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TEACHER AWARENESS OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LATVIA

Abstract:

Abstract
Recently, the topic of academic integrity (AI) has regained its importance among scholars around the world. In Latvia, from 2019, these issues have been reconceptualized in initiatives of the Ministry of Education and Science and Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Considering the increasing scope of perplexities related to AI in the post-pandemic world, HEIs are in demand of research and academic environment based on a sustainable culture of AI. The given study is tailored to explore awareness of AI issues and views on the implementation of AI in their HEIs of teachers from Latvian regional HEIs. The sample of this study consisted of 11 teachers from four small regional universities in Latvia, working at three study levels (bachelor, master, and doctoral studies). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews consisting of nine open questions. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from the interviews. Teachers showed the good awareness and understanding on Ai, admitting that today AI is considered much more than before. Normative documents of HEI and study courses with integrated topics of AI are used in regional HEIs to communicate AI politics to students and teachers. Advising research work and integrating principles of AI in all study courses were reported as the most frequent forms of teachers' personal activities to prevent students from academic dishonesty. Teachers' suggestions for the promotion of AI were mainly related to the continuation of already implemented activities and adoption of activities administred in other HEIs. The findings of this research have essential implications for regional HEIs in Latvia to improve the communication and procedures of AI policy considering teachers' perspectives. One of the routes for further research would be the triangulation of the views of teachers with the perspectives of students and experts in the field of AI.

Keywords:

 awareness, academic integrity, academic dishonesty, university teachers, higher education institutions, Latvia.

JEL Classification: I23

Introduction

Considering the increasing scope of perplexities related to academic integrity (AI) in the post-pandemic world, higher education institutions (HEIs) both globally and in Latvia are in demand for research and academic environment based on a sustainable culture of AI. Recent international projects in EU countries (e.g., Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education across Europe) have shown that universities look upon academic dishonesty as a crucial issue (Glendinning 2013). Several drawbacks related to AI have also been discovered in Latvian universities ranking 19th among 27 countries (Stabingins 2014).

So far, there have been only a few empirical studies on AI in HEIs of Latvia, focusing on the content of AI policy documents in online public spaces (Anohina-Naumeca, Tauginiene & Odiņeca 2018) or students' awareness of AI in large university (Anohina-Naumeca, Birzniece & Odiņeca 2020). This article presents the first study oriented to AI in regional HEIs in Latvia, considering the importance of hearing the voices not only of students but also of their teachers. Given the dual academic duties of university teachers in Latvia, bearing responsibility for teaching and research, teachers are not only entitled to adhere to AI themselves but also to be on guard for AI of their students.

In this study, we will pertain to the definition of AI provided by Tauginiene et al. (2018), describing AI as "a compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards, practices and a consistent system of values, which serves as guidance for making decisions and taking actions in education, research, and scholarship" (p.7-8). This definition comprises conceptual, behavioral, and contextual discourses on AI. The current trend toward more personality-based and proactive strategies to deal with academic dishonesty at the university level adds to the urgency of the study on teachers' awareness of AI. On the other hand, speaking about the holistic management of student AI in HEI, which should be promoted by entire HEI and individual teachers, "meaningful student participation would involve listening to student experiences regarding what they know about academic integrity, how they feel about it and deal with it and then discussing with students the ways by which institutions can facilitate their collaboration and partnership in academic integrity" (Nayal et al. 2015, p. 1).

However, as the literature review shows, research evaluating student awareness, attitude, and/or behavior is much more prevalent than research related to the views of university staff. However, teachers have a major impact in their position to influence students' awareness and behavior related to AI (Alfredo & Hart 2011; Gray & Jordan 2012). Some studies show the inconsistency between the views and awareness of students and teachers. For example, students and teachers differ in their perspective on actions to reduce academic dishonesty (Tabsh, Abdelfatah & Kadi 2017). However, it seems that at least some studies have identified the considerable underestimation by staff of the prevalence of virtually all forms of student academic misconduct (Volpe Davidson & Bell 2008) and that faculty members rarely report cases of academic dishonesty to the university and handle them by their own standard (Kwong et al. 2010). In terms of teachers in the field of social science, the recent study by Huberts and van Rijswoud (2019) shows a mixed picture: "On the one hand, a majority of respondents encountered no integrity violation during the last two years, and most employees are willing to report violations when they encounter them. On the other hand, the data offer a lot of information for the conclusion that integrity dilemmas and violations are present and should be taken seriously" (p. 37).

The large volume of empirical studies on AI in HEIs has been conducted using quantitative surveys (e.g., ICAI 2022, Ferguson 2010). However, to delve into unexplored terrain and context, as in the case of a given study, it is suggested to rely on a more open and probing qualitative approach, allowing one to listen to the voices of participants telling stories from their perspective, providing real examples of AI/academic dishonesty, and explaining contextual

nuances of issue. Thus, the qualitative study aims to explore awareness of AI issues and views on the implementation of AI in their HEIs of teachers from Latvian regional HEIs. The following research questions will help to focus the exploration:

1) How do Latvian regional HEI teachers understand and evaluate AI?
2) What is the perception of teachers in terms of the communication of AI politics in their HEI?
3) What personal activities do teachers use to improve AI?
4) What are the teachers' suggestions to improve AI?

Methodology

2.1. Participants, Procedure, and Ethics

Initially, universities willing to participate in this study were identified. Universities from different regions of Latvia agreed to participate in the study: Daugavpils University (n=3), Rezekne Technology Academy (n = 3), Liepaja University (n=2), and Latvian Agricultural University (n=3).

The voluntary sample consisted of 11 teachers (one male and 10 females) aged 38 to 65 years with an average age of 53 years. All teachers had PhDs; their positions ranged from assistant professor to professor, and 3 respondents were senior researchers. The sample represented different specialization groups ((Education (n=7), Education and Social Sciences (n=2), Social Sciences (n=1), Literary Studies (n=1)). Seven teachers worked in Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral programs, two teachers in Bachelor and Master programs, while one teacher in Bachelor program.

To launch the study, permission was obtained from the rectors of the HEIs; then the teaching staff was invited to the study by email or phone calls from researchers explaining the purpose of the interview and the research procedure. In case of agreement, the teachers received the link to the online Zoom session and the form of informed consent to sign. In addition, the teachers obtained a small sociodemographic survey to respond and send back together with the informed consent form in due time. Teachers were informed about the principles of research ethics, such as confidentiality, privacy, data safety, etc., considered during the study. The interviewees were markedly assured that all recognizable details would be omitted from the transcripts and from direct quotes and data interpretation.

The authors of the article conducted interviews in the Zoom environment, which proved to be a viable tool for qualitative data collection (Archibald et al. 2019). The interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes and were recorded with Zoom software with the permission of the teachers.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

An individual semi-structured interview with nine open questions was conducted with all research participants according to the same interview schedule after the pilot study with two teachers. The research method was constructed based on analysis of relevant literature (Anohina-Naumeca, Birzniece & Odiņeca 2020;, Ferguson 2010; Hulbert 2018). Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was applied to the interview transcripts, and, to enhance the trustworthiness of exploration, three authors were engaged in the qualitative data analysis.

Results and discussion

Initially, the main themes and subthemes, elicited from the interviews' transcripts, will be structured according to the four research questions, illustrated with the italicized quotes from the interviews and compared to the results of similar studies in other countries.

3.1. Understanding and Evaluation of AI

Defining AI. The interviewees presented a very diverse range of AI definitions, depending on their experience and understanding. In general, the understanding of teachers matched the discourse on the definition of AI mentioned above (Tauginiene et al. 2018). The explanations focused mainly on teachers and students together, although two interpretations addressed only teachers, and two other perspectives emphasized the research. The topics of definition varied from a philosophical point of view to purely normative connotations. Three main subthemes were 1) honesty (as professionalism) in academic work, 2) plagiarism in students' research and learning, and 3) normative view on AI (according to rules, standards, etc.). AI was mainly connected with the skills to quote the scientific sources for both students and teachers/researchers. However, it appears that teachers who focus mainly on plagiarism denigrate the importance of other AI issues.

AI in the past and today. When the interviewees were students, the topic of AI did not draw particular attention, and cases of academic dishonesty (like cheating, plagiarism) were not considered a serious breach. In the past, anti-plagiarism software was not available; though, today many activities of AI are gounded on fear to get caught (not decency). The interviewee who studied abroad noticed that the educational environment there did not allow for plagiarism, as the tasks were mostly associated with the reflection of personal experience. Teachers admited that in Latvia many assignments are designed in this way now, and today much larger attention is drawn to AI compared to the past. Yet, for some teachers in both the past and today, AI is something taken for granted.

Self-evaluation and evaluation of students. Most of the interviewees admitted that they observe or try to observe the AI, but few avoided giving a straight answer. One teacher self-critically confessed to some acts of academic dishonesty because of ignorance, other teachers stressed the role of upbringing for their AI or pointed to the distinction between past when AI was based on personal responsibility and present when all is regulated by normative documents.

The evaluation of the students shows divergent views similar to those in the study by Huberts and van Rijswoud (2019). Four teachers thought that the situation has improved a little, while the others indicated the urgent and declining situation with AI, mostly because of the wide availability of technologies: *today the possibilities to steal something for personal use have grown, thus it is a large challenge both for teachers and students – what path will they choose?*

Most typical AI breaches. The majority of interviewees (n=6), speaking about this topic with respect to students and teachers, mentioned plagiarism. Teachers (n=4) commented on cloning as a type of plagiarism in both the learning process and the final works of the students and mentioned (n=4) mosaic plagiarism (compilation of different sources). Teachers referred to purchasing the work by student or translating publications from the foreign language to Latvian and using excerpts without references, undetectable by anti-plagiarism software. In terms of learning process, one teacher spoke about the usage of unauthorized means during examinations.

Regarding the research work of academic staff, one teacher mentioned the self-plagiarism of research publications, while others named plagiarising ideas and data falsification. Only two types of AI breaches by teachers in the study process have been declared by interviewees, namely stealing the presentation from other teachers and irrelevant tasks or evaluation criteria for final exams.

Causes of academic dishonesty. The causes observed among students can be divided into three large groups, starting from signs of times, external social and economic factors, to

personal traits of students. Although each factor was mentioned by 1-2 teachers, the summary of the findings provides a fairly comprehensive picture.

Speaking about the meta-causes, interviewees alluded to the lack of integrity in society and such signs of times like haste and carelessness. One of the external factors is family upbringing, orienting towards the search for easier ways to do things. AI is also a cultural feature that needs to be developed already in school. Following the analysis in the HEI environment, teachers noticed such causes as teachers' biases, neglect, low quality teaching, lack of example from teachers and administration, and belief that works will not be read and checked. Other external problems were lack of time/poor time management, overload, burnout (especially for working students), wide access to the technologies (e.g. websites to purchase works), lack of information, and restricted access to scientific works (more in secondary school and first years of studies).

Two groups of internal factors were 1) the lack of skills and knowledge: misunderstanding of meaning of study process, lack of critical thinking skills, language and academic writing skills, and 2) personal traits like fear of punishment (not the conscience and responsibility), work avoidance, lack of motivation, laziness, and negligence. However, one teacher admitted that, actually, there are no objective causes for academic dishonesty – these are all subjective factors, mainly personal responsibility and interpretation of rules. Especially, when talking about future teachers, *this AI should be one of the safegards of professionalism, you cannot teach integrity to other people if you cannot be honest yourself.*

3.2. Communication of AI politics in HEI

Six teachers showed that in their HEI principles of AI are communicated by all teachers in their study courses, while two teachers indicated that AI is explained mainly by advisors of the student research work. A similar number of interviewees (n=5) pointed to: 1) normative HEI documents and 2) study courses with specifically integrated AI topics. Teachers emphasized that normative documents of HEI can foster the ageement on AI between the academic staff. Apparently, this document needs to be communicated to students, moreover, the students can be involved in the development of AI policy: *Documents on AI are elaborated and approved at Senate and representatives of students are closely involved in the development and evaluation of these documents and, afterwards, communicating these ideas to their study mates.* These activities resemble the idea of holistic management of AI reported in Nayal et al. (2015).

Another group admitted that students master the study courses (e.g. Intro to Studies, Basics of Teacher Profession, Intro to Research) containing the principles of AI in the beginning of studies and before the research work. The application of antiplagiarism software to the final works of the students was recognized as one of the best tools to ensure AI (n=3).

In terms of communicating AI politics to university teachers, many interviewees (n=6) mentioned inservice training – academic and methodological conferences, workshops, study program in Didactics of HEI, and courses of professional development.

3.3. Personal Activities to Improve AI

Although teachers mostly spoke about improving students' AI, three teachers affirmed their engagement in the self-development of AI: performing decent scientific work, reflecting on AI and consulting colleagues, and acquiring the principles of AI within a professional development.

Similarly as in previous studies, emphasising the impact of teachers on AI of students (Alfredo & Hart 2011; Gray & Jordan 2012), two main forms of promoting AI in students were 1) advising their research work (n=7) and 2) integrating AI principles in study courses (n=5). In one HEI, the

elaboration of the final work of students is organized in a way that makes plagiarism impossible: *every week we have a joint face-to-face or distance meeting where students show their progress and working materials.* Another teacher emphasised the benefits of explaining the consequences of academic dishonesty in final works.

Teachers care for the AI in their study courses, organizing group work, explaining meaning of references and how to use them, informing about the consequences for AI breaches, setting specific tasks on AI, discussing about the ethical communication with teachers, explaining other principles of AI, and encouraging to ask questions in case of uncertainty. Other activities include collecting the student's course works, reading them and checking for plagiarism, consulting students on AI while collaborating in other types of work, and pointing to the plagiarism while reviewing the students' works. None of the teachers mentioned reporting of cases of academic dishonesty to the university (like in Kwong et al. 2010).

3.4. Suggestions for improvement of AI

In general, teachers did not provide very original and innovative responses related to this theme. The answers were based on either the continuation of already implemented activities or on the adoption of activities implemented in other HEIs in Latvia. Most of the suggestions still focus on the AI of students, much less on the AI of teachers.

The most frequent suggestion was to continue the explanation and discussions of AI principles in study courses, not only in introductory, research methodology courses or in first year studies but also on subsequent years of studies. The exercises asking for the implementation of AI principles could be integrated in any study course, as well as the changes in learning toward comprehension of material versus rote learning. Two teachers mentioned that teachers should collaborate with students in research work, showing the good example of AI, or construct the meaningful tasks not allowing for the breaches of AI.

Beyond the study courses, the teachers mentioned annual or end-of-semester workshops with students that included discussions and case analysis. Some teachers supported the continued use of anti-plagiarism software and the more careful checking of the work of the students. Several responses underlined the necessity for the actualization of AI more widely at different levels of HEI, creating new common documents. In terms of improving teachers' AI, interviewees pointed to teacher discussions in departments, joint workshops, older colleagues sharing their experience with younger colleagues on AI in research. Besides, echoing the previous study (Kwong et al. 2010), teachers declared the necessity for the collaboration between the teachers and HEI: *It is necessary to establish closer cooperation between teachers from all faculties and study programs to enhance communication within HEI, instead of developing individual subjective understading of AI by every single teacher.*

Conclusions

The qualitative study presented explored awareness of AI issues and views on the implementation of AI in their HEIs of teachers from four Latvian regional HEIs. The diversity of interview questions allowed researchers to gain a wide insight into the understanding and perception of teachers about this topic according to the four research questions. Many elements of the findings coincided with other studies in different parts of the world, though, the study revealed a quite mixed picture of AI in regional HEIs of Latvia. Although the interviews questions asked to focus on AI of teachers and students, most of the answers pertained to awareness and behavior of the students in terms of AI, while in terms of AI of teachers, the majority to cases related to AI in research, not teaching.

Summarizing the data on teachers' understanding of AI, it seems that provided definitions match the general normative discourse of this concept. However, oscillation from the philosophical background of AI to the excessive focus on specific examples of plagiarism show the controversial approaches to AI even among the teachers from similar HEIs. Teachers admit that today much greater attention is paid to AI as before. The majority of teachers acknowledge that they observe or try to observe the AI, although with students the situation is not so clear. Among the most typical breaches, teachers mentioned plagiarism (both performed by students and teachers). The comprehensive picture of causes of AI for students consists of three dimensions: signs of the times (hastiness, carelessnes), external (social and economic) factors and personal traits of students like lack of skills,motivation, laziness, etc. Communication of AI politics in regional HEIs is performed mostly by normative documents of HEI and study courses with specifically integrated topics of AI. Inservice training was mentioned as the main form of communication of AI politics among teachers. Teachers reported two main forms of promoting AI in their students: advising their research work and integrating AI principles into study courses. Teachers have not reported cases of academic dishonesty to the university. Teachers' suggestions for improving AI were based on the continuation of already implemented activities and the appropriation of activities managed in other HEIs.

The trustworthiness of this qualitative exploration was ensured by involving three researchers in the thematic data analysis and the balance of homogeneous / heterogeneous characteristics of the sample recruited from different HEIs, providing diversity of contexts. Among the strengths of this study, we could mention the wide scope of interview questions allowing us to obtain complex and comprehensive picture of AI from the perspective teachers. One of the limitations of the sample is the gender disproportion, and also the volume of paper would not allow providing more quotes and broader explanation of research outcomes.

The results of this study have important practical implications for regional HEIs in Latvia to improve the communication and procedures of AI policy considering teachers' perspectives. One of the avenues for further research would be the triangulation of the views of teachers with the views of students and experts in the field of AI.

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