



CASE STUDY

From AI Pushback to AI Integration: A Reflective Case Study on Academic Integrity in EAP

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores a leadership-driven institutional response to the challenges posed by generative artificial intelligence (AI) to academic integrity within an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) foundation programme in Kazakhstan. The context involves academic essay writing assessments suddenly becoming vulnerable to AI-assisted plagiarism via large language models like ChatGPT or DeepSeek. The evolving initiative transitioned through three distinct phases in development: an initial zero-tolerance policy toward AI use in written assignments, a subsequent developmental phase emphasizing awareness raising and support, and a third phase involving the proactive integration of AI into the programme via the redesign of assessment and materials. Drawing on literature related to academic integrity and AI to support the author's self-reflection, this paper draws on lessons learnt from the experiences of a case study institution outside of the Western-centric context that is often targeted for research. The investigation critically evaluates the tensions between deterrence, awareness-raising, and curriculum adaptation. Findings suggest a need for a reflective and continuing state of adaptation to the challenges of AI on academic integrity. The study contributes to the emerging EAP discourse on AI by illustrating how programme leadership can shift from reactive policies to more sustainable and constructive pedagogical integration. The conclusions also recognize the ongoing need for change and the resulting faculty fatigue drawbacks that this constant state of fluidity can bring.



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1. Introduction

This study examines the evolving institutional response to the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI). More specifically, its potential impact on academic integrity within an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) foundation programme at an English as a medium of instruction university (EMI) in Kazakhstan. The case study centers on the challenges posed by AI-assisted plagiarism in essay-based assessments, in which students are required to showcase their progress by writing coursework *guided* by EAP tutors (though not under their direct *supervision*). These assessments, while still common in higher education, have become vulnerable to the misuse of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT. The combination of processing power with a user-friendly interface (Acuyo Cespedes, 2025a), makes these models perfectly capable of writing academically viable essays subject to minimal user input (Sullivan et al., 2023). As a result, growing faculty concerns related to the authenticity of their students' work, as well as AI's potential harm to their overall education, have come to the fore. New terms that have emerged as a result, including "aigerism" (Khalaf, 2025), in a nod to how AI models can be used to facilitate plagiarism, and "postplagiarism" (Eaton, 2023), which prompts educators to consider the implications of AI ubiquity on an author's traditional sense of ownership over their own writing.

With this context in mind, the first stage of the institutional response at the heart of this case study was urgently put into place shortly after the popularization of ChatGPT in 2023. This effectively prohibited students from using AI for the purposes of essay-writing. The second phase, which represented a shift away from penalising AI use and towards awareness raising and AI ethical use literacy, came in 2024. The third, and most recent, 2025 stage has prioritized proactive curriculum reform, in order to adapt assessment and material to an increasingly AI ubiquitous university environment.

1.2 Context

The EAP programme on which this investigation is based operates within a Kazakhstani EMI environment that is increasingly reliant on digital technologies yet also confronted by the unprecedented challenge of integrating AI tools ethically into academic practice. Universities in Kazakhstan, like in many parts of the world, faced unprecedented technological challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic period (Acuyo Cespedes, 2024). The tangible learning loss among school students that this emergency-remote-teaching scenario created in Kazakhstan (Courtney et al., 2025) has had subsequent knock-on effects, as these disadvantaged learners have subsequently progressed to university. Plagiarism is thus often viewed as a coping mechanism used by overburdened students completing an assessment delivered in their second or third language as a result of their EMI environment. This challenge is compounded by the unique demands of a foundation-level EAP course, where students are often developing critical academic writing skills for the first time and are expected to do so in adherence with strict academic integrity guidelines. Both critical thinking (Burkhalter & Shegebayev 2012) and academic integrity (Zainiyeva & Kaiyrkenova, 2021) have posed an ongoing challenge for

educational systems in post-soviet countries like Kazakhstan. The creative freedom permitted in essay-writing tasks, essential for fostering independent scholarship, therefore increases the risk that students from this region rely on AI-assisted plagiarism. This situation echoes broader higher education concerns surrounding AI's impact on assessment integrity worldwide (Martino, 2024; Pearson, 2023) and therefore signals that academic integrity is likely to become more relevant as AI ubiquity increases in Higher Education (HE) spaces.

1.3 Research Problem and Aims

In 2023, the programme leadership of the case study university that includes the author of this investigation, recognized the urgent need to develop an effective and sustainable response strategy. The core challenge was to address faculty distrust in student essay submissions, while also fostering student learning in EAP and maintaining morale among fatigued faculty members. Early policy measures prioritized deterrence, but growing feedback pointed toward the need for a balanced, development-oriented response that eventually resulted in planning ahead through curriculum redesign. The three phases of this response are captured in the following three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How has the programme's initial 2023 policy of zero tolerance to AI use in essay writing influenced student and faculty responses to AI-assisted plagiarism?

RQ2: How has the 2024 transition to a developmental and supportive approach towards AI-assisted plagiarism impacted students and faculty?

RQ3: How has the latest 2025 pivot towards tackling AI-assisted plagiarism through proactive curriculum redesign started to impact students and faculty?

Through critical reflection anchored in the author's reflective notes supported by relevant excerpts from faculty and students, this case study contributes to emerging discussions on integrating AI ethically within foundation-level EAP programmes.

2. Methodology

This investigation employs reflective case study methodology grounded in practitioner-led inquiry (Farrell, 2016). The paper therefore draws on the author's own critical self-reflection from an EAP leadership standpoint, both during and after the critical 2023 period in which AI entered mainstream education via the launch of the ChatGPT LLM. The paper thus theorizes professional practice through this personal reflection, rather than making bold claims about measuring absolute success (Mann & Walsh, 2017). The focus is thus on the process of responding to this challenge, which was still very much ongoing at the time of writing, and the lessons that can be taken from this personal struggle. Personal pronouns are used throughout to emphasize the adopted self-reflective method. The personal observations are illustrated

using accompanying quotations based on informal feedback and anecdotal observations from colleagues and students. These quotes have been gathered from the author's personal notes and diaries as informal observations, rather than through more formal data-collection mechanisms such as interviews or surveys.

With ethical conduct in mind, the illustrative quotes have been anonymized so as not to identify any individuals. Moreover, the draft paper has been shared with relevant colleagues and students ahead of publication to allow opportunity for the removal or modification of any information. Most importantly, the purpose of these excerpts is to illuminate key points, add personalization and enrich the analysis overall. Lastly, as programme leader, the author's positional authority had to be recognized throughout the investigation. This leadership position carried the potential to inadvertently bias some of the illustrative comments and responses. The consensus that 'office politics' carries the potential to influence how individuals respond to their supervisors (Ferris et al., 2019), meant that the author had to take this factor into account when reflecting on collegial and student feedback. For instance, the possibility that colleagues or students might be more likely to praise an initiative due to this perceived power imbalance prompted the author to scrutinize these positive reflections very carefully before embedding them into the paper.

3. Responses to AI-Related Academic Integrity Concerns

The subsections below provide insight into the three distinct phases that have contributed to the target institution's response to AI-related academic integrity concerns. These steps are visually represented in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Institutional Responses to the Threat of AI Plagiarism

3.1 Zero Tolerance

My first port of call was to liaise with the university's teaching and learning centre, as they were responsible for developing a university-wide AI policy. After learning that this policy essentially permitted each unit autonomy to tailor their own (justified) response in accordance with their individualized programme's needs, I quickly implemented EAP's zero-tolerance policy. This initial 2023 response phase prioritized speed and simplicity, as I recognized that an *absence* of response likely equated to the *worst* response, at a time when ChatGPT was causing moral panic among educators (Gilmore et al., 2025). Using faculty team meetings and student feedback as temperature measurements ("why haven't we received instructions yet?" and "are they [management] planning on doing anything about it?"), it became clear that teachers were most concerned by the *delay* in (not the nature of) the response. This informed the implementation of an easy-to-comprehend instruction of zero tolerance for AI-use in assessed essays. Prior to grading a submitted essay, EAP faculty would first identify the amount of AI plagiarism (if any) and subtract this as a percentage from the overall grade. For example, a student scoring 80% with 10% AI plagiarism would receive a final grade of 70%. Notably, egregious offences of 50% or more AI plagiarism were penalized with a zero grade. My rationale behind this punitive response was to deter AI-plagiarism for long enough to give myself, in coordination with my close team of senior teaching faculty, enough time to develop a more nuanced strategy. This called for quick and decisive leadership at a time when we could not afford to delay. While simplistic, this initial 'sledgehammer' approach effectively deterred opportunistic AI-assisted plagiarism. This was evident based on the immediate drop in submitted essays with high levels of suspected plagiarism. At the very least, the approach seemed to encourage students to pause and consider the potential consequences of AI-assisted plagiarism.

I reflected on immediate challenges associated with this first phase shortly after its implementation. For example, collegial feedback via team meetings strongly suggested reliability concerns with AI-detection software, such as Turnitin or GPTZero. This concern that detection software alone is not a reliable indicator of AI-assisted plagiarism has subsequently been supported by literature (Acuyo Cespedes, 2025b; Giray, 2024). Reflecting, therefore, on the harsh consequences that wrongly implemented penalties based on false-positive AI-use results could have on students competing for scholarships, I settled on a policy of triangulation for identifying AI use. The rationale was that this cross-checking mechanism would help to mitigate this risk of inaccurate (unfair) penalisation. Triangulation required teachers to consult multiple avenues of investigation in order to confirm suspicions of AI detection in students' essays. Examples of these sources of suspicion included software detectors like Turnitin as well as comparative analysis of the essay in question to previously submitted essays. Students could also be challenged on the content of their submissions. Anecdotal evidence suggested that this triangulation approach provided temporary relief if not a long-term solution ("this works for now, it's more thorough" and "students have to actually write for themselves now"). The aim was to avoid penalising students based on any single source of suspicion.

3.2 Developmental Opportunities

After much reflection based on literature reviews, collegial debate and student feedback, 2024 presented an opportunity to build on the initial reactionary response to the threat of AI-assisted plagiarism. While I still reflect that the aforementioned initial stage had been a 'necessary evil' in the early stages of AI entering mainstream education on account of a lack of institutional preparedness (Acuyo Cespedes, 2025c), the raising of awareness and training on the ethical use of AI (Kong et al., 2023) was quickly becoming a prominent theme in widespread literature. This pivot towards upskilling was also informed by recent student feedback voicing frustration at the absence of this training component ("we need help instead of just penalties" and "why don't teachers explain AI cheating before making grades lower?"). The second phase therefore aimed for a more long-term mechanism that placed emphasis on developing students' AI awareness and literacy, instead of relying solely on the threat of policing and penalising offences. The aim thus shifted towards helping students to comprehend AI-assisted plagiarism as a concept, how to avoid it and, most importantly, why it is in their best interest to do so. This builds on lessons learnt from the previous year ("everything is about penalties" and "students don't always understand what they have done wrong"), by pivoting towards a more developmental approach. This second phase was thus underpinned by educating students to be more transparent and ethical in their use of AI, in a bid to promote student ownership over their own academic actions (Lodge et al., 2023).

With the above in mind, I instructed colleagues to avoid direct AI-assisted plagiarism penalties in the first semester for all except the most egregious offences (i.e. where more than 50% of a submission had not been written by the student). In lieu of the grade deduction, I encouraged tutors to follow-up on lesser offences via the regular feedback channels of lessons, one-to-one tutorials and Google Doc feedback comments. I provided colleagues with illustrative examples of target development areas to raise with their students. For example, paraphrasing strategies in cases where students were simply unable to reword information from academic sources (Hutson, 2024). My advice extended to questions that prompted critical reflection among students ("how would other students feel if this AI-generated work was accepted?" and "wouldn't it be more rewarding to learn to write this yourself?"). Extensions of this included a trial Turnitin submission was embedded early on in the course, to give students a chance to view and reflect on their own AI detection similarity reports. This developmental focus initiative led to lower rates of plagiarism in the subsequent semester and, more importantly, prompted greater student curiosity about how AI should and should not be used ("so brainstorming is fine, but I think not for big parts of my paper right?"). This was supported by student comments that specifically attributed their improved ability to paraphrase to their tutor's follow-up guidance in areas where AI plagiarism had been suspected. More importantly, anecdotal evidence suggested an improved perception of course fairness and respect from students ("I appreciate these explanations even if I still have problems with writing").

3.3 Proactive Curriculum Redesign

In 2025, two years after ChatGPT entered mainstream HE, it became increasingly clear to me that the second academic integrity initiative, though improved, was still ultimately reactionary in nature. This prompted the third and most current phase by gradually redesigning the programme's assessment and materials. This was carried out in a bid to proactively factor in the reality of increasing AI ubiquity across HE courses (Kovari, 2025). This was encapsulated by a shift away from single-essay coursework submissions, in favor of assessments that have since been assessed with greater regularity and have thus proved easier to monitor for AI-use. The focus is on the diversification of assessment to avoid over-reliance on any single testing vehicle (Khlaif et al., 2025). The literature trend emphasizes the need to design *for* (rather than respond *to*) AI plagiarism (Świecki et al., 2022). Examples of how this manifested in the case study in focus include a newly introduced weekly portfolio, which is written during class time and under teachers' direct supervision (Appendix 1). Additionally, more of the lesson material now refers explicitly to AI, in order to promote awareness of its potential strengths and weaknesses in a balanced manner. This contrasts with the absence of reference to AI in older versions of the programme's materials. Additional steps have included a plan to continue the gradual phasing out of the longer and more heavily weighted essay format assessments, due to their increasing vulnerability to AI plagiarism. At the time of writing, this was evidenced in the planned course changes for the upcoming 2026-27 academic year, which show a higher number of lighter-weighted and easier-to-monitor assessments (Peters, 2023). For example, I have extended the number of Integrated Skills exams, whereby students write assignments live under tutor invigilation based on reading extracts. While the students prepare for the nature of the task in advance, the actual exam text prompts are kept concealed until the start of the exam, which in turn minimizes the opportunity for AI plagiarism. Many colleagues have praised this proactive assessment pivot in contrast with the sluggish reactive responses represented in the previous two phases ("glad we're thinking about this in advance this year"). Students have also praised these planned changes in recent feedback ("less stress and pressure on one big essay").

In parallel with the above-mentioned redesigning of assessment, I have also initiated for more AI-related themes to be embedded into upcoming lesson material. This has been partly in response to concerns from colleagues that course material needed greater alignment with the updated assessment ("we've changed a lot of our testing in response to AI, so this should be reflected in lesson material"). They convinced me that the heightened focus on academic integrity that was being placed on assessment would be far more effective alongside explicit AI awareness-raising components in the lessons prior to these assessments. That is, taking further steps to ensure that lesson content constructively aligns with the assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2011). I therefore initiated the updating of some of our older course material with new lessons that were more immersed in an AI context. For example, a lesson on paraphrasing now includes a follow-up task that prompts students to evaluate various examples of AI-generated paraphrasing. The newly added AI-themes raise awareness while maintaining the integrity of the EAP course aims.

4. Conclusions

This reflective case study has investigated the evolving response within an EAP foundation programme in Kazakhstan to the rise of generative AI tools and their impact on academic integrity. Anchored in the author's leadership experiences and supported by faculty and student feedback, this study has illuminated the complexities and tensions inherent in addressing AI-assisted plagiarism across three distinct phases: zero tolerance, developmental awareness-raising, and proactive curriculum redesign.

The initial 2023 zero-tolerance policy (RQ1) effectively served as a rapid deterrent against opportunistic AI plagiarism amid widespread uncertainty among students and faculty alike. Despite this initial limited success, the evidence suggests that this blunt punitive tool alone was insufficient for providing the sustainable promotion of integrity that was being called for. Concerns about AI detection (un)reliability and consequent student frustrations with perceived (un)fairness highlighted the limitations of this initial reactive policy. This stage thus served its purpose as a necessary, albeit primitive, initial institutional response that bought valuable time for the development of the more sustainable subsequent approaches. The 2024 transition towards a developmental strategy (RQ2) fostered greater awareness and ethical understanding among students. Incorporating AI literacy and ethical use training alongside relaxed penalty frameworks alleviated much tension and improved perceptions of fairness within the programme. Importantly, personalized tutor support and feedback demonstrated positive impacts on students' attitudes towards plagiarism. This second phase therefore underscored the importance of implementing education and support as AI-assisted plagiarism deterrence, rather than relying solely on a 'stick' approach via assessment penalties. The 2025 phase that is current at the time of writing prioritizes the proactive curriculum redesign (RQ3) and thus represents a progressive and promising model for integrating AI realities into future assessment and lesson material. By implementing diversified, frequent, and directly supervised assessments, alongside embedding AI-awareness into lesson content, the programme has moved towards creating a sustainable environment. This both mitigates AI misuse and promotes critical engagement with AI tools. This forward-looking strategy aligns with emerging scholarship advocating design *for* AI rather than design *against* AI philosophies, thereby reducing faculty fatigue and fostering a culture of ongoing adaptation.

5. Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned conclusions, the following guidelines are proposed for EAP institutions to reflect on and customize according to their own local needs and conditions:

1. Adopt a Phased, Reflective Approach

Institutions should exercise caution when implementing responses to AI-related academic integrity concerns. The rapid development of LLMs suggests that new academic integrity concerns are likely to arise in future. Instead of aiming for 'quick and easy' solutions to these, a more measured trial and error approach is recommended.

This gives institutions the opportunity to pivot further towards actions that appear to yield positive results, while at the same time limiting damage caused by flawed initiatives.

2. Prioritize Student and Faculty AI Literacy Training

Given the relative infancy of the popularization of AI in education, institutions should assume that students and teachers alike still require significant guidance in using and making sense of LLMs. This initial lack of understanding acts as a catalyst for many of the challenges related to AI-assisted plagiarism. AI literacy should therefore be implemented from the early orientation stages of EAP courses and should then be supplemented with 'refresher' sessions throughout the academic year.

3. Redesign Assessments with AI in Focus

Frequent, smaller-scale, supervised assessments complemented with varied task formats can effectively reduce opportunities for AI-related academic misconduct and reduce overall pressure on students and teachers alike. The novelty and speed at which LLMs are evolving means that these changes should be planned at least one full academic year in advance. This allows for thorough piloting before the changes are implemented.

This reflective study contributes to the emerging discourse on how EAP leadership can navigate AI's disruptive challenges to academic integrity with balanced, constructive, and context-sensitive strategies. Despite these contributions, the study is limited in part by its reflective case study methodology. This calls for future investigations with similar focal points to collect empirical data from multiple universities (cases), which will serve to complement the current investigation's reflective findings based on a single institution.

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Ethical Statement:

This study was conducted as a practitioner-led reflective case study and adheres to the ethical standards for practitioner inquiry. All data, including anecdotal observations and informal professional feedback, have been fully anonymized to protect the identity and reputation of all individuals. While the observations were gathered through everyday professional interactions rather than formal research instruments, a process of member checking was employed to ensure voluntary and informed consent.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Writing Portfolio Sample

Task description

- 1) You will write a response consisting of one or more paragraphs, as determined by your tutor, to a provided prompt. The written response will be your own work without any tutor or AI assistance.
- 2) The prompts will not be related to the major assessments (RP and Viva) and you will not be allowed to work on those assignments as part of the portfolio.
- 3) You are not allowed to bring in material to help you answer the prompt. Notes are not allowed.
- 4) You will have an OWE Portfolio running Google Doc for these writings.
- 5) **40 minutes** will be given for you to complete your response.
- 6) This work will be marked as pass or fail depending on whether the task has been completed satisfactorily according to the Writing Portfolio Content stipulated below.
- 7) You will receive brief feedback. You could discuss the writing in office hours if you wish to do so.
- 8) The pass/fail will be recorded on Moodle.

Student Handout: Writing Prompts

Instructions:

Write at least 200 words on one of the following topics. Your paragraph (or paragraphs) should include a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence. You have 40 minutes.

1. Good Nutrition

The six food groups are vegetables, fruits, whole grains, dairy, protein (fish, poultry and meat), and fats and oils. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), a daily intake from each of these food groups gives us the essential nutrients to maintain a balanced and healthy diet.

To what extent do Kazakhs follow these guidelines? Why/why not?

2. Sustainable Businesses

Kazakhstan is transitioning to a green economy. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) defines a green economy as “low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive”.

All businesses have to make important decisions regarding their long-term social, environmental and economic objectives. How successful are businesses in Kazakhstan in balancing their economic growth with environmental and social responsibility, and in minimising their negative impact on our planet?