



Academic Integrity in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Pakistan: Problems and Recommendations

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Abstract: Academic integrity refers to the concept of ensuring moral standards and ethics in academia. The commitment and demonstration of moral values like honesty, trust and fair dealing in academic settings and contexts are the fundamentals of academic integrity. The International Center of Academic Integrity (ICAI) sets out five values to define academic integrity including honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. This is a fact that higher levels of academic integrity consequently lead towards better academic standards and refinement of academic quality at higher education institutions (HEIs). The paper entails a qualitative approach and is based upon the past pertinent studies as well as the personal experiences of the authors in academia to discuss and evaluate the academic integrity in the context of Pakistani HEIs. The actions and practices which violate academic integrity constitute academic misconduct and academic dishonesty. The malpractices may be done at the end of students, faculty or institutional authorities and HEIs administration. This paper discusses the problems and issues which undermine the academic integrity in HEIs encompassing the major issues including plagiarism, cheating in exams, contract cheating, collusion, facilitation and deceit among others. The paper also proposes the ways to address the issues of academic misconduct by suggesting measures and recommendations to curb the aspects of academic dishonesty by the students, faculty members and HEIs administrative staff.

Key words: Higher Education Institutions, Pakistan, Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, Academic Misconduct.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, the prosperity and development of any nation strongly rests on the effectiveness and robustness of its education system (Aqib et al., 2024a). The strength of education system is firmly pinned upon the elements of ensuring academic provision and quality across all academic levels and to make sure that the education opportunities are available and accessible to all without any discrimination in terms of demographical attributes like race, religion or age and also in with regards to geographical location and economic class (Lewin, 2015). The success in the modern world is not measured by the quantity of resources possessed, it is rather ascertained by the quality of human and non-human resources. The greatest resource any country can have in today's competitive world is educated and skilled population which is only possible by provision of adequate education opportunities by establishing a robust higher education setup. The economic wellbeing and any country's success and prosperity is reliant on how well it develops its education system (Ahmad et al., 2014) and education is inevitable for the growth

and advancement of nations in a world that is becoming more competitive, interconnected, and globalized (Aqib et al., 2024b). There is no denial regarding the importance of education at different levels including elementary, secondary and school levels but the significance and substance of education is exponentially enhanced in case of higher education which is just like the head of any country's education system (Usher and Cervenak, 2005). The aspect of ensuring quality at higher education institutions is of utmost importance because it ultimately leads to overall development and progress of societies. The superior quality and academic standards concerning higher educational institutions are further grounded upon the delivery and dynamism of higher education provided through various colleges and universities collectively labelled as higher education institutions (HEIs) (Ashraf et al., 2016). The higher education quality depends upon several factors including enactment of a potent education policy framework and its effective implementation, diversity of academic choices, competence of faculty, sound infrastructure, efficacy of regulatory and governing regimes, research and developmental activities, industry-academia linkages and liaisons, and most importantly the higher levels of academic integrity. There is a direct relationship between academic integrity and academic quality, higher levels of academic integrity warrant higher academic standards at the HEIs in an education setup. The concept of academic integrity has been in discussion since the decade of 1990s and the term became popularized by Professor Donald McCabe who spearheaded an initiative with the name of International Center of Academic Integrity (ICAI) founded in 1992. With the passage of time, the element of academic integrity assumed more and more significance especially in the context of changing academic dynamics across the globe and more recently after the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT and the like as well as their utilization in academia (Sullivan et al., 2023), academic integrity has gained even more traction and became even more relevant to assure academic standards and compliance to certain moral and regulatory academic benchmarks to maintain and achieve higher academic quality in the higher education domain.

Academic integrity refers to the concept of ensuring moral standards and ethics in academia. The commitment and demonstration of moral values like honesty, trust and fair dealing in academic settings and contexts are the fundamentals of academic integrity. According to the International Center of Academic Integrity (ICAI), the notion of academic integrity entails a commitment to five aspects in the context of all persons and practices who are in the field of academia; these aspects or cardinal principles of academic integrity are honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. The aspect of honesty enjoins the parties concerned to be truthful and requires to ensure proper disclosure of pertinent facts and all relevant information, further the due credit must be given wherever applicable during the academic processes and practices. The second element of trust can be achieved by ensuring transparency in all academic and administrative aspects, trusting each other leads to credence and reliance to formalize dealings in an amicable manner. The principle of fairness refers to application of rules and policies consistently by engage with others equitably and to take responsibility for our own actions. The facet of respect is specifically important warranting mutual respect especially relevant in instances of giving and receiving feedbacks on assessments and submitted works. The students shall receive feedbacks willingly and in respectable manner wherein the faculty is respected for their thoughts whereas faculty should also recognize the impacts of their words and actions on others and uphold and ensure the respect and dignity of students. The fourth aspect of academic integrity according to ICAI is responsibility which pertains to adherence to institutional rules and conduct codes, as well as to engage in difficult conversations, and model good behavior in testing situations and ensuring a courteous approach in interactions. Finally, the aspect of courage asserts to take a stand to address wrongdoings and to be able to defy pressures and influences to stay true to the cause of academic integrity by withholding objectivity, merit and to remain undaunted in defending integrity in all circumstances by even enduring discomfort for something you believe in (ICAI, 2021). Academic integrity is a notion which is pinned upon the premise of upholding the ideals of objectivity, fairness, merit, honesty and truthfulness to ensure that no behaviors and actions occur that are in violation of these values (Macfarlane, 2014). In case of a breach to any of the above factors of moral and academically acceptable conduct; the situation is referred to as academic dishonesty or academic misconduct which is the opposite of academic integrity. This research takes into consideration various forms of academic misconduct which are contrary to the conception of academic integrity. The paper also discusses various issues and problems which are pertinent to the subject of academic integrity in the context of HEIs in Pakistan and also proposes the ways in which the problems with reference to academic integrity in the Pakistani HEIs may be addressed to achieve favorable outcomes academically and otherwise. We will now discuss the problems which compromise the academic integrity at our HEIs in the following section hereunder.

2. Academic Integrity and Pakistani Higher Education Institutions: Issues & Obstacles

As asserted earlier, higher levels of academic integrity consequently lead towards better academic standards and refinement of academic quality at higher education institutions (Gallant, 2017). The actions and practices which violate academic integrity in fact constitute academic misconduct and academic dishonesty. The malpractices may be done at the end of students, faculty or institutional authorities and HEIs administration. We will discuss about each of these three stakeholders' academic misconduct respectively and discuss the measures and suggestions to address these issues in the next section. Let us begin our discussion from the context of students elaborating the aspects from the students' end which result in violation of standards of academic integrity.

Denisova-Schmidt (2017) has highlighted several types of corruption in higher education sector including but not limited to cheating, plagiarism, bribery, collusion, conflict of interest, and favoritism among other malpractices. Plagiarism, a complex and substantial problem in academia, includes the unauthorised use of others' belongings without proper acknowledgement (Perkins, Basar Gezgin, & Gordon, 2019). This consists of extensive misconduct, from plagiarism to implicit strategies such as mosaic plagiarism. Self-plagiarism also occurs when an individual unknowingly reuses his work – due to negligence or inadequate knowledge of citation formatting (Streefkerk, 2022). With the advent of the present technology, especially AI and paraphrasing software programs, this problem has become more complex, leading to new strategies for plagiarism along with the provision of tools that can detect it (Hutson, 2024). Globally, the prevalence of plagiarism is alarmingly high. McCabe, Butterfield, and Treviño (2012) revealed that 58% of American high school students openly admitted to conducting plagiarism, indicating a prevalent issue in educational institutions. The International Centre for Academic Integrity has also mentioned a growing level of academic dishonesty by students, with many admitting to directly copying sentences from the internet (Academic Integrity, 2024). However, despite the implementation of plagiarism policies by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC, 2023), the prevalence of plagiarism outlines the need for stringent implementation and a cultural shift towards academic honesty.

There are numerous factors that could drive a student towards conducting plagiarism. Firstly, learners are sometimes unaware of the actual meaning and ethical implications of plagiarism. Moreover, students often lack adequate knowledge regarding referencing and citations or the importance of recognising the work of other scholars (Soroya et al., 2017). This lack of information could be analysed as a result of insufficient training in academic misconduct, inadequate research and citation skills, and disorientation of uniqueness and correct referencing in academic assignments. Thus, factors such as academic stress, time constraints or the accessibility of information on the internet can lead to instances of plagiarising (Kampa, Padhan, Karna, & Gouda, 2024). Further, the advancement in technology, such as AI-based tools like ChatGPT and better paraphrasing tools to imitate and copy work, makes it easy for students to cheat, although the detection rates make it even harder for the professors (Khalil & Er, 2023).

Plagiarism, just like collusion and contract cheating, has a detrimental impact on the institutions that take pride in high-quality learning. This is because institutions that fail to identify and discourage plagiarism are at risk of tarnished reputation as it puts a question mark on their academic degrees (Soroya et al., 2017). Moreover, as the degrees offered by such institutions become devalued, it hampers the chances of graduates securing jobs or pursuing further education. Similarly, plagiarised content is likely to weaken the trust of public in the credibility of academic research and scholarly learning which further impedes knowledge development of students (Eaton & Christensen Hughes, 2022).

Apart from plagiarism, other major malpractices perpetrated by the students include cheating and collusion. Collusion is one of the most widespread academic dishonesty practices, which involves groups of students working on assignments that are supposed to be done individually (Parkinson et al., 2022). In the context of the Pakistani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), this concern has been escalating over the past few years (Ul Haq, Mahmood, Shabbir, & Batool, 2020). This is unfair and is against ethical guidelines and integrity, disrupting the educational outcomes and the process. According to a survey by McCabe, more than 60 per cent of university students agreed to be involved in some form of cheating (Academic Integrity, 2024). In HEIs, there are different ways in which collusion manifests. Some types of collusion include direct imitation, where a learner copies a fellow student's paper or engages in sharing of papers to enable other students to make copies or to use them for adaptation. Likewise, collaboration (working together) also occurs when students engage in group work while demonstrating it as an individual effort. Another form of collusion is unauthorised cooperation, where students work together on tasks that have been set as individual tasks (George & Caulfield, 2022). There are various factors that have led to the phenomenon of collusion in HEIs. Firstly, as Pakistan is a collectivist country (Zaidi, 2014), the cultural beliefs

of collectivism and group work can lead to several perspectives, which makes the line between collaboration and cheating relatively thin (Soroya, Hashmi, & Soroya, 2017). Culturally, students who have been used to group study might find it hard to determine the difference between proper group work and cheating (Sutherland-Smith, 2013), especially when moving from local universities to Western academic frameworks where individual achievements and progress is preferred (Miles, Campbell, & Ruxton, 2022). Several studies have established that societal and particularly parental pressure to excel in academic work generates considerable pressure to perform well, forcing students to engage in academic misconduct like collusion to take a short route to success (Anitha & Sundaram, 2021; Quraishi & Aziz, 2017). Also, time shortage, significant workload, and competitiveness of the academic climate amplifies the issue. In addition, students' attributes, including their obliviousness and ignorance of academic dishonesty policies, also contribute significantly to the issue (Miles et al., 2022). It is possible that many students have a weak understanding of collusion or its ramifications because they have not been trained enough on academic integrity (Fraser, 2014), and the rules surrounding acceptable collaboration are not very clear (Soroya et al., 2017). Such conscious ignorance is the main reason students end up engaging in collusion without being fully aware that they are cheating (Perry, 2010). Furthermore, assessment design can reinforce collusion in some cases. For instance, tasks that are generalised, contain vague directions, or do not distinguish between individual and group projects may lead to the formation of group cooperation among learners even when it is prohibited (Sutton & Taylor, 2011).

The prevailing practices contrary to the principles of academic integrity on the students' end include and not limited to cheating including contract cheating (Morris, 2018). Contract cheating is a considerable challenge threatening the academic integrity in Pakistan and across the world. Contract cheating is a scenario where students pay third parties to complete their assignments and dissertations (Zia & Khan, 2023). Such cheating involves a variety of services, like essay mills, and paid academic assessments and ghostwriting (Bretag, 2016). It includes students submitting the work that is not produced by them, hence violating the academic integrity protocols and educational outcomes (QAA, 2022). Contract cheating is becoming common globally, with numerous students reportedly engaging in unethical behavior (Curtis & Clare, 2017). Likewise, in Pakistan and worldwide, the availability of counterfeit writing services on the internet has made it convenient for students to acquire and purchase their assignments (Arshad, Umer, Khan, Sarki, & Yaseen, 2021; Zia & Khan, 2023). These services are frequently convenient, and the companies offering them utilise more aggressive marketing tactics, guaranteeing success without understanding their customers and making them attractive to students looking for an easier way out (Ellis, Zucker, & Randall, 2018). Several factors lure students to engage in contract cheating. Such behaviours are unethical, and often result from financial problems or other socio-economic influences that compel learners to seek help in cheating. Some learners may consider cheating a way to perform well academically and meet their learning goals, for example, when they are financially strained or lack proper learning resources. Fear of poor performance or having low self-esteem regarding academic performance can also lead learners to engage into contract cheating (Rahimi, Jones, & Bailey, 2024). It will prompt students who are struggling to cope with the rigorous academic challenges or those who have confidence in their ability to produce quality papers to engage in contract cheating to achieve passing grades (QAA, 2022). Furthermore, the level of risk, which is the chance of being caught cheating and punished, may not be perceived as high in this case to encourage students into cheating. Where policies in institutions are not strong or where detection measures are not efficient, students may have the mentality that 'I will not get caught' or 'this is acceptable' (Newton, 2018). The ramifications of contract cheating are detrimental and widespread, their effects being tangible across various aspects, such as the students' skills enhancement and academic status, as well as the worth of degrees. Situations like these lower a student's academic chances and rob them of relevant abilities for scholarship, such as research, reasoning, and writing styles (Khan, Hemnani, Raheja, & Joshy, 2020). These skills are not only good for graduating or for any career paths one might take but also for overall personality development (Rundle, Curtis, & Clare, 2023). Outsourcing deprives students and society of opportunities to grow intellectually and gain valuable characteristics for future professions. Furthermore, it erodes the honesty of students through contract cheating and devalues the students' certificates (Soroya et al., 2017). If students cheat, they put forward their work as an end product and deceive others about their capacity and content mastery. This could have a negative outcome on their future studies and careers. This loss of credibility may negatively affect the output of their employees or graduates and even lead to distrust from employers and graduate schools (Rahimi et al., 2024). In addition, it undermines the quality of the work of honest students who have invested time and effort in their assignments. Such dishonesty puts one group or learner in a higher position than the other, the latter having no chance of competing even though they studied hard and passed their exams; these

questions the worth of academic degrees and diplomas (Newton, 2018; Saleem et al., 2021). Along the same lines, contract cheating does not only pose threats for students as individuals but also adversely impact the overall educational framework by debasing the public perception of the value of educational degrees, thereby sabotaging the credibility of the entire system of education (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017). This is because the institutions that ignore the risks of contract cheating embark on a path of reputational damage as the students, parents and employers may lose trust in such institutions (Newton, 2018). Also, contract cheating contributes to the establishment of a culture that promotes dishonesty, further discouraging the standards of hard work, ethical demeanour and perseverance (Curtis & Clare, 2017). There are also certain distance-learning qualifications for which there are no examinations and students tend to outsource the assignments and coursework assessments by hiring ghost writers and getting their work done from essay-mills and using AI tools such as Chat GPT. All these practices must be discouraged and penalized by ensuring stringent measures to warrant quality assessments and grading policies to uphold and maintain the principles of academic integrity.

There are many ways in which the values and principles of academic integrity are compromised and violated by the faculty at HEIs (Ellahi et al., 2013). In Pakistani context, the academics and teaching staff have been reported and found guilty in offenses involving acceptance of undue consideration from the students against good grades without the students having to do well in their assignments and examinations (Quraishi and Aziz, 2017). There are instances wherein the issues of such academic dishonesty are aggravated to the level where this consideration is not in shape of money or gifts rather in shape of sexual favours leading to physical and sexual abuse of students. The recent increase in such cases at various universities in the public sector have been reported in the leading newspapers nationwide. The faculty members abuse their authority by indulging in corrupt practices whereby the counter party is mostly the students. The faculty is found to be involved in facilitating malpractices including facilitation regarding cheating in exams, collusion and collaboration in accepting plagiarized work, sham publishing of research papers and articles as well as disclosing exam papers in advance to provide advantage to certain students. There are also cases wherein the exam results are disclosed or leaked through unauthorized channels in an illegal and immoral manner by faculty to put some students at an advantage at the cost of others. A very important and prevailing form of academic malpractice from faculty's end is the tendency to provide benefits to some students on the basis of nepotism and favouritism which is a gross violation of academic integrity principles. The collusion of faculty members to accept plagiarized work by students at HEIs in Pakistan along with cheating in exams are among the most prevalent forms of academic misconduct (Soroya et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, the issues discussed, there are instances of academic dishonesty involving faculty members in relation to teaching, course provision and delivery. There are instances wherein the faculty is lacking the required qualifications, competence, capacity, relevant subject knowledge and experience, and also lacks essential skill set and expertise, but still they serve in HEIs because of slack implementation of statutes and weak accountability mechanisms leading to substandard academic quality and impaired academic integrity (Shoaib and Ali, 2020). Another important issue which pertains to assessment security, planning, and is the failure to execute and ensure implementation of transparent examinations which involves the complicity of both faculty and university administration eroding academic integrity against bribes and undue monetary and non-monetary favours from the students (Dawson, 2020).

Furthermore, the teachers also exhibit slackness in carrying out invigilation duties as well as in assessing and compiling students' examination results. There are even instances wherein the faculty delegates the task of exam-checking and grading to their colleagues or even to some favourite students. In addition to issue like accepting bribes and gifts against good grades, the faculty members at Pakistani HEIs also coerce students to become complicit in practices of academic misconduct involving fake research publishing and artificial citations. This issue is not that bigger as compared to malpractices in the western academia wherein the problem is much worse leading to 'citation cartels' (Franck, 1999) and 'boosted citations' (Davis, 2012). Among other aspects of academic misconduct, worse forms of faculty's involvement include practices that even go beyond academic misconduct, for reference the recent case of involvement of faculty members of a public sector university in drug trafficking and facilitation of narcotics trade also came to the fore. Apart from the above discussed serious matters, there are also examples of lighter nature but they also constitute a milder level of academic dishonesty from teachers' standpoint. The teachers in HEIs must demonstrate professionalism and dedication but opposing to this, the teachers especially in larger academic setups in public sector showcase poor time management, missing classes or reaching late and leaving early, are irregular and even assign other juniors or students to conduct lectures on their behalf. All the examples of academic dishonesty and malpractice by the faculty, as discussed raise concerns regarding the

profession which is deemed to be a sacred occupation and not only creates doubts about academic standards but also leads to negative perceptions regarding the sanctity of teaching profession as a whole. The faculty can never engage in such academically immoral practices without the connivance of university administration and managerial authorities. The issues that are highlighted above also embroil the HEIs administration to some extent, the involvement of university authorities and the actions and instances which lead to violation of academic integrity are described and elaborated hereunder.

The university HEIs managerial staff are metaphorically the custodians of the cause of education. This is their duty and obligation to facilitate the process of delivering knowledge and to ensure the principles of academic integrity by enacting a system of checks and balances that warrants transparent and efficient provision of higher education to the students. However, there are corrupt elements who are involved either individually or collectively in shape of groups and even whole departments in practices and activities that undermine the ideals of academic integrity and bring disrepute to the HEIs in Pakistan. The major issue of academic misconduct which involves the administrative staff is their collusion with students and at time with teachers to facilitate cheating in exams which is executed in form of provision of helping material during exams, disclosing or circulating the exam question paper before exams, and allowing modification of contents of answer sheets post exams. All three cheating scenarios usually involve the examination departmental staff who collude with students and faculty to carry-out the act of academic dishonesty. There are also cases wherein the administrative staff at HEIs has been involved in facilitating contract cheating and outsourcing of assignments and coursework. The issue of contract cheating and essay-mills has especially aggravated in the wake of increased distance-learning education institutions (Zia and Khan, 2023). Furthermore, in addition to cheating practices discussed, the university authorities also are accomplices in other grave crimes that transcend beyond academic aspects like the facilitation of drugs on campuses, illegal activities at hostels, awarding of undue scholarships or offering fee concessions against sexual or monetary favours, imposing unjust fines and penalties on students without legitimate reasons. The Pakistani academia image was also tarnished in the past when the scandal of a company floated in 2015, the company named Axact offering fake online degrees all around the world. The company was headquartered in the Pakistani city of Karachi, made tens of millions of dollars in estimated revenue each year. According to the US newspaper, Walsh (2015) reported that Axact had different websites for 370 fake high schools, universities, and accreditation bodies on its records (Imtiaz and Walsh, 2015). The issuance of fake degrees is the action which is beyond the purview and power of students and faculty and therefore, the main culprit is the HEIs' administrative staff. Another important aspect with regards to HEIs managerial staff is the conflict of interest in certain scenarios. There are financial or non-financial interests of HEIs administrative office bearers which allure them to commit acts that compromise the academic integrity and leads to academic misconduct. The HEIs managerial and administrative staff whenever intervenes in the academic aspects without due reasons, the motives are usually to draw monetary or monetary gains and benefits from either the students or the faculty. After discussing the diverse issues and problems which weaken the pillars of academic integrity, we will now discuss some recommendations to uphold the principles of academic integrity to eventually attain higher academic quality and achieve higher standard of academic offerings in the HEIs of Pakistan.

3. Recommendations to Ensure Academic Integrity in Pakistani HEIs

There are diverse counter measures to address the corruption in higher education academic institutions (Simola, 2017) and proper application and deployment of adequate resources pays the dividends in terms of combating the corrupt actions and practices to uphold academic integrity in higher education. We will ponder upon some of the proposals to uphold academic integrity by curbing the issues and problems which contravene the values of academic integrity. The initial step to combat plagiarism is by making sure that the students must be taught and trained not only about their domain knowledge and subject related aspects but they should also be sensitized and familiarized with the elements of ensuring academic integrity (Löfström, 2015). The higher education environment industry of Pakistan is facing many challenges, coupled with the cultural and social dimensions that fuel the issue. The collectivist culture prevailing in the country, along with the pressure to excel academically and inadequate knowledge of plagiarism, makes it easy for students to engage in academic misconduct (Miles et al., 2022). The plagiarism policy of HEC is designed to cater to this problem; however, though its success greatly depends on rigorous enforcement and strict reinforcement, with systematic emphasis on academic integrity (HEC, 2023; Ul Haq et al., 2020). Furthermore, as students are increasingly gaining access to AI tools due to their easy accessibility, it is crucial that the policies and rules prevailing for educational institutions incorporate AI to define and control the activities related to academic misconduct (Quynh Hoa, 2023). To sum up, plagiarism is a

complicated phenomenon that has a wide-ranging negative impact on students' learning in universities, educational institutions, and society in general. However, to address this issue, strategic formulation that involves schooling, prevention detection and enforcement is required. Also, by encouraging a pattern of educational accountability, advocating ethical research procedures, attempting technological advancement positively, Pakistani HEIs can lay the foundation for the students to generate original content and bolster up their instructional potential. The best course of action is to ensure coordinated efforts by the HEC, QEC (Quality Enhancement Cells) and QA (Quality Assurance) and academic compliance departments at the HEIs to warrant a system wherein the students and teachers are all well informed about the harms and hazards of plagiarism and also about the adverse consequences about the same which will potentially help to manage the menace of plagiarism in Pakistani HEIs to eventually improve the academic standards of higher education in the country.

In addition to plagiarism, another big issue which needs to be mitigated is collusion. The effects of collusion are detrimental, as it leads to the worsening of the educational process and students' learning, degradation of academic integrity, and overall learning environment (Atkinson, Nau, & Symons, 2016). By engaging into collusion, students play an active role in putting their learning at risk. This robs them of valuable learning experiences that could help hone key academic skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and research (Batool et al., 2021). Acquiring these skills is beneficial not only for succeeding in the academic environment but also for career pursuit. According to research, students who engage in academic fraud like collusion are less likely to have the ability to learn on their own and analyse information, which is fundamental in learning and professional environments (Chiang, Zhu, & Yu, 2022). As a result of collusion, it also becomes difficult for an individual to learn effectively, which makes academic assessments lose credibility. It may also be a practice where several students produce work without demonstrating individual learning and abilities. Thus, it is hard for instructors to ascertain the learning and teaching achievements and give appropriate feedback (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017). This, in turn, is highly damaging to the staff and the students as it negates the value of the qualifications and degrees awarded by these Pakistani HEIs and harms the reputation of the institutions (Parntner, 2020). Employers need to hire the best talents, while graduate schools require students with the best qualifications to benefit from the higher education system, and if these cannot be relied on, then the whole system is at a loss (Sabli et al., 2016). In addition, there is prejudice since, through collusion, different players conspire to offer predetermined outcomes that cannot favour the other party. Those who manage to finish the work independently lose to those groups that cheated their way to victory through collaboration (Sabli et al., 2016). This may contribute to anti-learning attitudes, where learners develop a lack of confidence in the education system. Hardworking learners may be discouraged because they will not benefit from being honest, and they will be encouraged to embrace the culture of taking shortcuts in their academic endeavours (Saleem et al., 2021). As demonstrated, collusion negatively affects specific learners, learning institutions, and society in general. The strong culture of collusion prevalent in all forms of assessment may lead to the degradation of the quality and reputation of Pakistani HEIs nationally and internationally. In the long run, it has adverse outcomes on the potential to attract international students and faculty, engage in research with universities worldwide, and offer graduates competitiveness in the global market (Soroya et al., 2017). However, it is also important that collusion may have social costs from a broader perspective. It is mandatory for graduates to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This enables them to improve their standard of living - so their communities or employers also prosper. Another aspect of academic misconduct which needs great attention to ensure higher academic standards is contract cheating. Combating the practice of contract cheating requires engaging awareness campaigns and developing strong and all-encompassing policies and procedures while ensuring that students are given sufficient assistance and do not resort to cheating through contracts. Universities are required to provide a disclaimer to the students stating the results of engaging in contract cheating and the significance of integrity among students (Bretag, 2016). They also need effective measures to identify and respond to contract cheating, ensuring that anyone involved in this type of integrity violation receives adequate penalties (Zia & Khan, 2023). Additionally, institutions need to ensure that learners have relevant and adequate means and opportunities to thrive in their academic endeavours through resources such as tutors, writing centres, and counselling services (QAA, 2022). Through these steps, the departments of HEIs in Pakistan and across the world can establish a culture of academic integrity so that a student can achieve success through proper hard work and determination instead of copying through a contract cheating system. The rules and policies are already in place but their true implementation is needed to prevent the students in opting any unlawful, unfair and unethical means to earn academic credentials.

With reference to managing the issues and matters of academic dishonesty on the end of faculty members, the role

of human resource and administrative bodies in the HEIs is of apex significance. The irony is that the administrative elements become partners in crime instead of deterring the faculty from engaging in malpractice. Nonetheless, to control the aspects of academic misconduct from the faculty members, the regulatory bodies vigilance and HEIs oversight are both crucial followed by stringent measures to ensure disciplinary actions and punitive steps taken against the ones who indulge in such academically unlawful and immoral acts of dishonesty to set examples for the future to discourage others from doing the same. There are very few cases to be considered as precedents wherein the Higher Education Commission (HEC) or the universities have penalized the faculty for their involvement in academic misconduct which must be changed to put things on the right direction. As far as the HEIs administration is concerned, their involvement in academic dishonesty can be addressed by ensuring an integrated approach by thwarting any plans and procedures that undermine academic integrity. This can be done by ensuring that faculty and students must deal with these administrative authorities in a most transparent and standardized manner that no under-hand dealings, or secret arrangements to embroil the different parties leading to collusion or complicity take place. The internal and external audit departments along with the QAAC (Quality Assurance and Academic Compliance) departments should enact and implement the quality and compliance regimes in a sound manner to block the ways towards academic and non-academic corruption by the university and HEIs administrative and managerial staff. There must be a coordinated and comprehensive approach to ensure seamless deployment of regulatory and disciplinary regimes which is only possible by enacting and implementing a potent and clear policy framework to ensure fulfillment of academic quality benchmarks, another important aspect to be taken very seriously is to uphold the academic integrity among the students and faculty. There must be no stone unturned to guarantee superior academic provision and fulfillment to global standards and best practices with regards to maintaining the academic benchmarks to warrant a sustainable and longer run success to eventually build and fortify the image and reputation of HEIs in Pakistan.

4. Conclusion

The strength of higher education system is firmly pinned upon the elements of ensuring academic provision and quality across all academic levels. The aspect of ensuring quality at higher education institutions (HEIs) is of utmost importance because it ultimately leads to overall development and progress of societies. The superior quality and academic standards concerning higher educational institutions are further grounded upon the delivery and dynamism of higher education which persists in upholding principles of merit and academic integrity. The higher education quality depends upon several factors including enactment of a potent education policy framework and its effective implementation, diversity of academic choices, competence of faculty, sound infrastructure, efficacy of regulatory and governing regimes, research and developmental activities, industry-academia linkages and liaisons, and most importantly the higher levels of academic integrity. There are certain aspects and actions which undermine the academic integrity at HEIs. These include malpractices like contract cheating, plagiarized research work, collusion, conflict of interests and exchange of financial and non-financial favors without due justification. These acts of academic dishonesty and academic misconduct are performed by three groups of education stakeholders including the students, faculty members and administrative staff of HEIs. The need is to implement the rules and policies in true and letter and spirit to ensure accountability of those who engage in the actions which erode academic integrity and bring a bad name to the academia in Pakistan. There is a pressing need for a coordinated and integrated approach in combating the corrupt elements in academia to warrant an academically sound higher education sector that would eventually help to raise academic quality and to attain higher levels of academic integrity. This would consequentially lead to higher academic standards where principles of merit, honesty, trust, responsibility and respect would be upheld to guarantee a promising higher education landscape in the country.

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