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Artificial Intelligence use and policy gaps in South African universities: A Pragmatic Inquiry into student punishment and academic regulation

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly being used by university students in the preparation of essays, assignments, projects, dissertations, and theses. However, the rapid integration of AI into higher education has generated significant debates regarding academic integrity, ethical authorship, and institutional governance within universities. In many South African universities, there appears to be limited institutional clarity regarding the acceptable use of AI in academic work. At the same time, some lecturers discourage the use of AI and impose disciplinary measures on students suspected of excessively relying on AI in their academic submissions. This paper adopts pragmatism as its theoretical lens to explore the tensions between technological transformation, academic integrity, and policy ambiguity within South African higher education institutions. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and five postgraduate students and five lecturers from different South African universities were purposively sampled for semi-structured interviews. The collected data were thematically analysed. Findings revealed that some students perceive themselves as unfairly accused of excessively using AI in their academic work despite the absence of explicit institutional policies regulating AI usage. Lecturers, on the other hand, expressed concerns regarding originality, authenticity, and ethical scholarship in the context of growing AI use. The study concludes that the absence of explicit AI governance frameworks creates procedural ambiguity and tensions between academic integrity enforcement and technological adaptation in higher education institutions. The study recommends that South African universities develop clear AI policies, provide institutional guidance on ethical AI use, and equip both lecturers and students with AI literacy and governance training. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to ongoing debates on AI governance, academic integrity, and policy development in South African higher education.

Keywords: AI, policies, academic integrity, higher education, South African universities

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become one of the most influential technological developments shaping contemporary higher education globally. The growing integration of AI technologies into academic

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practices has transformed the ways in which students access information, conduct research, summarise literature, and develop written academic work. Within South African universities, AI tools are increasingly used by students in the preparation of assignments, projects, dissertations, and theses. This growing use of AI has simultaneously generated debates regarding academic integrity, originality, authorship, and ethical scholarship.

Although universities continue to encourage technological innovation and digital transformation in the era of the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR), there appears to be limited institutional clarity regarding how AI should be ethically and appropriately used in academic work. In some instances, lecturers reportedly discourage students from using AI and may impose disciplinary measures on students suspected of excessively relying on AI in their academic submissions. This situation creates tensions between technological adaptation and academic integrity enforcement within higher education institutions.

Artificial intelligence may be understood as machine-based systems capable of processing information, generating responses, and simulating aspects of human intelligence.[1] AI technologies have become increasingly accessible through smartphones, laptops, and online platforms, thereby making them widely available to university students. According to some scholars, the excessive or unethical use of AI in academic writing may compromise originality, independent critical thinking, and ethical ownership of academic work.[2] Conversely, other scholars argue that AI can enhance efficiency, accessibility, and academic productivity when used responsibly within clear institutional guidelines.

Scholars such as Sokhulu et al. note that many universities currently rely on plagiarism-detection systems such as Turnitin to monitor similarity indices in academic work.[3] However, questions remain regarding the reliability and legitimacy of AI-detection mechanisms and the absence of universally accepted measures for determining excessive AI use in academic writing. Consequently, tensions may arise when lecturers attempt to regulate AI use in contexts where explicit institutional policies remain underdeveloped.

Based on this background, this study therefore aims to explore the ethical and institutional grounds upon which disciplinary measures related to AI use may be established within South African universities. The major question guiding this study is: Under what circumstances would it be fair and procedurally appropriate to discipline students for the excessive use of AI in academic work?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars such as Dube and Setlalentoa argue that AI has become increasingly important in higher education because it assists students and researchers in summarising large volumes of information efficiently.[4] Within the context of the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR), AI is often positioned as a transformative technological tool capable of reshaping teaching, learning, and research practices in universities. Maimela and Mbonde further argue that universities should harness the opportunities presented by AI for curriculum transformation, innovation, and knowledge production.[5]

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[1] Jiahui Huang, Salmiza Saleh, and Yufei Liu, "A Review on Artificial Intelligence in Education," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 10, no. 3 (May 10, 2021): 206, https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2021-0077; Lijia Chen, Pingping Chen, and Zhijian Lin, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: A Review," *IEEE Access* 8 (2020): 75264–78, https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2020.2988510.

[2] Charles Maimela and Palesa Mbonde, "Artificial Intelligence in South African Universities: Curriculum Transformation and Decolonisation—Aid or Obstacle?," *Frontiers in Sociology* 10 (July 8, 2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1543471; Antwi-Boampong Ahmed et al., "Half a Decade of Artificial Intelligence in Education in Africa: Trends, Opportunities, Challenges and Future Directions," *Journal of Engineering Education Transformations* 38, no. 3 (January 30, 2025): 81–100, https://doi.org/10.16920/jeet/2024/v38i3/24246; Chen, Chen, and Lin, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: A Review."

[3] Lerato Hlengiwe Sokhulu, Mzwandile Wiseman Zulu, and Dailene Lott-Naidoo, "Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education South Africa: The Role of ChatGPT in Students' Learning," *Journal of Education*, no. 99 (July 4, 2025): 142–66, https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i99a08.

[4] Bekithemba Dube and Wendy Setlalentoa, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: Embracing Change, Addressing Challenges, and Shaping Tomorrow's Curriculum," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research* 6, no. s1 (September 19, 2024): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2024.vol6.s1.01.

[5] Maimela and Mbonde, "Artificial Intelligence in South African Universities: Curriculum Transformation and Decolonisation—Aid or Obstacle?"

Despite these perceived benefits, debates surrounding AI in higher education remain contested. Ahmed et al. note that AI improves accessibility to information and enhances academic efficiency by enabling students to obtain information quickly and conveniently.[6] However, concerns continue to emerge regarding overreliance on AI, diminished critical thinking, ethical authorship, and threats to academic integrity. Elkhatat et al. caution that uncontrolled dependence on AI may undermine originality and authentic intellectual engagement.[7]

Within the South African higher education context, Chaka et al. highlight the growing need for universities to develop institutional AI policies and governance frameworks.[8] Their study reveals that while some universities have begun formulating AI-related guidelines, policy development across the sector remains uneven and fragmented. This policy ambiguity may create uncertainty for both students and lecturers regarding acceptable AI practices in academic work.

Furthermore, Sokhulu et al. argue that AI tools such as ChatGPT are increasingly shaping students' learning experiences within higher education institutions.[9] While some academics perceive AI as a threat to ethical scholarship, others view it as an inevitable technological development requiring constructive engagement rather than outright rejection. Huang et al. and Chen et al. similarly argue that AI is likely to remain central to future educational transformation, thereby making institutional adaptation necessary.[10]

The literature therefore reveals two major tensions. First, AI presents opportunities for innovation, efficiency, and accessibility within higher education. Second, AI simultaneously raises concerns regarding academic integrity, authenticity, originality, and ethical scholarship. This study contributes to these debates by exploring how the absence of explicit institutional AI policies may generate procedural ambiguities regarding disciplinary responses to AI use in South African universities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts pragmatism as its theoretical framework. Pragmatism may be understood as a philosophical worldview that emphasises practical problem-solving, contextual realities, and adaptive human responses to social change.[11] According to Rydenfelt, pragmatism focuses on practical consequences and lived realities rather than abstract idealism.[12] Scholars such as Mailhot and Lachapelle and Asemandareh and Bakht further argue that pragmatism prioritises solutions that respond effectively to contemporary societal challenges.[13]

The relevance of pragmatism to this study lies in its emphasis on adaptation, practical reasoning, and institutional responsiveness to changing realities. In the context of higher education, the growing use of AI presents universities with new ethical, pedagogical, and governance challenges that require practical and context-sensitive responses. Pragmatism therefore provides a useful lens for examining how universities may navigate tensions between technological transformation and academic integrity.

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[6] Ahmed et al., "Half a Decade of Artificial Intelligence in Education in Africa: Trends, Opportunities, Challenges and Future Directions."

[7] Ahmed M. Elkhatat, Khaled Elsaid, and Saeed Almeer, "Evaluating the Efficacy of AI Content Detection Tools in Differentiating between Human and AI-Generated Text," *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 19, no. 1 (September 1, 2023): 17, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-023-00140-5.

[8] Chaka Chaka et al., "An Environmental Review of the Generative Artificial Intelligence Policies and Guidelines of South African Higher Education Institutions: A Content Analysis," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 23, no. 12 (2024): 487–511.

[9] Sokhulu, Zulu, and Lott-Naidoo, "Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education South Africa: The Role of ChatGPT in Students' Learning."

[10] Huang, Saleh, and Liu, "A Review on Artificial Intelligence in Education"; Chen, Chen, and Lin, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: A Review."

[11] Fran Riga, "Pragmatism—John Dewey," 2020, 227–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43620-9_16.

[12] Henrik Rydenfelt, "Pragmatism, Social Inquiry and the Method of Democracy," in *Practices of Citizenship in East Africa* (Routledge, 2019), 29–43.

[13] Chantale Mailhot and Marc D Lachapelle, "Teaching Management in the Context of Grand Challenges: A Pragmatist Approach," *Management Learning* 55, no. 2 (April 15, 2024): 167–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076221116991; Abd Asemandareh and Mansor Bakht, "Educational Management in the Perspective of Pragmatism," *A New Approach to Children's Education Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2022): 1–7.

Drawing from John Dewey's understanding of problem-solving, this study conceptualises the absence of AI governance policies as a practical educational challenge requiring institutional reflection and adaptation. Dewey's pragmatic philosophy emphasises identifying problems, understanding their contexts, formulating tentative solutions, and evaluating the effectiveness of those solutions within lived realities.[14] This theoretical orientation enables the study to critically explore whether disciplinary responses to AI use remain procedurally appropriate in contexts where institutional regulations are unclear or underdeveloped.

Rather than positioning AI as inherently harmful or entirely beneficial, pragmatism allows this study to examine how universities may balance technological advancement with ethical academic practices. The theory therefore supports the argument that higher education institutions should develop clear, contextually relevant, and practically applicable AI governance frameworks capable of guiding both students and lecturers in the evolving digital era.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach because it sought to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and understandings regarding the use of AI within South African universities. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on subjective experiences and institutional realities rather than statistical measurements.

Prior to data collection, the study proposal was submitted to the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC) for ethical review and approval. Following careful evaluation, ethical clearance was granted under reference number TREC/809/2025: PG. The ethical clearance certificate was used to assure participants that the study complied with institutional ethical standards and that participation would remain voluntary and confidential.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed relevant experiences and knowledge regarding AI use in higher education. The sample consisted of five postgraduate students and five lecturers from different South African universities. The postgraduate students ranged from honours to doctoral level, while the lecturers had more than five years of supervision and teaching experience. Participants were selected because they were directly involved in academic writing, supervision, and assessment practices influenced by AI technologies.

Invitation emails containing the study information sheet, ethical clearance certificate, and consent information were sent to prospective participants. Upon agreeing to participate voluntarily, interview arrangements were made collaboratively with participants. To ensure accessibility and cost-effectiveness, all interviews were conducted through WhatsApp video calls.

The study adhered to ethical principles including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw without penalty. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission using a secure smartphone device. Participants were allowed to communicate in the languages with which they felt comfortable, including English, IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed, translated where necessary, and subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, coding of recurring ideas, identification of patterns, and generation of themes relevant to the research questions. Trustworthiness was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, careful transcription procedures, and the inclusion of participants from multiple institutions.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Perceived educational benefits and risks associated with AI use in academia

Participants generally viewed AI as an increasingly important academic support tool within higher education.

P1 explained that

> *"AI helps me summarise long readings and understand difficult concepts more efficiently."*

[14] Mohamed Djedidi, "Ethics from a Pragmatic Perspective Between John Dewey and Richard Rorty,"*Tabayyun* 13, no.51(2025):35–62.

Similarly, P3 stated that

> *"When there are many journal articles and chapters to read within a short period, AI becomes useful for simplifying information and identifying key arguments."*

These findings suggest that students perceive AI as a technological resource that enhances accessibility, efficiency, and academic productivity within their learning processes. The findings resonate with the arguments of Ahmed et al. and Dube and Setlalentoa, who maintain that AI technologies can improve learning efficiency and support academic engagement in the era of the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR).[15]

Participants further indicated that AI assists them in generating research ideas, simplifying difficult academic concepts, organising information, and improving language expression in academic writing. P5 noted that

> *"AI does not necessarily replace my thinking, but it helps me understand concepts better and structure my writing."*

This finding highlights that some students perceive AI not as a replacement for intellectual engagement but as a supplementary educational tool that supports academic development. The findings therefore challenge simplistic assumptions that all AI use automatically constitutes academic dishonesty or intellectual laziness.

Despite these perceived educational benefits, lecturers expressed concerns regarding the ethical implications of AI use in higher education. P7 and P8 argued that

> *"overreliance on AI may compromise originality and independent academic thinking."*

Similarly, P6 stated that

> *"students may become too dependent on AI and eventually lose the ability to think critically and engage deeply with academic literature."*

These concerns align with Elkhatat et al., who caution that uncontrolled dependence on AI may undermine authentic scholarly engagement, originality, and ethical authorship.[16]

The findings therefore reveal a significant tension between students' perceptions of AI as an educational support mechanism and lecturers' concerns regarding academic integrity, originality, and independent scholarly thinking. This tension reflects broader global debates regarding the ethical integration of AI into higher education systems. From a pragmatic perspective, these findings suggest that universities should avoid simplistic binary positions that either completely reject AI or uncritically embrace it. Instead, institutions should develop balanced and context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge both the opportunities and risks associated with AI use in academia.

Theme 2: Institutional ambiguity and the absence of clear AI governance frameworks

A dominant issue emerging from the findings concerns the absence of explicit institutional AI governance policies within some South African universities. Several participants indicated that universities continue to rely primarily on plagiarism-detection systems such as Turnitin while lacking clear institutional guidelines regarding acceptable AI practices. P10 explained that

> *"The only policy we know very well is about plagiarism and similarity percentages, but there is still uncertainty regarding AI use."*

[15] Ahmed et al., "Half a Decade of Artificial Intelligence in Education in Africa: Trends, Opportunities, Challenges and Future Directions"; Dube and Setlalentoa, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: Embracing Change, Addressing Challenges, and Shaping Tomorrow's Curriculum."

[16] Elkhatat, Elsaid, and Almeer, "Evaluating the Efficacy of AI Content Detection Tools in Differentiating between Human and AI-Generated Text."

Similarly, P9 stated that

> *"lecturers sometimes suspect AI use based on writing style or sophisticated language, but there are no universally accepted tools for verifying this."*

These findings suggest that procedural ambiguity may emerge when concerns regarding AI use arise in contexts where institutional policies remain underdeveloped. The findings correspond with Chaka et al., who argue that AI policy development within South African higher education institutions remains fragmented and uneven.[17] In the absence of clear institutional guidance, lecturers may rely on subjective interpretations when evaluating whether students have excessively relied on AI in academic work.

Some student participants expressed frustration regarding what they perceived as inconsistent disciplinary practices. P2 stated that

> *"Sometimes students are accused of using AI without being shown clear evidence or institutional rules explaining what is allowed and what is not allowed."*

Similarly, P4 explained that

> *"There is confusion because students are expected to avoid something that universities have not properly explained or regulated."*

These findings suggest that the absence of clear institutional frameworks may contribute to uncertainty, anxiety, and perceptions of unfairness among students.

However, lecturers also expressed concerns regarding their responsibility to uphold academic integrity standards. P8 argued that

> *"Even though universities may not yet have detailed AI policies, lecturers still have a responsibility to ensure that submitted work reflects genuine academic effort."*

This perspective highlights that lecturers' concerns are not necessarily rooted in hostility toward technology but may stem from broader responsibilities associated with maintaining ethical scholarship and educational quality.

The findings therefore demonstrate that tensions surrounding AI use in higher education are not merely technological issues but also governance and policy issues. From a pragmatic perspective, the absence of clear institutional AI frameworks creates uncertainty for both students and lecturers regarding acceptable academic conduct. Consequently, universities may need to proactively develop AI governance policies capable of balancing technological adaptation with the preservation of academic integrity.

Theme 3: Divergent perceptions regarding the embrace or rejection of AI in higher education

The findings further revealed differing perceptions regarding whether AI should be embraced or cautiously regulated within universities. Student participants generally viewed AI as an inevitable component of the evolving digital era. P1 argued that

> *"AI is part of modern education now, and universities cannot avoid it because students are already using it."*

Similarly, P4 stated that

> *"Technology continues to evolve, so universities should focus on teaching students how to use AI responsibly instead of treating it as something entirely negative."*

These findings reflect the arguments of Huang et al. and Chen et al., who contend that AI will remain central to future educational transformation.[18]

Some students also perceived generational differences in attitudes toward AI adoption. P3 stated that

[17] Chaka et al., "An Environmental Review of the Generative Artificial Intelligence Policies and Guidelines of South African Higher Education Institutions: A Content Analysis."

[18] Huang, Saleh, and Liu, "A Review on Artificial Intelligence in Education"; Chen, Chen, and Lin, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: A Review."

"Some lecturers appear uncomfortable with AI because they were trained in different academic environments before AI became common."

While this perception emerged from student narratives, lecturers rejected the suggestion that their concerns were simply generational resistance to technological change. Instead, lecturers emphasised ethical concerns associated with academic authenticity and independent intellectual engagement.

P7 explained that

"The concern is not necessarily about rejecting technology but about ensuring that students still develop their own analytical and writing abilities."

Similarly, P6 noted that

"Universities should not produce graduates who entirely depend on AI without demonstrating independent critical engagement."

These findings suggest that lecturers' concerns are connected to broader educational responsibilities rather than straightforward opposition to technological advancement. The findings therefore reveal that AI debates within higher education are shaped by competing understandings of educational quality, ethical scholarship, technological adaptation, and academic authenticity. While students often emphasise efficiency, accessibility, and technological progress, lecturers frequently prioritise originality, critical thinking, and intellectual independence. Pragmatism becomes particularly relevant in interpreting these tensions because it emphasises practical adaptation to changing realities while maintaining socially valuable educational outcomes.

Theme 4: The need for balanced institutional responses to AI integration in higher education

Another important finding emerging from this study is the growing recognition that universities require balanced institutional responses toward AI integration. Both students and lecturers acknowledged that AI is unlikely to disappear from higher education environments. However, participants differed regarding how universities should regulate and manage AI use.

P5 argued that

"Instead of punishing students immediately, universities should first educate students about ethical AI use and provide proper guidelines."

Similarly, P10 explained that

"Universities need formal policies because both students and lecturers are currently operating within uncertainty."

These findings suggest that participants perceive institutional guidance and policy development as necessary for reducing tensions surrounding AI use.

The findings further reveal that punitive approaches in the absence of clear policies may contribute to strained relationships between students and lecturers. Where institutional expectations remain unclear, disciplinary responses may be perceived as inconsistent or procedurally ambiguous. However, the findings simultaneously indicate that completely unrestricted AI use may also create concerns regarding academic standards and authentic scholarship.

Drawing on pragmatism, this study argues that universities should adopt balanced, adaptive, and context-sensitive approaches toward AI governance. Rather than framing AI as either entirely harmful or entirely beneficial, institutions should develop practical governance frameworks capable of guiding ethical AI engagement while preserving academic integrity and independent intellectual development. The study therefore positions AI governance as an evolving educational challenge requiring collaborative institutional adaptation rather than simplistic prohibition or unrestricted acceptance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of this study, it is recommended that South African universities develop comprehensive and contextually relevant Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance policies that clearly define acceptable and unethical uses of AI within academic work. Universities should proactively establish institutional guidelines capable of balancing technological innovation with the preservation of academic integrity, originality, and ethical scholarship. Furthermore, both students and lecturers should be provided with ongoing AI literacy, ethics, and governance training in order to promote responsible and informed engagement with emerging technologies associated with the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR). Institutional policymakers should continuously monitor technological developments and regularly review university regulations to ensure responsiveness to evolving educational realities. Universities should also establish transparent procedures and fair appeal mechanisms for addressing disputes related to AI use in academic submissions so as to minimise procedural ambiguities and perceptions of unfair treatment. In addition, lecturers should be supported through professional development programmes that encourage balanced, constructive, and adaptive approaches toward AI integration within teaching, learning, supervision, and assessment practices in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the tensions surrounding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within South African universities in contexts where explicit institutional AI governance policies remain limited or underdeveloped. The findings revealed that students increasingly use AI technologies as academic support tools for accessing information, summarising literature, and enhancing academic productivity, while lecturers simultaneously express concerns regarding originality, academic integrity, independent critical thinking, and ethical scholarship. The study further demonstrated that the absence of clear institutional AI governance frameworks may contribute to procedural ambiguities regarding disciplinary responses to AI use in academic work, thereby creating uncertainty for both students and lecturers within higher education institutions. Drawing on pragmatism as a theoretical lens, this study argues that universities should adopt practical, adaptive, and context-sensitive approaches toward AI governance in the era of the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR). Rather than positioning AI solely as a threat to academic integrity or as an unrestricted educational tool, universities should seek balanced institutional frameworks that promote ethical AI engagement while safeguarding scholarly standards and academic authenticity. Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing debates regarding AI governance, technological transformation, academic integrity, and higher education policy within South Africa by highlighting the urgent need for universities to proactively develop clear AI policies, strengthen AI literacy initiatives, and establish transparent institutional guidelines capable of supporting both students and lecturers in the evolving digital era.

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