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# PREDICTING STUDENTS' UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR: DO ATTITUDES LEAD TOWARDS INTENTIONS?

**ABSTRACT**

In the last several years, the amount of research on the lack of academic integrity and unethical behaviour of students has increased. On the one hand, technological development has spurred unethical behaviour, while on the other hand it has enabled better control of the same behaviour. This raises the question if the students behave unethically and why, and which factors influence their unethical behaviour. The research was conducted on a sample of 622 university students. The aim of the study was to determine if students' personal attitudes on unethical behaviour influence their intentions to engage in unethical behaviour, i.e. the aim is to determine the connection between the attitudes and the intended behaviour. The results of the regression analysis show a statistically significant positive correlation between the students' general personal attitudes toward unethical behaviour and their future intentions toward unethical behaviour. This leads to the necessity for control and supervision regarding unethical behaviour and a stricter approach to such behaviour, which would ultimately result in the reduction of intentions toward further unethical behaviour among students.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, intentions, unethical behaviour, marketing, theory of planned behaviour

**1. Introduction**

Today, the emphasis on sustainable development is increasing across all areas of activity, along with socially responsible business activities, and the ethical behaviour of individuals is increasingly considered. Higher education, as a sector where individuals receive education and where they focus on a specific area of interest, also has an effect on the ethical behaviour of students. A question that is emerging with increasing frequency, the one

also receiving an increased amount of media attention, is the (un)ethical behaviour of employers, employees, and government officials. We ask ourselves where it all starts, at what stage of their lives do people start considering unethical behaviour, what are the reasons for it, and what is its goal. The Croatian market is not alone in dealing with these issues; they are also present in foreign markets, where company managers have caused dramatic drops in the value of their companies' stocks

through their unethical behaviour in the organisation (Wang, Kleiner, 2005). Also, some studies (Ballantine et al., 2014; McCall, 1988; Sims, Sims, 1991; Nonis, Swift, 2001; Stone et al., 2009) indicate that persons who behave unethically in school also display unethical behaviour in the workplace. Furthermore, research has shown that students, who are the future of the labour market, show a decreasing amount of awareness regarding the importance of academic integrity, which ultimately affects all the stakeholders in the market. Another research study that supports this is authored by Rosman et al. (2008), which says that students' awareness of cheating is present from the childhood stage, considering that they believe cheating is acceptable because everyone cheats.

Ethics begins with each specific individual, with personal emotions, intuition, and attitudes, which are later translated into ethical behaviour. Individuals learn how to adapt ethical principles through their own socialisation process, their life experience, and critical thinking, along with the explicit cultural standard (Shaw, 2008). Ethical values have been widely recognised as a key element in educational institutions, where each educational institution wants to develop a culture of honesty among their students, as well as the awareness about the importance of academic integrity and about a quick response to academic dishonesty. The advanced technology that surrounds us presents a problem as it provides the possibility for more intensive unethical behaviour. On the other hand, the same technology enables us to monitor that kind of behaviour.

The aim of the study is to analyse the previous research related to the ethical behaviour of students, as the main stakeholders of higher education, and determine the intentions toward ethical behaviour of students in higher education, based on our own conclusions resulting from the primary research. Furthermore, the aim is to analyse the personal attitudes of students regarding unethical behaviour and predict their future intentions toward unethical behaviour on that basis. Subjective norms (Štimac et al., 2017) and perceived behavioural control (Štimac, 2018) were observed and determined, so in this article the focus will be only on attitudes, as one of the predictors of the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

## **2. Review of previous research on ethical behaviour in higher education**

Ethical dilemmas appear when there is no clear answer regarding the "right" or "wrong" course of

action in a certain situation. Complex dilemmas appear when the values of the institution collide with society or with the personal or professional values of the individual. Even though the dilemmas are observed as a problem in an individual's life or in the business activities of an institution, they are still a useful tool for helping individuals/institutions when considering their own approach to ethical questions. They can also play an important role in ethical training and in encouraging individuals to discuss problems and resolve unfavourable circumstances that appear in the course of their work<sup>1</sup>.

Symaco and Marcelo (2003) defined academic dishonesty as the violation of rules and regulations within the institutions of higher education. They believe that academic dishonesty is a serious "disorder" which is difficult to remove from higher education. The violations of rules and regulations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, using materials that are not allowed, copying exam questions from fellow students, writing exams/preliminary exams/student papers on behalf of other colleagues, stealing exams, and similar actions (Roberts, 2002; Petress, 2003; Finn, Frone, 2004). Roberts (2002) and McCabe et al. (2006) stated that the most common reasons for unethical behaviour among students are time pressure, laziness, fear of failure, peer influence/pressure and peer competition, advanced technology that facilitates unethical behaviour, the influence of scholarships, greed (Piff et al., 2012) and other circumstances. Piff et al. (2012) in their results show that more individuals from upper-class backgrounds behaved more unethically in naturalistic and laboratory settings, in comparison to lower-class individuals. The reasons for that are upper-class individuals' relative independence, availability of resources to deal with the costs and consequences of unethical behaviour, reduced concern for others and increased goal-focus.

Apart from the research on samples, some authors (Engle, Smith, 1990) conducted research on the ethical behaviour of faculty employees, and their position on ethical behaviour. The results have shown that most of them plagiarised their research, forged the results of the research, and their decisions on the grades they gave to students were influenced by the students' gender and the way they interacted with them. Furthermore, most of the study participants used outdated class notes and were prone to decide on the final grades based on the criteria that

are not objective, along with other similar practices. The results of a similar research by Lewellyn (1996) showed that employees attended professional conferences without significant participation, used faculty owned equipment for personal benefit, sold additional copies of books, and used certain computer programs without a licence.

All of this indicates the need for implementing a code of ethical behaviour, equally for students and for faculty employees. The code of ethical behaviour in higher education is used for promoting ethical actions in teaching. Institutions of higher education should implement a university code of ethical behaviour that emphasises core ethical principles, instead of only advocating adherence to laws and regulations. It is extremely important that certain institutions of higher education seriously reconsider their statements, as well as their actions. According to Astin (1989), some of the most serious ethical issues in higher education are the result of inconsistencies between explicit and implicit moral values of the institution. Explicit moral values include the formal rules of the institution, while implicit values drive the institutional practice related to issues like resource allocation, personal decisions, decisions related to teaching courses, and the like. All institutions of higher education are of course complex and autonomous organisations, and they should create their codes of ethical behaviour in accordance with their own policies and culture. The conclusion arising from this is that all institutions of higher education should engage in ethical issues, and the primary reason for it is that management should have a consistent approach, it should support the mission and the values of the organisation, provide guidelines for the employees and for students, deal with the issue of reputation and risk, adhere to the legislation, employ the best talent and attract students, as well as encourage sponsorships and additional financing<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the codes of ethical behaviour, it is necessary to systematically implement monitoring and correction of those codes in case certain irregularities are noticed. Simkin and McLeod (2010) suggest reinforcement of an intolerant collegiate culture about cheating and changing the attitude toward cheating - public exposure of cheating individuals who then suffer negative consequences might be useful.

On the other hand, some authors (Ruedy et al., 2013) show that unethical behaviour can trigger positive

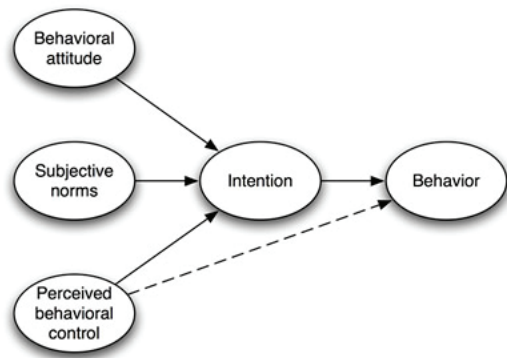
affect, not only negative. Authors find that the participants who cheated experienced more positive affect than those who did not cheat, because they show a high degree of excitement and they do not look at their behaviour as cheating.

### **3. Attitudes toward unethical behaviour in higher education**

One of the most applied theories in the area of research regarding human behaviour is the Theory of Planned Behaviour. In the last two decades, it has seen increased application and expansion to research related to personal behaviour, especially in predicting the intentions of individuals in their behaviour and their actual behaviour (Lin, Chen, 2010: 66). The Theory of Planned Behaviour is basically an expansion of the Theory of Reasoned Action which includes measurements of the belief control and the perceived behavioural control (Armitage, Conner, 2001: 471), and it states that people believe that the intentions toward certain behaviour come before the action. However, there are questions related to its generalisation and the operation of certain predictors in the equation. Also, the model does not explain that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour (Aiken, 2002). The new model makes up for the deficiencies of the Theory of Reasoned Action, which its authors (Ajzen, Fishbein, 2004) noticed during their research into the impossibility of the Theory of Reasoned Action to include behaviours during which individuals are not fully in control (Marangunić, Granić, 2012: 208). Furthermore, the model does not include the predictor of perceived behavioural control, which definitely leads to the expanded model, the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Perceived behavioural control has been added to the Theory of Planned Behaviour in order to improve predictions in situations where behaviour can be limited or where it does not follow the rules, like the policy of academic integrity.

Ajzen (1988) and Beck and Ajzen (1991) expanded the Theory of Planned Behaviour in order to enable the prediction of individuals' behaviour. Today, the Theory of Planned Behaviour is used in various areas of research to show the influence of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control on the individuals' intentions toward certain behaviour which result in certain behaviour. The mentioned information can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Theory of Planned Behaviour Model



Source: Ajzen, I. (1991), "Theory of planned behavior", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 179-211.

Theory of Reasoned Action and PLS (partial least squares) methodology is used by Simkin and McLeod (2010) to show cheating behaviour of students. According to their results, 60% of business students admitted to having cheated at least once while attending college. The most important reason for cheating was a "desire to get ahead", whereas the presence of a moral anchor in a faculty member whose opinion mattered was one of the reasons why students refrained from unethical behaviour. The Theory of Planned Behaviour is used in numerous social and scientific disciplines. Lin and Chen (2010) applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour in their research into the intentions toward unethical behaviour at the workplace, Beck and Ajzen (1991) applied it for various types of dishonesty, like the actions of cheating, stealing, and lying. Apart from that, it is applied for research into healthy living, into behaviours related to AIDS risk, voluntary blood donations, using coupons, alcoholism, consumption of fast food, quitting smoking, violence control, using technology (Ajzen, Fishbein, 2004), ethical behaviour of accountants (Buchan, 2005), as well as purchasing organic food (Jeger et al., 2013).

Considering the observed issues and the aims of this study, further in the text we will only explain attitudes toward behaviour, as one of the predictors of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Attitude toward behaviour is the level to which the execution (performance) of behaviour is judged as positive or negative by the individual. Ajzen (1991) defined attitude as a certain mood which responds positively or negatively to an object, person, institution, or event. Miller (2005) defined the attitudes of individuals as a group of beliefs about specific behaviour influenced

by the evaluation of those beliefs. An attitude is the individual's estimate regarding their level of approval or disapproval of specific behaviour.

Beck and Ajzen (1991) explained that attitudes of individuals identify to what level students approve or condemn academic dishonesty. Park and Blenkinsopp (2009) suggested that a person develops attitudes on the basis of beliefs they hold regarding certain behaviours and connecting them to certain consequences. Research conducted in Singapore on 518 students showed that students believe that cheating on exams is a serious problem, while plagiarism is a less serious problem. The results of the research by Hardigan (2004) show that mostly female students (56%), older students (58%), and students with a higher grade point average (51%) have negative attitudes toward cheating. Stone et al. (2007) and Harding et al. (2007) have concluded in the results of their research that attitudes are a strong predictor of cheating. The results of the research by Stone et al. (2009) have shown that the attitudes of students are statistically significantly related to the intentions toward behaviour ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Attitudes toward unethical behaviour of individuals in this study are related to the attitudes of students toward their specific behaviour, which are formed from expressed beliefs about such behaviour. As a result of everything mentioned previously, the following hypothesis is set in the study:

H1: Positively directed attitudes about unethical behaviour have a positive influence on the intentions to perform unethical behaviour by students in higher education.

Positively directed attitudes mean that the student believes that any form of cheating is acceptable (exams, seminar papers...), and that they would not report a fellow student if they believe that cheating is "normal" behaviour. In that case, the intentions toward the performance of the same unethical behaviour in higher education are increased for that student as well, just because such options are becoming available to them (if others are doing it, why shouldn't I do it). The aim of the study is to confirm the set hypothesis on the basis of primary research.

#### 4. Research methodology

The aim of the research was to identify and evaluate the attitudes of students regarding unethical behaviour in higher education and if personal attitudes of students have an influence on their intentions to engage in unethical behaviour in higher education.

The emphasis in the study has been placed on personal attitudes of students and their influence on the students' intentions toward unethical behaviour, and for that reason, only the mentioned predictor will be observed. The research was conducted on a sample of 622 university students (attending undergraduate and graduate study programmes). The

research covered all the years of study, as well as all the majors at the observed faculty. The sample of 622 students is a representative sample, and it represents 29% of the total number of currently active students at the observed faculty. The description of the sample regarding the observed socio-demographic data is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1** Description of the sample

		N	%
Gender	Male	225	36.2
	Female	389	62.5
Year of study	First year	123	19.8
	Second year	92	14.8
	Third year	161	25.9
	Fourth year	118	19.0
	Fifth year	127	20.4
Place of residence	Village	195	31.4
	Suburbs	64	10.3
	City	357	57.4
Student status	Full-time	516	83.00
	Part-time	100	16.1
Major	Financial Management	143	23.0
	Marketing	102	16.4
	Management	104	16.7
	Entrepreneurial Management and Entrepreneurship	84	13.5
	Business Informatics	64	10.3
Class attendance	0%	1	0.2
	0-25%	11	1.8
	26-50%	36	5.8
	51-75%	151	24.3
	76-100%	419	67.4
Performance (grade point average)	2.0 – 3.0	123	19.8
	3.1 – 4.0	323	51.9
	Higher than 4.1	132	21.2

Source: Authors' research

The data was gathered using a study questionnaire, in which the study participants were informed about the topic and the aim of the research. In the process of measuring the predictors, the authors accepted and adapted the scale for measuring personal positions related to cheating by Stone et al. (2009), while the measurement scale related to intentions toward unethical behaviour was adapted according to Stone et al. (2009) and Harding et al. (2007). The questionnaire consisted of three sec-

tions. In the first section, the attitudes and the intention toward unethical behaviour in higher education were tested; in the second part of the research, we wanted to find out to what extent, when, and why the study participants (students) cheat; and the last part of the questionnaire was related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants. Every scale used in the questionnaire was created according to the five-point Likert measurement scale, where the study participants

had the option to express their level of agreement or disagreement with specific statements from the questionnaire.

The research results were obtained using the SPSS 18.0 statistical software package. Descriptive analysis, multivariate analysis (correspondence analysis, correlation analysis, linear regression), factor analysis, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used in the research.

#### 4.1 Research results

When we looked at the problem of unethical behaviour of study participants (students in higher education) regarding our research, we reached the following results:

- 62.4% of the study participants were cheating in secondary school as well;
- 23.5% of the study participants are cheating on their exams/preliminary exams (the most common reason is helping a friend or getting a better grade);

- 25.7% of the study participants had someone else write their seminar paper for them at least once and 3.4% had their final paper written by someone else. The most common reasons are the lack of time to write the seminar/final papers or their lack of interest for the topic (for seminar papers);
- 17% of the study participants wrote a seminar paper for someone else at least once and 3.9% wrote final papers for someone else. The most common reason is the desire to help a friend.

Considering that there is a relatively large number of variables, it is necessary to contract them to a smaller number of common factors using exploratory factor analysis (Table 2). The variation method used was the varimax factor rotation with Kaiser normalisation. The factor analysis and the consistency analysis was performed on the 8 variables of the predictor Attitudes. The sample included 610, or 98%, of the study participants and the rest have been excluded from the factor analysis. The sample should be five times larger than the number of variables included in the analysis, so that condition was met.

Table 2 Results of the factor analysis

Variable of the predictor Attitudes	Factor 1	Factor 2	h <sup>2</sup>
Reported a student they know for cheating on an exam/preliminary exam	.906		.823
Reported a student they do not know for cheating on an exam/preliminary exam	.938		.884
It is important to report students who cheat on exams/preliminary exams because it is the right thing to do and it is fair toward the other students.	.541		.378
It is always wrong to cheat on an exam/preliminary exam.		.439	.261
It is acceptable for students to cheat on an exam/preliminary exam as long as they are not caught.		.639	.418
It is acceptable to allow another student to copy from me during an exam/preliminary exam.		.540	.358
It is acceptable to cheat when writing seminar papers (e.g. plagiarism, paying someone to write a seminar paper...)		.780	.609
It is acceptable to cheat when writing final and diploma papers (e.g. plagiarism, paying someone to write final and diploma papers...)		.724	.524
Eigenvalue	3.39	4.61	
Variance percentage	42.4	57.6	
Number of variables in the factor	3	5	

Source: Authors' research

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.781<sup>3</sup>, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure is 0.721, and the Bartlett test is  $\chi^2=2061.212$ ,  $df=28$ ,  $Sig.=.000$ . The Principal Axis Factoring method was applied. Two factors were identified through exploratory factor analysis. The eigenvalue, which shows the amount of information contained in each factor, is larger than one for each identified factor, which means that the criteria for determining the number of identified factors have been met. The variance percentage is 100%, which shows an excellent percentage of information of all the original variables of the identified factors. Therefore, two factors have been

identified through factor analysis, and they were given the following titles:

Factor 1: Attitudes of students toward cheating by other students

Factor 2: The general attitude of students toward cheating

Based on everything mentioned above, the reliability analysis was performed for individual factors and for intentions toward unethical behaviour. Table 3 shows that both factors, as well as intentions toward unethical behaviour, have the appropriate level of internal consistency, measured using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and average intercorrelation.

*Table 3 Reliability analysis for individual factors*

Measuring scale	Number of statements	Mean	Variance	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha	Average intercorrelation
Intentions	11	19.78	49.126	7.009	0.873	0.401
Factor 1	3	12.52	6.643	2.577	0.806	0.626
Factor 2	5	11.96	19.36	4.40	0.769	0.4

Source: Authors' research

Before developing a linear regression model, it is necessary to see if there is a statistically significant correlation between the two factors of the students' attitudes and the students' intentions toward un-

ethical behaviour. Table 4 shows the results of the Pearson correlation. Both factors are in positive statistical correlation with the intentions toward unethical behaviour.

*Table 4 Correlation analysis (n = 622)*

Predictor variables	Intentions toward unethical behaviour	
	Pearson correlation	Statistical significance
Factor 1	.105*	.016
Factor 2	.492**	.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01

\* Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05

Source: Authors' research

The linear regression model is shown in Table 5. Regression analysis is used in order to determine the correlation between the observed variables, i.e. the effect of the dependent variables on the independent variable. The results of the regression analysis show a statistically significant positive correlation between general personal attitudes of stu-

dents toward unethical behaviour and their future intentions toward unethical behaviour. The model explains the total of 24% of the variance in the intentions toward unethical behaviour. We will not comment on the other correlation, which shows the negative sign in front of the standardised regression coefficient, because it is not statistically significant.

**Table 5 Linear regression model**

Predictor variables	beta ( $\beta$ )	t-value	Significance (p)	Model summary
Factor 1	-.053	-1.318	.188	R = 0.494 R2 = 0.244 F = 83.996
Factor 2	.508	12.663	.000	

Note: Dependant variable: intentions toward unethical behaviour

Source: Authors' research

**5. Conclusions, limitations and implications for future research**

The research was conducted in order to explore intentions toward unethical behaviour by students, considering their personal attitudes toward unethical behaviour. The aim of the research was to determine the attitudes of students related to unethical behaviour in higher education and whether the students' personal attitudes influence their intentions toward unethical behaviour in higher education.

The results of the research have shown that both identified factors (the factor related to the attitude on cheating by other students and the factor related to the general attitude toward cheating) are in correlation with the intentions toward unethical behaviour by students in higher education. Furthermore, the results of the regression analysis have shown a statistically positive influence of students' general personal attitudes toward unethical behaviour on their future intentions toward unethical behaviour. Accordingly, the hypothesis that positively directed attitudes about unethical behaviour have a positive influence on the intention toward unethical behaviour of students in higher education has been confirmed.

It can be concluded that at the beginning of their studies, the study participants (students) believe that it is acceptable to cheat, and more than half of them (62.4%) cheated before, during the earlier stages of their education. There is also the problem

of implementing control and supervision over unethical behaviour, considering that all unethical behaviour is "swept under the carpet", i.e. it does not receive any large or significant amount of attention. Students usually receive a warning and that does not exclude their further unethical behaviour. This brings up an issue of whether changing the system of higher education would change the students' attitudes toward unethical behaviour and raises the question of their behaviour after they enter the labour market.

However, there are several limitations regarding this research. First, it is difficult to interpret the results on cheating among students unless we consider a comparable educational institution. It is questionable whether these results would be interpreted in the same manner in comparison to another educational institution. Second, in this study we observed only the personal attitudes of students in higher education, so the inclusion of other predictors of the Theory of Planned Behaviour would complete the image of the intentions toward unethical behaviour among students. Further studies will deal with the other predictors of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Third, considering the low variance explained by the model in the linear regression analysis, there is the question of the predictive strength of the model and the level of prediction. Taking into account all this, it is necessary to conduct further research in order to resolve the limitations of this research and fill in the blanks left by this research.



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## ENDNOTES

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- 2 IBE, CIHE (2005:10), "Ethics Matters: Managing Ethical Issues in Higher Education", CIHE and Brunel University, London.
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## **UTJECAJ OSOBNIH STAVOVA STUDENATA NA NAMJERE NEETIČNOG PONAŠANJA U VISOKOM OBRAZOVANJU**

### **SAŽETAK**

Zadnjih nekoliko godina porastao je broj istraživanja o akademskom nepoštenju i neetičnom ponašanju studenata. Razvoj tehnologije je s jedne strane negativno utjecao na razvoj neetičnog ponašanja, dok je s druge strane omogućio i bolju kontrolu istog. Postavlja se pitanje ponašaju li se studenti neetično i zašto, te koji čimbenici utječu na njihovo neetično ponašanje. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku od 622 sveučilišna studenta. Cilj rada je determinirati utječu li osobni stavovi studenata o neetičnom ponašanju na njihove namjere neetičnog ponašanja primjenom Teorije planiranog ponašanja. Rezultati regresijske analize pokazuju statistički značajan pozitivan odnos između generalnih osobnih stavova studenata prema neetičnom ponašanju i njihove buduće namjere prema neetičnom ponašanju. Nameće se nužnost provođenja kontrole i nadzora nad neetičnim ponašanjem te stroži pristup istom, što bi u konačnici rezultiralo smanjenjem namjera njihovog daljnjeg neetičnog ponašanja.

**Ključne riječi:** stavovi, namjere, neetično ponašanje, marketing, teorija planiranog ponašanja

