

UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR OF STUDENTS ON EXAMS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The unethical behavior of students on exams represents a serious challenge for the education system. This disturbing trend requires immediate attention and the implementation of appropriate measures to raise awareness about the importance of academic integrity and promote ethical awareness among students.

Objective: Examine the unethical behavior of students on exams.

Subjects and methods: The study involved students from the Medical School in Šibenik. Out of the total number of participants, 155 students took part, with 75 (48,4%) specializing in general nursing, and 80 (51,6%) in pharmaceutical studies. The participants completed a questionnaire based on the Šimić Šašić and Klarin model (2009).

Results: The results showed a high percentage of cheating during knowledge assessments. A total of 81,9% of respondents admitted to cheating at least once. In the domain of attitudes towards the acceptability of cheating, 52,9% of respondents agreed that cheating is entirely natural and inherent to human nature. Regarding different grades, fourth-grade students significantly held a stronger attitude toward the acceptability of cheating compared to students from other grades. Regarding reasons for cheating, the most common internal reason, stated by 50,4 % of respondents, was insufficient time for studying, while 49,6% cheated to help a friend, and 49% cheated to achieve good grades. External reasons for cheating, such as weak supervision, were mentioned by 52,9% of respondents, unfairness by 52,2%, and difficulty of the exam by 49% of respondents. Female respondents exhibited more pronounced internal and external reasons for cheating compared to male respondents. **Conclusion:** The research confirmed that academic dishonesty is a routine occurrence among students. The students themselves do not view cheating as ethically wrong and rationalize it in numerous ways.

Keywords: unethical behavior, students, exam

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies attest the alarming increase in student cheating during education (1, 2, 3). Students need to be made aware of academic integrity, and it is essential to raise awareness about how such actions are unethical and dishonest (4). This must be the stance of the entire society, not only teachers and students (5). One of the early researchers on this issue was Bill Bowers, who in his 1964 study provided a definition of academic dishonesty: "students engaging in dishonest behavior, not limited to activities such as plagiarism and cheating" (6). According to Cizek, cheating is defined as intentional behavior that violates an existing rule on a test or assignment, giving one student an advantage over others (7). Academic dishonesty encompasses any deceitful or unjust act aimed at achieving a more favorable outcome on an exam, assignment, homework, or other learning assessment (8). The majority of students consider cheating on exams to be morally acceptable (9). Cizek has categorized cheating into three domains: giving, taking, or receiving information during a test (10). Overall, academic dishonesty becomes particularly concerning when professors, who are guardians of academic integrity and future of students, engage in academic dishonesty.

Cheating on exams refers to students' attempts to answer exam questions using pre-prepared materials (11). Eisenberg distinguishes between active and passive cheating, where students weigh the effort invested against the gains. When they assess that there is a higher risk of getting caught cheating due to better supervision, they adjust their stance towards cheating and conclude that it is inappropriate in that situation (12).

The aim of this study is to examine the prevalence and causes of dishonesty on written exams at the Medical School Šibenik, taking into account overall performance, specialization, and grade level, as well as to highlight the implications that such behavior has on the academic level of the education system. This paper is motivated by the belief that academic dishonesty and all other forms of cheating pose a significant threat to our society and, consequently, to our profession.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

In this study, students from the Medical School Šibenik participated, including 75 (48,4%) respondents specializing in general nursing and 80 (51,6%) students in pharmaceutical studies. A total of 155 respondents (N=155) took part in the study, comprising 24 male respondents and 131

female respondents. The study was conducted from April 6, 2021, to April 28, 2021. It was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Medical School of Šibenik. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms application and, in collaboration with class teachers, distributed to students through Google Classroom. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The study utilized a questionnaire created based on the Šimić Šašić and Klarin model (2009) (with the authors' consent) (9). It was divided into three parts. The first part of the questionnaire included questions related to socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, the specialization the respondent is attending, grade level, and overall performance at the end of the previous academic year. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of a cheating scale, which comprised 17 questions where respondents assessed their agreement with statements about cheating and reasons for cheating on a scale from 1-3; where 1 means never, 2 means 1-2 times, and 3 means more than two times. The third part of the questionnaire was a scale of reasons for cheating, consisting of a total of 26 questions. Eight questions examined attitudes towards the acceptability of cheating, which respondents evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 -

strongly disagree, to 5 - strongly agree. Following this, respondents were presented with a set of 11 questions related to internal reasons for cheating and a set of 7 questions related to external reasons for cheating, all assessed on the aforementioned 5-point Likert scale.

STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS

Categorical data in the study are presented in absolute and relative frequencies. Chi-square tests were used to examine differences in categorical variables, supplemented by the exact Fisher's test if necessary. The Shapiro-Wilk test was employed to test the normality of the distribution of continuous variables. Numerical data are presented with interquartile range boundaries and medians due to the distribution of numerical data that does not follow a normal distribution. Non-parametric methods were used for testing. Mann-Whitney U tests were used to test differences in numerical variables between two independent groups, and Kruskal-Wallis tests (with post hoc Conover) between three or more groups. All reported P values are two-tailed. The significance level was set at Alpha = 0.05. The MedCalc® Statistical Software version 19.6 was used for statistical analysis.

RESULTS

The study examined attitudes of students towards cheating on examinations and their acceptability at the Medical School in Šibenik. When asked, "Have you ever cheated in school?" 81.9% of respondents stated that they had cheated at least once or more. Out of the 155 respondents, 82 (52.9%) agreed or strongly agreed with the

statement that cheating is natural in the domain of attitudes towards the acceptability of cheating, believing it to be inherent to human nature and something to be expected. Additionally, 80 respondents (45.1%) believed that cheating is quite common because there are no serious consequences for the cheater (Figure 1).

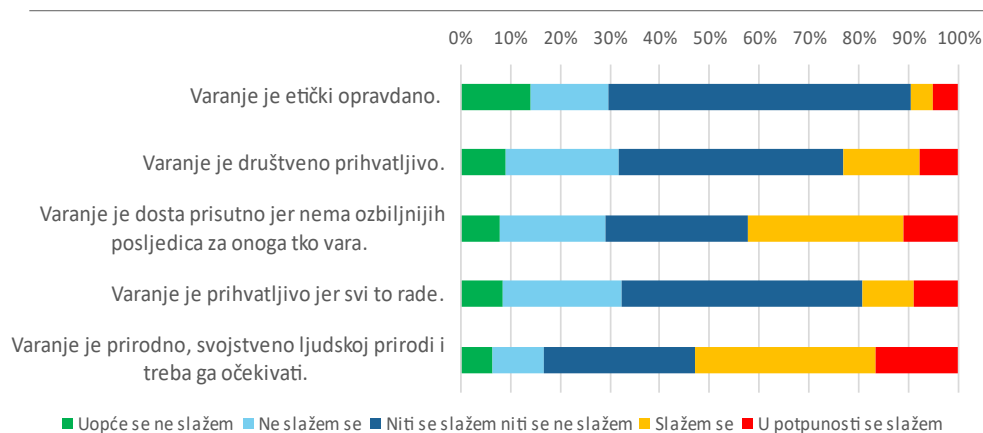


Figure 1. - Distribution of respondents according to attitude towards the acceptability of cheating

Female respondents slightly more agreed that implementing an ethical code in schools would reduce the rate of cheating on exams, while male respondents believed that cheating leads to dishonesty in later careers. However, there was no statistically significant difference. Those who strongly agreed that an ethical code implemented in schools would reduce cheating on exams were students who completed the previous grade with excellent or very good grades, compared to students with good grades, though without statistical significance.

Regarding inappropriate behavior, such as allowing other students to copy from them during an exam, a total of 139 (89.6%) respondents agreed. Similarly, a high percentage was observed for allowing others to copy assignments, with 138 (89.1%) students resorting to this method. Following closely behind were instances of copying from other students in written exams, reported by 125 (80.7%) students, and whispering to other students during oral or written exams, mentioned by 125 (80.6%) students (Figure 2).

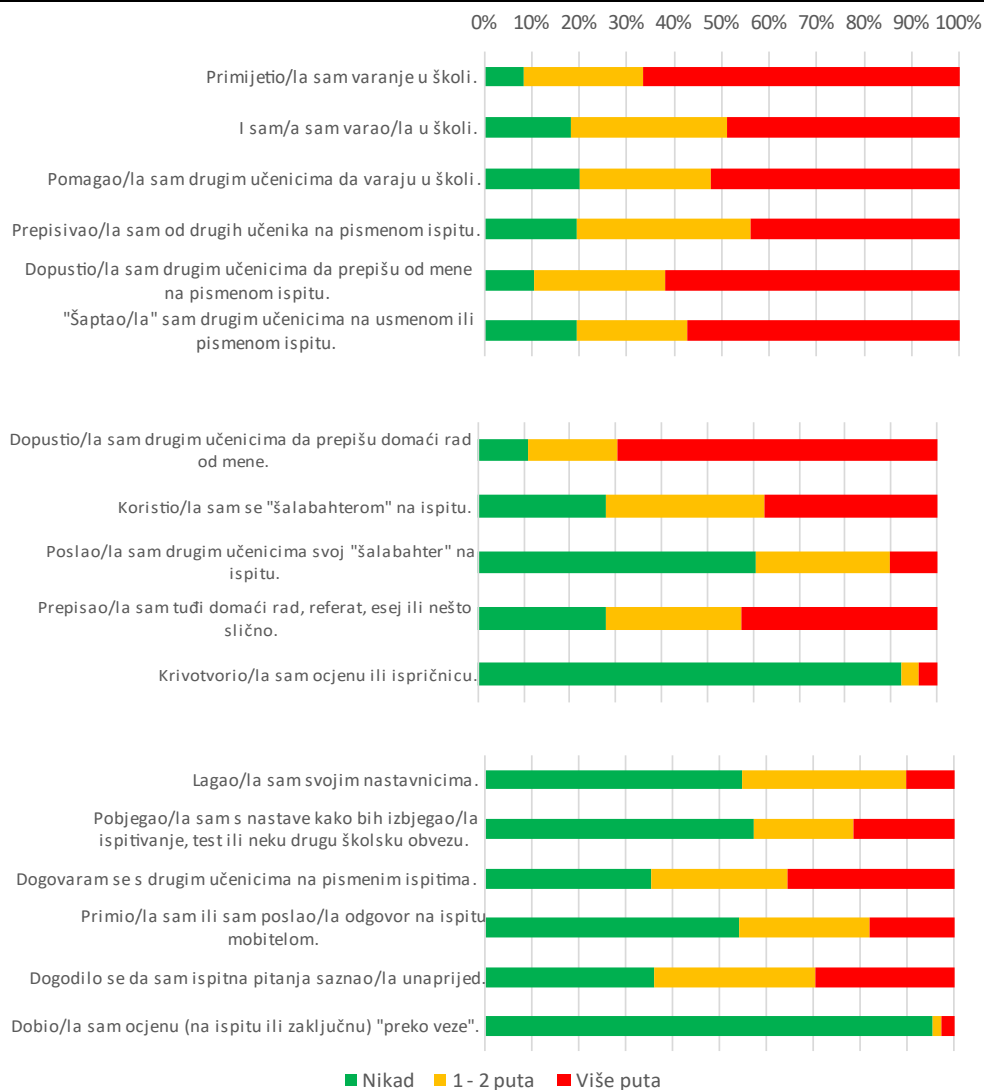


Figure 2. - Distribution of respondents according to cheating in examinations

When comparing general nursing students and pharmaceutical students regarding who lies to their teachers, either never or more than once, pharmaceutical students were significantly more likely to do so compared to general nursing students (χ^2 test, $P = 0.01$).

Regarding obtaining exam questions in advance, 53 (34.2%) students mentioned doing so 1-2 times, while 46 (29.7%)

students did it more frequently. Obtaining a grade through connections was reported by 3 students 1-2 times and never by 4 students. Likewise, sending answers via mobile phone was less frequently used, as reported by 18.1% or more precisely, 28 students. When comparing general nursing students and pharmaceutical students, "obtaining a grade through connections" was reported more frequently by general nursing students compared to

pharmaceutical students (χ^2 test, $P = 0.03$). All of this indicates that students consider these behaviors unacceptable. Arranging with other students multiple times during a written exam was used by 55 (35.5%) students, 1-2 times by 45 (29.0%), and never by 55 (35.5%) students. In the domain of internal reasons for cheating, the most common forms of cheating stem from a desire to help a friend, not having enough time to study, and wanting to achieve good grades. A total of 78 respondents (50.4%) agree or strongly agree with the statement that they cheat because they don't have enough time to study in this study, while 77 (49.6%) agree or strongly agree that they cheat to help a friend. Similarly, 76 (49.0%) respondents agree or strongly agree with the

statement that they cheat in school because they want to have good grades. Meanwhile, 49 respondents (31.6%) neither agree nor disagree with the statement that they cheat because they are too lazy to study, and 51 (33.1%) respondents agree with the statement that they are afraid of punishment if caught cheating in school. The majority of respondents, 78 (50.3%), do not agree at all with the statement that they cheat because other students are better than them, and 73 (47.1%) agree with the statement that they cheat because they can't otherwise get a good grade. Additionally, 52 respondents (33.5%) do not agree at all with the statement that they cheat on exams with a teacher they don't like (Figure 3).

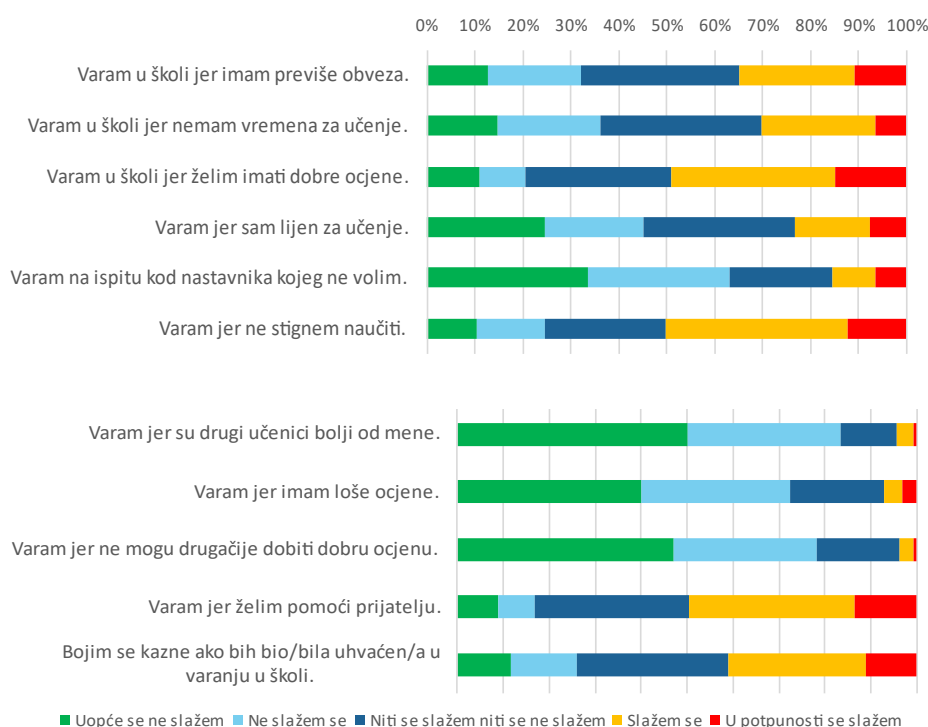


Figure 3. - Distribution of respondents according to domain of internal reasons for cheating

Analysis of external reasons provides us with data indicating that the majority of students engage in cheating when there is weak supervision, if the exam is perceived as unfair, or if it is exceptionally difficult. A total of 82 respondents (52.9%) either agree or strongly agree with the statement that they cheat when there is inadequate supervision during exams. Regarding the assertion that they cheat when the exam is perceived as unfair, 81 of them (52.2%) agree or strongly agree, while 76 respondents (49.0%) agree or strongly agree with the statement that they cheat when the exam is exceptionally difficult. When it

comes to the notion of cheating when the exam is highly important, 53 respondents (34.2%) expressed indifference, and 50 (32.3%) did so when asked about cheating due to poor exam organization. Surprisingly, a significant number of 92 respondents (59.8%) either completely disagree or disagree with the statement that they cheat in school because their parents and teachers expect high grades from them. Additionally, if their seating arrangement allows it, 37 of them (24.0%) completely disagree with cheating, while 47 (30.5%) express indifference (Figure 4).

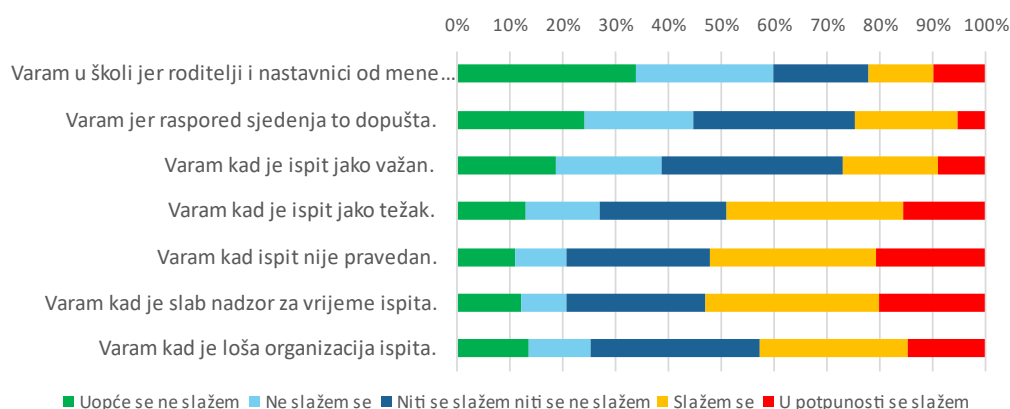


Figure 4 - Distribution of respondents according to the domain of external reasons for cheating

In the analysis of the assessment of attitudes towards the acceptability of cheating and both internal and external reasons for cheating, we arrive at the data that students are more inclined to cheat due to external reasons, which confirms one of the research objectives.

Furthermore, we wanted to determine if the occurrence of cheating is associated with overall performance, field of study, and grade level. There are no significant differences in the assessment of attitudes towards the acceptability of cheating, internal and external reasons for cheating,

based on the field of study and whether it is an initial or final year. Students in the 4th grade significantly exhibit more pronounced external reasons for cheating compared to the 1st, 3rd, and 5th grades. Similarly, students in the 2nd grade show significantly more pronounced external reasons for cheating compared to students in the 5th grade (Kruskal-Wallis test, post hoc Coover, $P = 0.008$), while there is no difference compared to students in the 1st and 3rd grades.

Respondents who completed the previous grade with very good success significantly exhibit the highest internal reasons for cheating compared to respondents with good or excellent success. There is also a significant difference when comparing respondents with good and excellent success (Kruskal-Wallis test, post hoc Coover, $P = 0.004$). Students who completed the previous grade with good success exhibit significantly fewer external reasons for cheating (Kruskal-Wallis test, post hoc Coover, $P = 0.02$).

DISCUSSION

This study provides alarming data on the prevalence of academic dishonesty among students. Almost 82.0 % of respondents admit to cheating at least once. Additionally, over half of the respondents believe that cheating is a natural and

inherent human behavior. Understanding cheating is particularly important given the trends indicating an increase in cheating. The first major study in higher education was conducted by Browsers in 1964, involving over 5000 students from 99 American colleges. It was found that three-quarters of the respondents engaged in one or more forms of academic dishonesty (6). McCabe and Trevino replicated this study 30 years later in 9 schools that participated in Browsers' research, which indicated a modest increase in cheating. However, there was an observed increase in cheating on exams. This could be attributed to a change in the definition of what constitutes cheating (13). In this study, students agree that an ethical code implemented in schools would reduce the rate of cheating on exams, which aligns with the findings of McCabe and Trevino (4). However, the existence of an ethical code and the enforcement of laws alone are not enough; it is the responsibility of the school to instill this ethical code in students. When it comes to the prevalence of cheating on exams, research spanning from 1963 to 1993 shows a clear increase from 39.0 % to 64.0 % (2). The study conducted by Šimić Šašić and Klarin in 2009 led to alarming data, revealing that 92.71 % of high school students cheated at least once (9). According to Hrabak's study, a concerning fact is that 94.0 % of students

at the Medical School cheated at least once during their studies (14). Therefore, cheating is a common occurrence present in all segments of education. As competition for the most desirable positions in the job market grows, so does the incidence of academic dishonesty (2, 6, 15). Dishonesty becomes particularly concerning when professors, ministers, judges, and engineers engage in academic dishonesty. According to numerous studies, dishonesty is more prevalent than ever, and universities need to take appropriate action to educate students about academic integrity (16). Of course, the responsibility is not solely on the students; teachers often fail to react when they catch students cheating on exams (17, 18). The only study conducted among teachers in Croatia was carried out by Štambuk and colleagues. Their results indicate that the majority of teachers agree with the lack of consequences for cheaters. Additionally, it is disheartening that as much as 60% of teachers overlook academic dishonesty (19). A similar claim is confirmed by Coren's research, where 40,3% of professors overlook cheating, mostly to avoid conflicts (20). Teachers are the ones who should create a negative atmosphere towards all forms of dishonesty because they are the most important role models for students (21). Only after teachers do students consider the institution

responsible for preventing cheating, with students themselves being considered the least responsible (22). Many studies indicate that high school is the time when the incidence of academic dishonesty is highest, and this behavior often carries on to further education (9, 18, 19, 23, 24). In a 1992 study, when asked "Is cheating wrong?", about 90 % of students answered affirmatively, indicating that students know it is unfair. However, upon reviewing the results of the actual frequency of dishonesty, of the 90.0 %, a staggering 76.0 % admitted to engaging in academically dishonest behaviors (8). Research based on age shows that younger students cheat more than their older counterparts (13), which is confirmed in this study. Additionally, they cheat more during high school education than college students (18). Students who cheated in high school continue with their cheating habits in higher education (25). Academic dishonesty represents a significant problem in the education system, especially in the field of health education. Since students in health sciences play a crucial role in society and must adhere to high ethical standards, it is important to ensure that their actions are reliable. Research has shown that individuals who engaged in academic dishonesty during their education often exhibit unethical behavior in professional practice.

CONCLUSION

Academic dishonesty is widespread in the educational system, particularly among students in health education. Research confirms alarmingly high numbers: almost 90% of students admit to some form of inappropriate behavior, including allowing cheating during exams. Even 80,7 % admit to copying from other students during written exams. The majority of students cheat when exam supervision is inadequate, and nearly 60.0 % do so due to the expectations of parents and teachers for high grades. These findings underscore the importance of further research and the development of strategies to prevent inappropriate behavior.

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NEETIČNO PONAŠANJE UČENIKA NA ISPITIMA

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SAŽETAK

Uvod: Neetično ponašanje učenika na ispitima predstavlja ozbiljan izazov u obrazovnom sustavu. Ovaj uvredljivi trend zahtjeva nužnu pažnju i poduzimanje odgovarajućih mjera kako bi se osvijestila važnost akademske čestitosti te promicala etička svijest među učenicima. Cilj: Ispitati neetično ponašanje učenika na ispitima.

Ispitanici i metode: U istraživanju su sudjelovali učenici Medicinske škole Šibenik. Od ukupnog broja ispitanika 155 (učenika) njih 75 (48,4 %) je smjera medicinska sestra – tehničar općeg smjera i 80 (51,6 %) učenika farmaceutskog smjera. Mjerni instrument koji su ispunjavali ispitanici je anketni upitnik po uzoru Šimić Šašić i Klarin (2009). Rezultati: Rezultati su pokazali visok postotak varanja na provjerama znanja. Čak 81,9 % ispitanika izjavljuje da je varalo barem jedanput. U domeni stava o prihvatljivosti varanja 52,9 % ispitanika se slaže da je varanje sasvim prirodno i svojstveno ljudskoj prirodi. Gledajući po razredima učenici četvrtih razreda značajno više imaju izražen stav o prihvatljivosti varanja u odnosu na učenike drugih i petih razreda. U domeni razloga varanja, najčešći internalni razlog 50,4 % ispitanika navodi premalo vremena za učenje, 49,6 % jer žele pomoći prijatelju dok 49 % ispitanika zbog želje za dobrim ocjenama. Eksternalni razlozi za varanje poput slabog nadzora navodi 52,9 % ispitanika, zbog nepravdnosti 52,2 % i teškog ispita 49 % ispitanika. Ženske ispitanice imaju izraženije internalne i eksternalne razloge varanja u odnosu na ispitanike muškog spola.

Zaključak: Istraživanje je potvrdilo da je akademsko nepoštenje rutinska pojava među učenicima. Sami učenici varanje ne smatraju etički pogrešnim te ga relativiziraju na brojne načine.

Ključne riječi: neetično ponašanje, učenici, ispit

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