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Authenticity, integrity, and AI: Navigating ethical uncertainty in student assessment

Sangeetha Kutty
Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia

Ritesh Chugh
Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia

Lily Li
Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia

Sentha Govin-Vel
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Pethigamage Perera
Loyola University Maryland, Maryland, United States of America

Arjun Neupane
Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia

Meena Jha
Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia

This study explores the ethical dilemmas faced by educators in managing student use of Generative AI (GenAI) in university assessments. Drawing on qualitative interviews with ICT educators at an Australian university, the research identifies four key themes: threats to academic integrity, diminished skill development, emotional and ethical burdens on staff, and institutional gaps in policy and governance. Educators reported difficulty verifying authorship, concerns about AI-induced dependency, and frustrations with vague institutional guidelines. The study highlights the misalignment between academic restrictions and industry practices, raising questions about assessment authenticity and equitable access. In response, participants advocated for clearer policies, ethics education, and assessments requiring human judgment. The findings emphasise the need for systemic change, supported by Communities of Practice and university-specific AI tools aligned with educational values. While limited in scope, the study offers critical insights into how educators can uphold integrity and authenticity amid the increasing presence of GenAI in higher education.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), educators, ethical dilemma, concerns, assessment, interviews, higher education

Introduction

The rapid advancement of ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer) and other chatbots powered by Large Language Models (LLMs) has drawn increasing attention from the general public, researchers and educators. Unlike earlier artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, Generative AI (GenAI) stands out for its ability to generate realistic content, including text, images, video, and code, in response to natural language prompts. This capability is already making a significant impact in higher education (HE), where an increasing number of students are adopting these tools for diverse academic purposes. These range from brainstorming and research to group collaboration and self-directed learning, with evidence suggesting that GenAI can also enhance student confidence and motivation (Kutty et al., 2024).

While GenAI offers promising opportunities for personalised learning and creative exploration, it also raises a host of ethical challenges, particularly for educators tasked with ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of student learning. These challenges become especially pronounced in the context of assessment, where students often have unrestricted access to GenAI tools and in the absence of comprehensive institutional policies. Given that assessments are fundamental to driving student learning (Fischer et al., 2024), and with the post-pandemic shift from traditional to online and summative formats (Hancock et al., 2025), understanding the ethical tensions that arise is increasingly urgent.

In response, this paper addresses the following research question**:** *What ethical dilemmas do educators face when students use Generative AI tools in university assessment?*

Although prior research has identified general ethical concerns related to GenAI, such as bias, privacy, trust, copyright, and misinformation (Cingillioglu, 2023; Gilson et al., 2023; Luo, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024), these studies have predominantly centred on student perspectives. There remains a significant gap in examining educators' views and experiences, despite their important role in maintaining academic integrity, designing equitable assessments, and guiding the responsible use of emerging technologies. As educators increasingly navigate issues such as equitable access, authorship attribution, evolving pedagogical roles, and distinguishing between student contributions and AI-generated content, it is essential to foreground their ethical perspectives in this complex GenAI ecosystem.

By critically examining these issues, this study aims to contribute to the development of clearer ethical guidelines and support responsible teaching practices in higher education. The structure of the paper is as follows: the next section provides a review of relevant literature, followed by the methodology section and the presentation of findings and discussion. The paper concludes with a summary and practical recommendations.

Literature Review

The widespread integration of GenAI tools into higher education has introduced a complex landscape of ethical dilemmas. While much of the existing literature centres on how students use these tools, particularly in relation to academic integrity and assessment practices, there is limited scholarship exploring the ethical challenges faced by educators. This oversight is crucial, as educators are positioned at the forefront of interpreting, managing, and regulating the use of GenAI within academic settings.

Ethical dilemmas emerge when conflicting values or obligations make it impossible to choose an action that fully satisfies all ethical principles. In the case of GenAI, educators frequently confront such conflicts: the imperative to maintain academic standards and fairness may clash with the equally important responsibility of supporting students who engage with emerging technologies in good faith. These tensions are further complicated by inconsistent institutional policies and inadequate technological safeguards.

Early work in this area, such as that by Gilson et al. (2023), examined the potential for GenAI to replicate or substitute student work, prompting the development of detection tools (Cingillioglu, 2023). However, subsequent studies have raised serious concerns about the reliability of these tools in evaluative settings. Educators, in particular, have criticised their limitations, citing risks to fairness and the ethical implications of penalising students without conclusive evidence (Lee et al., 2024). The dilemma here is not merely technical but moral: should educators act on suspicion without definitive proof, or risk enabling academic misconduct by refraining from intervention?

More recent studies have documented the pedagogical potential of GenAI, particularly in supporting student learning (Chan, 2023). Yet, the positive framing of GenAI in student-focused research often overlooks the ethical strain placed on educators. As Luo (2024) notes in a critical review of university policies, GenAI is frequently classified as an external aid that undermines student authorship, yet institutions rarely offer educators the procedural clarity or support needed to respond consistently. This places educators in ethically fraught positions, as they are expected to uphold academic integrity without sufficient guidance or reliable tools.

The literature makes clear that educators must grapple with complex questions surrounding authorship, fairness, and accountability in an environment marked by considerable ambiguity. These unresolved ethical issues not only amplify their professional burden but also expose a significant research gap. Addressing this void, the present study centres on the lived experiences and ethical challenges faced by educators, aiming to shed light on the complex and context-dependent nature of these dilemmas.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilising semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and perceptions of educators regarding student use of GenAI in higher education. The choice of a qualitative approach was guided by the aim to capture the nuanced perspectives of educators, who play a central role in shaping learning environments (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow flexibility in exploring individual experiences while maintaining a consistent framework for comparison (Kallio et al., 2016). Participants included educators responsible for teaching various courses in information and communications technology (ICT) at an Australian university. The study sought to elicit their unique insights and ethical concerns related to GenAI, particularly in the context of assessment practices and academic integrity. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed on the aims and procedures of the study and provided informed consent voluntarily. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms (e.g. P1, P2, etc.) were assigned to all participants. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, a method increasingly validated for qualitative data collection in post-pandemic academic research (Archibald et al., 2019). Participants were asked to keep their cameras turned off to enhance anonymity. All interviews were audio recorded by a research assistant and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used during recordings to avoid the use of identifiable names. Data were analysed through an iterative thematic analysis to generate a comprehensive understanding of the ethical issues raised. The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with familiarisation with the data, followed by the coding of significant features, grouping codes into initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, and ultimately defining and naming the final thematic categories. This rigorous process ensured both diversity and depth in capturing educator perspectives on GenAI within the ICT higher education context. The findings from this analysis are presented and discussed in the next section.

Findings and discussion

This section addresses the research question: *What ethical dilemmas do educators face when students use Generative AI tools in university assessments?* Drawing on interviews with ICT educators, the findings are presented thematically and supported by illustrative participant quotes (also see Table 1) and relevant literature. The insights reveal complex ethical tensions related to academic integrity, skill development, emotional burden, and institutional readiness in the context of an increasingly AI-enhanced higher education environment.

Finding 1. Academic integrity and the erosion of authentic learning

Educators expressed growing difficulty in verifying whether submitted work was genuinely authored by students. GenAI tools such as ChatGPT allow students to produce grammatically flawless, coherent responses with minimal intellectual engagement, thereby bypassing the learning processes typically associated with academic writing. This issue is well-documented in the literature. For instance, Kornieva (2024) notes that educators struggle to differentiate between AI-generated and student-authored essays, especially in language-based disciplines. Similarly, Kofinas et al. (2025) highlight that GenAI can produce convincingly original work, making the identification of authentic submissions more complex.

These challenges directly threaten the principle of academic integrity. As one educator stated, students may "just copy and paste... we cannot differentiate the effort" (P1). The difficulty is compounded by the absence of reliable AI detection tools. A systematic review by Zhao et al. (2024) found that existing detection technologies yield inconsistent results and can be easily circumvented through paraphrasing. This unreliability raises serious ethical dilemmas for educators, particularly regarding whether to penalise students based on suspicion alone, an issue highlighted by Tyler et al. (2025), whose experimental study found that even trained educators struggled to accurately distinguish AI-generated content from genuine student work. Such conditions have created a "grey zone" in assessment practices, leaving educators to make high-stakes ethical decisions without the necessary evidentiary support. As participant P14 reflected, the lack of reliable verification tools renders it ethically problematic to take disciplinary action against suspected misuse.

Finding 2. Assessment validity and the undermining of skill development

Educators voiced concerns that GenAI tools undermine assessment validity by enabling students to produce high-quality submissions without developing the underlying skills. Several educators observed that students who excelled in coursework often underperformed in final exams, suggesting that GenAI may be facilitating surface-level learning rather than deep understanding (P2, P3). This observation aligns with Kofinas et al. (2025), who argue that GenAI compromises the authenticity of assessments by obscuring actual student competencies.

Additional concerns also emerged about diminished cognitive engagement. P8 observed that "creative writing can be slower if you keep using GenAI", while P15 described students passively accepting AI-generated outputs without critically engaging with the material. Zhao et al. (2024) support these claims, indicating that AI use may hinder critical thinking and reduce academic independence. Similarly, Oliveira et al. (2025) found that excessive reliance on AI alters students' writing patterns, complicating efforts to assess learning progress through traditional means.

Finding 3. Emotional and ethical burdens on educators

Educators reported feeling emotionally burdened and ethically conflicted when managing GenAI-related misconduct. Many described a shift in their roles, from mentors to "enforcers", as they were tasked with upholding academic standards without access to reliable detection tools or clear institutional guidance (P14). This role strain not only diminished morale but also eroded trust within the educator-student relationship.

These sentiments are echoed in Luo (2024), who found that vague AI policies place educators in morally ambiguous positions, especially when dealing with vulnerable students. The ethical dilemma becomes particularly acute when educators must choose between enforcing rules and exercising empathy, for instance, with students facing academic risk. Kornieva (2024) similarly highlights that the lack of procedural clarity leaves educators isolated in interpreting and responding to AI-related misconduct without systemic support. Chugh et al. (2025a) further emphasise that students themselves seek clearer institutional guidelines to avoid breaches of academic integrity, suggesting that both educators and learners are navigating the same policy vacuum.

The emotional toll, exacerbated by unclear accountability structures, is not merely a technical or administrative challenge; it is an ethical dilemma, where principles of justice, compassion, and integrity often stand in tension.

Finding 4. Institutional risks: Policy gaps, data privacy, and misalignment with industry

Educators expressed concerns that extended beyond the classroom to broader issues of institutional readiness and governance. They highlighted a lack of clear policies around GenAI use, the absence of ethical frameworks aligned with institutional values, and significant data privacy risks when using commercial AI tools (P6, P7, P11). Moreover, a gap was noted between academic constraints and the growing use of GenAI in industry, prompting calls for customised AI solutions that reflect both ethical commitments and workplace realities (P2, P4, P11).

Several participants raised concerns over data privacy when students engage with commercial GenAI tools. These platforms often require the input of personal or academic information, potentially violating university data governance standards (P7). Kornieva (2024) emphasises that without institution-vetted tools, educators are forced to work within unregulated digital spaces, raising issues of compliance and liability.

Furthermore, educators pointed to a widening gap between academic restrictions and industry practices. While universities often restrict the use of GenAI, workplaces are increasingly embracing it. Kofinas et al. (2025) note that this misalignment creates pedagogical friction, as students are taught to avoid tools they may soon rely on professionally. Participants advocated for university-specific AI tools and policies that align with both ethical standards and real-world demands (P11).

Table 1
Thematic overview of the findings, along with the synthesised quotes

Theme Category	**Participants**	**Sub-Themes**	**Synthesised Quotes**
Academic integrity & authorship	P1, P4, P5, P13, P14	Academic misconduct, plagiarism, authorship ambiguity, contract cheating, verifying authorship	"They may not even read it... just copy and paste... we cannot differentiate the effort" (P1); "There's a fine line... claim originality, but it's assisted by the tool, willing to attribute... no creativity, no innovative, fraud" (P5); "Should we punish students for using ChatGPT if we can't prove it?" (P14)
Assessment validity & skill development	P1, P2, P3, P8, P15	Assessment authenticity, redesign, learning devaluation, skill development, superficial learning, long-term competency	"We are encouraging them to compile reports, but that's not the end of it... you have to engage weekly" (P2); "If you don't learn it properly, there will be a point you get stuck" (P3); "Your creative writing can be slower if you keep using GenAI" (P8)
Bias, accuracy & reliability	P5, P6, P9, P15	Biased outputs, false information, content validity, misrepresentation	"Programs... might be skewed towards a certain gender" (P5); "The AI might deliver information that is not actual fact" (P6); "We don't know if it's accurate or not... might misrepresent information" (P9)
Privacy & institutional risk	P6, P7	Data privacy, content misuse, policy conflict	"We cannot stop it... but it may result in problems in the future" (P7); "Not sure how they secured GenAI... disclosure of personal information" (P7)
Equity & fairness	P2, P12, P14	Fairness, professional risks	"Students doing 80-90% in reports, but can't pass the final exam... that's concerning" (P2); "Imagine a health professional who's cheated through their degree" (P12); “Annoyed because you think it's unfairness there when students tend to use this sophisticated tool to help them which they do not deserve to pass and that's where the dilemma is”(P14)
	P11		"Can we bring AI ethically into our education system?... customised AI"

Institutional ethics & readiness		Custom AI tools, organisational integrity, ethical alignment	(P11); "AI tools don't 100% fit into your organisation's ethics" (P11)
Misalignment between academic and industry expectations	P2, P4, P11	Conflict between academic restrictions on GenAI and industry norms where GenAI is embraced.	"In industry, they might be using these tools... but in academic environments, we prohibit them." (P2); "Some companies don't want you using them' worried about IP." (P4); "We need AI aligned with our ethics." (P11)
Emotional and moral burden on educators	P13, P14	Educators feel demotivated and burdened by enforcing GenAI rules without reliable detection tools.	"We become like law enforcers... the punisher... the executioner." (P14); "It demotivates me when I can't be sure they've learned." (P13)
AI-induced dependency and diminished cognitive resilience	P3, P8, P15	Concerns over students relying too heavily on GenAI, overreliance, weakening their critical thinking and writing skills.	"If you don't learn it properly... there will be a point you get stuck." (P3); "Your creative writing can be slower if you keep using GenAI." (P8); "Students just give a prompt and don't understand the answer." (P15)
Data governance, institutional ethics, and custom AI	P7, P11	Generic AI tools may conflict with institutional values and data governance standards.	"Maybe using GenAI with university resources is against ethics." (P7); "Can we build our own AI, aligned with our values?" (P11)
Pressure-driven ethical sliding (Situational morality)	P14	Students under pressure (e.g. limited time, visa issues, pass/fail stakes) are more likely to act unethically.	"They rely on something to ease the pain... morality at its weakest point." (P14)

The discussion reveals that ethical dilemmas surrounding GenAI use are not isolated incidents but systemic challenges shaped by cultural, pedagogical, and technological shifts. Addressing these issues will require more than just technical fixes; they demand sustained transformation in institutional culture, assessment practices, and governance, anchored in dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflection. Communities of Practice (CoPs), as conceptualised by Wenger (1998), could serve as platforms for collective reflection and the co-design of practical, inclusive policies, fostering shared responsibility for ethical standards.

Educators also advocated for assessment formats that incorporate human judgment, such as oral presentations, reflective essays, and live demonstrations, to reinforce authenticity and reduce the risk of AI-induced dependency (Chan & Hu, 2023; Gilson et al., 2023). These approaches can promote deeper engagement and help preserve the development of independent academic skills. Institutional support must extend beyond the creation of policies to include ethics education for students and ongoing professional development for educators on using GenAI as a learning assistant (Chugh et al., 2025b). Embedding themes such as authorship, accountability, and responsible AI use into the curriculum can foster critical thinking and reduce the risk of ethical erosion under pressure (Zhao et al., 2024). Additionally, the development of university-specific GenAI tools, aligned with institutional values and governance protocols, offers a strategic means to integrate technological innovation while upholding academic integrity (Luo, 2024).

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted ethical dilemmas educators face amid the growing integration of GenAI into higher education. Based on qualitative interviews with ICT educators at an Australian university, the findings reveal that while GenAI offers pedagogical benefits, such as enhancing student engagement and productivity, educators are constrained by ambiguous policies, unreliable detection systems, and conflicting expectations regarding fairness and authorship. These challenges require a coordinated and thoughtful institutional response.

One pathway forward is the promotion of Communities of Practice, where educators, students, and administrators can collaboratively reflect on challenges and co-create policies that are both practical and inclusive. Additionally, rethinking assessment design to emphasise tasks involving human judgment, such as oral presentations, reflective writing, and live demonstrations, can help restore authenticity and foster deeper learning. As GenAI continues to reshape educational environments, sustained dialogue and adaptive governance will be essential to safeguarding academic integrity while embracing innovation. Future research could extend this work by examining ethical dilemmas across disciplines or incorporating student and administrator perspectives to build a more comprehensive understanding of GenAI's impact in higher education.

This study's scope was limited to ICT educators in a single institutional context and did not include demographic data such as teaching experience or cultural background, which may influence ethical perspectives. Additionally, the study addressed assessment practices broadly without distinguishing between different formats, which may shape the nature and complexity of the dilemmas encountered.

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