

University Students' Reasons for Committing Academic Fraud and Knowledge About Regulations: A Qualitative Interview Study

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Abstract. The article focuses on university students' reasons for committing academic fraud and students' knowledge about regulations concerning academic dishonesty. A qualitative study has been carried out with students from Estonia, Finland and the USA, consisting of eight in-depth interviews. Qualitative inductive content analysis was used to

analyze the data. A document analysis has been carried out to provide a comparative look into how different universities regulate academic fraud. The results indicate that students commit academic fraud mainly because of individual reasons such as not being able to memorize the necessary amount of material and that students are not very well aware of the regulations concerning academic dishonesty. The study shows the need for Estonian and Finnish universities to develop their strategies on dealing with academic dishonesty and promoting academic integrity.

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Academic dishonesty has been researched mostly in cultural settings [Yang S. 2012; Sendag, Duran, Fraser, 2012; Rezanejad, Rezaei, 2013]. Recent media coverage on academic dishonesty has revived the subject and made it very topical. Plagiarizing scandals have received widespread coverage in media and reflect badly on the academic community. Many studies (e.g., [Yang, Huang, Chen, 2013; Yang, 2012; Jones, 2011]) confirm the relationship between student academic honesty in school and ethical decision-making in the workplace. It highlights that the causes and consequences of academic fraud urgently require more thorough investigation. Research results may provide helpful tips for universities and faculty members on how to prevent academic dishonesty in the future.

The aim of the study is to identify university students' reasons for committing academic dishonesty and to find out and compare the extent of students' knowledge about university regulations on academic dishonesty. The first part of the article focuses on the theoretical

Introduction



background. This includes the definition of academic dishonesty and prominent research results on academic dishonesty. The second part lists the different regulations that the universities studied in this thesis have on academic dishonesty. In the third part, the research methods are explained in greater detail. The fourth part covers the results and highlights data discovered in the qualitative study. The last part discusses results and provides ideas on how to further study the topic of academic dishonesty.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Definition of academic dishonesty

Bernard E. Whitley, Jr and Patricia Keith-Spiegel [2002. P. 16] have said, “Academic dishonesty appears to be one of those phenomena that few people can define exactly, but that everyone can recognize when they see it.” There are many definitions of academic dishonesty which all share some common characteristics. In this study, the typology provided by Gary Pavela [1978] will be used because most universities’ regulations on academic dishonesty seem to be based on this typology. Pavela lists four components of academic dishonesty:

1. Cheating is “intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise. The term academic exercise includes all forms of work submitted for credit or hours.” Thus, cheating includes such behaviors as using crib notes or copying during tests and unauthorized collaboration on out-of-class assignments.
2. Fabrication is “intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.” Thus, fabrication includes behaviors such as making up sources for the bibliography of a paper or faking the results of a laboratory experiment.
3. Plagiarism is “deliberate adoption or reproduction of ideas or words or statements of another person as one’s own without acknowledgement.” Thus, plagiarism includes behaviors such as turning in a paper written by another student or buying a paper from a commercial source and failing to properly attribute quotations within a paper. Depending on institutional policy, it could also include what might be called self-plagiarism—submitting the same paper for credit in more than one course without the instructor’s permission.
4. Facilitating academic dishonesty is “intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another” engage in some form of academic dishonesty.

According to research by Whitley & Keith-Spiegel [2002], components like misrepresentation (giving a false excuse for missing a test), sabotage (preventing others from completing their work), and failure to contribute to collaborative projects could also be added to the typology.



Academic dishonesty is a serious problem in the academic realm with more and more attention being directed at understanding it and regulating it. Research on academic dishonesty started in the United States in the 1960's [Silpiö, 2012]. The results of both older and newer research show that 50–70% of university students have taken part in activities that can be seen as academic dishonesty during their university studies [Bowers, 1964; McGabe, Trevino, 1993; Curasi, 2013]. The reasons students report for engaging in these activities are multiple. They include different psychological processes from neutralization strategies to individual factors and social issues. These reasons will be discussed in the following part.

1.2 Students reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty

The reasons students give to explain their academic dishonesty can be roughly divided into two different categories. The first category is individual reasons [Anderman, Cupp, Lane, 2010; Curasi, 2013]. These include explanations that stem from the students' own actions or the inability to meet certain requirements of academic work. Jones [2011] found that 92% of students engage in academic dishonesty because of the need or wish to get better grades. This result is also supported by Olafson and Schraw [2013], who found that getting better grades was also the most common reason for students cheating (43% of students). Individual reasons also include a lack of proper learning strategies to perform well in school [Anderman, Murdock, 2007], a lack of time to complete assignment or study for a test, and having no interest in the subject [Jones, 2011]. Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] found lack of time to complete a task to be the reason for cheating in 69% of students who had reported engaging in academic dishonesty. They also found that language students cheat because of a lack of good command of the language (82% of students). This relates to the study by Olafson and Schraw [2013] in which students reported the inability to complete a task a reason for engaging in academic dishonesty.

In conclusion, the most prevalent individual reasons for students engaging in academic dishonesty are a need to get better grades, a lack of time, a the perceived inability to complete tasks. These individual reasons do not make use of neutralization strategies and explain engagement in dishonest activities as a result of individual actions and inability to meet the requirements of academic work.

The second category that students use to explain their academic dishonesty is institutional reasons. These reasons are strongly related to neutralization strategies in which the students remove blame from themselves and put it on their respective schools or other individuals [McGabe, 1992; Sykes, Matza, 1957]. Neutralization theory was developed while studying juvenile delinquents but is also strongly associated with academic dishonesty and other behavior that goes against societal norms [Curasi, 2013] .

Neutralization theory provides five techniques for how people neutralize and explain their immoral behavior [Sykes, Matza, 1957]:



(1) *Denial of responsibility* is when the individual is able to define himself or herself as completely excused from his or her deviant behavior; for example, the individual believes that cheating is understandable when students make no effort to cover up their answers during an exam. (2) *Denial of injury* is when the individual believes there is no specific person who has been harmed by the deviant behavior. (3) *Denial of victim* is when the individual accepts responsibility for his or her behavior but blames the victim for the occurrence of the behavior; for example, a student cheats because he or she feels that the requirements for an exam are unfairly strict, and therefore, cheating is a way of retaliating against the professor. (4) *Condemnation of the condemners* is when the individual deflects the focus away from his or her wrongdoing and instead condemns the condemner; for example a student claims that cheating is understandable when the instructor does not care if students learn the material. (5) *Appeal to higher loyalties* is when the individual explains his or her behavior with being caught between two conflicting actions; for example a student might think it is understandable to cheat when he or she is in danger of losing his or her scholarship.

Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] discovered that 84% of students explained that they cheated because it was easy. This explanation is related to the neutralization technique of denying responsibility. For example, students put the blame of cheating on other students who do not cover up their answers for example [Curasi, 2013]. The blame can also be put on professors who do not care about academic dishonesty in their classes or do not wish to act on it. This is categorized as condemning the condemners. Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] found out that this was the case with 63% of students. In this case, students maintain that the professor is to blame for the occurring academic dishonesty because of his inability to act on the problem [Curasi, 2013]. Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] also discovered that 73% of students cheat because they feel that their universities do not offer enough training on the matter of academic dishonesty and that 63% of students feel that there is a lack of clarity on university regulations regarding academic dishonesty. Both Jones [2011] and Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] found that students also explain their academic dishonesty by claiming that everyone else is doing it, too. This again removes the blame from the cheating individual and places it on others. The social aspect of academic dishonesty has been widely studied, and research suggests that seeing other students engaging in academic dishonesty is positively correlated with an individual's own engagement in academic dishonesty [Rettinger, Cramer, 2009].

Olafson and Schraw [2013] have found that there are differences between students who have been sanctioned for academic dishonesty and students who have not. Students who had been sanctioned indicated more institutional reasons than individual ones. Students who had been sanctioned for academic dishonesty mentioned that



the reasons why they cheated were: feeling pressured to succeed (19%), feeling incapable of completing the task (17%), wanting to earn a higher grade (19%), and other reasons (29%). These other reasons included explanations such as, “The class wasn’t worth my effort to study.” These reasons found by Olafsen and Schraw [2013] are similar to the ones that Jones [2011] found (not having an interest in class). The students who had not been sanctioned reasoned that they engaged in academic dishonesty because they felt pressured to succeed (10%), felt incapable of completing the task (24%), wanted to earn a higher grade (43%), and other reasons (14%). The results by Olafsen and Schraw [2013] show that students who have not been caught explain their engagement in academic dishonesty as being more connected to getting better grades and less related to other reasons. Another popular reason for cheating is the lack of time to meet deadlines [Rezanejad, Rezaei, 2013; Jones, 2011; Sendag et al., 2012].

In conclusion, institutional reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty are strongly related to neutralization techniques. Students transfer the blame from themselves to other individuals, or they blame their universities for their own dishonest behavior. There are differences between the reasons provided by students who have been caught being academically dishonest and those who have not been caught. The former explain their academic dishonesty with more institutional reasons than individual ones.

A factor that is related to academic dishonesty but that is often overlooked is university students’ knowledge about university regulations concerning academic dishonesty [Rezanejad, Rezaei, 2013]. Where do students get information about their schools’ policies, and how is this knowledge related to students’ behavior? Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] found that the most common source of information about plagiarism among students is professors (87.6% of students). Other sources of information include newspapers and magazines (49.2%), friends or family members from higher levels of education (42.6%), and TV and radio (41%). Since this study was conducted in the Middle East, it does not necessarily apply to western universities. Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] concluded that Iranian students needed more training in the matter of academic dishonesty—but what is the situation like in the West? Jones [2011] similarly showed that students received the most information about academic integrity from their professors (75% of students surveyed), and 67% of students surveyed received information about regulations from their university’s “Introduction to College Life” course.

Hamlin, Barczyk, Powell and Frost [2013] carried out a study examining how ten US universities regulate academic dishonesty, what kinds of measures they take to prevent academic dishonesty, and how the schools deal with cases of academic dishonesty. The empha-

1.3 Students’ knowledge about regulations and the honor code system



sis of most American universities is on prevention. All of the universities studied by Hamlin et al. had used their website to communicate an anti-cheating message and to provide students with resources to get a better understanding of what academic dishonesty is. This is in strong contrast to the study by Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013]. The reason for this could be cultural—the availability of the Internet might be scarcer in the Middle East. Many of the universities represented in Hamlin et al.'s study also had an official ethical code (known as an honor code) or had implemented student pledges which students had to sign at the beginning of their studies. The effect an honor code has on academic dishonesty is prone to discussion. Some research suggests that the existence of an honor code is associated with less student cheating [McGabe, Trevino, 1993; Ely, Henderson, Wachsmann, 2013]. Other studies claim that honor codes have minimal or no effect whatsoever on academic dishonesty [Gardner, 1988; O'Neill, Pfeiffer, 2011; Yang, 2012]. One reason for the different research results could be the way in which honor codes are implemented—there are many different types of honor codes and various ways in which these honor codes are promoted.

The classical honor system has a student pledge and means dual responsibility. Students are expected to report themselves and others when a violation of the honor code has occurred. In most cases, faculty members are required to report incidents of academic dishonesty to a judiciary body instead of dealing with cases of academic dishonesty by themselves. The other way of implementing an honor code is the modified honor code system, in which one or more of these components is not implemented. This could mean that students only have to sign a pledge at exams or that faculty members have the option of assessing and addressing honor code violations themselves as opposed to always having to report cases to the judiciary body.

Another thing that could explain the different research results is the way in which universities promote academic integrity. O'Neill and Pfeiffer [2011] claim that the existence of an honor code in itself does not reduce cheating; the implemented honor code has to be embraced by the students of the university. Their results also show that universities can reduce cheating behavior by raising awareness of what constitutes cheating. On the other hand, if academic integrity is not promoted, then universities run the risk of creating a culture of cheating that pervades campus culture and leads to more self-reported cheating. This view is supported by Rettinger and Cramer [2009], who also claim that students may more easily justify their own cheating if universities fail to promote integrity. This justification may lead to the neutralization of attitudes, which in turn could lead to students regarding academic dishonesty as acceptable. Aaron and Georgia [1994] found that only half of faculty members discuss academic integrity during new faculty orientation. As mentioned before, most uni-



versities now share information about academic dishonesty on their webpages and use the Internet to promote academic integrity.

While US universities use mostly similar methods to prevent academic dishonesty, according to Hamlin et al. [2013], how they deal with cases of academic dishonesty varies strongly. Six of the ten universities Hamlin studied had a separate board to handle cases of academic dishonesty, but the way sanctions were given varied. In a few of the universities, the sanctions varied according to the severity of the dishonest behavior. For example, a level 1 offense would oblige the student to take part in a seminar on academic dishonesty, while a level 4 offense would lead to the student's being expelled from the university. Another university gave grades that clearly stated when a student had failed a course because of academic dishonesty. Four of the universities studied did not have a board or committee handling the cases but dealt with them through the dean or the professors themselves. One of the universities clearly stated that they wanted to take a proactive stance on academic dishonesty and focus less on punishment.

The present study seeks to bridge the gap in previous research, addressing the reasons for committing academic dishonesty and examining students' knowledge about university regulations on academic dishonesty.

Based on this aim and theoretical framework, the authors compiled three research questions: (1) What reasons do students use to explain their commitment of academic dishonesty? (2) To what extent are students aware of their universities' policies on academic dishonesty? (3) Where do students get information about their universities' policies on academic dishonesty?

Universities from three different countries have been studied in the current research: two universities from Estonia (marked in the text as A and B), two universities from Finland (marked in the text as C and D), and one US university (marked as E). In the following section, the studied universities' regulations on academic dishonesty will be discussed. The only university studied in this article that has an honor code is the university from the United States. In northern Europe, honor codes are less common and none of the Estonian or Finnish universities studied in this thesis have a clear-cut honor code that has been implemented for the whole university. As expected, the Estonian and Finnish universities do have regulations on academic dishonesty and academic integrity, but ethical codes as such are promoted and have been implemented by faculties themselves. In the case of the Estonian universities studied, the general guidelines and regulations on academic dishonesty are covered in the study regulations. In both of the Estonian universities, regulations on academic dishonesty are very similar (although written out differently). Both documents

2. Regulations of the universities studied



state six types of academic dishonesty and then follow by elaborating on what measures will be taken if a student is caught violating the regulations. The six types of academic dishonesty are very similar to the typology of Pavela [1978].

Estonian university A has a point in the document which states that the dean is obligated to either reprimand or expel the student from the university in cases of academic dishonesty. University B, on the other, hand has more options—in cases of academic dishonesty, university B will assemble a board, which will give the student either a written or spoken reprimand or apply for the expulsion of the student to the vice rector. There is also a possibility that no board will be put together and the student will simply receive an F grade¹ for his or her course. Both university A and B have granted students the possibility of appealing the verdicts given by faculty, the dean, or the board.

As mentioned, some faculties have implemented their own regulations on academic dishonesty. In the Estonian university A, two faculties have done this and issued clear documents that state what will happen if academic dishonesty is discovered. Both these faculties will form a committee in which all the people involved with the case are present. The accused will have a chance to explain his or her behavior, and then the committee will make a decision to either reprimand the student (for first-time offenders) and not allow him or her to finish the course during that semester or to apply for expulsion if the offense is sufficiently serious or if the student has been found guilty before.

The Finnish universities have a more proactive approach to regulations and access to information about academic dishonesty. Both universities C and D have clear documents that present ethical rules of academic conduct. The documents concentrate on promoting academic integrity instead of simply describing what academic dishonesty is and how it will be punished, as is the case in the Estonian universities. University C's document is written in third person and defines ideal academic conduct and also discusses possible problematic issues regarding ethical behavior in academia. University D has chosen a first-person approach. In university D's first-person document, the responsibilities and freedoms of students and faculty are very clearly stated without much philosophical or ideological discussion. This document is closer to the typical American honor code, even though it does not officially require a pledge from the students.

Both the Finnish universities studied also have separate documents available in which there are clear instructions about what measures will be taken in case of academic dishonesty. University C has clearly addressed the document to faculty members with in-

¹ Grade "F" or "insufficient": the knowledge and skills acquired by the student are below the minimum required level.



structions on what to do. This document is an “in-a-nutshell” version of what measures should be taken and is most likely very easy for faculty members to remember and act by. The measures have been divided into seven categories, which correspond to the severity of violations. First, the teacher should have a talk with the student. If the violation is not very severe or is the result of carelessness, then no further action will be taken. If the violation is serious, then the teacher can forward the case to the director of the department, who will then speak with the student. The director of the department will then hold a hearing during which the case will be discussed, and if the student admits to the charges, then he or she will receive a grade of “F” for the course. The director of the department will also forward the records from the hearing to the dean, and the dean can then decide to have another hearing. The last and most severe measure is that the case will be settled by the university government. The most severe punishment is expulsion for a maximum of one year.

University D, on the other hand, has a very broad document covering everything from what exactly constitutes academic dishonesty to a very large table that has very clear instructions on what measures should be taken if a certain type of academic dishonesty is committed. The table does leave some room for faculty members to decide on what measures ought to be taken, depending on how serious the violation is according to the faculty member. Depending on the seriousness of the offense, the punishments for academic dishonesty include repeating coursework, failing a course, a written reprimand from the dean, a reprimand from the principal, and a temporary expulsion of one year. Since the document is so large and complicated, one would think that an “in-a-nutshell” version of the document would be needed. It might be the case that a shorter version is available for faculty members, but only the long version is available for the public on the university website.

The American university studied in this article has an honor code. The honor code states what is expected from students and what will happen if violations occur. The honor code of university E has a high emphasis on honesty. The word honesty appears very often in the code and is used to promote academic integrity. The honor code states very clearly what happens when violations occur. A student is handed a written copy of the charge and he or she will then have four days to build a case. A hearing then takes place during which the charge is discussed and the accused student has a chance to be heard and explain his or her behavior. The student also has the possibility of stating evidence and calling witnesses. The honor board then makes a judgement, and if the student is found innocent, no report of the case will remain in his or her college record. If a guilty verdict is reached, the student may be subject to fines, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion. Suspension will also lead to a certain type of mark for the course that indicates that the reason for such a



grade is a violation of the honor code. The honor code also explains in detail what constitutes a violation of the honor code. These violations are mostly the same as in the Estonian and Finnish universities and include most types of academic dishonesty. The violations also concern the behavior of honor board members, and a separate point of improper disclosure is included, according to which “failure of an honor board member to maintain strict confidentiality concerning honor board proceedings” is also a violation of the code and will lead to a hearing and a verdict. Students also have the possibility to appeal a verdict if they feel that it is wrong. The appeal should be presented in writing and include reasons for why the verdict should be overturned. The honor code of university E is considered a classical honor code in that it contains dual responsibility and all cases will be dealt by the honor board. What that stands out in comparison to the Estonian and Finnish universities is that the American university can impose fines on students for academic dishonesty.

3. Research method

The study was carried out using a qualitative research method. The authors chose in-depth semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. According to Johnson (2002, referenced [Marvasti, 2004]), “in-depth interviewing provides a multi-perspective understanding of the topic.” By this he means that in-depth interviews can reveal multiple and even conflicting attitudes about a topic. This is important when speaking about a topic as delicate as academic dishonesty.

The study was conducted in five universities in Estonia, Finland, and the US. The selection of universities and interviewed students was based on convenience sampling. This is a sampling technique in which subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility to the researcher. The most obvious limit of the convenience sampling is sampling bias and that the sample is not representative of the entire population—the results of the study cannot be accurate for the entire student population. At the same time, this sampling technique is useful in documenting that a particular quality of a substance or phenomenon occurs within a given sample. Ethical aspects of this research method were considered during the entire period of research. According to Kvale, in an interview the subject talks about private events for later public use. This requires a delicate balance between the interviewer’s objective of pursuing interesting knowledge and ethical respect for the integrity of the interview subject [Kvale, 2007].

Altogether, eight interviews were carried out (4 in Estonia, 2 in Finland, and 2 in the US). The interviewees varied from 3rd-year bachelor students to masters and doctoral-level students from faculties of social science. Five of the interviewees were female and three were male.



Table 1. **Qualitative content analysis categories**

Individual questions	Regulations	Knowledge about regulations	
		Promotion of integrity	
Social questions		Sources of information	
		Suggestions for regulations	
Institutional questions	Reasons	Individual reasons	Неспособность выполнить задание
			Inability to complete tasks
	Institutional reasons/ neutralization techniques	Denial of victim	
		Condemning the condemners	

The instrument (a semi-structured interview) consisted of 20 questions. The questions were compiled with the theoretical background of academic dishonesty in mind. A pilot interview was conducted in order to find out which questions needed clarification and what kinds of related topics would appear and should be addressed. The questions were divided into three categories (individual, social, and institutional) so that the interview would not become too broad.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, a qualitative content analysis was chosen as the data analysis method. All interviews were transcribed using a computer program called Inscribe. The data was then exported into a Microsoft Word file for further editing. First, the questions and answers were divided according to the categories of the questions (individual, social, institutional). The answers were also edited and repeated sentences along with sentence construction were corrected so that the idea of each answer would be clear.

Subsequently, the data was divided into three categories the authors made notes to each answer and divided the data into two simple categories based on the research questions. From these categories a new set of subcategories was formed. These categories were composed based on the theoretical background of academic dishonesty and the research questions of the study. The categories were changed based on what was found in the transcribed text. The development of the categories can be seen in Table 1.

4. Results

The interviewees were asked what, in their opinion, constitutes academic fraud. The answers varied according to the length of the students' studies. Interviewees who were completing their bachelor's degrees first discussed crib-sheet cheating first.

4.1 What students consider to be academic dishonesty



Est Uni 1: Using disallowed methods in exams or other forms of knowledge checks. If you go to an exam with a crib-sheet, that's academic dishonesty.

Est Uni 2: All dishonest ways of getting an academic result. Crib-sheet cheating, plagiarism, and ghostwriting.

Fin Uni 1: It is at least when you cheat on exams by bringing your notes or looking at other students' answers.

Fin Uni 2: Claiming other authors' texts and/or ideas as your own—in other words, plagiarizing.

Students who were further along with their studies (completing master's theses or doctoral studies) mentioned plagiarism and dishonest referencing first.

Est Uni 3: Today for me this is a multifaceted term. It is when a person takes [someone] else's text and uses it without referencing properly. Using crib sheets also goes under that (academic dishonesty) .

US Uni 1: Academic dishonesty is when you use someone else's ideas or data in your research without referencing properly.

4.2 Individual questions

Apart from the definition of academic dishonesty, students were asked questions about their own behavior and experiences with academic dishonesty. The results from these questions will be discussed in the following section.

All of the interviewees had taken part in some form of academic dishonesty, either in university or at earlier levels of education. Only one of the interviewees had not committed any academic dishonesty at the university level. The chosen form of academic dishonesty for most was using a crib-sheet on exams. Most students explained that they had cheated in secondary school or high school and that they have committed less academic dishonesty at the university level. Only one of the interviewees admitted to committing academic dishonesty in a group assignment for which students were supposed to carry out a small study with interviews.

Fin Uni 1: We had to do this coursework study and conduct interviews. We decided as a group to fabricate one of the interviews. It was laziness.

None of the interviewees had ever been caught being academically dishonest and could not therefore speak from personal experience about the measures taken by universities in cases of academic dishonesty. When asked about the seriousness of their offenses, none of the students considered their offenses to be very serious. Several reasons for this were cited.



Est Uni 4: To think that I checked my answers, yes, it was serious but I was pleased with the result. It did not bother me morally because I saw that my answers were correct and I just wanted confirmation.

Fin Uni 1: It was not serious. I don't feel bad about it at the moment. It was just an exercise.

Est Uni 1: I was terribly afraid of getting caught. That one question (on which I cheated) did not kill me. For me it was important not to get caught. I think stealing is a lot worse than academic dishonesty and I didn't do it systematically. It was not a big ethical problem for me and my percentage of crib-sheet use was smaller than the other students.

Students were also asked about the reasons why they committed academic dishonesty. The answers varied from individual reasons such as being incapable of completing the task to using neutralization techniques.

Est Uni 2: I have a bad fact memory. If there is an exam which is based on fact knowledge then I feel bad.

Est Uni 4: It was the perfectionist's need for control

Fin Uni 1: It was laziness.

US Uni 1: We did it just for fun and to see if it was even possible.

The neutralization techniques that students use to explain their academic dishonesty did not come out when students were asked specific questions. These techniques were often mentioned when students spoke freely after answering more specific questions or as side comments on certain questions. Condemning the condemners and denial of victim were the most commonly used neutralization techniques implied by the interviewees. Students used the teaching practices and exam requirements of teachers to explain their academic dishonesty.

Est Uni 1: I cheated in history because our teacher was not a great didactic from a teaching perspective. Our classes consisted of 45 minutes of writing down notes very fast and memorizing all that information was not necessary since I already knew what I wanted to become.

Est Uni 2: I don't like exams which are about nit-picking facts. It should be allowed to check facts to a certain extent. The situations where most academic dishonesty occurs are a result of a lack of student-teacher communication. The teachers could come half way in some cases and think of why students engage in academic dishonesty.



Est Uni 3: I didn't see any point in memorizing all the theoretical equations for the exam. I still don't see any point in memorizing facts, it is more important to be able to do things in practice.

Students were also asked if there are any circumstances under which academic dishonesty is excusable and acceptable. The answers were split in half.

Est Uni 1: I think it is acceptable to cheat up until the moment that you start to learn a profession. I think the negative influence of academic dishonesty is overrated. If I make a crib-sheet it's an overview of the subject.

Fin Uni 1: It's not—because you learn for the benefit of yourself and cheating is wrong.

Fin Uni 2: I do not think it is, at least a situation like that does not come to my mind. I can, however, understand why some people choose resort into academic dishonesty.

When asked what students would do or have done if they see or have seen an act of academic dishonesty, none of the interviewees expressed willingness to report others' academic dishonesty to a member of the faculty.

Est Uni 4: Since I've been guilty myself I haven't been able to take on that responsibility of reporting the offense to someone.

US Uni 1: It is very hard to intervene because when you study in an intimate social group where everyone knows each other, there is that (social) pressure. In university it is easier to be anonymous and report academic dishonesty.

Fin Uni 1: I don't feel like I need to intervene because they are only hurting themselves.

The interviewees from all countries claimed that their attitudes regarding academic dishonesty had changed from secondary school to university. The changes were attributed to growing up and understanding that academic dishonesty only hurts the student who is doing it.

4.3 Social questions

The second category of questions that interviewees were asked pertained to social matters concerning academic dishonesty. In explaining the reasons for their own academic dishonesty, students primarily presented individual reasons and neutralization techniques regarding their instructors' teaching methods. When asked about why other students engage in academic dishonesty, the answers were somewhat different.



Est Uni 4: It could be that social group has formed where the idea is that “we pass our exams by looking at others answers.”

Fin Uni 2: In some cases, I'm sure, it is all about taking the easy way out. Sometimes, however, I believe the motive is ambition: a student who does not feel he's capable of something tries to convince others he is.

Est Uni 1: It could be the issue of too little time to study. It could be that someone is just not very good at a certain subject. And also because it is so easy.

The interviewees were also asked how much academic dishonesty is discussed among students. Most students in all countries claimed that academic dishonesty is not a very common topic of discussion among students. Though it is not a taboo, most students simply do not bring it up very often. One Estonian student claimed that students talk about it when they are asked about it, but otherwise it stays under the surface. Another interviewee said that while academic dishonesty was bragged about to some extent in high school, it is not as acceptable in university, and therefore people do not talk about it at all. Since the topic is not often discussed between students, it might also seem to some that it is not a very big problem in the academic community.

Fin Uni 1: We don't really talk about it since there is no need for us to do it.

Interviewees were also asked questions of an institutional nature. These questions dealt with students' knowledge about regulations concerning academic dishonesty, students' knowledge about the honor code system, students' thoughts on how accessible information about academic dishonesty is in their respective universities, and how academic integrity should be promoted. The results will be discussed in the following section.

Estonian and Finnish students are not well aware of the honor code system that is popular in the United States. This is most likely because none of the Estonian and Finnish universities studied had an honor code in place. The American university, on the other hand, did have an honor code, and the system was quite well-known to the both students who were interviewed from that university. The Estonian and Finnish students mostly agreed that the honor code system might be of some help in reducing academic dishonesty in their universities but did not think it would be very effective. Only one student was very keen on the idea.

Fin Uni 1: I don't know if it would be very useful. I don't know how big the issue of cheating is in my university. I think that even if there was an honor code, students would still cheat.

4.4 Institutional questions



Est Uni 3: In principal there could be an honor code but there is the risk that it will be just a formality. I don't think it would change the situation.

Est Uni 4: Sure. My university is one of the most traditional universities in Estonia. If we don't set the trend then other universities will think they don't need an honor code either.

When asked about their knowledge of regulations concerning academic dishonesty, most students knew the basics of the regulations and where they could be found. As expected, everyone knows that academic dishonesty is not allowed, but the specifics of the regulations are not very clear. Students also think that other students do not know very much about the regulations.

Est Uni 1: I don't know about the regulations. I've never had any problem with cheating so I've never had to look up what the regulations are. I think the average student doesn't know anything about the regulations.

Est Uni 2: I know because I've read about it. But the random student doesn't probably know. The Study Regulations document is the only document that regulates it, I think. Plagiarizing is prohibited and cheating too. Basically academic dishonesty is prohibited with the punishment of getting thrown out of school or getting a reprimand.

US Uni 2: I know that plagiarizing is prohibited and cheating as well.

Students generally believe that students embrace their universities' regulations. According to the interviewees, the regulations are embraced more because of students' general ethics—not because they are very well aware what the exact regulations in their universities are.

US Uni 1: Nobody questions the honor code. Nobody says that the honor code is nonsense. There is a lot of respect for the honor code.

Fin Uni 1: I think the regulations are embraced. If you get caught it's very shameful. I think it's only in the big things but in the small things like exercises, the regulations are not embraced as much.

Est Uni 4: I think most students do embrace the regulations. When they write their thesis they know what to do.

Students were also asked about how their universities promote academic integrity. In the case of the American university, both students highlighted that the honor code promotes academic integrity and that the honor code is promoted on the university's website and



during freshman orientation. In the Estonian and Finnish universities, the promotion of academic integrity is more complicated. Both interviewees from Estonian university B concluded that academic integrity is in no way promoted in their universities. In Estonian university A, it is mainly teachers and professors that promote academic integrity.

Est Uni 1: How is academic integrity promoted?—In no way! Teachers talk about how the course is graded but don't speak about cheating.

Est Uni 2: Everyone has their ethics from home. But we have not been told what is academic ethics.

Est Uni 4: Mainly through professors. My supervisor has emphasized that this is science, not popular science. If you claim something then you have to reference it.

In Finland, the promotion of academic integrity is similar to in Estonia. Academic dishonesty is not spoken about very much, and the promotion of academic integrity is close to nonexistent.

Fin Uni 1: I've never seen any directions and information about it. It isn't really spoken about since I think not that many students get caught.

While the promotion of academic integrity seems to be close to nonexistent in the Estonian and Finnish universities (and is done through the honor code in the American university), students do feel that academic integrity should be promoted more. Almost all the interviewees felt that their university should commit more resources to promoting academic integrity. The methods of how this could be done varied. One student from Estonian university A claimed that the promotion should be realized through universities actually doing something, rather than doing campaigns or teaching the rules. Others thought that there should be more visible information about academic honesty and that software that detects academic dishonesty should be made available to the students to prevent bad academic writing practices.

Est Uni 3: There is no point in using marketing tricks. It should be done through actions. I think there should be a course already in the bachelor level on this (academic writing/integrity). The rules can also be there but it can't be only teaching the rules. Teachers should give independent exercises which need deciphering information and then check if the students do so.

Fin Uni 1: There should be more information about it and more visible. It could be on the website and teachers should maybe mention it more.



US Uni 1: I think it's well done (the promotion of academic integrity) and everyone takes it very seriously.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reasons of academic dishonesty

Most of the reasons given by students were individual, meaning that they saw only themselves behind their academic dishonesty. Contrary to previous research [Jones, 2011; Synder, Cannoy, 2010] the most popular reason for engaging in academic dishonesty was not to get a better grade. The most prevalent reason given was that the student was not able to memorize the necessary information and therefore resorted to academic dishonesty. Laziness and a self-perceived perfectionism were other individual reasons given. While explaining their academic dishonesty, many students used neutralization techniques, but they did not use them when asked specifically what the reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty were. It seems that the interviewees believe that other students' academic dishonesty occurs because of institutional reasons like teachers making exams based only on facts. The students also say that these institutional problems bother them, but they do not claim their own academic dishonesty to be mainly motivated by institutional reasons. In other words, the interviewees take responsibility for their own dishonest behavior and do not only blame others for their actions. A reason for this might be the fact that most of the interviewees were either master's- or doctoral-level students. More research is needed to find out if the reasons that students give for their academic dishonesty vary between bachelor's-, master's- and doctoral-level students.

5.2. Students awareness of policies on academic fraud

The interviewees in this study were not very well aware of what the specific regulations on academic dishonesty in their universities were. All students are totally aware that academic dishonesty is prohibited, but they do not understand as well what exactly counts as academic fraud and what the consequences are. Based on the results of this study, one could argue that the use of an honor code does make students more aware of the regulations. The interviewees in this study also believe that other students are not very well aware of the regulations concerning academic dishonesty in their universities. This is an issue that universities struggling with academic dishonesty could tackle. As students said, awareness of regulations might not completely eradicate the growing problem of academic dishonesty, but it surely cannot hurt.

5.3. Information channels about university policies on academic dishonesty

The interviewees in this study have gotten and would get their knowledge about regulations on academic dishonesty in their universities from the Internet, books, student councils, and faculty members. These results are partly in conformity with the research of Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] and Jones [2011]. Students do get information about regulations from their professors, teachers, and other faculty



members, but this is not the main channel. The students from Estonian, Finnish and American universities interviewed in this study look to the Internet for answers. This can be explained with the cultural norms of Estonia and Finland and also the high level of Internet services available to the students. More research is needed to determine how students get their information about regulations.

Access to these regulations is also a topic that should be discussed. Students perceive that it is relatively simple to access regulations, but in reality, it is simpler in the American university than in the universities of Estonia and Finland. This is a point that universities should consider.

Another interesting thing that was discovered in this study was the fact that respondents from Estonian and Finnish universities strongly believe that their universities should allocate more resources to promoting academic integrity. Rezanejad and Rezaei [2013] discovered that students cheat because they feel that their universities do not offer enough training on the matter of academic dishonesty and that students feel that there is a lack of clarity on university regulations regarding academic dishonesty. This seems to be the case in Estonian and Finnish universities as well. The Estonian and Finnish students participating in this study felt that there is too little discussion about academic dishonesty and ethics in their universities.

The American university that was studied had a classical dual-responsibility honor code in which the rights and obligations of the student were clearly stated. The honor code left little room for interpretation, and all cases of academic dishonesty are handled by the honor board. The Estonian universities have a document called *Study Regulations*, which establishes a regulatory framework for the organization of teaching and studies. This document has a section dedicated to academic fraud and inappropriate behavior in which academic dishonesty is defined and the consequences of getting caught are explained. The Finnish universities studied did not have one single document in which all the regulations on academic dishonesty could be found. Instead, they had various ethical codes and guidelines for students. Some of these were university-wide, and some were made for certain faculties and institutions only.

Despite the limited number of subjects and institutions covered in the study, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions about the differences between wider country contexts, which may open avenues for future research in terms of cross-country differences.

Firstly, the American and Finnish universities emphasize academic integrity and honesty more than the Estonian universities. The American honor code and the Finnish ethical codes pay more attention to prevention and upholding ethical standards. The Estonian *Study Regulations* documents, on the other hand, focus more on

5.4. The differences in university policies on academic dishonesty between the universities in Estonia, Finland, and the U.S



defining academic dishonesty and clearly stating what the consequences are.

Secondly, the way in which faculty members can handle cases of academic dishonesty vary among universities in different countries. In the American university, all cases are handled by the honor board and faculty members cannot settle cases on their own. In the Finnish and Estonian universities, the faculty members have more power to settle cases on their own or report the cases to a higher authority.

In conclusion, the regulations of the American university and the Estonian universities are the furthest from each other. The Finnish universities' regulations are somewhere in the middle, and if they would gather their ethical codes into one document, it could be considered as a modified honor code.

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