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FORMALISTIC LEARNING APPROACHES: CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Abstract. The current paper investigates the factors contributing to academic dishonesty among students at the National Technical University of Ukraine, highlighting the effects of formalistic learning approaches. Through a review of resent research and a targeted survey analysis, this study examines the impact of pedagogical strategies and the broader educational environment on student integrity. Key findings indicate that external pressures such as competitive academic climates, unclear pedagogical objectives, and the perceived (by students) irrelevance of course content significantly influence academic dishonesty. Theoretical insights from McGregor's Theory A and Theory B are applied to differentiate between the authoritarian and humanistic educational frameworks, demonstrating that environments which emphasise punitive measures and controls (Theory A) tend to exacerbate dishonest behaviours, whereas those that support personalised learning experiences (Theory B) help mitigate these tendencies. The survey reveals a disconnect between students' academic responsibilities and their personal and professional aspirations, with many resorting to dishonest practices when faced with unmanageable academic loads or misaligned curriculum goals. The manuscript proposes a paradigm shift in
educational strategies to develop a culture of integrity. Recommendations include restructuring curricular designs to enhance relevance and engagement, improving communication of academic expectations, and implementing supportive measures that encourage ethical academic conduct. By addressing both the symptomatic and root causes of academic dishonesty, this study advocates for a more holistic approach to fostering integrity within the educational system.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, survey, university students, formalistic learning approaches, motives.

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ФОРМАЛЬНІ ПІДХОДИ ДО НАВЧАННЯ: ПРИЧINI ТА НАСЛІДКИ

Анотація. В статті представлено результати дослідження факторів, що сприяють академічній нечесності серед студентів Національного технічного університету України та вплив формальних підходів до навчання. На основі аналізу актуальних досліджень та проведеного опитування, автори розглядають вплив педагогічних стратегій та освітнього середовища на ставлення студентів до проявів академічної недобробочесності. Основні висновки підкреслюють, що зовнішні фактори, такі як конкурентне академічне середовище, нечіткі педагогічні цілі та несприйняття студентами навчальних курсів як релевантних, суттєво впливають на академічну нечесність. Теоретичні концепції Теорії А та Теорії Б МакГрегора використовуються для відображення різниці між авторитарними та гуманістичними освітніми
підходами, показуючи, що середовища, які базуються на покаранні та контролі (Теорія А), підштовхують до нечесних дій, тоді як ті, що сприяють формуванню персоналізованого навчального досвіду (Теорія Б), допомагають зменшувати ці тенденції. Проведене опитування виявило розрив між академічними обов'язками студентів та їхніми особистими та професійними амбіціями, причому багато хто вдається до нечесних практик, коли стикаються з надмірним навчальним навантаженням або неузгодженими цілями навчальної програми. Автори пропонують зміну парадигми в освітніх стратегіях для розвитку культури академічної добробочесності. Рекомендації включають ресурскутурацію навчальних програм для підвищення їхньої релевантності, покращення комунікації щодо академічних вимог та впровадження підтримуючих заходів, що сприяють етичній академічній поведінці. Звертаючись як до симптоматичних, так і до кореневих причин академічної нечесності, це дослідження підтримує більш цілісний підхід до розвитку добробочесності в освітній системі.

Ключові слова: академічна недоброчесність, опитування, студенти університету, формальних підхід до навчання, чинники.

Problem Statement. One of the essential prerequisites for high-quality education is a conscientious and responsible attitude from students toward their university studies. Central to this concept is academic integrity, which fundamentally involves recognising and valuing the education being received, responsibly and independently completing all academic assignments, and honestly undergoing all forms of academic assessment. These practices underscore the commitment to a truly educative process and are critical to the realisation of academic and professional potential [5; 8; 10]. Currently, academic dishonesty — often referred to as 'cheating' — is alarmingly prevalent among students and is increasingly seen as a normative behavior. This widespread acceptance significantly undermines the effectiveness of the higher education system. Moreover, academic dishonesty not only incurs reputational damages for universities but also devalues the education of the students involved. Those who engage in deceitful practices forfeit the opportunity to gain a substantive education, ultimately acquiring a degree that lacks true merit [4; 7; 11].

Every educator inevitably encounters various forms of academic dishonesty among students and often ponders the motivations behind it, the reasons students resort to cheating, and solutions to eliminate these issues. We consider it as one of the possible ways to synthesise most instructors' reflections from the perspective of D. McGregor's motivation theory,
distinguishing two basic approaches to addressing student academic dishonesty, which we will refer to as Theory A and Theory B (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Theory A</th>
<th>Theory B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>View of Student Behavior</td>
<td>Considers an average student as inherently indolent and tries to avoid academic responsibilities whenever possible.</td>
<td>Considers an average student as having an inherent inclination towards learning and seeking responsibility in favourable conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Responsibilities</td>
<td>Students often try to simplify tasks and shirk responsibilities.</td>
<td>Students do not shirk responsibility under favourable conditions but are impeded by external factors when they do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of Students</td>
<td>Advocates for close supervision by instructors and a tight control system.</td>
<td>Emphasises the need for instructors to manage educational activities effectively and create a supportive environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling Academic Dishonesty</td>
<td>Views strict control and the threat of punishment as the only way to combat academic dishonesty.</td>
<td>Suggests that academic dishonesty often stems from poor management or past failures, and improved management can reduce such behaviours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Strategy</td>
<td>Supports a stringent system of control and punishments to enforce discipline and compliance.</td>
<td>Focuses on removing obstacles that hinder learning, unveiling student talents, and motivating through rewards to encourage academic success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and Rewards</td>
<td>Relies primarily on the threat of punishment to motivate students.</td>
<td>Advocates for motivation through rewards to facilitate the discovery and development of students' potential abilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, both Theory A and Theory B exist within educational paradigms; Theory A has been the conventional approach for a long period, characterised by its authoritarian teaching methods. However, Theory B, which aligns with a humanistic, person-oriented paradigm that encourages personal initiative, independence, and self-regulation in learning, is becoming increasingly dominant nowadays. This second approach (Theory
B) appears to be more relevant at the current stage of societal development. Believing that most students have an intrinsic motivation to learn and wish to engage in learning, it follows that external control and the threat of punishment are not the only means to address the problem of academic dishonesty among students. This understanding necessitates identifying all possible causes that might prompt even highly motivated students to engage in academic dishonesty.

**Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.** The problem of academic dishonesty has been explored through a wide range of studies in an attempt to provide insights into the underlying causes that may lead even students with strong academic intentions to commit such acts.

Researchers outline:
- social factors like sense of competition, social rejection, and societal pressure contribute significantly to this behavior [3; 6];
- peer influence, procrastination, and educational anxiety are also associated with academic dishonesty [9];
- rationalisation, lack of academic ability, and the opportunity due to lack of supervision [1; 6];
- self-esteem, personal values, ambiguity about sanctions, cultural integrity [2; 6].

Having analysed the recent studies and our practical experience we can outline that the diversity of factors contributing to academic dishonesty causes a notable negative response - the increasing adoption of formalistic learning approaches. By “formalistic learning approaches”, we mean strategies that prioritise meeting externally imposed criteria over deeper engagement with the material, often leading students to focus merely on fulfilling the minimal basic requirements necessary to pass exams or satisfy evaluative benchmarks. Implied in this strategy is an environment conducive to academic dishonesty. Such behavior not only undermines the educational process but also limits personal and professional development by depriving students of the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that come from real engagement with learning materials.

Moreover, students may resort to formalistic learning approaches and academic dishonesty when educational tasks lack personal significance. This can be seen as a symptom of a mismatch between traditional educational methods and the current societal and educational demands. It often results from pedagogical requirements that conflict with students' intentions and opportunities, leading to internal discomfort and quasi-adaptive behavior.

This perspective suggests that academic dishonesty should not only be discouraged but also recognised as an indicator of deeper systemic issues within the educational framework, highlighting the need for educational
strategies that align more closely with the authentic learning needs and personal goals of students.

**Aim.** The current study aims to identify possible reasons motivating students to adopt formalistic learning approaches and as a result, engaging them in academic dishonesty. The research aims to identify factors that prevent students from engaging in conscientious study and to understand which pedagogical requirements cause internal resistance. Despite the limitations of the conducted research, this endeavour represents an earnest attempt to contribute to the ongoing discourse on academic integrity and educational practices.

**Methods.** For data collection, we employed a survey research approach. The research design adopted a one-shot survey method, focusing on the perceptions of students at a specific point in time. Utilising a questionnaire instrument, statements were carefully formulated to capture comprehensive insights into student perceptions. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended questions, and was administered online. The research targeted a group of 225 students enrolled in the Management and Marketing Faculty of the National Technical University of Ukraine, known as the "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute.

**Findings.** Based on the survey results, it was found that the majority of respondents (80%) are generally satisfied with their university curricula and find their studies interesting. In our view, these findings may indirectly prove that the students sampled for the study are mostly motivated and interested in their studies.

However, among the respondents, only 14% indicated that they rarely resort to using cheat methods in exams, tests, or assignments. The overwhelming majority, with varying frequency, admitted to employing various "dishonest" methods in their performance (see Figure 1).

*Fig. 1. The frequency of using cheat methods by FMM students in their studies*
Moreover, only 3% of the respondents unequivocally condemn such methods, while 40% are more inclined to disapprove but consider it acceptable in certain circumstances. Additionally, 57% of the respondents perceive such behavior as normal, considering it a common practice among students.

In order to test the assumption that students resort to formalistic learning approaches when faced with inflated demands, we asked respondents how realistically do they think it is to conscientiously and honestly fulfil absolutely all the requirements of the curricula and professors. It was found that only 18% of respondents believe that the program is too complex and demanding, with professors setting inflated expectations. On the other hand, many respondents agree that although the curricula requirements are challenging, they believe they can fulfil them with effort and dedication, feeling confident in their ability to manage the workload effectively. Additionally, some perceive the workload as reasonable and attainable, feeling adequately prepared to meet academic challenges without significant difficulty. Overall, the majority (82%) consider the academic workload as manageable and realistic (Figure 2).

![Fig.2. Students’ evaluation of curricula difficulty](image)

Thus, for the majority of students, studying honestly is entirely achievable. Perhaps students resort to formalistic learning approaches only when they do not perceive the academic goal as personal. Thus, we included to our survey questions to reveal whether all the disciplines in their curricula are personally essential for their personal and professional development. As a result, student opinions were divided – 54% of respondents believe that all the disciplines they study are significant for their growth, while 46% note that there are academic disciplines in the curriculum that they see just as an
extra burden. Students most commonly consider "unnecessary" disciplines to be those in the general cycle, non-core disciplines, as well as some disciplines in the optional section.

The obtained data indicate that students are more likely to resort to formalistic learning approaches if they see no sense in studying disciplines or do not understand the aim of particular assignments. To avoid spending time that they could dedicate to more engaging and personally important pursuits, students may opt to formally pass a course or complete an assignment with less effort by resorting to cheat methods. Additionally, according to the survey results, the most common reasons for students' dishonest behavior in studies include the following:

- problems understanding the course material (53%);
- lack of interest in the material or subject overall (47%);
- excessive amount of study material and assignments (39%);
- insufficient time for preparation (34%).

Respondents also note the influence of factors such as their own unwillingness, time management issues, attempts to balance work with studies, as well as the professors' attitude towards the subject (students' responses include in some form similar concept that professors/instructors the teacher themselves is not interested and engaged).

Among the reasons why students resort to plagiarism, using artificial intelligence or other digital tools for cheating in written assignments, the most common are:

- lack of time (47%);
- lack of knowledge or no vision (39%);
- lack of interest in the topic (23%);
- lack of interest in the subject or course overall (16%).

When asked about measures of punishment respondents believe they should be taken by a professor/instructor in case of revealing academic dishonesty by a student in a form of verbal note (remark/warning), the respondents expressed the following opinions:

- incorrect/ wrong/ inappropriate listing of referenced sources, citing sources that were not actually used in the completion of the work (36%);
- cheating on exams/tests (58%).

Respondents believe that more severe penalties, such as lower scores, should be applied for the following actions:

- plagiarism (43%);
• using artificial intelligence for creative tasks (12%);
• falsifying data without actual execution (29%).

The vast majority of students outlined that the most serious penalties such as reporting and disqualifying should not been employed (62%) or employed in “really hard cases” (however, respondents were not able to clarify which ones or give examples) (41%).

It was common for respondents, when asked about hypothetical punishment for various forms of academic dishonesty, to choose the option "I find it difficult to answer," which may indirectly suggest that students are not willing to take responsibility and give moral judgments on manifestations of academic dishonesty, leaving it to the professor/instructor.

Conclusions. The results of the conducted research indicate that academic dishonesty in the student environment is common and is perceived by the majority of students as normal. Explaining the reasons for academic dishonesty by attributing it to indolence and avoidance of responsibility limits possible solutions to this problem to merely formal measures of tightening control and punishment. A broader range of solutions is possible if academic dishonesty is considered as a symptom of formalistic learning approaches, which occurs when pedagogical demands conflict with students' personal intentions, goals, abilities, or evoke internal resistance. In such an approach, emphasis is placed primarily on improving pedagogical guidance of students' academic activities and fostering responsible, conscientious attitudes towards learning and professional activities. To combat students' academic dishonesty, a complex of measures is necessary, which should include not only strict control and inevitable punishment but also long-term measures such as:

• developing interest in the course content (making it practical, demonstrating the relevance between course content and specific professional tasks in students' field of study);
• providing detailed explanations and instructions on how to complete assignments, developing clear, transparent assessment criteria and rubrics;
• planning the amount of assignments and time for their completion, taking into account students' level of knowledge and skills;
• developing non-standard assignments, topics for written assignments, supporting students' research and creative activities;
• democratising relationships between professors/instructors and students, stimulating personal responsibility of students for the results of their educational activities.
References:


