UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND LECTURERS

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Abstract

There is no secret that higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe and especially in its Post-Soviet block still face academic misconduct frequently. Although, as results of researches reveal, academic integrity makes a significant impact on the quality of future professional activities and thus on the sustainability of society in general, the fight against academic misconduct still heavily makes its way to universities.

In order to foster changes in this area and to improve culture of academic ethics a Lithuanian social science university decided to explore the situation and initiated research of academic ethics issues in its academic community.

This paper aims to present one of the aspects of conducted research – perceptions of academic integrity from the perspective of both students and lecturers, since the analysis of prevailing perceptions, their similarities and differences is inevitable for gaining a deeper understanding of the on-going processes.

Empirical data have been gathered in 2016 using two methods – individual qualitative interviews with 15 lecturers and 6 PhD students, and 7 focus group discussions separately with bachelor and master students, who represented different study programmes and study years. The analysis of research results reveals that both students and lecturers perceive academic integrity as one of the most important imperatives of academic ethics and event as its synonym. On the other hand, the differences of perceptions are also observed. Students tend to consider academic integrity as a whole of agreed rules and obedience to them. While defining academic integrity they prefer to give examples of academic integrity as an opposite of academic misconduct (e.g. do not cheat, do not plagiarize, do not copy ideas etc.). Direction or focus of academic integrity is given to particular students' behaviour related with study process, especially with the implementation of required tasks. Meanwhile, the perception of academic integrity provided by lecturers is more general, extended to common values. In many cases it is based on the positive aspects like academic freedom and security, courage, objectivity, respect, trustworthiness, professionalism, etc.

These differences of perceptions indicate that although objectively every member of academic community follows the same ethical rules, on personal – subjective - level they perceive ethical issues differently. These differences of perceptions of academic integrity are significant for determination of the most effective ways to foster common ethical culture of every member of the academic community and to enhance academic integrity as a shared academic value.

Keywords: Academic integrity, academic ethics, perception, university, qualitative research.

1 INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity is one of the most significant values of academia. It maintains fluency and transparency of educational process including provision of knowledge, development of skills and shaping “the moral behaviour of future generations” [1: 93] and thus contributes to the training of future professionals. The results of researches indicate that “people with higher integrity are more innovative and productive than those with lower integrity” [2: 160]. Many future professionals acquire their professional competences at universities. However, universities of Central and Eastern Europe and especially its Post-Soviet block still face academic misconduct frequently as well as discrepancy between declarations about academic integrity and the actual behaviour within academic life.

In order to foster changes in this area and to improve the culture of academic ethics a Lithuanian social science university (hereinafter – the University) decided to explore the situation of institutional academic ethics. First attempts to study academic ethics at the University have been made in 2012 at one Faculty. In 2016, team of researchers conducted academic ethics research at the University level,
focusing on academic ethics and especially on two main ethical principles, namely, integrity and responsibility. The aim of the research was to assess conditions of consolidation and implementation of principles of academic ethics in study process and research performance at the University. Research covered following tasks: analysis of internal regulations on academic ethics and statistical data related to the breach of principles and procedures of academic ethics; analysis on perceptions and practices of academic ethics and its principles in the community.

This paper aims to present one of the aspects of the conducted research – perceptions of academic integrity from the perspective of both students and lecturers, since the analysis of prevailing perceptions, their similarities and differences is inevitable for gaining a deeper understanding of the on-going processes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of scientific literature, codes of ethics (conduct) and other sources reveal that academic integrity can be understood as (a) a commitment to such fundamental values as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage [3]; (b) honest behavior, e.g. compliance with rules of the code of ethics (conduct) [4], [5]; (c) opposite to dishonesty and misconduct. On the other hand, academic integrity is often understood as a personal issue [6].

Recently, the interest of researches in academic integrity has increased and still there are only a few studies on the issues related to perception of academic integrity conducted by the researchers of the Central and Eastern Europe [7], [8].

There are similar researches on the perception of academic integrity. Their findings contribute to understanding of the issue. However, they do not integrate at once the perceptions of actors involved in study process who are as both sides of one coin, namely students and lecturers. These researches mainly focus on the perceptions of only students (e.g. [9] – [15]); or only lecturers or other academic staff (e.g. [16] – [18]).

Researchers exploring perception of academic integrity usually provide a list of concrete questions on various aspects of academic integrity including policy understanding, the assessment of the role of instructors and students, prevalence of academic integrity violations, attitude towards disciplinary actions, resources necessary for prevention [19], combine quantitative and qualitative research methods [20].

Mostly, researches focus on the oppositions (negative aspects) of academic integrity such as dishonesty, misconduct, cheating and plagiarism (e.g. [21] – [25]). These researches analyse particular modes of behaviour, actual practices in study and learning process, however, do not include reflective thinking towards the basic question “What does the academic integrity mean and why it should be important in everyday academic life?”

Therefore, presented research explores perceptions of both students and lecturers who were asked a conceptual questions on how do they perceive academic integrity and if academic integrity is important to them?

3 METHODOLOGY

Empirical research employed qualitative approach in order to receive deeper insights into the perspectives of members of university community as well as manifestation of principles of academic ethics (specifically – integrity and responsibility) in the daily life of the University. Research mainly followed inductive logic purposively avoiding relying on a priori categories.

Data collection methods. Qualitative interviewing methods were applied. Research involved three groups of university community: bachelor and master students (further referred to as students); doctoral students (further referred to as PhD students), and academic personnel (lecturers and scientists) (further referred to as academic personnel or lecturers). The forms of interviewing were chosen to best correspond to the needs of different groups so that participants felt most comfortable and open to express their perspectives. Therefore, focus groups were conducted with students (separately for bachelor and master levels; also, separately by form of study – full time and part time). Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with PhD students and academic personnel.

Selection of research participants. Selection of research participants was based on the principles of purposive sampling. One of the main principles was to ensure diversity of participants involved so that
the overall composition of sample covered different faculties, study programmes, study levels and forms. Also, additional criteria were used for each particular group of research participant. PhD students had to be from 1 to 6 year of study and from different study fields. Academic personnel selection followed diversity based on the length of experience of working at the university, level, programme and faculty where they teach, and academic position. Also, some of academic personnel participants had experience in administrative work at the University. Students were diversified by study level (bachelor and master), study year, study form (full time and part time) as well as study field. Overall, 7 focus group discussions with students (31 student involved) and 21 interview (6 with PhD students and 15 with academic personnel) were conducted.

Data collection process. Data collection proceeded in April-June 2016 (2 focus groups were conducted in November 2015 as pilot of this method with students).

Data collection instrument. A common interview guide was prepared in advance to include core thematic questions (perceptions and experiences). However, interview guide was flexibly used in each particular interview or discussion following natural course of conversation as well as characteristics of participant group involved. For example, interviews with PhD students and academic personnel included questions both about study process and scientific work.

Data record: All interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded. In addition, focus group discussions were written down by an assistant of moderator so that it was possible to distinguish answers of individual participants during transcription. Video recording was not used to avoid pressure and constraint on students. All records were transcribed. Overall amount of transcriptions reveals richness of the data collected. Transcripts of focus groups cover 68132 words (average time of a focus group was 78 minutes); transcripts of interviews with PhD students cover 20941 words (average time of an interview was 38 minutes); transcripts of interviews with academic personnel cover 90270 words (average time of an interview was 54 minutes). Hence, rich qualitative data allowed making deeper insights into the realisation of principles of academic ethics in the daily life of university.

Research ethics. Research followed the principles and requirements of social research ethics. However, the research context may be considered as sensitive in respect to research ethics because it asked research participants to share the experiences from “inside”, thus in relation to other members of University community. Herewith, research team was also composed of members of University community. Therefore, research planning involved scrupulous attention to making research environment as safe, encouraging and sensible as possible. It was aimed to make research participants feel confident to talk openly, not to feel constraints when discussing “uncomfortable” topics and especially not to feel any threat of being involved in the research. Based on the material collected it is possible to conclude that research team managed constructing secure environment of interviewing. However, students and academic personnel were more open than PhD students who in some cases felt constraints to fully open-up because of their on-going link of inter-dependence with their scientific supervisors and other actors of doctorate process.

All participants were coded and these codes were not related to any of their personal characteristics. All field work materials are being kept confidential in restricted access only by research team.

Previous to interviewing, each research participant received information about the research and intent of his involvement. All participants signed written informed consent form. Participants were asked to give permission to use authentic citations when presenting research data. Participation in the research was voluntary.

4 RESULTS

As it has been mentioned in the Introduction, the paper focuses on the principle of integrity and how different groups of participants of study process perceive it. The results revealed that there is a wide range of associations linked to academic integrity (see in detail in Table 1). Also, students, PhD students and academic personnel put focus on distinct areas in relation to academic integrity (though some general aspects coincide).
4.1 Academic integrity as perceived by university students

4.1.1 Academic integrity as perceived by bachelor and master students

Initially, students (like all other research participants) were asked to discuss what academic ethics, integrity and responsibility mean to them personally. Research revealed that students do not make clear (or any) difference between concepts of academic ethics, integrity and responsibility. However, when further discussing the principle of integrity in more detail following aspect of integrity were brought out.

First, *external* perspective on academic integrity as a whole of rules and agreements as well as compliance with these rules and agreements.

Second, *relational* perspective on academic integrity when it is perceived as a relationship between actors involved in study process. Namely, constructive interaction and cooperation between a lecturer and a student as well as formation of mutual relationships based on agreed rules between other actors of study process (e.g. other students, administrative personnel, etc.).

Finally, *internal* perspective on academic integrity as personal disposition to aspire for knowledge and to do that in an honest way (that is, independently and using conventional means). Also, students associate academic integrity with commitment (e.g. to attend classes, to be honest), responsibility, self-reliance as well as respect, personal maturity, consciousness. Overall, academic integrity is strongly associated with virtues both of an individual and society in general. E.g. “You are consistent then... If you have values you are consistent with them. You do not tolerate those things in your life and you try not to break it” (participant FG3D8).

In addition, students attribute different meaning of academic integrity towards the role of students and lecturers. In relation to students, academic integrity is linked to certain modes of conduct as opposite to misconduct, i.e. non-cheating (during the discussions this was a repeating primary association expressed by individual students), non-plagiarising, proper citation, not copying of ideas, not submitting works of other people as your own, avoiding improper agreements (e.g. giving only positive remarks during self-assessment of group work). Also, personal responsibility to follow the rules of proper behaviour and transparency of student behaviour during exams were mentioned.

In relation to lecturers, academic integrity is linked to benevolence (towards students), keeping one’s word and objectivity. However, in one focus group discussion students raised a question about the relationship between objectivity and integrity. On one hand, objectivity was discussed as a universal principle that transcends the boundaries of personal perceptions and relies on commonly agreed university rules. On the other hand, though students expect objectivity from the side of lecturers some also have examples when objectivity has worked out in a dishonest way (e.g. when a lecturer graded a student based exclusively on objective conditions and disregarded justification related to health condition of a student).

Students unanimously agreed that academic integrity is important. The importance relates to the value and quality of studies (i.e. only studies based on principle of integrity can be assessed as high-quality studies and the diploma acquired is more valuable). Also, it has personal importance (as an expression of personal self-esteem (e.g. that one is able to do a work independently)) and personal motivation (e.g. inner motivation to acquire knowledge has more effect on honest behaviour than external motivation when a parent presses to study). Discussions of students revealed that appreciation of the value of academic integrity comes with experience, age, and personal maturity (e.g., when one starts understanding the value and need for knowledge and skills). A student reflected that he realised the importance of integrity when he started to work, that is “<…> you must have knowledge. If you cheat <…> you will not learn that much” (participant FG4D3).

However, the discussions also revealed that students put more emphasis on academic integrity from the side of lecturers, especially on their role when ensuring atmosphere of integrity in the study process. Students see their own capability to influence dispositions and behaviours of other students as limited therefore direct the responsibility towards lecturers, especially when it is related to prevention and control of dishonest behaviour of students.
4.1.2 Academic integrity as perceived by PhD students

PhD students have evaluated academic integrity in the field of study process and scientific work separately.

The principle of academic integrity is perceived as an honest use of research data, gathering research data by legitimate means and methods, and referring the works of other authors. In relation to study process, academic integrity is realized as referencing the authors and their works in study material, assurance of the quality of delivery of classes and proper citation in students’ written works.

On the contrary, academic dishonesty, as opposite of academic integrity, is viewed as the improper reference of literature sources, embezzlement of others’ ideas, fabrication of research data and justification of fabricated research data through absence of harm.

According to PhD students, academic integrity does relate to ethics, objectivity, and conscientiousness in any activity and within agreed rules. Academic dishonesty pertains to inequality in efforts and refers to behavior inconsistent with the standards of a profession. Generally, PhD students perceive academic integrity as an important and vital for the existence of educated and advanced society.

4.2 Academic integrity as perceived by university lecturers

According to lecturers, academic integrity is fundamental virtuousness, as a “red line”, the most important principle of academic ethics. Thus, very often they use both terms – academic ethics and academic integrity – interchangeably.

Defining academic integrity, University lecturers distinguished external and internal perspectives. The external perspective points out agreement of community about the standards of integrity and compliance with them. The internal perspective implies honesty in respect to oneself and others. It is the element of internal culture of a person.

University lecturers associate academic integrity to various phenomena. They are academic freedom and security followed by creativity (“If I perform everything honestly, I feel secure. Only secure human can create. Especially in university. When you are secure, you may use academic freedom in the broad sense of this word”, participant IDM8), courage to say truth (“Courage is <...> the luxury”, participant IDM9), detachment (“Look at the reality as it is, do not smother it”, participant IDM13), respect to other’s work, trustworthiness (“You do not betray, do not sell”, participant IDM5), professionalism.

University lecturers indicate four parties of academic integrity – students, lecturers, researchers, and institution. Academic integrity of students appears through their intercommunication and communication with lecturers as well as performing tasks independently. Academic integrity of lecturers is expressed in regard to students. That involves honest performance of lecturer’s duties and maximum purposeful use of class time. Academic integrity of researchers implies accurate use of scientific, intellectual material and data, proper citation and references, and non-plagiarism. Whereas, academic integrity of higher education institution is perceived by University lecturers ambiguously. On one hand, lecturers indicate the loyal relationship between institution and employees and students, on the other hand, integrity of institution is linked to its responsibility for education of a person and the final result of this education. A research participant represented this duality very well: “University does prepare professionals who in their work have to demonstrate the highest level of integrity. It is one of the most important values that should be planted in. And if we do not imprint it, it is deficiency of our work”, (participant IDM4).

Perception of academic integrity involves different perspectives and dimensions. Hence, we may conclude that academic integrity, according to lecturers, is the principle of academic ethics, playing the most important role in ensuring the quality of studies and scientific work. It is the leading guide to straight behaviour in entire academic activity.

Review of perceptions of academic integrity by students, PhD students and lecturers revealed that they associate integrity with different phenomena. Table 1 presents comparison of perceptions of the three groups.
Table 1. Perceptions of academic integrity as perceived by students, PhD students and academic personnel.

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<tr>
<th>Students</th>
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<th>In relation to lecturers</th>
<th>PhD students</th>
<th>Academic personnel (lecturers)</th>
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<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>Academic freedom</td>
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<td>Non-plagiarising</td>
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<td>Keeping one’s word</td>
<td>Academic security</td>
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<td>Proper citation</td>
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<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Detachment (objectivity)</td>
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<td>Not copying of ideas</td>
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<td>Set of rules</td>
<td>Courage</td>
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<td>Not submitting works of</td>
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<td>Conscientiousness</td>
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<td>other people as your own</td>
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<td>Avoiding improper</td>
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5 CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of research results reveals that both students and lecturers perceive academic integrity as one of the most important imperatives of academic ethics and even as its synonym. Nevertheless, differences of perceptions are also observed. Students tend to consider academic integrity as a whole of agreed rules and obedience to them. While defining academic integrity they prefer to give examples of academic integrity as an opposite of academic misconduct. Direction or focus of academic integrity is given to particular students’ behaviour related with study process, especially with implementation of required tasks. Meanwhile, perception of academic integrity provided by lecturers is more general, extended to common values and standards of professionalism. It is rather based on positive aspects like academic freedom and security, courage, objectivity, respect, trustworthiness, professionalism, etc.

These differences of perceptions indicate that although objectively members of academic community follow the same ethical rules, at the personal – subjective – level they perceive ethical issues differently. These differences of perceptions of academic integrity are significant for determination of the most effective ways to foster common ethical culture of every member of the academic community and to enhance academic integrity as a shared academic value. Researchers’ team started an open discussion in the academy on how to promote and maintain academic ethics at the University.

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REFERENCES


