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*Corresponding author: Annemarie Davis, Department of Business Management, University of South Africa, P. O. Box. 392, Pretoria, Unisa 0003, South Africa
E-mail: davisa@unisa.ac.za

Reviewing editor:
Arif H Kabir, Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka, BANGLADESH

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EDUCATION POLICY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Academic integrity in the time of contradictions

Annemarie Davis^{1*}

Abstract: Academic integrity is a fundamental aspect of education that is often framed in a negative context, while existing in a reality marked by inherent contradictions. This article reports on how academics perceive academic integrity based on a study that adopted a qualitative hermeneutic approach. The study employed listening posts to interrogate the perceptions of academic integrity amongst academics. The notes from these facilitated listening post sessions were thematically analysed. Findings highlight that the understanding of academic integrity is influenced by various contradictions stemming from academics, students, society, and trends in misconduct. The article argues that academic integrity, in the time of contradictions, can be reframed as an academic skill aligned to specific values. By imparting knowledge about the significance of academic integrity within a university context, academics, university managers and policy makers can play a vital role in driving change and preparing future academics, researchers, administrators and graduates to lead the universities of the future. Findings suggest diverse perspectives on academic integrity, and highlight the necessity of revising policies to promote academic integrity as a skill. Additionally, findings emphasise the adoption of a developmental approach that goes beyond merely preventing misconduct, fostering a comprehensive understanding of academic integrity.

Subjects: Education Policy; Study of Higher Education

Keywords: academic integrity; listening post; thematic analysis; higher education; academic misconduct; ethics

1. Introduction

In a complex world, making sense of academic integrity may not be as easy as one would think. Some may argue that approaches to academic integrity that are grounded in punishment are outdated and need to be reconsidered. Others may argue that academic integrity needs to change over time based on changes in the educational environment. Conventionally, academic integrity, honesty in academe, or sound academic conduct are some of the descriptors used to present the inherent value and practice associated with the completion of an academic qualification.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annemarie Davis is an associate professor in Strategic Management in the Department of Business Management at the University of South Africa. She conducted her doctoral research on middle managers using the strategy-as-practice perspective. She is a qualitative researcher with a focus on micro-strategising practices, and favours studies on organisational change and the middle manager context. As a practicing academic, she also conducts research on quality assurance and academic integrity matters in higher education.

Additionally, the actual practices and initiatives that enhance the academic integrity associated with a qualification come in many guises. In its most basic form, the concept of academic integrity might be described best by behaviour that runs counter to integrity principles. It is common to frame academic integrity negatively, emphasising what it is not. Academic integrity is about honesty and not dishonesty. It is about truthful reporting, and not fabricating data or findings. It is about recognition of authorship, and not plagiarism. It is about individual attempts and not contracted cheating. Despite the numerous methods to describe the act of *not* plagiarising, there appears to be agreement that the value of an assessment is affected by the perceived trust in the assessment practices, the admission procedures, the quality assurance and the qualification verification. Inherently part of all academic practice is the moral code that guides it. This *academic honour code* is interwoven into the fabric of institutions of learning over centuries and is foundational to educational values.

Despite the concept of academic integrity existing for a considerably period of time, renewed interest in academic integrity at universities often flares up, particularly when there is a crisis or a scandal or when “the risk cat has escaped the management bag” (McWilliam, 2007, p.132). A quick internet search of the concept “academic integrity” delivers hundreds of millions of results and almost half of that number when coupling “academic integrity” and “university”. As a practicing academic at one of the largest institutions of higher learning on the African continent, I was particularly interested in the existing research on this topic, and what scholars are saying about academic integrity. This interest stems from my current position within a university environment and an educational space that are slowly recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as a lecturer, a member of the ethics review committee, and an examiner, I have witnessed the challenges to the assessment systems and practices that were driven by COVID-19 realities. The hasty shift to online learning and assessment due to the efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 placed increasing focus on academic integrity and privacy practices associated with technology-enabled assessment. I was confronted with a multitude of bureaucratic procedures, reports and form filling to report suspected academic dishonesty. At the same time, I gained insight into truthful explanations from students who claim that “*they did not know*” what they were doing wrong. I strongly associate with the view of Altbach (2004) that universities are organisations of special standing in society and globalisation means that integrity failures damage institutional brands and the credibility of higher education systems. Fishman (2016, p.12) asserts that institutional and societal factors are increasingly recognised as having significant potential to affect academic cultures with respect to integrity. Exploring how academics perceive academic integrity in the complex institutional environment is thus a worthwhile research endeavour.

Based on my experiences, I consulted colleagues and literature and set out to gain a deeper understanding of academic integrity within my university context by exploring the lived experiences of staff members. I purposely chose to zoom in on academics who are tasked with teaching, assessment, reviewing, checking and reporting. Although there was a high incidence of hits when I searched the World Wide Web on the topic of academic integrity, when student conduct (or misconduct) literature was disregarded, there was considerably less research that focused on academics. Additionally, academics are most likely also involved in reporting suspected cases and testifying on suspected academic dishonesty. It is not unreasonable to assume that these academics be asked by disciplinary committees what *they did* to prevent students from cheating. Insights into how academics perceive academic integrity could provide deeper understanding of the concept within the challenges of the current university context and potentially promote academic integrity as a skill to be mastered.

Following from this introduction, this article is structured as follows: a review of the literature on academic integrity, a description of the methodology used to interrogate the concept of academic integrity, an overview of how the data was analysed, findings from the research, and comments on reframing academic integrity. The article ends with suggestions for further research and practical implications of the research findings. Finally, the article presents a conclusion on academic integrity.

2. Literature review: academic integrity

I set out to read widely, and then filtered my reviews into specific themes. To a limited extent, my approach was borrowed, from Brooke (2021), as I consciously and continuously reflected on my reading while jotting down notes and ideas on specific themes. Where available, I intentionally included literature linked to academic integrity within the South African context. This was done to provide a more appropriate contextualisation within which to frame the findings from my own research. Through this approach, I am able to offer a thematic review of the literature, as my approach encompasses the consideration of appropriate scholarly literature related to my research on academic integrity in universities as lived by academics. Interest in research on academic integrity seems to be growing and Macfarlane et al. (2014) confirm research into academic integrity as an area of scholarly and policy-based interest in higher education studies. Although I alluded earlier to what academic integrity is not, the next section offers a definition of the concept, framed outside the negative association.

2.1. Defining academic integrity

As suggested earlier, there appears to be clarity on what academic integrity is *not*. There also appears to be a notion that, within higher education, academic integrity is situated in two distinct groupings: academic integrity for academics, and academic integrity for students (Christensen Hughes & Eaton, 2022). This notion confirms that academic integrity is not only about the conduct of the academics, but the concept also extends to the students. One could argue that academic integrity encompasses the conduct of the professional and support staff within institutions as well.

In the context of academic integrity for academics or researchers, the concept deals with research methods, ethics in conducting research, correct presentation of data and authorship. On the negative side, academic integrity, encompasses predatory publishing, overpublishing using the same dataset and questionable practices in student supervision, hiring practices, and inappropriate interpersonal relationships (Christensen Hughes & Eaton, 2022). For students, the context of academic integrity refers to plagiarism, contract cheating, purchasing customised essays from freelance writers, using wearable high-tech devices to communicate with accomplices, and obtaining examination questions beforehand (Finchilescu & Cooper, 2018) and even bribing teaching assistants or tutors for inflated grades or correct answers. The professional and support staff context refers to academic integrity situated in adhering to admission rules, accuracy and honesty in recording results and checking module credits, monitoring and maintaining systems to detect misconduct, investigating reported cases of academic misconduct, and strengthening awareness through hosting workshops, developing materials, and developing policies and procedures to promote integrity.

The International Centre for Academic Integrity in Canada defines the concept as a commitment to the five fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility—even in the face of adversity. Within my host institution, academic integrity is defined as the meaningful and concerted efforts to ensure concern for human dignity, honesty, trust, fairness, truthfulness, accuracy, respect and responsibility in teaching, research and community engagement (University of South Africa, 2017). The common themes and core values that encompass the concept of academic integrity are clearly evident. In agreement with Macfarlane et al. (2014), for the purpose of this article and research project, academic integrity is defined as encompassing values, behaviour and conduct that embrace sound academic standards and educational principles. This approach implies a firm adherence to a code of moral values and translates into actions that avoid cheating, plagiarism and contract cheating.

2.2. Themes within academic integrity literature

The discussion that follows is structured according to four themes, namely academics, students, misconduct, and technology. However, while reviewing the recent literature, I was not surprised to identify a substantial number of articles linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (Awosoga et al., 2021; Eaton, 2022; Gamage et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2022). One cannot underestimate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on assessment practices across all forms of institutions of learning. The first

section below therefore offers a brief overview of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then presents the four themes.

2.3. The effect of the covid-19 pandemic

There is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic translated into a higher education emergency. Freeman et al. (2021) explored the rise of paid, centralised decision-making in Australian higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that institutions responded to the crisis by operationalising emergency management plans. With the rapid shift to online learning and assessment, practices around academic integrity and privacy associated with technology-enabled assessment received considerable attention (Freeman et al., 2021, p. 400). Tan et al. (2021), proposed a single best-answer multiple-choice assessment for undergraduate students in the medical programme under study, to retain academic integrity during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Marais (2022) explored academic integrity within the same institution that this article reports on and confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered how examinations were conducted. Verhoef and Coetser (2021) explored student perceptions on online assessments conducted remotely, while Verhoef et al. (2020) examined the disruption caused by the pandemic and how it can serve as an impetus for cheating and academic dishonesty.

Within the Ethiopian higher education sector, Zikargae (2022) analysed the commitment, preparedness, responses, and challenges of risk communication for the prevention, ethics, and academic integrity in terms of Covid-19. Adopting a qualitative thematic analysis, he found that e-learning to support disrupted education caused by the pandemic was managed poorly and unethically, and academic integrity was eroded. Mumtaz et al. (2023) explored the major challenges faced and lessons learned during the unplanned transition to online examinations at a traditional university. They identified several challenges related to institutional infrastructure, non-familiarity with online examinations and limited student access to technology resources. These challenges directly affected academic integrity, and the researchers called for university managers to arrange dedicated examination centres equipped with computers, webcams and online proctoring software. Ultimately, they concluded that the administration of online examinations requires the professional development of instructors, the use of authentic summative assessments, the use of specialised software solutions (such as Turnitin) and ensuring instructor readiness to design authentic assessments.

As alluded to in the title of this article, while working through the literature, I was confronted with contradictions. I present these contradictions in the findings section where I integrate my data with the literature.

2.4. Literature theme 1: academics

Academics view academic integrity in two ways: as a rule-based approach where the rules rather than discretion is emphasised, and as a principle-based approach where opportunity for self-correction and discretion is emphasised (Amigud & Pell, 2021). Many academics indicated that they felt unsupported by the administrative section of their university, and they were therefore reluctant to report academic dishonesty due to the excessive burden of dealing with paperwork and providing proof (MacLeod & Eaton, 2020). The 412 academics surveyed across 17 universities in Canada confirmed that academic dishonesty is a worsening problem at institutions and that institutional policies are sound in principle but fail in application (Eaton, 2020). Earlier, Tabsh et al. (2012) explored academics' perception of ethical issues related to teaching, scholarship and service. They found that approximately one-third of the participants were unaware of the code of ethics of the university, and several acknowledged that they would ignore ethical code violations committed by colleagues Tabsh et al. (2012). Mahabeer and Pirtheepal (2019) confirmed the significant role of academics in maintaining academic integrity. They also emphasise the need for academics to reconsider their approach to plagiarism detection tools in teaching large classes.

In another study, Bristor and Burke (2016) found that academics have disagreements over who is responsible for teaching academic integrity and how to handle cases of misconduct (Löfström et al., 2015). Gottardello and Karabag (2022) conducted research on the roles of university professors in academic integrity management. They explored academics' perceptions of their role in the phenomenon, how cultural contexts influence university teachers' perception of their role in the academic integrity field, and whether conflict exists between what they believe their role should be and the types of roles they actually play. The findings suggest that professors believe the teaching role extends beyond encouraging the learning of the subject matter being studied, and includes offering to students education and information about the importance of avoiding academic misconduct such as cheating and plagiarism.

2.5. Literature theme 2: students

An interesting finding in the study by Bretag et al. (2014) showed that there is awareness of academic integrity amongst students. Using a survey amongst 15,000 students across six Australian universities Bretag et al. (2014) found that the majority of respondents were aware of academic integrity, but were mostly dissatisfied with the information they received on how to avoid academic integrity breaches.

Being aware does not imply understanding, and in 2014, Gullifer and Tyson conducted research amongst students to determine who has read the policy on plagiarism. They found that only half of the 3,405 students participating in the research had actually read the policy, but were nevertheless still confused regarding behaviour that constitutes plagiarism. Keeping to how students perceive academic integrity, Tabsh et al. (2017) surveyed students in engineering at an American university in the United Arab Emirates to gain their perception of the issues related to academic dishonesty incorporating plagiarism, inappropriate collaboration, cheating in examinations, and copyright violations. Their results show that students preferred softer approaches when dealing with academic transgressions. These softer approaches include education on academic integrity issues, lenient deadlines, and lowering the difficulty level in examinations.

On another note, Mulisa et al. (2021) considered the carryover effects of college dishonesty. They specifically explored the link between college dishonesty and workplace dishonesty. Through a systematic review incorporating four databases, their findings confirm that academic dishonesty in college should be considered more than just a matter of immediate academic repercussions, as it could also indicate potential workplace dishonesty to some degree. Rather, academic dishonesty and its repercussions tend to be a choice between fostering ethical and unethical citizens or a choice between preserving and undermining the integrity of the profession.

In their article within this journal, Lin et al. (2023) reported on the outcome of the move from a traditional assessment method (in person) to an online assessment among students in Hong Kong. Specifically, they explored unproctored online assessment and found no major differences in overall grades but identified negative effects on the students due to the shift to online assessment. Lin et al. (2023) however did not specifically explore learning quality issues such as plagiarism and grade inflation.

2.6. Literature theme 3: technology

On the one hand, technology is proffered as a solution to reduce cheating. On the other hand, technology is seen as an enabler of increased cheating. Bajjnath and Singh (2019) specifically considered examination cheating and how a number of South African institutions are dealing with smartwatches or "wrist computers", with most institutions banning them entirely during examination sessions. Online examinations invite new opportunities for cheating where students could potentially engage in screen-sharing, remote desktop control, or the use of virtual machine software. Automated paraphrasing tools as well as the booming online sharing economy comprise a threat to academic integrity.

Benson et al. (2019) promote the use of technology in offering university-wide e-learning courses integrity courses. Educational technology companies have responded to the concerns around academic integrity by developing technological solutions to combat the increase in cheating linked to alternative assessment methods (Swauger, 2020).

Flores-Vivar and García-Peñalvo (2023) as well as Gelman (2023) warn that the arrival of artificial intelligence (AI) powered chatbots has raised additional interest in their implications, ethical use of chatbots, and their influence on the perseverance of academic integrity. In addition, Chaudhry et al. (2023) explored AI-based tools, and conducted an empirical study to test the capability of ChatGPTs to solve a variety of assignments, and then compared it to the highest-scored students. The ChatGPT-generated assignments were then tested using the best-known tools for plagiarism detection to determine whether they could pass the academic integrity test. Chaudhry et al. (2023) confirms that ChatGPT is sophisticated enough to write assignments, analyse case studies, develop project reports, and provide solutions to work-based problems. As technology continues to accelerate, the rate of development in advanced tools that aid academic work legitimately and illicitly also increases (Roe & Perkins, 2022). Artificial intelligence can generate content and there is a need to also acknowledge the sources and tools used. At the same time, researchers working with artificially generated data are equally responsible for the ethical conduct involving such data and remain accountable for the societal and ethical implications of their work. Misconduct using content generated through artificial intelligence could include the creation of biased algorithms, conducting research that is harmful to individuals or communities or presenting content as own.

Given the practice implications of academic integrity, I also consulted popular media and found articles that deal with essay mills, journal blacklists, academic corruption, and buying academic papers. Obviously, ChatGPT and similar applications add to the disruption and complexity.

2.7. Literature theme 4: misconduct

Much of academic integrity research is framed in terms of misconduct or academic corruption (Macfarlane et al., 2014). Ali et al. (2021) explored ghost-writing or contract cheating as a growing threat to academic integrity in higher education institutions across the world. Findings from their study confirm that “ghost-writing” is perceived not only as cheating, but also as a form of plagiarism. The range and types of academic misconduct are on the increase. Unauthorised use of resources is quite common where textbooks, notes or copyrighted material are shared through social media platforms. Drawing on a survey of over 4,000 students and 1,300 academics, Harrison et al. (2021) deemed the use of commercialised websites offering access to tutors or study help collaborative cheating. Awasthi (2019) conducted a systematic review of academic misconduct and identified earlier research by Bornmann (2013) and Weber-Wulff (2014, p.9) on the different types of academic misconduct. The list includes copying and pasting, disguised plagiarism, self-plagiarism, paraphrasing, word switching and patchwriting. Hopp and Hoover (2017) surveyed 1,215 management researchers, including editors and reviewers, to explore their experiences with four types of academic misconduct: plagiarism, self-plagiarism, coercive citations, and questionable reviewing practices. They found that many management researchers deemed self-plagiarism acceptable. There also appeared to be practices of honorary authorship where colleagues and supervisors who did not take part in the work, are added as co-authors. The admittance by editors that they regularly witness conflicts of interest in peer reviewing is worrying.

2.8. Concluding comments on the literature reviewed

Through my engagement with literature, I obtained strong confirmation that academic integrity is a relevant topic to explore. The thematic approach to the literature enabled me to set the scene for the empirical research and to compare my data and findings with what is already known.

3. Research proposition

The proposition that I put forward as I embarked on this research project is grounded in the attempts of higher education institutions to limit instances of academic dishonesty by implementing rigorous monitoring, control, and methods to detect plagiarism. Simply developing policies and integrity and/or honesty statements, limits the potential of the institution and staff members to provide guidance to its students to develop a shared understanding of the values underpinning the learning, their teaching and the research endeavour. However, in support of East and Donnelly (2012), I concur that there is a need for more systematic approaches to teaching students and academics about academic integrity and providing resources that promote academic integrity as an educational opportunity instead of focussing on punishment. The current research proposition is that academic integrity can be reframed as an academic skill. Research on how academic integrity is perceived in the challenging higher education environment is bound to strengthen understanding of the concept and thereby play a vital role in driving change and preparing future academics, researchers, administrators, and graduates to lead the universities of the future.

4. Methodology

I adopted a qualitative research approach to gather rich descriptions of the lived experiences of academic integrity among staff within my host institution. My approach was hermeneutic in nature as I aimed to discover hidden meanings and interpretations linked to lived experiences of academic integrity. As my research involved staff, I not only obtained ethical clearance but also permission from the institutional research permission sub-committee to conduct the research. My inclusion criteria covered members of academic integrity committees within the institution, and academics with an interest in academic integrity and research ethics. After obtaining institutional permission, I was provided with access to the list of close to 500 members of the various academic integrity committees within the institution and the list of research ethics review committee members. I also shared an open invitation on the institutional eNews site. The invitation offered introductory comments about the research topic, shared the details of the ethics clearance certificate and offered a brief description of the planned engagement, which entailed a five-hour workshop. Details on the listening post methodology were provided and prospective participants were invited to bring metaphors related to the theme of academic integrity to the workshop. A total of 109 participants registered for the workshop. No exclusion criteria were applied to filter the participants, with the assumption that those participating did so in response to the invitation that listed the inclusion criteria. The objective was to gather rich descriptions from individuals with an interest in academic integrity within the selected institution.

I engaged the services of six trained convenors to delve into the lived realities of the participants. The workshop took place on 6 October 2022 and was hosted online. A total of 61 participants joined the engagement that started off with some introductory remarks by myself, followed by a presentation on the sharp increase in alleged academic transgressions and student disciplinary cases.

The actual engagement where the data was gathered took the form of a listening post. After the presentations, the participants were randomly assigned to three groups and entered online break-away rooms where the convenors took over the discussions. The listening post approach of OPUS (the Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society) is a methodology developed from the systems psychodynamic approach of the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations, and is useful in investigating the preoccupations of citizens in society (Dartington, 2000). The listening post was divided into three parts:

- firstly, to share preoccupations and experiences about the metaphors that participants would use to describe academic integrity;
- secondly, to identify major themes emerging from the first session collectively, and;
- finally, to identify the predominant and underlying dynamics which manifested collectively in the first two sessions.

The listening post enabled participants, as individual members of the institution, to reflect on their own experiences of academic integrity and to try to develop an understanding of what is happening in the institution. Through this approach, participants were invited to share their preoccupations about academic integrity. I specifically set out to use metaphors related to the theme to go beyond individual and personal preoccupations to arrive at a deeper collective understanding of academic integrity. I am confident that the themes reported in this article emerged through associative dialogue and were legitimately analysed as societal content. The dynamics of the three groups, as well as the expertise of the trained convenors simulate a microcosm of the larger institution. The six convenors (two per group) were tasked with managing the boundaries between the alternating roles of convenor and participant. The theory underlying the listening post acknowledges that the convenor is always part of the dynamics of the group, and is a participant too. The convenors made notes during the session. Data was obtained through the notes made by the convenors during the three listening post groups that incorporated the contributions of 61 participants.

5. Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis of the convenor notes. I employed self-reflexivity and member checking (with the convenors) to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings. Keeping to the theme of self-reflexivity, I declare that the way I present the data, is based on my research lens and how I made sense of the convenor notes, participant comments, personal observations and ongoing conversations in the literature. My findings align with those documented in published academic research. My rendition of the real-world setting in this article is coloured by my meanings and interpretations. Within this, I offer personal narratives on the contextual factors related to academic integrity within my unique context. As I commenced with the data analysis, I reflected on the actual listening post exercise. As the lead researcher, I jumped between the three groups and noted my observations.

6. Findings

It is important to state that context matters. In agreement with Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), the behaviour of an organisation, and its members, can be understood by interrogating the context of the organisation. First and foremost, I gained a sense of academic staff feeling overwhelmed with the realities of enforcing academic integrity. I took a step back to interrogate my own experience, and found that I could identify with the burden of enforcing academic integrity. This observation resonates with Vehviläinen et al. (2018) who found that, when academics discover that students have committed breaches of academic integrity, they experience a breakdown in the pedagogical relationship and they face a conflict between their responsibility of care for students and their responsibility as quality assurance agents for degrees. The moral distress experienced by academics is exacerbated by the administrative burden in terms of reporting cases, providing the evidence, and delivering testimony on the suspected misconduct. They have to do so in front of members of student bodies whose primary concern is the interest of their own members (and not necessarily academic standards and reputation).

My second observation emerged upon reflecting on the metaphors employed by participants to share their preoccupations and experiences regarding academic integrity. For example:

Academic integrity comprises stakeholders walking together in a thick, foggy forest. Some have better flashlights compared to others. (Convenor group 1)

Academic integrity is a belly dancer – the temptation to take the easy way is always present. (Convenor group 1)

Academic integrity is teaching a toddler not to touch the hot stove. (Convenor group 2)

Academic integrity is difficult in an unethical environment. (Convenor group 3)

As I considered these descriptors, I reminded myself of the views of Barnett and Hallam (1999, p.140), “we are faced with a world of super complexity ... [and] dilemmas of understanding (the world), of acting (in the world) and of identity and self-understanding (in that world)”. Yet, recognising the complexity of the environment should not delay the efforts to create shared understandings, joint accountability, and collaborative efforts to strengthen academic integrity.

From these preliminary observations, I moved on to a deeper level of analysis that led me to the overarching theme of contradictions. I was not surprised by this theme as the research project originated from the contradictions between academic conduct and academic misconduct. I observed a constant parrying between what should be and what should not be, or between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. As can be expected, the contradiction of what is right versus what is wrong was evident from the start. The right versus wrong contradiction found expression in comments such as

We [i.e. academics] only focus on wrong, we do not focus on what is right. It is difficult to identify what is right.

This comment reminded me of the statement by Gullifer and Tyson (2014), who remark that there are different interpretations of academic integrity. Such differences result in confusion among students and staff alike. The authors also say that integrity is a “suitcase” word (Gottardello & Karabag, 2022, p.528) that means different things to different people most of the time. This notion of different views on what is right and what is wrong was confirmed by a number of participants with some references to the personal value system of the student. Being mutually accountable was observed and the following analogy was presented:

Academic integrity is not only about the student, but also about the academic. The academic is the captain of the ship. If the captain does not work, what happens to the crew? The captain must be dedicated to the task ... (Convenor group 2)

The theme of contradictions was evident throughout. The following section offers the contradictions while acknowledging the complexities of the institutional context and recognising the literature themes identified earlier in this article.

6.1. Be sensitive to context, but ...

Linking to the statement in the opening paragraph, context does matter. In a diverse country and within an institution that prides itself on being diverse, inclusive and student-centred, the contradictions were clear. It almost felt as if justifications were presented for academic misconduct, for example¹

If it takes being unethical to put food on the table, I'd also be unethical (Convenor group 3)

Being hungry is a motivation for cheating – both the students and those writing the assessments on their behalf are motivated by hunger (Convenor group 3)

Behaviours of honesty are different for different people (Convenor group 2)

The contradiction lies in the reality that while we, as an institution, portray a sensitivity to the social ills and student realities, we do not accept it as an excuse. The following quotes offer a different view:

The student reality should be appreciated with compassion (Convenor group 1)

[Academics] need to fully appreciate the student lived experience and reality (Convenor group 1)

The contradiction is expressed as being sensitive to the context of the student, but does not condone the misconduct. What was also clear from the participants was that academic integrity cannot be seen in silos. The following description stood out:

The water affects the behaviour of the fish (Convenor group 3)

I observed a similar contradiction in the responses by the academics. The contradiction was expressed as being sensitive to the prevalence of misconduct, but not missing the deadlines for marking or maintaining good pass rates. For example:

Stakeholders are working against one another instead of working together. There is a tug of war between changing how we teach and pass rate. Pass rate is prioritised over assessment integrity. (Convenor group 3)

The reality of the contradiction may be summarised by a provocative comment by one of the participants who stated that university management is only interested in good pass rates.

6.2. Use technology, but ...

I found this contradiction interesting, but not surprising. Linking back to the reviewed literature regarding technology, which could aid academic work legitimately and illicitly, the drive to strengthen the technological abilities of our students is clear. We want them to use technology to find solutions, but not to cheat! In a fast-paced world with instant access to information, it is not surprising that students turn to Internet search engines in response to assessment questions. And when assessment policies discourage the use of the Internet, the blame goes to those tasked with enforcing the policies. The following example serves to confirm this:

If you want something, google it. Academics are the brakes to the speed of accessing information. (Convenor group 2)

As stated elsewhere in this article, the rapid shifts to online learning and assessment introduced a multitude of technological solutions, tools, tricks, and shortcuts—not all within sound academic conduct.

I present a provocative comment: artificial intelligence versus human intelligence—the discernment of what constitutes acceptable practices may reside exclusively within the realm of humans rather than machines.

6.3. Collaborate, but ...

Graduate employability and competence development around the world depend on a strong sense of innovation and collaboration practices implemented in institutions of higher learning (Abelha et al., 2020). This implies that employers are looking for graduates with competencies and skills that include the ability to work in groups, function in a team, and display helping behaviours. If institutions of higher learning could enhance these skills through the courses they teach and by the way they teach, then graduate employability is bound to be strengthened. However, the boundaries of “helping behaviour” cannot include inappropriate collaboration for example, on individual assessments. Contract cheating, collaborative cheating, screen sharing, and ghost-writing were already confirmed as forms of misconduct earlier (Awasthi, 2019). Student disciplinary statistics in my institution show almost 11 000 cases of academic misconduct reported for 2022. In the period January 2016 to December 2020, only 3383 disciplinary cases were recorded. The sharp increase in disciplinary cases is due to students enlisting the help of third parties to complete examinations, assignments, and coursework (Mosia, 2023). On the other hand, Seeland et al. (2020) reported on the efforts of institutions to protect students by blocking access to contract cheating websites on institutional networks—which could be seen as stifling collaboration

amongst students. The contradiction expressed here is: collaborate, engage, and work as a team, but do not cheat.

6.4. Do as we say, but ...

This contradiction is presented on two levels: the institutional level and the societal level.

The institutional level may be the most uncomfortable level to deal with, as I am confronted with the realities of academics misbehaving. Here, the finger points back to those tasked with teaching, assessment, reviewing, checking, and reporting. Sadly, the media is rife with reports on academic misconduct and transgressions by academics, whether in connection with research methods, reporting of research findings, plagiarism, coercive citations, or with regard to being added as authors without participating in the work. The following descriptions dealt directly with this observation:

It all starts with you as the lecturer. (Convenor group 3)

From the stories shared by the participants, I noted comments about what I do, versus what others do. One participant referred to examples set by academics and said:

If academics engage in academic misconduct students are likely to emulate them and the culture of dishonesty will be perpetuated ... (Convenor group 1)

On a broader societal level, references were made to the cool drink culture that knows no boundaries. The cool drink culture is also referred to as the culture of “tjotjo” in South African slang referring to paying bribes or buying one’s way out of a predicament, usually in reference to traffic officers or cops.² One statement that stood out was:

Whoever benefits from (academic misconduct) condones it. (Convenor group 3)

I noted the emphasis on what happens in the broader context.

Adapt or die – a country run by unethical government. It is difficult to behave ethically in an unethical environment. If you can’t beat them, join them. (Convenor group 3)

Academic misconduct is actually a social ill ... everybody is doing it ... hence, it is like an octopus with far-reaching tentacles ... (Convenor group 1)

When stakeholders are reluctant to take accountability for academic misconduct, the formulation and promulgation of policy becomes a defence against taking ownership for their contribution to academic dishonesty ... (Convenor group 1)

I express the last contradiction as “Do as we say, but do not do as we do”. This boils down to leading by example, practicing what we preach, and taking ownership of academic integrity matters. However, it goes beyond the boundaries of the institution, and speaks to society and the country as a whole.

7. Reframing academic integrity

By focusing on misconduct rather than on conduct, there is a risk of merely “training” students to remain within boundaries while never educating them about the underlying reasons for their existence. By merely developing policies and integrity and/or honesty statements, we limit the potential of the institution and staff members to guide students fully in developing a shared understanding of the values that underpin the learning, our teaching, and the research endeavour.

Training for the promotion of academic integrity came through in comments such as:

Institution to add academic integrity as part of open days [W]hen academic integrity is approached as a collective, systemic, consistent, shared, meaning-making process, the result could be a sustainable, shared and meaningful cultural experience of academic integrity. (Convenor group 2)

Some of the suggestions linked to training focused on teaching students the value of competence in order to reduce the propensity of academic dishonesty. Such training is countered however by the following comment:

If more employers could hire for competence (for example invest in psychological assessments during recruitment) instead of hiring “for qualifications” academic dishonesty will subside as students will know that they won’t obtain employment despite having the papers. (Convenor group 2)

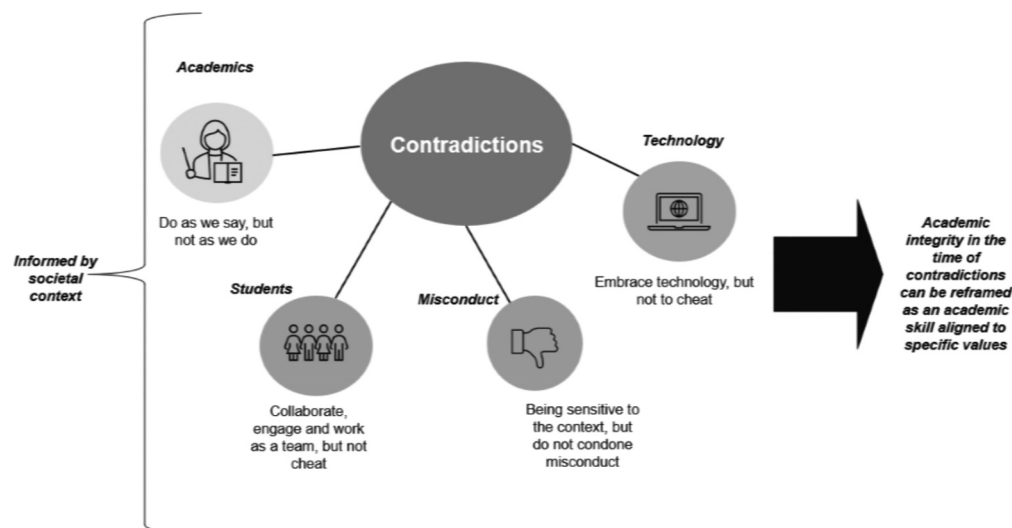
To present my findings, and concluding proposition, I offer Figure 1, which illustrates the merging of the literature themes: academics, students, misconduct, and technology (shown in italics below). While the COVID-19 pandemic was a definite theme in the literature, it is linked to a specific event, and I therefore chose to focus on the other four themes. What is important to note is that the societal context cannot be divorced from how integrity plays out in practice—be it the unique university context, the wider higher education context, or the country. I conclude with a proposition that academic integrity, in a time of contradictions, can be reframed as an academic skill aligned to specific values.

8. Practical implications

Being true to my earlier observations on context, I share some thoughts on the practical implications of the research and make some recommendations. After engaging with the data and the participants, I confirm that my concluding proposition is strongly connected to the argument by Sefcik et al. (2020: 39), namely “[w]e cannot expect students to act in ways that are respectful of academic integrity if we don’t explain what it is, why it is so important, and teach in ways that reflect its importance.” This observation implies that higher education institution managers ought to revisit their existing practices used to monitor students’ learning progress and improve their educational programmes. Instead of warning students against the use of artificial intelligence and technology, educational institutions should engage in open discussions with all important stakeholders to set achievable expectations from students regarding the acceptable use of AI-assisted writing tools. At national level, it is important to understand how students can be allowed to use AI under the right circumstances and under the supervision and guidance of the instructors, with

Figure 1. Contradictions in academic integrity.

Source: Author



effective training on the ethical use of artificial intelligence. In practice, I concur with Ali et al. (2021), namely that we need holistic approaches to assist educators to curb academic misconduct.

My recommendation for future research is to replicate the listening post study among students in order to delve into their lived experiences. Additionally, I believe a broader study is necessary to gather perspectives from diverse cultures regarding what constitutes academic integrity. Furthermore, I deem it important to conduct a similar exploration among professional, administrative, and support staff. Existing policies within the institution should be revisited with an emphasis on mastering academic integrity as an academic skill. In this way, the common understanding of academic integrity could promote academic integrity from a developmental perspective instead of an excuse to enforce punishment. Finally, with the wider adoption and uses of artificial intelligence, research that tracks the use of artificial intelligence, and how it impacts academic integrity practices, should be prioritised. This may require the revision of policies, and drawing from the amendments across institutions, and countries, could contribute significantly to establishing acceptable practices.

9. Personal insights

Given the hermeneutic nature of this research, I offer my personal insight and reflections as a practicing academic. I am convinced that academic integrity needs to be infused throughout all academic processes—from application and admission to teaching and assessment, as well as detecting and reporting academic misconduct. All stakeholders need to take ownership in upholding, maintaining, and managing academic integrity. Moreover, students should be as knowledgeable as possible about the nature of academic integrity decisions and the potential consequences. Various means should be employed to share this knowledge, such as policies, short messages, video demonstrations of appropriate practices (such as citations), and regular reminders through personalised communication. Furthermore, providing constructive feedback on student assessments is an important tool in promoting academic integrity as a skill. Finally, I am convinced that developing academic integrity is an ongoing process that requires a commitment to ethical principles and personal responsibility. It is a vital skill not only for academic success but also for exhibiting ethical behaviour in all aspects of life.

10. Conclusion

After discussing the topic thoroughly, I have reached the end of my article; however, my mental engagement with the subject persists. The need to foster a greater understanding of academic integrity has been reaffirmed. By imparting knowledge about the significance of academic integrity in universities today, we can play a vital role in driving change and equipping future academics, researchers, administrators, and graduates to take the helm of the universities of tomorrow.

Finally, I highlight the findings of Gottardello and Karabag (2022), who stated that the actions and inactions of academics are the result of an interaction between their individual characteristics, their cultural environment, the rules established by the institution, and the students in the classroom. These factors contribute to the promotion or inhibition of academic integrity to a greater or lesser extent. Upon personal reflection on the insights gleaned from the listening posts and literature review, it is evident that academic integrity, academic conduct, and academic misconduct can be sources of frustration. However, amidst these challenges, there is also recognition of the realities faced by both students and staff, evoking a sense of empathy. The task of enhancing academic integrity may appear overwhelming; yet, there are concurrent calls for shared responsibility and integrated approaches in upholding and promoting academic integrity. Just as we expect our students to exhibit truthfulness and ethics, it is incumbent upon us to embody the same principles. Practising academic integrity as a skill requires a sound understanding of policies, the practice of citing sources, and avoiding plagiarism, as well as the management of time to avoid last-minute rushes. It also necessitates learning from mistakes and staying informed. Developing academic integrity is an ongoing process that requires a commitment to ethical principles and personal responsibility.

Author details

Annemarie Davis¹
E-mail: davisa@unisa.ac.za
ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2137-2597>
¹ Department of Business Management, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

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Notes

1. Please note that all responses are reproduced verbatim and unedited.
2. Skhokho (2021). Tjotjo. <https://afriictionary.com/definition.php?word=Tjotjo#:~:text=A%20term%20used%20to%20refer,to%20cops%20or%20traffic%20officers>. (Accessed 25 May 2023)

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