



Generative AI in Higher Education: Perception and Attitude of Students from a University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perception and attitude of university students in a South Africa-based institution towards generative AI. The specific objectives of the study are to i) examine students' attitude towards generative AI, ii) assess students' perceptions of the impacts of generative AI on learning dynamics, and iii) access students' views regarding the ethical use of generative AI. Premised on the Technology Acceptance Model, the study takes an exploratory approach hence, a qualitative research method that allows gathering of non-numeric data was adopted. Data was obtained through open-ended structured interviews from first-, second-, and third-year students of the Department of Arts. Generally, the findings indicate a positive attitude towards the use of generative AI with the recognition of generative AI-embedded tools' potential in enhancing learning by providing personalized learning support and tailored learning resources. In terms of attitude, a mix of excitement, skepticism, ethical concerns evaluative trust in generated information, and reflective compliance was observed. Equally, while generative AI was agreed to be an ethical learning aid, it was, however, perceived that ethics in its use are to be dependent on context, intent, and personal accountability. The study concludes on the need for institutions to create awareness, guidelines, and training to address issues on the ethical use of GenAI tools by higher education students.



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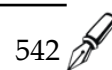
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INTRODUCTION

Globally, the higher education sector, like several other sectors, is experiencing an unprecedented shift and transformation through generative artificial intelligence technology innovation, deployment, and integration. According to Guetalla (2024) and Alier (2024), generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is a technology that is able to create content like images, codes, sounds, and text that are similar to those created by humans. This technology is used by digital tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, and DALL-E. Alqahtani (2024) notes that the advancement in natural language processing and machine learning has led to accelerated adoption of GenAI in academia. This has led to content generated by AI now being used for various educational purposes that include developing interactive learning modules, writing codes, writing automated essays, and summarizing complex topics (Faccia et al., 2023; Fasanmi & Seyama). Equally, institutions are also experimenting with AI-enhanced assessments that are able to provide tailored feedback and promote learner-centered learning (Sajja et al., 2024; Bhatia et al., 2024). Another identified benefit of AI is its potential for democratizing access to high-quality education that could ensure equal opportunity to learning (Alasadi & Baiz, 2023). Apparently, GenAI has changed students' ways of learning, engagement with learning



materials, and completion of academic-related tasks. It has been observed that artificial intelligence-based systems are not only able to assist students in solving problems, and create content to attempt assignments but also act as virtual tutors that provide explanation and guidance (Alubthane, 2024). While it cannot be disputed that GenAI innovation offers very significant benefits, there are concerns that have led to critical debate among education stakeholders (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). Some of these issues include academic integrity, bias in content generated by AI, and students' over-reliance on such technology that discourages critical thinking, amongst others.

However, since GenAI is here to stay and has become an indispensable part of the contemporary educational landscape, it is imperative to optimize its benefits and mitigate potential risks through relevant policies irrespective of several opposing views. Achieving this requires a clear understanding of stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes towards it within various contexts. This is so because there are reports of opposing and diverse perceptions and attitudes by stakeholders about GenAI integration and use in education (Sevnarayan & Potter, 2024; Niu et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024; Chun & Elkins, 2023). Chun and Elkins (2023), for instance, highlighted that students in humanities express reservation about potential loss of human creativity through AI-assisted content, whereas students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine (STEM) show more eagerness towards the application of AI tools due to their orientation toward scientific innovation and tools. Given these varying perspectives, it is essential to investigate how student themselves, as higher education stakeholders within a contextual framework, perceive and engage with GenAI tools. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine students' perceptions and attitudes towards GenAI. The specific objectives of this study are: (i) to explore students' attitudes toward the use of GenAI, (ii) to assess students' perceptions of the impact of GenAI on the learning outcome, and (iii) to evaluate students' views and attitudes concerning the ethical implications of using GenAI. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on student engagement with generative AI tools by offering a localized perspective from a South African university context. While global discourse on generative AI in education continues to expand, much of the existing research is situated within highly resourced, digitally advanced settings in the Global North. In contrast, this study provides insight into how students in a digitally divided environment adapt to these technologies within specific institutional constraints.

As earlier mentioned, GenAI is a technology that uses machine learning models to extract information and learn from of large datasets. It is designed such that it is able to create new content in the form codes, text, and images from various available digital materials (Guettala et al., 2024). GenAI in education offers writing support, brainstorming assistance, and research and data analysis features. It is noted that the application of GenAI into education is seen to be able to tailor learning contents to individual students' needs, thereby fostering engagement with and better understanding of learning contents (Sajja et al., 2024; Guettala et al., 2024). Additionally, Baidoo-Anu and Ansah (2023) buttressed that GenAI helps with the development of problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, as it provides different and simplified perspectives on complex issues. These suggest that GenAI can better facilitate personalized learning pedagogy and experience.

Beside the general conceptual overview of GenAI in education is the actual perspective and attitude of individuals, especially students, toward the technology. Some recent studies provide insight into how students view and engage with GenAI. In the study of Kumar and Anu (2024), where the uptake of ChatGPT was examined among 32 students in 12 higher education institutions, it was shown that the perceived usefulness of the technology is not directly impacted by the quality of responses it generates, though the quality of responses from ChatGPT was found to significantly affect the ease of use. A study among university students in the UAE found that psychological and social perceptions of ChatGPT rather than demographic factors influence the acceptance of the technology. For instance, lower perceived risk is associated with a positive attitude toward it. Evidence was provided by Alotaibi (2025) that

attitude toward ChatGPT was strongly influenced by perception of its usefulness rather than its ease of use. Likewise, it was found that female students held more positive attitudes toward GenAI and that those with longer usage duration reported higher perceived ease of use.

Chan and Hu (2023) investigated the topic in Hong Kong, where postgraduate and undergraduate students were used as the study sample. The findings from the study indicate a general positive attitude towards GenAI, as the examined students identify increased research capabilities, personal learning supports, and writing and brainstorming support as the benefits from GenAI. Despite these benefits, the examined students are concerned with issues of accuracy of AI-generated content, data privacy, and potential impact on personal development and career prospects. In a study conducted by Țală (2024) among master's and undergraduate students of the Faculty of Business and Tourism at Bucharest University of Economic Studies, it was shown that, besides a high level of awareness and interest in content generated by the technology, those who perceive that the generated content as high quality are more likely to believe the technology can boost the creativity of students.

Findings from Grájeda (2024) also show a significantly positive impact of AI tools on student academic experiences, which include productivity, creativity, and enhanced comprehension. Similarly, Almassaad (2024), show the students' perceived benefits of GenAI include ease of access and use, time-saving, instant feedback, enhancement of critical thinking and problem-solving, language ability improvement, academic performance enhancement, learning engagement, and increased confidence. Contrarily, Kumar (2021), Han (2022), and Kosar (2024) show that use of GenAI does not consistently boost students' motivation, confidence, engagement, and practical skill development, sometimes even resulting in poorer outcomes compared to non-users.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is qualitative research, as it involves the collection of non-numeric data to explore the phenomenon of perception, attitude to, and impact of GenAI. Equally, a cross-sectional research design was adopted. This research design means that data was collected from participants once within a particular timeframe. The population for this study comprises first-year students from the Department of Arts in the Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Sciences at a university in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. To select the 20 participants among the population used for this study, a purposive and convenience sampling technique was applied.

In line with some other studies (Obenza et al., 2024; Abdullah & Mohd Zaid, 2023; Ahmad et al., 2024; Alshamy et al., 2025), this study adopts the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to explore university students' perception of the impact of Gen AI on learning outcomes, their attitudes towards it, and their view on associated ethical issues. TAM posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence users' attitude and behavioural intentions towards adopting and using technology. While students generally recognize the practical benefits of GenAI tools (Abubakar et al., 2023), such as enhanced productivity and support in academic tasks, there are mixed perceptions regarding their actual impact on learning outcomes (Ahmad et al., 2024). Furthermore, ethical concerns complicate how students evaluate the acceptability of these tools. In this context, TAM provides a valuable lens to interpret how perceived utility, use, and ethical consideration shape students' overall attitudes towards GenAI.

Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire. This method allows participants to freely express their thoughts, experiences, and opinions without limitation on the subject under consideration. This approach has the benefit of being able to produce detailed non-numeric data in a structured yet flexible format. The research instrument was distributed and collected in person. The data obtained were analyzed through the thematic analysis technique. The technique is appropriate because it enables the examination and analysis of different experiences and perspectives of the participant (Lacey, 2001). Furthermore, it helps identify

themes and summarize important features of the obtained data. Ethical consideration was applied while gathering data from the participants. In line with the approved ethical clearance used for the study, participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. The researcher involved assured anonymity and confidentiality. The ethical clearance number for the research is 03/01/24/2025/PG. Figure 1 represents a flowchart of the research procedure adopted in this study.

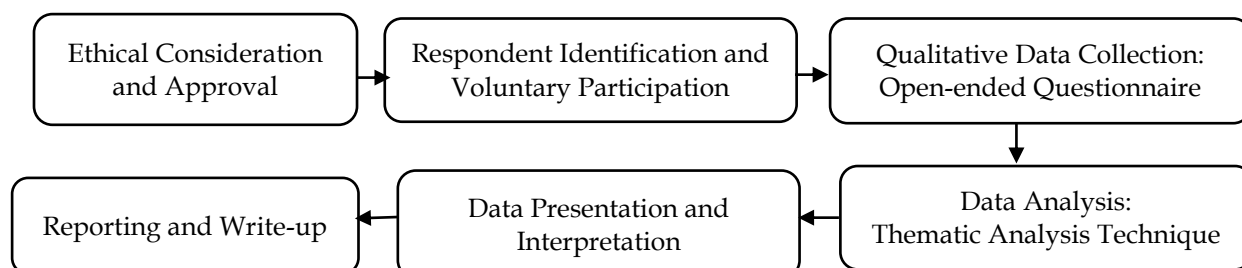


Figure 1. Research flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the attitude and perception of first-year students at a university in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa toward generative AI tools. The qualitative data collected offers reflective insight into student experiences and critical reflections around the use of generative AI tools. The discussion section follows the structure of the research objectives and is divided into three major areas: student attitudes, perceived impacts on learning, and ethical concerns.

Examining Students' Attitudes Towards Using Generative AI

Following a thematic analysis of responses to the questions relating to the first objective of the study (to examine students' attitudes towards the use of GenAI tools in learning), a number of themes are identified and discussed.

Mix of Excitement, Skepticism, and Concern

The responses of students reveal a dynamic interplay of enthusiasm, skepticism, and ethical concerns, as encounters with these tools often evoked a sense of curiosity and hopefulness. Expression of excitement was observed from various responses; for example, respondent 7: "I was excited as it would have made things easier," and respondents 12: "I was actually surprised because I was finding it hard to get some things and discovered AI helped me." These responses reveal an appeal for generative AI because of its efficiency, innovation, and cognitive supportiveness. The responses are in line with Fidan and Gencel (2022), which discusses the novelty effect of artificial intelligence in an educational context where students feel empowered by the fast access to information, assistance with complex tasks, and instant feedback that AI can provide. As their use of AI tools becomes more persistent, attitudes are shifting toward caution, concern, and moral ethics. One of the respondents admitted, 3: "I was scared that I would be caught by my lecturer," while another respondent reflects, 8: "I was shocked... but I always avoid using it to write assignments for me." These sentiments suggest that, while students appreciate the usefulness of GenAI, they are also concerned about its ethical and academic implications, especially in terms of plagiarism and over-reliance.

Moreover, respondent 3 notes, "I am able to get an insight or an idea of what is expected from me in the assignment." This shows excitement and concerns about reliability and authenticity, which are also seen from respondent 10. "I feel somewhat skeptical... I worry about the quality and reliability of the information," as well as respondent 6, who explained this unease: "skeptical and concerned... AI could never offer a humanistic perspective on a subject as authentically as a human." This aligns with the critiques of van Berkel (2022), who argues

that while AI performs well in structured, fact-based contexts, it struggles with moral judgment qualities essential in disciplines like humanities and social sciences. Besides, students expressed anxiety over becoming too dependent on AI; they worry that it might undermine their critical thinking. As respondent 9 mentioned, “It makes me feel concerned because when you are using AI frequently, you can’t think on your own; basically, a robot thinks for you.” This resonates with Gerlich (2024), who warns against the risks of cognitive offloading, where students may substitute meaningful engagement with surface-level convenience, thereby weakening metacognitive skills essential for lifelong learning. These attitudes show that students are not passive consumers of AI technologies but rather are actively discussing its role in their academic lives. They are balancing the benefits of its simplification with concerns about accuracy, originality, and intellectual independence. As Fowler (2023) points out, these tensions reflect the ethical landscape in which students operate, which is shaped by evolving institutional standards, academic integrity policies, and personal moral judgments.

Discomfort and Cognitive Dissonance

The participants were asked how comfortable they feel using AI for assignments; the majority indicated discomfort. Only one respondent said, “very comfortable,” while most were “somewhat uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable.” As respondent 10 explained: “somewhat uncomfortable, as we are always told not to even think of asking the AI to write assignments for us.” This unease is not only from ethical guidelines but also from the perceived inadequacy of the responses received from Gen AI tools. Respondent 8 noted that AI “doesn’t give references... and that can cause a serious issue of plagiarism.” Respondent 2 remarked that they “use AI cautiously”; this suggests a guarded trust in its outputs. These attitudes reflect what Galindo-Dominguez (2024) describe as “cognitive dissonance” between the affordances of AI tools and the regulatory norms of academic culture.

Evaluative Trust

Another key dimension of students’ attitudes toward generative AI involves how they navigate conflicting information, which reveals a pattern of evaluative trust, where AI is cautiously consulted but measured against the credibility of established academic sources. When AI-generated answers contradicted classroom learning, most students exhibited evaluative trust, an attitude marked by confidence in traditional academic sources paired with critical verification of AI outputs. Respondent, 4 simply stated, “Trust class material more.” This reflects a preference for lecturer-provided knowledge. Respondent 8 elaborated further: “I cross-check the sources... I trust my class material more and prefer to verify information.” These responses reinforce the enduring authority of classroom instruction and align with the findings of Qin (2020), who reported that students view AI as a valuable secondary supportive tool, but not definitive. Meanwhile, some students acknowledged the potential of AI, even when its responses differed from classroom content. They appreciated that AI could present alternative explanations, which enhanced their understanding.

Reflective Compliance

Student attitudes toward lecturers who either allow or restrict the use of artificial intelligence in coursework reveal a stance best described as reflective compliance, a disposition marked by a willingness to respect institutional or instructional boundaries, tempered by personal reflection and ethical reasoning. Many students expressed support for restrictions placed on AI by lecturers; they interpret them not as limitations, but as formative interventions that foster intellectual independence. Comments such as “Supportive because we need to think for ourselves at some point” and “They want us to think on our own because we have beautiful minds that can come up with great outcomes” illustrate an acceptance of these regulations as part of an educational goal. These views resonate with Ayanwale (2024), which advocate for an AI-literate pedagogy that cultivates critical thinking and minimizes passive reliance on

automated tools. However, reflective compliance does not equate to uncritical agreements. Some students voiced frustration, which emphasizes the value of AI when used ethically and responsibly. Respondent 6 noted, “somewhat frustrated... I believe AI can be a helpful tool when used responsibly,” while respondent 2 maintained a balanced position: “I support both when they restrict or allow it... but the user should be in control, not AI.” Such statements reflect an evolving AI literacy and a recognition that AI is neither inherently good nor bad but must be approached with intentionality and ethical considerations. This attitude aligns with what Long and Magerko (2020) describe as “critical computational agency,” where learners not only follow rules but also understand and engage with the rationale behind them. Reflective compliance is not a mere submission to authority. It is an informed, values-driven response that harmonizes respect for academic norms with personal accountability and thoughtful AI use. Furthermore, when asked whether they will still use AI privately if a lecturer explicitly bans it, most students stated they were “very unlikely” to continue using AI, which suggests that some students prioritize personal academic advantage over institutional integrity. This divergence highlights the need for clearer pedagogical discussions around the use of AI, as suggested by Chan (2023).

Accessing Perceptions on the Impact of Generative AI on Learning

This section draws on responses from participants to discuss the students’ perceptions of the impact of generative artificial intelligence on their learning process, which is the second objective of the study.

Aid and Diminish Critical Thinking

The students’ responses reflect a contrast in how generative AI is perceived as affecting critical thinking. Some argue that AI enhances cognitive engagement by offering structured ways of understanding complex topics. Respondent 7 noted, “It enhances critical thinking because you will have a clear picture of what you want to write.” This is consistent with the idea that artificial intelligence can serve as a cognitive framework by helping learners to organize their thoughts, explore alternative perspectives, and develop greater understanding (Dai & Ke, 2022). On the contrary, a substantial number of respondents expressed concern about diminishing cognitive independence. For instance, respondent 6 stated, “It truly diminishes critical thinking ... I rely on it when it comes to breaking down topics.” Respondent 8 added, “It does make people lazy to think for themselves and rely on AI mostly.” These perceptions underline a legitimate concern identified in a recent study (Thus et al., 2024); overreliance on generative AI may inhibit metacognitive processes, such as self-questioning and conceptual synthesis, which are central to critical thinking. Meanwhile, respondent 5 offered another perspective, stating that AI enhances and diminishes critical thinking depending on its usage: “It enhances it, but at the same time it diminishes critical thinking if you are overusing it.” These two perspectives support the conclusion of Zhai (2024) that the impact of AI on learning outcomes is shaped by the learner’s intentionality and engagement style, especially their commitment to the learning process.

Transformative Dependency

The responses show that generative AI tools are subtly but significantly changing the learning behaviour of students. A few participants emphasize that AI enhances study efficiency: “AI can quickly summarize articles, find key points, and suggest relevant resources and make exploring much faster.” Others described AI as instrumental in improving language skills: “I’m just learning words and how to combine them... just improving or upgrading my vocabulary.” However, this transformative effect is not uniformly positive. While some students view AI as a facilitator of deeper engagement, others see it as a support. Respondent 1 remarked, “I can’t concentrate when there is no AI,” raising concerns about the development of dependency. This reflects findings by Zhai (2024), which observed that students often develop habitual reliance

on AI, which may shift the rigorous engagement required in independent learning. This perceived impact is neither negative nor positive, in that it shapes reliance as well as empowerment.

Source of Academic Support

When asked if generative AI provides meaningful academic support, students responded with cautious optimism. While acknowledging its strengths in generating ideas and quickly retrieving information, many quickly position AI as secondary to traditional educational sources. Respondent 7 summarizes this sentiment: “AI tools can be useful... but they cannot fully replace textbooks, lectures, or discussion with peers.” Several learners praised AI for its capacity to offer updated information: “It can provide information that maybe none of them (lecturers or textbooks) could have thought of... it comes with the latest information.” However, a high level of trust remained in human educators: “Our lecturers... do not come to teach about things they are not sure of.” These perspectives resonate with the findings by Mohammed and ‘Nell’ Watson (2019), who argue that while AI can enhance access to information, it lacks the depth, context sensitivity, and pedagogical responsiveness that human instruction offers.

Conditional Enhanced Learning

Another recurring theme in students’ reflections on the perceived impact of generative AI on their academic achievement is enhanced learning through conditionality. The responses reveal a pattern of conditional enhancement, where the benefits of learning outcomes depend significantly on how the technology is engaged and integrated into the study process. Most students recognize that generative artificial intelligence has a positive impact on their learning outcomes, particularly when used as a supplementary or enriching tool. As one respondent noted, “It helps me have more information”-respondent 5, while another explained, “It improved my learning, and I had excellent outcomes”-respondent 2. These statements echo growing academic consensus that AI, when used purposefully, can facilitate personalized learning, support independent inquiry, and foster a more flexible learning pace (Wu et al., 2024; Nisa & Sulaiman, 2025). However, this perceived benefit is not universal. There is a contrasting view from students who questioned the authenticity of learning when AI is overused. As one student stated, “If I had to choose, I’d say it hinders learning outcomes because the student did not actually gain the knowledge. This highlights concerns about the existence of superficial learning, where reliance on AI may shortcut critical thinking and reduce retention and impair conceptual understanding. Thus, the impact of AI on learning outcomes is not inherently positive or negative but context dependent. It depends on whether AI is used as a tool for cognitive engagement and exploration or as a substitute for mental effort and intellectual autonomy.

Improved Student Agency and Digital Literacy

As generative AI becomes increasingly integrated into students’ learning practices, their ability to critically assess its output reveals important insights into emerging patterns of digital literacy and student responsibility. Most of the participants reported encountering incorrect or misleading information generated by AI tools. In response, many demonstrated responsibility and critical digital literacy by employing verification strategies. One student noted, “I cross-check with reliable sources like textbooks and academic papers.” These practices reflect students’ capacity to interrogate AI outputs, rather than passively accept them as an essential component of digital literacy in the age of artificial intelligence. Such responses are particularly encouraging as they signal an evolving sense of academic autonomy, where students not only use AI but also actively manage its limitations. This aligns with contemporary educational goals but emphasizes student autonomy, that is, the ability to take ownership of one’s learning through informed decision-making and strategic engagement with digital tools. However, not

all students demonstrated the same evaluative awareness. One respondent admitted, “I have not” (encountered inaccuracies), which may suggest either a high level of trust in AI-generated content or a lack of critical engagement with its validity. This underlines the importance of embedding AI literacy and critical evaluation skills into academic curricula to ensure that all students can navigate complex digital environments responsibly and effectively.

Perception of Ethical Use of Generative AI

Drawing from student responses, various perceptions were deduced regarding the perception of ethical use of generative AI. These perceptions balance enthusiasm for AI’s learning potential with caution against its misuse. The following explains how respondents ethically evaluated generative AI in academic contexts.

Generative AI as an Ethically Acceptable Learning Aid

The responses from participants show a strong perception that the ethical use of generative AI in academic work is centered on its role as a learning tool rather than a substitute for imaginative thinking or intellectual engagement. Respondent 10 summarizes this sentiment by stating that “the ethical use of generative AI in academic work means using it as a support tool rather than a replacement for original thinking... AI assistance does not lead to plagiarism or academic dishonesty.” This view underscores a commitment to academic integrity, situating AI ethically when it aids in comprehension, brainstorming, or strategy development. This stresses the student’s understanding that while AI can assist with information combination, it should never compromise the accuracy of scholarly work. The perception also aligns with Luckin and Holmes (2016), who argue that AI in education should enhance learners’ ability to reflect on their understanding rather than automating cognitive tasks.

Equally, respondent 8 suggested that AI should be used for guidance and strategy “to give you tricks” and “help you understand what you don’t.” This perception conceptualizes AI as an educational platform that enables users to bridge gaps in understanding and improve cognitive strategies rather than relying on it. Mazari (2025) argues for AI tools that promote metacognitive development and help learners become self-directed thinkers. This insight is vital in conceptualizing ethical AI usage as a learning enhancer rather than a performance booster. However, Respondent 11 stated, “it is unethical because it hinders critical thinking of people.” This perception reflects a fear that AI usage could encourage intellectual complacency. Scholars like Yan (2024) cautioned that excessive reliance on generative AI tools could lead to cognitive overload, where students avoid deep learning processes and opt for instant answers, thereby compromising their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These perspectives illustrate the duality of AI in academia, which can empower or hinder discourse depending on how it is used. The ethical problem is in the intention of users and the context of its application.

Ethics of Use Depend on Context and Intent

Students also expressed a contextual and situational understanding of AI ethics. A response stated, “AI in education can be a useful assistant, a tool for innovation, or a means of cheating, depending on its use.” This conditional framing suggests that AI is not inherently ethical or unethical; instead, its morality is determined by the user’s intent and the context of use. Such responses resonate with Kasneci (2023), who found that students’ ethical evaluations of AI vary depending on the academic setting, whether it’s used during open-ended research tasks or high-stakes assessments like exams. Another student captured this differentiation by stating, “On assignments and research I see AI as a form of assistance... but on the exams it’s cheating,” reflecting situational ethics where technological help is permissible in exploratory tasks but prohibited in environments requiring independent thought. This shows that students recognize situational ethics, where certain academic contexts allow for technological aid, while others require unaided cognitive performance. Moreover, respondents’ concern that some users just copy and paste without digesting content indicates growing awareness of plagiarism risks.

Gammoh (2024) argues that academic misuse of AI often occurs when students do not critically evaluate AI outputs or fail to cite sources properly. Thus, while some students perceive AI as a threat to academic integrity, others see it as a tool for democratizing access to knowledge, especially for those who struggle to articulate ideas or find scholarly sources. The ethical boundary, therefore, lies not in the tool, but in the balance between dependence and engagement.

Ethical Use Requires Personal Accountability

Among the varied perceptions regarding the ethical use of generative AI in academic settings, a consistent theme that emerges is the belief that personal accountability is central to its responsible integration. This view is succinctly articulated in two participant responses, both of which reflect a mature, ethically grounded understanding of AI's role in education. One respondent (Response 2) explains that “the ethical use of generative AI in academic work means using it as a support tool rather than a replacement for original thinking. It involves properly citing AI-generated content when necessary, verifying information for accuracy, and ensuring that AI assistance does not lead to plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Ethical use means balancing AI's help with personal effort.” This perspective emphasizes the student's responsibility to maintain academic honesty and originality, even when leveraging powerful tools like generative AI. It underscores that ethical use is not defined by institutional rules alone but by the individual's intent and action. By highlighting the need to cite AI-generated content and verify its accuracy, the student shows awareness of their active role in ensuring transparency and academic integrity, the hallmarks of personal accountability.

Similarly, another student (Response 4) states, “The ethical use of generative AI in academic work means using it as a learning aid rather than a shortcut to avoid genuine effort. It involves transparency, fairness, and maintaining academic integrity.” This echoes the same foundational idea that while generative AI can be beneficial, it becomes unethical when it replaces a student's effort and engagement. The call to avoid using AI as a “shortcut” signals a concern for intellectual diligence and moral responsibility. The inclusion of values such as transparency and fairness points toward an internal ethical compass that governs decision-making, rather than blind reliance on external controls. These views align with scholarly positions that argue ethical AI use must be grounded in human agency and responsibility. As Cows (2019) argues in their unified framework for AI ethics, the use of AI systems should support rather than undermine human autonomy and intellectual integrity. Similarly, Aoun (2017) cautions that educational environments risk turning into “cognitive outsourcing systems” if users are not taught to engage with AI critically and responsibly. Moreover, the emphasis on “balancing AI's help with personal effort” and using AI as a “learning aid” reflects an understanding of AI as a complementary tool, not a crutch. This aligns with Luckin and Holmes (2016), who advocate for AI systems that encourage learners to develop metacognitive awareness and take ownership of their learning journeys. In essence, these responses reflect an advanced ethical stance: that students themselves are the ultimate gatekeepers of academic integrity in the age of AI. While institutions can and should develop guidelines, it is the individual's commitment to effort, originality, and transparency that ensures generative AI is used ethically.

Guidelines as Ethical Anchor

Another perception inferred from respondents' responses is the need for clear institutional guidelines to establish ethical boundaries around AI use. The respondents unanimously voiced the need for clear and enforceable institutional policies to regulate the use of generative AI in academic environments. This strong consensus highlights a growing recognition that ethical ambiguity must be addressed through structured guidelines. A student emphasized this clearly: “Yes, universities should set guidelines on generative AI to ensure ethical and responsible use... Without guidelines, misuse could undermine learning and academic integrity.” This response

reflects the belief that the presence of policies would not only deter unethical behaviour but also promote fairness and clarity in educational practices. Another respondent argued that guidelines are necessary because “students too lazy to analyze, read, and do other research about the information we've got.” Here, the policy is seen as a corrective mechanism not just to prevent cheating but to cultivate research skills and critical thinking. According to Long and Magerko (2020), institutions have a responsibility to cultivate digital citizenship and AI literacy to help students become discerning users of emerging technologies. Some students also associated lack of guidelines with broader existential threats. One warned, “If not, our world in the next years to come can turn into a world led by robots, not by humans.” Importantly, respondents did not call for banning AI tools but rather for structured integration, suggesting they value AI's potential when used ethically. This aligns with Chan (2023), who advocates for regulatory frameworks that guide responsible innovation rather than stifle it. Hence, institutional guidelines are not just rules; they are ethical compasses, helping students navigate the blurred lines between assistance and academic misconduct.

These students' responses reflect ethical discourse around GenAI that shows students as not mere users of technology but ethical agents that are actively assessing its implications for learning, academic honesty, and originality. Their perceptions reveal a desire for balance. GenAI should enhance and not replace thinking and support and not subvert academic effort. As the academic community navigates the challenges of integrating GenAI into education, these students' voices serve as a compelling call for ethical literacy, institutional clarity, and learner accountability. Through such a framework, GenAI can evolve into a trusted partner in human-centered education rather than into a threat.

CONCLUSION

The study underlines that the first-year arts students examined for this study are active and reflective users of GenAI tools. Rather than being passive consumers, they critically assess GenAI's utility, ethical dimensions, and relevance across academic tasks. Also, the findings highlight that while GenAI can enhance learning, it is not a substitute for human reasoning and engagement. Furthermore, ethical use goes beyond mere rule-following; while students respect institutional boundaries, they also seek personal accountability and a value-based understanding of integrity. Likewise, interaction with GenAI appears to contribute to the development of students' digital literacy and academic agency.

Based on these findings, the study proposed a few recommendations to guide the ethical and effective integration of GenAI tools in higher education. Institutions should promote the ethical use of GenAI tools through value-based education that emphasizes integrity, originality, and responsibility, as students view GenAI as a support tool rather than a substitute. Clear institutional guidelines should be developed to distinguish acceptable use, such as brainstorming and summarization from unethical practices like full assignment generation, with attention to disciplinary contexts and academic levels. To encourage responsible use, higher education institutions should provide access to verified GenAI platforms that are integrated into institutional learning management systems and minimize reliance on unregulated external tools. Open dialogues between students and instructors should also be facilitated through forums or co-created policies to align expectations and reduce tension around the use of GenAI-embedded tools. Lastly, institutions should embed structured reflection activities into coursework to prompt students to critically assess their use of GenAI; this will foster deeper learning, metacognitive awareness, and ethical engagement, respectively.

A key limitation of this study is its focus on a single South African university, which may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other contexts. The study offers a cross-sectional view without tracking changes over time and excludes the perspectives of other faculty.

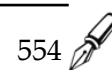
Future studies should explore cross-institutional and cross-regional comparisons to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal research is needed to assess how student attitudes evolve with greater exposure and policy development. Including perspectives of students from other faculty would offer a more comprehensive view. Discipline-specific analyses and mixed-methods approaches could deepen understanding and inform effective educational practices and AI literacy interventions.

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