

Investigating Female Students' Attitude towards Cheating and Plagiarism: A Study in King Saud University

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Abstract - : *During their studies, many students commit some form of academic dishonesty, such as cheating and plagiarism, often to obtain higher grades than they are capable of. The current widespread use of the Internet, mobile and wireless devices has made it easier for students to illegally access information, and at the same time it has become difficult for academic institutions to control and discover such instances. Hence, it is essential that students become aware of the seriousness of these offences, and be encouraged to avoid them. In this paper, we study the attitude towards cheating and plagiarism among female students in the College of Computer and Information Sciences (CCIS) at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. We aim to highlight the most prevailing practices, the underlying reasons, the popular sources of illegal information, and the conception of students towards the ethicalness of such practices. The results of the study indicate that both cheating and plagiarism are common among our students. After having analyzed the results, we propose some recommendations that may help combat cheating and plagiarism among students in higher education.*

Keywords: cheating, plagiarism, academic dishonesty, ethics, ethics in information technology

1 Introduction

Academic dishonesty at universities is a common phenomenon among students of all ages and specialties. Nowadays, the widespread use of the Internet and the popularity of mobile and wireless devices have made it easier for students to reach and transmit information in illegal and dishonest ways. Academic dishonesty can be defined as the students' use of illegal activities, techniques, and forms of fraud during their examination or evaluation processes, usually for the purpose of achieving better grades [1].

In the literature many types of academic dishonesty have been observed. For example, the collaboration when doing assignments, completely or partially copying an assignment from another student, using the Internet as a source for help for solving difficult problems, submitting the same work for multiple courses, copying text from another source (book,

Internet, etc.), paying someone to do an assignment, using hidden resources during an exam, and many other forms [2].

In general, academic dishonesty can be divided into three main categories: cheating, plagiarism and collusion [3]. The first two categories seem to be the most common among students, especially those of younger ages. In general cheating is considered as an intended violation of rules in order to acquire illegal advantage or better academic results in exams or similar forms of assessment. This may happen by 'stealing' ideas and other material from different sources [4], [5]. On the other hand, plagiarism involves passing off someone else's work as your own without acknowledging the source [6]. Thus, plagiarism may or may not be intentional, due to some students' lack of knowledge regarding relevant standards of quoting. Hence why, plagiarism may not always be considered as cheating.

An increasing number of incidents of cheating and plagiarism are being observed daily. One reason could be that electronic communication through handheld and other popular devices makes it even easier for students to copy and transmit information both inside and outside the classroom. While doing so, students do not think much about the legality of this action, since improving their grades and passing the course come up as their only concern and ultimate goal that they hope to achieve. Although getting better grades may seem as the most compelling factor for making students cheat or plagiarize, other less obvious reasons could be: peer pressure, playing smart, making fun of the instructor, or just because they can!

The academic community is currently giving a lot of attention to increasing the awareness of students about ethical issues, including ethics of copying and using information in the electronic age. Publishing ethical codes of practice and teaching ethics courses have become an essential part of almost every discipline in the university, which indeed can help in fighting academic dishonesty prevailing among students. In addition, studying students' attitudes, what they think about academic dishonesty, and why they practice it may help overcome this phenomenon, while increasing the students' -as well as the faculty members'- consciousness about the danger and consequences of such acts.

In our department, which is a female only department in King Saud University, the phenomena of cheating and plagiarism are rather noticeable. This is despite efforts done by faculty members to combat cheating, and severely punishing students who are caught with academic misconduct. It would be interesting to know the extent of the spread of academic dishonesty among students, and the reasons behind committing it. It is also important to understand the attitude of students towards cheating and plagiarism, and what their conception is about their ethicalness. This may help in targeting the reasons behind the spread of these actions and could increase the awareness of students about the danger and consequences involved thereof. Overcoming academic dishonesty is essential in preparing students for a promising and successful professional future.

To this end, we conducted a study among the female students in our department. A survey about cheating practices and another about plagiarism practices have been distributed to students from different levels. This is the first time this type of study has been conducted in our college. In this paper we will analyze the results obtained by those surveys to determine the extent of the spread of academic dishonesty. We try to propose some recommendations about how to confront the phenomena of cheating and plagiarism, and to increase the awareness about them among our students.

2 Research Methodology

In the current research, two surveys were used to assess female students' attitude towards cheating and plagiarism in our college, where female students are segregated from male students. The Arabic language was used to write both surveys, since almost all students are native Arabic speakers and they are usually more comfortable using Arabic than English.

The cheating survey consists of three parts: the first part is composed of six questions intended to assess the frequency of some cheating practices among students. The second part consists of seven possible reasons for committing cheating and is intended to survey the students' opinion about the relevance of these reasons to practicing cheating. The third part consists of one question asking the student about her opinion regarding whether the cheating practices described are ethical or not, then giving the reason for her answer.

Similarly, the plagiarism survey consists of three parts: the first part tries to determine if the student knows the meaning of plagiarism, besides assessing the frequency of practicing some common plagiarism acts (three practices were included). The second part tries to examine the most common sources of plagiarism. The third part asks the student about her opinion regarding the ethicalness of such practices and giving the reason for her answer.

The target sample for the surveys was undergraduate students in levels 3 to 6 (a level is equivalent to one semester;

so level 1 is the first semester of the student in the college, level 2 is the second semester, etc.). 148 students anonymously answered the cheating survey, and 115 students answered the plagiarism survey.

2.1 Surveys Results

Table 1: Assessing the frequency of some cheating practices

	Copy from another student	Pressured by a colleague to give answers	Use of body parts	Extract hints/answers from instructor	Paid someone for doing assignment	Changed answer after grading
%Frequently	0.0	3.3	1.3	2.0	0.6	0.0
%Sometimes	4.7	18.9	0.6	22.9	7.4	4.7
%Rarely	10.8	32.4	4.0	24.3	13.5	4.0
%Never	84.4	45.2	93.9	50.6	78.3	91.2

The results of part 1 of the cheating survey, shown in Table 1, indicate that 15.5% of students have previously copied answers from others during an exam. 54.6% have been pressured at sometimes to give answers during an exam. 5.9% of students have previously used body parts to hide written answers for the purpose of cheating during an exam. 49.2% of students have previously resorted to extracting hints from instructors during an exam. 21.5% have previously paid someone to do an assignment for them, and 8.7% of students have previously changed answers after grading and claimed an error in the marking of an exam.

Table 2: Reasons for cheating

	Difficulty of the exam	Not ready for the exam	Lack of time to study	Lenience of instructors	Having fun/ playing smart	Helping a friend	Importance of grades
%Agree	31.5	30.4	36.9	9.7	7.6	14.1	31.5
%Neutral	30.4	29.3	30.4	35.8	17.3	30.4	19.5
%Disagree	38.0	40.2	32.6	54.3	75.0	55.4	48.9

Among the 145 students who answered the cheating survey, 92 students answered Part 2¹. The results of Part 2, shown in Table 2, indicate that 31.5% of students agree that difficulty of the exam is one possible reason to cheat. 30.4% agreed that not preparing enough for the exam made them cheat. 36.9% have agreed that lack of time to study is a reason of cheating. 9.7% agreed that having a lenient instructor encouraged them to cheat. 7.6% did it because they were

¹ Those who answered "Never" to all questions of Part 1 did not answer Part 2.

playing smart or because they had fun doing it. 14.1% thought that helping a friend was one reason to cheat, and 31.5% agreed that importance of grades justified cheating. Finally, 11.5% students thought that cheating was ethical.

Table 3: Meaning and common plagiarism acts

	Know what plagiarism means	Submitting another person's work	Replacing words without citing	Using exact words
%Yes	72.1	11.3	32.1	40
%No	11.3	66.0	44.3	41.7
%Uncertain	16.5	22.6	23.4	18.2

As shown in Table 3, 72.1% of students indicated that they know what plagiarism means. 11.3% of students have previously copied all or parts of another person's work and submitted it as their own without citing the source. 32.1% have replaced the words of someone else with their own words without citing the source. 40% of students have used the exact words of someone else without quotations and without citing the source.

Table 4: Common sources of plagiarism

	Electronic Resources	Printed Resources	Ideas/work of others
%Frequently	39.1	20	9.5
%Sometimes	44.3	42.6	41.7
%Rarely	10.4	27.8	26.9
%Never	6.0	9.5	21.7

As shown in Table 4, 83.4% of students have frequently or occasionally used electronic resources as a source of plagiarism. 62.6% have used printed resources, and 51.2% have used ideas and/or work of others like parents, colleagues, etc. as a source of plagiarism during their undergraduate studies. When asked whether plagiarism is ethical, 34.75% of undergraduate students believed that it is ethical!

3 Discussion

From the results of the cheating survey we can conclude that the majority of students (approximately 85%) have never copied answers from someone else during the exam, whereas a large percentage of them (approximately 55%) were pressured to give answers to someone during the exam. Most students did not resort to using body parts to hide written answers during an exam, and the majority also did not try to change the answer after grading. On the other hand, extracting hints from the instructor during the exam was

relatively common, where approximately 50% of students had practiced it. Strangely enough paying someone to do an assignment seems to be a common practice among our students, where approximately 22% of students have admitted committing this act. This is surprising because in our community and especially among female students, getting access to professionals (a private tutor or a software company for example) who are paid to do a difficult homework like a project or a research paper is usually infeasible without the consent of a parent or a guardian. Thus, it seems possible to assume that parents themselves do not find this practice unacceptable!

Regarding the reasons for cheating, the most relevant reason for cheating is the lack of time to study, followed by the difficulty of the exam, importance of good grades, and not preparing for the exam (in order). On the other hand, helping a friend, having a lenient instructor, and playing smart, were less important factors that can lead to cheating.

When asked about the reason, 65% of students who believe cheating is unethical indicated that cheating is forbidden in Islam, and against Islamic values. Most of them cited the Hadith (saying) of Prophet Mohammed "*He who cheats us does not belong to us*". 14% indicated that cheating gives one what is not right for them. 4% said it is not honest, and another 4% said that the benefit they get from cheating is "not blessed". Similarly 4% said that they are afraid of Allah (God). Other less frequent responses included: "who cheats can do more serious offences"; "it is like stealing"; "being honest is essential for the development of the society"; "a student who cheats is irresponsible"; and "because exams are intended to assess your understanding of the subject".

On the other hand, when asked about whether cheating is ethical, approximately 12% thought it is ethical! Among the reasons given for being ethical are: "I am not very religious"; "it depends on your values"; "I have to do it because the distribution of grades is not fair"; and "I have to do it to succeed".

From the results of the plagiarism survey, we can see that the majority of students know what plagiarism means. The most common practice was to copy exact words without citing the source. Paraphrasing without citing the source is another common practice. On the other hand, submitting someone else's work (an assignment for example) as their own is not a very common practice among students.

Regarding the source of plagiarism, most students agreed that electronic resources are the most popular source of plagiarism followed by printed resources. Slightly less common is the use of work or ideas of someone known to them like parents or colleagues.

A large percentage of students (approximately 35%) indicated that the act of plagiarism is ethical. However, most

of those who said that did not give a relevant reason for believing so. Instead, they said that if the source is mentioned or it is an open source it is “okay” to use it. Some of those who believed it is ethical mentioned reasons like: “to help me”; “it depends on your intentions”; “it doesn't hurt to make use of some text in my research if I write it in my own way”; “I may have to do it because of lack of time”; “I am just using it without mentioning it is mine”; and one person said “I don't know”!

On the other hand, 81% of those who believed it is unethical said that plagiarism is like stealing the work of others; 16% said that it violates intellectual property rights; and 3% said that it is against Islam. Some of the reasons given for being unethical are: “everyone should be given their right”; “it is a form of stealing/cheating”; and “it does not help me learn”.

To sum up, it appears from the results observed from the cheating survey that our students generally practice cheating by giving answers during an exam if pressured to do so by someone. They frequently resort to extracting hints from the instructor during the exam, and they sometimes pay money to get their homework done. As a result, we recommend that teachers be vigilant during the exam and avoid answering unnecessary questions by students. In fact, it is advisable to prohibit answering questions during the exam and to discourage the proctoring of the exam by the instructor of the course.

Regarding paying someone to do the homework, it is advisable that the instructor tries to get more acquainted with the students to recognize their individual levels. Also, having assignments of incremental nature, where every part is submitted separately, may help discourage this phenomenon. More interesting assignments that need creativity and discussion after submission may also help combat the students' tendency to rely on others.

It can also be observed that importance of grades, competition with peers and expectations of parents are among the factors that can lead to cheating. Trying to motivate the students to learn and giving rewards that are not dependent on grades may help reverse the effect of these factors.

To increase the awareness of students, teachers as well as parents should stress the fact that cheating is unethical, not only because it is against religion, but because it is a form of fraud that makes someone gets what is not right for them, and it is harmful for the society. Policies against cheating and relevant punishments should be made clear at the introduction of every course, and implemented seriously by all faculty members.

From the results of the plagiarism survey, it seems that students think that it is less serious than cheating during an exam. This can be deduced from the lower percentage of

correlating plagiarism with being ‘anti-religion’ compared to cheating. Most probably students think it is less serious because it is not directly done during the exam, or because it is more difficult to discover and the source of information is mostly unknown. Also, cheating by nature is often more stressed upon in the pre-college education than plagiarism. Therefore, students may be inclined to think that cheating is more serious than plagiarism.

We also believe that weakness in the English language, which is the language of instruction in our college, and the inability of students to express their thoughts properly in English, can lead to plagiarism. The most common forms of plagiarism are copying exact words and paraphrasing without citing the source. In addition, electronic resources stand out as the most popular source of plagiarism.

To combat plagiarism, students should be made aware of the seriousness of this act, and that it can affect not only their academic studies but also their future careers. Students should be warned about legal issues that may be involved with violating intellectual property rights. To help students combat their tendency to plagiarize, proper citation and referencing methods should be taught. Students should also try to improve their language and writing skills. They should practice quoting and paraphrasing techniques. Introductory research methods and writing courses should be given to all students starting from the undergraduate level. Plagiarism detection software should be used and the students can be advised to try them and review their essays to get rid of plagiarism before submission.

4 Conclusions and Future Directions

Motivated by the spread of practicing cheating and plagiarism among our students, we surveyed a sample from female students in different college levels about cheating and plagiarism practices. The surveys focused on the most prevalent practices, the reasons for doing them, and the awareness of students about the ethicalness of such acts.

The results indicated that, despite being aware of the immorality of these practices, students sometimes resort to cheating by taking or giving answers during the exams. However, a more common practice was to pay someone to do the homework on their behalf. This seems to be a serious offence that should be given more attention and severely punished by both the administration and faculty members.

Plagiarism practices seem to be even more common among students. It appears to be less serious in their view than cheating during exams. Increasing the awareness of students about the seriousness of this practice is essential. Moreover, helping them by improving their language and writing skills and teaching proper referencing, quoting, paraphrasing and citation styles are also important to discourage this phenomenon.

In the future we intend to examine whether the level of study is related to patterns and frequency of cheating and plagiarism. For example, it would be interesting to know whether students at introductory courses cheat more or less than students who are approaching graduation. Whether there is an effect of gender on the tendency and prevalence of cheating is also worth studying.

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