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**PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AMONG OVERSEAS  
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE UK<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** A plethora of publications have dealt with academic integrity as an issue for overseas postgraduate students especially in the US and the UK and Australia. The present study is based on a questionnaire distributed anonymously among primarily Chinese, as well as Middle East students at the end of a six-week pre-session course in English for Academic Purposes at a UK university. The aim is to elicit a multitude of factors, including cultural background, educational systems in their home countries, personal values, and the academic environment they encounter in the UK, which define students' understanding of academic integrity before they embark on their postgraduate studies. The results demonstrate, first, that the comprehensive course they have just finished has changed their understanding of what constitutes academic integrity. Secondly, however, it becomes clear that despite the explicit instruction given during the course and the practical tasks ensuring first-hand experience, there are still partial or wrong assumptions of some aspects of academic integrity as it is understood in the Western world. Finally, the subjects seem to be aware of the latter fact and express a definite need for UK universities to implement a multi-faceted approach including programs, ongoing education about academic integrity expectations, and fostering a supportive academic community that encourages ethical behavior.

**KEYWORDS:** academic integrity; overseas students; cultural differences

### **1. Introduction**

The most wide-spread and accepted definition of academic integrity has been specified by *The International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI)*, namely: “as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage” (ICAI), founded more than 50 years ago by Donald McCabe. Ever since, research in this field has been carried out first by scholars based in English-speaking countries such as Australia (Tracey Bretag, Cath Ellis), Canada (Sarah Elaine Eaton), USA (Tricia Bertram Gallant), UK (Thomas Lancaster), to name just a few. In 2016 the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) was established, which attracted more and more individual and institutional members from Europe and beyond. In the meantime, scholars from a number of countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East join the common efforts to set international standards and combat academic misconduct.

All these briefly sketched developments are the result of a growing concern about the constant proliferation of academic malpractices (Macfarlane et al., 2014; Abasi and Graves, 2008; Bretag et al., 2014; Gallant et al., 2015; de Jager and Brown, 2010; Park, 2004, among others). Until quite recently, plagiarism was considered to be the major issue among the various forms of academic misconduct and led to the development of various plagiarism-detection software products gladly accepted and introduced by universities worldwide. These products, together with the Codes of ethics, were expected to minimize the extent of cheating by primarily students, but also by academics. However, the launch of highly sophisticated AI chatbots at the end of 2022 placed more pressure on HE institutions that are still struggling to decide how to regulate their usage. Scholars, on their part, also reacted immediately and their efforts resulted in a bulk of publications ranging from suggestions to ban the use of AI products in academia to total acceptance and searching for ways to use it as a tool in both education and research (for a comprehensive discussion on different views see, e.g. Cano, Venuti & Martinez, 2023).

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The increasing internationalization of HE and research, especially in the English-speaking countries, has further exacerbated the problem of academic dishonesty and is threatening the reputation of universities. Since most international students come from developing countries in Asia and, primarily, China, a bulk of research has been devoted to dealing with the issues stemming from their adaptation to the Western standards for academic integrity. Without attempting to enumerate such studies, I shall just note here that a simple Google Scholar search for “*Chinese students’ plagiarism*” yielded 59,400 hits, while “*Chinese students’ academic integrity*” resulted in 392,000 hits. For instance, in the UK a number of universities “reported that international students committed between 50% and 75% of all academic integrity violations during the 2015–2016 academic year, even though these students often comprised less than 25% of the overall student population” (O’Malley, 2016).

Issues with academic integrity among these students have been attributed to a variety of factors. Gallant et al. (2015, p. 226) suggested that international students are „particularly vulnerable because they may be unfamiliar with behavioral standards in western educational institutions”. Lack of knowledge of what is considered as plagiarism has been pointed out by Bista (2011), Lupton et al. (2000), Mori (2000), among many others, while de Jager and Brown (2010) indicated that insufficient writing skills in English also contribute to a large extent to students’ inclination to resort to unfair means. Another issue examined in detail by Taylor and Bicak (2019) seems to be the quality of academic integrity policies in terms of their accessibility for international students.

Without going into further details and recounting the enormous amount of literature, I will just point out that the present investigation was provoked by my own hands-on experience as a lecturer on EAP courses at various UK universities in the past ten years and the obstacles which have to be overcome in the hope that such courses would facilitate international students’ awareness of academic integrity and thus prepare them to commence and successfully complete their post-graduate studies without breaching academic standards.

## 2. Aim, methodology and study design

The aim of this research is to elicit a multitude of factors, including cultural background, educational systems in their home countries, personal values, and the academic environment overseas postgraduate students encounter in the UK, which define their understanding of academic integrity before they embark on their postgraduate studies.

This is a small-scale study based on a questionnaire distributed anonymously via Google Sheets among primarily Chinese, but also Middle East students at the end of a six-week pre-session course in English for Academic Purposes at a UK university, before they undertake their postgraduate studies. Therefore, the results should be understood as indicative of a trend. The hypothesis tested is that the students will be fully aware of what constitutes academic integrity after completing the course.

The number of students who received the questionnaire was 110, yielding 76 responses. 70% of the students were female, 30% - male. The age span was between 21 and 26, with the majority – between 22 and 24, which shows that most of the subjects were about to start their post-graduate studies immediately after completing their undergraduate studies in the home country. The participants came from the following countries: China – 85%, Taiwan – 5%, Saudi Arabia – 4%, Thailand – 3%, Turkey – 3%. As to their field of studies, the distribution was as follows: Humanities – 50%, Architecture – 14%, Engineering – 12%, Economics – 12%, Law – 12%.

The questionnaire consisted of 6 sections, where the first one provided the general data presented above. Section 2 explored students’ “Understanding Academic Integrity“. Section 3 requested information about “Personal Experiences and Beliefs“ related to academic integrity, while Section 4 focused on respondents’ views about “Promoting Academic Integrity“. Section 5 collected the opinions of the students regarding “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Academic Integrity” and Section 6 was open-ended for “Final thoughts“. The questionnaire contained questions requiring a *yes/no* answer, as well as multiple-choice questions with the option to choose more than one answer. The initial design was created by ChatGPT 3.5 and then edited by the author to better suit the purposes of the study.

Thus, based on previous assumptions, the key points addressed in the questionnaire<sup>2</sup> related to students’ perceptions of:

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix

1. **Cultural Differences:** Different cultures may have varying attitudes toward academic integrity. Some students may come from educational systems where collaboration and sharing are encouraged, while others may come from environments where individual achievement is highly emphasized. These cultural differences can influence their perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, or honest academic practices.
2. **Awareness and Education:** Overseas postgraduate students may not be fully aware of the academic integrity expectations and guidelines in the UK.
3. **Language Barriers:** Language challenges might lead some students to unintentionally commit academic integrity violations. They might struggle with proper citation practices or inadvertently use phrasing that appears plagiarized due to language differences.
4. **Pressure to Perform:** Some overseas students might feel significant pressure to excel academically in a foreign educational system. This pressure could potentially lead them to engage in dishonest behaviors, such as cheating or plagiarism, as they attempt to meet high academic standards.
5. **Access to Support Resources:** Universities typically offer resources like writing centers and academic advisors to help students understand and practice academic integrity. However, overseas students might not be fully aware of how to access these resources.
6. **Fear of Failure:** Overseas students may fear failure due to language barriers, cultural differences, or unfamiliarity with the UK's academic expectations. This fear could potentially lead them to resort to dishonest practices.
7. **Ethical Values:** Some students might genuinely prioritize academic integrity, but their understanding of what constitutes dishonesty might differ from UK norms. They may need to navigate the balance between their existing ethical values and the expectations in their new academic environment.
8. **Internet and Technology:** The ease of accessing online resources and the prevalence of essay mills can tempt students to engage in plagiarism. Some overseas students might not fully understand the implications of using such services.
9. **Assessment Methods:** Overseas students might come from educational systems where assessment methods differ from those in the UK. Adjusting to new assessment formats, such as essays, reports, group work and oral presentations, could impact their understanding of academic integrity.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Understanding Academic Integrity

This section included three multiple-choice questions related to students' general understanding of academic integrity, their conception of cheating and of plagiarism. The results are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Fig. 1. Understanding of academic integrity

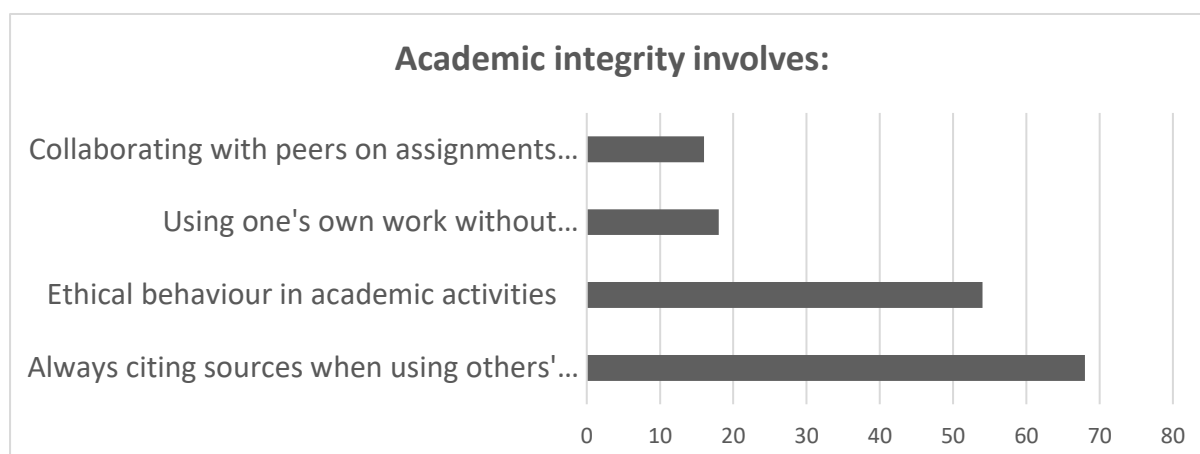


Fig. 2. Understanding of cheating

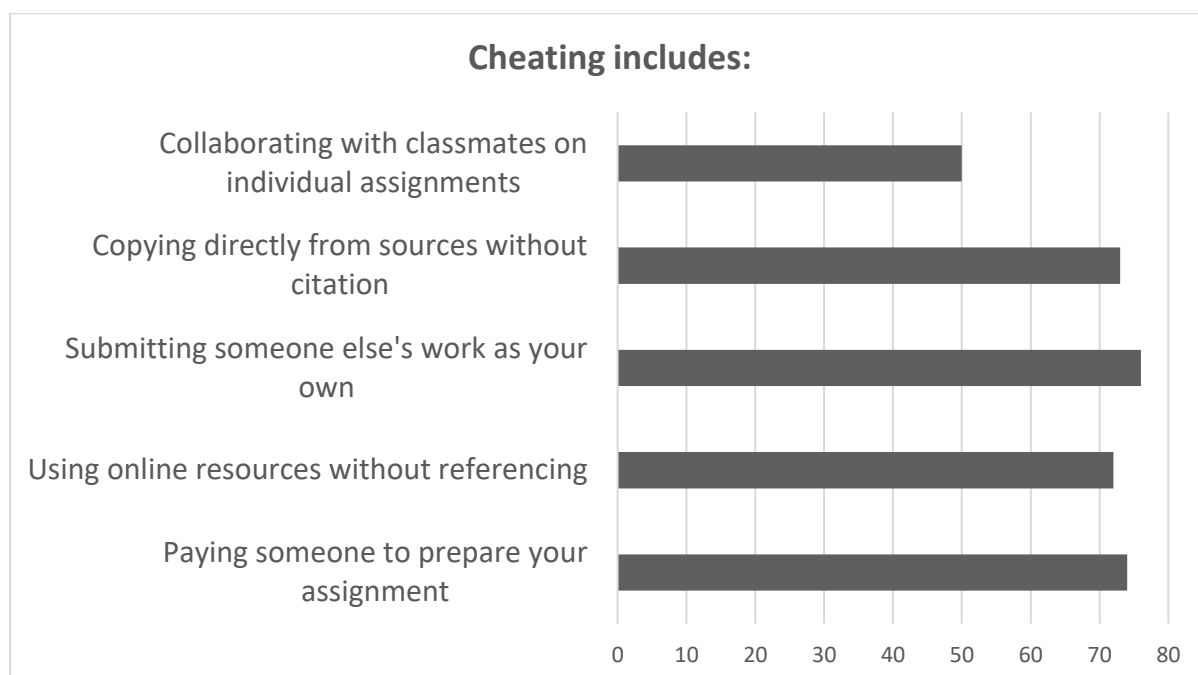
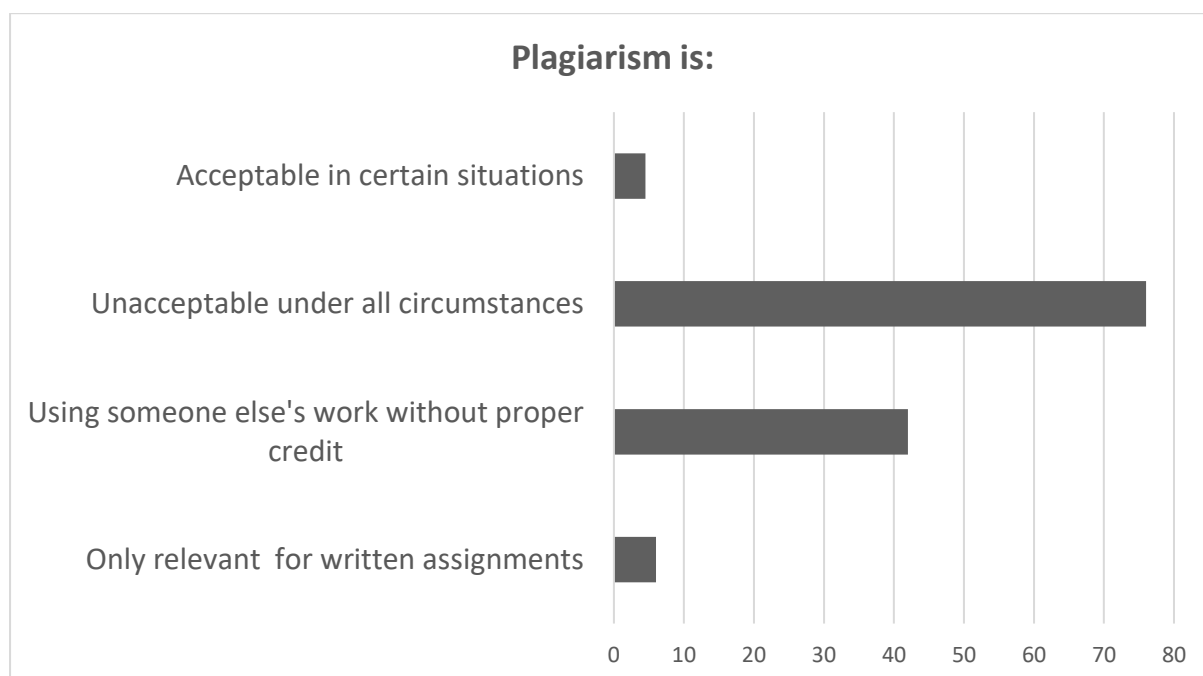


Fig. 3. Understanding of plagiarism



The data demonstrates that, in terms of academic ethics awareness:

**Students are aware of:**

- What counts as plagiarism in terms of using sources.
- Other forms of cheating (contract cheating, improper use of online resources).

**Students are not fully aware of:**

- Collusion as a type of academic misconduct.
- Recycling / self-plagiarism as a type of academic misconduct.
- Certain instances of plagiarism (e.g. in presentations).

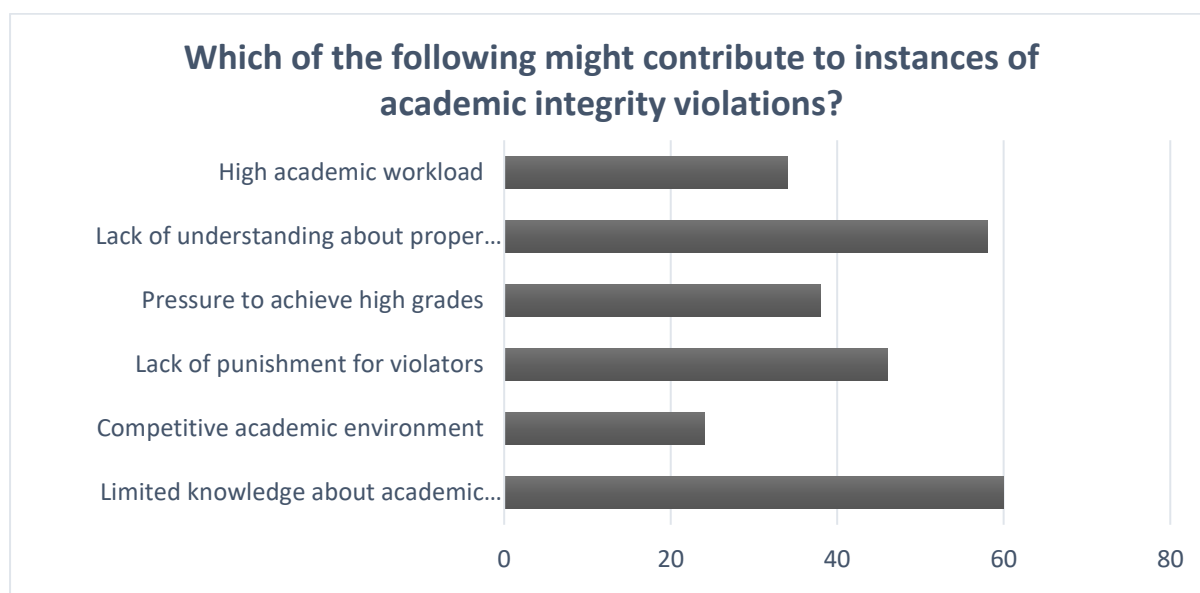
The deficiencies noted above are most probably due to the fact that the majority of the students have a Chinese educational background where assessment is predominantly done through tests, and they have little or no experience in writing academic essays of any type. Besides, they have not reached a stage in their studies where they have to submit multiple pieces of writing and thus be prone to self-plagiarism.

Concerning collusion, respondents' insecurity might be attributed to the abundance of group work during the course, which was new to most of them also because of their prior practices directed exclusively to individual fulfillment of tasks. Therefore, they seem to have been left with the impression that collaborating with classmates on any type of assignment represents good academic practice.

**3.2. Personal Experiences and Beliefs**

The first question in this section was: "Have you ever witnessed or experienced a violation of academic integrity (e.g., cheating, plagiarism) during your studies?", where almost 98% of the respondents replied with "No". The second question was: "In your opinion, which of the following might contribute to instances of academic integrity violations?" with the option to choose more than one answer. The results are presented in Figure 4.

Fig. 4. Reasons for breaches of academic integrity



The data suggests that the main reasons for resorting to breaches of academic integrity are related to lack of knowledge / understanding of proper academic practices. It could therefore be speculated that students' writing would display instances of unintended plagiarism in various forms (e.g. Flowerdew & Li, 2007, Pecorari, 2015). However, these answers contradict the results shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, where the subjects maintain that they are aware of what counts as plagiarism and cheating in general. Hence, the data either points to students' lack of confidence in their skills, or they are not sincere.

Besides, almost 68% believe that there is lack of suitable punishment for violators, which is a completely wrong assumption in UK university settings and is most probably associated with previous experiences in the country-of-origin academic culture. Pressure to achieve high grades (56%) and competitive academic environment (25%) are also typical features of the educational atmosphere especially at Chinese universities, which predetermine students' initial attitudes and behaviour at least at the beginning of the EAP course. It thus takes a lot of effort on the part of the teacher to convince the

students that the aim of the course is for them to acquire skills necessary for their future studies, that there is no competition among them, and they simply have to pass the assessment elements, while the specific grades do not really matter.

Half of the respondents (50%) seem to experience high academic workload that may lead them to resort to unfair means. Admittedly, the workload during the EAP course is immense as the course is very intensive and focuses simultaneously on various academic skills, which, paired with the completely new environment, poses enormous stress on these students, most of whom are also separated from their families for the first time. Nevertheless, the number of students who drop out of the course or fail to complete it is negligent.

The last question in this section asked the students to rate how well their **home-country** academic institution addressed issues related to academic integrity. 30.6% answered with “very well”, 13.8% - with “somewhat” and 55.6% - with “adequately”. These data largely contradict the information students share with their teachers in class and in personal communication, when they claim to have heard about most issues with academic integrity for the first time, and do not corroborate with their written performance before they are made aware of what belongs to good practice and what does not.

### 3.3. Promoting Academic Integrity

The first question in this section is linked to students’ previous experience, asking them whether they have received any formal education or training on academic integrity during their undergraduate studies. 54.3% answer with “Yes”, 45.7% with “No”. Then the respondents were asked to describe in free text what the nature of the training was. The answers are quite disparate and demonstrate respondents’ lack of knowledge of what such training should consist in. Here are some examples (unedited):

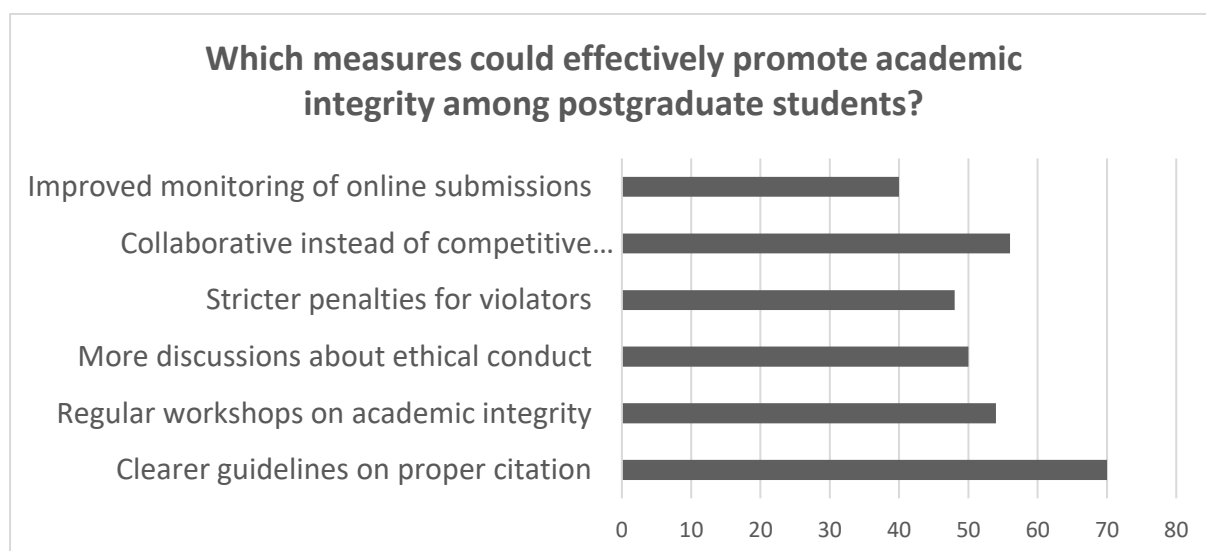
*During my undergraduate studies, all final exams were given in the presence of a monitored teacher and monitors. The final essay was given 1 month to check the similarity. If it was too high, students should deal with it in time.*

*some workshops about it*

*My tutor told me something about it.*

At the backdrop of these quite scattered experiences, but also considering the new ones acquired during the EAP course, the subjects were asked about the measures that could effectively promote academic integrity among postgraduate students. The results are presented in Figure 5.

Fig. 5. Measures for promoting academic integrity



The results corroborate with the reasons for breaching academic integrity, namely:

- 97% need clearer guidelines and 75% - regular workshops.
- 78% prefer collaborative to competitive atmosphere.

- 67% believe that there should be stricter penalties for violators.
- 56% expect improved monitoring of online submissions.

It has to be noted here that the questionnaire does not include any questions regarding AI tools since, at the time of the collection of data (end of August 2023), the university had no clear guidelines in this respect. Therefore, what is meant under “online submissions” concerns the compulsory submission of all students’ written assignments through Turnitin which is in-built in the VLE platform used. Since the students were clearly instructed on how to decipher Turnitin feedback, however, it might be assumed that their expectations of improved monitoring were connected to the use of such tools.

#### 3.4. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Academic Integrity

The introductory question in this section: “In your experience, do you think there are differences in how academic integrity is perceived and practiced among students from various cultural backgrounds?” yielded 80% “No” and 20% “Yes” results. Examples of cultural differences observed in relation to academic integrity between the native country and the UK were cited:

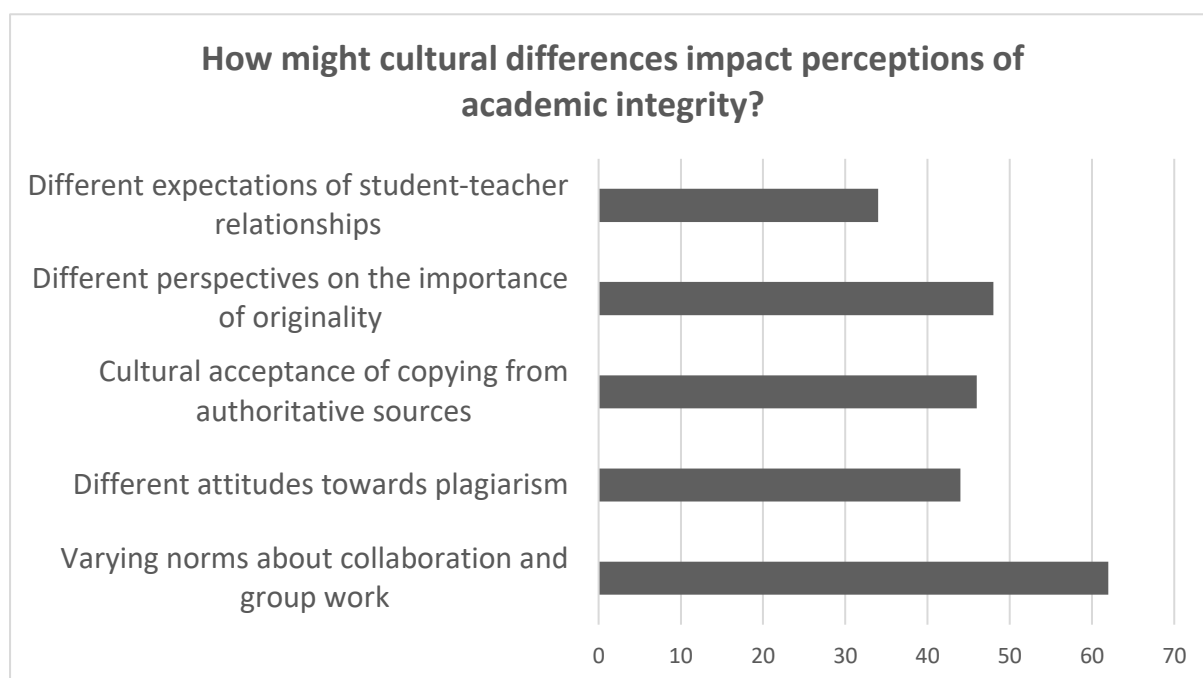
*In my country, we don't need to do many essays. So, we don't have a chance to contract with academic integrity.*

*The academic environment in the UK is more rigorous.*

*Britain pays more attention to academic integrity than China.*

The above results are, however, in contrast to the responses to the next question, namely: “In your opinion, how might cultural differences impact perceptions of academic integrity?”

Fig. 6. Impact of cultural differences on academic integrity



Almost 90% of the subjects consider different norms for collaboration and group work as an important cross-cultural factor. As mentioned above, especially in the case of Chinese students, group work is not encouraged at their home universities and individual accomplishment is highly valued and awarded, hence the extremely competitive atmosphere. When introduced to this collaborative learning technique, the students are usually reluctant to participate, until they discover for themselves how fruitful it can be. The role of the teacher here is decisive in convincing the students that group discussions will be an essential part of their future education in the UK.

Unsurprisingly, 67% of the subjects indicate different views of originality. Therefore, encouraging originality represents an essential goal of the EAP course through advancing critical thinking skills. The development of such skills is one of the most challenging tasks since the students come from academic cultures where the focus is on the acquisition and reproduction of knowledge without questioning and reflecting on the content or the reliability of the sources.

The two questions related to plagiarism also yielded answers well above 60% (63% and 66% respectively). Many international students have not been introduced to notions such as authorship, copyright, plagiarism in their home countries and do not “know the importance of ownership and authorship of a published and referenced material” (Pawar, 2019, p. 39). The language barriers and deficiencies are, of course, another serious issue students have to struggle with, as they do not feel confident in paraphrasing pieces of text written in native-speaker English. Paraphrasing, on its part, is another skill that poses an almost unsurmountable obstacle and is often overcome by using online paraphrasing tools.

Almost half of the subjects (49%) are aware of the different teacher – student relationship which is strictly regulated in their home countries and the power distance, following Hofstede (1980, 2011), is large compared to that in UK university settings. In personal communication Chinese students share that they hardly have any individual contact with the lecturers and question sessions at the end of a lecture barely exist.

Considering the discussion above, the students’ response to the next question “Are there cultural practices that might **unintentionally** lead to misunderstandings about academic integrity?” is somewhat inconsistent with 76.5% - “No” and 23.5% - “Yes”. Here are some sample explanations:

*The difference of logic and culture.*

*Chinese custom would suggest that plagiarism is limited to copying other people's work. Not realising that quoting one's own previous work is also plagiarism.*

*Different cultural practises may lead to different understandings of the same sentence.*

The examples demonstrate that subjects attribute possible misunderstandings to various reasons – the relation between language and culture, understanding of plagiarism and language-intrinsic features. Importantly, 91.4% believe that academic institutions should provide specific education or support for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to ensure a common understanding of academic integrity, while only 8.6% do not think so.

### 3.5. Final Thoughts

Under the final section the subjects shared their views on “what academic institutions can do to better address and accommodate cross-cultural differences in their approach to promoting academic integrity”. Some sample examples are:

*Increase understanding of cross-cultural differences of academic integrity*

*Develop clear and comprehensive academic integrity policies that are accessible and understandable for all students, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds.*

*They need to do some researches on different cultural areas, and consider different standards of academic integrity.*

*let the same nationality teacher to teach student and communicate the cross-cultural differences*

Interestingly, there are several suggestions of the latter type, although it is not clear whether the EAP course is meant or special additional in-session instruction.

## 4. Conclusions

The results demonstrate, first, that the comprehensive orientation course they have just finished has changed students’ understanding of what constitutes academic integrity. Secondly, however, it also becomes clear that in spite of the explicit instruction given during the course and the practical tasks giving first-hand experience, there are still partial or wrong assumptions of some aspects of academic integrity as it is understood in the Western world. Many of these misunderstandings are due to cultural differences and background experience. For instance, group work is not encouraged in their home universities; individual achievements are promoted, which leads to very strong competition; there are different understandings of what constitutes plagiarism and academic misconduct in general; breaches of academic integrity are not sufficiently punished. All these factors cause students’ insecurity and lack of self-confidence, which increases additionally anxiety and stress levels, as well as fear of failure. Overall, there seems to be awareness of a high degree of cultural differences in all respects, where some of them may be attributed to Hall’s (1976) distinction between high-context versus low-context cultures, the Anglo-American one being of the first type and the East-Asian – of the second.

Finally, the subjects seem to be aware of the latter fact and express a definite need for UK universities to implement a multi-faceted approach including programs, ongoing education about



academic integrity expectations, workshops on proper citation practices, clear communication about assessment methods, and fostering a supportive academic community that encourages ethical behavior.

From a theoretical viewpoint, considering Chinese students' highly individualistic attitude and extreme competitiveness which are in contradiction to Hofstede's (1980) claim that their culture is collectivistic, it is obvious that some widespread theories of culture and cross-cultural communication need adjustments in view of new social developments. More recent economic developments in the Eastern world have led to embracing Western values, including consumerism, striving for better education and consequently – better-paid jobs and higher social and economic status.

The present small-scale study does not pretend to be comprehensive but leaves open a number of questions for future research, such as: closeness versus distance between home culture and accepting country culture, background educational environment and experiences, international students' ability to adapt to new expectations and requirements posed on them, openness of Western universities to diversity, and many more. Last but not least, there is also the looming challenge of AI tools higher education and research institutions have to decide how to deal with.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

#### Exploring Perceptions of Academic Integrity Among Postgraduate Students

##### Section 1 – General information

- |    |  |      |        |                   |
|----|--|------|--------|-------------------|
| 1. | What is your gender?   | Male | Female | Prefer not to say |
| 2. | What is your age?  |      |        |                   |
| 3. | Postgraduate Program: (e.g., Master's, Ph.D.)                    |      |        |                   |
| 4. | Field of Study: (e.g., Engineering, Social Sciences, Humanities) |      |        |                   |
| 5. | Country of origin:   |      |        |                   |

##### Section 2 – Understanding Academic Integrity

1. Please tick the statements about academic integrity you **agree** with. You can choose as many as you like.

- Always citing sources when using others' work  
Using one's own work without acknowledgement  
Ethical behavior in academic activities  
Collaborating with peers on assignments without permission
2. Plagiarism is:  
Acceptable in certain situations  
Unacceptable under all circumstances  
Using someone else's work without giving proper credit  
Only relevant in written assignments, not presentations or projects
3. Cheating includes:  
Collaborating with classmates on individual assignments  
Copying directly from a source without citation  
Submitting someone else's work as your own  
Using online resources for research without citation  
Paying someone to prepare your assignment

##### Section 3 – Personal Experiences and Beliefs

1. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a violation of academic integrity (e.g., cheating, plagiarism) during your studies? YES NO
2. If yes, could you briefly describe the incident and how it was handled?
3. In your opinion, which of the following might contribute to instances of academic integrity violations? (Select all that apply)
- High academic workload  
Lack of understanding about proper citation  
Pressure to achieve high grades  
Lack of suitable punishment for violators  
Competitive academic environment  
Limited awareness about academic integrity
4. How well do you think your **home-country** academic institution addressed issues related to academic integrity?
- |           |            |          |                 |
|-----------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Very well | Adequately | Somewhat | Not well at all |
|-----------|------------|----------|-----------------|

##### Section 4 – Promoting Academic Integrity

1. Which measures do you believe could effectively promote academic integrity among postgraduate students? (Select all that apply)

- Clearer guidelines on proper citation and referencing
- Regular workshops on academic integrity
- More open discussions about ethical conduct
- Stricter penalties for violations
- Encouraging a collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere
- Improved monitoring of online submissions

2. Have you received any formal education or training on academic integrity during your undergraduate studies? YES NO

3. If yes, please describe shortly the nature of the education or training you received.

#### Section 5 – Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Academic Integrity

1. Have you interacted with students from different cultural backgrounds during your studies?

YES NO

2. In your experience, do you think there are differences in how academic integrity is perceived and practiced among students from various cultural backgrounds? YES NO

3. If yes, please provide examples of cultural differences you've observed in relation to academic integrity **between your native country and the UK.**

4. In your opinion, how might cultural differences impact perceptions of academic integrity? (Select all that apply)

- Varying norms about collaboration and group work
- Differing attitudes toward plagiarism and citation
- Cultural acceptance of copying from authoritative sources
- Different expectations of student-teacher relationships
- Different perspectives on the importance of originality

5. Are there cultural practices that might **unintentionally** lead to misunderstandings about academic integrity? YES NO

6. If yes, please describe these practices and their potential impact on academic integrity.

7. Do you believe that academic institutions should provide specific education or support for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to ensure a common understanding of academic integrity? YES NO

#### Section 6 – Final Thoughts

1. In your view, what can academic institutions do to better address and accommodate cross-cultural differences in their approach to promoting academic integrity?

2. If there's anything else you would like to share about the intersection of academic integrity and cross-cultural perspectives, please feel free to do so.