Academic Dishonesty and Whistleblowing in a Higher Education Institution: A Sociological Analysis

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Introduction

• Academic institutions give students a broad understanding of the world, and aside from educating the students - they mould the students by placing a high premium on honesty and inculcating values in students that make them ethical.

• Students’ perceptions of acceptable behaviour regarding dishonest practices are described in higher education, thus flowing over into their workplace (Saana, Ablordeppey, Mensah and Karikari, 2016: 2).

• Therefore, these academic institutions do not only serve the purpose of providing students with degrees but also create productive and ethical citizens.
• Academic dishonesty is a commonly occurring phenomenon faced by higher education institutions globally (McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 2001; Hutton, 2006; De Bruin and Rudnick, 2007 and Caldwell, 2010).
• Academic dishonesty is generally defined as behaviour that consciously contravenes the requirement that work submitted for the purposes of assessment was a student’s own work (De Lambert, Ellen and Taylor, 2003: 98).
• It occurs in the form of:
  • plagiarism
  • test or examination cheating
  • gaining access to examination papers in advance of the examination being written
  • working with others on the completion of an assignment that should have been completed individually.
Thomas and De Bruin (2012: 13) noted that international literature has focused much more extensively on student responses to academic dishonesty than is the case in South African literature. Thomas and Van Zyl (2012: 143) supported this notion by stating that issues related to academic dishonesty was a “relatively under-researched problem in South African universities”.

Research at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa, showed that a large proportion (approximately 38%) of students had engaged in academic dishonesty on at least one occasion in their academic careers (De Bruin and Rudnick, 2007: 160).

Data released by the UJ Department of Student Ethics and Judicial Services (2014: 1) academic transgressions constituted the majority of disciplinary cases (57%)
• Academic institutions worldwide attempt to implement mechanisms to combat the problem of academic dishonesty endemic to many of them. Academic institutions in South Africa, similarly, place a high premium on academic honesty and use various mechanisms to increase the awareness thereof.

• UJ’s plagiarism policy (2013: 1) indicates that academic honesty and integrity are preconditions for fulfilling an ideal of research credibility. It identifies it as a threat to UJ’s “goal of realising the highest international standards of academic and professional performance”.

• The UJ plagiarism policy (2013: 1) attempts to rectify the problem through instilling ethical values, academic honesty and integrity.
Whistleblowing presents itself as a mechanism to remedy wrongdoing such as academic dishonesty. Whistleblowing is generally seen as an act where information about perceived organisational wrongdoing is reported to superiors by organisational members (Uys, 2008: 904).

This study explores the problem of academic dishonesty at a South African higher education institution and explores why the mechanism of whistleblowing is or is not used by students to expose the wrongdoing. It focuses on factors that would facilitate students reporting academic dishonesty at UJ.
The intention to blow the whistle: The reasoned action approach

- The reasoned action approach (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010) argues that background factors culminate in an individual’s experience of the social world, which determines their behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs.

- **Behavioural beliefs** = beliefs that an individual holds “the consequences a behaviour might have, and they determine an individual’s attitude toward the behaviour.”

- **Normative beliefs** are beliefs of how one might be evaluated by an ‘important’ individual or group when performing a certain behaviour, and in turn these normative beliefs produce a *perceived norm*.

- **Control beliefs** are “beliefs about personal and environmental factors that can help or impede” an individual’s attempts to act put a behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010: 16). It results in *perceived behavioural control*.

- This set of factors, determines intention. The intention, in turn, predicts an individual’s behaviour.
Applying the reasoned action approach to the context

• The behavioural beliefs are the beliefs associated with the perceived impacts of reporting academic dishonesty. These beliefs entail the consequences of reporting and are impacted by factors such as a fear of retaliation. If a student feels that the potential consequences of are negative, that student will develop an attitude that is inclined to not report.

• The normative beliefs are associated with the positive evaluation that students strive to achieve from ‘important’ individuals or groups. A positive evaluation associated reporting academic dishonesty, is a norm established by the institution to exercise a morality of loyalty and act out in good faith.

• Control beliefs such as perceptions of being in academic competition with a dishonest student influence the perceived behavioural control of a student to report academic dishonesty.
Factors to consider

• If students have a higher degree of morality present, they are more likely to blow the whistle on academic dishonesty to the faculty (Henningsen et al., 2013: 162).

• A reason why students commit academic dishonesty is because they do not understand which behaviours qualify as academic dishonesty. They want to achieve higher grades, and succumb to pressures to succeed. Sometimes students believe that academic dishonesty was an immoral act Hutton (2006: 171).

• Students would be more likely to engage in cheating behaviour if they consider it acceptable or in line with the subjective norm.

• They list “fear of failure” as a justification for committing academic dishonesty (Monica et al., 2010: 81)

• The willingness to report academic dishonesty can also be greatly influenced by a fear of wrongdoer retaliation.

• A morality of loyalty should compel a student to expose a wrongdoing.
No one likes a tattle-tale!
Method

- A quantitative approach was used to measure UJ sociology students’ attitudes to perceived academic dishonesty, as well as the extent to which they were willing to engage in whistleblowing.
- Data was collected utilising a self-administered questionnaire which was distributed electronically.
- A census was used for the purposes of the research.
- The link to the online questionnaire was distributed to the entire undergraduate sociology population rather than drawing a sample.
- A total of 405 respondents completed the questionnaire, which gave a response rate of 20.52%.
- The data was analysed by using SPSS 22.
- Factor analysis and item analysis was conducted. Exploratory factor analysis was used to create the scales.
- The Oblimin with Kaiser Normalisation rotation method.
Results – exploratory factor analysis

Willingness to report academic dishonesty

- This factor analysis dealt with the willingness to report academic dishonesty and was measured using questions pertaining to students’ most likely immediate actions when encountering academic dishonesty. The questions aimed to determine what students’ most likely response would be in a set of scenarios, and were provided with the following possible responses:
  - 1 ‘keep quiet’
  - 2 ‘talk to the offender’
  - 3 ‘discuss you concerns with other students’
  - 4 ‘discuss your concerns with an appropriate authority within your given academic institution’
  - 5 ‘discuss with an individual in authority outside of your given academic institution’
Two factors were identified: *willingness to report severe academic dishonesty* and *willingness to report severe academic dishonesty*. Students were generally inclined to at most talk to the offender and not engage in the internal reporting of academic dishonesty.
General honesty

• This factor analysis dealt with students’ varying degrees of morality and was measured using questions pertaining to general honesty. The questions aimed to determine the students’ degree of general honesty. The students were asked to indicate to what extent they considered certain actions acceptable, and were provided with the following possible responses:
  • 1 ‘completely acceptable’
  • 2 ‘somewhat acceptable’
  • 3 ‘neither acceptable not unacceptable’
  • 4 ‘somewhat unacceptable’
  • 5 ‘completely unacceptable’
One factor was identified: *general honesty*. It identified that there is a relatively high level of honesty amongst the students of the sample. Students found most of the statements pertaining to dishonest behaviour as unacceptable.
Students’ level of academic honesty

- This factor analysis dealt with students’ level of academic honesty and was measured using questions pertaining to cheating behaviours. The questions aimed to determine the students’ level of academic honesty, and students were provided with the following possible responses:
  - 1 ‘completely acceptable’
  - 2 ‘somewhat acceptable’
  - 3 ‘neither acceptable not unacceptable’
  - 4 ‘somewhat unacceptable’
  - 5 ‘completely unacceptable’
• One factor was identified: *level of academic honesty*. The students constituting the sample had a very high level of academic honesty. They generally found the behaviours associated with academic dishonesty as unacceptable.
Justification of dishonest behaviours

- This factor analysis dealt with justifications for committing academic dishonesty and was measured using questions pertaining to how acceptable students find justifications for academically dishonest behaviours. The questions aimed to determine to what extent the students justified reasons for improper academic behaviour, and student were provided with the following possible responses:
  - 1 ‘completely acceptable’
  - 2 ‘somewhat acceptable’
  - 3 ‘neither acceptable not unacceptable’
  - 4 ‘somewhat unacceptable’
  - 5 ‘completely unacceptable’
One factor was identified: *justifications for academic dishonesty*. The students were gravitating towards finding the majority of the statements somewhat unacceptable. The mean of the students is located around a general neutrality towards the justifications for academic dishonesty, however due to a fairly large standard deviation the mean is not a good description of the sample. Some students find the justifications for academic dishonesty somewhat unacceptable whilst others find it acceptable.
Justification of reporting or not reporting

- This factor analysis dealt with the reporting or not reporting of academic dishonesty. The questions aimed to determine why students justify reporting or not reporting academic dishonesty. The students were asked how influential certain factors were when considering reporting academic dishonesty, and were provided with the following set of possible responses:
  - 1 ‘extremely influential’
  - 2 ‘somewhat influential’
  - 3 ‘slightly influential’
  - 4 ‘not influential at all’
Two factors were identified: the personal impact of reporting academic dishonesty and adherence to principles as being influential when reporting academic dishonesty.

The personal impact of reporting academic dishonesty is somewhat influential in students’ decisions. It is mainly impacted by a fear of retaliation from the wrongdoer and student community.
Adherence to principles is influential in students’ decisions to report academic dishonesty. Students feel that rules, norms and procedures are very influential in making their decisions with regards to reporting academic dishonesty.
## Testing results – Pearsons’s r

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Severe academic dishonesty</th>
<th>Less severe academic dishonesty</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General honesty</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>0.352</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>405</td>
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<td><strong>Level of academic honesty</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>403</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Personal impact</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adherence to principles</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
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<td>-0.245</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>383</td>
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Testing results

- Severe academic dishonesty and less severe academic dishonesty correlate positively with the factor ‘general honesty’. Students who are generally more dishonest are less willing to report academic dishonesty.

- Severe academic dishonesty and less severe academic dishonesty correlate positively with the factor ‘level of academic honesty’. Students who have a low level of academic honesty are less willing to report academic dishonesty and students with a high level of academic honesty are also more willing to report academic dishonesty.
The willingness to report severe academic dishonesty and less severe academic dishonesty correlate positively with the justification of dishonest behaviours. However, only the correlation between severe academic dishonesty and the justification of dishonest behaviours is statistically significant. Students who justify academic dishonesty are less willing to report severe academic dishonesty, while students that do not justify academic dishonesty are also more willing to report severe academic dishonesty.
• The weak positive correlation found between the personal impact of reporting academic dishonesty and the willingness to report severe academic dishonesty indicates that students with higher scores for the personal impact of reporting academic dishonesty, are more willing to report severe academic dishonesty. The less influenced students are by the fear of personal repercussions, the more willing they are to report severe academic dishonesty. It is important to remember that this correlation is very low.

• The adherence to principles (such as institutional rules, norms and procedures) is responsible for influencing an individual’s willingness to report less severe forms of academic dishonesty.
Discussion

• Students who exhibit lower degrees of general honesty are less willing to report academic dishonesty. Essentially, this means that students who are dishonest in their broader lives transfer that into the academic environment. Henningsen et al. (2013) also claimed that morality impacts on an individual’s likelihood to report academic dishonesty.

• Having a higher level of academic honesty plays a pivotal role in the willingness to report academic dishonesty. This coincides with the reasoned action approach, as it identified individual background factors (such as values) as having a significant impact on beliefs that influence the willingness to report academic dishonesty.

• Literature has indicated that students justify academic dishonesty due to a “fear of failure” (Monica et al., 2010). The research indicated that justified academic dishonesty were less likely to report severe academic dishonesty.
Perceived risk, according to the reasoned action approach, directly influences one’s beliefs which predict the intention to act. Wrongdoer retaliation is a perceived risk that discourages individuals from blowing the whistle (Black, 2011). This research identified that the less fearful students are of personal repercussions (such as retaliation), the more willing they are to report severe academic dishonesty. Students weigh up the personal impact that the act whistleblowing will have on their lives, and if they deem the impact influential enough – they will not report.

An individual’s loyalty to an organisation should be a good predictor of whether they would report wrongdoing (Uys and Senekal, 2008: 38). The reasoned action approach notes that environmental factors, (which in this study are the rules; norms and regulations) act as an actual control that influences behaviour. This research indicated that an adherence to principles influences willingness to report. If a student feels that academic dishonesty is a serious offence which damages the reputation, and goes against the rules regulations of UJ - they would likely report.
Conclusion

• The research concurred with literature that varying degrees of morality impact on a student’s willingness to report academic dishonesty, because students with higher degrees of general honesty were more willing to report academic dishonesty.
• Students that had a lesser level of academic honesty were less willing to report severe and less severe academic dishonesty.
• Students that justify academic dishonesty are less willing to report it.
• The personal impacts of reporting academic dishonesty influence the willingness to report severe academic dishonesty.
• Lastly, the adherence to principles influences a student’s willingness to report.
• The research indicated that the willingness to internally report academic dishonesty was generally not common amongst UJ sociology undergraduate students.
Recommendations

• This study focused on sociology undergraduate students. Should future research wish to conduct a more comprehensive study, it could consider that a population is selected that encompasses students from a varied array of subjects and faculties, and not just the field of sociology. Furthermore, it should also include post-graduate students along with undergraduate students.

• A mixed methods approach could be considered to improve the research as it would enable the researcher to yield large quantities of responses from quantitative research, as well as more descriptive attitudes; beliefs; and feelings regarding the topic via qualitative research.
Thank You