

## Using unfair means in undergraduate E-learning programmes in English: An analytical survey

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### Abstract

This study aims to emphasize students' views on using unfair means in e-learning programmes in English at undergraduate level. The research examines further how they trick, why they trick, and possible approaches to decrease this unfair practice. This investigation was carried out after the second half of 2020 when the whole world was witnessing the impact of COVID. Data from 60 students of undergraduate programmes in English offered different Indian universities in correspondence mode have been obtained. This study utilized a mixed-method research strategy by use of a tailor-made, fourteen closed-ended and one open-ended item questionnaire. Frequency and percentage analysis was performed in the quantitative portion and open questions were thematically analyzed. The data show that the majority of students cheated on others by receiving the right answers from or sending the right answers to their peers. Another technique, as claimed by some of them, being employed was copying answers from electronic website using the internet resources and then pasting them onto the screen of the exam portal. The survey further indicated that grounds for fraudulent e-learning programmes, often without virtual classrooms, were not always attributable to technical difficulties and to students who wished to graduate and gain knowledge.

**Keywords:** Unfair means; E-learning; UG programmes in English; Students' opinions; Virtual classrooms; Academic dishonesty

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## 1. Introduction

The trend of E-learning is increasing worldwide and has become a need of a good number of students for various reasons. Due to all discoveries and inventions worldwide, formal education is one of life's most vital parts. Different colleges, including regular and e-learning or distance learning, provide several forms of education. E-learning is playing a key role in shaping the modern society in which the whole world depends on the Internet (Almazova, et al., 2016; Alotaibi & Kumar, 2019; Çakmak, Namaziandost, & Kumar, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021). E-learning programmes allow students to adopt and promote self-orientation and autonomous approaches to learning. Like the conventional class, teachers can also encourage hesitant students to engage and talk with their peers without any fear (Ibrahim, Silong, & Samah, 2002). Furthermore, part-time students and professionals can continue their education at a remote learning level. In comparison to traditional study, distance learning saves money too (Sadeghi, 2019). No doubt, there are some limitations to e-learning such as the denial of one-on-one live relationships between teachers and students, and also among the peers, insufficient contact hours, the shorter time spent in virtual classrooms, etc. which increase the tendency and possibilities for cheating (Harashchenko et al., 2019). Increasing number of students and the changed life style has given rise to the emergence of e-learning programmes. Many students have studied and obtained knowledge and degrees in e-learning mode, which in itself is an evidence of sea-change in the education system worldwide. It is assumed that in future, the stakeholders will have a better understanding of the attitude of students to cheat in an e-learning environment.

Because of significantly large number of student in numerous education programmes, the training system has been evolved through alternative programmes such as e-learning and distance learning in addition to regular classroom teaching. The major means of communication between educators and students are zoom, google classroom and several other platforms, which allow students to use their phones or laptops. There are no traditional classrooms, all lectures are held in virtual classrooms, and all study materials, tasks, discussions, and exams are sent online or are made available on the portal in online mode. Among the advantages of such programmes are cost-cutting in education equipment for new students, and flexibility in terms of time and pace of learning. Even the working people and students with disability can pursue and complete these courses. Moreover, online courses may allow teachers to strengthen teaching methods and provide more innovative information on the subjects (Malik, Al Shaer, & Arora, 2019; Kumar, 2021). This contributes to the involvement and efficiency of attainment. Looking at another side, these programmes also encounter several challenges grouped into four primary categories: technological, financial, social, and administrative problems

(Alhareth & McBride, 2014). Concerning such problems encountered by a great number of students, among the most important obstacles are 1) absence of tactics, 2) limited practical and interactive chances, and 3) time management, (Hurd, 2000) with the noticeable drawback of using unfair means to get the right information (Alghamdi, Rajab, & Rashid, 2016).

### **1.1. Conceptual or Theoretical Framework**

#### **Defining E-/Distance Learning**

It is necessary to specify what e-/distant learning programme is intended by. It is learning that takes place in several locations in which students and teachers use internet as a tool of communication while students are not physically present in classrooms, they opt for the course and engage themselves in learning via a mediation programme (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). The educators employ web-based technology tools mostly (Nichols, 2003).

#### **Defining Unfair Means**

Raines et al. (2011) describe the use of unfair means to be a breach of regulations, dishonesty, and ethical work. 66% of the subjects in their survey consider this act contradictory to university rules and the teachers' instructions. This involves gaining improper support from either friend or the Internet in the contemporary online environment. Therefore, the student is regarded as cheating by any means that it receives knowledge and the teacher has not approved. Several objectives drive students to take the lead and be a part of this academic fraud; for example, to achieve a higher education without learning, to complete a course, and to get a lucrative job in the long run (Owen, 2016).

#### **Techniques Employed for Using Unfair means in E-/ Distance Learning**

Several scholars have identified many techniques of cheating by students during courses offered in e-mode, irrespective of their gender, i.e., male or female (Watson & Sottile, 2010). Two primary forms of cheating were identified. First, without their permission, the other students obtained work, and, second, without a quote, took sections from an article or book.

Other prevalent means of using unfair means in online mode are identity cursing, the dishonest cooperation of students, and the exchange of assignment data (Ravasco, 2012). The production or forgery of a reference is also a typical approach utilized by most students (Razek, 2014). Another prevalent way that students employ is to copy from different websites, especially while their online examination is going on. Golden and Kohlbeck (2020) said that utilizing verbally asked questions in

online testing encourages examinees to copy questions and receive answers straight from the Internet, but it is a problem for students who want to cheat to paraphrased questions.

### **Why do students use unfair means in E-/Distance Learning Programmes?**

There are several reasons why students use unfair means in E-/Distance Learning Programmes. Among the commonly noticed most important internal factors are the absence of sense of responsibility, idle nature, absence of compliance with academic ethics, and apathy. Students with low confidence are found more active in such activities in comparison to the one who are confident (Baran & Jonason, 2020). Besides, those who bunk classes misinterpret the delivered content and do not revise the topics taught in advance also contribute to such attributes (Diego, 2017). Hosny & Fatima (2014) observes the absence in class and spending less time for self-study as some obvious reasons behind this act. A few other reasons for why they seek help of such means are a sense of humiliation after scoring low marks and the pressure of their parents. Diego (2017) stressed that the habit of using unfair means in exams in students is to some extent related to their primary education and the majority of students believe it to be a social and connected behavior. One more reason that drives these students to use unfair means include technical issues while using the internet.

#### **1.2. Related Research**

To run a program effectively, preventing the use of unfair means is crucial. Rowe (2004) has proposed several strategies for avoiding such practices that includes getting the undertaking signed by students and their parents, and making them aware of the principles, ethical values, and important instructions as recommended by Michael & Williams (2013) and King, Guyette Jr, & Piotrowski (2009). Teachers should also know what they confront in remote learning and also the security management of the website. (Rowe, 2004). In addition, a few lectures on ethical values can be quite helpful for them (Kumar, 2020; Ajmal & Kumar, 2020).

Michael and Williams (2013) suggested including lesser number of MCQs and emphasis on descriptive questions in the question paper. The provision of displaying one question only on the screen at a time, and the teachers' conscious monitoring of students' level of knowledge can help a lot in checking this practice. In the context of Saudi education, Razek (2014) identified the attitudes of using unfair means is also because of the fear of an unavoidable failure and recommended fostering ethical consciousness and focusing on education as the preventive measures.

The result of a research conducted by Hosny and Fatima (2014) revealed that using unfair means is a regular attitude among students. The participants of the study accused themselves of contemporary

life style in which they had little time to study. This study is aimed at contributing to this increasing research field by studying student perspectives of distance learning, in particular the methods in which students employ unfair means, and reasons and remedies to the problem.

Butt (2016) investigated unethical practices used in computer-based assessment systems. From the fall of 2009 to the fall of 2015, he collected data on unfair means cases (UMC) impacting undergraduates at the Virtual University of Pakistan. The Virtual University uses a computer-based examination method. Cheating is more common on paper than on books, notes, and other such materials, according to him. Students are more comfortable using software aids than they are with using a computer to access a notes file or the Internet on their own. The majority of pupils use strategies to avoid being caught in the examination hall.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

Although several studies on academic dishonesty have been undertaken, the present survey is a small-scale study on the misappropriation of e-learning programmes. The purpose of this study is to find the perspectives of students in the field of e-learning on how and why they use unfair means; and what steps should be taken to resolve this issue.

### **1.4 Research Problems**

The objective of this survey based study was to respond to:

- Students' views on how they use unfair means online at e-learning and what the motivating factor behind this unfair practice are; and
- The students' views on the most feasible measures to be taken to prevent this practice in e-learning Programmes.

## **2. Method and Materials**

A mixed-method study design has been selected as a methodological foundation for this research, to collect quantitative and qualitative primary data to investigate and find certain remedies to the use of unfair means in E-/Distance learning programmes. This has been done since quantitative research looks for numerical development (Sukamolson, 2007) and the qualitative research addresses social issues (Choy, 2014).

### **2.1. Research Model**

An online questionnaire using google form was taken to gather information in this study and requested the respondents to reply in four sections to questions on three key topics. To assist the researchers to increase the clarity of the language and directives of the items, six students who were comparable to the target population were issued the questionnaire for pilot study. The questionnaire was forwarded to

a few WhatsApp groups created for the students of undergraduate programmes of English in e-learning mode after the piloting process.

## **2.2. Participants**

Research participants were 60 students of undergraduate programmes of English in e-learning mode, being offered by different universities of India. The study was carried out after the second half of 2020. Depending on the study, the volunteers were chosen deliberately. This resulted in the employment of a convenience sampling method. Ethical norms had been observed that all the identities of responders were anonymous.

## **2.3. Data Collection Tools**

The questionnaire developed by the researchers was based on a model developed by King et al (2009). In 2009, King, Guyette, and Piotrowski conducted an empirical study on the perceptions of business students at a South American university about online tests and cheating. Participants were interrogated on their views on a wide range of topics and behaviours during online exams. To measure students' attitudes regarding online exam cheating, they created an 11-item Cheating Questionnaire (CQ) that contained 11 items. The respondents were extremely liberal in their assessments of probable cheating practices.

The researchers, in this research, followed the 11-item Cheating Questionnaire (CQ) model suggested by King et al. (2009) for the basis of this research. The respondents of this research are the students of the various universities in India and thus the perception level and culture of the respondents are different than the respondents of the research done by King et al. (2009). According to the study's goal and location, as well as investigations used in earlier studies on academic integrity and the authors' past experience of teaching online courses, the researchers added or removed some items from the questionnaire. As a result, the researchers created a customized questionnaire with fourteen closed-ended and one open-ended item. A pilot study of the questionnaire was conducted with six students who were comparable to the target population to ensure the research's reliability and validity, as well as to assist the researchers in clarifying the language and directives of the items.

## **2.4. Data Collection Process**

First, the survey started with a comprehensive research description, its purpose as well as the usage of the data. A declaration after the first section was included to preserve the privacy of participants certifying their anonymity. The second section comprised questions based on biographical information such as sex, type of course, and their views on the use of unfair means in e-learning programmes. The

next section consisted of a total of 15 elements, split into three sub-sections, formed the final edition of the study: views of participants on how to use unfair means in e-learning; perceptions of participants on the motivations for using unfair means in e-learning; and, the views of participants on how to check this unfair practice. The questions deal with their agreement or disagreement with the statements given there. The last section consisted of a question of open-ended nature. The questionnaire ended with a note of thanks to the participants

## **2.5 Data Analysis**

The current study is being done using both a quantitative and qualitative methodology. In order to accurately analyze the data acquired, this study used a set of 15 statements organized into three sub-sections. Data was collected via Google Drive Electronic Media between 2020 and 2021. The data gathered was statistically analyzed using the Microsoft Excel software. Microsoft Excel is an excellent tool for data entry and quickly changing rows and columns prior to statistical analysis. When dealing with little amounts of data, performing basic data analysis in terms of frequency and percentage is a viable option. The researchers examined the data in terms of frequency and percentage and found that it was adequate for the purposes of the research study.

The responses received from the participants were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage using Microsoft Excel. The open question has been thematically analyzed and dealt with as one of the qualitative methods. The results were grouped into three categories as per the design of the questionnaire. These were to seek for answer to the following aspects:

- What perceptions they have about using unfair means in E-Learning;
- What, they think, can be the techniques of using unfair means; and
- What, according to them, are the reasons behind using unfair means.

## **3. Results**

The current study's findings are discussed in light of the study's established research questions, which were addressed statistically using Microsoft Excel. The data received are presented in three different tables, each table dealing with one particular aspect.

Table 1 (a) and 1 (b): What perceptions they have about using unfair means in E-Learning?

Question	Always		Sometimes		Rarely	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Q 1. To what extent may a student take the opportunity to use unfair means?	20	33.33%	36	60.00%	4	6.66%

Question	Yes		No		About the same	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Q 2. Is this practice more frequent in an e-learning programme as compared to a regular classroom learning?	32	53.33%	5	8.33%	23	38.33%

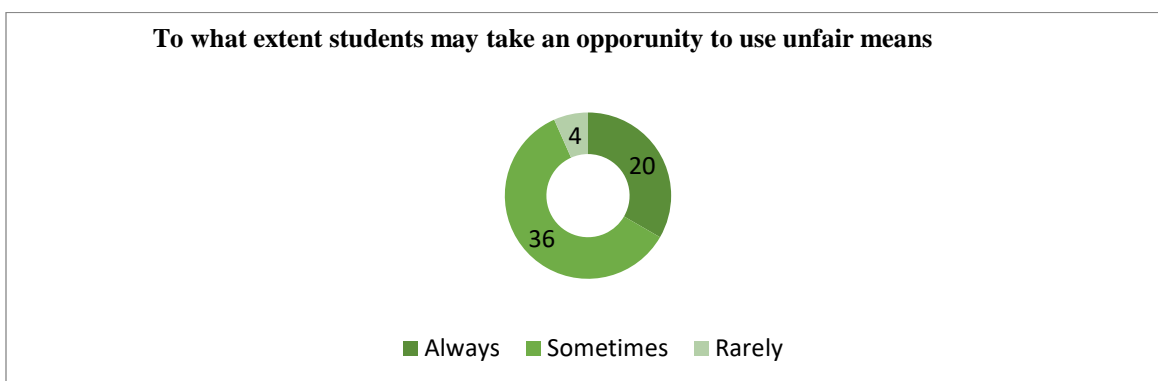


Figure 1: Representation of data in Table 1 (a)

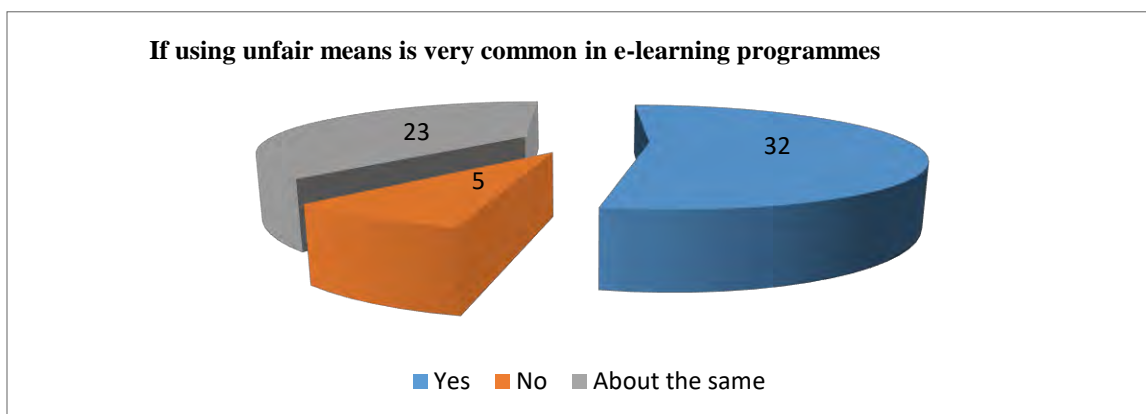


Figure 2: Representation of data in 1 (b) through pie charts



The data above are self-explanatory. Table 1(a) reveals that 60% participants' (n=36) believe that students tend to use unfair means in e-learning 'sometimes', one third of the participants (33.33%, n=20) said that students always use unfair means in such programmes; and a small percentage of participants (6.66%, n=4) said that students rarely do so. Table 1 (b) was to know if the practice of using unfair means was more frequent than or equally frequent to the same in regular classrooms. 53.33% (n = 32) consider that this practice is more frequent in e-learning programmes.

Table 2: What, they think, can be the techniques of using unfair means?

Questions	Always		Almost		Never	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
As a student of an E-learning programme, did you...						
3. ever use course book during exam?	16	26.66%	20	33.33%	24	40.00%
4. request someone else to do your exam?	8	13.33%	20	33.33%	32	53.33%
5. obtain the exam from another student who did the test before you?	21	35.00%	26	43.33%	13	21.66%
6. help others during the exam?	22	36.66%	29	48.33%	9	15.00%
7. use more time due to some technical problems ?	8	13.33%	16	26.66%	36	60.00%
8. send answers to your friends?	24	40.00%	22	36.66%	14	23.33%
9. write exam on behalf of someone else?	21	35.00%	13	21.66%	26	43.33%
10. copy and paste the correct answers from internet sources?	36	60.00%	14	23.33%	10	16.66%

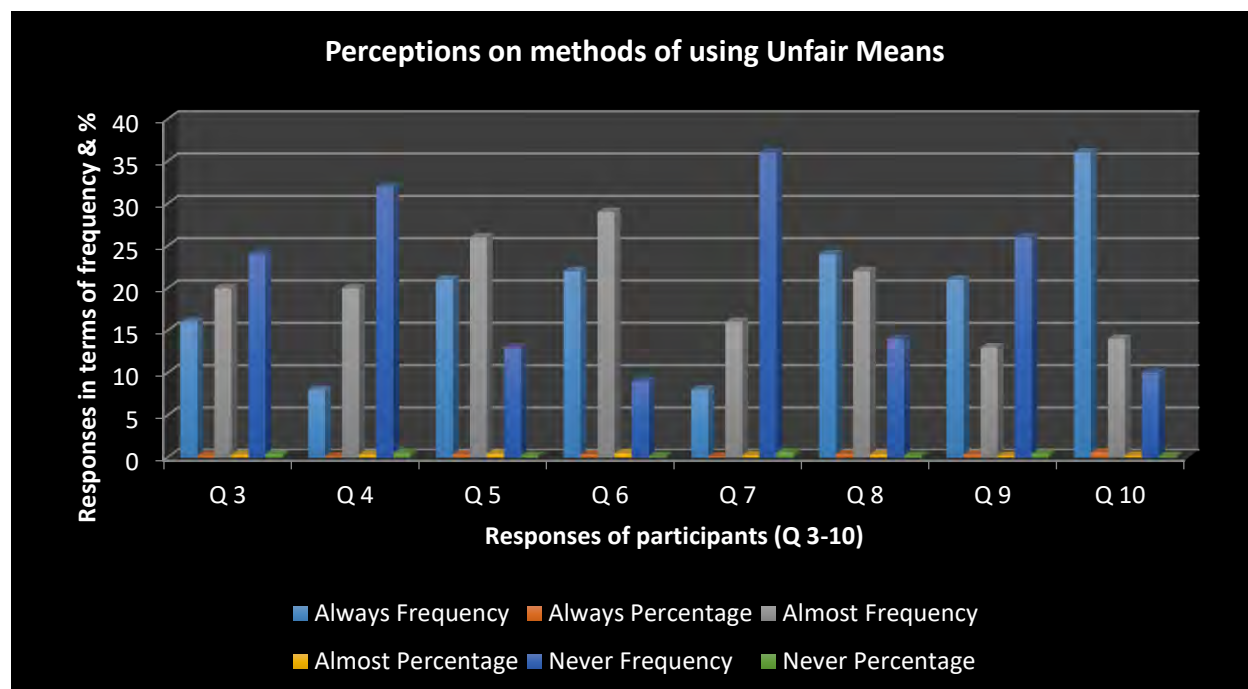


Figure 3: Graphical representation of data in Table 2

Table 2 above outlines participants' replies to the different techniques employed in using unfair means. It was good to note that 40.00% (n=24), 53.3% (n=32) and 60.00% (n=36) participants said that the students never use a course book in exam, never requested anybody else to write exam on their behalf, and never used extra time due to technical glitches. It was interesting to see that 43.33% (n=26) and 48.33% (n=29) participants respectively admitted that they obtain the exam from another student who did the test before, and help others during the exam. Whereas 40.00% (n=24) and 60.00% (n=36) participants accepted that students help their fellow students throughout the examination; use internet sources to reproduce the correct responses and put them onto the test.

Table 3: What, according to them, are the reasons behind using unfair means?

Question:	Agree		Disagree		Can't say	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Why do you use unfair means in exams?						
11. Because grade I my priority, not knowledge.	46	76.66%	13	21.66%	1	1.66%
12. Because I remained absent and failed to understand the contents.	42	70.00%	16	26.66%	2	3.33%
13. Because I had no sufficient time to prepare.	41	68.33%	18	30.00%	1	1.66%
14. Because my friends do so.	11	18.33%	49	81.66%	0	0.00%
15. Because of frequent technical issues.	43	71.6%	16	26.66%	1	1.66%

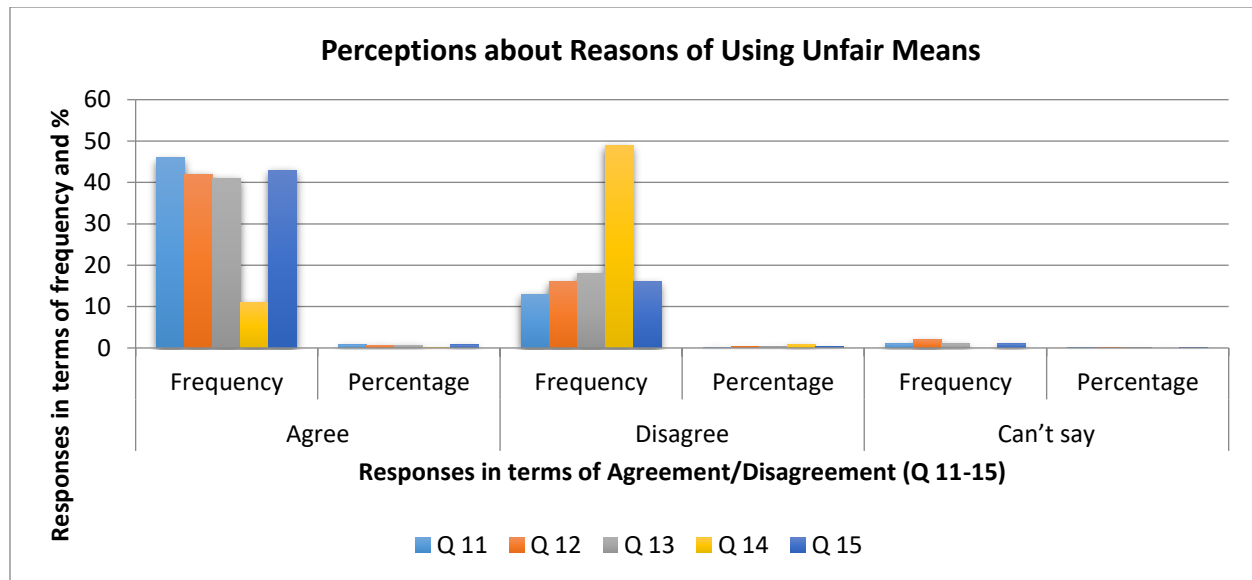


Figure 4: Graphical representation of data in Table 3

This part of questionnaire dealt with seeking for the participants' agreement or disagreement with the statements related to the use of unfair means. It was observed that there were a few participants who remained neutral to some statements and did not express their agreement or disagreement. However, 76.66% participants reported that they do so because grades are more important to them than knowledge. Most of them (70.00%, n=42) agreed that students do not attend the class regularly, and so, they fail to understand the contents delivered which lead them to use unfair means. Although 68.33% indicated that students usually do not have sufficient time to prepare and practice and so, they cheat on the exams. Only 18.33% (n=11) agreed that students use unfair means imitating their friends. A great number of participants (71.66%, n=41) agreed that frequent technical issues are the reasons why students do so.

The participants offered various suggestions in response to the open-ended question to prevent the use of unfair means in e-learning. In response to the open-ended questions to be analyzed thematically, the participants provided three solutions: (1) the students themselves are mostly responsible, and possible treatments include increased sense and awareness, helping a tutor comprehend when something is misinterpreted and hard learning, (2) the teacher must make efforts and think of using certain techniques to prevent cheats, including shorter course plans, creation and distribution of reading materials and practice exercises, and (3) recommending disabling copying and pasting features during exams by the educational institutions. Besides, some tests can also be conducted at regional study centres in an on-site mode.

## 5. Discussion

Data analysis showed that the majority of e-learners use unfair means under the label “assist others.” Some students regard it as a social network, where they assist one another and swap the right answers or get the entire test from another student who finished it before them. The websites and the internet play essential roles, in which Google’s (search engine) participants were utilized to test and copy and paste responses from various websites. Although some students examined others, the majority did not. In addition, some utilized the Open Book without the authorization of the teacher, while others took the IDs of their friends and tested them on their behalf. Employing these usual tactics for using unfair means was what was very common.

In response to why students use unfair means, several reasons were listed from the students’ perspective. The teachers and the educational institutions were accused for it because of their lengthy course curriculum and short test-period. Moreover, many feel that they need to use unfair means to get good ranks. Academic dishonesty, absence of fearing God, ease of writing answers compared to time invested in sincere studying, a wide range of possibilities to copy information from applications or websites available in abundance, and the lack of self-assurance and time to study properly were further reasons why the students were behind the fraud. Moreover, many students were looking for qualifications without necessarily grasping the issues where the lectures weren't important and hence did not attend many of the courses. As a result, it caused them to use such means. Based on the past results, modern e-learning students tend to be casual about ethical values when they take tests.

Finally, participants in this study offered strategies to avoid the use of unfair means, such as awareness to importance of actual knowledge, imparting ethical values of academic integrity and fear of God, etc. The teachers were supposed to closely monitor individual performance of students before, during and after the course. Questions should be such that no direct answers could be found using internet resources. The educational institutions might also use techniques to prevent such issues and check unlawful access to the examination portals.

The present survey study addressed the approaches, reasons, and possible remedies of using unfair means in remote/distance education programmes from the students’ viewpoint. The findings indicate that identification and consultation of other students during tests are the most popular method of cheating, which is following Ravasco’s results (2012). The Internet also plays an important part in helping electronic fraud. They can, for instance, browse several websites while test is going on, get the work of others without permission, or quote and copy accurate responses as the findings of a research conducted by Watson and Sottile (2010). This, as many students claimed was due to lack of time for

study as they were not regular students and occupied with some jobs. This fact again is confirmed by a research carried out by Hosny & Fatima. Irregular attendance in lectures caused a lack of comprehension of the contents, which consequently led the students trying to use unfair means for good performance, as mentioned by in Diego (2017).

Lastly, students were separated into 3 thematically based concepts about the identification of remedies to avoid such conduct in the online courses. The research was done by Diego (2017), which stressed and highlighted the value of academic honesty, urged that people study hard, review their courses periodically. The relevance of learning and working hours, confirmed by King et al, is highly important for the students to recognize (2009). Another remedy for the lack of lectures is to hear or locate an acquaintance to assist them to grasp the material of the courses. They also proposed numerous teacher and administrator behavior and instructional tactics, as quoted by King et al. (2009), as well as the belief that appropriate technical assistance and safety measures for testing and online testing are the functions of the universities.

## **6. Conclusion**

To conclude, this survey study examined the attitudes of students about using unfair means in the e-learning programmes in English language. The analyses showed that many participants of the study confessed that they used unfair means while pursuing their online courses. They assumed that the failure of students to learn and the technological issues around online platforms or programs was responsible for such an ill- practice. This may be minimized by knowing and having a clear picture of why student do so. Students must be made aware of their obligations to education and society, and acknowledge that learning is not just for earning a certificate, but for a better life full of knowledge. It is assumed that conducting workshops on academic ethics and a brief technical training before the start of the semester can give a meaning to the pedagogical application of this research with all of the predicted challenges and remedies. To tackle the problem, it is highly urged that the code of ethics should be developed and upheld, and that awareness among those involved in academic dishonesty should be raised and there should be a provision of punishment for all the practitioners of this ill-practice. It was good to note that participants proposed to make students aware of the fraud policy and to find answers to frequent technological problems, with the recommendations of viable alternatives to eliminate this unfair practice.

## **7. Recommendations**

This present survey study has a few drawbacks, including the limited sample size. Moreover, a balance between the number of male and female students as subjects of the study could not be maintained.

There was also no particular technique for observing how students may use unfair means in online mode, and so, the study is based on the information received from the subjects of the study and the researcher's own observations.

For any further additional investigations on e-learning, the researchers in future might analyze the betting of students in different e-learning courses at different institutions to distinguish between the most sensitive courses that may be tampered with and explain why. They might also compare the actual use of unfair means and dishonesty of students through observation in Online Courses. In addition, interviews with the teachers and the participants might provide a better insight into online motives for such activities.

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