Ethical Awareness of ChatGPT Use in Academic Writing: Integrity Concerns, Policy Support, and Assessment Trust Among Tertiary Students

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ABSTRACT

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT are rapidly entering students' academic writing practices, yet institutions continue to face uncertainty about academic integrity, disclosure expectations, and fairness in assessment. This study reports a focused analysis of tertiary students' ethical awareness regarding AI-assisted academic writing. A cross-sectional online survey was administered to 41 tertiary students with prior experience using AI tools. Three closed-ended indicators captured (i) concern about academic integrity, (ii) support for institutional AI-use guidelines, and (iii) acceptability of AI-supported grading. An open-ended prompt elicited perceived ethical risks and recommendations for responsible use. Descriptive statistics and inductive thematic analysis were applied. Results show very high integrity concern (92.7% somewhat/very concerned) and strong endorsement for institutional guidelines (75.6% agree/strongly agree). For AI-supported grading, most respondents preferred a hybrid approach combining AI and human evaluation (56.1%), while 19.5% believed AI could assess fairly. Qualitative responses triangulated these patterns, emphasising plagiarism/originality risks, overreliance, and distrust of fully automated evaluation. The findings support the need for explicit university policies and ethics-oriented AI literacy that strengthens students' judgement and responsible decision-making in AI-assisted writing.

Keywords: generative AI; ChatGPT; academic integrity; ethical awareness; assessment ethics; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Since its launch in November 2022, ChatGPT, a Generative Pre-trained Transformer developed by OpenAI, has gained widespread attention and attracted over 200 million registered users worldwide. ChatGPT is a free online artificial intelligence (AI) tool that can generate human-like responses, answer questions, and produce different types of written content, such as essays, poems, songs, and computer programs. The system is based on a machine learning model trained using large amounts of online text data available up to 2021. Notably, ChatGPT reached one million users within five days after the release of its prototype. This rapid growth was much faster compared to other popular digital platforms, such as Facebook, which took about ten months, and Netflix, which required three and a half years to achieve the same number of users (Jolly, 2023).

Generative AI chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT) can produce fluent text and are increasingly used by students for academic writing activities such as planning, summarising sources, and language refinement (Kasneci et al., 2023). Alongside these benefits, higher education has raised renewed concerns about academic integrity, blurred authorship, and the difficulty of distinguishing legitimate support from misconduct (Cotton et al., 2024; Thorp, 2023). Integrity concerns can also shape adoption behaviour and strengthen expectations for institutional governance (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023).

Assessment is a particularly sensitive domain. Students may accept AI assistance for learning while remaining uneasy about AI being used to evaluate their work, especially where transparency, accountability, and error risks are unclear (Evangelista, 2025; Zhai et al., 2024). Although ChatGPT is often described as a major technological advancement with strong potential in information search, interactive communication, and content creation, its

use in academic contexts has raised several concerns. Many educators are worried that the use of ChatGPT in academic writing may lead to ethical issues, including plagiarism, contract cheating, and other forms of academic misconduct. Despite fast-growing research on AI use in education, ethical awareness is often treated as secondary within broader studies of usefulness or satisfaction. A focused, ethics-first analysis can provide actionable evidence for policy design by documenting students' integrity concerns, their demand for guidelines, and their trust conditions for AI-supported grading.

Accordingly, this study examines tertiary students' ethical awareness of ChatGPT use in academic writing and addresses the following research questions:

• RQ1: What level of academic integrity concern do students report when using ChatGPT for academic writing tasks?

• RQ2: To what extent do students support institutional guidelines for AI use in academic work?

• RQ3: How acceptable do students find AI-supported grading, and under what conditions?

The remainder of this paper reviews related scholarship on academic integrity and assessment ethics in the context of generative AI, describes the research method, presents the results, and discusses implications for institutional policy and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic integrity is widely cited as one of the most pressing risks of generative AI in higher education. Bin-Nashwan et al. (2023) report that integrity concerns can negatively influence adoption behaviour, strengthening the argument for clearer principles on AI use in academic contexts. Cotton et al. (2024) likewise emphasise the challenges of AI-assisted cheating and the need to adapt assessment practices. At a conceptual level, Thorp (2023) argues that AI systems should not be treated as authors, reinforcing accountability and attribution. cDespite its potential in assisting Academic writing, at the same time, some professionals oppose the use of ChatGPT in academic writing and highlight several ethical concerns. They argue that excessive reliance on this tool may negatively affect students' writing development, creativity, and originality, as it may limit students' ability to generate their own ideas and express personal viewpoints. In addition, concerns have been raised regarding intellectual property, as students may use AI-generated content without proper referencing or verification of accuracy. Issues of fairness and accessibility are also noted, as not all students have equal access to the technology or the necessary skills to use it effectively (Moosmosis et al., 2022).

Beyond integrity, ethical issues also relate to cognitive engagement and overreliance. Zhai et al. (2024) synthesise evidence that reliability and ethical issues (e.g., hallucinations) can contribute to overreliance, affecting decision-making and performance. In assessment settings, Evangelista (2025) argues that institutions must rethink assessment design and ethical AI policy to protect integrity and ensure accountability. Collectively, prior work supports examining ethical awareness through three lenses: integrity concern, support for institutional guidance, and perceived fairness and acceptability of AI involvement in evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to capture students' ethical awareness toward AI-assisted academic writing at a single point in time. Survey methods are appropriate for documenting perceptions and attitudes across a defined sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

B. Participants

Participants were 41 tertiary students from multiple academic programmes who regularly completed academic writing tasks and reported prior experience using AI tools for academic purposes. Convenience sampling was used based on accessibility (Etikan et al., 2016).

C. Instrument

The questionnaire included three ethical-awareness indicators aligned with literature emphasising integrity concern, policy clarity, and assessment ethics (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024; Evangelista, 2025). Items asked respondents: (1) the extent of concern about academic integrity when using AI tools; (2) whether universities should set AI-use guidelines; and (3) their comfort with lecturers using AI to evaluate assignments. A short open-ended prompt invited respondents to describe ethical concerns and recommendations for responsible use.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was administered online with voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Open-ended responses were analysed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring concerns and recommendations that contextualise the quantitative patterns.

RESULTS

Tables I–III present the frequency distributions for the three ethical-awareness indicators. Table IV summarises themes from the open-ended responses.

TABLE I ACADEMIC INTEGRITY CONCERN WHEN USING AI TOOLS (RQ1)

Response	n	%
Very concerned	28	68.3
Somewhat concerned	10	24.4
Neutral	3	7.3

Note. N = 41.

TABLE II SUPPORT FOR INSTITUTIONAL GUIDELINES ON AI USE (RQ2)

Response	n	%
Strongly agree	16	39.0
Agree	15	36.6
Neutral	10	24.4

Note. N = 41.

TABLE III ACCEPTABILITY OF AI-SUPPORTED GRADING (RQ3)

Response	n	%
Yes, I believe AI can assess fairly	8	19.5
Yes, but only if combined with human evaluation	23	56.1
Neutral	7	17.1
No, I prefer human evaluation	2	4.9
No, I strongly oppose AI grading	1	2.4

Note. N = 41.

TABLE IV OPEN-ENDED ETHICAL CONCERNS: THEMES AND EXAMPLE EXCERPTS

Theme	n	%	Example excerpt (abridged)
Plagiarism / originality risks	10	35.7	"AI tools can make plagiarism easier, raising questions about originality and ethics in student work."
Overreliance / reduced effort	8	28.6	"Student become lazy and unmotivated."

Inaccuracy / hallucination	5	17.9	"The AI may create things up."
Assessment fairness / trust	4	14.3	"AI can't fully understand my work like a lecturer."

Note. Open-ended responses n = 28. Excerpts are lightly edited for brevity and anonymity.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an ethics-focused snapshot of tertiary students' views on responsible ChatGPT use in academic writing. The dominant pattern is high integrity concern alongside strong expectations for institutional governance. The finding that 92.7% of respondents were somewhat or very concerned aligns with prior work positioning generative AI as a challenge to authorship boundaries and academic integrity (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). Students' strong support for university guidelines (75.6% agree or strongly agree) reinforces calls for clearer, stakeholder-informed AI policies and explicit disclosure expectations (Cotton et al., 2024; Evangelista, 2025).

Assessment ethics emerged as a key condition for acceptability. Most students preferred AI involvement only when combined with human evaluation, suggesting that accountability and context-sensitive judgement remain central to trust in grading. This preference is consistent with concerns about reliability and overreliance, including the risk of accepting AI output without sufficient verification (Zhai et al., 2024). Open-ended themes— plagiarism/originality risks, overreliance, and hallucination concerns—triangulate the quantitative results and indicate that ethics is experienced as an immediate practical risk. Taken together, the findings support a balanced institutional response: specify permissible uses, require disclosure where appropriate, and embed ethics-oriented AI literacy that teaches verification, paraphrasing boundaries, and reflective decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Students in this survey demonstrated high ethical awareness of integrity risks associated with ChatGPT-assisted academic writing. They strongly supported institutional guidance and expressed limited trust in fully automated grading, preferring human oversight when AI is used in evaluation. These results suggest that effective governance should combine clear policy (what is allowed, what must be disclosed, and what constitutes misconduct) with pedagogy that strengthens ethical judgement and responsible AI use.

The findings of this study offer several important implications for educational practice and curriculum development in the context of AI-assisted academic writing.

First, the study highlights the need for clear institutional guidelines on the ethical use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in academic writing. Educators and institutions should ensure that students understand academic integrity policies, including the requirement to acknowledge and reference the use of AI-generated content appropriately.

Second, the findings suggest that digital literacy and AI awareness should be integrated into the curriculum. Students need explicit instruction on how AI tools generate content, their limitations, and the importance of verifying information. Although AI-generated text may appear authoritative, students must be equipped with critical evaluation skills and encouraged to use AI tools as a support for research and writing rather than a replacement for independent thinking.

Third, the study raises concerns related to equity and access. Not all students have equal access to AI technologies or the skills required to use them effectively. Institutions should therefore consider providing adequate technological resources, technical support, and training to ensure fair learning opportunities.

Finally, the study implies that educators may need to reconsider writing pedagogy and assessment design in response to the growing presence of AI tools. Emphasising writing as a process of thinking, valuing student voice, and designing assessments that promote critical thinking may help reduce over-reliance on AI while supporting meaningful learning.

Future research should replicate this work with larger and more diverse samples and develop a validated multi-item ethical awareness scale covering integrity knowledge, disclosure norms, moral reasoning, and perceived

fairness. Longitudinal and intervention studies (e.g., AI literacy training) can test whether clearer policies and ethics education improve students' decision-making and reduce overreliance risks over time.

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