

Academic Integrity among Prospective Teachers: Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract

Academic integrity is considered the moral fabric in higher education. This study uses a phenomenological approach within a qualitative research framework to explore academic integrity and its barriers among prospective teachers. The sample consisted of 16 graduate and undergraduate students from the Department of Education of two public universities in Punjab, selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected through interviews and analyzed phenomenologically, revealing four key themes: perception of academic integrity, barriers to academic integrity, perception of academic integrity policies, and techniques for promoting academic integrity. The findings suggest that students have limited knowledge of academic integrity and fail to adhere to its standards. Identified barriers include lack of authentic assessment, peer pressure, teacher favoritism, cultural differences, parenting issues, lack of awareness about academic integrity standards, and inadequate creative writing skills. Findings also reveal that respondents also lacked knowledge about academic integrity policies. To address these issues, the study recommends skill-based learning, awareness sessions, and workshops for students and teachers to enhance academic integrity and improve educational quality.

Keywords: *Academic integrity, skill-based learning, academic integrity policy*

Introduction

The scope and demand of higher education are rapidly expanding in the context of globalization, and this demand can only be met by quality education. Universities across the globe are ranked based on the quality education they offer to graduates. This quality education includes the quality of academic services, research productivity, the market value of its productivity, and the global outlook of the institution. The quality of education is a key focus of Sustainable Development Goal number 4 which states as “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals”. Central to achieving and maintaining this standard means fostering a culture of academic integrity, which significantly contributes to the progress of quality education (Mahmood et al., 2023).

Academic integrity is considered a serious issue in higher education because it affects their reputation and credibility of educational institutions (Nuriddin, 2019). Additionally, academic integrity is the act of adhering to a set of moral principles and conduct that one exhibits when participating in academic activities (Young et al., 2018). According to the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), “Academic integrity is commitment to six basic values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage” (ICAI, 2024). From these values, ethical academic behavior is defined, creating a community dedicated to learning and the exchange of ideas. It means that educational institutions can nurture people to uphold these values and transmit them to the future generations by leading a positive change in communities (Fishman, 2024).

Moreover, academic integrity is also central to outstanding teaching and learning which can be described as the commitment to and demonstration of honest and ethical behavior within an academic environment, applicable to both students and teachers (Tierney & Almeida, 2017). Nevertheless, educational institutions face numerous challenges related to breaches in academic integrity, whether unintentional or deliberate (Mahmud & Ali, 2023). From developing to developed countries

and from small elite universities to large public universities, issues of academic integrity including cheating and plagiarism etc. have been reported (Ahmed, 2020). Similarly, there are many types of violations are reported at all levels of academic institutions that can create hurdles to promoting academic integrity for example academic dishonesty (Dannhoferová et al., 2022).

The available literature suggests that the issues of breaching the academic integrity often due to the lack of awareness of plagiarism among the research students. In a study, attitudes regarding plagiarism among MPhil and Ph.D. students at a public sector institution in Islamabad were investigated. According to a quantitative poll of three hundred students an equal number of male and female participant's students studying management are more aware of plagiarism, those studying social sciences attempt to defend their activities, and those studying languages were more worried about punishment. After participating in this study, postgraduate students from all three areas unanimously stated that their concept of plagiarism had changed (Aurangzeb & Akhtar, 2019).

Similarly, Haq et al. (2020) used a qualitative research to examine the issue of academic integrity among university students, and discovered that students' integration can be guaranteed if they are happy with the way their teachers behave in the classroom and how they evaluate them in exams. Peer pressure for academic wrongdoing, however, also had a significant impact. Additionally, rote learning was found to have a major impact. They made the argument that moral and professional preparation for teachers is now necessary.

Additionally, students in Pakistani universities have been found to have engaged in academic dishonesty such as plagiarism and cheating due to pressure from their families and social circles to achieve higher marks because higher grades are thought to be crucial for obtaining work and prestige (Abbas & Ashiq, 2020). These demands drive the students to use dishonest tactics in order to improve their performance and publish more articles (Dawson, 2022). Additionally, a growing number of scholars have

started using shortcuts, leading to faked research, bogus data, paraphrasing, duplication, and outright plagiarism, as a result of the burgeoning research population and the abundance of PhDs, especially in Pakistan (Soroya et al., 2020).

In light of these concerns, the higher education commission in Pakistan has provided guidelines and plagiarism policy for dealing with academic dishonesty and asked the universities to develop strategies to promote academic integrity. Yet some universities are not clear about the procedures and rules of the policy given by HEC and prospective teachers are also unaware of these policies (Ahmed, 2020). Sugrue et al. (2019) identified that this issue caused worries for higher education institutions which are responsible for providing society with highly skillful employed and prospective teachers because their behavior can impact the reputation of institutions and students' life.

Moreover, the growing global awareness of the significance of academic integrity has led regulatory bodies to demand that higher education institutions double their efforts to address the problems of academic integrity. Additionally, evaluating and implementing the policies to promote academic integrity among future teachers and thus to reduce academic dishonesty are yet another milestone to be met specifically in the higher education institutions of developing countries. However, comprehensive awareness about academic integrity among prospective teachers is yet to be achieved. Therefore, this study is focused on assessing the awareness of academic integrity among the prospective teachers enrolled in the public sector universities of Pakistan and further exploring the barriers which hinder the students to practice their creative skills in the challenging educational scenario.

Research Questions

The research questions of the current were as follow;

- What is the perception of prospective teachers towards academic integrity?

- What are the barriers which hinder the prospective teachers to achieve academic integrity?
- What is the prospective teacher's level of familiarity regarding their university's academic integrity policy?

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory because it may be more applicable given that applied ethics in educational situations are by their very practical nature. Students learn indirectly and actively, in line with Bandura's social learning theory. According to this idea, learning is influenced by a variety of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Due to this, there are many ways to involve students in their learning through direct, indirect, and online instructional activities such as, role-playing, observing, and imitating (Bandura, 2024). This theory has strong support as a paradigm for teaching in academic integrity. We can make use of the theory to comprehend how observational learning can help students to overcome the barriers of academic integrity. This idea can also be utilized to look into how good role models, such as prospective teachers, may encourage positive behavior and support academic integrity.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to explore academic integrity and its barriers as the objective of the study. The population of this study was all the prospective teachers enrolled in the departments of education of public sector universities of Punjab. Further, sample of the study selected was selected after going through two stages.

1st Stage: There are total 233 universities in Pakistan and out of these 141 in public sector and 92 are in private sector. In Punjab, there are total 25 public sector universities, and out of these two public sector universities were selected randomly.

2nd Stage: The sample of this study consisted of 16 prospective teachers. In this regard, firstly the result information regarding prospective teachers

was collected from the examination branch, and then the prospective teachers having a high GPA and CGPA were selected purposively.

Further, the research instrument was developed through reviewing the literature. Interview guide with nine open-ended questions was employed in the current study to better understand academic integrity and its obstacles. Further, the data were analyzed by using the procedure of phenomenological analysis. This procedure includes the transcriptions, organizing the data, coding, deducing categories, identifying common themes and making interpretations. The result of the data analysis is given below.

Results

In-depth interviews were conducted with sixteen respondents. The demographic profile of the participants in the study includes prospective teachers from various academic programs with a GPA range of 3.47 to 4.00. The respondents consisted of PhD scholars, MPhil candidates, B.Ed (1.5 years), BS (8th semester), and B.Ed Honors (8th semester) students. All participants were studying at the University of Sargodha and the University of Education Lahore, Punjab. This diverse academic representation provided a broad perspective on the research topic, ensuring a comprehensive analysis across different educational levels and institutions.

Phenomenological Analysis

To analyze the data obtained from the in-depth interviews, at first stage transcripts were developed. To carry out the phenomenological analysis of this data, categories were derived and combined and reduced them into major themes. As Creswell states that identifying major number of categories in the early data analysis and then combining and reducing them into four to six themes would be better to narrate the results (2013, p.184). Since the current study investigated assessing the awareness level of prospective teachers regarding academic integrity and exploring the possible barriers that hinders their creative skills through their lived experiences, thus total four major were derived.

Perception of Academic Integrity

The first major theme emerged from the data is the perception of academic integrity. The majority of respondents highlighted that academic integrity is all about the “honesty” that how much you are honest with the work that you submit because honesty is essential for personal and professional growth. Further, the second aspect mentioned by the respondents is “fairness”. Respondents describe that academic integrity means being fair with yourself and your studies about your academic achievements. They said that being fair means no cheating in your work, the work you do is all yours and not stolen from someone else and when you are writing a paper and thesis you give credit where it is due, and it also means to treat all your classmates equally without your self-interest. Some respondents mentioned that academic integrity means being “responsible” for you work that how you do your work with responsibility and completing your work to the best of your abilities.

One respondent explain that it means standing up against the wrongdoings, and all the people who are in the institution e.g., students, teachers, head of the department, and administration consider it their responsibility to promote academic integrity in the institution. It is also crucial for fulfilling other academic responsibilities including giving other students sound advice, serving on student affairs committees, and other similar tasks. Further, one respondent said that academic integrity is a “key of self-confidence”. He said that it builds self-confidence in yourself because if you work with integrity then you have trust in your abilities and your work so you can present it with confidence and you don't have to fear getting caught. These findings reveal that academic integrity is a multifaceted concept which involve the honesty, fairness, responsibility and self-confidence these all aspects play a vital role in building the effective academic environment.

Barriers of Academic Integrity

The second dominant theme that emerges from data is barriers of academic integrity which create hurdles in promoting academic integrity.

The first barrier mentioned by respondents is the "lack of authentic assessment" they said that there is no authentic assessment done in our institutions because our method of assessment is not authentic, there are 80% teachers who do not check the paper. And even though most teachers don't check the paper properly, they randomly put marks. Therefore, those who attempt the full paper will get low marks, and those who do the wrong paper or leave the paper blank get equal or higher marks. Some respondents mentioned the "unclear concepts" as barrier. They explain that students have an issue with understanding the concepts because in class you just have to listen to the teacher and not discuss the topics with the teacher, so you did not focus, and due to lack of focus your concepts are not clear and then you face difficulties at the end of the semester, and you do dishonest acts to pass the exam.

Furthermore, some respondents describe that "political involvement" is also a barrier to academic integrity because political involvement affects negatively academic integrity. After all, political leaders are directly or indirectly involved in our institutions. They said that if the political leaders are involved with honesty and fairness then it can be beneficial. But in our country, there is a misuse of power because political leaders put those people in positions in educational institutions who are not capable of this position or seat so it is highly affected in an educational institution.

The next barrier which is mentioned by all the respondents is the "influence of peer pressure". All the respondents said that there is a lot of pressure from peers because mostly peers suggest ways of cheating, collusion, and plagiarism to get grades. Respondents said that peer pressure affects academic integrity because there is a competition of getting good grades between peers, so students use unfair means to get grades because their friends make fun, so they compromise their integrity. They further explain that teacher is not "committed" to their profession they considered their profession as a source of income. Respondent no 2 said that now as the policies are being made regarding promotion if the teacher writes so many articles the teacher will get so much promotion, so the teacher's

attention is more on this side therefore the goal of the teacher that was the whole development of the student is left behind because the whole development includes psychological, philosophical, sociological and individual development and when the teacher does not do whole development then how students will work with honesty.

Another barrier that is included is “teacher’s favoritism”. Respondents said that our institution's teachers are biased they do not evaluate the students properly. The one who is the teacher's favorite gets more marks. The next barrier explained by respondents is “lack of research environment”. They said that in our institutions there is a lack of research environment like students don't know how to copy, even most don't know how to download the articles, they don't know how to properly cite and how to write references so, and they hire any professional to do their work. Another barrier mentioned by respondents is the “lack of student interest”. They described that students only come to university only for getting a degree not for learning and knowledge. They read mostly one day before or on paper night. It doesn't matter whether they keep the values of academic integrity. According to these results there are many significant barriers which create hurdle in promoting the academic integrity which should be addressed and effectively resolved to promote the academic integrity.

Perception of Academic Integrity Policy

The next theme that emerges from the data is the perception of respondents regarding the policy of academic integrity. All respondents were “unfamiliar with policy” and were never listening and reading about the policy of academic integrity. All respondents said that we just listen and see in our class that if someone is caught cheating their paper gets canceled or the teacher takes their paper for a short time. Further, they said that we don't have any idea about plagiarism. Only respondent no 4 tells that I don't know about the academic integrity policy, but I know about the “plagiarism policy”.

All respondents emphasized the need for the Higher Education Commission (HEC) to develop and promote a comprehensive academic integrity policy. They suggested that such a policy should be actively implemented and widely communicated to strengthen ethical practices in academic institutions. Respondent 13 specifically proposed that HEC should support these efforts as they do with scholarship programs.

Techniques of Promoting Academic Integrity

The theme of promoting academic integrity highlights several effective techniques. The majority of respondents emphasized the importance of workshops and practical sessions to raise awareness, with Respondent 1 advocating for a "top-to-bottom" approach involving all stakeholders. Respondents 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 15 suggest that teaching at the students' mental level and adapting teaching methods to suit students' abilities.

Respondents 1, 3, 10, 14 and 16 also suggested using university platforms (like newsletters and websites) to spread awareness, as well as forming student committees to tackle academic dishonesty. Lastly, some respondents (12 and 15) emphasized that students must take personal responsibility by being self-disciplined, honest, and committed to ethical practices to excel academically and globally.

Discussion

The present research study aimed to explore the phenomena of academic integrity and its barriers among respondents and the study consisted of three research questions. Data were collected through interviews and collected from 16 respondents. The views of respondents in response to the interview questions generated various themes, which provided an essence of the experiences of respondents. The finding signifies that peer pressure, teacher's favoritism and lack of authentic assessment is the major barriers to academic integrity. These findings supported by Haq et al. (2020) who said that if students see their other peers cheating or dishonest acts then they also do dishonest acts. Also, Almutairi (2022) found that academic administrators' negligence caused some faculty

members to act dishonestly toward their work in a variety of ways, including plagiarism, mistrust, favoritism, and a lot of other ways. Similarly, Openo (2024) found that an academic culture of honesty can be established in large part through the use of authentic assessments. It offers direction for considering the reasons that authentic assessments are more important than ever and offers doable methods for creating more authentic evaluations.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In the light of findings of this study it is concluded that study concluded that all respondents had different views about academic integrity. The majority of the respondents said that academic integrity means honesty, fairness and standing up against wrongdoings. Respondents mentions some barriers which create hurdle in promoting academic integrity among students these barriers include Lack of authentic assessment, Unclear Concepts, Political Involvement, Cultural Differences, Parenting Issue, Pressure from the Job Market, Influence of Peer Pressure, Teacher Attitude, Teacher Favoritism, Lack of Awareness about the Academic Integrity Standards and Lack of Creative Writing Skills. Additionally, the majority of respondents said that teacher favoritism is the most significant barrier because the teacher is biased, they favor some specific students and it affects other students' scores. It is also concluded that the majority of respondents were not familiar with the policy of academic integrity. They do not ever listen to any type of academic integrity policy. They said that HEC must provide the policy on it and institutions provide clear guidelines about academic integrity. Furthermore, respondents suggested that workshops, seminars, and conferences should be arranged for the teachers and students to provide awareness about academic integrity.

Thus, keeping in view the findings of the study researcher makes some recommendations. First is that to aware the students the course of academic ethics and morality should be included in the curriculum of all undergraduate programs. To enhance awareness and promoting academic

integrity workshops, seminars, and national and international conferences organized in the universities. To empower the students equipped with the real-life skills and enables them to deal with the real-life problems, skill-based curriculum should be adopted. To improve the critical and academic writing of students, departments or universities should arrange a series of academic activities, symposiums, seminars, and workshops for thesis writing and conducting research in parallel with the regular programs. Teachers and competent authorities in the universities should organize the workshops and seminars in true letter and spirit. HEC incorporate clear guidelines in its policy of academic integrity for the clarity of students.

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