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ARTICLE

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI-GENERATED CONTENT IN ACADEMIC PUBLISHING: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE TUNISIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Implicações Éticas do Conteúdo Gerado por Inteligência Artificial na Publicação Acadêmica: Desafios e Perspectivas no Contexto do Ensino Superior Tunisiano

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ABSTRACT | Background: GenAI systems are now an integral element of academic life, although guidelines for research ethics are mostly based on the experiences of the North American and European countries. There is not much information available about the ethical issues related to AI that researchers face in Tunisia as well as whether their institutions have adapted to the developments. **Objective:** to record the way faculty members, postgraduate students and editors in Tunisia comprehend and handle the ethical issues related to AI-created academic materials and to investigate whether the current institutional policy provides significant assistance. **Methods:** eighteen participants across three institutions (ISET Kasserine, FLSH Sousse, University of Sfax) took part in semi-structured interviews, supplemented by analysis of institutional documents and observation of five research-methods and writing seminars, coded thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. **Results:** awareness of AI ethics was uneven, with only about a third of participants describing solid understanding and a fifth reporting minimal awareness; institutional documents were largely silent on AI, with the great majority of integrity codes making no mention of it; and the concern raised most often was the absence of structured training, followed by uncertainty over authorship attribution. **Conclusion:** Tunisian higher education is operating in something close to a policy vacuum on AI-assisted writing. To remedy this situation, it is essential to formulate codes of ethics that incorporate the notion of so-called AI literacy into the educational process of teaching research methods and academic writing.

Keywords | artificial intelligence, Academic Integrity, Academic Publishing, Authorship Ethics, Higher Education, Tunisia.





RESUMO | Contexto: Os sistemas de inteligência artificial generativa (IAGen) tornaram-se parte integrante da vida acadêmica, embora as diretrizes de ética em pesquisa sejam, em sua maioria, fundamentadas nas experiências de países da América do Norte e da Europa. Ainda há poucas informações disponíveis sobre as questões éticas relacionadas à inteligência artificial enfrentadas por pesquisadores na Tunísia, bem como sobre a adaptação de suas instituições a esses avanços. **Objetivo:** Registrar como docentes, estudantes de pós-graduação e editores na Tunísia compreendem e lidam com as questões éticas relacionadas a materiais acadêmicos produzidos por inteligência artificial, bem como investigar se as políticas institucionais vigentes oferecem suporte significativo. **Métodos:** Dezoito participantes de três instituições — ISET Kasserine, FLSH Sousse e Universidade de Sfax — participaram de entrevistas semiestruturadas, complementadas pela análise de documentos institucionais e pela observação de cinco seminários sobre métodos de pesquisa e escrita acadêmica. Os dados foram codificados tematicamente utilizando a abordagem de seis fases de Braun e Clarke (2006). **Resultados:** A conscientização sobre ética em inteligência artificial mostrou-se desigual: apenas cerca de um terço dos participantes relatou possuir compreensão sólida sobre o tema, enquanto um quinto apresentou nível mínimo de conhecimento. Os documentos institucionais, em grande parte, não abordavam a inteligência artificial, e a ampla maioria dos códigos de integridade não fazia qualquer menção ao tema. A preocupação mais frequentemente apontada foi a ausência de treinamento estruturado, seguida pela incerteza quanto à atribuição de autoria. **Conclusão:** O ensino superior tunisiano encontra-se em uma situação próxima de um vácuo normativo no que diz respeito à escrita acadêmica assistida por inteligência artificial. Para enfrentar essa situação, é essencial formular códigos de ética que incorporem a chamada alfabetização em inteligência artificial ao processo educacional, especialmente no ensino de métodos de pesquisa e escrita acadêmica.

Palavras-chave | Inteligência Artificial; Integridade Acadêmica; Publicação Acadêmica; Ética da Autoria; Ensino Superior; Tunísia.

INTRODUCTION

If you were to inquire of almost any graduate student in Tunisia today whether they have made use of ChatGPT to assist them in accomplishing their school work, the honest answer would in all probability be in the affirmative. On the other hand, when it comes to probing whether they have any knowledge of what the policy of their university is regarding this issue, the answer would likely be much less straightforward. This gap between practice and policy is the starting point for this paper.

Much of what we know about AI and academic integrity comes from studies conducted in well-resourced systems where institutional ethics infrastructure is already mature. Tunisia offers a different picture: universities under real budget pressure, integrity codes that predate the current wave of generative AI by years, and a research culture in which many scholars write in English as a second or third language, which itself creates a strong incentive to lean on AI-based writing support. None of this makes Tunisian researchers less capable or less ethical. It does mean that the guardrails available to them look quite different from those assumed in most of the existing literature.

The consequences are not theoretical. When a post-graduate student files a thesis chapter drafted partially by an AI language model without making a mention of it, or when a journal editor cannot discern whether a given manuscript's literature review has been paraphrased by an author or an AI model, the ambiguity affects everything from attribution of authorship to the integrity of the published literature. Left unaddressed, that uncertainty is likely to erode trust in scholarship precisely as more of it is being produced with AI assistance.



The paper views the discussed issues not just through the lens of publishing but rather educational issues. The manner of teaching students to use, disclose, and critically analyze AI instruments in their studies determines the way they will use them in their future research activities. If a program does not include the teaching of AI-assisted writing, it means that students are taught that the issue is of no importance. Thus, this study takes a close look at not only the results of the publishing aspect but at what is going on or not going on in the research methods classes and writing seminars.

Two questions inspired the field study: first, what ethical issues do Tunisian professionals meet while using AI in writing and publishing, and second, what is the current position of Tunisian institutions in dealing with the matter. The second part of this paper consists of a literature review and research design followed by the findings and discussion on how Tunisian institutions and publications might cope with the issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of AI-generated content in academic publishing

The emergence of large language models such as GPT and Gemini has changed from novelty to commonplace in a surprisingly short time. Researchers utilize them to write summaries, consolidate complex literature, correct phrasing, and in some instances even provide whole manuscript sections (de Fine Licht, 2023). It is worth noting that understanding the mechanism of the language model is important, especially due to the fact that it affects the nature of its ethical dilemma: this type of system does not copy or retrieve existing text but predicts the most probable next word based on the totality of its training experience, hence producing fluent and creative texts even though they are boringly derivative and practically impossible to trace, thus making frequent mistakes like inventing non-existent references and facts which is referred to as hallucination in academic literature (Idris et al., 2024). The consequence of how they operate is that standard plagiarism detectors that spot literal repetition often appear ineffective when it comes to AI-driven composition and writing: once again, AI output can come free of exact matching phrases, even if containing ideas or structures generated by AI.

The reality is undeniable yet the resulting temptation cannot be dismissed either. With the pressure to publish, it is easy to understand why scholars love the assistance of services that bring the research work from a sketch to a publishable document in a matter of minutes (Ndubisi, 2025). The problem arises when it comes to not declaring such assistance because from that point the reader has no idea about the degree to which the content or language has been produced by the author personally (Iqbal, 2023). Perkins (2023) states that the case is less about cheating and more about the institutions failing to keep up with a new category of authorship issue.

Publishers have started to take actions in this respect. The Committee on Publication Ethics as well as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors have adopted a position statement that requires indicating the use of AI and does not allow for making AI the author (COPE, 2023; ICMJE, 2023). The awareness of those guidelines, not to mention their implementation, changes dramatically depending on the region and on the institution (Arnold et al., 2024).



Authorship and accountability when AI assists the writing

Authorship has always carried a double meaning: credit for the ideas, and responsibility for their accuracy. Resnik and Shamoo (2020) argue that this second half, accountability, is what gets lost when a language model contributes substantially to a text, because a model cannot be held responsible for a fabricated reference or a misrepresented finding in any meaningful sense. Guesseir (2025), writing about legal scholarship specifically, notes that AI tools are already blurring the line between assisted and authored text in ways the profession has not fully reckoned with.

Gulumbé et al. (2024) pose the core question effectively: does AI stand as merely an upgraded version of conventional research tools, such as spell checkers and bibliography managers, or does it introduce something fundamentally new by producing original ideas, rather than just corrects the already produced text? The response provided by publishers to this question is to introduce an obligation to disclose the contribution of AI tools, while denying them authorship. However, this way leaves the tough question unanswered: how much AI contribution can be out there without being disclosed?

The situation in Tunisia looks less like a discussion and more like an information void. A survey conducted by Abdeljaoued (2024) demonstrated that less than a quarter of respondents in Tunisian universities were aware of the existence of international research ethics about artificial intelligence, and, moreover, students using ChatGPT for the purpose of proofreading and paraphrasing thought that their usage of AI does not imply any obligation to disclose. Compounding the problem, the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education's Code of Ethics for Scientific Research, still the primary reference document for research conduct nationally, contains no language addressing AI whatsoever (Maoui, 2024), leaving a regulatory vacuum that individual researchers are left to navigate on their own judgment.

Academic integrity and the limits of plagiarism detection

Traditional approaches to academic integrity are erected on a reasonably straightforward concept of plagiarism: the unauthorized appropriation of someone else's work or ideas. AI-generated text does not fit that model cleanly. It can be entirely original at the level of exact wording while still representing a substantial outsourcing of intellectual work, which is exactly the scenario existing detection software like Turnitin was not designed to catch (Foltynek, Meuschke, & Gipp, 2020).

Abdeljaoued's (2024) survey data are instructive here: 85% of Tunisian students surveyed viewed ChatGPT favorably, largely for how quickly it retrieves and organizes information, and 69% felt it answered their questions effectively. Enthusiasm at that level, combined with limited guidance on where the ethical lines sit, creates exactly the conditions in which well-intentioned students drift into practices their institutions would not condone if asked directly. In the case of researchers working in a foreign language, the situation is complicated because intelligent software that helps with grammar and writing is really beneficial and accepted until one thing turns into entire paragraphs written by an invisible author. It is not clear nowadays where the threshold between the two is set (Elgamri et al., 2024).



This does not mean that universities in Tunisia should create plagiarism policies anew from the very beginning. However, this implies that policies that were designed before the emergence of AI have to be modernized, and simply using plagiarism detection tools will not be sufficient to deal with the issue that is essentially the one of norms surrounding disclosure rather than mere matching of texts.

Institutional policy gaps in the Tunisian context

If there is a single, consistent finding running through the literature on AI governance in higher education, it is that policy tends to lag adoption by years, not months (Aithal & Maiya, 2023). Tunisia is not unusual in this respect, but the gap has particular consequences given how quickly students and faculty have taken up these tools. No national policy currently addresses AI use in academic publishing, and the existing Code of Ethics for Scientific Research predates the generative AI era entirely.

In the absence of top-down guidance, individual departments and journals are left to improvise, which produces exactly the kind of inconsistency this study documents. Much of the international literature on AI ethics is also written from contexts with different resourcing, different library access, and different linguistic assumptions, which makes direct policy transplantation an imperfect fix (Ishkhanyan, 2025). There are signs of grassroots momentum, including AI-focused sessions organized by the Tunisian Association of University Teachers, but momentum is not the same as policy, and turning one into the other is the practical challenge this paper returns to in its discussion.

METHODOLOGY

Because the questions driving this study are about lived experience and institutional practice rather than measurable outcomes, a qualitative approach was the natural fit: what counts as a concerning use of AI, and how confident someone feels navigating it, are not things a survey instrument captures well on its own. The design combines three sources of evidence rather than relying on interviews alone, on the view that self-reported awareness is more convincing when it can be checked against what institutions actually put in writing and what actually happens in the rooms where research training takes place. In the following subsections, some aspects of the research methodology that relate to the locations and participants, the data collection methods and how these methods were used, the data analysis and how raw interview transcripts were processed in order to identify themes appearing in the study results, and the ethical procedures that were followed throughout the study will be discussed.

Research design

The study used a qualitative, multi-site case study design across three Tunisian institutions: ISET Kasserine, FLSH Sousse, and the University of Sfax. These sites were chosen for contrast



rather than representativeness, an applied technical institute, a humanities faculty, and a large research university, in order to see whether institutional type shaped how AI ethics questions were experienced.

Ethical approval and consent procedures

This study did not go through a formal institutional review board process; no equivalent body was available to the research team at the time of data collection. This is not unique to this project: research on ethics committee infrastructure across the region has found that no dedicated social science research ethics committee exists in Tunisia, with oversight bodies that do exist concentrated almost entirely in biomedical research (ElAshkar et al., 2024). In place of formal committee oversight, participants were briefed verbally and in writing on the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time, and gave informed consent before any interview was conducted. All data have been anonymized and are reported here under pseudonyms, and particular care was taken not to expose individual participants or institutions in connection with more sensitive comments about AI use, given the largely unregulated national context described above.

Data collection

For completion of the entire picture, three different instruments were used.

Semi-structured interviews

18 participants were included in the interviews conducted including 6 academic faculty, 6 postgraduate students, and 6 editors and/or editorial assistants, 6 from each institution. Interviews lasted for around 30-45 minutes, conducted in English as per the preference of the participant and audio-recorded with their consent. Questions covered participants' own use of AI tools, their sense of where the ethical lines sit, and their awareness of institutional guidance, or the lack of it.

Document analysis

Institutional integrity codes, publishing guidelines, and training materials from all three sites were collected and reviewed for any mention, however brief, of AI-related provisions.

Classroom and seminar observation

The observation covered three research-method seminars and two academic writing workshops, with particular stress on whether discussion involving AI tools took place and how the instructors report on their usage. Observation notes were based on a loose version of the



COLT framework, which was amended to report on AI-related interactions rather than on normal classroom conversation.

Sampling

Participants were purposively selected for direct relevance to the research questions: involvement in postgraduate supervision or research, some prior exposure to AI writing tools, and, for the editor group, an active role with an academic journal. This was a deliberate trade-off. Purposive sampling of this kind yields information-rich cases but cannot support claims about how common these views are across Tunisian academia more broadly, a limitation discussed further below.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted with the help of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide of six phases: the process of becoming familiar with data, generating initial codes, searching for possible themes, reviewing themes against the whole data set, defining and naming final themes, and finally writing the analysis with extracts. Coding was done in NVivo 12, while the analysis of the themes has been undertaken with the consideration of the data coming from document analysis and observations rather than using just one data source.

RESULTS

Through the interviews, document analysis, and observations, three patterns emerged, as described below with accompanying visual summaries.

Awareness of AI ethics varied sharply by role

Roughly a third of participants described a solid, working understanding of the ethical issues AI raises for academic writing; a further 45% put themselves in a middling category, aware that AI use raised questions but unsure exactly what the answers were; and one in five, mostly postgraduate students, admitted they had barely considered the issue before being interviewed.

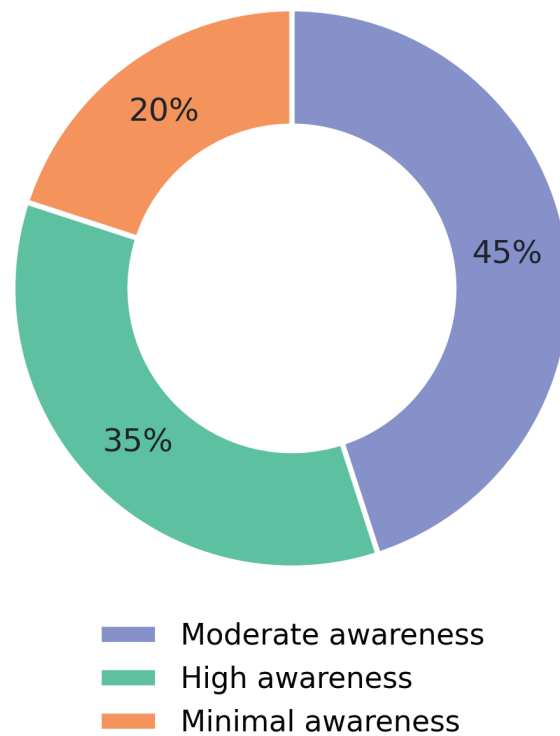


Figure 1. Self-Reported Awareness of AI Ethics Issues Among Interview Participants (N = 18)

Note. Percentages reflect participants' own characterization of their awareness during the interview, grouped into three categories by the research team during coding.

The trend by category was relatively constant. Editors and academics, for whom manuscript evaluation and monitoring are part of their roles, were typically found in the category with the highest awareness level. In contrast, students, who may be the heaviest users of AI writing programs, were largely seen in the group with little awareness. This combination of high usage rate and limited awareness among the group most likely to submit written work without anyone checking it is arguably the most worrying finding in the dataset and indicates a lack of training rather than any issue related to a particular discipline.

Institutional documents rarely mention AI at all

The document review told a consistent story across all three sites. Formal integrity codes were almost entirely silent on AI: only about 15% contained any language that could plausibly be read as covering AI-assisted writing, and even that was often a single general sentence about “using external assistance responsibly” rather than anything specific. Journal editorial policies did somewhat better, with about a third of the journals reviewed including at least a short statement on AI disclosure, and faculty training materials touched on the topic in roughly a fifth of the workshops examined.

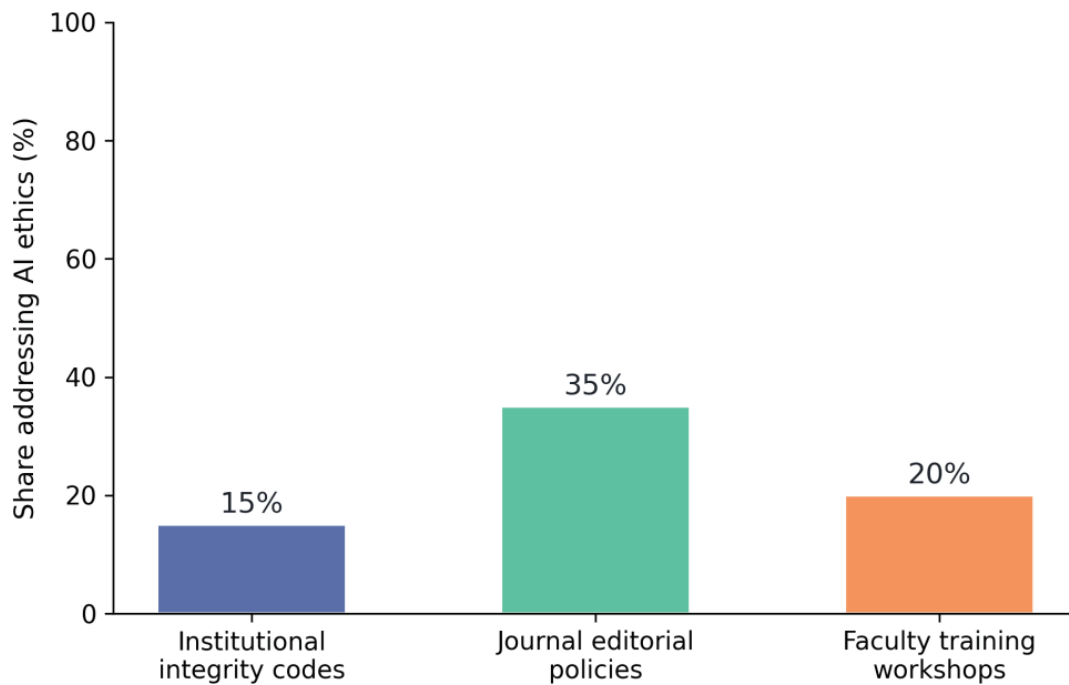


Figure 2. Proportion of Institutional Materials Addressing AI Ethics, by Document Type

Note. Based on document analysis of integrity codes, editorial policies, and training materials collected from the three participating institutions.

Among the things which were revealed to me in the course of the review process is not only the fact that AI-specific language was absent but also that some of the integrity codes appeared to be outdated, as they seemed to have been created before generative AI had become a part of modern life and had only been left unchanged. Journals, on the contrary, responded at a relatively rapid pace to the emerging technology, which is understandable as editors engage with the problem of disclosures every time a manuscript comes in, while curriculum committees would not have to deal with such issues immediately when conducting their activities.

Insufficient training was the concern raised most often

Participants delivered a response to the question, asked in an unprompted way, about concerns regarding AI in academic writing, which was repeated more than other responses.

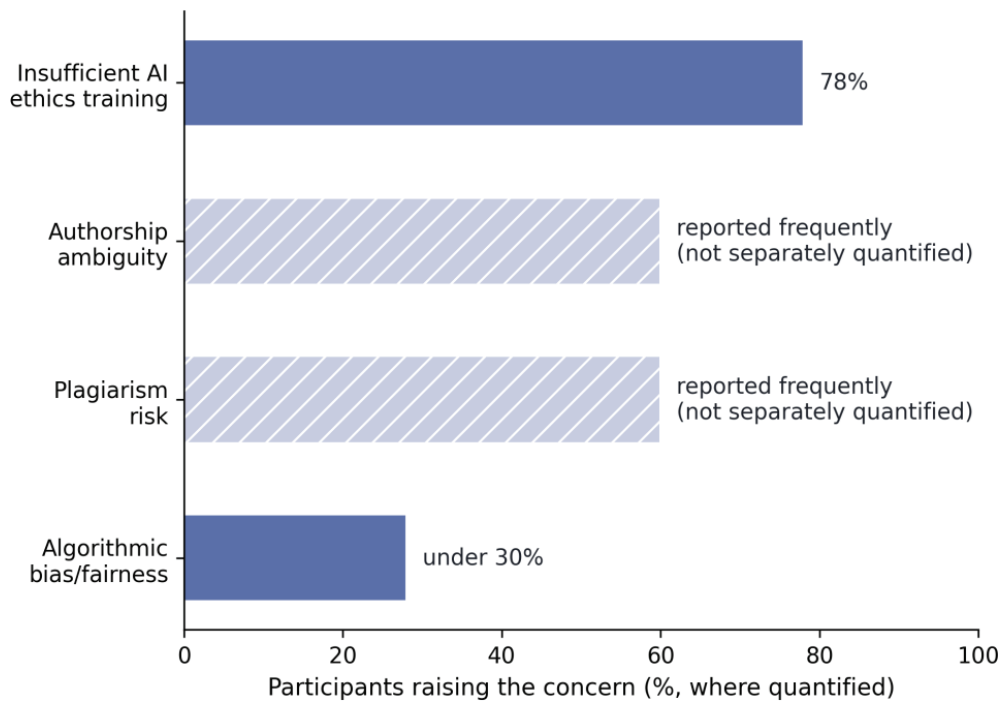


Figure 3. Frequency of Ethical Concerns Raised Spontaneously by Participants During Interviews

Note: In the previous coding, the values for training (78%) and algorithmic defect (less than 30%) were presented as explicit percentages. Meanwhile, authorship uncertainty and plagiarism risk were requested often, but were not recorded as specific numbers and are hence represented with unnumerated, lined bars in this diagram instead of assigned some approximate number to avoid misrepresentation of the data.

The issue of limited structured training was raised by 78% of those surveyed, indicating that it was the greatest cause for concern by any participant group as it applied to all three groups of people involved in the study rather than just the students being studied. Remarkably, even the academic workforce group considered themselves adequately knowledgeable about the training process despite realizing that they acquired that information through non-institutional channels. Authorship ambiguity and plagiarism risk were also raised very often, closely enough behind training that our coding did not treat them as clearly separable in frequency, which tracks with what the literature review would predict given how thin the disclosure norms are; we report this qualitatively rather than assigning either theme a specific percentage, since we did not track them as mutually exclusive counts during coding. Algorithmic bias and fairness were raised far less often, by under a third of participants, which likely reflects where the conversation about AI ethics in Tunisia currently sits: most people are still working through the basics of disclosure and authorship and have not yet turned their attention to the deeper questions about what is embedded in these systems' training data.

Examining the Three Strands Simultaneously

The three findings, when considered in parallel, support each other in a way that would not occur if only one set of data were to be considered in isolation. Awareness is uneven and weakest exactly where AI use is heaviest; institutional documents provide little to no guidance to close that



gap; and the concern participants raise most is, unsurprisingly, the absence of training. This is not three unrelated problems. It is one problem, a policy and pedagogy vacuum, showing up in three different places in the data.

DISCUSSION

The explicit message gleaned from this research indicates that the academic institutions in Tunisia are not falling short of tackling the issues of academic integrity with respect to AI but rather they have yet to kick off any attempts to do it in a coordinated manner. This is a matter of framing, since the meaning of this becomes important once it comes to what kind of reaction should be a rational one. This is not a case of either a need for disciplines or a way of enforcing rules; it is a case of creating infrastructure.

In the context of the wider literature, the findings presented in this paper confirm the assertions made by COPE (2023) and the ICMJE (2023) on a global scale: disclosure is a viable standard for the use of AI in writing, which only works when researchers are informed about what they need to do. Where this study adds something the international guidance does not fully capture is the language dimension. According to responses from those interviewed, AI appeared to serve as a major tool for those who are writing in English as a second or third language. This indicates that policies copied from countries where English is spoken may penalize those who are using this legitimate language assistance needed for equal treatment of multilingual scholars. This means that institutions must draw a clear line between providing assistance and replacing someone's ideas. For university leaders, the conclusion that should be drawn is quite clear, even this will not be easy to execute. A single vague sentence about "using outside help responsibly" clearly was not enough to give students or faculty a workable sense of where the line sits, and continuing to rely on such language is unlikely to change that.

For journal editors, the finding that a third of journals already have some form of AI disclosure statement is a starting point worth building on rather than a problem to solve from zero. Sharing language and review procedures across Tunisian journals, rather than each outlet drafting its own policy independently, would likely close the gap faster than waiting for national-level regulation.

For policymakers at the ministry level, the absence of any AI provision in the national Code of Ethics for Scientific Research is arguably the single highest-leverage gap identified in this study, since a national update would give every institution a common reference point instead of leaving each one to draft its own interpretation, with all the inconsistency that implies.

For those designing curricula, the training gap identified here points to a specific and fairly modest fix: research-methods and academic writing courses are the natural place to introduce AI literacy, since they already reach nearly every postgraduate student, and the observation data suggest that when instructors do raise the topic, even briefly, students respond with the kind of practical questions that suggest real appetite for guidance rather than resistance to it.

There are two other points that can be made since those two have been brought up by participants of the research time and again, even though they are somewhat outside the framework of the research questions posed to respondents. The first point is that many professors and



educators have found it important to differentiate between using AI for polishing grammar and using it for formulating arguments, and they have observed that the existing discussions and debates on ethical aspects of AI do not normally make this distinction. The second point is that some editors noted that sometimes reviewers also use some AI tools to draft their reviews, which is an extremely underestimated scenario in the research on artificial intelligence and academic integrity.

Future research could usefully track whether awareness changes once institutions actually adopt explicit AI clauses, since this study captures a single moment in what is clearly a fast-moving situation. A comparative study of higher education systems across North Africa and the Global South would reveal if the findings in this paper applies only to Tunisia or have some broader context. Finally, based on how often the issue of AI usage on the reviewer side appeared in conversations with participants, it merits a full-blown study rather than just being mentioned as a side matter.

Limitations

While evaluating this research's results, a few limitations should be held in mind. The qualitative sample drawn consisted of eighteen individuals, which, although large enough for the saturation of the themes reached, is nonetheless small, and the research design involved purposeful sampling, which aimed at acquiring insights from people directly concerned with the research questions. Due to the fact that the study was conducted at three sites in Tunisia, the generalization of findings is limited even in the North African region.

The awareness levels were evaluated according to self-assessments conducted in a single interview rather than being confirmed against an external benchmark, which means that even if a respondent claimed to be very aware, they might not have possessed relevant factual knowledge that would have become evident if some systematic assessment of that had been used. The absence of the authorization from the institutional review board mentioned in the research methodology is also an important limitation and is not something that has an established protocol; rather, it indicates that the reviewing committee was nonexistent at the particular time in question, which is in line with the evidence demonstrating that the infrastructure of research ethics in social sciences is inadequate in Tunisia and the region (El Ashkar et al., 2024). Readers should weigh the ethical safeguards described there, informed consent, anonymization, and careful handling of sensitive material, against the absence of independent committee oversight when interpreting these findings. Finally, the study captures a snapshot of a fast-moving field; institutional policy and AI tools themselves are both likely to look different within a year or two of publication, and readers should weigh the findings accordingly.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how Tunisian academic stakeholders experience the ethical questions AI-generated content raises for scholarly writing, and what institutions are, or are not, doing about it. The conclusion that has been reached is rather straightforward: Some level of understanding does exist among academics, but there is almost no formal instruction; surprisingly



enough, the ones with the highest exposure to the use of AI technology in learning are postgraduate students, while at the same time, those users appear to have received almost no formal training for responsible utilization of the new technology.

The point concerning the lack of knowledge does not reflect poorly on those individuals who utilize AI tools; it rather highlights the fact that the existing education system has not yet embraced the new technology. It does not imply that universities in Tunisia should develop their own ethical code. Instead, they can base their practices on the guidelines set forth by international organizations (COPE, ICMJE, etc.). What it implies is that those guidelines should be integrated into the integrity codes, journal policies, and AI comprehension education as part of the regular training program.

Tunisia's experience here is unlikely to be unique among Global South higher education systems facing similar pressures with fewer resources than their counterparts elsewhere. If this study contributes anything beyond its immediate setting, it is a reasonably detailed picture of what that gap looks like in practice, and a starting point for the institutional conversations that now need to happen.

AI Disclosure Statement

Following the journal's editorial guidelines regarding the employment of artificial intelligence technology in manuscript crafting, the author(s) make it known that they have employed an AI writing assistant during the preparation stage of their manuscript to aid them with language editing, citation formatting, and methodology. However, no AI tool was employed for producing, interpreting, or evaluating the qualitative data used in the study; all coding and analysis were done independently by the authors. The authors hereby take full responsibility for the presented material in the article, including its accuracy, reliability, and originality.

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