The Ethical Considerations of Using Gen AI and AI Tools in Academic Writing in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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ARTICLE INFO

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Article History
Received: 13 August 2025
Reviewed: 20 September 2025
Revised: 25 September 2025
Accepted: 5 October 2025

Abstract

This systematic review investigates the ethical challenges and strategic responses surrounding the use of Generative AI (GenAI) and related tools in academic writing within global higher education. Following the PRISMA 2020 framework, a rigorous search and screening process across academic databases identified 18 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025, which were subjected to in-depth thematic analysis. The findings reveal four major ethical concerns: threats to academic integrity through plagiarism, authorship misrepresentation, and diminished originality; issues of bias and fairness arising from algorithmic limitations and unequal access to technology; limited transparency due to nondisclosure of AI use and the absence of clear citation standards; and risks to data privacy linked to the use of student and proprietary information. In response, the literature highlights strategies that include the development of institutional ethical guidelines and policies, enhanced digital literacy and training for faculty and students, improved design and regulation of AI tools with embedded ethical safeguards, and the promotion of transparent human–AI collaboration guided by human oversight. This review demonstrates the significance of adopting a comprehensive, multi-layered approach rather than relying on isolated interventions. For educators, it underscores the need to cultivate critical digital literacy skills; for policymakers, it emphasizes the importance of enforceable and context-sensitive frameworks; and for researchers, it points to future inquiry on the ethical–technological nexus. Collectively, the findings provide actionable insights to ensure that GenAI's integration into academic writing supports integrity, fairness, and trust in higher education.

Keyword : Systematic literature review, Gen AI &AI Tools, academic writing, ethical considerations, higher education

Introduction

The landscape of higher education is being fundamentally reshaped by the proliferation of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). Since the public release of powerful large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, these tools have become deeply embedded within the academic ecosystem, offering unprecedented support for drafting, summarizing, and refining scholarly texts (Anik & Rahman, 2025; Umar Sodangi & Isma'il, 2025). This technological shift presents a significant dichotomy; while GenAI offers opportunities to enhance efficiency and support learners, particularly non-native English speakers (Arif et al., 2025), its rapid integration is intertwined with profound ethical challenges that strike at the core of academic values.

While the potential benefits of these tools are clear, the academic discourse surrounding their use remains fragmented, and institutional responses have been uneven. Concerns regarding academic integrity, algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the potential erosion of critical thinking skills are now at the forefront of scholarly debate (Apata et al., 2025; Gallent Torres et al., 2023). As institutions worldwide grapple with these issues, strategies have varied widely, moving from initial prohibition to the development of nuanced policies for integration (Hristova, 2025). This fast-paced and often inconsistent evolution in technology and policy has created a critical gap: the lack of a consolidated understanding of the shared ethical issues and the strategies being proposed to address them. A systematic overview is therefore essential to synthesize scattered research and bring clarity to this complex global discussion.

This paper aims to occupy that niche by systematically reviewing the scholarly literature from 2020 to 2025 to provide a coherent map of the ethical landscape. By synthesizing existing research, this study seeks to advance the conversation around the responsible use of AI in academic writing. It is guided by two primary research questions: What are the ethical considerations and issues intertwined with the implementation of GenAI and AI Tools in academic writing in Higher Education? and What are the strategies to address the ethical use of GenAI and AI Tools in academic writing in higher education?

Methods

Review Protocol

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA framework provides a robust, evidence-based checklist to ensure transparency and completeness in reporting (PRISMA, n.d.-a; Page et al., 2021).

Eligibility Criteria

The selection of research papers was guided by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria required that the studies be peer-reviewed journal articles or conference papers published between 2020 and 2025. Furthermore, the papers needed to address ethical considerations related to

the use of Generative AI in academic writing within the context of higher education and be published in the English language. The exclusion criteria ruled out non-peer-reviewed journal articles, studies focused on K–12 education, purely technical AI papers, and publications that fell outside the specified date range.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A systematic search was performed across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined keywords related to technology ("generative AI," "AI tools," "ChatGPT"), application ("academic writing," "academic integrity," "ethics"), and context ("higher education," "university"). To ensure broad geographical representation, searches were also targeted with country names such as "India," "Nigeria," "China," and "Australia."

Study Selection Process

I followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA)-2020. I screened titles and abstracts of all the articles after an initial database search and removal of duplicates. Then the full texts of relevant articles were assessed for final eligibility.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were extracted from the final 18 included research articles using a standardized form. A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyze the extracted data, organized according to the two primary research questions and the predefined themes and sub-themes.

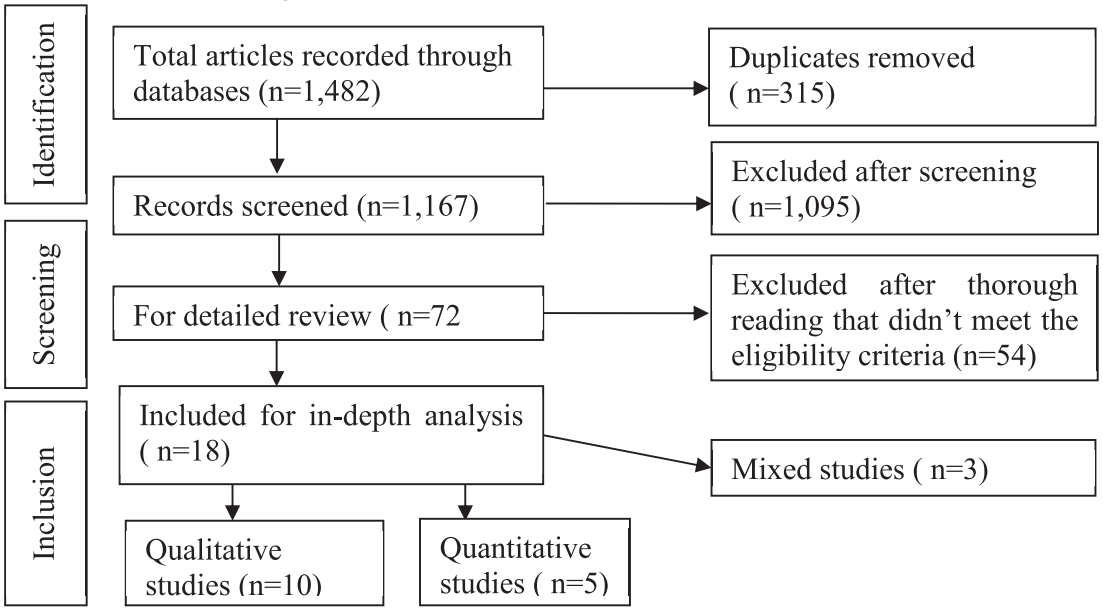
Study Selection

The initial search produced 1,482 records. After removing 315 duplicates, 1,167 records were screened. 1,095 were excluded from 1,167 records. The full texts of the remaining 72 articles were assessed, and 54 were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria. Thus, finally 18 articles were included for in-depth analysis.

Figure 1 presents the selection, inclusion, and exclusion procedures and the final number of research studies considered for the thematic review.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram



Results

Ethical Issues Intertwined with Gen AI and AI Tools Implementation

The first research question searched for identifying the ethical issues associated with GenAI and AI tools in academic writing in higher education. The analysis produced four primary themes: Academic Integrity, Bias and Fairness, Transparency, and Data Privacy.

Academic Integrity

The most significant ethical issue identified is the challenge to academic integrity. This theme includes topics about plagiarism, authorship, originality, and accountability.

Plagiarism and Authorship Misrepresentation: The literature broadly examines how GenAI tools promote new forms of academic malpractice. Shin et al. (2025) refer to the unethical use of AI to generate content without proper attribution as "AI-giarism," a term that captures the evolving nature of plagiarism. The ease with which AI can produce human-like text blurs the lines of authorship, making it difficult to distinguish between student work and machine-generated content (Gallent Torres et al., 2023). This creates a fundamental challenge to traditional notions of intellectual ownership and originality (Subaveerapandiyan et al., 2025).

Ghostwriting and Attribution Challenges: GenAI tools can function as sophisticated ghostwriters, creating content that students may submit as their own. This practice of "impersonation of authorship"

(Gallent Torres et al., 2023) weakens the purpose of academic assessment, which is to evaluate a student's own knowledge and skills. The challenge is intensified by the difficulty of attributing ideas when they are generated or heavily mediated by an AI, raising complex questions about intellectual property (Izevbigie et al., 2025).

Originality and Accountability: This is a serious ethical issue created by the unethical use of Gen AI and AI tools in academic writing. Since AI models cannot be held legally or ethically responsible as authors, the human user remains accountable for the final output (Umar Sodangi & Isma'il, 2025). This is especially concerning because Large language Models (LLMs) can generate false information and citations, which may lead to misinformation for which the student author remains responsible (British Journal of Biomedical Science, 2024; Umar Sodangi & Isma'il, 2025).

Bias and Fairness

The major ethical theme concerns bias embedded within AI systems and the fairness of their application in diverse educational contexts.

Algorithmic Bias and Cultural Representation: Generative AI models are trained on large datasets that are mostly in English and reflect the cultural viewpoints of the Global North. Apata et al. (2025) highlight in their review of GenAI in Africa that this can lead to outputs that are culturally misaligned, perpetuate stereotypes, and marginalize non-Western languages and knowledge systems. Similarly, Panmei and Shimray (2025) found that international students in Thailand encountered challenges with AI's "monolingual and monocultural design," which failed to accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural nuances.

Academic Integrity and Access Disparities: The use of generative AI can worsen existing inequalities. A significant "digital divide" exists, where students in developing regions like Bangladesh and Nigeria face barriers due to limited internet access and hardware (Anik & Rahman, 2025; Izevbigie et al., 2025). Furthermore, a socioeconomic divide is emerging, as the most powerful AI models often require paid subscriptions, giving an unfair advantage to students with greater financial resources (Kumar et al., 2023). Stone (2025) also points out that flawed AI detection tools may be biased against non-native English speakers, increasing the risk of false accusations for already vulnerable students.

Transparency

A lack of transparency in how AI is used and how it functions presents a serious set of ethical challenges.

Non-disclosure of AI Use: Many students work in a gray area when using AI for tasks such as brainstorming or outlining. They may not see this as cheating, yet it can conflict with institutional rules (Stone, 2025). This uncertainty often results in students not disclosing AI use, which compromises transparency in academic work. Scholars consistently recommend clear guidelines and responsible reporting of AI assistance

(Subaveerapandiyan et al., 2025; Umar Sodangi & Isma'il, 2025).

Need for Citation Protocols: A vital issue is the absence of standardized protocols for citing or acknowledging the use of Gen AI and AI tools. Castro-Romero (2025) highlights the absence of consistent editorial and institutional guidelines, leaving students and researchers without clear direction on how to report their use of AI tools. This gap makes it harder to evaluate the extent of AI's role in academic work and to maintain proper standards of attribution.

Data Privacy

One of the ethical considerations related to the use of Gen AI and AI tools is privacy and security of data used by and provided to GenAI platforms.

Use of Proprietary or Student Data: Many studies show concern over the security of personal and intellectual data submitted to commercial AI platforms. Gallent Torres et al. (2023) and Subaveerapandiyan et al. (2025) argue that this data could be stored, analyzed, or misused by the corporations that own the AI models. In the European context, as Symeou et al. (2025) discuss, this raises significant legal issues related to compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which mandates strict standards for data handling and consent.

Strategies to Address the Ethical Use of Gen AI and AI tools: The second research question focused on exploring strategies to address these ethical challenges related to the use of Gen AI and AI tools in academic writing in higher education. The analysis found out four strategic themes: Ethical Guidelines & Policies, Digital Literacy & Training, AI Tool Design & Regulation, and Collaborative Human-AI Writing.

Ethical Guidelines & Policies

The most commonly proposed strategy is the development and implementation of clear institutional ethical guidelines and policies related to the use of Gen AI and AI tools in academic writing.

University and Institutional Policies: The literature illustrates a clear trend of institutions moving away from outright bans towards creating guidelines for responsible use (Hristova, 2025). However, approaches vary globally. For instance, universities in Singapore and Malaysia are establishing explicit rules that permit AI use with proper acknowledgment (The Straits Times, 2025). On the contrary, many institutions in the nations like Bangladesh and Nigeria are still in the emerging stages of policy development, often lacking any formal framework (Anik & Rahman, 2025; Apata et al., 2025). In this context, Symeou et al. (2025) describe a comprehensive, consensus-based process at European University Cyprus to create a framework that balances innovation with ethical principles like human-centricity and data privacy.

Authorship and Collaboration Policies: A key component of institutional strategy is to redefine policies around authorship and collaboration. This includes creating clear protocols for disclosing the use of Gen AI and

AI tools in academic work (Castro-Romero, 2025). Some scholars and institutions propose the use of "AI Contribution Statements" where students detail how and why they used AI tools, promoting transparency and accountability (Stone, 2025).

Digital Literacy & Training

A strong strategy to making an ethical use of Gen AI and AI tools in academic writing for scholarly works is to conduct rigorous digital literacy training and workshop for the concerned scholars.

AI Ethics Training for Students: Many researchers argue that students must be educated on the ethical boundaries of AI use. This includes training on what constitutes plagiarism in the age of AI, the importance of originality, and the limitations of AI tools, such as their potential for bias and inaccuracy (Nguyen, 2025; Shin et al., 2025). In Sri Lanka, workshops are being designed to equip educators and students with skills for the ethical use of Gen AI (International Journal of Law Management & Humanities, 2025).

Understanding Responsible AI Use: Effective strategy requires that both students and faculty develop what is often termed "critical AI literacy" (Nguyen, 2025). This goes beyond technical proficiency to include a critical understanding of how AI models work, their inherent biases, and their data privacy implications. Apata et al. (2025) and Freeman (2025) stress the urgent need for faculty development programs, as many educators feel unprepared to guide students or adapt their pedagogy for an AI-integrated classroom.

AI Tool Design & Regulation

A third group of strategies focuses on technological measures and regulations directed at the AI tools themselves.

Embedding Ethical Constraints: Some studies highlight the importance of adopting an “ethical-by-design” approach, in which fairness, accountability, and transparency are built into LLMs from the beginning (Gaper.io, 2025). This approach may include technical methods such as fairness-aware algorithms that reduce biased outcomes or adversarial debiasing techniques applied during model training (Gaper.io, 2025).

Watermarking AI-Generated Content: Watermarking has been proposed as a technical means to identify AI-generated text. This involves embedding a hidden, statistically detectable signal into the output that can help verify its origin (Artificial Intelligence, 2025). However, researchers also acknowledge the limitations of this approach, noting that watermarks can often be removed through simple paraphrasing or translation, making it an imperfect solution for preventing academic misconduct (Data & Innovation Initiative, 2024).

Collaborative Human-AI Writing

Lastly, many studies advocate for a pedagogical and philosophical shift that reframes the relationship between humans and AI in the writing process.

Creating Co-creation with Transparency: Instead of viewing AI as a tool for cheating, educators are encouraged to

teach students how to use it as a collaborative partner. Talandis and Muller (2025) describe pedagogical approaches in Japan that frame GenAI as a "near peer" for brainstorming and feedback. This model of co-creation depends on transparency, where the use of AI is openly acknowledged and documented (Umar Sodangi & Isma'il, 2025).

Recognizing Human Oversight: A critical component of this collaborative model is the emphasis on human oversight. The literature confirms that the human author must maintain ultimate control and responsibility for the work. This involves critically evaluating, fact-checking, and refining AI-generated content to ensure its accuracy, relevance, and ethical integrity (University of Oxford, 2024).This approach places AI as a tool that enhances rather than replaces human intellect and creativity.

Discussion

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into academia presents a profound challenge to established academic norms, creating a critical juncture for knowledge, practice, and policy. A systematic review of the global discussion reveals that GenAI is not merely a new tool but a disruptive force redefining integrity, authorship, and equity in scholarly work. The ethical dilemmas posed by Genii including academic integrity, algorithmic bias, transparency, and data privacy—are deeply interconnected. For instance, the lack of transparency in how AI is used directly compromises academic integrity, as it obscures the true origin of intellectual contributions (Blum, 2024). Simultaneously, the inherent biases within AI models raise significant questions about fairness, potentially marginalizing voices from underrepresented communities and reinforcing existing societal inequities (UNESCO, 2024, para. 2). The significance of these challenges extends beyond individual misconduct, forcing a re-evaluation of how learning is practiced and assessed.

The literature indicates that purely technological solutions, such as detection software or watermarking, are insufficient to address these complex issues. In fact, an over-reliance on such tools can foster a counterproductive "cat-and-mouse game," as bypasser tools designed to humanize AI text become more sophisticated (Turnitin, 2025, para. 3). Consequently, the most impactful immediate responses are rooted in pedagogy and policy. This represents a significant paradigm shift from a punitive approach focused on detection to an educational one centered on responsible AI use. This evolving strategy champions the development of "critical AI literacy" among both students and faculty (Nguyen, 2025). For educational practice, this means moving beyond simple prohibitions and instead teaching students how to engage with AI ethically and effectively using it to brainstorm or refine ideas while maintaining intellectual ownership and accountability (Costa, 2023). This pedagogical pivot is crucial for preparing students to be responsible digital citizens in an AI-saturated world.

However, the global implementation of these forward-thinking strategies is

dangerously uneven. While institutions in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia are actively developing advanced, principle-based frameworks for AI integration, many universities in the Global South are hampered by significant infrastructural and policy-related challenges (Apata et al., 2025; Anik & Rahman, 2025). This disparity is not merely a matter of technological access but also of policy readiness and resource allocation, creating a risk of a new global divide in AI-enabled education. Such a divide has profound implications for global knowledge production, potentially reinforcing the very inequities that ethical AI frameworks are intended to mitigate and limiting diverse perspectives in the global academic conversation (NORRAG, 2024, para. 5). This review, therefore, contributes a critical perspective by highlighting that ethical AI in education is not only a matter of academic integrity but also of global educational equity.

Conclusion

The integration of generative AI into academic writing is a transformative development, and this systematic review's primary contribution is the synthesis of a fragmented global discourse into a coherent ethical framework. The findings demonstrate that the challenges posed by GenAI are not isolated but deeply interconnected, revolving around four core themes: the erosion of academic integrity, the exacerbation of systemic bias and inequity, the pervasive lack of transparency, and critical risks to data privacy. By mapping these issues, this review provides a consolidated understanding that moves beyond anecdotal evidence to offer a structured view of the shared ethical landscape. The review's insights make it clear that navigating this new era requires a proactive, multi-layered strategy rather than isolated interventions. The identified challenges to academic integrity and transparency, for example, are most effectively addressed not by flawed detection tools, but through the development of clear institutional policies and robust digital literacy training that empowers students and faculty with "critical AI literacy." Similarly, to combat bias and fairness issues, the evidence points toward a dual approach: advocating for an "ethical-by-design" philosophy in AI tool development while simultaneously promoting pedagogical models of human-AI collaboration where human oversight and critical evaluation are paramount. Ultimately, this review provides actionable insights for key stakeholders. For educators, it underscores the urgent need to redesign assessments to prioritize critical thinking over content generation. For policymakers, it highlights the necessity of creating clear, context-sensitive frameworks that uphold academic values while allowing for innovation. By balancing the potential of GenAI with an unwavering commitment to integrity, fairness, and trust, the higher education community can ensure these powerful tools enhance, rather than undermine, the fundamental purpose of scholarly work.

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