

Perspective of Professional Integrity in University Teachers: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Objective. Teachers play a vital role in our education system. It is important for teachers to have integrity and ethical standards. The present study was conducted to unveil the perception of Professional Integrity in university teachers.

Method. Purposive sample of university teachers ($N = 104$) belonging to different departments were drawn from four public sector universities of Lahore and Islamabad. Their age of university teachers ranged from 25 to 62 years. Open ended questionnaire was constructed keeping in view the previous literature and model about integrity. The questionnaire was administered online due to the outburst of pandemic (Covid-19).

Results. The responses were analyzed by using thematic analysis. Eight themes were derived namely professionalism, honesty, positive attributes, negative attributes, attitude with colleagues, attitude with students, quality of teaching, morality, institutional factors and research integrity.

Conclusion. The study revealed various factors that influence teachers' integrity. This study has implications for the universities to enhance professional integrity in teachers. Teachers can be trained incorporate professional integrity in their academic journey.

Keywords. *Professional, integrity, morality, quality teaching, research, university teachers.*



Introduction

The development of a state is deep-rooted in its education system. The more the quality of education the better the next generation of the country will be. Education system has gained a lot of importance in Pakistan in the past few years but the problems in its infrastructure and quality of education still prevails. Unfairness, discrimination, dishonesty and false claim of degrees and expertise are also the common problems that are ignored. Moreover, fraud and corruption in the education system of Pakistan is a major hurdle for teachers to act professionally, therefore professional ethics and integrity should be focused to promote professionalism (Amir et al., 2020).

When talking about the upgradation of the education system the individuals who have the utmost responsibility are teachers. A teacher should be sufficiently motivated and committed to duties to effectively operate an institution to promote educational development. Values, morals, ideas, management, and behaviour are the current issues in teaching as they are linked to the surrounding changing needs of the institute as well as the society and to cope with this professional integrity is the chief characteristic of the teaching profession (Toom, 2017).

Professional integrity is to take up the profession of teaching honestly and responsibly. It deals with issues like cheating, fraud, moral values, plagiarism, injustice, unfairness and facilitation of the acts of dishonesty by others (Peters, 2019). Hinman (2002) is of the view that integrity comprises of five principles, i.e., honesty, responsibility, trust, respect, and fairness. Nillsen (2005) states that integrity means to accept the reality without any personal interest in the outcome. It is accepting the situation as such without manipulating it. Professional commitment to duties and organization is also the contributing factor of integrity (Micheál Ó Gríofa & Tomás Ó Ruairc, 2012). Moreover, Banks (2010) asserts that integrity is a multifaceted term. It does not only indicate how committed a person is but also focuses on person's character, competence, morals and the ability to honestly reflect upon things. It is the foundation of a person's character. A person with high integrity has a flawless character in every aspect of life as every action and decision is based on fairness and honesty.

Barnard et al. (2008) have defined Professional Integrity as *“a multifaceted and dynamic construct based on a moral foundation and inner drive that is managed by cognitive and affective processes manifesting various integrity-related behaviours (pp. 1).*

The theoretical framework of Professional integrity is based on five themes. The first theme is foundational derives of integrity which has the category of moral compass and inner derive. Moral compass is part of integrity that is based on the internalized set of moral values and norms that a person has. The category of inner derive has personal motives, needs, and goals. The second theme is authenticity which refers to being honest, straightforward, true and genuine at intrapersonal and interpersonal level. The third theme is functions of integrity which has the categories of cognitive function of integrity and affective function of integrity. Cognitive function is the understating of norms and principles and their application in different circumstances while affective function of integrity includes conscience and self-regard. Conscience is evaluation of one's behaviour against the moral values and self-regard is to feel rational and positive about oneself. The fourth theme is competencies of integrity which includes behavioural manifestation of integrity. Competencies of integrity are self-motivation, assertiveness, honesty, consistency, commitment, self-discipline, responsibility, trustworthiness and fairness. The fifth theme is developmental context of integrity which reflects that integrity is developed over time and is influenced by ones upbringing.

Previous literature shows few other factors that are associated with professional integrity which are discussed further. The first factor is quality of teaching in academia which refers to the quality of education that is maintained and not compromised. It includes effective content delivery (Ofojebe & Ezugoh, 2010), time management, punctuality and regularity (Sahito et al., 2016), and expertise of the teaching staff who can deliver the content effectively (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Azer (2005) has reported that integrity is a central aspect of quality of teaching. High integrity of teachers has a positive impact on students and creates an environment of honesty and fairness.

The second factor is student-teacher relationship which has a long lasting effect on students' academics as well as on their well-being. Support and guidance by teachers can create an environment that can enhance academic achievement, dignity and self confidence in students (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2018). Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004) is of the view that all the decisions in an educational institution should be based honesty, fairness and justice to promote integrity.

A teacher should not be biased for students in terms of assessment of grades, assistance, and behaviour as it affects their confidence, self-esteem, worth and capability (Arasli & Tumer, 2008). Similarly, discrimination due to personal bias lowers self-respect of students and makes them inactive. Teachers should be trained to maintain equality and fairness in class which will increase professional integrity (Aydogan, 2008).

The third factor is morality in teachers which is the basic foundation of integrity. Buzzelli and Johnston (2001) define morality as a *“set of a person’s beliefs and understandings which are evaluative in nature: that is, which distinguish, whether consciously or unconsciously, between what is right and wrong”* (p.876). According to Halfon (1989), integrity is the pursuit of moral life. It reflects a person’s dedication towards moral values. Moral commitment is considered a prerequisite for having integrity which means that if a person has moral commitment than he will strictly abide by principles and values and the consistency in following these principles and values will determine his integrity (Vandekerckhove, 2010). Banks (2010) have proposed three levels of professional integrity in which morality is an important aspect. At first level, professional integrity means to morally act good considering the ethical rules and codes. At second level professional integrity is the commitment to one’s identity and moral values. The third level is moral competence in which a person reflects and re-evaluates previously believed ideas and values.

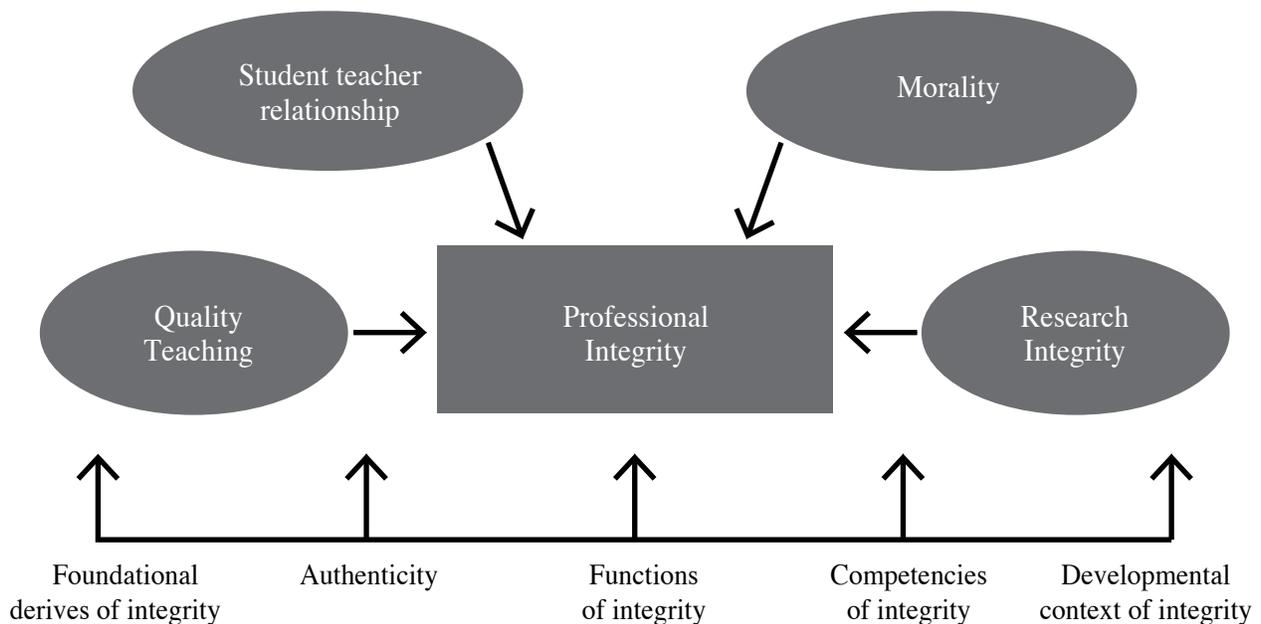
The fourth factor is research integrity which refers to integrity of conducting the research ethically. It is a commitment to the criteria and standards of research as well as the discipline in which the research is being conducted. Research integrity has three elements. The first is the integrity of research practice, i.e., it should be valid and harmless. The second element is the integrity of the researcher. The researcher should be fair and honest and the third element is the integrity of the organization or academics where the research is being conducted. The organization should be trustworthy and have a good reputation in conducting researches. All these elements contribute to integrity of research and are inter related with each other (Banks, 2010).

Academic publication is an imperative area in education. Academic success is deeply rooted in the number of publications these days as the Higher Education Commission demands faculty to publish articles for promotions and recognition. Due to increasing demand of research and publication teachers are in a continuous struggle to publish more and more articles in less time which in return is affecting the integrity of the research.

The most prevalent issue is of authorship. Researchers who have actually contributed in the study are not recognized as authors (Bavdekar, 2012). Another issue in educational research these days is supervisor-student authorship which needs attention. The differential power between the student and the supervisor create problems when articles have to be published. The student is fearful to write his name as the first author as the supervisor is more superior and is in a more powerful position. In some cases, the supervisors take advantage of students’ dependency and publish their dissertations work as first authors (Rose & Fischer, 1998). As a result, the students receive less credit and recognition at the forum of research which negatively impacts their career (Oberlander & Spencer, 2006). When talking about research, plagiarism is also a common academic activity which is an unethical activity and a hindrance to professional integrity. The academic community should be cautious in identifying plagiarized work (Shahabuddin, 2009).

Keeping in view the framework of professional integrity (Barnard et al., 2008) and previous literature the above-mentioned factors were linked with professional integrity. The four themes namely, functional derives of integrity, authenticity, functions of Integrity and competencies of integrity given in the model were associated with each of the factors. The fifth theme developmental context of the integrity was not the focus of the study.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of Professional Integrity



Rationale of the study

Pakistan is an Islamic country. Values, policies and strategies of teachers as well as the institutions should be in the light of Islam. Honesty, moral values, fairness and justice in order to save our cultural and religious values should be the focus universities (Mushtaq & Mustafa, 2021). Teachers play a foremost role in instilling ethical and moral values in students so it is important that they are honest, fair and follow ethical standards. If they themselves have high integrity only then they can transfer good values in students (Harrison & Walker, 2018). Higher Education commission (HEC) is also focused for the betterment of education and facilities provided. Moreover, HEC has also developed strict polices for recruitment of teachers to improve the quality of education (Bibi & Khan, 2018). Keeping in view the importance of education and problems that are prevailed, this study was conducted to explore the phenomena of professional integrity in university teachers and to identify the factors that determine professional integrity positively and negatively.

There is lack of literature and research on professional integrity so the focus of this study was to explore the construct from teachers' perspective. These days the integrity of teachers have become questionable as it is hard to fine dedicated, honest and fair teachers. False claim of expertise, lack of quality in education, poor student-teacher bonding and false research are the growing problems in academia which are affecting professional integrity of teachers (Ahmad et al., 2014).

To address these controversies the present study was conducted to explore the perspective of university teachers about professional integrity. This study focuses on teachers that how they view professional integrity and what are its key factors.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the perception of professional Integrity in university teachers
2. To investigates the underlying factors of professional integrity.

Method

Sample

One hundred and four university teachers (51 men and 53 women) belonging different departments were drawn from four public sector universities of Lahore and Islamabad through purposive sampling technique. The age of university teachers ranged from 25 to 62 years. Teachers were of various designations namely lecturer (27.9 %), assistant professors (46.2%), associate professors (14.4%) and professors (11.5%). Teachers belonged to the departments of Psychology ($n = 14$), Biology ($n = 10$), Chemistry ($n = 12$), Physics ($n = 10$), Political science ($n = 11$), Mass communication ($n = 10$), English ($n = 12$), Computer Science ($n = 13$), and Economics ($n = 12$).

Research Tool

Demographic information. It included information about gender, age, designation, educational qualification, the discipline they belong, the subject they teach and number of publications.

Open Ended Questionnaire. It was constructed keeping in view the literature and model to uncover the construct and perception of professional integrity in university teachers. Open ended questionnaire was preferred over close ended because the aim was to gather vast information that reflects the key elements and underlying factors of professional integrity. The questions were related to characteristics of teachers of high and low professional integrity, factors that risks professional integrity, central elements of quality of teaching, the role of morality and the importance of integrity related to research. Some of the questions asked were what are the characteristics of teachers with high professional integrity? In your view what are the factors that put professional Integrity of teachers at risk? How would you view a teacher who put his or her name as first author on article based on students dissertation? How professional integrity is related to quality teaching?

Procedure

Due to the situation of pandemic and lock down of universities, the questionnaire was administered online. Consent from the head of departments of different disciplines of four public universities was taken via email. The questionnaire was forwarded to heads and their faculty university teachers via email. The written responses of the participants on the open ended questionnaire were analysed.

Ethical Considerations

The confidentiality and the welfare of the participants were protected. Informed consent was taken from the participants and they were also given the freedom to drop out from the study at any time.

Data Analysis and Results

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. It is a technique used for texts such as transcripts of interviews, focus groups or survey responses. It helps in understanding people's ideas, knowledge and experiences from a set of qualitative data. One of the drawbacks of thematic analysis is that it is subjective in nature.

It is dependent upon the researcher's judgment; therefore an unbiased analysis should be done. It can be used on large set of data and is helpful in discovering a new phenomenon. There are two approaches in thematic analysis. In inductive approach the data determines the themes. Coding is done without any pre-existing theory. Deductive approach is theory driven in which the researcher has some preconceived themes he expects to find based on pre-existing theory or knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study followed the deductive approach.

At first step the data was familiarized by reviewing the content of responses repeatedly. Common ideas and repetitive content was viewed. At second step, coding of the content was done to summarize the data. Similar codes having the same underlying meaning were grouped together to form themes. To avoid any biased judgment the content was also provided to the experts. The coding and themes of data was reconfirmed to avoid any biased judgment.

Discussion

The themes derived from the analysis of data were Professionalism, Honesty, Positive attributes, Negative attributes, Attitude with colleagues, Attitude with students, Quality of teaching, Morality, and Research integrity.

The theme of Professionalism included ethical behaviour, ethical decision making, recognition of responsibility and commitments. University teachers were of the view that teachers who strictly follow rules and regulation of the institute have high integrity. One of the teacher reported, "*It is acting in accordance with the ethical and moral standards of the university*". Another teacher said, "*it is being committed to duties and making ethical decisions*". Literature also shows that ethical decision making is associated with integrity. Gaikwad (2011) asserts that a teacher who performs all the required tasks and takes decisions ethically have high integrity. Recognition of responsibility and commitment in integrity is also in line with the previous literature (Micheál Ó Gríofa & Tomás Ó Ruairc, 2012). Honesty was the second theme derived. Honesty included truthfulness, faithfulness, objectivity, and sincerity in all aspects of teaching. Hinman (2002) has listed honesty to an important aspect of integrity. Similarly, Peters (2019) also reported that individuals with integrity are fair and honest in their professional and personal relationships.

The theme of positive attributes had list of all positive characteristics which respondents perceived to be present in teachers with high integrity. This included sincerity, dedication, creativity, hard work, humbleness, proficiency, consistency, patience, tolerance, reliability, credibility, vigilance, assertiveness for an immoral act, selflessness, motivation, and passion. All these attributes are in line with the prior literature. Nilsen (2005) state that integrity is selfless as it is to submit oneself to the surrounding reality selflessly without any personal advantage in the outcome. Moreover, Brown and Treviño (2006) asserted that empathy, reliability, humbleness, and patience are the foundations of integrity. The theme of negative attributes had list of all negative characteristics which respondents perceived to be present in teachers with low integrity. This included greediness, ego, impassion, insincerity, dishonesty, arrogance, rudeness, lack of commitment, unethical behaviour, inconsistency, lack of hard work and responsibility and poor decision making. Micheál Ó Gríofa & Tomás Ó Ruairc, (2012) reported that lack of responsibility, poor commitment to duties, dishonesty, and unethical acts are few of the characteristics of people with low integrity. One of the teachers stated, “*a teacher with low integrity is corrupt, has lack of commitment and is not loyal with his profession, the institute and the students*”. Attitude with colleagues was the fifth theme. Teachers with high integrity are collaborative, good at team work and they respect differences with colleagues as reported by Brown and Treviño (2006) that teachers with high integrity can be trusted upon by others as they are good in collaborative work, they respect their co-workers and they disagree with respect without humiliation. Attitude with students was the sixth theme. Teachers reported that university teachers who act as mentors, are unbiased, are helpful and supportive, and are concerned for students’ academics and well-being are teachers with high integrity. Evidence show that positive student-teacher relationship has resulted in students’ good well-being, and also students are more satisfied with their institute and the educational system (Moscardini, 2015). Bartholomew et al. (2018) have reported that students are more eager to come to school if the teachers are cooperative and the most important unbiased. Quality of teaching was the next theme. Teachers with high integrity were considered to have high quality teaching as reported by Azer (2005).

It consisted of upgradation and implication of knowledge, deep understanding of content, conceptual clarity, expertise in subject, completion of course on time, organized and well prepared lectures, regularity, punctuality and student centred learning. Sahito et al. (2016) concluded that time management, competence in the subject and punctuality and regularity are the essentials of high-quality teaching. Similarly, Ayodele and Ige (2012) found that effective’ time management directly improves academic performance of the students. One of the teachers reported, “*A teacher should have understanding of the content and should have practical implication of knowledge*”. The next theme was morality of teachers. Teachers reported that university teachers with integrity have high moral values. Their behaviour and acts are based on morals. Past literature indicates that morality is a prerequisite for having integrity (Vandekerckhove, 2010). The last theme derived was of research integrity. Teachers were of the view that plagiarism, fake publications and unfair authorships are the current issues in research. Past literature also indicates that academic fraud and unethical practices like plagiarism have increased in the past decade globally (Glick, 2001). Marušić et al. (2011) has reported that authorship is given to that researcher who has not contributed much in the study and is only entitled as an author on the basis of his leadership and authority.

The above themes describe the construct of professional integrity and also reflect the model of Professional Integrity. The foundational derives of integrity having moral compass and inner derive which can be seen in professionalism, attitude with colleagues and students, morality and quality teaching. Teachers goals, motives and morals will keep them professionally and ethically committed. They will maintain good relationship with colleagues and students and will also focus on quality teaching and research integrity. Authenticity which is honesty, being true and genuine is applicable on all the derived themes of the study. A teachers needs to be authentic in his profession, attitude, moral values, quality teaching and research. Without authenticity a teacher has low integrity (Peters, 2019). Moreover, function of integrity is reflected in the themes. Understanding of principles and norms (cognitive function) and the need to evaluate oneself against moral values (affective function) is important for teachers for their professionalism, attitudes, quality teaching and research.

Competencies of integrity which are behaviour manifestation is also reflected. Abiding by the rules, being committed, showing good and bad attributes, displaying good quality teaching, showing morality and by being authentic in research can be demonstrated through behaviour.

From this study professional integrity of university teachers can be defined as “*ethically and honestly abiding by the university rules with high moral values along with good quality teaching and fairness in research*”.

Implication of the study

This study would help teachers to evaluate themselves in terms of professional integrity. Factors that positively affect integrity can be highlighted in educational institutes and factors that risk integrity in teachers should be deeply looked into so that in future they are avoided.

Limitations and Suggestions

Only few factors of professional integrity of university teachers were explored. Data was only taken from public universities. In future researches public and private university teachers can be compared on professional integrity.

Declaration

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Conflict of interest. The authors are well informed and there is no conflict of interest between the authors.

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Availability of data and materials. The data analyzed during the study is available from the corresponding authors on request.

Ethical Approval and Consent to participate. Formal permission was taken from the institutional ethical board to conduct the research.

Competing Interest. The authors have no competing interest

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