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META-ANALYSES ON TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' VIEWS ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND A WAY FORWARD

Abstract:

This paper presents a metanalyses on teachers' and students' awareness, their understanding and evaluation of the situation about academic integrity and the proposals to improve the situation in higher education by the experts in the field from different Universities of Latvia. The study is based on the analyses on two previous studies carried out by the team of researchers of Daugavpils University, Latvia. The first study was focusing on the awareness of social science teachers about academic integrity in regional higher education institutions in Latvia. This study included in depth exploration of the awareness of teachers, their conceptual understanding, evaluation of academic integrity among students and teachers, the analyses of the most frequent barriers to academic integrity among students and teachers, as well as the evaluation of communication of academic integrity politics in higher education. While the first study examines academicians perspectives and focuses on policies and procedures of academic integrity in higher institutions (HI), and whether the current policies and procedures are satisfactory as evaluated by the academic staff members to prevent plagiarism among students and staff members in higher education institutions, the other study was focusing on students' perspectives, their awareness and understanding about academic integrity in regional higher education institutions in Latvia. The questions were related to their awareness of academic integrity, evaluation of the politics about academic integrity and its implementation in higher education, as well as ways how to promote academic integrity in their institution. The current study offers meta evaluation of the situation based on the research findings of two previous studies by the experts in the field. The methodology employed in this study involves semi-structured interviews with three experts in the field about the situation with the academic integrity in the regional higher education institutions of Latvia. This paper contributes to the existing debate of academic integrity and how universities can respond to this emergent concern.

Keywords:

JEL Classification: I23, I23

INTRODUCTION

Academic honesty is a cornerstone and the main value in the academic life of universities in Latvia. The issue of academic integrity is becoming more and more relevant for Latvia in the age of digitalization. Teaching profession and training of future leaders requires high ethical standards, therefore, universities need to pay proper attention to academic integrity. In recent studies there has been a concern about cheating and plagiarism as a consequence of digitalization in higher education. Academic misconduct is an issue in all Universities of Latvia though they all claim supporting honesty in their academic life. Fatemi & Saito (2020) reported the insufficient quality of support programs for university students in terms of proper ways of referencing and ethical conduct. The rhetoric in recent years moves from detecting plagiarism to promoting academic honesty as an institutional policy. Many scientists argue that rather than adapting a simple approach of informing students and making them aware of misconduct, universities need to apply a systemic whole institutional approach in dealing with academic integrity (East, 2009; Emerson, Malcolm, & MacKay 2005). Rather than applying a simple approach of informing students about honesty policy and then penalizing or ignoring those who do it wrongly or do not meet expectations, a whole university approach would be applied as a whole institutional approach. Academic integrity relates to honesty in the academic world in all aspects of academic work, namely, teaching, learning, in disseminating knowledge and conducting research (Löfström et al., 2005).

Current qualitative study aims to explore a view of experts in the field about the situation with the academic integrity in higher education as interpreted by the staff members and students presented in two previous studies conducted by the same group of researchers. The experts provide a meta analyses of data gained in two studies about academic integrity in HEIs by evaluating Latvian regional teachers understand of academic integrity, the communication of AI politics in higher institutions, ways and suggestions of improving the situation with the academic integrity.

Academic integrity is one of the aspects of quality education. *The European Network for Academic Integrity* defines academic integrity as: 'Compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards and practices by individuals and institutions in education, research and scholarship' (Tauginiene et al, 2019). Academic integrity is a combination of honesty, fairness, trust, responsibility and courage (ICAI, 2014).

The World Health Organization has identified the following core values of ethical principles such as honesty - behaving ethically and intellectually; accountability – undertaking responsibility for one's actions, decisions and their consequences; independence and fairness - behaving in a way that personal views would not be contrary to ethical principles; dignity - respect for the dignity, values, equality of all people privacy; professional commitment – showing professionalism in doing research (WHO, 2017). According to McCabe et al. (2001) cheating behavior includes plagiarism, falsifying references, submitting work done by someone else, submitting text without referencing. As mentioned by Lambert at al. (2003), student tend to find various justifications for their unfair behaviour. Therefore, academic integrity should be integrated in many courses and should be taught creatively via problem based learning, group discussion, role plays and interviews. As Dawson (2021) admits, major initiatives are oriented towards detecting misconduct rather than encouraging academic integrity. The focus needs to be placed on educational programs that foster academic integrity by fostering the environment where ethical principles are already integrated into pedagogical practice. East (2009) asserts that a holistic approach is the most efficient in the university setting to maintain policy of academic honesty in the whole institution.

2.METHODOLOGY
2.1 Participants, procedure, ethics

The experts from three higher education establishments from different regions of Latvia agreed to participate in this study on a voluntary bases. The sample consists of three experts (all of them females) aged from 40-60. All experts hold PhD degree and all of them are having high expertise and training in academic integrity. They all have participated in high level conferences, projects and workshops on academic integrity and did a great job in introducing and strengthening the policy of academic honesty in their universities. One of the experts attended numerous European academic integrity and plagiarism conferences, has designed Erasmus project with international team members and contributed to a creation of an European academic integrity network - a transnational association, within the framework of which she has developed various educational materials, like the dictionary of academic honesty terms. The other expert has been working for more than 20 years in academia and taught courses in ethics and philosophy. For six years she served as a chair of the Ethics Commission for Humanities and Social Sciences Research in her university. She delivers courses on professional ethics and does research, as well as integrated ethics in various study courses. She is a leader of a joint doctoral study program "*Educational Sciences*" and delivers the study course "*Responsible Research and Innovation.*" In recent years, she undertook courses on academic integrity in Latvia and Amsterdam, presented by the lecturers from the Baltic States, including Poland and Finland. The third expert represent another regional university and is active in pursuing policy of academic honesty in her institution. All experts work in Bachelor, Master and Doctoral programs in education and management. The researchers explained the context, the aim of the survey, research procedure, and ethical issues to the experts in regional higher educational institutions who agreed to participate in this study. Three researchers who conducted this study hold a leadership position in educational programs, one of them is a high level expert in qualitative research in both, psychology and education. Therefore, the team of scholars in this study have an expertise to carry out this study.

2.2 Data collection methodology

For the purpose of this study the authors have used semi structured Zoom interviews with the experts in the field. They all provided written consent to participate in this study. Inductive thematic analyses was applied for the analyses of interview data. Interviews were 20-30 minutes long with each expert. The data gained from the interviews were coded and analysed by three researchers with a high expertise of doing research. In-depth analyses of data gained from the expert interviews were classified in sub categories and described accordingly. For the validation of the content of interviews, the researchers have applied as the judgement of the experts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 The awareness about academic dishonesty in higher education

In regards to overall situation with the academic integrity in the country, all three experts have indicated that some efforts have been made in Latvia but major work lies ahead. As compared with other European countries, Latvia is just at the beginning of the road. As one of the experts admitted, "*For example, Lithuania, Poland and Finland have national standards*

for academic integrity. Latvia does not have. In Latvia, every university itself undertakes a responsibility for the academic integrity. This indicates that the situation in Latvia is not comparable to any other situation. In fact, the issue of academic integrity is delegated to the universities themselves that indicates, that in Latvia this issue not taken seriously at the governmental level."

The other expert emphasized that in the English-speaking countries, like Great Britain, USA, Australia traditions with the academic integrity are very strong and ingrained. Academic integrity is approached differently in non-English-speaking countries. For Latvia and Central Europe, the difference is not so great. The policy of academic integrity varies from university to university. There is no unified national policy in other European countries and much depends on each institution.

In regards to the awareness of the academic staff in promoting academic integrity, the experts admitted as a positive sign availability of training provided for students and staff members on academic writing and integrity in some regional universities. As experts admitted, there are lot of good initiatives that are taking place in Latvia, like availability of software tools for a plagiarism detection; a national database that stores theses thus providing an opportunity for checking originality of students' work, but at the same time a lack of transparency and consistency in assessing academic dishonesty is still evident in higher education. Still, universities need to look for creative and innovative ways of integration of ethical behavior in all aspect of learning by introducing activities that are useful for students across disciplines.

For example, one of the experts have mentioned that they sign up group contracts with the group and a mentor before a group work or a project, especially if this work has to be done during the semester. A symbolic agreement is being signed, where everyone is aware of what their contribution is. Thus, in a reminiscently educational form, there is a reminder about the academic integrity. " *This is a modern and interesting part of a study process for the student, to draw their attention to academic integrity and honesty*" (Experts A)

Factors that facilitate dishonesty and the ways of dealing with it

As all experts admitted, technologies play their role in fostering plagiarism and academic misconduct. We live in the age of advanced technologies that offer an opportunity to use internet sources and e-books and higher education institutions need to ensure quality insurance mechanisms by offering software systems that detect plagiarism. Modern technologies have exacerbated ability for plagiarism and academic misconduct. Availability of such software in regional institutions can help to reduce cases of ethical dishonesty, but still *"the right ethical behavior needs to come from inside of the individual*" (Expert A). Many staff members pointed to dramatic changes in the learning environment, the context and conditions that changed the way the teachers are delivering and assessing the content, while academic "*honesty remains a cornerstone of academic work and researc*h."(Expert B).

All experts pointed to an academic environment as an important factor in fostering academic integrity. As one of the experts have commented, "*It is important that the environment in the higher institution is supportive and helpful. Academic staff should become a living example on how we do things in a right way – while delivering lectures, making references to images. It shows how academics behave, this helps students to understand how to do things in a right way, thus creating a sense that it cannot be otherwise.*" (Experts C)

Another expert refers to the need to overcome the need to be in control and to focus less on mistakes, because "fear creates a desire to escape" and many violations of academic integrity often are initiated by a fear of losing a budget placement. Teaching staff can do a lot to make a student feel as a colleague and to be supported and understood. We continuously are learning how to be ethical throughout our lives outside the academic framework of any morality. And this can never be learned for a life time. "*There are lot of moral dilemmas in relation to academic integrity and there should be a dialogue and communication of those dilemmas in fear free university's environment. (Expert B)*

3.2. The communication of academic honesty politics in higher institution

All experts admitted that every higher institution needs to have their own policy of academic integrity, for example, "each university must have a separate document that defines the policy of academic integrity." (Expert C). The policy of academic integrity guides students and lecturers within the framework of rules we live within. This is also important to know the rules when something is violated. Reproduction of the best practice from other countries without proper contextualization would not be helpful for Latvia. For example, as the expert commented, "*I have encountered a foreign student from France who, along with any assignment, handed in a signed paper assuring that this is her own work. Students hand in such a certification at their university for every written work. I don't know if it is necessary to dramatize things like this, since at some point it becomes a formality.*" (Expert C). Another expert has mentioned an example for American experience that cannot be reproduced in Latvia either: "We cannot apply the American model straight away to our social political and historical background.The U.S. universities have student commissions that investigate violations of academic integrity and students participate in both accusations and defenses. It is a different kind of approach and an ambition that is difficult to replicate into our reality.' (Expert A).

All experts admitted that issues related to academic honesty need to be integrated in study courses. As one of the experts commented: "*The situation could change if Universities integrate more of those these topics into the curriculum, if we create a regulatory framework and loudly declare how important this issue is. The expert referred to a professor who said: "A person cannot be a bit honest, just as he or she cannot be in a little bit pregnant*".

Experts admitted SAM projects as valuable in collaborate among higher institutions. "*Together with the University of Latvia and Riga Technical University, we had a project, where we developed MOODLE platform, which was intended for the distribution of materials that need to be available to both teaching staff and students as a single resource that prevents duplication of work and helps to develop a unified understanding, because students who enter one higher education institution, may continue their studies in another institution. So the honesty policy should be the same in all higher institutions.*" (Expert C)

But the best way is to begin is from oneself, by evaluating one's own stance and morality. "*Lecturers are the good example in writing their own publications with 100% of clear conscience, without adding the names of other lecturers, because the project requires so; by adding references in one's lecture notes, without handing in old materials as new ones.*"

3.3. How to improve academic honesty in higher education?

As some of the experts admitted, knowing the reasons behind academic dishonesty, may provide opportunity of higher education institutions to increase academic integrity. As a

means of increasing academic integrity among the students the experts have provided valuable advices such as encouraging students to take a greater responsibility for their actions, identifying the reasons for ethical misconduct, and reducing opportunities for the possibility of ethical misconduct through more creative and personalized deign of the assessment tasks, and developing an overall culture of organization that has no place for the academic dishonesty. This requires the involvement of all stake holders and shared institutional policy and philosophy that enhances academic integrity.

As one of the experts admitted, everything is interconnected. Academic honesty in HEI is closely related to a culture and values that dominate in the society. For example" In our society, small violations are well tolerated in different areas of life, like crossing the street at the red light. "*Therefore, this is difficult to accept some higher level of responsibility at the university if you do not behave honestly in everyday life. We encounter everyday dilemmas, like to cheating by a classmate and whether to report it or not. If so, the next time, you may need to cheat and you do not want somebody to report about you? We live in a culture of covering-up others for small violations*" (Expert A).

As the expert A reported, 'the situation with academic integrity could improve if people talk and discuss more about it. As Immanuel Kant told, "*if morality does not work, then the law comes into force." So, for people to start thinking about academic integrity and worrying about it, we need systems that would make them think about it to some extent. Reminding and informing the student already in the first year of their studies about academic integrity and what it is unacceptable would be very helpful.*' (Expert A).

Many students pointed to a lack of time to do their course assignments properly due to their workload. As one of the experts admitted, time constraints is not a reason to behave dishonestly: "Does the fact that I have little time and a lot of work justify dishonest behavior? (Expert A). If the employee does not pay me enough, then this is not justifiable to steal". There are no excuses for stealing or cheating. Another expert refers to a quality of learning process and availability of study loans: "The student, especially a full-time student, should be able to study as his main activity. It has its roots in the study funding model and has to do with the quality of studies. Study loans should be available so that you know that when you have completed your studies, you will have a job and you will be able to repay this loan and you can afford to devote full time for your studies. The students need to get an amount of financing that allows to study full time and there will no longer arguments that one has to work, and to provide means for oneself and one's family. This is an important pay attention to the quality of education.

All experts admitted that teaching honesty and values need to be done since kindergarten already, since we cannot require the students to behave honestly at the university, if they are not taught so already in the kindergarten. " *For example, the task set for the John in the kindergarten to make autumn scenery design in high quality turns out to be his parents duty to create a masterpiece. We are setting very high standards like these aimed at perfection but it will not be John's work.*" (Expert A).

Conclusions

There is much greater attention being paid to academic integrity in Latvia and worldwide. Academic integrity is complex and highly subjective term. As this is reported in scientific literature, academic dishonesty is still a prevalent and debatable issue in higher education

worldwide (Bretag & Mahmud, 2016). This is particularly important to avoid cheating behavior since the students who graduate higher institutions will be future leaders.

 Among **the factors that facilitate academic dishonesty, the** experts have mentioned opportunities provided by the digitalization processes. Technology will be a part of students' everyday life, therefore this is particularly essential to embrace technology and to use it to a full expend by enhancing critical thinking skills and using all provided opportunities ethically.

To reduce academic dishonesty, as proposed by the experts, staff members need to design creative assessment tasks for the students that diminishes the opportunity to cheat, to personalize assessments and to inform students about the academic honesty laws in the institution, and by fostering anti-plagiarism culture in the higher institutions. Another suggestion by the experts is training students about ethical behavior and developing their academic writing skills, by verifying validity of the obtained information, and fostering their moral stance.

Among the ways of fostering academic honesty, Universities need to adopt efficient whole institutional approach to assuring academic integrity. Universities need foster the environment that could foster academic integrity by applying a range of approaches in teacher training, research, policies, communication and transparency. Universities need to raise the awareness of staff members and the students about cheating and plagiarism, as well as about the existing policies of academic integrity in the institution.

Academic integrity should be seen as a part of University's overall culture and each individual's morality. In establishing academic dishonesty not only following norms and regulations should be stressed but academic honesty should be integrated in the process and the culture of the institution. This is more essential to engage students in critical discussions and to raise their willingness to make ethical choices as their academic responsibility.

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