

## Student Perceptions of Academic Dishonesty in a Private Middle Eastern University

Khawlah Ahmed,<sup>\*,a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>American University of Sharjah, Universities City, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

**Submitted:** December 26, 2017 | **Peer reviewed:** January 28, 2018 | **Accepted:** April 6, 2018 |

**Published:** April 25, 2018

### Abstract

**Objective:** In varying degrees of severity and seriousness, evidence of academic dishonesty exists in tertiary institutions around the world. This paper examines academic misconduct in a tertiary-level institution in one of the Gulf countries to see if academic dishonesty prevails, and if so, how and why it happens.

**Method:** To gauge students' perceptions about academic dishonesty in this context, a survey was distributed to 111 junior, sophomore, and senior level students taking an advanced academic writing course in a private university.

**Results:** Results show statistically significant evidence that cheating exists.

**Conclusions:** While research on academic misconduct is extensive in Western contexts, less is documented in the Middle East and North Africa region besides conceptual papers that aim to create a general understanding of this issue and newspaper articles that discuss its prevalence.

**Implications for Theory and/or Practice:** This paper underscores the existence of academic misconduct in the Middle East and North Africa region, identifying the need for further research and implementation of improved teaching strategies and increased attention regarding academic misconduct.

**Keywords:** academic dishonesty, academic integrity, plagiarism, cheating, Middle East region

### Introduction

As technology makes academic dishonesty more easily accomplished, identification and prevention of plagiarism is an issue that all academic institutions must confront. This phenomenon has long been documented in countries like the United States, and was highlighted decades ago in headlines like "Cheating, Writing, and Arithmetic" (1999). It is an ongoing issue today and prevails even in some of the world's elite academic institutions, like Harvard (Carmichael, 2012), and in established universities in the United Kingdom (O'Malley, 2016) and Australia (McNeillage & Visentin, 2014; Smith, 2015).

Academic dishonesty contradicts academic integrity, which is a commitment to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (*Fundamental Values*, 1999). Because academic integrity has come to include all aspects of learning, teaching, and research, these values are essential if an academic institution is to successfully educate students and maintain a reputation for excellence (Hinman, 2002).

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\*Author correspondence: khawlah@aus.edu

Academic dishonesty is generally divided into three categories: cheating, plagiarism, and collusion (Moon, 2006). Yet, whether discussing plagiarism in all its forms (Fallon, 2008; Howard, 2002), other categories and subcategories, like fabricating, falsifying, and aiding (Howard, 2000), other deceptive methods (Griffin, Bolkan, & Goodboy, 2015), or using traditional or contemporary methods (Witherspoon, Maldonado, & Lacy, 2012), academic dishonesty is an issue of concern on the academic front. The ways in which individuals commit such misconduct may be seen by some as unclear issues (Owunwanne, Rustagi, & Dada, 2010), but what is clear is that academic dishonesty has intensified due to technology and the Internet (Bachore, 2014; Foster & Read, 2006; Harris, 2012; Riskey, O'Dweyer, & Ledwith, 2011; Strom & Strom, 2007; Wasley, 2006) and is creating challenges (Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003; Sieber, 2005) for students, educators, and academic institutions alike.

World organizations have called for innovative approaches to increase access to education (such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's [2016] *Education for People and Planet: Creating Sustainable Futures for All*). Whether this increase in access to education is done through e-learning technologies, open access platforms, flexible, hybrid, or fully online education, the pressure to incorporate technology in the classroom is intensifying. However, this has resulted in what is known as cyber plagiarism (Miller, 2012), encompassing new methods of cheating (from essay mills to contract cheating) and the student belief that online information is "commonly owned" and therefore can be "commonly authored" without attribution (Bonner, 2006, p. 4). This phenomenon, referred to as a "crisis" (Wangaard & Stephens, 2011, p. 1), is spreading in academic institutions across the world.

### Literature Review

Research shows that academic dishonesty prevails on Western college campuses (Chen, 2009; O'Rourke et al. 2010; Simkin & McLeod, 2010) at alarming rates (Carter & Punyanunt-Carter, 2006), with no limits to the types of cheating that can occur (Hendricks, Young-Jones, & Foutch, 2011), and in different forms and varying degrees of severity and seriousness (Levy & Rakovski, 2006). Research conducted in the United States by McCabe (2005) revealed that 70% of the 50,000 undergraduate students surveyed across 60 campuses nationwide reported cheating. McCabe's (2005) text refers to a 1964 study conducted by Bill Bowers (the first large-scale study of cheating in institutions of higher learning, which surveyed more than 5,000 students in a diverse sample of 99 U.S. colleges and universities), which found that three fourths of the respondents had engaged in one or more incidents of academic dishonesty.

Many factors and or reasons have been shown to contribute to academic dishonesty. According to Ajzen's (2002) Theory of Planned Behavior, behavior is controlled by three key factors: a person's attitude toward the behavior, a person's control over the conditions of performing such a behavior and its consequences, and the perceptions of social pressures (Ajzen, 2002; Passow, Mayhew, Finelli, Harding, & Carpenter, 2006). Such factors have, in many ways, been reflected in other research conducted on academic dishonesty. A review of such studies shows that academic dishonesty may occur due to varying reasons and factors that can range from issues relating to maintaining a grade point average (GPA) to age and gender (Smyth & Davis, 2003; Teixeira & Rocha, 2008). McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (1999) showed that lack of responsibility, character, personal integrity, poor self-image, laziness, parental pressures, and a desire to excel are some reasons for such behavior. Other studies have shown that it can be attributed also to peer behavior (O'Rourke et al., 2010; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009), instructors not responding to academic dishonesty incidents (Kerkvliet & Sigmund, 1999; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001), and institutions that underestimate the degree at which academic dishonesty

is occurring and the subsequent lack of strict measures to prevent it (Hard, Conway, & Moran, 2006).

Other factors bringing about a new generation that cheats have been attributed to a new culture of sharing (Kolker, 2012), the increased emphasis on testing, and the social norms, whereby many like the “Wall Street titans, politicians, and other high visibility leaders ... cheat [and] ... get away with it” (Kolker, 2012, p.2). There are those who have attributed the new generation to the shifting values from idealism to materialism (Callahan, 2004) or to social pressures that demand 21<sup>st</sup> century students to demonstrate not only speed but also productivity and performance (Blum, 2009; Rabi, Patton, Fjortoft, & Zgarrick, 2006).

While some research has suggested that honor codes have had positive effects on reducing academic dishonesty (Konheim-Kalkstein, Stellmark, & Shilkey, 2008; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001), other research has shown that it is not reduced, even if students are aware of these codes (Anakwe & Thomas-Haysbert, 2009; Vandehy, Diekhoff, & LaBeff, 2007). Some research has even suggested that the effects of extrinsic motivation and competition are not reliable predictors of academic dishonesty (Orosz, Farkas, & Roland-Lévy, 2013).

Finally, though empirical research has shown that academic dishonesty has no geographic boundary and is seemingly a universal phenomenon (Hosney & Fatima, 2014; Hughes, Butler, Kritsonis, & Herrington, 2007; Jalal-Karim, 2013; Lin & Wen, 2007; McCabe, Feghali, & Abdallah, 2008; Ossai, Ethe, Okwuedei, & Edougha, 2014; Shariffuddin & Holmes, 2009; Teixeira & Rocha, 2008), researchers conducting cross-cultural comparisons have speculated that academic dishonesty is a construct that varies across cultures due to collectivist and individualistic societies’ differing perspectives (Chanock, 2005; Pickering & Hornby, 2005). Such studies show that some concepts which are part of students’ home cultural values may not be compatible with the cultural values within other cultures, or cultural contexts (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), including academic contexts. In some Asian cultures, some level of academic dishonesty is acceptable (Ahmad, Simun, & Mohammad, 2008). For example, including the exact words and phrases of party leaders, in some communist countries, is essential to publication, while in Western contexts, academic misconduct is considered a serious offense (Coalter, Lim, & Wanorie, 2007; Leonard & LeBrasseur, 2008).

### **The Study**

Even though the topic of academic dishonesty has been explored in Western contexts, studies concerning this issue are still rarely conducted or published on an international level in many regions of the world, one of which is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In this region, as Afifi (2007) explained, there is little “data about the prevalence of plagiarism, honorary authorships, or other violations of research integrity” (para. 2). Research conducted in this region is scarce, with few cited sources, such as McCabe, Feghali, and Abdallah (2008), Jalal-Karim (2013), and Razek (2014). There are some conceptual papers that aim to create a general understanding of this issue (Khan, 2010), and newspaper articles that discuss academic dishonesty in the region (Al Najami, 2009; Al Lawati, 2010; Moussly, 2010, 2012; Shabandri, 2015; Swan, 2014), but little research exists on regional student perceptions of academic dishonesty in academic contexts.

The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of academic integrity in a tertiary-level (postsecondary) institution in one of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

## Research Questions

The study gauges students' perspectives about cheating to see if cheating prevails, and if so, how it is done. It also asks students for suggestions that may help in preventing cheating. Students responded to 13 statements (see Appendix for the statements and the "Data Collection and Analysis" section for how the statements were generated). To gain insight on how cheating (if any) is done and how it can be prevented, students were asked to answer the following open-ended questions:

1. How is cheating done (i.e., what are the latest trends or methods of cheating, if any)?
2. How, in your opinion, can cheating be prevented?

## Data Collection and Analysis

To be able to conduct this research, an ethics approval form, for doing research involving human subjects, was submitted and approved. To get an idea of students' perceptions about academic dishonesty in this context, a survey was distributed to 111 junior (second year), sophomore (third year), and senior (fourth year) students from different colleges within a private university in one of the GCC countries. All students were enrolled in an advanced academic writing course, which focused on issues of academic integrity. The majority of students attending this course (who are representative of all the student body in the university) are of Middle Eastern descent and are categorized as English as a second language (ESL) and or English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. This university has an academic code published in its catalogue, as well as on the university website. A clause referring to academic integrity is found on every syllabus for every course taught, and the code is presented to the students at the beginning of the semester.

To ensure that the students did not have any problems with understanding the items on the survey (or filling it out), a pilot study was conducted where the survey was given to 10 students from the study institution with similar background and profile as the final sample. The final survey was distributed in class, in hard copy, to the 111 students (a convenience sample) who attended the advanced academic writing course. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes, students were instructed not to write their names on the surveys.

The survey administered is part of a larger research project being conducted by the author on academic dishonesty. The complete survey includes three sections:

1. Demographics
2. Item statements that address issues of academic dishonesty and university policies
3. Open-ended questions that examine the students' perspectives and school experiences regarding cheating

Ideas for the statements in the survey were generated from the literature review (Owunwanne, Rustagi, Dada, 2010) and gauged from 3 years of discussions with students taking the advanced academic writing course.

Only the statements and questions related to the focus of this paper were selected for analysis: 13 statements from Section 2 (see Appendix) and 2 open ended questions from Section 3 (Figures 1 and 2). The 13 statements chosen examined students' perspectives toward cheating, whether there is academic misconduct and the reasons for it. A 5-point Likert scale, from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1), was used to assess statements 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12 and 13. Statements 3, 7, 9, and 10 were yes/no questions. Therefore, for analysis purposes, the results of these 13 statements were grouped under two headings: those that yielded positive responses

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(strongly agree, agree, and yes) and those that yielded negative responses (strongly disagree, disagree, and no). Though statement 11 was placed as a hypothetical question (in the survey distributed for the larger research project conducted by the author), during this study the students were specifically asked to state if they themselves would cheat or not if they had the opportunity to do so. To see if the results obtained from the student responses to these questions were statistically significant, a proportion test was conducted.

Regarding the two open-ended questions from Section 3, the first question asked students about the mediums by which students take part in academically dishonest activities, if any. The second question asked students to provide suggestions on how academically dishonest activities, if any, could be prevented. The open-ended questions were analyzed through inductive coding, where the answers to the questions were transcribed then scanned “to see what categories suggest themselves, or ‘emerge’, from the data” (Burns, 2010, p.107).

## Results

The proportion tests conducted show that there is statistically significant evidence (5% level of significance) in all the statements (except statement 8 that says that *cheating is a means of success in today's world*; see Appendix).

Figure 1 displays the results for the first open-ended question (which asked students about the common mediums or trends by which students take part in academically dishonest activities).

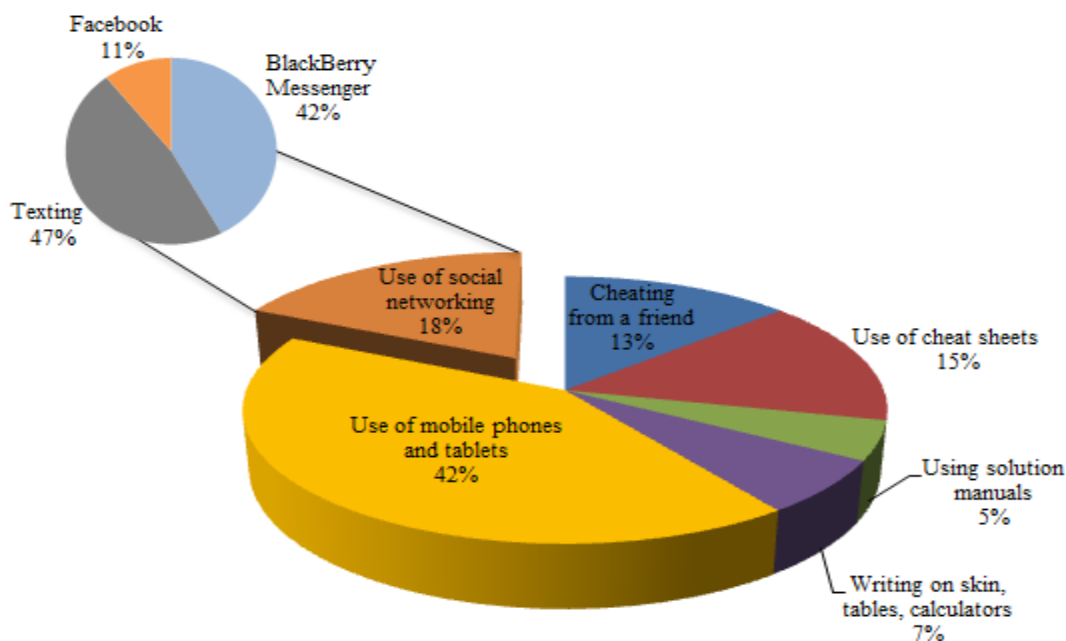


Figure 1. Cheating mediums.

Results show that 65% of the students use technology to cheat (42% used mobile phones and tablets; 18% mention the use of Blackberry Messenger, Facebook, and texting; 5% said they use the online solution manuals provided for faculty by book publishers); 15% said they use cheat *chits* (i.e., sheets, students refer to them as *chits*); 13% said they cheat from friends; and 7% said they cheat by writing on skin, tables, and calculators.

Figure 2 shows the suggestions for preventing cheating, addressed in the second open-ended question.

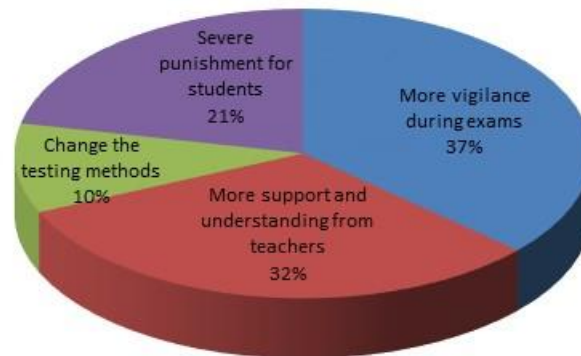


Figure 2. Suggestions for preventing cheating.

Results shows that 37% of the students suggest more vigilance during exams, 21% said there needs to be severe punishment for those caught cheating, 10% of the students suggested changing the testing methods, and 32% said that more support and understanding from teachers is required.

## Discussion

The results emerging from this study, to some degree, seem congruent and comparable with findings from studies conducted in Western university settings (Carmichael, 2012; McCabe, 2005; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Based on student perceptions, a considerable amount of academic misbehavior is occurring at the institution. Results show a gap between students' beliefs and their actions. The majority of the students believe that this kind of misbehavior is wrong, yet they still report doing it. This coincides with research previously conducted, where students reported academic dishonesty behaviors, yet they condemned it in terms of their cultural, religious, and or ethical beliefs (Gross, 2011, Hosney & Fatima, 2014; Wowra, 2007). Despite their beliefs (cultural, religious, or ethical), many students are willing to sacrifice these stated values to get better grades or help fellow students. The idea of explaining what they do as *helping* and not cheating may be attributed to what Kolker (2012) refers to as the new culture of "sharing" among today's students.

The results in this study support Rettinger and Kramer's (2009) findings that "having peers who cheated in college" is not only "correlated with an individual's cheating behavior" but "knowing people who cheat (or have cheated) is a risk factor for starting to cheat" (p. 296). The majority of the students in the study said that if they had the opportunity to cheat they would take it. This may be a result of "know[ing] students on the Dean's or Chancellor's list who cheat" (survey question 7; see Appendix) or seeing students "who cheat but have never been caught" (survey question 9; see Appendix). In all cases, this is important since seeing others cheat makes individuals "judge the behavior" as "less morally reprehensible" (O'Rourke et al., 2010, p.47).

Contributing to reports of academic misbehavior in this study may be the fact that the majority of the students "know of students who cheat but have never been caught" (survey

question 9; see Appendix) and also know of those who “have been caught cheating, but were not punished” (survey question 10; see Appendix) Results show that this kind of academic misconduct may be highly associated with faculty leniency (“lenient towards those they catch cheating” or “look the other way when they see students cheating” [survey questions 12 and 13 respectively; see Appendix), faculty who are not implementing the policies and the academic code published in the university’s catalogue.

This may also be a reason why many of the students surveyed suggested more vigilance during exams, severe punishments to students who commit such misconduct, and a change in the testing methods currently used. Students suggested that teachers “observe” students more “rigid[ly]” by bringing in “more individuals” along with the teacher to help “supervise the exams,” “collect[ing] the phones at the door” or “plac[ing] them on the table,” “empty[ing] pockets out at the door,” “looking at hands and desks,” and even “putting up cameras in [the lecture] halls.” Students suggested “severe punishment,” by “bring[ing] in strict professors” who “will implement strict punishment” and “mak[e] sure the rules of the system are enforced,” with “strong actions” being taken against those caught cheating, such as “giving a failing grade,” “hav[ing] them do community services,” “remov[ing] them from class,” or “expel[ling] them from the university.” As one student explained, “giving out real harsh punishment and a little bit of embarrassment” can be an effective deterrent to cheating since “cheating causes a ripple effect after all.” In regard to changing the testing methods currently used, students suggested “using essays,” doing away with “memorizing,” and “giv[ing] less weight to quizzes and exams” and “more weight to participation and in class assignments.”

The results suggest that not only do students need to be held accountable when caught committing misconduct of any kind, but administration should hold faculty accountable for enforcing the institution’s code of conduct. Faculty should be made aware that measures will be taken against those who are lenient and look the other way. Saying that, administration needs also to encourage and facilitate this process and not complicate it, which adds a burden on faculty who do report such incidents. Administration should create policies and procedures that make it less onerous to enforce the rules and should make sure faculty are supported when they identify academic dishonesty in the classroom.

Technology plays a major role in intensifying cheating, and this study supports such findings. Many of the breaches and academic misconduct committed in this study were facilitated by the Internet and the use of technology. Whether it is through the use of mobile phones and social networking, or by hacking to gain access to the online solution manuals provided by publishers for faculty use, students today are often more tech savvy than some of their faculty. Digital natives utilize technology to aid them, whether in the classroom during exams or outside, and as Curtis and Vardanega (2016) suggest, it is through technological and educational initiatives that we can counteract the potential of cheating. Though technology seems to be a major factor in academic misconduct in the study institution, older methods of cheating are still used and should not be underestimated. These methods ranged from using cheat chits; writing on skin, desks, and other available objects; or simply cheating off friends.

The author intended to capture the current conditions of academic integrity at one Middle Eastern university, which may be reflective of the situation in similar institutions and contexts. When academic misconduct is not dealt with effectively, it is advisable to first address the reasons behind the phenomenon, and determine ways by which it is done before trying to find solutions. This study is an attempt to understand why and how students engage in academic dishonesty in all its forms. Through a better understanding of how academic dishonesty is committed in a digital environment, institutions can develop effective means of detecting and eventually combatting



technology assisted cheating. An effective code of conduct must be coupled with the means to detect and punish cyber academic dishonesty on all campuses. Assessing the underlying patterns of thought and behavior may be deterring factors, if understood and dealt with properly. Gaining awareness of the techniques being used, and having discussions with students about the types of activities, could prove beneficial to creating appropriate remediation paths. Many of the students the author has worked with have actually divulged information about how they have outwitted not only their faculty, but even cheat detection tools like Safe Assign, through which the majority of assignments are submitted.

The results from this particular study establish students' perceptions about academic dishonesty. Nevertheless, the commonality reflected in studies conducted in other parts of the world seems to indicate that students, irrespective of their cultural background, may be quite similar in their actions and rationale for engaging in academic dishonesty. Such commonality may be a factor allowing Middle Eastern and North African institutions to apply successful initiatives currently being used in other institutions, where extensive research has been conducted. This may allow for interesting and fruitful cross-cultural comparisons.

Administrative attitudes toward faculty who report academic dishonesty might decrease the number of individuals on campus who feel supported in combating plagiarism on campus. "Although Arab researchers might be aware of a problem," as Afifi (2007) explained, it is "always swept under the carpet" (para. 3). The prevalence of such an approach toward issues of academic dishonesty suggests a potential research project that may shed light on the issue.

### **Conclusion**

Whether through theoretical or empirical research, or the establishment of codes of conduct, addressing academic dishonesty is a serious issue and has repercussions, not just during students' academic careers but also in their future work. Students who cheat on tests are more likely to engage in dishonest activities in the workplace (Graves & Austin, 2008). This phenomenon does not suddenly and unexpectedly appear at the tertiary level (where the majority of research being conducted currently is targeted) but may have its roots in pre-tertiary levels of education. Within the academic context, researchers, faculty, and administrators tend to concentrate more on tertiary levels and not on the beginning stages of education. A lack of emphasis on the earlier stages, where students establish their foundation for future behaviors, can therefore yield unintended consequences.

Academic dishonesty and ethical misconduct do not involve academic institutions only. In the process of researching the gray areas and trying to find solutions, including new strategies to address and combat this issue, it is important to start a discussion on academic dishonesty not only with students, faculty, administrators, counselors, advisors, and curriculum developers, but also with families, businesses, and society at large, because the repercussions of academic misconduct are bound to exceed the walls of the classroom.

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## Appendix

### Survey Results

Statement	Positive response	Negative response	No answers provided
1. Everyone cheats at one time or another in their life	89	12	10
2. Cheating is wrong but it is still done	105	2	4
3. I have cheated at least once in my academic career here	85	25	0
4. Sometimes one may be forced to give an answer to a friend	73	34	4
5. When one doesn't help a friend/classmate, even in cheating, s/he will be excluded from their circle	66	44	1
6. It is not considered cheating when one helps a friend	46	64	1
7. I know of students on the Dean's or Chancellor's list who cheat	65	46	0
8. Cheating is a means for success in today's competitive world	56	55	0
9. I know of students who cheat but have never been caught	98	13	0
10. I know students who have been caught cheating, but were not punished	67	44	0
11. If one has the opportunity to cheat, s/he will do so	75	36	0
12. Teachers are lenient towards those they catch cheating	70	40	1
13. Teachers look the other way when they see students cheating	54	57	0