

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY LITERACY OF STUDENTS AT THE TIME OF ENROLLMENT IN POSTSECONDARY COURSES: A STUDY OF AN ONLINE UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity literacy (AIL) is an integral part of academia and a critical skill for academic success, particularly in postsecondary education. Studies reveal that many students lack this valuable competence, which becomes glaringly obvious when pursuing higher education. In secondary schools, students have exposure to written assignments with sources of information for reference, but there is a lack of clarity around how to implement this essential skill in academic writing and beyond (Hossain, 2020). A few studies (e.g., Schab, 1991; Tauginiene and Gaizauskaite, 2018) claimed that K-12 schools are the poorest education setting in promoting academic integrity. Consequently, many students fail to demonstrate the knowledge of academic integrity that is required to be successful when pursuing postsecondary education. The common belief is, students build their fundamental understanding of academic integrity at the secondary level and failing this paves the way to academic misconducts that can extend into the workplace (Tauginiene and Gaizauskaite, 2018). Samanta (2018) and Yoannou's (2014) studies claim that academic misconduct is a growing concern in schools globally that starts at the primary level and continues through college. Therefore, examining freshmen students' AIL experiences gained during their secondary education could be an important

step for postsecondary institutions to design and implement proper guidance.

The University of the People (UoPeople) markets itself as the first non-profit, American-accredited, tuition-free online university. With nearly 31,000 students from 200 countries and territories, most of its students are working adults, young parents, undocumented students, and refugees (Bella, 2020). Since the university is inclusive and not selective, students are enrolled with various educational levels and from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Thus, there is a significant possibility that many students are not familiar with the ethical use of information or how to acknowledge a source. Research has found that international students violate standards of academic integrity at a disproportionate rate to their domestic e.g., the United States and Canadian counterparts (N.A., 2011 cited in Simpson, 2016; Taylor-Bianco and Deeter-Schmelz, 2007) and among others, Scollon (1995) indicated cultural, social and political contexts affect students' views of academic integrity. As an emerging online university, the UoPeople students are no exception. It is within this context, this study was formulated to understand the UoPeople Foundation Course students' AIL competence at the time of enrollment, and the level of support they need from the university.

AREA OF FOCUS

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the academic integrity literacy of the UoPeople Foundation Course (UNIV1001) students during their secondary education that may lead to addressing the

existing academic integrity competence of students and the further support they need to meet the university requirements. Mainly, the study aims to:

1. Explore students' perceptions of academic integrity and related knowledge and skills gained during secondary education;
2. Critically analyze students' current (at the time of enrollment) competence in academic integrity and related issues; and
3. Identify students' views of the UoPeople academic integrity policy and procedure and their experiences with the course instructors.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a mixed-method approach to explore the UoPeople Foundation Course students' familiarity with academic integrity and related issues, their competence at the time of enrollment, and their perceptions towards the support and guidelines they received from the university and instructors. The questionnaire consisted of open and closed-ended questions with multiple-choice questions (MCQ), checkboxes, and Likert scale options. The survey questionnaire was shared with the target population (UNIV1001 students), and the responses were automatically recorded and tabulated on Google Forms. The data was then procured in a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 26.

The target population in this study was the students enrolled in the UNIV1001 Foundation Course. Foundation Courses are one of the admissions requirements to enroll in an undergraduate degree program. In their first term, newly admitted

students are placed in two courses: UNIV1001 and an additional course related to their major studies (University of the People, 2020). Based on admission requirements for the university, the participants are assumed to have completed education at least equivalent to a high school diploma.

Research Questions

In pursuing the research objectives, the following Research Questions (RQs) were employed to guide this study:

- **RQ1.** What is the current academic integrity literacy (AIL) (familiarity, knowledge, and perceptions) of UoPeople UNIV1001 students?
- **RQ2.** What are the students' perceptions about existing UoPeople academic integrity initiatives?
- **RQ3.** What specific modifications do students advocate in support of the UoPeople academic integrity policy and procedures?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the online survey, 431 responses were received that represented 78 countries ($n = 407$) across all continents. Regarding gender ($n = 431$), 56.4% (243) of respondents were male, 40.6% (175) female, and the remaining participants (3%) preferred not to disclose their gender identity. For age ($n = 428$), participants were scattered across all age spans with the largest group (21.3%) falling in the range between 23 and 27 years, the youngest group (18 and 22) was 14.8%, and the oldest (50) was 8.8%.

The overall results of this study revealed that participating Foundation Course students are somewhat familiar with academic integrity and the ethical use of information (see Figure 1). A majority of them have adequate knowledge of AIL, particularly regarding what causes and is considered to be plagiarism

and the rationale of using and acknowledging sources in academia.

Further data analysis implies that students are comparatively less proficient in how to appropriately apply a particular convention such as APA (university required convention) to their writing. There might be several reasons for this, among others, a lack of emphasis and hands-on exercises in this skill in their previous level of education e.g., high school; no or minimal consequences for academic misconduct; a lack of consistency and requirements from secondary level educational institutions; and finally, the socio-cultural perspective of the respondents towards the ethical use of information within their milieu.

Surprisingly, a small portion of students indicated that they still do not know how to cite and reference (3.5%) in order to avoid plagiarism and uphold

Tab. 1: Participants' Age and Gender ($n = 431$)

Age	Female		Male		Prefer not to say		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
0–17	2	1.1%	2	0.8%	0	0.0%	4	0.9%
18–22	18	10.3%	43	17.7%	3	23.1%	64	14.8%
23–27	37	21.1%	52	21.4%	3	23.1%	92	21.3%
28–32	30	17.1%	45	18.5%	2	15.4%	77	17.9%
33–37	32	18.3%	36	14.8%	2	15.4%	70	16.2%
38–42	28	16.0%	27	11.1%	1	7.7%	56	13.0%
43–47	14	8.0%	15	6.2%	1	7.7%	30	7.0%
50–	14	8.0%	23	9.5%	1	7.7%	38	8.8%
Total	175	100.0%	243	100.0%	13	100.0%	431	100.0%

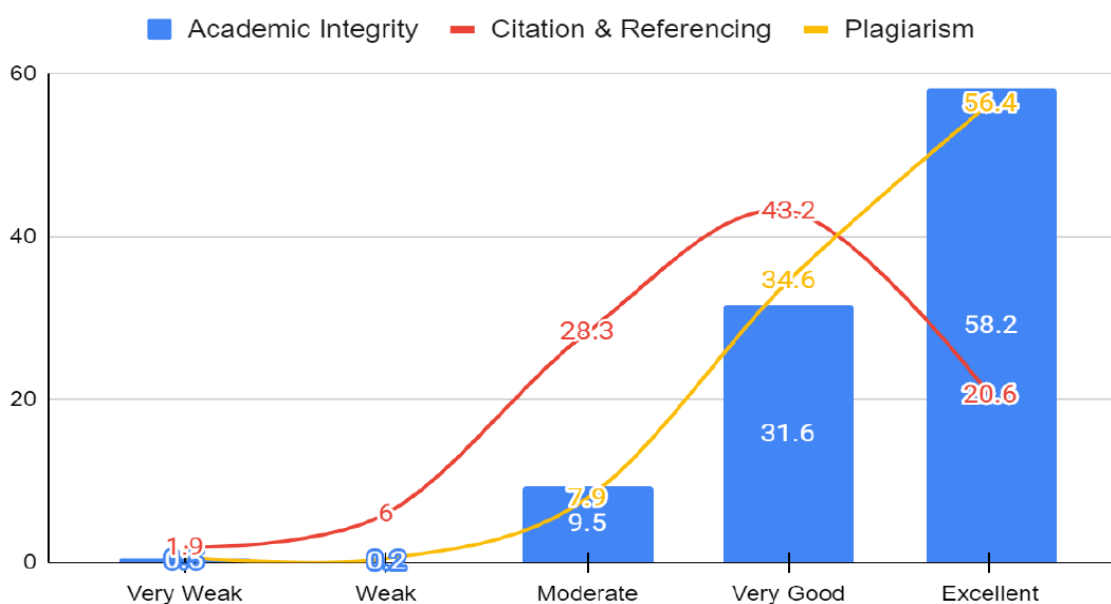


Fig. 1: Participants' familiarity with academic integrity and related issues

academic integrity. Moreover, results revealed from the five knowledge-based questions (see Table 2) were alarming as 41.3% of respondents thought that using their own works for two different assignments is legitimate and 37.2% were confused about whether they have to cite and reference their previously written works. These findings imply that the university and the course instructors need to rethink their existing and future instructional support for academic integrity to current and future students.

Participant feedback also confirmed that students are aware of their limitations and plan to upskill their AIL competencies through a variety of means such as related online resources, course instructors, friends, and librarians depicted in Figure 2.

Although a vast majority of the survey participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with the UoPeople academic integrity policy and procedures (see Figure 3), and the effort course instructors make to coach and implement it, they suggested that the university could design a foundation course, online tutorial, or workshop on academic integrity and related areas to make it a more supportive and beneficial for foundation course students. Additionally, participants expect course instructors to extend more constructive feedback, and provide pragmatic support with an individualized instructional approach to those who are in need.

Tab. 2: Participants' comprehension of plagiarism, citation and referencing

Questions	Correct answer	True/Yes/A	False/No/B	Not sure/C	Total
1. If you forget to cite a source in your paper, that is still plagiarism. *	True	96.3	3.7	–	100% ($n = 429$)
2. Using my own writing for two different assignments is plagiarism?	Yes	58.8	41.2	–	100% ($n = 430$)
3. Forming a study group to go over information prior to exams and projects is plagiarism/cheating?	False	5.6	81.8	12.6	100% ($n = 429$)
4. It is acceptable to copy-and-paste a sentence written by someone else into your paper and simply add quotation marks around it. *	No	23.9	76.1	–	100% ($n = 431$)
5. Which of the following requires proper citation? *	B	5.6 (A)	57.2 (B)	37.2 (C)	100% ($n = 430$)
A. When I include my own ideas that are unique to the paper I am writing;					
B. When I refer to my own papers that I have previously written;					
C. None of the above					

Note: *) Questions adapted from Turnitin Plagiarism Quiz by Turnitin (2018).

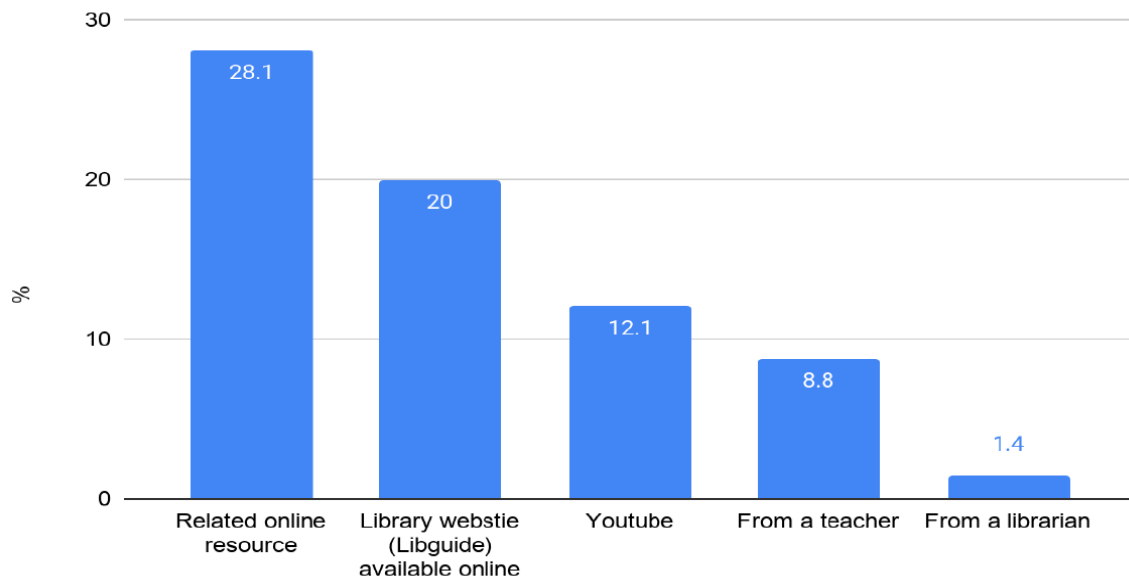


Fig. 2: Participants' plans for upskilling Academic Integrity Literacy ($n = 431$)

CONCLUSION

This is, to the author's best knowledge, the first study exploring the UoPeople students' familiarity, knowledge, perceptions, and sociocultural views of academic integrity and AIL. The research provided general recommendations for the UoPeople and the course instructors including: offering a mandatory short course on academic integrity, or recommending

to complete one offered by a reliable institution; requesting worldwide librarian volunteers to support with teaching these skills; capacity building of instructors and students; and, finally and most importantly implementing a rigorous academic integrity framework for agile support.

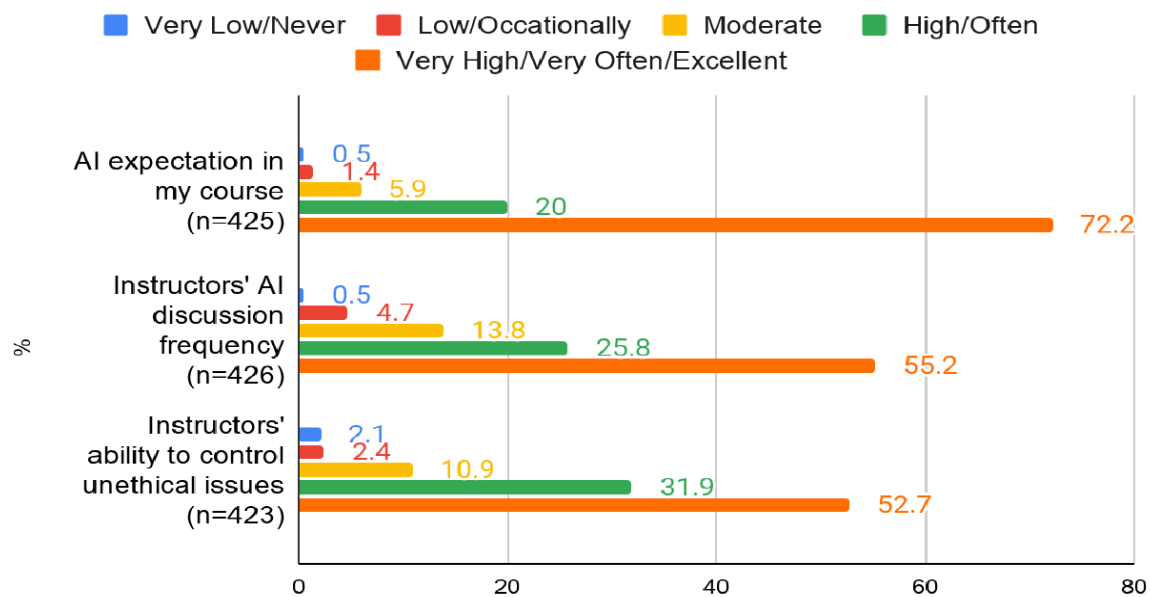


Fig. 3: Students' consolidated academic integrity (AI) related experience with the UoPeople

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