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Easy Help, Hard Exams: AI Cheating as a Signal of Assessment Vulnerability

This paper studies what AI-assisted cheating reveals about student behavior and academic performance. We combine a classroom field measure of unauthorized generative AI use with a panel of administrative grades for second-year undergraduate students in a French Business and Administration Technology program. In the experimental task, students completed a compulsory take-home economics assignment for which AI use was explicitly prohibited. Despite this rule, about 43 percent declared using AI, while a broader declared-or-flagged measure combining declarations with textual indicators identifies about 53 percent as likely AI users. Declared cheating is not randomly distributed: it is more frequent among students with lower prior performance, higher perceived task difficulty, more frequent habitual AI use, and lower perceived detectability, consistent with a cost-benefit interpretation of misconduct. Linking this behavioral measure to 6,410 student-assessment observations over 101 pre-intervention assessments shows that AI cheaters perform only moderately worse on average. The main result is an assessment- format interaction. Students who declare AI cheating underperform specifically in supervised exams relative to continuous assessment, with a penalty of about 0.21–0.26 standard deviations. This pattern is robust to student-semester fixed effects, assessment fixed effects, prior achievement, current academic level, habitual AI use, overconfidence, assessment difficulty, common-mark assessments, and the observed timing of submission, used as a behavioral proxy for planning or procrastination. Part of this gap is already visible in the first semester, suggesting that AI cheating captures pre-existing assessment vulnerability as well as contemporaneous misconduct. The findings imply that unauthorized AI use should be understood not only as an integrity problem, but also as a diagnostic signal for assessment design and student support.