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## ACADEMIC ETHICS AS SEEN BY STUDENTS – THE CENTRAL-EUROPEAN CASE

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**Abstract:** The intensive ethical dilemmas characterize the contemporary world, so ethics as a scientific discipline is even more present in the scientific world and the educational system. Numerous universities offer their students the opportunity to study ethics as a scientific field. That enables young people to become more familiar with her and the application of her theories in everyday decision-making. At the faculties of business and management, business ethics is receiving more and more attention after numerous scandals, the center of which were the most famous multinational companies. In addition to family, friends, and national culture, education is important in creating, adopting, and disseminating ethics. Higher education institutions should not be singled out in this, even though, as a rule, they do not deal with an educational role. Professors should be a model for creating morally responsible future generations.

This research aimed to determine students' perception of ethical issues in the University environment. The authors examined how demographic characteristics influence their ethical attitudes and tried to define the ethical dimensions in their perception of the faculty's role in the individual's ethics. In order to achieve this goal, a survey was conducted among students from Hungary and Serbia. ANOVA and factor analysis processed the obtained data set. The results indicate that students consider the faculty an important factor in shaping individual ethics. Conversely, students are sometimes held to different ethical standards than other constituents.

**Keywords:** academic ethics, students, university, perception

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Today's universities and colleges face many challenges and expectations. From an ethical point of view, they have to deal with academic dishonesty and, as the last educational institution in chronological order, they should set a good example. The reality is that university students are prone to commit various acts of dishonesty, such as fraud and plagiarism (Ashworth et al., 1997; McCabe, 2005; De Lambert et al., 2006). It seems that students who exhibit these acts during their university years tend to continue this bad behavior in the workplace (Payan et al., 2010). Violations of scientific integrity/ethics are a widely researched phenomenon. It is investigated from the student side and less frequently from the academic staff side. Researchers are looking for answers as to whether it varies with age, or it is less pronounced among PhD students, whether it depends on gender, type of education, or

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whether it shows country- or culture-specific signs. But some think it is worth looking at academic ethics and its violations from a digital and non-digital perspective (e.g. Kukulja Taradi et al., 2012).

In addition to the sub-issues of academic ethics, academic ethics is also an important area of research because many empirical studies show that the vast majority of students are affected by, and therefore act against, academic ethics (e.g. Harris, 2004; De Lambert et al., 2006; Carpenter et al., 2010; Toprak, 2017). There are many ways to improve the situation, but the academic evidence so far suggests that these methods and tools have not been very successful.

In our study, we first present some recent research in academic ethics, indicating the most common aspects. We then turn to our empirical research, in which we interviewed students in Hungary and Serbia about some aspects of academic ethics. Our research is significant in that there are relatively few publications from the Central European region.

## **2. RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEW**

The original meaning of the word 'ethics' can be traced back to ancient Greek (ethos), meaning custom, manners, tradition. Its subject is morality, its origin, nature and structure. In today's understanding, ethics is a philosophical science dealing with morality, a collection of norms and rules of behavior. It varies from one historical period to another, adapting to the society of the time. According to Hornby (2015) "ethics as moral principles that controls or influences person's behavior, professional or business or is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles". Ethical behavior involves honesty, justice, fairness, and other good virtues (Grigoropoulos, 2019).

Applied ethics, or professional ethics, describes the ethical standards for the practice of a profession. "While ethics describes the set of moral positions that are possible generally, integrity describes the subset of consistent moral positions (ethics) held by a specific actor." (Jordan, 2013:246) In other words "academic integrity is the moral code or ethical policy of academia" (McCabe, 2016). Academic integrity means that students carry out their own work without the unauthorized assistance of others or without cheating, lying, plagiarism or theft. When academic integrity is achieved, we see that the student is trustworthy and honest enough to do his or her own work, whether or not it is being checked. Pavela (1997) distinguishes between four types of violations of academic integrity: cheating, plagiarism, fabrication of information, or facilitation of such misconduct.

Why do students not follow the standards of academic ethics? Why do they choose unethical behavior? Harris (2004) found that the majority of asked students cheat for selfish interests. Benjamin (2001) concludes that students choose unethical behavior in order to gain recognition. According to Alnajjar and Hashish (2021), the reason for unethical behavior is simply to allow such behavior, i.e. the opportunity is given, so why not. In support of this, several authors have indicated that the increasing trend of plagiarism among university students can be attributed to several factors, such as lack of general ethical knowledge, ineffective plagiarism education, non-conforming plagiarism rules, individual dishonesty, contemporary culture and inadequate sanctioning (e.g. Fischer & Zigmond, 2011; Choi, 2019) This negative trend is supported by the extensive use of the internet and its ever-expanding offers, sometimes poor English skills, the burden of difficult tasks and the fear of failure (e.g. Carpenter et al., 2010; Alnajjar & Hashish, 2021; Blau et al., 2021). The reasons may include what Brimble (2016) refers to as the neutralizing effect, which refers to the fact that although students feel that their behavior was wrong, they deny it, blaming external factors or other people.

Researchers have looked at students' views on academic ethics from a number of perspectives (see Table 1 for a summary). Ludlum et al. (2017) interviewed Finnish students, and concluded that the students' cheating depends on a number of demographic factors, such as gender, age, marital status, or year in school. Kukolja Taradi et al. (2012) made a survey in Croatia and reported that 97% of respondents violated academic integrity. Alnajjar and Hashish (2021) examined in detail the views of nursing students on several ethical issues. They found low levels of ethics in terms of plagiarism, but much higher levels and sensitivity in terms of ethics in relation to patients, and professional ethics in general. McCrink (2010), Cho and Hwang (2019) found similar results. Denat and Tugrul (2023) also surveyed Turkish postgraduate students in health care and found that the higher the academic education, the more sensitive one is to ethical values. Uğurlu and Sert (2020), however, did not support this correlation. This may be because they studied postgraduate students from all fields of study. Desai et al. (2020) are of the opinion that the Covid-19 epidemic has had an impact on ethical behavior. They add that this situation provides a unique opportunity for the development of the skills of PhD students. Sidi et al. (2019), however, found the opposite result, i.e. that there is no difference in the ethical behavior of the academy depending on whether the student is an undergraduate or a postgraduate student and on the number of years.

Results from Taha and Obeidat (2021) in Jordan show that female students are more prone to unethical behavior. However, Pehlivanli and Akin (2019) found that women have stronger levels of academic ethics. On contrary Blau and Eshet-Alkalai (2014) have the view that male students are more likely to violate academic ethical standards. But there is also research that finds no gender differences in academic ethics (e.g., Ives et al., 2017). In this, and in the previous paragraph, we see conflicting scientific results. This may be due to the number of elements in the samples. The research samples used were sufficient to carry out statistical analyses, but - due to a lack of representativeness - could not give an overall picture. Other reasons could be cultural differences, different training and perhaps time differences of data collection.

Table 1. Summary of empirical research publications on academic ethical topics

Research aspects within academic ethics	Literature, source
Origin and culture of students	Ludlum et al., (2017); Denat and Tugrul (2023); Taha and Obeidat (2021); Kukolja Taradi et al., (2012)
Level of study (BSc, master or PhD level)	Denat and Tugrul (2023); Uğurlu and Sert (2020); Desai et al., (2020); Taha and Obeidat (2021)
Gender	Pehlivanli and Akin (2019); Blau and Eshet-Alkalai (2014); Taha and Obeidat (2021); Ludlum et al., (2017); Ives et al., (2017)
Type of study program (e.g. nursing, business students)	Alnajjar and Hashish (2021); Denat and Tugrul (2023); Uğurlu and Sert (2020)

Several researchers have made suggestions on how to improve the level of academic ethics in universities (see Figure 1), mainly as a preventive measure. Drumwright et al. (2014) makes clear distinguish among moral awareness, moral intention and moral action therefore offers a free, accessible ethical teaching program, called Ethics Unwrapped. Moris and Caroll (2016) argue for relevant holistic institutional policies, while Brimble (2016) sees the need for a strong university ethical code that motivates students. Intrinsic motivation and the role modelling of instructors are emphasized by many, stating that this is where academic ethics begins (e.g. Moris & Caroll, 2016; Brimble, 2016; Grigoropoulos, 2019). Curtis and Clare (2017) consider the deterrent power of punishment as a solution. Many encourage ethics education, whether through workshops or otherwise, and trust that appropriate ethics

education increases ethical sensitivity and responsibility (e.g. Park et al., 2012; Baykara et al., 2015; Cho & Hwang, 2019; Taha & Obeidat, 2021).



Figure 1. Proposals by scholars to raise the level of academic ethics

According to the literature review, the following hypotheses were defined:

H1: There is statistically significant impact of the gender on student's perception of the ethics in academic environment

H2: There is statistically significant impact of the year of study on student's perception of the ethics in academic environment

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The data collection for this research was performed by the survey method. The survey was conducted through an online platform and direct contact with respondents. The questionnaire was created by authors Atkinson et al. (2016). It consisted of three groups of questions. The first group refers to the demographic characteristics of the respondents (country of origin, gender, age, year of study). The second group of questions examines the perception about the role of faculty in promoting ethics. For this group, the respondents expressed the level of agreement with the statements by selecting the number on a five-point Likert scale (1. strongly agree ... 5. strongly disagree). In this case, number one indicated complete agreement and five complete disagreements with the specific item. Finally, the third group relates to the students' views on forms of academic dishonesty. This is achieved by asking respondents to indicate what they consider as dishonest selecting from a short list. Respondents were answering the questions by circling Yes or No.

This research was conducted among the students of two universities from Hungary and Serbia. A database of a total of 305 correctly completed questionnaires was created. Demographic structure of the respondents is given in Table 2.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To determine if the items within this questionnaire have relatively high internal consistency, the Cronbach alpha test was used. In this case, the value of Cronbach alpha was 0.757, suggesting that the selected questionnaire is reliable.

In order to examine the impact of the students' gender and year of study on perceptions of ethics in the academic environment, ANOVA analysis (Analysis of Variance) was applied. Demographic characteristics were determined as independent, and respondents' attitudes as

dependent variables. A statistically significant influence exists if the significance level ( $p < 0.05$ ). In this way, the influence of factors on each dependent variable was determined. Data processing was performed using the SPSS v.17.0 software package.

Table 2. Demographic statistics

Grouping Category	Grouping Title	Frequency	Percent
Country	Hungary	194	63.6
	Serbia	111	36.4
Gender	Male	154	50.5
	Female	151	49.5
Age	18-21	131	43.0
	22-25	105	34.4
	26-29	32	10.5
	30-40	30	9.8
	40+	7	2.3
Year of study	1 <sup>st</sup> year Bachelor	91	29.8
	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Bachelor	71	23.3
	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Bachelor	57	18.7
	4 <sup>th</sup> year Bachelor	73	23.9
	Master level	9	3.0
	Ph.D. level	4	1.3

The results of univariate ANOVA test for gender and year of study revealed no significant group differences with respect to the students' perception of the role of the faculty on improving their ethical standards. When it comes to the third group of questions relates to the students' views on forms of academic dishonesty, the results of univariate ANOVA revealed significant group effect (difference) for the independent variable of gender. By analyzing the mean values shown in Table 3. It was noticed that the females reported more negative attitudes toward cheating, while male student responses tend to indicate their more permissive attitudes.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics - Gender

Item	Gender	N	Mean	STDV
Q10_1 Personally, I consider plagiarism to be a form of academic dishonesty.	female	151	1.1788	.41771
	male	154	1.2987	.45918
Q10_2 Personally, I consider submitting another person's work as my own to be a form of academic dishonesty.	female	151	1.1258	.33276
	male	154	1.1688	.37582
Q10_3 Personally, I consider copying off of other student's exam papers to be a form of academic dishonesty.	female	151	1.1523	.37856
	male	154	1.3052	.46199
Q10_4 Personally, I consider texting other students' exam questions while testing to be a form of academic dishonesty	female	151	1.5232	.51426
	male	154	1.6429	.48072
Q10_5 Personally, I consider failing to report others observed cheating to be a form of academic dishonesty.	female	151	1.6954	.46178
	male	154	1.7922	.40705

Statistically significant impact of year of study on students' attitudes towards unethical acts is recognized only in the case of question Q10\_5 which reads: *Personally, I consider failing to report others observed cheating to be a form of academic dishonesty.*

Table 4. Descriptive statistics - Year of study

Item	Year of study	N	Mean	STDV
Q10_5 Personally, I consider failing to report others observed cheating to be a form of academic dishonesty.	1 <sup>st</sup>	91	1.6154	.48920
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	71	1.7183	.45302
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	57	1.8082	.39643
	4 <sup>th</sup>	73	1.9123	.28540
	Master	9	1.6667	.50000
	Ph.D.	4	1.7443	.43699

The relationship between the year of study and interest in reporting academic dishonesty is determined. According to the descriptive (Table 4), the students on higher year of study don't consider failing to report others' observed cheating as a form of academic dishonesty.

The next step in this research was to reduce the items from the questionnaire to a smaller number of factors by applying the Factor analysis. By conducting Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, scores of 0.843 and 947.480 were obtained, respectively (Table 5). These results indicate the possibility of applying factor analysis to the obtained data set.

Table 5. KMO and Bartlett's Test scores

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.843
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	947.480
	df	36
	Sig.	.000

Factor analysis revealed two main components with eigenvalues greater than one (Eigenvalues >1) (Figure 2. Screeplot). Both factors explain approximately 58.12% of the total variance Factor 1 31% and Factor 2 27.2% (Figure 3).

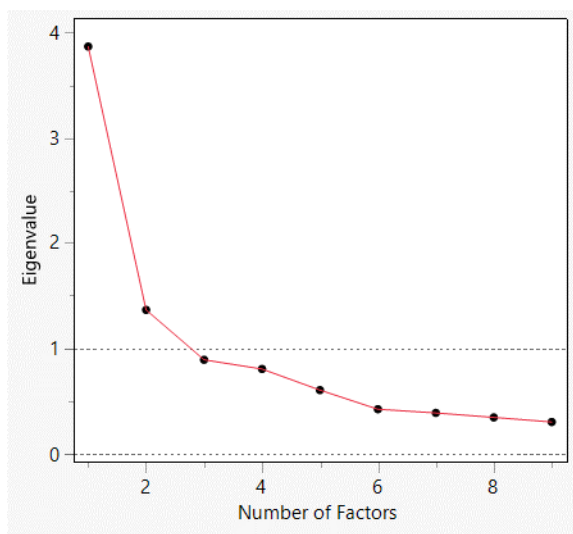


Figure 2. Screeplot

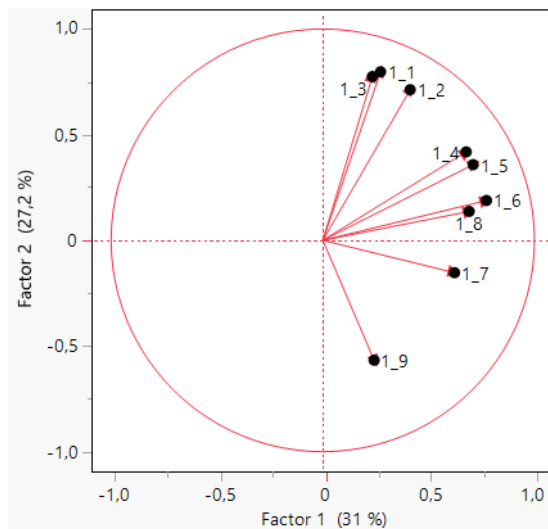


Figure 3. Factor loading plot

Factor loadings and total variance for each item are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Factor loadings

	Component	
	1	2
Q_1 College education should play significant role in teaching student about ethics.	.285	.794*
Q_2 Faculty helps students develop values in their classes.	.415	.711*
Q_3 Faculty incorporates ethics instructions into their classes.	.238	.771*
Q_4 Faculty should enforce ethical standards with their students.	.688**	.399
Q_5 Ethics are very important to me.	.709*	.355
Q_6 I hold myself to the same ethical standard to which I hold others.	.772*	.193
Q_7 In general, students abide by the University's Honor Code.	.619**	-.149
Q_8 I consider the faculty in my major to be ethical human beings.	.690**	.142
Q_9 By the time student reaches college; it is too late to teach them about ethics.	.261	-.573**

\*strong factor loadings

\*\*medium factor loadings

In VF1, strong positive loadings were assigned to questions Q5 and Q6, while medium positive loadings were assigned to questions Q4 (0.688), Q7 (0.619), and Q8 (0.690). Analysis of the questions assigned to this group indicated they mostly refer to personal attitudes toward ethical issues. Students believe they are ethical and respect ethical standards but expect the same from those around them.

VF2 explains 27.16% of the total variance, and the strongest positive load is recorded in questions Q1, Q2, and Q3. In contrast, the average negative load is assigned to question Q9. VF2 refers the influence of the teaching process on ethics. Based on the selected items in this VF, students believe that professors should promote ethical behavior and values during classes. Also, they believe that higher education has a significant role in developing and improving individual ethics.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Although our research brought some unexpected results, we can say that in general, ethics and ethical behavior are considered important by students (see Q5 as a strong factor). They even try to hold themselves to their ethical standards (Q6 as another strong factor). But it is the details of the ethical aspects that seem to be the most interesting. Perhaps we could say that people want to behave ethically, but in practice this is very difficult.

Our findings suggest that female students perceive slightly stricter academic ethical standards as more important, but the literature is divided on this issue (see our literature review). This suggests that understanding this requires deeper, more rigorous research. It may be that cultural - in some cases religious - background plays larger role, perhaps which generation he/she belongs to, but it can also be assumed that it changes over time. There may be a dynamic, interactive relationship with age and which year in university the respondent is, as well as what education he/she has.

Denat and Tugrul (2023) argue that the perceived, expected level of academic ethics increases in higher grades. Our results, however, confirm the conclusions of Sidi et al. (2019) that the academic ethics expectations of students in postgraduate education are not higher than those of students in undergraduate education.

Our research confirms that the example of lecturers and faculty members matters (see Q8) and these results are similar to several previous studies (e.g. Brimble, 2016; Curtis & Clare, 2017; Morris, 2018). We see that students not only expect the university to set an

example, but also to enforce ethical standards (Q4), so this means it is not too late for the university to be active in raising the ethical and academic ethical standards and awareness. This might also prevent the neutralization effect that could occur.

Generally we believe that academic ethics is still relevant in the 21st century and that it is worthwhile to investigate new challenges (e.g. digital opportunities, AI), but that the wide-ranging and complex nature of the subject may sometimes require creative, innovative methodologies that can deal with the complexity of the factors at play and the fact that, on the one hand, people are by nature more ethical in theory than in critical situations, and on the other hand, they are fundamentally concerned to comply with the rules around them.

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