
DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF ACADEMIC HONESTY: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN COMBATING PLAGIARISM IN TIMOR-LESTE

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Abstract: This study investigates the challenges of academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism, in higher education institutions in Timor-Leste, emphasizing the critical role of universities in promoting a culture of academic integrity. As the educational landscape in Timor-Leste evolves, the prevalence of plagiarism poses a significant threat to the credibility of academic qualifications. The study advocates for a collaborative effort between universities, government agencies, and international partners to develop robust policies and practices that promote research ethics. The research underscores the importance of cultivating a culture of integrity that not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares students for ethical participation in their future careers.

Keywords: *Academic integrity; plagiarism; higher education; educational policies; university role.*

Desenvolvendo uma Cultura de Honestidade Académica: O Papel das Universidades no Combate ao Plágio em Timor-Leste

Resumo: Este estudo investiga os desafios da desonestidade académica, particularmente o plágio, nas instituições de ensino superior em Timor-Leste, enfatizando o papel crítico das universidades na promoção de uma cultura de integridade académica. À medida que o panorama educativo em Timor-Leste evolui, a prevalência do plágio representa uma ameaça significativa à credibilidade das qualificações académicas. O estudo defende um esforço colaborativo entre universidades, órgãos governamentais e parceiros internacionais para desenvolver políticas e práticas robustas que promovam a ética de investigação. A investigação sublinha a importância de cultivar uma cultura de integridade que não só enriqueça a experiência educativa, mas também prepare os estudantes para uma participação ética nas suas futuras carreiras.

Palavras-chave: Integridade académica; plágio; ensino superior; políticas educativas; papel da universidade.

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Introduction

Academic integrity is a cornerstone of higher education, serving as a fundamental principle that underpins the credibility and value of academic qualifications. In Timor-Leste, a nation striving to enhance its educational landscape, the challenge of academic dishonesty, particularly in the form of plagiarism, has emerged as a significant concern. As the higher education sector expands, it becomes increasingly vital to address the factors contributing to academic dishonesty to ensure that the integrity of academic qualifications is maintained.

This study aims to explore the multifaceted nature of academic dishonesty within higher education institutions in Timor-Leste, while also evaluating the role of universities in fostering a culture of academic integrity. By examining the prevalence and various forms of plagiarism, the research seeks to identify the common challenges faced by students and faculty, including limited awareness, inadequate academic resources, language barriers, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, the study will assess existing institutional responses, such as academic integrity policies, faculty training, and plagiarism detection software.

Through this comprehensive analysis, the study aims to propose strategies for enhancing academic honesty, including improving assessment methods, expanding awareness programs, and implementing more effective prevention mechanisms. By addressing these objectives, the research aspires to provide valuable insights into the complexities surrounding academic integrity in Timor-Leste and offer practical recommendations for universities to effectively promote ethical scholarship. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of cultivating a culture of integrity that not only strengthens the educational experience but also prepares students for responsible and ethical participation in their future careers.

Research Methods

To achieve the objectives of this study, a mixed-methods approach is employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This methodological framework allows for a more comprehensive analysis by integrating multiple sources of data, thereby enriching the understanding of academic integrity issues in Timor-Leste.

To begin with, surveys are distributed to 55 students and faculty members across various universities in Timor-Leste. This survey aims to assess their perceptions, awareness, and experiences regarding academic honesty and



plagiarism. Previous studies have highlighted that survey-based research is effective in capturing attitudes and self-reported behaviors related to academic integrity (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012). By gathering quantitative data from a diverse group of respondents, the study can identify trends and patterns in perceptions of academic integrity within the local context.

In addition to surveys, semi-structured interviews are conducted with university administrators, lecturers, and academic integrity officers. These interviews are designed to provide in-depth insights into institutional responses and the challenges faced in combating plagiarism. According to Flick (2018), interviews are particularly valuable for understanding stakeholders' perspectives and institutional dynamics, which are crucial for evaluating the implementation and enforcement of academic integrity policies. This qualitative component allows for a richer exploration of the complexities surrounding academic dishonesty and the effectiveness of current measures.

Furthermore, document analysis is undertaken to review existing academic integrity policies, university guidelines, and reported plagiarism cases within higher education institutions. As noted by Bowen (2009), document analysis serves as a valuable method for assessing existing frameworks and enforcement mechanisms. This approach enables a critical examination of institutional commitments to academic integrity and helps identify gaps in policy and practice.

To ensure analytical rigor, the collected data will be analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and statistical analysis for quantitative data (Field, 2018). Thematic analysis allows for the identification of key themes and patterns within the qualitative data, while statistical analysis provides a quantitative understanding of the survey results. This dual approach ensures a robust and nuanced understanding of the academic integrity landscape in Timor-Leste, facilitating the development of targeted strategies to enhance academic honesty.

Understanding Plagiarism in the context of Timor-Leste

Plagiarism presents a significant challenge in higher education worldwide, and Timor-Leste is no exception. As Macfarlane (2014) points out, upholding academic integrity becomes increasingly crucial as education systems in developing countries expand. In this context, a recent survey conducted among 55 respondents from 18 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Timor-Leste, along with insights from several key informants,

provides valuable perspectives on perceptions, practices, and structural barriers related to plagiarism.

To begin with, the survey indicated that 63.6% of respondents were lecturers, while 25.5% were students, suggesting that most insights came from academic staff responsible for evaluating student work. Among the respondents, 63% accurately defined plagiarism as the use of someone else's work without proper citation, which aligns with the interviews conducted with lecturers Da Costa, Cecilia and Nina from UNTL. They described plagiarism as *“taking ideas and texts from other authors without proper acknowledgment, noting that students often copy and paste information from the internet without remorse.”* Similarly, lecturers Xisto Martins from UNPAZ and Augusto Da Costa the lecturer of CRISTAL highlighted the prevalence of plagiarism in student assignments, with Martins noting that *“students frequently copy from online sources like Wikipedia and fail to cite original sources, even when attempting to paraphrase”*. Da Costa added that *“students often modify assignments from seniors to evade detection, particularly in the absence of institutional archives and effective plagiarism detection systems.”* These findings resonate with Bowers (2001), who demonstrated that an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of plagiarism contributes to both unintentional and deliberate academic dishonesty.

The survey highlights critical gaps in Timor-Leste's educational system that foster plagiarism. A significant 49.1% of respondents believe that copying references constitutes knowledge sharing rather than plagiarism, reflecting a fundamental misunderstanding of academic integrity. This misconception is rooted in the national curriculum's failure to integrate robust referencing and citation skills. Without explicit instruction on academic norms, students often view unattributed copying as a legitimate practice, with 30.9% finding plagiarism acceptable and 12.7% considering it a valid learning method.

Moreover, the survey underscores a lack of awareness and resources for addressing plagiarism. For instance, 47.3% of students are unaware of plagiarism detection software, and 34.5% lack training in using such software. Additionally, 52.7% of respondents noted insufficient human resources for monitoring plagiarism, leaving academic institutions ill-equipped to enforce integrity standards. These systemic shortcomings create an environment where plagiarism flourishes unchecked.

The normalization of plagiarism in Timor-Leste can be analyzed through Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT-1977), which posits that individuals acquire behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge by observing and imitating others in their social environment. In academic settings, when stu-



dents observe peers or even instructors engaging in or tolerating plagiarism, they are more likely to adopt similar behaviors. Aderita, an educator from Dili Institute of Technology (DIT), noted, “When plagiarism becomes normalized among peers, it perpetuates further acceptance of the practice.” This observation aligns with SLT’s emphasis on modeling, where influential figures—peers, educators, or institutional cultures—shape behavior.

The survey data supports this perspective: the high percentage of students view copying as acceptable (30.9%) or a learning method (12.7%) suggests that plagiarism is embedded in academic culture. This normalization is further reinforced by the absence of consistent penalties or awareness campaigns, which fail to challenge the behavior. SLT also highlights the role of reinforcement; when students face no consequences for plagiarism or see it rewarded (e.g., through higher grades), they are incentivized to continue the practice.

The perpetuation of plagiarism in Timor-Leste has far-reaching consequences. Academically, it undermines the development of critical thinking and original scholarships, essential for fostering innovation and intellectual growth. Professionally, graduates accustomed to plagiarizing may struggle in environments that demand ethical conduct and independent work, potentially hindering Timor-Leste’s development in a competitive global landscape. Culturally, the acceptance of plagiarism risks eroding trust in academic institutions and devaluing educational credentials.

Furthermore, limited access to academic resources in Timor-Leste exacerbates plagiarism. According to the survey, 67.3% of students rely on free online content due to insufficient institutional support. This situation can be attributed to the Deprivation Theory, which suggests that individuals deprived of resources are more likely to engage in deviant behavior. Additionally, Strain Theory posits that when individuals experience barriers to achieving academic success, they may resort to dishonest practices, such as plagiarism, as a coping mechanism. Interviews with educators, including Nina from UNTL and Da Costa from CRISTAL, support this idea, highlighting that “limited access to resources leads students to rely on free online content, thereby increasing the risk of plagiarism. Language barriers and lack of access to academic databases further compound the problem, underscoring the need for institutions to provide students with access to resources and support to promote academic integrity”.

In addition to this challenge, a significant concern in the realm of academic integrity is the lack of technological support available to educational institutions, as many have yet to adopt plagiarism detection software like

Turnitin, leaving lecturers to manually identify instances of plagiarism, a process that is both inefficient and unreliable (Park, 2003). Survey data reveal several barriers to the adoption of these tools: 43.6% of respondents indicated that the costs are prohibitively expensive, 25.5% cited a lack of skills necessary to effectively utilize the software, 23.6% pointed to high licensing costs, and 7.3% mentioned poor internet connectivity as a hindrance. Supporting this, Da Costa and Cicilia from UNTL notes that:

Both students and lecturers struggle to use technology for writing, with many being unfamiliar with plagiarism detection software. As well as lack of financial resources to purchase these tools further impedes efforts to promote academic integrity and enhance the quality of education in Timor-Leste, highlighting the urgent need for institutional support and investment in technological solutions.

Considering these challenges, addressing plagiarism in Timor-Leste requires a comprehensive approach that includes developing standardized institutional policies for academic integrity. Survey results show that 50.9% of respondents advocate academic research training and 18.2% for workshops on citation techniques, indicating a strong need for educational support. Additionally, 34.5% reported receiving training on plagiarism detection tools, while 25.5% received training on ethics and integrity, revealing gaps in professional development for educators. An interview with a faculty member highlighted the necessity for structured training to empower educators in combating plagiarism. The Social Learning Theory supports this approach by emphasizing the role of observational learning in fostering a culture of academic integrity. Overall, this strategy aims to address immediate challenges and promote a long-term commitment to upholding academic standards in Timor-Leste.

The Role of Universities in Promoting Academic Honesty

The role of universities in promoting academic honesty is intricate and demands a robust, multifaceted strategy that encompasses well-defined academic integrity policies, comprehensive training programs, advanced assessment methods, and cutting-edge plagiarism detection tools to foster a culture of ethical scholarship. Survey data underscores the critical need for such measures: 50.9% of respondents stress the importance of tutorials and orien-



tations from lecturers on proper citation and referencing to equip students with essential skills for ethical academic work. Additionally, 12.7% advocate targeted campaigns and workshops to raise awareness, while another 12.7% highlight the necessity of specialized training in research ethics, particularly from authoritative bodies like the INCT. Others call for broader awareness programs to embed integrity into the academic ethos.

Central to this effort is the establishment of clear, concise, and accessible academic integrity policies that articulate expected behaviors and delineate the consequences of academic misconduct, thereby cultivating a strong ethical foundation within institutions. Survey findings reveal that 45.5% of respondents believe all researchers should adhere to stringent research regulations, including meticulous referencing and compliance with academic integrity standards. Furthermore, 43.5% emphasize the critical importance of upholding research ethics to maintain scholarly credibility. However, while 52.7% of respondents acknowledge that their institution's policy is well-defined, its dissemination remains a significant challenge – only 23.6% believe it is effectively communicated, 12.7% report the absence of any policy, and 9.1% note that a policy is still under development. This gap in communication is vividly illustrated by an interview with Cicilia, a faculty member at UNTL, who observed, “Many students remain unaware of existing policies, leading to widespread confusion about acceptable academic practices and inadvertently fostering misconduct.” This observation aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that insufficient awareness and inadequate training diminish students' motivation and ability to uphold academic integrity. To address this, universities must not only craft precise and transparent policies but also prioritize their effective dissemination through consistent, engaging, and accessible channels. This should be complemented by comprehensive training programs, including interactive workshops, online modules, and ongoing mentorship, to empower students and faculty to internalize ethical standards. By integrating these efforts with innovative assessment strategies—such as authentic, project-based evaluations—and leveraging advanced plagiarism detection technologies, universities can create a robust framework that not only deters academic dishonesty but also inspires a deep-rooted commitment to integrity across the academic community.

In addition to policies, training and awareness programs for both students and faculty are essential for promoting academic integrity. Survey results show that 34.5% of respondents believe regular training on plagiarism detection software is important, while 25.5% emphasize the need for ethics training. However, 25.5% report that no training is offered, and 10.9% men-

tion occasional training on manual plagiarism identification. Additionally, 45.5% advocate for discussions on academic research ethics, with 29.1% supporting student engagement, 14.5% endorsing collaborative efforts, and 10.9% highlighting the need for clear plagiarism policies. This aligns with the Social Learning Theory, which suggests that individuals learn behaviors through observation and interaction. By involving faculty in training initiatives and fostering ethical discussions, institutions can model integrity and create a culture of academic honesty.

Moreover, strengthening assessment methods is vital in discouraging plagiarism. The survey indicates that 41.8% of respondents believe assessments should incorporate oral exams and personalized research topics, while 30.9% advocate for monitoring alone, and 18.2% support the use of personalized research topics. Knez, McDonald, and Tansley (2018) argue that diverse assessment strategies, such as project-based tasks and oral exams, can discourage students from engaging in dishonest practices. In fact, survey results support the effectiveness of these assessment methods, with 41.8% of respondents stating that assessments are moderately effective, 34.5% deeming them very effective, and 14.5% considering them not effective at all. By designing assessments that require critical thinking, originality, and independent analysis, educators can create an environment where academic integrity is naturally upheld. Assignments that encourage collaboration among students and relate to real-world applications further reduce the temptation to plagiarize, as they necessitate deeper engagement with the course material.

Additionally, the implementation of plagiarism detection software is crucial. Survey results indicate that 54% of respondents prefer software tools for detecting plagiarism, while 34.5% believe that manual checks by professors, supplemented by software, are effective. Tools such as Turnitin and Copyscape serve as effective measures for identifying instances of academic dishonesty. Park (2003) notes that these tools help institutions detect similarities between students' submissions and existing academic content, thereby discouraging plagiarism. However, it is important to recognize that while these tools are valuable, they should complement educational measures rather than replace them. A balanced approach that combines technology with proactive educational strategies fosters a culture of integrity and accountability.

In conclusion, when universities integrate these strategies—clear policies, educational programs, robust assessment methods, and effective use of plagiarism detection tools—they create an environment where honesty and integrity are the standard. This comprehensive approach not only enhances



the credibility of the educational process but also contributes to the overall success of both students and faculty in their academic endeavors.

Institutional Strategies for Enforcement and Prevention

Institutional strategies to prevent and address academic dishonesty require a balanced and coherent approach that combines clear punitive measures with proactive efforts to foster a culture of integrity. A critical step is the establishment of clearly defined and consistently enforced penalties for violations such as plagiarism, cheating, and data falsification. Whitaker and Wilson (2015) emphasize that such sanctions are effective deterrents when applied fairly, a view supported by survey data indicating that 41.8% of respondents consider penalties effective. However, inconsistencies remain, with 27.3% reporting no defined penalty procedures and 10.9% viewing current sanctions as ineffective, highlighting the need for institutional clarity and consistency. Supporting this view, in-depth interviews with Da Costa, a lecturer from CRISTAL and Nina from UNTL underscore the importance of holding individuals accountable for scientific misconduct. Nevertheless, enforcement alone is insufficient; institutions must also promote academic integrity through awareness programs, ethical training, and the integration of integrity principles into teaching and research practices, thereby creating an environment where honesty and responsibility are deeply valued.

In addition to enforcement, promoting a research culture grounded in proper citation practices is essential for maintaining academic integrity. Survey data show that 50.9% of respondents see the need for training in academic writing, 18.2% request citation workshops, and 40% emphasize ongoing support. Others highlight the importance of clear citation policies (32.7%), self-tutorials (14.5%), and citation exams (20%). Early exposure to citation practices helps prevent unintentional plagiarism, fosters original thinking, and encourages the synthesis of multiple sources. Faculty members also play a crucial role by modeling ethical research behavior, reinforcing institutional values (Peled & Stead, 2017).

Complementing the establishment of clear academic integrity policies and comprehensive training, the provision of robust academic writing support is pivotal in empowering students to produce original, high-quality work while upholding ethical standards. Survey data reveal that students acquire citation skills through varied channels: 41% rely on personalized feedback from thesis advisors, which offers tailored guidance critical for mastering proper referencing techniques; 36.6% benefit from external tutorials, which provide accessible, often self-paced learning opportunities; and 23.6% gain these skills

through structured research methods courses, which embed citation practices within broader academic training. However, a significant gap persists in the availability of plagiarism detection tools, with 41.8% of respondents reporting no access to such resources at their institutions. Only 21.8% have access to Turnitin, a widely recognized tool for identifying textual similarities, and a mere 9.1% use Grammarly, which offers additional support for writing quality and integrity. This lack of access underscores a critical barrier to ensuring academic honesty, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

To address these challenges, universities must prioritize the development of comprehensive writing support systems, including workshops, tutorials, and dedicated writing centers. These resources are particularly vital for students grappling with language barriers or limited experience in academic writing, as they provide structured guidance to enhance skills in research, composition, and proper attribution. Writing workshops can foster practical skills through hands-on activities, while tutorials—whether delivered by faculty or peer mentors—offer individualized support to address specific challenges. Writing centers, staffed by trained professionals, serve as hubs for ongoing assistance, creating a supportive environment that encourages students to take ownership of their academic work. Such initiatives not only strengthen technical writing abilities but also cultivate a culture of academic responsibility, aligning with the findings of Harner and Davis (2019), who emphasize that well-resourced writing support systems contribute to long-term academic success by reinforcing ethical practices.

This issue is particularly pronounced in contexts like Timor-Leste, where systemic challenges exacerbate the problem. Da Costa, a faculty member at UNTL, highlights a critical obstacle: “One of the major challenges in Timor-Leste is the lack of plagiarism detection tools, particularly for Tetum-language texts. At the postgraduate level, such as in master’s programs at UNTL, the absence of these tools makes it difficult to effectively monitor academic integrity.” This observation points to a broader issue of technological and linguistic inequity, as tools like Turnitin are often optimized for widely used languages like English, leaving local languages like Tetum underserved. In contrast, Da Costa notes that countries like Portugal enforce rigorous standards, such as a maximum 5% similarity index for academic submissions, which serve as a global benchmark for maintaining academic quality and deterring dishonest practices. This stringent threshold not only ensures originality but also sets a clear expectation for students and researchers to prioritize authentic scholarship. The absence of similar tools and standards in Timor-Leste highlights a need for context-specific solutions, such as developing pla-



giarism detection software tailored to local languages or adopting alternative integrity-checking methods, like manual review processes or peer assessments. By investing in these resources and adapting the best global practices to local contexts, universities can bridge existing gaps, empower students to produce ethical and high-quality work, and foster an academic environment where integrity is both achievable and sustainable.

Challenges Remaining in Addressing Academic Integrity

Despite comprehensive efforts to promote academic honesty, significant challenges persist in effectively addressing issues related to academic integrity. A major obstacle is the ongoing gap in understanding what constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty. The survey results indicate that 50.9% of respondents reported receiving training in academic research, including workshops on citation practices. Specifically, 18.2% attended only workshops, 14.5% utilized self-tutorials, and 16.4% did not respond at all. This knowledge gap often leads to unintentional violations, complicating enforcement efforts. As Macfarlane (2014) points out, even with policies and training programs in place, many students and faculty continue to hold incomplete or inconsistent views about academic integrity. Supporting this, Da Costa, lecturer from UNTL highlighted in an interview that “many postgraduate students in Timor-Leste, especially those writing in Tetum, are unaware of what constitutes proper referencing, often due to limited exposure to academic conventions and insufficient instruction at earlier stages of their education.”

The survey also reveals that while 52.7% of respondents believe a policy is in place, it is not well disseminated to students. In contrast, 23.6% report that the policy is well communicated, while 12.7% indicate that no policy on academic integrity exists, and 9.1% state that the policy is still under development. Additionally, 52.7% of respondents express a lack of human resources to monitor academic integrity, underscoring the need for training for both lecturers and students, as well as increased awareness of the risks associated with plagiarism. Specifically, 25.5% noted a lack of training for lecturers, while 16.4% cited insufficient human resources for monitoring. Da Costa, lecturer from CRISTAL, emphasized that “the need for academic institutions to provide not just policies but also continuous training and mentoring; often, faculty themselves are unsure how to apply the rules consistently due to lack of clear institutional guidance.” Martins of UNPAZ echoed this, noting that “the absence of a centralized academic ethics committee or office makes the enforcement of rules fragmented and sometimes ineffective.”

Furthermore, structural limitations continue to hinder progress in addressing academic integrity issues. Specifically, the survey results indicate that 41.8% of respondents believe there is a need to create a specialized department focused on academic ethics, increase oversight on scientific work, and enhance awareness among students and professors regarding plagiarism prevention. Furthermore, the survey reveals that 41.8% of respondents suggest the implementation of software such as Turnitin and Grammarly for plagiarism detection. The limited access to academic resources and plagiarism detection software remains a significant challenge, particularly in developing educational contexts like Timor-Leste (Bowers, 2001; Park, 2003). Without sufficient technological tools and institutional support, educators struggle to accurately detect and address misconduct. As Da Costa of UNTL explained, “unlike universities in Portugal where similarity thresholds are strictly enforced, we have no tools to check Tetum-language texts, and that leaves a huge gap in ensuring fairness and accountability.”

Similarly, cultural factors also present unique challenges that intertwine with academic practices. The survey indicates that 49.1% of respondents perceive sharing ideas as normal, while still asserting that plagiarism cannot be tolerated. Conversely, 30.9% consider plagiarism an acceptable practice, and 12.7% believe that copying other scientific work is a legitimate form of learning. Only 7.3% reported no cultural influence at all. Sutherland-Smith (2010) explains that in many educational systems where memorization and knowledge-sharing are culturally ingrained, behaviors such as copying or collaboration may not be perceived as dishonest. This cultural acceptance, highlighted in the Timorese context by recent surveys, creates resistance to adopting Western notions of individual academic responsibility (Bertram Gallant, 2008). According to Martins of UNPAZ, “Many students still believe that reproducing a lecturer’s materials word-for-word is a form of respect, not misconduct, so changing this mindset requires more than just rules—it requires cultural transformation.”

Moreover, inconsistent enforcement of academic integrity policies significantly undermines progress in fostering a culture of honesty. The survey results reveal that only 45.5% of respondents believe policies are enforced consistently across all faculties. In contrast, 21.8% report inconsistent enforcement, 18.2% state that policies apply to some faculties only, and 7.3% indicate that no policies are enforced at all. This inconsistency can lead to disengagement and cynicism among both students and faculty regarding the importance of academic honesty, as noted by Whitaker and Wilson (2015). The root causes of this inconsistency often include inadequate training for faculty,



unclear procedures, and fears of damaging the institution's reputation. As highlighted by Da Costa of CRISTAL, Nina and Cecilia of UNTL, "in some faculties, cases of misconduct are taken seriously, while in others they are overlooked due to favoritism or lack of capacity to investigate properly."

Furthermore, collaboration between governing bodies and institutions is crucial but often encounters bureaucratic and resource-related hurdles. In this context, the survey results suggest that 45.5% of respondents identify a need for the creation of rigorous regulations and the allocation of budgets for purchasing detection tools, as well as providing training on academic ethics. Specifically, 30.9% advocate for the establishment of rigorous regulations, 16.4% emphasize the need for budget allocation for detection tools, and 7.3% call for academic ethics training. Eaton (2021) highlights that aligning national policies with institutional practices requires sustained commitment and effective communication, which can be particularly challenging to maintain over time, especially in resource-constrained environments.

In conclusion, addressing these challenges necessitates ongoing education, investment in resources, culturally informed strategies, consistent enforcement, and strengthened collaboration among all stakeholders. Only by tackling these complex barriers can academic integrity be fully realized and sustained.

Collaboration and Policy Recommendations

To effectively address the multifaceted challenges of academic integrity in Timor-Leste, a coordinated strategy involving government agencies, higher education institutions, and international partners is essential. Survey results show a strong consensus among respondents—45.5% believe that researchers must be subject to clearly defined regulations, particularly those ensuring proper citation and referencing. This reflects a broader need for strong regulatory frameworks, as emphasized by Altbach (2015), who argues that clear and enforced policies are critical for upholding ethical standards in academic institutions.

1. Strengthening National Regulatory Frameworks

Governments must assume a proactive and authoritative role in fostering academic integrity by developing and enforcing robust, comprehensive policies that set a national standard for ethical scholarship across all educational institutions. These policies should encompass several critical components to ensure consistency and accountability. First, mandatory regulations

for citation and referencing practices must be established and uniformly implemented across all academic institutions, from universities to technical colleges, to provide a clear framework for ethical academic conduct. These regulations should outline standardized citation formats, such as APA, MLA, or Chicago, and mandate their integration into curricula to ensure students are well-versed in proper attribution from the outset of their academic journeys. Second, governments must allocate dedicated budgets to equip institutions with advanced plagiarism detection software, such as Turnitin or Grammarly, a need underscored by 16.4% of survey respondents who identified the lack of such tools as a significant barrier to maintaining academic integrity. These tools not only deter plagiarism but also serve as educational resources, helping students understand the importance of originality through real-time feedback on their work. Third, governments should mandate comprehensive ethics training programs for both faculty and students, a priority highlighted by 7.3% of survey participants. These programs should cover research ethics, the ethical use of sources, and the consequences of academic misconduct, fostering a shared commitment to integrity across the academic community. Such training could include mandatory workshops, online certification courses, and faculty development programs to ensure educators are equipped to model and teach ethical practices effectively.

To ensure these policies are not merely symbolic, governments must establish robust monitoring systems to oversee implementation and compliance, addressing the significant gaps revealed by survey data. Notably, 52.7% of respondents reported a shortage of human resources dedicated to monitoring academic integrity, indicating a critical need for trained personnel to enforce policies, review submissions, and investigate potential violations. Additionally, 25.5% highlighted insufficient resources for training, underscoring the urgency of capacity-building initiatives within universities. Governments can address these shortages by investing in specialized roles, such as academic integrity officers, who would be responsible for overseeing compliance, conducting audits, and coordinating training programs. Furthermore, partnerships with international organizations or technology providers could facilitate the development of localized plagiarism detection tools, particularly for underrepresented languages, ensuring equitable access across diverse educational contexts. For instance, in regions like Timor-Leste, where tools for languages like Tetum are scarce, government-funded research and development could bridge this gap, aligning local practices with global standards, such as Portugal's stringent 5% similarity index for academic submissions. By prioritizing these measures, standardized regulations, technological investments, ethics



training, and robust monitoring—governments can create a cohesive national framework that not only deters academic dishonesty but also cultivates a culture of integrity, equipping institutions and individuals with the tools and knowledge to uphold the highest standards of scholarship. This holistic approach would also address the systemic inequities highlighted in the survey, ensuring that all institutions, regardless of resource constraints, can contribute to a global academic community rooted in trust and ethical excellence.

2. Institutional Implementation and Capacity Building

Universities are pivotal in translating national policies on academic integrity into actionable practices, fostering environments where ethical behavior is internalized rather than merely enforced. As Macfarlane et al. (2014) and Bretag (2016) emphasize, institutions must move beyond punitive measures to cultivate a culture of integrity that resonates with students and faculty alike. This involves a multifaceted approach to embedding ethical principles into the academic ecosystem.

A key step is establishing or strengthening academic ethics committees or dedicated units to oversee integrity initiatives. These bodies coordinate training, develop policies, and ensure consistent enforcement, creating a unified framework for addressing misconduct. Integrating academic integrity modules into orientation programs and course curricula is equally critical. By introducing students to ethical expectations early and reinforcing them throughout their studies, universities can instill a deep understanding of responsible academic conduct. These modules should cover plagiarism, proper citation, and the ethical use of digital resources, tailored to diverse disciplinary contexts.

Continuous professional development for lecturers is another cornerstone. Training in integrity and digital literacy equips faculty to model ethical behavior and address misconduct effectively, particularly in an era of evolving technologies. Workshops on detecting plagiarism, navigating AI tools, and fostering critical thinking ensure educators are well-prepared to guide students. Additionally, structured mentorship programs and peer-led workshops can engage students proactively. Mentorship fosters personalized guidance, while peer-led initiatives create a collaborative environment where students learn from each other, reinforcing accountability. Digital tools, such as plagiarism detection software and online ethics modules, further support these efforts by providing accessible resources to prevent misconduct. By implementing these strategies, universities bridge the gap between policy and practice,

nurturing a culture of integrity that empowers students and faculty to uphold ethical standards in academic and professional pursuits.

3. Promoting International Collaboration

The global nature of academic standards underscores the importance of international cooperation in strengthening academic integrity. Collaborative partnerships with institutions in countries known for robust academic integrity frameworks, such as Portugal, Brazil, Australia, Canada, and the UK, offer significant opportunities to enhance institutional practices worldwide. As Stappenbelt (2012) and Bertram Gallant (2008) argue, such collaborations can facilitate the adoption of best practices, ensuring that academic integrity is consistently upheld across diverse educational systems. These partnerships enable institutions to share proven strategies, such as integrating ethics education, developing transparent policies, and designing assessments that promote original work. Additionally, international cooperation can provide technical assistance for implementing advanced plagiarism detection systems, which are critical for maintaining academic standards in an era of increasing digital content. Faculty exchange programs and joint training initiatives further support this effort by fostering cross-cultural dialogue and professional development, equipping educators with the tools and perspectives needed to address academic misconduct effectively. Survey findings highlight the demand for such collaboration, with 38.2% of respondents advocating for the adoption of international policies to standardize integrity practices and 14.5% emphasizing the need for collaborative development of detection tools to combat plagiarism more effectively. Regional networks and alliances, such as the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), play a pivotal role in this process by serving as platforms for knowledge sharing and benchmarking. These organizations enable institutions to learn from global leaders, adapt successful strategies to local contexts, and establish shared standards that transcend borders. By leveraging these networks, universities can align their policies with international benchmarks, fostering a cohesive global academic culture rooted in ethical scholarship. Such cooperation not only enhances institutional capabilities but also promotes a shared commitment to intellectual honesty, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning. Ultimately, international partnerships create a dynamic ecosystem where resources, expertise, and innovations are exchanged, ensuring that academic integrity remains a cornerstone of higher education worldwide. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing the challenges of academic misconduct in a globalized academic landscape,



preparing students and faculty to uphold the highest standards of integrity in their scholarly pursuits.

4. Fostering a Culture of Integrity Through Education

Embedding academic integrity from the outset of a student's academic journey is essential for fostering a culture of ethical scholarship and intellectual honesty. According to a survey, 43.6% of respondents believe this process should begin at the undergraduate level through a multifaceted approach. First, integrating ethics education into early-year courses is critical. This involves embedding discussions of ethical principles, plagiarism, and proper citation practices within the curriculum, ensuring students develop a foundational understanding of academic integrity as they begin their studies. Second, transparent academic policies are vital. These policies must be clearly communicated, easily accessible to both students and staff, and consistently enforced to establish trust and accountability. Third, diversifying evaluation systems can reduce the pressure of high-stakes exams, which often tempt students to engage in dishonest practices. By incorporating varied assessment methods—such as project-based assignments, reflective essays, or collaborative tasks—institutions can encourage original work and critical thinking, aligning evaluations with real-world applications. As scholars like Bretag (2019) and Foltýnek et al. (2020) emphasize, fostering academic integrity goes beyond establishing rules; it requires cultivating daily academic practices that prioritize critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and intellectual honesty. This holistic approach ensures that integrity becomes an intrinsic part of the academic culture, shaping students' values and behaviors throughout their educational journey and beyond.

5. Encouraging Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

Finally, achieving sustainable academic integrity in Timor-Leste requires a dynamic, multi-stakeholder collaboration that unites ministries, accreditation bodies, student unions, and civil society in a cohesive effort to embed ethical scholarship within the national educational framework. This collaborative approach should prioritize several key strategies to foster a proactive, value-driven culture of academic honesty. First, transparency in research funding and output evaluation is paramount. Ministries and funding agencies must establish clear, publicly accessible guidelines for allocating research grants, ensuring that funds are awarded based on merit and ethical research proposals. Similarly, accreditation bodies should implement rigorous evaluation criteria for academic outputs, requiring institutions to demonstrate adher-

ence to ethical standards in research and publication. This transparency not only builds trust among stakeholders but also discourages practices like data fabrication or ghostwriting by holding researchers accountable to clear, measurable standards. For instance, adopting open-access repositories for research outputs, as seen in global best practices, could allow public scrutiny and ensure that scholarly work meets ethical benchmarks.

Second, the approach must balance clear consequences for academic violations with constructive interventions to promote long-term behavioral change. While punitive measures—such as suspension, grade penalties, or public disclosure of misconduct—are necessary to deter violations, they should be paired with rehabilitative strategies like ethics counseling and mandatory retraining programs. These interventions can help students and faculty understand the root causes of dishonest behavior, such as pressure to publish or lack of citation knowledge, and equip them with the tools to make ethical decisions. For example, a structured counseling program could involve workshops on ethical decision-making, guided reflections on academic values, and mentorship from faculty trained in research ethics. Survey data indicating that 12.7% of respondents advocate for ethics training underscores the demand for such proactive measures, which can transform violations into opportunities for growth rather than mere punishment.

Third, student-led initiatives are critical for fostering a grassroots culture of integrity. Encouraging student unions to develop honor codes—formal pledges committing students to ethical conduct—can instill a sense of personal responsibility and collective accountability. Ethics clubs, led by students, could serve as platforms for peer-to-peer education, hosting discussions, workshops, and case studies on academic integrity challenges. Peer accountability mechanisms, such as student-run review boards or mentorship programs, can further empower students to uphold standards within their communities. These initiatives align with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that fostering positive attitudes and perceived control over ethical behavior can strengthen students' commitment to integrity. For instance, successful models like student-led honor councils in Western universities could be adapted to Timor-Leste's context, with culturally relevant modifications to resonate with local values.

By investing in these coordinated, multi-stakeholder actions, Timor-Leste's academic institutions and governing bodies can shift from reactive enforcement to a proactive, values-based system that embeds academic honesty into the national educational culture. This requires sustained collaboration, such as regular summits between ministries, universities, and student



representatives to align policies and share best practices. Civil society organizations can amplify these efforts by launching public awareness campaigns that highlight the societal value of ethical scholarship, particularly in a developing nation where education is a cornerstone of progress. Additionally, addressing local challenges, such as the lack of plagiarism detection software for Tetum-language texts (as noted by UNTL faculty), requires innovative partnerships—potentially with international tech providers or regional academic networks—to develop context-specific solutions. By fostering transparency, balancing consequences with rehabilitation, and empowering students as active stakeholders, Timor-Leste can cultivate a resilient academic ecosystem where integrity is not just enforced but celebrated as a core pillar of educational excellence, setting a model for other emerging academic systems globally.

Critical Conclusion

This study exposes the persistent and systemic challenges undermining academic integrity in higher education institutions in Timor-Leste. While frameworks and policies formally exist, they remain largely underimplemented and poorly integrated into institutional cultures. The research reveals that academic dishonesty is not merely a matter of individual misconduct, but a symptom of broader structural issues—including inadequate policy enforcement, lack of institutional capacity, and limited access to essential tools and training.

Critically, the findings point to a widespread lack of clarity among both students and faculty about what constitutes plagiarism and academic misconduct. This gap in understanding—exacerbated by insufficient ethics education, limited faculty development, and the absence of robust support systems—undermines both prevention and accountability efforts. Furthermore, cultural norms around communal knowledge-sharing, while valuable, are often at odds with formal academic expectations, highlighting the need for localized approaches that balance global standards with contextual relevance.

Equally concerning is the inconsistent application of academic integrity policies, which have eroded trust in institutional responses. Without clear, transparent, and consistently enforced consequences, violations are perceived as tolerable or inconsequential, diminishing the legitimacy of academic standards. This inconsistency reflects deeper governance challenges, including underinvestment in quality assurance mechanisms and an absence of coordinated national oversight.

The study therefore calls for a paradigm shift—from reactive, punitive responses to proactive, preventive strategies. This requires a multi-level commitment: governments must establish and fund enforceable national policies; institutions must build internal capacity through training and infrastructure; and international collaborations must be leveraged to share tools, practices, and expertise.

Ultimately, fostering a sustainable culture of academic honesty in Timor-Leste demands more than procedural reforms — it requires a transformation of values. Academic integrity must be embedded not only in policies and curricula but in the everyday practices and expectations of academic life. Only through a sustained, collective effort can higher education institutions cultivate environments where integrity is internalized as a shared responsibility and foundational principle of academic excellence.



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