Applying Principles of Scholastic Honesty in Higher Education: Are We on the Right Track?

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Abstract:
Scholastic honesty at higher education institutions has been a hot issue for some time all around the world. Slovakia had been falling behind in efforts to reduce acts of academic disintegrity for a long time. This has changed with introduction of a centralized system of plagiarism detection. Vysoká Škola Manažmentu v Trenčíne/City University has been the leader in this area for more than 10 years. During the last decade, the school in cooperation with its mother university City University of Seattle has been in a process of continuous monitoring and reviewing the process of applying policies and procedures to fight acts of scholastic dishonesty. All these steps are aiming at building a name of an institution whose graduates are young managers with high ethical standards. Even though we can claim based on results of the work of our scholastic honesty committee that there is a decreasing trend in the number of cases where scholastic dishonesty was found, there is still a space for improvement in practice and raising awareness of academic integrity among students and staff. This paper provides an overview of the steps that have been taken with the recent assessment findings and suggests possible course of action for improvement in this area.

Keywords: plagiarism, cheating, scholastic honesty, academic integrity, plagiarism detection system, punitive action, learning goals, moral codes

1 Introduction
Scholastic honesty and plagiarism are currently not a new phenomenon in higher education. In today’s digitalized world there exist many opportunities for an easy access to information of any kind, which increases the opportunities for plagiarism and other forms of unethical behaviour. In the area of academics we can encounter plagiarism practically every day and it is not an unknown phenomenon in other spheres of life either, not excluding our political representatives in the highest positions. According to Katuscak [1], one of the reasons for plagiarism in academic environment is its uneasy detection. Without technological support, responsibility for plagiarism detection lies on instructors’ shoulders, their knowledge of texts that students use when preparing their papers and available time they can devote to reviewing papers. Focused involvement in raising awareness of academic integrity by both faculty as well as students is another important aspect. How can we effectively fight scholastic dishonesty in academic environment?

2 Current situation
Based on experiences from foreign education institutions we could say, that just introducing of a plagiarism detection systems leads to its reduction. Many foreign, but also Slovak universities are currently using plagiarism detection systems and some of them even provide such services to other education institutions. There are commercial organizations that provide similar services for a fee [2]. Recently there has been taken steps to support antiplagiarism efforts in Slovak universities relying on a computerized system. Thanks to the initiative of the Ministry of education of Slovakia from 2008 with the aim to realize complex system for plagiarism detection on a centralized level, there has been created Central Repository of Theses and Dissertations (Centrálny register záverečných prác – CRZP). This system collects thesis and dissertation projects and compares them against each other and selected internet sources. The database that the system is using consists of all previously submitted papers and it is continually growing since every day there are submitted thousands of new papers. Currently it includes more than 200 000 papers [3]. The result of the system checking is an electronic document that shows similar or identical parts of text to other papers stored in the systems’ database. The system is unique in the way that there are no other similar systems that would cover all higher education institutions in one country.

The system is in use since 2010 and so its probably too early to make any judgements about its efficiency, or at least no evaluation of its performance as plagiarism prevention tool is available. Despite this, its important to
note that the author team that stands behind the algorithm of this system has won the first prize in the international competition PAN 2011, which was a part of CLEF conference in Amsterdam 2011 [5]. Closest with similar efforts in the region is Czech republic. Masaryk University in Brno is the leader in the area of systemized plagiarism detection. They use their own system since 2006. Their activity has created the basis for creation of a centralized system Theses.cz which provides services to participating schools in a similar way as CRZP. Half of universities in Czech republic uses the system and it is also supported by Czech Ministry of Education [4].

3 Scholastic Honesty Program at VSM/CU

Some universities in Slovakia, with Vysoká Škola Manažmentu v Trenčíne/City University being the leader, have been using also other systems as a result of their own initiative long time before the CRZP has been created. These systems work more thoroughly thanks to their well-built larger databases as well as a longer experience and continuous improvement based also on the users’ requirements. One of such systems is Turnitin, providing services under the discretion of iParadigms LLC corporation. It is the leading system in the area of plagiarism detection. It works on a similar principle as our CRZP. Its database, however, consists of 250 million archived papers, 24 billions web pages, 90 thousands periodicals and electronic books. It is currently used by institutions in 126 countries including City University of Seattle [8]. Similar systems do have their drawbacks. They are not able to undoubtedly determine whether a paper is plagiarized. They can only highlight text similarities which can contain general knowledge or cited information, plus they are limited by content of their own database. However, they are time efficient compared to unrealistic expectations of the instructors being able to devote time to detection of originality of papers on their own provided the number of students and their submissions. Human factor still plays an important role, though. That requires assigning human resources to work with the reports of originality in order to decide whether a suspicious paper is really plagiarized. Such designated person or a team of people that are specialists in the plagiarism detection should not be just anonymous characters or teachers that do not have time for such a job. The existence of such department draws attention and creates impression that the particular school has taken the question of academic integrity seriously and its students as well as employers will see it in a similar way.

For a scholastic honesty program to fulfill its purpose, it has to clearly define the rules and following sanctions for violating those. Most of Slovak universities do have such rules or codes of conduct and VSM/CU is not an exception. How thoroughly the compliance with the codes is controlled is questionable. Every system is only as good as thorough people responsible for their functioning are. When following the rules is not closely watched and its violation is not penalized, scholastic honesty program is losing its justification. Education and information dissemination is a very important part of the program. It is the basis for preventing cases of violating the scholastic honesty policies. That is why students at VSM/CU are informed about the rules and policies right at the beginning of their studies during plenary sessions with mandatory attendance. Also important is reminding the students about the rules they should follow at the beginning of each course. Supporting literature in form of brochures explaining the problems of academic integrity plays another role and should be easily available. Creation of courses that are aimed at academic writing and their inclusion in the curriculum is a significant aspect. Finally, it is the clearly defined set of sanctions applied in case of violation of the policy.

VŠM/CU has defined a due process to prevent arbitrary actions applied against students. Case of suspected violation of the rules are being reviewed by a Scholastic honesty committee which consists of three people and its chair. Students are invited to provide a statement of defense at a hearing. After consideration of evidence and the students’ defense, the committee delivers. The decision varies from case to case, but the sanctions applied in case violation is found are in range from 0 assignment grade to dismissal from the study. Results of these hearings are publicly announced through notice boards and web page announcements in order to provide feedback and serve the preventive purpose. The graph below displays the number of cases that have gone through the formal process of hearings and following decisions by the scholastic honesty committee. The overall decreasing trend has been disrupted in years 2005 – 2006 when it was decided to lessen the penalties for violations because the data in the previous year showed that students seemed to be accepting the principles of scholastic honesty. What happened however, was that the number of cases amplified as the year progressed. These results showed that it was too soon to lower the penalties; strict penalties were necessary to maintain a level of credible deterrence, and therefore, we returned to the original penalties. Similar attempt has been made in year 2011, so we will see how it will affect the overall trend.
4 Punitive Actions May Not Be Effective

What would be the best approach to be taken in creating an environment supporting academic integrity and dissapproving of scholastic dishonesty is still questionable. Miller, Stopaugh and Woolridge have investigated the reasons not to cheat among college students. Their investigation was based on prior studies that suggested three common areas of reasons not to cheat. These categories are

- Learning goals
- Character moral codes
- Punishment [6]

Motivation theories suggest that learning goals play a significant role in acts of scholastic dishonesty. Goal orientation theory speaks about two types of goals, which are mastery or learning goals and performance goals. Those students who are oriented towards the mastery goals will engage in learning process with high efforts avoiding activities like cheating. On the other hand, students who are oriented towards the performance goals will try to put the outcomes above the means of achieving them and thus are more likely to cheat. This suggests that learning goals can be considered as one of the reasons for not cheating as supported by research [7]. Moral reasoning theories are commonly used to represent connections between cheating and moral reasons. However, no study so far has shown that there would be a clear relationship between levels of moral development and level of cheating. In general, people may agree on what is wrong but they would give different reasons for why it is wrong. The most common way of teaching students that cheating is wrong is based on punitive actions. However, even though the moral and learning lessons are always related to less cheating, punishment can be a reason to cheat. When failure in an activity is considered as a punitive outcome, it may outweigh the threat of punishment resulting from cheating [6].

The study involving more 1,000 respondents revealed that learning and moral standards were reasons for lower level of cheating while punishment was related to higher level of cheating. This result however does not mean that punishment will not prevent cheating. Strict sanctions for cheating give signal that this type of behavior represents a serious concern. What works effectively though, is the perception that probability of being caught cheating is high. Thus, penalties themselves will no deter students from cheating no matter how strict they appear to be. The focus of scholastic honesty programs should be on moral standards, education goals and climate of academic integrity should be more likely to reduce cheating. Promoting student responsibility for maintaining academic integrity is a way how to reduce acts of scholastic dishonesty [6].

5 Pilot Study on Scholastic Honesty Awareness at VSM/CU

5.1 Methodology

There has been performed a pilot study trying to detect the level of scholastic honesty awareness among the students of VSM/CU on a sample of 363 students. From a population of 1440 students, using the simple random sampling method and a random number generator, a sample of 900 students was selected. For data collection, the respondents were contacted via email and asked to fill out an online questionnaire with simple 7 questions. The response rate was 40.34%. The survey has provided some interesting data and will serve as a starting point for for following studies and development of the scholastic honesty program at VSM/CU.
5.2 Interpretation of results of realized survey

The first question was focusing on revealing information about the first contact of respondents with the scholastic honesty rules and procedures.

The responses to the first question show the highest percentage for student orientation session, which is done at the beginning of each academic year for new students. Interesting to note is the fact that 14.81% of respondents heard about scholastic honesty before they applied to VSM/CU. That may raise a question, how much attention is paid to this issue at high schools. Almost 95% of respondents have received some information on scholastic honesty before they finished their first year of study. That is actually one of the goals of the scholastic honesty program – to have well-informed students on scholastic honesty issues right from the beginning of their studies. The scholastic honesty committee has been applying more lenient approach to cases of first year students, but has been more strict with older students. The first year of study is considered as a transitional period in which the students have to get used to new environment and high requirements involving not only the course performance, but also the way how they approach their assignments regarding the scholastic honesty. Interesting notion is the fact that there are 0.37% of respondents who get familiar with scholastic honesty rules and procedures later than 3rd year of study, although there are none in the 3rd year. That relates to new students entering the second level of higher education without prior experience from bachelor’s studies at VSM/CU, thus being exposed to scholastic honesty rules and procedures for the first time. There is still the 2.59% of respondents that have never heard of scholastic honesty rules and procedures, which may correspond with the percentage of cases that the committee has to deal with every term (Figure 1).

The second question was trying to reveal the means that serve as a source of information on scholastic honesty rules and procedures. It shows that the most common sources are instructors as well as the course syllabi together with the students orientation sessions. Less common sources are the VSM portal and catalogue and the
notice boards placed in hallways of school buildings. The focus of information dissemination therefore is and should be aimed at instructors who are also responsible for creating syllabi for every course. Therefore, building their level of awareness of SH rules and procedures should be supported in order to have well informed students.

![Graph](image)

**Figure 4; Survey question #3**

The next question was asking students to evaluate the way how information on scholastic honesty rules and procedures get to the students. Almost 80% of respondents consider the information dissemination as effective or very effective. That shows the communication means that are used to support the level of awareness in this area are well designed. However, there is still the 20.9% of respondents who consider the information channels as less effective or ineffective at all which creates a room for improvement focusing on current and new, more effective communication channels.

![Graph](image)

**Figure 5; Survey question #4**

More than 80% of the respondents participating in the survey consider their knowledge on SH rules and procedures as good or very good. This shows correlation with the responses to the survey question #3. When the communication means work effectively than also the knowledge is on high level. Another correlation can be seen in terms of the average and lower level of knowledge which together represents 19.9% compared with the percentage of respondents considering the communication means used to disseminate information on scholastic honesty as less or ineffective at all from the previous question.
One of the crucial questions of the survey was focusing on the level of importance the students put on the scholastic honesty issues which is a basis for building environment supporting a academic integrity. The results show that most of the respondents consider the scholastic honesty enforcement as important part of their study. The main idea of the scholastic honesty program at VSM/CU is to teach our students values and build characters with high moral standards. Based on the responses to this question, we may say that the students do have consider scholastic honesty as something important and also valuable that can be applied as an asset in their future careers.

The sanctions being applied for cases in which violation of the policy has been found have been evaluated as adequate or strict to very strict by vast majority of respondents – 94.86%. In order for the sanctions to serve the purpose of preventive measures, they need to be seen as strict or at least adequate. Otherwise the level of credible deterrence would not be achieved. Still, as it has been mentioned at the beginning, the future focus of the program will be aimed at the education rather than punitive action. The percentage of respondents not aware of the sanctions corresponds with the percentage of cases the committee deals with every quarter. The 3.13% of respondents considering the sanctions as loose can be explained as a response of students who see dishonest type of behaviour around themselves and may see the sanctions as not serving their purpose of preventive measure. That however is only our assumption and it would require a deeper research.
The last question was aimed at the sources students are most likely to use when looking for further information. The results show that instructors are still considered as the best source of information. That is closely related with responses to question #2. Easily accessible online information and the word of mouth through discussion with classmates put these two options on the second and the third place. The 1.96% of respondents who do not know where to find information shows again a correlation with the cases that appear in front of the committee and formal hearings. Interesting results correspond with the „other“ option. Most of the responses in which students specified other possible sources of information led to the student advisors at the admissions department.

6 Conclusion

Acts of scholastic dishonesty are most probably not going to disappear on their own. There have been several different approaches applied to fight the issue all around the world. We are glad to say that our country is not lacking behind in this effort. The focus now should be aiming at the methods of credible deterrence, which do not necessarily have to focus on punitive actions. Raising the level of awareness of scholastic honesty through more effective information and knowledge dissemination will create a climate of mutual trust that encourages free exchange of ideas and thus motivates people to reach their highest potential. The results of our pilot study has provided some appealing data that will determine our future course of action in the area. Although the results can be considered as very positive, there is a need for deeper analysis of collected data since it left some issues not addressed as well as possible redesign of the questionnaire to get more specific data on the studied issue. It would be interesting to find out more about reasons why students consider the scholastic honesty program as important part of their study, or use more specific questions and situations describing some real scholastic honesty issues to determine how good the knowledge of students really is. The study has shown that the instructors are the main source of information and knowledge for students regarding scholastic honesty issues and thus the focus of building academic integrity environment will be more directed towards the faculty.
Literatúra


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