PATTERNS OF DEFINING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AMONG BA STUDENTS AND THE RELATION WITH DYNAMICS OF THE FACULTY, UNIVERSITY, AND FIELD OF STUDY

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In recent decades, academic integrity has risen to the top of the agenda throughout higher education in most countries in Europe. The unprecedented expansion of university education (Lucas, 2001; Voicu et al, 2010) comes with a vivid debate surrounding tendencies to cheat (Jones, 2011; McCabe et al., 2001; Simkin and McLeod, 2010;), plagiarize (Park, 2003; Glazer, 2013; Weber-Wulff, 2014), fraudulent scientific results (Goodstein, 1991; Eisner, 2018), and influence peddling within universities (McCabe and Pavela, 1997), etc.

It becomes a matter of interest to understand how understanding upon academic integrity is perceived at the level of university students. This paper investigates the way in which students conceive academic integrity. The objective is to understand to which extent such definitions depend on the recent expansion of the department, discipline, and university, seen as potential drivers for a culture of academic integrity, that can experience dissolution under the fast increase of the number of students.

Previous studies were mainly conducted in societies less permissive to academic fraud and were mainly focused on the practices of the faculty, not students. We exploit the need to comprehend how such understanding are consistent with the current definitions of integrity, how they differ across fields of study, and how they depend on the expansion of higher education, understood as relatively fast increases in numbers of students and access to university studies. Expansion refers to the universities and individual department's discipline level, and we argue that a quick expansion creates more space for misunderstandings with respect to integrity.

To answer our research questions, we employ an original sample of Romanian BA students in three Romanian universities, covering nine academic disciplines. We inspect their representations and predict them in logical cross-classified, multi-level models. The findings reveal that expansion seems harmful only when it comes to the university, but a larger department means more precise knowledge on integrity. The resulting interplay can be fruitfully explored by policy makers to point out success stories that can be replicated in other departments/universities.

The novelty of our approach is given by the inspection of what academic integrity means for students, an issue that was to our best knowledge never investigated in a societal context of widespread corruption, such as Romania. Corruption Perception Index for 2018 (Transparency International) indicated a value for 44 out of 100 in case of Romania, 100 meaning no corruption at all, and 0 standing for extremely corrupt; within the European Union, only Bulgaria – 43, and Hungary – 44, scored as low. Second, the embeddedness of representations on integrity into the context of university expansion provide guidelines to academic leaders and policy makers to act in such instances, as explained in the conclusion of the paper.

Students from three major Romanian universities, divided into nine departments for each university were asked to define academic integrity. We explain variation in the definitions by the size of the department and the recent history of the department and of the university. We find a lot of confusion in the definitions related to academic integrity, with some responses completely unable to define the

concept. There is no difference across fields of study; however, the data suggests universities that experienced recent growth are less likely to pay attention to academic integrity. Size of department plays a buffering role, through the inertia of organizational culture. Increases in the size of department regarding knowledge of academic integrity. Implications for policy and potential for generalization of findings to other universities and societies are discussed in the conclusive section.

Bouville (2008) discusses the negative consequences of plagiarism, the most important being related with the readers: they will not be able to differentiate between the original and copied work and their trust may be jeopardized. Through extension, a similar impact may raise from inability to reinforce academic integrity. With vague definitions among students, this becomes a problem for the entire university system. According to our findings, regulators and academic management may be interested in focusing their efforts to promote integrity in those universities that experienced a rapid growth.

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