Thinking critically, acting ethically: The role of critical thinking in mitigating plagiarism among medical undergraduates in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Academic integrity is fundamental in shaping future medical professionals who adhere to ethical standards in both academic and clinical settings. A key aspect of integrity is the ability to recognize and avoid plagiarism, which compromises personal and professional ethics. Although plagiarism has received increasing attention in higher education, its relationship with critical thinking remains underexplored, particularly within the context of Malaysian undergraduate medical education. This study addresses this gap by examining how plagiarism knowledge and critical thinking ability interact to influence students' engagement in plagiarism-related practices. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional quantitative study will be conducted among Malaysian undergraduate medical students, who will be selected through simple random sampling from two public universities. Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire encompassing three core constructs: plagiarism knowledge, plagiarism practice, and critical thinking ability. The instrument integrates adapted items from validated sources, organized into sub-sections assessing students' understanding of plagiarism, their engagement in related practices, and their critical thinking disposition and skills. Data analysis will be performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate both direct and moderating relationships among the constructs. **Results:** The study is expected to underscore the critical thinking ability in shaping ethical academic behavior. Students with stronger critical thinking abilities are anticipated to exhibit greater ethical discernment, making them less likely to engage in plagiarism even when their knowledge of plagiarism is similar to others. This suggests that critical thinking influences the relationship between plagiarism knowledge and practice, amplifying the negative association between the two. The findings will provide empirical support for the role of critical thinking in fostering ethical academic conduct by mitigating plagiarism. Integrating critical thinking development into medical curricula is therefore essential as a strategic approach to reinforcing academic integrity. **Conclusion:** This research contributes a context-specific foundation for promoting professionalism and ethical conduct among Malaysian medical undergraduates. It emphasizes the importance of embedding critical thinking into both academic and clinical training to uphold academic integrity and reduce unethical practices.

Keywords: Plagiarism, academic misconduct, academic integrity, critical thinking, medical students