The Nature, Causes and Practices of Academic Dishonesty/ Cheating in Higher Education: The Case of Hawassa University

Mebratu Mulatu Bachore (PhD)
Assistant Professor
College of Social Sciences and Humanities,Hawassa University ,Po.Box: 05,Hawassa, Ethiopia

Abstract
The main objective of the study was to assess the perception of teachers and learners on the nature of practice, the type and the causes of academic cheating (dishonesty) in Hawassa University. The study was basically a survey which employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather data. The subjects were 20 instructors and 60 students who were selected randomly from four colleges/ institutes namely Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities and Business and Economics Colleges and the Institute of Technology. Moreover, four program coordinators were selected to gather the qualitative data. The data gathering instruments were questionnaire and interview. The findings of the study disclosed that academic dishonest/ cheating, specifically test/ exam related cheatings and plagiarisms on written assignment and papers are prevalent. The practices were caused by the difficulty of the tests/exams, time scarcity, irrelevance of course material, pressure to gate good grades and losing clarity on the policy and the need of having extra points to raise their grades from high commonly confirmed reasons to low commonly confirmed ones. In addition, the study proved that submitting an assignment that was written by someone else, copying material from a published source without giving credit and copying from someone else during a test are the top three unethical behaviors which are prevalent. Therefore, as the acts hamper the quality of education in the level, various stakeholders suggested strategies to curb the challenges as recommendations. These include assisting learners to develop self confidence through delivering question based practical lesson, applying the rules and regulations strictly, developing and revising the existing rules and regulation in line with the sophistication of recent cheating strategies, designing technology based mechanisms, and improving the quality of teachers in the university.
Keywords: Cheating, Plagiarism, Academic Dishonesty, Higher Education

1. Statement of the Problem

Education is the key to solve multi dimensional problems of a society through knowledge. Thus, many countries of the world engaged in ensuring the access of education to their citizens. However,   quality of Education has been drawing the attention of scholars across the world these days. Academic achievement is often used as an indicator of schools quality because it is easily measurable using standardized tests, while other outcomes may be more complex and less tangible (SIDA, 2000). This means, quality of education can be determined by proper assessment of academic achievement measurements such as tests/ exams and assignments.

Scholars of education underscore the students' assessment strategies as a core part in insuring quality. In reality, student assessment should be regarded as a complex, multidimensional activity that requires alignment, balance and rigor in order to assure quality outcomes (Joughin, & Macdonald, 2004). To ensure rigorous assessment, academic cheating must be minimized. If there are unethical practices, like cheating in the process of administering such kind of tools, the quality of education will be questioned as well.

Academic cheating can occur at either the institutional or individual level. In institutional cheating, a higher education institution might attempt to inflate scores, perhaps to ensure that its students do well. This might happen on transnational programmes where the awarding body is an external service provider. In such a case, it is in the interest of the local service provider to inflate scores so as to maintain market share. However, the negative impact on quality will be significant if the awarding body or the accrediting body does not have a rigorous quality assurance system to limit such practices.

Academic dishonesty, which compromises the quality of education, is becoming the concern of most of the academic institutions in Ethiopia. The researchers experience indicates that Hawassa Univeristy also shares the concern as a number of instructors and students are complaining about the growing practice of cheating and plagiarism on exams and written works. Therefore, it is ideal to investigate the causes, the trends of the practices and the perceptions of stakeholders before these acts impede the overall quality of education.

2. Research Questions

➢ How do teachers and learners perceive the practice of various academic dishonesties in the university?
➢ What are the most frequently occurring unethical academic behaviors in the university?
➢ Why do students engaged in such activities (academic corruption) regularly; and
➢ What are strategies to curb the problems in the context of the university?

3. Objectives of the Study
3.1 General Objective
The main objective of the study was to assess the nature, causes and practices of various academic dishonesties in Hawassa University.

3.2 Specific objectives
The study attempted to:
- Assess the perception of teachers and learners towards the practice of various academic dishonesties in the university;
- To identify the most frequently occurring unethical academic behaviors in the university;
- To sort out common reasons to be engaged in such activities (academic corruption); and
- To suggest possible university based strategies to curb the problems.

4. Review of Related Literature
4.1 The concept of Academic Dishonesty/ Plagiarism
Academic institutions are places where citizens are prepared for a diverse need of life and societal issues. We value academic integrity very highly and do not permit any forms of dishonesty or deception that unfairly, improperly or illegally enhance a grade on an individual assignment or a course grade. We are aware, however, that new forms of cheating, plagiarism and other forms of dishonesty may arise and therefore, we expect every student to interpret the requirement of academic honesty and integrity broadly and in good faith.

Plagiarism occurs when a person represents someone else's words, ideas, phrases, sentences, or data as one's own work (Higbee & Thomas, 2002). When submitting work that includes someone else's words, ideas, syntax, data or organizational patterns, the source of that information must be acknowledged through complete, accurate and specific references. All word for word statements must be acknowledged through quotation marks, unless, academic dishonesty comes as a practice in the academic environment.

4.2 Types of Academic Dishonesty
In the academic environment, academic dishonesty can be explained in different ways. In most cases, in Ethiopia, the practices are being manifested in the form of cheating exams and plagiarism (papers and assignments).

Academic dishonesty may be categorized as exam cheating and plagiarism based on the nature of the acts. In cheating exams, Etter et.al (2006) state that we can have a list of activities including copying from others, having or using notes, formulas or other information in a programmable calculator or other electronic device without explicit teacher review and permission, having or using a communication device such as a cell phone, pager, or electronic translator to send or obtain unauthorized information, taking an exam for another student, or permitting someone else to take a test for someone else and asking another to give you improper assistance, including offering money or other benefits and etc.

Secondly, under plagiarism, practices like, giving or getting improper assistance on an assignment meant to be individual work, including in any assignment turned in for credit any materials not based on your own research and writing; this includes: using the services of a commercial term paper company, using the services of another student and copying part or all of another person's paper and submitting it as your own for an assignment (Mitchell, 2008; Brimble & Stevenson, 2005).). In addition, acting as a provider of paper(s) for a student or students, submitting substantial portions of the same academic work for credit in more than one course without consulting both teachers (self-plagiarism), failing to properly acknowledge paraphrased materials via textual attribution, footnotes, endnotes and/or a bibliography and citing nonexistent sources (articles, books, etc.) are seriously considered as acts of plagiarism.

In the Ethiopian context, though there are differences in the widespread of the acts, both forms of dishonesties are observed in the academic institutions. However, experiences revealed that the former one is prevalent in all academic levels. The later one, plagiarism, is very common in higher education: universities and colleges.

Technology based exam cheating

Traditional Exam Cheating

5. Materials and Methods

5.1 Research Design

The main objective of the study was to assess the trend and practice of academic dishonesty in Hawassa University. The research design is basically a survey which employs both qualitative and quantitative approach to analyses data.

5.2 Subjects and Sampling Techniques

The subjects of the study were Hawassa University students and instructors from Social science, Natural Science and Business and Economics Colleges and Institute of Technology (IoT). These were selected randomly out of eight colleges/institutes in the university. 80 students were selected randomly: 30 from IoT, 20 from Natural Science, 15 from Business and Economics and 10 from Social Sciences and Humanities Colleges. The students' level was sorted by year. It ranged from second year to third year and fifth year to IoT. The instructors were also selected from the same colleges and institutes. Accordingly, 20 instructors of which 8 from IoT, 4 from Natural Science, 4 from Business and Economics and 4 from Social Sciences and Humanities were selected. Finally, four program coordinators were also selected through random sampling technique for an interview.

5.3 Research Instruments

The data was collected by employing two instruments, namely questionnaire and interview. The main objective of the questionnaire was to collect data from the students and instructors about their perception regarding the prevalence, types, causes and practices academic dishonesty (cheating) in the university. Some items were common for both subjects so as to verify the data across. The interview was designed to assess the major reasons of cheating, teachers' reaction and further suggestions to curb the challenge. The question was adapted from standard measurement which is being used to survey such kinds of practices. This helped the researcher to ensure the reliability of the tool. Before conducting the main study, a pilot was conducted on 10 students and 5 instructors and some items of the questionnaire were edited and paraphrased so as to ensure clarity to the respondents.

5.4 Procedures of Collecting Data

Since the study was a survey, first the questionnaire was administered to the instructors and the students simultaneously so that the data could be gathered at the same time. Then, the interview was conducted to the instructors. The instructors who were interviewed didn't fill the questionnaire. This helped not only to get additional data but also to avoid possible redundancy which might occur due to similarity of respondents.

5.5 Methods of data Analysis

Though the questionnaire which was employed to gather data from the both teachers and students was different, the method of analysis was the same. That means, the data from both sources was analyzed through quantitative approach which employs frequency and percentage tabulation. Moreover, bar graphs were used to compare the response from the learners and the teachers. On the other hand, interview data was purely qualitative and it was analyzed textually by setting themes.

6. Results and Discussions

This part contains the detail presentation and analysis of the data. Some of the items in the tools were common in both the learners' and teachers' questionnaire. Therefore, the first part focuses on the comparison between the responses of the two subjects. And, then, each subject's data is presented separately.

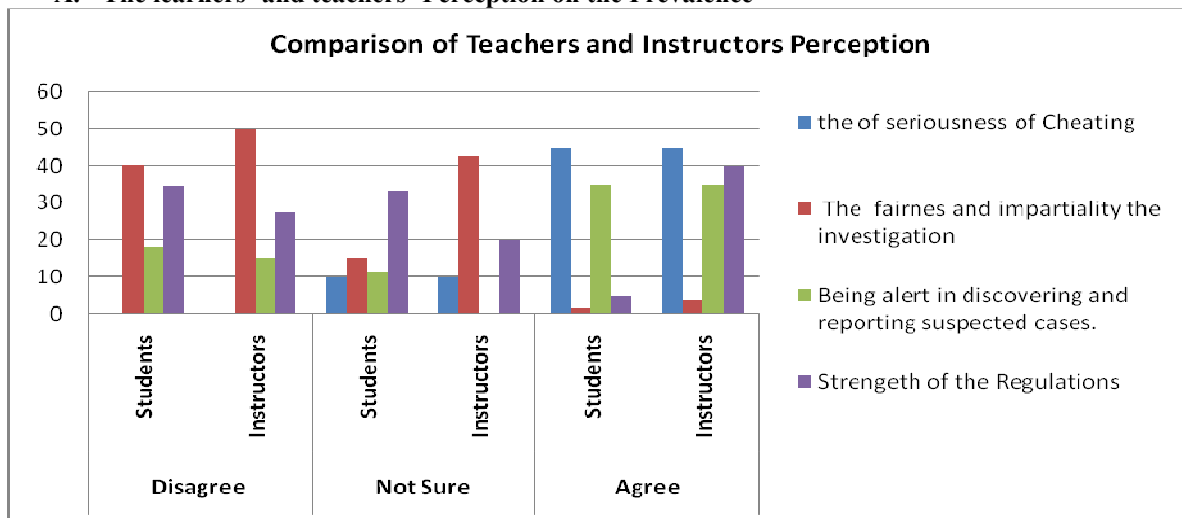### A. The learners' and teachers' Perception on the Prevalence

Fig 1: Comparison of Teachers' and Learners' Perception

The graph clearly shows the comparison of the teachers' and students perception on the seriousness of the problem, impartiality of the investigation, the level of being alert in discovering and the strengths of the rules and regulations. Both groups disclosed their agreement almost in the same extent in the seriousness of the problem and in the extent of being alert in discovering. But, regarding the strengths of regulations, the graph shows that teachers have extreme positive perception where as the learners have the opposite extreme. In the disagreement part, both groups equally confirmed that the level of investigation is not fair/ impartial.
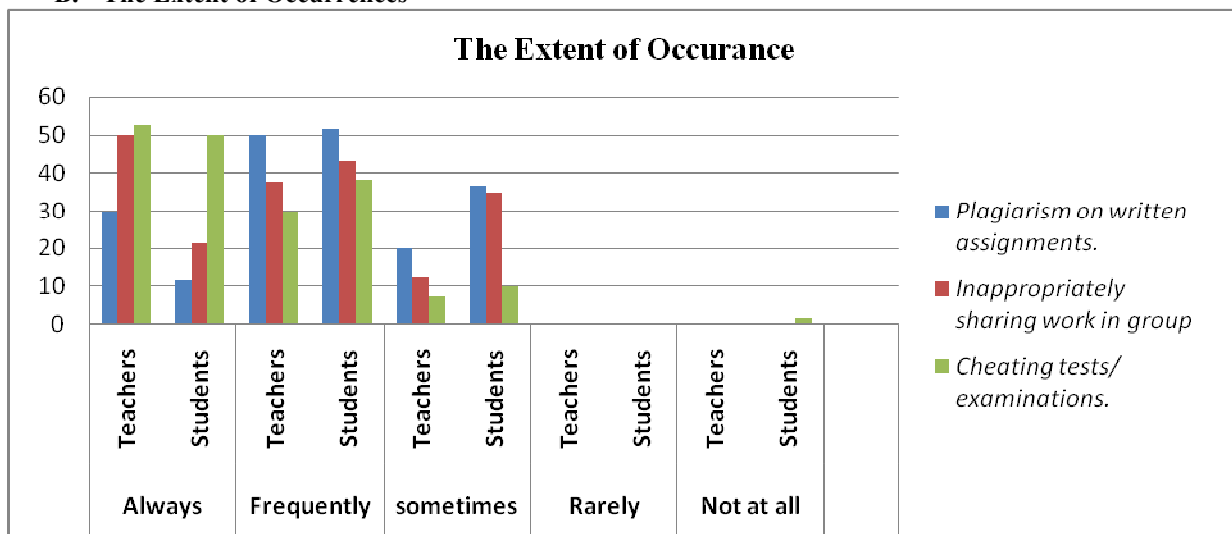
B. The Extent of Occurrences

Fig 2: The Extent of Occurrences

The above graph demonstrates the comparison of the teacher' and learners responses on the extent of the occurrences of the three major academic dishonesties. Accordingly, both groups confirmed 'Always' equally having 50% is cheating on tests and examinations. On the other hand, 50% and above rated 'Frequently' on the occurrence of plagiarism on written works/ assignments and the third type, inappropriate sharing of group work is witnessed in different figure in the sale, but most of the respondents agreed that its occurrence is frequent. This shows that though all of them are happening repeatedly, the first position is for exam/test related cheating; the second one is plagiarism on written work, and the last is for inappropriate sharing of group work.

C. Causes of Cheating/ Academic dishonesty

No.	Behavior	F	%
A	More than half the class is cheating	13	21.6
B	Test is too hard or there's too much work.	49	**81.6**
C	Student is involved in many school activities.	-	0
D	Teacher doesn't have different test for each class and year.	28	46.6
E	Could not have passed without cheating	9	15
F	Not have enough time to read	51	**85**
G	Course material is irrelevant /unimportant to the test.	47	**78.3**
H	Student involved in many outside activities.	22	36.6
I	Teacher hasn't made policy clear.	41	**68.3**
J	Pressure to get good grades.	47	**78.3**
K	Needed extra points to raise grade average.	41	**68.3**

The table demonstrates the reasons that force students to participate in academic cheating. Among the causes which are confirmed by most of the students were indicated in bold numbers in the table. Accordingly, 81.6% of the students disclosed that the level of difficulty of the test enforce them to be engaged in such activities. Also, 85% of the respondents stated time scarcity as a reason. Course material irrelevance and pressure to gate good grades took 78.3% of the respondents each. 68.3% respondents proved that their reasons are losing clarity on the policy and the need of having extra points to raise their grades.

D. The Nature of Reporting the Incidents

	Yes		No		Sometimes	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Would you report an incident of cheating that you observed?	10	16.6	43	71.6	7	11.6
Would the student at Hawassa University report such violations to the instructor/ head?	10	16.6	37	61.6	13	21.6
Would a student report a close friend?	39	65	11	18.3	10	16.6

In the above table, the respondents' reaction to their experience of reporting the incidents is displayed. Concerning the experience of reporting, most of the students, 71.6%, stated that they don't report the incidents. Only 16.6% of the students disclosed that they often report the cases. In addition, the students were asked about their practices of reporting the incidents to the concerned bodies. Accordingly, 65% of the students report to their friends, whereas only 16.6% of them report to the instructor or the head. This implies that there is not only limited practice of reporting the incident but also the limited practice is addressed to friends who don't take any measure.

E. The Rank of the occurrences Specific Unethical Academic Behaviors

	Unethical academic behavior Ranking	Rank					
		1st-5th		5th-10th		11th-16th	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Copying from someone else during a test	**27**	**67.5**	8	20	5	12.5
2	Taking an exam for another person	4	10	27	67.5	19	47.5
3	Submitting an assignment that was written by someone else	**36**	**90**	4	10	-	0
4	Using technology to answer exam questions during the exam	8	20	21	52.5	11	27.5
5	Using un-authorized material in an exam	11	27.5	0	0	29	72.5
6	Reproducing an exam questions for the purpose of selling them	4	10	4	10	32	80
7	Copying material from the net and submitted it as my own work	**25**	**62.5**	4	10	11	27.5
8	Invented or falsified information for the bibliography of a paper	0	0	7	17.5	33	82.5
9	Allowing another person to copy from them during an exam	**17**	**42.5**	10	25	13	32.5
10	Copying material from a published source without giving credit	**29**	**72.5**	3	7.5	8	20
11	Writing an assignment for a friend who submitted it as his work	12	30	20	50	8	20
12	Collaborating on an assignment when asked for individual work	3	7.5	25	62.5	12	30
13	Reproducing an exam questions and sharing them with friends	4	10	12	30	24	60
14	Obtaining questions from a previous exam	8	20	20	50	12	30
15	Inventing a family crisis in order to get an extension on an exam	8	20	7	17.5	25	62.5
16	Not contributing to the group work in group assignment	**25**	**62.5**	15	37.5	0	0

In the above table, the rank of occurrence of specific plagiarism related behaviors which indicate the magnitude of the prevalence. Accordingly, six acts were rated by most of the respondents from 1st -5th rank. These are Copying from someone else during a test (67.5%), Submitting an assignment that was written by

someone else (90%), Copying material from the net and submitted it as my own work (62.5%), Allowing another person to copy from them during an exam (42.5%), Copying material from a published source without giving credit (72.2%), and Not contributing to the group work in group assignment (62.5%).

This shows that the acts can be ranked from 1st to 5th as Submitting an assignment that was written by someone else, Copying material from a published source without giving credit, Copying from someone else during a test, Copying material from the net and submitted it as my own work and Not contributing to the group work in group assignment, and Allowing another person to copy during an exam respectively.

F. Interview of Program Coordinators

Interview was administered to four program coordinators in different colleges/ institutes. The main concern of the interview was to investigate the reasons for academic dishonesty/ cheating in academic institutions, the practice of taking measures such kind of dishonesties and measures to alleviate such kind of unethical behaviors.

Concerning the reasons for cheating and other academic dishonesty, the respondents commonly reflected the following views. The major ones are lack of confidence in their own work, lack of enough preparation, poor background knowledge, weak controlling mechanisms, invigilator's carelessness, classroom size and having no motivation to refer different resources. Specifically, according to the interviews, graduate students often engage in such activities as they don't have good reading and writing skills in the language of instruction (English).

The coordinators were also interviewed about trends and practices of taking measures for such kind of dishonesties. Specifically, the types of measures taken were listed by them. These are signing on exam papers for further decision by the department or instructor, taking the cases to the department and giving zero on the exam at hand. But, most commonly observed ones are changing places of students who shoot troubles in exam rooms or leaving without any measure.

Finally, the coordinators were asked to suggest measures which should be take to minimize the extent of cheating and plagiarism. Accordingly, they have suggested different views, but the most common ones are

A. Assist to develop self confidence,
B. Delivering question based practical lesson,
C. Applying the rules and regulations strictly,
D. Developing and revising the existing rules and regulation in line with the sophistication of recent cheating strategies,
E. Improving the quality of teachers in the university, and
F. Designing Technology based mechanisms.

7. Conclusions

The main objective of the study was to assess the view of teachers and learners on the extent of the practice, features and causes of academic dishonesties/ corruption in Hawassa University. In line with this, four specific objectives were set for a further clear assessment.

The first specific objective was to assess the perception of teachers and learners towards the practice of various academic dishonesties in the university. Accordingly, the data showed that cheating/ academic dishonesty is a serious challenge in the university. Furthermore, the study revealed that though the college members are alert about it, the investigation is not fair; it is impartial.

The other specific objective is identifying the most frequently occurring unethical academic behaviors in the university. These activities are categorized as general and specific. The first case encompasses three activities like written work plagiarisms, test/exam cheating and improper use of group work assignments. The data confirmed that test/exam related dishonesty took the first position in occurrences following written work plagiarism and improper use of group work. The specific types of cheatings which took the first four positions are submitting an assignment that was written by someone else, copying material from a published source without giving credit, copying from someone else during a test, and copying material from the net and submitted it as my own work and not contributing.

The third specific objective was sorting out common reasons to be engaged in such activities (academic corruption). Among the causes which enforce them to be engaged in such activities as confirmed by most of the students, the first one is the level of difficulty of the test. The second position was given to time scarcity as a reason. Course material irrelevance and pressure to gate good grades took the third and the fourth rank respectively, and having no clarity on the policy is the fifth one.

8. Recommendations

It is obvious that the prevalence of academic dishonesty extremely hurts the quality of education. And, scholars stated that if academic cheating in individual level is not controlled timely, it would proceed to institutional level soon.

➢ Thus, the study confirms that academic dishonest is becoming very common in higher level. It is a high

time to understand its prevalence and impact on the quality of education in the level.

> The findings revealed that the dominant causes are difficulty of exams, scarcity of time, inconvenience of course materials and ambitious to get high grades. Thus, it is recommended to improve the quality of classroom lessons by making them practical and question based. And, students should get training on how to manage their time and study skills, and Academic/ research report Writing skills.

> One of the contributing factors for academic cheating is technology. Therefore, it advisable to revise the rules and regulations towards academic cheating in line with the complexity of the act. Even, using anti plagiarism software should be practiced in a national level.

References

Brimble, M., & Stevenson-Clarke, P. (2005). Perceptions of the prevalence and seriousness of academic dishonesty in Australian universities. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 32*(3), 19-44.

Etter, S., Cramer, J. J., & Finn, S. (2006). Origins of academic dishonesty: Ethical orientations and personality factors associated with attitudes about cheating with information technology. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, *39*(2), 133–155.

Higbee, J.L. & Thomas, P.V. (2002). Student and faculty perceptions of behaviors that constitute cheating. *NASPA Journal: 40*(1), 39-52.

Joughin, G., & Macdonald, R. (2004). *A model of assessment in higher education institutions*. The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from http://www.llas.ac.uk/resourcedownloads/2968/Joughin_and_ Macdonald_model_assessment.pdf

Mitchell, T. & Carroll, J. (2008). Academic and research misconduct in the Ph.D: Issues for students and supervisors. *Nurse Education Today:* 28, 218-226.

SIDA. (2000). *Teacher education, teachers' conditions and motivation*. Stockholm: Department for Democracy and Social Development, Education Division.