

## SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS OF ISSUES RELATED TO ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN TWO PAKISTANI MEDICAL SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To determine issues related to academic integrity in two Pakistani medical schools and suggest possible solutions of the issues identified.

**Study Design:** Qualitative research.

**Place and Duration of Study:** This study was conducted at Army Medical College and Armed Forces Postgraduate Medical Institute (AFPGMI), Rawalpindi.

**Participants and Methods:** Six focus groups were formed using systematic method of sampling. Discussions were held around a set of predetermined exploration structured questions: (1) what are the issues related to academic integrity? (2) What are the proposed solutions of these issues? The common issues, and solutions were organized, and listed in a sequence. Data was presented in appropriate table for easy comprehension

**Result:** All focus groups identified that existing poorly defined ethical policy in the medical colleges, cheating and plagiarism by the students and poor teaching of ethics and academic integrity were significant issues related to academic integrity in the medical colleges. The remedial measures included presence of honor code and inclusion of teaching of ethics in the medical schools.

**Conclusion:** Teaching of professionalism and ethics should be included in the curriculum of medical colleges.

**Keywords:** Academic integrity, Professionalism.

### INTRODUCTION

All experts worldwide, though they define medical professionalism in different ways, agree on that certain core values and behaviors that must be present, and which are understood to be vital. One such recognized value is integrity<sup>1</sup>. Academic dishonesty is common in many medical colleges around the world<sup>2,3</sup> and it seems that its incidence is on rise<sup>4,5</sup>. Medical councils agree that professionalism and medical ethics should be taught in medical colleges. Medical ethics is being taught in medical colleges in Europe, and America. In developing countries awareness to teach medical ethics in medical colleges is growing. The Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (2002), recommends: "A physician shall always maintain highest standards of professional conduct...being in

conformity with principles of honesty, and justice", and advises, "All medical and dental colleges may incorporate medical ethics into their curriculum"<sup>6</sup>.

Recently many reports of cheating<sup>7,8</sup>, plagiarism<sup>9,10</sup> and unprofessional behavior<sup>11</sup> of Pakistani medical students have been reported. Doctors who are educated in developed countries are less likely to be subjected to punitive actions by the medical councils than those instructed in Pakistan and other developed countries<sup>12</sup>.

The serious issues related to academic integrity in Pakistani medical schools need solutions. Different approaches are used to deal with issues related to academic integrity worldwide. These approaches address different components of the curriculum and factors related to medical councils, medical colleges and its administration, faculty and students.

The purpose was to determine issues related to academic integrity and suggest possible solutions of the issues identified.

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## PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

The study was carried out at an undergraduate and a postgraduate public sector medical college of Pakistan.

Six focus groups participated. Each focus group consisted of 6 members. The members in each focus group were: 02 senior faculty members, 02 junior faculty members, 02 students. Systematic method of sampling was used.

All members of focus group were given the results of the study titled "Academic integrity in two Pakistani Medical Schools from perspective of students and staff"<sup>13</sup> two weeks before each focus group assembled to hold discussion. They were asked to note any issues arising from the study, and their proposed solutions, and bring these with them on the day the focus group assembled.

Each group was assembled in a room, with a moderator (author). The interaction was of 45 minutes. The group discussion was structured around a set of predetermined exploration questions: What are the issues that arose from the information you have read, related to academic integrity? What are the proposed solutions of these issues? The moderator opened the discussion, kept the conversation flowing, and took notes. In addition, the proceedings were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed later. The issues, with their generated solutions were documented. The results were collected from all 6 groups. The common issues and solutions were organized, and listed in a sequence. Data was presented in appropriate table for easy comprehension.

## RESULTS

All focus groups identified that existing poorly defined ethical policy in the medical colleges, cheating and plagiarism by the students and poor teaching of ethics and academic integrity in the medical colleges were major issues related to academic integrity in the colleges. Other issues identified by a majority of focus groups were students coming late or being

absent in a class, proxy attendance, copying assignments, lenient behavior of faculty towards dishonest behaviors and imposition of fine as a level of sanction. They suggested appropriate remedial measures (table-1).

## DISCUSSION

The majority of focus groups identified that there are issues in the curriculum of the medical colleges and there are factors related to administration, faculty and students in the medical colleges that contribute to the increased prevalence of academic dishonesty. They suggested appropriate remedial measures.

The absence of honor codes in our colleges may be a cause of increased prevalence of academic dishonesty as its absence has inverse effect on academic dishonesty<sup>14</sup>. In the majority of colleges that have honor code there is higher level of reporting and less cheating<sup>15</sup>.

To increase awareness of academic honesty in the medical colleges the focus groups suggested holding workshops, seminars, and small group discussions with the aim of educating students about academic integrity and deterring them from engaging in academic dishonesty. Such events are being held in different medical colleges. For example Yale in 2006 held its first Academic Integrity Awareness Week<sup>16</sup>.

The focus groups identified that there is a need to improve teaching of ethics and academic integrity in the medical colleges. They suggested that the curriculum should include topics on academic integrity and professionalism. These topics should be taught using appropriate teaching and learning strategies. These will provide the students opportunity to reflect. Reflection will make students aware of dishonest behaviors and develops moral reasoning<sup>17</sup>.

The focus groups identified different methods used by the students to engage in academic dishonesty. If faculty becomes aware of methods used by the students to engage in academic dishonesty, they can identify

appropriate strategies and enforce effective means to deal with it<sup>18</sup>. The focus groups identified strategies and means to deal with specific examples of dishonesty. These are listed in table-1.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching of professionalism and ethics should be included in the curriculum of medical colleges.

**Table-1: Issues and remedy related to academic integrity.**

S. no	Issues identified by focus groups	No of focus groups identifying the issue n=6*	Remedy suggested by focus groups
1	<p>Ethical policy/code of conduct:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The code of conduct or ethical policy is very poorly defined.</li> <li>2. A 02-page document exists describing few unprofessional behaviors, recommended punishments, and the awarding authority.</li> <li>3. The students are unaware of above document.</li> <li>4. There is no uniformity in award of punishments.</li> </ol>	6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A committee should be formed consisting of appropriate members to revise 02-page existing document into a comprehensive code of conduct or ethical policy.</li> <li>2. The code of conduct/ethical policy should be in detail describing unprofessional behaviors, including those related to academic dishonesty, and punishments for first time offenders, and repeated offenders.</li> <li>3. The document should describe the process of awarding punishment, and process of repeal by the student.</li> <li>4. The committee should study result of the survey (result of phase 1 and phase 2). The survey would provide guideline for writing above document.</li> <li>5. On admission a copy of the Code of Conduct/ ethical policy should be provided to all admitted student, and student parents.</li> <li>6. The student should sign a certificate that he has read, and understood the document.</li> <li>7. The parents should also be involved and sign that they have read and understood the documents, as in our culture they are important support for the student.</li> <li>8. In the initial introduction classes of first year, during first week, this document should be discussed with the students, to facilitate their understanding.</li> <li>9. The disciplinary committee of the college should follow the ethical policy strictly.</li> </ol>
2	<p>Plagiarism</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Plagiarism exists in the college.</li> <li>2. Students don't know what plagiarism is?</li> <li>3. Academic writing is not being taught.</li> <li>4. How to detect plagiarism?</li> <li>5. How to prevent plagiarism?</li> </ol>	6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Academic writing should be taught in all 5 years of curriculum.</li> <li>2. Workshops are being conducted in final year &amp; fourth year on research methodology. A component of academic writing should be added in these workshops.</li> <li>3. Workshops should be conducted for faculty on academic writing.</li> <li>4. Software should be bought to detect plagiarism.</li> </ol>

			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Stricter punishments should be awarded for offences related to plagiarism.</li> <li>6. The faculty should recommend reading material to students on academic writing.</li> </ol>
3	<p>Ethics and issues related to academic integrity are not being taught.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Department of community medicines delivers few lectures on ethics, which is insufficient</li> </ol>	6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. More emphasis should be given to ethics in curriculum.</li> <li>2. Each year there should be classes on ethics and professionalism.</li> <li>3. Twenty lectures of department of community medicine are not needed in first 02 years. They should be replaced by lectures on medical ethics.</li> <li>4. The faculty should teach ethics by small group discussion, interactive lectures, and role modeling.</li> <li>5. Each year there should be seminar on these issues to raise awareness.</li> <li>6. The faculty should be trained in dealing different issues related to ethics /academic dishonesty</li> <li>7. The faculty should continue to emphasize correct attitudes, and behaviors during interaction with students.</li> </ol>
4	<p>Coming late in class or being absent from lectures</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students thought one reason is that lectures are boring.</li> <li>2. Students do not attend because of various problems.</li> <li>3. There is no fixed time of attendance in clinics</li> <li>4. There is no structured training program for clinical training.</li> </ol>	5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Doors should be closed of the lecture hall /teaching room after 10 minutes of the start of session.</li> <li>2. Attendance should be done at the start of session. No attendance during the teaching session.</li> <li>3. There should be fixed seats in the class with roll number of students visible to the teacher.</li> <li>4. Better coordination between administration and teaching staff so that students are not required to be at both places at same time.</li> <li>5. A survey should be done to understand the problems of students and solving them.</li> <li>6. A structured training program should be issued to students, and faculty for clinical training.</li> <li>7. The faculty should make lectures more interesting, and interactive. Department of Medical Education should train faculty in teaching methods.</li> <li>8. Senior faculty members should attend the lectures of junior faculty, and give feedback to them.</li> <li>9. Giving marks in internal assessment should reward good attendance.</li> <li>10. The existing rule of minimum 70% attendance necessary to appear in final examination should continue.</li> </ol>

5	Proxy attendance	4	System of biometrics using electronic thumb printing system should be introduced to record attendance.
6	Lenient behavior of the faculty towards issues related to academic integrity	4	Group discussions should be held among faculty members to correct their fear of becoming unpopular, or getting adverse feedback from students.
7	Sanctions include fine on the students	4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fine should not be included in the sanctions for lapse of honest behaviors because it is additional burden on parents, and students are not affected by it.</li> <li>2. The result of phase 2 of the study about recommendations of level of sanctions could be used as a guide by committee developing code of conduct.</li> </ol>
8	Cheating in exam	4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mobile phone electronic jammers should be used in examination area.</li> <li>2. Closed circuit television monitoring should be done during examination to detect cheating, and monitoring vigilance.</li> <li>3. Invigilators should be made aware of methods used by students to cheat, and trained in invigilation.</li> <li>4. Stricter enforcement of punishments</li> <li>5. The incident and punishment awarded should be communicated to the parents.</li> <li>6. Students before final examinations should revisit the rules and regulation of examination.</li> </ol>
9	Copying assignments	3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Electronically submitted assignments / articles should pass through plagiarism detection software.</li> <li>2. Assignments submitted in paper format e.g. Logbooks, history taking copies, practical journals etc. should be destroyed after assessment at the end of academic year.</li> <li>3. Assignments done during practical like in practical notebooks should be checked at the end of practical period.</li> </ol>
10	<p>Induction/ selection of students</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In selection of students attitudes towards integrity and honesty are not given due weightage.</li> <li>2. There is different process and criterion of admitting different categories the students.</li> </ol>	2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The process of admission should be standardized.</li> <li>2. One component of admission selection process is interview of the students. One member is a psychologist, who evaluates student suitability for military service. If possible he should evaluate the student with regard to his attitudes towards integrity and honesty. More weightage should be given to his assessment, in selection process.</li> </ol>
11	Repeated offenders	2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There should be a system to identify such</li> </ol>

			students. 2. There should be student-counseling cell to find the issues related to such students who are repeated offenders, and help them.
12	Use of personal connections and networking to get academic advantage	1	There should be equal number of external examiners and internal examiners. The weightage in assessment of all examiners should be equal.

\* Each focus group consisted of 6 members. The members in each focus group were: (1) Two senior faculty members, (2) Two junior faculty members, and (3) Two students.

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