The International Review of Multidisciplinary Research
Volume 1, Issue 3, March 2026, pp. 34-42
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18861155

The International Review of Multidisciplinary Research
Advancing knowledge through quality research

Generative AI in Graduate Education: Student Experiences, Critical Thinking, and Academic Practice

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Article Details:

Received: 22 February 2026
Revised: 28 February 2026
Accepted: 02 March 2026
Published: 04 March 2026
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Recommended Citation:

Sabado, A. G., Concepcion, B. R. (2026). Generative AI in Graduate Education: Student Experiences, Critical Thinking, and Academic Practice. The International Review of Multidisciplinary Research, 1 (3), 34-42. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18861155

Index Terms:

generative AI, graduate education, academic practice, critical thinking, AI literacy, academic integrity, cognitive scaffold

Abstract. The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Bard, is reshaping graduate education by transforming academic writing, research productivity, and scholarly engagement. While prior studies have largely focused on technological adoption and performance metrics, limited qualitative research has explored how graduate students interpret and critically regulate AI use in their academic practice. This study investigates how Philippine graduate students experience generative AI, examining its perceived benefits, limitations, ethical concerns, and influence on scholarly identity. Using a qualitative descriptive design, 12 graduate students (six Master's and six PhD students) participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings reveal that GenAI functions as a cognitive scaffold that enhances efficiency, reduces cognitive load, and supports idea generation, content organization, and academic writing refinement. Participants reported increased productivity and creative stimulation; however, they also expressed concerns regarding the accuracy, overreliance, academic integrity, and contextual limitations of AI-generated outputs. Differences emerged between master's and doctoral students, with master's students emphasizing operational efficiency, while PhD students demonstrated stronger verification practices, concern for originality, and reflective regulation of AI use. Overall, the study suggests that GenAI is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental; rather, its impact depends on students' critical AI literacy, ethical awareness, and self-regulation. These findings underscore the need for institutional frameworks that promote responsible AI integration while safeguarding intellectual rigor, authenticity, and higher-order thinking in graduate education.

Introduction

The rapid spread of Generative AI (GenAI) tools, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Bard, is shaking things up in higher education. These tools have a significant impact on how academic writing and research are conducted (Chavez et al., 2024; Deep & Chen, 2025). However, this change has sparked discussions on academic integrity, artificial intelligence (AI) ethics, and cognitive outsourcing. People are worried that relying too much on AI might weaken critical thinking skills and lead to academic dishonesty(Ardito, 2024; Chavez et al., 2024; Deep & Chen, 2025). In response, universities worldwide are developing policies to manage AI use and attempting to find a balance between ethical concerns and the potential for increased productivity (Ilieva et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2024). This shift in technology is changing the way scholarly work is done, allowing for AI-assisted productivity while also challenging traditional academic values(Haroud & Saqri, 2025; Katsamakas et al., 2024). Thus, GenAI is a major force of disruption and innovation in the field of global education.

Generative AI (GenAI) is becoming a popular tool in graduate education, helping students with tasks such as developing literature reviews, refining academic writing, and coming up with research ideas. Many studies have shown that graduate

students are turning to AI tools such as ChatGPT to brainstorm, organize their thoughts, and improve the coherence and grammar of their writing. This use of AI is boosting students' engagement with academic tasks on both cognitive and metacognitive levels(Parker et al., 2024; Wang, 2024). However, faculty members have raised concerns about the potential for academic dishonesty and a decline in independent thinking, as students might rely too heavily on AI-generated content for their assignments. This reliance could weaken their critical thinking skills and reduce their confidence in their abilities(Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Chavez et al., 2024). Consequently, there is a growing focus on teaching critical AI literacy, promoting the responsible use of AI, and encouraging self-regulated learning in graduate programs. The goal is to find a balance where AI serves as a helpful tool rather than replacing cognitive effort(Jiang et al., 2025; Wang, 2024). This highlights the need for institutions to update their policies and curricula to maintain academic integrity while effectively integrating AI innovation.

Graduate students are finding Generative AI (GenAI) to be a game-changer, although it is a mixed bag when it comes to boosting their academic work and shaping their academic identity. On the one hand, they see Gen AI as a great tool for enhancing productivity, thanks to its ability to help with writing, organizing ideas, and sparking creativity in the process. However, concerns remain regarding the quality and reliability of the content it produces(Prosen & Ličen, 2025; Veras et al., 2024). Ethical questions also arise, especially regarding academic integrity and the risk of becoming too dependent on AI. Students are trying to find a balance between using AI to aid their learning and the potential downside of losing critical thinking skills and self-confidence(Chavez et al., 2024; Sousa & Cardoso, 2025). As they integrate AI into their work, students are also navigating changes in their academic identity, striving to keep their authentic voice while developing strong self-regulation and critical AI literacy(Wang, 2024). There are noticeable differences between Master's and PhD students, which might be due to varying levels of cognitive maturity and depth of engagement with meaning-making and critical reflection in doctoral studies(Haroud & Saqri, 2025). Graduate students' experiences with Gen AI highlight a complex interplay of productivity benefits, ethical challenges, and evolving academic identities in today's higher education landscape.

The global transformation of higher education through generative AI (GenAI) has prompted widespread research, predominantly focusing on technological readiness and performance outcomes using quantitative, survey-based, and faculty-centered approaches. While these studies provide valuable metrics on AI adoption and system efficiency, there is a notable scarcity of qualitative inquiry into how graduate students interpret and critically regulate AI outputs within their academic work. In particular, studies exploring how AI integration influences the formation of graduate students' academic identities and their negotiation of scholarly authenticity are lacking in the literature. Moreover, comparative insights into AI experiences between master's and PhD students remain underexplored, limiting our understanding of the potential cognitive and developmental differences in AI engagement. In the Philippine graduate education context, evidence is especially limited, and few studies provide contextualized and culturally grounded perspectives on student experiences with generative AI. Thus, while prior research has quantitatively addressed AI adoption from educators' viewpoints, a critical gap remains in qualitatively understanding graduate students' meaning-making, self-regulation, and identity construction in the context of AI integration. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how graduate students in the Philippines navigate the complexities of generative AI use in scholarly practice, with attention to differences between master's and doctoral cohorts in this regard.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore graduate students' experiences with and interpretations of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in academic contexts. This design was selected to capture in-depth reflections, subjective meanings, and contextualized understandings of how students engaged with AI tools in their scholarly work. Given the study's focus on perception, interpretation, and meaning-making, a qualitative approach was appropriate for uncovering nuanced academic and cognitive dimensions that cannot be fully represented by quantitative data.

Participants and Sampling

Twelve (n = 12) graduate students participated in the study, comprising six (6) Master's students and six (6) Doctor of Philosophy students enrolled in various graduate programs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all had prior experience using at least one generative AI tool (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Copilot) for academic

purposes, including research writing, literature review development, idea generation, instructional preparation, and content refinement. The inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be currently enrolled in a Master's or PhD program, (2) have used generative AI for academic-related tasks, and (3) voluntarily agree to share their experiences. Data saturation guided the final sample size, which was achieved when no substantially new themes emerged.
For confidentiality and analytical clarity, the participants were assigned coded identifiers. Master's students were labeled using the prefix "MS" (e.g., MS1–MS6), while PhD students were labeled using the prefix "PS" (e.g., PS1–PS6). These codes were used consistently throughout the results section to distinguish between academic levels while preserving anonymity.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended questions that aligned with the research objectives. The instrument elicited participants' perspectives on the perceived quality and usefulness of AI outputs, efficiency and productivity gains, ethical concerns and academic integrity issues, strategies for the critical evaluation and regulation of AI use, and the influence of generative AI on academic identity and scholarly practice. Prior to administration, the interview guide was reviewed by two experts in educational research to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's research questions.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 min and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of the participants' responses for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, beginning with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by the generation of initial codes, identification of emerging themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and the development of a coherent narrative report. Two researchers independently coded the data to enhance credibility, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. The final themes were organized in direct alignment with the research questions, including quality of output, efficiency and productivity, ethical concerns, critical regulation strategies, and academic identity.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, this study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, and peer debriefing. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias and ensure that the interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the participants and academic contexts to allow readers to assess their applicability to similar graduate education settings.

Results and Discussion

Positive Experiences and Perceived Benefits of Generative AI This section presents the key themes describing graduate students' positive experiences with Gen AI. The findings highlight how AI tools enhance efficiency, support academic writing and content development, and stimulate creativity and cognitive engagement in scholarly works.

Theme	Description	Representative Responses	Participant Group
Efficiency and Productivity Enhancement	Generative AI reduces cognitive load, accelerates academic tasks, and simplifies complex assignments, allowing students to work efficiently.	"It made the task more efficient and less overwhelming." (MS1) "Tasks that once took hours now take a fraction of the time." (MS3) "Help me give faster to do my class topics." (PS1)	Master's & PhD

Academic Writing and Content Development Support	AI can assist in drafting, structuring, and organizing ideas, refining grammar, and preparing instructional or research material.	"It helps me draft documents and lesson plans faster." (MS1) "Make outlines, quiz and even exams faster." (PS3) "Quickly give lesson feedback." (PS5)	Master's & PhD
Creativity, Idea Expansion, and Cognitive Assistance	AI stimulates new ideas, clarifies complex concepts, broadens perspectives, and supports analytical thinking and instructional innovation.	"It generated creative exercises and rubrics." (MS3) "It gives me clear ideas and explanations." (PS2) "It is easier now to see the bigger picture." (PS4)	Master's & Phd

Table 1 Positive Experiences and Perceived Benefits of Generative AI in Graduate Education

Table 1 reveals three central themes describing graduate students' positive experiences with Gen AI: (1) efficiency and productivity enhancement, (2) academic writing and content development support, and (3) creativity, idea expansion and cognitive assistance. Participants consistently emphasized how AI tools reduced cognitive load and accelerated academic tasks, enabling them to complete writing, lesson preparation, and research activities more efficiently than before. This aligns with studies demonstrating that AI-assisted tools enhance workflow efficiency and writing support in higher education contexts (Deep & Chen, 2025; Wang, 2024). Beyond productivity, students highlighted AI's role in organizing their ideas, refining their content, and stimulating creative thinking. These findings resonate with those of Parker et al. (2024), who described AI as a collaborative cognitive partner in graduate-level writing. Moreover, the cognitive and pedagogical benefits reported by participants parallel prior research on technology-enhanced learning environments, where digital tools improve engagement and instructional innovation (Anselmo et al. 2024). Simultaneously, the structured support provided by AI may reduce cognitive strain and academic stress, an experience conceptually related to findings on professional and instructional adaptation in technology-integrated contexts (Anselmo & Anselmo, 2024). Collectively, Table 1 suggests that generative AI functions not merely as a convenience technology but as a cognitive scaffold that supports productivity, creativity, and evolving scholarly practices in graduate education.

Limitations, Frustrations, and Ethical Concerns in the Use of Generative AI This section outlines the challenges encountered by graduate students in the use of generative AI. The themes reflect concerns related to accuracy and reliability, risks of overreliance, academic integrity issues, and structural and contextual limitations affecting equitable and responsible AI integration.

Theme	**Description**	**Representative Responses**	**Participant Group**
Accuracy and Reliability Concerns	AI sometimes produces incorrect, outdated, or dubious information that requires verification by a human.	"Sometimes AI gives wrong answer." (PS6) "AI occasionally provides inaccurate information." (MS4) "I always check the content; sometimes giving me doubt." (PS5)	Master's & PhD
Overreliance and Academic Integrity Issues	Concerns about dependency, reduced critical thinking, and ethical misuse.	"I am mindful not to rely on AI too heavily." (MS1) "Students rely most times in these technologies without analyzing the data." (PS6) "AI affects intellectual reasoning." (MS5)	Master's & PhD
Access and Contextual Limitations	Subscription barriers and generic outputs lack local relevance.	"Limited searching if not subscribe." (PS4) "Limitation of any payment." (MS2) "Outputs can sometimes be too generic or lack local context." (MS3)	Master's & PhD

Table 2 Limitations, Frustrations, and Ethical Concerns in the Use of Generative AI

Table 2 reveals that the graduate students demonstrated critical awareness of the limitations of generative AI despite recognizing its benefits. Three dominant concerns emerged: accuracy and reliability issues, risks of overreliance and academic integrity compromise, and access and contextual constraints. Participants noted that AI-generated outputs sometimes contain inaccuracies or generalized information, necessitating verification before use in scholarly works. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing the need for human oversight and validation in AI-assisted academic writing (Deep & Chen, 2025; Veras et al., 2024). Beyond technical reliability, students expressed apprehension regarding overdependence and its potential impact on their intellectual reasoning. Such concerns reflect the broader academic discourse warning that excessive reliance on AI may weaken analytical rigor and diminish authentic scholarly voices (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Chavez et al., 2024). This echoes the findings on responsible technology integration, where student perceptions highlight the importance of maintaining critical engagement alongside digital tool use (Anselmo et al., 2026). Moreover, the emphasis on sustaining independent thinking parallels research on cultivating 21st-century skills—particularly critical thinking and evaluative judgment—across higher education disciplines (Anselmo et al., 2025).

Participants also identified structural limitations, including subscription barriers and outputs that lacked local relevance. These concerns align with institutional discussions on equitable access and contextual adaptation of AI systems in higher education (Haroud & Saqri, 2025; Sousa & Cardoso, 2025). Collectively, Table 2 suggests that graduate students are not passive consumers of AI outputs; rather, they actively negotiate the balance between efficiency and academic integrity in their assignments. Their responses indicate emerging AI literacy competencies, characterized by verification practices, ethical mindfulness, and conscious regulation of AI-assisted academic tasks.

Influence of Generative AI on Academic Approaches and Scholarly Practices This section describes how generative AI reshapes graduate students' academic workflows, critical thinking, and scholarly identity. The findings revealed shifts toward guided learning, reflective regulation, and evolving patterns of intellectual engagement across academic levels.

Theme	**Description**	**Representative Responses**	**Participant Group**
Increased Speed and Efficiency in Academic Work	AI accelerates the completion of assignments, lesson planning, and research.	"It is more faster than I thought." (PS5) "Draft documents and lesson plans faster." (MS1) "Help me give faster to do my class topics." (PS1)	Master's & PhD
Shift Toward Guided and Assisted Learning	AI functions as a guide, helping to clarify complex ideas and structure the thinking.	"It gives me clear idea." (PS2) "Easier now to see the bigger picture." (PS4) "Improve my learning and explanation." (PS3)	Master's & PhD
Reflection on Intellectual Independence and Critical Engagement	Students recognized the need to maintain analytical thinking and avoid dependency on AI.	"Sometimes using AI affects intellectual reasoning." (MS5) "You don't try to challenge yourself." (MS6) "Ethical use becomes key." (PS6)	Master's & PhD

Table 3 Influence of Generative AI on Academic Approaches and Scholarly Practices

Table 3 demonstrates that generative AI significantly reshapes graduate students' academic approaches through three interrelated patterns: (1) increased speed and efficiency, (2) a shift toward guided and assisted learning, and (3) reflective awareness of intellectual independence. Participants consistently reported that AI accelerated the completion of assignments, lesson preparation and research-related tasks. This finding aligns with research indicating that AI-supported tools enhance workflow efficiency and academic writing processes in higher education (Deep & Chen, 2025; Wang, 2024). The integration of AI into everyday scholarly activities reflects a broader institutional transformation of academic productivity (Katsamakas et al. 2024). Beyond efficiency, students described AI as functioning as a cognitive guide by clarifying complex concepts, structuring ideas, and facilitating iterative refinement of academic outputs. This observation is consistent with Parker et al. 's(2024) conceptualization of AI as a dialogic partner in graduate writing. This also resonates with findings from technology integration research, which show that pedagogical innovations enhance engagement and scaffold higher-order thinking when strategically implemented (Anselmo et al., 2024; Ellorin et al., 2026).

However, participants also expressed a heightened awareness of the need to preserve intellectual rigor and an authentic scholarly voice. Concerns about overdependence mirror scholarly discussions emphasizing critical AI literacy and responsible integration to safeguard analytical reasoning (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Chavez et al., 2024). Furthermore, the emphasis on maintaining evaluative judgment aligns with research highlighting the cultivation of 21st-century skills—particularly critical thinking— in higher-education disciplines (Anselmo et al., 2025). Overall, Table 3 suggests that generative AI is not merely a productivity enhancer but also has a transformative influence on scholarly practice. Graduate students are negotiating a hybrid academic model in which AI serves as both a cognitive scaffold and a tool that requires ethical regulation. This evolving interaction reflects the reconfiguration of academic identity shaped by technological augmentation, reflective oversight and disciplined self-regulation.

Comparative Analysis Between Master's and PhD Students

Although both Master's and PhD students reported similar overarching themes regarding efficiency, productivity, and ethical concerns, subtle differences emerged in the depth and orientation of their responses. Master's students tended to emphasize immediate practical benefits, particularly time-saving, task completion, and instructional assistance. Their reflections frequently centered on reducing workload burdens and simplifying academic requirements. In contrast, the PhD students articulated reflective and evaluative perspectives more often, highlighting the need for verification, critical engagement, and intellectual independence when using generative AI. While Master's participants described AI primarily as a productivity-enhancing tool, PhD students framed AI as a cognitive assistant that requires active regulation and scholarly discernment. Concerns about overreliance and its potential impact on intellectual reasoning were articulated more explicitly by the doctoral participants. This suggests that academic maturity and research immersion may influence how generative AI is interpreted—not merely as a convenience technology but as a tool that requires methodological caution and ethical responsibility to use.

Moreover, PhD students appeared more sensitive to issues of originality, analytical rigor, and scholarly voice, whereas Master's students focused more on efficiency and structural clarity in writing tasks. These distinctions indicate that the level of graduate training may shape AI engagement patterns, with doctoral students demonstrating stronger critical regulation and metacognitive awareness. Overall, while generative AI was perceived positively across both groups, the nature of engagement differed: master's students emphasized operational support, whereas PhD students emphasized critical oversight and academic integrity. This comparative insight deepens our understanding of how the integration of generative AI varies across graduate academic stages.

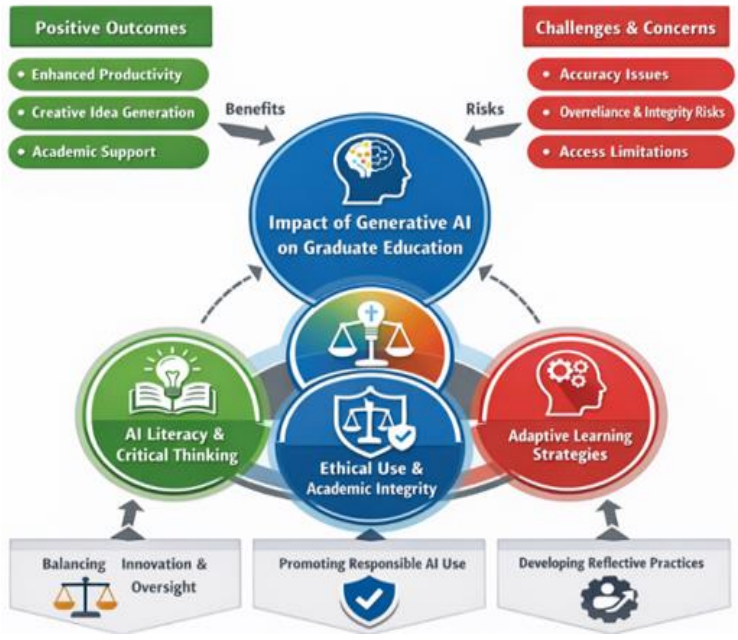

Figure 1. Generative AI in Graduate Education: Student Experiences, Critical Thinking, and Academic Practice

Figure 2 synthesizes the study's findings into an integrated framework, illustrating how generative AI influences graduate education through the interconnected domains of benefits, risks and adaptive responses. The results indicate that generative AI functions as both a productivity enhancer and a cognitive scaffold. The graduate students described significant improvements in efficiency, academic writing support and idea generation. These findings align with research demonstrating that AI-assisted tools enhance workflow efficiency and writing processes in higher education (Deep & Chen, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 1, under "Positive Outcomes," AI reduces cognitive load while supporting structured thinking and instructional innovation (Ellorin et al., 2024).

However, this study also highlights some critical issues. Accuracy issues, overreliance, and ethical dilemmas were the most dominant themes. Participants recognized the necessity of verifying AI-generated outputs and maintaining intellectual independence. These findings mirror broader discussions emphasizing academic integrity and critical AI literacy in higher education (Bittle and El-Gayar 2025; Chavez et al. 2024). Figure 1's "Challenges & Concerns" domain illustrates this tension between innovation and oversight. Importantly, the findings reveal that generative AI reshapes scholarly practices rather than merely accelerating them. Students reported shifts toward guided learning and reflective regulation. The interconnected elements of "AI Literacy & Critical Thinking," "Ethical Use," and "Adaptive Learning Strategies" in Figure 1 represent the mechanisms through which students balance efficiency and academic responsibility. This aligns with research underscoring the cultivation of 21st-century skills, particularly critical thinking and evaluative judgment (Anselmo et al., 2025). Overall, generative AI in graduate education represents a negotiated space in which productivity gains coexist with ethical considerations. Its impact depends not only on technological capability but also on students' capacity for disciplined, reflective and responsible engagement.

Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that generative AI functions as both a cognitive scaffold and a disruptive force in Philippine graduate education, enhancing productivity while introducing ethical complexities in the learning process. Graduate students perceive AI as a tool that improves efficiency, supports academic writing, and stimulates idea generation; however, they also exhibit critical awareness of the risks related to accuracy, overreliance, and academic integrity. The findings indicate that AI integration reshapes scholarly practices by fostering guided learning while necessitating heightened self-regulation and reflective oversight. Notably, the differences between master's and PhD students suggest that academic maturity influences patterns of AI engagement, with doctoral students demonstrating stronger verification practices and concerns for intellectual independence. These insights imply that institutions must move beyond restrictive AI policies toward structured integration frameworks that emphasize critical AI literacy, ethical governance, and metacognitive skill development. Graduate curricula should incorporate explicit instruction on responsible AI use, verification strategies, and scholarly voice preservation to ensure that technology enhances, rather than diminishes, intellectual rigor. Ultimately, the responsible integration of generative AI in graduate education depends not only on technological capability but also on cultivating disciplined, ethically grounded, and critically reflective academic communities.

Recommendation

Based on these findings, higher education institutions should establish structured guidelines and institutional frameworks to facilitate the responsible and ethical integration of generative AI into graduate education. Universities should incorporate formal instruction on critical AI literacy, encompassing verification strategies, ethical-use policies, citation practices, and safeguards against overreliance. Graduate programs should incorporate workshops or modules that explicitly train students to utilize AI as a cognitive support tool rather than a substitute for independent analysis. Faculty development initiatives are also essential to ensure that instructors are equipped to guide students in balancing productivity gains with scholarly integrity. Furthermore, institutions should consider contextualizing AI tools to meet local academic needs and enhance equitable access to mitigate disparities caused by subscription barriers. Future research should expand the sample size across diverse universities and disciplines to examine the longitudinal effects of AI use on academic identity formation and critical thinking development. By embedding reflective regulation and ethical governance into AI integration strategies, graduate education can harness technological innovation while preserving intellectual rigor and authenticity.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all the participants and institutions involved in this study. Their cooperation and insights were invaluable in exploring the longitudinal effects of AI use on academic identity formation and

critical thinking. We also thank the experts and colleagues who provided guidance on embedding reflective regulation and ethical governance within AI integration strategies. This support has been essential for advancing graduate education by balancing technological innovation with intellectual rigor and academic authenticity.

Funding

The authors declare that they have no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could influence the work reported in this article.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Access to the data used in this study can be obtained by submitting a formal request to the author of the study.

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Appendices

No appendices are included in this article