

# Staff Perceptions of Academic Integrity among Medical Students: A Study Conducted in a Higher Education Institute in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** *In the recent past that there have been several instances of breach of academic honesty among students which has resulted in much distress among teachers. The objectives of the study were to determine perception of staff on the frequency of certain dishonest acts, the attitude of staff to academic integrity issues, the perception of staff on adequacy of mechanisms available to minimize dishonesty and the opinion of staff on steps that can be taken to strengthen academic honesty. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed among academic staff of a higher education institute in Sri Lanka, after obtaining ethical clearance.<sup>7</sup> Responses were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS. Cheating at exams is an infrequent occurrence even though plagiarisms on written assignments, copying assignments from seniors/previous groups, forging signatures and producing false medical certificates occur frequently. Almost one third of the teachers did not talk to the students about dishonest behavior and some had ignored a suspected incident of cheating while few had referred a suspected case of cheating to relevant authorities. Teachers perceive that efficacy of the existing system is low. Many felt that academic integrity may be improved by giving staff clear guidelines and advice regarding academic integrity issues and by providing clear instructions and information about the consequences of dishonesty to students. The teachers felt that it is necessary to strengthen aspects of academic integrity among students. They felt that the present mechanisms inadequate and that it is necessary to be explicit about such issues with students and give staff and students clear guidelines.*

**Keywords:** Academic integrity, Staff perceptions, Medical education, Academic honesty, Higher education institutes.

## 1. Introduction

Academic integrity in relation to students encompasses values, behavior and conduct in all academic aspects in their student life. The Center for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

A study conducted in universities in Canada and USA revealed that, cheating on tests/ exams and plagiarism are a significant issue.<sup>2</sup>

It has been noticed in the past that there have been several instances of breach of academic honesty within the student population which has been exposed and resulted in much distress among teachers. Issues related to academic integrity are discussed at various forums with arguments as to whether such behavior is due to the lack of awareness on what amounts to academic dishonesty due to lack of a formal academic integrity policy in Sri Lankan universities, whether it is a result of leniency in punishments or whether it is purely a reflection of society where dishonesty is not considered a "significant issue". For example the frequency with we hear statements such as "everyone is doing it," "What's the big deal," or "I didn't intend to cheat" suggest that students may have learned such behaviors from society as a whole. Also it can be said that students who perceive that the relevant authorities are ignoring incidents of academic dishonesty are more likely to engage in academic

misconduct such as cheating because it is believed to be socially acceptable at the institution.

In order to minimize academic dishonesty foreign universities have established policies. Eg, an academic integrity oath.<sup>3</sup> According to the study "A Decade research of Cheating in Academic Institutions " academic integrity programs and policies, such as honor codes, do have a significant influence on students' behavior.<sup>4</sup> In 1998, McCabe and Pavela<sup>5</sup> suggested that development of an honor code is an effective approach to creating an environment where faculty and students share an "understanding and acceptance of the institution's policies on academic integrity ". However it is accepted that honor codes and policy alone will not reduce student cheating. Policy enforcement coupled with other strategies (changing exams regularly, closely monitoring student taking tests/examinations), communicating clear expectations about academic integrity in the classroom, providing academic integrity information on course outlines and assignment sheets, and making a commitment to follow through on reporting cheating incidents may be the most effective deterrents to cheating.

The researcher asserts that in our focus of individual cases we fail to perceive the enormous impact academic dishonesty has on higher education as a whole. The emergence of global university brands and influential international rankings means that positive and negative perceptions of academic integrity can have a significant impact on institutional reputations.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it has become

necessary for higher education institutes to maintain high standards academically as well as morally. The paucity of literature on the topic of academic dishonesty within Higher education institutes in Sri Lanka may be a reflection of the reluctance to acknowledge the existence of such issues. However this study was conducted with the intention to determine the attitude and perceptions of teachers and not with a view to determining the magnitude of the problem

**Objectives**

With regard to academic integrity among students, to determine the

- 1) perception of staff on the frequency of certain dishonest acts
- 2) attitude of staff
- 3) Perception of staff on the adequacy of mechanisms available to minimize dishonesty
- 4) Opinion of staff on what steps can be taken to strengthen honesty

**2. Methodology**

A self-administered questionnaire on academic integrity was distributed among academic staff of a higher education institute in Sri Lanka, after obtaining ethical clearance.<sup>7</sup> Responses to the close ended questions were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS.

**3. Results**

Out of the 40 responses received (57.5%) were female and (42.5%) were male. Sixty percent of those who responded had served for over 10 years in the said higher education institute.

**3.1 Perception of staff on the frequency of certain dishonest acts**

**Table 1:** Perception of staff on the frequency of dishonest acts

	Never (%)	Very Seldom (%)	Seldom (%)	Sometime (%)	Often (%)	Very Often (%)	I don't Know (%)
Plagiarism on written assignments	0	3	8	13	28	10	38
Copying assignments from senior/previous groups	3	3	8	25	43	10	10
Cheating during test or examinations	3	15	18	40	13	3	8
Students forging signatures	5	0	13	28	33	13	10
Producing false medical certificates	3	5	8	30	20	18	18

**Inference**

Plagiarism on written assignments, copying assignments from seniors/previous groups, forging signatures and producing false medical certificates occur frequently. Cheating during examinations occur sometimes

**Table 2:** Frequency of cheating at examinations as perceived by staff

Frequency	%
Never	38
Once	20
A few times	35
Several times	5
Many times	3

**Inference**

Cheating at exams is an infrequent occurrence

**3.2 Attitude of staff to academic dishonesty among student**

**Table 3:** Frequency of discussion of university policy on integrity with students

	Do not discuss (%)	On individual assignments (%)	In the syllabus or course outline (%)	At start of Semester (%)	Other (%)	Not Applicable (%)
Attendance at classes	23	23	15	43	13	10
Absenteeism	8	15	25	43	10	8
Eligibility to sit exams	23	5	18	30	15	8
Copying at exams	33	15	3	10	30	5
Reporting dishonest behavior	43	15	15	13	18	10
Plagiarism	30	38	5	8	5	10
Permitted and prohibited group work or collaboration	35	23	15	15	5	18
The proper citation or referencing of sources	30	33	10	5	5	10
Falsifying/fabricating research data	30	30	8	3	5	18

*Inference:* Almost one third of the teachers did not talk to the students about copying at exams, reporting dishonest behavior, plagiarism, permitted/prohibited collaboration, proper citation of sources, fabricating research data

**Table 4:** Academic staff reaction to cheating on a test or assignment

Reaction	%
Reprimand or warning student	53
Report student to the Head or Dean	70
Lower the student's grade	13
Fail the student on the test or assignment	8
Do nothing about the incident	0
Require student to retake the test or assignment	5
Engage a faculty/student conference to resolve the allegation	5
Follow university policy for cheating	38
Other	0

*Inference*

A majority stated that they would either report the student to the head or the dean or warn the student. Thirteen percent of staff had ignored a suspected incident of cheating and only 28% had referred a suspected case of cheating to the relevant authorities.

### 3.3 Perception of staff as to the adequacy of mechanisms available to address academic integrity

**Table 6:** How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Agree Strongly (%)
The student judicial process is fair and impartial	5	0	43	35	8
Students should be held responsible for failing to report an academic integrity violation they witnessed	15	5	33	28	13
Faculty members are vigilant in discovering and reporting suspected cases of academic dishonesty	20	5	38	23	8

*Inference*

The majority were unsure about whether the student judicial process is fair, whether students are responsible for reporting incidents of dishonesty they witness and whether faculty members are vigilant on issues of dishonesty

**Table 7:** Adequacy of university policy on academic integrity

	Very Low (%)	Low (%)	Medium High (%)	Very High (%)
Your understanding of the academic integrity policies	5	38	40	10
Your understanding of the severity of penalties for cheating	5	35	45	8
The average student's understanding of university policies concerning cheating	20	60	13	0
Students' support of university policies concerning cheating	27.5	52.5	7.5	0
Faculty support of university policies concerning cheating	5	22.5	55	7.5
The effectiveness of university policies concerning cheating	5	30	47.5	7.5

*Inference:* Academic staff understanding of the academic integrity policy, penalties for dishonesty and faculty support

**Table 5:** Factors that influenced the decision of a staff member to ignore a suspected incident

Factors influencing the course of action	%
Lacked evidence/proof	18
Student is the one who will ultimately suffer	0
Cheating was trivial/not serious	3
Didn't want to deal with it, system is so bureaucratic	5
Lack of support from administration	0
Lacked enough time	3
Fear legal or other repercussions from student	0
Other	3

*Inference:* The reason why a staff member ignored a suspected incident of cheating was the lack of evidence/proof

of these policies is low or medium high. They perceive that the efficacy of the existing policies is low or medium high and average student understanding and support of institutional policy is low

**Table 8:** Satisfaction of academic staff on the way a case of academic dishonesty was handled

Degree of satisfaction	(%)
Very Satisfied	10
Satisfied	18
Neutral	8
Unsatisfied	0
Very Unsatisfied	0

*Inference:* Majority were satisfied at the way a case of academic dishonesty was handled

### 3.4 Opinion of staff on steps that can be taken to minimize academic dishonesty

**Table 9:** Safeguards employed by staff to reduce cheating

Safeguards	%
None	10
Use the Internet or software such as (i.e., turnitin.com) to detect or confirm plagiarism	10
Provide information about cheating/plagiarism on courses outlined or assignment sheet	10
Change exams regularly	28
Hand out different versions of an exam	20
Discuss the importance of honesty and academic integrity with my students	45
Remind students periodically about their obligation under our University's academic integrity policy	45
Closely monitor students taking a test/exam	83
Require students to sign an academic integrity pledge on every assignment	5
Other	3

#### Inference

The safeguard observed by a majority was the monitoring of students during exams. However a considerable proportion stated that they remind students periodically about their obligation under the institutional academic integrity policy and discuss the importance of honesty and integrity with the students

**Table 10:** Suggestions on how policies concerning issues of academic integrity may be improved

Suggestions	%
Family should be educated to reduce pressure on the children	3
Staff should be given clear guidelines and advice	20
Students should be given clear instructions to follow along with information about the consequences of breaking them	20
Use technology to monitor students during exams CCTV, internet/software to detect plagiarism	13
Obtaining a student pledge	8
Get external examiners to invigilate at exams	3
Carrying out punishments	5
Teaching should be done properly so that students will know the answer	3
Give multiple versions of question papers	8
Change attitudes from small age	5
Increase space between desks	5

#### Inference

Many felt that academic integrity may be improved by giving staff clear guidelines and advice regarding academic integrity issues and by providing clear instructions and information about the consequences of dishonesty to students

## 4. Discussion

The faculty staff perceives that there is a certain degree of plagiarism on written assignments, copying of assignments from seniors, forging signatures and producing false medical certificates but infrequent cheating at examinations. It is noted that students allow copying of assignments in good

faith in order to help a friend. The need to protect their peers an element of the collectivist culture is seen in all aspects of life. Therefore, it is necessary to instill in students a strong sense of integrity. This may be done by being explicit and open about integrity issues. Since many staff members feel that students lack awareness on what amounts to plagiarism it may be useful for staff members to be explicit on such issues during the briefing stage. Furthermore the fact that a significant proportion of staff members did not know whether there was plagiarism indicates the necessity to implement mechanisms to detect such activities. It is also necessary to instill in students the ethical and legal aspects of signing on behalf of others and producing false medical certificates.

It appears that a significant proportion of teachers do not discuss issues such as eligibility to sit examinations, copying at examinations, plagiarism, collaborations in group work, proper citation/referencing and falsification of data. Since information regarding these issues is not given to the students explicitly they may not be aware of the consequences of these activities and its influence on their career as a whole. However it appears that issues on absenteeism are discussed with the students frequently. It is noted that a significant proportion of staff members do not discuss with students the importance of reporting dishonest behavior. However it may be important to instill in students a responsibility of reporting such dishonest behavior in order to develop social accountability among students. It is surprising to note that a small proportion of staff members felt that discussion of these aspects are not applicable to them. When encountering dishonesty a majority stated that they would either report the student to the head or the dean or warn the student. However, there were instances when academic staff members had ignored a suspected incident of cheating. The main reason for this has been lack of proof of the particular incident. Installation of surveillance equipment in examination hall may be the answer to such situations while it will also act as a deterrent.

Even though a significant proportion of teachers agreed that the student judicial process is fair and impartial the fact that a greater proportion was unsure of this fact may indicate the need to revise the judicial process or the lack of awareness among the staff on the process. However a significant proportion of academic staff admitted that they had little knowledge of the academic integrity policies and penalties for dishonesty, which may support the latter. Furthermore it is surprising that even though a significant proportion of staff members were of the opinion that the students are responsible for reporting incidents of dishonesty they witness, a greater proportion was unsure on these aspects. The fact that a majority of staff members were also unsure as to whether faculty members are vigilant on issues of dishonesty may indicate the degree of importance the staff members place on such issues.

When considering the adequacy of university policy on academic integrity many felt that the faculty support of university policies and the efficacy of the existing policies is high. Furthermore the staff felt that the average student



understanding of university policies regarding cheating and student support of these policies is low.

Even though a majority were satisfied at the way a case of academic dishonesty was handled they were of the opinion that academic integrity cannot be improved purely by institutional policies. It appears that a safeguard employed by a majority of staff members in order to minimize cheating was monitoring of students during examinations. However a considerable proportion stated that they remind students periodically about their obligation under the institutional academic integrity policy and discuss the importance of honesty and integrity with the students. The staff is of the opinion that policies concerning issues of academic integrity may be improved by giving staff clear guidelines and advice regarding academic integrity issues and by providing clear instructions to follow as well as information about the consequences of dishonesty to students. It is interesting to note that many staff members were not in favour of implementing external mechanisms such as punishments, providing multiple versions of the question papers and reorganizing the examination halls.

## 5. Conclusion

It is necessary to strengthen aspects of academic integrity among students. The teachers felt that the present mechanisms to address such issues are inadequate and they may be addressed by being explicit about such issues with students and by giving staff and students clear guidelines.

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