

BETWEEN ASSISTANCE AND ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT: ENGLISH LECTURERS' EVALUATION OF AI-SUPPORTED STUDENT WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT has transformed writing practices in higher education and raised important questions regarding authorship, assessment, and academic integrity. Although previous studies have explored the benefits and challenges of AI-assisted writing, limited research has examined how lecturers evaluate student writing that involves AI support. This study investigates how English lecturers conceptualise the boundary between acceptable AI-assisted writing and academic misconduct and explores the factors influencing their assessment and grading decisions in Vietnamese higher education. A qualitative design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty English lecturers from three universities in Hanoi. The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with iterative discussions between the researchers used to refine interpretations and theme development.. The findings indicate that lecturers viewed AI use along a continuum rather than as inherently unethical, distinguishing acceptable AI assistance from academic misconduct primarily based on students' agency and intellectual contribution. Assessment decisions depended on transparency in AI use and evidence of learning, with lecturers emphasising students' ability to explain, justify, and reflect on their writing processes rather than relying primarily on AI-detection tools. The findings also highlight the need for clearer institutional guidance and professional development to support consistent and context-sensitive assessment of AI-supported writing. The study concludes that assessing AI-supported writing is a pedagogical and interpretative practice rather than a purely technical or rule-based process.

Keywords: *AI-assisted writing, academic integrity, lecturer assessment, teacher cognition, Vietnamese higher education.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly following the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, has transformed educational practices worldwide. In higher education, AI-powered tools are increasingly being used to support learning activities such as information retrieval, idea generation, language development, and academic writing (Naznin et al., 2025). Within English language education, students are now able to employ AI systems throughout the writing process, from brainstorming and outlining to drafting and revision (Ramadani & Pitaloka, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). As a result, AI-assisted writing has become increasingly common in university classrooms.

While these technologies offer important pedagogical opportunities, they also raise significant concerns regarding authorship, originality, and academic integrity. Unlike conventional writing support tools, generative AI can produce coherent and sophisticated texts that closely resemble human writing, making it more difficult to determine the extent of students' intellectual contribution to assessed work (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023). Consequently, questions surrounding acceptable AI use and academic misconduct have become central issues in contemporary higher education (Cotton et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship suggests that educational institutions have struggled to keep pace with the rapid development and adoption of generative AI technologies. In many contexts, policies governing AI use remain unclear, inconsistent, or underdeveloped, leaving lecturers responsible for making complex judgements about student work without established guidelines (Cotton et al., 2023; Finkel-Gates, 2025). At the same time, students themselves often report uncertainty regarding ethical boundaries and acceptable forms of AI-assisted writing, particularly when institutional expectations vary across courses and instructors (Lund et al., 2025). These developments have intensified concerns about how academic integrity should be understood and maintained in the era of generative AI.

The challenges posed by AI-assisted writing are particularly salient in language education, where writing assessment requires evaluators to make interpretative judgements about students' language ability, learning processes, and textual authorship. Decisions regarding the acceptability of AI use, therefore, extend beyond technical concerns and involve broader pedagogical and ethical considerations. Understanding how lecturers navigate these challenges is becoming increasingly important as AI continues to reshape writing practices in higher education.

In Vietnam, research on AI integration in English language education has expanded rapidly. Existing studies indicate that Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers recognise both the benefits and risks associated with AI technologies. For example, Vo and Huynh (2025) found that teachers simultaneously viewed ChatGPT as a valuable educational resource and a potential threat to learner autonomy. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2025) reported that lecturers appreciated AI's potential to support writing instruction while expressing concerns about student overreliance on AI-generated content. Broader research has

also highlighted ethical concerns, pedagogical adaptation, and uncertainty regarding AI implementation among Vietnamese university lecturers (Nguyen, 2025).

Despite these emerging contributions, relatively little is known about how lecturers evaluate AI-supported student writing in assessment contexts. Most existing studies have focused on instructional applications of AI or general perceptions of AI adoption. Much less attention has been paid to how lecturers distinguish between acceptable academic assistance and academic misconduct, and what factors shape their assessment and grading decisions when AI is involved in student writing.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how English lecturers in Vietnamese higher education conceptualise and assess AI-supported student writing. Specifically, it explores how lecturers define the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct and examines the factors that influence their assessment and grading decisions. Drawing on the perspectives of English lecturers, the study contributes to the literature by connecting AI-supported writing assessment with teacher cognition and assessment literacy in the Vietnamese EFL context. In doing so, it reframes AI-supported writing assessment as an interpretative professional practice and provides empirical insights into how lecturers exercise professional judgement when evaluating AI-supported student writing in an evolving institutional landscape.

The study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

1. How do English lecturers conceptualise the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct in AI-supported student writing?
2. What factors influence lecturers' assessment and grading decisions in relation to such writing?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Academic integrity and AI-supported writing

The emergence of generative AI has prompted renewed discussions regarding academic integrity in higher education. Traditional understandings of academic integrity are largely based on assumptions that students independently produce and submit their own work. Core principles such as honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility, and respect have historically guided expectations regarding academic conduct and authorship. Within this framework, learning is typically demonstrated through students' own intellectual effort, and assessment is designed to evaluate individual knowledge, skills, and critical thinking. However, generative AI systems challenge these assumptions because they can generate substantial amounts of original-looking text with minimal user input (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023). As a result, the distinction between legitimate academic assistance and academic misconduct has become increasingly difficult to define.

Unlike conventional educational technologies such as grammar checkers, spell-checkers, or online reference tools, generative AI is capable of producing coherent arguments, synthesising information, and generating complete essays that closely resemble human writing. This capability complicates traditional notions of originality and authorship because students may submit work that appears to demonstrate independent learning while substantial portions of the content have been generated by AI. Consequently, concerns have emerged regarding students' overreliance on AI, reduced engagement in the writing process, and the possibility that AI-generated texts may mask gaps in understanding or critical thinking (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Lund et al., 2025).

Recent scholarship suggests that AI-related integrity concerns cannot be adequately addressed through binary classifications of acceptable versus unacceptable use. Cotton et al. (2023) argue that generative AI creates new forms of academic practice that require institutions to reconsider existing definitions of cheating and plagiarism. Rather than viewing all AI use as inherently problematic, scholars increasingly advocate for a more nuanced understanding that distinguishes between AI as a learning support and AI as a substitute for students' intellectual work. Similarly, Finkel-Gates (2025) contends that maintaining academic integrity in the age of AI requires assessment approaches that focus on students' learning processes, accountability, and engagement rather than solely on final products. From this perspective, integrity is no longer simply a matter of detecting AI-generated content but of evaluating the nature and extent of students' intellectual contribution.

From this perspective, AI-supported writing may be understood as a continuum rather than a binary distinction. At one end, AI can serve as a learning aid through functions such as grammar correction, vocabulary support, and idea generation. Intermediate uses, including paraphrasing, text restructuring, and partial drafting, involve greater AI contribution and require careful pedagogical judgement. At the other end of the continuum, generating complete essays or constructing arguments with minimal student input is more likely to be regarded as academic misconduct because it substantially reduces students' intellectual contribution (Cotton et al., 2023; Finkel-Gates, 2025).

The growing use of AI-detection software has also generated debate. Although such tools are often promoted as solutions to AI-related misconduct, concerns have been raised regarding their accuracy, reliability, and potential impact on fairness in assessment (Cotton et al., 2023; Finkel-Gates, 2025). False positives and inconsistent detection results have led many educators to question whether technological detection alone can provide a valid basis for academic judgement. As a result, increasing attention has been directed towards assessment practices that emphasise transparency, process documentation, and opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding.

Student perspectives further illustrate the complexity of this issue. Lund et al. (2025) found that university students often experience uncertainty regarding the ethical boundaries of AI use, particularly when institutional expectations are unclear or inconsistent. Students frequently report confusion about which forms of AI assistance are permissible and whether

expectations differ across courses and instructors. Such uncertainty may contribute to unintentional violations of academic integrity policies and further complicate assessment practices.

Taken together, the literature suggests that academic integrity in AI-supported writing is increasingly understood as a contextual and negotiated concept rather than a fixed set of rules. While existing research has examined ethical concerns surrounding AI use and student perceptions of academic integrity, less attention has been paid to how lecturers themselves interpret and operationalise these principles when evaluating AI-assisted student writing. Understanding lecturers' perspectives is therefore essential for developing assessment practices that remain both educationally meaningful and ethically defensible in the age of generative AI.

2.2. Teacher cognition and assessment literacy

To understand how lecturers evaluate AI-supported writing, this study draws on the complementary concepts of teacher cognition and assessment literacy.

Teacher cognition refers to the knowledge, beliefs, thinking processes, and decision-making practices that shape teachers' professional behaviour (Borg, 2003). According to Borg (2015), teachers do not simply implement policies or prescribed procedures; rather, their actions are influenced by accumulated experiences, contextual factors, and personal beliefs about teaching and learning. Consequently, assessment decisions should be understood as products of professional reasoning rather than purely technical applications of institutional regulations.

Assessment literacy provides a related perspective for examining lecturers' evaluative practices. Fulcher (2012) defines assessment literacy as the knowledge, skills, and principles required for making informed assessment decisions. Beyond technical competence, assessment literacy involves understanding the purposes of assessment and interpreting evidence of learning appropriately. Scarino (2013) further argues that language assessment is fundamentally interpretative because teachers must make meaning from incomplete and context-dependent evidence of student performance.

Together, teacher cognition and assessment literacy provide complementary perspectives for understanding how lecturers evaluate AI-supported writing. Teacher cognition explains how lecturers' beliefs, prior experiences, and institutional contexts shape their professional judgement, whereas assessment literacy highlights how they interpret evidence of student learning and make informed grading decisions. Therefore, these perspectives suggest that assessment decisions are informed by both pedagogical and ethical judgement. Accordingly, lecturers must determine not only the quality of a written product but also the extent to which it reflects students' own learning, understanding, and authorship.

2.3. Studies on AI-supported writing assessment

Research on generative AI in writing education has expanded rapidly since the emergence of tools such as ChatGPT. Existing studies have primarily examined the pedagogical applications of AI, its impact on writing development, and the perceptions of students and educators regarding its use. Overall, the literature suggests that AI offers significant opportunities for supporting writing instruction while simultaneously raising important concerns about learning, authorship, and assessment.

Several studies have highlighted the educational benefits of AI-assisted writing. In a systematic review of AI integration in higher education, Naznin et al. (2025) found that generative AI can support personalised learning, academic writing development, and learner engagement when used appropriately. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) reported that university students perceived ChatGPT as a useful tool for brainstorming, organising ideas, and improving the quality of their written work. Students particularly valued the immediate feedback and assistance provided by AI during different stages of the writing process. These findings suggest that AI has the potential to function as a cognitive and linguistic support tool that enhances students' writing experiences.

At the same time, researchers have noted concerns regarding students' dependence on AI-generated content and the potential implications for learning. Wang et al. (2024) observed that some students relied heavily on AI-generated suggestions, raising questions about the development of independent thinking and writing skills. Similarly, Ramadani and Pitaloka (2025) found that both lecturers and undergraduate students recognised the pedagogical value of AI while expressing concerns about authenticity, originality, and the possibility that AI might reduce students' active engagement in writing tasks. Their findings illustrate the dual nature of generative AI as both a learning resource and a potential challenge to traditional educational practices.

Research focusing on lecturers has revealed similarly nuanced perspectives. In the Vietnamese context, Vo and Huynh (2025) explored EFL teachers' perceptions of ChatGPT through conceptual metaphor analysis and found that teachers simultaneously viewed the technology as a helpful assistant and a potential threat to learner autonomy and pedagogical control. The coexistence of these contrasting perspectives reflects the complex role of AI in language education. Likewise, Nguyen et al. (2025) reported that Vietnamese EFL lecturers appreciated the efficiency and instructional support provided by ChatGPT, particularly for feedback and writing instruction, while remaining concerned about students' overreliance on AI and the challenges of evaluating AI-assisted work.

Further evidence from Vietnam suggests that lecturers' responses to AI are shaped by multiple contextual and professional factors. Nguyen (2025) found that attitudes towards AI integration were influenced by ethical considerations, pedagogical beliefs, institutional expectations, and teaching philosophies. Rather than adopting uniformly positive or negative positions, lecturers tended to evaluate AI in relation to its perceived impact on learning

outcomes and educational values. These findings indicate that lecturers' perceptions of AI are closely connected to broader understandings of teaching, learning, and academic responsibility.

Taken together, the existing literature portrays generative AI as a transformative but contested technology within writing education. While studies consistently highlight its potential to support writing development and learning, they also point to concerns regarding authenticity, student dependence, and the changing nature of academic work. The literature, therefore, suggests that AI-supported writing should be understood as a complex educational phenomenon that involves both opportunities and challenges for students and educators.

2.4. Research gap and conceptual framework

The literature indicates that generative AI has complicated traditional understandings of academic integrity and introduced new challenges for writing assessment (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2023; Finkel-Gates, 2025). Existing studies have documented both the educational potential of AI in supporting writing development and learning (Naznin et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Ramadani & Pitaloka, 2025) and the ethical concerns surrounding authorship, academic honesty, and student overreliance on AI-generated content (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Lund et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). However, relatively little is known about how lecturers interpret and evaluate AI-supported writing when making assessment decisions, particularly in higher education contexts where institutional policies remain unclear or are still evolving.

Furthermore, previous studies have rarely examined these issues through the combined lenses of teacher cognition and assessment literacy. Teacher cognition provides insight into how lecturers' beliefs, experiences, and contextual understandings shape their professional judgement (Borg, 2003, 2015), while assessment literacy highlights the interpretative nature of evaluation and decision-making in language assessment (Fulcher, 2012; Scarino, 2013). Integrating these perspectives offers a useful framework for understanding how lecturers negotiate questions of authorship, learning, fairness, and academic integrity in AI-supported writing assessment.

Accordingly, the present study investigates how English lecturers in Vietnamese higher education conceptualise the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct and explores the factors that influence their assessment and grading decisions in relation to AI-supported student writing. By combining the perspectives of teacher cognition and assessment literacy, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of lecturers' evaluative reasoning in the emerging context of AI-mediated writing.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design to examine how English lecturers understand and evaluate AI-supported student writing. Semi-structured interviews were used

to explore lecturers' assessment practices, ethical judgements, and professional reasoning in relation to the research questions. The interview protocol was piloted with two lecturers before the main study. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback to improve the clarity and sequencing of the questions. The interview protocol covered topics including lecturers' definitions of acceptable AI assistance and academic misconduct, factors influencing assessment and grading decisions, perceptions of institutional guidance, and professional development needs. Example questions included: "How do you personally define the boundary between acceptable AI assistance and academic misconduct in student writing?" and "How does the possible use of AI influence your assessment and grading of student writing?"

3.2. Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit English lecturers who were actively involved in teaching and assessing English at the tertiary level and had experience with, or awareness of, AI-supported student writing. The final sample comprised 20 English lecturers from three universities in Hanoi, including one public university and two private institutions. The participants represented a range of teaching experience and institutional contexts, allowing the study to capture variation in assessment practices and professional judgement related to AI-supported writing. Table 1 summarises the key demographic and professional characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Participant profile

Characteristic	Description
Number of participants	20 English lecturers
Gender	7 male; 13 female
Mean age	Approximately 32 years
Teaching experience	Mean = 6.5 years
Institution type	One public university; two private universities
Assessment responsibility	All participants were actively involved in teaching and assessing English writing at the tertiary level
AI familiarity	All participants reported experience with, or awareness of, AI-supported student writing

3.3. Data collection

All invited participants received a formal invitation letter and an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and data confidentiality procedures. Only those who provided informed consent were included in the study. Data were collected over a two-week period from 14 to 27 April 2025. Participants were recruited through the professional networks of the two researchers, with initial contact made via Zalo.

. Semi-structured bilingual interviews were conducted online via Zoom, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. They were free to use English, Vietnamese, or both. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission. Recordings were transcribed using Turboscribe, after which the researchers manually checked each transcript, paying particular attention to accuracy in instances of code-switching.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. An inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge from the data. Both researchers initially coded the transcripts independently before meeting to compare and discuss the preliminary codes. Related codes were then iteratively grouped into broader categories and refined into the five final themes reported in this study. Differences in interpretation were resolved through reflexive discussion and repeated reference to the original Vietnamese transcripts until a shared interpretation of the developing themes was reached. These discussions were intended to deepen analytical interpretation and refine theme development rather than to establish intercoder reliability. . Microsoft Excel was used to organise codes, compare cases, and document the development of themes. The analysis was conducted using the original Vietnamese transcripts, and participant quotations presented in the Results section were subsequently translated into English by the researchers with reference to the original transcripts to preserve meaning. Quotations originally provided in English are presented without translation.

3.5. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Trustworthiness was supported through pilot testing, bilingual interviewing, transcript verification, and researcher cross-checking. An audit trail was kept to record analytical decisions. All participants were informed of the study's aims and ethical conditions. Participation was voluntary, identities were protected through pseudonyms (for example, L1, L2), and all data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. As the study involved voluntary interviews with adult participants and posed no more than minimal risk, formal ethical approval was not required under the applicable institutional regulations.

IV. RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed five interrelated themes that explain how English lecturers conceptualise AI-supported student writing and how they approach assessment and

grading in practice. These themes address the two RQs by illustrating how lecturers define the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct and identifying the factors that shape their evaluative decisions. The themes are presented sequentially, beginning with lecturers' conceptualisations of acceptable AI use and followed by the key considerations influencing their assessment and grading decisions. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and their descriptions.

Table 2. Summary of themes emerging from the thematic analysis

Theme	Description
1. AI use as a continuum between support and misconduct	Lecturers viewed AI use as existing on a continuum, distinguishing between acceptable support for learning and inappropriate substitution of students' intellectual effort.
2. Process transparency and evidence of learning	Assessment decisions were influenced by students' ability to explain, justify, and demonstrate understanding of their writing process and outcomes.
3. Ethical tensions in balancing academic integrity and pedagogical responsibility	Lecturers experienced tension between maintaining academic standards and supporting students in adapting to emerging AI technologies.
4. Institutional context and policy ambiguity	The absence of clear institutional guidelines resulted in uncertainty and reliance on individual judgement when assessing AI-supported writing.
5. Assessment literacy and professional experience	Lecturers' confidence and assessment decisions were shaped by their professional experience, familiarity with student writing, and assessment expertise.

4.1. AI use as a continuum between support and misconduct

A dominant theme emerging from the interviews was that lecturers did not perceive AI use as inherently acceptable or unacceptable. Instead, most participants described AI-assisted writing as existing on a continuum, with ethical acceptability depending on how the technology was used and the extent to which students remained intellectually engaged in the writing process. Table 3 illustrates lecturers generally conceptualised AI-supported writing as a continuum rather than a binary distinction between acceptable and unacceptable use.

Table 3. Lecturers' conceptualisation of AI use as a continuum

Generally acceptable support	Context-dependent/ ambiguous use	Likely academic misconduct
Idea generation and brainstorming	Paraphrasing AI-generated content	Full essay generation
Vocabulary development	Restructuring AI-generated text	AI-generated argument construction

Grammar and language correction	Partial drafting	Submission with minimal understanding or intellectual contribution
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Many lecturers distinguished between AI as a support tool and AI as a substitute for student effort. AI use was generally considered acceptable when it facilitated idea generation, language correction, vocabulary development, or text organisation. However, participants expressed concern when students relied on AI to generate substantial portions of their assignments without meaningful revision or critical engagement.

One lecturer explained:

“Nếu ChatGPT chỉ giúp sinh viên gợi ý ý tưởng hoặc sửa lỗi ngôn ngữ thì tôi chấp nhận, nhưng nếu bài viết gần như do AI tạo ra thì đó là gian lận.” (L4)

[If ChatGPT only helps students generate ideas or correct language errors, I accept it; but if the essay is largely produced by AI, then it is academic misconduct.]

Several participants emphasised that the issue was not the technology itself but the degree of student contribution. As one lecturer commented:

“I see AI as a support tool in the writing process. If students use it to generate ideas, expand vocabulary, or check language errors, that is entirely acceptable. However, when AI takes over most of the content development and argument construction, I believe the boundary of academic integrity has been crossed.” (L7)

Another participant highlighted the importance of intellectual ownership:

“In my view, the issue is not whether students use AI. What matters is that they remain the final academic decision-makers, including selecting ideas, evaluating information, and revising content.” (L10)

Across the interviews, lecturers repeatedly referred to authorship, responsibility, and intellectual engagement as the key criteria for determining whether AI use was legitimate. Acceptable use was associated with active student involvement, whereas unacceptable use was characterised by the replacement of students' cognitive effort and ownership of the writing process. This theme suggests that lecturers' professional judgement was shaped not only by the presence of AI but also by their beliefs about student authorship, agency, and meaningful learning, reflecting the influence of teacher cognition on assessment decisions.

4.2 Process transparency and evidence of learning

Another prominent theme concerned the importance of transparency and evidence of learning. Most lecturers reported that they did not rely solely on the final written product when evaluating AI-supported assignments. Instead, they sought evidence that students understood and could explain the content they submitted.

Several participants explained that they frequently asked students to clarify arguments, justify language choices, or explain how particular sections of a text had been developed. According to these lecturers, students who genuinely engaged with the writing process were usually able to discuss their work confidently, whereas those who relied excessively on AI often struggled to provide detailed explanations.

One lecturer stated:

“When I suspect that a piece of writing has been heavily supported by AI, I usually ask students to explain why they chose a particular argument or expression. Their explanations help me evaluate their actual understanding.” (L2)

Similarly, another participant remarked:

“Tôi thường hỏi sinh viên tại sao các em chọn lập luận này hoặc cách diễn đạt kia. Nếu các em giải thích được thì tôi tin rằng các em thực sự hiểu nội dung bài viết.” (L9)

[I often ask students why they chose a particular argument or expression. If they can explain their choices, I believe they genuinely understand the content of their writing.]

Some lecturers described conducting informal follow-up conversations after assignment submission. These interactions enabled them to assess whether students understood the ideas presented in their essays and whether they could explain the reasoning behind particular arguments.

Others emphasised the value of examining drafts, outlines, or revision histories:

“I do not focus solely on the final product. I am interested in the development process, such as drafts, notes, or revision histories, because these elements reflect students’ learning processes.” (L12)

Several lecturers also commented on the role of AI-detection tools. Although a few participants reported occasionally consulting such tools when they suspected AI involvement, they generally viewed them as supplementary rather than definitive sources of evidence. Concerns were raised about their accuracy and the possibility of false positives. Consequently, lecturers preferred to rely on students’ explanations, drafts, revision histories, and other process-based evidence when making assessment decisions.

Overall, transparency regarding AI use and the ability to demonstrate understanding were widely regarded as indicators of legitimate authorship and learning. These findings illustrate how lecturers drew on assessment literacy to interpret evidence of learning beyond the final written product, placing greater value on students' explanations, writing processes, and demonstrated understanding. They also suggest that assessment may benefit from greater emphasis on process-oriented tasks, such as writing portfolios, reflective AI-use statements, oral explanations, and the documentation of drafting or revision processes. Such approaches may provide lecturers with richer evidence of student learning while supporting the responsible integration of AI into writing assessment.

4.3 Ethical tensions in balancing academic integrity and pedagogical responsibility

Participants frequently described experiencing tension between protecting academic standards and supporting student learning. Many felt uncertain about how strictly AI-assisted writing should be judged, particularly in situations where institutional expectations were unclear.

One lecturer commented:

“Nếu phạt nặng thì tôi thấy không công bằng, vì nhà trường chưa có hướng dẫn rõ ràng. Nhưng nếu bỏ qua thì cũng không ổn.” (L17)

[If I penalise students heavily, it feels unfair because the university has no clear guidelines. But ignoring it is also not acceptable.]

Several lecturers expressed reluctance to impose severe penalties because they believed many students were still learning how to use AI responsibly.

One participant explained:

“As a lecturer, I have a responsibility to uphold academic standards. At the same time, I recognise that students are adapting to a new technology, which makes assessment decisions challenging at times.” (L1)

Another lecturer noted:

“If severe penalties are imposed without clear guidelines, it may be unfair to students. However, ignoring the issue entirely may also be unfair to students who complete their work independently.” (L8)

Many participants acknowledged that they often had to balance competing priorities, including fairness, student development, institutional expectations, and academic integrity. As a result, assessment decisions were frequently described as context-dependent rather than rule-based. This theme reflects lecturers' ongoing negotiation between maintaining academic

integrity and supporting student learning, highlighting the interpretative nature of professional judgement in AI-supported writing assessment.

4.4 Institutional context and policy ambiguity

Across all three universities, participants highlighted the absence of clear institutional policies governing AI use in assessment. Many lecturers reported that formal guidance was limited or nonexistent, leaving them uncertain about how AI-assisted work should be evaluated.

One participant stated:

“The biggest challenge at present is the absence of an official framework for AI use in learning and assessment. As a result, each lecturer has to make individual decisions.” (L17)

Several lecturers explained that they often relied on personal judgement or informal discussions with colleagues when evaluating AI-assisted assignments.

Another participant observed:

“Trong cùng một khoa, có thể có những giảng viên đánh giá rất nghiêm khắc, trong khi những người khác lại linh hoạt hơn. Điều này tạo ra sự thiếu nhất quán trong đánh giá.” (L9)

[Even within the same faculty, some lecturers may assess AI-assisted work very strictly, while others are more flexible. This creates inconsistency in assessment practices.]

Some lecturers also expressed concern that inconsistent expectations could confuse students. Without clear institutional guidance, students might encounter different standards across courses and instructors, leading to uncertainty regarding acceptable AI use.

Overall, participants viewed policy ambiguity as a significant challenge that complicated assessment and increased reliance on individual judgement. The findings suggest that, in the absence of clear institutional guidance, lecturers relied heavily on their own professional beliefs and assessment expertise when making evaluative decisions. These findings also highlight the need for department- or institution-level guidance that establishes shared expectations for AI-supported writing. Developing common AI-use policies and shared assessment rubrics may help promote greater consistency across courses while providing students with clearer expectations regarding acceptable AI use.

4.5 Assessment literacy and professional experience

Differences were observed between lecturers with varying levels of teaching experience. More experienced lecturers generally expressed greater confidence in evaluating AI-supported writing and identifying potential concerns, whereas less experienced lecturers often reported uncertainty regarding how to determine appropriate levels of AI use.

One experienced lecturer explained:

“After many years of teaching and assessing writing, I have become familiar with students’ writing styles. As a result, I can often identify unusual changes in their work.” (L5)

In contrast, some early-career lecturers expressed a lack of confidence in making assessment decisions involving AI-supported texts.

One participant remarked:

“Tôi vẫn cảm thấy chưa hoàn toàn tự tin khi đánh giá các bài viết có sử dụng AI, bởi vì đây là một vấn đề khá mới và chưa có nhiều kinh nghiệm thực tiễn để tham khảo.” (L16)

[I still do not feel completely confident when assessing AI-assisted writing because it is a relatively new issue and there is limited practical experience to draw upon.]

Participants also highlighted the importance of assessment expertise, familiarity with student writing, and professional experience in making judgements about AI-supported work. Several lecturers noted that evaluating AI-assisted writing required more than technical knowledge of AI tools; it also required the ability to interpret evidence of learning and authorship. This theme emphasises that assessment literacy develops through professional experience, enabling lecturers to make more confident and context-sensitive judgements while recognising the limitations of relying solely on technological indicators. At the same time, participants’ reliance on familiarity with students’ writing styles also raises questions about assessment fairness. While prior knowledge of students’ writing may support lecturers’ professional judgement, it may be less applicable in contexts where lecturers assess unfamiliar students or large cohorts. This highlights the importance of complementing professional judgement with transparent assessment processes and multiple sources of evidence when evaluating AI-supported writing.

Taken together, the findings suggest that lecturers view the boundary between acceptable AI support and academic misconduct as flexible and context-dependent. Rather than applying fixed rules, they exercised professional judgement by drawing on their beliefs, assessment knowledge, and interpretations of students’ learning processes. Their assessment decisions are shaped by considerations of student agency, transparency, ethical responsibility, institutional conditions, and professional experience. These themes collectively illustrate the complexity of evaluating student writing in the context of rapidly evolving AI technologies.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1. Conceptualising the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct (RQ1)

The findings indicate that English lecturers do not conceptualise AI-supported writing through a simple dichotomy of acceptable versus unacceptable use. Instead, participants

viewed AI use as existing on a continuum, with ethical judgement depending largely on the extent to which students retain intellectual ownership of their work. AI was generally regarded as acceptable when it functioned as a support tool for idea generation, language improvement, or text organisation, but problematic when it replaced students' own thinking and writing processes. This finding supports previous research suggesting that generative AI has blurred traditional distinctions between academic assistance and academic misconduct (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Naznin et al., 2025).

A particularly significant finding is that lecturers focused less on the presence of AI itself and more on student agency and authorship. Participants consistently emphasised that students should remain responsible for evaluating information, making rhetorical decisions, and revising content. This suggests that academic integrity in AI-mediated writing is increasingly being understood as a matter of intellectual ownership rather than technological prohibition. Such a perspective extends previous studies that have highlighted the educational value of AI when used as a learning support rather than as a replacement for cognitive engagement (Ramadani & Pitaloka, 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

The importance assigned to process transparency further demonstrates that lecturers evaluate writing through evidence of learning rather than solely through textual products. Students' ability to explain, justify, and reflect on their writing decisions was frequently used as an indicator of genuine authorship. This finding aligns with arguments that AI-related assessment should move beyond detection-focused approaches and instead emphasise accountability, transparency, and learning processes (Cotton et al., 2023; Finkel-Gates, 2025). It also supports Scarino's (2013) view that language assessment is fundamentally interpretative, requiring teachers to make professional judgements based on multiple sources of evidence.

From a broader perspective, these findings suggest that the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct is neither fixed nor universal. Rather, it is negotiated through lecturers' interpretations of student engagement, responsibility, and learning. This highlights the growing complexity of academic integrity in higher education and suggests that future assessment frameworks should focus on process-oriented indicators of learning rather than relying exclusively on product-based evaluation.

5.2. Factors influencing assessment and grading decisions (RQ2)

The findings reveal that lecturers' assessment and grading decisions are influenced by multiple interconnected factors rather than by formal rules alone. One major influence concerns the ethical tension between maintaining academic integrity and supporting student learning. Participants frequently described uncertainty regarding how strictly AI-assisted writing should be judged, particularly when institutional expectations remained unclear. Similar concerns have been reported in previous research, which portrays lecturers as ethical mediators who must balance fairness, accountability, and pedagogical responsibility when responding to AI-supported work (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023; Finkel-Gates, 2025).

Institutional context emerged as another important factor shaping assessment practices. The absence of clear policies often resulted in inconsistent approaches across lecturers and institutions. Participants reported relying heavily on personal judgement and informal discussions with colleagues when making decisions about AI-assisted assignments. This finding reinforces concerns that the rapid adoption of generative AI technologies has outpaced institutional policy development (Cotton et al., 2023). Similar challenges have also been reported in the Vietnamese context, where lecturers frequently operate in environments characterised by policy ambiguity and evolving expectations regarding AI use (Nguyen, 2025).

Professional experience and assessment literacy also played significant roles in shaping assessment decisions. More experienced lecturers generally reported greater confidence in evaluating AI-supported writing, while less experienced lecturers expressed uncertainty about identifying appropriate levels of AI use and making fair grading decisions. This finding supports Fulcher's (2012) argument that assessment literacy extends beyond technical knowledge and involves the ability to make informed professional judgements. Likewise, Scarino (2013) emphasises that assessment requires ongoing interpretation and reflexive decision-making, particularly in complex educational contexts.

These findings can also be understood through the lens of teacher cognition. According to Borg (2003, 2015), teachers' professional practices are shaped by their beliefs, experiences, and contextual understandings rather than by policies alone. The present study supports this perspective by demonstrating that lecturers' responses to AI-supported writing reflect individual conceptions of learning, fairness, authorship, and academic integrity. Consequently, assessment decisions are best understood as situated cognitive and ethical practices rather than as straightforward applications of institutional regulations.

Although individual participants varied in the confidence with which they described their assessment decisions, particularly according to their teaching experience, the five themes were evident across participants from both public and private universities. This suggests that the issues identified in the study were shared across institutional settings despite some differences in individual experience.

However, reliance on professional judgement may also create challenges for assessment consistency, as lecturers' interpretations of acceptable AI use can vary according to their beliefs, experiences, and institutional contexts. While such flexibility reflects the interpretative nature of assessment (Scarino, 2013), it may also result in inconsistent evaluation of similar cases of AI-supported writing. These findings, therefore, reinforce the need for clearer institutional guidance and shared assessment principles that support lecturers' professional judgement while promoting greater consistency and fairness in assessment.

5.3. Implications

The findings have several implications for higher education institutions and language educators. First, universities should develop clear yet flexible guidelines regarding acceptable

AI use in academic writing. Rather than focusing exclusively on prohibition or detection, such guidelines should clarify expectations concerning transparency, student contribution, and authorship, for example, through AI-use disclosure statements and shared assessment rubrics for AI-assisted writing.

Second, assessment design may need to shift towards greater emphasis on process-oriented evidence of learning. Incorporating reflective statements, drafting records, revision histories, oral explanations, or writing conferences, and portfolio-based assessment may provide more reliable evidence of student engagement than reliance on final written products alone. Third, the findings highlight the importance of professional development in AI-related assessment literacy. Training programmes should support lecturers in understanding AI capabilities and limitations, designing appropriate assessment tasks, and making consistent ethical and pedagogical decisions regarding AI-assisted work.

Finally, AI literacy should become an integral component of writing instruction. Students should receive explicit guidance on acceptable AI use, appropriate citation or disclosure practices, and reflective documentation of AI-assisted writing processes. Such support may reduce uncertainty regarding academic integrity and encourage more responsible and reflective engagement with emerging technologies.

5.4. Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of twenty English lecturers from three universities in Hanoi. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the perspectives of lecturers working in other institutional or disciplinary contexts.

Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported interview data. The findings, therefore, reflect lecturers' perceptions, beliefs, and reported assessment practices rather than their actual grading decisions. As interview responses may not always correspond to enacted assessment behaviour, the study did not examine how lecturers assessed authentic student assignments or provided feedback in practice. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on lecturers' perspectives. Students' understandings of acceptable AI use and their experiences with AI-supported writing were beyond the scope of the investigation.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating student perspectives, analysing authentic writing samples and assessment artefacts, or conducting classroom-based observations of AI-related assessment practices. Longitudinal studies may also help researchers examine how lecturers' assessment beliefs and practices evolve as institutional policies and AI technologies continue to develop. Comparative studies across disciplines, universities, or national contexts would further contribute to understanding how generative AI is reshaping assessment, academic integrity, and writing instruction in higher education.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored how English lecturers in Vietnamese higher education conceptualise and assess AI-supported student writing. The findings indicate that lecturers generally view AI use as existing on a continuum rather than as a simple issue of compliance or misconduct. Their evaluation of AI-assisted writing is shaped not only by the final written product but also by evidence of student agency, transparency, and engagement in the writing process. Assessment decisions are further influenced by ethical considerations, institutional conditions, and professional experience.

The study contributes to ongoing discussions on academic integrity and assessment in the age of generative AI by reframing AI-supported writing assessment as an interpretative professional practice grounded in lecturers' professional judgement. As AI technologies become increasingly integrated into educational contexts, higher education institutions should promote clear guidance, responsible AI use, and assessment practices that support both learning and academic integrity. More broadly, the study provides empirical insight into how English lecturers negotiate AI-related assessment decisions in a Vietnamese EFL context where institutional policies and assessment practices are still evolving. Future research may extend this work by examining student perspectives, analysing authentic assessment artefacts, and exploring AI-related assessment practices across different disciplines and educational settings.

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