When Does Intellectual Misconduct Start? A Comparative Research among Scholars, University Students and School Pupils

Liviu Papadima

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Abstract: In order to render prevention of intellectual misconduct efficient, the University of Bucharest has conducted a series of empirical studies starting with 2017. Perhaps the most important finding of these researches was the fact that tolerance towards academic fraud is substantially decreasing along the academic stages, from PhD students to MA students and undergraduates. A similar research was initiated among college students in Bucharest. The conclusion was the same regarding the evolution of the attitudes towards intellectual fraud: during school time the tolerance towards academic fraud is even larger than among undergraduates at the university level. Both studies enabled us to reflect on various aspects regarding the way intellectual misconduct is generated in various academic milieus and to establish illuminating correlations between important variables such as gender, level of instruction, study results, studies abroad etc. and the attitude towards intellectual integrity of various categories of respondents.

Résumé : Afin de rendre efficace la prévention de la fraude intellectuelle, l'Université de Bucarest a mené une série d'études empiriques à partir de 2017. Le résultat le plus important de ces recherches est sans doute le fait que la tolérance à l'égard de la fraude académique diminue substantiellement tout au long des étapes universitaires, des doctorants aux étudiants de maîtrise et aux étudiants de premier cycle. Une recherche similaire a été lancée auprès des étudiants des collèges de Bucarest. La conclusion était la même en ce qui concerne l'évolution des attitudes envers la fraude intellectuelle : pendant la période scolaire, la tolérance envers la fraude académique est encore plus grande que parmi les étudiants de premier cycle au niveau universitaire. Les deux études nous ont permis de réfléchir sur divers aspects concernant la façon dont la fraude intellectuelle est générée dans divers milieux universitaires et d'établir des corrélations éclairantes entre des variables importantes telles que le sexe, le niveau d'enseignement, les résultats d'études, les études à l'étranger, etc. et l'attitude envers l'intégrité intellectuelle de diverses catégories de répondants.

Is there a National Strategy of Fighting Intellectual Misconduct in Romania at Present?

Of course there is. One of the most frequent intellectual frauds, plagiarism, has been a very hot topic in Romania during the last decade. The almost sudden interest in this topic started in 2012 with a note in the well-known scientific review Nature about the PhD thesis of the prime minister of Romania at that time, Mr. Victor Viorel Ponta. As some of you might already be familiar with the case, which enjoyed quite a large national and international popularity in the media and in the social networks, I will skip the spectacular details of the immediate consequences of that press note. I am here interested rather in the more general aspects of the matter, as the title of this sub-chapter indicates. The fact is that after 2012 intellectual conduct became a front-line problem in Romanian public space, especially when politicians are nominated to take over important functions in the state, had to face the inquiries of journalists. During this last decade plenty of highly ranked politicians were exposed for having cheated in their official C.V.-s about the courses of study from which they allegedly graduated, the papers they allegedly published or the way they got their academic titles, viz. the PhD.

My colleague Emilia Ş ercan, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Journalism, University of Bucharest, a most effective public investigator of very numerous plagiarisms committed by prime-ministers, ministers, members of the Parliament, judges, prosecutors etc. even published a book about Fabrica de doctorate (''The PhD Factory'') with a very gloomy subtitle, in addition to being highly significant with respect to the magnitude of the phenomenon she investigated: Cum se surpă fundamentele unei naţ ii (''How the Foundations of a Nation Are Dismantled'').

Besides the disputable efficiency of such enhanced vigilance about the intellectual conduct of prominent politicians, several questions regarding plagiarism have been spread in the public space to a larger extent than usual: What is intellectual fraud? How can one identify it beyond 'reasonable doubt'? How severe should such a fraud be considered to be? How should it be punished when evidenced beyond doubt?

Eventually, some other more refined questions emerged, such as: What encourages people to indulge in intellectual fraud? What could / should we do in order to discourage such undesirable behavior?

Nevertheless, the official national policies regarding intellectual misconduct seemed to be primarily interested in finding means of avoiding perpetual public fuss over past faults of present V.I.P.-s. A minister of education nominated a few years ago, previously rector of a provincial small university, declared before his appointment that we should stop chasing plagiarism in obsolete PhD papers, in

order not to depreciate the image of the Romanian academic education, which is otherwise praiseworthy. In response to the harsh criticism caused by his statement, the same minister decided a couple of days after taking his post to decree the obligation of all Romanian universities to introduce special courses of academic ethics and integrity. Strangely enough, these courses were mandatory for students of PhD and MA programs of study, and only optional for undergraduate students enrolled in BA programs.

Later another minister of education offered the universities resources intended to strengthen their reaction to intellectual fraud. A special fund was created by means of which they would digitalize all their PhD papers since 1990 – the year of the fall of communism in Romania – and check them for plagiarism.

In order to be granted access to the money, the universities that issued PhD diplomas from 1990 up to June 2016 were required

> „să elaboreze o strategie proprie de prevenire şi combatere a fenomenului de plagiat şi să demareze activitatea de verificare a respectării eticii şi deontologiei universitare în elaborarea tezelor de doctorat". (ORDIN, 2021, p. 1)

> (to elaborate their own strategy of preventing and fighting the phenomenon of plagiarism and to start the activity of checking the observance of university ethics and deontology in the elaboration of PhD theses.)

According to the same official document, the strategy of reducing intellectual fraud is supposed to be conducted by a specially designed academic structure, established at the level of doctoral schools.

I do not intend to criticize the national policies in Romania regarding intellectual misconduct. Some official decisions in this respect have been bolder than the measures appropriated by the boldest universities in my country – the University of Bucharest included. In June 2016 the Ministry of Education inaugurated an open access platform to publish all the PhD theses in all scientific fields validated from that date on. It was a very potent means for enhancing the transparency of the process of getting a PhD diploma in Romania – a measure which had been previously rejected several times, under various dubious arguments, by the Senate of the University of Bucharest, for example.

What is questionable about this national strategy of managing intellectual misconduct is the fact that it is directed towards its most notorious and therefore annoying aspects – getting an undeserved PhD – and it almost completely ignores the roots of the phenomenon and its widest manifestations.

Intellectual Misconduct in the University of Bucharest: What Do We Know about It?

In 2017 the Ministry of Education started an annual program to encourage projects intended to foster institutional development of Romanian universities. One of the financing lines was dedicated from the very beginning to "îmbunătăț irea calităț ii activităț ii didactice, inclusiv a respectării deontologiei ș i eticii academice" („the improvement of the quality of didactic activity, including the observation of academic deontology and ethics"). Tellingly enough, the weightiest part of the subject occurs in a parenthetical clause introduced by "including"! Nevertheless, the University of Bucharest decided to base the main focus of its application on this presumably marginal topic.

What we have done since then year by year was not only to enhance the awareness of all actors involved in the process of education – professors, students, administrators, decision-makers, etc. –regarding the ethical problems they are facing, but also to try to find out, as accurately as possible, what the situation looks like among our teaching staff and our present and future students.

In 2018 we conducted a sociological inquiry among the members of our academic community, both students and teachers, regarding the tolerance to intellectual fraud.

The survey was implemented by means of an on-line questionnaire, open to the addressees between the 25th of October and the 11th of November 2018. The message sent to participants referred to the goals of the investigation and assured complete confidentiality regarding the identity of the respondents. The questionnaire was sent to 11,040 students and 1,914 teaching staff using the databases of the university. 539 faculty members and 3,608 students responded to the questionnaire. Not all of them answered all the questions in the document – a pretty complex questionnaire, consisting of 36 items, of which 4 open questions required an elaborate answer. The rate of only partial completion of the forms was higher among the students than among the academics. Nevertheless, the lower number of students' answers to certain questions – e.g. "What attracts you personally most in the experience of studying abroad?" – could be compensated by specific statistical algorithms.

The most important finding of the study, among many other interesting ones, was that the PhD level, so intensively debated in the public space, was NOT the most precarious stage in terms of academic morality. On the contrary, the inquiry clearly indicated a gradual decrease of the tolerance for intellectual fraud along the three stages of the academic education in the University of Bucharest. More explicitly, the tolerance for all types of intellectual fraud – blatant plagiarism,

downloading anonymous information from the internet, translating information without mentioning the source, falsifying research data etc. – was larger among undergraduates than among MA students, and was even smaller among PhD students. This was, obviously, good news. It meant that, instead of helping corruption to blossom – finis coronat opus – the academic system had a positive impact on the morality of the students during their study routine. We could not deduce from our study what actually caused this improvement of the moral stance of our students: was it that the internal policies of the university gradually proved their effectiveness or was the selection process the students have to experience whenever they enroll at a higher level the real explanation of the phenomenon? In fact, both alternatives proved to be optimistic. The first reason would tell us that the academic environment has had a positive influence on the development of the character of the students attending university studies. The second variant would inform us that selection was also targeting, explicitly or implicitly, the moral quality of the candidates involved.

Either way, the inquiry initiated by the University of Bucharest led to one conclusion: if we want to educate students for truth and dignity, we should start from the very moment they join the university. Focusing on PhD means accepting that the majority of our students would graduate from the BA or the MA level convinced that they could arrange their way in life by cheating.

Intellectual Misconduct during School Studies

The yearly system of applications for public grants geared towards institutional development enabled the University of Bucharest to consolidate a large and competent team of professors capable to cope with academic ethics both in terms of teaching and of research. We have also had the privilege of being able to rely on internal structures founded prior to 2017, structures which had accumulated plenty of relevant expertise in the field of academic ethics and integrity. A Center of Research in Applied Ethics has functioned in the Faculty of Philosophy since 2004, with a highly productive international collaboration – among others, with Oxford University. The Commission of Ethics of the University of Bucharest, inaugurated in 2012 according to the requirements of the Education Law issued in 2011, was confronted from its first days with the huge public scandal stirred by the blatant plagiarism in the PhD thesis of the Romanian prime minister of the time. The head of the commission that managed to resist the crushing political and media pressure at that time, professor Marian Popescu, later created the CARFIA, "Centrul de Acț iune, Resurse, Formare pentru Integritate Academică" (Center for Action, Resources and Training for Academic Integrity).

Relying on a strong team of experts, every year the University of Bucharest could thus enlarge and deepen the scope of its actions in the field of academic

integrity. One of the main directions pursued with determination and remarkable results was the tightening of the connections with the pre-university level of education with respect to intellectual conduct. Our team has organized plenty of events involving academics, on the one hand, and school pupils and teachers, principals, inspectorate and ministry officers, on the other hand, in order to foster high ethical standards in secondary education institutions.

The most relevant enterprise in connection with the topic of the present paper was a second sociological inquiry, this time carried on among the students of the Bucharest secondary schools, grades IX to XII.

For this purpose we used an on-line questionnaire that was almost identical to the one addressed to the students of our university, in order to make possible an accurate comparison of the findings.

> "Chestionarul a fost deschis de 10244 persoane, 5790 au început completarea lui, însă numai 2975 l-au completat până la final. Timpul de completare este relativ scăzut, de aproximativ 7 minute, în medie. Această situaţie de renunţare la completarea chestionarului poate fi, de asemenea, un indicator de interes scăzut acordat temei, iar rezultatele îngrijorătoare cu privire la acest subiect pot fi la un nivel ş i mai ridicat luând în calcul renunţ area la completare sau mai mult, dificultatea de a aduna un număr ş i mai mare de respondenţ i."
> (Sandu et al., 2021, 6)

> (The questionnaire was opened by 10,244 persons, 5,970 started to fill in the answers but only 2,975 persons thoroughly completed it. The average completion time was pretty short, approximately 7 minutes. Abandoning the questionnaire may indicate the low interest for the topic and the troublesome results may be even more numerous when we take into consideration this phenomenon and, more generally, the difficulty of getting a larger number of respondents).

The most important finding – even though a predictable one – is that secondary school pupils' tolerance of intellectual fraud is much higher than it is for university students, even at undergraduate level. A somehow curious aspect is that in secondary school, unlike in the university, this tolerance seems not to decrease with each year of study, reaching its highest values in the 10th, the 11th or even the 12th grade. (Sandu et al., 2021, p. 14)

Otherwise most of the correlations noticed in the first study remain valid. Students with better study performances and more involved in educational activities also have better standards of intellectual morality. The good examples set by

teaching staff largely contribute to more adequate study behavior. The existence of a code of ethics in the institution and the degree of students' awareness regarding its content are also relevant factors for improving intellectual conduct. Last but not least, the results showed that students who received detailed guidance and were regularly confronted with the norms of correct conduct had a more positive attitude towards them.

Quite accidentally, the investigation among school pupils also revealed some other possible correlations, which did not emerge from the first inquiry. The research team noticed from the very beginning large differences regarding the pupils' willingness to answer the questionnaire in relation to geographic distribution. A very large percentage of pupils from the 1st district of Bucharest, for example – the wealthiest in the Romanian capital city – responded to our request, while a much lower percentage of responses were received from pupils from the 6th district, the poorest one in Bucharest. Needless to say, the tolerance of intellectual misconduct was considerably greater in the 6th than in the 1st district. Does the socioeconomic status influence the pupils' awareness and attitude towards misconducts? Or should we look for another possible explanation?

Another surprising, 100% contextual finding, was connected to the period when the data was collected. The process had started by the end of 2019 and was resumed in the early spring of the following year, during the lock-down caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. The answers received while all educational activities had been transferred on-line indicate considerably higher tolerance of intellectual fraud, independently of their source – the area, type of school, type of student, etc. These findings were consistent with the results of the international survey carried on by Copyleaks in April 2019 – March 2020 and April 2020 – March 2021 (Copyleaks, 2021).

Conclusions to Be Reached

When?

"When does intellectual misconduct start?" – we have asked this question from the very beginning. The evidence relied upon clearly indicates that it starts neither with the PhD, nor with the final paper of the MA programs or the current exams for undergraduates. It seems that it flourishes mainly in the secondary school and gradually fades away, to a certain extent, in the Academia.

One should nevertheless not ignore that the inquiries I discussed here refer to attitudes, not to facts. Cheating in a written paper in secondary school is definitely not the same thing, in terms of gravity, as cheating on a PhD. The latter has obviously much more important direct consequences than the former. In particular,

as mentioned in the case of the plagiarized paper by Victor Ponta, a PhD in law, has a very high stake, as it makes possible for the "doctors" to avoid a very difficult exam, mandatory in order to enter the lawyers' bar.

The conclusion we should reach, in this respect, is that, in the process of education, more and more young people tend to favor correct behavior, but the ones who fail to do that are liable to more and more severe moral – and gradually even legal – breaches to integrity in their intellectual conduct.

To sum up, the 'when' is hardly relevant in itself. Children entering school at the age of 6 or 7 have no idea whatsoever about 'intellectual property', 'intellectual conduct' etc. To start fighting plagiarism at this level, before they learn to read and to write, seems a little bit ridiculous. Of course, this leads to an even larger question, about the way contemporary schools deal with moral values in general. In Romania and in other former communist countries this is a very sensitive issue, after decades of education focused on the so-called "formation of the new man". The prevailing curricular pattern in present day Romanian education is oriented towards the implementation of skills and competences, while the appropriation of values and attitudes is marginal.

What about the next stage, grades V to VIII?

> "În acelaș i timp, între 30-50% dintre persoanele intervievate incalcă integritatea academică chiar din clasa a IX-a, ceea ce poate semnala că problema începe chiar din ciclul primar" (Sandu et al., 2021, p. 14)

> (At the same time, about 30-50% of the respondents infringe academic integrity as early as their 9[th]grade, which might signal that the problem starts as early as elementary school).

For a strategy of prevention, the question regarding the starting point of its implementation cannot be separated, in my opinion, from the one concerning the way to deal with it. Two aspects should be primarily considered, I think, in early stages of education: the ethics of teamwork and, above all, on the practical level, the proper way to use the internet as a major resource of knowledge.

Why?

The two studies I hinted at seem to reveal very low ethical standards among our students, both in school and in university. Of course, some external comparators – other universities in Romania and abroad, other secondary schools in various places or cultures – would help us to build a more precise definition of what "very low" can mean.

The public pressure on domestic universities and the accumulation of so many outrageous cases among people occupying top positions in present day Romania have led many academics to the conclusion that we need an urgent and firm strategy of finger-pointing in order to separate the 'good' from the 'evil', so that everybody should get what 'they deserve': bene merenti for the 'virtuous', strict punishment for the 'foul' students and / or educators.

But viewing the ones who yield to intellectual misconduct as solely 'guilty' for it is a highly inefficient way to prevent such a behavior. It is much more plausible to interpret such deviant forms of behavior in terms of 'shared responsibility'.

> "In fact, it is valid to ask, when doctoral students plagiarize in their theses, where does the true responsibility lie? Does it lie with the uncommunicative supervisor? Is it the fault of the tempting sharks who offer «made to measure» theses on the Web? Or does this responsibility lie with the university top brass who did not make academic values explicit? How students – or indeed professors – be required to develop a sense of morality or obey «Integrity directives», if the notion of responsibility within their institution has slipped from everybody's grasp?" (Bergadaà, 2021, pp. 66-67)

Students in school and in academia are indeed no 'naturally born cheaters' – at least not all of them. The investigations I mentioned indicate that possible causes of the high tolerance of intellectual fraud, among others, include a poor institutional culture of integrity – unconvincing examples, lack of appropriate information, precarious means of control and prevention, etc.

This is perfectly coherent with Michelle Bergadaà's view on ways that educators could avoid 'normal' PhD students becoming 'deviant' by plagiarizing.

> "A paradigm shift seems vital. It is a matter of getting away from the perspective of plagiarism perceived as delinquent behavior that must be combatted and of opening the door to increased knowledge of prevailing practices of digital scrapbooking. Then, students will be able to produce quality academic work with integrity." (Bergadaà and Peters, 2022, p. 11)

Most probably the interdisciplinary team of our university will direct its future enterprises towards investigating the influence of the organizational cultures of educational units – schools, departments, faculties, universities – on the behavior of their members. We have already gathered useful information during the ethical debates organized with secondary school pupils in 2020. It was amazing how the teen-agers we talked to became extremely interested in moral topics regarding their activities in school as soon as we went beyond the normative approach they were

accustomed to and tried to question, leaning on actual, every-day life situations, the moral premises which underlie the formation of the abovementioned norms.

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