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CHEATING AND ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND COVID-19 DISTANCE LEARNING²

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Abstract

With the rapid spread of the novel Coronavirus, the whole world went into chaos. As countries tried to remedy the issue with the ever-increasing numbers of new cases, a multitude of measures were put into place in order to contain the virus and increase safety. One of the first measures that were implemented were the closures of schools in different countries around the world.

Following global trends, schools in North Macedonia were also officially closed in the middle of March of 2020. As of then, students turned to remote learning on various platforms. As schools closed and the workflow of both students and teachers shifted from an offline setting to an online one, a prominent issue became even more noteworthy: students cheat and engage in academic dishonesty, and the online setting of the remote learning process during COVID-19 makes this easier than ever.

Witnessing this issue firsthand, the author surveyed students in order to examine their attitudes and opinions on academic dishonesty and cheating during remote learning to, ultimately find out whether students cheat more in an online setting.

Keywords: distance learning, online classes, cheating, academic dishonesty, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

1. Cheating and Academic Dishonesty online and offline: Opening remarks

In the quest for knowledge, both schools and higher education institutions are expected to foster academic integrity as a crucial pillar for quality education. However, technological advancements and new education trends, especially during the pandemic with COVID-19, make this quest for integrity a demanding effort, if not an ideal that cannot be obtained.

The notion of cheating and academic integrity is an ever-present issue in educational institutions throughout the world. With more and more online devices that enable such cheating behaviours for both primary school and high school students, as well as undergraduate and graduate ones, academic dishonesty has become even more prevalent in the classrooms of the today. Students of now have many more tools for such dishonest behaviour – from forums and chat groups with peers, to access to different books and data within clicks, to whole web pages dedicated to essay-writing and book retellings. The online presence has contributed to such behaviour, undoubtedly, and this is ever more amplified by remote learning as an online-only studying environment.

² Original scientific paper

Cheating nowadays is much easier for students and much harder to detect by educators. (Johnson et al., 2005) Dishonesty in its different forms seems to be “*a chronic problem that has successfully escaped a lasting solution regardless of institutional efforts to eradicate it*” (Symaco et al. 2003). And although such dishonesty is considered a breach of rules in most if not all educational institutions in the words, students still seem to be inclined to take the risk.

A 2013 study by Miller et al. (Miller et al., 2013), conducted long before the pandemic outbreak, found that there was a trend of increased academic dishonesty and cheating behaviours in online classes in comparison to traditional, in-person ones. The study found that students who attend both online and offline classes, tend to cheat more during the online exams. Students cheated more online, according to this study, simply because they found it was much easier.

An even earlier study, conducted in 2006 (Lanier, 2006) also presents similar findings. The study in question surveyed 1262 university students on the cheating behaviour patterns during online learning and traditional lecture courses. The study found that academic dishonesty was significantly more prevalent in the online classes and exams that students took.

Though few more studies that focus on the subject of academic dishonesty during remote learning are available (Hart et al., 2010, Wisely et al., 2009) and even a study that discerns the techniques that help educators control these cheating behaviours online and foster academic integrity (Li et al. 2020) the data is still lacking in terms of adequate research, especially in the trying times of COVID-19-induced distance learning.

2. Remote learning during COVID-19

As schools throughout the world were closed as a mitigation measure in attempts to flatten the curve when COVID-19 continued to spread, students in many countries, N. Macedonia not being the exception, were transferred to a new education system, vastly different from the one they were used to.

In a matter of days, students alongside educators had to adapt to all of the changes that came with online classes. Curricula was adjusted, methods were altered and ultimately, online exams were conducted. This process was, needless to state, challenging for all involved. While adjusting to the not-so-normal “new normal”, educators in many countries, with no prior experience at online teaching, had to learn how to navigate different platforms and programs, while waiting for a unified, country-wide online education policy. Technical capacities were built, students in need were helped and in most of the world, almost one year after the initial closures due to COVID-19, education has sustained. (UNICEF, 2020)

3. Remote learning in North Macedonia

Though in recent years, E-learning has been becoming progressively more important and desirable, especially in higher education institutions, a 2018 study conducted in the University of Tetovo, found that a significant number of educators and students do not appreciate the idea of implementing such an online learning system. (Xhaferi et al. 2018)

Despite the aversion of such blended or fully-online learning, students and educators had to transform the learning process and start remote classes in North Macedonia as of March, 2020. Ever since March, in order to contain the novel COVID-19 virus, schools have remained closed and classes as well as most of the exams, especially in primary and high school have been transferred online. Students of Grades 1, 2 and 3 continued to go to school while the rest had to learn how to navigate different platforms, tools, and apps in order to adjust.

As time progressed, a steep motivation decline was noticed by educators. In a small study, the author (Shalevska, 2021) has found that high school students participating in the survey, thought the online classes are less effective. A significant number of respondents i.e. students also stated that they often find themselves feeling less motivated during remote learning. This lack of motivation might be the contributing factor to cheating and dishonesty – things that educators have noticed occurring regularly during remote learning.

METHODOLOGY

Upon conducting this paper, the questionnaire method for data collection was employed. The sample data included high school students from Year 2 and Year 3 from two high schools in Bitola, North Macedonia – *Taki Daskalot* and *Jovan Kalauzi*. Hence, both students from vocational classes as well as gymnasium students were included.

As the respondents' answers were primarily obtained through a series of closed-ended questions, the qualitative method was the one implemented. The information gathered, thus, was primarily numerical and the data could be statistically discerned.

The link to the questionnaire, made in Google Forms, was sent to the students at the beginning of the term on January 21, 2021. The questionnaire was open for responses for 14 days, up until February 4, 2021. The questionnaire was completely anonymous as to ensure complete privacy for the underage respondents. Furthermore, the questionnaire was purposely anonymous as this, the author deemed, increases objectivity as students are more likely to be honest when they know their answers cannot be tracked back to them. The questionnaire itself limited students in the principle of one-answer-per-respondent.

The said online questionnaire included a total of 7 questions, posed by the author. The questions aimed to explore students' opinions and attitudes towards cheating and dishonesty during online exams.

The research was limited to Year 2 and Year 3 students in two high schools in only one city of North Macedonia – Bitola. To further the research and provide a better understanding of the issue, the research could be performed again to include a larger scope and sample data and include both high school and primary school students, as well as higher education students, as all of them are currently subject to remote learning.

The research was based on the hypothesis that *Students cheat more during online exams than the do in traditional examinations.*

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The author thus declares no conflicts of interest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated above, the main method for obtaining data was an online questionnaire administered to Year 2 and Year 3 students in two local high schools *Taki Daskalot* and *Jovan Kalauzi* in Bitola, North Macedonia. A total of 145 respondents answered the online questionnaire administered by the students' ESL teachers. As noted above, the questionnaire was completely anonymous.

The first question looked into respondents' age to ensure equal representation of both target groups of students – Year 2 and Year 3 students. Out of the 145 respondents, 87 students or 60% of the total stated they were in Year 2 while 58 of them or 40% stated they were in Year 3. The number of Year 2 students is slightly greater, but nonetheless, a somewhat objective representation of the students in both years is present. (Figure 1)

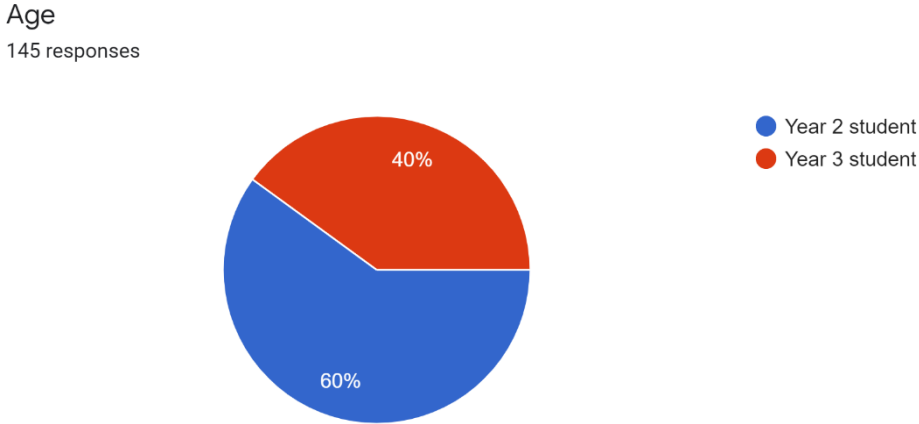


Figure 1 - Age of the respondents

The second question looked into respondents' sex in order to ensure the results were sex-inclusive and thus, more objective. The question was answered by a total of 142 out of the 145 respondents in the following manner: 79 students i.e., respondents (55.6%) chose *female*, 50 (35.2%) chose *male* while 13 (9.2%) opted for the “prefer not to say” option. Though there are more female respondents than male, the sample size features both sexes and thus the data objectively represents the participants in terms of sex. (Figure 2)

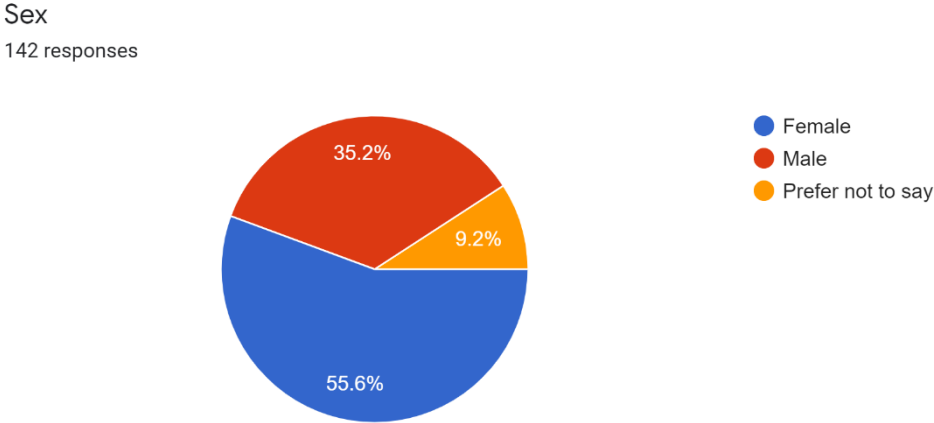


Figure 2- Respondents' sex

The following question aimed to discover whether or not respondents i.e., students thought cheating was more frequent during their online classes and/or online exams. All 145 respondents answered the question. A rather significant number – 128 or 88.3% stated that *yes*, they thought students cheated more during such examinations. Only a small portion of the respondents, 17 or 11.7% answered that they do not think students cheat more in such examination scenario (Figure 3)

Do you think students cheat more during online classes/online exams?
145 responses

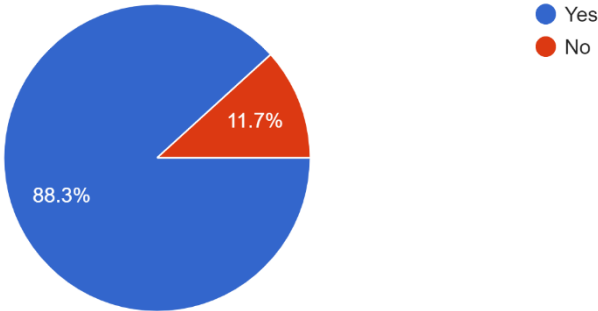


Figure 3 - Students' opinion on cheating during online exams

With the following question, the author wanted to learn whether students have witnessed someone cheating during their online exams as part of the remote learning process during COVID-19. As the question was not directed to them and their own potential academic dishonesty, but to others, the author expects a high level of honesty in the given answers and thus, gathered data in this regard. The question was answered by all of the 145 respondents. A vast majority of them – 104 or 71.7% admitted that they have indeed witnessed someone cheating on such exams. The rest 41 or 28.3% answered negatively. (Figure 4)

Have you ever witnessed anyone cheating on an online exam?
145 responses

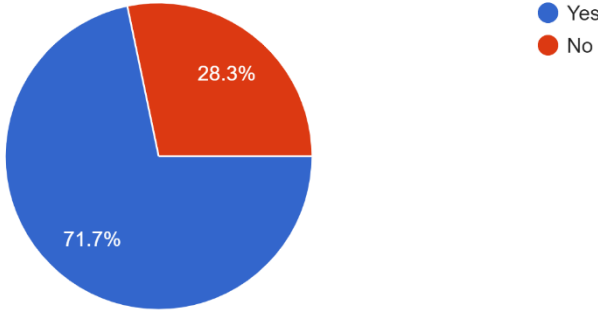


Figure 4 - Testimonials of other students' academic dishonesty

Following that, the author wanted to learn if students would admit to cheating on such online exams themselves. It is important to note that the questionnaire was sent to the students by their teacher so, although the students were aware that the questionnaire was anonymous, students might have some reservations as to openly admitting to have cheated on a questionnaire whose results are going to be seen by their teacher. The students were given 3 possible answers in this multiple-choice question. The question was answered by all of the 145 respondents. Almost two thirds of the respondents – 91 or 62.8% admitted that *theysometimes cheat* during these online exams. 23 respondents i.e., students stated that *they often cheat*. This makes for a noteworthy number of 114 out of 145 students who admit that they cheat either sometimes or fairly often. 31 respondents (21.4%) said that *they have never cheated* on an online exam. (Figure 5)

Have you ever cheated on an online exam?
145 responses

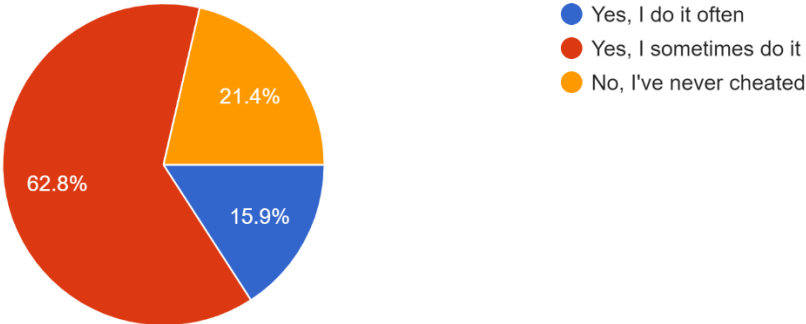


Figure 5 - Students' cheating habits

The next question aimed to examine whether students who admit to cheating, cheat more during online exams than they do in in-person exams. On, yet another multiple-choice question, students were asked to choose one of the given answers. 114 out of the 145 respondents answered the question. The vast majority of them – 93 or 81.6% stated that they do cheat more frequently on online exams while the rest – 21 or 18.4% stated that they do it just as frequently. (Figure 6)

For those who stated that they do cheat on online exams, do you do it more frequently than on regular exams?
114 responses

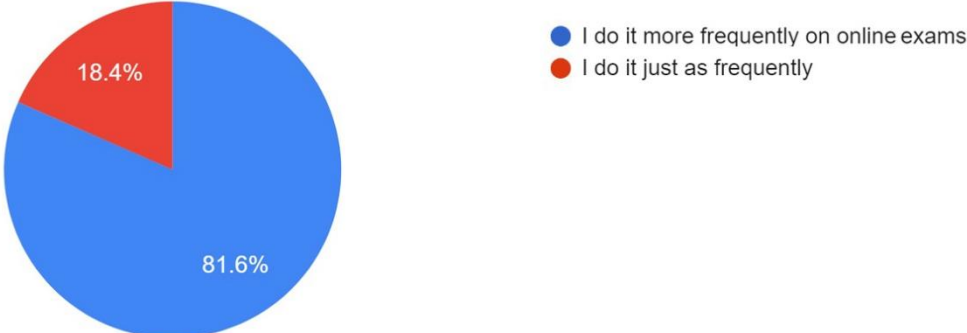


Figure 6 - Cheating on online vs. regular exams

The last question included a list of possible reasons for students' cheating habits. They students i.e., respondents could choose one or more options from the checklist, but they could also add their own suggestions. The question was answered by the majority of the respondents – 143. They could choose one or more of the following options:

1. They want better grades – 74 responses;
2. They believe they can't get caught – 48 responses;
3. They think it's very easy to cheat online – 73 responses;
4. They are not really interested in the subject – 46 responses;
5. They are afraid of failing – 52 responses;
6. They do it because everyone else is doing it – 61 response and
7. They are too lazy to do the work – 49 response.

5 of the respondents have also added their own suggestion using the option “Other”. 1 has said that he/she thinks all of the reasons apply. One stated that low confidence might be the reason. One claimed that they had too much studying material to go over. One said that everyone in their generation cheated while one said that they prefer to do other things in life than study. (Figure 7)

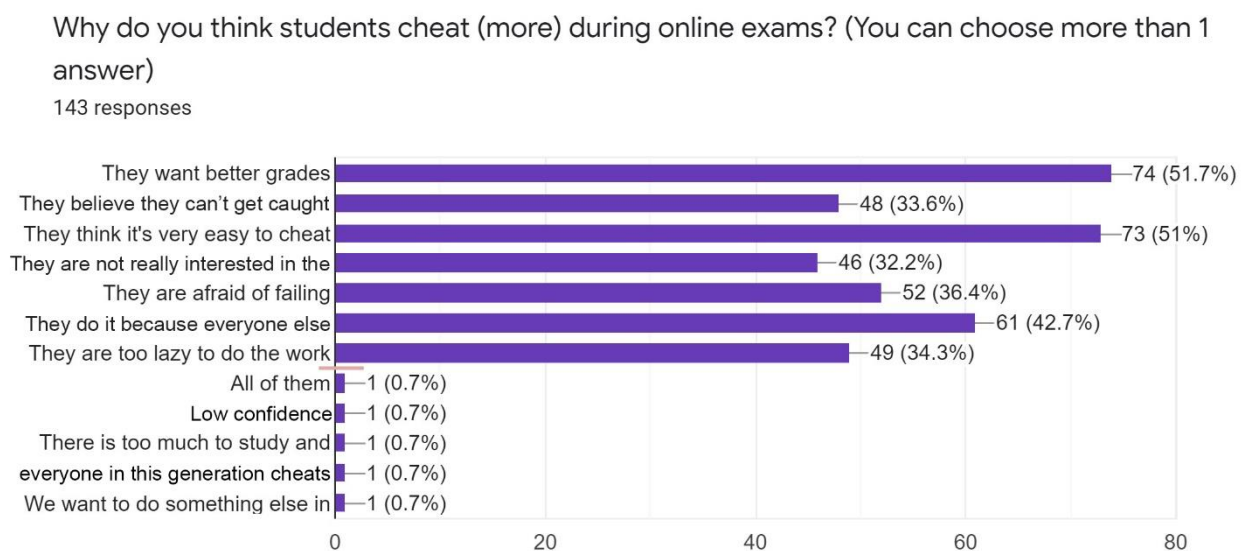


Figure 7- Reasons for cheating

CONCLUSION

Education has rapidly been changing in order to consider the ever-developing needs of the societies throughout the world. The ability to adjust and alter has always been one of education's paramount traits, the latest developments not being the exception. As the world succumbed to the spread of the novel COVID-19 virus and the developing pandemic, education had yet again, managed to adjust.

However, this adjustment was not unimpared as a long withstanding issue became even more prominent: students' cheating behaviours became more noteworthy as technology and online education has enabled them access to easy ways to impair academic integrity.

The survey conducted for the purposes of this paper found that students admit to cheating more online than they do in traditional classes. A significant number of the respondents i.e. students state that they either cheat regularly or they cheat at least sometimes, which is rather worrisome. Furthermore, the respondents state that they cheat mostly because they want better grades and because cheating online is rather easy.

All in all, the cheating habits of the high school students during COVID-19 online learning are alarming and they hinder the educational process in these trying times, as well as obstruct objectivity as educators find it increasingly harder to recognize and control the dishonesty that impairs all academic integrity.

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