

Challenges of University Students in Negotiating Academic Integrity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence in Open and Distance Learning Assessment

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools have emerged as a transformative force in higher education, their impact especially significant within open and distance learning (ODL) modalities in which assessment practices depend on trust, autonomy, and self-regulated learning, thereby fundamentally challenging traditional notions of academic integrity. This qualitative inquiry examined how students experience and negotiate academic integrity while using AI technologies in assessed tasks within the ODL context of a Malaysian institution. Data were collected from ten purposively sampled Open University Malaysia students through semi-structured interviews and analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. Analysis revealed four overarching themes: (a) ambiguity in institutional AI policies, (b) students' moral reasoning and self-regulation, (c) contextual pressures and assessment design, and (d) navigating the boundary between assistance and misconduct. The findings indicate that students occupy a complex ethical space shaped by conflicting institutional messaging, competing life demands, and evolving perceptions of AI's role in the learning process, and that they must continually negotiate between their own ethical initiative and an ambiguous institutional environment. This study contributes empirical evidence to the growing discourse on AI governance in higher education, grounded specifically in the Malaysian ODL context, and carries practical implications for ODL assessment design, academic integrity policy, and digital literacy education.

Keywords: ChatGPT, higher education, Malaysia, moral reasoning, qualitative research, reflexive thematic analysis

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools into university students' academic lives represents one of the most significant disruptions to higher education in recent decades. Following, in particular, the public release of the large language model application ChatGPT in late 2022, students have demonstrated a readiness to use such tools for a wide range of academic tasks, including drafting essays, synthesising literature, and preparing for examinations (Kasneji et al., 2023), thus rendering existing frameworks for defining, detecting, and adjudicating misconduct increasingly insufficient (Perkins, 2023). Open and distance learning (ODL) institutions find themselves in a uniquely vulnerable position within this scenario: unlike traditional campus-based universities, ODL institutions rely primarily on asynchronous, technology-mediated assessment formats characterised by high levels of learner autonomy and limited real-time supervision (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019), conditions under which AI-assisted academic misconduct may be particularly difficult to detect and prevent. While the broader issues of AI and academic integrity have received growing scholarly attention, there has been comparatively little research on students' personal experiences of navigating and negotiating these tensions, with most existing studies instead treating student behaviour as something to be measured and managed rather than a complex lived experience warranting sustained inquiry (Dawson, 2020; Foltynnek et al., 2023).

This study addresses that gap by centring student voices, drawing on qualitative data to explore how ODL students at Open University Malaysia (OUM) experience, make sense of, and negotiate the boundaries of academic integrity in an era of readily accessible AI assistance. This study is important for three reasons. First, it contributes empirical material to a fast-moving discourse at a point where institutional responses have been largely reactive and poorly theorised. Second, it highlights the distinct challenges experienced by ODL students, who often represent non-traditional learner characteristics, including mature-age enrolment and concurrent employment, and also have limited access to on-campus academic support services. Third, by situating this investigation in the Malaysian higher education context, it provides a culturally contextualised perspective that enriches the largely Western-centric literature on AI and academic integrity (Pazilah et al., 2024; Popenici & Kerr, 2017). The specific research objectives and questions that guide this inquiry are set out at the close of the literature review, following a summary of the theoretical and empirical foundations on which the study builds.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity in Higher Education

The availability of easy-to-use generative models has sparked an ongoing research discussion on AI and academic integrity. A comprehensive review of the implications of large language models for academic misconduct has been provided by Perkins (2023), who argues that conventional text-matching detection software is intrinsically ill-suited to detecting AI-generated content, because these tools were not designed to identify synthetic text production, but rather literal copying. This is especially relevant in ODL assessment environments in which written academic work is typically submitted through digital means with little biometric or environmental verification of authorship.

Foltynnek et al. (2023) took a systems perspective on AI-assisted misconduct, arguing that solutions will require not just more powerful detection tools but a fundamental rethinking of assessment philosophy. Drawing on contract cheating literature, the authors contended that if students perceive assessments as performative displays rather than genuine measures of learning, instrumental use of AI tools becomes a rational response. This framing echoes Dawson's (2020) appeal for assessment designs that make AI-assisted misconduct

structurally difficult, not merely institutionally prohibited. Together, these perspectives suggest that policy measures based on prohibition and detection alone will be ineffective without commensurate reforms to assessment practices.

The moral and ethical dimensions of AI use in student assessments have also attracted research attention. Kasneci et al. (2023) examined students' epistemic frameworks regarding what constitutes legitimate AI support, finding substantial variability both within and across disciplinary contexts. Students in professional faculties generally applied higher self-regulatory standards than those in the humanities, and were more likely to view AI-assisted paraphrasing as inappropriate, a pattern the authors attributed to assessments that closely model their respective real-world professional practices. This variability in students' ethical orientations highlights the limitations of one-size-fits-all institutional policies as well as underscores the need for context-sensitive approaches to academic integrity governance.

Dawson (2020) documented enduring challenges in cultivating a culture of academic integrity within Malaysian higher education, arguing that institutional policies are often experienced by students as bureaucratic compliance exercises rather than genuinely educative frameworks. He contended that integrity education must foster an affective connection to such values as honesty and academic responsibility, rather than merely disseminating procedural knowledge of plagiarism rules. This position is echoed by Popenici and Kerr (2017), who cautioned that institutions heavily invested in compliance-based enforcement may inadvertently suppress the very ethical development and moral agency that underpin genuine academic integrity.

2.2. Open and Distance Learning and the Integrity of Assessment

Research in traditional campus-based settings cannot fully account for the unique vulnerabilities and challenges associated with assessment integrity in ODL contexts. Zawacki-Richter et al.'s (2019) systematic review of quality assurance in online and distance education identifies the establishment of assessment authenticity as a persistent cross-institutional challenge. Asynchronous ODL environments, which structurally separate students from instructors, render traditional forms of proctored assessment either impractical or cost-prohibitive, thus necessitating alternatives such as portfolio-based assessment, project work, and reflective writing, each of which carries its own integrity risks.

Lancaster and Cotarlan (2021) investigated the extent of contract cheating services in online education, finding that distance learners used ghost-writing services at significantly higher rates than their campus-based counterparts. The authors attributed this to reduced identifiability, otherwise facilitated through face-to-face submission, and absence of social accountability mechanisms that operate in campus learning environments. While Lancaster and Cotarlan's study predates the widespread availability of generative AI tools, the structural conditions they identified are directly applicable to the context in which ODL students engage with AI assistance today.

Using the social contract theory, Eaton and Christensen (2022) proposed a conceptual framework for understanding academic integrity in ODL, arguing that the mutual obligations between institutions and students regarding assessment fairness are frequently compromised by poorly articulated expectations, inconsistent enforcement of integrity policies, and inadequate academic support. This framing is especially relevant to the Malaysian ODL context, in which the large-scale, non-residential nature of institutions such as OUM limits their capacity to provide individual or personalised academic guidance.

2.3. Assessment Design, Academic Integrity, and Artificial Intelligence

A growing strand of literature has turned its attention from the detection of AI-assisted misconduct towards the redesign of assessment itself as the more durable institutional response. Bearman et al. (2022) proposed an organising framework for assessment design in a digital world, arguing that authentic, personalised task design, rather than reliance on invigilation or detection software, offers a more sustainable path to safeguarding integrity as generative technologies become more ubiquitous.

Sabli et al. (2016) highlighted that academic dishonesty represents an erosion of academic integrity within the higher education system. Academic dishonesty has become a significant concern in higher education, as it can undermine academic integrity and affect the credibility of educational institutions (Sabli et al., 2016).

In a similar vein, Lye and Lim (2024) proposed an "against, avoid, and adopt" framework for redesigning tertiary assessment in response to generative AI, cautioning that an arms race between detection tools and AI capability is unlikely to resolve the underlying integrity challenge, and that tasks structurally resistant to AI substitution, such as those requiring situated reflection, oral defence, or process documentation, offer a more durable safeguard. Neither framework, however, was developed with specific reference to the ODL context, in which the asynchronous, non-invigilated nature of most assessment already constrains the feasibility of some of the redesign options they propose, such as oral or in-person components requiring live proctoring, a tension this study revisits in the Discussion section.

2.4. Research Gap and Objectives

Taken together, this literature establishes that generative AI presents a substantial challenge to safeguarding academic integrity in higher education, that ODL contexts carry distinctive structural vulnerabilities, and that assessment redesign, rather than detection alone, is increasingly regarded as the more durable institutional response. What remains largely absent from this literature, however, is an account of how students themselves, and ODL students in the Malaysian context in particular, experience and negotiate these tensions in their own words. This study addresses that gap. Accordingly, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What motivates ODL students to use or avoid AI tools in assessed academic work?
- RQ2: What institutional and contextual pressures shape students' engagement with AI during assessed tasks?
- RQ3: What moral reasoning do students apply in determining which forms of AI assistance are legitimate or illegitimate?
- RQ4: How do students construct and negotiate the boundary between permissible AI assistance and academic misconduct?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study utilised a qualitative research approach, grounded in an interpretivist epistemological perspective. A qualitative design was selected because the purpose of this research was to gain rich, contextually situated insights into students' subjective experiences of negotiating academic integrity in AI-mediated ODL assessment contexts, which can be considered fundamentally at odds with the variable-level logic underpinning quantitative research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the broader qualitative paradigm, a generic qualitative approach (Caelli et al., 2003) was adopted, as it affords sufficient methodological

flexibility for an exploratory and descriptive focus without constraining the theoretical orientation of the study within more prescriptive traditions, such as phenomenology or grounded theory.

3.2. Qualitative Research and Semi-Structured Interviews in Education

Educational research has long drawn on qualitative methodologies to illuminate the experiences, perspectives, and sense-making of students and educators. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to phenomena that are subjectively experienced and contextually embedded, as they enable the kind of in-depth interpretive analysis that quantitative methods cannot replicate. In higher education research, qualitative designs have been employed productively to examine student experiences of academic misconduct (Gravett, 2021), processes of identity formation, and engagement with institutional policies.

In particular, semi-structured interviewing has emerged as a remarkably adaptable and fruitful method for generating participant-led data on complex educational phenomena. In a detailed account of the semi-structured interview methodology, Galletta and Cross (2013) underscore how it straddles the tension between achieving comparability across participants and responsiveness to each case's unique narrative, a balance essential for capturing the full complexity of every participant's experience. It has been widely used in academic integrity research, in which getting participants to self-disclose sensitive information about typically deviant behaviours is more readily accomplished within the relational context of a conversational interview than through anonymous survey formats (Bertram Gallant, 2017).

The reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021) has quickly emerged as the most widely used method of analysing qualitative data in education research, offering a transparent and theoretically flexible approach to generating analytic themes that are closely situated in the accounts provided by participants but ultimately remaining interpretative. Braun and Clarke (2021) have refined reflexive thematic analysis' philosophical underpinnings by differentiating it from code-oriented coding frameworks and highlighting the active involvement of the researcher in constructing analytic interpretations. Such an epistemological orientation is congruent with a constructivist ontological position that recognises participant accounts as socially situated constructions rather than faithful reports of an objective reality, and is thus particularly suited to researching the inherently subjective and morally laden territory of academic integrity.

3.3. Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from OUM's student population. Criteria for inclusion were that the participant was currently enrolled in a postgraduate or advanced undergraduate degree at OUM and had completed a minimum of one assessment cycle after the public release of ChatGPT (i.e., after November 2022). A total of 10 participants from diverse programme disciplines, academic levels, and professional backgrounds were selected. The ten-participant sample is aligned with qualitative research designs using interviews, which value depth of analysis over representativeness (Patton, 2015).

The 10 participants who took part in the study (comprising five males and five females) were aged between 28 and 52 years. All were Malaysian citizens enrolled in ODL programmes at OUM at the time of data collection. The disciplines represented were education, business administration, information technology, social science, and public health. All participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. Their profiles are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Profile Summary

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Programme Discipline	Academic Level	AI Tool Familiarity
Ahmad	Male	35	Business Administration	Postgraduate	High – regular user of ChatGPT
Balqis	Female	29	Education	Postgraduate	Moderate – occasional use
Calvin	Male	43	Information Technology	Advanced Undergraduate	High – professional and academic use
Diana	Female	38	Social Science	Postgraduate	Moderate – used for paraphrasing
Farid	Male	52	Public Health	Postgraduate	Low – infrequent, exploratory use
Geetha	Female	31	Education	Advanced Undergraduate	Moderate – used for idea generation
Hazwan	Male	28	Business Administration	Postgraduate	High – daily academic and work use
Irene	Female	45	Social Science	Postgraduate	Low – occasional exploration
Jaafar	Male	39	Information Technology	Advanced Undergraduate	High – professional programmer
Kamala	Female	33	Public Health	Postgraduate	Moderate – used for summarising

3.4. Data Collection Instrument

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via video-conferencing platforms between February and April 2026. The interview guide was developed through a multi-stage process informed by literature on academic integrity, AI use in education, and ODL learner experiences. An initial pool of questions was constructed based on the study's objectives and a systematic review of relevant literature. Two academic experts in educational research methodology and one AI ethics specialist in higher education peer-reviewed the draft instrument, followed by *pakar rujuk* (i.e., expert referee) consultations during the validation process.

The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency for cross-participant comparability while granting the flexibility to explore individual lines of inquiry as they emerged. The guide was organised around five thematic domains: (a) general awareness and use of AI tools in academic work, (b) understanding of academic integrity and institutional policy, (c) specific experiences with AI in assessed tasks, (d) ethical reasoning and self-regulation in AI-mediated assessment, and (e) perceptions of institutional support and guidance. Probing questions were embedded throughout the duration of each interview to elicit further elaboration and clarification. Interviews lasted between 55 and 85 minutes and were conducted in English, with code-switching to Malay when participants sought to express themselves with greater precision in their first language.

3.5. Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed all 10 interviews word for word. Transcripts were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis according to the six-stage model outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021): (a) familiarisation, (b) initial coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) report production. During the familiarisation phase of analysis, the researcher conducted multiple rounds of close reading and generated analytical memos to record emergent interpretations and reflexive responses to the data.

In the first phase of analysis, coding was conducted inductively to generate codes from participants' language and descriptions of their experiences. In subsequent phases, the codes were organised into candidate themes through a combination of constant comparison and analytical interpretation, guided by the study's theoretical framework and research questions. Member-checking procedures were carried out with six of the 10 participants to strengthen the credibility of the interpretive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and a researcher audit trail was maintained throughout all analytical stages to support dependability and confirmability.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were made aware that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that their data would be kept confidential and disposed of according to specified procedures. As the study topic is sensitive, participants were reassured that any disclosure of academic misconduct made during the interviews would not be reported to their institutions, and all data were anonymised prior to reporting. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all other identifying information, including specific course names, cohort identifiers, and workplace descriptions, was redacted from transcripts and analytical outputs.

As part of the effort to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout data collection and analysis, recognising that his position as an OUM-affiliated academic researching a topic with direct relevance to student assessment practices at said institution could shape both participants' disclosures and the researcher's own interpretive choices. To manage this, participants were reassured of confidentiality and the non-punitive nature of the study prior to being interviewed. In addition, the researcher relied on analytical memos throughout coding to make explicit, and where necessary set aside, his own assumptions about legitimate and illegitimate AI use before attributing meaning to participants' accounts.

4. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data generated four overarching themes, each encompassing its respective constituent sub-themes. Together, these themes provide a detailed account of the complexities ODL students at OUM navigate with respect to academic integrity in AI-enabled assessment contexts. A summary of the identified themes and sub-themes is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes

No.	Theme	Sub-Themes
1	Ambiguity in institutional AI policies	Lack of clear guidelines; Inconsistent enforcement; Policy awareness gaps
2	Students' moral reasoning and self-regulation	Internal moral calibration; Role of academic identity; Guilt and rationalisation
3	Contextual pressures and assessment design	Time constraints and work-life demands; Perceived fairness of assessments; Structural vulnerability
4	Navigating the boundary between assistance and misconduct	Definitional ambiguity; Situational ethics; Graduated boundary drawing

4.1. Theme 1: Ambiguity in Institutional AI Policies

The absence of clear, consistent institutional guidance on the acceptability of AI in assessed work emerged as a cross-cutting theme for all 10 participants. The students described institutional communications about AI use as piecemeal, inconsistent, and vague, making confident academic decision-making difficult. Ahmad, a postgraduate student in business administration and a regular user of AI tools, expressed this sentiment with particular clarity: “The university keeps talking about integrity, but nobody tells you exactly where the line is with ChatGPT. Can it be used for research? For structuring? For editing my grammar? Nobody says.”

The experience of ambiguity varied by disciplinary context. Participants in information technology programmes (Calvin and Jaafar) reported receiving more pragmatic guidance from supervisors who normalised AI as a professional tool, while participants in education programmes; Balqis and Geetha described an institutional discourse they found more prohibitive and anxiety-inducing than clarificatory. This disciplinary differential in AI policy communication has been identified in prior literature as a contributing factor to unequal distribution of the integrity burden across student populations (Kasneci et al., 2023).

Several participants also observed that the gap between when generative AI tools became widely available and when institutions issued formal guidance created a period of normlessness that later complicated students’ own judgements about appropriate AI use. Irene, a mature-age postgraduate in social science, captured this temporal dislocation clearly: “Nothing written for a whole semester. We all used these tools. And then boom: an announcement that AI is academic cheating. I thought the rules of the game changed half-way through.”

4.2. Theme 2: Students' Moral Reasoning and Self-Regulation

Despite the institutional ambiguities described above, participants also demonstrated rich and nuanced moral reasoning in relation to their own AI use. Rather than defaulting to purely instrumental decision-making, many conveyed that ethical self-interrogation was an ongoing process drawing on multiple normative frameworks simultaneously. As an education student who identified as a future teacher, Balqis explained her moral reasoning in professional terms: “I keep asking myself, would I be okay with my own students doing this? If the answer is no, then I do not do it. I am training to teach values — I need to live them.”

This kind of identity-anchored moral reasoning was particularly evident among participants enrolled in professional programmes, a finding that is consistent with the disciplinary variation in ethical self-regulation documented by Kasneci et al. (2023). While participants across all disciplines applied personal standards more stringent than those stipulated by their institutions, those in education and public health framed AI use in relation to direct professional practice, whereas participants in technology and business tended to frame it through a lens of productivity and professional competency.

Some participants described post-hoc rationalisation, whereby they retrospectively constructed ethical justifications for AI use that had in practice been driven by pragmatic pressures. Hazwan, a high-frequency AI user in business administration, articulated this self-awareness candidly:

“I am aware when I am making an excuse. Once in a while I tell myself, no — I just use AI like a reference tool, like Google. But if I am being 100% honest, sometimes I simply use it to avoid the heavy thinking.”

4.3. Theme 3: Contextual Pressures and Assessment Design

The third theme captured the structural and contextual factors that shaped participants' AI decision-making. All 10 participants described juggling professional responsibilities alongside their ODL studies, and seven specifically identified time pressure as a driver of AI-assisted academic work. With characteristic directness, Farid, a full-time hospital manager in his early fifties pursuing a postgraduate public health degree, described the temporal realities of ODL study: “I work ten-hour days. I have a family. When a deadline comes up and I have barely slept all week, it is not philosophy that goes through my mind. I am only thinking about how to get it done.”

In particular, this contextualisation of AI use as a strategy for coping with structural time scarcity, rather than as universally morally deficient behaviour, is consistent with Eaton and Christensen's (2022) cross-applicable social contract framework, which holds that institutions bear an obligation to sufficiently support learners who face competing demands. A number of participants also highlighted specific features of assessment design they believed were encouraging, or even incentivising, AI use: e.g., generic essay question prompts, the absence of iterative formative feedback, and the lack of oral examination components requiring demonstration of genuine personal understanding.

Kamala, a postgraduate student in public health, expressed this critique of the relationship between assessment design and integrity expectations directly: “You're not even trying to have me write the paper; you're inviting in AI. The question itself has to be constructed such that it necessitates me as a person.”

4.4. Theme 4: Navigating the Boundary Between Assistance and Misconduct

The fourth and analytically richest theme concerned the processes by which participants drew and renegotiated the boundary between permissible AI assistance and academic misconduct. This boundary was not fixed; rather, it was actively constructed through a combination of contextual judgement, perceived institutional expectations, peer norms, and personal ethical commitments.

Participants consistently drew distinctions between different modes of AI use, attributing varying degrees of moral concern to each. Most broadly accepted AI for idea generation, structural scaffolding, and language editing; however, the use of AI to generate substantive arguments or empirical claims was viewed as more ethically problematic, particularly without

independent verification. Diana, a postgraduate student in social science, articulated this graduated boundary clearly:

“Using AI to help structure my argument, that feels like having a brilliant organiser at my side. But if I let AI tell me what to think and just submit that, then I have stopped being a student. I have become a copy-paster.”

Many participants also described the boundary between assistance and misconduct as situationally fluid, shifting in response to the perceived stakes and nature of the assessment task at hand. High-stakes summative assessments, particularly those with significant grade consequences, were associated with more cautious AI behaviours than formative or low-stakes tasks. This situational ethics pattern, whereby moral standards shift according to risk perception rather than principled conviction, has been documented in prior academic integrity research and is regarded as an indicator of an instrumental rather than internalised ethical orientation (Bertram Gallant, 2017).

Table 3

Representative Participant Quotations by Theme

Theme	Representative Quotation	Participant
Institutional Policy Ambiguity	"Nobody tells you exactly where the line is with ChatGPT."	Ahmad
Moral Reasoning	"I keep asking myself, would I be okay with my own students doing this?"	Balqis
Contextual Pressure	"I work ten-hour days. When an assignment is due I am thinking about how to get it done."	Farid
Boundary Negotiation	"If I let AI tell me what to think and then I submit that, I have stopped being a student."	Diana

4.5. Discussion

These findings illuminate the complexity of ODL students' engagement with academic integrity in the context of AI-mediated assessment. Taken together, the four themes trace a landscape characterised by institutional ambiguity, contextual vulnerability, nuanced moral agency, and recursively negotiated boundaries. The following discussion situates these findings within the broader theoretical and empirical literature and highlights their key implications for ODL policy and practice.

The pervasive sense of institutional policy ambiguity identified in Theme 1 corroborates Perkins' (2023) argument that higher education institutions have responded inadequately to the availability and use of generative AI tools. While Perkins focused on the limitations of detection-centred approaches, this present study suggests that the deeper problem is an institutional failure to provide normative frameworks that students can meaningfully internalise. Eaton and Christensen (2022) social contract framework is instructive here: when institutions are unclear or inconsistent in their expectations, they not only abdicate their side of the social contract but also undermine the moral foundations of students who would otherwise act with integrity.

Theme 2 revealed substantial moral reasoning capacities among participants, challenging reductive characterisations of AI-using students as ethically deficient or purely instrumental in their motives. The identity-anchored reasoning evident in Balqis' responses, and the candid self-reflection demonstrated by Hazwan's, suggest that many students possess genuine

affective resources for ethical self-regulation in AI-mediated environments. This finding aligns with Pazilah et al. (2024) call for integrity education that engages students affectively, and underscores the importance of institutional approaches that activate, rather than bypass, students' intrinsic ethical dispositions.

The structural pressures identified in Theme 3 underscore the need to interpret AI-enabled academic behaviours through a socio-contextual lens that accounts for the lived realities of ODL learners. Characterising AI use as simply a moral failure, without addressing the structural circumstances that render it instrumentally rational, risks producing overly narrow analyses and correspondingly limited policy responses. Lancaster and Cotarlan (2021) argued that the structural features of online education predispose students to academic misconduct, an observation directly applicable here; the current study adds qualitative depth to that argument by detailing how those structural conditions shape students' practical engagement with generative AI.

The dynamic boundary construction described in Theme 4 may be the most theoretically significant finding of this study. Students' characterisations of their AI boundaries, drawn, contested, and redrawn in response to context, suggest that academic integrity is not a matter of straightforward binary rule-adherence but a continuous ethical achievement requiring ongoing judgement. This framing resonates with Bearman et al.'s (2022) case for assessment literacy approaches to AI governance, in which students are positioned as ethical agents navigating a transformative technological landscape, rather than as passive subjects of institutional monitoring.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how ODL students at OUM negotiate academic integrity within AI-mediated assessment, thus addressing a gap in the Malaysian higher education context that remains under-represented within the largely Western-centric literature on AI and academic integrity. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively sampled participants, whose accounts were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, the study found that students have to continually negotiate between their own ethical initiative and an ambiguous institutional environment, doing so under structural pressures distinctive to ODL study and through a fluid, situational process of drawing and redrawing the boundary between legitimate assistance and academic misconduct.

These findings carry practical implications for ODL practice and policy: institutions should develop clear, programme-level AI use policies articulated in terms meaningful to students' own ethical frameworks; assessment designers should prioritise authentic, personalised tasks that are structurally resistant to AI substitution while remaining feasible within ODL's asynchronous format; and integrity education should cultivate students' capacity for critical reflection and ethical self-governance rather than procedural compliance alone. Future research might usefully extend this work through longitudinal designs, cross-institutional comparison, and the inclusion of academic staff and policymaker perspectives. Ultimately, addressing AI-mediated academic integrity in the Malaysian ODL context requires institutions to move beyond reactive, prohibition-based strategies towards a more collaborative ethical partnership with students, one that takes the distinctive realities of ODL seriously.

Third, institutions must commit to academic integrity education that develops students' capacities for critical reflection and ethical self-governance, rather than providing procedural compliance training alone. This is especially important for learners in an ODL environment, who often miss out on informal peer and mentoring interactions through which integrity norms are communicated and reinforced in campus-based settings.

Future research should seek to broaden understanding of AI-mediated academic integrity across diverse ODL institutions and national contexts. Longitudinal designs that track how students' ethical orientations towards AI use evolve over time would be particularly valuable, as would studies that incorporate the perspectives of academic staff and institutional policymakers. Moreover, quantitative studies examining the effects of different assessment modalities on AI-related academic misconduct in ODL would complement the qualitative insights generated by this study.

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