Academic Integrity Programs at Schools Are One of the Key Assumptions for Ethical Workplace

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Abstract

This paper describes how college students are trained to behave ethically not only during their studies but also as graduates functioning in business environment. It reflects results of a study performed at the College of Management in Slovakia. The focus is an analysis of academic honesty program at the college, its successes and challenges as well as importance of ethics in the current business environment.

Keywords: Dishonesty; academic integrity; human resources; business ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today’s business world the human resources deal with many ethical challenges since it is the department that deals directly with people employed by a company. HR operations include various ethical pitfalls that can damage a company’s reputation or financial sustainability if not handled properly [1]. Understanding the importance of ethics in the field of human resources is essential for every business owner, whether it is a small local startup or a large multinational company. However, the basics of ethical behavior have to be learned at schools [2].

Academic dishonesty has been a controversial issue at all educational institutions. Examples of such behavior include using notes on exams, unauthorized collaboration, recycling...
assignments, fabricating data, submitting someone else’s work as one’s own, or contract cheating [3]. Most of the institutions try to address it by rules of conduct and honor codes with a different degree of success. However, what makes these efforts justified is how the learned behavior at school affects the behavior at the workplace. There is a high probability that students who “cheated” during their studies will behave unethically in their following carriers as proved by different studies. The reasons for unethical behavior at school and the workplace are similar: not enough time, pressure from the professor/boss, desire to seem better. The chances for graduates to successfully apply for a dream job increase if their alma mater pays attention to ethical issues and has a clearly defined set of rules to ensure its graduates are people with a high moral credit [4].

2. CURRENT STATUS OF THE ACADEMIC ETHICS PROGRAM

The College of Management (hereafter referred to as the “College”) is unique in Slovakia in the field of academic integrity and the application of the academic honesty policy with zero tolerance for violations of the policy. This system has been adopted as a result of close cooperation with City University of Seattle, an American college whose study programs are offered by the College. The College has developed a system of means to combat plagiarism and fraud, called the Academic Ethics Program. This system is not only based on punishing students in the event of a breach of the policy by a committee set up for this purpose, but also focuses on educating students and academics in this area. The ultimate goal of this program is not to catch and punish fraudsters, after all - it is an educational institution, but to build the name of an institution whose graduates are people with a high moral credit. Although it could be said from the results of the Academic Ethics Committee on (see graph) that, given the declining trend in the number of cases the Committee has dealt with, awareness of academic ethics among students is growing, streamlining educational resources in this area is essential.

As can be seen from the graph, since 2001, when the Academic Ethics Commission became operational at the school, the number of cases has been gradually decreasing, due to better information, but also due to sanctions applied in cases of violation of the rules. The initially considerably declining trend has recently slowed down and is gradually beginning to level out.

In the current state of society, when most young people determine value by price tag, attention is not paid to issues that are not clearly defined or do not have a clearly defined price. Unless the assignment is graded, students are not motivated to do it. The same applies to sanctions for violations of the rules of academic ethics. The attention with which students approach the issue of plagiarism is also related to the amount of punishment. Students calculate that if the punishment for plagiarism is a reduced grade for work, which does not mean that the subject has not been completed and therefore had to be repeated, they will evaluate the risk as worthy of an attempt to make life easier and commit an offense. However, if the penalties are strict and lead to the repetition of the subject, resp. to be excluded from the study in any cheating attempt, the risk is high, and the cheating effort is reduced. Of course, the consistency with which sanctions are actually applied again plays an important role.

The College has established a process to protect students from unfair and arbitrary sentencing. Cases are assessed by the aforementioned committee, consisting of 3 members and a chairman. The chairman leads the meetings but has only an advisory vote. Students are invited to a meeting where they are allowed to make a statement in their defense. After reviewing the evidence and hearing the student, the committee decides whether the student has violated the rules and any sanctions. The student has the right to appeal against the decision of the committee to the rector. His decision is final. Sanctions in cases of breaches of the rules range from a formal reprimand to expulsion from studies. The results of investigations into such cases are made public in order to provide feedback and also serve as a means of prevention. For this purpose, there has been created a section on academic ethics on the website of the College, where complete documentation related to the issue is available.

Given the differences between individual faculty members in looking at the issue and assessing what is and what is not ethical, which ultimately affects effective management strategies, the leadership of educational institutions should create opportunities for dialogue and discussion among faculty members that would create an atmosphere conducive to academic integrity. Our
research shows that a proactive and preventive approach to issues of unethical behavior contributes better to the promotion of academic ethics than sanctions applied to offenses. The involvement of students in the process of creating and enforcing the rules of academic ethics also contributes positively to the reduction of activities representing unethical behavior. Training and access to the latest research findings in the field of academic ethics improves the readiness and ability of faculty members to deal effectively with ethics violations. The creation of specific sanctions applied in cases of fraud serves as a supportive means of prevention. The recommended strategy is therefore to apply a philosophy that educates students and faculty in the field of academic ethics instead of focusing on sanctions.

It is difficult to talk about the quality of education if students receive grades or even a college degree by fraud. According to a study conducted in Slovakia by MESA 10, plagiarism appears to be one of the most common ways of cheating. Only 16% of students think that their classmates never submitted a plagiarized paper. One reason for plagiarism is that students do not know what plagiarism is. “As many as half of the respondents stated as a reason for plagiarism that the student is not such an expert to write the original text. However, in order to avoid plagiarism, it is sufficient to mention sources when reviewing the literature,” says analyst Stanislav Lukáč. Other answers suggest that plagiarism may also be caused by the absence of sanctions. Students believe that their classmates plagiarize because of the fact that in the seminar work plagiarism is not monitored (37%), or that teachers do not read their work (25%) [5].

So what are some specific examples of promoting academic integrity? The first one is an example from the USA where Wangaard & Stephens introduced a project Achieving with Integrity applied in high schools. Its focus is on changing the culture at a school level relying on student-led projects and initiatives such as integrity pledge drive, t-shirt, poster, essay and PSA (public service announcement) contests, facilitation of an “ethics café” [6]. The second one reflects a situation in Canada, Ontario where a survey of 22 universities showed that in many cases these institutions use separate websites within their portals, or even separate portals to promote academic ethics. The content of these pages is in some cases divided according to which specific group it is aimed at, whether they are bachelor students, master students, academic staff, proctors or even parents of students. Most of the pages are empathetic and try to bring students closer to the issue of academic ethics, assuring them that it is possible to understand this issue and prevent situations that could lead to unethical behavior. Plagiarism is easy to prevent, you just want to learn something about it. These sites use various tools for this purpose. They label unethical behavior as unfair to students who approach their studies responsibly and honestly, presenting true stories of students who have committed offenses to the rules with details of how they committed, how they were caught and what the consequences were for them. Research by Jacob and Dee found that students who had the opportunity to take an online tutorial on the rules of academic ethics had a reduced level of plagiarism through
education. They concluded that the tutorial taught students how to follow the rules of academic ethics compared to the expectation that it would increase their belief in the possibility of being caught in violations [7].

3. STUDY ON LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE ON THE ACADEMIC ETHICS

We conducted a study aimed to obtain information about the level of knowledge on the academic ethics among students at the College. The obtained data was subjected to statistical analysis and subsequently served as an implication for the possibilities of streamlining the management of the program of academic ethics at the College. At present, this program is based on rules and procedures defined more than 10 years ago. Although records of resolved cases of violation of the rules of academic ethics show a long-term declining trend, this trend has stopped recently. So far, no survey has been conducted among students to find out their views on the basic functioning of the academic ethics program and related activities. Our study provides information on the extent to which students are informed about this issue, whether they consider the current way of applying the principles of academic ethics to be effective. Information about the rules and procedures in the academic ethics program reaches students in several different ways, and it is not known which ones are effective, which are not, and the extent to which the same level of awareness of academic ethics is ensured among different groups of students.

As a result of random sampling with repetition, total of 914 respondents were contacted, consisting of 8 questions. The return rate of the questionnaire was 39.39%. The collected data were recorded in contingency tables. We analyzed contingency tables of type r x c (r>2). We considered random selections from r basic files with multinomial distribution. Unlike the binomial distribution, the multinomial distribution assumes more than two possible results of a randomized trial. The values represent observed frequencies with corresponding expected frequencies in brackets.

The basic question we asked ourselves when analyzing contingency tables was whether there is an association between the variables. The answer was to be found using the chi-square test at chosen alpha level of 0,05 (5%)
Table 1. Example of a contingency table used in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When did you hear about the Academic Honesty rules and procedures applied at the College for the first time?</th>
<th>Before sending my application</th>
<th>During the orientation session</th>
<th>During first term of my study</th>
<th>During first year of my teaching (later then teaching first term)</th>
<th>During second year of my teaching</th>
<th>Later than second year of my teaching</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>( n_i )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site A</td>
<td>6(6.36)</td>
<td>3(2.54)</td>
<td>18(16.54)</td>
<td>3(3.81)</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>4(4.45)</td>
<td>1(1.27)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site B</td>
<td>4(3.63)</td>
<td>1(1.45)</td>
<td>8(9.45)</td>
<td>3(2.18)</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>3(2.54)</td>
<td>1(0.72)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( n_i )</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By testing homogeneity, we also found an association in studying in English and studying in Slovak, as well as in bachelor's and master's studies. This means that at the significance level of 0.05 we could say that the source of obtaining information about academic ethics differs for different languages of study as well as different degrees of study. The analysis of the corrected standardized residues confirmed that there are more students studying in English who obtain information at the beginning of the study - during the orientation session for new students or from the teacher during lessons than assumed by the hypothesis of homogeneity. There are also fewer students studying in Slovak who obtain information at the beginning of their studies - during the orientation session for new students or from the teacher during lessons than the hypothesis of homogeneity assumes. This means that students studying in English obtain information earlier in the study than students studying in Slovak. The analysis showed that the deviation from homogeneity is indicated at different degrees of study, i.e. undergraduate and graduate, as well as in different years of study. Thus, at the significance level of 0.05, we rejected the assumption that there is no association between the preferred source of information and the level of study, respectively the year of study.

When we compared the above conclusions of the analysis with the established hypotheses, we found that our first hypothesis, stating that the method of disseminating information on academic ethics at College of Management is not homogeneous within sites, study programs, forms of study, language of study or degree of study, has been confirmed. The analysis also revealed that the next hypothesis stating that the level of knowledge of academic ethics is not homogeneous within sites, study programs, forms of study, language of study or degree of study, was confirmed too. Hypothesis H3, the level of knowledge about academic ethics does not change with the length of study, was not confirmed, as we found a departure from homogeneity and thus the association between the year of study and the level of knowledge about academic ethics. Residue analysis indicated a higher level of awareness among senior students.

Based on the above mentioned, we could conclude that the level of awareness of the
academic ethics rules and procedures is not homogeneous, and thus there is room for improvement in this area, which should ultimately lead to a reduction in the number of cases handled by the Academic Ethics Committee. The positive finding was that the level of awareness tends to increase with the higher year of study.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Cheating, plagiarism and other forms of unethical behavior are most likely not going away on their own. There are various methods by which educational institutions around the world try to combat this ailment with a focus on employability prospects of future graduates [8]. It is only necessary to focus on effective methods of education and prevention, which do not necessarily have to be based on a repressive approach. Raising the level of awareness of academic ethics through modern methods supported by pointing out the importance of using print versions of research materials rather than the internet, using internet platforms, social networks or multimedia content which provide an opportunity to create an environment of mutual trust that encourages the exchange of views and ideas and motivates people to fulfill their potential.

Researchers have observed that an organizational culture is a leading indicator of how much market value can an organization create for every dollar invested by shareholders. Stock market returns tend to be the highest for companies with the strongest cultures [9]. Good ethical culture increases reliability, employee commitment and can also be a powerful productivity engine that raises output and reduces misconduct, fraud, and absenteeism [10]. Successful organizations seek workforce that is well trained not only from a professional point of view but can also behave ethically and set example to others.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, participant’s written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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