

An Empirical Study on the Influencing Factors of Academic Misconduct in Graduate Students—Based on the Comparison between “Double First-Class” non “Double First-Class” Universities

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Abstract: To address the current lack of targeted measures in graduate academic misconduct governance, this study analyzed 994 survey responses from students across four “Double First-Class” universities and 11 non “Double First-Class” institutions using SPSS 21.0’s linear regression method. Key findings reveal: (1) University type shows no significant impact on misconduct behavior, indicating uneven governance implementation; (2) “Double First-Class” universities misconduct is predominantly influenced by personal traits and faculty conduct; (3) Non “Double First-Class” institutions misconduct correlates with academic integrity awareness, institutional frameworks, and scholarly culture. Policy recommendations are proposed to enhance precision in misconduct governance, aiming to advance sustainable development in graduate education.

Keywords: Graduate students; Academic misconduct; Influencing factors

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1. Introduction

Graduate education, serving as a dual mission of cultivating high-caliber professionals and advancing scientific research, forms a cornerstone of China’s “Double First-Class” initiative. Addressing academic misconduct is crucial for its sustainable development. Preventing such misconduct among graduate students and fostering an ethical academic environment are vital to the success of this educational system.

Recent years have seen remarkable progress in China higher education: six mainland universities ranked within the QS World University Rankings by Subject (2025), with 436 disciplines securing positions in the ESI global top 1% (September 2025). While these achievements highlight China’s growing influence in global academia, recurring cases of academic misconduct continue to tarnish the reputation of Chinese higher education, drawing sustained attention from both domestic and international academic communities and the public^[1,2]. There is still a certain distance from the postgraduate education that people are satisfied with.

Research on academic misconduct abroad began in the 1940s, while Chinese scholars started focusing on this field

in the 1990s, starting relatively late. The factors influencing academic misconduct have long been a hot topic among international researchers. In contrast, studies on the governance of postgraduate academic misconduct in China still predominantly focus on macro-level phenomenon descriptions, with limited attention paid to academic.

Empirical studies and theoretical analyses on factors influencing academic misconduct remain scarce, resulting in ineffective governance measures lacking targeted approaches. This study investigates factors affecting academic misconduct among graduate students through a questionnaire survey of 994 participants from 15 universities in Shaanxi Province.

Using SPSS21.0 linear regression analysis, the research not only enriches existing scholarship on academic misconduct in Chinese graduate education but also provides decision-making references to enhance the effectiveness of governance strategies.

2. Literature review

Academic misconduct includes plagiarism, falsification of experimental data, failure to cite sources of others' literature, failure to participate in projects, and so on.

The results are signed, the results completed by many people are claimed as their own, and plagiarism of others results are carried out^[3-6]. With the increasing application of network information technology in the field of education, electronic dishonesty such as online selling or buying academic achievements, downloading and plagiarism has become increasingly prominent^[7,8]. The emergence and development of new educational formats such as MOOC, online education, distance learning, blended teaching, and "micro-master" online degree programs have led to new forms and characteristics of academic misconduct.

Long-term research by foreign scholars indicates that academic misconduct among university students worldwide continues to spread across nations, The number of outstanding students involved is increasing^[9-11]. This reflects the long-term, complex and urgent nature of the governance of academic misconduct, so it is necessary to carry out continuous and in-depth research.

International scholars have extensively examined how age, gender, academic year, grade ranking, average GPA, academic discipline, and parental education levels influence academic misconduct among college students. While multiple studies indicate male students are more likely to engage in academic dishonesty than their female counterparts, researchers have also highlighted gender socialization theory and structural theory perspectives, suggesting that women may demonstrate greater tolerance toward such behaviors compared to men^[12].

Due to varying levels of awareness regarding academic misconduct, master's students are more prone to engage in such behaviors than doctoral candidates. Cultural and ethnic backgrounds also significantly influence academic dishonesty among university students. For instance, Pakistani students, influenced by their tradition of valuing friendship, tend to be more tolerant of peers' academic misconduct^[13-15].

The personality traits of college students have a certain predictive effect on academic misconduct. Studies show that college students with strong self-control can inhibit the tendency to benefit and serve higher goals^[16]. However, college students with sub-clinical psychopathy are more likely to engage in academic misconduct. Additionally, those who enjoy video games or possess sensation-seeking personality traits are more prone to such behaviors^[16,17].

Utilitarian value orientation has an important influence on college students' academic behavior. Different from the emphasis on knowledge memory in middle school and the emphasis on knowledge understanding in college, the postgraduate stage pays more attention to knowledge discovery and innovation^[18]. The pressure of innovation, the pressure of employment and the increasing academic standards all pose challenges to the academic integrity of graduate students^[19]. Some college students put the cart before the horse to achieve certain purposes, pursuing immediate results rather than the improvement of their abilities, are more likely to engage in academic misconduct^[20]. For example, college students with performance goals are more likely to engage in academic misconduct than those with mastery goals^[21].

Furthermore, foreign scholars have deeply analyzed the internal mechanism of academic misconduct in college students from the perspectives of planned behavior theory, self-efficacy, social bond theory, self-determination theory, moral liberation theory and so on^[22-24].

The academic environment exerts a profound influence on academic misconduct among college students. The Honor Code, a traditional preventive and disciplinary measure against academic dishonesty, has been widely adopted by numerous American universities. According to Bernard E. Whitley's research, 50% of students at institutions implementing the Honor Code refuse to engage in academic misconduct, compared to 25% in those without such regulations^[25]. But Charles A. Malgwi argues that punishment is more useful in practice than the rule of honor^[26]. Teachers' attitude and behavior towards academic misconduct have a significant impact on students^[27]. Studies have shown that while 90 percent of teachers say they have warned students about academic misconduct, only 9 percent of students say they have received warnings from teachers^[28]. Teachers' indulgence, poor supervision, and unfair punishment of students' academic misconduct also led to the spread of academic misconduct^[29]. Although education can enhance the cognition of academic norms, the traditional academic ethics education model based on knowledge transmission and subject-object education thought ignores the subjectivity of students, and the effectiveness of education is not strong^[30,31].

Comparative studies between different types of universities constitute a crucial perspective in China's higher education research. Significant differences exist between "Double First-Class" institutions and non- "Double First-Class" universities in graduate student demographics, anti-plagiarism governance systems, academic culture development, ethical education, degree criteria, and quality evaluation mechanisms. This raises critical questions: Does university type influence academic misconduct among graduate students? Are there distinct contributing factors across different educational institutions? Current research on these issues remains limited, necessitating further empirical investigation.

3. Design of the study

3.1. Research subjects

This study examines master's students from four Double First-Class universities and 11 non-Double First-Class institutions in Shaanxi Province. 1,200 questionnaires were distributed, with 994 valid responses collected after processing (368 males, 37%; 626 females, 63%).

The valid response rate reached 82%. The survey included 8% valid responses. Among the participants, 206 individuals from Double First-Class universities (accounting for 20.72%, including Xi'an Jiaotong University with 40, Northwestern Poly-technical University with 42, Shaanxi Normal University with 56, and Northwest University with 68) and 788 from non-Double First-Class institutions (accounting for 79.28%, comprising Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology with 48, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology with 27, Xi'an University of Science and Technology with 62, Northwest University of Political Science and Law with 71, Xi'an Technological University with 85, Xi'an Petroleum University with 67, Xi'an Polytechnic University with 218, Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications with 51, Xi'an International Studies University with 58, Yanan University with 52, and Shaanxi University of Technology with 49 completed the survey.

3.2. Design of survey tools

Given the unique characteristics, sensitivity, and hidden nature of academic misconduct, measuring such behavior among graduate students remains a significant challenge in research. Some scholars argue that exposed misconduct often represents only the tip of the iceberg compared to actual prevalence.

Most studies employ self-report methods, asking questions like "Have you engaged in academic misconduct?" or "Have your peers engaged in academic misconduct?"

However, these self-reported approaches struggle to fully capture the accurate picture. Other researchers conduct sampling inspections of specific groups theses or academic papers, but such samples are often limited in scope.

Psychological research indicates that academic misconduct is strongly context-dependent. By creating empathetic, stakeholder-driven moral dilemmas, we can obtain more accurate assessments. This study therefore developed a five-item scale to measure graduate students' academic attitudes and indirectly evaluate their potential tendencies toward misconduct.

As shown in **Table 1**, the scale explains 51.225% of respondent's academic attitudes with a Cronbachs Alpha coefficient of 0.759, demonstrating strong reliability.

Table 1. Reliability analysis of academic attitude measurement of graduate students

	Factor loading	Cronbachs alpha
Attitudes towards academic misconduct by classmates	0.658	
The attitude towards being ordered to leave school for cheating in postgraduate examinations	0.780	
The attitude of a graduate student who was denied his degree for repeatedly downloading assignments from the Internet	0.749	0.759
The attitude of the students around me who were punished for academic misconduct	0.779	
What you might do about your classmate's academic misconduct	0.594	
<i>P</i>	0.000	
eigenvalue	2.561	
Explained variance (%)	51.225	

Based on a literature review and referencing academic misconduct scales developed by Roberts, Patty, and Muafia Munir, this study designed the "Postgraduate Academic Misconduct Influencing Factors Questionnaire" by integrating characteristics of Chinese graduate students. The questionnaire underwent Delphi method discussions and revisions among selected postgraduate students. It categorizes influencing factors into seven dimensions: personal efficacy, utilitarian value orientation, personality traits, awareness of academic norms, faculty behavior, academic systems, and academic environment (**Table 2**).

Items follow Likert scale format with five response levels from "strongly agree" to "disagree", coded as 1–5. Reliability analysis using SPSS21.0 showed Cronbachs alpha = 0.958, indicating strong reliability.

Table 2. Measurement table of factors influencing academic misconduct of graduate students

Dimension	Number of indicators	Example of measurement indicators
Individual effectiveness	3	Individuals are passive due to personal laziness or procrastination
Personal characteristics	3	Do it or don't, and if you don't get caught, you win
Academic institutions	3	Academic misconduct can be punished lightly
Academic atmosphere	4	People around me and seniors do this
Academic norm recognition	3	Lack of recognition and compliance with social norms
Teacher behavior	4	The teaching effect of the teacher is not good
Utilitarian value orientation	4	To be eligible for a scholarship

3.3. Research methods

This study utilized SPSS21.0 software for data analysis. The validity and reliability of the graduate academic attitude measurement scale were first assessed through factor analysis and reliability analysis. Subsequently, non-parametric tests were employed to compare academic attitude differences between "Double First-Class" universities and non "Double

First-Class" institutions. Finally, linear regression analysis was conducted to further examine how different dimensions influence academic misconduct behaviors among graduate students across various university types.

4. Research findings

4.1. Differences in academic attitudes of graduate students between universities with and without "Double first-class" construction

Before entering graduate studies, students' academic attitudes are shaped by factors such as family background, social environment, and undergraduate experiences, forming a foundational structure that constitutes the internal basis for addressing academic misconduct in graduate education. This study employs non-parametric tests to analyze differences in graduate academic attitudes between "Double First-Class" universities and non- "Double First-Class" institutions (as shown in **Table 3**). The results reveal no significant differences in academic attitudes between these two types of universities, a conclusion that contradicts public perception. This finding highlighted that while "Double First-Class" universities excel in multiple fields, they face similar challenges in managing graduate academic misconduct as non- "Double First-Class" institutions. It also demonstrates consistent internal foundations for addressing academic misconduct among students, indicating that external factors influencing academic misconduct governance will significantly impact graduate students' behavior.

Table 3. Analysis of academic attitude differences between graduate students in different types of universities

Type of higher education institution	N	Academic attitude of graduate students		Approximate significance (bilateral)
		Rank mean	Sum of ranks	
"Double first-class" universities	206	524.09	107963.50	0.128
Non-Double "first-class" construction universities	788	490.55	386551.50	

* $P < 0.1$, ** $P < 0.05$, *** $P < 0.01$

4.2. Analysis of influencing factors of academic misconduct in graduate students

This paper uses linear regression to analyze the influence of personal efficacy, utilitarian value orientation, individual personality characteristics, academic norm cognition degree, teacher behavior, academic system, and academic environment on graduate students' academic misconduct behavior (shown in **Table 4**).

Table 4. Analysis of factors influencing academic misconduct of graduate students

Model	Standard coefficient trial version	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics VIF
(Constant)	-	16.590	0.000***	-
Individual effectiveness	-	-	-	-
Personal characteristics	0.177	3.391	0.001***	2.904
Academic institutions	0.171	3.855	0.000***	2.100
Academic atmosphere	-0.143	-3.160	0.002***	2.174
Academic norm recognition	0.134	2.570	0.010**	2.884
Teacher behavior	-0.090	-2.307	0.021**	1.629
Utilitarian value orientation	-0.077	-1.974	0.049**	1.639

* $P < 0.1$, ** $P < 0.05$, *** $P < 0.01$

Beyond individual efficacy, factors such as graduate students' personality traits, utilitarian value orientations, and understanding of academic norms all particularly external elements like academic systems, scholarly environments, and faculty conduct collectively influence academic misconduct. Among these, academic systems exert the most significant impact on students' scholarly attitudes. These systems encompass regulations governing the definition, prevention, monitoring, punishment, and education regarding academic misconduct, along with their enforcement mechanisms. While international universities explicitly oppose academic misconduct through measures like orientation manuals and dedicated websites, Chinese institutions still maintain relatively vague definitions of such behavior. Institutional gaps persist, especially in unified awareness of misconduct consequences, coupled with lax supervision and lenient disciplinary actions that inadvertently encourage opportunistic tendencies and unethical practices. The notable effects of personality traits and academic climate further underscore the urgent need to strengthen scholarly culture development and enhance academic ethics education.

Tables 5 and **6** present the influencing factors of academic misconduct among graduate students in “Double First-Class” universities and non “Double First-Class” institutions, revealing distinct differences between the two groups. Notably, personal personality traits and faculty behavior significantly impact academic misconduct in “Double First-Class” universities, reflecting their overall strengths in academic systems, scholarly environment, student efficacy, and value orientation. However, these institutions should focus on improving teaching quality through supply-side measures like enhancing instructional effectiveness, assigning tasks appropriately, and reducing external pressures that may induce academic misconduct. In contrast, graduate students in non “Double First-Class” institutions show a significant correlation between their awareness of academic norms and misconduct behaviors, indicating insufficient depth and breadth in academic ethics education at non “Double First-Class” universities, as well as weak practical effectiveness. Additionally, these institutions must refine and optimize their academic systems and scholarly environments.

Table 5. Analysis of influencing factors of academic misconduct among graduate students in “Double First-Class” universities

model	Standard coefficient trial version	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics VIF
(Constant)		9.224	0.000***	
Personal characteristics	0.245	3.249	0.001***	1.228
Teacher behavior	-0.224	-2.973	0.003***	1.228

* $P < 0.1$, ** $P < 0.05$, *** $P < 0.01$

Table 6. Analysis of influencing factors of academic misconduct among graduate students in non “Double First-Class” universities

Model	Standard coefficient trial version	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics VIF
(Constant)		14.716	0.000***	
Academic norm recognition	0.232	4.562	0.000***	2.196
Academic institutions	0.158	3.402	0.001***	1.831
Academic atmosphere	-0.147	-3.019	0.003***	2.002

* $P < 0.1$, ** $P < 0.05$, *** $P < 0.01$

The disparity between the two indicates uneven development in China's postgraduate academic misconduct governance. Marked by the 2002 Ministry of Education's “Guidelines on Strengthening Academic Ethics” and the 2011

China Association for Science and Technology and Ministry of Education's "Notice on Promoting Scientific Ethics and Academic Integrity Education", China's postgraduate misconduct governance has progressed through two phases: establishing policy frameworks and fostering academic standards. The 2016 Ministry of Education's "Measures for Preventing and Addressing Academic Misconduct in Higher Education Institutions" marked a new phase.

However, this study reveals distinct factors influencing misconduct among postgraduates in Double First-Class universities versus non Double First-Class institutions. Non Double First-Class universities, in particular, face incomplete academic systems, insufficient awareness of academic norms, and inadequate policy implementation, with the second phase objectives remaining unfulfilled. Given these challenges and institutional gaps, targeted precision governance of postgraduate misconduct has become urgent and essential, requiring tailored approaches that address each university's unique characteristics.

5. Research conclusions and policy recommendations

5.1. Research conclusions

Through questionnaire surveys and data analysis of 994 graduate students from four "Double First-Class" universities and eleven non- "Double First-Class" institutions in Shaanxi Province, this study reveals three key findings

- (1) There is no significant difference in academic attitudes toward misconduct between these two groups, with no notable impact from university type on academic dishonesty.
- (2) Academic misconduct among graduate students stems from multiple factors, particularly the combined influence of personal personality traits, academic systems, and scholarly environment. The development of misconduct governance remains uneven across institutions, highlighting the persistent challenges in fostering academic integrity and moral education.
- (3) Distinct influencing factors exist between the two groups, necessitating targeted strategies to enhance the effectiveness of misconduct prevention measures.

5.2. Policy recommendations

Adopting a graduate-centered approach to enhance the effectiveness of academic misconduct governance. Academic integrity is both an inherent requirement of graduate education and a defining element of students' core competencies, forming the foundation for implementing socialist core values in this field. In addressing academic misconduct among graduate students, we should respect their autonomy by shifting focus from prohibitions to guidance and support for proper conduct. This aims to strengthen students' self-discipline and critical judgment through innovative concepts, platforms, models, content, and methodologies. Targeted measures should be implemented to address specific contributing factors across different universities, particularly leveraging supervisors and academic departments roles in misconduct prevention. By integrating ethical education into educational practices, we can effectively improve governance outcomes and steer graduate students' scholarly conduct toward positive development.

Promote supply-side reforms to enhance the governance capacity for academic misconduct in Double First-Class universities. Cultivating top-tier talent remains a defining feature of this initiative. Such talents must adhere to academic ethics and standards. Given that research achievements critically influence rankings in global academic benchmarks, including Shanghai Ranking, THE, US News, and QS, the excessive focus on these metrics inevitably strains the balance between academic research and talent development^[32]. This also intensifies the pressure on graduate students, particularly doctoral candidates, to produce high-level innovative achievements. The study reveals that individual personality traits and faculty behaviors significantly influence academic misconduct among postgraduate students in Double First-Class universities. These factors manifest through unsatisfactory teaching performance, instructors (supervisors) failure to provide objective evaluations during academic activities, abrupt task assignments that hinder preparation, and tasks lacking substantive value. To address these issues, Double First-Class universities should align with global academic governance

standards for world-class institutions. By implementing comprehensive reforms in educational practices and talent development from the supply side, these universities can establish a holistic system for preventing academic misconduct across all personnel, processes, and stages. This approach will ultimately create a supportive environment for graduate students' academic growth.

Strengthen institutional support to address governance gaps in academic misconduct at non "Double First-Class" universities. This study reveals uneven development in China postgraduate academic misconduct governance, particularly evident in three aspects

- (1) Under-representation of postgraduates in understanding misconduct definitions, manifestations, and consequences across non "Double First-Class" institutions.
- (2) Acceptance of behaviors deemed non-crisis situations as usual, undermining academic integrity.
- (3) Universities simplistically equating misconduct detection to thesis plagiarism checks, adopting lenient or even permissive attitudes toward violations while neglecting enforcement.

The academic climate remains problematic, with misconduct tactics being widely circulated among students. Postgraduates, especially in humanities often reduce academic standards to merely avoiding 20% plagiarism rates, resorting to excessive text polishing. To address these issues, non "Double First-Class" universities must have criteria below.

- (1) Establish comprehensive governance frameworks
- (2) Enhance foundational infrastructure
- (3) Implement extensive academic ethics education to reinforce students' awareness of scholarly norms, thereby cultivating a robust academic culture rooted in ethical principles.

Thus, a good academic atmosphere with integrity and avoid a governance landscape of academic misconduct would be expected.

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