Prevalence of Academic Misconduct in Vietnamese Students: Correlates of Self-Reported Cheating Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown the extent and resulting impact of academic misconduct in many parts of the world and has highlighted it as a pressing problem. However, research around academic misconduct is lacking in Vietnam, and it is difficult to find existing literature with high school students as the target demographic. This research paper sets out to fill this void and unearth unidentified trends in this area of study. Specifically, this paper distributed a self-reported survey with N=70 high school students from Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted in Hanoi and Thieu Hoa High School in Thanh Hoa to discover the prevalence of academic cheating and its relationship with a range of other factors, such as the relationship between students and others and students’ plans for higher education. The results showed substantial correlations between a higher reported cheating frequency and numerous variables like a lower self-reported strictness of the teachers during proctoring, lower reported disapproval of cheating from parents, higher willingness to help a friend cheat during a test, higher willingness to help a stranger cheat during a test, and students planning to study abroad rather than domestically. In addition, participants answered a free response question about the methods they thought would help discourage cheating. Results suggest that most students identify stricter proctoring and more technology usage as possible interventions towards cheating.

Introduction

Academic misconduct in Vietnamese universities has been increasingly prevalent and problematic in recent years (Khang Do Ba et al., 2016; Pham et al., 2021). Most of the literature thus far has only investigated plagiarism specifically in Vietnamese universities. However, students in Vietnam may learn cheating behaviours before they enter university, especially in high school. Determining the extent to which cheating behaviours develop in high school is therefore important for addressing the problem of cheating more comprehensively.

Academic Misconduct in Vietnam

Academic misconduct is defined as any behaviour that leads to an unjustified advantage over other students (Hughes & McCabe, 2006). While academic misconduct is broadly defined and can include many behaviours such as bribery, plagiarism and cheating, amongst other things, the focus of this study was on cheating on tests and assignments.

Plagiarism is the most common form of cheating by far in Vietnam. One study showed that 91.7% of graduation reports at one Vietnamese university were plagiarised (Tran et al., 2018). One possible explanation for this high rate of plagiarism is a lack of awareness that leads to students using sources without citation. However, other forms
of cheating like discussing test materials with others, using mobile phones, and other overt behaviours are through no lack of awareness. This type of proactive engagement in academic misconduct is the focal point of this paper.

In Vietnam, academic misconduct is generally frowned upon, yet it is still common practice in many institutions, especially at the high school level. This may stem from heavy course loads and a lack of choice in classes offered. High school in Vietnam is from grade 10 to 12 with a heavy emphasis on testing. Although there has been a movement towards fewer exams over the years, the number of tests that students must sit is still relatively large, with up to 12 tests for each subject per school year, and students are required to study 13 different academic subjects in total (moet.gov.vn, n.d.; hcm.edu.vn, n.d.). Couple this context with the importance the education system has placed on test scores, it is not entirely baffling why cheating has become so common despite outward disapprobation by society.

Factors that Influence Academic Cheating

Several factors can increase the likelihood that a student will cheat. For example, evidence has shown that cheating is more likely to occur in a change of environment, particularly as high school freshmen get sorted into classes at different academic levels after they leave middle school (Anderman & Midgley, 2004). Studies have also linked attitudes towards academic misconduct with gender, the corruption level of a country, and socioeconomic status (SES) (Crittenden et al., 2009). This latter factor was of particular focus in the present study. We hypothesised that students from a higher SES background will engage more often in academic misconduct than their low SES counterparts. In order to test this, the prevalence of cheating behaviour was compared between students from a high school in a province with a higher average SES to a province with a lower average SES (gso.gov.vn, n.d.).

Vietnamese high school students also often aim very high academically and are self-aware of the difficulties in reaching their objectives (Pham, 2021). This is particularly prevalent in students who have plans to pursue higher education overseas, as they have to rise to the expectations of performing well academically, at least on paper. Thus, they may unknowingly put themselves in a difficult position that may lead to the temptation of academic misconduct. We hypothesised that students who plan to study overseas will report cheating more often.

While the emphasis of investigations into cheating behaviours is largely on the students themselves, there are also extraneous influences from other people in students’ lives. Teachers and parents may be involved in academic misconduct and their involvement is commonly overlooked by society. For example, it is common practice for parents to visit teachers at their residences on special holidays and before important test dates, often bringing them a gift or envelope of money (McCornac, 2012). This not-so-subtle bribe can put enormous pressure on teachers to aid in cheating, either by assessing students more highly than they would otherwise or proctoring exams less harshly. Students’ relationships with their classmates may also impact their cheating behaviours. For example, students may be more likely to ask a friend for help cheating rather than a stranger. A third focus of the present study was to investigate how each of these relationships impacts students’ cheating behaviour.

Given each of these factors, conditions have aligned in many ways for academic misconduct to occur regularly and this should be cause for concern for all stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and learning scientists.

Potential Solutions to the Problem of Academic Misconduct

The wide prevalence of academic misconduct in Vietnam has garnered the need for measures to be taken to reduce and discourage this phenomenon. Many studies have concluded that there is a need for the nurturing of a culture of integrity (Yu et al., 2018). Others offer more straightforward and applicable solutions, including utilising higher order thinking multiple-choice questions, increasing frequency of assessments, having students complete an academic integrity pledge, and administering multiple versions of the examination each with the questions in a different random order (Bernardi et al., 2008). In the current study, we were also interested in assessing possible solutions to cheating,
so participants were also asked to share what methods they believe their schools could use to deter cheating behaviours. This phenomenon has motivated the present investigation into the causes and the effects of cheating in two Vietnamese high schools.

In this study, we conducted a survey of cheating behaviour in Vietnamese students in order to better characterise how widespread cheating is, as well as the circumstances under which cheating occurs. The survey was designed to examine our hypothesis about the relationships between cheating frequency and college plans, SES, and the dynamics of the relationships between students and others.

Method

Participants

Participants were 50 high school students who enrolled in Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted, a specialised high school for talented students in Hanoi, Vietnam and 20 students who were enrolled in Thieu Hoa High School. The participants’ ages range from 16-18 (i.e., 10th grade to 12th grade). All participants were Vietnamese in terms of nationality. All participants in the study spoke either Vietnamese or English fluently.

Materials

Participants were asked to fill out an online web-based survey in one of two languages based on their level of proficiency (Vietnamese or English). Participation in the survey was optional, as was made clear to all of those who chose to participate. Participants were asked to fill out 18 survey items including Likert scale, multiple-choice and short answer questions (see Appendix for a sample of the survey questions). The survey was designed to measure the correlations between academic misconduct and a selection of factors, such as teacher-student relationship, ideas for effective measures to discourage cheating, and personal information such as gender, grade point average (GPA), and plans for college.

Procedure

The survey was conducted using Google forms, a free online software. This medium was chosen due to the restrictions put in place by the Vietnamese government that limited travel at the time the survey was conducted due to COVID-19, allowing participants to take the survey from their preferred location so long as they had internet access. Participants were sent a link to the survey, and once they clicked on the link, they began by optionally entering their email address and gave consent by checking 'yes' to the first question and proceeded to respond to each survey question. The survey took participants approximately 14 minutes to complete. After they finished their responses were recorded and stored securely.

Results

Cheating Behaviour and Academic Goals

On average, participants reported participating in cheating behaviours moderately frequently ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.33$). As hypothesised, a one-tailed independent $t$-test revealed that students who reported not planning to study abroad ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.13$) reported cheating significantly less frequently than students who reported planning to study abroad ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(68) = -1.90$, $p = .03$, $d = -.46$. GPA ($p = .36$) was not related to cheating.
Parent and Teacher Influences on Cheating Behaviour

When looking at student-parent relationships, a Pearson’s correlation revealed that students who reported that their parents are more disapproving of cheating reported cheating less frequently ($r = -.30, p = .01, 95\% CI [-.07 - -.50])

Self-reported strictness of teachers when monitoring tests was related to self-reported cheating behaviours such that students who rated their teachers as more relaxed when monitoring tests reported participating in cheating behaviours more frequently ($r = .29, p = .02, 95\% CI = [.05 - .49]$). Self-reported relationships with teachers were also significantly related to the frequency of cheating behaviours such that students who reported more resentful relationships with their teachers reported cheating more frequently ($r = .33, p = .01, 95\% CI = [.10 - .52]$). How effective students reported proctors being at discouraging cheating was not related to the frequency of cheating behaviour ($p = .77$).

Peer Relationships and Cheating

Frequency of cheating was related to how willing students reported being to help a friend ($r = .51, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.321 - .66]$) or stranger ($r = .34, p = .004, 95\% CI = [.11 - .53]$) cheat as well as asking a stranger ($r = .35, p = .003, 95\% CI = [.13 - .54]$) to help them cheat ($r = .35, p = .003, 95\% CI = [.13 - .54]$). However, cheating was not related to willingness to ask a friend to help them cheat ($p = .22$).

On average students reported being significantly more willing to ask a stranger to help them cheat ($M = 4.84, SD = 1.65$) rather than a friend ($M = 2.40, SD = 1.58$), $t(69) = -12.54, p < .001, d = -1.50$, and to help a friend cheat ($M = 4.23, SD = 1.68$) than a stranger ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.29$), $t(69) = 10.90, p < .001, d = 1.30$. Additionally, students reported being significantly more willing to help a friend cheat ($M = 4.23, SD = 1.68$) rather than ask a friend to help them cheat ($M = 2.40, SD = 1.58$), $t(69) = 6.98, p < .001, d = .83$, and less willing to help a stranger cheat ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.29$) rather than ask a stranger to help them cheat ($M = 4.84, SD = 1.65$), $t(69) = -11.53, p < .001, d = -1.38$.

Cheating by School

When looking at school-level differences (Figure 1), an independent two-tailed $t$-test revealed that students at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted ($M = 4.10, SD = 1.30$) reported cheating significantly more often than students at Thieu Hoa High School ($M = 3.20, SD = 1.20$), $t(68) = 2.68, p = .009, d = .71$. Additionally, how accepted cheating was reported to be at the high school students attended was significantly related to cheating frequency such that students that reported their high schools as more accepting of cheating reported cheating more frequently ($r = .42, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.21 - .60]$) and students at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted reported their school as being more accepting of cheating ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.61$) than the students at Thieu Hoa High School ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.57$), $t(68) = 5.48, p < .001, d = 1.45$. 

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Students at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted reported having more resentful relationships with their teachers ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.30$) than the students at Thieu Hoa High School ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(68) = 2.66$, $p = .01$, $d = .70$. Additionally, students at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted reported that proctors are less effective at discouraging cheating ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.37$) than students at Thieu Hoa High School ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.61$), $t(68) = -3.04$, $p = .003$, $d = -.81$. Lastly, students at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted reported being more willing to help a friend cheat ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.51$) than students at Thieu Hoa High School ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(68) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$.

Open-Ended Participant Responses

At the end of the survey, students responded to an open-ended question, “What methods do you think your teacher or school should use to effectively discourage cheating?” We coded the open-ended data based on common themes present in the responses, which resulted in five categories of responses: monitoring technology, alternate methods of assessment, stricter proctoring, better preparation/instruction, and harsher consequences. Table 1 presents an example of each category of response and has not been corrected for spelling/grammar errors. Responses that were originally written in Vietnamese have been translated to English.

Results of the open-ended questions (see Figure 2) indicate that 33% of respondents think that monitoring technology, such as cameras or other software, would discourage students from cheating, while 42% of respondents suggested a need for stricter proctoring during exams. Other respondents (18%) suggested harsher consequences for cheating behaviours such as losing points or getting a fine. Lastly, 28% of respondents suggested other methods of assessment (e.g., more difficult questions, fewer tests, different types of questions) and 16% of participants shared that better instruction and exam preparation is needed to effectively discourage cheating.

Table 1. Themes resulting from qualitative analysis of the open-ended survey data. Participants’ responses fell into five categories: monitoring technology, alternate assessment methods, stricter proctoring, better preparation/instruction, and harsher consequences. We’ve included participant responses for each category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Technology</td>
<td>“Use plagiarism detection software and record the test room with cameras.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternate Assessment Methods</td>
<td>“Tests should keep students’ ability in mind and more advanced problems/questions should be used for practice.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stricter Proctoring</td>
<td>“Examiners should be more attentive and stern”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Preparation/Instruction</td>
<td>“Explain the importance of studying”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsher Consequences</td>
<td>“More severe punishment”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.** Frequency of cheating behaviours by School. Students at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted reported cheating significantly more frequently than students at Thieu Hoa High School.

**Discussion & Conclusion**
The purpose of the study was to evaluate the prevalence of cheating amongst adolescents and young adults in Vietnam and identify human-based school-wide interventions that can address this issue. To this end, a survey was designed to evaluate the prevalence of cheating amongst students of two high schools. It was hypothesised that students who have plans to study abroad would be more engaged in academic dishonesty. This prediction was corroborated by the survey, as the data showed a substantial correlation between students studying abroad intentions and their cheating frequency. One possible explanation for this result is that Vietnam has a universal entrance exam for every college, and students' evaluative test results at school bear little significance in the admission process. The same cannot be said for many foreign institutions, however. Consequently, students who look to pursue higher education overseas have a need to boost their grades, and inevitably some of them resort to academic misconduct.

The results further point to a significant discrepancy in cheating frequency between the two schools. As aforementioned, Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted is a school located in Vietnam’s capital city of Hanoi, a high socioeconomic region, relative to Thanh Hoa province where the SES is not only lower than Hanoi’s, but also the country’s average (gso.gov.vn, n.d.). While the difference in cheating behaviour between these schools observed here may be due to differences in SES, it could also be accounted for by the fact that more economically well-off families are much more likely to send their children to higher education institutions overseas.

Willingness to ask a friend for help during a test was on average significantly lower than their reported willingness to ask a stranger for help. This might be caused by the student’s mindset to maintain a favourable image in their social group or the student’s fear that they have to return the favour in some way. Additionally, students who reported more resentful relationships with their teachers reported cheating more frequently, contradicting a previous study that suggested no such correlation (Kalhori, 2004). The difference may be due to cultural, geographical, sample size, and increased access to cheating due to technological advances.

The present study had several limitations. One limitation was that there was a discrepancy in the number of responses received from the two schools. This may cause some of the comparisons to be less accurate, and since students of both schools answered some questions quite similarly to their schoolmates, the average answer could lean towards the same trend as the answers given by the school with more representatives who responded to the survey. Additionally, the survey was developed for this study and thus had not been standardised with previous literature. This may help to explain any differences in findings compared to previous surveys.

A further problematic implication of the methods is rooted in the beliefs each individual holds about themselves. Indeed, some students engage in wrongdoings, but only to the degree against which they can still maintain a delusional self-view. This type of self-monitoring can lead to understatements since the study design takes the form of a self-reported survey. A similar underreporting effect can be brought about by another source: while the survey was confidential (or anonymous for most respondents who were not immediately identifiable by the handle of their email and those who chose not to provide such information), what ultimately determines the accuracy of the eventual result is how that confidentiality/anonymity is viewed by the respondents. One aspect of administering the study that may have been concerning to students is that respondents received the survey from a teacher or student, which may have led students to doubt the anonymity/confidentiality of the survey as they fall victim to the fundamental attribution error.

Our results suggest several possible interventions to reduce cheating. A useful finding could be that students who reported having more disapproving parents also reported cheating less often. Parental intervention, therefore, might be utilised to reduce cheating. Thus, it may be of interest for future research to consider this as a potential intervention. Other studies should set out to reaffirm the validity of these findings and make students informed of this reality and encourage them to determine for themselves that taking the route of academic misconduct is an unnecessary risk. The survey shed light on cheating behaviour at the high school level and is one of few such studies conducted within the Vietnamese education system. Not only do the findings present the need for change, but they also indicate the need for more studies to be conducted to examine this problem and bring higher levels of awareness to students and schools. Moreover, because the results of this survey contradict some past findings, more work should be done to test the relationship between teacher-student relationships and cheating.
Acknowledgments

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References


