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Partners in Integrity: Students, Staff, and Third Spacers

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Abstract: Generative AI (GenAI) has introduced new opportunities and challenges in higher education, influencing teaching, learning, and definitions of academic integrity. This study investigates how students, educators, and third-space professionals negotiate 'appropriate use'. Using constructivist grounded theory and dialogic inquiry, it examines how these stakeholders co-create norms that guide ethical and effective engagement with GenAI. Findings aim to support practical guidance, assessment design, and institutional policy.

Keywords: GenAI, higher education, academic integrity, learning advisors, third space

1. Introduction

Generative AI (GenAI) is quickly changing higher education; reshaping how students approach learning, how educators design assessments, and how institutions frame academic integrity and appropriate use policies. GenAI promises efficiency and personalised learning (Sharma et al., 2025; Bond et al., 2024; Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025), but also introduces challenges such as dependency, inequitable access, and potential for academic misconduct (Kosmyna et al., 2025; Bond et al., 2024). Since GenAI has both benefits and risks, it is important to understand how students, educators, and support staff navigate its ethical and practical challenges in real-world settings (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025).

This study will explore how students, educators, and third-space professionals negotiate the boundary between legitimate use and misconduct. Studying how these groups understand and set limits on GenAI use helps build a practical model of academic integrity in the AI era. The study aims to enhance support for students and staff, inform assessment design, and guide institutional policy. This paper will first outline the core problem of AI and academic integrity, then explain the suitability of a three-party perspective, outline its advantages over past studies, and describe criteria for evaluating research reliability.

2. Background and Literature Review

2.1 Core Problem: Academic Integrity in the AI Era

Australia, like many countries, lacks a cohesive national policy on GenAI use, and institutional guidance varies widely (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2024). Existing institutional policies on academic integrity often overlook the everyday decisions students, educators, and support staff make when using AI. This study proposes a bottom-up, practice-informed perspective, examining how stakeholders with a university co-create norms in the AI era. Traditional notions of academic integrity have focused on originality, authorship, and fairness (Bond et al., 2024). However, students now use AI tools to draft and generate ideas, sometimes for large parts of assignments (Freeman, 2025), creating ambiguity around what 'appropriate use' means. Students and staff report uncertainty around AI use, reflecting variation in institutional guidance and perceived support, and concerns about ethical

application (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Bond et al., 2024), underscoring the urgent need for research into stakeholder perspectives.

2.2 Technical Fit: Why a Three-Party Perspective

The “three-party perspective” recognises that students, educators, and third-space professionals have distinct priorities, experiences, and knowledge of AI tools. Students often prioritise efficiency and grades (Freeman, 2025), while educators generally value skill development and maintaining assessment integrity (Bond et al., 2024; Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025). Third-space professionals, like learning advisors, navigate both worlds, translating policy into practice and offering guidance on ethical AI use. Studying these interactions is a technical fit for the study: a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2024) allows the capture of different viewpoints and the building of a shared understanding in real educational settings.

2.3 Advantages Over Existing Studies

Most research on GenAI in education focuses on single stakeholder groups or on evaluating GenAI in isolation (Ashrafimoghari, Gürkan, & Suchow, 2024). Few studies explore how different groups interact to negotiate acceptable AI use, a gap highlighted in recent reviews (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025). By studying students, teachers, and support staff together, this study provides a more holistic understanding of how ‘appropriate use’ is emerging. The approach explains how these norms form, rather than simply documenting behaviour or compliance, giving insights that are useful for both research and practice (Bond et al., 2024).

2.4 Establishing Reasonable Evaluation Criteria

Ensuring the reliability and validity of qualitative inquiry in AI contexts requires careful thought. Constructivist grounded theory facilitates transparency in explaining how data is analysed and supports systematic comparison across participant accounts (Charmaz, 2024). Reviewing multiple types of data repeatedly helps to cross-check findings and increases their trustworthiness, which is consistent with sociocultural perspectives on knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). The study will also ensure that coding is consistent, that researchers reflect on their own influence, and that participants can confirm interpretations when appropriate (Charmaz, 2024).

3. Research Questions and Aims

This study is guided by three central questions:

1. How do students, educators, and third-space professionals perceive the boundary between legitimate GenAI use and academic misconduct?
2. What patterns of GenAI use emerge in teaching and learning, and how do they influence perceptions of learning quality and integrity?
3. How do permissions, boundaries, and expectations regarding GenAI differ across these stakeholder groups?

The overall aim is to develop a grounded, evidence-based model of academic integrity in the AI era that can guide the creation of effective support resources, shape assessment design, and inform institutional policy.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm & Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a constructivist paradigm, recognising that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed in social contexts (Charmaz, 2024). The approach is suitable for studying AI in Education, where the rules and values around it are being constructed in real time. The project

uses sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and digital ethics (Floridi & Cowls, 2019) to better understand how social, cultural, and technological factors influence reasoning, decision-making, and ethical evaluation when using AI tools.

4.2 Research Approach

A qualitative, design-based approach will be employed using constructivist grounded theory alongside dialogic inquiry. This combination allows ideas to develop naturally from what participants say and allows the researchers to make iterative refinements of the 'research conversations' (dialogic tasks) as the study progresses. The study focuses on how participants think, reflect, and make ethical decisions, not just on recording what their behaviours or knowledge, aligning with constructivist grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978; Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

4.3 Data Collection

Data will be collected using three complementary research conversations (dialogic tasks).

- *Ethical scenario dialogues:* Semi-structured conversations where participants respond to realistic GenAI scenarios. The dialogues explore policy interpretation, decision-making, and ethical reasoning in context.
- *Think-aloud tasks:* Participants perform academic tasks (e.g., essay writing) while verbalising their reasoning about AI use, capturing real-time decision-making.
- *Critical-friend interviews:* Follow-up discussions where participants review earlier responses, reflect on decisions, and offer further insights.

Together, these methods focus on how participants think and decide what appropriate use of AI is. Task design and scenario construction will also consider principles of personalised learning, as highlighted in Sharma et al. (2025), to ensure that participant engagement reflects authentic student experiences with GenAI.

4.4 Sampling & Analysis

Participants will be purposefully selected from students, educators, and third-space professionals across multiple faculties, with maximum variation to capture diverse experiences and familiarity with GenAI, reflecting prior evidence that stakeholder perceptions of GenAI's ethical and practical use vary widely across institutional contexts (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025). Data will be analysed using Charmaz's (2024) coding steps and constant comparison, with memos and reflexive journaling enhancing transparency and rigour.

4.5 Ethics & Pilot Study

Ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality, and careful handling of sensitive discussions on academic integrity. Dialogues will take place in supportive environments to minimise reputational risk. Ethical approval will be sought from the host university's ethics committee. A pilot study will test and refine dialogic tasks for clarity, realism, and their ability to elicit rich, genuine responses, enhancing the study's reliability.

5. Discussion / Anticipated Contributions

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study advances theory by showing how integrity norms are developing in AI-mediated educational settings. It extends constructivist grounded theory into educational ethics, integrating sociocultural learning theory and digital ethics to explain how students, educators, and support staff co-construct understandings of appropriate GenAI use (Vygotsky, 1978; Floridi & Cowls, 2019). The findings will offer a foundation for future research and practical interventions.

5.2 Practical Contribution

The study is expected to generate practical contributions: improving GenAI support for students and lecturers, guiding assessment design that balances integrity with meaningful AI use, and offering evidence-based recommendations for institutional policy. Building on prior research addressing stakeholder needs and ethical challenges (Bond et al., 2024; Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025) and principles of personalised learning (Sharma et al., 2025), interventions are tailored to diverse learner needs, promoting authentic engagement with GenAI tools and reflective practice.

5.3 Strategic & Sectoral Relevance

The research aligns with the university's Strategic Plan 2025–2030 (Charles Darwin University, 2025) and national priorities for equitable, quality education (TEQSA, 2024). Findings may inform policy development and sector-wide practice by addressing challenges in how students and staff navigate inconsistent AI guidance and ethical uncertainties (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025).

6. Conclusion

GenAI presents both opportunities and challenges in higher education. This study examines how students, educators, and third-space professionals negotiate appropriate use, revealing how academic integrity norms are co-constructed in practice. Findings aim to strengthen practical support for learners and staff, contribute to assessment reform, and inform institutional policy, contributing to a more adaptive, ethically-informed educational environment.

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