ETHICS IN E-LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The use of information and communication technology has grown at an unprecedented rate and provides a revolutionary way of learning because specific information is easy to find on the Internet. One of the technology approaches in learning is e-learning or electronic learning. Whereas in the U.S., e-learning has become very popular in the recent years as, in Slovakia e-learning is far from being widely used as most of the universities in Slovakia offer only in-class courses and use information technologies only to support those. One of the disadvantages of elearning is that it provides more possibilities for the academic fraud (Nagi, 2006). The purpose of this article is to point at issues of ethical misconduct in higher education and to analyze the current threats of ethical misconduct of e-learning on an example of Slovakia. As part of our analysis, the answers to questions such as whether the online students committed more academic fraud compared to the daily students will be answered and conclusions will be drawn.

KEYWORDS

E-learning, ethics, academic fraud, scholastic honesty, ethical misconduct, online environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The e-learning is learning eased by electronic technology and its aim is to increase the knowledge, skills and productive capabilities of the learners (Ismail, R. et al., 2011, p. 49-52). It serves as a substitute for the traditional classroom setting and offers education with fewer space or time limitations, education in which discrimination against age and race is almost non-existent, the record keeping much easier and discipline problems kept to a minimum (Njenga, J., Fourie, L. 2010, p. 199-212). Despite of its undisputable benefits many people view e-learning as inferior in quality in comparison with the traditional classroom setting. The critics often argue that the lack of personal contact causes low motivation of students. They also claim that the lack of control causes that students do not do their tasks properly (Khoury A. H. et al., 2011, p. 53-56). Another disadvantage is that e-learning provides more possibilities for the academic fraud as Nagi (2006) states that it is easier to cheat online than face to face.

2. ETHICS IN E-LEARNING

Of the problems confronting contemporary universities, academic dishonesty may be one of the most serious especially since the online environment provides a more tempting environment for students to cheat (Pavela, 1993). The survey conducted within U.S indicates that as high as 59% of U.S. students involved in e-learning programs admit to some sort of academic fraud either "very often (27%) or "often" (32%). Most of the studies on e-learning indicate "psychological distance" as a main problem of studying online. When using information technology we tend to break the ethical rules because the act feels less personal as we cannot see or hear the other person. Today we cannot rely on the fact that traditional moral rules were learnt at home. Students tend to find „easy ways" of getting their degree and do not feel guilty breaking the ethical rules (Brown, T., 2008). Fass (1990), in a study for the American Council on Education, described early patterns of inappropriate behavior in e-learning. He identified the following categories of academic fraud in the e-learning environment: inappropriate assistance on examinations, misuse of sources on papers and projects, writing assistance and other inappropriate tutoring, misrepresentation in the collection and reporting of data, improper use of academic resources, disrespecting the work of others, lack of protection for human subjects in research, breaches of computer ethics, lack of adherence to copyright and copy-protection, providing inappropriate assistance to others and lack of adherence to academic regulations."

Whereas in the U.S., e-learning has become very popular in the recent years as indicated (Allen, Seaman, 2010), in Slovakia e-learning is far from being widely used as most of the universities offer only in-class courses and use information technologies only to support those. Our survey revealed that the Slovak teachers and students do not seem to have much experience in e-learning as above 13% of teachers and 17% of students answered "I don't know" when asked to rate the e-learning at their particular university. Above 30% of teachers and 25% of students evaluated e-learning at their universities as bad or very bad.[1]

Similar to other countries, e-learning in Slovakia is especially tailored for students that work during the day and want to enhance their qualifications by acquiring their degree in the comfort of their homes. The online students are mostly adults that are employed at various positions (even the top management) and may have families which in many cases, puts their education on a second or third place of priorities in their lives (Dutton et al., 2002). Due to the lack of time, online students may be more prone to ethical misconduct when compared to daily students. On the top of that, the online students may be less scared of the consequences (if caught) since a dismissal from their study or a forced break in their registration may not affect their lives as traditional students' lives would (Kročitý, 2013). Based on the statistics provided by Slovak university that is a leader in fighting the plagiarism in Slovakia (School of Management), we tried to find out whether online students committed more academic fraud compared to the daily students (expressed as a percentage on total number of students). The following table presents the violations of scholastic honesty by daily and online students for the period of 2002-2011.
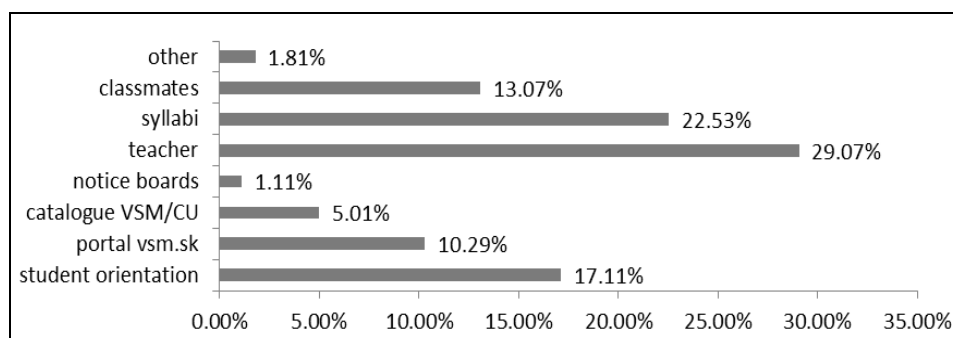
Table 1. Violations of scholastic honesty by daily and online students (2002-2011)

Academic year	Number of students violating scholastic honesty rules		Total number of enrolled students		Percentage of students violating the scholastic honesty rules on total number of enrolled students	
	daily	online	daily	online	daily	online
2002/2003	65	2	548	52	11,86	3,85
2003/2004	120	10	671	141	17,88	7,09
2004/2005	59	13	640	264	9,22	4,92
2005/2006	68	37	713	411	9,54	9,00
2006/2007	81	41	792	412	10,23	9,95
2007/2008	78	46	836	465	9,33	9,89
2008/2009	78	69	850	496	9,18	13,91
2010/2011	44	52	1030	458	4,27	11,35
2011/2012	35	54	1047	340	3,34	15,88

Source: own survey based on statistics of Scholastic Honesty Committee, School of Management, 2013

The table above provides significant results as the percentage of academic fraud cases in daily programs has fallen down over the years whereas it has significantly increased in online programs in the same time period. We have conducted an interview with the Head of Scholastic honesty Committee Mr. Kročitý who mentioned that the drop in the number of cases of academic fraud in the daily programs may have fallen down due to the more intensive means of communication at school (especially teachers, classmates, admission officers). On the other hand, he admits that communication with online students has severe limits and is – in many cases – limited to the in person orientation at the beginning of studies and several warning emails and short paragraphs in the school's academic catalogue and in the course syllabus. In his study, he has examined the sources of information about the scholastic honesty cases (students were asked a question "how did you find out about the scholastic honesty rules and procedures?") that are presented in the following figure.

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[1] The questionnaire was distributed by email to more than 7,818 teachers employed at the Slovak universities and more than 9,020 students studying at the Slovak universities with the response rate of 20.23% in case of teacher respondents and 15.61%.

Source: Kročitý, 2013 (363 respondents)

Figure 1. The source of information on scholastic honesty rules and procedureS

Figure 1 reveals that the most common sources of information are teachers, course syllabi, student orientation and classmates. Less common sources are the VSM portal and school catalogue. The focus of information dissemination should be aimed at teachers who are also responsible for creating syllabi for every course.

As aresult of this study, we believe that the limitations in communication in online programs (especially on the part of teachers) accompanied with the increased number of online students have caused the percentage of students violating the scholastic honesty rules to grow. Our recommendation is to focus on student-teacher communication in the forums, especially using a multimedia communication means (e.g. video, video-conference, webinar) which would be a better substitute of the traditional in class setting.

According to Kročitý (2003) the most common way of breaching the scholastic honesty is the improper citing or paraphrasing which was the main interest of our analysis. However, other ways of conducting the ethical misconduct have been revealed. Due to the limitations of this paper, we provide a brief summary of the most common cases as well as our recommendation to limit the possibilities of the students committing the fraud in table 2.

Table 2. Recommendations to fight the academic fraud in online programs

Most common ways of ethical misconduct in online studies in Slovakia	Our recommendation to fight the academic fraud in online programs
Improper citing or paraphrasing on the research papers, case studies, homework and on discussion boards.	Focus on prevention by intensifying **student-teacher communication** in the forums, especially using multimedia communication means. Establish Scholastic Honesty Committee at your university. Arrange for a solid academic plagiarism checker technology.
Writing assistance of another person on behalf of a student (often a paid service either through a personal acquaintance or even by a professional company specializing in writing papers on behalf of students).	Support the government action to abolish the businesses that write papers on the behalf of students . Examine the student work carefully and pay attention to the student's writing style. Check the date of creation of document as a listed by MS Office. Ask student to present the paper in a webinar.
Providing username and password to a third person who contributes in the discussion forums on their behalf.	Pose similar questions from discussion forums on the test. Pay attention to the student's writing style.
In case of an online test, a student may browse the Internet to find the correct answers or someone else may take the test on the student's behalf logging under student's name.	We generally do not recommend the online tests and suggest imposing the requirement of taking 1-2 on-campus proctored exams or using the professional proctor if a student is at a distant location. However, if online test is the only way, block the possibilities of opening another window on student's computer. Have a large test bank of questions so that the students' questions are unique. Ask open ended questions. Ask student to arrange a 360 web camera.
Asking someone else to sit for the exams.	Check the student's ID at each exam. Pose similar questions from discussion boards on the test.
In case the exam is being proctored through a proctor abroad, the proctor may not be reliable (a personal acquaintance which is very difficult to verify).	Ask the proctor to provide the verifiable credentials (e.g. the school's email address, confirmation from the school manager on a letterhead, business card, etc.). Verify the proctor by calling the university or check the name and the position on the Internet (e.g. on LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.).

Source: own work; conclusions based on the analysis of literature and own experience

3. CONCLUSIONS

In our paper, we examined whether online students generally commit more academic fraud compared to the daily students in Slovakia. We found out that at School of Management, the university that has the most experience with fighting academic fraud, percentage of academic fraud cases in daily programs has fallen down over the years (especially due to the more intensive means of communication at school in daily programs) whereas it has significantly increased in online programs in the same time period. During the last year, the percentage of students violating the scholastic honesty rules in daily programs on total number of enrolled students was approximately five times higher than in daily programs so we can accept the hypothesis that the online students committed more academic fraud compared to the daily students. The most common way of breaching the scholastic honesty is the improper citing or paraphrasing. One of the main recommendations to fight the academic fraud is to improve the teacher-student communication in online programs. The focus should concentrate on the methods of credible deterrence, which do not necessarily have to focus on punitive actions. Raising the level of awareness of scholastic honesty through more effective information and knowledge dissemination will create a climate of mutual trust that encourages unrestricted exchange of ideas and thus motivates people to reach their highest potential (Kročitý, 2013).

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