Academic integrity amongst students and faculty in Serbia

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The aim of this paper is to investigate views on academic integrity amongst students and faculty in Serbia, as well as to examine whether there are differences between these two groups.

Research has shown that attitudes towards academic integrity and misconduct vary across national cultures. Several studies have indicated that there are differences between attitudes toward academic integrity in Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe that imply a need for being sensitive to the specific cultural context (Mahmud et al., 2018). In comparison to the West higher tolerance to misconduct and a more widespread engagement in cheating behaviour has been shown in several Eastern European countries: Ukraine (Magnus et al., 2002), Russia (Stephens, Romakin, & Yukhymenko, 2010), and Croatia – a country with a past shared with Serbia (Hrabak et al., 2004). These studies provide several reasons for this attitude: discrepancies in the cultures and the educational system, and the coordination effect, i.e. the correlation between cheating and the attitude towards cheating. The behaviour is also often connected to general corruption problems.

In 2017, the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index available on the www. transparency.org has placed Serbia at the 77th place of 180 countries. Corruption in higher education is not unheard of in Serbia (OECD, 2012). In 2007, 87 faculty members from the University of Kragujevac were accused of selling exams and diplomas, but the legislative procedure has to this day not been finished (Milanović, 2018; Roknić, 2016). Corruption in higher education is frequently discussed as several prominent politicians have allegedly plagiarised their theses (Lazarević, 2014; Milanović et al., 2014; Robinson, 2014).

Earlier general research on academic integrity has indicated that there are differences between students and faculty when it comes to responses to student engagement in behaviours identified as academically dishonest (Stevens, 2012) as well as the frequency of plagiarism (Fish & Hura, 2013; Hard, Conway, & Moran, 2006). In Serbia the SEEPPAI project has noted a discrepancy between students' and faculty's approach to academic integrity regarding ways to improve academic integrity: "Students believe in education, whereas teachers prefer sanctions" (Foltýnek et al., 2017), but the SEEPPAI project has not examined other possible differences.

Method

Surveys that are analysed in this paper were sent as a part of the project "Strengthen Integrity and Combat Corruption in Higher Education" co-funded by the European Union and Council of Europe as part of the European Union – Council of Europe programmatic framework "Horizontal Facility for Western Balkans and Turkey" and implemented by the Council of Europe Education Department in cooperation with the Council of Europe Programme Office in Belgrade. The analysis does not reflect the opinion of the Council of Europe or Eu-

ropean Union, but the author's opinion.

Online questionnaires were distributed to faculty and students respectively. The request was made by e-mail distributed to universities in Serbia. Respondents were recruited on a voluntarily and anonymous basis. Responses were obtained from 729 faculty members (693 total and 36 partial answers) and 1741 students (1704 total and 37 partial answers).

In order to enable a future comparison with the conditions at other universities, relevant questions that were not area specific were taken from a survey that was sent out to a university in Sweden (Bjelobaba, 2018). The survey instrument has thus been previously tested in Sweden, and later translated in Serbian. The surveys' face value was established by Serbian experts that have pointed out the need to specifically address some cases very uncommon in Sweden and thus not included in the Swedish survey (i.e. attitudes towards selling and buying an exam or a diploma).

In order to find out whether there are differences between students and faculty regarding the view on academic integrity nine questions (beside the demographics) were identical for both groups. Students were asked four additional questions that did not concern the faculty, while faculty had five additional questions that did not concern students.

Questions that were the same for both students and faculty included 19 cases where respondents were asked to describe whether they considered described behaviours to be misconduct and how often they think that those behaviours occur. A large part of the survey focuses on plagiarism. 7 different cases were described in order to illuminate the respondents definition of plagiarism, and in several questions, attitudes to, knowledge of, prevalence, the perceived reasons for someone to plagiarize, and the prevention were investigated.

In addition, only faculty members were asked to describe the ways of detection and the reporting procedures regarding plagiarism while students were asked whether they have ever been engaged in any of the 19 cases of misconduct, if they know any student who has plagiarised, if they were ever accused of plagiarism, and on the main reasons why they study at the university.

While the majority of students and faculty members identify different types of misconduct as either cheating or serious cheating, 10.77% of students do not know that plagiarising is cheating. Even more alarming is the fact that additional 22.84% of the students – as well as 4.67% of the faculty members – state that getting someone else to write one's essay for free is not cheating, while 20.65% of the students do not consider that looking at stolen exam questions before an exam is a misconduct. 23.66% of the students – as well as 6.60% of the faculty members – consider submitting someone else's work as one's own text after receiving the author's permission not to be cheating.

When discussing the frequency of different cases of misconduct, 20% of the students and 30% of the faculty declare in their answers that they do not know, in particular regarding the most serious types of misconduct – buying and selling an exam or a diploma. Cheating on exams in various forms (providing answers to another student, copying answers from another student, collaborating with another student during an exam when that was not allowed) on the other hand, is something that both faculty and students think happens often

or very often.

The students' answers on the question concearning how often they themselves have engaged in different types of misconduct confirm that cheating on exams is indeed very frequent. The three most common types of misconduct that they themselves admit to have done concern exam situations: 67.36% of the students have at some point provided answers to another student in an exam; 58.89% have collaborated with another student during an exam when that was not allowed; while 46.38% addmited copying answers from another student in an exam. Approximatelly 1% of the students confess purchasing or selling an exam, and buying or selling a diploma.

Seven different cases of possible plagiarism show great differences between students' and faculty members' attitudes. Faculty members in general find the described cases being plagiarism to a considerably higher level than the students. Rules considering auto-plagiarism in particular seem to be challenging: 39.87% of the students and 24.20% of the faculty members believe that it is not cheating to copy a paragraph from your own earlier published text word by word without acknowledging a source, while 40.06% of the students and 21.61% of the faculty members think that it is ok to submit a work previously submitted to another course without specifying that.

Both students (70.34%) and faculty (65.92%) consider laziness to be the major reason for plagiarism. But while 52.92% of the faculty blame the internet for making it easy to cheat, only 34.42% of the students think the same. Other resons that students and faculty consider important are that students want to pass the course at any price due to the pressure from family, friends, etc. While students stress lack of interest in the topic, faculty sees insufficient knowledge on academic writing and of what plagiarism is as important reasons.

The results of this study show a need for further education in academic integrity. A clear majority of the students (88.73%) and the faculty (97.88%) in Serbia consider academic integrity to be an important question and several respondents stress in free text answers that pedagogical preventive work is required.

Although 69.35% of the faculty members state that they have informed students about plagiarism in the context of their teaching, the lack of information seems to be a problem. When asked whether they have received enough information on plagiarism in their course/program, only 13.58% of the students stated that they indeed did receive such information and this that it was sufficient, while 55.89% answered no. Only a minority of students (23.67%) and faculty members (46.15%) think that they have enough knowledge on plagiarism. Both groups consider making information about academic integrity a natural part of education at all levels from undergraduate to postgraduate one of the most effective ways to prevent plagiarism. The usage of the technology for the detection of plagiarism is limited: merely 17.91% of the faculty members have used a text matchning software, which might be seen as a potential area of improvement.

In order to enable the participants to write freely about their views on academic integrity, at the end of the survey several questions were posed as free text questions. In these answers, several students and faculty members comment on the plagiarism cases amongst the politicians and faculty members, and are annoyed with the lack of the punishment of the misconduct in such cases. Overall problems of corruption in higher education in Serbia reflect in attitudes towards academic integrity.

Keywords: student, faculty, disparate views on misconduct, academic integrity.

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