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# **Plagiarism and Academic Integrity in Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: A Critical Literature Review**

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## **Abstract**

The relationship between plagiarism and academic integrity has been a concern for Portuguese higher education institutions in recent decades and, more recently, partly due to technological developments that have occurred with the emergence of artificial intelligence and its use in higher education. We will seek to know students' perspective on plagiarism, as well teachers' perspective of plagiarism, which pedagogical practices were developed and implemented, and higher education institutions recommendations to promote academic integrity. The review covers the period 2010-2024. We searched in Scopus and Web of Science the following descriptors: plagiarism and higher education Portugal; academic integrity; academic ethics. We found that the approach to this topic already allows us to understand the phenomenon to a minimal extent. The conclusions point to both the need of an ethical-evaluative training and institutional policies.

## **Keywords**

Ethics, academic integrity, plagiarism, higher education, Portugal.

## **Résumé**

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La relation entre le plagiat et l'intégrité académique est une préoccupation pour les établissements d'enseignement supérieur portugais depuis plusieurs décennies et, plus récemment, en partie en raison des progrès technologiques liés à l'émergence de l'intelligence artificielle et à son utilisation dans l'enseignement supérieur. Nous chercherons à connaître le point de vue des étudiants sur le plagiat, ainsi que celui des enseignants, les pratiques pédagogiques qui ont été développées et mises en œuvre, et les recommandations des établissements d'enseignement supérieur pour promouvoir l'intégrité académique. L'étude couvre la période 2010-2024. Nous avons recherché dans Scopus et Web of Science les descripteurs suivants: plagiat et enseignement supérieur au Portugal; intégrité académique ; éthique académique. Nous avons constaté que l'approche de ce sujet nous permet déjà de comprendre le phénomène dans une mesure minimale. Les conclusions soulignent à la fois la nécessité d'une formation éthique et évaluative et de politiques institutionnelles.

## **Mots-clés**

Éthique, intégrité académique, plagiat, enseignement supérieur, Portugal.

## **Introduction**

It is not surprising that higher education has been facing increasing ethical challenges in part due to mass education, European internationalization and openness to the world, or, more recently, due to technological and digital changes. This fact entails with inevitable repercussions on university institutions that have forced them to review the choice of their principles and conduct.

However, if with the advent of the internet and its use in academia and scientific research, we were forced to face the phenomenon of plagiarism<sup>2</sup> —which led us to rethink the role of universities in society—, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has brought equally significant ethical challenges, as it has intensified and diversified plagiarism (Peixoto, 2017). Higher education institutions still experience enormous difficulties in combating academic fraud, given its incidence and scope. In our view, one of the most important explanatory factors seems to lie in the assumption made by some teachers that, just because students attend university, they automatically know

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<sup>2</sup> According to Ramos and Morais (2021, p. 92), plagiarism occurs when the following characteristics are observed: i) incorrect declaration of authorship or originality of texts, ii) lack of credit to cited sources, and iii) irrelevance of the intention with which the plagiarism occurs.

and apply information literacy skills. However, we consider this assumption to be a major fallacy. In fact, the academic career of most students of the secondary and vocational education demonstrates exactly the opposite, as they have always been familiar with plagiarism, particularly when teachers asked them to write and submit academic work (Dias et al., 2013). What we can conclude from this fact is that academic fraud which includes plagiarism<sup>3</sup> has become widespread and its prevalence has been the subject of increasing attention from the academic community, making its prevention a clear concern for different higher education institutions (Ramos & Moraes, 2020 and 2021; Braga, 2016; Glendinning, 2014). It is in this context that it becomes essential to understand students' perceptions and attitudes towards plagiarism, so that higher education institutions can develop and implement effective anti-plagiarism policies to promote and maintain a culture of academic integrity (Terra et al., 2021; Saraiva, 2018).

The systematic review on plagiarism and integrity in higher education institutions in Portugal that we present here refers to the period between 2010 and 2024, because no studies were known before this date.

According to a survey carried out by [www.b-on.pt](http://www.b-on.pt), a Portuguese well-known online library, especially used in universities (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010), 79% of publications on plagiarism are from 2010 to 2020, showing that academic research and publication on the subject have occurred mainly in the last decade with a few exceptions, with publications in recent years. One reason may be that the problem has become even more frequent and serious in recent years, despite the lack of knowledge about its extent and characteristics (Caldas et al., 2021; Peixoto, 2017). On the other hand, we believe this phenomenon may also be the result of the massification of higher education, as well as the growing heterogeneity of the student population who attend it and who have access to the internet and AI.

We sought to find answers to some of our research questions considering divided into three levels: 1. undergraduate and post-graduate students: What is the definition of

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<sup>3</sup> Plagiarism differs from other forms of academic fraud in that, in order to avoid committing it, students must not only adhere to a code of honesty that prevents them from engaging in any form of fraud, but must also possess a specific set of knowledge that enables them, on the one hand, to recognise the various manifestations of this practice and, on the other, to understand the rules involved in the use and crediting of external sources (Moraes et al., 2022, p. 91).

plagiarism for these students? What is the most frequent type of plagiarism used by them? What are the reasons indicated by them for their use? 2. Teachers: What are the teachers' reactions to plagiarism when confronted with it? What anti-plagiarism pedagogical practices have they developed and implemented? 3. Institutional policies: what recommendations aimed at promoting academic integrity have been made by higher education institutions?

According to the analysis of the studies carried out in Portugal, as we can see in the table below, we found that there are more studies from the narrow and restricted approach (Domingues, 2022; Morais et al., 2022) of analyzing students' perceptions (93%) and far fewer studies on teachers and institutional policies for a culture of academic integrity (1%) as well as studies on librarians (1%) and higher education universities (5%). In turn, the systemic or holistic approach<sup>4</sup> focused on university management, seeking to understand the role of teachers and institutional codes of conduct that emphasised academic integrity and ethics<sup>5</sup>. In the studies selected for analysis searched in Scopus and Web of Science, the methodology used was mainly quantitative, based on questionnaires, and mainly descriptive and normative, grounded in theoretical analyses (Morais et al., 2022). Few qualitative studies were found that used interviews. In addition, there was only one study conducted using photovoice (Sierra-Martínez et al., 2024). Furthermore, there are no records of studies on the impact of AI use by higher education students, perhaps because the topic is still recent and researchers need time to study and analyse it. Some more generalist studies on plagiarism were excluded, which only discussed its etymological origin and other rhetorical associated themes, but which distanced themselves from the reality of its occurrence in practice.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Domingues (2022, 1869), a holistic approach to plagiarism should be oriented towards both knowledge and control of the phenomenon. It should recognise the extent and importance of plagiarism (Stuhmcke et al., 2016), investigate causes rather than symptoms, establish interconnections between the network of procedures and actions (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006), and apply a code of ethics to the higher education system (Stuhmcke et al., 2016). A holistic approach should consider the available organisational, human, scientific, technical and regulatory resources, documented process (Ewing et al., 2016), policy, student preparation, learning and teaching strategies to foster preventive actions, consistency of proceedings and penalties, and communicate an unambiguous definition of plagiarism (Devlin, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> We refer to ethics taking into account its semantic distinction in Greek culture between *éthos* and *êthos*, where the latter variation means: "[...] way of inhabiting the place where one lives (not exactly the dwelling, but the experience itself) [...] of nature or character, in the sense of a personal nature or a subjective way of being [...] the power of critical judgement, which came to qualify human conduct in reference to the concepts of good and evil, fair and unfair, beautiful and ugly" (Spinelli, 2009, pp.41-42).



Plagiarism and integrity in higher education institutions in Portugal			
Number of Scientific articles (24)	Books (2)	Theses (2)	Reports (5)
Plagiarism: 21	Fraud and plagiarism at university the urgency of a culture of integrity in higher education,  University of Coimbra (2015)	Master's dissertation in criminology:  <i>Effective fight against the crime of plagiarism: respect for the social function of immaterial property and scientific production as a focus</i> (Porto, Lusófona University, 2018);	Plagiarism policies in Portugal, (2014);  CNECV (2018), Integrity in scientific research – recommendation  Strategies to promote academic and scientific integrity – higher education institutions in Portugal (2019)
Culture of integrity: 6	Plagiarism and academic integrity in the information society  Open University, Lisbon (2020)	Master's dissertation/sociology  <i>From intransparency to crime in science and higher education. An empirical study of deviant and corruptive processes in Portugal</i> (University Porto, 2009)	Report of the 1st conference on fraud and ethics in education and research (2019)  Scientific integrity report (2023)  Fac Medicine, University Porto.

Table 1. Plagiarism and integrity in higher education institutions in Portugal. Source: Author.

## Results

### Plagiarism from the students' perspective

We will now present some of the findings from the literature on the definition and perception of plagiarism from the students' perspective, as well as the types of plagiarism<sup>6</sup> they most commonly use and their main motivations for resorting to it. For

<sup>6</sup> In scientific literature, it is possible to identify different types of plagiarism, such as: i) word-for-word plagiarism (i.e., the use of direct quotations, whether from text or any other element, without correctly crediting the source of these quotations); ii) mosaic plagiarism, which involves altering details of the text or other elements, with or without crediting the sources; iii) self-plagiarism, which includes situations where a particular element is presented as

example, regarding the perception of plagiarism by higher education cycle, undergraduate students generally showed a general lack of knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism (Morais et al., 2022). However, this lack of knowledge decreased as they progressed in their academic studies at master's and doctoral level. Undergraduate students were the ones who most often revealed that they did not have a clear and correct understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, while master's and doctoral students were the most accurate in their definition, even though they had some doubts about what plagiarism is. Only literal plagiarism is clearly recognised at all levels of education. We also wanted to know which types of plagiarism were most commonly used among students. The most frequent types of plagiarism were copying part of other authors' academic work without citing the source; copying the academic work of other colleagues; signing group work without having contributed to its preparation.

There were also some plagiarism practices considered less serious by students, such as submitting the same work in different subjects (Morais et al., 2020 and 2022). Based on this data, we noticed that there seems to be an established policy among students to legitimise or socialise academic fraud based on mechanisms of trust and solidarity (Domingues, 2002). There seems to be a tolerance for sharing the authorship of academic work with others who were not involved in its production, based on the expectation that, someday in the future, they will also benefit from this practice (Morais et al., 2020).

As for the main motivations for committing plagiarism, it seems to lie in the fact that students are unable to manage their time well enough, (almost) always leaving academic work to the last minute or due to pressure from family or the job market to get good grades (Teixeira, 2011; Teixeira & Rocha, 2010). In addition, the fact that they feel that there is no detection or subsequent penalty for those who plagiarise leads them to resort to it more naturally and normally, as something that everyone does<sup>7</sup>.

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original when it has already been disclosed in full or in large part at an earlier date; and iv) the purchase or any other form of appropriation of the authorship of elements belonging to others (Morais et al., 2022, p. 92).

<sup>7</sup> Taking into account the three comparative studies conducted by Teixeira and Rocha in the 2000s, it was possible to highlight the importance of context, if there was a more or less favourable trend towards plagiarism, in determining its occurrence. Thus, in environments favourable to plagiarism, students' propensity to plagiarise tends to be greater; the greater and more severe the penalties, the less incentive students have to engage in dishonest behaviour; in schools where codes of honour exist, the propensity to copy among students is lower (Teixeira and

The existence of a culture of plagiarism that prefers to ignore this phenomenon, which knows it exists but does nothing about it, is therefore highly detrimental to a culture of integrity and honest practice in academia (Peixoto, 2017).

In addition, students' low awareness, or even ignorance, of the existence of ethical codes in the higher education institutions to which they belong contributed to many of them being unaware of plagiarism policies. In turn, regarding the ethical codes of conduct of institutions, there are some shortcomings to point out. In fact, these were characterized by being, for the most part, too generic, as well as largely unknown to the academic community. Even in cases where some codes explicitly referred to plagiarism, they revealed a lack of preventive strategies regarding this phenomenon.

### **Teachers and Plagiarism**

Next, we wanted to know how teachers assess incidents of plagiarism, how they react when faced with cases of plagiarism, what measures they take and how they proceed. From the selected studies, it was possible to see that, in the undergraduate studies, the most common penalty of teachers towards incidents of plagiarism was to reprimand and force students to rewrite their work; others chose to cancel the assignment and send the student to take an exam, and a significant number of teachers cancelled the assignment but allowed the student to continue with periodic assessment (Ramos & Morais, 2018).

As for teachers who detected plagiarism in coursework for master's and doctoral programmes, where students are required to write theses and scientific projects, most teachers choose to discuss the issue and force students to rewrite their thesis/project, a practice not provided for in the codes. Few reported the incident to others, whether to the head of the department, the university's teaching council, or even the rector.

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Rocha, 2006, 92). According to these assumptions, it was possible to state that, although academic fraud was widespread in Portugal and Spain (Teixeira & Rocha, 2008), Portuguese students were less prone to fraudulent behaviour, while Spanish students were more prone to copying than their Austrian counterparts, with no significant differences found between Austrian and Romanian students (Teixeira & Rocha, 2006, p. 92). In turn, the probability of copying is significantly lower among students in Scandinavia, the US and the British Isles, when compared to their counterparts in southern Europe. Surprisingly, this probability is also lower for the African bloc. However, students from Western European countries and, especially, Eastern Europe revealed statistically significant higher propensities to commit academic fraud (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010).

To prevent plagiarism, teachers believe it is important to impose stricter penalties on those who commit plagiarism, inform students about the rules on plagiarism, and ensure that work is submitted to plagiarism detection tools (Ramos & Morais, 2018; Teixeira, 2011; Teixeira & Rocha, 2010).

Based on this data, we can conclude that the attitudes teachers typically adopt are more preventive than punitive ones when confronted with situations of plagiarism, as they have shown little willingness to report cases of plagiarism that arise, and choose to resolve them privately and confidentially.

### **Institutional recommendations**

Finally, we wanted to know what anti-plagiarism recommendations were made by higher education institutions, whether or not they were included in the available documentation. The analysis of institutional documents has revealed that, then as now, they are vague or silent on the conceptual definition of academic fraud, on the definition of strategies for its prevention, on the definition of effective mechanisms for detecting academic fraud, as well as on the academic and disciplinary sanctions for fraudulent behavior. (Almeida, 2016; Peixoto, 2017; Peixoto et al., 2016).

In view of the existing data, we decided to group them into three levels: prevention, teaching, and institutional policies. It was suggested that prevention against plagiarism should begin at the very start of academic schooling, in the very first years, as it is not a phenomenon exclusive to universities. In other words, there is an understanding that fraud prevention should be introduced from the beginning of the academic experience, for example, in primary education (Hallak, 2021; Peixoto, 2016). However, the biggest change lies in the possible actions of teachers, required by institutions, in the sense of: 1. Prioritising ethical training on academic integrity; 2. Offering training modules on ethics, correct use of sources, and scientific writing; 3. Adopting more participatory teaching methods that incorporate critical thinking skills; 4. Including education on plagiarism as an integral part of the curriculum for all subjects; 5. Being consistent with consistent and coherent teaching of anti-plagiarism principles and practices; 6. Prioritising ethical training in academic integrity and ethics based on moral philosophy and academic writing; 7. Creating and offer modules that teach how to cite and

reference using APA standards; 8. Contributing to the knowledge, dissemination, and understanding of clear pedagogical rules focused on the ethics of honesty and a culture of integrity; 9. Developing essential educational strategies aimed at preventing plagiarism, in which students can develop practical outcomes (posters, tutorials, educational leaflets, videos), (Sierra-Martínez et al., 2024; Terra; Moreira & Gomes, 2021; Sanches, 2019; Matos & Sousa, 2017).

Therefore, there is a widespread understanding of how important and significant it is to adopt a positive educational and pedagogical perspective on resolving the phenomenon of plagiarism (Almeida et al., 2016; Festas; Matos & Seixas, 2020; Festas; Seixas & Matos, 2022; 2023; Nunes, 2025; 2019) rather than basing action on exclusively and purely negative attitudes that contribute nothing to the learning of writing skills, for example, which are clearly lacking. However, this does not mean that when instances of plagiarism are identified, punitive measures should not be taken, accompanied by other measures to re-establish the positive values that education, in its essence, requires.

With regard to institutional anti-plagiarism policies, there is a strong desire to develop and implement an ethical culture of integrity that is truly internalised by the entire university community. To this end, the data indicate that these measures must first be made known to everyone, and therefore higher education institutions should seek to promote and disseminate a culture of integrity that encompasses its different dimensions, both in terms of individual behaviour and institutional teaching practices, curricula, methodologies and types of assessment adopted (Nunes, 2019 and 2025; Peixoto et al., 2016). These institutional anti-plagiarism policies must also be made effectively visible, transparent and, above all, effective to the entire academic community.

## **Discussion**

Our critical perspective: the future as we want it? Nowadays, there is greater awareness of this scientifically studied phenomenon and its understanding in its various nuances, both from the point of view of students and teachers and higher education institutions. This study has therefore provided an updated overview of the

situation in Portugal, identified the shortcomings that still exist and, thus, determined the direction to take in terms of educational intervention. It was also possible to identify the effective resonance, in university teaching practice, of some of these studies with positive results. However, this has not been reflected in the investment in both research and effective educational practice currently being made in Portugal, either at the research level, as publications relating to 2025 on this topic are practically non-existent, or in the lack of initiatives to hold a variety of colloquiums and conferences. It is worth noting one exception, in that the International Colloquium on Ethics and Integrity in the Social Sciences and Humanities in the Age of AI is held annually at the University of Aveiro, since 2024.

This situation, however, does not reflect yet other international realities, such as those in Spain<sup>8</sup> and in Switzerland where IRAFPA<sup>9</sup> contribute to the necessary continuity of understanding and study of the phenomenon, given that plagiarism, as a phenomenon, is unlikely to disappear completely. It can therefore be concluded that it is absolutely crucial to carry out more research on a culture of integrity in higher education that now also considers the ethical use of AI in the context of university education.

A holistic theory (Domingues, 2022) that integrates all levels and types of plagiarism is therefore necessary, since the phenomenon is complex and must be analyzed in all its aspects (agent level; micro level; meso level; macro level) without forgetting the importance of a new level “[...] transversal, technological, due to its ability to influence all the above-mentioned levels. Given the rapid evolution of digital tools and artificial intelligence that are transforming the way knowledge is researched, produced, and shared, their inclusion is particularly relevant” (Gallent-Torres & Sureda-Negre, 2025, p. 24). (translated from Spanish)

Therefore, we can conclude that there is a need for further research with systemic preventive approaches, involving universities and university policies that are openly anti-plagiarism and emphasised the necessary visibility for the entire academic

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<sup>8</sup> The University of A Coruña (Spain) has been very active in this area over the years through research projects, research groups on plagiarism, publications, and the organisation of national and international conferences.

<sup>9</sup> IRAFPA is an international Institute of Research and Action on Fraud and Plagiarism in Academia *destinated to create a forum for international, interdisciplinary scientific discussion on fraud and plagiarism, to aid and assist individuals and institutions affected by academic fraud or plagiarism, to conduct theoretical and applied research in those specific fields, and to formulate and disseminate a methodological protocol with respect to fraud and plagiarism.* (<https://irafpa.org/en/>).

community with regard to existing codes of conduct; to create academic and pedagogical regulations, assessment regulations, statutes, regulations for students, and letters of rights and duties for the academic community, making these documents more effective in practice (Pedro, 2023).

## Conclusions

It is essential that universities clearly opt for an ethical culture of academic integrity and actively and, above all, effectively promote it in their academic communities, so that no one can claim ignorance or lack of attitude. In this sense, it is important that they take responsibility for disseminating it, ensuring that it reaches each and every one of us in the most varied ways and possibilities. At the same time, there is a need for a substantial change in the attitude of teachers who, through the use of active methodologies, the provision of scientific literacy modules for students, among other measures, can introduce change through education, as a lasting foundation for change. In this regard, we must not forget the fundamental role that students can play by involving them creatively in the production of anti-plagiarism output, making them their greatest advocates and spokespersons. We believe that only in this way, that is, with the consistent and coordinated support of everyone (because this is a cause for each and every one of us) will it be possible to persist in the humanistic values that we want to continue to guide us as a society, such as transparency, honesty, and responsibility.

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