AI Dependence and Educational Transformation: Challenges and Opportunities for University Students in Addis Ababa University

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Abstract

Students could be motivated to join universities because of their personal desire or familial or community expectations. Their level of motivation at university might be one of the triggering factors to rely on artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Since its acceptance continues to grow these days, students are regularly utilising AI. Although AI is believed to enhance education, students feel that if not properly utilized, academic performance and job success may decline after graduation. This study examines how AI affects Addis Ababa University students' academic performance, commitment, and job readiness. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, selecting respondents based on inclusion criteria. The interview guide aimed to capture narratives that were thematically analyzed. In this qualitative study, 6 instructors and 28 undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University College of Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities took part. The results indicated that students use AI mainly for assignments, to find answers to their questions, and as a personal advisor in their regular activities. Relying heavily on AI combined with optimistic expectations for future job prospects reduced students' commitment to their studies by causing them to ignore course readings and reference materials, which will also have an impact on their educational performance and knowledge acquisition. The study recommends that policymakers and educators should develop culturally sensitive strategies to prepare students for leadership in an AI-driven economy.

Keywords: Addis Ababa University, AI, academic performance, commitment, job readiness

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Introduction

According to the World Bank (2023), the demand for university education is declining around the world. Rising tuition costs, the availability of alternative learning options, shifting demands in the labour market, and changes in public perceptions of the value of higher education are often quoted as the major reasons (Vieriu & Petrea, 2025). Hence, this change is causing fewer students to join universities. Similar problems are being faced by African countries due to shifting skill demands, limited access to high-quality education, and economic concerns. To address this challenge, higher education must adopt new strategies considering the current needs. Therefore, the educational curriculum should be redesigned in line with employment trends (OECD, 2023).

Education used to be regarded as a key to obtaining employment and enhancing one's quality of life. Currently, education's immediate benefits have diminished; however, parents still put in a lot of effort and money to help their children succeed in their education (Francis et al., 2025). African countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa also hold similar beliefs, viewing education as crucial to economic mobility. In most African countries, issues like underemployment, unemployment, and mismatched skills are becoming more prevalent (World Bank, 2022). The very long tradition that dictates education ensures a prosperous future is currently in question (Mukhamedkarimova & Umurkulova, 2025). Therefore, this situation calls for reexamining existing job policies and educational strategies throughout the continent (World Bank, 2022).

Higher unemployment rates, social unrest, and slow economic growth could all be exacerbated in African nations because of AI. At the same time, the majority of the population in most African countries is young and jobless (African Development Bank, 2023). If AI takes over the limited jobs available, existing problems in Africa could worsen. Rapid adoption of AI without adequate reskilling could worsen unemployment and underemployment problems by leaving many young workers unprepared (Arowosegbe et al., 2024; ILO, 2022). So far, the job opportunities created by AI in the African situation are not comparable to its negative effects on the job market. It seems a must for African countries to strategically invest in entrepreneurship, education, and vocational training to help young people acquire the skills necessary to succeed in AI-driven economies. Hence, technological advancements can generate opportunities rather than escalating inequality and social instability (Mukhamedkarimova & Umurkulova, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

Like other African countries, graduate unemployment is becoming a bigger concern in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, there is a disparity between the growing number of educated people and the availability of employment opportunities. Furthermore, because of their low pay, which does not cover basic needs, in Ethiopia, government jobs, once thought to be secure and desirable, have become undesirable and a last resort. Nowadays, in Ethiopia, many recent graduates are looking for alternative sources of income other than being a government employee (ILO, 2023).

According to UNICEF (2021), about 62% of Ethiopia's population is under 25 years old, making it a country of youth and children. A large number of these youths are enrolled in elementary, secondary, and university education. Investments in digital infrastructure and education are necessary in Ethiopia to fully utilise the potential of young Ethiopians. Like many countries worldwide, the percentage of people with internet access increased rapidly, reaching about 19% in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). Learning and students' behaviour have changed as a result of the spread of smartphones and reasonably priced internet data plans (Stöhr & Malmström, 2024; World Bank, 2021). These days, the accessibility of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools is also starting to influence Ethiopian students. According to ITU (2022), offering access to global knowledge and new educational resources, AI tools have become students' favourite with their information-rich and connected environment.

Since AI tools are accessible and convenient, Ethiopian students are increasingly using them for homework and assignments (OECD, 2022). There are claims that reliance on AI tools can impact academic integrity and limit analytical and critical reading abilities (Aguado-García et al., 2025; Alshammari et al., 2025). Students often rely heavily on AI-generated responses instead of using reference materials and course modules (Heck et al., 2023; Vieriu & Petrea, 2025). This dependence may result in a decreased dedication to independently reading, comprehending, and synthesising information (Liu & Wang, 2022; Stöhr & Malmström, 2024).

Ethiopia's education system seems at risk of producing graduates with rudimentary knowledge if they are allowed to rely heavily on AI without adequate integration and critical engagement. If it is not addressed ahead of time, students might not have the in-depth knowledge required to solve challenging issues and lead to innovation (Alshammari et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2023). Upcoming professionals may have fewer skills as a result of this knowledge gap. Hence, this could cause employers to look for other alternatives to handle their daily routines. This change could shift the emphasis from traditional expertise to AI-driven skills, which can be handled by a few individuals (Singer-Freeman et al., 2025; World Economic Forum, 2022). AI automates repetitive tasks and reduces employment opportunities for those with limited critical thinking (Zhai et al., 2024). Therefore, job displacement by AI may be the result. Striking the balance to equip graduates to be knowledgeable and tech-savvy might prevent AI from jeopardising employment prospects (OECD, 2022).

Many believe that in Ethiopia, students' motivation for education is decreasing over time. This could be a result of job scarcity and economic uncertainty. Higher education is no longer the sole provider of opportunities for a bright future. The rise of AI exacerbates this decline in motivation. It also creates doubt about the value of traditional skills and graduates' employment prospects (Noroozi et al., 2025). AI's integration into various industries may affect students' performance and abilities. This may also then reduce their motivation to learn (Johnston et al., 2024). This could be the right time to exert effort on curriculum revision, technology-aligned skill development, and employment-enhancing policies (UNESCO, 2022).

The few existing studies in Ethiopia focused on the extent of AI use and its accessibility; however, the lived experience of students in relation to AI use and its influence on their education in Ethiopia is an area that requires research. Therefore, the current study aims to illuminate the experiences of students on growing dependence on AI and the influences on their education and preparedness for the labour market. This study also examines how the students' motivation to learn influences the utilisation of AI tools. To understand the perspectives of teachers about AI's influence on students, the study included teachers' experiences and expectations.

Methods

In order to examine the influence of Ethiopia's students' growing reliance on AI on educational quality and expected graduates' employability, a descriptive qualitative study was used. This study also assesses whether applying AI improves or deteriorates students' motivation and practical skills. There were 6 (2 females and 4 males) teachers and 28 students (16 females and 12 males) purposively selected students who participated in this study. Teachers who had encountered challenges in their course assignments and exams in relation to AI use were identified, as they were presented with those cases at the departmental and college-level meetings. With the recommendation of respective student representatives, 67 students were approached for an interview; only 28 of them were interviewed since they fulfilled the inclusion criteria, including admitting regular use of AI tools. The number of both female and male student participants was decided based on the diversity of their responses, and the female student percentage in the college during data collection (2024/25 Academic Year) was 62.3% of the total student population. The interview was concluded after involving 28 student participants, as data saturation had been reached. The inclusion criteria were being third- and fourth-year students at Addis Ababa University College of Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities, active use of AI, and their willingness to participate. The College of Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities was purposefully selected because the overreliance on AI use among students was repeatedly mentioned in meetings and other academic discussions, as witnessed by the author. During the data collection period, bachelor's students from the departments of Social Work, Political Science and International Relations, and Geography participated in the study since these departments had students. These inclusion criteria were developed since the purpose of the study was to understand the experience of students who had more experience using AI and its influence on their student life, rather than looking at the extent of the problem among the student population. The study also intended to shed light on how AI influences education, skill development, and job readiness in Ethiopia.

Data were collected from students using in-depth interviews. The students were approached first and asked if they were using AI tools on a regular basis. Only those who admitted to using the AI tool participated in the interview. The interview guide included items on

students' reasons for joining the university, their future aspirations, what purpose they use AI for, its advantages and disadvantages, how it affected their learning, and what they would advise their peers about AI use. Having a key informant guide, teachers were interviewed on student motivation trends, influencing factors, their opinions on students utilising AI, observed advantages and disadvantages, and the overall effect of AI on students' learning and employability.

Interviews with students lasted an average of 53 minutes, while interviews with teachers lasted 78 minutes. Students' interviews were conducted on campus at venues chosen by the students (empty classrooms, open spaces in the university, and in the office). Choosing the setting on their own fosters a relaxed atmosphere for conversation. All the teachers were interviewed in their offices. The interviews were conducted in Amharic to guarantee participants' clarity and ease of communication.

After carefully reading the translated and transcribed data several times, 98 sub-themes were developed manually from each storyline of respondents. The sub-themes were grouped into six major themes, generated by combining related sub-themes to create meaning from the data. The six themes are: "I am here to satisfy my parents," "I am here to have a degree," "Why should I stress myself," "AI is my best," "AI limited my learning," and "In the future, no one needs us; we will be replaced by AI." In order to highlight participants' viewpoints, their direct quotes were included. All participants gave their consent to participate. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study. Participants' rights, voluntary participation, and ethical integrity were communicated to all participants. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Findings

When we look at the backgrounds of the study participants, the student participants were from Social Work (11), Political Sciences and International Relations (11), and Geography (6). The teachers were composed of common course instructors and instructors in Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities. The instructors were five males and one female, whereas the student participants were 16 females and 12 males, with a mean age of 22.3 years. The following sections present the six themes identified from the participants' interviews.

Reason for being in the university: "I am here to satisfy my parents."

Among the student participants, some attended university mainly because of their parents' encouragement and expectations. They often feel they must pursue higher education due to their parents' efforts and hopes for their future. This obligation comes from cultural norms and family pressures. Hence, some students consider being in university a burden rather than something that facilitates their future. This is why students reflect that they are obliged to do it rather than out of real personal interest. To strengthen this claim, Demelash indicated,

> I hadn't had a plan to join a university …; hummm … it was my parents' passion that led me to join. You have no idea how they were acting when they knew my grade 12 result was enough to join a university. … you know, I am here to make them happy.

Joining the university to fulfil parental desire may affect students' learning and overall experience in the university. This situation shows that family influence can be considered as one of the determining factors in joining higher education in Ethiopia. This also raises questions regarding students' ability to make decisions in matters affecting their lives. There were student participants who admitted that they pursueed higher education because they wanted to make their parents proud. Molla said, "I was reluctant to join the university … You know, once my parents celebrated my grade 12 results, I didn't have any other option."

Some students admitted that parental expectations make them successful in their education. This motivation comes from cultural values that stress respect for parents and fulfilling family dreams. While this external motivation can lead to dedication, it can also cause stress if students focus on their parents' ambitions over their interests or passions. As Meseret indicated, " Once I joined the university, I started to think about my future … I had no idea what I wanted to do at first. … Now, I feel I have changed my attitude about university education."

Teachers often note that students have lacked motivation in recent years. They believe some students appear to be forced to be there. As reported by respondents who teach at the university, every year the proportion of students who lack motivation in their education is increasing. One teacher said,

> Some students don't act like students. They often skip class without any reason, … fail to take notes, and … sometimes browse social media during class despite the rules. It is frustrating to see … if they get dismissed or have their grades reduced, they don't seem to care.

There were also students who secured financial support from their parents by joining the university. However, some students who were struggling financially in their education, which affected their learning. Students who receive financial support often depend on their parents for tuition, daily expenses, living costs, and other personal needs. To secure and maintain financial support, they need to be in the university. Tsege mentioned that.

> Once, my brother told me that when you join the university, the family and relatives would be generous. … hahaha … I now realise this is true, … but you know I am worried that I might not get the same amount even with a job.

Reason for being in the university: "I am here to get a degree."

Even if it is reducing over time, having a university degree is considered one of the biggest accomplishments in life among Ethiopians, as in most countries in the world. For some participants, earning a degree is the main goal of joining the university. Hence, these groups

appreciate obtaining academic achievement, personal growth, and a pathway to future job opportunities. These students often see their time in higher education as a way to gain credentials that can boost their social status and connect them with professional networks. Tigist said,

> My parents are farmers … no one in my family has a university degree. Guess what, for me, simply having a degree is an accomplishment. … It could also help me in my career in political science and international relations.

Others focus on getting the degree at all costs. These students mainly emphasise finishing their coursework, passing exams, and securing their degree. Bedelu indicated that, "… I still want to finish my studies and earn my degree. I think having a degree is better than not having one."

Connecting educational achievement to social recognition and acceptance in their communities, students exert effort to be successful in the university. For some, a degree acts as social capital and provides access to better opportunities. However, for others, it is a means to gain respect from peers and family. Even as views about education change and some question its usefulness, many students hold onto the belief that their degree is still a vital credential for gaining societal respect. As Bogale indicated,

> From what I have heard from friends, it is better to be an unemployed graduate than to be unemployed without a degree. Community members sympathise with unemployed graduates and often blame the government for their situation. People assume that if you have a degree, you have done your part.

Some students believe having a degree gives them an edge over those who don't. This group feels superior in certain social or professional situations. They see education as a sign of success and ability. These students are not there to gain knowledge and excel in their field. They aim merely to pass their courses with any passing mark.

There were also those who thought that a degree can boost their confidence and social standing. There is also a claim that being educated makes young people desirable for romantic relationships. This belief is derived from societal norms that tie higher education to attractiveness and success. Tesfaye said that,

> Having a degree seems to make a positive impression on girls. It feels easier to impress them if you have a degree compared to not having one. People will see you as knowledgeable and reasonable. Our society admires educated individuals. An Amharic proverb goes, "Let the educated kill me."

Lack of Motivation: "Why should I stress myself?"

Fear of being unemployed and/ or successful after having their degree: some students were not motivated to learn. This group feels that after graduation, career opportunities might be limited. This belief makes them think that putting a lot of effort into university education may

not be worthwhile to secure a job. That viewpoint seems to lead some to take a relaxed or indifferent attitude toward their education. They focus only on non-academic activities while being in the university. Beza indicated that,

> Why should I stress myself, knowing that my degree might not guarantee a good future? I want to enjoy each day … and embrace my youth. As long as I graduate, … I don't want to feel stressed.

However, this mindset misses the valuable knowledge and skills gained through university education that can greatly improve future opportunities. Although the job market can be tough, acquiring knowledge and skills helps students build confidence. It could also help them to develop a well-rounded personality. Aboneh said, "Honestly, considering the situation in my country and the educated people living in poverty, I tell myself I shouldn't worry too much about my education."

The bonding and social relationships among the students were something overemphasised by some students in the university more than acquiring knowledge and skills. Believing that university life is a unique experience, some students prioritise social activities, entertainment, and personal enjoyment. Some students reported that they spend too much time on non-educational activities, like parties and socialising, which inversely affect their learning. As Maritu indicated,

> I made friends with students from wealthier backgrounds, … they exposed me to different entertainments, including parties. Now, I think I am enjoying my social life more than my education. Well … so far, I am surviving.

It is better to frequently remind students that university is not only about fun but also about building a solid foundation for their future. Such efforts can motivate students to prioritize their academic and career goals. Ayele indicated that,

> During my second and third years, I was heavily involved in parties and spending time with friends. This greatly affected my GPA … Nobody cares if you are focused on your education or not. If you don't perform, the system will fail you. I have a couple of Fs to clear.

The increase in the graduate unemployment rate in Ethiopia is often a point of discussion. Seeing graduates who are still looking for jobs can discourage current students. It creates uncertainty and doubt about the value of their education and their prospects. This ongoing job search among graduates may lead students to wonder if their hard work and investments in studies will pay off. These thoughts often cause anxiety and a lack of motivation. It can also reinforce that getting a degree doesn't guarantee immediate employment. As Burtikan indicated,

> In my neighbourhood, many graduates are unemployed. … since there is war in my birthplace, finding a job is tough. If you don't have relatives as I do in Addis Ababa, it is

> hard to live here and look for job opportunities. This situation makes me sad and stressed, affecting my educational performance.

To counteract this discouragement, universities and career services should stress the importance of gaining practical skills, internships, and networking during studies. They should also manage expectations and exert effort to facilitate a link to the job market. Encouraging students to focus on personal growth, resilience, and continuous learning can help them stay motivated. As one instructor indicated,

> Even if irregular, the university provides life skills development to support students. However, many students don't attend, and some leave the training halfway. Still, I believe the university should offer more life skills training. I often feel discouraged by students' lack of motivation and interest in their education.

Reliance on AI: "AI is my best."

The consensus among the student participants in this study was that the availability of AI makes their lives easier in the university. As they have indicated, currently, their respective teachers have started checking their work to see if it is generated by AI tools. However, they reported that AI has greatly changed how they complete assignments and homework. It allows them to produce work quickly. As Mestawit indicated,

> I don't think there is a student at this university who doesn't use AI, especially ChatGPT. If you do your assignment independently, instructors often find many mistakes in it. Nowadays, some instructors can easily spot assignments done using AI and may take disciplinary measures. So, you need to know first if the instructor will check for previous submissions.

Students might become overly dependent on technology instead of engaging deeply with the teaching materials provided by course instructors. I have started to lessen the value of assignments since nearly everyone submits AI-generated answers. The worst part is that when confronted, students don't even know what they submitted. I feel frustrated and unsure of how to handle it.

To make the most of AI while minimising drawbacks, educational institutions should guide ethical use and encourage students to use AI as a supporting tool for learning, analysis, and idea generation rather than a replacement for their efforts and understanding. Ultimately, AI in education offers opportunities for innovation along with challenges that need careful management to ensure it supports meaningful learning outcomes. According to one of the teachers,

> The university has a new AI policy. Along with others, I am not familiar with it yet. In the graduate program, theses and dissertations are checked to ensure they do not contain AI-

generated content or plagiarism. However, checking undergraduate assignments is tough because of the volume of tasks and courses.

Students take a couple of courses simultaneously and might have assignments submit for multiple courses. This often causes significant stress among students. Many see AI as a solution to manage their academic pressures. Therefore, students justified that AI tools help them to get some relief from their workload and reduce anxiety. As Weditu said,

> You might take six or seven courses each semester. In four or five of those, you could be required to complete one or more assignments. Often, the submission deadline falls at the end of the semester. So, in the rush to prepare for final exams while completing assignments, we often turn to ChatGPT.

The course instructors repeatedly mentioned that students become lazy in doing their course assignments, believing that they can produce them instantly using AI tools. Hence, students fail to get the required knowledge through reading reference materials to do their assignments. They believe that these new behaviours among the students are significantly affecting learning and critical thinking. As one of the course instructors indicated,

> I believe that access to AI makes students lazy. They seem hesitant to write even a single paragraph themselves. In some cases, some students hide their mobile phones during exams and use AI to answer their exam questions.

These days, when students seek answers, they increasingly prefer AI because of its speed, convenience, and broad access to information. AI tools let students get quick, detailed responses, often better than traditional methods like consulting textbooks or asking classmates, especially when time is tight. Alemitu said,

> I think I have read only two or three articles, in addition to the PowerPoint and lecture notes, in my three years at the university. AI simplifies my life. I got penalised only once for using AI. So far, I have received good marks on my assignments.

This shift shows a broader change in education, where digital and AI assistance have become part of the learning experience. However, this reliance on AI also raises concerns about students' depth of understanding, critical thinking, and independence in problem-solving. They may prefer quick answers instead of doing thorough research or reflecting on the material. As Selam indicated,

> Sometimes, I feel like I haven't learned what I should have since I do most of my assignments using AI. Honestly, if you ask me what I did in many of the assignments, I wouldn't be able to tell you. But at least it has helped me secure passing marks in my courses.

Students increasingly use AI for email communication and other conversations to improve clarity, professionalism, and efficiency. AI tools help draft, edit, and proofread emails, ensuring

the right tone and grammar. This makes it useful for formal or important messages. In daily engagements like messaging, chats, and discussions, which could be done virtually AI tools are identified as being in use. AI tools provide suggestions or summarise complex talks. Since AI makes students' communication smoother and less time-consuming, they prefer using it. According to Almaz,

> I can say that I do some form of texting or emailing all the time. As a university student, I have to minimise my mistakes. So I often use ChatGPT to correct and enhance my writing. The corrections and suggestions I always get from AI make me happy.

It is believed that technology like AI tools can help students express themselves better. However, there are also concerns regarding authenticity and personal engagement. University students are expected to develop genuine communication and critical skills rather than being someone who extracts everything from AI tools. Students should not see AI tools as replacements for developing their interpersonal skills and authentic voice. Universities should promote ethical and responsible AI use in communication.

Some students seek advice from AI on all aspects of their lives. Students' reliance on AI is because of convenience, accessibility, and perceived objectivity of digital assistants. When students fail to spend time learning from available references and course materials, they prefer AI instant support and tailored recommendations. AI tools provide data-driven insights to help students with complex academic inquiries. Students' reliance on AI increased when human guidance is limited or unavailable. According to Zenebech,

> I tell my friends that AI is my counsellor. Whenever I have something on my mind, I ask ChatGPT for advice. For various tasks, I turn to AI for its opinion. Surprisingly, it gives me comfort and confidence in what I am doing. I find myself feeling more at ease with ChatGPT than with people.

Failure to exploit references: "AI limited my learning."

For many years, textbooks and reference materials were very important elements for success and gaining a thorough understanding of the subject matter in higher education. Students are expected to read academic literature and be familiar with current knowledge through extensive readings. However, such engagements have decreased when students start shifting towards AI for quick answers and information. Hence, students' dependency on AI-generated responses without understanding the underlying concepts and critical thinking is increasing each day. Over time, this can hurt their ability to retain information and apply knowledge independently. Moreover, it will also affect their ability to develop intellectual curiosity. A teacher said that,

> I have noticed that these days, many students do not read reference materials and textbooks. They may glance at lecture notes but do most of their work using AI-generated

> information. … Sometimes, they even create fake data with AI's help. I worry that they won't have the necessary knowledge and skills once they graduate.

Even if students rely on AI tools at the same time, they are also worried about their knowledge acquisition. They often question themselves about whether they are capable and knowledgeable in their discipline. Abebech voiced this concern:

> Most of the time, I feel lost about what I should be getting out of my university experience. Thinking about it makes me feel hopeless. I rely on AI to get through university.

Educational institutions should devise a mechanism to enable students to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills during their stay in the university. These should enforce critical reading, note-taking, and self-explanation. Educational institutions also need to have clear policies for what purpose students can and can not use AI tools. Ultimately, the focus needs to be on helping students to build intellectual discipline and develop problem-solving skills that are vital for academic success and lifelong learning.

As it has been repeatedly mentioned by course instructors participating in this study, often students do not understand the content produced by AI for their assignments. They usually submit the information generated by AI tools without examining its content. This practice can weaken their learning process. Doing assignments only using AI could affect their opportunity to develop comprehension, analytical skills, and academic honesty. A teacher said that,

> I often ask my students to present their assignments. They usually just read what they submitted. When I pose simple questions about what they wrote, they often struggle to answer. Based on my experience, most of them do not know the content of their assignments. This mainly happens because they relied on AI to create them.

Students should focus on acquiring knowledge and demonstrating mastery of the subject matter based on their readings and critical reflection. If students lack critical engagement and simply produce information using AI tools, it could significantly affect their learning and understanding. As Dereje indicated,

> Sometimes, I read the assignments I create using AI. AI uses complex vocabulary that can be difficult to understand. I then stop reading and submit the work without fully grasping it, just waiting for the outcome. Occasionally, I might swap difficult words for simpler terms using Google Translate.

Peer influence is one of the factors that lead students to start and increase their use of AI tools. This practice might bring short-term gains rather than honing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. When peer influence is coupled with course instructors' reluctance to identify and take measures against those students who submit AI-generated assignments, more students could be attracted to the practice. As Mulu indicated,

> I used to advise fellow students not to generate assignments with tools like ChatGPT. I am not sure when I changed my mind, but I started using it regularly after seeing my friends earn better grades on their assignments. Now, I have even learned how to make my work feel more personal.

These days, among the students, it seems that success is measured based on grades instead of content mastery. Hence, rely heavily on AI as a shortcut promote a shallow learning mindset. Course instructors should stress the importance of authentic learning and develop assignments that require critical thinking and original thought. Students should be helped to understand the key concepts, rather than focusing on a shortcut. If students cultivate their academic integrity and deepen their engagement with the course material, their confidence in their capabilities might increase. Hence, their fear of their future and job prospects might be reduced.

Due to their reliance on AI tools for almost everything, students are increasingly worried that after graduation, they may struggle to create work-related texts independently. They fear that this reliance on AI may prevent them from developing essential writing. Therefore, they fear that they might not fit into professional environments. As Firhewot indicated,

> Sometimes, I wonder how I will survive in the job market after graduation if I cannot write a report on my own. What will happen if my employers discover that I depend on AI for my work? Honestly, I have no idea what I will do in the future. I lack confidence in my abilities.

Such students' anxiety arises from suspecting that their capacity for original thought and effective communication is weakened due to their dependency on AI. There is a need to balance AI assistance with traditional skill-building to help students build confidence in their ability to produce high-quality work.

Being helpless, "In the future, no one needs us, rather replaced by AI."

With their experience in using AI tools, students are becoming more aware that AI can handle many tasks beyond its capacity. This, in turn, creates concerns among students that employers may prefer AI systems over hiring graduates. Because of this thought, students feel anxious about their future job prospects. When this fear is coupled with their limited critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal communication, it makes them more frustrated. According to Meberatu,

> During my time at university, I often find myself questioning whether employers still need us. If they can easily generate everything with AI, what will our role be in the future? I fear that we might be replaced by AI. Even though I have relied on it, I sometimes wish it didn’t exist.

Helping students develop skills that complement AI and enhancing their human abilities might help them work alongside AI. However, students fear that this will intensify when

Ethiopian government officials frequently discuss integrating AI into the workforce. This is considered among students as AI will take over their future jobs. This creates fears of widespread unemployment and job insecurity. Moreover, students worry that AI tools might make their skills irrelevant. Bekelech said that,

> Government discussions about using AI in various sectors worry me. If the government supports AI taking on more jobs, what will happen to us? What will our worth be? I feel concerned for my generation.

Students would like to see the potential for new job creation, improved efficiency, and the rise of new industries as the focus of the government. Moreover, if students focus on creativity, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking, which AI does not fully replicate, they could still be desirable. The repeatedly mentioned concern was for those activities, like handling research data, which employers need graduates for. According to Weditu,

> For instance, why would someone need an expert to analyse research data? I have done it many times. You just input the data and specify the format you need to get results from AI.

Embracing continuous learning and skill development is a crucial element for graduates. They also need to adjust themselves to fast technological changes. If they do this, they can find success in roles where human judgment, empathy, and innovation are required, even while using AI tools.

Discussion

Students' motivation and engagement are determining factors in accomplishing a university education. However, as Johnton et al. (2024) indicated, student motivation to join universities is declining. Similarly, a lack of motivation among the students was witnessed in this study. The analysis of Addis Ababa University College of Social Sciences and Humanities students' motivations for attending university indicated that they are driven by factors such as parental expectations, social status, or the pursuit of degrees as symbols of achievement. When students' motivation is derived from external factors, it often leads to decreased engagement and active participation in their education. The change in learning behaviour and motivation has also been witnessed in different countries, as it has been documented in Stöhr and Malmström (2024), Liu and Wang (2024), and the World Bank (2021). This study documented that heavily relying on AI tools among students has become a trend at Addis Ababa University.

External factors contribute to low motivation, intensified by prevailing economic instability and high unemployment rates. The increase in unemployment rate among graduates is increasing globally (Ahai et al., 2023). A similar scenario also exhibited among Ethiopian graduates. Hence, eventually, students become hopeless, and their perceived value of higher education diminishes. With low motivation and engagement, students would like to survive in the university and graduate. To pursue their existence and graduation, one of the major means they utilised is AI tools.

The growing dependency of university students on AI tools is evident in this study. This dependency offers both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. AI tool dependency among students has become a global trend (Alshammari et al., 2025). Among the reasons students at Addis Ababa University utilise AI are completing assignments, obtaining ready-made answers, and seeking advice in their daily routines. They also use AI tools in their email communication and social media chats. However, this heavy reliance on AI is affecting their critical thinking and originality. The negative effect of dependency on AI tools was also documented by Aguado-Garcia et al. (2025). AI reliance makes students tend to favour easy solutions. This, in turn, reduces their engagement with learning materials. It is important not to undermine the development of essential skills, problem-solving, and independent learning as part of the university education.

These days, students' acquisition of knowledge and skills is challenged by irresponsible AI use. The way they utilise AI-generated content and quick answers can result in shallow learning. Irresponsible use of AI affects academic integrity and overall learning in the university (OECD, 2022). This is demonstrated by students submitting work they do not fully understand or cannot defend. Eventually, this sort of practice and experience hampers their ability to critically analyse information, synthesise ideas, and retain knowledge. Lacking academic integrity and professional competence will affect students' future job prospects (Singer-Freeman et al., 2025). When students' critical skills and analytical capabilities are not up to expectations, coupled with concerns about AI's role in job displacement, it can, in turn, create frustration among students. Later on, this trend might undervalue human skills such as creativity, emotional intelligence, and ethical judgment. Hence, it generates anxiety among students about their future employability in an increasingly automated economy.

People in the government of Ethiopia, reflecting the narratives, emphasised automation and job replacement. As the World Bank (2023) report indicated, the government is expected to devise a mechanism to accommodate its workforce. However, if the government emphasises automation and job replacement, it will fuel fears of unemployment and students' instability. Students worry that AI may replace them and intensify the existing unemployment among graduates. This leads to a sense of helplessness and diminished confidence in students' prospects. Considering the existing trend, policymakers and educational institutions are called upon to develop strategies that promote the ethical and responsible use of AI. If promising initiatives are implemented, students may begin to use AI responsibly in their education and careers. This, in turn, can foster resilience and innovation rather than frustration.

Conclusion

There are different viewpoints on utilising AI tools among students. However, this study indicated that there is a need to increase students' motivation and engagement in education while using AI responsibly and ethically. AI tools can be used as sources of information, to locate existing resources, and to obtain additional information to support students' learning. Therefore,

higher education must be carefully managed to balance AI benefits with the need to foster intrinsic motivation, critical thinking, and cultural relevance. In this way, it can be used to enhance students' education rather than impeding their learning. Policymakers and educators need to work to create culturally sensitive strategies to prepare students who will be capable of leading an AI-driven economy.

Limitations

` It is not possible to make generalisations based on this study to Ethiopian university students since this is a qualitative study based on one college at Addis Ababa University. However, this study could serve as an entry point to study the area further. This study didn't show the level of students who have heavily relied on AI, since students participated in the study after admitting they were using AI tools in their education.

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