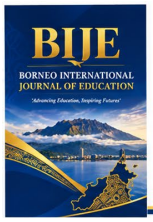
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HUMAN ACADEMIC GHOSTWRITING AFTER CHATGPT: ACADEMIC LABOUR OUTSOURCING AND PROCESS OWNERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Academic ghostwriting is a form of contract cheating in which assessed work is produced by a third party, creating an academic-integrity problem that cannot be reduced to textual similarity. This qualitative single-case study examines how an experienced Malaysian academic ghostwriter adapted to the emergence and subsequent diffusion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) between 2022 and 2026. The participant, "Xiaofen", is a doctoral graduate who provided paid academic writing services before ChatGPT and continued operating after its widespread adoption. The data comprise two published investigative reports, a newly conducted asynchronous semi-structured written interview, and six purposively sampled public Facebook advertisements. Reflexive thematic analysis indicates that, in this case, GenAI devalued routine undergraduate writing but complemented the provider's higher-order work. She shifted her focus towards postgraduate and time-poor clients, incorporated several paid GenAI tools, and expanded from text production to end-to-end academic labour outsourcing involving topic formulation, revision management, data-related support, and viva preparation. The case does not establish the prevalence or direction of Malaysia's wider ghostwriting market. Instead, it offers a task-based explanation: automation substitutes for routine drafting while complementing non-routine coordination, verification, judgement, and client management. Higher education institutions should therefore supplement text detection with staged, dialogic, and verifiable assessment practices that make students' ownership of the academic process visible.

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Kata kunci:
kecerdasan buatan generatif, penipuan kontrak akademik, penulisan

Penulisan akademik secara upahan ialah satu bentuk penipuan kontrak akademik apabila tugasan yang dinilai dihasilkan oleh pihak ketiga. Amalan ini menimbulkan masalah integriti akademik yang tidak dapat dikenal pasti melalui pemeriksaan persamaan teks semata-mata. Kajian kes kualitatif ini meneliti bagaimana seorang penulis akademik upahan berpengalaman di Malaysia

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menyesuaikan perkhidmatannya dengan kemunculan dan penggunaan meluas kecerdasan buatan generatif (GenAI) antara tahun 2022 hingga 2026. Peserta kajian, "Xiaofen", ialah pemegang ijazah kedoktoran yang menawarkan perkhidmatan penulisan akademik berbayar sebelum kemunculan ChatGPT dan terus beroperasi selepas teknologi tersebut digunakan secara meluas. Data kajian terdiri daripada dua laporan penyiasatan yang diterbitkan, satu temu bual bertulis separa berstruktur secara tidak segerak, dan enam iklan Facebook awam yang dipilih melalui persampelan bertujuan. Analisis tematik refleksif menunjukkan bahawa, dalam kes ini, GenAI mengurangkan nilai penulisan rutin pada peringkat prasiswazah tetapi melengkapi kerja aras tinggi penyedia perkhidmatan tersebut. Beliau beralih kepada pelanggan pascasiswazah dan pelanggan yang menghadapi kekangan masa, menggunakan beberapa alat GenAI berbayar, serta memperluas perkhidmatannya daripada penghasilan teks kepada penyumberluaran tenaga kerja akademik secara menyeluruh yang merangkumi perumusan tajuk, pengurusan semakan, sokongan berkaitan data dan persediaan peperiksaan lisan (viva). Kes ini tidak membuktikan kelaziman atau hala tuju pasaran penulisan akademik upahan di Malaysia secara keseluruhan. Sebaliknya, kajian ini menawarkan penjelasan berasaskan tugas: automasi menggantikan penulisan rutin sambil melengkapi koordinasi, pengesahan, pertimbangan dan pengurusan pelanggan yang tidak rutin. Oleh itu, institusi pendidikan tinggi disarankan supaya melengkapi pengesanan teks dengan amalan pentaksiran berperingkat, dialogik dan boleh disahkan yang memperlihatkan pemilikan pelajar terhadap proses akademik.

1.0 Introduction

The public release of ChatGPT in late 2022 transformed the conditions under which academic texts can be produced. Students can now use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) to generate prose, summarise readings, translate material, reorganise arguments, and revise language within seconds. These capabilities have intensified long-standing concerns about academic integrity because submitted work may no longer provide a straightforward indication of a student's own intellectual contribution (Cotton et al., 2024; Eke, 2023). Yet the separation between the named student and the actual producer of assessed work predates GenAI. Students have long outsourced assignments and theses to third parties, a practice commonly referred to as contract cheating (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006; Newton, 2018).

In Malaysian higher education, this technological change intersects with an already complex academic integrity landscape. Malaysian research has documented academic dishonesty among higher education students and inconsistent institutional approaches to plagiarism and similarity checking (Mustapha et al., 2017; Talib, 2016). A recent document analysis of selected Malaysian higher education institutions also identified variations in the scope and clarity of communication of academic integrity policies (Mehar Singh & Phan, 2024). At the same time, postgraduate researchers may encounter unfamiliar academic conventions, anxiety about writing in a second language, and difficulties in sustaining dissertation writing (Jeyaraj, 2020; Wan Osman et al., 2024). These studies do not establish that academic pressure or language difficulties cause contract cheating. They do, however, highlight the importance of examining integrity policies alongside the institutional conditions under which students are expected to demonstrate authorship and research competence.

GenAI further complicates this environment. Text-matching systems were

never designed to determine who performed the underlying intellectual labour, and automated AI detectors may produce unreliable results across text types and writers, including false positives in authentic student essays (Bendo, 2026; Weber-Wulff et al., 2023). Malaysian institutions therefore face two overlapping but distinct questions: whether students use GenAI within permitted boundaries and whether they retain substantive ownership of the work submitted under their names. The second question is especially important when a human intermediary combines research expertise, client communication, and AI-supported production.

This article examines the latter question through an information-rich case involving a Malaysian academic ghostwriter whose activities span a major technological transition. It addresses three research questions: (1) What forms of academic ghostwriting were displaced or devalued following the widespread adoption of GenAI? (2) How did an experienced provider incorporate GenAI into her own work processes? (3) Why did demand for outsourced academic work undertaken by humans persist despite clients having direct access to GenAI? The purpose is not to estimate the prevalence of academic ghostwriting. Rather, the study seeks to develop a cautious, task-based explanation of how GenAI may reorganise human ghostwriting practices and what these changes imply for assessment and supervision.

2.0 Literature Review and Conceptual Framing

This section reviews scholarship on contract cheating and academic ghostwriting, the demand for and commercial supply of outsourced academic work, and the disruption associated with GenAI. It then develops the concepts of task substitution, technological complementarity, and process ownership before locating the study within Malaysian evidence and identifying the research gap.

2.1 Contract Cheating, Academic Ghostwriting, and Process Ownership

Clarke and Lancaster (2006) introduced the concept of contract cheating to describe the outsourcing of assessed work to a third party. Unlike conventional plagiarism, commissioned work may be produced specifically for an individual client and may contain little copied text. The central issue is therefore not merely one of textual originality but also of authorship and ownership: who actually performed the assessed academic work? Newton's (2018) systematic review established that commercial contract cheating was a substantial concern before the emergence of GenAI, while Ahsan et al. (2022) identified persistent gaps in evidence, theory, and institutional responses. Together, these studies situate academic ghostwriting within the broader category of contract cheating and demonstrate why low textual similarity cannot establish genuine authorship.

Process ownership refers here to the student's substantive responsibility for the sequence of intellectual activities underlying an assessed piece of work: framing the problem, selecting and evaluating evidence, making methodological decisions, conducting or interpreting analyses, responding to critique, and defending conclusions. This does not imply that students must work without legitimate assistance. Editing, tutoring, peer feedback, and declared GenAI use may be permitted under institutional policies. The boundary of academic integrity is crossed when

assistance substitutes for the intellectual work or decision-making that the named student is expected to undertake and demonstrate.

2.2 Demand, Commercial Supply, and the GenAI Disruption

Demand-side research cautions against attributing academic outsourcing solely to laziness. An analysis of social-media requests identified academic difficulties, competing responsibilities, and personal pressures among the reasons students seek paid academic assistance (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019). Commercial providers respond by presenting outsourcing as convenient, confidential, and supportive. Contract cheating websites emphasise expertise, reassurance, originality, and customer service, potentially blurring the boundary between legitimate academic assistance and third-party substitution (Rowland et al., 2018). These pressures do not excuse academic misconduct, but they help explain the commercial environment in which outsourcing becomes normalised as a practical solution.

Supply-side research remains comparatively limited because providers have both commercial and ethical reasons to conceal their identities and practices. Interviews with independent ghostwriters have revealed variations in educational backgrounds, strategies, and ethical self-understanding (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016). Research on custom-writing websites further demonstrates that contract cheating involves organised business processes that connect clients, administrators, and writers (Ellis et al., 2018). However, these studies largely predate the widespread availability of GenAI and do not explain how highly trained human providers adapt when low-cost AI systems can perform some aspects of the writing process.

GenAI creates new opportunities for both students and providers. It can rapidly draft and revise prose, but it can also generate fabricated references, oversimplify disciplinary complexities, and require human verification. Recent evidence from 44 Spanish contract-cheating websites indicated a marked decline in traffic after 2022, a pattern consistent with the possibility of partial substitution by GenAI but insufficient to establish causation or the disappearance of commercial services (Comas Forgas et al., 2026). Other research recommends moving beyond a binary "AI or no AI" approach towards explicit, assessment-specific guidelines and verifiable evidence of learning (Perkins et al., 2024). For human ghostwriters, the unresolved question is whether GenAI reduces demand for their labour or reorganises it around tasks for which clients continue to value human expertise and involvement.

2.3 Task Substitution and Technological Complementarity

This article draws on task-based accounts of technological change to explain this relationship. Technologies rarely replace an occupation in its entirety; instead, they affect the different tasks that constitute it. Routine and clearly defined tasks are more susceptible to automation, while non-routine work involving judgement, contextual knowledge, interpersonal coordination, and problem-solving may remain complementary to human labour (Autor, 2015; Autor et al., 2003). Automation can also create or expand new tasks in which human workers retain or regain a comparative advantage (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019).

In the context of academic ghostwriting, substitution occurs when GenAI

performs a task that a client previously paid a human provider to complete, such as routine drafting, paraphrasing, translation, or language correction. Complementarity occurs when a provider uses GenAI to reduce the time and cost associated with these tasks while retaining responsibility for non-routine work such as interpreting ambiguous instructions, designing a defensible research project, verifying references, maintaining coherence across chapters, responding to supervisors' feedback, and managing ongoing client relationships. Academic labour outsourcing refers to the broader transfer of responsibility for interconnected academic and research activities. This framework suggests that basic text production may decline in value without necessarily leading to the disappearance of skilled human providers.

2.4 Malaysian Evidence and the Research Gap

Malaysian scholarship provides relevant but fragmented evidence. Studies of academic dishonesty, Turnitin practice, and institutional policies document concerns with integrity and rule communication (Mehar Singh & Phan, 2024; Mustapha et al., 2017; Talib, 2016). Research on postgraduate writing identifies challenges involving disciplinary conventions, language, anxiety, and sustained supervision (Jeyaraj, 2020; Wan Osman et al., 2024). Research published in 2026 further argues that open and distance-learning assessment must be redesigned where GenAI weakens the evidential value of conventional take-home work (Ong, 2026). What remains missing is longitudinal, supply-side evidence showing how a human ghostwriter interprets and adapts to GenAI within Malaysia.

Two investigative reports published by Sin Chew Daily, a Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper, in December 2022 documented a Malaysian commercial market in which highly educated writers and intermediary teams supplied assignments and postgraduate work (Lee, 2022a, 2022b). Those reports were produced by the present researcher in a former professional capacity as a journalist. A new academic follow-up in 2026 found that one focal provider remained active but had altered both her clientele and service model. The continuity of the case permits exploratory comparison across the early-GenAI transition, while its single-case character requires deliberately limited claims.

3.0 Methodology

This section explains the exploratory qualitative single-case design, the selection of an information-rich participant, and the three sources of evidence used in the study. It also details the thematic analysis, reflexive procedures, trustworthiness measures, and ethical safeguards applied to the written interview and public social-media documents.

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study uses an exploratory qualitative single-case design. Case studies are appropriate when a contemporary process must be examined in context and the boundary between the focal phenomenon and its environment cannot be cleanly separated (Yin, 2018). The study is an instrumental case in Stake's (1995) sense: a

particular case is examined in depth to provide insight into a wider issue, here the reorganisation of human ghostwriting after GenAI. The purpose of this design is analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness. Xiaofen was selected purposively as an information-rich case (Patton, 2015): she held a doctorate, had supplied paid academic work before ChatGPT, participated in the 2022 investigation, remained active in 2026, and could reflect on changes across the same technological transition. The unit of analysis is her changing labour practice and the implications she attributed to changes in clients, tools, and services. The case does not represent all Malaysian providers, institutions, or students.

3.2 Data Sources

Three data sources were triangulated. First, two publicly available investigative reports from December 2022 provide documentary context for Xiaofen's earlier practices (Lee, 2022a, 2022b). Only the published reports were used; unpublished journalistic notes, recordings, and other materials were excluded. The 2026 interaction was treated as a new research encounter with fresh, explicit consent obtained for this study, not as an automatic continuation of the earlier interview. The reports and their publicly accessible links are provided in the reference list so that the documentary baseline can be checked.

Second, Xiaofen completed an asynchronous written semi-structured interview in Chinese in 2026. She declined audio recording because she was concerned that identifiable details could affect her clients and commercial relationships. Before answering, she was informed that her responses would be used in an academic publication and that she would be identified only by a pseudonym, and she gave explicit verbal consent to participation and publication. Written consent was not obtained because she did not wish to create a signed record linking her legal identity to the study. The written questions concerned changes in her clientele, demand after ChatGPT, her own use of GenAI, and the scope of services now requested. She responded with an extended first-person written narrative, which also included her reflections on how universities assess students. For analysis, the researcher divided the narrative into topical segments; the segment labels are the researcher's and are not quoted as the participant's words. Written interviewing can give participants time to formulate reflective answers and produces a participant-generated textual record, but it also removes vocal and non-verbal cues and limits spontaneous probing (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Meho, 2006). No second-round clarification interview was conducted; consequently, ambiguous claims were not expanded beyond what could be supported by the written narrative and the documentary materials. Claims in the narrative were read against the 2022 documentary record and the advertising materials, and interpretation was confined to what the written account itself supports.

Third, six public Facebook advertisements posted or circulating during the 2026 data-collection period were purposively sampled as contextual documents. Searches were conducted on 10 August 2026 using English, Malay, and Chinese combinations including "assignment service", "thesis writing", "SPSS service", "online exam assistance", "academic writing service", "AI humaniser", "servis assignment", "buat tesis", "*论文代写*", "*作业代写*", and "AI*降重*". Only public posts and public pages were

examined. An item was included when it was publicly viewable without joining a closed group, explicitly marketed services to university-level clients in Malaysia, and described at least one service, target group, or integrity-related claim. Duplicate advertisements, purely general tutoring, and posts without a discernible Malaysian target were excluded. From the items meeting these criteria, the six advertisements were selected purposively to capture variation in services offered, target clients, and integrity-related claims; sampling stopped when additional items no longer added a new type of service, client positioning, or claim relevant to the research questions. The resulting corpus, summarised in Table 1, was not intended to estimate prevalence. Following document-analysis principles (Bowen, 2009) and context-sensitive internet-research guidance (Franzke et al., 2020), names, handles, images, and contact details were neither reproduced nor used to contact providers.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). First, the researcher read the 2022 reports, the complete written interview, and the advertisements repeatedly and prepared a case chronology. Second, initial semantic and interpretive codes were generated for changes in client type, task type, prices or value, AI use, workflow, responsibility transfer, and marketing claims. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against each data source and against disconfirming material, including advertisements indicating that low-cost undergraduate services had not disappeared. Fifth, themes were defined and named in relation to the research questions and task-based framework. Sixth, the analysis was written by moving iteratively between participant quotations, documentary context, advertising examples, and theoretical interpretation. Coding was conducted by the sole researcher; the purpose was reflexive interpretation rather than inter-coder agreement.

The 2022 reports established an earlier public account but were not treated as a purpose-built longitudinal baseline. The 2026 interview was the principal source for the provider's current practices, while the advertisements were used for contextual comparison rather than corroboration of every personal claim. Themes were retained only when they illuminated the research questions and could be supported by more than a single isolated sentence or by a transparent contrast between sources.

3.4 Reflexivity, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

The researcher's transition from investigative journalist to academic researcher created both access and interpretive risk. Prior knowledge enabled longitudinal continuity, but familiarity could encourage confirmation of the earlier narrative. Reflexive practice therefore included separating the published 2022 material from the new interview, actively looking for counterexamples, distinguishing the participant's self-presentation from claims that could be compared with other sources, and using cautious language when moving from Xiaofen's account to wider implications. This insider–outsider position is treated as a methodological condition requiring disclosure rather than as either automatic advantage or disqualification (Berger, 2015; Dwyer &

Buckle, 2009).

Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation, a transparent audit trail from research questions to codes and themes, retention of participant-generated written responses, and the presentation of verbatim translated excerpts (Carter et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quotes were translated from Chinese into English by the researcher with attention to preserving meaning rather than colloquial syntax. The participant is identified only by a pseudonym, and institutions, clients, and service providers are not named. The interview data are not publicly available because disclosure could compromise confidentiality.

4.0 Findings

Four themes were generated. They show how Xiaofen understood the reorganisation of her own business after GenAI. The themes should be read as an analytically useful account of one provider rather than as a census of the market.

4.1 Devaluation of Routine Undergraduate Writing

The clearest change was Xiaofen's withdrawal from undergraduate assignments and final-year projects. She stated: "I have completely stopped accepting undergraduate assignments and dissertations." In 2022, routine assignments, short papers, and occasional online examinations had formed a substantial part of her team's work. By 2026, she described these jobs as "low-value labour" because students could generate basic drafts themselves and low-cost competitors could use AI templates. Although she reported serving fewer clients, she said that the value of each remaining postgraduate client had risen (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese).

This account is consistent with task substitution. GenAI lowers the cost of routine prose production and weakens the advantage of paying a doctoral-level provider for standardised drafting. The advertisements nevertheless show that low-end supply has not vanished. AD2 offered rapid completion across assignments, theses, and online examinations, while AD5 competed on low price, speed, and stress reduction. The evidence therefore supports market segmentation within this case, not a claim that Malaysian undergraduate ghostwriting has ended.

The interpretation extends Ellis et al.'s (2018) analysis of contract-cheating business models. Where the product is primarily a short and generic text, GenAI can increase the supply of cheap alternatives and intensify price competition. A highly trained provider may respond by leaving that segment rather than by exiting the market altogether.

4.2 Movement towards Postgraduate and Time-Poor Clients

Xiaofen described her current clients as concentrated among master's and doctoral candidates, particularly working MBA and DBA candidates. In her account, many were business owners, senior managers, or executives in their forties or older. She gave two reasons why such clients did not simply use GenAI themselves. The first was a generational gap in technological and academic competence: in her view, most

in-service postgraduate students "simply cannot write prompts", and when the research problem cannot be clearly articulated, what AI produces is "just a pile of garbage that looks impressive but is actually empty". The second, which she considered more decisive, was the opportunity cost of time: "These bosses' time is calculated at thousands, even tens of thousands, per hour. How could they have time to waste on such tedious reference checking and formatting rules?" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese). This was her interpretation of her client base, not a verified demographic profile of Malaysian postgraduate outsourcing. Her emphasis on clients' limitations also serves to justify the value of her own service and should be read in that light.

The distinction matters because a thesis is a sequence of interdependent tasks. Prompting GenAI is only one element; a candidate must also frame a viable question, prepare a proposal, meet ethics requirements where applicable, locate and verify literature, collect or analyse data, revise chapters, and respond to supervisory critique. The participant framed her value as taking responsibility for this continuity.

Her clientele was also partly transnational. In addition to local business owners, she reported that "quite a few" clients were foreigners introduced through word of mouth by former clients and studying remotely for degrees at universities in various countries (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese). The case is therefore not bounded by Malaysian institutions alone: a provider based in Malaysia may serve distance-learning candidates elsewhere through referral networks, which further limits what any single institution's detection regime can observe.

The advertising material shows that such services are publicly marketed. AD1 targeted working adults and parents by emphasising work–family–study balance. AD4 targeted master's, DBA, and PhD clients and advertised support for academic English, critical analysis, referencing, questionnaires, statistical interpretation, results and discussion chapters, and responses to supervisor comments. These advertisements do not establish that all advertised "support" is contract cheating. Editing or tutoring may be permissible. The integrity concern arises when a third party performs assessed decisions or intellectual work expected of the student.

4.3 GenAI as a Productivity Tool for the Provider

Xiaofen did not treat GenAI solely as a competitor. She reported maintaining subscriptions to at least five paid AI or digital tools, including ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and speech-to-text and academic transcription software, and she had paid for a professional course in prompt engineering to keep pace with the technology. She used these tools for literature organisation, cross-language translation, expanding preliminary drafts, English language revision, and statistical data cleaning. Her summary was explicit: "AI is my 'super academic assistant', but definitely not the 'decision-making brain'" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese).

She estimated that these tools saved more than half of the time previously spent on such tasks but insisted that the decisive step remained human: "For whatever AI organises, I must personally read every line, check the original sources, and reconstruct the logical structure" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese). Elsewhere she noted that references generated by AI often contain "hallucinations", or "ghost references", which must be verified one by one in academic

databases, and she presented this verification as precisely the work that time-poor clients wished to avoid. The time-saving claim cannot be independently timed or audited; it indicates how the provider understood the productivity effect. This is the complementarity mechanism anticipated by task-based accounts of automation: GenAI substitutes for portions of her earlier labour while increasing the value of the remaining human work of verification and judgement.

The finding also exposes the limits of detection-oriented policy. Xiaofen was blunt on this point: "As for university similarity systems such as Turnitin, or the AI detectors on the market, they have never been a problem in our line of work" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese). This is a self-interested claim that cannot be verified here, but it is consistent with the logic of the case. A human intermediary can reorganise, verify, and edit AI-supported output before it reaches a student. Conversely, a submission may contain little detectable AI output while still being substantially produced by another person. Empirical testing has shown that AI-text detectors can yield inconsistent or unreliable classifications (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023). The relevant integrity question is thus not an "AI percentage" but whether the student can account for the intellectual work being assessed.

The advertisements show that providers also respond to the vocabulary of institutional integrity. AD2 promised "Turnitin safety", originality, and a pass or refund guarantee; AD6 sold an AI "humanising" service to reduce detection scores; and AD3 presented "professional writers" offering broad support from SPSS to translation. These claims were not verified and may be inaccurate. They nevertheless show that once an indicator becomes important to institutions, providers have an incentive to promise that they can satisfy or circumvent it. Detection-oriented integrity regimes can therefore generate their own market responses, making the problem dynamic rather than static.

4.4 From Text Production to End-to-End Academic Labour Outsourcing

The strongest theme concerned what higher-value clients purchased. Xiaofen contrasted her earlier role of helping clients "fill the pages" with a 2026 service in which "what clients buy is the outsourcing of all the academic labour required to complete a degree" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese). She called this "a VIP end-to-end concierge service". It began with in-depth conversations about a client's professional experience to identify a topic and continued through preparing proposals, organising literature, supporting data-related tasks, revising chapters, and responding to supervisors. She added: "Every time the supervisor sends back a revision and raises difficult comments, I formulate the arguments through which the client should respond." Her service could extend to slides and possible viva questions. Summarising what she sold, she wrote: "What I sell is this expertise, companionship, and the certainty of ensuring that they can put on the doctoral cap and graduate smoothly" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese).

This account reframes ghostwriting as a transfer of connected academic responsibility. A thesis is the visible product of problem framing, methodological choice, evidence evaluation, analysis, revision, and defence. If these activities are transferred to a provider, the text may be original in a narrow plagiarism sense while the candidate's process ownership remains weak. Human ghostwriting may therefore

persist after ChatGPT because the client is purchasing coordination, judgement, responsiveness, and responsibility over time rather than prose alone. Her own term, the "certainty" of graduation, names the commodity more precisely than "writing" does. The explanatory sequence generated by this case is:

GenAI diffusion → substitution of routine writing → service-market segmentation → AI-enabled human providers → expansion towards higher-value academic labour outsourcing.

This is a proposition for future comparison, not a model validated across Malaysia. It links the participant's trajectory with a broader theoretical expectation: automation acts unevenly across tasks and can simultaneously remove routine work and reinforce the position of workers who coordinate non-routine tasks.

Table 1. Public Facebook Advertisements Used as Contextual Material

Code	Services Advertised	Target / Positioning	Main Marketing Claims
AD1	Assignment support	Working adults and open/distance-learning students	Time saving; work–family–study balance; grades; originality
AD2	Assignments, final-year projects, theses, online examinations	University students	Rapid completion; Turnitin safety; originality; pass/refund guarantee
AD3	Assignments and theses; SPSS; proofreading; transcription; translation	Degree, master's, and PhD students	Professional writers; broad academic support
AD4	Academic writing; thesis revision; SPSS; Chapters 4–5; supervisor comments	Master's, DBA, and PhD working professionals	Structured support; supervisor revisions; research and formatting
AD5	Assignments, thesis chapters, data/figures, slides, and scripts	General students	Low price; speed; stress reduction
AD6	AI "humanising" service	Students using AI-generated essays	Reduction of AI-detection score

Note. The advertisements are contextual documents rather than a representative sample. Identifiers, images, and contact details have been omitted. Claims are reported as marketing language and were not independently verified.

5.0 Discussion

The case suggests that the effect of GenAI on human ghostwriting is neither simple replacement nor simple continuity. It is a redistribution of tasks. Routine prose becomes easier and cheaper to produce, encouraging a skilled provider to abandon lower-value undergraduate work. The same technology then lowers her cost of delivering a more comprehensive service to postgraduate clients. Task substitution and complementarity therefore occur together, but at different points in the labour

process.

This interpretation contributes a supply-side account to literature that has more often examined students, websites, or institutional detection. Earlier research established that providers and business models are heterogeneous (Ellis et al., 2018; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016). The present case shows one mechanism through which that heterogeneity may deepen after GenAI. Providers who mainly sell routine text may face falling prices, while providers with research training, communication skills, and client networks may use AI to move towards process management. The evidence cannot show how common either path is, but it identifies a comparative proposition that can be tested across providers and national settings.

The concept of process ownership also clarifies why academic integrity cannot be inferred from a finished document. A low-similarity, stylistically coherent, and factually verified thesis may still embody little of the named student's intellectual labour. Conversely, responsible GenAI use does not necessarily eliminate student ownership when the student frames the problem, evaluates outputs, verifies sources, makes decisions, and can defend the work. The relevant distinction is not simply human versus machine production. It is assistance versus substitution in relation to the assessed learning outcomes.

Within Malaysia, this argument complements calls for clearer institutional integrity policies and more context-sensitive approaches to GenAI (Mehar Singh & Phan, 2024; Ong, 2026). It also suggests that support and enforcement cannot be separated. Students struggling with academic conventions or dissertation writing need timely teaching and supervision (Jeyaraj, 2020; Wan Osman et al., 2024), while institutions must still distinguish legitimate support from the undisclosed transfer of assessed work. The present case does not connect any particular writing difficulty to misconduct; it shows why outsourcing markets can position themselves as solutions when institutional processes feel difficult, slow, or opaque.

6.0 Implications for Higher Education Assessment and Supervision

Xiaofen offered her own message to university teachers: "Teachers, please do not overestimate your students." She argued that if degree assessment remains filled with impractical, formulaic "academic labour" that can be assembled through procedural box-ticking, and the market still desires the prestige of credentials, then "even if AI evolves for another ten years, a 'human agent' like me will always have soil in which to survive and prosper" (Xiaofen, written interview, 2026; translated from Chinese). This is the view of a provider with a commercial interest in portraying institutions as ineffective, and it should not be read as a neutral evaluation. Its analytical value lies in identifying the assessment conditions that her business model exploits.

A process-oriented response should supplement, rather than merely intensify, technological surveillance. Assessment design should prioritise validity, that is, whether a task yields trustworthy evidence of what students can do, over cheating prevention as such (Dawson et al., 2024). Authentic assessment seeks meaningful performances aligned with the knowledge and judgement students are expected to develop (Villarroel et al., 2018). In the present context, that means designing connected evidence of participation across time. For substantial written work,

instructors can require a short proposal, an initial source map, an annotated reading record, a method justification, selected drafts, a response-to-feedback note, and a brief oral explanation. The aim is not to multiply bureaucracy. Each checkpoint should reveal a decision that the student must understand and connect to later work.

Feedback should operate as a process in which students interpret and use information rather than as one-way correction of a final text (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Developing students' evaluative judgement, their capacity to judge the quality of their own and others' work, also makes ownership more visible, because students must explain why their work meets the required standard (Tai et al., 2018). Supervisors can therefore ask candidates to explain why a research question changed, how an instrument was developed, why a source was retained or rejected, and how a revised claim follows from evidence. Short viva-style conversations may be especially useful for capstone and postgraduate work where the submitted product differs sharply from previous performance. Such dialogue provides course-specific evidence of ownership and can be fairer than a disciplinary decision based principally on an opaque AI score.

Institutions should also state which kinds of human and AI assistance are permitted at each stage. Language editing, statistical tutoring, translation, peer discussion, and GenAI-assisted brainstorming may be legitimate when disclosed and when the student retains control of the argument, evidence, and decisions. A transparent declaration can record tools used, prompts or functions where relevant, human editorial assistance, and the student's verification steps. Policy should focus on whether assistance replaces assessed intellectual work, not on whether any assistance occurred.

These measures must be proportionate to class size and programme level. Low-stakes checkpoints can be sampled, peer-reviewed, or discussed in groups. Oral verification can be reserved for major projects or cases where process evidence is inconsistent. Programme teams can map the points at which students must demonstrate increasing independence rather than requiring every lecturer to invent separate enforcement practices. This approach aligns integrity with learning. It gives students earlier guidance while making full-process outsourcing harder to conceal.

7.0 Limitations and Future Research

The evidence has five principal limitations. First, one information-rich participant cannot represent Malaysia's diverse ghostwriting market. Second, the 2022 reports are published journalistic documents rather than a research-designed baseline. Third, the written interview relies on self-report by a participant with a commercial interest in presenting her services favourably, and did not permit observation of actual transactions, workflows, income, or client outcomes. Fourth, asynchronous writing allowed reflection but removed vocal and non-verbal cues and constrained spontaneous follow-up, and no second-round clarification interview was conducted. Fifth, six purposively sampled advertisements reveal marketed claims, not the prevalence, legality, accuracy, or actual delivery of services. The findings should therefore be read as an exploratory mechanism and a set of propositions, not as market-level causal estimates.

Future research could compare independent providers, intermediary agencies, students, supervisors, and integrity officers; trace how service packages and prices

change; and examine variation across public, private, open-distance, and transnational programmes. Comparative work could test whether providers with stronger research credentials are more likely to move towards process management and whether staged assessment reduces demand for end-to-end outsourcing. Ethical safeguards will remain essential because participants may expose themselves or clients to serious institutional and reputational consequences.

8.0 Conclusion

This study examined how one experienced Malaysian academic ghostwriter understood her adaptation after ChatGPT. In her case, GenAI devalued routine undergraduate writing but did not eliminate human provision. It complemented a shift towards postgraduate and time-poor clients and enabled a hybrid service in which automated assistance was combined with human coordination, verification, judgement, and management of the academic process. The result was not merely AI-assisted writing but a reported expansion towards end-to-end academic labour outsourcing.

The study's contribution is a task-based explanation of that persistence. GenAI can substitute for routine components of academic production while increasing the productivity of a human provider who retains non-routine tasks. This mechanism redirects integrity policy from a narrow concern with generated text towards the student's process ownership. Universities cannot establish ownership from similarity or AI-detection scores alone. They need assessment and supervision practices that require students to show, over time, how they framed questions, evaluated evidence, made decisions, responded to feedback, and defended their conclusions.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

11.0 Research and Publication Ethics Statement:

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with relevant research ethics principles. Participation was voluntary, and informed verbal consent was obtained from the participant. Confidentiality and participant privacy were maintained throughout the research process. The author further confirms that the manuscript is original and complies with established standards of publication ethics.

12.0 Author Contributions:

The author was solely responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, manuscript preparation, and revision, and has read and approved the final

version of the manuscript.

13.0 Data Availability Statement:

The interview data are not publicly available due to privacy, confidentiality, and ethical restrictions. The two published investigative reports cited in the study are publicly available through the links provided in the reference list.

14.0 AI Disclosure Statement:

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing, grammatical refinement, and proofreading. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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