

# Cheating during Examinations: Prevalence, Consequences, Contributing Factors and Prevention

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Academic cheating, whether during examinations, study projects or the whole assessment period of academic activities, is a serious dilemma which is ubiquitous in learning institutes throughout the world. The problem is equally prevalent in Pakistan and reaches peaks during examinations and academic assessments. The issue reflects the degree of social, psychological and ethical norms of students engaged in cheating, although the role of institutions in directing academic cheating is also debatable. The practice negatively affects fair academic grading, the behaviour of non-cheating students, overall ethical standards expected of the future graduates and qualitative standards of the learning institutes. It is logical to presume that cheating during academic activities will likely influence the professional life of students in the workplace. In order to safeguard academic integrity, it is necessary to understand factors which contribute to the practice of cheating among students. The aim of this paper is to present the prevalence of academic cheating in higher education institutes during examinations, their corresponding factors and prospective preventive measures.

**Key words:** *dishonesty, academic integrity, ethics, social norms, higher education*

## Introduction

Academic cheating is a complex issue generally defined as the involvement of students in practices of plagiarism, copying and pasting, looking into other's work, fabrication of data, unauthorised use of study materials and several other immoral means for getting academic benefits (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Błachnio & Weremko, 2011). Cheating in academic activities is a stern ethical issue which poses severe risks to codes of academic honesty. The practice has negative effects on the students' ethical and professional standards. Conduct of academic cheating results in defective academic evaluation and may lead to erroneous grading of students which further destabilises the integrity of academic institutions (Desalegn & Berhan, 2014). Moreover, students engaged in academically immoral activities may create undesirable environment which can pose challenges of depression, behavioral changes and distrust for non-cheater students. Institutional reputation and their management capacity to cope with cheating are also affected by academic misconduct.

The problem of cheating in learning institutes has drawn considerable attention during the last few years because of increase in frequencies of self-reported as well as caught cases of academic dishonesty throughout the world (Bjorklund & Wenestam, 2000). Academic misconduct is prevalent in almost all the academic centers and at all level of study. Although exact data about the prevalence of cheating in different educational institutes is difficult to present because of the gaps which exist during such investigations, researchers' approaches and subjects' responses; however, studies indicate that academic misconduct at schools, colleges and universities is on rise since last few years (Turner & Beemsterboer, 2003; Marsden et al., 2005). The practices of misconduct significantly elevate during examinations and assessment tests which undermine social standards, evaluation process, economic matters and human life (Desalegn & Berhan, 2014). Several factors are responsible for students' inclination towards cheating during examinations. Poor understanding of institutional policies regarding cheating, peers' effects, greed for high scores, attitudes are among some of the most common factors which motivate students to cheat during exams (Passow et al., 2006). Although it seems difficult to completely eradicate the problem of misconduct during examination, strong efforts however, are necessary to curtail the global menace of academic cheating. The aim of this review paper is to summarise prevalence of cheating, its causal factors and to identify possible preventive measures.

### Prevalence of cheating: a cross regional evidence

Researchers who have addressed the issue of academic cheating reveal that cheating in academic activities is widespread and it is not confined to a particular region, culture, society or institution. In fact, academic integrity has long been at risk and the practice of cheating is increasingly ubiquitous throughout the world at almost all level of academic studies ranging from schools to universities (Balbuena & Lamela, 2015). The increasing prevalence of cheating during examinations is largely attributed to advances in technology and students'

perception about the acceptability of academic misconduct (Elliot et al., 2014). Lim & See (2001) observed high pervasiveness of cheating in different educational academies of Singapore and suggested that the practice of misconduct was tolerated in students.. Medical students of some Indian medical colleges were caught in copying others' work during examination (Gitanjali, 2004). Hrabak et al. (2004) revealed that 94% medical students of Zagreb University admitted cheating of different sorts in academic assessment. Rawwas et al. (2004) have also stated that Chinese and US marketing students showed some degree of academic misconduct during their academic examinations; however, Chinese students were less tolerant to cheating than American ones. Chapman & Lupton (2004) observed significantly elevated level of academic misbehavior and involvement of students from different US and Hong Kong Universities in questionable activities. In Australian Universities, Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke (2005) reported high prevalence of questionable activities among students during academic activities such as assignments, research projects and examinations. Students of 32 universities, colleges and schools across Canada and USA were reported to cheat during assignments, tests and examinations (McCabe et al., 2006). Rabi et al. (2006) reported that among four Universities in USA, 16-74% pharmacy students were engaged in academic cheating of different types. Similar to other western countries Lambert et al. (2006) revealed a similar tendency of academic cheating in New Zealand students. Lin and Wen (2007) revealed that 61% of 2068 college students in Taiwan were involved in test cheating, plagiarism and fabrication of data. McCabe et al. (2008) found that Middle Eastern students performed different cheating practices during their academic sessions and were not different in their behavior from their US counterparts.

In a study conducted in Croatia, about 62% medical students had attempted academic misconduct during assessment and they considered cheating as ethical and acceptable. Trost (2009) evaluated the occurrence and frequency of different cheating techniques students used in Swedish universities. He observed variable frequencies and different methods of cheating amongst students when they were assessed. In some Pakistani universities, academic cheating during assignments and examination was highly prevalent and cheating students attributed their misconduct to difficulty in understanding of questions and no punishment by the administration for such activities (Nazir and Aslam, 2010). Babu et al. (2011) presented their data which showed that 49-74% students of Indian medical schools (private) exhibited academic dis-integrity by copying, making substitute attendance for others, seeking help from others in exams, and pressurising their teachers for the award of high scores. Ramzan et al. (2012) outlined that a significantly visible proportion of students of some public and private sector universities in Pakistan were involved in academic misconduct (including plagiarism and falsification of data) while they were completing their research projects and taking final exams. In Iran, medical students and professionals were found to have been engaged in different questionable activities in their examinations and professional life at hospitals (Hejri et al., 2013). Rezanejad and Rezaei (2013) also reported that language and arts students at Iranian universities used plagiarism, copying assignments and other tools while they were

evaluated. Hafeez et al. (2013) noted high incidence of copying, asking for help and other categories of cheating during examination among students of three medical colleges of Karachi. Ghias et al. (2014) observed different methods of cheating (copying, writing assignments for others, falsifying data) among students of private and public medical colleges in Pakistan.

### **Factors influencing motivation for academic cheating**

There are many factors which correspond to students' engagement in academic misconduct. Loose administration at academic institutes, work pressure, students' greed for high scores, peers effect, social and cultural background, attitude of faculty members and students' attitude towards acceptability of misconduct seem some important contributing factors which motivate students to cheat during tests and exams (Passow et al., 2006). Jordan (2001) discussed in detail hidden motives for cheating. He concluded that lack of knowledge about the institutions' policies regarding cheating, students' attitudes towards misconduct and different motivational (intrinsic or extrinsic) factors and influences of peers promoted cheating among American liberal art college students. Arcegovac and Richardson (2004) identified that changes in social interactions, behaviors, poverty and economy in recent years had greater influences on American students for their motivation and engagement in academic cheating. In their systemic study, Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke (2005) identified five major reasons why student cheated in Australian universities. 43% of their sampled subjects justified cheating by stating reasons that they wanted to assist their friends; 37% subjects stated that they faced difficulty in assessment; 36% responded that they were unable to complete the assist in due time; 33% told that they felt they would not be caught while cheating and; 31% justified that performance of cheating was unplanned. Passow et al. (2006) highlighted different demographic, behavioural obligations, participation in co-curricular activities and social pressure as some of the major factors which corresponded to increased cheating prevalence among undergraduate engineering students in USA. In Romania, cheating during examination was found ubiquitous among students of several institutes which reflected growing challenges associated with academic honor code (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). Nazir and Aslam (2010) found that exercise of no punishment or less severe punishment by institutional administration for cheating were one of the many factors which motivated students to cheat. Ramzan et al. (2012) revealed that major causes of academic cheating (plagiarism) in students of some universities in Pakistan were lack of awareness of the students about misconduct and lack of provision of proper guidelines by the universities to make them aware about academic misconducts, although a small proportion of students deliberately cheated during their exams to get high grades.

Lack of awareness about the legality and nature of cheating were found to be important factors in academic misconduct during evaluation in some Iranian universities (Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013). Orosz et al. (2013) argued that external inspiration and struggle between

students for good grades had no effects on motivation of students to cheat in their academic assessments in Hungarian schools; rather considering cheating as an acceptable practice was a major influential factor for cheating. Balbuena and Lamela (2015) found different reasons for students' cheating. Respondents stated that they wanted get good grades, did not want to fail, did not know the answers of questions, did not study due to personal reasons, they were busy and had little time for study.

### **Consequences and prospective prevention**

A leading effect of academic cheating is potential damage to the integrity of all academic activities in particular and educational institutions in general. The practice of cheating can drastically influence fair academic grading and merit. Cheating may lead to alterations in social and ethical norms of graduates, professionals and future leaders. It is logically reasonable to assume that students getting academic benefit through unfair means would create a depressive environment for non-cheating students which could affect them socially, psychologically and academically. Moreover, the attitude of non-cheating students is likely to change towards cheating behavior due to peer effects. Many studies have shown that students engaged in cheating during academic life also show unethical behavior in their professional life. Nonis et al. (2001) documented that students who cheated during examinations and other evaluation tools in their academic years also exhibited some degree of cheating in their professional life. Carpenter et al. (2004) outlined that students engaged in academic cheating at institutions showed cheating behavior and unethical dissensions during their professional career too.

Learning institutes are places which contribute to the development of high ethical standards and professional achievements of their graduates. Efficient and motivated efforts seem inevitable to protect the integrity of academic centers and honor codes of education by preventing all types of academic dishonesty. One of the most effective measures to prevent cheating during examinations and students assessments is the introduction of strict administrative policies by educational institutions regarding misconduct practices. Since many studies demonstrate that unawareness among students about the institutional policies in respect to cheating remain a driving force for academic misconduct; formulation of clear guidelines about academic honor codes and unethical practices can work better in managing this problem. Simon et al. (2003) hinted that effective academic ethics and confident faculty supervision could provide best practice in the issues of academic misconduct. Punishments seem ideal methods to control cheating; however, some authors argue that penalties may prove less effective if the problem would be considered for durable solution (Faucher & Caves, 2009). Simon et al. (2004) proposed self-monitoring cheating policies at campuses of institutions as an effective alternative to punishments which generally creates reactions. Gallant & Drinan (2006) suggested that the practice of academic misconduct could not be dealt with routine punishment strategies; rather they proposed focus on changing values, behavior, learning and attitudes of students to refrain them from cheating. Hutton (2006)



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recommended that administration of institutions should make communications with faculty members and students about the seriousness and penalties regarding academic misconducts.

## **Conclusions**

The literature review revealed that academic cheating during examination and assessment is not restricted to a particular region, discipline or institute; rather it is a widespread problem prevalent throughout the world. The problem poses severe risk to academic integrity, social, ethical and professional standards of both cheating and non-cheating students. Leading factors associated with cheating are loose institutional policies, tolerance and overlooking of cheating by faculty members, students' insight about the acceptability of academic misconduct, peers' influences, motives for securing good grades and fear of failure, helping other students and unawareness about the ethics and educational honor codes. Although, punishment and strict repercussions over cheating practices seems effective tools to manage the problem; however, such acts work in short terms can result in reaction generation. To handle the problem of academic misconduct in educational institutions and to safeguard the academic integrity, an integrative approach involving all the concerned stakeholders is necessary. Zero tolerance policies of institutes, educating students about the ethics of academics, faculty supervision, self-monitoring and awareness strategies together could work better to reduce academic cheating.



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