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Student Perspectives on AI-Integrated Higher Education: A Thematic Analysis of Curriculum, Teaching, Assignments, Assessment, and Ethics Across Academic Disciplines

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly redefining the landscape of higher education, moving from a specialized technological resource to an increasingly visible component of everyday teaching, learning, and academic work. The emergence of generative AI has accelerated this transformation by enabling students to generate, summarize, reorganize, translate, and critically engage with information with unprecedented speed. Consequently, higher education institutions are confronted with a fundamental challenge: AI can no longer be addressed solely as an optional digital tool but must be considered within the broader architecture of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, academic integrity, and professional preparation. The central question is therefore shifting from whether AI should be used in higher education to how it can be integrated in ways that enhance learning while preserving intellectual independence, human judgment, creativity, and ethical responsibility.

Meaningful AI integration requires more than providing students with access to technological platforms. An AI-integrated curriculum should develop the capacity to understand how AI systems function, critically evaluate their outputs, identify inaccuracies and biases, recognize their limitations, and apply them responsibly within discipline-specific contexts. This has important implications for curriculum design, as AI literacy is increasingly intertwined with information literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, digital competence, and future workforce preparedness. At the same time, AI-supported teaching offers opportunities for personalized learning, immediate feedback, interactive explanation, and differentiated educational support. However, excessive or poorly structured dependence on AI may potentially weaken independent reasoning, deep learning, originality, and meaningful teacher–student engagement. The pedagogical challenge therefore lies in positioning AI as an intellectual aid rather than a substitute for the cognitive and relational processes central to education.

The influence of AI is particularly evident in assignments and assessment. Generative AI can assist students in brainstorming, organizing ideas, refining language, exploring alternative perspectives, and obtaining rapid feedback. Yet these capabilities

simultaneously complicate conventional understandings of authorship, originality, plagiarism, and individual academic performance. When AI can generate sophisticated academic content within seconds, traditional assignments may no longer reliably demonstrate what students independently know or can perform. This necessitates a reconsideration of assessment toward approaches that emphasize reasoning, application, reflection, problem-solving, oral defence, process documentation, and critical evaluation of AI-generated material. Rather than attempting merely to restrict AI use, educational institutions may need to redesign learning and assessment so that responsible AI engagement itself becomes part of demonstrable academic competence.

Ethical considerations are inseparable from this transition. AI use in education raises concerns related to privacy, data protection, algorithmic bias, misinformation, transparency, intellectual property, unequal access, academic integrity, and accountability for AI-assisted work. Students may be frequent users of AI technologies without necessarily possessing the critical literacy required to understand how these systems generate responses or the ethical consequences associated with their use. Responsible AI education must therefore extend beyond operational skills to cultivate the ability to determine when AI use is appropriate, how generated information should be verified, when AI assistance should be disclosed, and which decisions require human responsibility and professional judgment.

Importantly, perceptions of AI integration may differ across academic disciplines because fields vary in their epistemological traditions, learning outcomes, professional expectations, and ethical responsibilities. An approach considered useful in one discipline may be inappropriate or insufficient in another. Understanding these disciplinary variations is essential for avoiding a uniform model of AI integration that overlooks contextual educational needs. Students, as direct participants in evolving teaching, assignment, and assessment practices, provide a particularly important perspective on this transformation.

Against this background, the present study explores student perspectives on AI-integrated higher education across different academic disciplines through thematic analysis of qualitative responses. It examines students' views concerning the incorporation of AI into curriculum, teaching, assignments, assessment, and ethical academic practice. By identifying shared perspectives, emerging concerns, and discipline-related variations, the study seeks to contribute a student-informed understanding of how higher education can move toward responsible AI integration—one that embraces technological innovation while safeguarding critical inquiry, academic integrity, ethical awareness, disciplinary competence, and the enduring value of human judgment.

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Aim of the Study

The study aimed to explore students' perspectives on the integration of artificial intelligence into higher education across different academic disciplines.

Objectives

1. To explore students' perspectives on the integration of AI into the academic syllabus and curriculum.
2. To understand students' views regarding the use of AI in teaching and learning.
3. To explore students' perspectives on the use of AI in academic assignments, assessments, and examinations.
4. To identify students' concerns and expectations regarding the ethical and responsible use of AI in higher education.
5. To examine areas of convergence and divergence in perspectives among students from Technology, Science, Language, Arts, and Commerce streams.

Review of Literature

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), has initiated a substantial transformation in higher education. Current scholarship increasingly extends beyond the technological capabilities of AI to examine its implications for curriculum design, teaching and learning, assignments, assessment, academic integrity, and ethical practice. Students constitute an important stakeholder group in this transformation because their experiences and expectations can inform how AI is incorporated into educational environments. The following studies provide an empirical and conceptual foundation for examining student perspectives on AI-integrated higher education.

1. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of 146 studies on AI applications in higher education published between 2007 and 2018. The review identified four prominent areas of AI application: profiling and prediction, assessment and evaluation, adaptive systems and personalization, and intelligent tutoring systems. The authors observed that much of the existing scholarship was driven by technological development, while the role of educators and pedagogical considerations received comparatively limited attention. The study demonstrated an early imbalance between the technical advancement of AI and its pedagogically meaningful integration into higher education. This observation remains relevant to contemporary AI integration because curriculum development requires consideration of educational purpose, human interaction, and stakeholder perspectives rather than technological capability alone.

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2. Chan and Hu (2023) investigated university students' perceptions of GenAI through a study involving 399 undergraduate and postgraduate students from different disciplines in Hong Kong. Students generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward the potential use of GenAI in teaching and learning. They recognized benefits including personalized learning support, assistance with academic tasks, improved learning efficiency, and access to educational resources. At the same time, participants expressed concerns regarding accuracy, privacy, ethical use, academic integrity, and the possible effects of excessive reliance on AI. The findings demonstrate that students do not necessarily view AI as either wholly beneficial or harmful; rather, their perspectives reflect an attempt to balance educational opportunities against emerging risks. This is particularly relevant to studies examining AI integration across multiple dimensions of higher education.

3. Kasneci et al. (2023) examined the opportunities and challenges presented by large language models such as ChatGPT from both learner and educator perspectives. The authors identified several educational possibilities, including personalized learning, generation of educational content, enhanced interaction, and support for teaching-learning activities. However, they also emphasized risks associated with inaccurate information, algorithmic bias, privacy, misuse, and overdependence on AI-generated material. Importantly, the authors argued that successful integration requires AI literacy, critical thinking, fact-checking skills, appropriate pedagogical strategies, and continuing human oversight. Their analysis suggests that AI competence should be treated as an educational outcome rather than simply as the ability to operate an AI tool.

4. Farrokhnia et al. (2024) reviewed the educational implications of ChatGPT using a SWOT framework and identified both opportunities and challenges associated with its use in teaching and learning. Their analysis highlighted the potential of generative AI to provide individualized learning support, facilitate information access, assist educators, and promote educational innovation. Conversely, concerns included inaccurate or fabricated information, bias, academic misconduct, reduced critical engagement, and excessive dependence on AI. The authors emphasized that higher education institutions need structured strategies for integrating AI rather than relying on unrestricted student adoption. Their findings reinforce the need for curriculum-level approaches that develop students' capacity to use AI critically, transparently, and responsibly.

5. Johnston et al. (2024) specifically explored student perspectives on generative AI technologies in higher education, with the intention of informing institutional academic-integrity practices. The study revealed considerable complexity in how students understood acceptable and unacceptable uses of generative AI. Students recognized

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its potential as an assistive educational resource but also expressed uncertainty regarding boundaries between legitimate academic support and academic misconduct. The findings illustrate an important challenge for universities: institutional expectations may remain unclear while students are already incorporating AI into their academic activities. The study therefore highlights the importance of involving students in the development of AI guidance and academic-integrity frameworks rather than constructing policies solely from an institutional perspective.

6. Baidoo-Anu et al. (2024) examined higher-education students' perspectives regarding ChatGPT as a learning resource. The study identified three broad dimensions of student experience: perceived academic benefits, academic concerns, and accessibility and attitudes toward ChatGPT. Students recognized the potential of GenAI to facilitate learning but simultaneously raised concerns regarding overdependence, originality of assignments, institutional policy violations, and information security. A particularly important finding was that students reported limited formal training regarding safe and effective use of ChatGPT. This indicates a potential gap between the widespread availability of AI technologies and students' preparedness to use them responsibly. The study consequently supports incorporating AI literacy and ethical AI practice within formal educational curricula.

7. Yusuf et al. (2024) examined students' perceptions and use of generative AI chatbots in relation to university assessment and academic integrity. Their study of 337 Australian university students found that more than one-third had used AI chatbots to assist with assessment activities, while students did not always perceive such assistance as violating academic-integrity expectations. The findings demonstrate that conventional definitions of academic misconduct may not fully correspond with students' understanding of AI-assisted academic work. The authors emphasized the importance of clearer institutional guidelines regarding acceptable AI use and the redesign of assessment practices. This research is particularly relevant to the assignment and assessment dimensions of AI-integrated education because it illustrates how AI is challenging established assumptions regarding authorship and independent academic performance.

8. An international study examining the perceived impact of generative AI on assessment across universities in Australia, Cyprus, and the United States (2024) compared the perspectives of 680 students and 87 educators. Participants perceived essay-based and coding assessments as particularly susceptible to the influence of generative AI. Educators demonstrated greater preference for adapting assessment tasks to incorporate AI and promote critical thinking, whereas student perspectives were more varied, including concerns about potential effects on creativity. The researchers emphasized the need for assessment reform that gives

greater attention to the process of learning, higher-order thinking, and authentic application rather than focusing exclusively on the final academic product. These findings suggest that students should be actively involved when universities redesign assessment for AI-rich educational environments.

9. Miljkovic Krecar, Kolega, and Jurcec (2024) investigated student and faculty perspectives regarding the use of ChatGPT for homework assignments. The student component involved 350 ChatGPT users and examined attitudes, habits, ethical concerns, and future intentions surrounding AI-assisted academic work. Students showed moderate concern regarding the ethical dimensions of ChatGPT use, and differences were observed according to field of study and gender. The faculty component also demonstrated the difficulty educators experienced in accurately distinguishing student-generated work from AI-generated material. These findings question the sustainability of approaches based primarily on detecting AI-generated work and instead support clearer guidelines and educational interventions aimed at responsible AI use. The identification of field-of-study differences is especially relevant to research comparing students across academic disciplines.

10. A large-scale global study of 23,218 higher-education students from 109 countries and territories (2025) provided extensive evidence regarding students' early experiences and perceptions of ChatGPT. Students commonly reported using the technology for activities such as brainstorming, summarizing information, and identifying research-related material. They recognized its potential to improve access to knowledge, learning efficiency, AI literacy, digital communication, and content development. However, students also expressed concerns about plagiarism, cheating, reliability, social consequences, and the possibility that AI may not adequately develop skills such as critical thinking and interpersonal communication. Importantly, respondents supported the need for appropriate regulation of AI in educational contexts. The scale and geographical diversity of this study demonstrate that questions surrounding responsible AI integration are not confined to individual institutions but represent an emerging international challenge for higher education.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that students generally recognize the educational potential of AI while simultaneously expressing concerns about reliability, overdependence, academic integrity, privacy, originality, bias, and ethical responsibility. Existing research also indicates that generative AI is challenging conventional approaches to assignments and assessment and creating a need for AI literacy, transparent institutional guidance, critical evaluation skills, and redesigned educational practices. However, much of the emerging empirical literature has concentrated on students' general attitudes toward ChatGPT or GenAI, patterns of AI

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use, academic integrity, or individual aspects of assessment. Comparatively less attention has been directed toward understanding students' perspectives on AI integration as an interconnected educational system encompassing **curriculum, teaching, assignments, assessment, and ethics simultaneously**.

Furthermore, students from different academic disciplines may encounter AI in fundamentally different contexts. Disciplinary differences in knowledge production, professional responsibilities, practical training, assessment methods, and ethical expectations may influence how students conceptualize appropriate AI use. Although some studies have included participants from multiple disciplines, there remains scope for qualitative inquiry that examines both shared and discipline-specific perspectives concerning how AI should be incorporated throughout the educational process.

The present study addresses this need by qualitatively exploring the perspectives of students from diverse academic streams regarding AI-integrated higher education. Through thematic analysis of student responses concerning curriculum, teaching, assignments, assessment, and ethics, the study seeks to move beyond understanding whether students accept AI toward identifying **how students believe AI should be responsibly embedded within higher education**. Such student-informed evidence may contribute to the development of contextually responsive curricula, authentic assessment practices, responsible AI-use guidelines, and educational strategies that preserve critical thinking, academic integrity, ethical awareness, and human agency while engaging constructively with emerging technologies.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted to explore students' perspectives on the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education. The study focused on students' views regarding AI-integrated syllabus, teaching-learning practices, assignments, assessments, examinations, and ethical use of AI.

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted during September 2026 in a College in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. A total of 25 students participated, representing five academic streams: Technology, Science, Language, Arts, and Commerce. Five students were included from each stream to obtain perspectives from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

Sampling

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Participants were selected purposively, with accessibility and willingness to participate. The inclusion of students from five different streams was intended to capture diverse academic perspectives rather than achieve statistical representation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The interview questions explored six broad areas: AI integration into the syllabus, AI-supported teaching and learning, use of AI in assignments, AI-integrated assessment, implications of AI for examinations, and ethical use of AI in education. Participants were encouraged to express their views freely, and appropriate probing was used to clarify or elaborate responses where necessary.

Data Analysis

The responses were analysed using thematic analysis. The data were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity, followed by identification and coding of meaningful statements. Related codes were grouped into subthemes, which were subsequently examined to develop broader themes representing recurring patterns within the participants' perspectives. The predetermined interview areas were treated as domains of inquiry rather than automatically being considered final themes. Similarities and differences across the five academic streams were also examined qualitatively to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. Participant identities were replaced with codes, and the information obtained was used solely for research purposes. The study was undertaken with the consent of the participating students and relevant institutional approval, as applicable.

Methodological Scope

As the study involved 25 students from a single institution, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of the perspectives represented in this educational context rather than statistical generalization to the wider student population. The inclusion of students from five academic streams, however, enabled exploration of both shared and discipline-related perspectives concerning responsible AI integration in higher education.

4. Results: Thematic Analysis

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The thematic analysis of responses from 25 students across five academic streams—Arts and Humanities, Language, Science, Commerce, and Technology—revealed a complex and often ambivalent perception of AI integration in higher education. Students generally acknowledged the educational value of AI for understanding difficult concepts, research, skill development, and independent learning. However, substantial concerns emerged regarding AI-assisted assignments, declining cognitive engagement, reduced classroom attention, uncritical acceptance of AI-generated information, and limited awareness of ethical AI practices.

Although disciplinary differences were evident in how students applied AI, several concerns were shared across streams. Seven interconnected themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: AI as a Facilitator of Understanding and Discipline-Specific Learning

Subtheme 1.1: Simplification and clarification of academic concepts

Students across several disciplines perceived AI as useful for understanding academic concepts. Arts and Humanities students particularly valued AI-generated explanations and case examples, which enabled them to understand concepts more easily. Science students similarly reported that detailed AI-generated explanations helped clarify difficult subject matter. Commerce students found AI beneficial in understanding areas such as economics and accounting.

The findings indicate that students primarily valued AI when it functioned as an **academic facilitator**, providing explanations and supplementary learning support rather than replacing formal instruction.

Subtheme 1.2: Discipline-specific applications of AI

The nature of AI use differed according to disciplinary needs. Language students used AI to develop vocabulary and support research activities. Science students reported using AI to understand practical procedures and compositions required to obtain expected experimental outcomes. Commerce students applied AI to understand economics and accounting, while Technology students used it both to learn their academic subjects and to expand their knowledge of AI itself.

Arts and Humanities students described additional applications such as using AI to prepare for mock viva examinations.

Thus, although AI use was widespread, its perceived educational value was strongly influenced by the academic context of the learner.

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Theme 2: AI as an Emerging Research and Academic Support Tool

Subtheme 2.1: AI-supported research activities

Students from Language, Science, Commerce, and Technology streams specifically identified AI as useful for research-related activities. AI appeared to provide easier access to information, explanations, ideas, and research support.

The widespread reference to research suggests that students increasingly perceive AI not merely as a classroom learning tool but as part of their broader academic information-seeking practices.

Subtheme 2.2: Extending learning beyond classroom instruction

Students' use of AI extended beyond formal classroom activities. Examples included independent subject learning, vocabulary development, understanding practical procedures, research support, and mock viva preparation.

This reflects an emerging perception of AI as an **on-demand learning companion** that can provide academic assistance beyond scheduled teaching hours.

Theme 3: The Assignment Paradox — More AI, Less Meaningful Learning

One of the strongest themes emerging across the disciplines concerned dissatisfaction with AI-related or AI-assisted assignments.

Subtheme 3.1: Assignments perceived as academically unproductive

Arts and Humanities, Language, Science, and Technology students expressed dissatisfaction with assignments in the context of AI use. Students questioned the educational value of assignments when tasks could be completed rapidly using AI without meaningful intellectual engagement.

Language students additionally perceived that access to AI had contributed to an increase in the number of assignments, making assignment work tiring while offering limited perceived learning value.

Subtheme 3.2: Copy-paste culture and declining cognitive engagement

Science students explicitly described assignment completion as involving copying and pasting AI-generated information without giving sufficient attention to the content. Similar concerns were evident in other disciplines, where students perceived AI-supported assignments as reducing opportunities to think independently.

The data therefore reveal a paradox: while AI can facilitate understanding, its use in conventional assignments may encourage **task completion without corresponding cognitive engagement**.

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Subtheme 3.3: Preference for purposeful rather than repetitive assignments

Commerce students expressed interest in assignments that use AI meaningfully and ethically as a facilitator rather than as a substitute for student effort. This suggests that students were not necessarily rejecting assignments themselves; instead, they questioned assignments that could be completed mechanically through AI.

The findings indicate a need to redesign academic tasks around analysis, application, reflection, problem-solving, and demonstrable student contribution.

Theme 4: Resistance to Assignment-Based Assessment in the AI Era

Subtheme 4.1: Questioning assignments as evidence of individual competence

Students from multiple streams expressed reluctance to be assessed on the basis of AI-assisted assignments. Arts and Humanities students questioned whether assignment performance could accurately represent their learning, while Language and Technology students similarly did not want assignment work to determine their assessment.

Science students preferred evaluation through examinations and actual performance.

The findings suggest that students perceive a growing disconnect between **assignment output and authentic demonstration of individual competence** when AI is extensively involved in completing academic work.

Subtheme 4.2: Demand for alternative and authentic assessment

Technology students specifically suggested projects and alternative assessment approaches. Science students preferred examinations and performance-based evaluation.

These perspectives indicate an emerging preference for assessment methods that require students to **demonstrate what they know and can independently perform**, rather than merely submit a polished academic product that may have been substantially generated through AI.

Theme 5: AI Dependence and the Erosion of Active Learning

Subtheme 5.1: Reduced independent thinking

Students, particularly from Arts and Humanities and Technology, expressed concern that excessive dependence on AI was reducing the use of their own thinking abilities.

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AI-assisted assignments were perceived as particularly problematic because students could obtain ready-made responses rather than engage with the task themselves.

This suggests that students simultaneously appreciate the efficiency of AI and recognize its potential to diminish intellectual effort when used without appropriate boundaries.

Subtheme 5.2: Declining classroom listening and attention

A notable finding emerged among Arts and Humanities, Science, and Technology students concerning reduced attention during classroom teaching. Students indicated that awareness of being able to access explanations later through AI could reduce motivation to listen carefully during lectures.

This finding extends concerns about AI dependence beyond assignments. Students perceived that constant access to AI-generated explanations may alter their classroom behaviour by reducing active listening and engagement with teachers.

Subtheme 5.3: Demand for more interactive human teaching

Despite extensive AI use, students did not indicate that teachers had become unnecessary. Arts and Humanities students expected teachers to guide them toward books and other academic resources. Science students preferred more interactive teaching similar to earlier classroom approaches, while Technology students also requested more engaging classroom instruction.

These responses reveal an important tension: **greater access to AI appears to increase, rather than eliminate, the need for meaningful human interaction in teaching**.

Theme 6: Ethical Blind Spots and Uncritical AI Use

Subtheme 6.1: Limited understanding of ethical AI practice

One of the most consistent concerns across disciplines was the limited understanding of what constitutes ethical AI use.

Arts and Humanities students tended to perceive AI use as ethical when its use was permitted or encouraged within the syllabus. Commerce students similarly appeared to consider copying and pasting AI-generated content acceptable. Science students reported using AI without substantial awareness of ethical practices or of the principle that AI should function merely as a facilitator.

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These responses indicate that students' understanding of AI ethics may currently be based more on **whether AI use is permitted** than on deeper considerations of academic integrity, authorship, transparency, responsibility, and intellectual contribution.

Subtheme 6.2: Lack of verification of AI-generated information

Language, Science, and Commerce students reported that AI-generated information was generally not cross-checked.

This represents an important educational concern because students may be using AI-generated content without independently verifying its accuracy or source credibility. The findings therefore point to a need for AI literacy that includes not only how to generate information but also how to **evaluate, verify, reference, and critically challenge AI outputs**.

Subtheme 6.3: Need for explicit education in responsible AI use

Students' responses suggest that ethical AI practice cannot be assumed simply because students regularly use AI technologies. The absence of systematic verification and uncertainty regarding appropriate boundaries indicate the need for explicit education concerning responsible AI use, academic integrity, attribution, verification, transparency, and human accountability.

Theme 7: Moving from Generic AI Integration to Discipline-Sensitive AI Education

Subtheme 7.1: Different disciplines require different AI competencies

The analysis demonstrated that students' expectations of AI varied according to academic context. Arts and Humanities students emphasized conceptual understanding, case examples, books, and viva preparation. Language students emphasized vocabulary development and research. Science students highlighted conceptual explanations, practical procedures, compositions, research, and software skills. Commerce students emphasized economics, accounting, and research, while Technology students emphasized subject learning, advanced AI knowledge, updated curricula, and teacher competence.

These variations suggest that a uniform approach to AI education may not adequately address the learning needs of all disciplines.

Subtheme 7.2: Need for structured AI competency development

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Science students specifically proposed a separate AI course to develop competence in AI-related software and prepare students for future requirements. Technology students emphasized the need to update both the curriculum and teachers' AI knowledge.

These findings indicate that students expect institutions to move beyond informal and self-directed AI use toward **structured AI education and competency development**.

Subtheme 7.3: Teachers remain central to responsible AI integration

Technology students particularly emphasized the need for teachers to upgrade their AI knowledge. Across disciplines, students' preference for interactive teaching, teacher-recommended books, ethical guidance, and meaningful assessment demonstrates that AI integration does not diminish the role of teachers.

Instead, the findings suggest an evolving role in which educators are expected to **guide, contextualize, verify, humanize, and ethically frame students' use of AI**.

Overall Thematic Interpretation

The findings reveal a central tension in students' experiences of AI-integrated higher education. Students perceive AI as highly beneficial when it **supports understanding, research, practical learning, vocabulary development, subject-specific learning, and preparation for academic activities**. However, their perceptions become considerably more critical when AI substitutes for intellectual effort in assignments, assessment, or classroom engagement.

Across disciplines, students expressed concerns regarding reduced thinking, copy-paste practices, diminished classroom listening, limited verification of AI-generated information, and insufficient understanding of ethical AI use. At the same time, disciplinary differences demonstrated that students do not require identical forms of AI integration. Their expectations are shaped by the knowledge, skills, and learning practices characteristic of their respective fields.

Taken together, the findings suggest a transition from **unstructured AI adoption toward guided, discipline-sensitive and ethically informed AI integration**. Students appear to value AI most when it functions as a facilitator of human learning rather than as a substitute for thinking, teaching, or authentic demonstration of competence.

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Major theme	Key subthemes	Arts & Humanities	Language	Science	Commerce	Technology
1. AI as a facilitator of learning	Concept clarification; discipline-specific learning	Concepts and case examples; mock viva	Vocabulary; research	Detailed concepts; practical procedures and compositions	Economics and accounts	Subject learning; learning about AI
2. AI as research and academic support	Research assistance; learning beyond classroom	Mainly learning/viva support	Research support	Strong research utility	Research support	Research support
3. Assignment paradox	Low perceived value; copy-paste; reduced thinking	Assignments reduce thinking	Numerous/tiring assignments perceived as less useful	Copy-paste and poor attention	Wants useful AI-facilitated assignments	AI assignments perceived as useless; reduced cognitive effort
4. Rethinking assessment	Assignment validity; authentic assessment	Does not favour assignment-based assessment	Does not favour assignment-based assessment	Prefers exams and performance	Supports meaningful assignments with appropriate AI boundaries	Prefers projects/alternative assessment; rejects AI-assignment-based evaluation
5. AI dependence vs	Reduced thinking; reduced	Reduced listening; prefers	Lack of Attendance and	Reduced classroom	Reduced interest in	Reduced cognitive effort; wants

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Major theme	Key subthemes	Arts & Humanities	Language	Science	Commerce	Technology
active learning	listening; need for interaction	traditional/teacher-guided approaches	regularity to class.	listening; wants interactive teaching	listening lectures.	interactive teaching
6. Ethical blind spots	Weak ethical literacy; lack of verification	Permitted AI use perceived as ethical	Does not routinely cross-check; little ethical guidance	Does not routinely verify; limited ethical awareness	Copy-paste perceived as acceptable; limited verification	Ethical concerns less explicit in reported responses
7. Discipline-sensitive AI education	Discipline-specific competencies; AI training; teacher development	Books, cases and viva support	Language and research applications	Separate AI/software course desired	Business-related applications	Updated syllabus and AI-skilled teachers

Findings

The thematic analysis revealed a complex and discipline-sensitive pattern in students' perceptions of AI-integrated higher education. Across the five academic streams, students generally viewed AI positively when it functioned as a **facilitator of learning**, particularly for simplifying difficult concepts, providing detailed explanations, supporting research, developing vocabulary, understanding practical procedures, learning subject-specific content, and preparing for activities such as viva examinations. However, this positive perception was accompanied by considerable concern regarding the use of AI in academic assignments. Students across several disciplines perceived AI-assisted assignments as less meaningful because readily generated responses encouraged copying, reduced independent thinking, and weakened active engagement with academic tasks. Consequently, participants

expressed reservations about using such assignments as a basis for assessment and showed greater preference for examinations, performance-based evaluation, projects, and other approaches that could more authentically demonstrate individual competence. Another prominent finding was the perceived influence of AI dependence on classroom engagement; participants from Arts and Humanities, Science, and Technology reported that easy access to AI-generated explanations could reduce attention and listening during lectures, while simultaneously expressing a preference for more interactive and engaging teacher-led instruction. Ethical AI literacy emerged as a significant area of concern. Participants from several streams reported limited practices of verifying AI-generated information, while some interpreted AI use as ethical simply because it was permitted within academic activities or the syllabus. These responses indicated ambiguity regarding academic integrity, verification, responsible use, and the distinction between AI as a facilitator and AI as a substitute for student effort. Distinct disciplinary expectations were also evident: Arts and Humanities participants emphasized conceptual explanations, case examples, books, and viva preparation; Language participants highlighted vocabulary development and research; Science participants valued conceptual clarification, practical procedures, research support, and expressed a need for formal AI and software training; Commerce participants emphasized applications in economics, accounting, and research; and Technology participants called for updated curricula, greater AI competence among teachers, and alternative forms of assessment. Overall, the findings demonstrate a central tension between **AI-enabled learning and AI-dependent learning**. Students appeared to value AI when it strengthened understanding and extended learning opportunities, but expressed concern when it replaced cognitive effort, authentic assessment, classroom engagement, or independent academic work. The findings therefore point toward the need for a **guided, ethically informed, interactive, and discipline-sensitive approach to AI integration**, in which AI complements rather than substitutes human teaching, critical thinking, and student responsibility.

Discussion

The present study explored students' perspectives on AI-integrated higher education across Technology, Science, Language, Arts and Humanities, and Commerce disciplines. The findings reveal a nuanced relationship between students and artificial intelligence: participants largely recognized AI as a valuable facilitator of learning while simultaneously expressing concern about its capacity to replace intellectual effort, weaken meaningful engagement with assignments, alter classroom attention, and complicate conventional approaches to assessment. Rather than demonstrating either unconditional acceptance or rejection of AI, the findings suggest that students distinguish between **AI-enabled learning**, in which technology extends understanding

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and academic capability, and **AI-dependent learning**, in which technology begins to substitute independent reasoning and student effort.

A prominent finding was the perceived usefulness of AI for **conceptual understanding and discipline-specific learning**. Arts and Humanities participants valued AI for explanations, case examples, and viva preparation; Language students emphasized vocabulary development and research; Science students highlighted detailed explanations, practical procedures, and research applications; Commerce students reported its usefulness for economics and accounting; and Technology students used AI both for disciplinary learning and for extending their knowledge of AI itself. These differences indicate that AI integration may be most meaningful when aligned with the epistemological and practical requirements of individual disciplines rather than introduced through a uniform institutional model. Such an interpretation supports a shift from generic AI literacy toward **discipline-sensitive AI literacy**, where foundational competencies are shared but applications are contextualized according to the academic field.

Despite these perceived benefits, participants were considerably more critical of AI-assisted assignments. Across several streams, assignments were perceived as losing educational value when students could generate responses with minimal intellectual engagement. Reports of copying and pasting, reduced attention to assignment content, and declining independent thinking suggest that the availability of generative AI may expose limitations in conventional assignment design. This finding is particularly important because the problem may not lie exclusively in students' use of AI; rather, it may indicate that some existing assignments are insufficiently designed to require authentic reasoning, contextual application, reflection, or demonstration of learning. Contemporary research similarly argues that generative AI challenges the sustainability of traditional assessment practices and creates a need to prioritize learning processes, higher-order thinking, and authentic applications.

The participants' reluctance to be evaluated through AI-assisted assignments further reinforces this concern. Science participants preferred examinations and performance-based evaluation, while Technology participants proposed projects and alternative assessments. Participants from other disciplines also questioned the validity of assignment-based evaluation when AI substantially contributes to the final product. These perspectives raise a fundamental issue concerning **assessment authenticity**: if the submitted product cannot clearly demonstrate the learner's own understanding, conventional assignment marks may provide an incomplete representation of individual competence. Existing evidence likewise indicates that students' use of generative AI for assessment does not always correspond with

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institutional interpretations of academic integrity, strengthening the case for clearer guidelines and assessment redesign.

Another significant finding concerns the perceived relationship between AI dependence and **cognitive engagement**. Participants from Arts and Humanities, Science, and Technology described reduced classroom listening or attention because information could subsequently be obtained through AI. Students also expressed concern that extensive AI use could reduce independent thinking. These perceptions should not be interpreted as evidence that AI itself inevitably diminishes cognitive ability; rather, they reveal students' awareness of the possibility that unregulated dependence may alter learning behaviours. A systematic review of over-reliance on AI dialogue systems has similarly highlighted concerns regarding students' cognitive abilities and the importance of understanding the educational consequences of dependence on such systems.

Importantly, increased AI use did not translate into a reduced perceived need for teachers. On the contrary, participants called for more interactive classroom teaching, teacher-recommended books, greater engagement, and improved AI competence among faculty. Technology participants particularly emphasized the need for teachers to upgrade their AI knowledge. These findings challenge a simplistic assumption that increasingly capable AI systems will diminish the importance of educators. Within the participants' accounts, the teacher's role appears to be evolving from being primarily a transmitter of information toward becoming a **facilitator, mentor, critical guide, disciplinary expert, and mediator of responsible AI use**. This interpretation is consistent with human-centred approaches to AI in education that position technology as supporting rather than displacing human agency.

Perhaps the most concerning finding was the apparent gap between **AI use and ethical AI literacy**. Participants from several disciplines reported limited verification of AI-generated information. Some appeared to conceptualize AI use as ethical primarily when its use was permitted within the syllabus or academic activity, while others considered copying AI-generated information acceptable. These findings suggest that frequent use of AI does not necessarily translate into an understanding of responsible AI practice. Ethical AI literacy therefore requires more than institutional permission or prohibition; students need explicit guidance regarding accuracy verification, transparency, attribution, privacy, bias, intellectual ownership, academic integrity, and accountability for AI-assisted work. UNESCO similarly advocates human-centred AI integration that incorporates ethical validation, privacy protection, pedagogical appropriateness, and the development of human capacities.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the educational challenge is not simply whether institutions should permit or prohibit AI. A more productive distinction is

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between **AI as a facilitator of learning and AI as a substitute for learning**. Students valued AI when it expanded understanding, research capacity, practical knowledge, and access to academic support. Concerns emerged when AI reduced the need to think, verify, participate, listen, or independently demonstrate competence. Responsible integration should therefore preserve the benefits of technological assistance while intentionally protecting the cognitive, relational, and ethical dimensions of higher education.

The cross-disciplinary differences identified in the study further suggest that a single model of AI integration may be inadequate. While all students may benefit from foundational competencies in AI literacy and ethics, the educational application of these competencies should reflect disciplinary needs. The findings therefore support a **human-centred, discipline-sensitive model of AI integration**, in which technology complements rather than replaces critical thinking, authentic assessment, teacher–student interaction, and individual academic responsibility.

Suggestions and Educational Implications

Based on the findings, higher-education institutions may consider moving from informal AI adoption toward a structured framework for responsible integration. **AI literacy should be incorporated into the curriculum**, with students receiving explicit instruction on appropriate AI use, limitations of generated content, verification of information, academic integrity, attribution, privacy, bias, and responsible decision-making. Ethical use should not be assumed merely because students are technologically familiar with AI.

A **common foundational AI module combined with discipline-specific applications** may be particularly appropriate. Technology students could receive advanced exposure to AI tools and applications; Science students could be trained in responsible AI use for scientific literature, research, data-related tasks, and practical learning; Commerce students could explore applications relevant to economics, accounting, analytics, and business; Language students could critically engage with AI-assisted writing, vocabulary, translation, and research; and Arts and Humanities students could examine AI through conceptual analysis, case-based learning, critical interpretation, creativity, and research. Such differentiation would allow AI education to respond to disciplinary requirements without abandoning common principles of responsible use.

Assignment design also requires reconsideration. Instead of tasks that can be completed through straightforward generation and reproduction of AI output, assignments could emphasize **critical analysis, reflection, application to local contexts, problem-solving, oral defence, process documentation, and**

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evaluation of AI-generated responses. Where AI is permitted, students could be required to identify how it was used, verify its outputs, explain modifications they made, and demonstrate their own intellectual contribution. Assessment scholarship increasingly supports redesign that emphasizes learning processes, higher-order thinking, responsible learning, and authentic application.

Assessment should likewise employ multiple methods rather than depending heavily on take-home assignments. Projects, presentations, viva voce examinations, practical demonstrations, reflective tasks, supervised problem-solving, and conventional examinations can be strategically combined according to disciplinary requirements. The objective should not necessarily be to create “AI-proof” assessment but to design assessments in which **student reasoning and competence remain visible even when AI is available**.

Faculty development is equally important. Teachers require opportunities to develop AI literacy, understand the capabilities and limitations of emerging tools, design AI-aware assessments, and guide students regarding ethical use. More interactive classroom strategies may also help address students’ reported reduction in listening and engagement. Case discussions, debates, demonstrations, collaborative problem-solving, practical exercises, and student-led inquiry could strengthen the value of classroom participation in ways that cannot easily be substituted by obtaining an AI-generated explanation later.

Finally, institutions should establish **clear and accessible guidelines for responsible AI use**. Rather than relying exclusively on punitive approaches, policies should distinguish between acceptable assistance and inappropriate substitution of student work. Students should know when AI may be used, when its use must be disclosed, how AI-generated information should be verified, and what constitutes unacceptable academic practice. UNESCO's guidance similarly emphasizes coherent policy frameworks, ethical and pedagogical validation, human capacity development, and meaningful rather than technology-driven adoption.

Limitations

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study involved only **25 students from a single Arts and Science College in Coimbatore**, with five participants representing each academic stream. The findings therefore reflect perspectives within this specific educational context and should not be interpreted as representative of all students within the five disciplines or of higher-education students more broadly.

Second, although equal numbers of students were included from Technology, Science, Language, Arts and Humanities, and Commerce, the small number within each stream

limits the extent to which disciplinary differences can be interpreted. The cross-disciplinary patterns identified in the study should therefore be understood as **exploratory qualitative variations rather than generalized characteristics of particular disciplines**.

Third, the study relied on students' self-reported perspectives. Participants' descriptions of their AI practices, including copying, verification, ethical use, classroom attention, and assignment behaviour, were not independently observed or verified. The findings consequently represent students' perceptions and reported practices rather than objectively measured behaviour.

Fourth, data were collected through open-ended interviews organized around predefined areas of AI-integrated syllabus, teaching, assignments, assessment, examinations, and ethics. Although the open-ended format enabled participants to elaborate, the predetermined domains may have influenced the scope of responses and may not have captured every dimension of students' experiences with AI.

Finally, AI technologies and institutional practices surrounding their use are evolving rapidly. Students' perceptions recorded during **September 2026** represent a particular stage in this technological and educational transition. Future changes in AI capabilities, institutional policies, assessment practices, and students' AI literacy may produce different perspectives.

Future research could address these limitations through **larger multi-institutional qualitative studies**, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method investigations. Comparative research across disciplines and institutions could further examine whether the patterns identified in this study persist in different educational contexts. Intervention studies evaluating structured AI-literacy programmes, redesigned assessments, and discipline-specific AI curricula would also help determine how responsible AI integration influences learning, critical thinking, academic integrity, and student engagement.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that students perceive AI as a valuable educational resource when it enhances understanding, supports research, facilitates discipline-specific learning, and extends learning beyond the classroom. However, these benefits coexist with concerns regarding declining cognitive engagement, uncritical reliance on AI-generated information, reduced classroom attention, diminished value of conventional assignments, and inadequate understanding of ethical AI use. The findings therefore reveal an important distinction between **AI-enabled learning and AI-dependent learning**. Students appeared receptive to AI when it complemented their intellectual effort, but critical when it substituted independent thinking or obscured authentic

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demonstration of competence. Variations across Technology, Science, Language, Arts and Humanities, and Commerce further indicate that effective AI integration cannot be entirely uniform; it must respond to the learning practices and academic requirements of individual disciplines. Higher education should therefore move beyond unrestricted AI adoption toward a **human-centred, ethically informed, discipline-sensitive model of integration** that strengthens AI literacy, redesigns assessment, enhances faculty competence, and preserves critical thinking, meaningful teacher–student interaction, and learner responsibility. In this context, the educational value of AI should ultimately be determined not by how extensively it is used, but by how effectively it strengthens rather than replaces the human processes of learning, reasoning, and intellectual development.