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Ethics, Power, and Governance: A Qualitative Inquiry into Faculty Misconduct in Bangladeshi Higher Education

Dr. Md. Azizur Rahman

azizurmother77@gmail.com

Southeast University

Research Article

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to contribute to the existing lacunae in the literature on the prevalence of moral hazard and unprofessional conduct of faculty members in Bangladesh universities. The phenomenon of academic impropriety has been increasingly documented as a key concern that threatens the quality and integrity of higher education in the country. In spite of the expansion of access to higher education, several universities face the challenge of elitism, favoritism, marking malpractices, political manipulation, absenteeism, sexual harassment, and private tutoring. Previous studies on academic dishonesty have mainly focused on the role of students in perpetrating various forms of malpractice. However, there is a need to understand the mechanisms by which faculty members facilitate and perpetuate these activities, as well as their impacts on academic governance. This study adopted a positivist research philosophy and employed a phenomenological research design. In this respect, 30 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with students, junior and senior teachers, and education policymakers in Bangladesh to generate an in-depth understanding of the research problem. Findings indicate that teacher misbehaviors are facilitated by political patronage and internal governance challenges in the universities. The phenomenon of favoritism, political affiliations, and malpractices such as student tracking, grade inflation, and private tutoring is exacerbated by the lack of effective auditing mechanisms in the education system and institutional power resources that shield faculty members from scrutiny. In addition, commercialization and professional rivalry in both public and private institutions contribute to the prevalence of unprofessional conduct in higher education. The study adds to the body of knowledge on moral

hazard in academic settings by providing phenomenological insights into the ethical hazarding process. It also provides policy recommendations on the institutional governance and auditing mechanisms needed to address the issue in Bangladesh universities. This might set a foundation for similar studies in other countries.

Key words: Pedagogical misconduct, power asymmetries, political patronage, student vulnerability, qualitative phenomenology, NVivo analysis, South Asia

1. Introduction

The higher education system plays a pivotal role in social mobility, democratic governance, and intellectual development globally (Altbach et al., 2010). In this system, university lecturers hold a unique role, as mentors, custodians of integrity, and ethical exemplars for students Macfarlane (2018). However, when pedagogical impropriety, corruption, political patronage, and ethical breaches occur, the foundation of higher education's legitimacy is eroded Denisova-Schmidt (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017). Worldwide, academic corruption takes diverse forms, varying between plagiarism and contract cheating in the developed world, and systemic bribery and political patronage in the developing world (Kirya, 2019; Transparency International, 2024). In educational perspective, Bangladesh runs one of the biggest education administrations in the world. (Rahman et al. (Rahman et al., 2023) . But from the very beginning, Bangladesh has been facing the problems of crime, criminality and corruption with its diversified forms including education (Rahman et al., 2025). Actually, corruption in education distorts the allocation of resources, undermines quality, and aggravates social and economic inequalities (Muzammil, 2010).

Bangladesh is a prime example of where rapid higher education growth, in both the public and private sectors, has overtaken the capacity of regulatory frameworks to monitor, ensuring faculty-level ethical misconduct thrives (World Bank (World Bank, 2024). Faculty members' immoral practices in Bangladesh's higher education system have evolved from isolated ethical challenges to a pervasive ethical crisis. With reports of favoritism, grade-padding, absenteeism, sexual harassment, coercive private tutoring, and political placement in both public and private universities, the credibility of Bangladesh's higher education system is at stake (Monem and Baniamin, 2021;Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). While public university faculty positions often have a political nexus controlling appointments and promotions, private universities face commercialization pressures, treating students as consumers and inflating grades unethically. Such issues severely impact students, damaging credibility, creating widespread cynicism, and undermining the international reputation of Bangladesh's tertiary education sector. Although the phenomenon of immoral faculty behavior has attracted a significant amount of press and public attention, there is a conspicuous research gap on faculty-level ethics challenges in South Asian higher education. Most studies on education ethics focus on students, not lecturers, investigating cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism, not the unethical behaviors committed by faculty members themselves (McCabe et al., 2017). Moreover, much of the existing literature takes a quantitative approach, relying on survey instruments that assess perceptions of the prevalence of such phenomena, rather than understanding the lived realities of the students, faculty, administrators, and policymakers navigating these ethical challenges. This study aims to fill this research gap by providing an empirical investigation into faculty-level immoral practices in Bangladesh's higher education.

While this study takes a qualitative approach to exploring teacher immorality in depth, its novelty derives from its theoretical contribution. This paper applied Bourdieu's (1986) Theory of Practice and North's (1990) Institutional Path Dependency Theory to analyze the phenomenon of immoral practices deployed by faculty members in Bangladesh's higher education system. Specifically, this study used Bourdieu's concepts of habits, capital, and field, and North's ideas of institutions and path of dependency to understand why and how faculty members engage in immoral practices to advance their research, teaching, and service appointments, promotions, and salary increments. The practical applications of this research are threefold. First, it contributed original qualitative data to the literature on immoral practices in higher education. Second, the study analyzed these practices through an innovative theoretical lens, elucidating the mechanisms and structures enabling them. Finally, based on the data and analysis, this study offers policy recommendations to relevant agencies and policymakers to help them formulate effective ethics auditing guidelines and independent monitoring bodies to monitor and enforce ethical standards in higher education. If political nourishment could be cut, then most of the crime would be controlled (Rahman et al., 2025).

While this study focuses on the phenomenon of immoral practices of faculty members in Bangladesh's higher education system, it has implications for similar systems in other regions and countries. As universities in developing countries undergo expansion and diversification to meet the demand for higher education, policy monitoring and control mechanisms are often inadequate to the task, resulting in the emergence of various ethical challenges (de Wit & Altbach., 2021). Investigating how and why immoral practices emerge in Bangladesh can provide insights into analogous phenomena in other Global South contexts (Kirya, 2019;World Bank, 2024). Finally, in an increasingly globalized world where students and academics are more mobile than ever,

wherever change is inevitable, but it does not alter what I am arguing here about the essential role of higher education in creating a more equitable and democratic future (Tierney, 2021)

it is crucial to ensure the quality and ethical integrity of higher education in developing countries. This is especially important to maintain the value of qualifications awarded by universities in the Global South and to support research collaborations and academic exchanges.

This study adopted an interpretive philosophical research paradigm to explore the unethical behaviors perpetrated by faculty members in Bangladesh's higher education system. Data were generated through 30 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with participants from 5 Public and 4 Private Bangladeshi universities, analyzed thematically using Nvivo 14. Preliminary findings indicate that immoral faculty behavior stems from entrenched patron-client networks of political collusion that protects predatory faculty, extreme power differentials that discourages student reporting, and lax university administration that fails to enforce discipline. The study segregated into one more chapter and concluded by discussing the theoretical and policy implications and offers some recommendations for future research and ends the paper.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

The quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) is greatly influenced by the relationship between institutional governance, professional ethics, and academic practice. When faculty members practice immoral behaviors from marking malpractice and coercive private tutoring to political nepotism and sexual harassment, universities fail to achieve their core educational goals (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017; Macfarlane, 2018). Faculty misconduct in developing nations stems from a combination of collective and individual factors, and scholars must go beyond individualist theories and politicized discourse to understand this phenomenon (de Wit & Altbach., 2021). This

paper discussed the global and regional debates about faculty misconduct and presents a theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and Douglass North's Institutional Path Dependency Theory. The article utilized the two frameworks to examine the effect of patronage, power, and politics on academic ethics in Bangladesh Higher Education Institutions

2.1. Global and Regional Debates on Faculty Misconduct

The scholarly literature on academic integrity has a skewed emphasis, with most researchers focusing on student dishonesty, such as plagiarism, cheating, and contract essay writing, while portraying teacher malpractice as an anomaly (McCabe et al., 2017; Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). However, the prevalence of teacher-initiated ethical violations in tertiary education has been a common finding in global studies over the past decade, especially in post-colonial and developing economies (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017; Kirya, 2019). Faculty-level misconduct takes various forms, including administrative corruption, extortion of students, grade inflation, unauthorized absences, research fabrication, and weaponized grading in both public and private institutions (de Wit & Altbach., 2021; Tierney and Sabharwal, 2017).

In the Global North, debates on faculty integrity center around perceived conflicts of interest, corporate research takeover, mismanagement of grants, and authorship disagreements (Macfarlane, 2009). On the other hand, studies in the Global South highlight resource limitations, inadequate faculty remuneration, weak regulatory bodies, and state-level political interference (Hallak and Poisson, 2007). In South Asian tertiary education systems, faculty misconduct occurs in contexts of severe social stratification and governance challenges. Studies in India, Pakistan, and Nepal show that caste, regional belonging, and party affiliation often override meritocracy in faculty appointments and administrative promotions (Tierney and Sabharwal, 2017).

In Bangladesh, the proliferation of higher education institutions (over 50 public and 100 private) has far outpaced quality assurance mechanisms (Monem and Baniamin, 2010; World Bank, 2024). Transparency International Bangladesh (2024) and independent education researchers (Alam, 2016) have highlighted a dual crisis in faculty ethics: Partisan politicization of public university departments, where faculty members with political connections are shielded from performance evaluations and face little administrative repercussions for pedagogical negligence. Private universities' commercialization of education has resulted in perverse incentives for faculty to inflate grades and ignore student misconduct to maintain enrollment rates (Alam, 2016).

While the above-cited studies provide valuable evidence of ethical violations in Bangladesh's tertiary education system, most offer descriptive analysis of the phenomenon. The scholarly literature lacks a holistic theoretical framework to explain the persistence of unethical conduct in higher education, as well as an intersectional understanding of how power dynamics contribute to students' helplessness in confronting faculty misconduct.

2.1. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice: Habitus, Capital, and Field

To understand faculty misconduct in Bangladesh's public and private universities, this study employed Pierre Bourdieu's (1988, 1990) Theory of Practice. By conceptualizing social action as a practical reasoning process informed by durable social structures and individual agency, Bourdieu's approach offers a nuanced understanding of how faculty members and students navigate ethical dilemmas:

$$\text{Practice} = [(\text{Habitus}) \times (\text{Capital})] + \text{Field}$$

This theoretical triadic model allows for an examination of the structural, institutional, and individual dimensions of academic misconduct.

2.1.1. The Academic Field (Champ)

According to Bourdieu, a field is a structured social space of forces and struggles with specific rules and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The university ideal utilizes an academic field over which legitimacy, status, and authority are distributed from the scholarly expertise, peer-reviewed research, and effective pedagogy. However, the Bangladeshi academic field experienced a deep invasion from the political field. Political nourishment is the vital cause of crime in Bangladesh (Rahman et al. 2025). Therefore, political power functions as a dominant external force that changes the internal rules of the academic field. Consequently, the factors for academic success are no longer based solely on scholarly capital but also on political affiliation and faction.

2.1.2. Forms of Capital (Capital)

Bourdieu (1986) developed the concept of different forms of capital, including economic (financial resources), cultural (knowledge and qualifications), social (networks), and symbolic (prestige). In a healthy university academic field, cultural (scientific reputation) and symbolic (academic prestige) capitals are the main currencies for professional advancement. In the context of Bangladeshi universities, the following capital deviations occurred: Firstly, the traditional academic qualifications are commodified against political capital. The networks of political party affiliation constitute the dominant form of social capital that affords faction-based appointments as department chairs, deans, and vice-chancellors as well as lucrative committee memberships (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). Secondly, Faculty members utilize political capital to bypass public university obligations such as teaching at the expense of their private tutoring practice (Monem and Baniamin, 2012). They also exploit political capital to advance their career despite limited research credentials and face no administrative sanctions. And thirdly, the teacher possesses institutional symbolic capital (academic evaluation) and controls the field by

issuing grades, thesis approvals, and recommendations. Ordinary students, who possess little institutional capital, negotiate an unfair exchange in the teacher's domain and stand to lose their academic progression if they question the lecturer's ethics.

2.1.3. Academic Habitus

Habitus is a set of durable schemes of thinking and practicing that develops through prolonged exposure to a particular field (Bourdieu, 1990). In an ethically corrupted academic field, faculty members' academic habitus mirrors their adaptation to the changed institutional environment rather than an innate theoretical or ethical disposition. Junior lecturers learn through observation that faction-based survival is the best predictor of career progression. Subsequently, their habitus disposition transforms their unscrupulous conduct (e.g., mark inflation of politically connected students, personal interest demands, and chronic absenteeism) into expressions of pragmatic responses to their changed environment (Macfarlane, 2018).

2.2. Institutional Path Dependency: Lock-ins and Impunity

While Bourdieu's thinking has illuminated the individual faculty member's role in the ethical corruption of universities, Institutional Path Dependency Theory offers the contextual history of the phenomenon. The theory helps explicate the faculty members' and administrators' inertia in addressing the unethical practices and the universities' subsequent lock-ins in the corrupt institutional field long after the initial unethical episode. In summary, Path Dependency theory assumes that institutions, defined as a set of formal rules and informal constraints shaping human interactions, possess histories that can influence their subsequent development (North, 1990). A path dependency approach assumes that a given institutional configuration (set of formal and informal rules) can have greater 'increasing returns' and, therefore, be self-reinforcing (Pierson,

2000). In the context of Bangladeshi higher education, path dependency is manifested through the following mechanisms:

2.2.1. Historical Institutional Lock-ins

After independent Bangladesh, public universities became a training ground for political movements. The ruling party and its allies started to occupy key administrative posts (Vice Chancellor, Syndicates, Selection Boards) to gain control over universities (Monem and Baniamin, 2012). Thus, the relationship between academia and the state forms a path-dependent historical institutional lock-in.

2.2.2. Self-reinforcing Mechanisms or Increasing Returns

Partisan universities generate several self-reinforcing mechanisms for maintaining political status quo (Pierson, 2000). These include: Firstly, Partisan selection boards produce ideologically congruent academics to maintain control of the university administration (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). Secondly, Unaligned and ethically questionable faculty members are subject to institutional punishment and funding revocation to enforce conformity. And Thirdly, Disciplinary action against faculty misconduct is reversed when the accused individual has high political connections. Sexual Harassment Elimination Committees and Ethics Committees do not have the capacity to punish faculty members due to their lack of autonomy, and the accused faculty members retain protection from administrative sanctions due to their political power (World Bank, 2024). The status quo of partisan university governance is maintained due to the high cost of disciplinary action. With these mechanisms, this study has demonstrated how theory-informed institutional analysis can uncover the mechanisms of path-dependent processes. In order to identify how academic misconduct is reinforced, this study will employ path dependency theory, and the

concepts of a field and habitus by Bourdieu. Table 1 below represents the analysis model used in the research, including such variables as levels, units of analysis, main forms of academic misconduct, and identified mechanisms.

Table 1 Synthesis: An Integrated Diagnostic Model

Theoretical Layer	Primary Analytical Unit	Mechanism of Academic Misconduct	Observed Empirical Manifestation
Macro-Level(Path Dependency)	Institutional Rules & Historical Trajectories	Historical lock-in of political patronage; self-reinforcing governance failure.	Systematic non-enforcement of university statutes; administrative protection of politically aligned faculty; regulatory paralysis.
Meso-Level(Bourdieusian Field)	The University Field & Forms of Capital	Invasion of the academic field by political capital; subversion of academic merit.	Politicized recruitment; mark manipulation; commercialized grade inflation; administrative capture.
Micro-Level(Faculty Habitus)	Individual Dispositions & Pedagogical Relations	Internalization of compromised ethical norms; exploitation of power asymmetries over students.	Coercive private tutoring; chronic absenteeism; retaliatory grading; enforced student silence.

As proposed in Table 1 above, there are three key levels at which academic dishonesty is entrenched, constituting a set of reinforcing feedback loops.

Macro-level path dependency: Political capture of the university governance structures results in policy inaction, whereby the most politically connected teachers are effectively insulated from regulatory scrutiny, thus rendering regulation difficult to implement and control.

Meso-level field subversion: In the university field, political favoritism undermines objective merit-based assessments, resulting in the capture of the university by political interests. The result is the perversion of the university's core functions: faculty appointments, marking practices, and grade selling, among others.

Micro level: Teacher habitus and student normalization: Teachers' professional dispositions are shaped by the broader institutional context, making them prone to anti-academic dishonestly behaviors such as grade manipulation and private tutoring. Similarly, students' behaviors are also shaped by the same environment to adopt dishonest behaviors such as habitual absenteeism and selective grade plagiarism with little or no fear of being caught or punished.

3. Objectives of the study

The main objective of this qualitative study is to unveil mechanism and logic of faculty immorality in Bangladesh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Thus, the present research will be guided by the following objectives:

• To identify and classify the main types of immoral practices of the faculty teaching in HEIs, such as mark manipulation, private tutoring, political patronage, absenteeism, and sexual harassment.

• To explore the influencing factors (party patronage, commercialization, lack of effective regulation, etc.) that contribute to the prevalence of unethical practices among university teachers.

• To analyze the power asymmetry between students/teachers and administration that results in silent acceptance of various forms of faculty immorality.

• To assess the inaction of Bangladesh universities and colleges in response to teacher misconduct using Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and North's Institutional Path Dependency Approach.

• To recommend concrete measures to be taken by Bangladesh's higher education system to combat teacher immorality, such as establishing a National Academic Ethics Commission, implementing teacher accreditation process, etc.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Qualitative Research Questions

Therefore, the current research will employ qualitative research questions, which are as follows:

RQ1: What are the types of faculty immorality presented in Bangladesh's higher education system?

RQ2: How does teacher immorality manifests itself in private and public universities?

RQ3: What is the relationship between the power asymmetry in academic fields and the prevalence of unethical conduct of the faculty members?

RQ4: Why do Bangladesh universities and colleges act non-intervention in the cases of faculty misconduct?

4.2. Research Philosophy and Design

To examine the structural mechanics, power dynamics, and institutional drivers of faculty-led misconduct in Bangladeshi higher education, this study adopts an interpretivist qualitative research

design. Qualitative inquiry is uniquely suited for this investigation as it enables a deep exploration of sensitive social phenomena, lived experiences, and complex institutional behaviors that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Grounded in phenomenological principles, this methodology explores how students, faculty, administrators, and policy experts experience, interpret, and navigate ethical violations within public and private university fields in Bangladesh. Qualitative frameworks and concept development models provide critical tools for faculty and graduate researchers in higher education to evaluate complex family dynamics (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1991). This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, assuming that social reality is socially constructed through human interaction, power relations, and institutional contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). By employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explores how faculty misconduct is normalized, experienced, and resisted within tertiary institutions.

4.3. Sampling Strategy and Institutional Context

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy and used the maximum variation method to select respondents (Patton, 2015). The research was carried out in nine higher educational institutions in Bangladesh: 5 public (general, science and technology, and regional universities) and 4 private accredited universities in Dhaka metropolitan cities. Thus, the sample included respondents from both public and private universities to understand better the role of political patronage in the former and neoliberal commercialization tendencies in the latter. The empirical sample comprised N = 30 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) conducted across four key stakeholder categories: Students (n = 12): Undergraduate (n = 7) and postgraduate (n = 5) students representing diverse academic disciplines across public (n = 7) and private (n = 5) universities. Faculty Members (n = 10): Junior lecturers, assistant professors, and mid-career associate professors (n = 6 public, n = 4 private) across

Humanities, Social Sciences, Business, and STEM faculties. University Administrators (n = 5): Current or former Department Chairs, Deans, Syndicate Members, and Proctorial Team Members (n = 3 public, n = 2 private) with direct insight into institutional governance and grievance handling. Higher Education Policy Experts (n = 3): Senior researchers, university integrity advocates, and former regulatory officials with macro-level expertise on South Asian higher education governance. To capture diverse institutional perspectives of public and private higher education institutions in Bangladesh, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to achieve maximum variation in disciplines, academic hierarchy, and gender. Table 2 presents the distribution of the qualitative sample (N = 72) in relation to categories, sources of information, university sector, and selection criteria.

Table 2: Qualitative Data Collection Matrix Across Participant Categories, Data Streams, and University Sectors (N = 72)

Participant Category	Data Stream	Public Sector (n)	Private Sector (n)	Total (N)	Selection Criteria & Rationale
Students	IDIs	7	5	12	Enrolled 3rd year or above; direct observation/experience with evaluation systems.
Faculty Members	IDIs	6	4	10	Active teaching staff across Humanities, Social Sciences, Business, and STEM.
Administrators	IDIs	3	2	5	Current/former Chairs, Deans, Provosts, or Proctorial Body members.
Policy Experts	IDIs	-	-	3	Higher education researchers, governance experts, and integrity advocates.
Student FGDs	6 FGDs	21 (3 FGDs)	21 (3 FGDs)	42	Mixed-gender focus groups (7 participants each) to examine shared narratives.
Total Participants		37	32	72	Maximum variation across institutional type, discipline, and hierarchy.

As can be seen from Table 2, there are two major types of qualitative fieldwork. First, there were In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with n = 30 individual respondents and, second, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with n = 6 participants. Overall, there were 42 participants with similar interview protocols. The study used a stratified sampling strategy to ensure that both public (n = 37) and private (n = 32) universities would be represented by the sample.

There were two categories of students who participated in the research. Senior students who studied at least three years at the university were included in the sample as participants in IDIs (n = 12) and six focus groups with mixed composition (n = 42). Faculty members were invited to participate in individual interviews (n = 10). There were also individual interviews with administrative and executive authorities (n = 5). This category included Chairs, Deans, Provosts, and Proctorial Officers who could speak on behalf of their institution. Finally, the study invited individual interviews with external experts (n = 3). This sample included governance and integrity experts, researchers, and policymakers.

4.4. Data Collection Instruments and Protocols

The data collection process was carried out over the span of six months, using a semi-structured IDI field protocol. Each interview session lasted from 50 to 80 minutes, being conducted mostly in Bengali, with critical technical, academic, theoretical terms interpreted in English at the transcription stage. The semi-structured interview protocol included specific questions geared towards exploring certain structural and experiential dimensions, depending on the interviewee's affiliation. Namely:

Student IDIs: Inquiries were focused on students' experiences with mark manipulation, coercive private tuition, selective favoritism, sexual harassment, power asymmetries, and mechanisms of enforced silence.

Faculty IDIs: Questions revolved around recruitment practices, political unionization, peer pressure, promotion criteria, administrative interference, and the faculty habitus of unethical behaviors.

Administrator IDIs: Exploratory questions were targeted at grievance redress mechanisms, disciplinary procedures, and political pressure from syndicate or ministry bodies, administrative inertia.

Policy Expert IDIs: The analysis aimed at macro-political drivers, University Grants Commission (UGC) regulatory limitations, policy gaps, and structural reform pathways.

Interviews were recorded with consent from participants, who also provided field notes with insights, observations, non-verbal communication, and institutional environmental cues. The data analysis process followed a reflexive thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2019), using NVivo 14 for coding and storage. Recordings were first transcribed verbatim and translated into English in context, followed by a cross-verification by the research team. The inductive coding was complemented by a set of theoretical codes derived from Bourdieu's Field theory and North's Path Dependency – both relating to power, hierarchy, and structural determinism. Subsequently, generated codes underwent a process of trimming to eliminate redundant terms, followed by the grouping of related concepts into overarching themes.

4.5. Trustworthiness and Methodological Rigor

To establish qualitative rigor, this study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for trustworthiness:

Credibility: Achieved through source triangulation across four distinct participant categories (students, faculty, administrators, and policy experts) and member-checking of selected interview transcript summaries.

Transferability: Ensured by providing detailed contextual descriptions of institutional settings, participant sampling criteria, and structural power dynamics across public and private university sectors in Bangladesh.

Dependability: Maintained through a transparent audit trail documenting interview protocol, raw transcripts, NVivo coding hierarchies, and reflexive analytical logs.

Confirmability: Enhanced through peer debriefing sessions where secondary qualitative researchers independently coded 15% of the transcript dataset (n = 4 IDIs) to establish inter-coder agreement and minimize subjective researcher bias.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Given the highly sensitive nature of investigating faculty corruption, political patronage, and institutional malpractice, stringent ethical safeguards were enforced:

Informed Consent & Voluntary Participation: Written or verbal recorded consent was obtained from all 30 participants after explaining the research objectives, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Anonymization and Pseudonymization: All participant identities, specific university names, and department designations were completely anonymized using alphanumeric codes (e.g., Public-Student-IDI-04, Private-Faculty-IDI-02, Admin-Public-IDI-01, Expert-IDI-03). Data Security: Audio recordings, transcripts, and NVivo project files were encrypted and stored in secure, password-protected cloud storage accessible exclusively to the principal investigators.

Protection Against Retaliation: Interviews involving sensitive disclosures (e.g., sexual harassment, academic blackmail, or politicized hiring corruption) were conducted in neutral, off-campus locations or via secure online platforms to protect participants from academic retaliation or administrative surveillance.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

The results of 30 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) shed light on the multifaceted phenomenon of faculty misconduct in Bangladesh. It emerges as a complex issue that is influenced by the systems and processes at the national (political), university (managerial), and teacher-student (interactional) levels. 5 key themes were identified from the transcripts using the NVivo 14 software, with each theme being interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of practice and North's institutional path dependency that explain how academic dishonesty and institutional governance issues are generated and maintained in public and private universities in Bangladesh. Table 3 below presents the five identified parent themes, the child nodes, theoretical underpinnings, and excerpts from the participants' responses.

Table 3 Matrix of Thematic Findings, Sub-Themes, Theoretical Alignments, and Representative Data Excerpts

Major Parent Theme	Primary Sub-Themes (Child Nodes)	Theoretical Alignment	Key Sample Quote Excerpt
1. Political Patronage	Politicized hiring; union protection; administrative capture.	Bourdieusian Field Distortion; Political vs. Academic Capital.	"If you wear the political badge, university statutes do not apply to you." (Public-Faculty-IDI-02)
2. Pedagogical Misconduct	Mark manipulation; coercive private tuition; chronic absenteeism.	Subversion of Cultural Capital; Pedagogical Exploitation.	"Join my paid coaching batch if you want an A grade." (Public-Student-IDI-05)

3. Power Asymmetries	Retaliation fears; gendered harassment; enforced student silence.	Monopoly over Symbolic Capital; Structural Violence.	"Complaining against a teacher is academic suicide." (FGD-Public-02)
4. Private University Dynamics	Commercial grade inflation; employment precarity; student-as-customer.	Neoliberal Marketization; Commercialized Capital.	"Management told us to pass failing students to protect revenue." (Private-Faculty-IDI-04)
5. Institutional Inertia	Dysfunctional Ethics Committees; UGC regulatory failure; self-reinforcing loops.	North's Path Dependency; Institutional Lock-In.	"The Sexual Harassment Cell exists on paper, but nobody acts." (Admin-Public-IDI-01)

As per Table 3, the qualitative results unveiled diverse themes of academic dishonesty in higher education, ranging from field-level political capture in the public sector to the marketized grade inflation in the private universities. The subsequent sub-sections elaborate on each of the themes in detail with excerpts from qualitative evidence. This theme interrogates the politicization of the university management as a mechanism through which political capital is used to shield non-compliant faculty members, resulting in de jure paralysis of statutory enforcement. This also focuses on the pedagogical exploitation of students through coercion, marking malpractices, and absenteeism as a means of extracting financial or personal gains. It tried explore the asymmetric power dynamics in academic capitalism that cause the suppression of grievance reporting through fear of academic retaliation. And on grade inflation practices that emerge in private universities due to the "student as a customer" approach and resultant precarity. Finally, the set of themes deals with the institutional capture of regulators such as the UGC, ethics committees, and external auditors.

5.1. Theme 1: Subversion of Academic Capital by Political Patronage

The participants revealed in both public and private universities that political capital (partisan loyalty and party affinity) has overtaken academic capital (research, peer-review and quality teaching) in the recruitment process, staff retention and administrative appointments of the universities. In the public universities there exists the teacher recruitment board and syndicates whose major function is to ensure the ruling party's faculty alignment (divided into partisan teacher panels) through the recruitment of teachers who do not question the party lines. The teachers who belong to the ruling party's faculty alignment panel operate with total immunity as they know the university administration will not take any action against them.

A senior member of the faculty in one of the public universities explained this thus:

"Teaching posts in our departments are no longer judged by who has published in the best journals and who teaches best. It is now the order of the day that in the recruitment process, we carry flags for teacher's political panel. Once recruited into our departments through political patronage, a teacher knows that his promotion and tenure will be on political loyalty. If the lecturer wears the correct political label, university statutes will not apply to him"-(Public-Faculty-IDI-02)

From a Bourdieusian perspective, there is a subversion of the autonomy of the university field by the larger political field. The conversion of political capital into academic capital alters the faculty habitus so that it becomes tuned to political networking in preference to academic excellence. Institutional protection of politically connected teachers from professional accountability even for overt professional misconduct encourages a culture of total immunity:

"A senior teacher in our faculty takes 60% of the syllabus to class and evaluates the examination scripts arbitrarily. When the students complained to the Department Chair, he told us privately

with a wink, 'He is an executive member of the ruling panel, if I issue a formal notice to him, my chair position will be in jeopardy tomorrow'. Politics protects misconduct" -(FGD-Public-01, Student Participant)

5.2. Theme 2: Pedagogical Misconduct and Coercive Academic Extortion

The study's empirical findings indicate that the ethical violations by the faculty members center around classroom practices. The two types of pedagogical misconduct which were revealed as the most prevalent by the participants were mark manipulation (retaliatory or favored grading) and coercive commercial private tuition.

5.2.1. Mark Manipulation and Selective Favoritism

In many departments in the university's academic assessment is a complete mystery. Continuous assessment, mid-term results and thesis approval are used as a means of rewarding obedient and servile students and punishing inquisitive students.

A final year undergraduate student revealed this:

"There are no guidelines for the allocation of continuous assessment marks, which constitute 30% or 40% of the whole year marks. The teachers use this internal assessment as a weapon to punish students for asking hard questions in class or showing no respect. However, they give good marks to students who obey and serve them. If a student runs errands for the teacher and joins their political student wing, they are awarded distinction even when they submit poor work."- (Public-Student-IDI-05)

5.2.2. Coercive Private Tuition and Financial Extortion

In the professional and technical faculties in both public and private universities, the teachers set up private coaching centers and offer evening classes where students are threatened into paying exorbitant fees to pass their professional courses.

A mid-career faculty member candidly revealed this:

"It has become an open secret in some departments that certain faculty members deliberately teach only 30% of the course syllabus in the university lecture halls. However, in their private evening batches they tell the students exactly what is required for the examinations and practicals. The students who pay the monthly private fee to these teachers are awarded very good grades whereas those who cannot afford to pay are failed"-(Private-Faculty-IDI-03)

A student participant in an FGD revealed this:

"Our course teacher told the class 'If you want to know the numerical problems and get an A grade, join my evening batch at my private set up'. Therefore, those of us who could not afford the fee got C and D grades while the students who paid the fees to his private evening classes were awarded straight A's for submitting exactly the same examination scripts"- (FGD-Private-02, Student Participant)

5.3. Theme 3: Power Asymmetry and the Culture of Student Silence

One of the most pervasive themes identified in the study was the culture of student silence. The totalizing faculty control over evaluation, including grades, internships, recommendations, and vivas, creates toxic power asymmetry that discourages students from reporting any form of misconduct.

5.3.1. Fear of Retaliation and Academic Blacklisting

Students in both IDIs and FGDs repeatedly explained that making a formal complaint against a faculty member often leads to academic retaliation, delayed graduation, or total career sabotage. Students articulated that a formal complaint would lead to professional blacklisting and damage their future career prospects.

An undergraduate student highlighted this structural trap:

"In our system, a teacher has the power to make or break your career. They design the question paper, evaluate your answer script, take your viva, and write the recommendation letter for your postgraduate program. If you dare to complain against a teacher, the whole department will come after you to defend their reputation. They will ensure that you do not pass your comprehensive exam or they will delay your graduation by a year. To report a teacher is to commit career suicide."

-(Public-Student-IDI-03)

5.3.2. Gendered Power Dynamics and Sexual Harassment

Students also noted the gender dimension of faculty power over their academic lives. Female students were subjected to persistent sexual advances, unwanted touching, and other forms of sexual coercion by faculty members. Their experiences indicate that gender-based ethical violations are particularly acute in the domain of power and control.

A female postgraduate student shared her account of institutional silence:

"When Professor started sending me messages at night, asking me to meet him off-campus, I confronted a senior female faculty member. She told me to drop the matter and focus on my studies. 'If you want to finish your degree and move on with your life, it is best to leave him alone. It will

take two years for the Sexual Harassment Cell to take any action, and by then, your reputation at the university will be ruined,' she said. The harassment stopped immediately after that. However, to this day, I believe that his actions would have gone unpunished if I had formally filed a complaint with the Sexual Harassment Cell." -(Public-Student-IDI-07)

5.4.Theme 4: Neoliberal Logics and Marketization of Higher Education

While the ethical challenges in public universities are firmly rooted in political patronage, the malaise in private universities appears to be informed by a market-based logic. Marketization of higher education has created a toxic competitive environment wherein faculty members are often pressured to deliver higher grades and compromise on academic standards.

5.4.1. Commercialized Grade Inflation and the Student-Customer Paradigm

Commercialization of grades and the student-as-customer approach appear to be the main drivers of ethical violations by faculty members in private universities.

A private university lecturer described these institutional pressures:

"When we set tough exams and fail 30 percent of our students, the management berates us for not giving enough opportunities to the students. 'Why are you being so harsh?' they ask. 'They are your customers, and you have no right to fail them just because they did not study.' We feel obliged to give good marks to students who do not deserve them." - (Private-Faculty-IDI-01)

5.4.2. Employment Precarity Among Contract Faculty

Many faculty members in private universities also expressed frustration about their own precarious employment status. They indicated that they are often hired on a year-to-year basis and fear losing

their jobs if they do not comply with administrative demands to relax grading policies or cover up for the misconduct of senior faculty members.

"As a contract faculty member, I am employed provisionally, and my fate depends entirely on the goodwill of the management. If I decide to take a stand against the administration's unethical practices, I will be labeled 'unfriendly' and 'incompetent' and will not be hired again after the semester ends. Many of us are afraid to question the authority of the warden or accuse senior faculty members of financial misconduct because we do not have job security."- (Private-Faculty-IDI-04)

5.4. Theme 5: Path Dependency and the Problem of Institutional Inertia

The phenomenon of path dependency applies with equal relevance to the functioning of higher education institutions in Pakistan. Drawing on North's framework, it is evident that political interactions become deeply entrenched in the decision-making processes of higher education institutions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of inertia. This is particularly apparent in institutional response mechanisms to reports of unethical behavior by faculty members. The key response mechanisms in Pakistani universities, including Ethics Committees, Proctorial Bodies, and Sexual Harassment Cells, serve more as farcical theater than genuine accountability mechanisms. The issue is one of institutional response and the capacity of administrative bodies to enforce consequential disciplinary action.

While the relevant committees are statutorily mandated to act upon formal complaints of mark manipulation and sexual harassment, in practice, they often serve to shielding faculty members from scrutiny. When a formal complaint is brought against a faculty member, the Syndicate often

initiates an inquiry through an ad hoc committee of faculty members who shield their colleague from disciplinary action.

5.4.1. The Breakdown of Internal Redress Mechanisms

A senior university administrator candidly explained how institutional processes are bypassed or neutralized:

"Recently, a faculty member was accused of manipulating grades and misappropriating funds meant for student scholarships. Instead of initiating a transparent disciplinary hearing, the Syndicate responded by convening an inquiry committee comprised of faculty members from the same department. After months of deliberation, the committee concluded that there was insufficient evidence to take disciplinary action against the accused." - (Admin-Public-IDI-01)

5.4.2. Regulatory Failure of the University Grants Commission (UGC)

At the national level, policy experts stated that the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh does not have independent statutory authority or enforcement powers to take action against corrupt faculty and intervene directly in university administration.

A higher education policy expert summarized these systemic limitations:

"The UGC operates primarily as a fund-disbursing body rather than an independent regulatory watchdog. It lacks the legal mandate to penalize faculty members, remove corrupt administrators, or independently investigate institutional malpractice. When the UGC issues directives or recommendations regarding academic ethics, university syndicates simply ignore them. Without

an independent statutory body with punitive powers, academic integrity in Bangladesh will remain unprotected." — (Expert-IDI-02)

6. Discussion

The research findings indicate that there are multiple academic misconducts in Bangladesh's higher education institutions that are done under faculty members' influence. This article discusses the key ethical issues discovered during the research, which were found in both public and private universities, using participants' views. The following discussion analyzed the effect of academic dishonesty on various levels, from macro to micro, applying Bourdieu's Field Theory and Douglass North's Institutional Path Dependency Theories to interpret the research results. The analysis is based on qualitative research data collected during 30 In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with respondents from private and public universities.

6.1. Subversion of Academic Capital through Political Patronage

In an autonomous academic field, cultural capital, taking the form of scholarly productivity, pedagogical competence, and research output, serves as the primary currency governing professional advancement (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the qualitative data indicate that within public universities in Bangladesh, political capital has systematically displaced cultural capital as the chief determinant of recruitment, tenure, and administrative appointments. Partisan alignment with ruling faculty panels enables politically connected instructors to operate with structural impunity. Because statutory governing bodies such as Syndicates and Proctorial Teams are frequently staffed by partisan panel members, internal accountability mechanisms are routinely neutralized. When political capital guarantees security of employment and career mobility, the

faculty habitus adapts to prioritize partisan loyalty over scholarly rigor, normalizing absenteeism, unethical administrative practices, and pedagogical neglect (Alam, 2016).

6.2. Classroom Power Asymmetries and Pedagogical Extortion

At the micro-level, classroom power asymmetries enable distinct forms of pedagogical extortion. Continuous assessment protocols allocate 30% to 40% of course grading to internal evaluations controlled exclusively by individual course instructors. The findings demonstrate that this discretion is frequently weaponized through retaliatory grading and forced private tutoring. Faculty members leverage their authority over internal marks, viva-voce examinations, and thesis approvals to compel students into enrolling in paid off-campus coaching modules. Students who refuse to pay or who express critical feedback face systematic academic penalties, whereas compliant students receive high marks regardless of academic performance. These transactional dynamic converts student financial resources into academic capital, compromising the integrity of educational evaluations and establishing an environment where compliance is required to secure academic progression.

6.3. Enforced Student Silence and Gendered Harassment

The structural monopoly that faculty members maintain over academic and professional trajectories creates a culture of enforced silence among students. Because course instructors serve as continuous evaluators, thesis supervisors, and gatekeepers for postgraduate recommendations, the perceived personal cost of filing a formal complaint outweighs the likelihood of receiving administrative redress. This institutional vulnerability is particularly pronounced in cases of gendered power misuse and sexual harassment. Female participants reported that university Sexual Harassment Prevention Cells often suffer from procedural delays, lack of administrative

independence, and secondary victim-blaming. As a result, informal student networks frequently advise victims against filing formal grievances to avoid academic blacklisting or delayed graduation. By inflating the personal and academic costs of reporting violations, the institution tacitly protects perpetrators and normalizes unethical conduct.

6.4. Commercialization and Marketization in Private Higher Education

While public university misconduct is anchored primarily in party-political patronage, ethical erosion in private universities is driven largely by neoliberal commercialization. The marketization of higher education redefines students as paying customers, shifting administrative priorities toward revenue generation and customer satisfaction. Private university faculty members face administrative pressure to inflate grades and pass underperforming students to maintain retention rates and preserve tuition revenues. This dynamic is compounded by employment precarity, as junior and non-tenured faculty operate on short-term contracts without job security. Under the threat of non-renewal, faculty members are discouraged from enforcing rigorous standards or reporting institutional irregularities, demonstrating how market-driven pressures compromise academic standards (Sziegat, 2022)

6.5. Path Dependency and Regulatory Breakdown

At the macro-structural level, Douglass North's Institutional Path Dependency framework explains why governance reform remains difficult to implement (North, 1990). Historical institutional arrangements in Bangladeshi higher education have created self-reinforcing mechanisms that preserve current operational patterns. Statutory oversight bodies, including university ethics committees and the University Grants Commission (UGC), suffer from structural paralysis. Internal inquiry committees appointed to investigate faculty misconduct are often composed of

partisan peers who delay proceedings, suppress evidence, or issue inconclusive reports. Concurrently, external regulatory bodies like the UGC lack independent statutory authority and punitive mechanisms to enforce compliance or sanction non-compliant leadership. Consequently, the institutional costs of challenging corrupt networks exceed the cost of maintaining administrative inertia, locking the sector into a cycle of structural impunity.

7. Policy Recommendations and Institutional Reforms

To break the self-sustaining cycle of faculty misconduct, political capture, and administrative inertia that this research has unearthed, Bangladesh's higher-education governance system requires urgent reforms. Drawing on the insights of 30 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), this research offers policy-level recommendations, as well as pedagogical and administrative suggestions at the institutional and classroom levels. To disrupt these self-reinforcing cycles of impunity in academia, higher education governors need to enact multi-layered structural interventions:

- Establishment of an independent regulatory body: As the Education Development Index reflects this poor performance, ranking Bangladesh 105 out of 121 countries in terms of educational outcomes. The University Grants Commission of Bangladesh needs to be granted statutory enforcement powers or a new National Academic Integrity Commission needs to be established by parliamentary act which will operate free of the political panels to investigate faculty corruption, conduct mandatory integrity audits, and enforce binding sanctions upon non-compliant public and private university administrations (Hallak and Poisson, 2007).
- Depoliticization of faculty appointments: Faculty recruitment, tenure-track progression, and administrative appointments (Deans and Department Chairs) need to be decoupled from

political panel affiliations and rely on transparent, peer-reviewed scholarly metrics (Tierney and Sabharwal, 2017).

- Reforming internal evaluation and student protection: Continuous assessment allocations (30%-40%) need to be standardized by second-examiner protocols, double-blind grading, and anonymous digital mark repositories to prevent mark manipulation (Osipian, 2012). Also, institutional bans need to prohibit faculty from giving paid private coaching to their own students and establish encrypted digital whistleblower channels to protect students from academic retaliation (Rumyantseva, 2005).
- Addressing market precarity in private universities: Private higher education governors need to establish minimum contract protections for non-tenured faculty to avoid administrative pressures to inflate grades for commercial retention purposes (Altbach and Knight, 2007).

8. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that faculty members' unethical behaviors in Bangladesh's higher education institutions are not an outcome of their moral deficit. Instead, it results from the combined effect of the political patronage system, marketization, and path dependency that perpetuate a vicious cycle of academic misbehavior in the absence of an authoritative academic law and accountability mechanism (Bourdieu, 1986; North, 1990). Breaking this downward spiral requires implementing a set of higher education reforms at the systemic level to ensure academic integrity, such as establishing a National Academic Integrity Commission with the power to investigate and penalize faculty members, depoliticizing the faculty recruitment process, adopting double-blind marking and anonymized mark repositories, and protecting contract faculty from commercial grade inflation (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Hallak and Poisson, 2007; Osipian, 2012;Rumyantseva, 2005; Tierney and Sabharwal, 2017). Again, economic transformation will

require development of new skills in the workforce. Tertiary educational institutions can support this agenda if quality, relevance, and access challenges are addressed (World Bank. 2019). Beyond its theoretical and regional significance, this research's findings have global implications for higher education in the developing world and Global South countries, where similar political and market forces undermine academic integrity at universities. By demonstrating how political patronage and neoliberalism intersect to undermine higher education, this study contributes original evidence for international scholars and policymakers to address this critical human capital challenge (Sayfullooh et al., 2023; Sozon et al. 2024).

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was conducted in accordance with international ethical standards for social and behavioral research, including the British Sociological Association (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice and the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval for the research protocol was granted by the Academic Committee of the Department of Business Administration (DBA) (Chaired by the Dean of Southeast Business School), Southeast University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. (Ref No-SEU/SBS/1148/2025- 15-10-2025). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants prior to conducting the interviews. Participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the measures taken to guarantee strict data confidentiality and anonymity.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. The manuscript does not contain any individual personal identifiers, photographic images, or identifiable individual participant data. To respect local socio-cultural norms, personal

privacy, and religious sensitivities no photographs or direct audiovisual recordings were taken during the study. All qualitative excerpts and survey responses have been fully anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Availability of data and materials

The data that has been used is confidential and very sensitive in terms of Bangladesh perspective. But on request Corresponding author will share the data.

Competing Interests

I, the author (Corresponding Author) declares that there have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Author's contribution

The author confirms sole responsibility for study conception and design, qualitative data collection and fieldwork, reflexive thematic analysis, literature synthesis, and manuscript preparation.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the preparation of the manuscript Statement:

While preparing this work, the author (me) used chat GPT to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. The author (me) also then edited the text generated by this software as deemed necessary. The author (me) is solely responsible for the content of this published article.

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