

Title

Cheating or Being Cheated? AI Policy Ambiguity and the Emergence of a Cheating Habitus in Higher Education

Research Overview

This paper examines academic integrity in higher education. With a critical discourse analysis of the UNESCO and OECD frameworks, the article demonstrates how policy ambiguity results in the production of a “cheating habitus,” which situates students within a transforming normative space.

Purpose of Study

The adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) across higher education is underway. This technological shift is prompting a reassessment of how academic knowledge is made, and how student writing is evaluated. Academic integrity questions dominate current conversations and discourses, framing plagiarism (now assisted by AI) largely as an act of student misbehaviour. This interpretation, however, obscures a more significant change: that it fundamentally alters the discursive structures through which academic knowledge is made, legitimized, authorized, controlled and constrained.

The author views academic integrity not as an absolute ethical value, but as conditional, given current realities in academia. As AI plays an increasing role in academic production, knowledge production and the recognition of intellectual labour are transformed. This development challenges prior notions of originality and intellectual work, a gulf between the idealized and the practical is thus created.

This study uses Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977) to describe academic integrity as a field of practice constructed through policy. It introduces the concept of “cheating habitus” to address the issue of students who change their dispositions toward academic work in response to technological tools and policy ambiguity in context. The study also discusses translating the global AI policy framework into the local institutional contexts.

Research Methods

The research takes a qualitative approach based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), conceptually informed by Norman Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model. It treats the global policy documents developed by UNESCO (2023, 2025) and OECD (2023, 2026) as agenda-setting texts guiding international educational reactions towards AI.

The inquiry proceeds through three interconnected layers:

- **The textual layer:** This entails an examination of the explicit definition of academic integrity (in all its guises) and the way in which it's communicated and represented.
- **The discursive layer:** This layer considers how the ideas around integrity, trust and responsibility fit within the larger frameworks.
- **The societal layer:** This layer connects these different narratives to the more fundamental changes taking place in AI-enabled scholarly practice, focusing on technological opportunities and institutional expectations.

Results and Discussion

The results show that global AI policy frameworks shape academic integrity through a cluster of ethically resonant, yet loosely defined concepts, such as responsibility, transparency, trust, and fairness. These function as floating signifiers (Laclau, 1996) that cement policy discourse at the level of values but postpones definition at the level of practice.

This leads to a structural disjuncture between policy talks and AI-assisted academic labor. Although policy schemes are general and principled, generative AI systems are immediate and actionable forms of academic production. As a result, students are navigating spaces where the use of AI is normalized

and functionally defined, yet institutional expectations are vague, inconsistently communicated and dependent on context.

In this sense, academic integrity is not deteriorating, but rather being reformed. This condition reflects what Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes as *illusio*, the sustained belief in the coherence and legitimacy of academic norms even as their practical foundations are destabilized. The distribution of epistemic labour between human and non-human (technical) agent raises questions about the nature of author, the originality of a text, and the amount of intellectual work. Academic production is increasingly the product of hybrid processes human and algorithmic, which muddies the water around legitimate practice.

Thus, students are constructed as concurrently potential transgressors of academic conventions, and agents attempting to make sense of ambiguous and fluid expectations. In this respect, they are both “cheating” and “being cheated on,” as they participate in a system that normalizes the use of AI but that is reluctant to articulate clear normative boundaries. This state of affairs embodies a more fundamental contradiction in policy talk, technology affordances, and institutional practice.

Such dynamics produce a *cheating habitus*, that is, a recalibration of dispositions in relation to academic work in changing field contexts. Rather than revealing an erosion of ethical consciousness, this transformation demonstrates how the actors in an evolving academic field adjust to new expectations.

This inconsistency is visible at the level of global policy, which contrasts with practice at the local level. University leaders are expected to make sense of and adapt the global policy conversation within their institutional circumstances, indicating that the gap between policy intent and policy reality will endure. We see this dynamic at play in a system like the United Arab Emirates, where the swift adoption of AI technology is juxtaposed with a high level of accountability and a culture of relentless reform.

These findings carry profound implications for educational policy reform. The results underscore a shift in policy development away from broad, principled statements about ethical behavior towards more practical, operational delineations of what constitutes permitted AI usage, what constitutes authorship and what constitutes academic responsibility. This move can also be understood as a pivot from compliance-based regulation towards valuing adaptability and flexibility in how institutions respond to evolving technologies and emerging situations.

Keywords

Academic integrity, cheating habitus, *illusio*, AI policy, higher education, policy enactment, educational leadership

Disclaimer:

Generative AI tools were used to support language refinement and structural organisation during manuscript development. All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, evaluated, edited, and interpreted by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final form of the manuscript.

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