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Students' Perception and Practices of Academic Dishonesty: The Case of Debre Markos University, Ethiopia

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Abstract:

To become a competent professional, it requires not only subject matter knowledge and practical skills, but also high moral values and responsibilities including academic integrity. However, academic dishonesty has becoming an impediment for universities' mission in producing competent and ethically responsible citizens. This study was therefore conducted to investigate the perception and practices of academic dishonesty among students in Debre Markos University. To achieve this objective, cross-sectional survey design was employed. 349 students who were selected using proportional stratified random sampling technique participated in the study. From the participants of the study, data were collected using questionnaire. The collected data was analyzed quantitatively using descriptive and inferential statistics, such as percentage, mean, t-test and one-way analysis of variance using SPSS version 20. The findings of the study showed that the majority (86.9%) of students perceived each listed behaviours as minor or serious dishonest behaviors, yet 55% of them reported that they engaged in cheating one or more times during their university lives. The finding of the study also revealed that there is no statistically significant mean difference between male and female students in their perception of academically dishonest behaviors in terms of their sex and grade level. We concluded that most students were aware of academically dishonest behaviors, but high proportion of them engaged in cheating behaviors.

Keywords: Academic dishonesty, academic integrity, quality of education

1. Introduction

Higher learning institutions are supposed to be places where seeds of knowledge and ethics are bloomed on the fertile land of human mind. In doing so, they must remain vigilant of the academic integrity of their students so that they can play a crucial role in producing competent, productive, ethically responsible and professionally committed citizens (Brimble & Stevenson-Clark, 2005; Lauder & Schmidt, 2013).

Despite efforts to ameliorate academic integrity on university campuses, academic dishonesty, commonly referred to as cheating, has become a complex and serious widespread problem at institutions of higher education (Lauder & Schmidt, 2013). An all-inclusive definition of academic dishonesty involves the practices of students in giving or receiving unauthorized assistance during exams; receiving credit for work which is not their own; copying and submitting other students' written works; collaborating with others on individual assignments, writing a paper for a student; using unauthorized material during examination; cheating during examination using different techniques; forging or altering university documents, or hiding library resources (Kaufman 2008; Batool, Abbas & Naeemi, 2011; Hughes, Julia, & McCabe, 2006, cited in Rehman & Waheed, 2014).

Through its effect on the quality of the education system, cheating influences the assessment of the stock of human capital thereby reducing the efficiency of a country's education system by distorting honest competition among students in particular and quality of education in general (Lupton, Chapman & Weiss, 2000, cited in Brimble & Stevenson-Clark, 2005; Magnus et al., 2002, cited in Teixeira & Rocha, 2006). Dick et al (2003, cited in Teixeira & Rocha, 2006) also emphasized that students who involved in cheating will not have the required knowledge, skills and ethics for their future professional life, and the production of these unfit professionals can damage the individuals, institutions that trained them and the country at large.

Academic dishonesty has become a common phenomenon that is plaguing the academic integrity of higher education institutions worldwide (Kaufman, 2008; Simkin & McLeod, 2009; Lauder & Schmidt, 2013; Alleyne & Phillips, 2011). The prevalence was even higher in some developing countries where the majority of students admitted cheating at least once during their studies (Hrabak et al., 2004, cited in Tanawattanacharoen & Nimnuan, 2009; Adeniyi & Taiwo,

2011). These students first look for ways to cheat in secondary school and continue these unethical practices in universities (Kaufman, 2008). Several studies also indicate that the levels of cheating among students in higher learning institutions has not only increased steadily over time to time but also the mechanisms students use to cheat have been highly sophisticated (Harding, Carpenter, Finelli & Passow, 2004; Lin & Wen, 2007; Tefera & Kinde, 2010; Feyisa, 2015).

Viewed in an historical perspective, a number of studies have shown evidence of the growing prevalence of academic dishonesty in academic institutions (Diekhoff, LaBeff, Clark, Williams, Francis & Haines, 1996; Karlins, Michaels & Podlogar, 1988; McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001; Adeniyi & Taiwo, 2011; Graham et al., 1994, cited in Rehman & Waheed, 2014; Baillo, 2000; Reyes, 1998; Bautista, 1980, cited in Balbuena & Lamela, 2015). To this end, scholars have described academic dishonesty as endemic to higher educational institutions (Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Simkin & McLeod, 2009).

Students perceive the immorality of academic malpractices. However, their good perception is not supported by inhibiting themselves from not actually practicing these behaviors. In line with this, Feyisa's (2015) study revealed that nearly 72% of his research participants perceived cheating in any form is unfair but still more than half of them had committed it. Rehman and Waheed (2014) also found that though the majority of their research participants have agreed that academic dishonesty has become the normal part of life in education system they are in favor of that it is bad habit and should be avoided to ensure quality of education. Furthermore, Balbuena and Lamela (2015) reported that the participants of their study considered cheating as unethical, and yet cheating on exams and homework is still prevalent and the students view these dishonest behaviors as ordinary school acts.

Although the prevalence of academic dishonesty and its short and long-term implications has been exhaustively examined by numerous studies (Karlins et al., 1988; Diekhoff et al., 1996; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; McCabe et al., 2001; Harding et al., 2004; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Teixeira & Rocha 2006; Lin & Wen, 2007; Kaufman, 2008; Simkin & McLeod, 2009; Tefera & Kinde, 2010; Jones, 2011; Jurdi, Hage & Chow, 2011; Adeniyi & Taiwo, 2011; Witherspoon et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2012; Elliott, Deal & Hendryx, 2014), only few studies have been conducted concerning the perception of students about academic dishonesty (Tanawattanacharoen & Nimnuan, 2009; Rehman & Waheed, 2014; Balbuena & Lamela, 2015; Feyisa, 2015). Therefore, due to our motivation to fill this research gap, we are interested to conduct a study to investigate the perception and practice of Debre Markos University students towards academic dishonesty. Thus, the study has raised the following research questions:

- How do students perceive academically dishonest behaviors?
- Do students have the habit of cheating during their stay in the university?
- Is there any statistically significant difference in students' perception of cheating in terms of sex and grade level?

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Design of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the perception and practices of Debre Markos University students towards academic dishonesty. In order to achieve the objective of the study, a cross-sectional survey design was used. A cross – sectional survey design was adopted because the study was undertaken at one point in time with the participation of different year level students (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

2.2. Population of the Study

The target population of this research was Debre Markos University regular undergraduate students. The total number of the population was 10, 000 (6602 males and 3398 females), The participants were included from college of social science and humanities, college of natural and computational science, college of agriculture and natural resource, college of health science, college of business and economics and college of technology.

2.3. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

From the total population of 10, 000 students, 370 students (246 males and 124 females) were selected as sample size for the study. Before selecting the sample size from each stratum, the researchers selected 50% the departments from each college using simple using simple random sampling technique. Then, by considering their numbers in the respective college, department, year level and sex, the participants of the study were selected in proportion to their representation in the population by using proportionale stratified random sampling technique (see Table 1 below). After their number of representation in each stratum was determined, the required 370 study participants was selected by using simple random sampling technique.

College	Department	Year 1			Year 2			Year 3			Year 4			Grand Total		
		M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
SSH	Amharic	2	4	6	5	1	6	3	4	7				10	9	19
	English	2	2	4	4	0	4	3	1	4				9	3	12
	Civics	3	5	8	6	1	7	4	2	6				13	8	21
Total		7	11	18	15	2	17	10	7	17				52		
NCS	Biology	2	3	5	2	3	5	2	3	5				6	9	15
	Sport science	1	1	2	2	2	4	2	2	4				5	5	10
	Statistics	3	4	7	5	1	6	3	2	5				11	7	18
Total		6	8	14	9	6	15	7	7	14				43		
Agri.	Animal Scie.	2	1	3	2	2	4	2	2	4				6	5	11
	Rural dev't	2	2	4	2	2	4	2	2	4				6	6	12
	Horticulture	2	2	4	2	2	4	2	2	4				6	6	12
Total		6	5	11	6	6	12	6	6	12				35		
Techno.	Civil				15	7	22	24	10	34	20	7	27	59	24	83
	Electrical				11	1	12	14	3	17	7	2	9	32	6	38
	IT				8	5	13	6	3	9	6	2	8	20	10	30
Total					34	13	47	44	16	60	33	11	44	151		
CBE	Economics	5	2	7	8	2	10	5	2	7				18	6	24
	Management	6	3	9	6	4	10	6	5	11				18	12	30
Total		11	5	16	14	6	20	11	7	18				54		
Health	PH	4	1	5	5	2	7	3	1	4				12	4	16
	Nursing	3	2	5	3	0	3	3	1	4				9	3	12
	Midwifery	1	1	2	2	1	3	3	0	3				6	2	8
Total		8	4	12	10	3	13	9	2	11				36		

Table 1: Students' Sex, College, Department and Year Level (N = 370)

2.4. Data Collection Instrument

The main source of data for this study was questionnaire. The researchers developed the questionnaire after reading different research findings regarding the title of the study and research objectives. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part was designed to gather information about students' demographic information and. the second part includes questions which have been designed to answer the objective of the study. Before the actual data collection was made pilot study was conducted by having 30 university students who were not involved in the final study so as to assure the internal consistency of items of the questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha correlations were calculated and alpha coefficients of $\alpha = .919$ and $\alpha = .961$ were obtained for the questions referring to perception and cheating practice respectively. Finally, data from 349 questionnaires (response rate 94.3%) were included in the statistical analysis of the final study.

2.5. Methods of Data Analysis

After the necessary data was collected, it was checked, coded, organized and recorded in to code sheet. Then, the collected, coded and organized data was analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation; and inferential statistics such as independent t-test and one-way analysis of variance using SPSS version 20.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Students' Perceptions of Academic Dishonesty

As shown in Table 2 below, students were presented with 17 items designed to measure their perceptions of what behaviors they consider academically dishonest. Each item was assigned with a scale that ranges from 1-3. While 1 represents the behavior never be considered as academically dishonest, 2 and 3 represents that the behavior is minor academic dishonesty and serious academic dishonesty respectively. This implies that the larger the number, the serious the behavior is academically dishonest.

No	Behavior	Scales						Mean	SD
		Not at all		Minor		Serious			
		F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	Copying answers from another student on a test/exam	48	13.8%	63	18%	238	68.2%	2.54	.72
2	Allowing another student to copy answers on a test/exam	38	10.9%	73	20.9%	238	68.2%	2.57	.68
3	Giving exam answers to a student by signals (finger, lip, etc.)	43	12.3%	87	24.9%	219	62.8%	2.50	.71
4	Receiving exam answers from another student by signals	38	10.9%	90	25.8%	221	63.3%	2.52	.68
5	Giving exam answers to another student by SMS, crub notes	28	8%	72	20.6%	249	71.4%	2.63	.63
6	Cheated on exams by illegally obtaining it in advance	29	8.3%	73	20.9%	247	70.8%	2.62	.63
7	Using an electronic device (mobile, calculator, etc.) as an aid	55	15.8%	171	49%	123	35.2%	2.28	.72
8	Receiving exam answers from a student by SMS, crab notes	29	8.3%	90	25.8%	230	65.9%	2.58	.64
9	Writing exam answers on the blackboard, tables, and sandals	37	10.6%	104	29.8%	208	59.6%	2.50	.69
10	Bringing false sick medical certificate for missing exams	50	14.3%	131	37.5%	168	48.2%	2.34	.72
11	Continuing to write after a test/exam has finished	78	22.4%	185	53%	86	24.6%	2.02	.69
12	Working with others on assignment when asked individually	44	12.6%	191	54.7%	114	32.7%	2.32	.69
13	Paying another person to complete an assignment/project	42	12%	107	30.7%	200	57.3%	2.45	.70
14	Writing /providing an assignment for someone else	79	22.6%	170	48.7%	100	28.7%	2.06	.72
15	Submitting work submitted the previous year by senior	48	13.8%	115	33%	186	53.2%	2.40	.72
16	Submitting the same work with friend	61	17.5%	119	34.1%	169	48.4%	2.31	.75
17	Copying and submitting the research work of others	31	8.8%	114	32.7%	204	58.5%	2.5	.66

Table 2: Students' Response about Their Perceptions of Academically Dishonest Behaviors

According to the data presented in Table 2, with an overall mean of 2.41 and a minimum of 2.02 average mean and a maximum of 2.63 average mean, it is clear that the great majority (86.9%) of the respondents defined the above behaviors to be dishonest in an academic setting. Specifically, among the 17 behaviors listed, Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16 & 17 were considered as serious academically dishonest behaviors whereas Items 7, 11, 12 & 14 were considered as minor academically dishonest behaviors by the respondents. As the calculated mean of each listed behavior is greater than or equals to 2 (expected mean), each behavior corresponds to minor to serious academically dishonest behaviors. Hence, almost all of the research participants realized the above listed behaviors as minor or serious dishonest behaviors.

3.1.2. The Major Cheating Techniques Employed by Students

Nineteen items were developed to gather data concerning the cheating practices of Debre Markos University students. The research participants were asked to report which behaviors they used to cheat during by putting an "X" mark in front of the five scales given (see Table 3 below). For the sake of analyzing the data, numbers were assigned for each scale 1 for never, 2 for once, 3 for sometimes, 4 for often and 5 for always.

As it is indicated in Table 3 below, more than half (55%) of the respondents reported that they used academically dishonest behaviors one or more times during their university lives. Specifically, continuing to write after a test/exam has finished (79.9%), working individual assignments with others (72%), allowing others to copy answers on exams (69.8%), writing notes on the blackboard, tables, sandals, etc. (67.2%), receiving exam answers from others by whispering (65.8%), submitting previously done assignment (65.3%), giving test/exam answers to others by signals (65%), using crib notes and electronic devices (64.7%), copying and submitting the research work of others (63.3%), copying exam answers from others with their knowledge (61.3%), sending exam answers to others by text message (55.4%) and copying exam answers from others without their knowledge (51.4%) were the top twelve academic malpractices students engaged in during doing exams, assignments, and other written works.

No	Behavior	Scales										Mean	SD
		Never		Once		Sometimes		Often		Always			
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	Copying exam answers from others without their knowledge	172	48.6%	33	9.3%	89	25.1%	11	3.1%	44	12.4%	2.2	1.41
2	Copying exam answers from others with their knowledge	137	38,7%	39	11%	95	26.8%	20	5.6%	58	16.4%	2.49	1.47
3	Allowing others to copy answers on a test/exam	107	30.2%	44	12.4 %	118	33.3%	27	7.6%	52	14.7%	2.69	1.72
4	Giving test/exam answers to others by signals	124	35 %	42	11.9 %	102	28.8%	29	8.2%	52	14.7%	2.55	1.42
5	Receiving test/exam answers from others by signals	195	55.1%	39	11%	71	20.1%	21	5.9%	23	6.5%	1.96	1.27
6	Continuing to write after a test/exam has finished	71	20.1%	42	11.9 %	167	47.2%	34	9.6%	34	9.6%	2.77	1.18
7	Impersonating another student in a test/exam	245	69.2%	50	14.1 %	46	13%	7	2%	1	.3%	1.48	.82
8	Getting someone else to pretend they are the student	256	72.3%	41	11.6 %	40	11.3%	4	1.1%	8	2.3%	1.47	.91
9	Submitting false medical certificate for missed exams	194	54.8%	57	16.1 %	76	21.5%	17	4.8%	5	1.4%	1.80	1.03
10	Illegally obtaining exam items before its administration	231	65.3%	35	9,9%	59	16.7%	18	5.1%	6	1.7%	1.66	1.04
11	Using crib notes and electronic devices	125	35.3%	46	13%	121	34.2%	24	6.8%	33	9.3%	2.41	1.29

No	Behavior	Scales										Mean	SD
		Never		Once		Sometimes		Often		Always			
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
12	Send exam answers to others by text message	157	44.4%	33	9.3%	124	35%	23	6.5%	12	3.4%	2.14	1.17
13	Receiving exam answers from others by whispering	121	34.2%	36	10.2 %	93	26.3%	51	14.4 %	48	13.6%	2.62	1.43
14	Writing notes on the blackboard or tables, sandals, etc.	114	32.2%	25	7.1%	112	31.6%	47	13.3 %	51	14.4%	2.70	1.42
15	Working individual assignments with others	99	28%	49	13.6 %	86	24.3%	36	10.2 %	79	22.3%	2.85	1.51
16	Paying others to work an assignment	205	57.9%	55	15.5 %	69	19.5%	15	4.2%	5	1.4%	1.74	1.01
17	Submitting previously done assignment	123	34.7%	39	11%	76	21.5%	57	16.1 %	54	15.3%	2.66	1.48
18	Submitting the same work with friend	180	50.8%	44	12.4 %	71	20.1%	31	8.8%	23	6.5%	2.06	1.29
19	Copying and submitting the research work of others	130	36.7%	46	13%	74	20.9%	67	18.9 %	32	9%	2.50	1.39

Table 3: Respondents' Responses Concerning Their Cheating Practices

3.1.3. The Difference in Students' Perception of Academic Dishonesty Based on Their Sex and Grade Level

Sex	N	Mean	SD	T	DF	Sig.(2-tailed)
Male	228	46.06	18.17	.235	347	.814
Female	121	45.57	19.25			

Table 4: Students' Perception of Cheating Using Independent-Samples T-Test

* $P < 0.05$

As it is indicated in Table 4, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean perception scores of male and female students regarding academic dishonesty. There was no statistically significant difference between male and female students in their perception of academically dishonest behaviors ($t(317) = .235, p = .814$, two-tailed).

	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	Year Level	Mean	F	Sig.
Between Groups	173.894	3	57.965	First year	42.46	1.049	.371
				Second year	40.46		
Within Groups	19060.358	345	55.247	Third year	41.10		
Total	19234.252	348		Fourth year	41.00		

Table 5: Students' Perception of Academic Dishonesty Using One-Way ANOVA

* $P < 0.05$

One-way analysis of variance was employed to examine the differences in students' perception regarding academic dishonesty among the four groups (year levels). The result from Table 5 shows that there was no statistically significant difference in the perception of academic dishonesty among the four groups of students in the study ($F(3, 345) = 1.049, p = .371$, two-tailed).

4. Discussion

4.1. Students' Perception of What Behaviors Constitute Academic Dishonesty

The finding of the study revealed that the great majority of the study participants realized test/exam related scenarios, assignment related scenarios, attendance related scenarios and research related scenarios as minor to serious academically dishonest behaviors, yet a substantial number of students engaged in cheating in one or more times during their university lives. In line with the present findings, Feyisa (2015) reported that nearly 72% of his research participants perceived cheating in any form is unfair but still more than half of them had committed it. Similarly, Balbuena and Lamela (2015) found that the majority of their study participants considered cheating as unethical, and yet cheating on exams and homework is still prevalent and the students view these dishonest behaviors as ordinary school acts. In his study Wideman (2008) also stated that his research participants acknowledged that many forms of cheating are wrong; yet many chosen to cheat anyway. Furthermore, from their survey study Tanawattanacharoen and Nimnuan (2009) confirmed that the majority of medical students felt that most scenarios were wrong but admitted to engaging in at least one of the scenarios.

4.1.1. The Major Techniques Employed by Students to Cheat

Students have employed both traditional and contemporary methods to cheat. The finding of the study showed that using crib notes to cheat during exams; writing exam notes on hands, legs, shoes, desks, blackboards, etc.; directly copying and submitting others' written works; collaborating on assignment when it is asked to be done individually; continuing to write after a test/exam has finished; submitting the same work with a friend; giving and/or receiving exam answers via SMS; sitting near to the clever students to cheat; writing answers in bold letters on answers sheet papers to make them visible for cheaters from distant; registering group members name on group assignment papers who didn't participate on it; using unauthorized electronics devices (such as mobile phones, calculators, etc. during exams) and using symbols through lips, hands and fingers to allow the nearby students to cheat were some of the major techniques Debre Markos university students used to cheat

The finding of Witherspoon, Maldonado and Lacey (2012) supports our finding in that cheaters will cheat using whatever method convenient to them, whether it is using a crib sheet, signs, or using a cell phone or other media to text message or to have others' work available to them. Similarly, in their simple survey of several universities in Ethiopia (Nelson et al., 2012) reveals that students engage in examination malpractices and cheating of some kind in all institutions employing various tactics such as: cheating through importing pre-prepared notes in 'cassettes', notes written on the body, on the clothes into the examination rooms; coping from one another between students who arrange before to sit next to each other, using SMS from cell phones and programmed calculators; handling of missing marks, missing marks, wrongly recorded marks, lost marks and nonexistent marks; impersonation, especially hiring someone else to do examination (re-take examinations); prior knowledge of the examinations questions through leakage; submission of answer scripts/booklets at a later time at a fee by internal examiners; bargaining for better marks from a lecturer at a fee; plagiarism; and so on.

5. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Summary

Based on the data analysis, interpretations and discussions, the following findings were summarized.

- The majority of students in Debre Markos University had good perceptions about academic dishonesty. Hence, they considered test/exam-related, assignment-related and research-related behaviors as academically dishonest behaviors.
- Yet a significant number of the participants (on average, 55%) reported that they used academically dishonest behaviors one or more times during their university lives.
- Independent t-test result has revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female students in their perception of academically dishonest behaviors.
- One-way analysis of variance result has also showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the perception of academic dishonesty among the four groups (year levels) of students in the study.

5.2. Conclusion

Despite the fact that the majority of Debre Markos University students had good perception regarding academically dishonest behaviors, significant number of students engaged in such behaviours one or more times during their university lives using different techniques. The findings of the study has an implication that unless and otherwise the university has to equip its students with a strong sense of academic integrity, the production of today's ethically irresponsible and professionally unfit graduates will be tomorrow's corrupted citizens who are not able to exercise their professional competency and responsibility to serve themselves, the society and the country at large.

5.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made.

- Though the majority of students in Debre Markos University had good awareness about cheating and its consequences, they haven't yet put their good perception in to practice by refraining themselves from any

academic related dishonest behavior. Hence, departments and colleges should give further consecutive training for their students regarding academic integrity culture.

- Debre Markos University should also promote and enforce its honor code of ethics regarding academic integrity among its students as early as possible, especially for first year students so that students can be responsible for their actions.
- Since academic dishonesty is deep rooted, the intervention mechanisms to curb this problem require an ongoing and collaboration approach. Therefore, students, teachers and administrative bodies should be committed in communicating students concerning ethical behaviors, academic integrity and professional responsibility. Moreover, all responsible bodies should take swift and serious measures on students who engage in cheating.

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