

AI and Academic Integrity: Student Perceptions of Plagiarism and Ethical Use at the University of Fort Hare

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Abstract: The rapid adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education is transforming how students engage with learning, research and academic writing, while raising concerns about plagiarism, authorship, originality and academic integrity. This study explored undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism and the ethical use of generative AI at the University of Fort Hare. A mixed-methods, interpretive design was used, drawing on pre-workshop responses from 347 students and post-workshop responses from 127 students. Quantitative items were analysed descriptively, while open-ended responses were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach. The findings show that students entered the workshop with substantial prior exposure to AI but uneven understanding of ethical use. Among post-workshop respondents, 96.9% rated their understanding of responsible AI use as good or excellent, while 86.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they understood when AI use could become plagiarism or academic misconduct. The study highlights the need for continuous AI literacy development, clear institutional guidance and assessment practices that promote responsible AI use while preserving student authorship and independent thinking.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Academic Integrity; Plagiarism; Ethical Use; Student Perceptions; Higher Education; Mixed-Methods Research; Thematic Analysis.

1. Introduction and Background

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping higher education by influencing teaching, learning, assessment and academic writing. Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot support idea generation, summarisation, feedback and writing, but also raise concerns about authorship, originality and academic integrity (Kasneci et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023). Generative AI complicates conventional understandings of plagiarism because students can produce fluent text without directly copying an identifiable source. This creates uncertainty about acceptable assistance, disclosure and authorship (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Chan, 2025). These issues are particularly relevant to the University of Fort Hare (UFH), where students increasingly encounter generative AI in academic work. Context-specific evidence is needed to understand how students distinguish legitimate learning support from inappropriate assistance and what guidance they require. Against this background, this study explores undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism and the ethical use of generative AI at UFH. It assesses students' use and understanding of AI before and after an AI literacy workshop and examines their perceptions of responsible use, plagiarism, authorship and institutional support. The study contributes evidence from a historically disadvantaged South African university and offers recommendations for AI literacy, institutional guidance and assessment practices that support responsible AI use while protecting academic integrity and independent thinking.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Artificial Intelligence and Generative AI in Higher Education

Higher education's teaching and learning methods are being drastically changed by artificial intelligence (AI), especially generative AI tools like ChatGPT. According to Kasneci et al. (2023), these technologies allow students to produce ideas, summarize knowledge, obtain personalized explanations, and assist with academic writing. Additionally, personalized learning, greater accessibility, and more effective academic support are all made possible by generative AI (Tlili et al., 2023). Concerns about student reliance, authorship, academic integrity, and the accuracy of AI-generated data have been highlighted by its increasing use. Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway (2024) draw attention to the difficulties generative AI poses for traditional methods of academic misconduct evaluation. Universities must therefore strike a balance between the educational opportunities provided by AI and responsible integration into teaching, learning, and evaluation as well as explicit ethical guidelines (Perkins et al., 2024).

2.2 AI as a Learning and Academic Writing Support Tool

More university students are using generative AI as a tool to help with learning and academic writing. Tools like ChatGPT can help students brainstorm, organise arguments, summarise research, explain complex ideas, and make their writing clearer (Kasneji *et al.*, 2023). These AI tools can also give quick, personalised feedback, helping students work more independently (Tlili *et al.*, 2023). Still, relying too much on AI-generated content can make it harder for students to think critically, write on their own, and build subject knowledge. Using AI in academic writing also brings up questions about who is the real author, how original the work is, and how much AI help should be mentioned (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024). Due to this, students need clearer guidance and AI literacy skills so they can use generative AI to support their learning without risking academic integrity.

2.3 Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, Originality and Authorship

Generative AI has complicated traditional understandings of academic integrity, plagiarism, originality and authorship in higher education. While AI can support learning, students may struggle to determine when AI assistance becomes academic misconduct or compromises the originality of their work (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Gruenhagen *et al.*, 2024). Chan (2025) demonstrates that students' understandings of "AI-giarism" vary, highlighting uncertainty around acceptable AI use. These concerns extend to authorship and disclosure when AI contributes substantially to academic work (Lund *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, clearer institutional expectations regarding transparency, acknowledgement and ethical AI use are increasingly important (Perkins, 2023; Perkins *et al.*, 2024).

2.3.1 Student Perceptions of AI-Assisted Academic Work

Emerging South African research suggests that university students generally recognise generative AI as a valuable tool for learning, academic support and improving efficiency, while remaining concerned about its ethical implications. Megbowon (2025), studying students at a South African university, found that perceptions of generative AI encompassed its effects on learning as well as concerns about ethical use. Similarly, research involving engineering students at Stellenbosch University highlights the growing integration of generative AI alongside concerns about ethics and academic integrity (Jooste, Wolff and Joubert, 2025). More recently, Pramjeeth (2026) found mixed levels of confidence and ethical engagement among 1,866 students across five South African private higher education institutions, including uncertainty about integrity and disclosure of AI use. These findings demonstrate the need for clearer institutional guidance, ethical AI literacy and further context-specific research within South African universities.

2.4 Ethical Use, Disclosure and Responsible AI

Ethical use of generative AI in higher education requires transparency, accountability and responsible engagement with AI-generated content. Students should critically evaluate AI outputs and disclose AI assistance where required, particularly when it contributes to assessed academic work. Research shows that uncertainty remains around disclosure practices and acceptable levels of AI use, including in the South African higher education context (Pramjeeth, 2026). Responsible AI use therefore extends beyond avoiding plagiarism to include verifying AI-generated information, maintaining student authorship and acknowledging AI assistance appropriately (Bittle and El-Gayar, 2025). Clear institutional guidance and AI literacy are consequently important for helping students distinguish between legitimate academic support and unethical AI use.

2.5 Institutional Policies, AI Literacy and Assessment

The rapid adoption of generative AI requires universities to develop clear institutional policies that distinguish acceptable AI-assisted learning from academic misconduct. Research shows that unclear or inconsistent policies can create uncertainty for both students and lecturers regarding permissible AI use in assessment (Gruenhagen *et al.*, 2024; Moorhouse *et al.*, 2025). AI literacy is therefore essential to enable students to critically evaluate AI-generated information and use these technologies responsibly. In the South African context, institutional approaches remain uneven, with differences in how universities regulate and communicate acceptable AI use (Jacobs-Basadien and Pather, 2026). Assessment practices should consequently provide explicit guidance on permitted levels of AI involvement and align AI use with intended learning outcomes (Perkins *et al.*, 2024).

2.6 South African Higher Education Context and Research Gap

Generative AI is increasingly influencing teaching, learning and assessment across South African higher education, while institutional responses remain uneven. Tarisayi (2025) found gaps in South African university plagiarism policies, particularly in addressing AI-generated content and emerging forms of authorship. More recently, Jacobs-Basadien and Pather (2026) found that only 46% of South African universities examined had institution-wide generative AI guidelines, with considerable variation in how ethical principles were addressed. Student evidence also indicates uncertainty about ethical AI use and disclosure practices in South African higher education (Pramjeeth, 2026). Despite this emerging scholarship, limited research has examined how students at historically disadvantaged public universities understand plagiarism, authorship and ethical AI use. This study addresses this gap by investigating undergraduate students' perceptions at the University of Fort Hare, thereby providing context-specific evidence that may inform institutional policy, AI literacy and academic integrity practices.

3. Normative Theory of Academic Integrity and its Application

The Normative Theory of Academic Integrity provides an ethical foundation for understanding how students make decisions about acceptable and unacceptable academic practices. Academic integrity is conceptualised through six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (International Centre for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2021). These principles are particularly relevant in the context of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), where students must make decisions about plagiarism, authorship, originality, acknowledgement and disclosure of AI-generated content. The six values can be applied to this study as follows:

- Honesty refers to students being truthful and transparent about their use of generative AI in academic work (ICAI, 2021).
- Trust concerns maintaining confidence in the authenticity of students' academic work and critically evaluating information produced by AI.
- Fairness relates to ensuring that AI use does not provide an inappropriate advantage or undermine the requirements of an assessment.
- Respect involves recognising intellectual contributions, acknowledging sources and adhering to institutional expectations regarding AI use.
- Responsibility requires students to remain accountable for submitted work, including verifying, evaluating and appropriately using AI-generated information.
- Courage involves making ethical academic decisions even where inappropriate AI use may provide an easier means of completing academic tasks (ICAI, 2021).

The framework is applicable to this study because it provides a theoretical lens through which University of Fort Hare students' perceptions of plagiarism, originality, authorship, disclosure and ethical AI use can be interpreted. The framework will assist in examining whether students perceive particular forms of AI assistance as consistent with or contrary to established principles of academic integrity. However, these six values will guide the interpretation of the findings rather than serve as predetermined themes, as themes will be generated from participants' responses through thematic analysis.

The Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale (AIAS) developed by Perkins *et al.* (2024) can further complement the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity by providing a practical framework for understanding different levels of acceptable AI involvement in assessment. The AIAS was developed to provide greater clarity and transparency concerning the appropriate integration of generative AI into educational assessment (Perkins *et al.*, 2024). Together, the two frameworks allow the study to examine both the ethical principles underlying students' perceptions and the practical boundaries between acceptable and inappropriate AI-assisted academic work.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design within an interpretive orientation, guided by the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity and its values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (ICAI, 2021). Data were collected using structured pre- and post-workshop questionnaires administered to undergraduate students who participated in an AI literacy workshop at the University of Fort Hare. The

instruments combined closed-ended questions examining AI use, academic integrity and confidence with open-ended questions on students' experiences and perceptions of plagiarism and ethical AI-assisted work. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). The framework was subsequently used as an interpretive lens to relate emerging themes to responsible AI use.

4.2 Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy that included undergraduate students who participated in the AI literacy workshop and were therefore able to reflect on AI-assisted academic work. The pre-workshop questionnaire generated 347 responses and the post-workshop questionnaire generated 127 responses. The two datasets were analysed at group level because the questionnaires did not contain identifiers that would permit individual pre- and post-workshop responses to be matched. Purposive sampling was appropriate because participants had direct experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020).

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through structured pre- and post-workshop questionnaires containing closed-ended and open-ended questions. The pre-workshop instrument examined prior AI use, frequency and purposes of use, and students' initial understanding of academic integrity. The post-workshop instrument assessed perceived understanding of responsible AI use, recognition of plagiarism and academic misconduct, confidence in ethical AI use, and recommendations for institutional support. Open-ended questions enabled students to explain what they had learned and how they intended to use AI in future academic work. Participation was voluntary and responses were collected without direct personal identifiers.

4.4 Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach to data analysis was employed, integrating descriptive statistics with thematic analysis. Quantitative responses from the closed-ended questionnaire items were analysed using frequencies and percentages to identify patterns in students' AI use, understanding of academic integrity, perceptions of plagiarism and confidence in using generative AI responsibly. The descriptive findings provided an overview of students' perceptions before and after the AI literacy workshop.

Qualitative data from the open-ended responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) thematic analysis. Students' narratives were examined for recurring phrases, meaning units, sentences and keywords, which were coded and grouped into broader categories and themes. The analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, developing potential themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the students' responses rather than imposing predetermined categories. This process generated themes relating to responsible and ethical AI use, plagiarism and academic misconduct, AI as a learning support tool, independent thinking, verification of AI-generated information, and the need for institutional guidance and continued AI literacy support.

Following the development of the themes, the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity was used as an interpretive lens to understand how students' perceptions and experiences related to the principles of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (ICAI, 2021). The framework therefore did not determine the initial coding or themes but provided an ethical lens through which the qualitative findings were interpreted within the context of AI-assisted academic work.

5. Results

In line with the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity, descriptive statistics and thematic coding were used to evaluate students' responses before and after the AI literacy workshop. The analysis drew on pre-workshop responses from 347 students and post-workshop responses from 127 students. The framework provided an interpretive lens for understanding students' perceptions and experiences of generative AI in relation to the fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (ICAI, 2021). The themes emerging from the data demonstrate how students understood AI as an academic support tool, negotiated the

boundaries between acceptable AI use and academic misconduct, and reflected on their responsibility for maintaining academic integrity.

5.1 AI as an Academic Learning Support Tool

The pre-workshop responses established students' existing experience with generative AI and provided a basis for understanding their perceptions of AI-assisted academic work. Of the 347 students who completed the pre-workshop questionnaire, 300 (86.5%) indicated that they had previously used AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini or Copilot for academic purposes. The most frequently reported use was understanding academic concepts (256 responses), followed by summarising information (142), brainstorming ideas (123), editing grammar and language (74) and writing assignments (36).

Qualitative responses similarly revealed that students viewed AI as a mechanism for obtaining explanations, simplifying difficult concepts, generating ideas and supporting academic tasks. These findings indicate that students entered the workshop with substantial practical exposure to generative AI. However, their prior use did not necessarily demonstrate an equivalent understanding of the ethical boundaries associated with AI-assisted academic work. The findings therefore established the importance of examining not simply whether students use AI, but how they understand their responsibility when incorporating AI into academic learning.

5.2 Responsible and Ethical AI Use

The post-workshop findings indicated high levels of perceived understanding of responsible and ethical AI use. Of the 127 post-workshop respondents, 61.4% rated their understanding as excellent and 35.4% as good. Combined, 96.9% therefore rated their understanding as either good or excellent

Qualitative feedback reinforced these findings, with recurring phrases referring to using AI "responsibly", "ethically", "correctly" and as an "assistant". One student stated, *"AI is not for doing my whole assignment, but it assist me to do it,"* while another indicated, *"We should use AI more responsible."* These narratives reflect an emerging understanding of **honesty and responsibility**, two principles of the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2021). Students appeared to recognise that they remain responsible for their academic work even when generative AI is used to support the learning process.

5.3 Plagiarism, Academic Misconduct and Authorship

Students' understanding of plagiarism and academic misconduct represented another prominent theme. Post-workshop findings showed that 52.0% agreed and 34.6% strongly agreed that they understood when the use of AI could become plagiarism or academic misconduct. Combined, 86.6% of respondents therefore expressed a positive understanding of the ethical boundaries surrounding AI-assisted academic work.

Students' narratives further demonstrated this awareness. One participant stated that they had learnt *"To not copy and paste from AI,"* while another indicated that *"Using AI irresponsible lead to plagiarism."* These statements demonstrate an emerging distinction between using AI as academic assistance and presenting AI-generated material as one's own work. Within the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity, these responses particularly reflect **honesty, respect and responsibility**, as students recognised the importance of maintaining their own intellectual contribution and taking responsibility for submitted academic work (ICAI, 2021).

5.4 Independent Thinking and Responsible Use

The students' narratives also demonstrated an understanding that generative AI should support rather than replace independent thinking. Students repeatedly referred to AI as a "guide", "assistant", "support" or form of "help". One student stated, *"You can use AI to guide you but not to think for you,"* while another explained, *"I should use Ai as an assistant tool not to relia on it."*

These responses suggest that students recognised the importance of maintaining intellectual ownership when using generative AI. This finding particularly reflects the academic integrity principle of **responsibility**, since students remain accountable for demonstrating their own knowledge, understanding and academic skills. It also reflects **honesty**, as responsible AI use requires students to ensure that submitted work represents their own intellectual contribution. The findings therefore indicate that students were beginning to conceptualise AI as a supplementary learning resource rather than a replacement for their own academic thinking.

5.5 Trust and Critical Evaluation of AI-Generated Information

The post-workshop responses also revealed an increased awareness of the limitations and reliability of generative AI. Students recognised that AI-generated information may be inaccurate and therefore requires verification before being incorporated into academic work. One student explained, *"I learnt that AI can bring up wrong things... and it can bring non existing information."* Another participant stated, *"I learned that AI has hallucinations hence it produces inaccurate references."*

These narratives demonstrate the importance of **trust and responsibility** within AI-assisted academic work. Trust does not imply accepting AI-generated information without question; rather, students demonstrated an understanding that they have a responsibility to critically evaluate and verify information. This was further illustrated by one student who emphasised *"double-checking AI outputs for accuracy and learning how to prompt it correctly for my coursework."* The findings therefore suggest that responsible AI use extends beyond avoiding plagiarism to include critical evaluation, verification of sources and accountability for the accuracy of academic work.

5.6 Confidence in Responsible AI Use

Students' confidence in applying their understanding of responsible AI use was also examined. Following the workshop, 41.7% of respondents indicated that they were moderately confident in using AI responsibly while maintaining academic integrity, while 34.6% reported being very confident. A further 19.7% were slightly confident, while only 3.9% indicated that they were not confident. Combined, 76.3% of respondents therefore described themselves as moderately or very confident.

These findings suggest that most post-workshop respondents perceived themselves as having the capacity to apply responsible AI practices to their academic work. However, the proportion of students who remained only slightly confident indicates that the development of responsible AI practices requires continued support. Within the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity, this finding is particularly relevant to **responsibility and courage**, as ethical academic practice requires students not only to understand appropriate behaviour but also to apply these principles when completing academic tasks independently.

5.7 Institutional Guidance and Continued AI Literacy Support

The need for continued institutional guidance emerged strongly from students' recommendations. Students frequently requested additional workshops, tutorials, practical demonstrations and clearer guidance on responsible AI use. One participant recommended *"More workshops to teach about AI,"* while another requested *"Clear university guidelines on acceptable AI usage in assignments."* Another suggested that the University should *"Post short videos on Blackboard to help alleviate the unethical use of AI by students."*

These findings demonstrate that students regarded responsible AI use as both an individual and institutional responsibility. Their requests for consistent guidelines are particularly relevant to **fairness**, since students require clear and equitable expectations concerning acceptable and unacceptable AI use in academic assessment. Students also requested support from lecturers, tutors, the Teaching and Learning Centre and the library, as well as guidance on plagiarism detection, credible academic sources and verification of AI-generated information. The findings therefore indicate that responsible AI integration requires an institution-wide approach combining academic integrity principles, AI literacy, clear assessment expectations and ongoing student support.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students entered the workshop with substantial experience of generative AI but varying levels of understanding of its ethical implications. The post-workshop responses reflected stronger awareness of responsible AI use, plagiarism, independent thinking and the need to verify AI-generated information. When interpreted through the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity, the findings particularly demonstrate the relevance of **honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility** to students' engagement with generative AI. Although **courage** forms part of the framework, it was less explicitly evident in students' narratives and was therefore not treated as a dominant empirical finding. This ensures that the theoretical interpretation remains grounded in the themes that emerged from the data rather than imposing all six values on participants' responses.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that the AI literacy workshop provided a context for students to reflect on responsible generative AI use through the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2021). Although students had substantial prior AI experience, extensive use did not necessarily correspond with clear understanding of ethical boundaries. Their emphasis on avoiding direct copying, verifying outputs and using AI as an assistant reflects honesty, trust and responsibility. This supports research showing that students value generative AI while remaining uncertain about plagiarism, authorship and acceptable assistance (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2024; Gruenhagen et al., 2024; Chan, 2025).

Students' calls for clearer guidelines and further training also reflect fairness and respect and show that responsible AI use cannot depend on individual judgement alone. Universities should provide transparent expectations, continuous AI literacy and assessment guidance (Kasneci et al., 2023; Perkins et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where institutional responses remain uneven (Tarisayi, 2025). Overall, the findings show that ethical AI engagement requires student accountability, critical evaluation and institutional support.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that generative AI is an important academic support tool, but extensive use does not necessarily ensure understanding of ethical boundaries. Post-workshop respondents demonstrated high awareness of responsible AI use, plagiarism, verification and independent thinking. Interpreted through the Normative Theory of Academic Integrity, the findings particularly emphasise honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. The study contributes context-specific evidence from a historically disadvantaged South African university and highlights the importance of combining AI literacy with clear institutional guidance.

8. Recommendations

The University of Fort Hare should provide continuous AI literacy and academic integrity training, supported by clear guidelines on acceptable AI use, disclosure and assessment. Lecturers should communicate AI expectations for individual tasks and encourage students to verify AI-generated information and retain intellectual ownership. Practical resources should be available through Blackboard and other institutional platforms, while policies and assessment practices should be reviewed as generative AI evolves.

Ethics Declaration

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards and institutional guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Inter-Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee: IFHREC-26/05-0439. All participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their voluntary participation was secured through written informed consent. The privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants have been strictly maintained, and all data were handled in compliance with applicable data protection regulations.

AI Declaration

Artificial intelligence tools, specifically ChatGPT (OpenAI), were used during the preparation of this paper to support language refinement, clarity of expression and the organisation of ideas. The authors critically reviewed and verified all AI-assisted content and retained full responsibility for the analysis, interpretation, academic arguments and final manuscript. The use of AI was undertaken in accordance with applicable ethical and institutional guidelines.

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