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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PAKISTAN

The purpose of this study is to investigate empirically the students' perception of ethical behaviour in institutions of higher education in Pakistan. Structured questionnaire is used to collect primary data from 670 students. The results indicate that students exhibit low to high tolerance to academic cheating, violation of university rules, lack of computer ethics, and selfishness. No significant difference is found with regard to students' perception of unethical behaviour based on age, gender, and academic discipline, level of education, and years in university. The results provide insights about this issue enabling decision-makers to take appropriate actions.

Keywords: academic discipline; ethical behavior; higher education; Pakistan.

Мухаммад Асиф Хан

ЕМПІРИЧНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ ЕТИЧНОЇ ПОВЕДІНКИ СТУДЕНТАМИ ВИЩИХ НАВЧАЛЬНИХ ЗАКЛАДІВ ПАКИСТАНУ

У статті емпірично досліджено студентське сприйняття етичної поведінки у вищих навчальних закладах Пакистану. Для збору первинної інформації проведено структуроване опитування 670 студентів. Результати дослідження показали, що ступінь толерантності студентів підвищується у такій послідовності: списування, порушення загальних правил університету; порушення комп'ютерної етики; використання у корисливих цілях. Жодної суттєвої різниці за всіма позиціями за змінними віку, статі, спеціалізації, кваліфікаційного рівня та року навчання не виявлено. Розроблено рекомендації для адміністрації університетів щодо відповідних політик закладів.

Ключові слова: навчальна дисципліна; етична поведінка; вища освіта; Пакистан.

Табл. 6. Літ. 33.

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ЭМПИРИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ВОСПРИЯТИЯ ЭТИЧЕСКОГО ПОВЕДЕНИЯ СТУДЕНТАМИ ВЫСШИХ УЧЕБНЫХ ЗАВЕДЕНИЙ ПАКИСТАНА

В статье эмпирически исследовано студенческое восприятие этического поведения в высших учебных заведениях Пакистана. Для сбора первичной информации структурированные опросники были розданы 670 студентам. Результаты исследования показали, что степень толерантности студентов повышается в следующей очередности: списывание, нарушение общих правил университета; нарушение компьютерной этики, использование в корыстных целях. Никакой существенной разницы в данных позициях по переменным возраста, пола, специализации, квалификационного уровня и года обучения не обнаружено. Даны рекомендации для администрации университетов по разработке соответствующих политик.

Ключевые слова: учебная дисциплина; этическое поведение; высшее образование; Пакистан.

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1. Introduction. Institutions of higher education provide environment for ethical and intellectual development of students. Highlighting the objectives of educational institutions, Hogness (1986, p.562) asserted these institutions to "produce a virtuous populace, one that is morally mature and spiritually grounded." Researchers identified the deteriorating ethical standards among university students (Casado et al., 1994; Yeung et al., 2002). Research indicated that students practicing unethical behaviour at educational institutions are more likely to practice similar unethical behaviour in workplaces (Rakovski and Levy, 2007; Lawson, 2004). Responding to these concerns, Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has adopted quality assurance strategy with a view to improve all the dimensions of academic quality in institutions of higher education in Pakistan. The objective of this policy is to enhance students' competitiveness at national and international markets. HEC's zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism is the manifestation of its commitment to create and sustain academic discipline. In the context of stakeholders' theory, students are important stakeholders, and potential leaders of business organizations. Their perception of ethical practices and their implementation is likely to affect business practices in future. Limited research has been done on this important issue in Pakistan. The present study aims to bridge this gap in the existing literature within the context of Pakistan in particular and for academic literature in general.

The purpose of this study is to investigate empirically the perception of Pakistani students towards ethical behaviour. The study provides insights about the phenomenon of students' perception about ethical behaviour in academic matters. The study offers opportunities for academicians and academic administrators to identify the appropriate intervention strategies to enhance students' knowledge, abilities, orientation, and practices on ethical behaviour with a view to contribute to higher standards of future ethical leadership for sustainable growth, and fair and ethical workplace practices.

2. Literature Review. The concept of students' unethical behaviour in higher educational institutions remains widespread (Love, 1997). This phenomenon has been established irrespective of cultural differences (Arkoudis, 2007). Bista (2010) noted that unethical behaviour includes "cheating (use of unauthorized notes or study aids in an examination); plagiarism (use of other's works as their own without acknowledging contribution of authors); fabrication (falsifying any information of data, unauthorized access, misuse of availability of computer system or alteration of computerized records); deception (providing false information to instructors); and sabotage (preventing others from completing their course work). Researchers have established that cultural values, stress, peer pressure, personality, poor time management, financial problems, peers' behaviour, scholarship-related pressure, poor organizational skills, and lack of understanding of existing rules and regulations as essential determinants of students' unethical behaviour (Bamford and Sergiou, 2005; Hall, 2004; Park, 2003).

Researchers argue that students' unethical behaviour diminish their feelings about ethical values and issues, and this attitude may be used in different milieu during post education period in practical life (McMurtry, 2001; Bernardi et al., 2004,). In order to initiate remedial measures at early stage, understanding of the factors that affect unethical behaviour is essential. This understanding will provide opportunity to

academicians and decision-makers in educational institutions to pursue appropriate interventions strategies to improve ethical behaviour among students enabling them to value ethics and practice it in their daily lives.

The study focuses on 4 important factors that constitute unethical behaviour in academic environment. These are academic cheating, computer ethics, violation of university rules and regulations, and selfishness (Nejati et al., 2009; Zopatis and Kapardis, 2008). The researchers have found strong evidence of an association between unethical behaviour of students at university and their subsequent unethical behaviour in a job-related environment (Gulli et al., 2007; Thompson, 2000).

The contextual factors of gender, age, level of education, experience, culture, academic discipline, and religion are the focus of this study with regard to students' unethical behaviour. Different perspectives were hypothesized to establish association of gender with unethical behaviour. The results are, however, mixed. Studies found no significant association between male and female, and immoral and unethical behaviour (Sankaran and Tung, 2003). Furthermore, some studies found strong relationship between gender and unethical behaviour of students (Ryan and Ciavarella, 2002; Smith and Rogers, 2000).

Conflicting results have emerged from the studies focused on relationship of age with unethical practices. In meta-analysis of 43 studies, Borkowski and Ugras (1998) found mixed results of association of age and unethical behaviour of students. Researchers found that older students demonstrate significant ethical behaviour (Milner et al., 1999; Worting, 2007). However, evidence in literature indicates that older students tend to exhibit unethical behaviour (Tse and Au, 1997). Some studies indicate that younger students are more inclined toward unethical academic behaviour (McCabe and Trevino, 1997; Rakovski and Levy, 2007). The lack of conclusive evidence necessitates the need for more research to establish conclusively the association of age and unethical behaviour of university students.

Researchers have focused on academic discipline as an important variable affecting students' ethical behaviour. Some studies found that business students are less ethical as compared to students of non-business disciplines (Caruana et al., 2000; Worting, 2007). Conflicting evidence was also found in different studies that established no significant difference between business and non-business students with regard to their unethical academic behaviour (Iyer and Eastman, 2006; Worting, 2007). The contradicting evidence needs further investigation to explore the phenomenon.

The following hypotheses emerge from literature review:

H 1. Male and female students differ in their perception of unethical behaviour in higher education institutions.

H 2. Students of business and non-business discipline differ in their perception of unethical behaviour in higher education institutions.

H 3. Older students differ from younger students in their perception of unethical behaviour in higher education institutions.

H 4. Graduate and undergraduate students differ in their perception of unethical behaviour in higher education institutions.

H 5. Students of public and private universities differ in their perception of unethical behaviour in higher education institutions.

3. Method. The population of study is based on all the institutions of higher education in Rawalpindi, Islamabad. 10 universities from both public and private sectors were randomly selected from the list of HEC Pakistan. The questionnaires were administered to 800 students using convenience sampling technique. 700 completed questionnaires were returned. 30 questionnaires were discarded containing incomplete information. 670 questionnaires were used for the data analysis showing a response rate of more than 83%. The 19-item instrument for the study was adapted from Zopiatis and Kapardis (2008) and Nejati et al. (2009). Violation of regulations variable contains 4 items. Computer ethics variable is based on 4 items. Academic cheating variable is operationalized using 5 items. Selfishness variable carries 6 items. The responses are sought on Likert scale ranging from 5 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree).

The pilot study was done to test the reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach's alpha of all the variables was greater than 0.60, and indicated adequacy as recommended by Nunnally (1978). The face and content validity was performed through discussions with academicians, professionals, and experts in the field as well as potential respondents. Factor analysis was performed to test the construct validity of the instrument. Statistical tests based on factor analysis, independent sample t-test, and one way ANOVA were conducted. Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

4. Results. Demographic profile of respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of respondents (N = 286)

	Frequency	Valid %
Gender		
Male	350	52.2
Female	320	47.8
Age		
Up to 20 Years	310	42.3
> 20 years	360	53.7
Level of Education		
Undergraduate	270	40.3
Graduate	400	59.7
Academic Discipline		
Business	375	56.0
Non-Business	295	44.0
Educational Institution		
Public	370	55.2
Private	300	44.8
Years in University		
First Year	140	20.9
Second Year	150	22.4
Third Year	175	26.1
Fourth Year	205	30.6

The reliability of the instrument is checked using Cronbach's alpha. The details of the results are shown in Table 2. The results indicate that values of all the subscales are within the acceptable range (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 2. Reliability of Instrument

Variables	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Violations of University Regulations	4	.602
Academic Cheating	5	.695
Lack of Computer Ethics	4	.692
Selfishness	6	.724
Overall Instrument	19	.821

The results of descriptive analysis indicate the students' tolerance level with regard to different dimensions of ethical behaviour. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Analysis

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
Violations of University Regulations	1.99	.747	3
Academic Cheating	2.20	.837	2
Lack of Computer Ethics	2.31	.927	1
Selfishness	1.82	.723	4

The results in Table 3 indicate the level of tolerance of students to different dimensions of unethical behaviour in academic environment at universities. The students exhibit high tolerance (mean = 2.31) to computer ethics. Such behaviour is attributed to ease of access, lack of stringent policies about copyright, and availability of solutions related to their academic work. Students show low tolerance to selfishness (mean = 1.82). They are quite sensitive to the acts of bribing to seek preferential treatment, gaining unauthorized access to modify records, build relationship with teachers to seek favours, and hurt others to achieve professional advancement. Students' sensitivity to violation of university rules and regulations is low. This is because of likely repercussions of unethical behaviour that prevent them to resort to this practice. Academic cheating gets a moderate tolerance indicating that students view acts of getting someone's support during examination, repeated submission of assignment or written work with cosmetic change, and availing opportunity of cheating in examination.

The results of exploratory factor analysis based on varimax rotation identify 4 factors. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) which measures the sampling adequacy shows the value of (0.766). The Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at ($p < 0.001$). Factor loadings (< 0.40) are deleted. Factors with Eigen value (> 1.0) are retained. The 4 factors explain the cumulative variance of 49.861. The results of factor analysis are in Table 4.

Table 4. Factor Analysis

Factors / Items	Factor Loading	Eigen Value	Cumulative Variance	KMO	Bartlett Test
School Regulations Violation		1.836	45.908	.690	.000
SRV1	.619				
SRV2	.643				
SRV3	.719				
SRV4	.722				

The End of Table 4.

Factors / Items	Factor Loading	Eigen Value	Cumulative Variance	KMO	Bartlett Test
Selfishness		2.576	42.94	.729	.000
S5	.641				
S6	.688				
S7	.565				
S8	.689				
S9	.730				
S10	.606				
Academic Cheating		2.260	45.207	.704	.000
AC11	.653				
AC12	.705				
AC13	.609				
AC14	.704				
AC15	.686				
Computer Ethics		2.1	52.496	.684	.000
CE16	.608				
CE17	.690				
CE18	.815				
CE19	.768				

The independent sample t-test is performed to identify differences between groups basing on the variables of gender, age, academic discipline, type of university, level of education, and years of stay at a university. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Independent sample t-test

Variables	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig (two-tailed)
Gender						
Violations of	M	350	1.90	.62	-1.870	.063
Regulations	F	320	2.07	.85		
Academic	M	350	2.18	.79	-2.38	.812
Cheating	F	320	2.21	.88		
Computer	M	350	2.27	.87	-7.49	.455
Ethics	F	320	2.35	.97		
Selfishness	M	350	1.89	.71	1.584	.114
	F	320	1.75	.72		
Academic Discipline						
Violations of	Business	375	1.9	.76	-7.44	.458
Regulations	Non-Business	295	2.0	.72		
Academic	-	375	2.1	.77	-7.92	.332
Cheating		295	2.2	.89		
Computer	-	375	2.2	.80	-7.84	.433
Ethics		295	2.3	1.0		
Selfishness	-	375	1.8	.70	1.150	.251
		295	1.9	.73		
Level of Education						
Violations of	Undergrad	270	1.9	.77	-8.46	.398
Regulations	Graduate	400	2.0	.73		
Academic	Undergrad	270	2.1	.91	-1.613	.108
Cheating	Graduate	400	2.2	.77		
Computer	Undergrad	270	2.3	1.03	.314	.824
Ethics	Graduate	400	2.3	.84		

The End of Table 5.

Variables	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig (two-tailed)
Selfishness	Undergrad	270	1.7	.71	-1.42	.072
	Graduate	400	1.9	.72		
Age						
Violations of Regulations	Up to 20 Yrs	310	1.8	.68	-1.531	.127
	> 20 Yrs	360	2.0	.76		
Academic	Up to 20 Yrs	310	2.2	.86	.319	.750
	> 20 Yrs	360	2.1	.84		
Cheating	Up to 20 Yrs	310	2.3	1.0	.116	.908
	> 20 Yrs	360	2.3	.8		
Selfishness	Up to 20 Yrs	310	1.8	.72	.221	.825
	> 20 Yrs	360	1.8	.72		
Educational Institution						
Violation of Regulations	Public	370	1.9	.77	-268	.789
	Private	300	2.0	.72		
Academic	Public	370	2.3	.80	1.231	.219
	Private	300	2.1	.86		
Computer	Public	370	2.4	.92	1.286	.200
	Private	300	2.2	.91		
Ethics	Public	370	1.9	.74	.755	.451
	Private	300	1.8	.69		

Table 6. Test of ANOVA – Years in University

Source	Mean	DF	Sums of Squares	Mean of Squares	F Ratio	F (Sig)	
Violation of Regulations							
Between Groups		4	3.594	.899	1.626	.168	F: 1.95
Within Groups		666	155.318	.553			S: 2.04
Total		670	158.912				T: 1.83
							FT: 2.11
Academic Cheating							
Between Groups		4	5.920	1.480	2.147	.075	F: 2.18
Within Groups		666	193.560	.689			S: 2.05
Total		670	199.480				T: 2.18
							FT: 2.40
Computer Ethics							
Between Groups		4	4.342	1.086	1.268	.283	F: 2.40
Within Groups		666	240.587	.856			S: 2.46
Total		670	244.929				T: 2.21
							FT: 2.27
Selfishness							
Between Groups		4	2.549	.637	1.224	.301	F: 1.98
Within Groups		666	146.248	.520			S: 1.75
Total		670	148.797				T: 1.78
							FT: 1.81

Notes: F = First Year (N=140), S= Second Year (N= 150), T= Third Year (N = 175), FT= Fourth Year (N = 205).

5. Conclusions, Recommendations and Future Implications. The purpose of the study is to evaluate empirically the students' ethical behaviour in academic environment in different institutions of higher education in Pakistan. The study provides useful insights into this important phenomenon enabling academicians and policy makers to initiate appropriate strategy to improve ethical behaviour of students for strategic gains.

The study examines the presence of significant difference among respondents basing on demographic dimensions of gender, age, academic discipline (business and non-business), type of university (public or private), level of education (undergraduate, graduate) and year of stay in a university (from the first year to the fourth year). The results of independent sample t-test in Table 5 indicate no significant difference in unethical behaviour of male and female students. Covey et al. (1989) argued that male and female tend to respond in a similar way to academic ethical behaviour. Haines et al. (1986) found no significant difference between ethical behaviour of male and female students. The results of independent sample t-test, therefore, reject H1.

The results show that older and younger students do not differ significantly in their perception of unethical behaviour. The results, therefore, reject H2. The results are in conformity with earlier studies (Whitley et al., 1999; Yeung et al., 2002). The results indicate no significant difference in unethical behaviour of business and non-business students. The results reject H3. The results concur with the findings of Zopiatis and Kapardis (2008). The results reject H4 that undergraduate and graduate students significantly differ in their perception of unethical behaviour. The results draw support from the study of Zopiatis and Kapardis (2008).

Duration of students' stay in a university does not seem to have divergent effects on unethical behaviour of students. The results indicate that no significant statistical difference exists among students of first year, second, third and fourth years in their perception of unethical practices in universities. The results of the study reject H5. The results conform to the findings of the study by Zopiatis and Kapardis (2008).

The students' propensity to act ethically is attributed to cultural and religious differences. In Pakistan unethical behaviour in academic life is not appreciated. Such acts of unethical behaviour in academic environment not only bring personal loss to students but affect the self-esteem of parents and family, their standing in the society. This perception is in line with Husted et al. (1996) that cultural aspects affect ethical behaviour. The religious focus on highest ethical behaviour is fundamental in Pakistani society. Sood and Naso (1995) noted that religious belief affect behaviour of individuals. The results of students' perception of unethical behaviour and its relationship with demographic variables of gender, age, academic discipline, level of education, type of university, and year of stay at a university concur with the studies of (Zopiatis and Kapardis, 2008; Whitley et al., 1999).

One-way ANOVA test is undertaken to find the difference in ethical behaviour of students based on the duration of their stay in the universities. The results at Table 6 indicate no significant difference between students of the first, second, third, and fourth years in their perception of ethical behaviour in academic environment. The results are in agreement with earlier studies (Sierless et al., 1980; Zopiatis and Kapardis, 2008).

The study provides useful insights about students' perception of ethical behaviour in academic environment. It is an addition to the existing body of knowledge

about ethical behaviour in academic milieu. Strong ethical behaviour of future leaders creates multiplier effects toward character building, transforming ethical perception, and ethical behaviour modifications. Such transformation is likely to yield significantly positive outcomes in their work and life environment. The results of the study offer opportunities to academicians and policy makers of higher education institutions to initiate, implement, and sustain high standards of ethical practices with a view to enhance students' awareness and sensitivity to ethical behaviour. The results of the study have practical implications that should be addressed to achieve the desired ethical outcomes.

Institutions of higher education in Pakistan need to foster value based culture of personal integrity, accountability, transparency, collaboration, character building of students, and visible plagiarism prevention and cheating augmented with compatible disciplinary penalties. This calls for a leading role of heads of institutions and academic faculty. The strategic approach to building this culture entails integrating ethical courses as part of curriculum, involvement of students in formulation and implementation of ethical culture. Specific guidelines need to be formulated with regard to the code of conduct of students highlighting different dimensions of ethical behaviour within academic milieu. Students should be active partners in the development and implementation of such code of conduct to have ownership of this code, and accountability for its implementation through committees composed of students. Institutions should develop comprehensive and well defined policy for academic cheating including plagiarism, computer ethics, and violations of university rules. These rules should be widely circulated among students. A well structured monitoring mechanism should be in place to constantly monitor ethical lapses and unethical behaviour. A combination of positive and negative reinforcement is imperative to change the behaviour of students.

The study has certain limitations. The number of institutions of higher education is small. There is a need to increase this number to enhance generalizability. The nature of the study involves issues regarding personal behaviour about a sensitive issue that is of vital concern to academia and society. The individual bias in giving a response to such an issue is possible, though the respondents were assured of complete confidentiality. Future direction for research may focus on additional demographic factors like race and ethnicity, religious beliefs, morality, academic achievement, motivation, and university environment. The roles played by faculty members are very important in shaping the academic culture, and transforming students' behaviour. Their role model behaviour and its impact on students' perception of ethical behaviour need to be investigated.

The primary focus of institutions of higher education is to develop sound character and value-based personal and professional development of students. Consistent nurturing of ethical behaviour in institutions of higher education is a strategic investment in nation building and developing future leaders. The results of the study provide value-added dimensions to academia and institutional policy makers to integrate ethics strategically into curriculum, policies, and individual behaviour. A multi-pronged strategy must include creating awareness, providing institutional framework to plan and implement ethical practices, collaboration with students, role model behaviour of faculty, and a combination of disciplinary and reward approaches to

achieve excellence in ethical behaviour of future leaders, and improved effectiveness of institutions.

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