Factors That Trigger Students Studying at Higher Educational Institutions in Azerbaijan to Involve in Cheating in Exams and Assignments

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Master Thesis

Master of Arts in Educational Management

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June 15, 2022

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ABSTRACT

FACTORS THAT TRIGGER STUDENTS STUDYING AT HIGHER EDUCATIONAL

INSTITUTIONS IN AZERBAIJAN TO INVOLVE IN CHEATING IN EXAMS AND

ASSIGNMENTS

by

Suleyman Suleymanov

This study, based on a qualitative interview approach, aimed at exploring factors triggering students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to engage in cheating in the exams and assignments. Although there are a great deal of measures taken against cheating at higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan still there are many cheating cases among the students. The research study explored the following research questions: What are students' perceptions about cheating? What triggers students studying at Azerbaijani higher educational institutions to cheat in the exams and assignments?

In order to explore the above mentioned research questions students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan were recruited and interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The investigation took place in 2022 and the collected data were coded and later divided into four categories. The methodology and discussion of the study findings with the literature review was also provided in the final sections.

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Statement of the Problem

The goal of the study is to explore factors triggering students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to engage in cheating in the exams and assignments. Cheating is accepted as something totally wrong regardless of its extent, and according to Kohn (2007) "just about everyone agrees that cheating is bad and that we need to take steps to prevent it". The study participants who revealed their cheating experiences are the best examples of the existence of cheating cases in Azerbaijan. As many preventive measures have been taken or policies have been conducted by ADA University for instance, there are still a considerable number of cheating cases among the students (ADA University, 2021). However, review of the current literature could not reveal much research conducted on this topic related to the local context which covers local higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan.

The current international scholarly research on the topic shows that there is a high prevalence rate of cheating in almost all higher educational institutions in the world which leads to the existence of unethical workplace behavior by those students involved in academic dishonesty (Simkin & McLeod, 2010). As research participants indicate the existence of cheating among students studying in Azerbaijan it is already a red alert for administrations to deal with the issue now in order not to suffer from having unethical working environments in the future. Moreover, cheating in the exams is considered as violation of the principles of academic integrity which refers to institutional values for promoting academic honesty (Simkin & McLeod, 2010).

To prevent any kind of misconduct there have to be severe sanctions that have to outweigh possible benefits generated from cheating (McCabe, 2005). For this purpose, honor

codes are applied in many universities around the world including Azerbaijan (ADA University, 2021) that not only requires the students involved in academic misconduct to admit but also provide information about such kind of actions done by other students. The research conducted by McCabe (2005) shows that this kind of preventive mechanisms bolster the integrity culture in academic institutions, however there are still many cheating cases that exist and the respective research study intends to reveal the main motives behind behavior (Glendinning et al. 2019).

There are many research studies conducted in different countries about cheating cases at Universities. A professional investigation done by a prominent researcher McCabe (2005) among 18000 students in 61 schools in the U.S. and Canada revealed that the level of cheating was more than fifty percent, most of whom were students from business schools. Furthermore, it was concluded that creation of academic integrity culture plays a crucial role in prevention of cases regarding academic dishonesty (McCabe, 2005). This finding helps me in considering the culture of academic integrity as one of the main variables and checking to what extent it plays a key role in involvement of students in cheating in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan (Glendinning et al. 2019). The studies also show that there are actually cheating cases among students studying at higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan (Glendinning et al. 2019).

Definition of Important Terms

In this section I will provide definitions of important terms that are used in the research study. When conducting a research study, identifying the term academic integrity is important. In this paper to define academic integrity as "truth-seeking and truth-telling which requires shared commitment to honesty and trust in the academic workplace and the faculty members have responsibilities to preserve this tradition" I refer to McCabe (2004, p.2). The word "cheating" in the research study is defined as misbehavior by students in the exams in order to find answers to

their exam questions by using different ways. The next term that needs to be explained is 'contract cheating' which is defined by Harper (2018) It is defined as occurring 'when a student submits work that has been completed for them by a third party, irrespective of the third party's relationship with the student, and whether they are paid or unpaid'.

Significance

This study is expected to demonstrate remarkable contributions in the form of raising awareness about the existence of cheating cases among local Azerbaijani students, deep understanding of the roots of the problem, and thus assisting the related authorities take effective preventive measures against cheating in advance. Moreover, as preservation of academic integrity in all educational institutions is extremely important, it would be fascinating for administrators of higher educational institutions as well as the faculty members to be aware of the reasons that have led students to become involved in academic dishonesty (McCabe and Trevino, 2012). Prevalence of academic dishonesty, particularly cheating and plagiarism can, to a great extent, lower down the quality of the education and thus harm the reputation of educational institutions, which indicate significance of the problem. Besides, the findings can also draw students' attention to the phenomenon because those who are constantly involved in breach of academic integrity may have never thought about its reasons and to analyze whether it is worth to engage in cheating considering consequences of their behavior.

Research questions:

This study aims to explore two research questions.

- What are students' perceptions about cheating?

- What triggers students studying at Azerbaijani higher educational institutions to cheat in the exams and assignments?

Literature Review

This part of the paper presents literature review of academic integrity and breach of it in various higher educational institutions with different academic cultures. The core objective of the research is to explore overall perceptions of the students regarding cheating and explore the factors that trigger students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to engage in cheating in the exams and assignments. Similarly, the main aim of this literature review is to discuss existing academic literature on the topics of academic integrity and cases regarding involvement of students in cheating in exams and assignments.

Azerbaijani higher educational institutions take preventive measures against academic dishonesty (Glendinning et al. 2019). For instance, for the purposes of preserving key principles of academic integrity ADA University apply Honor Code policy which states that "The University's philosophy is centered on the idea that academic integrity and honesty should be promoted not by the use of sanctions and threats, but rather, by instilling an academic culture that embraces these values in their own right" (ADA University, 2021). Finally, application of all these policies shows the value given to academic integrity and also contributes to prevention of cheating cases in higher educational institutions in the country to a great extent. The research shows that administrations of higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan really care about prevention of cheating by for instance involving students in training in academic writing to avoid plagiarism (Glendinning et al. 2019).

In order to make sure that the reviewed articles have been published within a decade or less I used articles published mostly after 2011. As the main sources database of ADA University, Google Scholar, Jstor, and Ebook Central were used, which have many reliable peer reviewed articles written by prominent authors all around the world. The literature review of the respective research study consists of two parts. The first part mainly presents contemporary literature on academic integrity in various countries. The second part of the literature review will be dedicated to discussion of the reasons that lay behind breach of academic integrity in different higher educational institutions.

Cheating in higher educational institutions has been extensively explored in the western literature and many factors that lead to cheating among students have been listed by different researchers in the field such as Harper, Kisamore, McCabe, and Trevino. The factors such as difficulty of assignments, peers' cheating behavior, lack of appropriate academic integrity culture, and lack of competency in the language of instruction were the most frequently mentioned ones among others (Bernardi et al., 2021; see also Glendinning et al. 2019; Harper et al., 2018). The research studies however were limited to only a small portion of the population, for instance among only business students which potentially limits generalizability of the study. In the following paragraphs I will provide more detailed data review of these findings.

To begin with, geographical proximity is an important element to consider when analyzing cheating cases in higher educational institutions of countries within the same region. Because, the countries located in the same region may have a common past such as a colonial system or ruled by an empire like the Soviet Union. To support this, there is a research project conducted on academic integrity in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Turkey and all these mentioned countries except Turkey were a part of the Union of Soviet Socialist

Republics (USSR). The research project on Academic Integrity in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Turkey revealed that the main reasons leading students to cheat include laziness, easiness of coping and pasting any information, and difficulty of the assignments (Glendinning et al. 2019). There were some other reasons as well stated by the undergraduate students such as easiness of getting higher grades, but these above mentioned were the most commonly used justifications (Glendinning et al. 2019).

Furthermore, among the threats to academic integrity, there is also 'Contract cheating' which is a recently growing phenomenon first coined by Clarke and Lancaster, and unfortunately is emerging as a significant problem globally across all education sectors (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). I have also observed cases regarding contract cheating among the students in the local universities or even once asked to be the third party as stated in the quote above. The researchers such as McCabe and Trevino (2012) mainly see the cause of it in the type of assessment structures and therefore suggest making changes in task constraints. In other words, researchers suggest making such kinds of assignments which for the most part require students' own ideas, their critical thinking, and a distinct way of approaching issues from different perspectives (McCabe & Trevino, 2012). However, according to the reviewed research articles still there is not any particular effective mechanism to deal with this issue (Bernardi et al., 2021; see also Glendinning et al. 2019; Harper et al., 2018). In other research studies it was found that the number and difficulty of the assignments as well as the allocated time for submission of the task also play a great role in occurring instances of general cheating cases. Thus, as the students stated the reasons for the academic dishonesty some portion of the students engage in cheating because either the assignments are boring or the students are overwhelmed (Harper et al., 2018).

A recent study conducted by Bernardi (2021) in the USA among 195 business students in accounting classes revealed that there is a strong relationship between students' cheating behavior regarding minor (quiz), major, and future exams. Thus, knowing other students' engagement in cheating can lead their peers to fall into that track and also cheating in minor examinations can lead to increased cheating cases in more important examinations, which in a way creates a 'cheating chain' or 'cheating begets cheating'. (Bernardi et al., 2021, p. 247-263). Furthermore, this argument is quite convincing because if a single student so called successfully completes his/her cheating in exams without any severe punishment others might be more prone to cheat next time (Bernardi, 2021). Besides, a similar study with the same variable was conducted among students in Australia, China, Ireland, Japan and the USA and the results revealed a high level of similarity in the findings (McCabe and Trevino, 2012).

In addition, similar results in terms of factors triggering students to involve in cheating were visible in a different study which investigated the relationship among academic integrity culture, demographic variables including gender, age, and personality constructs based on the four criteria: frequency of misconduct, suspected misconduct, consideration of misconduct, and reporting cheating by others (Kisamore, 2007). The research study highlighted the role of academic integrity as one of the values in any educational institution in the engagement of students in academic misconduct (Kisamore, 2007). To support this, the concept of social justice developed by McCabe and Trevino (2012) suggests that actually perception of peers' behavior is the best predictor of the academic dishonesty, which indicates that how frequently a student cheats in the exams can shape their peers' intention to involve in cheating (Kisamore et al., 2007, p. 381-394). The findings showed that the variable namely perception of peers' behavior is especially influential when the students engaged in cheating do not get punished and others can

use it as justification for their academic dishonesty behavior (Kisamore et al., 2007, p. 381-394).
Therefore, the culture of academic integrity in an educational institution plays a key role in
formation of students' perception regarding wrongfulness of academic misconduct as well as its
potential consequences. The absence of that kind of culture in an educational institution can lead
the students to engage in academic dishonesty. The research shows that in Azerbaijani higher
educational institutions the type of academic integrity culture which may prevent students from
being involved in cheating is missing (Glendinning et al. 2019).

While analyzing the variables in the research study conducted by McCabe and Trevino it
turned out that in terms of the gender variable there has been more cheating cases among females
rather than males. Furthermore, unlike the research by McCabe who ignored importance of
personality factors,in a different study conducted by Kisamore (2007) both academic integrity
and personality variables were examined in order to come up with clear predictions about
students' perceptions on misconduct.

Moreover, the studies conducted by different authors (Bernardi et al., 2021; see also
Glendinning et al. 2019; Harper et al., 2018) on exploring the phenomenon regarding cheating
shows that there are various factors affecting the percentage of cheating, one of which for
example is gender. In one of the studies done among 172 undergraduate students in chemistry
classes it was found that females are more likely to report cheating cases compared to males
(Simon et al., 2004). The research conducted by Simon (2004) also drew attention to the fairness
of the policies and regulations regarding provision of academic integrity. Because, it was found
that the fairer the policies and regulations are, the more students are inclined to actively
participate in supporting university administration to prevent academic misconduct (Simon et al.,
2004). In this regard the fair policies are those which are based on principles of equality and

equity and all the faculty members are committed to support academic integrity culture in the educational institutions (Simon et al., 2004).

The study on the threats to academic integrity in higher educational institutions in Australia revealed that among all the influential factors English language proficiency is considered to be one of the main determinants of cheating in exams (McCabe and Trevino, 2012). Thus, it was found that those whose English language skills are poor are more likely to engage in cheating because they cannot find any other way to pass the course (Atkinson et al., 2016, p. 197-208). However, this argument is also a little controversial in a way that the university has already accepted those students engaged in cheating with certain language requirements, which is enough to understand and also answer exam questions.

I would have to say that there is not much academic research conducted on the topic of academic integrity in the local context, which indicates the existence of a gap in the literature. Thus, the research study will have more contributions to the literature as well as the professionals working in preserving the culture of academic integrity. While researching I mostly focused on the variables or reasons including perception of peers' behavior, chain of cheating, difficulty of the assignments, laziness, and getting higher grades. The reasons stated by the students in foreign countries are especially interesting, because it is really interesting to identify whether they exist in the local cases.

Methodology

Research paradigm

This research study is intended to understand and interpret the factors that lead the students to be involved in cheating. The research questions that fall under interpretivist, also known as constructivist, paradigm. Honebein (1996, as cited in Adom et al., 2016) defined

constructivism as an approach in which people construct their own understanding and knowledge of different realities based on their experiences and this paradigm is especially applied in the field of humanities and education. The study also investigated how students perceive academic dishonesty, which according to interpretivist paradigm is socially constructed and exists as multiple realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The paradigm as stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) is also appropriate for exploring sensitive issues, such as cheating or plagiarism experiences of students. The research study employed qualitative research design since it focuses on interpretation of textual data as well as experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of participants regarding cheating in exams and assignments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Site

The study was conducted among the students studying in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions located in Baku. The location of the institutions was selected based on the geographical proximity since it is more preferable to meet with the study participants in-person to see their reactions to the interview questions. Moreover, as most of the institutions are located in Baku it would be much easier to reach the target group consisting of students from different academic and social backgrounds.

Participants

When it comes to participants, the study involved 16 students currently studying in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years in higher educational institutions located in Baku. The rationale behind the selection of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year students, they have experienced both online and offline education and are able to make comparisons between the two forms of lesson delivery and exams. from In addition, the interview participants were selected based on their citizenship since the research mainly focuses on academic dishonesty among the local students. For the purposes

of getting more generalizable data the students were selected based on the probabilistic random manner and I did my best to recruit students from most of the higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan.

Sampling

For sampling of the participants, a snowball sampling strategy was employed, through which students were selected according to the predetermined criteria. The students were those with whom I have personal connections and can rely on their honesty in providing reliable data for the research study. This sampling strategy helped me reach to the participants who are information rich regarding the topic of the study and thus can provide more precise data that the research is intended to find (Cresswell, 2012). The researcher recruited the participants by asking the acquaintances based on their consent to participate in the study. It was also undeniable that it can be too challenging to ask the participants to share experiences in cheating because students would shy away from telling the truth. However, the students were more comfortable with their peers since they were ensuring that their names would not be disclosed and coded with pseudonyms. The main criteria for the study participants were that they should had experience in in-class exams, online exams, and take-home assignments.

Interviews

Throughout the study various ways of collecting data including literature review and interview were applied. In order to collect comprehensive data on the research topic students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan were individually interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured in which the interviewer does not use only a predetermined list of questions but rather creates some conditions to have discussions with the interviewees (William, 2015). In semi-structured types of interviews, it would be much easier for the

researcher to get more detailed data because during the interview process some probing questions might arise spontaneously. It is important because the given interview question alone might not be so helpful to get all data from the participant and the interviewer can use some additional questions to make the interviewee use his/her critical thinking and reveal the data needed for the research. In addition, I had conducted one pilot interview before the actual data collection process started and it was quite useful to see how the questions helped to acquire high quality and comprehensive data for the research study. After the pilot interview, I also made some changes to the interview questions to help the interviewees to better understand the questions and answer more straightforwardly to the questions. The sample size for this research study was 16 participants and each interview took around 30 minutes and the total hours of interviews were 8 to 9 hours.

Limitations

The research study also had some limitations that need to be mentioned. Time was the primary limit, which prevented the researcher from having interviews with more students from different higher educational institutions. The next limitation was regarding lack of literature in the local context, absence of which made the study less generalizable.

Delimitations

One of the delimitations of the study was inclusion of only bachelor degree students and excluding all other levels. However, including master students as well would make the research study even more generalizable. In addition, the students studying in secondary special educational institutions were also not included in the investigation due to time constraints.

Trustworthiness

The main aim of providing trustworthiness was to demonstrate to the reader that the research findings are worth to be considered as reliable and valid. The key element in provision of trustworthiness was to employ the most appropriate data collection method which was highly likely to demonstrate the intended research focus and thus to find answers to all pre-determined research questions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In order to evaluate trustworthiness of the qualitative research study several alternatives were applied including credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Credibility - Credibility is considered as an indication of appropriateness, credibility of the research or the extent to which the study findings are convincing for the reader (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In order to ensure credibility, I used multiple strategies including triangulation and member checks.

Triangulation: For the provision of triangulation I used multiple sources of data and multiple methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, I conducted data collection through interviews and I also compared the data acquired from interviews with documents obtained from higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan.

Member checks: For the purposes of achieving internal validity of the research study I applied member checks which created an opportunity for the interview participants to ensure that the transcripts were the best description of their ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this purpose, I introduced the transcripts to interview participants for their confirmation that the information was compatible with what they expressed during the interviews.

Dependability - Dependability refers to consistency between the research findings and the collected data, which measures reliability of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Reliability demonstrates credibility of the research and approves its reliability. If the study was conducted

again by applying the adequate method the findings would be the same (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

In order to ensure dependability of the study I used triangulation and audit trials.

Audit trail - This is the process of keeping record of all steps of the research including how the data was collected, categorized, and analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The audit trail of my research study consisted of a research journal which included information regarding sampling technique, interviews, and documents (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Confirmability - Conformability is about objectivity of the research, which mainly focuses on accuracy of the findings or data provided by study participants (Elo., 2014). In order to ensure confirmability of the research I conducted an audit trail.

Transferability – Transferability, also known as external validity, refers to the extent that the research findings are generalizable enough to be used in other study settings (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In order to ensure transferability of the research study I provided a thick and rich description of the current situation.

Thick and rich descriptions – refers to demonstration of detailed description of experiences, behavior, and the context for the reader that the research findings were applicable in other settings or contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Validity – Validity also refers to accuracy of the research and shows that the research measures what it is supposed to measure (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Data analysis

The main goal of qualitative data analysis was to reveal emerging themes or concepts and find the relation between them by applying appropriate theoretical organizing framework

(Merriam, 2009). In addition, data analysis was considered to be the best interpretation of what the researcher saw, collected, in terms of data, and thought to find an answer to the predetermined research questions (Merriam, 2009). In this case the study was mainly based on the data gathered from interviews with the students and documents. The interviews were conducted in both Azerbaijani and English languages and after the coding process each code was translated into English. The rationale behind selection of language was that in some universities the instruction of language is in English and in others it is in Azerbaijani. The cultural factors, meaning of the words were also taken into account in order to find the best translation of the words or phrases. The interviews were transcribed and later the data was coded and analyzed to find answers to the pre-defined research questions. Along with the interviews the documents regarding the University policies that would support and promote academic honesty were collected from some of the higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan.

After completing all the interviews, they were transcribed and stored in a computer. The names of the respondents were coded with pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of the study participants. Later the data was coded (330) and analyzed to find answers to the pre-defined research questions and the collected data were divided into different categories to produce more detailed findings (Merriam, 2009). In order to ensure safety, the collected data in this case interview transcripts and articles from the literature will be stored both on papers and in electronic devices.

As a part of this research study I interviewed 16 students studying various majors. To protect participant identities their names were changed with pseudo names assigned by me. The study participants are bachelor year students from different higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan. In order to keep the gender, balance the number of participants were selected equally

(8 female and 8 male students). Most of the students had average academic standing and a few of them had excellent academic performance during their studies. In addition, a very small portion of the students, specifically 4 of them, were also taking internships in both public and private sectors related to their majors, which could potentially affect their time dedicated to preparation for regular lessons or exams. Furthermore, some of the individuals also regularly join volunteering activities during international events held in Baku, even if it is during the exam weeks they simultaneously prepare for exams. Since the interviews were taken in both Azerbaijani and English the students' opinions were given in the original language in which they were interviewed. If there is a quotation in Azerbaijani, its translation into English will be provided.

In the table below I have provided detailed information about each participant separately by following the principles of confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 1. Participant information

Ms. Moon	first year student Field of study: Business administration Gender identity: female Intern in a company
Ms. Juli	fourth year student Field of study: English language teaching Gender identity: female Intern in a company

Mr. Gurbanov	Second year student Field of study: Economics Gender identity: male
Mr. Sun	Second year student Field of study: English language teaching Gender identity: male
Mr.Abbasov	second year student Field of study: International relations Gender identity: male Intern in a company
Ms. Aliyeva	Second year student Field of study: State and public relations Gender identity: female
Mr. Jabbarov	Third year student Field of study: Marketing Gender identity: male
Mr. Shahbazov	Fourth year student Field of study: Politics Gender identity: male Internship experience: yes
Ms. Aydan	Second year student Field of study: Engineering Gender identity: female
Ms. Gul	Fourth year student Field of study: Geography Gender identity: female Job experience: yes
Mr. Haydarov	Third year student

	Field of study: Information Technologies Gender identity: male
Ms. Leyla	Fourth year student Field of study: German language teacher Gender identity: female
Ms. Gunel	Third year student Field of study: Marketing Gender identity: female
Mr. Ahmadov	Fourth year student Field of study: Computer engineering Gender identity: male
Ms. Nazrin	Second year student Field of study: Chemistry Gender identity: female
Mr. Abbas	Third year student Field of study: International relations Gender identity: male

Findings

The objective of this research study is to reveal the key factors that trigger students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to be involved in cheating. The research questions that the study is intended to answer are the following:

- What are students' perceptions about cheating?

- What triggers students studying at Azerbaijani higher educational institutions to cheat in the exams and assignments?

This section below summarizes the information collected by means of interviews from students. The gathered data was categorized according to the predefined research questions. Category one and two represent the first and second research questions respectively.

Category #1: Students' perceptions of cheating.

In this category I am going to explain how the students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan perceive cheating in general. Since there are different understandings of cheating I will provide you with various perceptions of cheating as well as the extent to which it is likely to happen at the universities. Therefore, in the very first questions of the interview the study participants were asked to state their understanding regarding academic honesty, dishonesty, and cheating in general. Since there is not a single policy on academic honesty applied in all the higher educational institutions the students have different understanding about this concept. Thus according to the students' perceptions academic honesty is to avoid any kind of cheating as well as plagiarism. Academic dishonesty is to give the answers to other students, or to get the answers from their peers in exams or take-home assignments. Mr. Shahbazov stated:

> From my personal point of view, I think honesty is important when we study at school or university and we have to produce something that should be owned by ourselves. So we do not need to cheat or copy and paste from different works of other authors which will lead to academic dishonesty and eventually destruction of our education system in the end. That is why there should be honesty in education and students have to value academic honesty.

However, not all the students think as such and they have different understanding of academic honesty. Because, according to the majority of the study participants, there have not been organized any kind of activities such as info sessions about academic honesty and dishonesty or any policy accepted at the University level. Even for some students the terms academic honesty and dishonesty (both in Azerbaijani and English) were totally new that they had never heard about. Ms. Juli said:

> For me, I could honestly state to myself that when you are reading you think you're understanding everything that your teacher gives you. For example, at the university our teacher prepares for us a lot of materials, uh, presentation. And for me, honesty is first of all, a thing that we are catching from all the teachers. So because they are doing their best in order to give us knowledge. And when we all listen carefully at the lesson, when we are participating at lesson, it means that we are honest to the teachers, but dishonest, it means that when you are doing something, when you are having fun during the lesson or doing something during the academic period.

This quote suggests that it is quite important to make a distinction between academic honesty and dishonesty. In terms of cheating, almost all of the students stated that they understand how bad it is to steal someone's work and present it from their behalf and it also leads to injustice among the students when they get high grades without putting any effort into studying hard. As stated by Mr. Shahbazov:

> Cheating is also related to stealing intellectual property, because we use someone's ideas, thoughts without mentioning his/her name. Therefore, it is really important to provide references or citations while using materials from an author's book or article or any other document.

This kind of behavior also demotivates students from studying hard and engaging in fair competition with their peers. The students also understand the consequences of cheating in higher educational institutions as damaging the education system of the country and thus resulting in low quality of education. Mr. Gurbanov stated:

İlk öncə onu deyə bilərəm ki, Köçürtmək yaxşı bir şey deyil. Həm bizim gələcəyimizlə bağlı olsun işimizlə bağlı olsun,məsuliyyətimizlə bağlı olsun,yəni, düzgün deyildir.Məsələn,tələbə başqasının məlumatı götürür öz adı vasitəsilə köçürdür və müəllim də buna inanır. Bu digər tələbənin haqqına girmiş olur çünki,bunun üzərində zəhməti yoxdur.Müəllim bunu qəbul edir qiymət yazır.Bu təbii ki,tələbələr arasında münasibətlərə də təsir edir. Çünki, başqa tələbə əziyyət çəkir onu yazır həmin tələbə isə bəhrələnir müəllimə təqdim edir.Bu artıq düzgün deyil. Müəllim tələbəyə inanmalıdır. Mən bir tələbə kimi deyə bilərəm ki,köçürtmək yaxşı bir şey deyil və köçürtmənin sonrakı nəticələri nə ola bilər, köçürtmək savadsızlığa gətirib çıxara bilər. [First of all, I can say that copying is not a good thing. Whether it is related to our future, our work, our responsibilities, that is, it is not right. This is due to the other student taking information from someone and presenting it to the teacher and the teacher accepts it and writes a grade. This, of course, affects the relationship between students. Because another student suffers, he writes it, and that student benefits and presents it to the teacher. This is no longer true. The teacher must believe in the student. As a student, I can say that cheating is not a good thing, and what the consequences of cheating can be is that cheating can lead to illiteracy.]

The above mentioned quote indicates how cheating can lead to injustice among the students and it also affects their future behavior in their workplaces.

Furthermore, according to the students' opinions, cheating is highly likely to happen at most of the higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan, because most of them stated quite a high probability of cheating cases in their respective universities. For the study participants, cheating is understood as taking someone's work or ideas and presenting on their behalf without mentioning the author's name. The main reason why cheating in take-home assignments is so spreaded is the lack of technological advancement provided by the relevant universities. As Ms. Leyla stated:

Təhsil müddəti ərzində mütəmadi olaraq hər semester fərdi araşdırma qabiliyyətini artırmaq üçün verilən sərbəst işləri internetdən olduğu kimi köçürdüb fənn müəlliməmə təqdim etmişəm. Köçürmədən istifadə etmə səbəbim universitetin təmin etdiyi resurs imkanının zəif olması və pedaqoji heyətin texniki bilik səviyyəsinin aşağı olması səbəbi ilə düzgün yoxlama aparılmamasıdır. Nəticə olaraq, doğru yanaşmanın olmadığı və düzgün yoxlamanın aparılmadığını nəzərə alaraq, sərbəst işimi fərdi yazacaq qədər zaman ayırmıram. [During my studies, I regularly copied and submitted to my subject teacher the free assignments given each semester to increase my individual research ability. My main reason for using cheating is that the resources provided by the university are weak and the teaching staff is not properly knowledgeable about the current technologies due to the low level of technical knowledge. As a result, I don't have enough time to write my own work individually, given the lack of the right approach and proper verification.]

In general, cheating is understood differently by the students since each university has established its policy on academic honesty differently. However, it is common among almost all

the students that they do understand that it is something bad and does not help them gain anything good in the end.

Category #2: Factors triggering cheating.

Within this category the study participants were asked to reveal the reasons that triggered them to be involved in cheating in exams or in take-home assignments. As for the categories I grouped them as the following: lack of interest in the subject, lack of time and laziness, and effect of peers' cheating behavior on students, cheating chain, and perspectives on online education. Below there is detailed information about each of the above-mentioned categories.

Lack of interest in subject

Coming to the main factors that trigger students to be involved in cheating in exams and take-home assignments, the students generally stated having less interest in the topic, especially in elective courses. Ms. Aliyeva stated:

Sometimes the lectures are not related to my profession and I think that if I do not take those lessons I do not lose anything regarding the knowledge and that is why I sometimes cheat on those lessons or I get prepared for those lessons only the night before the exam date. For example, a philosophy course is not related to my profession at all but I have to take this course for 6 months which is a waste of time for me. That is why the university has to give us some choices regarding the course selection.

Because, for them those elective courses are not related to their major as such and the students take them only for completing certain credit requirements and thus getting their diploma. Therefore, students think that they will not need those elective courses anyway in their future career since they do not have too many implications for their major and they cheat in the exams and take-home assignments related to those courses specifically. Ms. Juli who studies English language teaching said:

> I highly recommend students not to cheat, because you can also be in teaching positions in the future, so you need to be professional in your sphere. For example, especially in the subjects which are truly connected to our sphere I recommend not to cheat. But in other lessons students may be involved in cheating. For example, in my case I am studying English language teaching but we are also learning medicine lessons, come on, and it is for three times a week and it can be replaced by the English language lessons that medicine. Okay it can be important, but we need exams from these subjects.

All in all, it turns out that students usually do not take the courses that are called elective less relevant to their major so seriously. Since they do not see any importance in learning the materials assigned for those elective courses, they are involved in cheating.

Lack of time and laziness

The further factors include laziness and getting prepared for the exam the night prior to the exam date. Some of the students do not do their weekly readings and preparations and keep everything for the last day and they actually highly emphasized productivity of that day. The participants stated that cheating occurs due to lack of time and laziness in take-home assignments since they keep it for the last time before the deadline. Ms. Moon said:

I feel more productive and motivated on the last day before the deadline and working in a hurry gives me happiness. However, if the assignment is from a subject that is not related to my profession I am immediately involved in heating, like copying information from the internet sources or paraphrasing ready materials shared on the internet.

However, it is not always the case and when they do not manage to cover all the materials before the exam, they inevitably become involved in cheating in order to pass the course.

Effect of peers' cheating behavior on students

According to some students their involvement in cheating is triggered by their peers' cheating behavior. The study participants stated that they see injustice when they put all their efforts into preparing for exams and get the same with or lower grade than others who did not prepare and cheated in the exam. Therefore, some of the students do not see any point in spending time and effort for exam preparations and use some easy ways like cheating. Mr. Gurbanov stated:

Bəli mən onu deyə bilərəm ki,tələbə yoldaşlarım bəzilər imtahandan köçürdürlər və keçirlər. Bu məndə həvəs yaradır belə deyək,onların elədiyi bu hərəkətdən paxıllıq hissi keçirdirəm. Onlar əziyyət çəkmədən imtahanda köçürdüb keçirlərsə, mən niyə də etməyim. Çünki,sadə bir yoldur. [Yes, I can say that some of my fellow students cheat and pass the exams. It makes me want to say that I am jealous of their actions. If they pass the exam without putting any effort, why shouldn't I? Because it's a simple way]

However, another study participant proposed a counter argument opposite to what Mr. Gurbanov said by stating that her peers' cheating behavior does not affect or even trigger her to be involved in cheating at all. Ms. Aliyeva said:

I think no, because I also saw cheating cases at school but it did not affect my behavior. It does not motivate me at all. I think everyone has a free will and we have to take it for ourselves. So it depends only on me and my instructors.

Although the study participants had contradicting statements in general, peers' cheating behavior is highly likely to affect a student's behavior in cheating.

Cheating Chain

From another point of view, the students are also involved in cheating because they have "successfully" completed their previous cheating behavior in the past without getting any kind of severe punishments from the University administration. With this in mind, the participants stated that they sometimes cheat due to their past experiences in cheating, which in a way creates a cheating chain in a student's academic period and it may eventually become a habit. Ms. Moon stated:

Actually. Yes, I didn't mention that, but when you pass one exam by cheating, you kind of feel that yes, I can do it. It kind of boosts your confidence, but like in that bad way, confidence. And in that case, he says, okay, if I haven't done it before I can do it, now I know the strategy, I know what to do. I have to be really attentive and I will solve this problem. And it's kind of, yeah. can trigger you. It's kinda like a chain. If you do it one time, you continue, continue doing that until the time when someone like let's say, um, kind of someone tells you that it's wrong, or maybe it can be your teacher.

This argument is pretty much related to the previous one in a way that both of them trigger students to be involved in cheating. Cheating among the group mates creates cheating

chain in which a student involved in cheating in an exam or take-home assignment he/she is highly likely to continue repeating the same behavior in the future exams or assignments as well.

Perspectives on online education

When it comes to online education the students had positive as well as negative opinions in the sense that in online education it is much easier to cheat and get high grades due to lack of control from the administration and also during online education it is difficult to learn and join lessons regularly due to poor internet connections. Ms. Moon stated:

> There is a big difference between two types of education systems, because I have seen that during online education everyone got an A from lessons and got scholarship, however, this year when the lessons as well as exams are traditional the students only try to get C or D or even just try to pass the course. So the difference is huge. Everyone probably has one computer and one phone and the teachers cannot control you and prevent cheating. However, in some other universities, during the online exams the students are observed with some cameras and they have no access to the internet, however, even in those situations I know students who do cheating very well. So all in all, in online education it is much easier to cheat and much harder to control.

Category #3: Factors preventing students from cheating.

Within this category the perspectives of study participants about the reasons preventing students from cheating were explored. In the interview, the individuals were kindly asked to provide factors including the role of a teacher-student relationship which was comprehensively described below.

Role of teacher-student relationships

The research participants were also included those who have not cheated either in exams or take-home assignments and their perspectives have been taken into account. Thus, these students' main reasons for deviating from cheating is their relationship with the relevant course instructor. In the case of having a friendly relationship by building mutual trust and respect the students see cheating as shame for themselves and do not involve themselves in cheating at all, even if they get low grades at the end. As stated by Ms. Leyla:

> Məncə, tələbələrin dərs və ya ev tapşırıqlarını köçürmələrində müəllimlə olan münasibətlərinin xüsusi təsiri var. Məsələn, mən və ya qrup yoldaşım xüsusi hörmət və diqqət ilə yanaşdığımız müəllimlərimizin dərsinə həmişə hazırlıqlı oluruq və kənar vasitələrdən istifadə etmirik. Çünki, özümə ideal hesab etdiyim müəllim digər vasitələr ilə köçürdüyümü başa düşərsə, aramızdakı yaxın münasibətin korlanmasından çəkinirəm. [In my opinion, students' relationship with the teacher has a special effect on the transfer of lessons or homework. For example, my classmate and I are always prepared for the lessons of our teachers, which we treat with special respect and attention, and we do not use external tools. Because if the teacher, whom I consider ideal, understands that I have transferred by other means, I am afraid of spoiling the close relationship between us.]

On the other hand, some students do not get involved in cheating in exams and take-home assignments because they know that it is academic dishonesty and what are the possible consequences including punishments like failing from the course, getting warnings or even expelled from the university. The recruited individuals were also kindly asked to provide their opinion on what can support academic honesty in the educational institutions. To answer this question, some of the participants, although they had experience in cheating, touched upon a

very interesting point regarding the relationship between teacher and student. Mr. Gurbanov stated:

Mən ilk öncə müəllimlə tələbə arasında görürəm bu dürüstlüyü. O deməkdir ki, müəllimlə tələbə arasında dostluq münasibəti və bunlar arasında yaranan dürüstlük akademik dürüstlüktür.Yəni, onlar arasinda dostluq, aralarında heç vaxt yalan olmuyacaq və ya loru dildə desək heçbir hiylə,kələkbazlıq olmayacaq. Tələbə müəllimin dərsinə məsuliyyətlə çalışacaq. [I first see this honesty between teacher and student. It means that the friendship between teacher and student and the honesty that arises between them is academic honesty. That is, due to the friendship between them the students will never lie or, in other words there will be no trickery. The student will work responsibly on the teacher's lesson]

Mr. Gurbanov further continued about importance of relationship between students and teachers in building academic honesty in the educational institutions:

Sonra, akademik dürüstlüyə gətirib çıxardan amil ola bilər ki, cəza tədbirləri. Rəhbərlik tərəfindən müəllim tərəfindən tətbiq edilən cəzalar artdıqca,tələbədə müəllimə qarşı yalanı olmayacaqdır. Ən əsası tələbənin vicdanı,yəni,tələbənin vicdanından çox şey asılıdır.Vicdan olsa müəllimə qarşı hiçbir yalanı olmayacaq. Bu da ona gətirib cixaracaq ki,akademik dürüstlükdə səhv olmayacaq.Bir tərəfdəndə deyə bilərik ki,cəza tədbirləri qısa müddətli olur.Ancaq müəllim ilə tələbə arasındakı dürüstlük uzun müddətli,daha gözəldir,yaxşıdır.Həm təhsilimizlə bağlı, həm də münasibətlərimizlə bağlı. [Then, punitive measures may be a factor leading to academic integrity. As the penalties imposed by the administration by the teachers increase, the students will not lie to their teachers.

The most important thing is the student's conscience, students' involvement in cheating depends on their conscience a lot. If there is a conscience, there will be no lies against the teacher. This will lead to academic dishonesty. It is also true to say that the punitive measures are for the short term but the honest relationship between student and teacher is long-term, more beautiful, and much better.]

However, it is not the case in every higher educational institution in Azerbaijan since only some of them clearly deliver the policy provisions on academic honesty in general and the rules that students are expected to follow.

Category #4: Preventive measures against cheating

After getting data about factors that trigger or prevent students from being involved in cheating the measures taken by the universities against cheating cases were explored. Because, it shows the attitude of the respective universities to academic integrity as well as honesty. This category revealed that there is actually a lack of measures taken against cheating and it is explained in more detail in the next paragraphs.

Lack of measures taken against cheating

Besides, lack of measures taken by the university administration against cheating cases also creates a kind of favorable conditions for those who are potential students to cheat in exams or take-home assignments. On the other hand, students sometimes cheat because they do not fully understand what cheating is, how it is related to academic dishonesty, and what are the possible consequences including punishments. During the interviews it was revealed by the individuals that the root cause of the above-mentioned issues is having a lack of policy provisions about cheating or less effective delivery of rules and regulations set by the university

administration. The university administration should inform all the students starting from the very first day of their enrollment about the codes of conduct including policies on academic honesty to which they have to adhere throughout their academic years. If all the policies are clearly communicated with the students it will be much clearer what are the rules and how the students are expected to behave. For this purpose, the university instructors and professors have to be involved in the process since they are the ones who are in indirect communication with the students and can effectively shape their behavior in accordance with the university regulations. Because, while analyzing the acquired data from interviews I found out that most of the students' experiences in cheating is highly triggered by the lack of preventive mechanisms by the universities against cheating. When it comes to cheating in take-home assignments the main source of students' involvement in the process is that they feel more comfortable while engaging in cheating because without special software it is too difficult as well as time consuming to catch similarities among the students' papers or to check plagiarism. Ms. Aydan stated:

> If you are involved in cheating during the exam the observers will warn you and tell you that just go out from the exam room and your result will not be considered. This is the only policy in our university against cheatings cases.

As it was stated by the study participants the policies about academic integrity and academic honesty is not clearly communicated and therefore the students are not fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. The punishments applied in case of the breach of academic honesty seem to be clear, but still the students do not understand the value of academic honesty and why it should be preserved.

Students' Cheating Behavior Model

lack of interest in the enrolled courses

lack of time and laziness

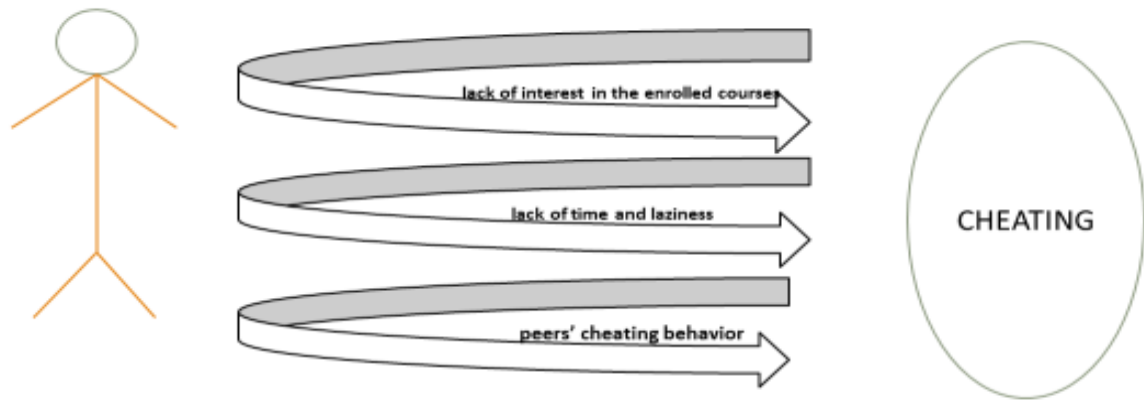peers' cheating behavior

CHEATING

Table. 2

The table. 2 given above visually illustrates the factors that study participants stated in

the interviews, which trigger them to be involved in cheating in exams and take-home

assignments. In the table there is a student and the circle illustrate breach of academic honesty

and the arrows are the factors including lack of interest in the enrolled courses, lack of time and

laziness, and peers' cheating behavior. The above-mentioned factors are the most frequently

mentioned ones and they are followed by arrows to illustrate what exactly triggers students to be

involved in cheating.

Discussion

In this section of the paper the study findings and the literature review of the topic will be

discussed in order to explore how they are related or fit together, what are the new research

results and why they are important. The factors that trigger the students' intentions to involve in cheating usually include lack of interest in the topic or the course itself, laziness, fear of failing, and getting the semester scholarships. When it comes to the factors that students stated such as unrelated courses or lack of interest in the topic, the students' behavior falls under the principles of rationalization theory (Van Bavel et al., 2019). In the rationalization theory when people are involved in something wrong, they try to rationalize their behavior by concocting their beliefs or arguments (Van Bavel et al., 2019). In other words, according to the rationalization theory "if you believe that a man threatens your life, if you want to live, and if you think he can only be stopped with a bullet, then it is rational to shoot him". It means that first you do the action and then you state your desires to rationalize your behavior (Van Bavel et al., 2019). In terms of students' involvement in cheating in exams or take-home assignments this theory is very much related and provides the best explanation of students' behavior. Thus, many of the study participants stated that their involvement in cheating is for the most part due to their lack of interest in the assignment or the enrolled courses are not related to their majors at all. This is purely a way of rationalizing their cheating behavior, because even if there is lack of interest in the assignment, cheating is still something bad and academically dishonest behavior. However, still students through rationalization theory bring up several arguments to in a way rationalize their behavior and present themselves as rightful.

In addition, although contract cheating is emerging as a significant problem globally across all education sectors (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006) the findings of this research showed no evidence regarding this type of cheating. Because, while the students were asked about their cheating behavior in terms of the take-home assignments there were not any single answer regarding the existence of it and they had never tried contract cheating during their academic life.

Interestingly the study participants revealed some information regarding their involvement in cheating or plagiarism in take-home assignments, however it is only about taking information from internet sources and the papers are written by themselves not by a third party.

Furthermore, the research findings confirmed that actually cheating in minor examinations can lead to increased cheating cases in more future examinations, which in a way creates a 'cheating chain'. (Bernardi et al., 2021, p. 247-263). The individuals stated that the so-called successful involvement of a student in midterm exam, for instance, can most probably lead to continuation of this behavior in the final exam as well. However, in terms of the argument that if a student is involved in cheating with high frequency in the exams it can shape his/her peers' intention to involve in cheating (Kisamore et al., 2007, p. 381-394) the study participants stated an opposite argument and denied the effect of their peers' cheating behavior in shaping their intention. Only some of the students agreed with this argument and the rest said the opposite, that their peers' cheating behavior is unlikely to have an independent effect on their intention to be involved in cheating in the further exams or take-home assignments.

Implications

In the subsections below I present the recommendations based on the findings of this study. The research findings have implications for research and practice.

Implications for practice

Implications for practice include suggestions for teachers and students. The study participants suggested for teachers not to overload the students with a lot of home assignments which take a lot of time and effort and eventually some students inevitably get involved in

cheating. The teachers are also suggested to construct the questions both in exams and take home assignments in a way that requires students' opinions, thoughts as well as their critical thinking on the given topic.

In terms of recommendations for students the participants suggested the students not to be involved in cheating at all. This finding is quite interesting, because those who have cheating experience suggest not to cheat and already understand the long term negative implications of this behavior. All in all, students are not recommended to be involved in cheating due to its potential negative consequences.

Implications for research

In terms of further research studies, it is recommended to explore students' cheating behavior at schools, because this kind of behavior is usually formulated at the school level. In addition, the concept of academic honesty is for the first time introduced and clearly communicated to students at schools and they later in their future studies might make modifications to their understanding.

Implications for Institutions

One of the implications for the institutions is about students' perception of academic honesty and cheating in general. Because, in order to avoid students from being involved in cheating, first of all they have to understand what it is, why it is bad, and what are the consequences in case of doing it. This research study can help the institutions to a great extent to formulate their policies in a way that would promote academic honesty among the students. Secondly, with the help of this investigation the university administrations can also understand the factors that trigger students to be involved in cheating. For instance, if the students are involved in cheating due to

lack of interest in the assignment or if the courses are not relevant to his/her major the institutions can work on the curricula to make some modifications regarding the program of study.

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Factors That Trigger Students Studying at Higher Educational Institutions in Azerbaijan to Involve in Cheating in Exams and Assignments

Consent Letter

Dear Participant:

Through this letter you are kindly invited to take part in a semi-structured interview to conduct a study on the topic of factors that trigger students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to engage in cheating in the exams and assignments. Your ideas, experiences, and perceptions are extremely valuable for data creation regarding the factors that lie behind the students' intention in cheating in exams and assignments. The study in question will assist the educators and even the administrations of higher educational institutions to understand the students' misbehavior and take proactive measures to prevent such cases. The study: factors that trigger students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to engage in cheating in the exams and assignments is conducted by Suleyman Suleymanov, under the supervision of Dr.

Jeyran Aghayeva. The interview sessions will take about one hour of your time depending on the length of your responses.

The recruitment process of the study participants will completely be on a voluntary basis which means that you can refuse to answer the questions that you do not feel comfortable with and you can also withdraw from participating in the study at any point until the data analysis process is started. For the purposes of keeping confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants your names, surnames or any other information identifying you will be removed in the data analysis process. After collecting the information from interviews the data will be coded and categorized and will be used for purposes of the study.

All the tools will be employed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and eliminate any kind of potential risks. Participation of the individuals is absolutely voluntary and their rights will be preserved based on the Law. Taking part in this study will help the participants share their perceptions, experiences, and thus contribute to the knowledge creation process. After conducting the interviews, the individuals will be provided with special gift cards for appreciation of their time and effort.

In case you have any questions regarding the study you are involved in, please contact Dr. Jeyran Aghayeva, Assistant Professor of School of Education Management, Room D310, ADA University, by phone at 408 or email at jaghayeva@ada.edu.az.

Thank you for participating!

I voluntarily consent my participation in the study and agree for audio-recording of my voice as well as utilization of my responses in the data analysis process.

Signature_____   Date_____

Name (Printed)_____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Introduction: The researcher will give overall information about the research study and its main purpose. Then background information about the researcher will be provided to the interviewee.

Purpose: The researcher will state the purpose of the study which is to reveal the reasons that trigger students studying in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan to engage in cheating in the exams and assignments.

Procedures: The researcher will explain to the interviewee the interview procedures which include asking the open-ended questions. The interviewee can choose which questions to answer or not to answer at all and the interview will take approximately 30 minutes and it will be recorded based on the interviewee's consent. The interviewee's name will be coded by certain numbers in order to keep the anonymity and confidentiality.

Consent: Before starting the interview, the interview participant will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm his/her voluntary participation in the study and also ensure that the interviewee is comfortable to share the information.

Dialogue:

1. Could you please introduce yourself and your academic and personal background?
2. How do you understand academic honesty and dishonesty? What does it mean to you?

3. How do you understand cheating and what prevents you from getting involved in it? What are some things that would support academic honesty?
4. To what extent is cheating likely to happen at the University you study and have you ever done so?
5. How would you evaluate your academic performance?
6. Do you cheat more in the exams or in taking home assignments?
7. What are some factors that may trigger your intention to be involved in cheating?
8. Which of the reasons you mentioned were the most motivating factor for you to cheat?
9. Are there more cheating cases among your group mates? If yes, have you ever been motivated by their cheating behavior and how?
10. Could it be true to say that cheating begets cheating? Or Cheating among your group mates makes a cheating chain?
11. What about your cheating behavior among different exams like midterm, final, home assignments or even among the small quizzes? Could it be possible that your "successful" involvement in one exam or in taking home assignment may trigger you to do cheating in other upcoming exams or assignments as well?
12. Could you please describe the measures taken by the University administration on how to reduce/prevent academic dishonesty?
13. How did online education during the pandemic affect the frequency of cheating cases? And Why?
14. Do you want to share anything else or make suggestions for teachers or students?

Conclusion: At the end of the interview the interviewee will be asked whether his/her has any question and thank them for their participation in the research.

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