

19th MULTI CONFERENCE ON COMPUTER SCIENCE AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

MCCSIS

LISBON, PORTUGAL

23 - 25 JULY

2025

PROCEEDINGS of the International Conferences

e-Learning and Digital Learning 2025

Sustainability, Technology and
Education 2025

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
E-LEARNING AND DIGITAL
LEARNING 2025

AND

SUSTAINABILITY,
TECHNOLOGY
AND EDUCATION 2025

part of the

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Organised by



international association for development of the information society

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Volume Editors:

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Computer Science and Information Systems Series Editors:

Piet Kommers and Pedro Isaías

Associate Editor: Luís Rodrigues

ISBN: 978-989-8704-68-9

USE OF GENERATIVE AI BY PHD STUDENTS: IMPACT ON PRODUCTIVITY AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is constantly changing, especially with the growing use of generative artificial intelligence by doctoral students. This reality has led to significant changes in the way research activities are planned, organized, and executed, directly influencing productivity and skills development. This article aims to analyze the impact of the use of generative AI on productivity and the acquisition of skills by doctoral students at a university in Mozambique. The research, exploratory and descriptive, was based on the application of a questionnaire to all students on two postgraduate courses at a higher education institution. Sixty-two responses were validated, allowing for a robust analysis of the data. The results indicate that the use of AI has significantly changed the way students plan and carry out their research tasks, facilitating productivity. However, concerns were also identified about a possible over-reliance on these tools. In addition, participants recognized that certain skills were particularly impacted by the use of AI. Despite the risks, students reported a balance between productivity gains and skills development, highlighting the importance of conscious and strategic use of AI in the academic context.

KEYWORDS

Academic Productivity, Doctoral Students, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Higher Education, Skills Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is currently undergoing a period of intense transformation, driven by the rapid advance of digital technologies. Among these innovations, the growing adoption of AI by doctoral students stands out, which has led to profound changes in the way research activities are designed, organized, and executed. This new technological reality introduces a dynamic that, while challenging consolidated academic practices, also opens space for the reconfiguration of pedagogical and scientific processes in universities.

The use of AI, especially in advanced training contexts, has been significantly changing how knowledge is produced and disseminated. AI tools are now widely used in scientific writing, data analysis, bibliographic review, and time management, among other tasks relevant to the academic path. However, this widespread adoption raises crucial questions: to what extent are these technologies contributing to student productivity? Are they promoting the development of skills essential to scientific research, or, on the contrary, are they generating forms of dependence and cognitive superficiality?

In this scenario, it is essential to understand the real impact of generative artificial intelligence on the training of researchers in higher education contexts, especially in countries where structural challenges coexist with the urgent need for educational innovation. This article, therefore, aims to analyze the effects of the use of generative artificial intelligence on the productivity and acquisition of skills by doctoral students at a university in Mozambique. The research adopted an exploratory and descriptive approach, using a questionnaire applied to students of two postgraduate programs at a higher education institution.

The article is organized into five parts. After this introduction, a brief review of the literature on the relationship between AI and academic practices is presented. Next, the methodology used to conduct the study is described. The fourth section is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the main results obtained. Finally, the conclusions and final reflections are presented, highlighting the challenges, potentialities, and implications of the use of AI in the training path of doctoral students.

2. PRODUCTIVITY AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS

The use of AI in education is expanding rapidly (Roos, 2018) and has been integrated into administration and teaching-learning processes (Chassignol *et al.*, 2018). This evolution, particularly of generative AI, has significantly transformed the higher education landscape, creating possibilities for research, scientific writing, and learning processes. Nalbant (2021) identifies a series of advantages of AI for education, namely: access to information, distance learning, personalization in education, global knowledge, student attendance detection, digitalization and environmental protection, removal of barriers, reduction of errors, carrying out challenging explorations, among others.

The growing adoption of AI in higher education, especially among PhD students, has led to profound changes in the way research activities are planned, organized, and executed.

Recent studies show that the use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, can significantly increase the productivity of postgraduate students. For example, one study found that, with proper instruction, the use of AI reduced writing time by 64.5% and improved the quality of texts (from a B+ to an A), especially benefiting students for whom English is not their first language (Usdan *et al.* 2024). This suggests a leveling effect and a facilitation of the academic production process.

Another example is a study published by MIT Technology Review that showed that writers who used ChatGPT took 40% less time to complete their tasks, and the texts produced received 18% higher grades compared to participants who did not use the tool (Camara, 2023; MIT Technology Review, 2025).

These results are corroborated by another study by MIT and Stanford, which indicates an increase of up to 14% in productivity and a reduction of 35% in task execution time among workers who used generative AI, with even more significant gains for less experienced workers (Pergentino, 2023). Such evidence reinforces the idea that AI facilitates the academic production process and contributes to improving the quality of work (MIT Technology Review, 2025).

Beyond these examples, the literature highlights that the impact of AI is not limited to productivity: there are also significant effects on skills development. A recent study introduced the concept of “critical literacy in generative AI,” which combines technical understanding, ethical awareness, and self-directed learning. PhD students who participated in micro curricula focused on this approach reported a significant transformation in the way they use AI: they moved from a skeptical stance to a more critical and strategic understanding, learning to create effective prompts, critically evaluate AI responses, and reflect on the writing process as knowledge creation (Palm, 2025).

Systematic reviews have identified six key areas in which AI offers significant contributions to academic research: idea generation and research project design; content structuring and development; synthesis of existing literature; data management; review and editing of texts; and support for compliance with ethical guidelines. These contributions highlight the potential of AI to offer comprehensive support throughout all stages of the scientific process, promoting gains in efficiency, rigor, and innovation (Khalifa and Albadawy, 2024).

However, despite the benefits, there are ongoing concerns that over-reliance on AI tools can compromise the development of essential skills such as critical thinking, creativity and intellectual autonomy (Aldulajjan and Almalky, 2025; Univeristy of London, 2025). Educational institutions such as City St George’s recommend the responsible and ethical use of AI, emphasizing that it should support — not replace — the development of a researcher’s capabilities. Use should be discussed with supervisors, and, where AI contributes to the final product, it should be appropriately acknowledged.

In short, recent literature points to a significant expansion in the use of AI in higher education, with applications ranging from administration to teaching-learning processes and scientific production. Generative AI, in particular, has transformed the way researchers, especially doctoral students, plan, organize, and execute their academic activities. Studies show that tools such as ChatGPT increase productivity, reduce writing time, and improve text quality, especially for students whose first language is not English. In addition to operational gains, AI also contributes to the development of skills such as critical literacy, combining technical, ethical, and reflective aspects. However, there are warnings about the excessive use of these tools, which can compromise essential cognitive skills.

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research objective initially formulated, we carried out exploratory and descriptive research. We analyzed the impact of using generative AI on productivity and the acquisition of skills by doctoral students at a university in Mozambique.

As a data collection tool, we applied a questionnaire survey to all the students in the two doctoral courses at the respective institution. The questionnaire has closed and open questions, which shows that it is a mixed instrument (quantitative and qualitative). The survey was administered using Google Forms, and the link was sent to all PhD students.

The sample consisted of 117 students from both courses. Of these, 62 responded to the survey with valid answers, which corresponds to a response rate of 52.99%.

The following table shows the relationship between the total number of individuals surveyed and the socio-economic variables (gender, age group, doctoral course, and year attended).

Table 1. Relationship between the total number of individuals surveyed and the socio-economic variables

Variables	n	%	Total n	Total %
Gender				
<i>Male</i>	53	85,50	62	100,00
<i>Female</i>	9	14,50		
Age group				
Under 25	0	0,00	62	100,00
25 to 29 years old	0	0,00		
30 to 34 years old	5	8,1		
35 to 39 years old	17	27,4		
40 years or older	40	64,5		
Doctoral course				
Doctoral course 1	28	45,2	62	100,00
Doctoral course 2	34	54,8		
Year attended				
1st year	21	33,9	62	100,00
2nd year	16	25,8		
3rd year	25	40,30		

Data collection took place between January 15 and February 15, 2025. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages) to identify trends in the use of AI and its impact on the productivity of doctoral students. As for the qualitative data, a content analysis was carried out to recognize patterns in the answers that would show how AI contributes to the development of skills in the field of academic research.

About ethical issues, the study ensured that informed consent was obtained from the participants, guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the information collected, by the institution's ethical guidelines.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The data collected provides a clear picture of the impact of AI on the research practices of doctoral students. Analysis of the results shows significant changes in the way these students plan and conduct their research activities, reflecting the growing incorporation of AI into their academic processes. The main findings are presented below, organized around three central dimensions: Organizing research with AI, ethics, and AI addiction and impact on skills development.

4.1 Organizing Research with AI

This category aims to understand how these technologies are being integrated into academic work routines, influencing efficiency, autonomy, and time management. It aims to analyze whether AI acts as a complement to traditional methodologies or whether it has caused a significant restructuring in students' research approach.

Changes in the planning and organization of tasks

The data shows that the majority of doctoral students (48,4%) consider that the use of AI has significantly changed the way they plan and organize their research tasks. This result indicates a clear and direct impact of AI on the structuring of academic work, suggesting that these tools are being actively and transformatively integrated into research routines.

In addition, 38,7% of respondents recognize changes, albeit to a moderate degree, which reinforces the idea that even among those who have not yet adopted AI in depth, there is already a perception of a positive or adaptive influence. Only 12,9% indicated that the use of AI had not caused any changes, which represents a negligible minority in the universe studied.

These data lead us to conclude that AI is indeed redefining research practices among doctoral students, promoting a reorganization of strategies for planning and carrying out tasks. The prevalence of positive responses, both significant and moderate, shows a trend of growing adoption and a potential for structural transformation in the way postgraduate students manage their academic careers.

Role of AI as a complement or substitute for the researcher's skills

The survey reveals that the majority of students believe that AI complements their skills, with 58,1% of respondents saying that AI helps to improve research work, without completely replacing the researcher's skills. This indicates that students recognize the value of AI as a useful tool that increases productivity and facilitates tasks, but without eliminating the need for essential human skills.

On the other hand, a smaller proportion of students (19,4%) believe that AI partially replaces researchers' skills, suggesting that, although it won't replace everything, AI can take over some functions previously done manually, such as data analysis or proofreading. Only 1,5% of participants see AI as capable of completely replacing the skills of the researcher.

On the other hand, 21,0% of students say that AI won't replace their skills, indicating that they still value the cognitive and creative skills that AI can't replicate.

Balance between increased productivity and skills development

Of the 62 doctoral students, 50,0% consider the use of AI to be "very balanced", stating that it increases productivity without compromising their skills. Another 29,0% find the balance "reasonable", recognizing efficiency gains but identifying gaps in the development of some skills. For 8,1%, the use of AI is "poorly balanced" because, although it helps productivity, it hinders the learning of essential skills. Only 3,2% rate the balance as "unbalanced", feeling that AI prioritizes productivity to the detriment of their academic and personal development. Finally, 9,7% still have no opinion on this impact.

These results show that half of the students enjoy the benefits of AI without seeing significant losses in their skills, while almost one in four (29,0%) perceive a trade-off between productivity and skills development. A minority (11,3%) express more severe concerns about the imbalance, indicating the need for usage practices that guarantee both efficiency and continuous learning.

4.2 Ethics and AI Addiction

This category explores the ethical dilemmas faced by doctoral students when using these tools and the risks associated with possible over-reliance. At the same time, it seeks to reflect on responsible and sustainable practices for integrating AI into advanced training, ensuring that the technology is used critically and consciously.

Ethical issues related to the use of AI in research

The results indicate that a considerable proportion of doctoral students (24,2%) faced significant ethical doubts when using AI in their research, while the majority (53,2%) reported having had these doubts to a moderate degree. These figures show that almost 78,0% of participants recognize some level of ethical questioning related to the use of AI, which demonstrates a growing awareness of the limits and responsibilities associated with the application of these tools in the academic context.

On the other hand, 21,0% of respondents said that the use of AI had no relevant ethical impact, which may indicate different levels of awareness of these issues, or even contexts of use where ethical dilemmas are less evident. A residual number (1,60%) mentioned that AI reduced their productivity, which, although a minority, suggests that, for some, the effort required to deal with ethical issues could compromise the fluidity of research work.

In terms of conclusions, the data points to the need to include the ethical dimension in the training of doctoral students, providing spaces for reflection and guidance on the responsible use of AI. The existence of doubts, albeit moderate, should not be undervalued, as it shows that students are questioning the impacts and limits of these technologies - an essential step towards their conscious and critical integration into the scientific process.

Possible over-reliance on AI tools

Of the 62 doctoral students, 27,4% say that AI often leads to excessive dependence, 54,8% see this risk in specific cases, and 17,7% consider it only a complement. These figures indicate that almost all students (82,2%) recognize some degree of dependence in the use of AI, although for the majority, this only occurs in specific situations. This suggests the need for clear guidelines for the conscious use of these tools, combined with training that reinforces the autonomy of the researcher and the development of critical skills without resorting solely to AI.

Strategies and recommendations for the responsible integration of AI in academic training

The growing adoption of AI tools in doctoral research poses the challenge of balancing efficiency gains with the preservation and development of critical skills. From the respondents' answers, a set of recommendations emerged that can guide the responsible integration of AI into advanced training:

Continuing education and practical training:

- Insert compulsory modules on AI into curricula, with workshops that teach everything from basic functionalities to advanced applications in research, writing, and data analysis;
- Offer regular refresher training on new AI tools and extensions.

Ethical policies and guidelines:

- Create an institutional code of conduct that defines limits on use, rules for citing automated tools, and penalties for inappropriate practices.
- Guarantee regular supervision and auditing, ensuring transparency and accountability in the research process.

Balanced use and support for autonomy:

- Encourage AI as an aid, not a substitute, highlighting the importance of maintaining critical thinking and independent reflective processes;
- Develop protocols that identify specific tasks where AI is recommended and points where manual or collaborative work is preferable.

Integration of specialized tools:

- Guide doctoral students in the selection and use of reference management software with AI plugins, assisted writing systems, and libraries for data analysis;
- Promote practical sessions to apply these tools to real research cases.

Encouraging debate and awareness:

- Organize seminars, study groups, and interdisciplinary forums dedicated to the ethical dilemmas, methodological possibilities, and impacts of AI in science;
- Include reflections on plagiarism, authorship, and validation of results produced with the help of AI.

The conscious adoption of AI in doctoral programs requires a multifaceted approach: continuous education, clear regulation, respect for intellectual autonomy, and constant dialogue on ethics and methodologies. With these practices, it is possible to maximize the transformative potential of AI while cultivating the critical and creative skills indispensable to the academic researcher.

4.3 Impact on Skills Development

This category investigates which skills have been most influenced, positively or negatively, by the use of AI, and how doctoral students perceive this influence on their educational and scientific path.

Skills most impacted by the use of AI

To understand the impact of AI on the development of academic and research skills, a Likert scale with three response options - “Improved”, “Had no impact”, and “Harmed” - was used to assess perceptions of different skills. Below are the main results in percentage terms, based on the responses collected.

- The majority of participants believe that AI has had a positive impact on scientific writing, with around 69,0% reporting improvements, while around 31,0% indicated that they had felt no impact at all.
- About critical thinking, around 63,0% recognized improvements, but around 34,0% saw no change, and a small minority (around 3,0%) pointed to negative impacts. This balance indicates that, although there is a positive trend, there is also some caution about the depth of this influence.
- In data analysis skills, both quantitative and qualitative, the results reveal a split: around 47,0% perceived improvements, while the remaining 53,0% identified no impact. This suggests that the use of AI in these areas may not yet be fully disseminated or exploited.
- Planning and organizing research projects was identified as a skill that benefited, with around 60,0% of respondents noting improvements, although around 39,0% saw no change, and around 2,0% saw a loss;
- Searching for and organizing bibliographic references stood out as one of the most positively impacted areas, with around 77,0% reporting improvements, and only around 23,0% noting no impact - a clear indicator of the usefulness of AI in this process;
- In solving complex problems, around 53,0% saw benefits, 45,0% felt no change, and 2,0% mentioned negative effects;
- As for creativity in generating ideas and hypotheses, AI was widely valued, with around 71,0% indicating improvements, compared to 29,0% who felt no impact;
- In the critical interpretation of results, around 57,0% reported improvements, while around 42,0% noted no difference, and 2,0% indicated harm;
- Time management and personal productivity were the skills with the most positive impact, according to around 79,0% of respondents, as opposed to 21,0% who felt no change, highlighting AI's strong influence on personal organization and efficiency;
- Scientific communication also benefited from the use of AI for around 60,0% of participants, while the remaining 40,0% saw no impact;
- Team collaboration or interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, was the skill least positively impacted, with only 37,0% recognizing improvements, compared to 61,0% who felt no change, and 2,0% who pointed out losses. This result indicates that AI still plays a limited role in collaborative dynamics.
- Finally, in data-driven decision-making, around 52,0% reported improvements, while 47,0% saw no impact, and 2,0% reported a negative effect.

The data reveals a largely positive perception of the impact of AI, especially in the areas of organization, productivity, creativity, and support for scientific writing. However, in areas such as data analysis and interdisciplinary collaboration, the impact is not yet as evident, which may indicate a transitional phase in the use of AI or less maturity in its application in these domains.

Influence of AI on critical thinking skills

The results on the impact of AI on the development of critical thinking reveal diverse opinions. A small proportion of students, 9,7%, believe that AI significantly reduces their ability to think critically, while 22,6% point to a moderate reduction. On the other hand, 22,6% say that AI does not affect their critical thinking skills. A larger proportion, 29,0%, believe that AI moderately increases their ability to think critically, and 16,1% consider that it significantly increases this ability. Thus, the majority of students believe that AI has a positive or neutral impact on the development of critical thinking, with a considerable proportion stating that it moderately or significantly increases this ability. However, some still see risks that AI could reduce this ability, especially if it is used excessively.

5. CONCLUSION

This study allowed us to understand how AI is transforming the research practices of PhD students. The data show that AI is increasingly being integrated into academic routines, changing the organization of work, influencing the development of skills, and raising important ethical reflections. Most students demonstrate openness to using AI as a support tool, recognizing substantial benefits in productivity and the quality of scientific work, without, however, losing sight of the risks associated with its excessive or uncritical use.

It was also found that the perception of the impacts of AI varies according to the areas and individual experiences, which indicates a transition phase in the integration of these technologies in the academic context. The conscious and critical adoption of AI, therefore, requires adequate institutional support, which combines technical, ethical, and methodological training.

Organizing research with AI

AI is already significantly changing the way students organize their research. A significant proportion of PhD students feel that AI has changed the way they plan tasks, structure projects, and manage their time. The perception that AI complements, rather than replaces, human skills predominates, serving as support in the execution of repetitive or technical tasks. Even so, it is essential to ensure that this support does not reduce students' critical involvement in the more complex research processes. In general, the data point to a structural transformation in academic work practices, mediated by these new tools.

Ethics and dependence on AI

Ethical issues emerge as a relevant concern among students. The majority report having faced doubts, albeit moderate, about the limits and responsibilities of using AI in scientific production. The perceived risk of excessive dependence is also highlighted, although in many cases this only manifests itself in specific tasks. These concerns demonstrate the need for clear regulation and targeted training that helps students make informed decisions about the use of AI, promoting responsible and transparent research practices. It is urgent to foster a culture of conscious use that balances innovation with academic integrity.

Impact on skills development

The perception of the impact of AI on skills development is generally positive. Students report particularly clear improvements in scientific writing, creativity, organisation of references, and time management. However, some more analytical and collaborative skills, such as data analysis or interdisciplinary work, do not show such significant impacts, suggesting that AI is not yet fully explored or integrated in these contexts. The influence of AI on critical thinking is mixed: although the majority perceive improvements or neutrality, some students identify risks of cognitive impairment, especially in cases of excessive or dependent use.

This study shows that AI is a profoundly transformative element in the research practices of doctoral students. However, this integration is not without its challenges. Ethical issues, risks of dependency, and possible impacts on the development of fundamental skills, such as critical thinking, continue to raise legitimate concerns among students.

In this scenario, the need for an institutional response that goes beyond the mere provision of technology becomes clear. Higher education institutions must take an active role in the ongoing training of their students, promoting critical and up-to-date digital literacy on the applications of AI in science. This training should include not only the technical mastery of the tools but also ethical and methodological reflection on their use, ensuring that students are prepared to make responsible and informed decisions.

In addition, it is urgent to define clear regulatory policies and good practices that guide the use of AI in academic contexts. The existence of codes of conduct, rules for citing AI-generated content, and scientific oversight mechanisms is a fundamental element to guarantee the integrity of research.

In short, AI has the potential to significantly enrich the experience and results of doctoral research, provided it is integrated in a conscious, critical, and targeted manner. This study contributes to this debate by offering empirical data that illustrates both the benefits and risks of using AI, and by highlighting the importance of educational and regulatory strategies that ensure a balance between technological innovation and full academic development. The responsible adoption of AI will therefore be one of the decisive factors for the future of scientific research in an academic context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work has been supported by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia within the Project Scope: UIDB/05777/2020 (<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/05777/2020>).

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