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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY - FRAGILE BY DEFINITION OR BY NEGLECT?

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Abstract

The article examines academic dishonesty as a persistent and deepening issue within university environments. Cheating is considered not only an ethical concern but also a socially and culturally conditioned phenomenon. The article presents original research involving a survey of 125 respondents and focus group discussions. The first set of questions addresses the types of academic misconduct students have observed, while the second explores what they perceive as dishonest behavior. The focus groups revealed ambivalence: cheating is seen as "wrong," but often "not that serious." The causes of academic dishonesty are multifaceted: low self-esteem, pressure to succeed, lack of understanding of academic rules, weak moral culture, and societal tolerance for unethical behavior. Information technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, are also identified as additional catalysts. The article reinforces the idea that academic integrity cannot be enforced through statements and declarations alone. What is needed is a cultural shift within universities—through the implementation of clear policies, ethical education, institutional transparency, and student engagement. Cheating is not merely an individual failure, but a systemic issue that requires a comprehensive institutional response.

Keywords: academic misconduct, academic integrity, plagiarism, cheating, Higher education

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Academic Misconduct: A Complex and Cross-Cultural Issue

Academic misconduct is a complex issue that transcends borders and cultures, encompassing behaviors such as plagiarism, falsification, and even impersonation. Such actions are regarded as ethical issues involving judgments about right and wrong, and are perceived as a growing epidemic influenced by various factors such as culture, age, and the university environment. Academic integrity is one of the many essential values that all educational institutions strive to instill in their students. Most universities have written guidelines and codes of conduct, which students rarely read. Moreover, the definitions and severity of terms such as “cheating” and “misconduct” are not clearly defined and are often open to (arbitrary) interpretation.

At first glance, the definition of cheating seems clear: cheating is dishonest or unfair behavior aimed at gaining some kind of advantage or benefit. In education, students mainly cheat because of the impact on grades or other consequences related to assessment. Assessment is a key aspect of the educational process, increasingly emphasized by accrediting bodies. Cheating undermines the purpose and process of assessment, and even more so, the process of acquiring knowledge. It is important to recognize that what an individual student considers cheating and permits themselves to do—and what they do not consider cheating—is influenced by individual and situational variables, such as level of development, motivation, personal morals, and ethics. On the other hand, the motivational orientation of the academic environment is just as important as the individual one.

Extensive research on this issue has been going on for years. A large-scale study by Vandehey et al. (2007) covering a 20-year period compared student misconduct in 1984, 1994, and 2004. In 1984, it was found that 54% admitted to cheating during various types of exams. The main reasons identified were characteristics of the students themselves—immature, lacking educational engagement, and inclined to rationalize their actions to reduce the guilt associated with cheating. By 1994, the percentage had risen to 61%. Interestingly, both those who cheated and others felt less need to seek justifications to neutralize their sense of guilt or wrongdoing. This leads to the conclusion that academic dishonesty had almost become normative and was no longer perceived by students as deviant behavior requiring justification. In 2004, the

percentage was 57.4%, encompassing not only final exams but the entire period of university education.

Similar trends are observed in European universities. A 2008 study conducted in various universities across four countries found significant instances of plagiarism. In Spain, about 59% admitted to plagiarizing from digital sources, and 47% from books, journals, or academic articles. In the UK, 35% admitted to plagiarism, and 49% didn't even consider it a violation when the sources were from the internet. In Bulgaria, 47% admitted to cheating, and 75% of them said they knew others who did so but had no intention of reporting them. In Croatia, 82% of students admitted to some level of plagiarism, with 52% copying at least 10% of a source verbatim (Pupovac et al., 2008). A 2019 study by Bucciol et al., (2020) in Italy found that 61% of students cheated at least once, including students from top universities like the University of Bologna. A study involving over 1,000 students at the University of Lleida, Spain, revealed that 69.3% copied and pasted text into their written assignments, and 68.3% paraphrased. Furthermore, 82.1% of students believed that translating a text was plagiarism, while 13.6% insisted that citing digital sources was unnecessary (Olivia-Dumitrina et al., 2019).

The methods of cheating began to change after 1994 due to the rapid advancement of technology. This phenomenon brought many advantages to people and the economy but also introduced new opportunities for cheating. The internet provides unlimited information accessible at any time. Today, it is relatively easy to find information on a given topic online and just as easy to copy and use it—even store it on mobile phones or small devices that can be hidden easily. As a result of this easy access to information and advanced technologies, some students are more likely to disregard their values and choose to engage in plagiarism and cheating. Currently, ChatGPT and similar tools are seen as the biggest challenge to learning assessment—providing vast and rapid information that is almost impossible to trace. Its potential role as a study assistant is still not fully understood. Once again, value orientation plays a crucial role—when speed, convenience, and efficiency are valued more than ethics and integrity, abuse becomes much more likely.

Educational researchers have sought to explain the causes of academic dishonesty through a range of theoretical frameworks (DiPietro, 2010). From a learning process

perspective, students may resort to cheating due to a lack of effective study strategies or an unwillingness to invest the time and effort required to implement them. From a developmental standpoint,, the tendency to cheat can vary according to the student's cognitive, social, and moral maturity. From a motivational viewpoint, the reasons are highly diverse: some students are strongly driven by external rewards such as grades; others are concerned with maintaining a particular self-image in front of parents or peers; and some lack the self-efficacy needed to engage with complex academic tasks, or are influenced by personality traits developed over time (Miller et al., 2007).

Game theory offers a particularly interesting explanation that closely matches the current reality and is especially applicable in the Bulgarian context. In essence, students and instructors are "playing a game", each seeking to optimize outcomes. Students aim to complete academic tasks through the easiest means possible, often attempting to demonstrate some knowledge acquisition while avoiding more rigorous academic expectations. The prevalence of dishonest behavior today may stem from an equilibrium of sorts—where student tactics are matched by equally calibrated faculty countermeasures. This dynamic fosters a "cheating culture" characterized by sentiments such as, "I succeeded, I outsmarted the system, I didn't get caught, I'm clever." Such a mindset not only normalizes dishonest behavior but also encourages its replication. It may also explain why Bulgarian students tend to avoid admitting personal misconduct—even in anonymous settings—yet display detailed familiarity with dishonest practices, express admiration for them, and share them widely among peers.

Diekhoff et al. (1996) found that the most significant deterrents to academic dishonesty are external and related to potential punishment. Internal deterrents—such as guilt or anxiety about being exposed—tend to have far less influence and are often rationalized. The primary factor discouraging misconduct is fear of being caught by an instructor, which may result in a failing grade or institutional disciplinary action. These findings are supported by numerous other studies, reinforcing the conclusion that reducing academic misconduct depends largely on proactive measures by faculty and institutions. However, instructors often show reluctance to actively monitor or report cheating (Coren, 2011). They are discouraged by various factors such as emotional burden of potential conflict with students, fear of confrontation, the time-consuming nature of redesigning assessments to prevent cheating, the effort required to gather

evidence and address incidents, concerns about retaliation, the possibility of institutional or legal disputes, and the fear of receiving low course evaluations from students.

Methodology

The current study employed both a survey and focus group discussion. A questionnaire was developed targeting current undergraduate and graduate students, as well as alumni who had graduated within the past five years and more than five years ago. This approach was chosen to allow for a broader analysis of attitudes and behaviors associated with academic dishonesty. The study was designed in response to the current educational landscape, which is shaped by instant access to digital information, collaborative learning formats such as group projects, and the influence of students' professional work environments.

Tools and Data collection

The survey was structured around two core sections:

Reported Observations of Academic Dishonesty

The first group of questions aimed to assess the extent to which students were aware of or had witnessed specific dishonest behaviors during individual assessment tasks or exams throughout their studies. In an effort to encourage honest responses, participants were not asked to disclose their own misconduct, but rather to indicate which practices they were aware of or had witnessed. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale: Always, Often, Rarely, Sometimes, Never.

Perceptions of Acceptability

The second group of questions aimed to find out what the students' attitudes were, how they perceived various practices of misconduct. Respondents were asked to classify specific behaviors as either dishonest or acceptable. Responses included “Yes,” “No,” or “Cannot decide.”

A focus group discussion was conducted with current students only. The discussion centered on the results of the survey, exploring the reasons behind academic dishonesty during exams and coursework, and potential strategies for its prevention and reduction.

Procedure and Participants

The survey was administered in May 2025 using an online Google Forms questionnaire, which was distributed electronically to current and former students. After the survey results were compiled, a focus group discussion was conducted with students from New Bulgarian University to further explore the findings and address specific issues highlighted by the data.

Results

A total of 130 survey responses were collected, with 91% from current students and 9% from alumni. Gender distribution was 44.8% male and 55.2% female. Age distribution was as follows: 80% of respondents were between 19 and 24 years old; the remaining 20% were aged 25 and above.

First set of questions: "Have you heard of or observed the following actions during individual assessment tasks or exams during your academic studies?"

The first group of questions provides information about whether students engage in various forms of cheating. Since in the focus groups participants expressed some reluctance to fully share their opinions, the final analysis combined answers as follows: "rarely" and "never" were grouped as clearly negative; "sometimes," "often," and "always" were grouped as positive. Nevertheless, negative answers clearly predominate—from 65% to 86%. (Table 1). However, this is somewhat questionable because it contradicts the results from the focus groups, except for the third and fourth questions. In those discussions, students clearly stated that mass copying from the internet for written assignments is common, especially after the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI), and that group test solving is a usual practice. The discrepancy between the focus group discussions (where students admitted widespread cheating) and the survey results (where negative responses dominate) suggests a possible social desirability bias—students may underreport misconduct when surveyed.

The first, second, fifth, and sixth questions have the highest percentages of affirmative answers (48%, 36%, 31%, and 36%, respectively), indicating that even if some negative answers are not fully honest, these practices are the most widespread.

Copying without citing the source, group test solving, and using AI to complete written assignments are also the most frequently detected forms of plagiarism by instructors. Unfortunately, no official reports have been registered by faculty in this regard.

Table 1

Reported frequency of observed academic misconduct during assessments or exams

Question	Predominantly Negative Response (Never, Rarely)	Predominantly Positive Response (Sometimes, Often, Always)
1. Does it happen that information from the internet is used without citing the source?	55.4%	48.4%
2. Does it happen that someone uses answers from others for an individual assignment completed outside class (e.g., purchased answers)?	67.7%	35.6%
3. Does it happen that a student from a higher semester gives their written work to students from following semesters?	86.4%	14.5%
4. Does it happen that students from higher semesters provide exam information to students from following semesters?	76.9%	23.8%
5. Does it happen that students from the same course gather to complete online tests that should be done individually?	71.6%	30.8%
6. Does it happen that artificial intelligence (AI) is used to entirely produce a written assignment?	64.6%	36.2%

(More than one answer may be indicated)

Two additional analyses were performed according to respondents' age and student status based on the first group of questions.

Table 2

Distribution of reported academic misconduct by age

Age of Respondents	Predominantly Negative Responses (Never, Rarely – Number of Responses)	Predominantly Positive Responses (Sometimes, Often, Always – Number of Responses)	Ratio (No Such Practices : Such Practices)
Up to 24 years old	465	158	3 : 1
25 years and older	68	83	0.8 : 1

Table 3

Distribution of reported academic misconduct by student status

Student Status	Predominantly Negative Responses (Never, Rarely – Number of Responses)	Predominantly Positive Responses (Sometimes, Often, Always – Number of Responses)	Ratio (No Such Practices : Such Practices)
Current Students	507	196	3 : 1
Graduated Students	27	46	0.6 : 1

Second set of questions – "Do you consider these specific activities to be academic dishonesty?"

The second group of questions investigates which forms of cheating students perceive as improper behavior and violations of academic ethics (see Table 4). The results are interesting, especially if we add the "I don't think so" answers to the "I cannot judge" responses, which suggest that some activities are perceived not as academic cheating but as normal preparation or allow for ambivalent behavior. There is strong consensus that submitting someone else's work as one's own (69.2%), using AI to fully complete assignments (68.5%), and using ready-made test answers (60.8%) constitute academic misconduct. At the same time, more than half of the respondents do not perceive as misconduct helping a friend with an out-of-class assignment that they

should do alone (73.1%), receiving help for such an assignment (70%) or submitting one's own previous work for a new course (57.7%). A significant share also do not perceive copying internet sources without citation as cheating (44.7%). The findings suggest that some behaviors, such as group work on assignments that should be individual, reusing one's own work, or copying from online sources without citation, have become normalized or are not perceived as serious ethical violations by many students.

Table 4

Classification of specific behaviors as either dishonest or acceptable

Question	Yes	No	Not sure
1. Do you consider submitting your completed work from a previous course as an assignment in a subsequent course to be academic dishonesty?	42.3 %	29.2 %	28.5%
2. Do you consider submitting a completed work from a student in a previous semester as your own assignment in the following semester in the same or similar course to be academic dishonesty?	69.2 %	21.5 %	9.2%
3. Do you consider taking exams for a friend that you completed in a previous semester (e.g., test answers) to be academic dishonesty?	60.8 %	21.5 %	17.7%
4. Do you consider receiving help from a friend for completing an out-of-class assignment that was supposed to be done individually to be academic dishonesty?	30.0 %	47.7 %	22.3%
5. Do you consider giving help to a friend for completing an out-of-class assignment that he/she should do individually to be academic dishonesty?	26.9 %	52.3 %	20.8%
6. Do you consider obtaining instructions from the internet for completing an out-of-class assignment, which are copied and used without citing the source, to be academic dishonesty?	55.4 %	16.2 %	28.5%
7. Do you consider using artificial intelligence to fully complete an assignment to be academic dishonesty?	68.5 %	19.2 %	12.3%

An additional analysis was conducted for the second group of questions, segmented by the respondents' age.

Table 5

Distribution by age of perceptions regarding certain activities as academic dishonesty

Question/Age Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Up to 24 years old – Total	Negative – 367 / Positive – 340 / Ratio – 1,1:1						
По-скоро отрицателен отговор – (не; не мога да преценя – брой отговори)	59	32	43	76	76	47	33
По-скоро положителен отговор (да – брой отговори)	42	69	58	25	25	54	67
25+ годишна възраст - общо	Отрицателни – 67 / Положителни – 101 / Съотношение – 0,7:1						
По-скоро отрицателен отговор – (не; не мога да преценя – брой отговори)	10	18	18	11	9	16	19
По-скоро положителен отговор (да – брой отговори)	14	6	6	13	15	8	5

Discussion

From these data we can derive some implications for institutional policy and educational processes. The mixed perceptions about what constitutes misconduct highlight the importance of clear communication from institutions regarding academic integrity policies and expectations. Educational interventions should focus on clarifying ambiguous areas and foster critical reflection on ethical standards.

The data shows a clear difference between younger students (up to 24 years) and older students (25+ years) in terms of admitting to engaging in academic misconduct. One in three respondents up to 24 years old do not even acknowledge the presence of cheating at universities, unlike respondents aged 25+, who are more candid and nearly all admit to such practices. The same ratio is observed between current students and graduates. More than half of the students under 24 do not recognize many forms of cheating as such, implying they allow such behavior. Younger students tend to be less strict in labeling certain behaviors as academic misconduct compared to older students. The ratio of negative to positive responses indicates a more permissive attitude among younger students toward certain questionable practices.

This raises an important question: is cheating simply a stage in personal development that most students overcome over time? Do students change their behavior with professional growth and awareness of the connection between actions and consequences? Or do habits formed during university years become entrenched, leading to disregard for moral norms and prioritizing success at any cost over personal integrity? This topic is scarcely researched. Only Whitley (1998) identifies factors influencing cheating propensity and suggests that the hypothesis of personal development deserves attention. His study shows that older and married students cheat less frequently, a finding confirmed by our research. This leads to the conclusion that with increased maturity, independence, and responsibility, the tendency to cheat decreases.

Students in the focus groups generally believe cheating is wrong because "it's unfair." Most consider some situations clearly wrong—stealing a colleague's work, falsifying research results, or buying an article online and submitting it as their own. However, in many cases, they judge cheating as acceptable or do not perceive it as improper—such as submitting the same work for two courses, using a citation without reading the original article, paraphrasing without citing the source, or jointly solving an online test.

The reasons for engaging in cheating can be divided into several main types:

- **Inability to complete the task** – "I can't do it," "It's too hard," "I don't understand what's required."

- **Lack of interest or irresponsibility toward studies** – "I don't care," "I'm just trying to pass," "I'm not interested in this subject."

- **Coping strategy under stress and pressure** – many students are under pressure to achieve success (need for scholarships, rising fees, parental expectations, public emphasis on grades, tight job market). Under such pressure, cheating may be a way to cope and secure good results. According to Whitley (1998), external pressure to achieve high grades, heavy workload, and competition strongly influence cheating behavior. Grades are not only measures of learning but also criteria for scholarships, internships, and jobs. This system fosters the motivation to cheat to succeed.

- **Unclear instructor expectations** – some behaviors which are considered cheating by instructors may stem from unclear guidelines. Many students think it is acceptable to cite without a source if the text is paraphrased or translated. Whether work should be individual or group also depends on the instructor, and unclear rules can cause inadvertent violations. Clear communication of expectations and their rationale could prevent this.

- **Learned behavior and cheating culture** – if the value of academic integrity and consequences for cheating are not taught in secondary education, and if cheating goes unpunished, it may become habitual. Given the prevalence of cheating, it is likely that students grow up in a cheating culture. Since this is likely to be the case (at least for a portion of students), reducing cheating requires serious work to change attitudes on the part of the university. The "Codes of Honor", applied alone, are not particularly effective, but may help if combined with other measures.

- **Societal model for professional development** – frequent public scandals in Bulgaria show people who reached high positions through various cheating and even criminal acts without consequences. Some students interpret events such as fake diplomas, economic or political fraud and corruption as the only route to success. This is a serious issue that requires societal and governmental efforts to address.

Conclusion

Plagiarism represents a serious and widespread problem in the higher education system across Europe. The extent to which it occurs depends on the specific country, academic discipline, and the methods used for its detection. Results from various studies indicate that a significant portion of students admit to having engaged in some form of academic misconduct. The reasons for such behavior are diverse — ranging from unclear rules about citation and pressure to achieve high results, to poor time management and easy access to information on the internet, which facilitates copying others' texts. To address this issue, universities apply a combination of technological tools for detecting plagiarism and educational measures such as seminars and training on academic integrity. Nevertheless, progress remains limited and largely depends on

the institution's internal culture, policies, and societal attitudes towards cheating in education.

As previously noted, cheating is closely linked to ethical norms, personal values, and an individual's subjective understanding of what is right and wrong. The lack of a clear and concrete definition of cheating can confuse students and lead to a misunderstanding of the significance of academic integrity. To counter this, most universities implement codes of ethics that establish behavioral standards to which both students and faculty are expected to adhere. However, even when rules exist, they are not always communicated effectively, nor fully understood or observed by all. It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that the code and other measures are accessible, clear, and known to students. When effective preventive mechanisms are lacking in the university environment, the propensity to cheat increases. If a student manages to cheat once without being caught, the likelihood of repeating such behavior rises significantly. When students are convinced that they can cheat without consequences, this leads to wider spread of academic dishonesty. Moreover, when they realize that others also benefit from cheating, it further fuels their desire to follow suit.

Different types of cheating behaviors should lead to penalties of varying severity, with repeat offenses sanctioned more strictly than first-time violations. It is important that punishments are proportionate — overly harsh sanctions may discourage instructors from applying formal procedures. The key is balance: penalties should be fair and realistic. Equally important is that students believe cheating will be detected and punished. This, however, is difficult to achieve because procedures are often carried out opaquely, others do not learn about them, do not see the enforcement and impact of university policy, and tend to underestimate the problem.

In some European countries, strict legal sanctions exist, while others emphasize more educational and disciplinary approaches. When rules are clearly formulated and applied consistently, cases of plagiarism tend to decrease. Codes of ethics, sanctions, and increased monitoring by faculty should be united around the idea that open dialogue with students about cheating is essential. Students should be encouraged not only to follow rules but to think critically about their own actions and actively participate in discussions on the topic.

Changing attitudes demands systematic work at the university level and across society. Authorities and institutions have a key role in creating conditions for integrity and fairness. The educational strategy should not only strengthen control and provide support for learning but also help foster early development of personal responsibility and maturity in students — qualities crucial for their long-term ethics and success.

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