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Autonomy and Academic Dishonesty Among Researchers: The Moderating Role of Trust in ChatGPT

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Abstract: Use of AI in academics is a highly controversial issue in the education sphere. ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence (AI) that offers numerous advantages, such as increased student engagement, collaboration and accessibility. Nevertheless, it questions the issue of academic dishonesty. However, we are yet to learn much about the impact of trust in ChatGPT in academic integrity and autonomy. This paper was therefore part of the research to explore the connection between autonomy, academic dishonesty and trust on ChatGPT in scholars. The studies employed quantitative designs to come up with a comprehensive view of these interdependent factors. Four hundred undergraduate, master and PhD level researchers at multiple universities in Rawalpindi-Islamabad were approached to fill in a well-constructed questionnaire. As predicted, that individuals with greater autonomy would rely less on ChatGPT, resulting in lower trust in the system and a lower risk of engaging in academic dishonesty. The findings supported the notion, indicating a significant negative relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty. This shows that persons with greater autonomy are less likely to engage in academic dishonesty, while placing more trust on ChatGPT more likely result in ethical misconduct in academia. The outcomes have noteworthy implications for academics, highlighting the need to develop morals and ethics in researchers. This can enable institutions to produce ethically sound professionals who benefit the community.

Key Words: Autonomy, Academic Dishonesty, Trust in ChatGPT, Researchers

Introduction

Technological advancements have significantly impacted all facets of modern society, including higher education. However, the advancement in technology is causing concerns about potential cognitive and logical decline in students' academic proficiency (Ipek et al., 2023; Irfan et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2026). The use of the internet and artificial intelligence tools not only challenges the essential organization of both teaching and evaluation practices but is also responsible for the decline in academic integrity among scholars at higher education levels and hinders genuine learning and development. Undoubtedly, information and communication technologies have created new learning opportunities, but sadly, they have also made academic dishonesty more common (Levine & Pazdernik, 2018).

Academic dishonesty can be "purposeful involvement in dishonest practices involving one's own academic work or the work of others" (Faucher & Caves, 2009). A variety of factors influence it, including self-control, attitude, and perceived opportunity (Bolin, 2004). Guerrero-Dib et al. (2020) claimed that students who admitted to committing such actions also indicated a propensity for dishonesty in other spheres of their lives. Academic institutions play a crucial role in preparing individuals with the skills to tackle life's challenges and societal difficulties. Academic dishonesty impacts

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nations worldwide, regardless of development. The existing educational system in Pakistan plagued by policy gaps and academic dishonesty (Khan, 2018).

On the other hand, humans are self-directed agents. They are free to make decisions and take action to fulfil their wants and accomplish their goals. In human behavior, personal autonomy has diverse implications. "Autonomy" describes the privileges, liberties, and freedom to make independent decisions without outside influence (Motloba, 2018). Previous studies mostly defined autonomy as fostering motivation to engage in an activity (Borhani et al., 2017).

Although artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT is a highly sophisticated Chabot that was skilled using a varied range of internet texts, including novels, books, articles, and webpages, spanning a diverse array of subjects such as broadcast and narrative (Shen et al., 2023) but its effects have been felt in various fields, including content development, customer service, and natural language processing and it quickly earned the mark "next big disruptor of the industry" (Rudolph et al., 2023). Apart from its numerous benefits, ChatGPT's latest version sent shockwaves in the business and academic circles due to its potent powers and high potential for abuse. It also raises potential security concerns, such as confrontational attacks, misinformation spread, and identity theft (Deng & Lin, 2023). This highlights a significant issue regarding academic integrity and the need for interventions to address this behavior. It was essential to comprehend how autonomy and academic dishonesty were related to build solutions to support ethical research practises.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a negative relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty among researchers.

H2: There is a positive relationship between trust in ChatGPT and academic dishonesty among researchers.

H3: Male score higher on academic dishonesty and trust in ChatGPT as compared to female.

H4: There is a positive relationship between age and the occurrence of academic dishonesty among researchers.

H5: There is a positive relationship between educational background and the occurrence of academic dishonesty among researchers.

H6: There is a positive relationship between years of research experience and the prevalence of academic dishonesty among researchers.

H7: Trust in ChatGPT moderated the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty among researchers.

Literature Review

Academic Dishonesty and Autonomy

Academic dishonesty remains a significant source of concern even with the implementation of new, more rigorous strategies and codes of ethics by academic establishments. Previous studies have shown that many factors can influence academic dishonesty, including parental pressure (Roth & Assor, 2012), peer influence (Maring et al., 2018), high academic achievement, low morality, inadequate time organisation, value issues (Varelius, 2006), a lack of autonomy, a lack of professionalism, a fear of failure, emotional issues, lazy or ineffective teaching means and syllabus issues, and problems with understanding. Studies also revealed that academic dishonesty decreases when students' autonomous and self-regulated learning increases because students who can carry out a good self-regulation process in coping with learning situations are better equipped to meet demands and carry out their roles (Kusuma, 2022). A series of research conducted by Nazir et al. (2011) and Ellahi (2013) discovered a substantial association between student demographics and their attitudes and behaviours towards academic dishonesty. Half of the participants believe that cheaters are intelligent people in the country. Male undergraduate students, particularly those of a younger age, and business students were found to be more prone to engage in dishonest behaviour (Nazir et al., 2009). Furthermore, students rationalise their dishonesty based on personal, social, and ethical concerns (Ellahi, 2013).

Researchers, on the other hand, argue that parents can enhance their children's autonomy by providing basic support, demonstrating their values, and minimizing conditional regard, which can reduce acceptance of academic dishonesty (Hegner et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it has also been discovered that those who have higher levels of real or perceived competence, a stronger sense of internal locus of control (Crown & Spiller, 1998). Higher levels of autonomous motivation or personal interest in a task (Schraw et al., 2007) also have lower levels of cheating and

tolerance for cheating. Additionally, people who have high levels of self-efficacy are able to exercise control over challenging demands and their behavior and do better in academic settings because they have a greater capacity for problem-solving and information processing.

Teachers can also contribute a major role in promoting academic integrity. Previous research proposed that autonomous teachers can boost students' enthusiasm and independence more than non-autonomous teachers (Abdaoui, 2018). Because when teenagers satisfy their demand for autonomy, they are less inclined to condone academic dishonesty. As a result, students maintain academic integrity primarily by working independently to improve their research skills and practise the appropriate citation practices (Abdaoui, 2018). Moreover, studies also claimed that autonomy-supportive learning settings that allow student autonomy are related to advanced levels of internalisation of the value of academic work (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Students who are actively involved in their education and place a high value on learning assignments are therefore more likely to strive for mastery of the material they are studying—a goal that cannot be attained by dishonesty (Krou et al., 2020).

Academic Dishonesty and Trust in ChatGPT

ChatGPT is creating a commotion in the academic sphere due to its use as an AI-powered chatbot (Hisan & Amri, 2022). D'Agostino (2023) published an article in which he claimed that ChatGPT looks to be the next wave of academic dishonesty, which is swiftly developing into a tsunami, raising severe issues and obstacles to learn. Previous studies also revealed that ChatGPT can produce research studies for highly ranked publications (Dowling & Lucey, 2023) and can create credible scientific abstracts along with fully fabricated ones, ensuring originality without plagiarism detection (Gao et al., 2022). These features may lead university students to rely completely on ChatGPT to write academic papers.

Hisan and Amri (2022) stated that it can be easy to confuse text produced by humans and machines while using ChatGPT, which can be used to aid cheating. Furthermore, Abdaoui (2018) identified key causes of student dishonesty such as internet and online content, lethargy, low educational confidence, poor referencing and paraphrasing skills. On the other hand, Ellahi (2013) stated regarding ChatGPT's hazards in medical education and called for initiatives for solutions.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The relationship between the variables was investigated using a cross-sectional study design and survey strategy. Participants were selected from semi-government and private universities of twin cities, i.e., Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The study utilized quantitative data from first-stage researchers who were doing research under supervision in universities, research institutes or industry, which also encompassed doctoral students. The participants were selected from three departments, i.e. social sciences, business studies and computer sciences. All the selected participants were in the final semester of their degrees and were doing research in their respective fields.

Research Participants

Table 1 shows that the sample (N=400) was composed of both male (197) and female (203) researchers, 137 from social sciences, 130 from computer sciences and the remaining 133 from the business studies department. Participants were within the age range of 20 to 45 years.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Demographics Variables (N=400)

Demographics		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	197	49
	Female	203	51
Qualification	Undergraduate	142	36
	Masters	145	36
	Doctorate	113	28



Demographics		<i>n</i>	%
Age	Young Adults 20-23	148	37
	Early Adulthood 24-29	133	33
	Adults 30-Above	119	30
Field Of Study	Social Science	137	34
	Computer Science	130	32
	Business Studies	133	33
Researcher's Career Stage	Undergraduate level	142	36
	Master level	145	36
	PhD level	113	28
Year of Research Experience	Less than 1 year	133	33
	One year	131	33
	Two and more years	136	34

Note. *n*= Frequency; %= Percentage

Measurements

To meet the study's objective, a survey was developed, and participants gave written informed consent before the survey. The questionnaire was organised into four segments. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Learner Autonomy Scale (LAS)

To access autonomy among researchers, the Learner Autonomy Scale (LAS) was used (Bei et al., 2020). It was a self-reported scale consisting of 16 items in total, including "I can solely manage any new problem that may emerge in my studies" and "I seek alternative solutions when a difficult problem arises in my studies". The Cronbach's alpha reliability value ranged from 0.83.

Internet-Triggered Academic Dishonesty Scale (ITADS)

Researchers' academic dishonesty was measured using the Internet-Triggered Academic Dishonesty Scale (ITADS) (Akbulut et al., 2008). It was a self-reported scale. The scale contains two sub-scales. The first sub-scale contains 26 items that were based on opinions on the case of academic dishonesty, whereas the second sub-scale has 16 items about the reasons. For this study first sub-scale having 26 items was used, including items such as "Using the Internet to copy others' work without permission". ITADS mainly designed to measure fraudulence, plagiarism, falsification, delinquency and unauthorised help. The Cronbach's alpha reliability value ranged from 0.91.

Human-Computer Trust Scale (HCTS)

Human-Computer Trust Scale was used to measure trust in ChatGPT which was developed by Gulati et al. (2019). It was a self-reported scale, which comprises 12 statements, including "I believe that there could be negative consequences when using ChatGPT". The Cronbach's alpha reliability value ranged from 0.76.

Data Analysis Procedure

SPSS-25 software was used for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Subsequently, PROCESS was used to conduct a moderation effect text.

Ethical Considerations

The scales were utilized after getting the authors' consent via email. Data collection was begun after obtaining approval from the ethical committee of our university. The individuals received the consent form, which clearly explained the study's purpose and their rights to participate voluntarily. The researcher ensured openness in describing the findings, refining from data alteration or biased reporting.



Results

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficient of Assessment Measures (N=400)

Variable	k	α	M	SD	Ranges		Skew	Kur
					Actual	Potential		
Autonomy	16	.83	53.53	11.79	16-80	19-80	-.21	-.02
Academic Dishonesty	26	.91	60.84	19.99	26-123	26-122	0.10	-.97
Trust in ChatGPT	12	.76	34.61	9.04	12-60	12-60	-0.10	.37

Note: k= No. of items; α = Alpha Reliability; M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; Skew= Skewness; Kurt= Kurtosis.

Table 2 indicates the descriptive statistics of the measures used in the study, along with the corresponding alpha reliability values for both the overall scales and their respective subscales. The alpha reliability coefficients of all the scales fall within the acceptable range (>0.7), indicating that the measures employed in the study were reliable and suitable for data collection.

Table 3

Correlation for Study Variables (N= 400)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Autonomy	53.53	11.79	-	-0.26**	-0.38**
2. Academic Dishonesty	60.84	19.99	-	-	0.31**
3. Trust in ChatGPT	34.61	9.04	-	-	-

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation and ** $p < .01$.

Table 3 shows the correlation coefficients among the variables under consideration. At the 0.01 level, the correlation coefficients are significant. Overall, the findings suggest that greater autonomy is negatively associated with academic dishonesty and trust in ChatGPT. On the other hand, elevated levels of academic dishonesty correlate with increased levels of trust in ChatGPT.

Table 4

Independent Sample t test on the Basis of Gender on Study Variables (N=400)

Variables	Male (n= 197)		Female (n= 203)		t(398)	P	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Autonomy	52.33	11.57	54.69	11.91	2.02	.04	-4.67	-.05	.20
Academic Dishonesty	63.19	19.68	58.56	20.07	2.32	.02	0.72	8.54	0.23
Trust in ChatGPT	35.43	9.29	33.83	8.74	1.77	.07	-0.17	3.37	0.17

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; CI = confidence interval; LL= lower limit; UL = upper limit; $p > .05$

For a number of variables pertaining to both male (n = 197) and female (n = 203) respondents, the table 4 shows descriptive statistics and inferential tests. There were statistically significant differences in the responses between the male and female participants when it came to the autonomy and academic dishonesty categories. More specifically, than females, men demonstrated greater degrees of autonomy. On the other hand, female students showed lower degrees of academic dishonesty than male students did. However, trust in ChatGPT remained consistent across genders, with no notable difference observed.

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way ANOVA on the Basis of Years of Research Experience on Study Variables (N=400)

Variable	Less than 1 year (n= 133)		1 year (n= 131)		2 and more years (n= 136)		F(2, 397)	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Autonomy	51.97	10.50	54.57	11.66	54.05	12.97	1.82	.00
Trust in ChatGPT	36.56	8.38	34.02	8.89	33.28	9.54	4.93**	.02
Academic Dishonesty	67.21	18.31	59.48	19.04	55.91	20.93	11.77***	.05

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; η^2 = Partial Eta square.

Table 5 presents the analysis of variance (ANOVA) results for Autonomy, Trust in ChatGPT, and Academic Dishonesty across three groups based on participants research experience: "Less than 1 year," "1 year," and "2 and more years." For Autonomy, mean scores increased with experience as for less than a year had the lowest mean score, while those who had been involved for two or more years had the highest mean score, but differences were not statistically significant. Trust in ChatGPT showed a decreasing trend with experience, with the highest mean score in participant with less than a year of experience and the lowest in those with two or more years. Academic dishonesty also showed a significant difference between the groups; participants with less than a year of experience reported the highest level of academic dishonesty, indicating that less experienced participants engaged more in academic dishonesty.

Table 6

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way ANOVA among Age Groups (N= 400)

Variable	Young Adults 20-23 (n= 148)		Early Adulthood 24-29 (n= 133)		Adults 30-45 (n= 119)		F(2, 397)	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Autonomy	53.32	10.04	52.14	11.43	55.35	13.87	2.38	.01
Trust in ChatGPT	36.17	8.38	34.45	8.21	32.86	10.36	4.53**	.02
Academic Dishonesty	66.48	18.32	60.20	19.50	54.53	20.67	12.57***	.05

Note. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; η^2 = Partial Eta square.

Table 6 presents descriptive statistics for Autonomy, Trust in ChatGPT, and Academic Dishonesty across three distinct age groups (20-23, 24-29, and 30-45). Autonomy scores were highest in the 30-45, which varied from 53.32 to 55.35. With means dropping from 36.17 to 32.86 throughout the age groups, trust in ChatGPT declined as age went up, though the effect size was small. Academic dishonesty was highest in 20–23 year olds and lowest in 30-45 year olds, with a significant difference showing younger participants engaged more in dishonesty.

Table 7

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way ANOVA among Fields of Study (N= 400)

Variable	Social Sciences (n= 137)		Computer Sciences (n= 130)		Business Studies (n= 133)		F(2, 397)	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Autonomy	54.87	13.86	52.00	10.60	53.65	10.41	2.00	.00
Trust in ChatGPT	34.09	10.53	34.48	8.20	35.29	8.16	.61	.00
Academic Dishonesty	53.29	19.50	66.51	19.03	63.07	19.15	17.08***	.07

Note. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; η^2 = Partial Eta square.

Table 07 presents descriptive data and comparison between Social Sciences (n = 137), Computer Sciences (n = 130), and Business Studies (n = 133) for Autonomy, Trust in ChatGPT, and Academic Dishonesty. For every discipline, mean



(M) and standard deviation (SD) scores are given. The highest score in autonomy was in Social Sciences and then came Business Studies and Computer Sciences. Conversely, the level of trust of ChatGPT was similar among the disciplines with a slightly greater score in Business Studies. The most observable gap is in Academic Dishonesty with Computer Sciences reporting much higher scores according to the significant F- value this indicates possibly a difference in disciplinary applications regarding the attitudes and behaviors towards academic integrity.

Table 8

Moderating effect of Trust on ChatGPT between Autonomy and Academic Dishonesty (N= 400)

Predictor	Estimate	SE	95%CI		P
			LL	UL	
Main Effect					
Constant	93.38	13.75	66.35	120.41	.000
Autonomy	-0.92	0.23	-1.38	-0.48	.000
Trust in ChatGPT	-0.47	0.35	-1.15	.21	.17
Autonomy * Trust in ChatGPT	0.02	.006	.00	.03	.002
R ²	0.14				
F	21.08				.000

Note. CI= Confidence Interval; LL= Lower Limits; UL= Upper Limits.

Table 8 explored the moderating influence of Trust in ChatGPT in the relationship between Autonomy and Academic Dishonesty (N = 400). Autonomy was also a strong predictor of reduced academic dishonesty (B = -0.92, $p < .001$) and Trust in ChatGPT alone was not significant (B = -0.47, $p = .17$). The Autonomy and Trust interaction in ChatGPT were relevant (B = 0.02, $p = .002$), which suggests that trust mediates similar to autonomy. The model explained 14% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.14$) and was statistically significant ($F = 21.08$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study examines a multifaceted nature of autonomy and academic dishonesty amid researchers, and particularly, the moderating influence of Trust in ChatGPT, a highly advanced AI application that gains more and more popularity in the research space.

Based on our predictions, the significant relationships between variables at the 0.01 level are shown by the correlation coefficients in Table 03, which indicates a significant relationship between academic dishonesty and autonomy among researchers is supported by the negative correlation between the two variables. This outcome is consistent with the findings of earlier studies (e.g., Jones & Vigil, 2014), which all indicate that autonomy leads to ethical behaviors as lessening academic misconducts. Employees that have more freedom in their work are probably more responsible in what they do and will be less willing to behave dishonestly.

The findings indicate that there is a noticeable correlation between the academic dishonesty of researchers and trust in ChatGPT, which is consistent with the results in Table 03, indicating that autonomy and trust in ChatGPT are significantly negatively correlated. This indicates that researchers are more likely to have less trust in ChatGPT when they are more autonomous. These findings are in line with the literature, such as the one that Hegner et al. (2017) conducted, which concluded that individuals with greater control or autonomy in the tasks are less trustful toward the technology.

The researcher discovered that there were significant relationships between trust of ChatGPT, and academic dishonesty among researchers, as can be borne out by Table 03, suggesting a positive correlation between the two. This implies that increased confidence in ChatGPT can predispose one to get involved in academic dishonesty. This is in line with the current literature (Müller, 2020), where the responsible usage of AI is essential. This helps to prove the statement that excessive use of AI can result in anti-ethical practices.

Table 04 shows a potential finding that male researchers are more likely to commit academic dishonesty than the female ones, which is consistent with earlier studies (McCabe & Treviño, 1997) which revealed that male students were more likely to commit academic dishonesty. This underlines the possibility of gender variations in moral manners.

The results in Table 6 confirm the hypothesis that age has a connection on academic dishonesty in researchers. Age range (20-23) has more inclined participants towards academic dishonesty; this reduces with age. This is in line with earlier study that suggests that academic dishonesty is most prevalent among the younger individuals and this may be because of academic pressure, immaturity or ignorance of ethical conduct (McCabe et al., 2001).

The results of the analysis of Table 07 data indicate that the rates of academic dishonesty vary significantly between researchers in the fields of Social Sciences, Computer Sciences and Business Studies, which supports the assumption that the issue of academic dishonesty is closely related to the education background. Specifically, the F-value presents that there are significant mean score differences, which means that there are different positions on academic integrity in different fields. The trend has been corroborated by the previous studies that found that there are differences in discipline as regards to their ethical perspectives. As an example, Mățã & Poenaru (2020) found that more fields such as computer sciences, potentially where skills in technology can be more important, had higher rates of academic dishonesty, potentially because of less consideration of ethics. However, in comparison, researchers in the Social Sciences which were trained to put more emphasis on research ethics and research integrity (Brown et al., 2016) demonstrated reduced cases of academic dishonesty, suggesting the concept that disciplinary culture and educational experience can influence academic integrity perception.

The ANOVA results support the hypothesis that there is a significant correlation between years of research experience and the frequency of academic dishonesty among researchers. Table 05 data shows researchers with less than a year of research experience had the highest mean score for academic dishonesty. This is consistent with earlier studies (McCabe & Treviño, 1993; McCabe, et al., 2001) suggesting that experience reduces academic dishonesty due to heightened awareness of ethical standards.

The regression analysis supports the hypothesis that ChatGPT moderates the relationship between academic dishonesty and autonomy. This hypothesis argues that the degree of trust in ChatGPT influences the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty. The result from Table 08 suggests that, depending on how much trust people have in ChatGPT, autonomy's effect on academic dishonesty differs. The notion that academic dishonesty is influenced by autonomy is supported by prior research. Research has demonstrated how crucial trust is to relationships mediated by technology. Users' decisions and behavior can be influenced by their trust in technology, especially AI systems like ChatGPT (e.g., McKnight & Chervany, 2001). As a result, it can be concluded from the current study that students with higher autonomy may engage less in academic dishonesty, but the strength of this link will depend on how much trust they place in ChatGPT. The correlation between academic dishonesty and autonomy may weaken if students have a higher level of trust in ChatGPT, indicating ChatGPT's moderating influence.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the study's findings offer valuable insight into several important elements of academic dishonesty among researchers and their correlation with different circumstances. The negative correlation between autonomy and academic dishonesty suggests that researchers with greater autonomy promote ethical conduct, which is consistent with other research findings. Furthermore, age plays a crucial role, as younger researchers show higher dishonesty rates, aligning with studies that emphasize on maturation's impact of maturation on ethical behavior. Moreover, the differences in disciplines emphasize the importance of designing specific approaches towards promoting integrity. Also, the negative impact between autonomy and trust on ChatGPT indicates that there is a complicated interplay between technical dependency and personal control. Altogether, these findings indicate that academic dishonesty is a multi-layered issue with several dimensions and that to promote the culture of honesty on the academic campus, the particular solutions, and the governmental policies should be adopted.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations due to its cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to infer causality among variables, implying findings should be interpreted with caution. Secondly, the particular research setting and group also reduce the ability to generalize, and future studies need to validate them in varied situations to increase the extrinsic validity. Thirdly, the sample size is quite small, and this can affect the reliability and validity of results and may require that larger sample sizes should be used in future studies in an attempt to increase statistically the power of a study and its generalizability. Fourth, another ethical consideration is the problem of social desirability bias where the participant might have given a response that is considered socially acceptable by the respondent, in the future, anonymity or indirect methods of questioning should be employed in encouraging the participants to provide valid responses. In addition, longitudinal research is being encouraged to explore the long-term impacts of AI systems on academic behavior and integrity. Moreover, the outcomes demonstrate the necessity of offering training activities to both educators and researchers to make certain that AI technologies are used responsibly. The balance between innovation and integrity can be achieved by formulating clear AI use policies and obtaining training that helps institutions to engage with these technologies responsibly.

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