Analysis of Academic Dishonesty Among Students in Distance Higher Education

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Abstract

Distance higher education has expanded significantly with the development of digital technology and online learning platforms. However, the increasing use of e-learning systems has also raised concerns about academic integrity. This study analyzes academic dishonesty among students in distance higher education using the case of an e-learning system. The research employed a survey method combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, supported by observations of student academic performance in an online learning platform. The participants consisted of 100 students and 3 lecturers selected from three study programs: Government Science, Business Administration, and Taxation. The results show that academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism in discussion forums and assignments, remains prevalent in distance learning environments. The primary causes include limited understanding of academic writing, low reading motivation, and the tendency to choose shortcut methods in completing academic tasks. The study also finds that lecturers play an important role in reducing dishonest practices by enforcing academic writing rules and encouraging students to revise their work. Strengthening academic integrity policies and improving students' academic literacy are crucial to maintaining the quality and credibility of distance higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has significantly transformed the landscape of higher education worldwide (Ichsan et al., 2023). One of the most significant developments is the expansion of distance higher education, which enables universities to provide flexible learning opportunities for students regardless of geographical and time constraints. Distance education has become an important mechanism for increasing access to higher education, particularly for working adults, remote populations, and non-traditional learners. The integration of digital platforms, learning management systems, and online communication tools has facilitated the growth of distance learning programs in many universities around the world (Suyatmo et al., 2023; Yulianti, 2020).

The adoption of online and distance learning environments has accelerated significantly in recent years, particularly during the global COVID-19 pandemic(Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Winiasri et al., 2023). Higher education institutions were required to shift rapidly from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning systems. Although this transition enabled the continuity of educational activities, it also introduced new challenges related to student engagement, assessment practices, and academic integrity (Dhawan, 2020). Among these challenges, academic dishonesty has become one of the most critical issues facing higher education institutions.

Academic integrity is considered a fundamental value in higher education. It refers to the commitment to ethical academic practices such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in the process of producing and evaluating academic work (Fishman, 2014). Violations of these values are commonly referred to as academic dishonesty. According to McCabe, Butterfield, and Treviño (2012), academic dishonesty includes behaviors such as plagiarism, cheating during examinations, falsification of academic work, fabrication of data, and unauthorized collaboration (Santosa & Sudirman, 2023).

The issue of academic dishonesty has been widely studied in traditional classroom settings; however, it has become increasingly complex in online and distance learning environments. The characteristics of distance learning systems such as remote participation, asynchronous communication, and technology-mediated

assessment—may create opportunities for dishonest behavior. Several studies indicate that the absence of direct supervision during online examinations and assignments increases the likelihood of cheating and plagiarism among students (King, Guyette, & Piotrowski, 2009).

In addition, the widespread availability of digital information and communication technologies has made it easier for students to access online materials, share answers, and replicate existing academic work. While these technologies are designed to support learning, they may also facilitate unethical practices when students misuse them to gain academic advantages. Consequently, maintaining academic integrity in online learning environments has become an important concern for higher education institutions.Various theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the phenomenon of academic dishonesty. One of the most widely applied frameworks is the Theory of Planned Behavior proposed by Ajzen (1991). This theory suggests that individuals' behaviors are influenced by their attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of academic dishonesty, students may engage in cheating if they perceive that such behavior is acceptable, commonly practiced among peers, and unlikely to be detected by instructors.

Another relevant perspective is Neutralization Theory, which explains how individuals justify unethical behavior through rationalization processes (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Students who engage in academic dishonesty often employ rationalizations such as believing that "everyone cheats," that the assignment is unfair, or that cheating is necessary to achieve academic success. These justifications allow students to neutralize feelings of guilt and maintain a positive self-image despite engaging in dishonest practices.

Furthermore, some scholars also explain academic dishonesty using the Fraud Triangle Theory, which identifies three main factors that encourage fraudulent behavior: pressure, opportunity, and rationalization (Cressey, 1953). In academic settings, students may experience pressure from academic workload or performance expectations, opportunities arising from limited monitoring in online learning environments, and rationalizations that justify dishonest behavior (COIRO & DOBLER, 2007; Elfira & Santosa, 2023).

Distance higher education institutions, particularly open universities, rely heavily on e-learning systems to facilitate learning activities, including online discussions, assignments, and assessments. While these systems provide flexibility and accessibility, they also present challenges in ensuring that students complete academic tasks independently and ethically. Previous studies have shown that plagiarism and copying responses in online discussion forums are among the most common forms of academic dishonesty in e-learning environments. Understanding the forms and causes of academic dishonesty in distance higher education is therefore essential for maintaining academic integrity and improving the quality of learning(Luciana et al., 2024). Identifying the factors that contribute to dishonest behavior can help institutions develop appropriate strategies to prevent misconduct and promote ethical academic practices among students. Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the phenomenon of academic dishonesty among students in distance higher education. Specifically, this research seeks to identify the forms of academic dishonesty that occur in online learning environments and to explore the factors that contribute to such behavior. The findings of this study are expected to provide insights for higher education institutions in developing policies and strategies to strengthen academic integrity in distance learning systems.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive survey design using a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data. The mixed-method approach was selected to obtain a comprehensive understanding of academic dishonesty practices among students in distance higher education. Quantitative data were used to describe the prevalence of dishonest academic practices, while qualitative data were used to analyze the forms of academic dishonesty and the factors contributing to such behavior.

The research was conducted within the context of distance learning implemented through an e-learning platform, where students participate in online discussions and submit assignments digitally. The study focused particularly on identifying academic dishonesty practices occurring in online discussion forums and assignment submissions.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in a distance higher education environment where teaching and learning activities are facilitated through an e-learning system. The platform allows lecturers to deliver course materials, manage assignments, and facilitate asynchronous discussions among students. These discussion forums are designed to encourage students to actively engage with course materials and exchange ideas with peers.

However, the open nature of online discussions may also create opportunities for academic misconduct, such as copying answers from other students or reproducing information from internet sources without proper citation.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 100 students and 3 lecturers involved in distance learning courses. The students were drawn from three academic programs including government science, business administration, and taxation.

Students were selected from those actively participating in online discussion forums in the e-learning platform. The lecturers involved in the study were instructors responsible for moderating discussions, evaluating assignments, and monitoring student participation in the selected courses.

Observation of Online Discussions

The primary data were obtained through observations of student participation in online discussion forums within the e-learning system. The observations focused on identifying patterns of responses that indicate possible academic dishonesty, such as:

- identical or highly similar answers among students
- copying responses from previously posted comments
- reproducing information from external sources without citation

Data Analysis

Student responses in the discussion forums were also analyzed as learning documents. These documents were examined to identify similarities in arguments, wording, and structure that may indicate plagiarism or copying behavior.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and qualitative analysis techniques. First, student responses in discussion forums were examined to identify patterns indicating academic dishonesty. Similarities in responses, repetition of arguments, and lack of original analysis were considered indicators of potential plagiarism or copying. Second, qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret the observed behaviors and identify factors contributing to academic dishonesty. These factors were analyzed based on patterns emerging from student responses and lecturer observations. Finally, the findings were interpreted to understand how academic dishonesty occurs in distance learning environments and to identify possible strategies for promoting academic integrity in online education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several patterns of academic dishonesty among students participating in distance higher education through an e-learning platform. The analysis is based on observations of student participation in online discussion forums, examination of written responses submitted through the learning management system, questionnaire responses, and feedback from lecturers facilitating the courses. The results indicate that academic dishonesty in the distance learning environment primarily manifests in the form of plagiarism, copying responses from peers, and reproducing information from external sources without proper citation.

Forms of Academic Dishonesty in Online Learning

The analysis shows that plagiarism and copy–paste practices represent the most dominant forms of academic dishonesty observed in the online learning environment. These practices occur mainly in online discussion forums and written assignments submitted through the e-learning platform.

In online discussion forums, students are required to respond to questions provided by lecturers and interact with their peers by commenting on or responding to other students' ideas. However, the observations reveal that several students submitted responses that were identical or highly similar to previously posted answers. Instead of presenting original arguments, these students reproduced the responses of their peers with little or no modification. Another form of academic dishonesty identified in the study is the reproduction of content from external sources such as websites, digital learning materials, or online articles. In many cases, the copied materials were incorporated into the responses without proper citation or acknowledgment of the

original authors. This practice reflects a lack of adherence to academic writing standards and academic integrity principles.

These findings demonstrate that the characteristics of the online learning environment—particularly the accessibility of information and peer responses—may facilitate dishonest academic behavior if students do not possess adequate academic literacy and ethical awareness.

Patterns of Copying Behavior in Online Discussions

A closer examination of student responses reveals several recurring patterns that indicate copying behavior. First, some responses contain direct duplication of sentences or paragraphs from earlier contributions posted by other students. The structure, wording, and sequence of ideas in these responses are nearly identical, suggesting that the content was copied without modification. Second, some responses show minimal paraphrasing of previously submitted answers. In these cases, students slightly modify the wording of the original response but maintain the same structure and argumentation. Although these responses appear different on the surface, the similarity in reasoning indicates that they were derived from the same source.

Third, some students reproduce information obtained from external sources without providing references. These responses often contain academic or technical language that differs from the student's usual writing style, suggesting that the information was copied directly from other materials. The presence of these patterns indicates that the discussion forum environment allows students to review multiple responses before submitting their own answers. While this feature encourages collaborative learning and knowledge exchange, it also creates opportunities for students to replicate existing responses rather than produce independent analyses.

Factors Contributing to Academic Dishonesty

The results of this study indicate that academic dishonesty in distance higher education is influenced by several factors, including students' academic literacy, learning behavior, and structural characteristics of the online learning system. One important factor is the limited understanding of academic writing principles among students. Many students appear unfamiliar with citation practices and paraphrasing techniques. Consequently, they incorporate ideas and information from external sources without acknowledging the original authors. This lack of academic writing competence increases the likelihood of unintentional or deliberate plagiarism.

Another factor is the low level of student engagement with learning materials. Some students demonstrate a tendency to complete assignments quickly without thoroughly reading or analyzing the course content. As a result, they rely on responses posted by their peers or information found on the internet instead of developing their own interpretations (Hussain et al., 2023; Zulkifli et al., 2022).

The structure of the online discussion forum also contributes to the occurrence of academic dishonesty. Because students can easily view previously submitted responses, some students may feel tempted to copy answers that appear comprehensive or well-written. This situation creates an opportunity for dishonest practices within the online learning environment. Time constraints also play a significant role. Many students enrolled in distance higher education programs are working professionals who must balance academic responsibilities with employment and family commitments. Due to limited study time, some students adopt shortcut strategies such as copying existing answers in order to complete assignments more efficiently.

Interpretation of Findings Using Behavioral Theories

The findings of this study can be interpreted through several theoretical perspectives that explain dishonest behavior in academic contexts. First, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that individual behavior is influenced by attitudes toward the behavior, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of online learning, students may perceive copying responses from peers as an acceptable or common practice, especially when they observe similar behavior among other students. When students believe that such behavior is unlikely to be detected by instructors, their perceived behavioral control increases, making them more likely to engage in dishonest practices.

Second, the findings can also be explained through Neutralization Theory, which suggests that individuals justify unethical behavior through rationalization processes. Students may justify copying answers by believing that the assignment is not important, that time constraints make it necessary, or that other students are doing the same thing(Dewanto et al., 2024; Youna Chatrine Bachtiar et al., 2023). These rationalizations reduce feelings of guilt and make dishonest behavior appear more acceptable. Third, the results are consistent with the Fraud Triangle Theory, which identifies three factors that lead to fraudulent behavior: pressure,

opportunity, and rationalization. In the context of distance higher education, students may experience pressure from academic workload or time constraints, opportunity due to the open structure of online discussion forums, and rationalization through the belief that copying answers is a practical solution to academic demands.

Lecturer Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity

Despite the challenges identified in the study, lecturers play a critical role in promoting academic integrity in distance learning environments. Several strategies have been implemented by lecturers to address academic dishonesty and encourage responsible academic behavior among students. First, lecturers emphasize the importance of academic integrity and originality in student work. Students are regularly reminded that copying responses from other sources without proper citation constitutes plagiarism and violates academic regulations (Suryono et al., 2023).

Second, lecturers provide feedback and opportunities for revision when student responses appear to be copied from other sources. By requiring students to rewrite their answers using their own words, lecturers aim to improve students' academic writing skills and encourage independent thinking.

Third, lecturers attempt to design discussion questions that require analytical and reflective responses rather than simple factual answers. Questions that require interpretation, comparison, or critical evaluation make it more difficult for students to copy responses directly from external sources.

These strategies highlight the importance of instructor involvement in maintaining academic integrity within distance learning systems. While digital learning platforms facilitate flexible education, effective guidance from lecturers remains essential in fostering ethical academic behavior.

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CONCLUSION

This study highlights that academic dishonesty remains a significant challenge in distance higher education, particularly in the context of e-learning systems. The findings indicate that plagiarism in discussion forums and assignments is one of the most common forms of dishonest behavior among students. Several factors contribute to this issue, including limited understanding of academic writing practices, low motivation to engage with learning materials, and the tendency of students to seek quick solutions when completing academic tasks. The results also demonstrate that lecturer involvement plays a critical role in minimizing dishonest practices. Through strategies such as checking the originality of student responses, requiring revisions using students' own words, and designing analytical discussion questions, lecturers can encourage deeper learning and reduce opportunities for plagiarism. These practices help students develop academic literacy and critical thinking skills, which are essential for maintaining integrity in online learning environments.

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