

HERB

Higher Education in Russia and Beyond



Cheating and Plagiarism in Higher Education

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Countries and Cases

- 6 Diana Karanauskienė, Vida Janina Česnaitienė, Brigita Miežienė, Arūnas Emeljanovas**
Differences in Understanding Academic Integrity: A Lithuanian Case
- 8 Ani Hovhannisyan**
Cheating and Plagiarism in the Armenian Higher Education System: Why Not?
- 9 Anna Solovyeva**
Student Experience with Academic Dishonesty and Corruption
in the Khabarovsk Region of Russia
- 11 Elvira Leontyeva**
How Secondary School Practices Contribute to the Acceptance of Plagiarism
in Russian HEIs
- 13 Abel Polese, Tetiana Stepurko**
Ukraine: A Thousand Reasons to Cheat the System
- 14 Ivan Sterligov**
Why Blacklists Matter

Remedies, Measures, Reforms and Other Initiatives

- 17 Mihaylo Milovanovitch**
Academic Dishonesty: A Symptom, Not a Problem
- 19 Igor Chirikov, Evgeniia Shmeleva**
Are Russian Students Becoming More Dishonest During College?
- 21 Sergey Mezenin**
A Cheat Sheet Exhibition: Is It Promotion or Prevention of Cheating Among Students?

ing time to enforce standards of academic integrity and to check all written assignments properly. An additional reason in Ukraine as well as in Armenia was the lack of intrinsic motivation to study among a substantial share of students who engaged in cheating, which could be traced back to the way in which undergraduate admission procedures and criteria were set. They encouraged prospective students to make study choices that prioritize access to state-funded places over their study interests and aptitude.

The Way Ahead

The discussion on how to prevent academic cheating should not be limited to a reflection about the manifestations of the problem and its regulation. It should include a consideration on how to improve higher education in ways that reduce the need to cheat. The expectations, hopes and professional conditions of participants in higher education hold important clues in this respect, particularly about the reasons why cheating persists, despite all rules and campaigns against it.

Certainly, such targeted improvement may be costlier, more difficult, and time-consuming for an academic institution than a website update or the purchase of radio jammers for the exam hall. Yet an informed effort to address the root causes of dishonesty is also more likely to make the summertime discussion of wireless earpieces in exams eventually a thing of the past.

Notes

[1] The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the organizations with which the author is affiliated.

[2] Retrieved from:
<https://www.oecd.org/corruption/acn/>.

[3] For more information on INTES, see the corresponding OECD publication at <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/acn/preventionofcorruption/>.



Are Russian Students Becoming More Dishonest During College?

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One of the biggest challenges for the Russian higher education system is to combat academic dishonesty among students. In 2014, almost half of the students at Russia's most selective universities indicated that they cheated on exams [1]. Furthermore, international comparative studies show that Russian students are more tolerant of academic dishonesty than students from other countries [2].

It is not clear, however, whether students obtain tolerant attitudes towards cheating before coming to university (in high school) or develop these attitudes over the course of their university studies. Existing US-based research shares a consensus that universities contribute to the progress in the students' moral development: senior students tend to cheat less than freshmen [3; 4]. Researchers attribute this effect not only to the maturation but also to the specific college experiences that promote the values of academic integrity and honesty. But does it work the same way in Russia?

We will address this question using the data from two large-scale student surveys recently conducted in Russia. The first is the survey of more than 2,200 undergraduate students within the annual Monitoring of Education Markets and Organizations Project (MEMO Survey) in 2014. The second is the nationally representative survey of more than 2,300 first-year and third-year engineering students conducted in 2015 as part of the Study of Undergraduate Performance (SUPER-test) [5].

From Bad to Worse

In the MEMO Survey, students were asked two questions: if they were cheating during exams in the past academic year, and if they were plagiarizing in their academic papers in the past academic year. While nearly 30% of

the students indicated that they were cheating during exams, there is a striking gap between the first-year students (17% were cheating) and the fourth-year students (36% were cheating). The gap is a bit smaller for plagiarism (24% in the first year and 34% in the fourth year). A positive correlation between the year of study and both cheating and plagiarism is still significant, even if controlled for a number of individual and institutional characteristics.

The design of the MEMO Survey is not ideal to identify a change in student dishonest behavior and attitudes, since students from different majors and universities are surveyed at each year of study. The SUPER-test data has a better design for this purpose – first-year and third-year students from the same departments were selected to participate in the study. They were asked indirect questions measuring their attitudes towards academic dishonesty (what the faculty member should do if a student is caught cheating or plagiarizing). And again, tolerance to academic dishonesty increases during college: 88% of third-year students demonstrate dishonest attitudes as compared with 82% of the first-year students. Both figures are high, so it seems that Russian students are going from bad to worse when it comes to academic dishonesty.

What is Wrong with Higher Education Institutions?

The data from the two surveys show that Russian higher education institutions in fact implicitly encourage academic dishonesty among students. Students cheat more and develop tolerance towards academic dishonesty over the course of their studies. We identify at least four factors at the institutional level of Russian higher education institutions that allegedly contribute to developing student academic dishonesty.

First, higher education institutions do not develop and enforce policies aimed at academic integrity. Honor codes or similar documents are virtually non-existent at Russian universities (with few exceptions). Students are largely unaware of what constitutes dishonest behavior, especially when it comes to plagiarism. Faculty are not informed about the actions that they should undertake when they encounter student academic dishonesty and usually act very leniently.

Second, there are no incentives for faculty to combat cheating. Conversely, since university budgets depend on the number of enrolled students, university faculty are pressed by the institutional environment to tolerate cheating. Very often they are advised by administrators not to give students failing grades for academic dishonesty so that they can continue to be enrolled at the university.

Third, there are no incentives for honest students to help maintain academic integrity among their classmates by reporting cheating students. Russian students study in administratively assigned study groups (20-25 people) throughout the whole period of their education and at-

tend all classes together. This leads to the development of a sense of belonging to the group and strengthens feelings of solidarity. Cheating is therefore regarded as much less unethical action compared to whistleblowing or a refusal to help a fellow student during an exam.

Fourth, outdated teaching and grading methods contribute to the development of academic dishonesty. The learning process emphasizes “the replication of authoritative knowledge” [7]. Russian students spend a lot of time at lectures, taking notes, copying or taking pictures of PowerPoint slides. Their major goal as learners is to memorize material and correctly reproduce it on exams in a way that their instructors expect from them. Therefore, it is not surprising that copying from cribs or from others during the exams or while preparing a term paper becomes so widespread.

What is to be Done: Reactive or Proactive Approach?

There is a wide range of actions that policymakers and university administrators can undertake to prevent the increase of academic dishonesty among students. The reactive approach is aimed at increasing the costs from cheating by enhancing monitoring and by making sanctions stricter and inevitable. Chinese policymakers are moving progressively in this direction: cheating on the national exam (gaokao) is currently punished with a prison sentence.

The proactive approach [8] aims at developing a culture of academic integrity and highlighting the shared responsibility of the students, faculty and university administrators to maintain it. This approach also seeks to make cheating costlier, but emphasizes the educational component. Decreasing the number of high-stakes exams and introducing courses on academic and research ethics as well as formative assessments may potentially produce the long-term effects of student honesty at universities and beyond.

It seems that Russian higher education needs a combination of these approaches to reverse the worrisome trend of increasing dishonesty among students. The newly established Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia needs to set the goal of combating academic dishonesty as one of its top priorities, since dishonesty undermines the investments in human capital. Russian higher education is a top-down system; thus, universities need a strong signal from the Ministry to prioritize this aspect of their work. Universities should be incentivized to develop policies and programs against dishonesty, such as honor codes and research ethics courses, as well as stricter punishments for cheating and plagiarism and improved assessment practices. Finally, universities should create support structures for faculty and students who report academic dishonesty. All these measures are a bare minimum that is required, considering the current state of academic honesty in Russian higher education.

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A Cheat Sheet Exhibition: Is It Promotion or Prevention of Cheating Among Students?

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The Ural Federal University, located in Ekaterinburg, has been hosting an annual exhibition of cheat sheets for several years. The collection has nearly 150 items, all of which have been ‘tested’ in real life at secondary schools and ter-

tiary education institutions. According to Ivan Kolotovkin, a journalist and the mastermind behind the exhibition, it is not in any way aimed at promoting cheating among students; rather, it highlights the important problems in the sphere of higher education that need to be discussed.

Kolotovkin says he began collecting cheat sheets in 2010 or so. Still a student then, he was working on a piece for the local media about how students take exams. That was when he learned about various creative ways of cheating and decided to start his collection. His own classmates were among his very first ‘suppliers’, but nowadays his collection is expanding with the help of students and teachers from all over Russia. Here is what he says:

— The exhibition takes place every year during winter break. This is the time when first-year students take their first midterms. Items on display change all the time, because so does the examination process. With the advance of technologies, some kinds of cheat sheets have become extinct, so they can only be viewed at the exhibition. On the whole, cheat sheets have become simpler. Nevertheless, each cheat sheet represents an individual story — a story of a person who had to make it while preparing for exams. It does not necessarily mean that the person was stupid or wanted to find an easy way to pass. Many people perceive cheat sheets primarily as a sort of safety harness, as a talisman that they take with them in order to mitigate agitation. You know that even if you forget everything, you might get a chance to look into your cheat sheet. And this is what helps you calm down and regain composure before entering the exam room.

— Does your exhibition feature any sophisticated items based on modern telecommunication technologies?

— Yes, though it is all pretty straightforward: very small earbuds, mobile phones, tablets, smart watches, etc. Unfortunately, the use of devices eliminates any kind of studying for exams. In the past, students used to write or type their cheat sheets, thus actually learning what they had to learn, but nowadays they simply use the information they find online. People who do this probably don’t study day and night before the exams in an attempt to learn everything.

— Have you ever seen cheat sheets of high artistic merit?

— What has always surprised me most is how some girls can hide cheat sheets under their nails, especially when they manage to hide a response to a whole test question per nail. Actually, I know that is quite effective, because at some HEIs, teachers used to force students to empty their pockets before starting the exams, and that is why female students came up with such a creative solution.

— In your opinion, are cheat sheets still relevant?

— Indeed, cheat sheets are becoming digital and cheating on the whole has become more difficult because of the introduction of the Unified State Exam for secondary school leavers. Still, college applicants and students do find ways

About HERB

Higher Education in Russia and Beyond (HERB) is a quarterly informational journal published by National Research University Higher School of Economics since 2014. HERB is intended to illuminate the transformation process of higher education institutions in Russia and countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The journal seeks to adduce the multiple-aspect opinions about current challenges and trends of regional higher education and give examples of the best local practices. Our audience represents wider international community of scholars and professionals in the field of higher education worldwide. The project is implemented as part of cooperation agreement between Higher School of Economics and Boston College Center for International Higher Education.

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