



## **CONSENT OR OPPOSITION - STUDENTS IN THE FACE OF CHEATING AND BUYING SCIENTIFIC WORKS**

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### **Abstract:**

Making an access to universities in Poland common, as well as a massive development of non-public universities have resulted in an increase in the number of students and universities of non-established position. As a result, not only did the quality of education decrease, but also the development of such pathologies as cheating or plagiarism has been observed, which was fostered by the development of the Internet and digital technologies.

Our studies conducted at the turn of 2015 and 2016 involved 1,000 students. The research results revealed the phenomenon of relativizing the approach to pass the subject. The less important the subject is in the students' opinion the greater the permission to pass it 'by shortcuts' by cheating or buying the final examination papers. In the second stage 45 in-depth interviews were conducted, where students were also asked about the experience of 'cheating the society' in the economic field.

**Keywords:** academic ethics, honour code, cheating.

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### **1. Introduction**

Until recently, higher education in Poland was perceived as a rare good, and its acquisition could actually be considered an educational success. The last dozen or so years are primarily the dissemination of access to universities, as well as the massive development of non-public universities. In Poland in November 2015 there were 1 million 405 thousand of students in almost 450 universities. However, the rapid increase in the number of students and universities of uncharted position was

conducive to lowering the quality of education, as well as several new pathologies that affected the entire academic community. We mean above all the phenomenon of plagiarism, commissioning the writing of scientific works for remuneration, as well as searching for places where, at a faster pace and without much difficulty, you can obtain a scientific title. In other words, in the process of cheating the public equally participated students and authorities (examples in the full text of the article). As lecturers, we also collided with a generational change, undoubtedly influenced by the progress of digital technologies. So, the ways of cheating and the practice of copying essays and projects from the Internet have come to a higher level. In addition, anti-plagiarism systems were still in their infancy, and even when they appeared at universities, they were used in a small percentage.

Among other things, these issues prompted us to look systematically at the phenomenon of 'shortcuts to the target', which Robert Merton would call the weakening of social control factors. Following Merton's thoughts, we felt that we are dealing with a cultural weakening of institutional norms where permission to reach a shortcut has become the norm, and cheating is no longer treated as an offense, but only as a commonly accepted (by students) competence. We assume, however, that this was also influenced by the experience of primary and secondary schools where, as research shows, education contributed to dishonesty in education. The solution is not even to create academic honour codes. Compliance with the Code (which principles each student signed voluntarily) was supposed to shape moral attitudes that stigmatize cheating, buying essays and projects, and even unjustified receiving a positive grade for the effect of group work in which the student did nothing. The example of Stanford University shows that the idea of the Code itself is not enough without social control and a penalty system. The conclusion is that the habit of individuals to be subject to control does not guarantee that after withdrawal from the control system students will want to observe ethical principles themselves. One precedent to reach the shortcuts immediately triggers

the feeling that you are a loser and it may have been better to cheat or buy a work than to do it yourself.

Every human action results from the inside premises, inducing a human to choose the goals and ways to achieve them, according to their will. "Only a rational being has the ability to act in accordance with the concept of laws, that is according to principles; in other words, only a rational being has a will." (Kant, 1971, p. 38). A good will is the central category of Immanuel Kant's ethical system.

Is there still room for ethics in a globalized world? - Bauman (2007) asked more than a decade ago. Today, this question is not only current but also requires a deeper reflection. The global world for Bauman means a new disorder of the world. Disorder, but not chaos.

The aim of this publication is to show examples of lowering academic norms by students' acquiescence to deviant behaviours of their colleagues.

The publication hypothesizes that the tendency to a deviant behaviour is strengthened by rewarding informally those who have managed to deceive the system (to cheat or to buy a work, to commit plagiarism). The prize, however, is not recognition, but the very fact that the participants of the race for higher education are not credited with the name of 'losers'. Although it is not widely accepted, the students' consent to such an unfair behaviour in a certain sense makes them accustomed to lying and manipulation, considering them to be universally acceptable, according to the principle that 'everyone does that'. In other words, if you have not been caught, it means nothing has happened.

In 1970, Richard Christie and Florence Geis from Columbia University invented a game, based on the book "Prince" by Machiavelli, in the form of a survey that was to test the abilities useful in gaining and exercising power. The multi-segment test includes, among other things, the sentence: "A significant difference between criminals and other people is that criminals are stupid enough to let themselves be caught" (Riklin, 2000, pp. 13-14). The person with the highest number of points approached the ideal of the typical manipulator. In this research, a theology student won. According to the authors, the factor influencing the

tendency to manipulate is not the study field direction, but the universal consent to fraud and manipulate.

The idea of examining the phenomenon of universal acquiescence to dishonesty was born after meetings with graduates represented by the authors of the university, when almost every group came up with the statement “only ‘losers’ did not cheat”. A Polish historian Władysław Bartoszewski often repeated in his speeches: “It is worth being honest, although it does not always repay. It repays to be dishonest, but it is not worth it.” This very statement was most often cited in the media shortly after his death, i.e. on days between 24 March and 5 May 2015. In the period analysed by Media Press Service, the quotation appeared in as many as 48 publications.

Bartoszewski’s statement, though ethically lofty, seems not to be reflected in the attitudes of contemporary youth of the so-called “Western civilization”. The documentary entitled “The Truth About Cheating” presents the results of the research showing that at least 75% of students cheat while studying in junior high and high schools. The authors of the document argue that many of them have continued this practice during their university studies. There is also a thesis that those who have cheated at school, cheat also in everyday life. What’s more, it is consistent with the contemporary social model, in which honesty is regarded as a source of embarrassment and an evidence of awkwardness, while cuteness and shrewdness cunning are considered as advantages.

However, the problem of downloading is not new, because already in the 1920s, renowned universities tried to deal with it. The solution was proposed by the students at one of the best universities in the world at Stanford. They created the Code of Honour, which was designed to draw students’ attention to the problem of acquiescence to unfair academic practices. The compliance with the Code (which principles each student signed voluntarily) was supposed to shape moral attitudes that stigmatize cheating, buying work, commissioning the third party to implement projects, and even unjustified receiving a positive grade for the results of group work in which the student did not contribute at all. For many decades, the Code operated

without any failures, until almost 100 years after its introduction, Stanford lecturers noticed a sharp increase in the number of students caught on cheating, and on some particular subjects. As a result, the Provost of Stanford appealed to reverse to the ideas contained in the Code. According to Etchemendy, the Provost, “young people do not see the boundary between independent and collective work. They also do not understand when and under what conditions the use of another people’s work is permissible and when it is excluded” (Kazimierczuk, 2015).

The diagnosis of the problem or the phenomenon scale has also been examined by Polish universities. At the University of Nicolaus Copernicus in Torun in 2013, the research on cheating and plagiarizing was carried out. Over half a thousand students took part in the study, and the authors of the report explain the widespread cheating by the imperfect procedures of responding to such behaviour, and by an insufficient attention which is paid to the issue of unreliable and dishonest actions (Bielska & Hofman, 2013). Also, at the AGH University of Science and Technology in Cracow, the MA thesis was defended, in which the author analysed the problem of cheating among students. The author states that this problem will not disappear until it breaks with “a convenient explanation that cheating is an inseparable and inevitable element of the Polish educational reality” (Adamus, 2011, p. 123).

In an academic environment, as well as in any public and business organization, legal standards should prevail, which in turn should be in line with ethical standards (Jørgensen & Boje, 2010), (Palidauskaite et al., 2010), (Tauginienė, Jurkevičius, 2017b). The educational system should be based on moral and ethical values (Bieliauskaitė, 2013). Nevertheless, there are cases in which a relationship between ethical and legal standards is insufficient and disproportionate (Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017b). Universities should therefore make greater efforts to combine academic values with teaching and learning activities (Tauginienė, 2016). The basic value of teaching and learning should be academic integrity; however, numerous studies indicate a significant number of cases of students’ academic dishonesty (Bieliauskaitė, 2014).

It can be stated that it is well known that students have cheated and are still cheating, have bought and are still buying works, commissioned others to perform tasks, committed plagiarisms etc. (Glendinning, 2014), (Jereb et al., 2018), (Orim et al., 2013), (Rets & Ilya, 2018), (Rosol & Cyphert, 2018), (Selemani et al., 2018), (Schneider et al., 2018). Students try to get credits for various projects and good grades, engaging 'external help' to get an unfair advantage (Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017a). In the view of the above, the authors decided to investigate the issue of dishonesty in the academic environment from a different perspective.

According to Ashworth et al., (1997), a student-oriented look at cheating and plagiarism can greatly help academics in their efforts to hand down the appropriate ethical standards and moral values. Therefore, the goal of our research was to find the answer to the question of how far the acquiescence to dishonesty has been anchored and to what extent we are contributing to the perpetuation of negative attitudes. The fact that students have been cheating and are still cheating is not new, but so far it has been mostly individual acts. Today, they form a cooperative which aim is to minimize the effort during the exam. To work on cheating lecturers, they harnessed modern technologies and the fight is taking on more and more the form of a strategic game based on military jargon, where targets are set, actions are carried out and losses are estimated. And what about morality, where Emanuel Kant (2010), who declaims the starry sky above me and the moral law within me? According to professor Janusz Mucha, students do not want to learn about ethics and philosophy (at least those who study science). Instead of moral laws, they prefer to learn about the second hammer which they will use to hammer nails.

## **2. Material and methods of research**

In order to verify the way of thinking of today's students and to examine their level of tolerance towards unfair practices, a research questionnaire was prepared. The study was conducted on a group of 1000 students, who were presented with 14 statements to which they responded by

selecting the answer in the 5-point Likert scale: I definitely agree, I rather agree, I have no opinion, I rather disagree, and I strongly disagree. The study was conducted on a random sample of students taking into account such variables as gender, the field of study and a year of study. However, no significant correlation was captured, therefore the results represent the general characteristics of the studied subject. However, the obtained results are so interesting that it is planned to continue the research not only applying the statistical method, but also based on qualitative methods, such as individual in-depth interviews and group interviews. In the second stage 45 in-depth interviews were conducted, where students were also asked about the experience of 'cheating the society' in the economic field.

### **3. Research results**

The collected data show that 35% of students think that cheating on the exam is acceptable, the most important thing is not to be caught. But when we add that it concerns a less important (in their opinion) subject, cheating is accepted only by 40% of students. The same is true with a permission to buy works or a commission to write projects. Although only 10% of students think that such behaviour is acceptable, if we add that it concerns a less important subject, the consent to such a practice increases to 16%. It should be taken into account that students come to university with a determined attitude of no severe consequences in the case of achieving goals 'cutting corners'. In high school, the grade for cheating was always possible to be changed by retaking a test, hence the calculation of profit or loss and small consequences was conducive to risk taking, preserving the 'it may come off' attitude.

52% of respondents believe that copying the content from the Internet without mentioning the name of the author or the name of the page is a common practice. No wonder they do it, they do not want to be considered as 'a loser' who has worked harder than others. Almost half of respondents do not like teamwork, but not because they cannot work in a group, but because of the lack of proper

external supervision over the work of individual team members. 42% of respondents think that there will always be someone who does nothing and be given the same grade as all the other members of the team. It means that they are not assertive and are not able to mobilize their colleagues to work. Although this is not a rule, of course, such a percentage results should give food for thought to those who set a team work which is to be assessed.

However, it is optimistic that 58% of students do not agree with the statement that in most cases it is better to prepare materials for cheating than to learn. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that they do not affect whether someone is successful in their attempts to cheat or not.

In the second, in-depth study, 45 individual interviews were conducted, which results show clearly that honesty is measured by students also by the effectiveness of procedures. For example, the respondents believe that a fairly conducted exam is the one during which everyone was equally prevented from cheating. This does not apply to the content aspect of evaluating the written work, but to following the procedures during the examination. It is also worth noting that 41% of respondents think that it is worth introducing the Code of Honour, but it should be made by students themselves, and as shown by the example from Stanford, subsequent generations should be involved in the creation of the Code of Honour, even if they reach similar conclusions. Perhaps then, during the moral law exam, students, instead of taking attempts of strategical cheating, will attempt to understand the subject independently. There is a strong foundation for this, because as many as 87% of respondents think that honesty depends on upbringing and is developed at home.

In-depth interviews, conducted on another group of students who did not participate in the quantitative study, describe examples of 'innovative' (applying the categories of Robert Merton, (2002, pp. 206-217) methods of reaching the goal. The aim of the study was to indicate the conditions in which the violation of the social code is a 'normal' and even expected response. Merton was convinced that if it was possible to locate groups particularly prone to pressure and undertaking actions incompatible with the accepted



patterns of behaviour, and they do not prove the psychological abnormality of a group or an individual, but they are only an indicator of the effectiveness of social control measures aimed at maintaining social and culturally accepted structure standards (Merton, 2002, pp. 198-199).

Observations show that examples can be found in many areas of life, ranging from the sale of outdated products in stores to the sale of second-hand cars at the dealers'. Andrzej Szahaj (2014, p. 176) believes that nowadays "particularly painful is forcing young people to lie and to manipulate people in order to cheat clients". Some examples were provided by our respondents. The first situation concerns the mobile network, well-known in Poland. A telemarketer calls a potential customer with the proposal to buy a tablet with the Internet access. The whole offer is arranged in such a way that a customer would be convinced that the contract for providing the Internet and a tablet would be valid for two years. A customer agrees with the conditions and without reading the contract, with a part written in small print, confirms accepting the offer. The telephone offer was "a tablet for 50 PLN a month and the Internet for two years". However, a small detail was omitted, which was the information that the repayment of the device will last 4 years. After two years, the customer makes a complaint, because he still gets bills, while he no longer has the Internet access, and the tablet is worn out. In response, he is told that he is not the only one who "has misunderstood the terms of the contract." He has no choice but to pay for another two years.

The other example is the manipulation applied while selling flats in the new 'ecological' housing estate. Everything was beautifully described on area development plans. Despite the high price of a square meter, customers were glad at the beginning as they focused on details such as water cascades, green terraces, etc. However, in the very centre of the estate, six-storey steel and glass buildings were built, with the lights glowing till late hours, and illuminating the area with an artificial white light. Unfortunately, residents cannot do anything, because the plans clearly stated that the housing estate centre will be

designated for the park. However, no one noticed that it was supposed to be a technology park.

Young people learn not only the art of manipulation, but also get used to impunity. Large corporations are supported by groups of legal advisors who do not give any hope for settling disputable issues in favour of the customer who feels disadvantaged and cheated. In addition to these particular examples, there are situations that can be included in certain categories. Among them the lack of legal support during work recruitment was mentioned by the respondents. According to them, they are often asked to prepare for the interview a ready-made projects, for example marketing and sales projects. Even if the candidate is not offered a job, it happens their ideas and projects are accepted in a certain way. However, they cannot prove it and the only thing they are left with is a greater caution when trying to find a job again.

The authors' observations show an interesting fact that the older the respondent (more or less 35 years old) the more critical opinions concerning the younger generation. The respondents suggest that the younger generation is more 'spoiled' and more unreflective than they are themselves. However, in-depth interviews show that not only the younger are seen as more likely to lie and to manipulate, but also their own entire generation is regarded as creating 'tailor-made lies'. This is confirmed by scientists' observations. Corruption of young people is done on a large scale and has assumed a systemic character today. However, as Szahaj notes, "it does not mean that people have become morally worse nowadays than they were before", but that the civil society institutions do not provide mechanisms of controlling, stigmatizing and forcing to follow the honour moral principles. It is also believed that a remedy for healing is a systemic (legislative) action, thanks to which fraud and dishonesty will not be profitable any more (Szahaj, 2014, p. 177).

#### **4. Summary and conclusions**

On the basis of the conducted research it can be concluded that:

1. Dishonesty becomes not only a virtue, but also a custom that dangerously blurs the boundaries between what is moral and what is immoral, and it is getting more and more difficult, also for students, to see something reprehensible about it.
2. Unfair activities cannot be eradicated only by a set of penalties and sanctions.
3. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be done or nothing should be done. Not only on the basis of the authors' beliefs, but also basing on the students' answers, it can be stated that there is still room for ethics in the globalized world and the values highly regarded by the previously quoted professor Bartoszewski - however, pupils and students should be involved in the activities developing the attitude of being honest is a valuable advantage.

The indicated state of affairs has at least several reasons:

- getting used to cheating during the previous stage of education,
- new technologies facilitating cheating,
- lack of effective control,
- the fall of authority figures.

In the morning news of the Third Polish Radio Program (07/05/2015) the director of the Central Examination Board admitted that he has some information about the practices of high school graduates who – during their oral exam - invent the contents of books that do not exist and the examiners cannot check it during the exam. The report was supplemented with the statement of one of the graduates, who confirms that she also heard about such cases. A few years ago, one of the authors of this study found the title of an essay which had been just set at an online auction, where the student issued an offer of writing a text for the price of PLN 99 (20 Euro).

It also revealed a case where a group that passed the test in the form of a test sent out a list of responses to smartphones using Bluetooth technology. The effect was that before the lecturer handed out all the tests, the last

rows were filled with already completed sheets and with a very good result.

There was also a case when a group taking an exam in the form of a test sent out a list of answers using smartphones and Bluetooth technology. The effect was that before the lecturer handed out all the copies of the test, the first rows of students had already had their sheets completed and they had done it with a very good result.

Taking into account the conducted research and the events described above, several questions should be asked. Where is the problem? Where did the break in the process of socialization occur? Why are academic con men so commonly regarded as sociometric stars by the new generation, and cheating is recognized even as a virtue? We are guilty ourselves, all those who allow fraud in everyday life, starting from touching an old woman for buying an expensive pot with an iron in a set, and ending with palming off a young couple on a 30-year mortgage. We lived in a traditional, modern, post-modern society and today we live in a society of risk, which greatest personification is cheating each other.

The proposed solution to this problem was creating a Student Honorary Code following the model of American universities. Such codes are created jointly by students and academic staff. The adopted rules regulate the sanctions system, but not in the form of statutory penalties, but as some hours of social work for the benefit of a school or an orphanage. The code has been successfully operating at Stanford University for almost 100 years. Interestingly, graduates of this prestigious university, when they already become employers themselves, are willing to employ graduates of this university. This belief in honesty results in an automatic solidarity and the certainty that the diploma assessment was not given for 'cutting corners', but for hard and honest work. The process of changing students' mentality may last for years, but in the authors' conviction it is worth it, because, as Miguel de Cervantes wrote, "whoever attaches to a good tree, gains a good shadow" (Nowak, 1998, p. 16).

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