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## Insidious, Invasive, Invisible: Academic Dishonesty and on-going assessments in higher education

Parmjit Singh<sup>a</sup>, Roslind Xaviour Thambusamy<sup>b\*</sup>, Zachariah Aidin  
Druckman<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a,\*b,c</sup> Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA  
Selangor Campus, Malaysia

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### Abstract

Academic or Scholastic Dishonesty is defined as misconduct including, but not limited to, plagiarism, cheating, and collusion. Various concerns have been raised by many studies which focus mainly on the issue of plagiarism and not on traditional academic dishonesty (AD) of cheating and collusion. Hence, this study seeks to address the issue of the traditional scholastic dishonesty on cheating and collusion by analyzing the prevalence and seriousness of cheating on quizzes, exams, and coursework (i.e. assignments), to gain an insight into students' perceptions of such academic dishonesty. The study adopted a quantitative approach utilizing a descriptive design. A questionnaire was administered to 1132 undergraduates from five colleges within Klang Valley. The findings reveal that more than two-thirds of the students concede that AD is a serious problem despite efforts made by institutions in overcoming the issue. When asked about the occurrences of AD in exams, quizzes and assignments, the sample consider cheating in quizzes to be the most serious among the three, followed by assignments and quizzes. The results also reveal that the students' understanding of policies regarding AD in exams is significantly higher than that concerning quizzes and assignments. This is corroborated by the students' perception that lecturers' implementation of AD policies in exams is higher than that for quizzes and assignments. It is suggested that future research attempt to identify the factors leading to AD in quizzes and ways to formulate instructional policies concerning the matter.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-000-000-0000 ; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .  
E-mail address: rosai042@salam.uitm.edu.my



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## 1. Introduction

Despite every effort made by higher education institution authorities to stamp out Academic Dishonesty (AD), it continues to remain a scourge that threatens the moral and ethical foundations of academic endeavour. The threat of AD is now all the more alarming looking at the statistics of AD prevalent in higher education. According to studies undertaken by the International Centre for Academic Integrity, out of around 70,000 undergraduates and 17,000 graduates who had responded to a survey on AD between 2002 and 2015, a shocking 39% of undergraduates admitted to cheating on tests, while 62% admitted cheating on written assignments. Of the graduate students, 17% admitted cheating on tests, while 40% admitted cheating on written assignments. Graduate students are those engaged in educational pursuits at the master and doctorate levels, which in itself, is even more alarming. The researchers who had also surveyed high school students found that:

"of over 70,000 high school students at over 24 high schools in the United States... 64% admitted to cheating on a test, 58% admitted to plagiarism and 95% said they participated in some form of cheating, whether it was on a test, plagiarism or copying homework."

(<http://www.academicintegrity.org/icaai/integrity-3.php>) retrieved 9 July 2016

This only goes to show that the extent of the insidious nature of this scourge is as deep as it is far reaching; right from school to the highest levels of educational endeavor. Policymakers and stakeholders should take note that this behaviour appears to start at adolescence (high school) which is a notable predictor of the age at which such behaviour starts to rear its ugly head, and devise appropriate and timely interventions to cut off the head of the Hydra before it starts to mutate into multiple heads of unethical behaviours.

If the data above is not upsetting enough, it was revealed in a U.S News and World Report that 90% of those polled believed that neither they nor others would be caught for cheating or punished,

which means that, in their view, AD would go unpunished. (<http://oedb.org/ilibrarian/8-astonishing-stats-on-academic-cheating/> retrieved 9 July 2016).

The problem of AD had become endemic enough to have caught the attention of educational institutions and government agencies. For years, AD has been considerably studied and debated (Huang, Yang & Chen, 2015; Desalegn & Berhan, 2014) ) as a topic of concern among university educators. AD, according to Callahan (2004) can be defined as a type of rule-breaking behaviour undertaken by an individual to get ahead of others academically, professionally or financially. That being said, AD is defined as “a student’s use of unauthorized assistance with intent to deceive an instructor or other such person who may be assigned to evaluate the student’s work in meeting course and degree requirements,” (Center for Academic Integrity, Duke University 1999).

As mentioned earlier, various studies have been undertaken by researchers across the globe in relation to the prevalence of AD. DuPree and Sattler (2010) reported that based on 1058 students from Texas Tech University, 34% claimed to have "sometimes cheated in tests or examinations", while 26.9% claimed to have "often cheated" while 11.2% claimed to have "very often cheated in assessments". Ahmadi's (2012) study of 132 language students in a university in Iran, revealed that cheating is prevalent 'justified' by various reasons such as “not being ready for exams”; “the difficulty of the exams”; “lack of time to study” and “careless and lenient instructors.” A recent study by Desalegn and Berhan (2014) reported that undergraduate medical students in Hawassa, Ethiopia cheated mainly on the entrance examinations and students who cheated in high school had a higher tendency to cheat when entering the university. This finding can be extrapolated to tie in with that of the study mentioned earlier on the report of the cheating among high schools students in the US. Aside from that, the findings further revealed that these students would not report to the invigilators should they witness an act of cheating. This moral conundrum is further exacerbated by Zawiyah et al. (2008) who cite studies that report their subjects as perceiving that AD is "socially acceptable and not ethically wrong" and "morally uncertain about academic dishonesty" (p. 149). This moral vacuum in which these young people appear to have entrapped themselves is no trivial matter when one considers that they will be the future professionals, holding important positions in the government and related agencies and responsible for the well-being of the nation.

Studies have indicated that AD at higher education is simply a transition from AD behaviours at high school which proves that such unethical behaviour will not stop, but continue to slither its way into the professional careers that such people will undertake (Desalegn and Berhan, 2014; Krueger, 2014; Nonis & Swift, 2001). It is frightening to think of the damage these people may do

to society and the nation, if they were to become doctors, engineers, accountants, lawyers or teachers. One can only imagine the lives that would be directly and indirectly jeopardised due the incompetence and corruption of such unethical people.

It must be noted that, apart from the obvious consequences of AD, there are hidden consequences such as giving such students, i.e. those who committ AD behaviours, an unfair advantage against those students who do not indulge in such behaviours (Desalegn and Berhan, 2014; Callahan, 2004). On a more dangerous note, it gives the public and stakeholders a false sense of security as graduates with "good/excellent" results, are hired for positions that require specific knowledge and skills. But having cheated their way through college/university, such graduates do not possess the expertise or upright character required to do the job properly, which will lead them to find "other" ways to complete the task, which in turn, creates a vicious cycle of continuous unethical behaviours that will ultimately and irrevocably destroy the organisation they are work for.

The real life examples of these are too numerous to ignore. An Internet search for corruption yielded too many examples to recount here but just the 10 largest global business corruption scandals gives a dizzying revelation of scale of the scourge with well-known global business entities like Johnson & Johnson and Daimler being involved (Goozner, 2011). Closer to home, Malaysians are battered by reports of corruption and scandals even at the highest levels. A case in point is the recent sacking of 15 high ranking Immigration officers and suspension of many others after it was discovered that they were responsible for deliberately disabling the international airport's passport checking system over a number of years ([www.abcnews.net.au](http://www.abcnews.net.au) accessed 13 July 2016). Surely, high ranking officers in any department/organisation would have to have degrees to secure these positions. So, although these examples of perfidy cannot be laid directly at the door of AD, we may wonder if such behaviour was simply a flash in the pan, or a more deeply ingrained undercurrent of unethical behaviour which was seeded at a young age in school. Hence, as posited by Krueger (2014), Desalegn and Berhan (2014), Zawiyah, Maimun and Junaini (2008) and Nonis and Swift (2001), AD in the university or college can become a *predictor* to workplace dishonesty.

AD has been largely studied in the context of final examinations, but, there are other assessments to consider, especially in higher education, where formative rather than summative assessments are the norm. College and university assessments cover a range of modalities such as oral presentations, term papers, monthly even weekly quizzes, field trip/lab reports,

drama/theatre/musical repertoire performances, and so on, depending on the disciplines. These formative assessments are usually done collaboratively out of class which imply that a high degree of ethical conscientiousness is required of the students in undertaking these tasks. Even in individual assignments, a high degree of ethical conscientiousness is still of paramount importance. However, the findings of the related studies show otherwise. DuPree and Sattler's (2010) study reported AD in assignments and plagiarism with almost one-third of the respondents admitting that they "inappropriately shared work in group assignments" while close to half the respondents claimed to have "sometimes plagiarized" written assignments. This is corroborated by the study by the International Centre for Academic Integrity mentioned above which revealed that almost two thirds of undergraduates admitted "cheating on written assignments".

It has been established that in combating AD, most educational institutions focus on the examinations (ie: strict invigilation and in-depth explanation of the policies) and plagiarism (ie: anti-plagiarism campaigns and the application of the Turnitin software for many higher education institutions in Malaysia). For most courses, examinations usually comprise only 30% - 40% of the total score for the course, with the remaining 60%-70% derived from the on-going assessments. The concern here is how are cheating behaviours being monitored and enforced by the institutions for the on-going assessments? What are the policies, if any, that guide behaviour for on-going assessments? When confronted with this issue, most educational administrators and managers will talk about plagiarism. But, plagiarism is considered as only one aspect of cheating in assignments. Other forms of cheating in assignments include failing to contribute to group assignments, working on an individual assignment in groups, buying a ready-made assignment online (DuPree & Sattler, 2010) and lately, an increasing trend of AD among undergraduates in Malaysia, is hiring someone else to complete the assignment for him/her (Low, Durai & Yee, 2015). Taking all this into consideration, the study of prevalence of AD among undergraduates in on-going assessments becomes imperative.

In combating AD, institutions have prepared policies or honor codes but it is apparent that these policies are heavily inclined in combating AD in examinations and plagiarism thus raising the question: What about the policies of combating AD in quizzes and on-going assignments? Cole and McCabe (1996) stress that even after the implementation of policies, cheating still went on. Jordan (2001) further emphasized that although most institutions employ policies to combat cheating, students may not fully comprehend the academic rules and regulations which may result in the continuing acts of AD. This concurs with McCabe and Trevino (1993) who reported a significant

relationship between AD and the students' perceived opinions of the policies concerning AD. Jordan (2001) further stressed on the point that "lower ratings of understanding were associated with higher levels of academic dishonesty" (pp. 236). Hence, studies on understanding students' perspectives and levels of understanding of institutional policies concerning AD, would reveal and highlight inconsistencies in the policies and their enforcement.

Interestingly as well, studies have indicated a trend in the occurrence of AD to students' semester/year of study. Studies from the likes of Krueger (2014), Ahmadi (2012), Ledesma (2011), and Jensen, Arnett, Feldman and Cauffman (2001) had indicated that junior students have a higher tendency to commit AD in comparison to seniors. It was proposed by Desalegn and Berhan (2014) that students who had cheated in high school are more prone to cheat in college. This may be an indicator to why junior students cheat more than the seniors. However, Jordan (2001) claimed otherwise that there is at least one study which reported that senior students are more prone to AD.

In looking at all the issues pertaining to AD, how would Malaysian undergraduates fair in this matter? The institutional policy requirement for students to submit assignments through Turnitin is a backhanded assumption that undergraduates are not as honest as they should be. One may wonder why in the 60s and 70s such protocols were unheard of. Is there something about the nature of teaching and learning, the state of educational outcomes, the philosophy of obtaining a higher degree that has unravelled the system leading to the prevalence of AD? These may be some of the concerns that fuel the drivers of dishonest behaviours in our higher education institutions.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to study the academic dishonesty in terms of i) the seriousness of the issue, ii) the trend across the semesters, and iii) the perceived opinions on the university's policies related to on-going assignments ie. quizzes and assignments among undergraduates in a Malaysian public university. The research questions are as follows:

- i. What is the perceived seriousness of academic dishonesty occurrences in the university?
- ii. What is the trend of academic dishonesty in quizzes and assignments across the students' year of study?
- iii. What are the students' understanding of the policies concerning academic dishonesty?

- iv. What are the students' perceptions of the implementation of policies concerning academic dishonesty by the lecturers?

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach that employed a descriptive design. A total of 1132 respondents comprising undergraduate students from five institutions of higher education in the Klang Valley were involved in the study. These respondents are categorized based on First Year, Second Year, Third Year and Final Year. Table 1 displays the distribution of the sample based on their years of study.

**Table 1.** Year of Study

	N	%
First Year	306	27.0
Second Year	320	28.3
Third Year	365	32.2
Final Year	141	12.5
Total	1132	100

A questionnaire comprising four (4) sections was constructed for the purpose of this research. The sections are as follows:

- i. Demographic Data
- ii. Section A – The Seriousness of Academic Dishonesty in the University
- iii. Section B – Witnessing Academic Dishonesty
- iv. Section C – Policies Concerning Academic Dishonesty

The data was then analyzed utilizing frequency (frequency count, N; percentage, %) and descriptive (mean, M; standard deviation, SD) statistics. Inferential statistics (paired-samples t-test and ANOVA analysis) was also applied in testing the statistical difference between mean scores.

### 4. Findings

This section presents the analysis of the findings based on the data gathered from the sample. The data analysis is explained in accordance with the research questions.

**Research Question 1: What is the perceived seriousness of academic dishonesty occurrences in your college?**

**Table 2.** In your opinion, is academic dishonesty a serious problem in your college?

	n	%
Yes	763	67.8
No	362	32.2
Total	1125	
Missing data	7	100.0

Table 2 depicts the frequency statistics of the students' opinion on the seriousness of academic dishonesty within the college. Approximately two thirds of the sample (67.8%, n=763) believe that academic dishonesty is a serious problem within the college as compared to 32.2% (n=362) who stated otherwise.

**Research Question 2: How frequently do incidents of academic dishonesty occur in quizzes, exams and assignments?**

**Table 3.** Occurrences of cheating on quizzes, assignments and exams

Academic dishonest behaviors:	Never (1)	Seldom (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)	Mean	SD	Rank
Cheating occurs during a <b>QUIZ</b>	8.3% (93)	17.3% (195)	23.6% (265)	23.8% (268)	27.0% (304)	3.44	1.28	1
Cheating occurs in <b>ASSIGNMENTS</b>	16.1% (181)	21.5% (241)	24.1% (271)	19.1% (214)	19.2% (216)	3.04	1.35	2
Cheating occurs during an <b>EXAM</b>	27.7% (311)	25.2% (283)	23.4% (263)	14.3% (161)	9.3% (105)	2.52	1.29	3

Table 4 shows students' perceived views on the occurrences of academic dishonest behaviours in classroom quizzes, exams and assignments. The data reveals 91.7% (n=1032) of students stating

that cheating occurs on classroom quizzes, followed by cheating on assignments (83.9%) and exams (72.3%). To investigate if there were significant differences in the occurrences (between pairs of quizzes, assignments and exams), paired sample T-tests were conducted (refer table 4).

**Table 4.** Paired Samples Test

		t	df	p
Pair 1	Quizzes - Exams	25.688	1121	.000
Pair 2	Quizzes - Assignments	11.118	1117	.000
Pair 3	Assignments - Exams	12.630	1115	.000

The paired-samples t-test revealed significant statistical differences in the mean scores of 'Quizzes and Exams' ( $t(1121)=25.688, p<.05$ ); 'Quizzes and Assignment, [ $t(1117)=11.118, p < 0.5$ ], and 'Assignments and Exams' [ $t(1115)=12.630, p<.05$ ] at the 0.05 level. This indicates that the occurrence of AD behaviours in quizzes was significantly higher than the occurrences in assignments and exams.

**Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the trend of academic dishonesty behaviours across the students' years of study?**

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics and ANOVA analysis of AD behaviours among 1<sup>st</sup> Year, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year and 4<sup>th</sup> year students. The acts of committing AD behaviours is consistent in quizzes, exams and assignments across levels where the occurrence is highest among Year 3 students, followed by Year 1 students, Year 2 students and Year 4 students. One way ANOVA analysis indicates overall significant differences for cheating in quizzes ( $F=11.578, p <.05$ ) and exams ( $F=6.59, P < .05$ ) at the 0.05 level. This indicates that there is a significant difference in committing these AD acts between levels.

**Table 5.** One way ANOVA analysis among levels

	N	Mean	SD	df	SS	F	p	
Cheating on Quizzes	1st Year	302	3.44	1.21	3	18.365	11.578	.000
	2nd Year	319	3.26	1.27	1121	1.586		
	3rd Year	364	3.73	1.26	1124			
	4th Year	140	3.11	1.33				
	Total	1125	3.44	1.28				
Cheating on Exams	1st Year	301	2.64	1.25	3	10.731	6.591	.000
	2nd Year	318	2.39	1.29	1119	1.628		

	3rd Year	363	2.67	1.31	1122			
	4th Year	141	2.20	1.21				
	Total	1123	2.52	1.29				
Cheating on Assignments	1st Year	301	3.10	1.30	3	3.417	1.883	.131
	2nd Year	317	2.96	1.36	1112	1.815		
	3rd Year	364	3.13	1.39	1115			
	4th Year	141	2.86	1.31				
	Total	1123	3.04	1.35				
	Total	1116	3.42	1.22				

#### **Research Question 4: What are the students' understanding of the policies concerning academic dishonesty?**

**Table 6.** Students' Understanding of Policies

Policies on:	N	M	SD
Exams	210	3.46	1.07
Quizzes	210	2.98	1.06
Assignments	210	3.03	1.07

Scales: 1-Very Low, 2-Low, 3-Medium, 4-High, 5-Very High

Table 6 reports the descriptive statistics of the respondents' understanding of the current policies concerning academic dishonesty in exams, quizzes and assignments. The respondents' understanding of the policies related to AD in quizzes recorded the lowest mean (M=2.98, SD=1.06) score, followed by policies on assignments (M=3.03, SD=1.07) and exams (M=3.46, SD=1.07).

#### **5. Discussion**

The findings reported that the majority of the students concede that AD is a serious problem in the college despite the efforts made by the institution in overcoming the issue. This can be taken as a positive indicator of the moral acumen of the students in this study as they did not display the moral ambivalence of the students in the studies cited by Zawiyah et al. (2008). This may be explained by the fact that the sample in this study, coming from a strongly religious background are devout in their religious obligations which may have guided their reasoning on this matter. When asked about the occurrences of AD in exams, quizzes and assignments, the respondents considered cheating in quizzes to be the most serious among the three, followed by assignments and exams.

Additionally, the inferential statistics indicated that there is a significant difference in the mean scores for these assessments, placing quizzes as the highest in terms of occurrences of cheating. This can be obviously explained by the fact that final exams have always been imbued with a sense of strictness and formality that is not present for quizzes and assignments. This psychological factor may explain the students' perception that cheating in quizzes to be the most serious of academic transgressions. The university policies for examinations are rigorous such as the Chief Invigilator reciting the exam rules and regulations before the exam paper begins. Additionally, each answer booklet has the rules and regulations printed on the inside of the cover page signed off by the head of the institution. Apart from that, the entire protocol of the final exam, including the presence of the invigilators (who are not the students' lecturers), the checking and collection of the attendance slips and answer scripts all contribute to the strict and formal nature of the final exam. This is in direct contrast to the quizzes which are normally done in class, monitored by the students' own lecturers which somehow does not convey that psychological dread and fear (of the rules governing AD) that the final exam does.

As for assignments, the institutional policy requires all assignments to be submitted through Turnitin to combat plagiarism, which would explain the students' perception that cheating is not as serious as in the quizzes. To be noted, to date, there are hardly any formal policies guiding student behavior in classroom quizzes and this may explain why the students consider cheating in quizzes to be the highest, followed by assignments and exams. This indicates that from the students' perceptions, more cheating is going on in the on-going assessments (quizzes and assignments) in comparison to the final examinations. This further emphasizes the point that policies guiding behaviour in the on-going assessments (quizzes and assignments) need to be formulated and formalised, similar to those for the final exams.

In terms of the level in which cheating behaviours occur, it appears that the juniors cheat more compared to the seniors. This supports the claims made by Krueger (2014), Ahmadi (2012), Ledesma (2011), and Jensen et al. (2001) where younger students have a higher tendency to commit AD. In this study, incidences of cheating dropped from year one to two but increased to three and then drastically dropped in the final year. One explanation for this could be that junior students, being new and unfamiliar with the independent study style required in college system, may resort to cheating as a way of coping with the 'deep end' into which they have been thrown. This would explain why, as they progress in the university, the instances of cheating decrease because they would have gotten used to the style of studying required. Additionally, mixing with

the other students who are more ethical in their behaviour may have rubbed off on them and enable them to realign their moral compass. Also, as the students progress through the programme, the assessments would require more collaborative efforts, such as group projects or internships which by their very nature deflect attempts to cheat. Aside from that, as a student gets closer to completing their degree, they would not want to jeopardise their chance to graduate, since the penalty for AD may prevent them from graduating on time. This may explain the drop in AD from the third year to the final year.

In relation to policies, the students claim to have a deeper understanding of the policies concerning AD in exams and assignments as compared to quizzes. The results reveal that the students' understanding of policies regarding AD in exams is significantly higher than quizzes and assignments. This again can be explained by the strict and formal enforcement of policies in the final examinations as compared to on-going assessments. This is corroborated by the students' perception that lecturers' implementation of AD policies in exams is higher than that for quizzes and assignments.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has uncovered undergraduates' perceptions regarding the seriousness of AD in institutions of higher education in Malaysia. The findings reveal that, despite the policies in force for AD, cheating is still a serious problem, with cheating in quizzes being the most serious followed by assignments and exams. This is despite policies in place to guide behaviour during the assessments. This means that students, particularly those in the first and second years of study, are still willing to cheat despite the penalties. Reasons for this have been given but they should not be taken as excuses and the issue needs to be addressed. As for policies concerning on-going assessments, the study clearly indicates that students feel that lecturers do not emphasise enough the rules for AD for quizzes and assignments. What this implies is that the lack of a formal set of rules to guide behaviour in on-going assessments slackens the moral obligations of the students to behave ethically in completing their on-going assessments. This is a clear sign that there should be policies governing behaviours in on-going assessments with the same level of formality as the policies governing the exams. This would help curb and eradicate AD at all levels of higher education.

Future research in this direction can include a more diverse sample of students covering both public and private higher education institutions in order to get a more expansive and in-depth

overview of the occurrence of AD and, in doing so, uncover the means to stamp out this scourge once and for all. The education system is the backbone of an ethical society and nation, and the quality of the products of the education system is integral to the achievement of the nation's social and economic growth. AD is a cancer, insidious and invasive, that will ultimately, rot the entire nation from within. Like a cancer, it has to be excised cleanly and completely through a definitive programme of instilling moral values into the young and a robust implementation of rules at the institutional level for all assessments.

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eISSN: 2301-2218 / Corresponding Author: Roslind Xaviour Thambusamy

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