

CHEATING IN SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN AN ODL EDUCATION PROGRAMME A CASE STUDY OF AN UNDERGRADUATE QUALIFICATION

Dr Mmankoko Ziphorah Ramorola
University of South Africa
ramormz@unisa.ac.za
P O Box 392
UNISA
+27 12 429 6965

Abstract

Academic cheating is a global concern in most Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions as it cuts to the heart of the purpose of higher education and the pursuit of knowledge. Cheating on exams is a violation of university standards; it is a misrepresentation of the student's true capabilities, and can be the worst form of deception, it is considered to be unethical, and it is the opposite of honesty. Academic institutions continue to develop new ways to prevent cheating from happening, while at the same time cheaters come up with even better ways to cheat. If all the stakeholders can take responsibility to address this phenomenon, academic cheating will be effectively combated worldwide. The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings of the study which explores and explains the types of cheating students engage in, and why they cheat during examinations. A qualitative case study was used in this study to collect and analyse data. The findings of this study are reported under the following categories: biographical data; examination venues; modules involved; forms of irregularities; behaviours related to cheating; reasons for cheating; and performance after being given second chance. In conclusion I suggest the need for further investigation where interviews could be held with the students.

Keywords: Academic cheating, academic dishonesty, open distance learning, summative assessment, undergraduate, advanced certificate in education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic cheating has always been a serious concern in most higher education institutions. Several literature (Trost 2009; Teodorescu and Adrei 2008; Lambert 2003) confirmed students cheating at universities in Sweden, Bucharest, Spain and Portugal. Cheating is typically a hidden behaviour, and its true prevalence is difficult if not impossible to know. A cheating student may be more interested in hiding cheating from a teacher than a fellow student (Staats et al 2009). The reasons students engaged in academic cheating varied, but as commonly understood, the overriding reason was performance (Jones 2011). Although the causes of increased cheating are unknown, some speculate it as due to more pressure for success (Callahan 2004).

Cheating on exams is a violation of university standards; it is a misrepresentation of the student's true capabilities, and can be the worst form of deception, it is considered to be unethical, and it is the opposite of honesty. The phenomenon of cheating in universities is of overwhelming importance, since students engaging in it are least likely to have the necessary skills for their future professional lives, and awarding them a degree will most probably lead to various kinds of damage (Teixeira 2008). Cheating tends to reduce the efficiency of a country's education system by distorting honest competition among students (Magnus et al 2002). The entry of unfit professionals into the job market may lead to "social ills", since these future workers will almost certainly be unable to perform properly, possibly resulting in harm to human life and damage both to their colleagues and to the institution that trained them (Teixeira 2008). Cheating is not especially unfair to other students, but for the questionably comparative grading curves that some faculty employ in courses (Puka 2005).

Academic dishonesty is any type of cheating that occurs in relation to a formal academic exercise. It can include plagiarism, fabrication, deception, cheating, bribery, sabotage, professorial misconduct and personation (Lambert et al 2003). This study therefore focuses on one type of academic dishonesty: cheating. Frequently the terms academic dishonesty and cheating are used in the literature (Whitley 1998). While there may be subtle differences, for the most part these terms represent the same concept, and are used interchangeably in this paper.

Dick et al (2003) mention a wide range of possible kinds of cheating, deciding that, on the whole, cheating is the breach of defined and accepted rules and standards. From a review of literature, there are many characteristics of behaviours regarding academic dishonesty (Staats et al 2009; Murdock and Anderman 2006). Those who cheat and engage in other forms of bad behaviour often rationalise, neutralise, or deny that their behaviour is bad or has bad consequences for other persons (Staats et al 2009). The opportunity to engage in destructive behaviours may include cheating in assignments and examinations, or plagiarising written works (Murdock and Anderman 2006). These dishonest behaviours may result in high grades or "success", but the student would demonstrate that he or she was a "fraud" and not deserving of the high performance s/he obtained if caught (Ferrari 2005).

The present study is designed to understand the types of cheating students engage in, and why they cheat during examinations. It is of theoretical and practical importance to understand the causes of cheating by the undergraduate students who registered for the advanced certificate in education (ACE) qualification in the Department of Further Teacher Education, College of Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2011. Unisa is one of the Open Distance Learning (ODL) universities in South Africa. ODL is a system that combines the methodology of distance education with the concepts of open learning and flexible learning (Belawati and Baggaley 2009). ACE is a programme designed for practicing teachers who are expected not only to teach learners the content knowledge, but also to teach them the morals: to be honest and self-disciplined. To support these students, two contact sessions are arranged every year. In addition to the contact sessions, video conferences, myUnisa tools, SMS's, printed materials in the form of tutorial letters, and telephone conversations are also

used. Despite the support given to students, there are some assumptions that students are engaged in forms of dishonesty during the summative assessment (examination). While there has been significant research on the subject of academic dishonesty, little research appears to have been done on academic cheating during summative assessment. Based on this notion, the question asked in this study is: *What causes students to cheat during the examination?* Understanding the causes of academic cheating should help provide a better picture of past findings and also allow those interested in curbing cheating to focus upon important predictors of academic cheating.

This study is underpinned by Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg (1958a) has focused on moral development and proposed a stage theory of moral thinking. In his theory he used a series of dilemmas such as "Heinz steals the Drug". He therefore proposed six stages in which he located his theory: obedience and punishment orientation; individualism and exchange; good interpersonal relationships; maintaining the social order; social contract and individual rights; and universal principles.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Case study design was used in this study to collect and analyse data as outlined by Rule and John (2011). The choice of case study is determined by the exploratory question, why do students cheat in examinations? Case study research is not limited to a single source of data (Yin, 2012), therefore, documents that recorded the disciplinary procedures in the form of minutes were requested from the Student Disciplinary Matter. These documents include the invigilators' observation during examinations, individual interviews with the students concerned during disciplinary hearing, students' written statements after the conclusion of the examination, copies of second examination script after unauthorised materials were confiscated; copies of unauthorised material and the examiner's report. The sample consisted of twenty-nine students whose unauthorised material was confiscated during the 2011 examination. Ethical procedures were followed to access the student information (ie according to the university policy). This includes the promise to ensure autonomy and beneficence as outlined by Rule and John (2011). The accessed documents assisted me in determining the source of data that best answered the following research questions (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007): (1) What behaviours are associated with cheating? (2) How do students react after being caught? (3) What are students' performances after being given the second examination paper? (4) What causes students to cheat? (5) What is the relevance of the unauthorised material to the examination? To ensure trustworthiness of the study the findings were sent to the student disciplinary matter to check the interpretations of data and the conclusion of the study (Rule and John, 2011). This research is mainly qualitative in nature, but the analysis contains a small part of quantitative analysis. Though the inclusion of a quantitative part may qualify this study as a mixed method study, the majority of the analysis is qualitative in nature.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

- The biographical data revealed that students involved in cheating behaviour are mostly females. Males were also caught in rare cases. The other finding shows an age range of thirty to fifty-nine years. The highest frequency is indicated in the age cohort forty to forty-nine years. It may be assumed that this group lacks time to prepare themselves thoroughly as they still raise children, which is a demanding responsibility.
- The findings indicate at least thirteen centres hosted within four provinces of South Africa. [Meaning unclear] These provinces include Mpumalanga, KZN, Eastern Cape and Free State. This might have been caused by the high number of student enrolment in these regions.
- The findings to this study revealed that at least eight modules were involved in the examination irregularities during the 2012 examinations with ACE Life Orientation being at the top. The causes of this high percentage of irregularities may be that the ACE Life Orientation has the highest student enrolment.
- The findings revealed that in most instances, students use crib notes written on different tools such as rulers, pencils, shirt sleeves and others. It is evident that the widely used crib notes are written on paper, followed by notes on rulers, notes on toilet paper and timetables, and lastly notes written on stickers, on clothes sleeves and other hidden in bras.
- Observations data provided by invigilators indicated behaviours such as students being restless, unsettled, feeling nervous, and from time to time lifting up or turning either the exam paper or exam book. The other finding indicates that students pretend to write on the exam paper when the invigilator is closer by and write in the answer book when the invigilator walks in another row. Other students feel nervous when they are involved in the cheating process. Another finding revealed that cheaters would from time to time lift up or turn the pages of either their answer scripts or question papers. The findings with regard to the students' reactions after being caught indicate that students regret what they did, because in some instances, they failed to use the crib notes due to the tight security by invigilators. Some of the crib notes were irrelevant to the examination questions and students could not benefit from using them. This finding is also highlighted by the examiners' report where they found that in comparing the crib notes to the examination questions, the crib notes were totally irrelevant and the student could not benefit from using them. Other reactions noticed include students' refusal to write again after being caught and being given another book to write on. Other students failed to make any statement, and only signed the report form.
- In finding out the causes of student cheating, various factors were discovered. These factors range from lack of time for preparations due to family bereavement, ill health of either the student or a family member, and wedding preparations.

- In analysing the examination marks scored by these students, the findings revealed a high failure rate by these students. This would suggest that most of the students depended wholly on the crib notes; they could not write examinations using their own knowledge. Few students performed well and managed to pass the examination. This would mean that these students were ready for the examination and knowledgeable about the subject content. To use the crib notes was just a waste of their time.

4. Conclusion

The study has some limitations. Firstly, only one data collection method was considered for the study. Students appeared in a disciplinary hearing and to protect them from psychological harm, it was not possible to interview them. [Meaning unclear] Individual interviews would have provided richer data if they had been conducted by the researcher personally. Secondly, the study did not draw data from the entire university. It only focused on the College of Education, Department of Further Teacher Education, and ACE qualification. Lastly, the sample is too small to be generalised to the entire university.

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