



# “It is Not Only About US!”: Investigating EFL Learners’ Perspectives Towards Reasons of Online Exam Cheating

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## Abstract

The evaluation of students in online education poses a notable challenge, primarily due to the potential violation of academic integrity caused by various forms of cheating during online examinations. This study aims to explore the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners on the reasons for online exam cheating. The study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach and included 27 participants from three different educational contexts: universities, institutes, and schools. The qualitative phase of the study involved conducting comprehensive discussions using the Google Meet app, allowing participants to explore the factors contributing to online exam cheating. The results of qualitative analysis revealed three broad categories of reasons for online exam cheating: student-related factors, teaching-related factors, and assessment-related factors, each with sub-themes. Followed by this, a ranking scale was administered to the participants to determine the perceived significance of these categories. The implications of this study can guide the development of interventions and strategies targeting these different categories of reasons, ultimately fostering a culture of academic honesty among EFL learners in online exam settings. Also, this study contributes to understanding the reasons for online exam cheating among EFL learners and provides insights for promoting integrity in online assessments.

**Keywords** Reasons · Online exam · Cheating · Academic integrity · Academic dishonesty · EFL

## Abbreviations

EFL English as a Foreign Language  
ICT Information and Communication Technologies  
AD Academic Dishonesty

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## Introduction

Today, distance education has undergone a significant shift towards online platforms, and the global prevalence of online learning has been greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, there has been rapid progress in information and communication technologies (ICT), which have directly affected various aspects of human life, particularly in the realm of education (Ashraf et al., 2017). As a result of these advancements, e-learning has witnessed a substantial increase in its popularity in recent times and has been widely adopted by educational institutions. However, the assessment process poses a significant challenge in online learning due to the absence of direct control and supervision over students and educators (Noorbehbahani et al., 2022).

Academic dishonesty (AD) is widely recognized as a prominent challenge faced by educational organizations worldwide, irrespective of their national or religious affiliations (Arshad et al., 2021). AD encompasses attempts to gain an unfair advantage through illegitimate means (Benson et al., 2019). It is a pervasive and enduring phenomenon that is influenced by both universal factors and cultural norms, shaping perceptions of what is considered morally acceptable or unacceptable (Martin et al., 2011; Peled & Khaldi, 2013). It entails actions that undermine the principles of academic integrity. As per the International Center for Academic Integrity (2020), academic integrity encompasses a steadfast commitment to six essential values—honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage—even in the presence of challenges or obstacles. Atikuzzaman and Yesmin (2023) assert that AD is widespread, with Jensen et al. (2002) characterizing it as highly prevalent. The extent of its occurrence is often likened to an "epidemic" (Haines et al., 1986), a description that aligns with the U.S. Department of Education's report referring to AD as a "chronic problem" (Maramark & Maline, 1993). It exists in numerous educational institutions, where unethical students engage in activities that disrupt the harmonious learning environment. This behavior not only compromises the reputation of the faculty members but also tarnishes the overall organizational standing (Zalma, 2018). Cheating is undeniably one of the most common forms of academic dishonesty among students (Stoesz, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

Other forms of AD encompass attending classes or taking exams on behalf of another student (Piascik & Brazeau, 2010), outsourcing assignments by hiring individuals to complete assessments (Awdry, 2021; Awdry & Ives, 2020), plagiarism, which involves presenting someone else's work as one's own (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017), incorrect or insufficient referencing of sources, copying assignments from fellow students (Cabral-Cardoso, 2004), falsifying and fabricating information (Bryzgoria, 2022), as well as engaging in practices such as offering donations, gifts, or informal agreements as a substitute for grades, admission, receiving advance questions in exams, receiving preferential treatment, obtaining fraudulent degrees, or manipulating the graduation process (Denisova-Schmidt et al., 2016). The prevalence of exam cheating has reached such a level that Shrivastava (2017) refers to it as an epidemic. Bilen and Matros (2021) further assert that not only is cheating widespread, but it is also perceived as a normative behavior by students. The success of cheating can undermine the credibility of educational institutions and create an unfair advantage for cheaters over honest and diligent students, ultimately harming the learning culture within these organizations (Chala & Agago, 2022).

To ensure the integrity of assessments in online exams, it is crucial to employ both traditional methods of cheating detection and prevention, as well as embrace new digital monitoring and validation techniques (Fluck, 2019). This comprehensive approach

aims to support and safeguard the integrity of the assessment process. According to a study conducted by Watson and Sottile (2010), students exhibit a significantly higher inclination to seek answers from others during online exams or quizzes compared to in-person (face-to-face) settings. Furthermore, cheating in an online setting is considered more convenient when compared to traditional offline exams (Noorbahani et al., 2022). Accordingly, detecting and preventing online cheating is vital for maintaining the integrity of the online assessment process.

The progress of technology and the widespread adoption of online learning have brought significant improvements to education. However, the advent of technology and online learning have also inadvertently made cheating in exams more accessible (Turner & Uludag, 2013). For example, a test-taker might employ a mobile phone to send and receive text messages in order to obtain answers. Although this would pose challenges within the examination room, some individuals could manage to text discreetly without looking at their phones (Noorbahani et al., 2022). Additionally, the utilization of scientific calculators, MP3 players with calculator functions, and wireless devices like earphones and microphones are alternative means that enable cheating in traditional paper-based exams (Curran et al., 2011).

## Review of Literature

### Online Exam

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought distance learning to the forefront. Distance learning, which is also known as e-learning, blended learning, or mobile learning (Zarzycka et al., 2021), involves using technology for learning when there is a physical separation between students and teachers during the process of active learning, instruction, and examination (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic led to the implementation of "lockdown learning" in numerous countries, which lasted for almost two years. This prolonged period of remote learning sparked predictions that higher education would undergo lasting transformations, with online and distance learning becoming significantly more prevalent, and potentially even the new standard practice (Dumulescu & Muțiu, 2021; Stuart et al., 2022). A notable change that could emerge is the widespread adoption of online assessment methods. Online exams provide students with enhanced flexibility, such as the ability to take exams from the comfort of their own homes (Ali, 2021). Furthermore, as put by Patael et al. (2022), the shift to online exams may alleviate some of the anxiety associated with attending in-person exams in a traditional exam hall. Additionally, it has the potential to decrease administrative costs for universities (Ngqondi et al., 2021). However, distance learning presents several challenges when it comes to assessment. Summative assessments, which include exams, play a crucial role in determining individual students' grades and progress, while aggregated assessment results can inform educational policies, curriculum development, and funding decisions (Shute & Kim, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that online summative assessments and exams are conducted in a manner that preserves their fundamental reliability and validity.

## Cheating in Online Exams

The term "e-cheating" or "electronic cheating" is commonly used to describe a form of academic dishonesty that involves the use of technology to electronically copy or utilize material from an unauthorized or uncited source. This can include actions such as straight-forward copying and pasting from the internet or other electronic media without proper attribution (Railean, 2019). Dawson defines e-cheating as 'cheating that uses or is enabled by technology' (Dawson, 2020, p. 4). Cheating itself is then defined as "the gaining of an unfair advantage" (King and Case 2007, in Dawson, 2020, P4). Cheating in an online setting presents a significant challenge to the integrity and validity of online examinations, as this format heavily relies on technology (Noorbehbahani et al., 2022).

When exams are conducted online, students may take advantage of the fact that they are not under direct supervision by instructors, leading to dishonest behavior and instances of cheating (Al Shbail et al., 2022). In the online learning environment, students have the potential to use various means to gain an unfair advantage during exams. For instance, they might rely on their notes, conduct Google searches, or consult other external resources to find answers (Reedy et al., 2021). Additionally, students could utilize teleconferences or social media platforms to communicate and collaborate with others during exams (Al Shbail et al., 2022). These practices raise significant concerns regarding academic integrity when adopting an online learning system.

E-cheating outside of the classroom is facilitated by the internet and the wide range of online resources that are readily accessible (Dawson, 2020). The abundance of information available online makes it easier for individuals to engage in academic dishonesty. It is worth noting that the strategies for preventing e-cheating outside of the classroom differ significantly from those employed to address cheating that occurs within an online learning environment (Adzima, 2021).

## Related Studies

Ahmadi (2012) conducted a study to examine the prevalence of cheating on exams in the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The survey included 132 university students, and the findings revealed that cheating is widespread among Iranian language students. The most commonly reported reasons for engaging in cheating were identified as feeling unprepared for the exam, perceiving the exam as difficult, lack of sufficient time to study, and perceiving instructors as being lenient or not enforcing strict measures against cheating.

Also, Salehi and Gholampour (2021) conducted a study to explore the reasons, attitudes, and the influence of demographic variables on exam cheating among Iranian students. Their sample consisted of 310 participants. The findings of the study revealed that cheating was prevalent among the participants, and a majority of students either held neutral attitudes or lacked negative attitudes toward cheating. The most commonly reported method of cheating was allowing others to look at their papers during exams. Furthermore, the primary reason cited for engaging in cheating was feeling unprepared for the exam.

Arshad et al. (2021) administered a study in which they categorized academically dishonest behavior among students into four main dimensions: plagiarism, cheating on tests, cheating on papers and assignments, and other forms of general dishonest behavior. On the topic of academic dishonesty, Karassavidou and Glaveli (2007) suggested that women

tend to be more obedient and truthful compared to men. However, a recent study by Fell and König (2020) revealed that female students were actually more likely to engage in academically dishonest behavior compared to their male counterparts.

Noorbehbahani and colleagues (2022) recently conducted a review of the research literature focusing on a specific form of academic dishonesty known as online exam cheating in higher education. Their findings revealed that students employ various methods to gain an unfair advantage, such as accessing unauthorized materials like notes and textbooks, using additional devices to access the internet, collaborating with others, and even outsourcing the exam to someone else. These findings align with the work of Dawson (2020), who identified a similar taxonomy when examining e-cheating more broadly. The motivations behind such behaviors can vary and may include a fear of failure, peer pressure, a perception that others are cheating, and the ease with which they can engage in cheating (Noorbehbahani et al., 2022).

Understanding the extent of cheating is a crucial practical consideration when deciding how to address it effectively. While there is a significant body of literature on various forms of academic misconduct, such as plagiarism, the specific topic of cheating in online exams has received comparatively less attention (Garg & Goel, 2022). Also, based on the researchers' perspectives and the available literature, it can be inferred that no previous study has specifically examined students' perspectives on the reasons behind online exam cheating in various Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly after the outbreak of COVID-19. Therefore, the present study aims to fill the gap and explore students' views on reasons of online exam cheating in three Iranian EFL contexts. Additionally, the study seeks to rank these reasons based on the students' viewpoints. For these purposes, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ 1: What were Iranian EFL students' perceptions toward reasons of online exam cheating in EFL contexts?

RQ 2: How reasons of online exam cheating can be ranked based on their significance?

## Method

### Research Design

This study followed a mixed-methods design. For the first phase of the study, a qualitative approach was administered using online focus group discussion. A focus group is a group consisted of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussion on a specific subject (Nyumba et al., 2018). Next, a ranking scale was administered to order the reasons of online exam cheatings based on their significance.

### Participants and Settings

The research encompassed a group of 27 Iranian EFL learners, comprising both male and female participants. These learners were divided into three groups, each consisting of 9 individuals: university learners, institute learners, and school students. The participants were carefully chosen through purposeful sampling, which involved a deliberate and intentional approach. They comprised individuals who were either colleagues or students of the researcher, with whom the researcher had established a friendly relationship over a

**Table 1** Demographic Information of the Study Participants

	Classification(s)	N
<b>Field of Study</b>	EFL	27
<b>Gender</b>	Male	15
	Female	12
<b>Degree</b>	High School Level	9
	B.A	8
	M.A	6
	PhD	4
<b>Age</b>	15–25	18
	25–35	9
<b>Context of Learning</b>	University students	9
	Institute students	9
	School students	9

minimum period of one year. Moreover, the researcher was aware of the participants' inclination towards engaging in exam cheating. In addition to purposeful sampling, snowball sampling was also employed, where existing participants introduced potential participants for inclusion in the research study. Table 1 displays the participants' demographic information, providing an overview of their characteristics such as field of study, gender, degree, age, and learning context.

## Instrumentation

### Qualitative Measure

The qualitative phase of this study utilized an online focus group discussion conducted via Google Meet. The session lasted for 70 minutes, providing ample time for in-depth exploration of the research topic. Google Meet was chosen as the platform due to its user-friendly interface and accessibility. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the discussion, consisting of open-ended questions and prompts. Some of the triggering and prompting questions included in the discussions were: "How often do you cheat in online exams?" and "What are the main reasons behind your preference for cheating in online exams?". Additional questions arose naturally within the discussions. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accurate data analysis. Participant confidentiality was maintained by removing identifying information from the transcriptions and assigning unique identifiers. The online focus group discussion facilitated dynamic and interactive engagement, allowing for comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives.

### Quantitative Measure

The quantitative phase of this study employed a designed ranking scale as the primary instrument for data collection. The ranking scale aimed to assess learners' perceptions of the significance of categories related to reasons of online exam cheating. Participants were asked to rank the categories based on their perceived importance. The ranking scale utilized randomized presentation of the categories to minimize bias and provided clear instructions for assigning unique ranks. The scale was administered either in a paper-based

or online format, depending on participant preferences. A pilot test was conducted to refine the scale, and collected data were tabulated for quantitative analysis, enabling statistical comparisons and interpretations. The scale is presented in [Appendix](#).

## Procedure

A mixed-methods design was employed for this study. A total of 27 EFL learners from three distinct contexts were selected as participants. For the qualitative phase of the study, an online focus group discussion was conducted, with participants assigned to three groups based on their educational backgrounds. Google Meet App was the tool used for the aim of the study. Google Meet is a video conferencing service provided by Google that is accessible to all users. Throughout the online discussions, the participants delved into a comprehensive exploration of the factors contributing to online exam cheating. New questions emerged in the online discussion as participants could trigger and ask some questions from each other. For the quantitative phase of the study, an online ranking scale was developed to assess learners' perspectives on the importance of reasons for online exam cheating. The participants were asked to assign rankings to major categories based on their perceived significance.

## Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data gathered during the focus group discussion, a content analysis procedure was employed. This method involves systematically examining the data until categories, themes, and patterns emerge. Drawing from the insights gained through the group discussion, the researcher identified the main categories of reasons for students' cheating in online exams. Subsequently, to rank these categories, a ranking scale was administered to obtain the participants' opinions, allowing for a quantitative assessment of the perceived significance of each category.

## Results

In the qualitative phase of the study, the online focus groups' discussions were analyzed, and the main reasons with regard to online exam cheating were classified into three main categories: student-related, teaching-related, and assessment-related. Each type of reason is described in detail as follows.

### Student-related

Under this theme, two sub-themes including students' lack of self-confidence, and learners' procrastination were identified. Some students stated that they face lack of self-confidence whenever they attempt to sit online exams. A student described this as:

*Although I study very well for my exams, I do not have enough self-confidence to answer the questions without cheating most of the time. I think I can get a better score if I cheat. I do not know the reason for this but I think it is because I have gotten used to cheating in online exams. It has become a habit in me.*

Another factor that some learners discussed as a main challenge though academic period was learners' procrastination. Students mentioned that since they have lack of time to study and they put all their studies to the last minutes and nights, they have no other option but to consider online cheating as an alternative. The following excerpts exemplify this sub-theme:

*I mostly cheat in online exams because I do not have enough time to study for exams and read the materials over a night. College students have a habit to study for their exams only at the night before the exam. I also postpone to study for my exams to the last minutes. So, we do not have a choice but to cheat in online exams.*

### Teaching-related

Another major reason is related to the area teaching. After analysis of discussions, it fell into two sub-theme of poor teaching quality and teaching too much content. Most of the students in various EFL contents believed that online teachers do not possess content knowledge. As an instance, a university student stated her idea as:

*The teacher only read from the slides and pdf file and doesn't provide us with any extra explanation or examples to make the content clear. Also, in some ways, we think that some teachers don't have the content knowledge or knowledge of the subject that they are teaching. So, we do not learn the lessons and we have to cheat in online exams.*

Also, students believed that online teachers have a quantity-based view towards teaching and thus, teach too much content. A university student explained this idea as:

*At the beginning of the course, the teacher introduces too many sources to us that we are going to cover throughout the course. And within the online course, the teacher teaches too fast to cover all the sources that seems he/she only considers quantity, not quality of learning. And at the exam night, we have too many sources too read that we have not learned in the course.*

### Assessment-related

The last main reason was related to the assessment process which fell into four sub-themes. The first sub-theme was related to the lack of providing students with individualized feedback. Students mentioned that they cannot realize their weak and strong points in online learning setting. An institute learner clarified this as:

*I didn't receive any feedback on my own weak or strong points. So, I couldn't realize where to put my focus more. That is how my weaknesses remained weaknesses throughout the course. The teacher only gave us whole class feedback occasionally.*

The second sub-theme which could make cheating easier for learners was poor assessment design which was made by teacher or educational system. The most prominent factor in this regard was the test format. A student elaborated on this in this way:



*The online assessment design was in a way that we could easily cheat in exams. The questions were only in multiple choice format with no open-ended ones to ask for our own opinions.*

The third factor was poor test administration which was done again by teachers or educational systems. A school student explained this as:

*I think the test administration was in a way that everyone could easily cheat in exams. Our school teacher sent us the questions in the group and told us that we have for 30 min, for instance, to write answers in a paper and take a picture from it and send it back to him/her. In this way, my classmates and I had the chance to check our answers with each other before sending to the teacher.*

The last related sub-theme was too much difficulty of the exam. Some of the students believed that the online questions were difficult to answer since they had not seen them in the course books before. This issue can harm the content validity of the online tests as well. A student clarified this as:

*My classmates and I believed that the online exam questions were so difficult. We even thought that they might not be from the sources the teacher taught us. So, we had no choice but to find the answers on the internet.*

For the quantitative phase of this study, an online ranking scale was designed. It aimed to rank the major categories of the reasons behind online exam cheating based on the students' opinions. The ranking was filled out by the 27 students who also participated in the qualitative phase. As Table 2 indicates, teaching-related category with 48.14 percent was ranked first as the primary reason of online exam cheating. Student-related main category ranked second (29.62%) as the second reason. Lastly, assessment-related category ranked as the last primary reason of online exam cheating based on the participants' views (22.22%).

Also, the Table 3 displays the answers of 27 participants based on their context of learning.

**Table 2** Results of the Ranking Scale

Category	Number of Students	Percentage
<b>Teaching-related</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48.14</b>
Poor Teaching Quality	8	29.62
Teaching Too Much Content	5	18.51
<b>Student-related</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>29.62</b>
Students' Lack of Self-confidence	4	14.81
Learners' Procrastination	4	14.81
<b>Assessment-related</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>22.22</b>
Lack of Individualized Feedback	1	3.70
Poor Assessment Design	2	7.40
Poor Test Administration	2	7.40
Difficulty of the Exam	1	3.70

Items in bold indicate the number and percentage of students in broad categories

**Table 3** Results of the Ranking Scale Based on Context of Learning

Category	Context of Learning	Number of Students	Percentage
<b>Poor Teaching Quality</b>	University Students	4	14.81
	School Students	3	11.11
	Institute Students	1	3.70
<b>Teaching Too Much Content</b>	University Students	3	11.11
	School Students	1	3.70
	Institute Students	1	3.70
<b>Students' Lack of Self-confidence</b>	School Students	2	7.40
	University Students	1	3.70
	Institute Students	1	3.70
<b>Learners' Procrastination</b>	University Students	2	7.40
	School Students	2	7.40
<b>Lack of Individualized Feedback</b>	University Students	1	3.70
<b>Poor Assessment Design</b>	University Students	1	3.70
	School Students	1	3.70
<b>Poor Test Administration</b>	School Students	1	3.70
	University Students	1	3.70
<b>Difficulty of the Exam</b>	University Students	1	3.70

## Discussion

This study aimed to shed light on the reasons behind online exam cheating through exploring students' perceptions in various Iranian EFL contexts. Findings revealed that the reasons fell into three broad categories, including student, teaching, and assessment related factors. Each of these categories consisted of some sub-themes. Student-related factors included lack of enough self-confidence and procrastination which could make them to consider online cheating as a solution. Teaching-related factors included poor teaching quality and holding a quantity-based view toward online teaching by online instructors. Finally, assessment-related factors included items related to lack of individualized feedback, poor assessment design and test administration, and difficulty of online exams which increased the chance of online cheating by learners. Through analyzing the findings, one can conclude that putting all the blame on students because of cheating in online exams is a false common belief. This is in line with what Beasley (2014) achieved in his study. In interviewing students with regard to their reasons of exam cheating, he reported that students tended to deflect blame, usually by saying that their professor could have done something differently.

In addition, the findings of the quantitative phase revealed that teaching-related category was ranked as the first and primary one which can affect students' online exam cheatings. This underscores the importance of reevaluating our views and mindsets about teaching in online settings. Furthermore, the most significant factor contributing to students' online exam cheating was identified as poor teaching quality. This implies EFL teachers play a vital role in preventing e-cheating by strengthening their abilities in online teaching. This can happen through attending various professional development

courses, reflective practice, and seeking continuous feedback from learners (Vadivel et al., 2021). Also, findings indicated that university students have reported more complaints regarding this issue compared to students in other settings, suggesting that online exam cheating is a more significant problem in higher education. Besides, students-related was ranked as second categories based on students' views. It can be inferred that students should also gain a better understanding of their abilities and boost their confidence in online exams. Teachers can also take roles as motivators in this regard. In this category, both the sub-themes of low self-confidence and procrastination among learners were found to be equally significant. This study revealed that lack of self-confidence is more prevalent among school students. Academic pressure, social comparison, bullying and peer pressure, lack of support, and developmental factors such as identity formation and self-image can all contribute to this issue (Abdo et al., 2023; Curran & Wexler, 2016; Tsaousis, 2016). Providing support, guidance, and resources is crucial in helping students build their self-confidence regardless of their context (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020). The results also demonstrated that procrastination is more common among university and school students. This is in line with what Afzal and Jami (2018) reported in their study. They stated that academic procrastination is common among college and university students. Teachers can prevent procrastination among learners by setting clear expectations, deadlines, and providing regular progress checks through formative assessments (Hills & Peacock, 2022; Xu, 2015). Creating a structured learning environment and promoting active engagement further contribute to reducing procrastination tendencies and fostering academic success (Svardal et al., 2020).

Lastly, assessment-related category ranked as the last major category affecting learners' online exam cheatings. Findings showed that poorly designed assessments and improper test administration can contribute to a higher tendency for online exam cheating, especially in universities and schools. Consistent with this finding, Munoz and Mackay (2019) highlighted that poorly designed online tests can be misleading and tempting to learners and engage them in exam cheating. Careful test design and administration can enhance the test security which can led to low exam cheating rate among learners. This is what Janke et al. (2021) also approved and pinpointed in their study. Based on the findings of some studies (Gupta et al., 2023; Morgan et al., 2021), by employing diverse question formats, such as open-ended questions, critical thinking scenarios, and application-based problems, the test becomes less susceptible to simple memorization or cheating through unauthorized resources. Additionally, randomizing question order or creating multiple versions of the test can minimize opportunities for cheating by decreasing the likelihood of students sharing answers (Manoharan, 2019).

These findings can also highlight the fact that teachers and assessment organizations can also have a huge effect on students' cheating. By adopting strategies to promote academic integrity, ensuring robust assessment design, and providing necessary support, they can contribute to reducing cheating incidents. Also, establishing a culture of online learning and education is crucial for the success and integrity of online assessments.

## Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate the reasons behind online exam cheating through exploring students' perceptions in various Iranian EFL contexts. Based on the qualitative findings, the reasons fell into three broad categories, including student, teaching,

and assessment related factors. Each of these categories consisted of some sub-themes. Followed by this, a ranking scale was administered to ask learners rank these categories based on their significance. The findings of the study indicated that, according to the learners' perspectives, the teaching-related category was ranked as the primary and most influential factor contributing to students' online exam cheating. Additionally, the student-related and assessment-related categories were ranked as the second and third most significant factors, respectively. These results shed light on the importance attributed by students to different categories of reasons for engaging in online exam cheating.

This study can offer insights and implications to online teachers, students, and educational systems. Through knowing reasons of students' cheating in online exams, teachers can refresh and reimagine their views toward online teaching and assessment. Also, by understanding the internal factors that drive them towards cheating in online exams, students can develop a stronger sense of self-awareness. This increased awareness can empower them to make better choices and avoid engaging in dishonest behavior during their examinations. Lastly, educational systems and organizations can enhance the security of test designs and administrations in order to mitigate online exam cheating. By implementing measures such as secure test platforms, plagiarism detection software, and strict monitoring protocols, the integrity of online exams can be safeguarded. Additionally, providing training sessions for teachers on effective exam design and administration can enhance their ability to create assessments that discourage cheating. Furthermore, offering professional development courses for teachers to improve the quality of their online teaching can contribute to creating a conducive learning environment that minimizes the incentives for academic dishonesty. These proactive measures can help prevent and address issues related to online exam cheating in educational settings.

This research has raised many questions in need of further investigation. An additional study could specifically concentrate on exploring the motivations behind online exam cheating among students. The study included 27 participants, divided equally among university students, institute students, and school students, with 9 participants in each group. To obtain more robust and generalizable findings, it is advisable to replicate the study with a larger sample size and investigate if similar results are obtained. Also, since this study focused on students' perceptions toward reasons of online exam cheating, another study can be conducted to investigate teachers' views on this. By examining the perspectives of teachers, a more comprehensive understanding of the issue can be obtained, potentially leading to the development of effective strategies and interventions to address online exam cheating. Finally, other studies can employ alternative qualitative or quantitative methods, such as interviews or surveys, to investigate whether similar findings can be obtained.

## Appendix: Ranking Scale

**Instruction:** The below themes are extracted from the online focus group discussions. Based on your own opinion, please assign ranks to these themes based on their significance in the given box in front of each one. Please assign a unique rank to each category. Avoid assigning the same rank to multiple categories. If you are unsure about the relative importance of two categories, try to make a decision based on your best judgment. Your responses will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only.

**Students' Lack of Self-confidence**

**Poor Test Administration**

**Teaching Too Much Content**

**Lack of Individualized Feedback**

**Too Much Difficulty of the Exam**

**Poor Assessment Design**

**Poor Teaching Quality**

**Learners' Procrastination**

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**Data Availability** Not applicable. As a consent form was used, the recorded files can be shared under certain circumstances.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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