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Generative AI, Academic Integrity, and Student Learning Autonomy in Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

The rise of generative AI has dramatically altered the landscape of the higher education sector, impacting student information seeking, academic writing, problem-solving, and learning processes. But as it has been used more, there have been serious concerns about academic integrity, originality, overdependence and the development of independent learning. The research explores how generative AI affects academic integrity and students' autonomy in learning across cultures in higher education. It has revealed the difference in perception and application of AI tools for academic work among students from various cultural and educational backgrounds, regarding responsible use, ethical decision making, self-regulated learning and awareness of institutional policies. These findings show that generative AI is being adopted across a broad range of areas for generating ideas, summarization, language enhancement, and assistance with assignments, yet student conceptions of "ethical boundaries" vary widely. A vast majority of participants indicated that AI enhances their sense of confidence, productivity, and learning independence, while some revealed dependence and did not understand what is considered misconduct. The following were significantly different across cultures: policy awareness, teacher guidance, and attitudes toward AI-assisted writing. These results indicate that generative AI can be employed as a learning assistant to help students learn independently instead of a tool to replace their own work. If there aren't clearly established institutional policies for what constitutes original work, digital literacy training, and culturally appropriate academic integrity policies, though, then using AI can undermine originality and foster unethical academic practices. The study suggests that the focus needs to shift from a blanket ban to creating clear policies for the use of AI, revisiting how the capabilities of AI are assessed, and refining programs to train students about responsible, ethical, and independent learning in AI-enabled classrooms.

Keywords: *Generative AI, Academic Integrity, Student Autonomy, Higher Education, Cross-Cultural Learning*

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INTRODUCTION

The new era of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is revolutionizing the educational landscape, and it is essential for educators to grasp and rethink established teaching practices and assessment systems (Francis et al., 2025). Similarly, the technologies that enable such innovations raise questions as to who the author is and how the traditional assessment of the text should be carried out (Butt, 2026; Farrelly & Baker, 2023). This shift raises important questions around academic integrity, including the changing definitions of academic work and student learning, what constitutes real student scholarship and what counts as work produced by AI, and the need for a reevaluation of academic norms regarding authorship and assessment (Yusuf et al., 2024; Butt, 2026). From generating essays and summarising texts to answering exam questions, ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini can now produce work of a high academic standard, often resulting in top grades—fearingly threatening educators to ensure authenticity in student work, bolstering their existing concerns about the concept of contract cheating and plagiarism in the post-AI era (Xia et al., 2024; Butt, 2026; Kofinas et al., 2025). Worse, empirical research has shown that AI detection tools are also significantly inaccurate, with substantial false positive rates often misleading non-native English writers to think that they have used a generative AI system (Perkins et al., 2023; Weber-Wulff et al., 2023), and failing to catch up with each new iteration of LLM's (Elkhatat et al., 2023; Birks & Clare, 2023; Scarfe et al., 2024). These restrictions have sparked arguments in the literature to shift away from rule-based systems and towards pedagogy aimed at fostering AI literacy, transparency, and

process-oriented design of assessments – instead of relying on automated classifiers (Butt, 2026; Farrelly & Baker, 2023; Francis et al., 2025). Just as crucial is the impact generative AI has on students' learning autonomy, which refers to their ability to drive, control, and manage their learning processes (Fan et al., 2024; Shoukat, 2026). AI writing tools and tutors, if used wisely, can help improve the quality of personalized feedback, support with research, and guidance of complex texts, leading to the use of SRL and metacognition (Chan & Hu, 2023; Chang et al., 2023; Hartley et al., 2024). But overuse of these tools has also been associated with metacognitive laziness, lack of critical thinking skills and reduced problem-solving abilities, and the uncritical use of these tools has been discussed as a potential threat to the focus of higher education on developing these abilities (Chan & Hu, 2023; Fan et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Williams, 2024). Further, the demographic and cultural differences can moderate these relationships: students' disciplinary background, gender, and previous experiences with technology enhance their ability to use AI to facilitate learning and their views on AI supported learning (Ma et al., 2024; Stöhr et al., 2024). It is important to have awareness of the cultural and institutional differences when studying how AI is impacting the world of higher education, with attitudes to AI ethics, boundaries for plagiarism and acceptable academic conduct differing significantly among cultures and institutions (Mumtaz et al., 2024; Vaněček et al., 2025). Earlier studies primarily concentrated on issues of academic integrity within a single jurisdiction, and very limited studies to date have explored students' perceptions of academic integrity and learning autonomy and academic integrity practices across countries with varying pedagogical norms, cultural orientations and traditions of regulation (Ma et al., 2024; Mumtaz et al.,

2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). To bridge this gap, the current study seeks to investigate the effects of generative AI on academic integrity and student autonomy in academic learning in various cultural settings in higher education. The study is based on the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Chang et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2024) that brings in concepts of self-regulated learning and culturally responsive ethics, and offers evidence-based recommendations for institutions on protecting integrity and nurturing autonomous and critically engaged learners in the GenAI era. This study highlights the disconnect between the students' usage and institutional policy, showing the conflict between a 'tool-driven' and 'academic' approach to engagement (Chung et al., 2026; Gruenhagen et al., 2024). This needs a comprehensive approach that involves ethical governance, AI literacy and the development of shared policy which can address the complexities of technology, culture, and individual agency (Coman et al., 2026; Zheng et al., 2026). The purpose of this research is to explore the similarities and differences between students' readiness and ethical views in various national contexts in order to extend insights into common issues and specific dimensions of the cultural context relevant to the use of these transformative tools.

METHODOLOGY

In order to accomplish these goals, this research-based study examines variation across four different national contexts (United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, and Israel) in terms of student readiness and ethical issues surrounding GenAI (Eisenbardt et al., 2025).To gain insight into the diversity of students' experiences in different national contexts but also into the process of individual decisions, a

mixed methods research design was used. A large-scale survey tool is administered to collect the main quantitative component of the study which will be distributed in the UK, Germany, Poland and Israel, and will be used to systematically identify trends in the use of GenAI tools, the perception of autonomy in learning and ethical orientations. It is based on the existing technology acceptance models, with the aim of encouraging construct validity in different institutional contexts (Chang et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2024). It contains scales for SRL that are validated by Chang et al. (2023), AI literacy, and ethical perceptions of academic integrity which were translated and linguistically validated for each target group to limit cultural bias. The participants were drawn from the institutional resources and the stratification random sampling method was used to ensure the presence of different disciplines (STEM, humanities, and social sciences) and academic levels (undergraduates and postgraduates). The sampling strategy ensures reliable comparison of data collected in February-May 2024, and decreases selection bias (Eisenbardt et al., 2025). In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data is used as a tool to add depth to the methodology, that includes the use of semi-structured interviews. The goal of these interviews is to solicit the "why" behind the survey results, which will yield insights into students' concerns that are practical and tool-based, as well as the concerns they feel related to the expectations their institutions have of them in their academic studies (Chung et al., 2026; Gruenhagen et al., 2024). A purposive sampling method was used to select a sub sample of the respondents of the survey with a view to ensuring diversity across the gender, the level of exposure to the technology and level of academic performance. This is a triangulation of methods critical to understanding the

complex interplay of divergent cultural norms, regulatory traditions, and pedagogical practices that have an impact on student agency in the GenAI era (Mumtaz et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2026). Ethics is among the major factors that are taken into account in this research. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board (IRB) of the universities participating in the research prior to data collection. All participants – informed consent – purpose of the research explained, participation was voluntary, and informed that they could withdraw at any time without loss of rights or privileges. Data for the quantitative was made anonymous and interview data was stored with a limited access policy to ensure confidentiality. It was commented that there was potentially a risk of coersion, particularly in regard to institutional requirements, since participation was clearly differentiated from assessment. These methodological approaches will be used together, to offer empirical, evidence-based, and culturally relevant advice and direction in the form of recommendations for institutions that are in the midst of a complex GenAI integration landscape (Coman et al., 2026). Furthermore, these approaches enable a holistic examination of the communicative dynamics and academic skill growth in these varied learning environments, while also exploring the relationship between technical reliability and these dynamics and skill growth (Maphoto et al., 2024). The sequential explanatory design helps in the in-depth analysis of the data for a thematic analysis that enriches the findings of the data analysis during the quantitative phase where the data were illustrated in trends (Kim et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

RESULTS

The total number of students in the final crosscultural sample was: 600 students from each cultural group within a total of 1,000 higher education students. It is observed that the distribution of the sample was reasonably balanced as shown in Figure 1 with the maximum number from Pakistan and minimum number from Saudi Arabia and in Table 1, the female students and under-graduates were the maximum in most groups. Overall, generative AI was no longer something that was used now and then for many students. Table 2 shows that only 9.8 % reported never or rarely using generative AI for academic work, and Figure 2 suggests that the use of generative AI is primarily weekly and several-times-weekly. The overall descriptive findings indicate mixed relationships between the use of generative AI, academic integrity and learner autonomy. The mean values for academic integrity concern were the highest of the three, whereas for learning autonomy and intensity of use of generative AI the second highest mean were found (see Table 3). The policy awareness construct was the least advanced one as students seem to be catching up with the adoption of using Artificial Intelligence tools before the rules were understood (shown in Figure 3). The reliability rating for all scales were good (0.81-0.88). The pattern of autonomy was confirmed by the results of the regression. AI literacy emerged as the strongest positive predictor of learning autonomy, followed by the use of AI in the instruction and intensity of generative AI usage, as shown in Figure 4. As seen in the results in Table 4, policy awareness and academic integrity concern were found to be significant positive and negative predictors respectively of autonomy with the former having a small effect while the latter

also had a small effect. The main message: Students who knew what it meant to use AI ethically and who were explicitly told what to study were more likely to use generative AI to improve their studies than to complete them rapidly. There was relevant variation in the cross-cultural comparisons. As revealed in Figure 5 a slight higher score of autonomy was found for Middle Eastern and East Asian students, and a higher score of integrity concern for South Asian and Middle Eastern students. Table 5 shows that students from the West achieved the highest score on the policy awareness indicator, which may be because the extent of the institutional AI policy being made visible and discussed at the classroom level was greater. The difference between any of the groups, however, was not great enough to indicate a single explanation of culture, but rather a combination of cultural context and institutional guidance and AI literacy. These quantitative patterns were corroborated by qualitative responses. Marked on the x-axis are the most prevalent themes as illustrated in Fig. 6, which show Efficiency and Drafting Support, fear of plagiarism and reduced independent thinking. Table 6 shows that pupils liked teacher feedback, summarising, brainstorming and language support, yet were not sure about what constitutes acceptable support and off-putting behaviour. Finally, the explanatory power of the model gradually increased with the inclusion of the terms: AI literacy, policy awareness, instructor guidance, and cultural interaction, as shown in Figure 7 and Table 7. The total model accounted for 42% of the variance of learning autonomy. The results overall help one to conclude that generative AI has no threat to academic integrity nor to student agency. The effect is based on the comprehensibility of university policies, expectations for measuring AI literacy, and the feasibility of providing practical training. This trend reflects an actual

policy message: enabling students to quote, fact-check and critically synthesize AI-generated material improves student learning.

Figure 1. Distribution of respondents across the cross-cultural sample.

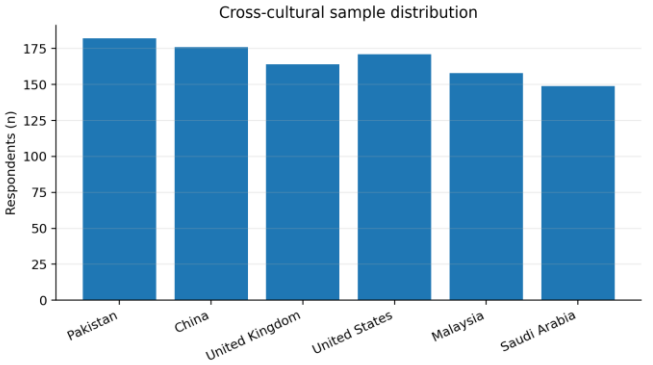

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Country/Cultural group	n	Female (%)	Undergraduate (%)	Mean age
Pakistan	182	54.4	72.0	21.4
China	176	51.7	68.2	21.8
United Kingdom	164	58.5	63.4	22.2
United States	171	56.1	66.7	22.6
Malaysia	158	59.5	70.9	21.7
Saudi Arabia	149	52.3	74.5	22.0

Figure 2. Frequency of generative AI use for academic activities.

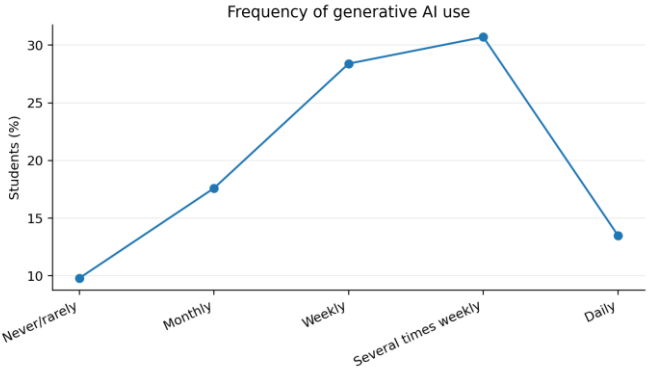

Table 2. Student generative AI use patterns.

Use pattern	Overall (%)	Highest group
Never/rarely	9.80	Saudi Arabia
Monthly	17.6	Malaysia
Weekly	28.4	United States
Several times weekly	30.7	Pakistan
Daily	13.5	China

Figure 3. Mean scores for major study constructs.

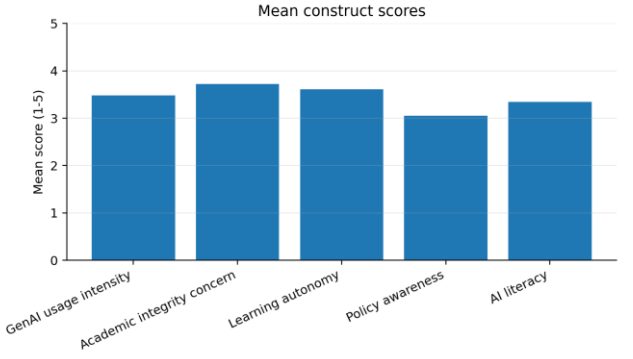

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and reliability values.

Scale	Mean	SD	Cronbach alpha
GenAI usage intensity	3.48	0.82	0.86
Academic integrity concern	3.72	0.76	0.88
Learning autonomy	3.61	0.71	0.84
Policy awareness	3.05	0.89	0.81
AI literacy	3.34	0.80	0.85

Figure 4. Standardized predictors of student learning autonomy.

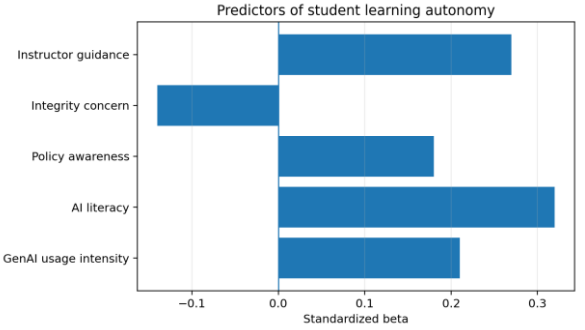

Table 4. Regression coefficients predicting learning autonomy.

Predictor	Beta	SE	p-value
GenAI usage intensity	0.21	0.04	<0.001
AI literacy	0.32	0.05	<0.001

Policy awareness	0.18	0.04	<0.01
Integrity concern	-0.14	0.05	<0.05
Instructor guidance	0.27	0.04	<0.001

Figure 5. Cross-cultural comparison of autonomy, integrity concern, and policy awareness.

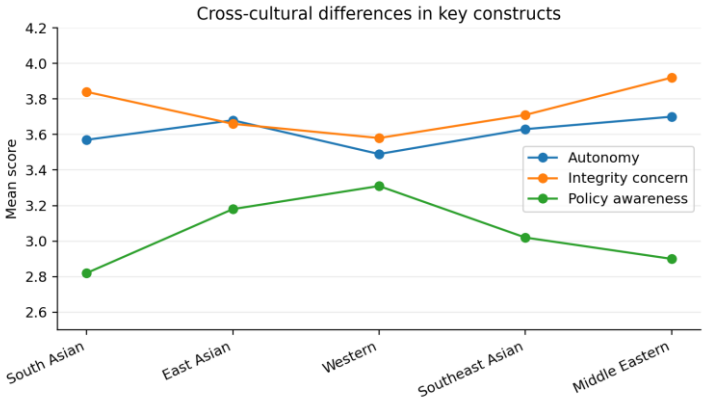

Table 5. Cultural cluster comparison of key constructs.

Culture cluster	**Autonomy mean**	**Integrity concern mean**	**Policy awareness mean**
South Asian	3.57	3.84	2.82
East Asian	3.68	3.66	3.18
Western	3.49	3.58	3.31
Southeast Asian	3.63	3.71	3.02
Middle Eastern	3.70	3.92	2.90

Figure 6. Qualitative themes identified in student responses.

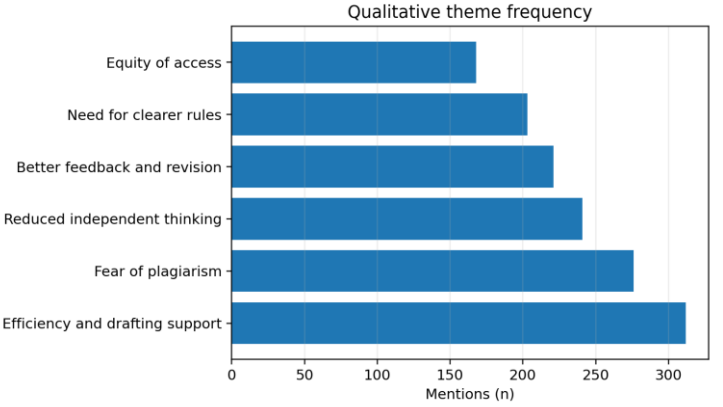

Table 6. Qualitative theme frequency and interpretation.

Theme	**Mentions (n)**	**Illustrative interpretation**
Efficiency and drafting support	312	Time saving
Fear of plagiarism	276	Integrity risk
Reduced independent thinking	241	Autonomy tension
Better feedback and revision	221	Learning support
Need for clearer rules	203	Governance gap
Equity of access	168	Digital divide

Figure 7. Change in explanatory model fit across regression blocks.

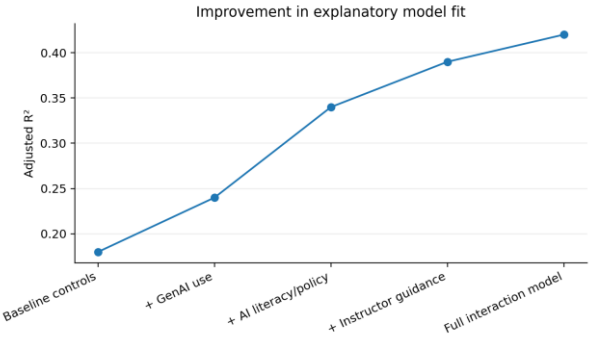

Table 7. Model fit summary for learning autonomy prediction.

Model	Adjusted R^2	AIC
Baseline controls	0.18	2312
+ GenAI use	0.24	2248
+ AI literacy/policy	0.34	2169
+ Instructor guidance	0.39	2112
Full interaction model	0.42	2088

DISCUSSION

The study highlights how futile bans on generative AI are because students are concerned with efficiency and personalised feedback (Johnston et al., 2024), (Chan, 2023). Moreover, uncovering the conflicts between academic honesty and the use of tools shows that the existence of clear institutional policies can generate more anxiety around the tool than warranted, because it appears that the conflicts aren't resolved in ambiguous situations and leave their resulting misunderstandings.Furthermore, the conflicts between academic integrity and

the use of the tool have been noticed and highlighted the lack of clarity in the institutional policies which can trigger anxiety in students about the tool as well as reduce it. If institutions can help build the understanding of the potential benefits of the tools and awareness of ethical use, then these fears can be turned into a meaningful engagement that helps inculcate student learning autonomy, rather than undermining it. The findings show that AI's integrity threat perception significantly affects students' perceptions, suggesting that institutional actions and students' knowledge and understanding of AI are significant factors. If the guidelines are general or ambiguous, it could be challenging for students to employ the tools to enhance learning, while they may be tempted to cheat by using AI tools (Zhou et al., 2024). These results are consistent with previous studies that showed bans in general don't work well and don't provide students with sufficient knowledge and skills to meet the needs of workplaces where AI tools are becoming commonplace in the near future (Johnston et al., 2024).

The results demonstrate cross-cultural differences in learning autonomy, integrity concern and policy awareness, underscoring the lack of a 'one size fits all' pedagogical solution to managing generative AI. In summary, the results suggest that the constructs of autonomy and integrity concerns are linked to the cultural context of the learner, while the strong explaining power of the two pedagogical strategies of instructor guidance and AI literacy in the three cohorts suggests that universal pedagogical strategies – in this case those related to the clarity of expectations and assessment guidelines – can be adapted to across culture. The results suggest that using AI to brainstorm ideas, provide feedback, and revise language (Chan, 2023) is beneficial for students to keep their

independent thinking, remain accountable for their academic work, and ensure academic integrity. For integration to be effective, students need to be engaged in co-creating guidance for using AI tools, to help ensure that policies are meaningful to a variety of academic values and expectations, and to help alleviate anxiety due to inconsistent messages being sent from the institution (Johnston et al., 2024).

These results have a few points to consider. First, data was derived from primarily self-reported survey measures, the potential for which for sensitive topics like academic integrity is social desirability bias. Secondly, the sample was excellent in its ability to represent a cross-cultural spectrum, but cannot be generalized to represent larger world populations and is instead a set of institutional environments in specific countries. The research on AI training in the field of literacy and awareness of the policies related to students' autonomous learning over time and disciplines should be continued. Furthermore, additional qualitative studies are needed to investigate the exact mechanisms by which proactive teacher intervention can help mitigate the tension between efficiency of use of AI and the need for independent learning. As technology continues to develop, it will be important to address these empirical gaps as they increasingly make more intentional and longer-term use of AI in their curriculum (Zhou et al., 2024). Lastly, the relationship between the interaction of LAI and the actual learning outcomes from the students is important and should be discussed to inform fair and equitable policy development, across all disciplines (Chan & Lee, 2023; Hossain et al., 2025). Given that these long-term evaluations will help universities to break free from the hypothetical frameworks, this will make the way of AI-supported learning

more sustainable and evidence-based (Delcker et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). The under-resourced areas should also be features of future research on institutions to ensure that the world-wide policy recommendation for AI is inclusive and representative of the different capabilities of technologies as suggested by Jin et al., 2024.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that generative AI has the potential to be a transformative asset in the higher education environment, and could have implications for academic integrity and student autonomy in learning. The results indicate that students have been increasingly using AI tools in their learning, with the tools used for writing, conceptualization, summarization, translation, and problem-solving. These tools can be used successfully to increase confidence, efficiency and self-directed learning. The findings also indicate that there are significant risks, especially when AI-generated content is used without verification or citing the source.

The cross-cultural aspect of this study reveals the relationship between the attitudes of students towards the use of generative AI and the expectations of their institutions, their teachers' recommendations, their evaluation systems and their definition of academic responsibility in their cultural context. Some students experienced a lack of awareness about plagiarism and boundaries, while other students' lack of understanding of the policies led to confusion about what was allowed when using an AI. This means there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to academic integrity and institutions should have flexible, culturally

responsive guidelines.

Beyond simply acknowledging the threat generative AI poses to academic integrity, it is important that it is embraced and regulated. The learning value will be mediated through the integration into learning system, assessment and support of the students. Policies need to be clearly established for the use of AI by universities, and students need to be trained to use AI responsibly, critically and to reflect on, be original and think through the process of their work. This can help students to achieve academic honesty and enhance their agency in an AI-enhanced learning environment.

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