To Be or Not to Be: AI-Assisted Writing, Plagiarism and Academic Integrity in Higher Education

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AI has already changed higher education in very concrete ways – both in how teachers design and deliver their courses and in how students learn, write, and prepare assignments. Along with these changes, questions about academic integrity have become much harder to ignore. Many students are still unsure what counts as misconduct in an AI-assisted context, and where the line is between legitimate support and plagiarism. With that in mind, we conducted a pilot study to explore how often students use ChatGPT, what they mainly use it for, how they understand plagiarism, and whether their AI use is linked to academically dishonest behaviour. We also paid particular attention to environmental courses, where AI tools are increasingly used to explain concepts, summarize materials, and support project work. The study involved undergraduate and master's students from the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Serbia, using an online questionnaire distributed via the 1KA platform during the 2025/2026 winter semester. Findings highlight the need for further research on the role of educators in guiding AI use, addressing digital inequality, ensuring data privacy, and developing instructional frameworks that integrate AI while promoting academic integrity.

1   Introduction

> *"The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster*
> *than society gathers wisdom."*
> –Isaac Asimov

No invention in itself is purely right or wrong, it is the way that we use those inventions that will determine their nature. Such was the case with the invention of gunpowder, and such will be with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI).

AI has quickly become one of the most important technological advancements of the 21st century. It has reshaped whole industries, healthcare, the educational system, and our day-to-day lives (Binns, 2018; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2018; Ilcic, 2025). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), AI refers to "the capacity of computers or other machines to exhibit or simulate intelligent behaviour". Despite growing concerns about the use of AI and the clear need for procedures and regulations to guide its application, it should be emphasized that AI remains an excellent tool for necessary innovation and progress, if it is used in a responsible and ethical manner.

The application of AI in education has brought with it many challenges and changes. This affects both teaching practices and the ways students learn and complete their assignments. To this it should be added that all over the world students are increasingly using programs such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quill Bot, Scite, etc. (Al Azri et al., 2025; Walid et al., 2025). The adoption of these AI tools has enabled students to learn in a safe and personalized environment for better understanding of the learning material and finishing the lessons (Holmes et al., 2022; Edtech, 2020; Hennekeuser et al., 2024; Vieriu & Petrea, 2025).

However, as students use AI more, it raises questions about the quality of their work, the amount of work they put in, and the difference between using AI for help with their studies and copying entire papers. When it comes to "classic plagiarism", it must be noted that plagiarism as a phenomen is not a a simple issue (Ehrich et al., 2016). Its complexity stems from the fact that people may engage in this unethical behaviour for different reasons, ranging from time pressure and performance anxiety, to weak academic writing skills, unclear rules, and the belief that the risk of

being caught is low. In addition, plagiarism is not defined in a single, universally agreed way. Plagiarism can be defined as "the use of an author's words, ideas, reflections, and thoughts without proper acknowledgment of the author" (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001; Jereb et al., 2018; Larkham & Manns, 2002), as well as a "form of cheating and theft since in cases of plagiarism one person takes credit for another person's intellectual work" (Koul et al., 2009). What is certain is that "plagiarism is a widespread issue that undermines academic integrity, intellectual honesty, and innovation" (Amirzhanov et al., 2025).

Having in mind debates about considering the use of AI as plagiarism in generated texts (Susnjak & McIntosh, 2024), educators are increasingly concerned about how to define and detect plagiarism linked to AI tools – especially in contexts where clear institutional rules and procedures are lacking in both areas: AI use and academic integrity (Bozkurt, 2024; Primami & Latifah, 2025). There is an urgent need for clear rules and lessons on how to use AI in an academic and ethical way, because "with the rapid growth of digital content and access to online information, plagiarism has become increasingly sophisticated, requiring equally advanced methods for detection" (Amirzhanov et al., 2025).

When it comes to students, it should be said that their understanding and perception of plagiarism differs and often depends on their digital literacy, the stress they are under at university, and their ethics. Also, many students are not sure that AI-assisted writing constitutes plagiarism, especially in cases where the downloaded text is altered or paraphrased (Prashar et al., 2024).

Considering all the above, the authors of this paper conducted their research on the opinions and attitudes of students towards the use of AI, especially ChatGPT in higher education. BSc and MSc students of the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Serbia were surveyed in the winter semester of the academic year 2025/2026. This research represents the beginning of a future larger research that aims to evaluate the way students use AI in higher education, and define transparent and necessary rules that all higher education institutions should have, which will define what plagiarism is when using AI, and how it can be used while respecting academic integrity.

2   Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, the authors conducted a survey using an online questionnaire distributed via the 1KA platform during the 2025/2026 winter semester. The survey was filled out by 95 anonymous students from the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Serbia. The survey assessed their academic use of different AI tools (but with a focus on ChatGPT), their digital literacy, and their perception of using AI for plagiarism. The responses were collected and analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 26 programme.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions, beginning with demographic data such as gender, age, and year of study, and included a combination of single-choice, multiple-choice, and Likert-scale questions. The authors applied descriptive statistics for all variables. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine associations between gender and different uses of AI (e.g., coding, using it as a search engine, etc.), and between plagiarism blame attribution and personal plagiarism history. Independent samples t-tests compared male and female participants on digital literacy scores and frequency of ChatGPT use. Mann–Whitney U tests were used when normality assumptions were not met (gender differences in frequency of ChatGPT use). One-way ANOVA was then conducted in order to assess the effects of frequent use of ChatGPT on the student's perceived acceptability of AI-generated content. Spearman's rho correlations were also calculated to examine the relationship between digital literacy, ChatGPT use, and attitudes toward AI-generated texts. Multiple Linear Regression was then performed to predict students' perceived acceptability of ChatGPT use based on predictors such as their digital literacy, the frequency of ChatGPT use, their editing and verifying AI data practices, and whether or not students viewed ChatGPT as a form of plagiarism. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was applied to 15 sub-questions related to reasons for plagiarism, using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) = .718 and Bartlett's test $p < .001$ confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis.

3   Results and Discussion

Out of 95 respondents, 72.6% were female, while 27.4% were male. Since most of them were the same age and study year (66% fourth year students), and SPSS analysis showed there was no statistical significance (p>.05) based on these parameters, so these variables are reported descriptively and were not included in the main inferential analyses.

One of the questions in the survey dealt with the issue of time students spent online daily. More concretely, they were asked to assess the amount of time in hours ranging from "less than 1 hour" to "more than 10 hours". Here, the highest chosen option was "between 4 and 5 hours online per day" with the frequency of 40%, while 24.2% declared that they spend "from 6 to 7 hours", and 9.5% declared that they spend more than 10 hours online per day. This off course, includes not only time spent online for academic reasons, but for the means of communicating with their peers, pleasure, gathering news information and content creation (Zhang & Lv, 2026). No significant gender differences were observed in reported time spent online (chi-square test, p = .480).

When asked to report their digital literacy on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 being "I need assistance", 2 being poor, 3 being average, 4 very good, and 5 excellent), this young generation that spends so much time online reported themselves as "very good" and "excellent" (76% of students cumulatively). An independent-samples t-test was performed to analyze the differences in self-reported digital literacy scores between male and female students. The findings indicated that male students (M = 4.15, SD = 0.88) reported slightly higher digital literacy scores than female students (M = 3.97, SD = 0.71).

In regard to how often they use different online platforms and tools, ChatGPT leads the category with 43% of students answering that they use it "multiple times a day". The most frequently reported use of ChatGPT was obtaining explanations of specific terminology (71%). This was followed by using ChatGPT as a substitute for Google (61%), brainstorming (48%), summarizing texts (41%), writing parts of texts (36%), and translation (34%), structuring papers and presentations (25%), language corrections (24%), writing entire texts (17%), image generation (17%), help with coding (14%), and help with tables (9%). To examine the association between gender

and using ChatGPT as a substitute for Google, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between gender and using ChatGPT as a substitute for Google p = .021. Out of the respondents that stated that they use ChatGPT instead of Google, 81% of them were of a female gender and 19% were of a male gender. This is to show that there is a huge difference in how those of different gender search online. Hence, out of the respondents that stated they use ChatGPT for coding, 69.2% were of male gender and only 30.8% were of female gender.

Because it is generally established that ChatGPT can generate wrong or falsified citations (for example, non-existent article titles or incorrect DOI numbers), the authors asked students how frequently they check the accuracy of information gained from AI tools. The findings revealed that 40% of students checked the data occasionally, while 20% said they rarely verified the information. The following question asked students if they had previously acknowledged that they use AI tools in their papers. Nearly half (48%) reported never doing so, and 24% indicated they were not aware that they were supposed to. The fact that students are not aware of this shows that they do not fully understand the academic integrity in the context of new AI technologies. Recent studies have shown that clear rules for citing AI tools in papers are still not fully formed and are much needed (Matysik & Jaworski, 2025). When asked whether they think it is okay to use texts written by AI, 42% of the students chose a neutral answer, and 29% considered it completely acceptable, which shows that many of them have nothing against using AI in their writing and work on assignments at faculty.

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted in order to examine how acceptability ratings differed across ChatGPT use-frequency groups. The frequency of students' use of ChatGPT results in a significant difference in whether they considered the use of AI-written text in assignments acceptable. Overall, students who reported using ChatGPT more often rated ChatGPT use in writing significant sections of academic text as acceptable. Conversely, students only using it once a month obtained a mean acceptability rating (M = 2.57) a lower than daily users (M=3.17). The pattern emerged among groups with intermediate frequency use, as the students who used ChatGPT several times in a week had the greatest average (M=3.22).

These results may indicate the more students are exposed to AI tools the more comfortable they are with incorporating them into their academic writing. The survey results show that as many as 70% of students agree with the statement that plagiarism is wrong, but also that there is a significant lack of awareness and knowledge among students about plagiarism. Thus, 30% of students were not aware or were not sure that plagiarism is cheating, 23% do not know that there are different types of plagiarism, while one third of students do not know how to cite electronic sources, and the same percentage was in doubt whether they might be copying without realizing it. A one third of the students responded that they do not know how to cite electronic sources, and a same percentile was in doubt whether they might be copying without realizing they were doing so. Concurrently, 38% of students were unsure that their faculty effectively regulates plagiarism; more than half (54%) said they do not know whether there are penalties for plagiarism. Most importantly, 56% of student respondents are uncertain whether there is an overarching mechanism for monitoring academic honesty infringements and 57% are not sure whether there are national-level policies or information campaigns about plagiarism. With regards to ethics, the same finding is evident through the large scale and institutional and systemic deficiency of plagiarism rules, where students are confused by a lack of rules.

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind why students plagiarize, a factor analysis was performed on 15 survey sub questions regarding reasons for plagiarizing. The analysis aimed to identify themes or patterns within student responses. Five different factors were found using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation. These factors together explained about 69% of the total variance. These five factors correspond to distinct motivational categories underlying student plagiarism:

- Not knowing how to do research or cite sources correctly (examples of academic skill deficits).
- Not having enough time or motivation (having too many assignments or trying to save time).
- Problems with writing (not being able to get their ideas across or not being sure of their writing skills).
- Problems with the faculty (unclear assignment instructions or professors not talking about plagiarism enough).

− Deliberate intent to plagiarize (including intentionally copying to achieve better grades).

These results show that plagiarism is not caused by just one thing, but instead, it is caused by a complicated mix of personal, academic, and institutional factors. To deal with plagiarism, educators need to not only enforce the rules, but also educate on them, explain them, support, and communicate more clearly with students.

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the factors affecting students' level of acceptance of AI-generated papers. The dependent variable was the students' assessment of how appropriate it was to use AI to write large parts of papers (Q10). The model had six predictors: digital literacy (Q3), how often they use AI (Q4), whether they check the accuracy of their AI-generated content (Q7), editing AI texts (Q8), citing the use of AI (Q9), and the belief that ChatGPT-generated papers are plagiarism (or not) (Q16). The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F=8.21$, $p<.001$, which means that the group of predictors explained a significant amount of the difference in students' acceptability scores. The model explained about 36% of the difference in Q10 ($R^2 =.359$, Adjusted $R^2=.315$), which is a medium effect size. The belief that using ChatGPT is plagiarism was the strongest and most important negative predictor ($\beta=-.431$, $p<.001$). This suggests that students who perceive the use of ChatGPT as a form of academic misconduct are considerably less inclined to deem its application acceptable in academic writing. On the other hand, the frequency of AI use (Q4) was a positive and statistically significant predictor ($\beta=.182$, $p=.049$), which means that students who use AI tools more often are more likely to agree that it is acceptable to use it for writing papers. The other variables did not have any significant effects. However, digital literacy came close to being significant ($p=.094$), which suggests that it could be a trend worth looking into in future research. These results indicate that students' moral and ethical perceptions of AI-generated texts, especially their classification of it as plagiarism, are the primary factors influencing their acceptance of it. Moreover, familiarity and regular engagement with AI tools may enhance their acceptance in academic environments.

Responses from students about how much blame they think should fall most on students who engage in plagiarism (taking place within school walls) illustrated their individual and structural views. Only 26% of students believed the students had most

of the blame, but a much larger share – 42% said society itself has a role in how the students think about authorship. Students, therefore, view cultural and structural factors as major reasons for unethical behavior in relation to academic behavior. Other interesting responses included the internet (8%), AI itself (6%) and even nobody at all (10%). Fewer than 6% of students (4%) found professors, (2%) colleagues, (1%) the university responsible. This is an interesting and critical finding, but also a revealing one because it means students do not necessarily feel they share responsibility for what they decide to do. When students take the blame of plagiarizing to others, the strategy to preventing such act may need to include something more than student behavior. An examination of this phenomenon uncovered some large divergences in students' perspectives on who to blame for plagiarism. On the contrary, Group 2 (students who attributed the blame to professors) had the highest mean acceptance of AI-generated text (M=4.00, SD=1.41), whereas Group 3 (students who blamed peers or colleagues) had the lowest average acceptance level (M=1.50, SD=0.71). In Group 1 students attributed blame on themselves (M=2.92) and in Group 5 students to society (M=2.80) respectively giving them a relatively small perspective. By using statistical significance of (p=.038), another interesting relationship to the effect scale was observed between students' experience of getting caught plagiarizing and their assignment of blame. The results indicated that the most common blame attribution among students that had been caught plagiarizing was the students themselves; however, students who did not get caught showed a wider range of blame attribution. Identifying these patterns indicates that students' moral reasoning and accountability might influence their attribution of blame and their views about the role of AI in academic work. The good news: over 50% of the students (52%) said they had never plagiarized, while 41% reported plagiarizing without being caught and 7% admitted they plagiarized and being caught. To explore this in more detail, the authors asked the students when using ChatGPT constitutes plagiarism, and most students (65%) said it is when text is copied without changing it and without saying that the tool was used. This shows that most students know that AI-generated content that is not credited or edited goes against academic integrity standards. A smaller group (19%) thought that using ChatGPT for ideas or to help with structure, even if you made changes, could still be considered plagiarism. Intriguingly enough, 13% respondents believe that using ChatGPT is never to be thought of as a form of plagiarism because the tool is not a traditional type of author. This paints the landscape of the current state of mind among the respondents and controversy of

using AI tools, which clarifies that there is still big moral grey area around AI authorship. Finally, 32% of students believe that whether using ChatGPT counts as cheating depends on the rules defined by the course, professor, or university ethics standards. This shows that academic institutions lack the clear, consistent and precise guides for usage of AI tools, to which 63% of students agreed.

Finally, students were asked about their use of ChatGPT in environmental courses (e.g., LCA, eco-design, circular economy, ESG). The most common uses were explaining key concepts and terminology (64%), exchanging topics and ideas for projects (56%), and summarising scientific articles or reports (52%). These responses show that properly targeting student use within a course allows students to perceive AI as a tool to support learning, especially for understanding complex content and working with literature, and not just as a writing tool.

4   Conclusion

> *"May not machines carry out something which ought to be described as thinking but which is very different from what a man does?"*
> –Alan Turing

The conducted research showed that students have a wide range of opinions and behaviors when it comes to plagiarism and the use of AI in their education. For example, more than half of the surveyed students claimed that they had never plagiarized, but a large number of them (41%) admitted that they had plagiarized, but that no one had caught them. This speaks in favor of the presence of academic dishonesty that is not registered, which shows the need to strengthen institutional monitoring and support mechanisms.

Today's time is certainly characterized by the raising of AI, which has become a powerful and easily accessible tool, but the results of the presented research clearly indicate the necessity of developing institutional frameworks and guidelines for the adequate use of AI. This "management of the use of AI" will also result in responsible AI practices that imply a culture of academic integrity.

As generative AI tools like ChatGPT are used more and more in higher education, not only regulatory or technical issues arise, but also much more sophisticated ones related to creative processes and the right of authorship in cases when AI helps in the process of creating a task, essay, or work. In other words, if the text is made by a machine, can the student call it his original author's work? And perhaps the most important of all questions, how to teach students to be honest and adhere to academic integrity when the border between AI-generated text and human-generated text is getting smaller and smaller? The results of the presented research show that the current perception of students about the use of AI in education, as well as their behavior when using AI, represent the basis for further research.

Future research should include how students perceive responsibility in their joint work with AI, and how social and institutional norms affect their personal ethical principles. To this should be added the research of possible ways in which educational systems can promote critical AI literacy, i.e. "a set of competencies that enables individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool at home and in the workplace" (Kentz, 2025) while maintaining innovation and integrity.

Acknowledgment

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