# Enhancing Ethics and Integrity in the Changing World

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## Background

This special issue of the Journal of Academic Ethics (JAET) is largely focused on major events and developments affecting education and research occurring between November 2019 and December 2023. This was a particularly turbulent period for the whole world. Looking positively, it was a very exciting time to be in education because everything was being turned upside down and inside out by changes to society, technology and ways of conceptualising learning, teaching, and scientific research. The world feels like a much smaller place than it used to be because technological advances facilitate connections between people wherever they are around the globe. This has been further enhanced by imperative adaptations imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to be true when conducting international collaborative research and sharing new ideas between individuals, institutions and nations.

## World-Changing Events

Although between early 2020 and late 2021 the global COVID-19 pandemic required isolation of people and closure of workplaces and educational institutions, it also forced productive advancements in uses of educational technology to bring educators, learners, and researchers together (Machado et al., 2023). Now that the major impact of the pandemic is over, there is time for reflection on how we can continue to capitalise on the benefits that emerged from that time, particularly how to effectively support and motivate distance learners using new and innovative teaching technologies.

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In contrast, as the first two papers in this special issue attest, there were also negative repercussions to education during the pandemic, particularly affecting academic and research conduct. On-line learning and assessment were perceived by some students as providing an ideal opportunity to ignore calls for academic integrity and instead access whatever support was available, such as essay mills, homework help sites (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021), other students, or family members, to help them complete their assessments. This opportunism may have been driven by desperation, isolation, or through lack of clarity and guidance from their institution.

Research conducted on the pandemic period points to a massive rise in the number of academic integrity breaches detected and proven in many institutions, compared to pre-pandemic years (Ives & Cazan, 2023; Stoesz et al., 2023). However, many institutions were so overwhelmed by the sudden rise in cases, at a time when resources may have been limited, through staff illness and other demands, that they had no effective systems in place to manage the additional workload (Erguvan, 2021). Unless the offending students were made aware that what they did was unacceptable academic conduct, at least some of them will have taken this as a sign of condonement and continued with their inappropriate behaviour. On the other hand, technology assisted solutions for maintaining integrity in assessments (such as e-proctoring) have received mixed responses from students and the academic communities (Nicola-Richmond et al., 2023). For example, in a recent systematic review on the COVID-19 impact in medical students' assessment, 40% of the studies adopted different strategies to prevent cheating and fraud (Machado et al., 2023). Also, many students were experiencing mental health related issues during pandemic. A review by Eaton and Turner (2020) reported a rise in students' anxiety and stress during the pandemic, especially for matters relating to academic integrity.

Late in 2022, during the journey to recovery from the pandemic towards finding the new normal, the world was abruptly hit by another challenge, this time not a threat to health, but a massive advancement in the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI), epitomised by the release of a tool called ChatGPT by the tech giant OpenAI. This event rocked the world and the ensuing fall-out continues to generate international news headlines more than a year later. However, access to free AI tools was not a new phenomenon. In 2021, for example, a publication by Forgas and colleagues raised concerns about student use of "automatic paraphrasing tools" to evade detection of plagiarism (Forgas et al., 2023). By March 2022, one member of this editorial team had already established an institutional working group to better understand advances in AI capabilities, update institutional regulations and create guidance on use of AI tools by staff and students.

Although AI had been embedded in many freely available products long before ChatGPT was released, the publicity starting in November 2021 led to concerns being raised in educational circles about potential misuse of AI tools by students (Foltýnek et al., 2023). A few educational institutions reacted by swiftly announcing a ban of student use of ChatGPT, but most of these bans were overturned when the reality became clear (Singer, 2023), leading to most institutions adopting a realistic and nuanced stance (Foltýnek et al., 2023; Weale, 2023).

Guidance was also generated by major publishing bodies on whether AI tools could be included as an author (COPE, 2023) and advice was forthcoming on how AI generated content could be acknowledged (McAdoo, 2023). Over time, a more pragmatic approach is emerging towards understanding how AI can be harnessed in an ethical way to improve

productivity in the workplace, education, and science. These advances do not just affect students, but also researchers, academics, public/private companies and the general public. It is becoming clear that finding ways to effectively incorporate AI in education and research is inevitable. However, there is a need to discourage unethical uses of AI, especially affecting education and research, a topic addressed in the seventh paper in this special issue.

A global pandemic followed by the release of powerful AI tools were two unprecedented events affecting the modern educational world, but several other events during this time, the impacts of many of which are on-going, seriously disrupted education and research in certain parts of the world. The courage of those in Ukraine, who are continuing to provide education and develop policies to address corruption and conduct research to strengthen ethics and integrity in the country, despite being in a war zone. Colleagues in Türkiye suffered great loss and disruption to education and research after the massive earthquake in February 2023, which also affected part of Syria. This natural disaster forced Türkiye to re-adopt remote learning. Academic institutions from all over the country, combined their efforts to compensate for the inability of some universities to continue their educational activities (UN Academic Impact, 2023). In October 2023, another earthquake struck parts of Morocco, with more tragic losses and disruption to education. At the time of writing, we can only hope for an early peaceful, lasting cessation to the hostilities in the Middle East, especially between Palestine and Israel, leading to the rebuilding of lives, schools, universities, hospitals and homes. Sadly, there has also been disruption in parts of the world where war and destruction are so normalised that they no longer make the news headlines, including territorial disputes, conflicts or illegal occupation, famine, terrorism, natural disasters, including fire and flooding. Restrictions to educational provision and the inability to make progress on important research are adding to the long-term misery and suffering of ordinary people in those regions.

All these recent world-changing events continue to affect educational institutions and their communities across the globe. In an ideal civilised world, all people, young and old, have all the basic necessities to live their lives safely, in comfort, in a caring society, that is (relatively) free of corruption, threats, violence and hunger, with ready access to education. We are all global citizens, where steady progress in ethically conducted scientific research should continue to steadily improve the quality of life for everyone, not just a select few privileged nations. Where there is instability of any kind, the basic human right for access to education and scientific breakthroughs will suffer. We as an academic community have an obligation to ensure that ethics and integrity prevail at all times.

Taking a long-term view, advances in ethics and integrity emanating from education and research can help to challenge some of the negative human-induced impacts, discussed above, that are affecting the educational world. The editors of this special issue are particularly interested in sharing evidence of how recent global events are disrupting research conduct, ethics and academic integrity and what can be done to reverse the negative side-effects from any form of disruption. The focus of many of the papers presented in this special issue provide evidence that responses to adversity in different parts of the world can overcome even severe challenges, in the interests of moving forwards in science and education.

## Addressing Educational Challenges: Summary of Papers in this Special Issue

This journal issue covers a broad range of topics relating to both academic integrity and ethics, encompassing: institutional policies and initiatives; capturing insights from students and teachers about academic integrity, ethical conduct in education and research; what we can learn from recent experiences of remote and on-line learning; guidance on detection of misuse of generative AI; transitioning between academic and research integrity; exploring ethical aspects in social media research; and, finally, views on the scope of ethics applied to social research.

The first two papers consider different approaches to creating a culture of academic integrity in student education, from an institutional perspective, with authors from different parts of the world. A paper from United Arab Emirates proposes a framework for guiding the development of institutional policies.

The next paper provides insights into how students understand academic integrity, based on data collected at a UK university from a small number of student participants, from a diverse student population. Recommendations from these authors are that to all students need to be given the same baseline of information about academic integrity and related expectations, to cover any initial gaps in their knowledge and misunderstandings. This should be followed up throughout the student journey, with additional related information to remind students of their responsibilities.

The next paper, which investigates the causes and motivations for cheating behaviours in on-line assessment, is based on a study in South Africa and proposes ways to address these. The following paper reports on findings from research conducted in Poland comparing individual and collective cheating behaviours, focusing on underlying psychological aspects.

The next paper provides welcome guidance on ways to detect text generated by AI tools that have been trained on the GPT-4 Large Language Model (LLM) training set. Although ethical use of AI tools is generally encouraged by universities, it is well understood that many students are submitting work as their own that was largely or completely generated by generative AI tools. The author of this paper advocates a detection method based on a combination of academic judgement and use of technology.

The next paper is from a medical ethics research team in Portugal, presenting undergraduate students' perspectives on the ethics of animal use in medical and veterinary research. This paper highlights the importance of ensuring animal rights and continual educational enforcement of the 3R policy (Reduction, Refinement and Replacement).

The next two papers, both with authors from different parts of Europe, cover synergies and guidance about the transition between academic and research integrity. The first of these two papers argues why it is important to understand the need to support the conceptual journey between academic integrity, research integrity and research ethics. The second paper provides a set of checklists for use by students, their supervisors and institutional managers, that are designed to facilitate this transition, from three different perspectives.

The penultimate paper focuses on publications covering research into social media, specifically providing a literature review about ethical discussions in this category of research. This paper also highlights the importance of research related to social media.

This special issue ends with research into ethical challenges faced by researchers when ensuring autonomy of research participants. All researchers should be familiar with the

concept of informed consent and the right of participants to withdraw their consent. However, difficulties can arise when a participant withdraws consent, especially the requirement to remove or delete ephemeral types of qualitative data and sensitive information they had already shared with the researcher. This paper explores the nature of associated ethical dilemmas that researchers face and discusses possible solutions to overcome these problems.

## Conclusions

Authors contributing to this special issue come from many different parts of the world, encompassing Europe, Canada, Indian sub-continent, South Africa, Middle East. They are part of the globally networked community of researchers who care enough about integrity and ethics in education and research to devote part of their lives to conducting in-depth studies on specific topics in this broad research field, then sharing their findings globally through this international journal. This demonstrates how an academic community can grow through international networking.

Although some of the research on integrity reported here is categorised as non-generalisable, usually because it is very localised, perhaps with small data sets, there still can be synergies between contexts, lessons that can be shared and benefits to be gained from reading about the research conducted and the results, irrespective of where it took place. Most importantly, localised data is essential for understanding the socio-cultural differences in the perceptions of academic integrity and research ethics.

The diversity factors between papers do not just relate to geographical differences between authors or their institutions and research participants. There are also great differences in the level of experience between the authors contributing to this issue. Several of the authors were awarded their doctoral degree within the last few years, therefore can be classified as early career researchers (ECRs), just setting out on their academic research journey. This special issue encourages these ECRs to continue their research journey by providing the opportunity to communicate their research findings via this international forum. On the opposite extreme, other contributors to this special issue bring many years of experience in researching and academic publishing.

The guest editors hope you find this set of papers both valuable and interesting.

### Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors have no competing interests.

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