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AI-Enabled Academic Dishonesty in UK Higher Education: Cultural, Social, and Situational Influences Among Postgraduate Students at a London-Based University

BIPLAV PRADHAN, ELIZABETH ACHINEWHU-NWORGU, SOHAIL KHAN & SUZZY OROMA NSIEGBE
QAHE, Ulster University, United Kingdom & Ireland

Abstract

The rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced new dimensions to academic integrity challenges in higher education. This study explores the emerging phenomenon of AI-enabled academic dishonesty among postgraduate students at a London-based UK university, with particular focus on South Asian International (SAI) students whose educational and cultural backgrounds may differ from those of home and European peers. The research investigates how cultural norms, academic expectations, technological access, and situational pressures intersect to influence students' perceptions of and engagement with AI-assisted dishonest practices. It also examines the extent to which existing institutional policies and support mechanisms adequately address AI-related integrity risks within privately owned higher education settings. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on preliminary observations and a thematic analysis of current literature to identify key drivers and patterns associated with AI-enabled misconduct. The findings aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on responsible AI use in academic work and inform the development of culturally responsive institutional strategies that promote ethical engagement with AI technologies. A subsequent phase will extend the study through a mixed-methods investigation of broader impacts on academic integrity.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, generative artificial intelligence (AI), South Asian International (SAI) students, academic integrity policy, cultural and situational influences

Introduction

Academic integrity has been widely examined in higher education research. However, limited attention has been given to how emerging artificial intelligence (AI) tools intersect with the cultural, social, and situational influences shaping academic dishonesty among South Asian International (SAI) students. In particular, there remains a lack of empirical and conceptual work exploring how AI-enabled misconduct may be experienced differently by this student population within UK higher education contexts.

This study emerges from growing concerns regarding the use of generative AI in academic work and the potential for its misuse among postgraduate SAI students. Drawing on teaching experience, professional observation, and existing scholarship, the research seeks to contribute to understanding how AI is being engaged in ways that may blur the boundaries between legitimate academic support and misconduct. At the same time, the study aims to identify how institutions can better support students in using AI responsibly while mitigating emerging integrity risks.

Recent research highlights that academic dishonesty is becoming increasingly complex and multidimensional, particularly as technological innovation lowers traditional barriers to plagiarism and contract cheating. AI tools, especially generative systems, have significantly expanded students' capacity to produce sophisticated academic text, thereby necessitating more nuanced analyses of how different student groups engage with these technologies (Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Within the context of SAI students, prior studies suggest that attitudes toward academic integrity may be shaped by cultural norms, social pressures, and situational challenges, such as adaptation to unfamiliar academic conventions and heightened expectations for academic success (Kumar et al., 2023).

Furthermore, emerging scholarship points to limitations in existing institutional academic integrity policies, which often fail to account for cultural diversity and the distinct pressures faced by international students (Foltýnek et al., 2022). A universalised approach to academic misconduct risks being ineffective and may inadvertently disadvantage students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds.

In this context, the present study examines how cultural, social, technological, and situational factors interact in shaping AI-enabled academic dishonesty among SAI postgraduate students. In doing so, it also considers the adequacy of current institutional policy responses and explores the potential for more culturally responsive and supportive approaches to promoting ethical AI use in academic work.

Literature review

South Asian students continue to be strongly represented in UK higher education, drawn by its global academic reputation and perceived opportunities for advancement. Data published by Universities UK (2024) indicate that

India accounted for the highest number of student visas issued in 2024 (116,455), followed by Pakistan (33,941) and Nepal.

This growing presence has contributed to the increasing internationalisation of UK universities. At the same time, higher education institutions often rely on international students, who typically pay higher tuition fees than home students, as part of their financial sustainability models (Collini, 2011; Molesworth et al., 2009). While this dynamic reflects broader structural trends, it may also intersect with varying levels of academic preparedness and familiarity with academic integrity conventions among incoming students (Birrell, 2006; McLean et al., 2013). Students with limited prior exposure to academic writing norms may experience challenges in adapting to expectations surrounding originality, citation, and independent argumentation.

Such adaptation challenges are compounded by language barriers and differences in academic conventions (Robertson et al., 2000). Limited experience in synthesising academic sources or constructing analytical arguments may lead some students to rely on technological writing aids, ranging from grammar support tools to advanced generative AI systems such as large language models. While these tools can support learning, uncertainty about appropriate use may create risks of inadvertent misconduct.

Beyond academic preparation, SAI students may also encounter social and cultural adjustment challenges. Acculturative stress - defined as the psychological and social strain associated with adapting to a new cultural environment - has been widely documented among international students (Constantine et al., 2005). In response, students often develop close peer networks within culturally familiar communities (Saha, 2025). These networks can shape shared perceptions of academic norms, potentially reinforcing either ethical conduct or normalising questionable practices (McCabe et al., 2001).

Social influence appears particularly significant. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that perceived peer cheating is a stronger predictor of individual misconduct than demographic or personality variables (Zhao et al., 2022). Students may adjust behaviour in response to perceived group norms, including attitudes toward the legitimacy of AI-assisted academic work.

Economic and time pressures further contribute to vulnerability. International students often face high living costs and the necessity of part-time employment, which can create significant time constraints (Shepherd, 2022). Under such pressures, external academic assistance—including AI tools—may be perceived as a means of meeting academic demands (Saana et al., 2016).

Institutional factors also play a role. Research examining academic integrity policies across universities has identified inconsistencies in policy design, implementation, and enforcement (Bretag et al., 2011). Faculty reluctance to report misconduct, often linked to concerns about fairness or

procedural clarity, may weaken policy effectiveness (Eaton et al., 2020). The rapid expansion of generative AI has further transformed this landscape. AI writing tools have lowered the barriers previously associated with contract cheating, making sophisticated text generation widely accessible (Cotton et al., 2024). Institutional responses have frequently centred on detection technologies; however, studies suggest that AI detection systems remain unreliable and susceptible to misclassification (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023). False positives may undermine trust between students and institutions.

Consequently, scholars increasingly argue for pedagogical realignment rather than surveillance-led responses (Leaton Gray et al., 2025). Instructional design improvements and clearer guidance on ethical AI use may offer more sustainable solutions (Amigud & Dawson, 2020). In parallel, sector-level bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have begun to provide guiding frameworks for institutional responses to emerging academic integrity challenges.

Despite the growing body of research on academic integrity, studies specifically examining AI-enabled academic dishonesty among South Asian International students remain limited. In particular, there is insufficient empirical work addressing how cultural, social, and situational factors interact with technological change, as well as how institutional policies align with the needs of culturally diverse student populations.

Review of scholarly research on international student experience

International students frequently encounter adaptation challenges when transitioning to study in a foreign country. Acculturative stress - encompassing psychological, social, and cultural adjustments - has been widely documented (Constantine et al., 2005). In response, SAI students often form peer support networks that may influence shared attitudes toward academic practices (Saha, 2025).

Within such communities, perceptions of academic integrity may either reinforce ethical conduct or normalise misconduct (McCabe et al., 2001). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that perceived peer cheating is a strong predictor of individual dishonest behaviour (Zhao et al., 2022). Social influence theory further highlights how individuals adapt their behaviours based on perceived group norms.

Academic dishonesty is also shaped by situational pressures. Economic constraints, high living costs, and the need for part-time employment may create time pressures that increase vulnerability to misconduct (Shepherd, 2022). Similarly, academic workload and family expectations may intensify performance-related stress (Saana et al., 2016).

Institutional factors also play a role. Studies have identified inconsistencies between academic integrity policies and their implementation

(Bretag et al., 2011), with some faculty hesitant to report misconduct due to concerns about fairness (Eaton et al., 2020). Recent scholarship has further highlighted the impact of AI on academic integrity (Glendinning, 2023). Students may perceive institutional AI policies as restrictive or misaligned with real-world expectations (Litvinaitė, 2023), while retrospective policy limitations may hinder enforcement in rapidly evolving technological contexts (Lancaster et al., 2025).

The growing accessibility of AI tools has lowered traditional barriers to misconduct (Cotton et al., 2024). However, reliance on AI detection technologies remains problematic. Studies indicate that detection tools may produce unreliable outcomes and false positives (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023), potentially undermining trust between students and institutions. Consequently, scholars increasingly advocate pedagogical and policy reform over surveillance-based responses (Leaton Gray et al., 2025; Amigud & Dawson, 2020). Sector-wide initiatives, such as guidance developed by quality assurance bodies, further emphasise the need for adaptive institutional responses.

Despite the growing body of work on academic integrity, limited research examines how AI-enabled dishonesty intersects with cultural and situational factors among SAI students.

Theoretical framework

This study draws upon Ethical Relativism, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Situational Ethics, and Rational Choice Theory to construct a multidimensional understanding of AI-enabled academic dishonesty.

Ethical Relativism suggests that moral judgments are shaped by cultural norms rather than universal standards (Velasquez et al., 2017). Differences in educational socialisation may therefore influence perceptions of collaboration, authorship, and acceptable academic practices.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) posits that behaviour is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of AI use, students' intentions may be influenced by perceived prevalence, acceptability, and risk.

Situational Ethics (Fletcher, 1966) highlights how contextual pressures - such as deadlines or performance expectations - may lead individuals to justify actions they would otherwise avoid.

Rational Choice Theory complements this perspective by suggesting that individuals weigh perceived benefits against risks when making behavioural decisions.

Together, these frameworks enable an integrated understanding of AI-enabled misconduct as shaped by cultural norms, perceived social expectations, situational pressures, and cost-benefit reasoning. This multilevel lens supports examination not only of individual behaviour but also of institutional practices that may mitigate or exacerbate integrity risks. Among these theories, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provides a

particularly well-established model for mapping how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control interact to shape academic conduct. Figure 1 below presents Ajzen and Fishbein's canonical visualisation of TPB, illustrating the pathways through which beliefs and social influences inform behavioural intentions. This diagram, therefore, serves as a foundational reference for understanding how the study operationalises TPB in relation to AI-enabled dishonesty among SAI students.

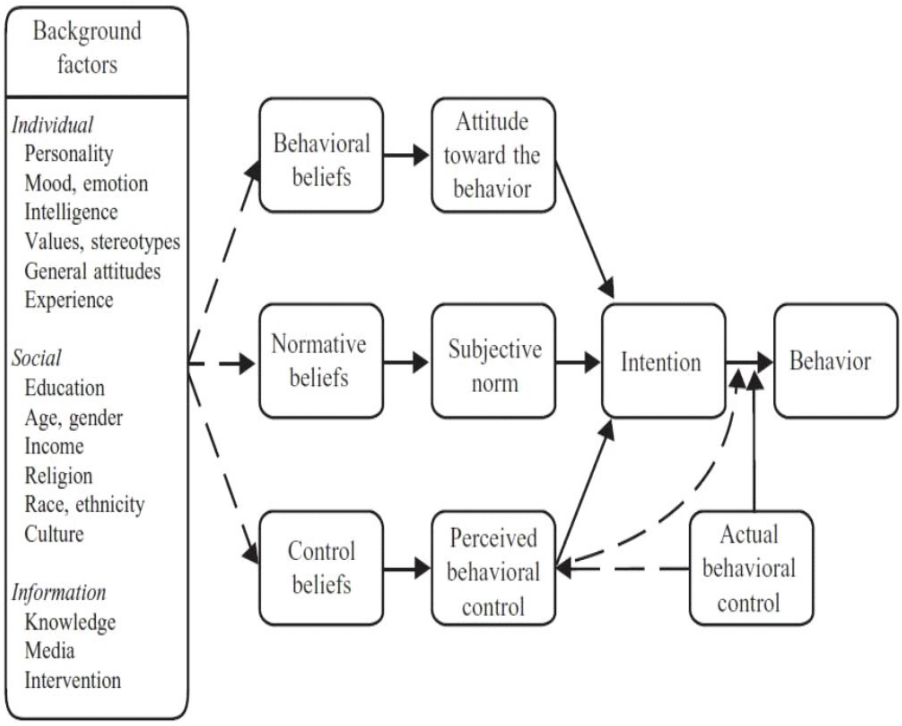


Figure 1. *Ajzen and Fishbein's model of planned behaviour*
(Source: Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005, p. 194, Fig. 5.3)

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine the emerging relationship between AI use and academic integrity among SAI postgraduate students. Given the relative novelty of AI-enabled academic dishonesty and the limited availability of population-specific empirical studies, a literature-informed approach was considered appropriate at this preliminary stage.

The research draws on a structured review of existing scholarly litera-

ture addressing academic integrity, international student experiences, and the impact of technological innovation - particularly generative AI on academic practices. To interpret the emerging patterns identified in the literature, thematic analysis was employed, guided by the conceptual structure of the Saunders Research Onion model (Saunders et al., 2019). This framework supports a systematic exploration of philosophical assumptions, research approaches, and analytical strategies suitable for examining complex and evolving phenomena.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. As the study engages with sensitive issues related to academic misconduct and institutional practice, care was taken to ensure that no identifiable institutional or individual data were disclosed. The anonymised reference to the study context further supports responsible reporting while maintaining analytical relevance.

As an exploratory investigation, the study does not seek to produce generalisable findings but rather to develop conceptual insights that may inform future empirical research. The outcomes of this preliminary phase are intended to support subsequent mixed-methods research, including surveys and interviews, to examine the lived experiences and behavioural drivers associated with AI-enabled academic dishonesty in greater depth.

Discussion of scholarly findings

The reviewed literature suggests that AI-enabled academic dishonesty among SAI students cannot be explained through a single explanatory framework. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of cultural norms, social dynamics, situational pressures, technological affordances, and institutional environments. Drawing on Ethical Relativism, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Rational Choice Theory, and Situational Ethics, this discussion synthesises existing scholarship to illuminate how these factors collectively shape behaviour.

From a cultural perspective, Ethical Relativism highlights how moral judgments are influenced by social norms and prior educational experiences (Velasquez et al., 2017; Taylor, 1954). While dishonesty is broadly condemned across cultures, interpretations of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and academic support may vary. SAI students transitioning into UK academic environments may encounter unfamiliar expectations surrounding authorship, originality, and citation practices. Such differences can create uncertainty regarding acceptable academic conduct, underscoring the need for contextualised academic integrity education rather than uniform approaches that overlook cultural transition.

Social influence also plays a significant role. Research indicates that perceived peer engagement in dishonest practices is a strong predictor of individual behaviour (Zhao et al., 2022). Campus culture and peer networks shape integrity norms (McCabe et al., 2001), and international student com-

munities formed to mitigate acculturative stress (Constantine et al., 2005; Saha, 2025) may reinforce shared attitudes toward AI use. Social influence theory suggests that individuals adapt their behaviour to align with perceived group norms. When AI-assisted writing is framed as a practical academic aid rather than misconduct, its use may become morally neutralised. TPB further explains this dynamic by linking attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control to behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991).

Situational pressures compound these influences. Acculturative stress, financial constraints, language barriers, and academic workload can increase vulnerability (Constantine et al., 2005; Robertson et al., 2000; Saana et al., 2016). Under economic and time pressures, international students may perceive AI use as a pragmatic coping strategy (Shepherd, 2022). Situational Ethics (Fletcher, 1966) helps explain such behaviour as a response to perceived necessity rather than inherent dishonesty. Rational Choice Theory similarly suggests that misconduct may become more likely when perceived benefits outweigh perceived risks.

Technological innovation further reshapes this landscape. Generative AI tools reduce the barriers historically associated with contract cheating by making sophisticated text production widely accessible (Cotton et al., 2024). Unlike traditional essay mills, AI tools are low-cost, immediate, and increasingly difficult to detect. However, reliance on AI detection technologies remains problematic. Weber-Wulff et al. (2023) demonstrate that such tools may produce inaccurate classifications, raising concerns about false accusations and potential erosion of trust. These findings reinforce the argument that institutional responses must remain adaptive in the face of evolving technological threats (Glendinning, 2023).

Institutional policy limitations also contribute to the complexity of the issue. Inconsistencies between integrity policies and their implementation can undermine credibility (Bretag et al., 2011), while uncertainty among faculty regarding enforcement may reduce reporting of misconduct (Eaton et al., 2020). Policies that impose retrospective limitations on misconduct proceedings may become counterproductive in an AI-driven environment where detection capabilities continue to evolve (Lancaster et al., 2025). Students may also perceive a disconnect between restrictive institutional AI policies and real-world professional expectations (Litvinaitė, 2023), creating tension between compliance and practicality.

In response, scholars increasingly advocate reformative pedagogical approaches rather than reliance on punitive measures. Ethical pedagogies that promote agency and authenticity (Leaton Gray et al., 2025) alongside improved instructional design (Amigud & Dawson, 2020) align with TPB's emphasis on shaping attitudes and norms rather than deterrence alone. For SAI students in particular, culturally responsive integrity education, scaffolded academic writing support, and clear guidance on the ethical use of AI may offer more effective solutions than surveillance-driven enforcement strategies.

Conclusion

This study highlights that AI-enabled academic dishonesty among SAI postgraduate students is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of cultural expectations, peer norms, situational pressures, technological accessibility, and institutional policy environments. The application of Ethical Relativism, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Rational Choice Theory, and Situational Ethics provides a useful framework for understanding how attitudes, perceived norms, and contextual stressors influence behavioural intentions regarding the use of AI tools.

The findings from the literature suggest that perceived peer behaviour, financial and academic pressures, language barriers, and acculturative stress may increase vulnerability to AI misuse. At the same time, the expanding accessibility of generative AI tools has lowered traditional barriers to misconduct, while detection technologies remain imperfect and potentially trust-eroding. These developments indicate that surveillance-led responses alone are unlikely to provide sustainable solutions.

Instead, the study underscores the importance of coherent institutional policies, pedagogical redesign, and culturally responsive support systems that promote responsible AI engagement. Strengthening academic integrity in the AI era requires a shift from purely punitive approaches toward the cultivation of ethical agency and informed AI literacy.

Ultimately, fostering trust-based, inclusive academic environments may offer a more durable pathway to integrity than reliance on enforcement mechanisms alone.

Future research

Future research for the group should extend beyond literature-based analysis to incorporate empirical investigation of AI-enabled academic dishonesty among SAI students within UK higher education. A mixed-methods approach would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how attitudes, perceived norms, and situational pressures influence behaviour, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

Quantitative surveys could examine the relationships between peer influence, academic pressures, technological familiarity, and patterns of AI use. Complementary qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, would allow exploration of students' lived experiences, including acculturative stress, perceptions of institutional expectations, and decision-making processes regarding AI use in academic work.

Longitudinal studies may further illuminate how evolving institutional policies, pedagogical adaptations, and AI literacy initiatives shape behavioural outcomes over time. Comparative research across different institutional types could also help identify best practices for culturally responsive academic integrity frameworks.

Finally, future work should examine not only the technical effectiveness of AI detection systems but also their psychological and relational impacts, particularly on student trust, perceptions of fairness, and engagement with institutional integrity systems.

Such empirical expansion would support the development of more adaptive, inclusive, and educationally grounded approaches to academic integrity in the AI era.

Correspondence
Dr Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu, Principal Lecturer
QAHE, Ulster University
UK & Ireland
Email: focuslearningsupport@googlemail.com

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