

THE EFFECT OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICIES ON ACADEMIC DISHONESTY PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Understanding academic dishonesty nowadays is important as the trend shows that academic cheating is recurring and somehow has become an accepted practice among students. Previous studies suggested that individual characteristics would be able to curb this problem. The same goes to academic integrity policies such as enforcement of stringent academic regulation on cheating practices would help to mitigate this problem. However, some studies revealed that individual characteristics and academic integrity policies would not be able to reduce cheating behaviour. Due to this inconsistency, the current study aims to investigate the effect of individual characteristics and academic integrity policies on cheating behaviour among students. A survey was utilized for the collection of data in which undergraduates students in a Malaysian university were used as sample. Self-esteem and mastery level of an individual were used as proxy for individual characteristic. The findings from this study showed that individual characteristics and academic integrity policies have significant effect in mitigating academic dishonesty.

Keywords: academic dishonesty; cheating behaviour; academic environment

ABSTRAK

Memahami kesalahan akademik pada masa kini amatlah penting kerana trend menunjukkan bahawa penipuan akademik kian menular dan menjadi amalan yang diterima umum dikalangan pelajar. Kajian terdahulu menunjukkan bahawa personaliti individu dapat membendung masalah ini. Begitu juga dengan polisi terhadap integriti akademik seperti penguatkuasaan peraturan akademik yang ketat terhadap amalan menipu mampu mengurangkan masalah ini. Walau bagaimanapun, beberapa kajian menunjukkan bahawa personaliti individu dan polisi terhadap integriti akademik tidak dapat membantu mengurangkan aktiviti penipuan. Oleh kerana penemuan yang tidak konsisten daripada kajian terdahulu, kajian semasa ingin mengkaji kesan personaliti individu dan polisi terhadap integriti akademik terhadap amalan menipu di kalangan pelajar. Borang soal selidik telah digunakan untuk tujuan pengumpulan data dimana pelajar di sebuah universiti di Malaysia telah digunakan sebagai sampel. Harga diri dan tahap penguasaan individu telah digunakan sebagai proksi untuk personaliti individu. Penemuan daripada kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa personaliti individu dan polisi terhadap integriti akademik mempunyai kesan yang ketara dalam mengurangkan penipuan akademik.

Kata kunci: kesalahan akademik; amalan menipu; persekitaran akademik

1. Introduction

During the past few decades, academic dishonesty has become a notable issue. It is a well-known issue to academic institutions across the globe. This prominent issue not only attracts the interest of psychologists and educators, but also the interest of the media, politicians as well as the society as a whole. Previous studies conducted on academic dishonesty were focusing on three areas which are cheating behaviour engaged by students (David 2015; Park *et al.* 2013; Rangkuti 2006), motivation to engage in cheating behaviour (Jordan 2001; Khodaie *et al.* 2011;

Park *et al.* 2013), as well as factors that would help reduce cheating behaviour among students (David 2015; Jordan 2001; Khodaie *et al.* 2011).

Communicating with other students during the exam (Rangkuti 2006), copying other student's answer (Park *et al.* 2013; Rangkuti 2006), allowing or helping students to cheat (David 2015) were among the common cheating behaviours committed by students. These unethical activities arose due to the desire to earn higher grades (Park *et al.* 2013), the desire to receive extrinsic rewards for the subject being studied (Jordan 2001) and also the difficulty level of the subject learned (Khodaie *et al.* 2011). Therefore actions such as proper communication of institutional policy with regard to cheating activities (Jordan 2001), severity of punishment for cheaters (Khodaie *et al.* 2011) as well as surveillance in the testing area (Park *et al.* 2013) would help to curb fraudulent activities among students.

Previous studies conducted on the effects of individual characteristics as a measure to reduce academic cheating was found to be significant (e.g, David 2015; Whitley 1998). However, according to the study conducted by Khodaie *et al.* (2011), the researchers did not find the relationship between those factors. The same goes to the effect of academic integrity policies to curb academic dishonesty practices. Some studies found significant effects between these two variables (e.g, Jordan 2001; Park *et al.* 2013) and some did not (e.g, McCabe & Trevino 1993; Park *et al.* 2013).

Due to the inconsistency of previous studies, the present study tries to investigate the following objectives:

- To explore the cheating behaviour committed by students
- To investigate the effects of individual characteristics and academic integrity policies on academic dishonesty practices.

For this study, a survey was deployed to undergraduate students at a university in Malaysia for data collection purposes.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides the literature review while section 3 elaborates on research method adopted for this study. Section 4 presents the result and discussion. The final section highlights the concluding comments.

2. Literature Reviews

Research conducted on academic cheating is not a new subject. However, this issue should not be neglected. A study conducted by Rangkuti (2006) by dividing cheating behaviour committed in classroom and outside the classroom towards 120 second years students of accountancy at a university in Jakarta. The researcher found that the most frequent cheating behaviour engaged in the classroom is communicating with other students during exam and copying other students' answer. This is in line with the study done by David (2015) which found that the most frequent cheating behaviour is allowing or helping students to cheat. Rangkuti (2006) also found that obtaining initial information about exam question from students in other classes also occurred. This result is supported by the study done by Park *et al.* (2013) which focused on 655 undergraduate nursing students from five institutions in South Korea as target sample. They found that studied exam questions collected from old exam without the instructor's knowledge and releasing the exam questions to other students who would take the same exam later are among fraudulent activities committed by student during the exam.

Meanwhile, the most frequent cheating behaviour committed outside the classroom as highlighted by Rangkuti (2006) is copying material from the internet to do academic task and also copying material without providing a reference to the author's name. Park *et al.* (2013) also found that the action of giving one's paper to other students although the person know that he or she would copy it and copying text from different sources on the internet are the most common assignment cheating behaviour committed by students.

Khodaie *et al.* (2011) who studied on the factors affecting the probability of academic cheating on 336 students in Tehran found that cheating behaviour arose due to difficulty in the subject learned by students, not taking the lecturer seriously as well as lack of self-studies. These results were supported by the study conducted by Jordan (2001) which pointed out that a low mastery of certain subject would lead to the tendency of students to commit in academic cheating. Meanwhile, Park *et al.* (2013) found that the desire to obtain higher grades, not enough time to complete given assignments as well as students were not motivated to study for an exam or to complete an assignment are the most common reasons to commit in fraudulent activities. Higher extrinsic rewards offered to the students also would lead to the tendency of cheating behaviour (Jordan 2001). However, the finding contradicted with Widianingsih (2013)'s study which found that there is a significant negative relationship between incentive and academic cheating. Moffat (1990) as cited by Khodaie *et al.* (2011) stated that 22% of students never committed fraud and their most important reason is the fear of being caught. Therefore, proper mechanisms must be in placed in order to curb academic cheating.

In the study conducted by David (2015) on 63 second years students from two fields namely economic and engineering found that self-concept which is represented by self-esteem and mastery level have a medium negative correlation with cheating behaviour. He pointed that those who valued themselves and those who possessed a high level of internal locus of control anticipate that a consequence of an event relies upon their own action, thus incorrect behaviour can be reduce. Widianingsih (2013) who found contradictory result from Becker (2006) as cited in her article pointed that the pressure to complete an assignment on time and the pressure to get good result is not an issue since 82% of her respondents are students with three pointers and above GPA value. This shows that mastery level would able to curb cheating behaviour. However, in the studies conducted by Khodaie *et al.* (2011), they found that there is no significant effect of past performance (GPA) with cheating behaviour. This is because perpetrators may vary with their mastery level in courses in which they cheat rather than the courses in which they do not cheat (Jordan, 2001). Therefore, based on the above discussion on individual characteristics and cheating behaviour, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: There is a significant negative effect between individual characteristics and cheating behaviour.

Academic integrity policies are in place for every academic institution. A part of these policies consists of academic cheating policies and honour code. It is very important for academic institutions to effectively communicate these policies to students and the faculty as academic integrity policies can influence academic dishonesty. Students and faculty members may know the existence of these policies, however, the details on the policies may be poorly communicated (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). McCabe & Trevino (1993) suggested that if the student accept and understand the academic integrity policies, it will make the academic integrity policies effective. Jordan (2001) pointed that having an honour code and effectively administering the system are two different matters. Further, he found that students who cheated have a lack of understanding about institutional policy regarding cheating. Park *et al.* (2013) reported that exam cheating behaviours are less likely to occur when students are well informed about academic integrity and policy. However, on the contrary, they also found that there is no

significant effect of assignment cheating behaviour with knowledge of academic integrity and policy. This finding also supported by McCabe & Trevino (1993) who found a lower significant effect between academic dishonesty and understanding of policy. Jendrek (1989) as cited in McCabe & Trevino (1993) stated that even if the faculty members understand and are familiar with the policies, the faculty may reluctant to enforce these policies and handle the matter by themselves due to time consumption and the fear of litigation. As a consequence, students might not take the academic integrity policies seriously and thus it will make the policies less effective. Therefore, based on the above argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H2: There is a significant negative effect between academic integrity policies and cheating behaviour.

3. Research Method

In this study, the survey method was used for data collection purposes since it is the quickest approach to deliver the questions to the respondents with practically zero cost besides ensuring anonymity of respondents (Sekaran & Bougie 2009). However, it is subject to low response rate and the data given might be biased due to the unwillingness of respondents in giving data (MSG 2008). Nevertheless, since most previous studies related to academic dishonesty also use survey method for data collection (e.g, David 2015; Park *et al.* 2013; Rangkuti 2006) and its benefits, thus, this further justifies the selection of survey method for this present study.

The survey was designed into six sections. Section A covered the demographic information of respondents. The motivation to engage in cheating behaviour and cheating behaviour activities were covered in section B and section C respectively. Meanwhile, section D and section E focused on self-esteem and mastery level respectively which become the proxy for individual characteristics. Finally, section F, which aims to gather information about academic integrity policies.

For cheating behaviour activities, the questions were adopted from David (2015). Respondents were asked to “indicate how often you have engaged in each behaviour since the beginning of your study” on five items of cheating behaviour activities based on 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1(always) to 4(never). Meanwhile for individual characteristics which was represented by self-esteem and mastery level were adopted from Rosenberg (1965) and Pearlin & Schooler (1978) respectively. Respondents were asked to “indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement” on nine items and seven items for self-esteem and mastery level respectively based on 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1(strongly agree) to 4(strongly disagree). Whereas for academic integrity policies, the questions were adopted from McCabe & Trevino (1993)’s study. The respondents were asked to “indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement” on six items of academic integrity policies based on 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1(strongly agree) to 4(strongly disagree).

This study involves 294 participants from various programs at a university in Malaysia, namely Universiti Teknologi Mara, Cawangan Sabah. The programs are namely accountancy, business management, public administration, applied science, hotel management and plantation industry management. Based on data collected, descriptive analysis and regression analysis were conducted. Descriptive analysis was utilized to report the mean for cheating behaviour variable, whilst regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses of this study by using the following model:

$$CHEAT = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IND + \beta_2 POL + \varepsilon$$

Where; *CHEAT* represents cheating behaviour activities
IND represents individual characteristics
POL represents academic integrity policies
 β_n represents the slope on n^{th} independent variable
 ε represents error term for the relationship

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarized the respondents' background who participates in this study according to faculty. Approximately 40% of the respondents came from the faculty of business management. This is followed by faculty of accountancy (24.5%), hotel management (10.5%), plantation industry management (9.9%), applied science (8.5%) and lastly public administration (6.1%).

Table 1: Faculty

	Frequency	Percentage
Accountancy	72	24.5
Business Management	119	40.5
Public Administration	18	6.1
Applied Science	25	8.5
Hotel Management	31	10.5
Plantation Industry Management	29	9.9
Total	294	100.0

The first objective of this study is to explore cheating behaviour committed by students. The descriptive result of cheating behaviour is presented in Table 2. A 4-point Likert scale that range from 1(always) to 4(never) was used to determine the frequency of cheating behaviour committed by students. Cheating behaviours are ranked based on the mean values. Based on Table 2, the result suggested that students are occasionally engaging in academic cheating. The most common dishonest practice committed by students is offering assignments to another students ($M = 3.38$). This is followed by helping someone else cheat in a test or exam ($M=3.42$), submitting an assignment which was entirely made by someone else ($M=3.48$), copying from the closest seated students in a test or exam ($M=3.56$) and the least common practice is using leaflet during test or exam ($M=3.70$).

Table 2: Cheating Behaviour Activities

Rank	Cheating Behaviour	Mean
1	Offer someone else my paper/assignment	3.38
2	Help someone else cheat in a test/exam	3.42
3	Hand in a paper/assignment entirely made by someone else	3.48
<i>Table 2 (continued)</i>		
4	Copy from the closest seated colleague in a test/exam	3.56
5	Use leaflet during test/exam	3.70

The second objective of this study is to investigate the effects of individual characteristics and academic integrity policies towards the academic dishonesty practices. A 4-point Likert scale that range from 1(strongly agree) to 4(strongly disagree) was used to determine the frequency of self-esteem and mastery level as a proxy for individual characteristics and the

frequency of academic integrity policies. In order to examine this objective, two hypotheses and a model were developed as stipulated in section 2 and section 3 respectively. Regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses.

Table 3: Model – Regression Analysis

	Beta	T	Sig.
Constant		18.69	0.000
<i>IND</i>	-.220	-2.70	0.007
<i>POL</i>	-.109	-2.10	0.036
Adj. R ²	.032		
F – Statistics (Sig.)	5.88(.003)		
Df	(2,291)		
N	294		

^aDependent Variable: *CHEAT*

Table 3 shows the regression analysis result for this study model based on 294 responses. Overall, it seems the model is significant at 1% significant level with Adjusted R-squared of 0.032, $F(2,291) = 5.88$, $p = .003$. This result suggested that 3.2% of the variation in cheating behaviour (*CHEAT*) could be explained by the variation in individual characteristics (*IND*) and academic integrity policies (*POL*). As F-value is significant, it can be concluded that the overall model is fit.

As mentioned earlier, the model is constructed to test hypotheses which are H1 and H2. H1 predicted that there is a significant negative effect of individual characteristics with academic dishonesty. Based on the result in Table 3, it seems that individual characteristics does significantly affect cheating behaviour at 1% significant level ($b = -.220$, $t(294) = -2.70$, $p = .007$). Hence, it can be concluded that individual characteristics would be able to mitigate academic cheating, therefore, H1 is accepted. The result seems to agree with David (2015)'s finding. Academic dishonesty would be reduced for those who valued themselves and possessed a high level of locus of control. Widianingsih (2013) also pointed out that with high mastery level, the pressure to complete an assignment on time as well as the pressure to obtain good grades do not affect students to commit academic cheating. Therefore, students who possessed a high level of self-esteem and a high mastery level are reluctant to act dishonestly.

H2 predicted that there is a significant negative effect of academic integrity policies with academic dishonesty. Table 3 also reveals that academic environment have a significant negative effect on academic dishonesty at 5% significant level ($b = -.109$, $t(294) = -2.10$, $p = .036$). This result suggests that academic integrity policies would able to mitigate cheating behaviour among students. Therefore, H2 is also accepted. The result seems to confirm with Park *et al.* (2013)'s result who suggested that students who are well-informed on academic integrity policy are less likely to cheat in exam. Further, Jordan (2001) also reported that participants who committed cheating behaviours have a lack of understanding concerning academic institutional policy than non-cheaters. Therefore, effective communication of institutional policy regarding to cheating behaviour is important in order to reduce dishonest academic practices.

5. Conclusion

A survey was disseminated to a university in Malaysia, of which 294 responses were gathered and analysed. Two objectives were developed. The first objective is to explore cheating behaviour among students. In order to achieve this objective, descriptive analysis was conducted. Based on the analysis, it was found that students are occasionally committing academic cheating behaviours. It was reported that the most common dishonest practice is offering one's assignments to another student.

The second objective is to investigate the effect of individual characteristics and academic integrity policies on academic dishonesty practices. In order to test this objective, two hypotheses were developed and regression analysis was conducted to meet the objective. The present study found that there is a significant negative effect of individual characteristics with cheating behaviour. This result confirmed David (2015)'s findings who also reported the same result. This finding suggested that students with high level of self-esteem and mastery level are unwilling to commit academic fraud. In this study, the result also revealed that there is a significant negative effect of academic integrity policies with academic dishonesty practices. This result supported Park *et al.* (2013)'s findings in which academic cheating behaviour are less likely to occur if students are well-informed with institutional policies regarding cheating activities. Therefore, this result give an idea to academic institutions on the importance of effective communication regarding the institutional policies on cheating with their students as well as faculty members so that the tendency of cheating behaviour can be reduced.

Besides the normal limitation such as non-response bias inherent in the survey method, there are other limitations present in this study. Firstly, this study was conducted at one university in Malaysia only. The small sample size in this study may not represent the whole population which may impact the statistical power of analysis conducted. Therefore, the findings reported must be interpreted with due care. Secondly, the present study focused only on personal mastery level in general and did not take into account other variables such as course mastery level. Jordan (2001) pointed out that perpetrators may differ with their mastery level in courses in which they cheat rather than the courses in which they do not cheat.

Hence, for the purpose of future study, firstly, it is recommended that the sample of the study should be improved so that the findings can be generalized to the population of undergraduate students in Malaysia. Secondly, additional measurement such as course mastery level is needed in order to better represent mastery level of students. Finally, factor such as perceived peer behaviour should be taken into account as it may affect cheating behaviour (e.g, Jordan 2001; McCabe & Trevino 1993).

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