

SELF-REPORT OF ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT PRACTICES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Academic misconduct refers to a group of reprehensible behaviors committed by students. According to Sierra and Hyman (1), these conducts may be defined as the conscious action of applying aids or prohibited information during a test or a written assignment and may also involve illegal actions such as borrowing a written work to present it as their own or using phrases or sections without citation (2). Furthermore, academic misconduct may also be described as any action that gives an unearned or undeserved advantage to a student over another (3, 4). Moreover, others (5) assume academic misconduct as the intent or execution of actions, using illegal or unauthorized means, for the attainment of potentially better academic results, considering it of two types: active, which includes actions to increase one's grade, and passive, involving collaboration to improve another student's grade.

Despite the existence of shared elements between the referred definitions, a universally accepted definition does not exist, therefore, what is considered academic misconduct may vary (6). Analysis of the prevalence evolution of these negative behaviors is therefore difficult (7), especially considering that most studies are self-reports and students may identify misconduct practices differently, if they have been given information on the topic (8). In any case, independently of the followed criteria, the numbers are worrying. McCabe et al (6) report a prevalence near 2/3 or above throughout the years (up to 2010). International Center for Academic Integrity presents survey results (9) on more than 70000 undergraduate students (2002–2015) with a similar prevalence. To the best of the authors knowledge, no such data exists for Portuguese Universities.

AIMS

Thus, this study mainly intended to assess Portuguese university students' behaviors related to academic misconduct, evaluating its prevalence and main types, and the reasons for engaging in them.

Additionally, participants were also asked about consequences, all with the purpose of assessing university students' perception and posture.

METHODS

Data were obtained from an anonymous online survey carried out during February and March 2021, the

participants being students from several Universities in the North of Portugal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two hundred and thirty-one students answered, mostly females ($n = 190$, 82.3%) and aged between 18 and 21 years ($n = 130$, 56.3%).

Regarding prevalence, 80.1% of the students reported they believe in general everybody has committed academic fraud at least once. As for their personal experiences, about half stated they have seen ($n = 114$, 49.4%) or committed ($n = 133$, 57.6%) academic misconduct, with no statistically significant differences between sexes ($p = 0.17$, $p = 0.78$, respectively); results about this issue are contradictory in literature (10, 11).

Considering the perception about misconduct types, 40.2% believe that cheating during tests/exams happens in the majority. Cheating seems to be an assumed and accepted behavior, since 55.4% stated that they would cheat if they were not caught. Submitting an essay made by other person is a much less prevalent and accepted action with almost every student (99.1%) denied doing it. Additionally, the majority (56.3%) stated that if asked, they would not allow somebody to submit an essay they made as their own.

As for the reasons to engage in practicing academic misconduct and its consequences, although most

(76.6%) believe that is a natural outcome of the competitive society we live in, students also stated that immediate and negative consequences should be enforced both on students as well as on the teaching staff who allow it, as long as themselves are not involved. In fact, some (39.8%) would disapprove if a professor did not prevent cheating during a test and the majority (57.2%) indicated that professors accepting these behaviors should be sanctioned. Nevertheless, 39.0% of the participants stated that if in the future, as professors, they were faced with academic misconduct, they would not expel the student. So, misconduct is perceived as wrong, however not wrong enough to be denounced within classmates (85.7% would not denounce academic misconduct) or not to be practiced, especially if there are no consequences. Feelings of loyalty towards students may explain the major option for not denouncing a fraudulent behavior.

For the majority, consequences of academic misconduct mostly apply to those who engage in these behaviors, but also to other students who in fact study, and to Society as a whole. To a lesser degree, consequences are recognized to the teacher and to the Institution.

CONCLUSIONS

The results herein presented are quite alarming, as they point to a high level of academic misconduct (independently from the student's sex), either testified or performed. Thus, the obtained data reflects the urgent need to develop and apply action measures for overcoming academic misconduct or, at least, to

reduce it significantly. The existence of Codes of Conduct, which may also include strong disciplinary sanctions, is probably one of the keys. Approval of statewide punitive legislation, including sanctions over companies selling services to produce academic works, is another important approach.

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