ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN ONLINE EXAMS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS IN THE UAE

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KEY WORDS

INTRODUCTION

COVID 19 pandemic has significantly impacted higher education, as the universities had to transition to online learning, and online exams replaced traditional face to face exams (Salah et al., 2020). Although, online exams have previously been used across the world (Harris et al, 2020), their widespread adoption in the wake of the pandemic has made them a vital consideration for higher education (Salah et al., 2020). One major recent concern of students and faculty with online assessments is academic integrity (Harris et al, 2020) and "e-dishonesty" a more recent phenomenon, refers to academic dishonesty in the online environment (Sendag et al., 2012)

Extant research reports mixed results for student perceptions of the scope of academic integrity in online exams. Some studies e.g. (Miller et al. 2012, Watson and Sottile, 2010) found that students believed there was more cheating on online exams as compared to face to face exams, while other studies contradicted these findings (Harris et al. 2020). Further, perceptions and behavior are shaped by the cultural contexts (Peled et al. 2020). Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate E-dishonesty in different cultural contexts (Adanir et al. 2020) to build upon collective understanding of this relatively new phenomenon, that has emerged during the sudden unplanned transition to online environment triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a cultural perspective, few studies have been conducted studying the perception of students toward online learning in the middle east. In fact, Elmehdi and Ibrahim (2019) suggest their study to be pioneering in this regard. They found that more than half of the students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), irrespective of gender and age, preferred online exams over traditional exams due to the convenience. It is also interesting to note that UAE is a very multicultural society with expatriates belonging to over 200 nationalities, accounting for 88.52% population (About the UAE, n.d.). Further, the literacy rate in the UAE is close to 95 per cent (About the UAE, n.d.), and according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 77,463 international students studied in the UAE in 2016 (Times higher education, 2019). In addition, the UAE has been ranked first in the Arab region, second in Asia, and seventh globally in the Telecommunication Infrastructure Index (TII), according to the UN E-Government Survey 2020 (Khaleej times, 2020).

This makes UAE an appropriate research setting to understand the phenomenon of e-dishonesty with the research objective, "To investigate student perceptions of what specific types of behaviors constitute cheating/academic dishonesty during online exams". Through this exploratory study, we aim to addresses a clear research gap and contribute to the current literature on e-dishonesty. The findings will benefit higher education institutions in understanding academic integrity challenges associated with organizing online exams and hence assuring high academic integrity in the online exams.

METHOD

This exploratory study used the qualitative investigative approach, in particular grounded theory method to gain a comprehensive understanding of the student perceptions related to e-dishonesty. Grounded theory method comprises a systematic, inductive and comparative approach for conducting inquiry to construct theory; and is a suitable method for exploratory study, in order enhance the understanding on the topic (Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

The population for this study constituted two large, multicultural and diverse universities based in the UAE, with one traditional international branch campus university that transitioned to an online learning / assessment environment triggered by the pandemic, and the other university was an accredited semi-government university using a blended learning approach for their programs since its inception. This study adopted two popular data collection tools i.e. focus group interviews and in-depth personal interviews to collect rich qualitative data, where 20 students participated in three focus group interviews and 15 students were recruited to participate in in-depth personal interviews. The respondents were chosen for the purpose of answering the research question i.e. purpose sampling was used. Data collection was completed after reaching the theoretical saturation where we couldn't identify any new themes or category from the participants (Strauss and Corbin 1997).

Respecting the social distancing protocol due to COVID-19, an online meeting platform was used to interview the participants. The interviews were recorded with prior permission of interviewees, with assurance of confidentiality of data and anonymity in reported results. The interviews were transcribed shortly after the recording and the analysis started immediately after the first interview; which helped in concurrent data generation and analysis. The study data was stored in a shared online repository to which all researchers had access, for independent analysis. Theoretical sampling was applied to define and follow up clues from analysis, fill gaps, clarify doubts, check intuition and test explanations as the study progresses.

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