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Academic Integrity and Ethical Boundaries of Academic Assistance among Final-Year Students in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Abstract

University students increasingly access academic assistance through peers, professional services, digital platforms, and academic-support providers. However, the boundary between legitimate academic support and contract cheating is not always clearly understood. This study aimed to examine final-year students' perceptions of acceptable academic assistance, academic integrity, and rationalizations associated with using external assistance to complete final projects. A descriptive survey was conducted among final-year students at higher education institutions in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Of 213 initial responses, 135 respondents met the eligibility criteria and were included in the analysis. We collected data using an anonymous online questionnaire and analyzed them descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The results showed that students distinguished between supportive academic assistance and full academic outsourcing. Reference-search assistance (32.3%), methodological consultation (27.8%), academic-writing training (24.1%), and formatting assistance (21.8%) were considered more acceptable than having another person complete a final project (5.3%). Furthermore, 63.1% of respondents considered full outsourcing a violation of academic integrity, 62.6% considered it unfair to students who completed their work honestly, and 61.5% believed it could reduce graduate quality. The most common rationalizations were time pressure (32.8%), perceiving assistance as "only technical" (25.2%), and fear of failure (24.4%). The findings indicate that students' ethical judgments are primarily determined by intellectual ownership, understanding, and responsibility. Universities should clearly distinguish legitimate academic assistance from contract cheating and strengthen academic-integrity education and legitimate academic-

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support services.

Keywords: academic integrity, academic assistance, contract cheating, final-year students, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity is essential in higher education because assessment credibility depends on students presenting work that genuinely reflects their knowledge, competence, and intellectual contribution. However, changes in the academic environment have made the distinction between legitimate assistance and academic misconduct increasingly complex. Students can now obtain support through academic consultation, proofreading, statistical assistance, online tutoring, social media, file-sharing platforms, generative artificial intelligence, and commercial academic services.

Not all external assistance can automatically be categorized as academic misconduct. Methodological consultation, feedback on writing, training in data analysis, and assistance in locating scientific references can strengthen learning when students remain responsible for the intellectual content of their work. The ethical problem becomes more serious when another person substantially replaces the student's intellectual contribution or produces work that the student later submits under their name.

Recent research identifies this distinction as an important “grey area” of academic integrity. Pike et al. (2025) found that students and academic staff distinguished between relatively acceptable practices, such as proofreading and collaboration, and more problematic activities involving substantial editing or another person completing academic work. This indicates that ethical judgments depend partly on how much intellectual responsibility remains with the student.

Contract cheating represents the more serious end of this continuum. Ahsan et al. (2021) describe contract cheating as a complex higher-education problem influenced by individual, academic, technological, and institutional factors. Digital development has also increased students' access to commercial services and other forms of external assistance (Hill et al., 2021; Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). In Indonesia, Bhinekaswathi et al. (2023) highlighted the growing visibility of contract cheating on social media, while Heriyati et al. (2023) showed that perceived benefits, subjective norms, and behavioral control were associated with contract-cheating behavior among Indonesian university students.

Nevertheless, awareness of academic-outsourcing services does not necessarily mean that

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students accept such practices. Rundle et al. (2023) found that morality, learning motivation, autonomy, and social norms can discourage students from engaging in contract cheating. Academic-integrity values may therefore serve as an important boundary between assistance that supports learning and assistance that replaces student responsibility.

Students may also rationalize questionable assistance. For example, external help may be described as "only technical," necessary because of limited time, justified by methodological difficulty, or considered unavoidable because of excessive revisions. Such explanations resemble the neutralization processes described in contemporary academic-misconduct research. Flutti et al. (2026) found that neutralization techniques were positively related to academic dishonesty, particularly when individuals reduced their perceived responsibility for the behavior.

The issue is especially relevant among final-year students because undergraduate theses, master's theses, dissertations, and other final projects are intended to demonstrate independent academic competence. Outsourcing substantial parts of these projects may therefore affect not only individual academic integrity but also graduate quality and institutional credibility.

Previous studies have examined contract cheating, academic dishonesty, and student motivations, but limited evidence exists on how final-year students in Southeast Sulawesi distinguish acceptable assistance from unethical outsourcing. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze students' perceptions of acceptable academic assistance, identify ethical boundaries between assistance and contract cheating, and describe the rationalizations associated with external academic assistance.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive survey design. Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire distributed to students from higher education institutions in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. A total of 213 responses were received. Respondents were screened according to three criteria: willingness to participate, final-year or final-project status, and enrolment at a higher education institution in Southeast Sulawesi. After screening, 135 respondents met all eligibility criteria and were included in the analysis.

The questionnaire covered respondent characteristics, acceptable forms of academic assistance, perceptions of academic integrity, intellectual responsibility, fairness, graduate quality, and reasons that may be used to rationalize external assistance. We analyzed closed-ended responses using frequencies and percentages. We summarized Likert-type items descriptively using mean scores when appropriate. For multiple-response items, we used the

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number of valid responses as the denominator; therefore, total percentages could exceed 100%. We grouped open-ended responses into themes related to intellectual ownership, academic responsibility, technical assistance, time pressure, methodological difficulty, and ethical boundaries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most respondents were undergraduate students, and most were enrolled in public higher education institutions. This composition reflects the group most frequently involved in undergraduate thesis preparation.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	103	76.3
	Male	31	23.0
Education level	Bachelor's	122	90.4
	Master's	12	8.9
	Doctoral	1	0.7
Institution type	Public university	115	85.2
	Private university	15	11.1
Final project	Undergraduate thesis	100	74.1
	Other final project	19	14.1
	Master's thesis	10	7.4
	Dissertation	1	0.7

The findings demonstrate that respondents did not view all forms of external academic assistance in the same way. Assistance in locating references was the most frequently accepted form of help, followed by methodological consultation and academic-writing training.

Table 2. Forms of Academic Assistance Considered Acceptable

Form of assistance	n	%
Assistance searching for references	43	32.3
Methodological consultation	37	27.8
Academic-writing training	32	24.1
Formatting assistance	29	21.8

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Data-analysis assistance while the student remains involved	28	21.1
Full completion of final project by another person	7	5.3

The very low proportion accepting full completion of the final project by another party indicates that respondents distinguished between assistance that supports learning and assistance that replaces student responsibility. This pattern is consistent with Pike et al. (2025), who found that students and staff differentiated proofreading and collaboration from more extensive editing and academic outsourcing. Thus, the ethical issue is not simply whether outside assistance exists, but whether students continue to control and understand the intellectual process. The strongest evidence of this boundary is shown in respondents' assessments of full outsourcing.

Table 3. Students' Perceptions of Academic Integrity

Statement	**Agree + Strongly Agree n (%)**
Full outsourcing violates academic integrity	82 (63.1)
Outsourcing is unfair to students who work honestly	82 (62.6)
Outsourcing may reduce graduate quality	80 (61.5)
Technical assistance may be understandable under certain conditions	58 (43.9)
Assistance is acceptable when students retain intellectual responsibility	56 (42.4)

More than 60% of respondents associated full outsourcing with academic-integrity violations, unfairness, and reduced graduate quality. These findings indicate that respondents evaluated academic assistance from at least three perspectives: authorship, fairness, and competence. Authorship concerns whether the submitted work reflects the student's own intellectual contribution. Fairness concerns whether students who outsource their work gain an inappropriate advantage over students who complete the work independently. Competence concerns whether the final academic product accurately reflects the graduate's actual research ability.

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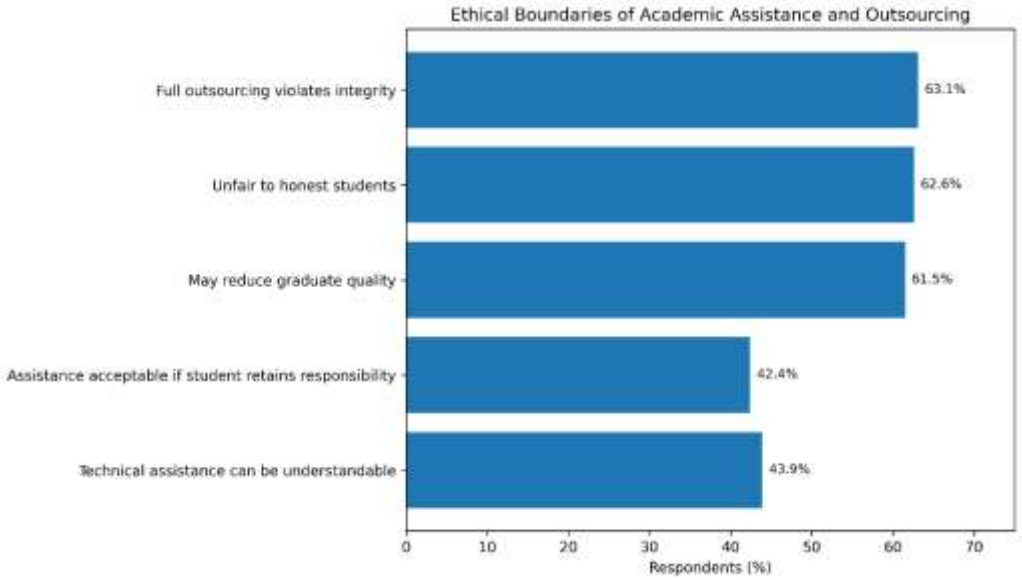


Figure 1. Ethical Boundaries of Academic Assistance and Outsourcing

Similar concerns have been raised in previous contract-cheating literature. Ahsan et al. (2021) argue that outsourcing undermines the validity of academic assessment, while Rundle et al. (2023) show that moral values and motivation to learn are key factors discouraging contract cheating.

Figure 1 demonstrates a clear difference between limited assistance and complete outsourcing. Acceptance of assistance decreases when another party replaces student intellectual involvement. Nevertheless, respondents recognized several conditions that could be used to rationalize external assistance.

Table 4. Rationalizations Associated with External Academic Assistance

Rationalization	n	%
Severe time pressure	44	32.8
Assistance considered “only technical”	34	25.2
Fear of failing/not graduating	33	24.4
Difficulty understanding research methodology	30	22.1
Excessive revisions	30	22.1
Insufficient supervisor assistance	25	18.3

Time pressure represented the most common justification. Students may therefore

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understand questionable assistance more readily when it is framed as a response to limited time rather than deliberate academic dishonesty. The second most frequent rationalization was that the assistance was "only technical." This finding is particularly relevant because the term *technical assistance* may obscure the degree of intellectual contribution another person actually provided. Assistance may begin with formatting or data processing but gradually develop into interpretation, substantive rewriting, or complete production of academic content.

This result is consistent with neutralization theory. Flutti et al. (2026) found that neutralization techniques were significantly associated with academic dishonesty. Individuals may continue to recognize academic-integrity rules while temporarily redefining questionable behavior as necessary, harmless, or beyond their control. In this study, statements such as "I had no time," "it was only technical assistance," or "I could not understand the methodology" may reduce students' perceived responsibility without eliminating awareness of academic-integrity norms. The findings can therefore be interpreted as a continuum:

Legitimate academic guidance → technical assistance → substantial external contribution → complete academic outsourcing

The ethical boundary becomes increasingly clear as intellectual ownership moves away from the student.

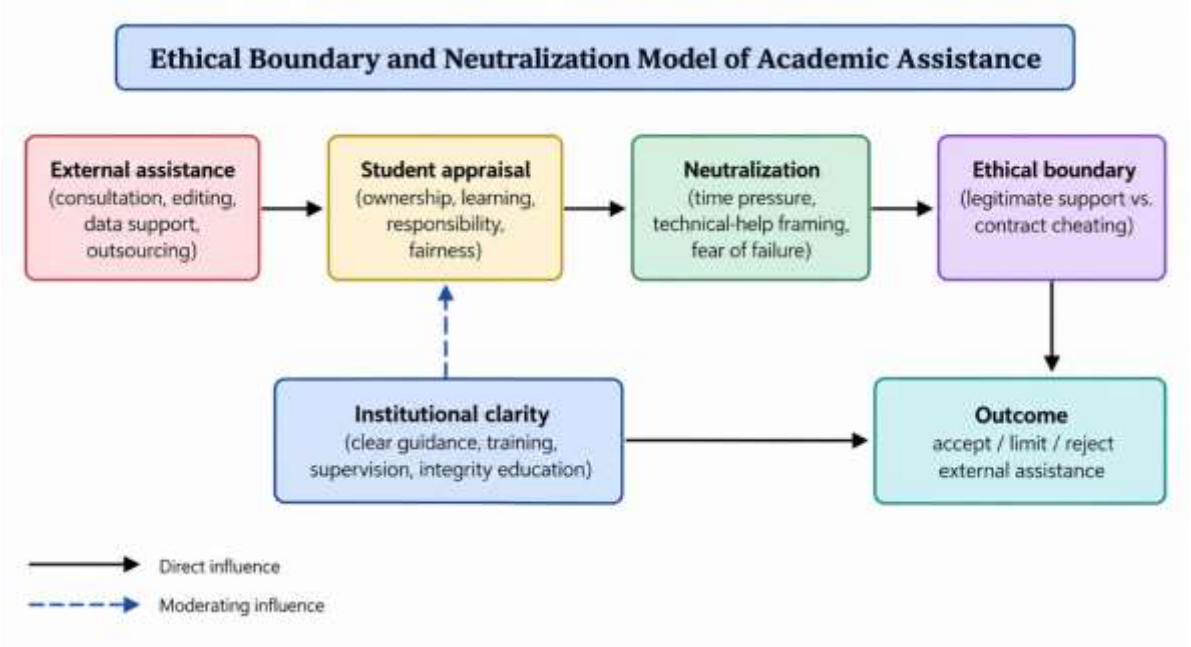


Figure 2. Ethical Boundary and Neutralization Model of Academic Assistance

The model illustrates that students first assess the form of external assistance and then

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evaluate whether they retain intellectual ownership, understanding, responsibility, and fairness. Rationalizations such as time pressure or technical-help framing can make some forms of assistance appear more acceptable. However, full outsourcing crosses a stronger ethical boundary because responsibility for producing the academic work has effectively transferred to another party.

These findings have implications for university policy. Academic-integrity guidance should not merely state that students must complete their own work. Institutions should clearly explain which forms of assistance are legitimate and which constitute unacceptable intellectual substitution. Campbell and Waddington (2024) emphasize that academic-integrity guidance should be understandable, timely, and accessible to students. Universities should therefore provide examples distinguishing methodological consultation, proofreading, statistical consultation, AI-assisted writing, substantive editing, ghostwriting, and complete outsourcing.

Clear institutional guidance may reduce the “grey area” that allows students to rationalize inappropriate assistance. Legitimate academic-support services should also be strengthened so that students facing methodological or writing difficulties have alternatives to commercial academic providers.

CONCLUSION

Final-year students in this study clearly distinguished between legitimate academic assistance and contract cheating. Assistance with reference searching, methodological consultation, academic-writing training, formatting, and data analysis was more acceptable when students remained intellectually involved and responsible for their work.

In contrast, completing a final project entirely by another party was widely perceived as a violation of academic integrity, unfair to honest students, and potentially harmful to graduate quality. The main ethical boundary was therefore intellectual ownership and responsibility. Rationalizations such as time pressure, technical-help framing, fear of failure, and methodological difficulty may make questionable assistance seem more acceptable. However, they do not eliminate students' awareness of academic-integrity norms. Universities should establish clear guidelines distinguishing legitimate academic support from contract cheating, strengthen academic-integrity education, and provide accessible methodological, writing, and data-analysis support for final-year students.

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