

Mapping the Ethical Challenges of Generative AI in Higher Education: A Bibliometric and Thematic Analysis Using VOSviewer

1st Tamer Hind

FSJES M, Cady Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco

h.tamer@uca.ac.ma

2^{ed} Knidiri Zakaria

FSJES K, Cady Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco

z.knidiri@uca.ac.ma

Abstract: This study explores the intersection of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), ethics, and higher education through a systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis. Drawing on a corpus of 896 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus (2013–2025), the research employs VOSviewer to identify dominant keyword clusters and thematic trends.

The results highlight three major research poles: (1) the adoption and integration of GenAI tools in academic practices; (2) ethical and social concerns, such as algorithmic bias, academic dishonesty, and the erosion of student autonomy; and (3) the factors influencing user perception and technology acceptance. A deeper thematic analysis of selected articles revealed that although GenAI offers clear pedagogical benefits, it also raises pressing questions about academic integrity, regulation, and educational values. The article concludes with targeted recommendations for institutions, including the development of clear AI policies, ethical literacy modules, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This work contributes to a more balanced and responsible integration of AI in higher education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI); Higher Education; Ethics; VOSviewer; Bibliometric Analysis.

XXXI. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of higher education, intensified by global digitalization, is redefining learning modalities by placing the connected students at the center of the educational system. This shift toward a connected mode is based on the integration of digital technologies particularly artificial intelligence (AI), into the architecture of learning environments. These tools not only manage and distribute educational content but also enable detailed and continuous analysis of student's behavior.

Indeed, intelligent digital platforms collect and utilize data related to students' learning paths, interactions, and performance, thereby offering unprecedented opportunities for personalized learning (Roll & Wylie, 2016; Siemens, 2013). The connected mode thus emerges as a dynamic system in which learning becomes increasingly individualized, results-driven, and supported by predictive analytics (Larsson & White, 2023; Gasevic et al., 2024).

This traceability of behavior introduces a new dynamic in the pedagogical relationship, based on adaptability, measurable engagement, and automated feedback. However, these technologies also raise ethical concerns related to surveillance, data privacy, and the potential reduction of student's autonomy in a highly instrumented environment.

Beyond the automation of administrative tasks, artificial intelligence plays an increasingly important role in the personalization of learning paths by analyzing the detailed behavior of connected learners. By leveraging data from students' digital activities, such as time spent on content, responses to assessments, and types of resources used, AI systems can generate individualized learning profiles and recommend content tailored to each student's specific needs (Holstein et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2024). This type of dynamic adaptation supports deeper understanding of concepts, provides immediate feedback on errors, and contributes to improved academic performance in the medium term. In this sense, AI becomes a powerful lever for responsive pedagogy, based on real-time feedback and continuous adjustment of learning materials.

However, the ability to model students' behavior raises significant concerns about personal data protection, algorithmic transparency, and respect for privacy (Slade & Prinsloo, 2024; Castañeda & Selwyn, 2023). While AI can enrich the educational experience, it cannot replace the human dimension of teaching. Pedagogical interaction, the trust-based relationship between teachers and students, and the emotional dimension of learning remain essential to ensure meaningful education. Therefore, the integration of AI into connected learning environments should be viewed as a complement (not a substitute) for human mediation and must operate within a framework of ethical and responsible governance.

In this context of hyperconnectivity and increasing exploitation of educational data, AI technologies play a central role in transforming learning environments. Their integration enables not only the automation of certain pedagogical and administrative tasks but also the personalization of learning paths based on each learner's behaviors and needs. By analyzing study habits, assessment

responses, and interactions on digital platforms, AI is able to propose targeted content, provide immediate feedback, and support students in more effective and individualized learning. Although these innovations are academically effective, they raise major questions regarding data confidentiality, algorithmic transparency, and the essential role of humans in the educational relationship. For while AI can support learning, it cannot replace the richness of human interaction, nor the fundamental role of teachers and mentors in the learning process.

In this context, a bibliometric analysis was conducted using the VOSviewer tool to identify the main research trends and map the dominant keywords related to artificial intelligence and ethics in higher education.

XXXII. METHODOLOGY

To analyze the relationship between artificial intelligence, the digital transformation of higher education, and their ethical implications in the connected era, we conducted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). This rigorous methodology minimizes bias through a comprehensive and structured collection of scientific data, followed by a critical evaluation and synthesis of the most relevant studies on the subject. The approach is grounded in strict procedures aimed at reducing bias through exhaustive and systematic data collection, followed by a critical appraisal and synthesis of pertinent studies (Cook et al., 1995).

More specifically, we followed the methodological framework proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003), structured into three essential phases:

1. Planning the review, including a clear definition of objectives, research questions, and inclusion/exclusion criteria for publications.

2. Conducting the review, through a systematic search across a scientific databases (Elsevier Scopus database), using specific keywords. The search strategy was built using a combination of controlled keywords and Boolean operators, as follows: ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI") AND ("ethics" OR "ethical concerns" OR "AI ethics") AND ("student behavior" OR "student attitude" OR "academic behavior" OR "student use") AND ("higher education" OR "university").

3. Presenting the results, which involves a thematic synthesis of the selected publications, a critical analysis of observed trends, and a discussion of the implications for understanding the relationship between artificial intelligence, the digital transformation of higher education, and their ethical and human dimensions in the connected era. To support this analysis, we used VOSviewer to visualize keyword co-occurrence networks and identify major research clusters, providing a clear mapping of the dominant themes and scholarly focus areas within the selected literature.

This methodology ensures the reliability of the results obtained and provides a comprehensive view of the existing literature on this rapidly evolving topic.

XXXIII. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Planning the Systematic Literature Analysis

Higher education is undergoing profound transformation driven by artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, which offer new opportunities for personalized learning and student behavior monitoring. Among the most developed applications, the personalization of the educational experience stands out. Adaptive learning systems powered by AI analyze students' responses, learning paths, and interactions to deliver tailored content, exercises, and support. This approach addresses the specific needs of each student while helping reduce costs associated with traditional pedagogical methods (Luckin et al., 2023; Xu & Chen, 2024).

Beyond personalization, other applications are emerging, such as support for peer collaboration, early detection of learning difficulties, and optimization of online engagement through behavioral analytics. These tools enhance teachers' ability to intervene at the right time and adjust their instructional strategies based on real-time data. However, while promising, such applications still require careful regulation and ethical consideration to ensure beneficial implementations for all educational stakeholders (Holstein et al., 2023; Slade & Prinsloo, 2024).

Thus, in a context where the analysis of connected student behavior becomes a lever for innovation in higher education, how can we fully leverage the potential of artificial intelligence without compromising fundamental ethical principles or diminishing the human dimension of teaching?

Answering this research question contributes to enriching literature both on the concept of ethics and on the emerging dynamics of artificial intelligence integration in higher education.

B. Conducting the Systematic Literature Analysis

To identify the articles for review, we chose to use "the Elsevier Scopus database", which we consider providing an accurate representation of the current literature in the fields of education, ethics, and digital technologies. This database is widely recognized for its relevance and comprehensiveness in academic research (Falagas et al., 2008).

The literature search was limited to peer-reviewed scientific articles published between 2013 and 2025, written in English, and originating primarily from the disciplines of education, computer science, social sciences, and management.

After the initial query, 2,120 articles were retrieved. Following a refinement process, including duplicate removal and abstract screening, a total of 896 articles were selected for analysis. The final selection retained only those publications that explicitly addressed the use of generative AI by students in educational contexts, along with the associated ethical and institutional concerns.

Referring to the methodological framework proposed by Donthu et al. (2021) which offers a structured approach to conducting bibliometric analyses, as well as to the work of

Castillo-Vergara et al. (2018) which demonstrates the application of this method in the field of management sciences, we chose to conduct a bibliometric analysis. The VOSviewer software was selected as the tool for analyzing and visualizing the scientific references related to the studied concepts.

XXXIV. RESULTS

A. Thematic Analysis Results

This section presents the results of an in-depth thematic analysis conducted with the support of VOSviewer, based on the articles selected in our systematic literature review. Drawing from a final corpus of 896 peer-reviewed scientific articles published between 2013 and 2025, extracted from the Elsevier Scopus database, we performed a qualitative analysis using the inductive thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves repeated reading of the selected texts, initial identification of meaningful codes, and the progressive grouping of those codes into coherent themes.

As a result of this process, four major themes emerged clearly and consistently from the analyzed literature:

1. The actual uses of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools by students;
2. The changes in academic behavior induced by these tools;
3. The ethical dilemmas and concerns associated with their growing use;
4. The institutional and pedagogical responses proposed or envisioned to address these new challenges.

B. Annual Trends in Publications

Figure 1 highlights an exponential growth in the number of scientific publications between 2018 and 2024 on topics related to artificial intelligence, ethics, and education. While the period from 2013 to 2017 remained relatively stable and less productive, 2018 marked a turning point, with a steady increase in academic interest. This momentum was further amplified from 2020 onwards due to the widespread adoption of generative AI tools and the accelerated digitalization of higher education.

The peak observed in 2024, with over 600 publications, reflects strong scientific enthusiasm for the uses and ethical implications of AI in educational practices. The slight decline noted in 2025 is likely due to the partial coverage of the current year and does not indicate a real drop in interest. These findings underscore the strategic importance of continuing interdisciplinary research into the responsible adoption of AI in higher education.

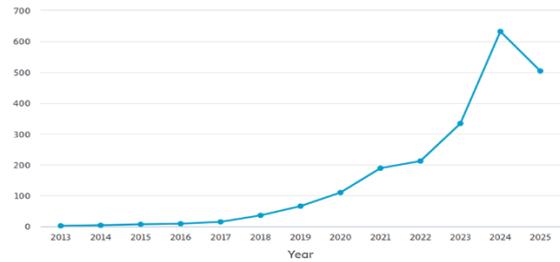


Figure 1: Annual trends in Publications

C. Distribution of Scientific Publications by Country

Figure 2 shows the distribution of scientific publications related to artificial intelligence in higher education by country. The «United States» appears as the undisputed leader in the field, with «over 500 publications», followed by the «United Kingdom» with approximately «250». «Germany», «China», and «Australia» form a second active group, each contributing more than «120 publications». Contributions from «Spain», the «Netherlands», «Canada», «India», and «Italy» are also notable but significantly lower.

This geographical distribution highlights a strong concentration of research in «developed countries», primarily «Anglo-Saxon and European nations», raising the question of the «global representativeness» of the issues being studied. It also underscores the «development potential» for «Global South countries», which remain underrepresented despite facing major educational challenges in the integration of AI.

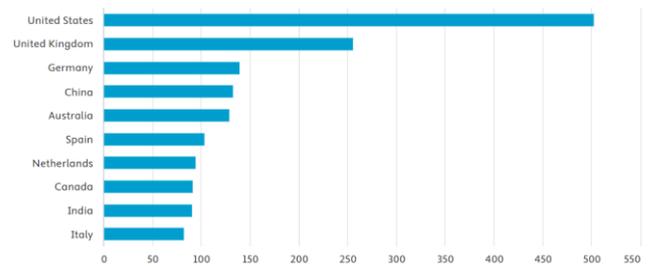


Figure 2: Distribution of Scientific Publications by Country

D. Analysis of Keywords Related to Emerging Research Areas

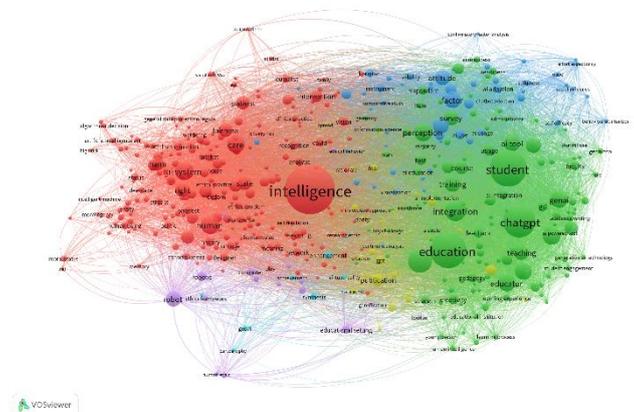


Figure 3 : The journal co-citation network of IA use in higher education and ethics models-related publications

Artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in educational dynamics, yet its adoption remains conditional on the engagement of educators and institutional acceptance. AI also introduces new tensions between technological innovation and fundamental values such as equity, justice, and freedom. Attitudes toward AI play a key role in its dissemination within academic environments, but perceptions vary widely depending on users' profiles and contexts.

The keyword co-occurrence analysis, conducted using VOSviewer on a corpus of 896 publications from Scopus and Web of Science, reveals a clear semantic structure within the field of research on artificial intelligence, particularly generative AI in higher education. The resulting mapping highlights three major interconnected thematic clusters, which represent the core scientific debates in this domain. Frequently occurring keywords such as intelligence, AI system, human, fairness, ethicist, harm, discrimination, right, moral agency, deepfake, and wellbeing reflect the current concerns surrounding AI and ethics.

- The first cluster, highlighted in green, revolves around terms such as student, education, GenAI, training, educator, learning experience, AI tool, and integration. This theme reflects research focused on the adoption of AI tools by students, their integration into pedagogical practices, and the transformation of teaching and learning processes. It reflects a technopedagogical innovation dynamic, centered on the potential of AI to enhance efficiency, creativity, and student engagement in educational settings (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

- The second cluster, in red, includes keywords such as intelligence, human, harm, right, fairness, AI system, discrimination, freedom, and ethicist. This cluster clearly focuses on ethical and societal questions related to AI. It reflects growing concern about the potential risks of automation, such as algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, accountability, and fairness. Grounded in moral philosophy and critical theory, this strand of research warns against the risks of dehumanization and the erosion of student autonomy if AI is not rigorously governed (Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

- A third, more diffuse cluster, shown in blue and violet, focuses on the methodological dimensions of studying AI use. It includes terms such as survey, factor analysis, readiness, perception, attitude, self-efficacy, and ease of use. This group reflects the legacy of technology acceptance models (e.g., TAM, UTAUT) and shows that researchers are still largely focused on the factors influencing AI adoption, often more than on their actual integration into curricula. This suggests a gap between AI as a perceived tool and its real implementation in educational systems (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

In summary, the literature is structured around a three-pillar framework:

1. The use of AI in higher education.
2. The ethical implications.
3. The factors of acceptance and adoption.

The strong linkage observed between student, IA, and ethics illustrates an increasing convergence between these dimensions, reinforcing the relevance of our research objective. However, ethical considerations still occupy a relatively peripheral position compared to pedagogical applications, highlighting the need for future research to adopt a more critical and responsible perspective on AI integration in higher education.

XXXV. DISCUSSION BASED ON THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A. Students' Use of Generative AI Tools

The analysis of the reviewed articles reveals notable diversity in students' practices regarding generative artificial intelligence tools. The most common uses include essay writing, summarizing academic texts, idea generation, content translation, and programming assistance (Alharbi, 2024; Perkins, 2023). These tools are widely perceived by students as effective means to save time, enhance productivity, and reduce academic stress, especially in linguistically complex or multilingual environments (Thi Nguyen et al., 2024). However, usage remains largely exploratory, with students demonstrating a limited understanding of the constraints and potential risks associated with these technologies (Fošner, 2024).

B. Behavioral Changes in Academic Work

Generative AI tools are profoundly transforming how students approach academic tasks. Several studies report a significant increase in students' dependence on AI for initial stages of academic work, leading to a decline in engagement with cognitively demanding activities such as critical thinking and original writing (Chen et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023). Additionally, the literature indicates student confusion about acceptable boundaries for using AI-generated content, with behaviors ranging from occasional assistance to complete delegation of academic tasks to automated systems (August et al., 2024; Fošner, 2024).

C. Ethical Dilemmas and Related Concerns

The most recurring theme in the analyzed literature pertains to ethical concerns surrounding academic integrity. Issues such as automated plagiarism, unauthorized AI assistance (ghostwriting), and the frequent lack of attribution or disclosure of AI-generated content are widely discussed (Perkins, 2023; Garcia Ramos & Wilson-Kennedy, 2024). Furthermore, algorithmic biases inherent in language models and the potential dissemination of incorrect or biased information by these tools are major concerns among researchers and educators (Thi Nguyen et al., 2024; August et al., 2024). These findings highlight an urgent need for normative clarification and institutional regulation around these emerging practices.

D. Institutional and Pedagogical Responses

The analysis shows that very few institutions have established formal and structured responses to the increasing use of AI by students. Some authors advocate for the explicit formulation of internal policies on academic integrity that directly address AI usage (August et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023). Others strongly recommend the integration of dedicated training modules on digital ethics

and the responsible use of AI into university curricula, along with faculty training to detect and effectively manage problematic uses of these technologies (Garcia Ramos & Wilson-Kennedy, 2024; Perkins, 2023; Alharbi, 2024).

XXXVI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article demonstrates convincingly that bibliometric analysis constitutes a rigorous scientific method capable of producing meaningful insights, particularly when applied to retrospective investigations of well-established research areas. As shown throughout this study, bibliometrics is gaining momentum and proving to be a reliable methodological approach, useful for both seasoned scholars and early-career researchers.

Our results highlight the significant rise in the adoption of artificial intelligence in higher education, with a growing emphasis on ethical concerns. Since 2017, academic interest in this topic has expanded, underscoring not only its current relevance but also its increasing impact on the scholarly community.

The widespread integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools into student practices represents a major transformation in the landscape of higher education. This systematic literature review shows that tools like ChatGPT, Bard, or Bing AI offer tangible pedagogical benefits, especially in areas such as writing, translation, and summarization (August et al., 2024; Alharbi, 2024). However, these advantages are accompanied by a reexamination of traditional academic integrity norms, giving rise to complex ethical dilemmas (Perkins, 2023).

The thematic analysis of peer-reviewed scientific articles allowed us to identify four key areas that structure recent academic discourse:

- a) The diverse ways students engage with GenAI tools;
- b) Behavioral changes in how academic tasks are approached;
- c) Ethical risks including plagiarism, source manipulation, and the circumvention of learning;
- d) The lack of adequate institutional responses to regulate and guide these emerging practices (Alharbi, 2024; August et al., 2024; Perkins, 2023).

These findings highlight the urgent need for strategic and pedagogical frameworks within universities. Without proactive governance, the benefits of innovation risk being overshadowed by harmful outcomes, such as the normalization of academic dishonesty, the erosion of meaningful learning, and the breakdown of trust between educators and students (Brison et al., 2023).

Based on these insights, we propose the following recommendations:

- Develop clear institutional policies defining acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI tools in academic work. These guidelines should be transparent, accessible, adaptable, and sensitive to disciplinary differences (Brison et al., 2023).

- Integrate AI ethics literacy modules into academic curricula to cultivate students' critical awareness regarding generative AI, especially concerning reliability, algorithmic bias, and responsibility (Perkins, 2023).
- Train faculty and teaching staff on the functionalities, limitations, and risks of GenAI technologies. This would help bridge the gap between students' often advanced uses and pedagogical expectations (Alharbi, 2024).
- Promote transparency in student submissions by establishing AI usage disclosure policies, similar to the "AI Disclosure Policy" already in place at several Anglo-American institutions (August et al., 2024).
- Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, computer scientists, ethicists, and education researchers to develop balanced pedagogical approaches that combine innovation, integrity, and responsibility.

In conclusion, the widespread adoption of generative AI by students is not merely a technological trend, it poses a fundamental academic and ethical challenge. It calls for a rethinking of teaching practices, regulatory frameworks, and assessment strategies in higher education.

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