

AI Meets Academics: Ethical Dilemmas and Insights on ChatGPT from Higher Education

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Please cite this paper as:

Kaur, K., Trifan, V. and Bumbac, R., 2025. AI Meets Academics: Ethical Dilemmas and Insights on ChatGPT from Higher Education. In: C. Vasiliu, D.C. Dabija, A. Tziner, D. Pleșea, V. Dinu eds. 2025. *11th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*. Oradea, Romania, 26-28 June 2025. Bucharest: Editura ASE, pp. 261-268

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2025/11/052

Abstract

The emergence of AI tools such as ChatGPT has ignited discussions about their ethical ramifications in educational settings. This qualitative research paper studies the ethical perceptions of ChatGPT among academics from various Romanian universities. By means of conducting semi-structured interviews with academics, the study investigates academic perspectives on the role of AI tools in student life, as well as their capacity to develop critical thinking abilities in students. While students usually think that ChatGPT is a valuable educational resource, academics hold a varied opinion regarding its impact, which is reflected in the form of a lack of consensus. Some believe that it may enhance critical thinking, while others argue that it may lead to over-dependency and plagiarism. The paper also reveals a more nuanced perception of academics regarding the future incorporation of AI in classrooms, balancing its advantages against ethical challenges. These results contribute to filling the literature gap by providing a detailed perspective regarding the ethical perception of academics regarding the usage of AI tools in educational settings. Moreover, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers and academics who will contribute to establishing ethical guidelines for the usage of AI tools in education.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence, AI tools, ChatGPT, Ethics, Perception

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2025/11/052

Introduction

Farhi et al. (2023) argue that although ChatGPT is a relatively new AI (Artificial Intelligence) tool, it has drawn a lot of interest and been embraced by several students enrolled in higher education institutions. Susnjak and McIntosh (2024) asserts that ChatGPT, or Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer, is a remarkable and one of the most significant AI chatbots as it is gained immense popularity among students in such a short period of time. This, in turn, motivated several researchers to study its implication in educational settings. However, a major proportion of these research studies primarily focus on the ethical perception of AI only among students, thereby ignoring the implications that professors or academics have on learning. Moreover, many academics show skepticism towards the usage of AI tools in learning settings. This, it has a direct impact on the process of adoption of AI tools in education (Bewersdorff et al., 2023).

Besides, discussions concerning the ramifications of ChatGPT's debut have also raised ethical concerns (Farhi et al., 2023). As a result, it is crucial to study the perception of academics regarding ethical usage of ChatGPT. The paper is a qualitative study which presents the results from semi-structured interviews conducted with academics from Romanian Universities. Therefore, the main purpose of the present paper

is to discuss the ethical concerns that AI tools such as ChatGPT raise, when used for educational purposes. This research is conducted by highlighting the perception of academics as they are the primarily responsible for adopting any new educational technique. The pessimistic approach of academics toward AI tools reveals a lot about the future of AI tools like ChatGPT in education. Regardless of several benefits that AI tools offer its users, these are not deemed enough credible and are subjected to a lot of criticism.

Based on the above arguments, the research question that we attempt to answer in this paper is as follows:

- RQ: What is the ethical perception of academics regarding ChatGPT and similar AI tools?

The results reveal that the academics are not able to adopt AI tools due to their traditional perception and opinion regarding their usage for educational purposes. More precisely, majority of the professors did not have a very optimistic approach while discussing the potential of ChatGPT in education.

1. Review of the scientific literature

1.1 Advantages of incorporating AI tools in educational institutions

Hornberger, Bewersdorff and Nerdel (2023) writes that AI already has a significant impact on educational sector, transforming the research pattern of students who actively search information online. Therefore, as a result of its prevalent use, it is even more essential to address the ethical concerns that are associated with this AI tool. However, does it really have the potential to enhance learning experience of students and their academic performance? To answer the aforementioned question, several researchers like Verma et al. (2023) argue that to guarantee an extensive learning experience, ChatGPT should be integrated with conventional teaching techniques. However, careful implementation is necessary to address ethical issues and potential biases. Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou (2023) and Kaur and Trifan (2024) assert that in recent decades, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have started to pay more attention to AI in education because of its potential to improve education. They created AI-powered learning resources, such as recommendation and intelligent tutoring systems, which are believed to improve learning experience of the students. By offering individualized assistance, these advancements enable AI to assess and improve student learning experiences. For instance, it can identify students who are at danger of failing, diagnose their strengths, weaknesses, and knowledge gaps, and offer learning materials or pathways that are customized to meet their individual needs.

Based on the above arguments, one may argue that by providing simple interventions, AI tools can significantly lower the risk of students failing in their career. Moreover, it can act as a career guide by identifying at an early-stage strengths and weaknesses of students. Rodway and Schepman (2023) also show that in order to provide interventions for students who are at risk of low performance or non-engagement, higher education institutions can also deploy AI systems for performance tracking and future performance prediction. AI can also suggest helpful resources and educational content to students. Previous research (Rodway and Schepman, 2023) has covered a variety of teacher-facing AI roles in addition to student-facing ones, such as automated marking, professional development, and technical assistance with the implementation of instructional strategies. Consequently, AI has the potential to transform the learning experience of students in a positive way and students can really benefit from the advantages of AI tools, if used ethically. Verma et al. (2023) mention in their study that by recognizing engagement indicators in videos, an AI technology improves learning. Nevertheless, an over-reliance on AI runs the risk of undervaluing the complex, human-centered approaches to learning that are essential for encouraging student participation.

According to another study's (Yilmaz and Yilmaz, 2023) findings, students' computational thinking abilities, programming self-efficacy, as well as motivation during lessons grew significantly when ChatGPT was used during programming lessons. Farhi et al. (2023) claim that ChatGPT provides learners with a number of advantages, such as the development of intrinsic learner motivation, which facilitates a deeper comprehension of ideas and the advancement of competence. Andries and Robertson (2023) mention that positive results of using ChatGPT in classrooms including improved learning, teamwork, and trust are highlighted in a new study. Nevertheless, the usage of ChatGPT and other AI tools does not significantly increase student motivation when confronted with difficult problems. Hence, to guarantee student motivation in dealing with of difficult assignments, teachers must look for different motivational techniques (Yilmaz and Yilmaz, 2023). This shows that more research is required for reaching a conclusion on the relation between ChatGPT and the motivational level of students. However, it is of no use to encourage and educate students for using ChatGPT ethically, when the professors and academics completely condemn its usage.

1.2 Role of academics in incorporating AI tools in education

Previous researchers (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023) claim that AI technologies give professors new ways to improve their teaching strategies, such as learning analytics, seamless communication as well as personalized support. Furthermore, they can increase their effectiveness, encourage self-regulation in their students (Seo et al., 2021), and promote meaningful interaction and communication by effectively utilizing AI-based solutions. Many instructors have struggled to embrace AI-driven technologies in spite of these advantages. Therefore, it's critical to comprehend the challenges they may face while integrating these technologies and provide them with the digital skills necessary to enhance students' educational experiences (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023). According to Cheng and Wang (2023), in order to overcome challenges in integrating AI in education, digital leadership is essential and calls for comprehensive teamwork. However, clear guidelines and policies are also required for long-term positive results. Niloy et al., (2024) also claim that professors are equally responsible for effectively incorporating such AI tools as they play a major role in shaping the future of education.

Fast lesson design created by AI tools enables professors to make interesting and captivating lesson plans more quickly. Farhi et al. (2023) mention in their study that researchers who favor the use of ChatGPT in classrooms assert that it can produce individualized lesson plans and learning materials more efficiently, offer immediate learner support, produce interesting educational content, help with language acquisition, simplify test preparation, help academics evaluate/correct assignments, and dynamically modify learning environment to accommodate individual development. Furthermore, it is believed that AI chatbots can lessen students' timidity and close the perceived divide between students and teachers. Therefore, ChatGPT has the potential to improve academic performance, raise learner engagement as well as educational standards. However, one may argue that over-reliance on AI and inaccurate information may cause serious repercussions in near future.

Other advantages of teaching with the help of ChatGPT may include encouraging active learning, raising student happiness and engagement, and fostering learning communities while lowering feelings of loneliness and so on (Rodway and Schepman, 2023). Furthermore, active learning, which is stimulated by using ChatGPT, has a strong positive effect on students' higher-order thinking and performance, according to existing studies (Lai, Cheung and Chan, 2023). Additionally, chatbots can help with teamwork by mediating online encounters or serving as extra team members who participate in online discussions. However, the current limits in chatbot technology can impact their usefulness and adoption, with acceptance anticipated by the conversation's authenticity, enjoyment, and simplicity of communication (Rodway and Schepman, 2023).

1.3 Challenges of adopting AI in education and the perception of academics

The opportunities and challenges of four aspects of AI in education were recently studied by Chiu et al. (2023): (1) using AI for student learning (e.g., facilitating human-machine conversations, analyzing student work, providing feedback, promoting adaptability and interactivity); (2) using AI for teaching (e.g., creating adaptive strategies, enhancing teachers' abilities, and supporting professional development); (3) using AI for assessment (e.g., automating grading, estimating student performance); and (4) incorporating AI into educational decision-making (e.g., offering evidence-based insights and convenient, individualized services) (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023).

For addressing the above-mentioned challenges, educational institutions can play a major role. McGrath et al. (2023) state that universities contribute significantly in research work and technological advancements but are they quick to adopt new potential learning practices? Artificial Intelligence models have made rapid advancements in the last few years and the educational institutions are also expected to adapt as a result of this progress. As discussed earlier, professors are believed to play the most important role in changing the present educational practices and integrating AI into their teaching curriculum. But, are the key question that must be addressed here is if they are ready to adopt AI tools in educational settings?

Given the reluctance of higher educational institutions to adapt and the importance of new AI technologies, it is necessary to investigate instructors' perceptions of their ethical obligations (McGrath et al., 2023). It is crucial to highlight that academic's opinions and concern about implementing AI in education are more complex in comparison to those of students. Some people show a serious concern about being replaced because they believe AI will make their jobs less valuable. Due to this, professors may be reluctant to use AI technology since they are unaware of how AI may enhance their job value instead of replacing them. In a time when people are becoming more conscious of the ethical ramifications of technology, educators could be reluctant to use AI tools unless they know exactly how student data will be safeguarded and algorithmic biases can be minimized. Furthermore, the widespread

deployment of AI is hampered in many contexts by a lack of funding, infrastructure, and support. Finally, there may be concern and hesitation among academics who lack the technical or pedagogical skills and experience to incorporate AI-driven tools into the classroom (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023).

McGrath et al. (2023) claim that although many university instructors self-reported having little knowledge of AI, a sizable portion of them also believed that AI may help create a more egalitarian system of student support. From the standpoint of competency development, university professors might require instruction for better preparing them to use new technologies. McGrath et al. (2023) concludes in their study that despite their lack of knowledge of AI, university professors are optimistic about the benefits to equity and emphasize the necessity for training in order to successfully incorporate AI into the classroom. Yilmaz and Yilmaz (2023) also advise educators to acquire AI literacy skills while incorporating ChatGPT and similar tools into their lectures, particularly to help students develop prompt writing abilities. Cheng and Wang (2023) highlight that educators must first have an established knowledge and gain awareness about these ethical challenges. However, all the aforementioned arguments cannot undermine the fact that if professors are not willing to adopt the technology, AI tools cannot be easily incorporated into classrooms. Therefore, it is equally important to consider professor's attitude and opinion regarding chatbots.

2. Research Methodology

The paper is a result of an extensive review of the present literature, mainly sourced from ScienceDirect and Web of Science databases. These scholarly databases offered a more comprehensive repositories of scientific papers, assuring credibility and quality. A preference was given to more recent publications, due to the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence. The study employed a qualitative research method, concentrating on comprehending the perception and attitude of academics toward ChatGPT. The qualitative method was chosen provided the exploratory nature of the research, with a clear objective of capturing nuanced perspectives that quantitative research could ignore.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics from the Economic Science Department of a prestigious Romanian University. This approach enabled flexibility in investigating emergent subjects while also assuring consistency across the main topic. The interview questions were divided in three different topics or subparts: General perception regarding using AI tools like ChatGPT; Ethics of using ChatGPT in education; Future implications and impact on critical thinking. Every interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to avoid any type of stress, pressure and shame of giving a potentially unexpected response. Before starting the interviews, the participants were explained about the purpose of the interview. This allowed them to be prepared for the interview in advance. We ensured the participants before starting the interview that their identity will remain hidden. The identity of all the academics remains anonymous to avoid any conflict of interest, to protect their privacy and also to minimize any type of potential bias.

3. Results and discussion

Table no.1 shows some information regarding the interviewed professors as well as their approach towards incorporation of AI tools in education. It is clear that majority of the professors aged above 40 years hold a somewhat pessimistic viewpoint.

Table no. 1. Profiles of the interviewees

Interviewee no.	Gender	Age	Position	Approach
1	F	46	University Lecturer	Very Optimistic
2	F	61	Full-professor	Somewhat pessimistic
3	M	45	Full-professor	Neutral
4	M	38	University Lecturer	Neutral
5	F	41	Associate Professor	Somewhat pessimistic
6	F	43	Full-professor	Somewhat pessimistic
7	F	39	University Lecturer	Optimistic
8	F	58	Full-professor	Somewhat pessimistic
9	M	30	University Lecturer	Very Optimistic
10	M	32	University Lecturer	Optimistic
11	M	42	Full-professor	Somewhat pessimistic
12	M	53	Full-professor	Neutral
13	F	30	University Lecturer	Neutral

Table no. 2. Summary of topics and relationship with the interview questions

Interview questions	Topic
Q1: How do you perceive the role of ChatGPT in academic integrity, particularly concerning students' use for assignments or research assistance?	Topic 1: General perception regarding using AI tools like ChatGPT
Q2: In your opinion, does the availability of AI tools like ChatGPT shift the purpose or expectations of traditional academic assessment? If so, how?	
Q3: What ethical responsibilities do you think educators have when it comes to advising students about the appropriate use of ChatGPT in their studies?	Topic 2: Ethics of using ChatGPT in education
Q4: What potential do you see for ChatGPT in enhancing learning experiences, and do you think this potential outweighs the ethical concerns?	
Q5: How do you believe in future ChatGPT could affect the development of critical thinking and independent learning skills in students, considering its ease of access and answers?	Topic 3: Future implications and impact on critical thinking

Table no. 2 highlights the summary of topics addressed during the interviews with academics as well as the relationship of these topics with the interview questions. Topic 1: General perception regarding using AI tools like ChatGPT: Q1: Professors' opinions on ChatGPT's potential effects on academic integrity are examined in this research question. The use of AI in education raises issues in the literature, especially in relation to plagiarism and "academic dishonesty" brought on by Generative AI. Professors are prompted by the question to consider these matters and to express any ethical worries or possible protections they may have in mind. Q2: This research question aims to find out how professors feel about their role in advising students on ChatGPT use. Educators must make moral decisions about whether and how to teach students about appropriate use of AI tools when they become more widely available. Professors can share their opinions on this function and what limits they think should be established by answering this question.

Overall, the interviewees were quite familiar with the AI tools like ChatGPT and their common usage among students for educational purposes. The interviews revealed that most of the academics think that they have an optimistic approach towards technology and AI tools. However, during the last part of the interviews, some of them realized that in reality, they do not hold a positive opinion about AI. Furthermore, some academics remained neutral and claimed that the presence of ChatGPT did not make a lot of difference in education.

Topic 2: Ethics of using ChatGPT in education: Under this topic, interviewees were expected to be more familiar with ChatGPT before responding to the questions. Questions regarding their perception of ethics were asked and all the responses were somewhat similar. Q3: This research question focuses on opinions about how ChatGPT can diminish the importance of conventional tests, such as essays and exams, where critical thinking and authenticity are crucial. AI capabilities have the potential to disrupt established academic norms and affect instructors' expectations for student achievement. Q4: This research question covers the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing AI tools in the classroom. Although there is proof that AI tools can enhance engagement and facilitate individualized learning, ethical issues might make broad adoption more difficult. Scholars are able to express their opinions on this compromise.

Some participants argued that the students should realize that ChatGPT has updated its old version and that its errors have reduced in number. This results in less ethical concerns for educators as the rapid improvement in AI tools can eliminate the risk of misinformation. The participants further claimed that "it is the responsibility of professors to educate them about the ethical usage of Generative AI as their role is like that of an instructor who guides the students to choose certain paths." The interview made it clear that the professor holds very positive opinion regarding this technology and encourages all the students to use it for educational purposes, including in the classroom. According to the interviewees, "the role of professors is not to provide knowledge but to encourage the students to find solutions." Hence, it is completely ethical to use AI tools for responding in classroom. However, it is also the duty of professors to make sure that students know about the limitations of these tools, which can only happen through practice. Some other interviewees, however, holds very different opinions. According to some participants, the academic expectations are still very high from the students. However, now that students can easily copy their responses from ChatGPT, there should be a change in academic assessment. For instance, the projects and assignments given to students should be more complex. This may provoke them to also use critical thinking and not cheat the entire response generated by ChatGPT. Unlike the first few participants, the later interviews revealed that "it is not fair at all to respond in classrooms using AI tools". The respondents gave the following reason: "using ChatGPT's responses and claiming them to be

your own is unethical from the perspective of idea ownership right, but also because the responses generated by Generative AI tools are incorrect and therefore, there should be proper guidelines and rules to regulate the usage of ChatGPT.” Furthermore, some academics also claimed that “once such a guideline is established by the educational institutions, it is the sole duty of the professors to explain the students regarding the repercussions they may have if they violate any of the established rules” According to some interviewees, “We should not consider level of knowledge as the criteria to evaluate students, but the ability to solve complex, real problems.” Hence, in their opinion, it is not unethical to utilize AI tools for the purpose of gaining knowledge.

Topic 3: Future implications and impact on critical thinking: Q5: This research question explores how AI might affect students’ cognitive development. According to some academics, depending too much on AI tools may result in the “outsourcing” of critical thinking, which could jeopardize skill development. Professors are prompted to think about the long-term effects on students’ intellectual development by this question. As discussed earlier, some scholars argue that AI tools can improve critical thinking abilities. However, many researchers also oppose the aforementioned statement and claim that in reality, ChatGPT hinders critical thinking of students as they are not given the opportunity to think before getting any response. This ultimately leads to over-reliance on AI tools and in worst cases, plagiarism and cheating. During the interviews, most of the professors showed skepticism for adopting AI tools in academia because of its negative impact on critical thinking. However, there is still no consensus regarding this subject among the academics.

The findings of this paper offer valuable information regarding the perception of academics from Economics Department regarding the ethical usage of AI tools like ChatGPT and their future potential. They also provide insights into obstacles that educators face while adopting ChatGPT for educational purposes. As stated in the literature review, there is no consensus regarding the impact of ChatGPT on students’ critical thinking abilities. This study confirms that some professors advocate the use of ChatGPT for developing essential skills in students, while others criticize the idea by arguing that if personal values of students do not align with the ethical guidelines, then there is no use of promoting ethical usage. The results also reveal that there are some academics who think that they are optimistic about AI tools in education. Nevertheless, their responses prove otherwise. This clearly shows that professors need to self-reflect on the topic. This will allow them to have an opinion that is backed-up by logic and reasoning. Moreover, this may help them to provide a constructive feedback to policymakers for establishing ethical guidelines. According to Hockly (2023) and Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou (2023) the ethical use of AI tools and developing strategies to reduce their disadvantages are important factors when addressing ethical concerns. Some professors claimed during the interview that potential error/incorrect responses generated by ChatGPT is one of the biggest disadvantages of Generative AI. If such concerns are addressed, this may allow more educators to rethink their approach and change their perception regarding AI tools.

Research on the perception of professors regarding the ethical usage of AI tools is still at its initial stage and professors are still figuring out their stand point. Accordingly, before educating students, it is important to educate professors regarding how ChatGPT can be used to develop essential skills among students without threatening academic integrity. However, for this purpose, professors should be flexible and adoptive to technology. It is important to highlight the aforementioned statement because older generations are believed to be less receptive towards technological advancement. Finally, this research also indicates that it is high time to provide tailored support for developing professors’ AI teaching competencies. This finding is also in line with the prior literature (Hrastinski et al., 2019; Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023) on the subject.

Conclusions

The paper throws light on the ethical perception of ChatGPT among academics, with a clear focus on its incorporation into educational settings like classroom. The findings uncover varied opinions of academics, reflecting optimism for its usage in rare cases and apprehensions regarding its ethical ramifications. Even though AI tools like ChatGPT have become an integral part of students’ life, academics struggle to fully accept and adopt them for educational purposes (possibly due to the fear of getting replaced and remain jobless). Interestingly, there is still a lack of consensus among academic community regarding the impact of ChatGPT on critical thinking abilities of students.

The interviews reveal that most academics are not very optimistic about the future potential of ChatGPT in education and express uncertainty. However, they also recognize that due to the recent technological advancements, higher education institutions need to adapt accordingly for addressing the ethical concerns

that are raised by AI tools. Besides, future studies should research the above dynamics more thoroughly for better understanding the impact of ChatGPT on classroom learning as well as critical thinking skills of students.

Based on the responses provided by the professors during the interviews, one may propose the establishment of stricter and more precise policies regarding the usage of AI tools. This may help in addressing some concerns of academics regarding the misuse of these tools. Similarly, the concerned authorities are recommended to foster a favorable atmosphere where ethical incorporation of AI tools is supported without compromising ethical integrity. Similarly, the primary limitation of this study is given by its reduced sample size, thereby, making it difficult to generalize the ethical concerns of academics. Therefore, future studies should focus on increasing the sample size for further validating the results of this research.

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