Impetuses For Cheating In COVID-19-Induced Online Assessments At A Rural University In South Africa

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Abstract

Owing to the significant disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on all sectors of society, education institutions have been forced to rethink how they conduct their operations. To continue with teaching and learning, most institutions were forced to adopt more blended methods of instruction as opposed to the previously dominant traditional face-to-face instruction. Because the transition was abrupt, most institutions in the developed world were therefore caught unprepared and had to grapple with gaps in the implementation of teaching, learning, and assessment. As such, this study sought to determine the motivations of students to engage in cheating during the transition to emergency online learning at a rural institution in South Africa. To achieve this, the present study relied on a qualitative approach in which lecturers and students at a rural university were interviewed using semi-structured online interviews. The study revealed that while online learning was introduced as a measure to salvage teaching and learning, institutions in rural settings find it difficult to guarantee assessment in the digital domain. The study determined that students' motivations for cheating can be broadly explained in three dimensions namely the incentives, pressures, and opportunities. It is therefore recommended that to rescue academic integrity and combat cheating, there is a need for the adoption of an educative approach to ensure academic integrity as a starting point. This would require institutions to engender a culture of honouring academic integrity, and an adaptation of traditional contact-based surveillance and punishment policies for use in the digital domain.

Keywords: academic integrity, academic dishonesty, cheating, online assessment, online learning, rural institution

1.   Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives and livelihoods globally, and education systems have not been spared. The pandemic has pushed education systems around the world to adopt measures to continue teaching and learning under the auspices of the 'new normal' (Mncube et al., 2021). To prevent transmission of the virus, contact-based learning was initially disbanded as countries went into lockdowns, and later some institutions began to stagger contact-based classes as they emerged from the vicious waves of the pandemic (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Due to increased risks of infection in adults, higher education institutions were forced to consider remote learning and assessment as an alternative for delivering academic objectives (Mncube et al., 2021; Alin, 2020). In some cases, the transition was abrupt, and this resulted in questions on the academic quality and standards of qualifications awarded at such institutions (Gamage et al., 2020).

While all educational institutions across the globe were affected by the pandemic (Reedy et al., 2021), the developing world was faced with challenges which they could in some instances, barely grapple with (Chala, 2021). The scantiness, sometimes a total absence of online technologies, and the lack of the competencies required thereof became more evident when rural institutions were paralleled with their urban counterparts (Steinberger et al., 2021; Baran & Jonason, 2020; Moralista & Oducado, 2020). In South Africa, upon realising the acuteness of the challenges to the perceived 'solution' to learning during the pandemic, universities began to capacitate their students with laptops and data (Mncube et al., 2021; Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021). However, due to the abruptness of the transition, there are still questions on the effectiveness of assessment and evaluation within the remote learning models (Daniels et al., 2021; Guangul et al., 2020). Studies reveal that cheating and academic dishonesty are notably more rampant in COVID-19-induced online models of education than in traditional contact-based learning models (Clark et al., 2020; Dicks et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). This is because online learning does not have the traditional measures of invigilation of assessments as is the norm in contact-based assessment (Daniels et al., 2021).

In rural universities which predominantly cater for the rural populations, the COVID-19 stringency gave faculty members little time to consider remote assessment strategies (Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021; Mncube et al., 2021). This was because, in most circumstances, such faculty members had never taught remotely, thus both online instruction and assessment were experimental (Birks et al., 2020; Vučković et al., 2020). The COVID-19 emergency has revealed deficiencies of remote learning and assessment, especially in the developing world where cheating behaviours have also been brought to the fore due to a lack of resources and training (Chala et al., 2020). Research has established that students cheat for a variety of reasons including anxiety which breeds poor time management, poor planning, insufficient knowledge, or skills to complete the work, pressure to perform, etc. (Eaton & Turner, 2020; Fontaine et al., 2020). This study, therefore, sought to examine what motivates undergraduate students at a rural university in South Africa to engage in academic cheating in the wake of COVID-19-induced online learning.

The study sought to answer the following question:

What motivates students to engage in academic dishonesty in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic at a rural South African university?

2.   Methods

2.1. Research paradigm, approach and design

Underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, the study was formulated along a qualitative research approach to effectively examine the motivations for engaging in academic dishonesty. This is because the interpretive paradigm allowed the researcher to understand the world from individual experiences, views, and perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is argued that a qualitative research approach allows researchers to get in-depth responses to a phenomenon under study (Leavy, 2017; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The study was therefore informed by a case study design because this design allowed for an in-depth understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of motivations for academic cheating from the perspectives and experiences of students and lecturers at the rural institution.

2.2. Population, sample and sampling techniques

From a selected rural university in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, a sample of thirty-five (35) final year undergraduate students and fifteen (15) lecturers were conveniently sampled to participate in the study – making a cumulative total of fifty (50) respondents. The students were selected to allow for equal distribution of students across all the institution's five (5) faculties, and each of these students had to be in their final undergraduate year of study. Lecturers were similarly equally distributed across all five (5) faculties, and the three (3) lecturers from each faculty were interviewed based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using semi-structured online interviews with the students and lecturers, after which the data were thematically analysed. Thematic analysis refers to a qualitative analysis that is employed to evaluate classifications and present themes that relate to the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To enhance data trustworthiness, the researcher utilized reflexive journaling, member checks, and peer debriefing in the data collection and analysis stage.

2.4. Ethical considerations

This study's ethical considerations mainly focused on informed consent and the confidentiality of the participants. As such, the researcher observed the following to ensure that no harm was done in this study:

- The researcher upheld anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy. This condition was communicated and accepted before data collection; and

- The researcher also sought participants' informed consent to prevent harm to the participants and their institution.

- The respondents were also made aware of their right to withdraw their participation at any point, after which data from such participants would not be used.

3.   Results and discussion

This study sought to investigate the student motivations for engaging in academic dishonesty at a rural institution in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. As such, the following themes arose from the responses given by the participants as they detailed the motivations for academic cheating in the context of online learning:

- Perceived benefits of academic cheating;

- Pressures aiding academic cheating; and

- Opportunities for academic cheating

3.1. Perceived benefits of academic cheating

Participants revealed that students engage in academic cheating because of the perceived benefits which it has for perpetrators. Incentives for cheating include the need to attain high marks and pass difficult courses, that cheating is an easier alternative to hard work, among others. A prominent motivation for cheating which the participants highlighted was the need to attain high grades. This motivation is accurately captured in the sentiments of a student who argued:

> *I just want to graduate…not just graduate, I want to graduate with good marks. If I do not pass very well, it may mean that I will not get employed by reputable organizations – the ones that always select top performers. Unlike before, when we were writing exams which were invigilated, now I can boost my passes by just Googling for answers…* (Student 17)

This perception was substantiated by participants who revealed that this desire to attain high marks is especially applicable for courses that are perceived as tough. A case in point can be drawn from a lecturer who opined:

> *I am of the view that students will try to cheat where they find the subject matter difficult. It is usually these subject areas that determine progression to the next level, so cheating is seen as beneficial…at the end of the day, we will have students who have glowing transcripts, yet are shallow in terms of mastering the taught content. I think they just want to get good marks and then move on to the next stage.* (Lecturer 1)

The foregoing view reveals that cheating appears to be aided by the benefits which students perceive that it will deliver. In this sense, cheating is therefore regarded as an alternative pathway to attaining passes and ultimately qualifications. Participants also revealed that students also cheat because they do not want to work hard. An example can be noted in the response by a student who contended:

> *Some students have become lazy, so they do not read. This online thing gives you many opportunities to find easier ways of passing assessments…it is just you and your conscience. The pressure of knowing that if I do not read, I will fail is now absent in these online assessments. It is not all of us who cheat, but I think more students are not even reading…and those who read, they read to make it easier for them to find answers when they are writing tests.* (Student 8)

One can thus note that engaging in academic dishonesty is highly influenced by the benefits which accrue to those who engage in this malpractice. Students in this study revealed that sometimes cheating is a matter of academic survival because almost everyone was doing it. A student posited:

> *I used to write all my tests with all honesty until one day when I failed while almost everyone else passed. My faith tells me that it is wrong, but if everyone else is doing it and there is nothing wrong happening to them, why not? It means the institution is allowing us to cheat because they are not doing anything against it.* (Student 21)

Lecturers however challenged the belief that the institution and its staff are complicit in the academic dishonesty happening there. This is underscored in the response by a lecturer who cautioned:

> *Look, when we talk about dishonesty, we are not saying there are no measures that have been put in place to arrest this misconduct. But, as elsewhere in the world, there is a race between institutions that are coming up with measures to combat cheating and students who seek to invent new methods of cheating. Yes, the rate of cheating may have increased, but the rate of penalizing this malpractice has also increased in my view. It is a battle!* (Lecturer 6)

From the above responses, it becomes apparent that cheating in the wake of COVID-19-induced online learning at a rural institution is influenced by the perceived benefits which accrue to the offenders. Reedy et al. (2021) contend that with the adoption of digital technologies, the nature of academic misconduct is bound to evolve. They contend that increases in academic dishonesty can be directly associated with the ease of access to information that can easily be copied online. Academic cheating is thus seen as an easier option to studying and working hard at university. This gives credence to the pervasive practice of contract cheating and 'ghost-written work, and recycling of assignments from previous years especially in the advent of poorly planned assessment models (Clarke et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). Rural institutions in the developing world were thus confronted with a unique circumstance where they were poorly equipped and underprepared for the transition to online learning (Daniels et al., 2021; Dube, 2021). It thus becomes critical for institutions to institute punitive measures which outweigh the perceived benefits of cheating to make academic dishonesty less attractive for students.

3.2. Pressures aiding academic cheating

The respondents also revealed that students engage in academic dishonesty due to the various pressures which confront the student in the academic journey. Such pressures include the influence of friends and peers, lack of confidence, work overloads and perceived unfairness, among other factors. Findings revealed that the transition to online learning was abrupt and institutions that were largely based on traditional pedagogies of contact-based learning were the most affected. This became clearer with participants who lamented how lack of training for use of online technologies left students and staff stranded. To this end, a lecturer argued:

> *Online learning has worsened this because now it is almost everything that has become tough. After all, in addition to the course content, there is suddenly an*

unspoken requirement for digital literacy. So, the increase we are seeing in cheating at this institution can be linked to the fear of failure. (Lecturer 3)

These sentiments were also shared by students who felt that the institution had heaped pressure on them without having done enough to ensure equitable access to teaching and learning. A student reasoned:

Cheating has now become a way of life…students no longer see anything wrong in cheating because, in the first instance, we feel like the institution has cheated us by providing insufficient teaching and learning. Students now view cheating as the only way to survive academically…it is almost like a moral duty. (Student 32)

Participants also revealed that students are also motivated to cheat by the pressure from unfair testing and perceived unfairness in the assessment procedures. To this end, a student argued:

When we adopted online learning, I do not think that much thought was put into the plight of the students. Sometimes you find that our lecturers will ask us questions on the subject matter which they have not taught us on…so to bridge that gap, we cheat – the lecturers are the ones who cheat first by testing us on what has not been taught. Also, some lecturers at this institution will give unrealistic timeframes in some tests and exams – time is just not enough when you factor in the lack of adoption of IT in our institutions. (Student 5)

It also became apparent that students sometimes engage in cheating owing to relational pressures. Central pressures in the relational domain included pressure from family, friends, and peers. This appears to embed and rationalize cheating, as one student argued:

Students cheat because of a variety of reasons. At face value, it may appear to be laziness and just a need for good marks, but there are some unspoken motivations for cheating. We come from poor families where we cannot afford to pay for our fees, so we are here because of the government's funding. Entire families are waiting for students to complete their degrees and lift them out of poverty, these are not just students – these students here represent dreams of families that are in the clutches of poverty. So, if a student fails, it means they lose funding, and if they lose funding, that means dropping out of university – that is a death sentence to entire families. Cheating is a systemic problem. (Student 19)

Other respondents further argued that cheating was a complex problem and that students have been pushed into the practice because of the unbearable workloads that students were left to grapple with. This can be summed up in the argument advanced by a student who reasoned:

I usually cheat when I am not prepared for a test. Since we started this online learning, I have felt underprepared more and more and as a result, I have started cheating more because I don't have enough time to prepare for tests. You find that sometimes you can write tests for the whole week…this doesn't help students. It is almost like the system wants us to fail…cheating has increased because we want to succeed at all costs. (Student 2)

This was corroborated by participants who also revealed that the abruptness of the transition to online learning resulted in untold pressures for students and staff, so cheating was being aided by the desire to complete the academic calendar. A lecturer opined:

> *Since we moved to online learning without the necessary training and skills, students and staff felt that they were left with an impossible task of completing the academic year in limited time and with scanty resources. We know that teaching was not as thorough as we hoped, so students feel underprepared to take assessments in some cases. Cheating has several sides to it, especially now.* (Lecturer 8)

In tracing the motivations for cheating in online assessment, it became apparent that while online learning was introduced as a panacea to the COVID-19 disruptions, the complexity of the rural settings in which some institutions operate makes it difficult for online assessment to achieve the same goals as traditional assessment. Students in rural institutions are confronted by pressures such as relational pressures, poor planning and work overloads, lack of adequate training, and the lack of adequate resources, among others. These findings can be corroborated by studies that reveal that advocates of online learning appear to overlook the complex setting in which rural institutions in the developing world operate (Daniels et al., 2021; Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021; Dube, 2020). Rural institutions have had difficulties in transitioning to blended or online modes of learning owing to being under-resourced, difficulty in accessing mobile networks, lack of training, etc. (Mncube et al., 2021; Guangul et al., 2020). This has in turn made it difficult for such institutions to effectively assess students in the wake of online learning (Clark et al., 2020). As such, it is argued that students are increasingly engaging in cheating in online assessments because of the pressures associated with attempts by rural institutions to catch up with delayed academic schedules, resource inadequacies, among others (Chala, 2021; Baran & Jonason, 2020; Fontaine et al., 2020; Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). It thus becomes imperative to address the systemic challenges which compound learning challenges for students in rural institutions, this would include equitable distribution of funding for higher education in South Africa.

3.3. Opportunities for academic cheating

The responses by the participants also revealed that students are increasingly engaging in academic cheating because of opportunities that online assessment presents to them. Some of the opportunities which aid academic cheating include a lack of policies for the regulation of online assessment, a lack of consequences for online cheating, and a lack of invigilation for online tests and examinations, among others. One of the prominent factors which were raised by participants was that opportunities to cheat arise from the lack of sanctions and penalties for this illicit behaviour. This sentiment can be noted in the argument by a student who reasoned:

> *Cheating is almost like a pandemic which if we are not careful, will bring higher education institutions to their knees. Students now cheat because they know that others are cheating and there are no consequences for this…everyone is doing it, and if you do not do it too, you will probably be the only one to fail. The academic calendar has become too tight that even if you want to be faithful, you cannot just keep up without going mad. There are simply no penalties…some lecturers sometimes just laugh it off. This is what is enabling cheating.* (Student 34)

In addition to the lack of consequences that gives rise to cheating in online assessments, the participants also highlighted that the lack of invigilation was a factor that promotes cheating. This can be understood in the sentiments aired by a lecturer who argued:

Online learning has exposed us greatly…we can now tell that the culture of academic integrity has not been adopted by our students. In the absence of a culture of integrity, compliance can only be enforced by policing exams and tests. However, with the advent of the adoption of online learning, it becomes difficult to proctor exams and tests. This for me is the flaw of online learning – especially the rushed version of it. Cheating is being encouraged by the lack of supervision during assessments. (Lecturer 11)

This was corroborated and extended by a student who noted:

The fact that there is no invigilator when I write my tests and exams makes it difficult to not cheat…especially when I am writing some difficult tests or exams where I barely received sufficient teaching and learning. The impulse to cheat when you have all answers at your fingertips, for example, Google, is very difficult to contain. I am not surprised that more and more students are now performing exceptionally – on paper at least. (Student 7)

Participants also reiterated the need for the adoption of policies that are suited to the digital domain. Some participants decried that their institution had been caught unprepared for the transition, and thus remained reliant on traditional policies which governed paper-based assessments. A lecturer noted:

I think the current situation could have been avoided if we had planned well before adopting online learning…we seemingly walked into this online assessment with no regulatory framework or at least no knowledge of such regulations. Policies for traditional assessment revolved around invigilation, but this cannot be done on online platforms because students are taking these assessments remotely. (Lecturer 4)

The lack of regulatory policies which govern the prevailing academic environment thus presents opportunities for students to engage in academic dishonesty. Students also revealed that cheating is motivated by opportunities to collaborate with friends and peers. This is illustrated in the following argument advanced by a student:

When your friends and classmates are cheating on tests, it becomes too much of a temptation for you not to do the same. There are stories of students calling one another during tests to exchange answers. Texting is also commonly used. When your friends know that you are good in a course, they usually call for assistance – and don't think that students will let their friends fail. It is pretty much the same mantra – 'We are in this together'. (Student 6)

The findings reveal that sometimes cheating happens as a result of the existence of opportunities for engaging in such illicit conduct. Examples of these opportunities are both intrinsic factors (cheating opportunities that arise from peer relationships) and extrinsic factors (systemic factors related to the institution). This can be corroborated by Khan et al. (2021) who contend that cheating is also encouraged in instances where students see it as a way of helping their friends. In such instances, loyalty to social groups encourages students to cheat as a way of 'looking out' for their friends who may be struggling where the other is good at (Baran & Jonason, 2020; McCabe, 2016). This would especially be true in instances where there are no material costs associated with this illicit behaviour. This, therefore, underscores the centrality of ethics in the quest to undo intrinsic factors that encourage

dishonesty in the digital domain. Yet the COVID-19-induced online learning has revealed that institutions that have limited resources simply do not have adequate measures to regulate assessment (Reedy et al., 2021; Baran & Jonason, 2020). It, therefore, becomes important for rural institutions in South Africa to cultivate a culture of honour for academic integrity as opposed to merely addressing the consequences of lack of integrity which often manifests in the form of academic cheating.

4. Conclusion

This study sought to examine the motivations for students to engage in academic cheating in the wake of online assessment at a rural university in South Africa. The findings revealed that while online learning was introduced as a measure to salvage teaching and learning, institutions in rural settings find it difficult to guarantee assessment security in the digital domain. The study determined that students' motivations for cheating can be broadly explained in three dimensions namely the perceived benefits which accrue to the offenders; opportunities that exist as a result of both intrinsic factors and extrinsic factors; and pressures that arise from the complexity of the rural settings in which some institutions operate. The findings suggest that students cheat when there is an intersection of different factors, at the centre of which is a justification and rationalizing of this delinquent behaviour. As such, the study recommends that to rescue academic integrity and combat academic dishonesty, there is an urgent need for the adoption of an educative approach to safeguard academic integrity as a starting point. This would require institutions to engender a culture of honouring academic integrity. The motivations of cheating unearthed by this study have also necessitated the need for and an adaptation of traditional contact-based surveillance and punishment policies for use in the digital domain.

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