

Empowering Tomorrow's Education: Explore Edu365's Latest Release, Focusing on Academic Integrity

On 15 May 2024, HEITSA (Higher Education Information Technology South Africa) hosted an educative webinar entitled "Empowering Tomorrow's Education: Explore Edu365's Latest Release, Focusing on Academic Integrity." Keynote speakers Ian Bayley, Global Education Head at SIS Global; and Professor Anné H. Verhoef, from North West University, discussed pivotal aspects of academic integrity and its significance in the contemporary educational landscape.

Ian Bayley commenced by introducing SIS Global as a Global Education System Integrator (GESI) renowned for its expertise in devising, designing, and executing transformative IT strategies and solutions tailored for educational institutions worldwide. He highlighted SIS Global's commitment to innovation in education, drawing upon the company's 20-year Microsoft expertise, specialized localization efforts in South Africa, and a portfolio of global use cases.

Bayley provided an overview of Edu365, SIS Global's ERP solution for Higher Education that manages the full student journey, from lead generation to graduation and alumni, along with back-office functions such as finance and HR requirements tailored specifically for universities, all underpinned by the modern Microsoft Dynamics Stack.

The core focus of the webinar pivoted towards the imperative of academic integrity encapsulated by SIS Global's latest offering, 'Academia Integritas,' which is now a module available within Edu365 (or as a standalone solution for universities). Bayley expounded upon the critical need to enhance academic integrity, particularly in light of the burgeoning AI landscape where students might resort to unethical practices such as leveraging AI for cheating and plagiarism. He underscored the collaborative effort between North West University and SIS Global in developing solutions to fortify academic integrity, positioning SIS Global as the official commercial partner in this endeavour.

Professor Anné H. Verhoef from North West University further emphasized the extensive development process of the Academia Integritas solution, spanning over a year since its inception in 2021. Verhoef highlighted the collaborative nature of the development, involving lecturers, professors, and field experts. By involving both lecturers and students, the solution aims to create a culture of academic integrity that is equitable, legally sound, and conducive to learning.

The Current Academic Integrity Landscape

The catalysts for the development of this solution were identified as the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of AI technologies. These external factors underscored the urgency and importance of addressing challenges related to academic integrity in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

Academic integrity faces significant challenges across educational levels, as evidenced by multiple studies. According to a study conducted by the Center for Academic Integrity, nearly 80% of tertiary students confessed to cheating, with 17% resorting to purchasing or utilizing custom paper-writing services. Moreover, a substantial 58% of high school students admitted to plagiarizing.

Further exacerbating this issue, a Rutgers University study indicated a recent surge in academic dishonesty, with 64% of students admitting to cheating on tests, underscoring the pervasive nature of this problem across educational institutions.

Key Features of Academia Integritas

Academia Integritas, an automated system for reporting incidents of academic integrity violations, ensures that incidents are promptly documented, with relevant stakeholders notified via email. The emails include clear instructions and hyperlinks to relevant courses, facilitating swift action and accountability. Moreover, the system standardizes record-keeping, ensuring consistency and accuracy in managing integrity breaches.

Another notable feature is the provision of Academic Integrity Remedial Online Courses (AIROC). These courses are tailored to address specific issues such as poor academic writing skills. For instance, the AIROC-1 Course is designed for first transgressions, offering targeted support to students in need. Additionally, the AIROC Course serves broader purposes, such as admission requirements, providing foundational knowledge on academic integrity principles.

Moreover, a reference framework is provided for faculty committees tasked with managing integrity-related processes. This framework equips committees with clear guidelines and procedures, ensuring that the management of integrity issues is conducted legally and transparently.

Professor Verhoef emphasized several key benefits of the academic integrity solution. Firstly, it serves as a deterrent, discouraging students from engaging in academic misconduct through transparent reporting processes and clear consequences. Secondly, it focuses on prevention, aiming to stop integrity violations before they occur. Thirdly, the solution ensures compliance with legal and regulatory standards, safeguarding academic integrity within educational institutions. Lastly, it serves an educative function by raising awareness and understanding of academic integrity principles among students and staff through various means such as training materials, workshops, and online courses.

Academia Integritas Use Cases

Professor Verhoef delved into the current statistics regarding academic integrity as of July 2023 at North West University. He highlighted that among the reported transgressions, a variety of issues were raised, with a notable portion categorized as "Null," indicating that many reports did not ultimately result in confirmed violations of academic integrity. However, approximately 1000 confirmed AI warnings were issued, serving as a deterrent

and educational tool for students engaging in behaviours contrary to academic integrity standards. Moreover, a significant number of transgressions were identified as “Poor Academic Writing Practices” (PAWP), suggesting prevalent challenges in academic writing skills among students.

These cases were approached as opportunities for education and improvement rather than punitive measures. Some cases were referred to Student Judicial Services (SJS) for further investigation and disciplinary action, demonstrating the system, and SIS Global’s commitment to accountability and fairness.

Notably, over 2000 current matters were finalized, with less than 500 resulting in AI warnings. This indicates that while a substantial number of cases were addressed, not all led to warnings or punitive actions. Professor Verhoef further highlighted the distribution of reported transgressions, with around 1000 cases categorized as PAWP, underscoring the importance of addressing academic writing challenges through educational interventions. Moreover, less than 600 cases were identified as plagiarism, and unethical AI use accounted for less than 400 cases.

The system also identifies faculties where academic violations are most prevalent, allowing for adjustments to course assessments. For example, the NWU Faculty of Health Sciences reported over 900 violations in 2023. Following data compilation and assessment analysis, lectures and faculty members implemented measures to deter AI usage, such as crafting questions requiring unique content answers. As a result, reported transgressions decreased to just over 500.

Development Process: Standard Operating Procedure

A standard operating procedure (SOP) was devised to ensure that standardization per category was achieved, ensuring consistency and clarity in handling various types of academic integrity violations. This involved categorizing transgressions into distinct niches such as plagiarism, poor academic writing practices (PAWP), unethical AI use, and others, each with specific protocols and procedures tailored to address the unique nature of the offense.

Structures and guidelines were established for each faculty, providing faculty members with clear directives on how to address academic integrity issues within their respective domains. Moreover, a committee framework and approach were developed to oversee the management of academic integrity cases. This involved establishing committees tasked with reviewing reported transgressions, assessing evidence, and determining appropriate actions or sanctions in line with institutional policies and standards.

Academia Integritas in Action

During the webinar, Professor Verhoef conducted a demonstration of the AITSA APP reporting framework, an academic integrity tech system designed to streamline the reporting and management of integrity violations.

Upon identification, the system prompts the user to consult with relevant stakeholders before reporting the violation (if necessary). The reported violation is then categorized as either Poor Academic Writing Practices (PAWP) or categorized as a more serious offense.

If the violation is categorized as PAWP, a deduction of 10-15% from the grade assessment may be imposed, and the student is required to complete the AIROC-P (Academic Integrity Remedial Online Course) within 7 days. Once the course is completed, the case is closed.

For violations categorized as other serious offenses, the committee is notified. The student is mandated to complete a 7-day course, and their mark is withheld during this period. Upon completion of the course, the student may resubmit their work, with the maximum grade capped at 50%. In the event of a second transgression, the student receives a grade of 0%. Furthermore, if a student fails to adhere to the remedial actions after five courses, they are subject to a disciplinary hearing by the Student Judicial Services (SJS).

In addition to the student-facing process, the framework also includes an automatic system for lecturers. This system allows lecturers to confirm the type of transgression, dismiss the transgression if necessary, or change the category, such as automatically enrolling the student in a PAWP remedial course. If the violation warrants further action, the lecturer can refer the case to SJS for disciplinary measures.

Paper Mills, PhDs and Integration

During the Q&A session of the webinar, attendees raised several pertinent inquiries regarding academic integrity. One participant queried the issue of students resorting to paper mills, prompting Professor Verhoef to acknowledge the prevalence of such practices and affirm the importance of a robust reporting system for addressing such instances without internal conflicts. "This is a huge industry," he stated, emphasizing that, "at least there is now a sufficient system to report the student."

Another attendee raised concerns about the use of AI, to which Professor Verhoef responded by highlighting the need for the deployment of detection applications to support Academia Integritas. Above all, he emphasized the necessity for students to take "responsibility for [their] your work."

In response to a question about handling academic integrity in PhD programs, Professor Verhoef stressed the significance of implementing preventive measures from the foundational level to mitigate offenses in higher education, advocating for an educative approach over punitive measures. He mentioned that this is a softer approach that alleviates the judicial system.

Regarding the integration of proctoring tools into the solution and its independence, Ian Bayley confirmed and emphasized that, "Currently, the system works independently, with no integration with proctoring tools. The output from proctoring tools (such as Turnitin) is, however, used as evidence in logging discretions. The system is very adaptable and,

based on market demand, SIS Global would look at which proctoring tools can be logically integrated. As a result, a business process can be created to automatically trigger cases from within the system. Based on demand, this will be added to the product.”

In conclusion, the academic integrity solution—Academia Integritas—outlined by Professor Verhoef and Ian Bayley offers a multifaceted approach to addressing academic misconduct within educational institutions. By focusing on deterrence, prevention, compliance, and education, the solution not only seeks to uphold academic standards but also promotes a culture of integrity among students and staff.