerations were adhered in this study. Participants were told about the aim of research and their voluntary participation was guaranteed via informed consent. All the participants were assigned pseudonyms and any information that could identify individuals or institutions was removed from the dataset in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also told they could exit the study at any time without having to face

consequences. The present study observed the basic ethical principles of research involving humans by respecting and honouring the rights of human participants.

This study adopted qualitative research methods and explore the complexity of academic honesty as it is an essential component of a learning environment that emphasizes ethical practices in education. The research explores the multi-focal approaches to academic integrity in higher education through multidisciplinary perspectives and comparisons.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings in the responses of individuals. Four major themes emerged from the study: (1) understanding of academic integrity, (2) conceptualization and motivations for dishonest behavior, (3) institutional barriers, and (4) strategies to promote ethical learning behaviors.

4.1 Understanding of Academic Honesty

Participants agreed that it takes active exercise of ethical values such as honesty, fairness and responsibility to make use of narratives expressing their understanding of academic integrity. Students largely expressed their understanding of academic honesty in regards to plagiarism and cheating, while professors and administrators described a broader culture of integrity that extends to teaching practices and assessment, among other aspects, such as research.

4.2 Forms and Causes of Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism, copying homework from others, cheating on examinations, and unauthorized collaboration tend to be other everyday forms of academic dishonesty. Survey respondents attributed academic dishonesty to peer pressure, knowledge of the problem, access to online materials, and lax enforcement of institutional guidelines. Students cited as key drivers of dishonesty stress due to lack of time and fear of failure.

4.3 Institutional Challenges

In the second phase of our qualitative research using axial coding, the most salient themes were institutional barriers to academic integrity. The research revealed weaknesses in monitoring approaches, poor training on ethical behavior related to students and educators alike, and uneven application and enforcement of policies. Furthermore, staff members noted difficulties resulting from crowded classrooms and limitations in resources for enforcement of the rules.

4.4 Strategies for Promoting Ethical Learning Practices

There was a round consensus that global framework is required to tackle the issue of academic integrity. Among the initiatives proposed were conducting awareness campaigns, introducing ethics education in academic curricula, developing methods to identify plagiarism and setting requirements for educational institutions. For example, educators stressed the need to model ethical behavior for students; administrators urged institutional support and accountability measures.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that although academics believe academic integrity is an important part of ethical learning, as with many concepts, it has not been universally applied. Members observed understanding of academic honesty echoes previous literature that framed the assessment of academic integrity as a multi-faceted concept (Bloomfield et al., 2021; Maral, 2024) consisting of

honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. Though interestingly, students' sense of plagiarism as the worst academic integrity offence seems limited, which supports previous findings suggesting that staff perceptions rarely extend beyond mechanical principles around ethical action (Zhang & Yin, 2020).

The academic fraud discovered in the present study aligns with past literature, to basically and predicting plagiarism, cheating and unauthorized collaboration in higher education (Sudrajat et al., 2024). Relatedly, Dineen and Goff (2024) take it one step further claiming that the only other factors seen observed—academic pressure, ignorance and access to technology—were compounded by the opportunities provided in today's digital realm have raised dishonest practices to unprecedented levels. Likewise, Adam (2024) mentions that students face both performance anxiety and a competitive academic environment which forces them to act unethically.

Institutional challenges were one of the major problems highlighted by this study. (d)Limited enacting of the policy, serious ignorance and absence of monitoring mechanism were potential causes to academic dishonesty in universities remained (Cigdem & Korkmaz, 2014). New lines of evidence and Investigators. (2013)— and notes that it can, indeed, feel normal to behave unethically when expectations lack clarity or institutional ethics-promoting practices are inconsistent. De Weerd et al. The need to balance organizational and technical dimensions, thus complicating efforts toward maintaining academic integrity as against social pressure (2023) also cite in this respect. Everyone — Public Institutions Can Build Control over Academic Integrity

It indicates teachers have great power in terms of keeping ethical learning strong. It highlights the involvement of moral teachers, whom they say are reflections or models for ethical conduct that exert a positive influence on the ethical development of students. Ethical teaching practices need to be an integral part of our classroom in order to foster integrity within learners (Strike & Soltis, 2015). Indeed, Cowan and Nurse (2024) found that a robust set of expectations, coupled with reactive strategy behaviors in the event of misconduct can greatly reduce academic dishonesty.

In addition, the results validate the theoretical lens of Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development in that moral reasoning is built through stages and structured learning experiences. What do you think and how do you feel about the idea of integrating ethical practices into our teaching and curriculum, enabling the promotion of moral development in students that can result in long-term academic integrity? The focus on awareness, training, and curriculum integration in this study resonated with O'Kane et. al (2024), where practitioners are encouraged to integrate ethical learning into their higher education systems to produce responsible and ethical graduates.

6. Conclusion

The study found that academic honesty and integrity is an important factor in promoting ethical practices during learning process for university-based students. Though participants showed an understanding of academic honesty, its implementation in academic environments is probable due to a range of personal and institutional elements. Only two years ago, in fall 2019, many professors expressed their belief that academic misconduct would have increased again if all students were back on campus from home and the Internet was everywhere.

The study goes on to say that cultivating academic integrity is a partnership among students, faculty and administrators. However, to maintain a culture of integrity there are institutional obstacles: policy inconsistency and insufficient resources available for integrity campaigns. Commenting on ethical integrity, Aides in the thoughts of ethics that run through teaching and learning from the subject matter to students becoming towards ethical integrity.

Recommendations

Thus, the next recommendations are made according to findings:

1. Moral development and students' sense of responsibility should take the lead over curriculum design. This method incorporates lessons regarding academic honesty and ethical learning techniques into the teaching materials.
2. Workshops and seminars on plagiarism should be conducted for both the faculty as well as students. These include initiatives to increase awareness of the detrimental effects of plagiarism in practice in a range of contexts.
3. Colleges and universities should have explicit and standardized responses to infractions of cheating behavior, as well as obvious consequences for the violators engaged in such offenses.
4. Both anti-plagiarism software and monitoring systems are useful in deterring unethical behavior
5. It is, therefore, important that faculty and students know the difference between ethical and unethical practices to ensure fairness in evaluation processes led by educators who keep ethics (such as transparency and accountability) at the forefront of their thinking.
6. Further, aside from deterrents to cheating, schools need offer consultancies to facilitate students manage the external strains associated with being honest on an academic level.
7. With developments in artificial intelligence, a growing need for universities to regularly review their academic integrity policies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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