



Academic Dishonesty as Knowledge Circulation: Commodity, Reciprocity, and Institutional Legitimacy in Vietnamese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Research on academic dishonesty has predominantly framed misconduct as individual deviation or institutional governance failure. Less attention has been given to how knowledge itself is reorganised within digitally mediated and performance-driven university systems. This article addresses that gap by examining academic dishonesty in Vietnamese higher education as a configuration of knowledge circulation rather than solely as rule violation. The study draws on survey data from 500 undergraduate students across five universities in Hanoi and 20 semi-structured interviews with lecturers and academic administrators. Quantitative analysis maps the distribution of dishonest practices across institutional and disciplinary contexts, while qualitative accounts trace how these practices are rationalised and stabilised within routine academic exchanges. Findings indicate that misconduct concentrates in low-visibility coursework and collaborative settings where grade pressure, relational obligation, and infrastructural accessibility intersect. Rather than conforming to a single ethical model, academic dishonesty emerges through overlapping regimes of valuation in which knowledge is alternately commodified, reciprocated, and institutionally regulated. The analysis reframes academic dishonesty as a patterned reorganisation of knowledge legitimacy under contemporary educational conditions, contributing a structural account that complements existing individual- and governance-centred explanations.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, higher education, knowledge circulation, digital mediation, relational obligation, market logic

INTRODUCTION

Assignments circulate through encrypted group chats before deadlines close. Drafts are revised collectively and sometimes completed by individuals not formally enrolled in the course. Examination questions surface briefly on shared screens, disappear, and return in altered form. Assistance moves between classmates under the language of care, reciprocity, or ordinary cooperation. These movements are not marginal disturbances of

academic order. They are woven into its routine functioning. What is often named as deviation may instead be symptomatic of how assessment already operates.

Their expansion coincides with the reorganisation of higher education through digital platforms, algorithmic tools, and data infrastructures. Academic labour no longer resides within the classroom or within a single authorial body. It unfolds across systems that enable delegation, replication, and rapid redistribution. Under such conditions, ethical judgement does not present itself as a singular act of will. It is fragmented across sequencing, substitution, and infrastructural access, shaped by performance pressure and technological affordance (Bozalek et al., 2020; Díaz et al., 2025; Hayles, 1999; Kubisch et al., 2020; Siddiqui, 2016). Normative commitments remain articulated, yet their force varies with institutional authority and local academic culture (Talanker, 2024). The gap between rule and practice widens not because norms vanish, but because the conditions of authorship have shifted.

Vietnamese universities render these shifts especially visible. Outsourced thesis writing, proxy examination participation, and AI-assisted coursework do not operate in secrecy beyond institutional reach; they adapt to assessment design and coexist with it. Informal digital markets for academic services flourish alongside official learning platforms. Knowledge circulates between these domains without a clear ontological rupture. It becomes purchasable output, a reciprocal obligation, or a credential resource depending on how it is positioned within relational and institutional arrangements. The question is no longer simply whether cheating occurs, but what form of knowledge the system itself is rewarding.

Such dynamics sit uneasily with governance-oriented models of academic integrity. Policy discourse in Vietnam, as elsewhere, continues to frame dishonesty through regulation, moral instruction, and procedural compliance. Analytical emphasis rests on examination security, plagiarism detection, and sanctioning frameworks. Yet ambiguity intensifies not in the tightly monitored examination hall but in routine coursework and collaborative formats where authorship boundaries blur and oversight thins. Credential competition and high-stakes graduation thresholds push pressure on low-visibility assignments where collective labour is both encouraged and disavowed. Integrity policy polices the event of violation, while institutional design normalises the circulation that makes violation plausible.

International research has linked academic dishonesty to grade pressure, competition, and uneven enforcement (McCabe & Treviño, 1997). Recent analyses show how digital infrastructures redistribute agency across human and non-human actors, complicating responsibility and authorship (Chiang et al., 2022; Pente et al., 2020). Yet integrity often remains anchored in individual decision-making. Grey zones—where assistance, delegation, and technological mediation converge—are acknowledged but rarely theorised. The problem is repeatedly relocated to student intention or governance failure, while the ontology of knowledge itself remains largely untouched.

Poststructural and posthumanist approaches shift the analytic centre. Ethics is understood as relational and materially mediated rather than as an attribute of autonomous subjects (Scherling & Kasa, 2024; Talanker, 2024; Taylor, 2011). Knowledge no longer appears as a fixed possession attached to an individual author. It is assembled, displaced, and reauthorised across infrastructures, exchanges, and assessment formats. Integrity, accordingly, cannot be reduced to rule compliance. It emerges within configurations of digital mediation, institutional authority, and peer obligation. This move, however, raises an unsettling possibility: if knowledge is structurally mobile, then the moral clarity attributed to authorship may rest on increasingly fragile ground.

This article examines academic dishonesty in Vietnamese higher education as a configuration of knowledge circulation structured through overlapping logics of exchange. The question is not why individuals violate rules, but how knowledge is mobilised, repositioned, and legitimised within everyday academic arrangements. Three intersecting logics—market, relational, and school-based morality—organise these movements. Through

them, knowledge is commodified, reciprocated, and defended in ways that render academic integrity less a stable baseline than a contested regime of valuation. The sections that follow situate this argument within existing approaches to academic dishonesty, outline the theoretical framing and research design, and present empirical findings tracing how these logics operate across institutional settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on academic dishonesty does not evolve through cumulative refinement but through successive relocations of ethical agency. What shifts across decades is not simply empirical emphasis but the assumed locus of responsibility: first in individual character, then in relational context, and more recently in distributed assemblages of humans and technologies. These relocations, however, do not displace one another in linear succession. Normative, relational, and posthuman orientations coexist within contemporary scholarship. They frequently draw on incompatible ontologies while addressing the same empirical terrain. Across these reorientations, one element receives comparatively little scrutiny: the status of knowledge itself.

Early normative and managerial studies stabilised academic dishonesty as a measurable deviation. Within this grammar, misconduct is treated as a violation of institutional rules, traceable to personality traits, motivational profiles, or perceived sanction risk (Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015; Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Whitley, 1998). Even when disciplinary differences, national variation, or organisational arrangements enter analysis (Broeckelman-Post, 2008; Davis et al., 1992; Kennedy et al., 2000; Lin & Wen, 2007), the underlying premise remains intact: integrity is a stable institutional norm, and dishonesty signals failure of compliance. Honor codes and regulatory frameworks are interpreted as corrective mechanisms (McCabe & Treviño, 1993, 1997). Ethical breakdown is diagnosed; governance is prescribed. This orientation continues to structure survey design and policy discourse even where more complex theoretical vocabularies are adopted elsewhere.

Vietnamese scholarship largely reproduces this managerial orientation. Empirical accounts document the proliferation of misconduct and the enabling role of digital technologies (Hoàng et al., 2023), while normative discussions emphasise moral education and institutional culture as remedies (Đình, 2024; Lan, 2020). The analytic horizon remains one of regulation and discipline. What is less visible in these analyses is how actors navigate everyday academic situations. In these contexts, cooperation, obligation, and infrastructural mediation blur the boundary between assistance and violation. At the same time, relational and technological perspectives increasingly appear alongside regulatory arguments. The result is a field in which incompatible explanatory grammars are layered rather than reconciled.

Relational and contextual approaches displace the individual as sole ethical centre without abandoning the assumption that integrity ultimately resides in human judgement. Ethical practice becomes negotiated rather than internalised; norms emerge in interaction rather than preceding it (Colnerud & Rosander, 2009). Digital environments complicate authorship. Platform affordances shape how labour is attributed and redistributed (Chiang et al., 2022; Ercegovic & Richardson, 2004). In Vietnam, platform-based academic assistance circulates within informal networks where interpretation is mediated through relational expectation rather than formal classification (Hoa & Trung, 2024). Misconduct here appears embedded in social exchange, not merely in deviance. Yet these contextual analyses often operate alongside normative metrics. This produces tension between viewing misconduct as negotiated practice and as measurable violation.

Even within contextual accounts, technologies and infrastructures are often treated as influencing conditions rather than constitutive forces. Ethical agency remains anchored in human subjects responding to context. Longitudinal studies linking academic dishonesty to later professional behaviour (Nonis & Swift, 2001) reinforce this orientation: the focus is on moral formation across time, not on the reorganisation of knowledge itself. As a result, relational and normative paradigms frequently intersect without resolving whether misconduct reflects flawed character, constrained judgement, or adaptive participation.

Within posthumanist and material-relational interventions, agency is reconceptualised as distributed across assemblages of humans and non-humans (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1991, 2016). Ethical action emerges through entanglement rather than autonomous intention. Within higher education, this perspective foregrounds care, relational responsibility, and materially situated practice (Bozalek et al., 2020). Digital infrastructures are no longer external influences but constitutive elements in how authorship and evaluation are organised (Díaz et al., 2025; Kubisch et al., 2020; Pente et al., 2020; Siddiqui, 2016). Integrity becomes inseparable from governance structures and discursive power formations (Macfarlane, 2016). Yet posthuman accounts do not replace earlier paradigms; they sit beside them, generating productive but unresolved frictions regarding responsibility, ownership, and normativity.

Across these shifts—from deviation to negotiation to assemblage—the scope of analysis expands outward. However, this expansion does not produce theoretical convergence. Competing accounts of agency coexist without shared assumptions about knowledge itself. They diverge on what knowledge is, how it travels, and where its legitimacy originates. One assumption nevertheless persists across paradigms: knowledge is often treated as a stable object whose legitimacy precedes exchange. Even when agency is distributed, the ontology of knowledge remains under-theorised. It is assumed to be non-transferable, individually anchored, and normatively prior to circulation. The analytic focus tends to remain on who acts and under what conditions, rather than on how knowledge circulates within institutional arrangements.

This tension becomes particularly visible in contexts where performance metrics, digital infrastructures, and relational obligations converge. In such environments, knowledge does not merely pass between actors; it is reorganised through competing regimes of valuation. Treating academic dishonesty solely as deviation, negotiation, or assemblage leaves unexamined the structural reconfiguration of knowledge as exchangeable resource within contemporary universities.

The analysis that follows addresses this omission by examining academic dishonesty as a configuration of knowledge circulation structured through intersecting logics of exchange, obligation, and institutional legitimacy in Vietnamese higher education. Rather than adding another explanatory layer to existing framings, it interrogates the ontological assumption that knowledge remains stable prior to its movement.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

If dishonest practices recur across routine coursework, collaborative formats, and digitally mediated tasks, the problem cannot be confined to episodic violation of established norms. What requires explanation is not simply why individuals deviate, but how knowledge is valued, authorised, and redistributed within contemporary academic systems. The framework developed here approaches academic dishonesty not as moral departure but as a patterned configuration of knowledge under specific institutional and infrastructural conditions.

Within massified and digitally mediated universities, knowledge no longer functions solely as an epistemic good tied to individual authorship. It is positioned, exchanged, delegated, and reassembled through assessment regimes, institutional hierarchies, technological infrastructures, and networks of social obligation. From this vantage point, what is conventionally designated as “*cheating*” appears less as rupture than as one arrangement within ordinary academic practice. The analytic task therefore shifts from identifying rule-breaking to tracing how regimes of legitimacy are assembled and maintained.

Prevailing theories of academic integrity often rely on an implicit ontology: knowledge is assumed to be inherently non-transferable, individually owned, and normatively stable across contexts. Misconduct is defined through breach of this ownership. Such a model stabilises the category of dishonesty by presuming that authorship precedes exchange. Yet under contemporary evaluative conditions—where learning is mediated by platforms, collaborative formats, and performance metrics—the transferability of knowledge

becomes structurally embedded. The instability observed in academic integrity debates may reflect tension in the assumptions about knowledge on which integrity theory relies.

Posthuman and relational accounts of ethics provide the grounding for this repositioning. Bozalek et al. (2020) conceptualise care as a materially mediated practice embedded in institutional arrangements, while Hayles (1999) demonstrates how agency becomes distributed across human–technical assemblages. Ethical judgement emerges through engagement with infrastructural and institutional arrangements rather than through isolated intention (Scherling & Kasa, 2024; Talanker, 2024; Taylor, 2011). Knowledge becomes stabilised through historically shaped processes of valuation. It is not inherently fixed; it becomes fixed under particular regimes of recognition.

Three interrelated logics clarify how such valuation occurs. These logics do not function as moral categories. They capture distinct regimes through which knowledge becomes legitimate within academic practice. Under a market logic, knowledge is rendered transferable and outcome-oriented. Assessment systems structured by performance metrics privilege results over process, enabling knowledge to be detached from authorship and reorganised through technological mediation. Grades and credentials operate as exchange indicators, while intellectual labour is calibrated toward measurable output (McCabe et al., 2006; Pecorari, 2015). Knowledge stabilises here through equivalence and substitutability.

A relational logic foregrounds valuation through obligation and reciprocity. Knowledge circulates within peer networks as part of ongoing social exchange. Assistance—whether through drafting, sharing restricted materials, or intervening in evaluative contexts—is framed through relational continuity rather than contractual transaction. Boundaries between cooperation and misconduct are negotiated in interaction rather than predetermined (Colnerud & Rosander, 2009). Knowledge stabilises through recognition within social bonds.

A school ethics logic anchors legitimacy in institutional authority. Authorship, authorised effort, and procedural compliance define acceptable production within formal codes and assessment rubrics. Yet technological mediation, large-scale evaluation, and uneven enforcement strain this anchoring. Formal regulation coexists with tacit accommodation, and ethical reference points fragment under institutional pressure (Macfarlane, 2016; Bozalek et al., 2020). Knowledge stabilises through institutional recognition even as that recognition remains contested.

These logics do not operate sequentially or independently. They intersect within a single academic situation. An act of delegation may simultaneously enact exchange optimisation, fulfil relational obligation, and partially conform to institutional expectation. Academic dishonesty emerges where these regimes of legitimacy overlap and compete. What counts as cheating depends on how knowledge is simultaneously commodified, reciprocated, and regulated within a given configuration. These logics function as interpretive heuristics for analysing recurring configurations of valuation rather than as fixed ontological categories. They do not map one-to-one onto individual actors or discrete behaviours; instead, they illuminate patterned tendencies within complex academic situations.

Conceptualising academic dishonesty in this way redirects analytic attention from individual disposition to institutional organisation. The issue becomes not simply who violates rules, but how contemporary higher education structures the circulation and ownership of knowledge under conditions that render it increasingly mobile. This framing provides the basis for the empirical analysis that follows, where dishonest practices are examined as structured configurations of exchange rather than isolated infractions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an explanatory mixed-methods design combining distributional analysis with interpretive reconstruction. The aim is not to enumerate instances of misconduct but to identify patterned configurations

through which knowledge is positioned, circulated, and justified under contemporary academic conditions. The quantitative component maps clustering across institutional settings; the qualitative component examines how these patterns are narrated, stabilised, and contested in everyday academic practice. The three-logics framework functions as an analytic orientation guiding interpretation rather than as a classificatory template imposed in advance.

Data were collected between September 2023 and April 2024 in Hanoi, Vietnam. Five universities were selected purposively to capture variation in governance structure (public and private), academic orientation (research-intensive and applied), enrolment density, and assessment design. All sites operated within competitive grading regimes and increasingly digitalised coursework environments. While structurally comparable in credential pressure and platform use, they differed in instructional monitoring practices and assessment sequencing, enabling analytic comparison across institutional configurations.

The first phase consisted of a stratified survey administered across year levels. Of 720 distributed questionnaires, 500 complete responses were retained for analysis (response rate: 69.4%). Recruitment approximated enrolment distributions by gender and disciplinary field; no exclusion criteria were applied based on academic standing. The instrument covered three domains: reported or observed forms of academic dishonesty; situational pressures, including grade anxiety and workload intensity; and contextual conditions such as instructional oversight, peer dynamics, and technology use. Items were adapted from established academic integrity measures and refined through preliminary exploratory interviews to ensure contextual fit within Vietnamese higher education. Responses were recorded on five-point Likert scales.

Quantitative analysis proceeded in stages. Descriptive statistics established prevalence patterns and distributional variation across institutional types. Chi-square tests examined associations between contextual variables and reported practices. Logistic regression models assessed predictive relationships between situational pressures and alignment with market-oriented knowledge handling. Composite measures were examined for internal coherence prior to modelling. Reported behaviours were subsequently mapped analytically onto the three logics to identify patterned alignment rather than isolated frequency.

The second phase comprised 20 semi-structured interviews with lecturers, academic advisors, and administrative officers across participating institutions. Participants were selected purposively to ensure variation in discipline, institutional role, and professional seniority. Interviews were conducted after preliminary survey analysis to allow focused interrogation of configurations that appeared structurally salient. Prompts centred on concrete academic episodes involving authorship, delegation, assistance, examination conduct, and technological mediation. Questions were framed to elicit situated descriptions of practice and institutional response rather than personal confession or moral declaration. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and conducted with informed consent.

Qualitative analysis followed a directed content approach structured initially by the three-logics framework. Two researchers coded independently and reconciled discrepancies through iterative comparison. Segments not readily captured by the initial coding structure were retained and examined for analytic refinement, allowing the framework itself to be tested against the data rather than presumed fully adequate. Cross-institutional comparison focused on recurrence of structural configurations rather than singular narrative emphasis.

Data collection ceased when additional interviews no longer introduced substantively new ways of positioning, legitimising, or contesting knowledge circulation. Saturation was assessed through repetition of structural configurations across institutional contexts rather than through thematic redundancy alone. Convergence between quantitative clustering and qualitative accounts provided analytic consolidation, though not perfect symmetry; minor discrepancies were retained rather than forced into alignment.

Throughout data collection and analysis, reflexive attention was given to the researcher's positionality. Familiarity with Vietnamese higher education facilitated contextual interpretation, while the absence of formal affiliation with participating institutions limited administrative influence over recruitment and disclosure. Field notes documented interpretive decisions and moments of uncertainty.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Given the sensitivity of discussing academic misconduct, instruments focused on institutional conditions and observed practices rather than on direct self-incrimination. Data are stored in anonymised form and may be shared upon reasonable request, subject to ethical constraints.

The findings are analytically generalisable to higher education systems characterised by massification, digital mediation, and intensified credential competition. They are not statistically representative of all Vietnamese institutions. The cross-sectional design captures configurations at a particular institutional moment; self-reported survey data may be influenced by social desirability bias. While triangulation mitigates this limitation, it does not remove it. These constraints delimit the scope of inference and inform interpretation of the results.

FINDINGS

Academic dishonesty in this dataset does not appear as episodic moral failure. It emerges as a patterned adaptation within an evaluative environment characterised by dense credit structures, competitive grading, and digitally mediated coursework. The integration of survey data (N = 500) and semi-structured interviews (N = 20) does not simply establish prevalence; it clarifies the mechanisms through which students and staff navigate competing regimes of value under institutional constraint. The three logics identified—market, relational, and school-based—do not describe stable moral types. They describe modes of valuation through which knowledge is positioned, redistributed, and defended in everyday academic practice.

Optimising Output Under Performance Pressure

Survey results indicate that 61.4% of respondents engaged in at least one practice aligned with market-oriented knowledge handling, including AI-assisted writing (38.6%), paid outsourcing (27.1%), and purchase of prior examination materials (24.9%). These figures derive from validated behavioural clusters rather than isolated admissions.

Regression analysis specifies the structural drivers. Grade pressure is the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$), followed by ease of access to cheating services ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and lower academic self-confidence ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$). Lack of instructor supervision does not reach statistical significance ($\beta = 0.18$, n.s.). The absence of significance for supervision complicates regulatory assumptions. Market-aligned practices are not primarily activated by monitoring gaps; they are activated by performance compression combined with infrastructural availability.

The qualitative material clarifies how this activation is rationalised. Fourteen of twenty interviews contained segments coded under market alignment. Second-cycle coding identified three recurrent sub-patterns: performance rationalisation, institutional displacement awareness, and reputational risk framing.

For instance, PA-L-J3 (Private Applied – Lecturer – Junior) described outsourced coursework as “*a way students survive heavy weeks*,” adding that tighter monitoring “*just pushes it elsewhere*.” This segment was coded first as market alignment and subsequently as performance rationalisation and displacement awareness. Similar displacement narratives appeared in five additional transcripts (PR-A-S1; PA-A-S2; PR-L-J4; PA-L-J1; PR-A-S3). The pattern is not anecdotal. Enforcement alters visibility but does not eliminate substitution routes.

Among senior administrators in research-oriented institutions, the framing shifts. PR–A–S1 characterised outsourcing as “*a threat to degree credibility.*” Here, the concern centres on credential stability rather than student morality. The same structural practice is interpreted through institutional risk rather than ethical lapse. Market logic, in this sense, reflects not deviance but alignment with output-oriented assessment regimes. Knowledge, under these conditions, becomes structurally detachable from the labour that produces it.

Asymmetrical Redistribution Within Group Stability

Relational alignment appears in 42.7% of survey responses, defined as completing academic work on behalf of peers without monetary exchange. Cross-tabulation indicates concentration in small elective courses and thesis contexts rather than large lecture settings. Students reporting such engagement are not disproportionately academically weak; high-performing students frequently report absorbing additional workload.

Sixteen of the twenty interviews contained segments coded as relational alignment. Second-cycle coding produced four recurrent sub-categories: reciprocal obligation (11 transcripts), competence redistribution (8 transcripts), boundary hesitation (7 transcripts), and enforcement reluctance (5 transcripts).

In PA–L–J2, a lecturer described a group presentation in which one student completed most of the analytical components. The initial assessment—“*that’s common*”—shifted under probing to “*well... if nobody complains, we do not escalate.*” The hesitation marker triggered boundary hesitation coding; the redistribution of workload was coded as competence redistribution; the decision not to intervene was coded as enforcement reluctance. Similar hesitation sequences appeared in six additional transcripts.

Relational logic does not neutralise inequality. It redistributes evaluative burden. Stronger students absorb labour to stabilise collective grades; instructors tolerate imbalance to preserve classroom functionality. What appears as solidarity often operates as pragmatic asymmetry management under constrained time and oversight. Relational adaptation is therefore not reducible to cultural collectivism. It is structurally embedded in assessment designs that assign collective output while evaluating individual performance imperfectly.

Commitment Under Eroding Authority

Only 23.3% of survey respondents reported consistent refusal to engage in misconduct across scenarios. This proportion is higher among first-year students and within programmes characterised by sustained faculty interaction and structured feedback cycles.

Interview coding identified principled refusal in six transcripts and authority fragility in five; four transcripts contained both. PR–L–S2 (Public Research – Lecturer – Senior) described integrity as “*professional responsibility,*” yet later acknowledged that inconsistent enforcement “*makes students question fairness.*” Commitment persists, but it is conditional upon perceived institutional coherence.

A subgroup analysis further complicates the picture. Among final-year students who rejected outsourcing for thesis work, 31% reported using paraphrasing or editing services for routine coursework. Moral positioning shifts with assessment visibility and perceived stakes. Integrity is situationally recalibrated rather than fixed at the level of character. School-based morality remains present but increasingly vulnerable to comparative disadvantage within performance-intensive environments.

AI and the Emergence of Authorship Ambiguity

The preceding sections describe three relatively stable regimes through which knowledge circulation becomes organised in academic practice. AI-assisted writing introduces a different form of ambiguity that does not fit neatly within market exchange, relational obligation, or institutional rule-following. Approximately 7% of survey

responses referenced AI-assisted work that did not align consistently with the validated market or relational clusters identified in the quantitative modelling. These cases were isolated during cluster validation procedures: responses involving AI use were first tested against the composite indicators for outsourcing (transactional substitution) and peer assistance (reciprocal redistribution). Where AI-mediated drafting involved neither payment nor identifiable peer exchange, and where respondents reported substantive post-generation revision, those cases were retained as analytically distinct rather than forcibly assigned to existing categories.

In the interview corpus, eleven transcripts contained segments coded under a cross-cutting category labelled authorship ambiguity. PA-L-J1 described a student who generated an initial draft using AI and subsequently rewrote it extensively. When asked whether this constituted cheating, the lecturer paused before stating that “*it becomes difficult to define.*” The pause was coded as boundary hesitation, indicating uncertainty in locating authorship rather than unfamiliarity with policy. Comparable hesitation sequences appeared in four additional transcripts. In each instance, ambiguity arose not from ignorance of regulation but from difficulty determining where authorial labour concluded and assisted generation began.

AI use does not constitute a fourth logic of valuation. Its quantitative prevalence remains modest relative to market-aligned practices. Its analytical significance lies elsewhere. Unlike paid outsourcing, AI-mediated drafting may not involve clear transactional exchange. Unlike peer collaboration, it does not operate through reciprocal obligation. It introduces process opacity rather than relational redistribution. The instability observed concerns attribution rather than substitution.

Where assessment regimes privilege final output while rendering drafting processes largely invisible, layered AI-assisted revision complicates the presumption that authorship is singular and temporally bounded. The question raised by these cases is not primarily one of frequency, but of definitional strain: how far assisted generation can be integrated into legitimate academic production before the category of individual authorship loses coherence. AI makes visible the extent to which contemporary academic writing already depends on distributed scaffolding, thereby exposing tensions within integrity frameworks grounded in solitary production.

Structured Adaptation Rather Than Moral Collapse

The integrated analytical matrix in **Table 1** summarises convergence and divergence across data sources. Across public and private institutions, research-oriented and applied settings, and early- and late-stage cohorts, variation appears primarily in magnitude rather than structural form. Two institutions show weaker market clustering among early-year cohorts, and one applied programme reports lower AI-assisted writing. These deviations limit generalisability but do not undermine the observed structural patterns.

The data do not support a narrative of ethical breakdown. Nor do they support regulatory sufficiency. What emerges instead is a structured field of adaptation. Students move between valuation regimes in response to performance compression, infrastructural mediation, and uneven enforcement. Academic integrity persists, erodes, and recalibrates within the same institutional architecture.

Table 1. Convergence and Divergence Across Data Sources: Domains, Structural Drivers, and Practical Status

Domain	Survey Prevalence	Structural Driver	Interview Recurrence	Practical Status
Market Alignment	61.4%	Grade pressure ($\beta = 0.47$)	14/20	Structurally dominant
Relational Alignment	42.7%	Group-based assessment	16/20	Functionally stabilising
School-Based Refusal	23.3%	Faculty interaction	8/20	Present but fragile
AI Ambiguity	~7%	Process opacity	11/20	Expanding grey zone

Under conditions where assessment design renders knowledge transferable, negotiable, and output-centred, the boundary between legitimate production and illicit substitution becomes structurally strained. The observed patterns reflect that strain rather than its absence.

DISCUSSION

The Vietnamese case examined here functions less as a national exception than as a diagnostic site. It renders visible tensions that remain partially obscured in much of the international literature on academic integrity. What appears at first glance as widespread misconduct is more accurately read as ontological friction. These systems continue to regulate knowledge as individually owned while simultaneously enabling its circulation.

Classical integrity scholarship rests on a moral baseline anchored in the autonomous individual agent. Studies of honour codes and institutional culture (McCabe & Treviño, 1993, 1997; Whitley, 1998) assume that ethical order depends on internalised commitment reinforced by communal norms. Within that framework, dishonesty appears when individual restraint fails or when enforcement weakens.

The Vietnamese data complicate this baseline. Regression results demonstrate that grade pressure and infrastructural accessibility outweigh supervisory absence as predictors of market-aligned practices. Interviews further show that enforcement does not eliminate outsourcing; it displaces it. These patterns suggest that misconduct cannot be reduced to moral deficiency or monitoring gaps. It is structurally patterned adaptation under conditions where measurable output governs progression.

In this light, the honour-code paradigm appears historically bounded. It presupposes a relatively stable correspondence between authorship, labour, and evaluation. In digitally mediated universities, authorship increasingly becomes distributed across algorithmic tools, collaborative platforms, and peer networks. Agency operates through assemblages rather than individuals alone (Bozalek et al., 2020; Hayles, 1999). The moral baseline has not disappeared; it has been destabilised by infrastructural transformation.

The rise of AI-assisted writing in the dataset intensifies this destabilisation. Nearly two-fifths of respondents reported AI-mediated drafting, yet qualitative accounts reveal layered revision, rewriting, and iterative modification. These practices resist binary classification as either original authorship or simple substitution. They exemplify distributed authorship—knowledge produced through human–machine entanglement rather than singular intentionality.

Existing regulatory frameworks often attempt to preserve rigid boundaries between “*language support*,” “*editing*,” and “*plagiarism*” (Pecorari, 2015). The Vietnamese data suggest that such boundaries are increasingly administrative rather than ontological. When algorithmic assistance becomes embedded in everyday academic workflow, integrity can no longer be defined solely through the exclusion of tools. The conceptual object requiring defence—individualised authorship—has itself become unstable.

Relational configurations further unsettle universalist assumptions. Integrity discourse typically frames responsibility as individually bounded. Yet 42.7% of respondents reported completing work for peers without monetary exchange. Interviews indicate that such acts are frequently experienced as a moral obligation rather than a violation. Within tightly networked cohorts, refusal to assist may jeopardise relational capital.

Care ethics scholarship recognises responsibility as embedded in relational binding (Bozalek et al., 2020). The Vietnamese findings extend this insight by demonstrating how relational obligation intersects with competitive credential structures. Redistribution of labour within groups does not abolish hierarchy; it reorganises it. Stronger students absorb disproportionate workload to stabilise collective outcomes. Integrity policy that addresses only rule compliance misses this redistribution dynamic.

This does not imply that relational ethics replace institutional norms. Rather, it shows that universalist integrity standards operate alongside, and sometimes in tension with, situated obligations. The issue is not cultural exceptionalism. Comparable patterns are observable in other collectivist and networked contexts. What the Vietnamese case offers is analytic clarity: it exposes how relational logics persist within systems officially committed to individual authorship.

The persistence of school-based morality—particularly among first-year students—might appear to reaffirm traditional integrity theory. Yet its erosion across later cohorts suggests structural strain. Where enforcement is inconsistent and credential competition intensifies, commitment alone does not guarantee equity. Students who adhere strictly to rules may perceive themselves as disadvantaged relative to peers who strategically navigate grey zones. Moral conviction becomes fragile when institutional signals appear contradictory.

A deeper theoretical implication emerges from this friction. Prevailing integrity theory implicitly assumes that knowledge is non-transferable and ethically stable across contexts. The empirical evidence challenges this ontology. Under massified, digitised higher education, knowledge is structurally exchangeable. It circulates as commodity, reciprocal resource, and credential simultaneously. Assessment systems both enable and constrain this circulation.

This raises a difficult question for international scholarship. If knowledge is already authorised to move across tutoring markets, licensed software, collaborative assignments, editorial assistance, and AI interfaces, what precisely distinguishes legitimate support from prohibited transfer? When delegation is structurally embedded in some assessment designs but penalised in others, the boundary appears administratively drawn rather than intrinsically grounded.

From this perspective, academic dishonesty is not merely a deviation from moral order. It reflects a structural contradiction between two coexisting regimes: one demanding measurable output and another presuming indivisible authorship. Surveillance alone cannot resolve this contradiction. As digital infrastructures expand more rapidly than monitoring capacity, control regimes risk entering an arms race with circulation pathways.

The Vietnamese universities analysed here do not represent a pathological case. They illuminate a global condition intensified by academic capitalism, credential inflation, and platform-mediated labour. What is often described as integrity crisis may instead reflect the lag between inherited moral frameworks and contemporary knowledge infrastructures.

To reconceptualise integrity under these conditions does not require abandoning ethical commitment. It requires acknowledging that the ontological premises underlying much integrity policy were forged under different technological and institutional arrangements. The challenge is not to relax standards, but to rethink how authorship, delegation, and collaboration are defined when knowledge production is irreversibly entangled with digital assemblages.

Academic integrity, in this light, is not a fixed moral baseline awaiting restoration. It is a contested regime negotiated within shifting circuits of circulation. The Vietnamese data do not overturn international theory. Instead, they expose the historical assumptions on which much integrity scholarship still relies, particularly the presumption of autonomous authorship and the idea that knowledge remains intrinsically non-transferable.

CONCLUSION

Academic dishonesty, as traced here, does not occupy the margins of university life. It is produced within the same arrangements that organise assessment, credentialing, and academic advancement. Across

institutions, what emerges is not episodic violation but patterned reconfiguration of how knowledge is positioned under performance pressure, relational obligation, and infrastructural mediation.

Within these conditions, knowledge does not function as a stable moral object. It circulates across assignments, peer networks, and digital platforms, shifting between commodity, reciprocal resource, and institutional credential. Ethical judgment does not precede these movements; it takes shape within them. Students act within architectures that render knowledge simultaneously as measurable output and as a transferable asset. Practices labelled dishonest are entangled with the same evaluative structures that define legitimate achievement.

Regulatory responses grounded in surveillance or procedural reinforcement encounter structural limits when knowledge is already distributed across technological and relational infrastructures. Where authorship, assistance, and delegation remain continuously negotiated, enforcement cannot restore a boundary that institutional design has already rendered porous. Ethical tension persists not because norms are absent, but because regimes of value coexist without consolidation.

If such instability is structural rather than incidental, then the limits of integrity policy may not lie solely in insufficient enforcement. They may lie in a misalignment between what policy presumes knowledge to be and how institutional arrangements organise its movement. Where assessment design embeds delegation, collaboration, and infrastructural mediation as routine features of academic work, integrity discourse risks defending an object whose ontological coherence has already shifted. The problem may not be that students fail to comply, but that governance frameworks continue to regulate knowledge as if it were singular, bounded, and immobile.

The Vietnamese context makes these tensions visible in concentrated form, yet the configurations identified are not reducible to national specificity. They resonate with broader transformations in massified and digitised higher education, where intensified credential competition intersects with platform-mediated circulation. Under such conditions, the distinction between production and transfer becomes unstable. Academic dishonesty remains a necessary category within institutional governance, but its coherence depends on assumptions about knowledge ownership that are increasingly strained.

The study is bounded by its empirical scope. Survey-based measures cannot eliminate social desirability effects, even when interview accounts complicate them. The focus on universities in Hanoi limits claims to analytic rather than statistical generalisation. Although the sampling strategy incorporated disciplinary variation across humanities, social sciences, and STEM programmes, cross-tabulation did not reveal systematic divergence in the distribution of the three logics. Differences appeared primarily in magnitude rather than structural form, suggesting that the observed configurations are not reducible to field-specific academic cultures. Institutional policy design and administrative practice warrant further examination beyond the present analysis.

What remains unsettled is not simply how to prevent misconduct, but how academic systems define the legitimacy of knowledge under conditions that structurally enable its mobility. The instability observed here is unlikely to disappear through tighter regulation alone. It reflects a deeper tension between the demand for measurable output and the realities of distributed exchange. Whether this tension is treated as an anomaly or as a structural condition will shape how academic integrity is theorised in the years ahead.

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