

The Impact of AI as a Support Tool on Academic Activities and Soft Skill Acquisition Among Communication Faculty Universitas Islam Riau Students

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an academic support tool is transforming learning behaviors in higher education, raising new questions about its implications for traditional learning outcomes, skill development, and academic integrity. Communication Studies as a discipline grounded in practical competence such as writing, media production, editing, and creative design becomes a critical locus for examining this shift. This study investigates The Impact of AI as a Support Tool on Academic Activities and Soft Skill Acquisition Among Communication Faculty Students at Universitas Islam Riau (UIR). The research explores how students' reliance on AI to complete academic tasks (scriptwriting, layout design, video editing) affects their motivation to learn and master the underlying soft skills that were once developed through sustained practice. AI enables students to produce results through accurate prompting, potentially bypassing deep learning processes and long-term skill cultivation. A central issue addressed in this study is the absence of formal institutional regulation, as UIR currently provides no written guidelines defining acceptable limits of AI assistance. This regulatory gap introduces uncertainty regarding ethical boundaries, academic honesty, and the authenticity of student-produced work. To deepen the analysis, the research compares two user groups: students enrolled in the Artificial Intelligence course, who receive structured academic instruction, and autodidactic users who adopt AI tools independently without theoretical grounding. Using a qualitative research design, data will be gathered through interviews, observation, and document analysis to uncover student motivations, usage patterns, ethical perceptions, and projected long-term effects on skill development. The findings are expected to contribute to scholarly discourse on AI literacy in higher education, offer critical recommendations for policy formulation, and provide a foundation for designing balanced AI integration strategies that maintain innovation while safeguarding competence-based learning.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Academic Support Tools, Soft Skill Acquisition, Communication Students, Institutional Policy, Academic Integrity, AI Literacy, Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into higher education has brought about profound transformations in academic practices, learning processes, and knowledge production. AI-driven tools such as text generators, automated design platforms, and intelligent editing systems are increasingly utilized by students to support academic tasks that were previously dependent on extensive manual practice and cognitive engagement. While these technologies offer significant benefits in terms of efficiency, accessibility, and productivity, they simultaneously raise critical

concerns regarding the nature of learning, skill acquisition, and the preservation of essential human competencies within academic environments (Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019).

In contemporary higher education, AI is rarely positioned as a replacement for formal learning but rather as a support tool that assists students in completing assignments, organizing ideas, and accelerating production processes. This supportive role, however, is not pedagogically neutral. Several scholars argue that the increasing reliance on AI systems may subtly reshape students' cognitive habits, encouraging shortcut-based learning and reducing engagement with deep learning processes that traditionally foster critical thinking, creativity, and reflective problem-solving (Boden, 2016; Holmes, Bialik, & Fadel, 2019). These concerns become particularly salient in academic disciplines where learning outcomes are closely tied to practical competence and experiential skill development.

Communication Studies represents one such discipline in which the impact of AI-assisted academic practices warrants closer scrutiny. As a field grounded in applied skills such as scriptwriting, media production, visual design, editing, and narrative construction Communication Studies emphasizes process-oriented learning through repeated practice, critical feedback, and creative exploration. The emergence of AI tools capable of generating scripts, designing layouts, and assisting in audio-visual editing introduces a fundamental pedagogical tension: students may achieve acceptable or even high-quality outputs without fully engaging in the learning processes traditionally required to master these competencies (Kember, 2016; Buckingham, 2015).

Existing literature on AI in education has largely focused on issues of efficiency, learning outcomes, and user satisfaction, often employing quantitative approaches to measure performance improvements or task completion speed (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Chen, Xie, Zou, & Hwang, 2020). While such studies provide valuable insights into the instrumental benefits of AI, they tend to underexplore the experiential and interpretive dimensions of AI use particularly how students themselves perceive the impact of AI on their learning motivation, skill development, and academic integrity. Moreover, relatively little attention has been paid to the implications of AI usage for soft skill acquisition, despite widespread acknowledgment that skills such as creativity, critical thinking, media literacy, and problem-solving are central to the mission of higher education in the digital era (OECD, 2018).

Soft skills occupy a critical position within Communication Studies curricula, functioning as both learning objectives and professional competencies. Unlike technical knowledge, soft skills are cultivated through sustained engagement, trial-and-error learning, and reflective practice. Scholars have warned that overreliance on automation technologies may weaken students' intrinsic motivation to engage in these formative processes, potentially leading to a form of cognitive dependency in which AI systems mediate not only task execution but also decision-making and creative judgment (Carr, 2010; Selwyn, 2016). This concern aligns with broader debates in educational philosophy regarding the balance between technological assistance and human agency in learning environments.

Another underexplored dimension in current scholarship concerns the ethical boundaries of AI usage in academic contexts. While many universities in the Global North have begun developing institutional guidelines to regulate acceptable AI-assisted practices, a significant number of higher education institutions particularly in developing countries lack formal policies addressing AI use in coursework and assessment (Williamson & Eynon, 2020). In such contexts, students are often left to

negotiate ethical boundaries individually, relying on personal interpretations of academic honesty and acceptable assistance. This regulatory absence creates ambiguity regarding where legitimate support ends and academic misconduct begins, especially when AI-generated outputs closely resemble original student work.

Indonesia provides a compelling context for examining these issues. As a rapidly developing country with expanding access to digital technologies, Indonesian universities are increasingly exposed to global trends in AI adoption while simultaneously facing structural and regulatory challenges. Universitas Islam Riau (UIR), as a private higher education institution with a growing Communication Faculty, reflects this broader condition. AI tools are widely accessible to students and frequently used to support academic activities, yet formal institutional guidelines governing AI usage remain limited. This situation positions UIR as a strategic case for exploring how students navigate AI-assisted learning in the absence of explicit regulatory frameworks.

This study aims to investigate the impact of AI as a support tool on academic activities and soft skill acquisition among Communication Faculty students at Universitas Islam Riau. Employing a qualitative research design, the study explores how students utilize AI in completing academic tasks, how they perceive its influence on their learning motivation and skill development, and how they interpret ethical boundaries related to AI usage. By foregrounding students' experiences and interpretations, this research seeks to move beyond instrumental evaluations of AI effectiveness and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of AI's pedagogical implications.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it extends existing literature on AI in education by focusing on Communication Studies as a practice-oriented discipline where soft skills are central to learning outcomes. Second, it offers empirical insights from a Global South context that remains underrepresented in AI-in-education research. Third, it provides a critical foundation for institutional policy development by illuminating how students negotiate AI usage in the absence of formal guidelines. In doing so, this study responds to growing calls for more reflective, ethically informed approaches to AI integration in higher education.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in an interpretive paradigm. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for examining how students subjectively experience, interpret, and negotiate the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an academic support tool within their learning practices. Rather than measuring AI effectiveness in terms of performance outcomes, this research seeks to understand the meanings students assign to AI usage, its perceived influence on motivation and skill acquisition, and their interpretations of ethical boundaries in the absence of formal institutional regulation.

The study adopts an exploratory and comparative design, enabling an in-depth examination of similarities and differences between two distinct groups of AI users within the same academic context. This design facilitates a nuanced understanding of how formal academic exposure to AI shapes students' learning behaviors compared to autodidactic adoption of AI tools.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Communication, Universitas Islam Riau (UIR), Indonesia. UIR was selected as a strategic case due to its increasing integration of AI tools in academic activities and the absence of written institutional guidelines regulating AI usage in coursework and assessment.

Participants consisted of eight undergraduate Communication Studies students selected through purposive sampling. The sampling criteria required participants to be actively enrolled students, have experience using AI tools to support academic tasks, and represent one of two user categories:

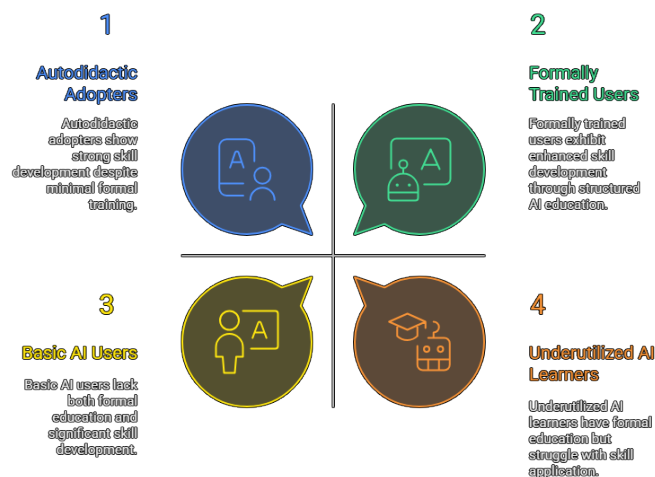
- **Formally trained users** (n = 4): students enrolled in the Artificial Intelligence course, where AI is introduced through structured academic instruction and theoretical grounding.
- **Autodidactic users** (n = 4): students who independently adopted AI tools without formal coursework or institutional guidance.

This purposive selection ensured information-rich cases capable of providing deep insight into AI-supported learning practices. The sample size aligns with qualitative research standards that prioritize depth of understanding over statistical generalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined how Artificial Intelligence (AI) functions as an academic support tool among Communication Studies students by comparing two distinct groups: students who completed the AI Communication course (formally trained users) and students who adopted AI autodidactically without formal instruction. The findings demonstrate that while AI usage is pervasive across both groups, formal AI education fundamentally reshapes learning orientation, ethical reasoning, and soft skill development. AI does not exert a uniform influence rather, its pedagogical impact is mediated by institutional instruction and epistemic awareness.

Impact of AI Education on Student Development



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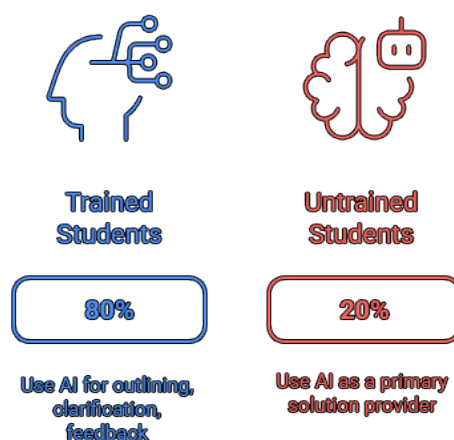
1. Patterns of AI Use: Universality of Adoption, Divergence of Purpose

Both groups reported frequent and routine use of AI for academic tasks, including summarizing theoretical materials, structuring papers, generating ideas, and assisting with content creation. Across interviews, AI was consistently framed as a time-saving mechanism that reduced cognitive and logistical burdens associated with coursework.

However, critical differences emerged in how AI was positioned within the learning process. Students without formal AI training tended to use AI as a primary solution provider, often relying on it to generate answers, explanations, or even complete drafts. In contrast, students who completed the AI Communication course more frequently described AI as a supportive pre-writing and ideation tool, used for outlining, clarification, or feedback rather than substitution.

This distinction reflects what Selwyn (2019) describes as the difference between instrumental automation and reflective augmentation. While both groups benefit from efficiency, formally trained students demonstrate greater awareness of AI's epistemic limitations.

AI Usage for Academic Tasks



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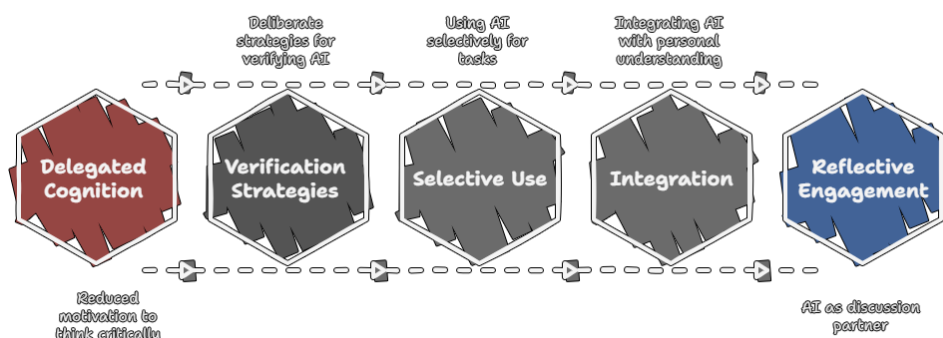
2. Learning Orientation: Delegated Cognition vs Reflective Engagement

Among students without the AI Communication course, a strong tendency toward delegated cognition was observed. Several participants acknowledged that they no longer attempted to understand concepts independently before consulting AI, particularly for theoretical or analytical assignments. AI effectively replaced initial cognitive effort, resulting in what participants themselves described as reduced motivation to think critically.

By contrast, students with formal AI education displayed more reflective engagement. Although they also admitted situational dependence especially under deadline pressure they articulated deliberate strategies for verification, selective use, and integration with personal understanding. AI was framed as a “discussion partner” or “second opinion” rather than a cognitive authority.

This finding supports Carr's (2010) argument that digital tools reshape thinking habits, but also demonstrates that educational intervention can moderate this effect. Formal instruction appears to preserve learner agency by reinforcing metacognitive awareness.

Preserving Learner Agency with AI Education



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3. Soft Skill Development: Divergent Trajectories

Writing and Academic Expression

Both groups reported improvements in writing mechanics, such as grammar, structure, and coherence. However, untrained users were more likely to admit copying or paraphrasing AI-generated text, sometimes using additional AI tools to mask authorship. This practice risks superficial learning and weakens long-term writing competence.

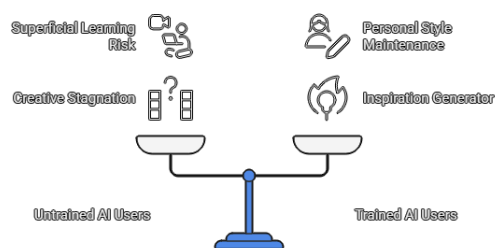
Conversely, trained users emphasized maintaining personal writing style and learning from AI feedback. This aligns with Buckingham's (2015) argument that digital tools can support literacy development when integrated pedagogically rather than used as replacements.

Creativity and Design

Creativity emerged as an ambivalent domain across both groups. AI-assisted brainstorming and design ideation were widely perceived as beneficial. However, untrained users more frequently reported creative stagnation due to overreliance, whereas trained users framed AI as an inspiration generator that still required human refinement.

These findings resonate with Boden's (2016) distinction between combinational creativity (which AI can support) and transformational creativity (which remains human-centered).

AI's Impact on Soft Skills: Training vs. Untrained



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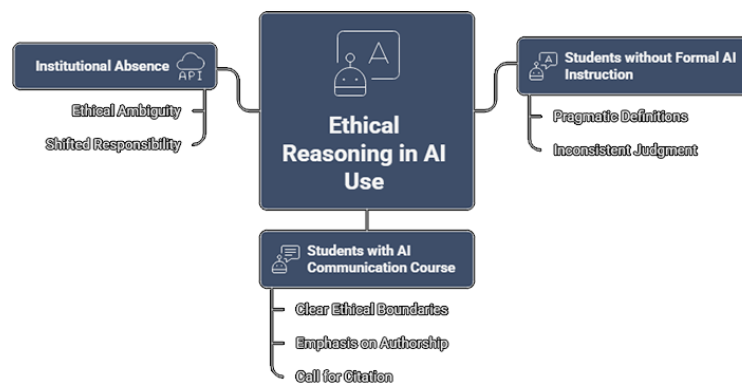
4. Ethical Reasoning and Academic Integrity

The most pronounced contrast between groups emerged in ethical reasoning. Students without formal AI instruction generally defined ethical AI use pragmatically, often relying on vague principles such as “not 100% AI” or “as long as the lecturer allows it.” Ethical judgment was individualized and inconsistent.

In contrast, students with the AI Communication course articulated clearer ethical boundaries, emphasizing authorship, originality, transparency, and the necessity of human contribution. Many explicitly called for citation of AI assistance and institutional regulation.

Despite this awareness, both groups reported the absence of clear university-wide AI policies, resulting in ethical ambiguity. This confirms Williamson and Eynon’s (2020) observation that institutional silence shifts ethical responsibility onto students, often without sufficient guidance.

Ethical Reasoning in AI Use Among Students



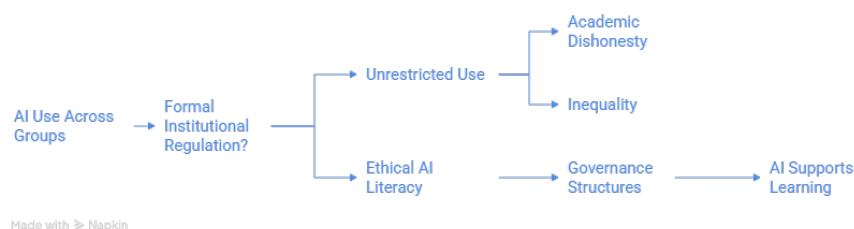
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5. Institutional Absence and Its Pedagogical Consequences

Across both groups, the lack of formal institutional regulation was identified as a critical issue. Students without training experienced this absence as permission for unrestricted use, while trained students perceived it as a structural risk that could normalize academic dishonesty and inequality.

This finding highlights that ethical AI literacy cannot be sustained solely through individual awareness. As Holmes, Bialik, and Fadel (2019) argue, governance structures are essential to ensure that AI supports learning rather than undermines it.

Impact of Institutional Regulation on AI Use

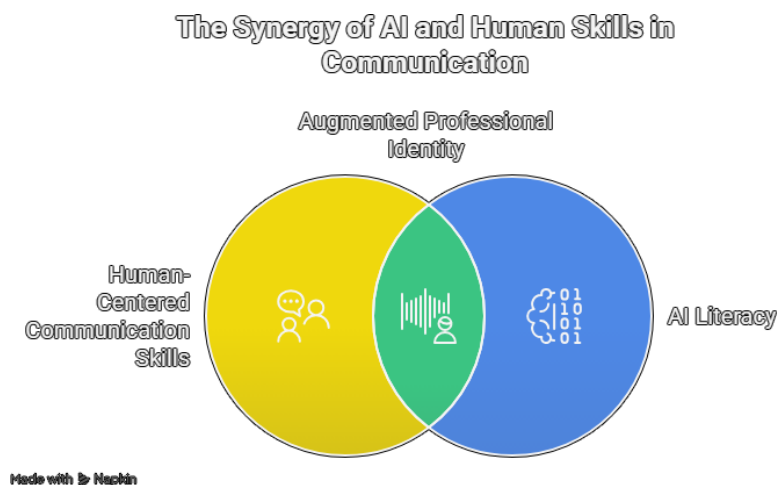


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6. Professional Identity and Employability

Both groups viewed AI literacy as essential for future employability, particularly in communication-related industries. Importantly, neither group believed AI would replace Communication Studies professionals. Instead, students emphasized that human judgment, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence remain irreplaceable.

However, trained students articulated a more integrated professional identity, envisioning AI as an augmentation tool embedded within human-centered expertise. This suggests that formal AI education contributes not only to academic practice but also to professional self-concept formation.



Integrated Discussion

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that AI's educational impact is not technologically deterministic but pedagogically mediated. While AI accelerates academic productivity across all users, its effects on cognition, ethics, and skill development diverge sharply depending on formal educational intervention.

Students without structured AI education are more vulnerable to cognitive delegation, ethical ambiguity, and surface learning. In contrast, students who complete the AI Communication course develop reflective AI literacy characterized by metacognitive control, ethical awareness, and balanced skill development.

These results support broader scholarship arguing that AI should be integrated into higher education through intentional pedagogy rather than passive tolerance (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Scholarly Contribution

1. This study contributes to international AI-in-education discourse by:
2. Empirically distinguishing instrumental vs reflective AI use in Communication Studies
3. Demonstrating the pedagogical value of formal AI literacy education
4. Revealing how institutional policy absence amplifies ethical and cognitive risks

The findings underscore the necessity of curriculum-based AI education and institutional regulation to ensure that AI enhances rather than compromises competence-based learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an academic support tool on learning practices and soft skill acquisition among Communication Studies students by comparing formally trained users those who completed an AI Communication course and students who adopted AI through autodidactic means. The findings demonstrate that while AI usage has become ubiquitous in academic contexts, its pedagogical implications are neither uniform nor technologically deterministic. Instead, the educational impact of AI is fundamentally shaped by the presence or absence of structured instruction and institutional governance.

The results reveal that students without formal AI education tend to adopt AI instrumentally, often delegating core cognitive processes such as interpretation, synthesis, and explanation to AI systems. This pattern contributes to surface learning, increased dependency, and ethical ambiguity, particularly in the absence of clear institutional guidelines. In contrast, students who completed the AI Communication course exhibited more reflective and controlled AI usage. Formal instruction fostered epistemic awareness, ethical sensitivity, and metacognitive regulation, enabling students to integrate AI as a supportive tool rather than a cognitive replacement.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that AI does not inherently erode soft skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and writing competence. Rather, AI reshapes the conditions under which these skills are developed. When used reflectively and pedagogically framed, AI can enhance ideation, improve writing quality, and support creative exploration. Conversely, when used without guidance, AI risks diminishing intellectual effort and weakening long-term skill formation. This distinction underscores the critical role of curriculum design in mediating AI's educational effects.

The findings also highlight a significant institutional gap. Despite students' growing reliance on AI, the absence of formal, written policies governing AI usage creates ethical uncertainty and shifts responsibility entirely to individual learners. This regulatory vacuum not only normalizes inconsistent practices but also undermines academic integrity and equity. Students with formal AI education expressed a strong demand for institutional guidelines, signaling that ethical AI literacy cannot be sustained through individual awareness alone.

From a professional development perspective, both student groups perceived AI literacy as essential for future employability. However, formally trained students articulated a more integrated professional identity, positioning AI as an augmentation of human creativity, judgment, and communicative competence rather than a replacement. This finding suggests that AI education contributes not only to academic performance but also to the formation of adaptive, ethically grounded professional identities.

In conclusion, this study argues that the key question is no longer whether AI should be used in higher education, but how it should be taught, governed, and pedagogically integrated. Effective AI integration requires more than technological access; it demands curriculum-based AI literacy, ethical frameworks, and institutional regulation that align innovation with competence-based learning. Without such structures, AI risks becoming a shortcut that undermines educational depth. With intentional pedagogical design, however, AI can function as a powerful partner in fostering reflective, responsible, and future-ready communication professionals.

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