

Academic Integrity: Perceptions and Practices among Prospective Teachers

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Received: 20-01-2026

Revised: 03-02-2026

Accepted: 18-02-2026

Published: 03-03-2026

ABSTRACT

Academic integrity is a core value in higher education. It shapes how students think, learn, and act in their academic life. This study explored how prospective teachers understand and practice academic integrity in their daily academic work. A qualitative research design was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen prospective teachers enrolled in BS Education programs at the University of Sargodha and the University of Education. The interview protocol was built around seven areas: the meaning of academic integrity, fairness and honesty, originality, responsibility, trust, respect, and courage. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis. Eight main themes emerged from the data. These were: honesty as the base of academic integrity, fairness in giving equal treatment, originality and the growing role of artificial intelligence, responsibility toward institutional rules, trust as a foundation for group work, respect shown through acceptance of feedback, courage to speak up against wrongdoing, and the need for structured guidance on research ethics. Findings showed that prospective teachers have a fair and, in many cases, a fairly detailed understanding of academic integrity, but their practice is not always consistent with their understanding. Attitudes toward dishonesty were also influenced by peer pressure, fear of consequences, gender, and the rapid development of artificial intelligence tools. Instead of formal rules, the study suggests that teacher education programs focus more on hands-on experience with academic honesty and appropriate technology use. This study contributed to the limited qualitative literature about academic integrity of prospective teachers in Pakistan.

Keywords: academic integrity, prospective teachers, honesty, artificial intelligence, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Academic honesty is defined as the ability to be honest, fair, and responsible with academic work (Bretag et al., 2019). It includes aspects of how students can compose assignments, take examinations, participate in groups, and incorporate the thought and labor of other students. Academic integrity is more than not cheating. It also involves developing student trust with the instructor(s) and respecting the property of others (International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2021). Prospective teachers play a special role in the discussion. Their generation is our children, our generation is their teachers. Their current academic integrity understanding and practice will impact their students later on (Akbar & Picard (2020).

In recent years, cheating, more commonly referred to as academic integrity, has become a growing problem for universities around the globe. With the convenience of the Internet, online notes and, now, AI tools,

students can now easily copy another student's work or simply plagiarize without acquiring the credit (Newton 2018; Perkins, 2023). Many students may not have a full grasp on what constitutes dishonesty. The social and psychological differences between what students know and what students do is a critical research area to be investigated (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010).

Most of the existing research on academic integrity uses surveys and questionnaires. The studies are useful in determining attitudes of large groups of students, but it is not always possible with these studies to give a valid reason for student attitudes and the actions. Qualitative research can be of assistance here. It gives students a chance to tell in their own words what academic integrity is to them and how they demonstrate it in real-world situations (Stone, 2023).

The findings presented in this Study stem from a collection of interviews that were conducted with prospective teachers as part of a larger PhD study involving academic integrity, perceptions, practices, and their impact on prospective teachers' attitude towards learning. Whereas the main project made use of a survey to gather data from a large sample, this Study covers only the qualitative interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to look more closely into the understandings of a sample of potential teachers as they practice the various principles of academic honesty, fairness, originality, responsibility, trust, respect, and courage. In order to maintain confidentiality of the participants no real names appear anywhere in this Study. Data from each participant is recorded with case number only 1 through 15.

The aim of this paper is to address the following research questions:

1. What is academic integrity and how is it understood to prospective teachers?
2. How do prospective teachers practice academic integrity in their daily academic work?
3. What ethical difficulties, dilemmas, or conflicts could arise for prospective teachers as they strive to be academically honest?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Meaning of Academic Integrity

Academic integrity can be traced back to the ancient days of academic education, when scholars were expected to display honesty and care in their work (Fishman, 2024). However, this notion of academic integrity became a formal component of institutional quality assurance in universities as the landscape of education expanded and research became increasingly international (Macfarlane et al., 2014). The term “integrity” is derived from the Latin word’s “integer” and “integritas”, which mean whole or complete. Integrity can be described as the action and ideas of an honest individual, wherein his or her conduct matches his or her values (Macfarlane et al., 2012). As per the ICAI (2021) academic integrity is defined as the responsibility of teachers, students, and researchers to demonstrate honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Courage is frequently included as the sixth value; it requires a courage to stand by the values when this is not easy (ICAI, 2014).

The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity

Honesty is the base value. It involves being honest in assignments, examinations and research and referring to the originator of an idea (Bretag 2016). Trust follows from honesty. Students and teachers are being honest with each other over time, and as they become each other's trust funds, they are able to work together and share ideas (McCabe & Butterfield, 2012). A fair approach ensures that all children are treated equally,

that no one child is pushed to the forefront of learning and that all measures of learning are based on the same criteria (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005). Respect involves: giving each other respectful opinion and respectful work, listening to the opinions and feedback of others, and accepting that others think differently (Sefcik et al., 2020). Responsibility involves knowing and enforcing the rules of the institution, getting things done on time and being accountable for one's own actions (Boehm et al., 20). For a student to act on these values, courage is needed, particularly if they observe another student cheating. A student has to demonstrate courage in acting on these values, particularly when he or she witnesses another student cheating (Gallant et al., 2026).

Academic Integrity among Prospective Teachers

Research on prospective teachers indicates that their knowledge about academic honesty has been mixed with what they personally experienced as students. Despite trains to become moral role-models for future students, many preservice teachers are found engaging in academic dishonesty as they themselves are pursuing professional careers, with the discovery by DiPaulo (2022). According to DiPaulo (2022), teacher preparation programs should place greater emphasis upon academic integrity because students not prepared for teaching may be the ones to carry this lack of understanding into their own classrooms. Muhammad and Rabbani (2021) argue that academic integrity is associated with the student's sense of responsibility for his or her own behavior and many students consider academic integrity primarily with respect to examinations, rather than academic work. Saeed (2023) further found that Pakistani undergraduate students have a limited definition of honesty with strong focus on only cheating in exams but not on any other academic activities like group work or plagiarism.

Gender has also been shown as a factor influencing perceptions of dishonesty. Miles et al. (2022) indicate that male and female students may recognize cheating differently, with female students more likely to take it seriously. But peer culture has a part to play as well. Students are less likely to report dishonest behavior by another student if they feel the friend may get upset or feel it is not being fair to the group (Khan and Foltýnek, 2020).

Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity

A current strand of research examines the implications of artificial intelligence tools for academic integrity. A more recent line of research investigates the impact of artificial intelligence instruments on academic integrity. Perkins (2023) suggests that students can now easily create texts at a much faster rate with the help of LLM, which creates new concerns regarding what defines their original work. Cotton et al. (2024) recommend that universities do not have the right to simply prohibit the use of such tools, but rather adopt clear policies for their use, increase awareness of students, and continue introducing and standardizing fundamental lessons on plagiarism and proper referencing. In the current study, these concerns reflect the students themselves, indicating that the use of AI is now a current and everyday matter for prospective teachers and not a policy question.

Research Gap

Most studies on academic integrity in Pakistan and elsewhere rely on closed-ended surveys (Nketsiah et al., 2023; Saeed, 2023). Existing research very rarely asks students about how they grasp and experience these values in their daily lives, or how they think about Artificial Intelligence in their own terms. This Study fills this gap by offering a qualitative and interview lens analysis of the concept and practice of academic honesty as it is perceived and experienced by prospective teachers in Punjab, Pakistan.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories are used as a guide to this study. The first, Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (Kohlberg, 1981) sees people progress in stages from avoiding punishment, obeying rules and finally making moral decisions based on personal values. This theory can also account for the fact that participants in this study who were future educators acted according to rules in order to prevent problems, but others in the study discussed honesty as a personal value related to their future profession.

The second is Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). This theory says that behavior is shaped by three things: a person's attitude toward the behavior, the pressure they feel from people around them (subjective norms), and how much control they feel they have over the behavior (perceived behavioral control). In this study, this theory helps explain why some prospective teachers who understood academic integrity well still hesitated to act on it, especially when peer pressure or fear of losing a friend was involved.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The qualitative, descriptive design was employed for this study. The goal of the study was not to test a hypothesis but to investigate and communicate from the prospective teacher's perspective what they know and do around academic integrity. The interview method adopted was a semi-structured format, as it enables the researcher to have a set of questions but also allows for the participant to then broaden up the answer and explain in detail (Creswell, 2013).

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. In qualitative research this technique would be useful because the researcher has discretion in the type of participant/deeps informant they would select to achieve rich and relevant information about the topic (Patton, 2002). There were in total 15 prospective teachers who participated in the research. All the students were in BS Education (6th/8th semester) at University of Sargodha and University of Education. The participants were from both the urban and rural background and included male and female students providing a broader perspective in the data. Real names have been anonymized by using numbered labels (Participant 1 to Participant 15) throughout this Study in order to protect participant privacy.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Institution	University of Sargodha	8	53.3
	University of Education	7	46.7
	Total	15	100.0
Semester	6th Semester	7	46.7
	8th Semester	8	53.3
	Total	15	100.0
CGPA	3.00–3.49	4	26.7
	3.50–3.74	6	40.0
	3.75–4.00	5	33.3
	Total	15	100.0
Residence	Rural	8	53.3

	Urban	7	46.7
	Total	15	100.0

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researcher. There were seven sections of the protocol, each of which corresponding with the values of academic integrity defined by the ICAI (2014): meaning of academic integrity, fairness and honesty, originality of academic work, responsibility of academic work, trust in academic tasks, respect in scholarly work, courage and initiative. Participants were asked a series of questions, beginning with a brief definition of the value, followed by two questions: What does the value mean to you? What do you believe it has to do with academic integrity? A closing question was given the opportunity of participants giving their broad perception of general cheating in exams and copying assignments, thereby giving various participants the chance to spontaneously cover the topic of artificial intelligence.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were done both in Urdu and English, as used in academic environment in Pakistan. The aim of the project was shared with the interviewee and verbal consent obtained prior to the interviews. Participants were informed that answers would be kept confidential, and that they could only be used for research purposes. Interviews were recorded on tape and then completely transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted thematically in line with the six-step process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes in the data, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up response. Transcripts were read several times and meaningful portions of text were provided a short code. Qualitative codes whose meanings were similar were aggregated into larger themes. The seven sections of the interview protocol served as an initial guideline, but the analysis was flexible and allowed for new themes to emerge throughout the analysis. Themes included discussion about the role of Artificial Intelligence, differences in views on cheating among respondents, and requests for greater structure in future guidelines for research ethics.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the interviews was taken as part of the wider PhD research project. People volunteered to be in the interviews and were informed that they were able to exit the interview as they saw fit. To follow an accepted ethical protocol in the study of human subjects, the actual names of participants have been deleted from this Study and replaced with numbered labels (Participant 1 to Participant 15). The data will be used only for academic activities.

FINDINGS

There were 8 key themes identified based on the data. Supporting quotes from participants are identified only by numbers, and are listed for each theme below.

Theme 1: Honesty as the Core of Academic Integrity

Almost all respondents related academic integrity with honesty. "It's how honest you are, written by your work, with doing your work. It's all about that," said Participant 1. Participant 2 provided an academically sound definition: "Academic Integrity: 'The integrity and responsibility with which we engage in all forms of academic activity, such as coursework, research activities, and exams. Participant 6 said that academic integrity is comprised of being honest with "everything" that they do while studying, and it "reflects our character as students." Participant 14 emphasized that integrity "reflects what type of student you are" and related it to having trust with students and teachers. Participant 12 agreed that prior to being enrolled in university "academic integrity is just not copying and pasting answers on a test," but now "this is more than that, this is about assignments, this is about presentations, this is about research, and now this is even about attendance." These responses reveal that, potential teachers view honesty as part of academic integrity, but that this view of honesty is a basis and not just one aspect, and that this view of honesty grows throughout the way of study and advances academic integrity.

Theme 2: Fairness as Equal Treatment

Fairness was generally interpreted as the creation of the equal opportunity and equal treatment for all. Participant 4 actually stated the definition of fairness orally: "Fairness is the opportunity to learn equally to all your students." Participant 1 related fairness to seeking for help with honesty, instead of quieting it: "If you are not getting any content then you should not take anyone's help, we should tell the teacher, we should be fair". Participant 13 responded, "fairness is treated equally with everyone, regardless of their gender, background or academic performance" and Participant 9 added, "fairness is evaluated on performance, not on personal preferences." Participant 3 discussed how being true to the source when doing research, including books, articles or teacher, was related to being fair. These answers imply that fairness in relation to others is the reason teachers give for using external information sources and that fairness is linked to the keeping of it with integrity.

Theme 3: Originality and the Growing Role of Artificial Intelligence

Originality was defined by the majority of participants as being able to produce work without the support of others or external influence, which yielded the most recent and prevalent information in the results of this study as no specific question about originality was asked directly, many participants responded to the concept of AI. Originality was clearly explained by Participant 1: "If it is a written task, we did it ourselves, we can state that we did the task ourselves." After reading books and sources of information, Participant 9 said that originality is work reflects on our own learning and analysis.

The first thing that came up was about artificial intelligence, Participant 5 pointed out that "these days, students don't look for originality when they do their work, they look more for the help of AI. Adding that, "The use of AI is not wrong, but if they just copy the answers, it's wrong." Indeed, several of the newer participants picked up on this concern and elaborated upon it considerably. Participant 6 responded to the question by saying that students should be allowed to use AI tools to gain a grasp of a topic, and that the final explanation should be in their-our words and in their own way of thinking. Participant 8 concurred that using AI can be helpful for "getting ideas or understanding hard concepts" but emphasized that students "should never submit work that has been generated by AI without some sort of review of it, understanding, and rewriting it in their words." Participant 13 added that, "If it becomes the sole means of teaching and learning, this will take away creativity and critical thinking from learners;" and Participant 15 said that, "When AI is employed without self-revaluation and rewriting, it will diminish creativity and critical thinking among learners." These responses offer one facet of how originality - a goal, unit, and standard of excellence in the teaching profession - is directly challenged by AI today's prospective teachers, a topic that

was not set forth in the original interview protocol, but was expressed consistently and quite strongly, and yet is very viable in the raw data.

Theme 4: Responsibility toward Institutional Rules

The responsibility was largely related to obedience to teachers' and school's rules. Participant 1 explained about the marking scheme followed by various teachers including for MCQs, presentations, attendance etc. Participant 3 remembered that when “one is in charge” of work they do not do works based on proper research, the presentations would not be good, thus emphasizing the need for them to search articles, visit the library, even go and interview, in order to have good presentations. Participant 6 interpreted responsibility as follows: “Doing things according to the university decisions and standards, to hand in the works on time, to not miss classes, to respect deadlines and if we are wrong, to accept our responsibility, not shift the blame.” Participant 10 reported a link between responsibility and a decrease in dishonesty, stating that “A responsible student plans his work in advance rather than looking for shortcuts at the last moment.” Participant 5 talked about his own custom of saying to a teacher in the class “move my roll number forward, I will not be disturbed during exams. Responsibility, across these responses, was closely linked with external rules established by teachers, although for a number of the newer-in-the-program participants, it related to a sense of self-discipline that extends into the work.

Theme 5: Trust as a Foundation for Group Work

The majority of instances of trust referred to group work assignments and group ideas. Participant 1 responded: “In group activities, we should have faith in our fellow participants: For instance, we should trust the contents of what we found.” Participant 3 mentioned that it was challenging to establish trust across different backgrounds and cultures, but that it was important to allow students to learn from one another and share from one another. “When there is shared responsibility in a group, trust “automatically” increases,” said Participant 10 drawing on experience of working in groups that had some members but not others. Participant 5 described a peer-based responsibility and a system of trust that they developed within the weaker members of the group, in which if a student didn't contribute, he would be warned and if necessary, left out from future group tasks. This indicates that trust between the participants was not a matter of attitude, but of concrete group practices.

Theme 6: Respect Shown through Acceptance of Feedback

Respect was primarily linked to reactions to feedback from teachers. Participant 1 shared that she used to often feel her class was taking teacher feedback amiss but that “over time... in the long term, we have been able to do better in our presentations as a result of the feedback from our teachers, so we have been respectful towards our teachers. Participant 2 related respect to empathy: “Giving value to the work and creating empathy and understanding it. Participant 7 confessed that when she used to see mistakes, “I was disappointed, but today I understand that teachers' corrections led to me to become better.” Participant 9 echoed this change and once believed that when she was corrected it meant she “did not do well,” but now understands feedback as “part of learning.” Participant 5 described respect in a more personal way, saying feedback from a teacher makes him feel “satisfied” because it is meant to help him do better work in the future. From these answers, it is evident that most respondents perceive respect as an aspect of their ability to accept or take in feedback gracefully, and that this act is often an indication of experience.

Theme 7: Courage to Speak Up against Wrongdoing

Courage was among those with the most detailed and emotional responses in the interviews. Participant 1 shared that one occasion a teacher asked a student to stand and then ask her about her recitation of the

definition, which made it obvious the student did not understand. She also noted differences between the sexes in how “cheating” is perceived – girls generally see it as unfair or unacceptable whereas boys she believes would be more likely to accept it or even participate in cheating without objecting.

The other participant, #5, was more personal and conflicted. He mentioned that whenever he sees his classmate cheating then he feels bad because he has been working so hard while his classmate is copying. He was also giving credit to special instructors and teachers whom he can't stand when they caught him cheating on them, due to fear of getting a cancelled Study. Several of the newer folks commented on a middle ground between silence and reporting on a classmate in and out of those two freshests. When it comes to plagiarism in group work, participant #6 said that he “try to encourage my classmates to rectify the plagiarism before handing it in” instead of reporting them. Participant 9 commented that the completed work construct had been for a friend who had requested it, instead of doing the work and having the friend do it, and commented that it also assisted with the long run. This dilemma of wanting to do what is right and stamp out as an aware moral witness and/or jeopardizing a friendship is one of the most pronounced trends throughout the entire data set.

Theme 8: Calls for Structured Guidance on Research Ethics

An unexpected theme emerged when several of the newer participants, on their own, asked for more training and guidance on academic integrity, rather than only stricter punishment. “The universities need to conduct knowledge sessions on plagiarism, ethical use of AI, and research writing more frequently. A lot of students copy work because they are not fully aware of the right way of citing the written work,” said Participant 8. Participant 10 seconded this with a statement of “workshops on plagiarism, referencing and research ethics from the first semester.” Participant 12 expressed objections that “universities should not just enforce rules, but teach students about what they are for, research ethics, referencing and academic writing.” He further stated that students are more likely to comply with rules once they understand the purpose behind them. The theme is that many potential teachers do not believe that the issue of academic integrity concerns simply policing, but one that needs to be actively taught.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that prospective teachers already have a fairly good conception, and sometimes quite a complex conception, of the various values of academic honesty and academic integrity but that these values are influenced by external factors including students' perceptions of peers, fears of the consequences, and the culture of the institution. This attitude discrepancy is similar to subjective norms in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) which states that attitude alone is not enough to predict behavior; other factors, such as how much pressure is experienced from significant people in one's life, also influence behavior. Subjective norms also affected observed behavior along with the personal attitude, as Participant 5 did not want to report the cheating, despite feeling wrong doing with respect to it, and Participant 9 observed the friend cheating but did not confront them but rather guided them away.

The results also relate to Kohlberg's (1981) Theory of Moral Development. Some participants, like Participant 5, exhibited behaviors that were more likely rule-following (closer to the early stages in Kohlberg's model of moral development), driven more towards staying out of trouble or punishment. Some other Participants, like Participant 3 and Participant 14, related honesty with a larger purpose of national development or with one's own character, indicating a more advanced and principled level of moral thought.

The strong and consistent emergence of artificial intelligence as a challenge to originality supports recent concerns raised in the literature (Newton, 2018; Perkins, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). It is fascinating that in this study, the people did not just label "AI as a threat and ban it. The vast majority of the newer participants

spoke of doing something in a middle way using this AI for an understanding of ideas or for enhancement of language, but not to replace one whole student's language or thinking. This aligns with the stance put forward by Cotton et al. (2024), which sparked an intense debate in its time, that universities should instead receive explicit guidance, not blanket bans for telling them how to manage concussion cases after an individual has already contacted a medical professional. This is different from plagiarism in books or online; AI-generated material is more challenging to detect and could be a growing problem in universities in the future.

The gender difference is also consistent with the results obtained in the literature by other researchers, which report that female students are more likely to consider academic dishonesty as a serious offence, while male students are less likely to take it seriously (Miles et al., 202). Implementing a program based on academic honesty likely requires some flexibility to take into account the different reactions of students to the issue of academic honesty, based on gender.

Lastly, the joint requests of participants for more workshops and for structured training instead of only more enforcement indicate that prospective teachers view academic integrity as being learned and taught, rather than simply obeyed or violated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings suggest a few practical steps for teacher education institutions. Academic integrity should be taught as an actively acquired rather than a, and unhelpful, rule printed on a handbook. Group presentations, peer feedback, and in-class discussion of authentic examples of cheating, like those recounted by students in this research, can aid in helping students relate the importance of academic honesty to their everyday academic experience. Second, universities should establish specific and conducive avenues for reporting academic dishonesty without worrying about the potential impact this may have on exam scores or friendships, as this was a chief concern of participants to abstain from reporting academic dishonesty. Third, teacher training institutes must come to a more open conversation on the responsible use of artificial intelligence solutions, in part because students are using them, regardless of the policies, and many of the participants in this research were already beginning to request it themselves.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitation of this study is based on sampling size of fifteen teachers' students who were selected from two institutions of this study region and two institutions of different cities where students were prospective teachers in the region limiting the generalizability of the study. Interviews were also undertaken in both Urdu as well as English with some loss of meaning and some minor changes in meaning during transcription and translation. This study could be expanded to include more participants and/or more provinces and institutions to determine if these themes exist more broadly. Future research may also examine, in greater detail, the use of artificial intelligence by prospective teachers as part of their academic studies as this emerged as a theme in this present study and has received little focus so far.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate prospective teachers' conceptions and implementation of academic integrity through in-depth interviews with 15 participants. Eight themes that were found: Honesty, Fairness, Originality and the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence, Responsibility, Trust, Respect, Courage, and requests for structured guidance on research ethics. Participants showed a fairly strong, and often thoughtful, understanding of what these values mean, but their willingness to act on them, especially courage in the face of wrongdoing, was often limited by fear and peer pressure. Setting the standard of

academic integrity as a moving target, AI continues to assert itself as a threat to originality, prompting the adoption of measures to protect the integrity of the academic process. Teacher education programs must go beyond mere definitions, providing prospective teachers actual opportunities to demonstrate academic integrity in their training and providing explicit guidance for new issues such as AI, and ensuring that these learnings are carried with them to their own future classrooms.

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