

Academic Literacy Issue in Thesis Writing Among Education Students

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ABSTRACT This study examined the manifestation of plagiarism among education students, as a basis for a literacy program. Employing a descriptive-correlational research design, 18 undergraduate thesis papers were analysed using Turnitin, followed by multiple regression to identify factors influencing similarity rates. Results revealed that 78 percent of the papers exceeded the acceptable 20 percent similarity threshold, with copy-paste practices from bound theses and online sources without proper citation as the most common violation. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that supervisor guidance, instructor input, and academic writing skills were significant predictors of plagiarism rates, whereas academic workload had no significant effect. These findings indicate that plagiarism is primarily a manifestation of academic literacy gaps rather than deliberate misconduct. The study concludes that addressing pedagogical deficiencies through enhanced research mentoring and explicit writing instruction is essential for fostering ethical scholarly practices in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Academic literacy has become a critical competency in higher education, encompassing the ability to think critically, conduct research, and effectively engage with diverse sources of information. In academic contexts, writing is considered the most complex macro skill due to its integration of cognitive, linguistic, and technical competencies, including organisation of ideas, mastery of academic language, and adherence to disciplinary conventions (Carranza and Álvarez 2021; Kaufhold 2025). These demands are particularly evident in thesis writing, a culminating academic requirement mandated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) that requires students to generate and communicate knowledge in their field.

Despite its importance, thesis writing remains a challenging endeavour. It requires coherence, logical structure, and strict adherence to academic conventions, making it a “laborious and complex process” (Quinto 2022). Recent studies indicate that many students continue to struggle with academic writing due to insufficient preparation, limited research skills, and a lack of explicit instruction in disciplinary writing practices (Mudau et al. 2025; Sanz-Tejeda et al. 2026). These challenges are further intensified among education students, who often face additional constraints such as language barriers and competing academic demands.

Importantly, these difficulties are closely linked to issues of academic integrity. Festas et al. (2022) identify plagiarism as an academic literacy issue rooted in inadequate skills in paraphrasing, summarising, and citation. However, despite increasing research on plagiarism, gaps remain in understanding the role of AI in this context. Recent findings suggest that generative AI becomes a risk when users lack the literacy to distinguish between machine-generated text and original thoughts (Yu 2025; Gabay et al. 2025; Butt 2026). Without this literacy, students risk ‘AI fatigue’ and loss of accountability for their academic outputs (Malik et al. 2026).

Objectives of the Study

This study explored the practices of plagiarism as an academic literacy issue in thesis writing among education students in Bicol from AY 2022 to 2024, and analysed specific factors that predicted students’ likelihood of plagiarising. More precisely, this study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. To determine the plagiarism rate of the submitted theses based on detection results.
2. To determine the circumstances contributing to the practices of plagiarism.
3. To operationalise the themes from student interviews into predictive indicators for plagiarism.

Literature Review

Plagiarism remains a critical concern in academic settings, particularly in the context of thesis writing among education students. The rise of digital tools, including artificial intelligence (AI) applications, has further complicated the landscape of academic integrity.

Students in higher education continue to struggle with academic literacy, especially when writing their theses, which call for advanced writing, research, and critical thinking abilities. Academic writing, information sourcing, and digital literacy skills are all crucial for generating scholarly work, and academic literacy is now recognised as a multifaceted concept (Mohamed-Amar and Mohamed-Amar 2024).

Students often struggle with research integration and academic writing conventions in higher education settings, which has a direct impact on their capacity to finish thesis requirements. According to a study by Mudau et al. (2025), a lack of exposure during secondary school has left many university students ill-prepared for academic writing. These shortcomings include issues with organising arguments, combining sources, and using appropriate citation techniques, all of which are crucial when writing a thesis.

Similar to this, Acain et al. (2025) discovered that students still face significant challenges when writing their theses, even when they exhibit effective reading strategies. This suggests that reading proficiency by itself does not equate to writing proficiency. The study shows that college students continue to struggle with idea organisation, argument development, and converting comprehension into cohesive academic writing.

The importance of instructional gaps in the development of academic literacy is also highlighted by recent research. According to Kaufhold (2025), disciplinary writing practices are frequently not explicitly taught in university instructional models, leaving students to negotiate academic writing conventions on their own. Students struggle to produce high-quality academic texts, especially in research-based outputs like theses, as a result of this lack of organised support.

Furthermore, a significant contributing factor to academic literacy problems is a lack of academic support. According to Chimenya (2025), students' reading-to-writing processes are significantly affected by their inability to adapt to the complexity

of academic texts, the demands of independent learning, and the increased workload. These difficulties are made worse by a lack of training in critical literacy and research techniques.

The integration of digital and AI-related literacies is another new aspect of academic literacy. According to recent research, AI tools can improve writing skills by facilitating idea generation, revision, and feedback. However, they also raise issues with over-reliance and decreased critical engagement (Feng et al. 2024; Sanz-Tejeda et al. 2026). This suggests that the ability to use digital tools critically, morally, and successfully in academic writing contexts is now part of academic literacy.

Furthermore, structured prompting techniques and guided writing instruction greatly enhance students' academic writing abilities, according to systematic reviews on academic writing interventions. But teacher education programs do not always incorporate these tactics, which could be the reason why education students still have trouble with thesis writing assignments (Plaatjes and Van Wyk 2025).

Accordingly, blended learning strategies can enhance academic writing proficiency, indicating that integrating digital tools with traditional instruction offers better support for the development of academic literacy skills (Torres 2026).

Overall, research consistently demonstrates that academic literacy problems in thesis writing are complex, involving gaps in prior preparation, inadequate instructional support, difficulties integrating research and writing, and new demands pertaining to digital literacy. The need for contextualised, explicit, and ongoing academic literacy interventions is highlighted by the fact that many education students are still unprepared for the challenges of thesis writing despite growing awareness of its significance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design within a descriptive-correlational framework. Quantitative document analysis was conducted to determine plagiarism prevalence using similarity indices, followed by qualitative interviews to explore underlying experiences and contributing factors. Emergent themes from thematic analysis were operationalised into

measurable predictors and examined using logistic regression to determine their influence on plagiarism outcomes.

Respondents/Participants

The participants were third-year students enrolled in their thesis writing 2 from the education programs of a state college in Bicol within the period of SY 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. All 18 papers were run for Turnitin similarity; however, only ten consented to participate in the interviews. This might offer a limitation in generalising the findings. Two rounds of informal interviews were conducted. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality, given enough time to share their experiences to ensure data completeness and validation, as reflected by the consistent and more comprehensive responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' knowledge and transcribed verbatim immediately to preserve the accuracy and integrity of the data.

Research Instruments

The research data was sourced from eighteen (18) theses and interviews with ten researchers in their third year of study taking an education course related to thesis writing during the academic year 2022-2023.

During the interview, each participant was given at least 30 minutes during the informal structured interview through an interview guide conducted according to the preferred time and modality of the participants. The researcher subjected the interview guide to comments and suggestions of the third-party readers, who are the researcher's colleagues in the College, before its actual use. All comments from the outside readers were integrated into the final interview guide. The criteria that

were considered include appropriateness, correctness, and significance to the nature and specific objectives of the study. All interview sessions were recorded so as not to miss any response from the interviewees, no matter how short. This was done after the researcher sought permission from the interviewees. All recordings were transcribed immediately after the interview. Transcriptions were shared with the interviewees to validate further their responses. This ensured that the participants were made part of the entire data collection process.

Data Analysis

Document analysis was employed to examine how plagiarism manifests in student theses submitted, supporting a deeper understanding of its role as an academic literacy issue. Turnitin, a commonly used anti-plagiarism tool, was used to evaluate the originality of the academic papers of the Education students. Turnitin reports were reviewed and analysed to identify recurring patterns of plagiarism. Turnitin is divided into 5 categories as similarity index percentages using colour labels of blue, green, yellow, orange, and red, indicating levels of similarity (University of Reading 2018). Each colour represents a specific level or percentage of plagiarism.

RESULTS

Plagiarism Rate of Submitted Theses

Table 1 shows the analysis of 18 undergraduate theses using Turnitin revealed five levels of similarity, that is, zero, low, moderate, high, and very high. Results indicate that 78 percent ($n = 14$) of the papers registered high similarity indices, while the remaining 22 percent ($n = 4$) fell within moderate levels, exceeding the institutional threshold of 20 percent. These findings demonstrate a

Table 1: Plagiarism rate of submitted theses of education students based on Similarity Index

<i>Similarity Level</i>	<i>Frequency (f)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Zero (0%)	0	0.00	No similarity detected
Low (1-20%)	0	0.00	Within acceptable limit
Moderate (21-40%)	4	22.22	Above acceptable
High (41-60%)	14	77.78	High similarity
Very High (>60%)	0	0.00	Very high similarity
Total	18	100.00	-

high prevalence of similarity in student theses, raising concerns regarding academic writing proficiency and integrity.

The high similarity indices indicate that plagiarism, whether deliberate or due to insufficient academic literacy, remains widespread. It is common to copy directly from online sources and previously submitted theses without giving credit. There were signs of plagiarism, like patchwriting and fake paraphrasing. This shows that students had trouble paraphrasing and putting sources together. This corroborates previous research indicating that deficient paraphrasing abilities and poor citation practices are significant factors contributing to plagiarism (Festas et al. 2022; Pecorari 2013).

Participants' Challenges and Circumstances Contributing to the Practices of Plagiarism

Ten students revealed information regarding challenges in thesis writing that contributed to plagiarism that could be categorised into four main themes of overloaded with academic work and requirements, a lack of expert advisers, guidance, and timely feedback, insufficient input from the research instructors, and a lack of academic writing and time management skills

Theme 1: Overloaded with Academic Works and Requirements

A heavy curriculum or multiple subjects requiring simultaneous attention is usually the reason why students cannot focus on their thesis writing. Also, they juggle their time because of their involvement in other extracurricular activities that add to their overwhelming academic workload. So instead of wide reading of related papers so they can translate the ideas into writing their thesis, they cannot do so because of insufficient time, thus leading them to cram and eventually plagiarise.

P2 says, "*Hindi lang kasi research ang subject naming sa dalawang semesters. Usually 8 subjects or 24 units ang loads naming. Bawat subject may mga nirerequire na mga projects ang lahat ng teachers like exams, quizzes, reporting, at kung anu-ano pa. Syempre di pwedeng mag focus lang kami sa Research namin.*"

(Because our subject isn't just research for two semesters. Usually, we still have 8 subjects or 24 units as our load. Each subject has required

projects from all the teachers, like exams, quizzes, reports, and so on. Of course, we can't just focus on our research.)

P3 says, "*Sobrang dami po talaga ng gagawin naming. Tapos may mga working students pa sa amin. Yung iba naman member ng mga students organizations. Hindi pwedeng pabayaang kasi may allowance kami doon. Kaya di talaga masyadong nababalanse ng tama ang oras kahit gustuhin man namin.*"

(We really have so much to do. Some of us are working students also. Some are members of student organisations. We can't neglect our other responsibilities at school because we have an allowance there. So the time can't really be balanced properly even if we wanted to.)

P5 says, "*Hindi na nakakapagbasa talaga ng mga related papers po dahil sa daming kelangang iprioritize kasi sabay-sabay na ang mga deadlines. Anyways may AI tools naman tulad ng ChatGPT. Mabilis pa.*"

(I really can't read the related papers anymore because there are so many things to prioritise since the deadlines are all at the same time. So we just rely on AI tools like ChatGPT.)

Thesis writing not only demands expertise but also enough time and focus to finish it. This is seconded by the study of Hashmi (2022) where developing time management skills to meet deadlines is one of the challenges for students in writing their research. In congruence, Bocar (2009) found that the cooperation of academic institutes provided to the students is very important for the timely completion of a thesis for research students. Results reflected that personal problems of students over time, along with stress management, distracted the students, and the majority of students found it a difficult task to complete.

Theme 2: Lack of Expert Advisers Guidance and Timely Feedback

Thesis writing is not the sole journey of the students, but of both students and advisers. Even though the students are working in groups, the guidance and assistance of the adviser cannot be undermined. The adviser who is not only an expert in the field of study but also knows about conducting research is very helpful in completing the thesis. The students should be guided properly as to the direction of the study. This helped them

avoid too many recommendations for revisions from the panelists during the defense. Also, this helped the students gain rich knowledge about the basics and rigours of researching so that they were well-prepared and confident during the oral defense.

Timely feedback is also important. Students rely on their adviser's comments and suggestions for improvement. Hence, minimal or vague feedback leaves the students unclear and confused about how to improve, contributing to the tendency of plagiarism. This important issue is strengthened by the testimonies of the participants as seen below.

P8 states, "*May mga advisers din na sobrang dami ng hawak na mga advisees. May mga instructors na may hawak ng sobra ng 5 groups of advisees. Syempre hindi na niya masyadong natutulungan ng quality ang bawat grupo. Hindi namin alam kung may policy ba ang school jan.*"

(There are also advisers who have an overwhelming number of advisees. Some instructors handle more than 5 groups of advisees. Of course, they can not provide quality help to each group anymore. We do not know if the school has a policy on the number of thesis advising.)

P1 says, "*Hindi rin kami nakakapag decide kung sinong adviser na gusto namin kasi ang research instructor namin ang nag-aassign o kaya kulang din ng mapagpipilian.*"

(We also can't decide who we want as our adviser because our research instructor assigns them, or there aren't enough options to choose from.)

P10 states, "*Isang rason din po na kulang kasi ang mapagpipilian na advisers na marunong din talagang magresearch.*"

(There is also a lack of advisers to choose from who are truly skilled in research.)

P6 says, "*Para sa akin ang thesis writing po kasi ay madaling magawa kung ginagawa talaga ng adviser ang kanilang roles. Yung binabasa talaga ang papel at specific ang pag feedback at clear ang suggestions na dapat naming gawin. Hindi yung sasabihin lang na okay nayan. Bala na ang panelists ninyo at si editor diyan.*"

(For me, thesis writing is easier to accomplish if the adviser truly fulfills their role. They really read the paper, provided specific feedback, and gave clear suggestions on what we should do. Not just saying, 'That's okay'. Let your panelists and editor handle that.)

Thesis writing is about a harmonious and give-and-take relationship between the adviser and the advisee. The adviser is doing the role, and the advisee is submitting what is required. Spear (2000) found that frequent student grievances included sporadic communication with supervisors who are usually busy with teaching or administrative tasks, have an excessive number of supervisees, or must frequently travel outside the university for conferences or external exams.

Corrolary, Matin and Khan (2017) conducted a cross-sectional descriptive study at 20 educational institutes to identify problems that students and supervisors both faced in the completion of thesis work in Bangladesh. The findings showed that students lacked the necessary expertise, dedication, and experience to complete their research projects. They encountered time-bar-related problems, and their supervisor's heavy workload caused them to miss too many meetings with their superiors. In finishing their thesis, they also encountered certain institutional issues, such as a lack of support, direction, funding, and other resources from the university administration.

Theme 3: Insufficient Input or Lecture-Discussion from the Research Instructors

The role of research instructors is crucial to guide the students through the complexities of conducting research. From conceiving research problems to finalising the research questions and adopting the appropriate methodology, the research instructor has a great role to play. Hence, they are not only expected to provide basic research technical knowledge, but they also should model critical thinking and independent inquiry. However, insufficient input or a lack of comprehensive and in-depth sessions from research instructors has become a recurring challenge, leaving students less prepared and groping in the dark as they navigate the demanding tasks of research.

P2 adds, "*Hindi man po inexplain yan ng instructor namin. Hindi nga po nagkaklase. Pina-submit agad kami ng title at SOP*"

(Our instructor didn't explain that. We don't even have classes. They immediately asked us to submit the title and SOP.)

P3 states, "*Hay naku, research instructor pero di nga nag reresearch. Paano makakaturong sa*

amin ng maayos? Dapat po ang pinapaturong research ay yung magaling din po sa paggawa ng research.”

(Oh my, a research instructor but doesn't even do research. How can they teach us properly to conduct research? The one teaching research should also be skilled in conducting and writing research.)

P4 says, “*Kulang po talaga ang discussions namain. Sobrang zero knowledge kami pagdating sa paggawa ng research lalo na sa methodology.*”

(Our discussions are lacking. We have absolutely zero knowledge when it comes to doing research, especially in methodology.)

P1 adds, “*Pinapabayaang lang kami. Wala nga kaming sessions sa mga methods at statistical tools. Kahit sa referencing at sa kung paano magcite ng sources. Wala talaga kaming kalam-alam.*”

(They're just letting us do all the work by ourselves without proper guidance. We don't even have sessions on methods and statistical tools. Even in referencing and how to cite sources. We really have no idea.)

The lack of understanding and inadequate instruction on thesis methodologies and writing significantly contribute to students' plagiarism behaviours. Recent studies highlight various factors that aggravate this issue, including insufficient training, lack of resources, and inadequate pedagogical approaches.

This finding is supported by Cutillas et al. (2023), Rustan (2024), and Pallela and Talari (2016). Many institutions lack experienced instructors, leading to a poor understanding of academic writing and ethical standards among students (Pallela and Talari 2016). As a result, many students often struggle with the complexities of research methodology, which directly impacts their thesis writing quality. A solid grasp of research methods enables students to plan effectively, collect valid data, and construct strong arguments, reducing the temptation to plagiarise (Cutillas et al. 2023). Instructional methods such as workshops and guided writing practices have been shown to improve students' understanding of plagiarism and writing skills (Rustan 2024).

Theme 4: Lack of Academic Writing and Time Management Skills

Personal and academic challenges, such as a lack of foundational competencies in writing and

time management, also interplay in the success of thesis writing. Many students struggle with skills such as writing conventions, grammar and vocabulary rules, and research and referencing, which impact their tendency to plagiarise. Moreover, procrastination, poor planning, and prioritisation skills exacerbated the difficulty and left little time for effective studying and writing good research. Further, complacency and overreliance on the vast amount of available information online and with AI tools such as ChatGPT and others, exacerbated the poor writing skills of the students. They do not exert much effort anymore on developing and honing their skills because everything is readily available to them at the click of fingertips.

P10 states, “*Para sa akin, hindi naman po namin intension na mag plagiarize. Siguro di lang kami confident sa skills namin na magsulat ng quality paper.*”

(We really don't want to plagiarise. We are not just confident to write a quality paper, like the research paper.)

P9 adds, “*Aminin ko din po ma'am, nahihirapan po talaga ako sa research writing. Hindi po ako talaga magaling magsulat. Kahit simple essay po hiram ako. Research pa kaya.*”

(I admit, ma'am, I really have a hard time with research writing. I'm really not good at writing. Even with a simple essay, I struggle. Research, let alone.)

P7 states, “*Hindi na nga ako magaling magsulat, naisama pa ako sa grupo na hindi din magagaling. Kaya hiram pa hiram po kaming gawin ang research naming.*”

(I'm not really good at writing, and I ended up in a group that isn't good either. That's why we had a really hard time doing our research.)

P10 mentions, “*Wala na pong time magsulat kasi sa dami ng ginagawa. May trabaho pa. At syempre nauubos na rin ang time sa social media, kaya ganun po, ma'am.*”

(I don't have time to write anymore because of all the things I have to do. There's still work to do. And of course, time on social media is also running out, that's why, ma'am.)

P11 adds, “*Marami naming AI tools ngayon tulad ng ChatGPT kaya siguro mas nagiging reliant na kami sa mga tools kesa mag exert pa ng effort na magbasa at magsulat.*”

(We have many AI tools now like ChatGPT, so maybe we are becoming more reliant on the tools rather than exerting the effort to read and write.)

P12 says, “*Hindi na masayadong big deal ngay-on ang pagsusulat talaga kasi pwede naming kopyahin lahat sa internet po at sa mga AI tools.*”-

(*Writing is no longer a big deal these days because we can copy everything on the internet and with AI tools.*)

Thesis writing not only demands expertise but also enough time and focus to finish it. This is seconded by the study of Hashmi (2022), where developing time management skills to meet deadlines is one of the challenges for students in writing their research.

In congruence, Bocar (2009) found that cooperation of academic institutes provided to the students is very important for the timely completion of thesis for research students. Results reflected that personal problems of students as time along with the stress management distracted the students and majority of students found it a difficult task to complete it.

Lastly, this finding agrees with Sariffuddin et al. (2017) that the rapid development of information technology, especially the internet, is a driving factor for students to practice plagiarism. They do not spend time and effort reading papers and articles to supplement their writing.

Regression Model that Determines the Challenges and Circumstances Contributing to the Practices of Plagiarism Among Education Students

This part presents the results of the multiple regression analysis conducted to determine the challenges and circumstances contributing to the practice of plagiarism among education students by examining the relationships between various independent variables and the dependent variable, which is the plagiarism rate among students. The independent variables investigated in this study

include academic workload, guidance and feedback, instructor input, and academic writing and time-management skills.

The analysis aimed to determine which of these factors have a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of plagiarism. Additionally, the study sought to understand how each of these factors contributes to the overall model.

Table 2 provides the results of multiple regression analysis, and it has revealed that three predictors, Guidance Feedback, Instructor Input, and Academic Writing Skills, significantly influence the plagiarism rate among respondents. Specifically, higher satisfaction with adviser feedback, better lecture quality, and greater confidence in academic writing skills were associated with lower plagiarism rates. Among these, Guidance Feedback had the strongest negative impact on plagiarism ($B = -6.569$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Academic Writing Skills ($B = -5.090$, $p = 0.001$) and Instructor Input ($B = -5.061$, $p = 0.002$).

This suggests that improvements in these areas could effectively reduce tendencies toward plagiarism. On the other hand, Academic Workload did not significantly affect plagiarism rates ($B = 0.345$, $p = 0.151$), indicating that the amount of academic hours per week does not strongly predict the likelihood of plagiarism.

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which academic workload, guidance feedback, instructor input, and academic writing skills predict plagiarism rate. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 55) = 36.731$, $p < .001$, explaining 72.8 percent of the variance in plagiarism rate ($R^2 = .728$; adjusted $R^2 = .708$). This indicates a substantial explanatory power, suggesting that the combined predictors strongly account for variations in plagiarism behaviour among learners.

Table 2: Multiple regression coefficients predicting plagiarism rate

Predictor	B	SE	$\hat{a}$	t	p	Zero-order r	Partial r	Part r
Constant	66.230	7.768	-	8.526	.000	-	-	-
Academic Workload	0.345	0.237	0.106	1.456	.151	.279	.193	.102
Guidance Feedback	-6.569	1.338	-0.388	-4.911	.000	-.646	-.552	-.346
Instructor Input	-5.061	1.538	-0.321	-3.290	.002	-.724	-.406	-.232
Academic Writing Skills	-5.090	1.391	-0.329	-3.659	.001	-.655	-.442	-.257

Note: Dependent variable = *Plagiarism Rate*. B = unstandardised coefficient; SE = standard error; $\hat{a}$ = standardised coefficient.

Table 3: Model summary of multiple regression analysis

<i>Model</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	<i>SE of estimate</i>	<i>ΔR</i> ²	<i>F change</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>p</i>
1	.853	.728	.708	10.16682	.728	36.731	4	55	.000

Among the predictors, guidance feedback emerged as the strongest significant factor ($\hat{\alpha} = -.388, p < .001$). The negative coefficient indicates that effective feedback significantly reduces the plagiarism rate. The relatively large standardised beta and part correlation (part $r = .346$) suggest a moderate-to-strong unique effect, highlighting the critical role of formative feedback in promoting academic integrity. This finding reinforces the importance of structured guidance in writing tasks, as it likely clarifies expectations and reduces reliance on copying.

Similarly, academic writing skills significantly predicted plagiarism rate ($\hat{\alpha} = -.329, p = .001$). The negative relationship indicates that students with stronger writing competencies are less likely to engage in plagiarism. The effect size (part $r = .257$) suggests a moderate unique contribution, underscoring that skill development in writing is a key preventive mechanism against plagiarism. This aligns with the view that students who are confident in expressing ideas independently are less dependent on external sources without proper attribution.

Instructor input also showed a statistically significant negative effect ($\hat{\alpha} = -.321, p = .002$), indicating that increased instructional support reduces plagiarism. With a partial correlation of $.232$, the effect can be interpreted as moderate, suggesting that active teacher involvement—such as modelling, scaffolding, and clarifying tasks, play a meaningful role in minimising academic dishonesty.

In contrast, academic workload did not significantly predict plagiarism rate ($\hat{\alpha} = .106, p = .151$). Although the positive coefficient suggests that higher workload may be associated with increased plagiarism, the effect was not statistically significant, and the small part correlation (part $r = .102$) indicates a weak and negligible unique contribution. This implies that workload alone may not directly lead to plagiarism. Instead, how students are supported in managing tasks appears to be more influential.

Overall, the findings suggest that instructional and skill-based factors (guidance feedback, instructor input, and writing skills) are more critical

determinants of plagiarism than structural factors such as workload. The results emphasise that reducing plagiarism requires not merely controlling task demands but enhancing pedagogical support and developing students' academic writing competencies. These findings have practical implications for designing interventions, particularly in literacy and academic writing programs, where structured feedback and explicit instruction should be prioritised to foster ethical academic practices.

The model's overall fit was strong, explaining a substantial portion of the variation in plagiarism rates ($R^2 = 0.728$), indicating that 72.8 percent of the variation in the dependent variable (plagiarism rate) can be explained by the independent variables included in the model, that is, Academic Workload, Guidance Feedback, Instructor Input, and Academic Writing Skills.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of plagiarism among education students, framing it as a multifaceted issue deeply rooted in academic literacy practices. The high prevalence of similarity in theses suggests a systemic challenge in the acquisition and application of complex writing skills. By evaluating the predictors of such outcomes, this discussion bridges the gap between traditional integrity models and the contemporary demands of AI-empowered research environments. The following sections critically engage with 2025 and 2026 literature to interpret the significance of supervisor feedback and the dual-edged nature of emerging technological tools.

The revelation that 78 percent of theses exceeded the similarity threshold is a stark indicator of the challenges facing education students. However, interpreting this statistic purely as evidence of "cheating" ignores the developmental nature of academic writing. Ramdhani et al. (2025) argue that such high similarity rates frequently reflect an underdeveloped ability to effectively summarise, paraphrase, and integrate scholarly material rather than a deliberate intent to deceive. This "skill deficit"

model is further supported by the work of Ison (2025), who attributes plagiarism to weak paraphrasing skills and a lack of understanding of scientific ethics rather than a simple desire to copy. Consequently, the 78 percent similarity rate should be viewed as a metric of the academic literacy gap existing within the student population.

The results also echoed by findings that students often struggle to preserve an original authorial voice and frequently use digital tools without full intellectual engagement (Gonzalez and Cháidez 2025). Engaging critically with these views, some researchers argue that high similarity is a symptom of “limited authorial voice” where students act more as descriptive narrators than argumentative synthesisers (Gonzalez and Cháidez 2025). Furthermore, the distinction between intentional cheating and “unintentional plagiarism” is vital, as for many students, especially those in L2 or multilingual contexts, plagiarism arises from navigating linguistic nuances rather than a desire to deceive (Yu 2025). Thus, the 78 percent similarity rate should be evaluated as an indicator of a severe “literacy gap” that necessitates pedagogical intervention rather than solely punitive measures (Sharma 2025; Butt 2026).

A pivotal finding of the regression analysis is that Adviser Guidance and Feedback ($\hat{\alpha} = -.388, p < .001$) and Instructor Input ($\hat{\alpha} = -.321, p = .002$) are the strongest negative predictors of plagiarism. This empirical evidence underscores that active supervision is the most effective safeguard for academic integrity. In contrast, Academic workload emerged as non-significant as a predictor, despite students citing it as a primary pressure point. This disconnect suggests that while students perceive time pressure as their greatest hurdle, the underlying cause of integrity violations is a lack of instructional support.

Recent literature reinforces this, suggesting that “constant accompaniment” from teachers is essential for developing the critical and creative skills necessary to produce original academic discourse (Peterson 2025). Effective feedback does more than correct errors, as it promotes academic integrity by clarifying expectations and reducing the students’ reliance on copying. Moreover, Omodan (2025) and Mbodila (2025) underscore the need to redefine the role of supervisors in the era of artificial intelligence. Brush and Kipnis (2024) suggests the inclusion of “AI Literacy” where the supervisor

guides students on the ethical and critical use of AI tools.

Comparative studies provide a nuanced view of this guidance. While AI tools can offer immediate and personalised feedback, human-led supervisory feedback remains superior for scaffolding self-regulated learning and fostering deep engagement with the research process (Gu et al. 2026).

Researchers advocate for a transition from mere compliance with rules to pedagogies that prioritise learning processes over final products, emphasising the human relationship between the supervisor and the student (Butt 2026). The regression finding that workload was not a significant predictor further strengthens this argument, that is, the issue is not that students have too much work, but that they have too little instructional support.

The participants’ reports of over-reliance on AI (specifically ChatGPT) present what scholars call the “AI Paradox”. On one hand, AI is viewed as a threat to integrity, facilitating plagiarism, data fabrication, and the “erosion of critical thinking skills” (Malik et al. 2026; Sodangi and Isma’il 2025; Sharma 2025). Some voices even suggest that GenAI could fundamentally compromise academic integrity to the point where its use should be strictly restricted (Abdelaal et al. 2025; Taylor 2026).

On the other hand, a growing body of research frames AI as a “literacy-enhancing tool” that can enhance writing fluency, reduce cognitive load during drafting, and provide personalised tutoring for underserved students (Deep and Chen 2025; Pandya 2025; Susiani et al. 2025). For example, AI can facilitate “idea generation” and “revision feedback”, acting as a cognitive scaffold that supports students who might otherwise struggle with the linguistic demands of thesis writing (Deep and Chen 2025).

The critical middle ground, as proposed in recent frameworks, suggests that AI should be integrated as a “collaborative partner” that augments human intellect rather than replacing it (Malik et al. 2026; Machado et al. 2025). The goal is to cultivate “critical AI literacy”, where students are taught to verify AI outputs and use them transparently to refine their own original thoughts (Yu 2025; Gabay et al. 2025; Butt 2026). Without this literacy, students risk “AI fatigue” and a loss of accountability for their academic outputs (Malik et al. 2026).

The findings collectively support a conceptual shift in how universities approach academic misconduct. Traditional models often treat plagiarism

as a moral failing of the individual student. However, the multifaceted nature of the predictors identified in this study, that is, lack of guidance, poor writing skills, and instructor input, point toward a systemic literacy issue.

Scholars emphasise that the ability to use digital tools “critically, morally, and successfully” is now a fundamental component of academic literacy. Institutions are encouraged to move away from an “indiscriminate use” of anti-plagiarism software, which can sometimes exaggerate similarity reports and harm the evaluation of original student discourse (Gonzalez and Cháidez 2025).

Instead, the literature calls for institutional frameworks that promote “responsible, ethical, and critically informed AI engagement” (Peleshok 2025; Brush and Kipnis 2024). By addressing the root causes, such as the need for better formative feedback and explicit training in academic writing, institutions can reduce the high similarity rates observed in this study and foster a more robust culture of integrity.

CONCLUSION

The 78 percent similarity rate found in education theses is not merely a crisis of ethics but a clear signal of a systemic academic literacy gap. The regression results prove that high-quality adviser guidance and instructor input are the most potent tools to bridge this gap. As generative AI becomes increasingly embedded in the research process, the role of the supervisor must evolve from a gatekeeper of rules to a mentor in digital and research literacy. Moving forward, academic integrity policies should focus on enhancing supervisory support and embedding critical AI literacy into the curriculum to ensure that students develop the necessary skills to produce original, high-quality research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address plagiarism as an academic literacy issue, institutional and pedagogical recommendations are proposed, such as a policy of treating plagiarism as a developmental milestone requiring pedagogical intervention rather than a purely moral failing, integrating academic writing, citation strategies, and research ethics into all stages of the research process, rather than isolating them in a

single methodology course, and developing specialised training modules to equip students with critical AI Literacy. Ensure that the instructors teaching research are skilled and experienced in conducting and writing research themselves so they can serve as effective mentors. Implement the policies on the required limit for the number of advisees per faculty member to ensure advisers can provide quality, timely, and specific feedback, and develop academic writing modules that cover research writing, citation styles, and thesis argumentation.

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