Toward Partnership Ethics for Generative Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education

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Abstract

Since generative artificial intelligence (genAI) applications became widely available in November 2022, university students and teachers have confronted choices about using genAI in coursework, research, and other tasks. In this article, we investigate Swedish university students' and teachers' perspectives on the ethics of genAI (non)use in higher education. Data comes from anonymous responses to voluntary online surveys and five focus group interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students and teachers in the social science faculty of a Swedish public university. We ask what ethical concerns informed research participants' perceptions and (non)use of genAI, and draw on the discipline of moral philosophy, particularly the work of environmental ethicist Carolyn Merchant, to consider how higher education institutions might work holistically with this material to support ethical genAI (non)use. Merchant proposes "partnership ethics" as an environmentally-informed, dialogue-based alternative to the ethics that often dominate decision-making. We argue that partnership ethics can guide university teachers and students in making decisions about this rapidly evolving technology and offer practical suggestions for implementing partnership ethics in higher education settings.

Practitioner Notes

1. The majority of students use genAI for a wide range of purposes in their coursework.
2. Cheating and/or plagiarism is too narrow a frame to support ethical (non)use of genAI in higher education.
3. Silence around teachers' and students' genAI uses creates uncertainty and suspicion, thereby reducing opportunities for agency and collaboration around ethical decision-making.
4. Discussions of genAI in higher education that do not consider the environmental consequences of developing and deploying these technologies fail to fully address teachers' and students' ethical concerns.
5. Open dialogues among and between teachers and students about genAI's potential effects on individual development, society and the environment promote critical engagement and ethical (non)use.

Keywords

Open dialogue, Collaboration, Co-creation, Environment, Moral character, Learning cultures.

Introduction

After OpenAI publicly released its generative artificial intelligence (genAI) application ChatGPT in November 2022, "chatbot mania" disrupted higher education institutions around the world (Rudolph et al., 2024). Which ,if any, uses of genAI were desirable, permissible, potentially problematic, or outright wrong, and who was responsible for making these determinations, became pressing questions across academic settings, from Denmark (Driessens & Pischetola, 2024) to Pakistan (Rahman et al., 2025), Australia (Lee et al., 2024) to Northern Cyprus (Isiaku et al., 2024), China (Yang et al., 2024) to the US (An et al., 2025). Reminiscent of the Covid-19 pandemic (see Wackenhut & Gillette, 2022), university teachers, students and leadership navigated changes without obvious precedents to guide behaviour and decision-making.

To understand how genAI was affecting relations of teaching and learning in a Swedish public university's social science faculty, we administered an online survey to teachers and students during the 2024-2025 academic year. Many voiced significant uncertainty about (un)productive, (in)appropriate, and (un)ethical uses of genAI (Wackenhut et al., 2025). For example, one teacher commented,

> I know very little about AI and student work, [and] how to use it in my own work. I have a strong feeling it is cheating and immoral. Though I know people who create their lectures via AI. Is this what I should also be doing?

A student wrote,

> I feel like it helps me with my learning, but you really need to have integrity and discipline to not over-use it. I feel like many do. And, you should know, EVERYONE uses it (even if it's not allowed). So, something has to be done. (emphasis original)

Decision-making about genAI (non)use in higher education entails ethical deliberation (Carrigan, 2024; Fitzgerald et al., 2025; Rana et al., 2025). While many national governments (e.g., RK, 2025) and university boards have wholeheartedly embraced genAI, scholars, teachers and students worry about academic integrity (Bearman et al., 2025; Bozkurt, 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Overono & Ditta, 2025; Perkins et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024), negative impacts on students' cognitive and personal development (Bearman et al., 2024; Encheva et al., 2025; Isiaku et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024), and environmental degradation (Carrigan, 2024; Manzi & Stålbrand, 2025). Scholars call for "the purposeful, responsible, ethical and sustainable integration of AI" in universities (Fitzgerald et al., 2025, p. 2; see also Rudolph et al., 2024). The fact that humans disagree about ethics is rarely mentioned.

In this study, we explore Swedish university teachers' and students' views on the ethics of genAI (non)use in higher education, based on anonymous responses to voluntary online surveys and five focus group interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students and teachers in the social science faculty. We investigate which ethical concerns influenced research participants' perceptions and (non)use of genAI. Drawing on the discipline of moral philosophy, particularly the work of environmental ethicist Carolyn Merchant, we consider how universities in Sweden and elsewhere could support ethically-informed genAI (non)use in academia. Merchant proposes "partnership ethics" as an environmentally-attentive, dialogue-based alternative to the egocentric and homocentric ethics that often dominate decision-making (2018). Partnership ethics aims to

achieve the greatest good for mutually interdependent entities through non-hierarchical dialogue, negotiation, and compromise. We argue that partnership ethics can guide university teachers, students and leadership in making decisions about genAI. We ask: 1) what ethical trepidations about genAI do teachers and students raise; 2) which understandings of ethics inform their concerns; and 3) how might partnership ethics support deliberation and decision-making about this rapidly evolving technology?

Literature Review

Large-scale international studies indicate that most university students and teachers are familiar with genAI (Yusuf et al., 2024). Many currently use it and most have plans to do so (ibid.). Unsurprisingly, genAI in higher education has attracted researchers' attention. Scholarship includes quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods empirical studies of use patterns (e.g., Bearman et al., 2025; Castro-Lopez et al., 2026; Chan & Hu, 2023; Duah & McGivern, 2024; Owusu-Agyeman & Pillay, 2023), conceptual analyses (Bearman et al., 2024; de Fine Licht, 2024), policy studies (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Driessens & Pischetola, 2024), autoethnography informed by scholarship on genAI and social media (Carrigan, 2024) and literature reviews (Xia et al., 2024).

This research identifies numerous ethical concerns. On the planetary scale, OpenAI created ChatGPT by extracting 300 billion words from online sources without formal consent (Driessens & Pischetola, 2024). It and similar large language model (LLM) chatbots exhibit biases favouring certain perspectives (Bearman et al., 2024; Carrigan, 2024; Nguyen, 2025; Rana et al., 2025). Generated text can contain inaccuracies and fake data, including fake references (Carrigan, 2024; Williams, 2024) presented as if they were true. Many applications require paid subscriptions, raising concerns about class and digital divides (Duah & McGivern, 2024; Newell et al., 2024). The individual's control over their own data, combined with widespread ignorance about the implications of sharing it (rendering informed consent impossible), are also moral issues (de Fine Licht, 2024). Finally, genAI causes environmental damage, with CO_2 emissions and water consumption particularly concerning (Carrigan, 2024; de Fine Licht, 2024; Driessens & Pischetola, 2024).

Among university teachers, academic integrity and cheating are major concerns (Bozkurt, 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Overono & Ditta, 2025; Perkins et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). Many genAI studies focus on assessment and altering assessment practices (Dguidegue, 2025; Overono & Ditta, 2025; Xia et al., 2024). Generally, teachers and students want universities to enhance regulation (Duah & McGivern, 2024; Isiaku et al, 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2025; Xia et al., 2024; cf. Corbin et al., 2025). Most university policies espouse the view that "student assignments must reflect individual knowledge acquired during their education" and individuals are responsible for "AI-related wrongdoings" (Dabis & Csáki, 2024, p.1; see also Driessens & Pischetola, 2024). Teachers largely set the rules for using genAI in courses and universities encourage teachers to modify assessment (ibid.).

GenAI's effects on students' cognitive and personal development also preoccupy many academics. Scholars are concerned about genAI's overall effects on academic performance (Castro-Lopez et al., 2026) as well as capacities for reading and thinking critically (Dguidegue, 2025; Olsson, 2026; Rahman et al., 2025), exercising evaluative judgement (Bearman et al., 2024), thinking creatively and independently (Isiaku et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Xia et al.,

2024), and collaborating (Xia et al., 2024). According to one international study, some teachers' concerns derive from an "uncharitable" assumption that students do not perceive learning as an intrinsic good (Newell et al., 2024, p. 45). Generally, studies show that teachers believe students are more instrumental about learning than students perceive themselves to be (Sagy et al., 2019; see also Encheva et al., 2025;).

Research from Australia, Cyprus, Hong Kong, the UK, and Sweden shows that students are generally positive toward using genAI (Chan & Hu, 2023; Duah & McGivern, 2024; Isiaku et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Malmström et al., 2023; Rana et al., 2025). Many experience genAI as providing highly accessible personalised learning assistance (Chan & Hu, 2023; Rana et al., 2025). Even so, students worry about dependence, loss of critical thinking skills and creative abilities, diminished human interactions, and cheating (Chan & Hu, 2023; Isiaku et al., 2024; Rana et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2024). A study of 74 Chinese postgraduate students who used genAI in an ethnographic methods course found that as the course progressed, enthusiasm for genAI decreased (Yang et al., 2024). These students kept journals about genAI use, facilitating self-reflection (cf. Darcie et al., 2024).

Many scholars studying genAI in higher education raise the subject of ethics (e.g., Bearman et al., 2025; Bozkurt, 2024; Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Fitzgerald et al., 2025; Rudolph et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2025). However, few explicitly define or problematise the meaning of ethical use (cf. de Fine Licht, 2024). Most researchers appear to assume that university teachers agree about what ethical use of genAI entails (cf. Yusuf et al., 2024). However, moral philosophy demonstrates that people disagree about ethical conduct. Insights from this discipline have potential for guiding ethical genAI (non)use.

Ethics

Moral philosophy (or ethics) is concerned with the principles and processes that guide decision-making and the standards by which human actions can be judged (Rachels, 2012). It offers normative theories about how we should live and the values that guide such aspirations. A foundational insight is that we disagree about ethics. Egocentric ethics, for example, view the individual's pursuit of their own happiness as the highest good (Deigh, 2010, pp. 25–27). Individuals should be free to act in their own self-interest, and what is good for the individual is considered good for society. By contrast, utilitarian ethics reject the proposition that the greatest good can be achieved by the individual pursuit of self-interest. Utilitarianism argues that right conduct is determined by the greatest good for the greatest number and typically assumes impartiality or the refusal to allow kinship, sentiment or personal loyalties to affect decision-making (ibid., pp. 93–97). Indigenous ethics, in the aggregate or in relation to specific groups, offers another normative system. Indigenous ethics prioritise harmony with nature, collective well-being, cooperation, cohesion, shared responsibility and spirituality (Macpherson, 2024; Verbos & Humphries, 2014).

Environmental ethicist Carolyn Merchant has investigated the ethics guiding diverse decision-making practices ranging from Euro-American fisheries management, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (1996, 1999, 2018). She identifies three dominant ethics (egocentric, homocentric and ecocentric) and proposes a fourth: partnership ethics. Like many moral philosophers, Merchant argues that the dominant ethics have inherent shortcomings (see also Deigh, 2010; Rachels, 2012). For example, egocentrism

promotes cut-throat individualism, homocentrism (or utilitarianism) leads to the tyranny of the majority and ecocentrism (the view that all biotic and abiotic entities have intrinsic worth) can descend into ecofascism. Partnership ethics is Merchant's alternative. Partnership ethics promotes the greatest good through recognising mutual interdependence, including between humans and nonhumans (2018). It "calls for a new balance" that reflects "a homocentric social-interest ethic of partnership among human groups and an ecocentric ethic of partnership with non-human nature" (ibid., p. 268). Precepts include equity between and moral consideration for human and nonhuman communities, respect for all forms of diversity, inclusiveness, ethical accountability, and a commitment to short- and long-term mutual health. Partnership ethics require dialogue, negotiation, and compromise. In some respects, partnership ethics resemble Indigenous ethics (see Merchant 1999).

The Swedish Context

Sweden has 49 higher education institutions, most of which are publicly-funded government agencies (Ahlbäck Öberg & Boberg, 2023, p. 130). Since 2011, the government has granted universities greater control over internal decision-making, including related to digitalisation (ibid.). During spring 2023, higher education institutions were asked to develop their own genAI guidelines. These efforts were later supported by the Agency for Digital Government and the Authority for Privacy Protection.

By spring 2025, some universities had adopted policies emphasising individual responsibility, transparency, data security, and ethics (as per national recommendations), while others were still formulating positions (Erhardt et al., 2025). Of the published policies, five indicated that genAI use had ethical and social consequences (ibid., p. 10). However, these policies did not define ethics beyond emphasising user "responsibility" nor did they articulate ethical dilemmas posed by genAI in higher education (ibid.).

Swedish universities' responses to genAI have been affected by systemic pressures. In autumn 2024, higher education institutions enrolled a record 402,000 students, even as the sector faced a third consecutive year of budget deficits (UKÄ, 2025, p. 6). Simultaneously, policies introduced in the 1990s to make higher education more accessible resulted in more diverse student cohorts with differing levels of preparation and skills (ibid.). Teachers experienced increasing time and resource pressures (de Fine Licht, 2024; Olsson, E. et al., 2024), while students reported rising levels of stress, anxiety and depression (FHM, 2018; Olsson, T. et al., 2024).

At our study location, teachers were instructed to develop their own genAI policies. The university's two-page guidance emphasised teachers' responsibility to prevent, identify, and report students' academic dishonesty and said nothing about genAI's economic, social, and environmental implications (University of Gothenburg, 2023). This latter omission was notable given the university's goal of becoming carbon-neutral by 2045 (University of Gothenburg, 2024).

Key aspects of our study location's learning culture include that lectures are the most common form of instruction, with seminars and group projects occurring less frequently (Wackenhut & Gillette, 2022, pp. 55-56). Somewhat counteracting this "distanced" pedagogy (Schick, 2020; see also Sagy et al., 2019) is the fact that students are formally represented in decision-making about education and encouraged to address university staff (from teachers to vice-chancellors) by their first names rather than titles. Local learning culture tends toward individualism and politeness

(see Yusuf et al., 2024, p.5). Grades are based on individual performance, and teachers are required to report academic dishonesty even when students admit to and apologise for wrongdoing.

Methods

This section outlines our research design, participants and methods for data collection and analysis. We situate our choice of research methods in relation to international research on higher education pedagogy. We also present information about ethics.

Research Design

Research on how genAI was affecting relations of teaching and learning in social science courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels at the University of Gothenburg was supported by internal grant funding awarded after institutional review. We chose a mixed methods design that combined exploratory online surveys (in English) and focus group interviews (in Swedish and English). Scholars interested in the relations of teaching and learning in other contexts have productively combined quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., Owusu-Agyeman & Pillay, 2023). As seen in other studies, we used quantitative methods to gather perspectives from a broad range of students (e.g., Johnston et al., 2024). To add nuance and context and deepen our understanding of the diverse perspectives suggested in the survey data, we turned to qualitative methods, namely, focus group interviews. Focus group interviews have been shown to elicit reflection and discussion about on genAI (non)use in relation to educational lifeworlds (e.g., Bearman et al., 2025).

Research was carried out during the 2024-2025 academic year. Surveys and focus group interviews were conducted in accordance with the Swedish Ethics Review Act (2003:460) and the Swedish Research Council's guidelines for ethical research (VR, 2024). Explicit goals of the research were producing materials that supported pedagogical development and scholarly publication. All research participants were informed of the study's purposes and consented to participate.

Participants

All undergraduate and postgraduate students and all teachers in the social science faculty at the University of Gothenburg were invited to fill out anonymous online surveys via email lists procured from faculty and departmental leadership. These surveys reached the entire population from whom we sought information (e.g., a census rather than a sample). Of approximately 10,000 students and 800 teachers. 541 students and 128 teachers completed the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate if they would be willing to participate in follow-up focus group interviews comprised of students (for student respondents) or teachers (for teacher respondents). This entailed providing their names and contact information. 70 students and 13 teachers volunteered for focus groups. All of these were invited to attend interviews post-survey. 13 students and two teachers participated in student or teacher focus groups. Students were from all social science departments in the faculty, and focus groups were mixed gender. Teachers came from two departments, and both were male.

Data collection

Surveys were piloted with students and teachers, revised, and then administered to the social science faculty (see Wackenhut et al., 2025). The survey requested basic information about respondents' degree programs/teaching subjects, years at university/years teaching in higher education, and gender identity (see appendices 1 & 2). Most questions were multiple-choice, multiple-answer, or Likert scales. Student surveys included two free-text questions, and teacher surveys included five. Although the surveys were voluntary and anonymous (unless the respondent chose to participate in a follow-up focus group), the data may reflect some social desirability bias or underreporting, considering the potentially sensitive nature of certain genAI uses.

After the authors reviewed the survey responses together and discussed their impressions, Gillette and Olsson created the interview guides for the focus groups (see appendices 3 & 4). We conducted five focus group interviews, four with students and one with teachers. Two authors were present at each focus group, and took turns leading the interviews. At the outset of each focus group, we sought permission to record and transcribe and explained that participation would in no way influence interviewees' studies or careers. Participation was anonymous, and each participant received an ID number in the transcripts. The authors were not current instructors of any of the student participants, nor were we direct managers of any of the teacher participants. Focus groups lasted for 60-70 minutes.

Importantly, ethics was a topic that our research participants invited us to consider rather than one we originally planned to study. We did not ask explicitly about ethics in the surveys or focus group interview guide. In the survey, some answer alternatives related to ethics, for example, "lack of clarity on which use cases are allowed" in a question asking students to identify challenges with using genAI, but no survey or interview questions explicitly raised ethics. Despite this, 29% of students and 40% of teachers brought up ethics in the comments they provided to free-text survey questions, and all focus groups discussed ethics.

Data analysis

Data analysis was iterative and combined inductive and deductive methods. In the quantitative data, we identified frequency rates for multiple choice, multiple answer and Likert scale questions, with the goal of gaining a general understanding of respondents' circumstances, views, and (non)uses. We then exported all survey responses as Excel files (one for students, one for teachers) and assembled all interview transcripts. All authors familiarised themselves with the data and discussed their observations. We noted how frequently respondents raised ethics, discussed key terms and phrases such as "gen AI makes me lazy," "genAI enshittifies my classmates," "there should be more information about the effects on the climate that genAI has," etc., and observed differences in whether research participants regarded genAI as positive, negative, or ambivalent for higher education. We then asked whether insights from moral philosophy, and particularly Merchant's partnership ethics (2018), might illuminate the materials. Following this, Gillette and Wackenhut performed a round of inductive coding, a method employed by other scholars interested in experiences of genAI (e.g., Isiaku et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024), and two rounds of deductive coding, one based on whether research participants were positive, negative, or ambivalent about genAI, and one based on the ethics described by Merchant (2018). Researchers studying genAI in higher education have used deductive coding when initial readings

of data have suggested the applicability of a particular model (e.g., Corbin et al., 2025). In the first deductive coding round, we looked for evaluative remarks. For example, we interpreted "it's very effective" or "it helps me understand" as positive. Comments where research participants talked about "blurry grey zones" or "there needs to be more clarity about what is ok and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not" were coded as ambivalent. When research participants made statement such as "I don't think genAI has any place in academia" we coded them as reflecting a negative view. In the second deductive coding round, we looked particularly for signs of individualism (e.g., the speaker mentions only themself and makes no reference to any group), homocentrism (the speaker was concerned about the class as a whole, their future profession, society, but never mentioned the environment), attention to the natural world (concerns for plants, animals, water, climate, etc.), and remarks that foregrounded interdependence, dialogue, and a combination of environmental and social concerns. The authors then met to discuss the results from this coding. From this we jointly generated themes for presenting the data.

Survey responses and focus group interviews reflected similar basic concerns, with the interviews providing richer depictions of experiences, including change over time and perceptions of one another's usage. The latter included students' perceptions of other students' genAI use, students' perceptions of teachers' use, and teachers' perceptions of students' use. Research participants chose whether to participate in Swedish or English. Quotations reproduced here were originally in both languages. The authors translated Swedish comments and corrected minor typographical errors in written English-language remarks.

Results

We briefly describe the general characteristics of survey respondents and the main genAI use patterns. We then turn to research participants' ethical concerns. We conclude the section by considering partnership ethics in the data.

General patterns

Survey respondents (541 students and 128 teachers) reflected the social science faculty's composition on several dimensions. For instance, respondents identifying as female somewhat outweighed their male counterparts, with 69 percent of students and 55 percent of teachers identifying as female. This distribution tracks with the faculty's make-up. Dimensions such as time as a university student, or years of experience as university teacher, also match the underlying population (Table 1). Students pursuing a degree at the undergraduate level, which usually takes three years in Sweden, were a majority (72 percent). 80 percent of teacher respondents indicated more than five years of teaching experience.

Table 1

Years of experience for university students (n = 541) and years of teaching for university teachers (n = 128) (absolute count and percent)

	Students		Teachers	
	Count	**Percentage**	**Count**	**Percentage**
0-1 years	183	34%	6	5%
2-3 years	208	38%	11	9%
4-5 years	93	17%	9	7%
More than five years	57	11%	102	80%

Most respondents (students and teachers) reported familiarity with genAI (Figure 1). 46 percent of students and 50 percent of teachers indicated that they were moderately familiar with the technology. About 30 percent considered themselves very familiar. More than twice as many students than teachers regarded themselves as *extremely familiar* with genAI (7.2% versus 3.1%).

Figure 1

Students' (n = 540) and teachers' (n = 128) self-reported familiarity with genAI (in percent)
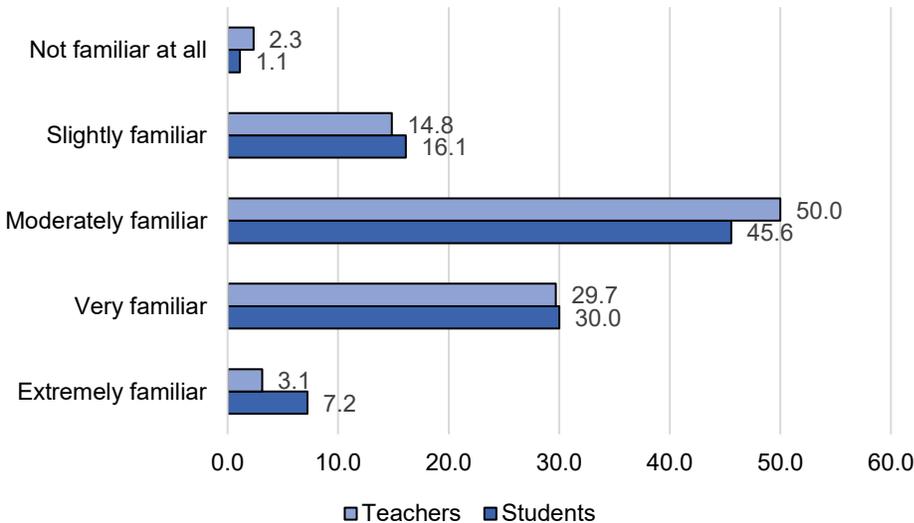

While most respondents were familiar with genAI, differences emerged in genAI (non)use. 80 percent of students indicated they had used genAI in their university education, while only 20 percent of teachers reported actively integrating genAI into courses or teaching. More than half of student respondents reported using genAI occasionally (36%), frequently (16%) or very frequently (5%) in their courses. Only 24 percent stated they used genAI rarely in this context (with the remaining 19% never having used genAI). In a follow-up question, students were asked about the extent to which they agreed genAI might benefit them in several potential academic

uses (Figure 2). Few (11.6%) agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that genAI offered "no benefits" for their studies. Students largely agreed that genAI offered advantages in terms of "finding inspiration" (73.6% *agreeing at least somewhat* or *agreeing*), "saving time" (64.7% *agreeing at least somewhat* or *agreeing*) and "studying and reviewing materials" (56% *agreeing at least somewhat* or *agreeing*). This included using genAI to "read" assigned course literature. 50.6 percent saw advantages in genAI correcting grammar or spelling, but an overwhelming majority (more than eight of ten students) did *not* see genAI as advantageous for writing essays or reports.

Figure 2

Students' perceptions of perceived advantages and disadvantages of different uses for genAI in their coursework in percent (n = 517).
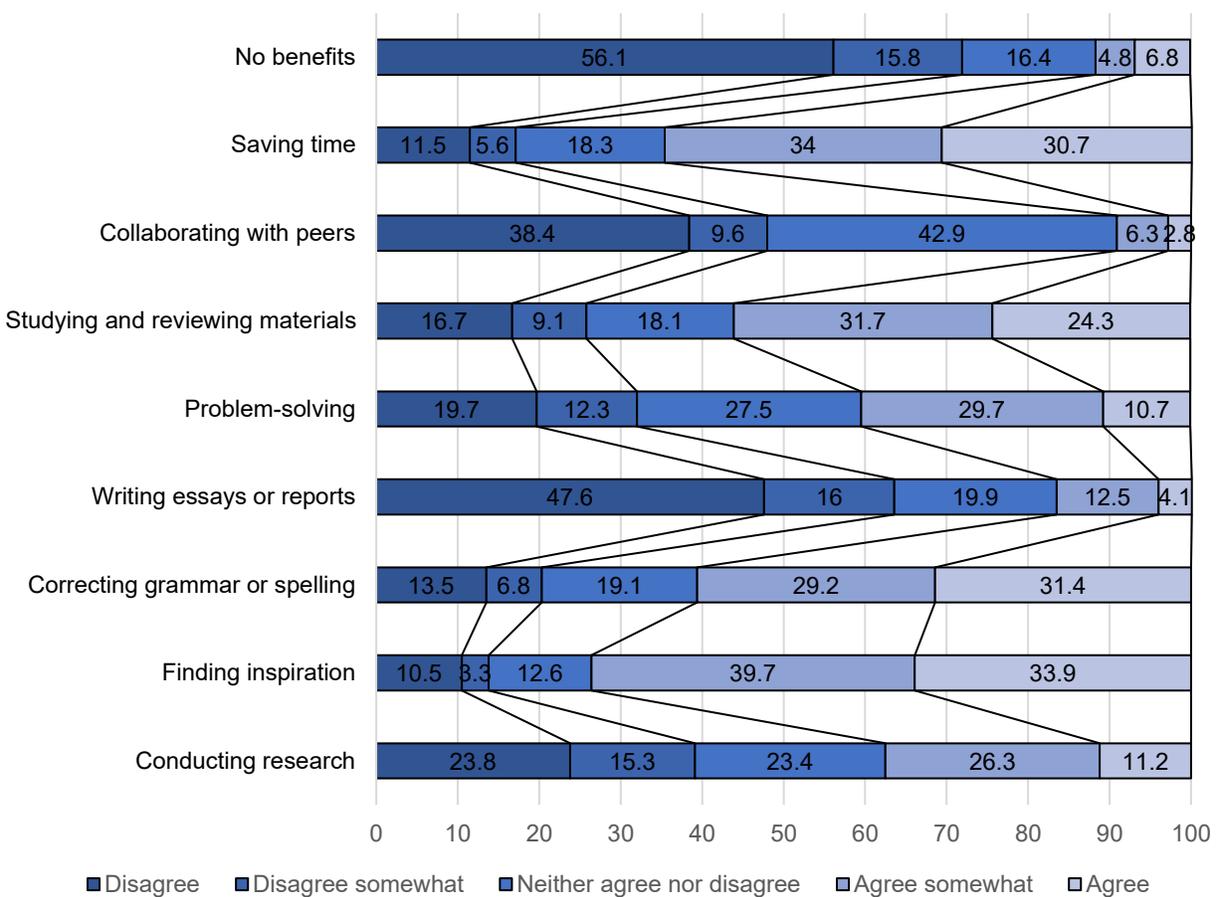
Ethical Concerns

In free-text survey responses and focus group interviews, 209 research participants (158 students and 51 teachers) raised ethics. Of these, only 13, all of whom were students, were entirely positive about genAI. The rest (94%, *n* = 196) expressed an ambivalent or negative view.

51 percent (*n* = 106) expressed concern that genAI use could hamper individual development by affecting the individual's knowledge, skills, capacity for "free thinking" and individual moral

character. Many worried that genAI affected what individual students knew. No one voiced concerns about genAI's impact on what teachers knew.

Teachers fretted that relying on genAI meant students "learn less", "stop thinking", and "take shortcuts", diminishing their mastery of course material. As one wrote,

> Learning happens in the process. If AI interrupts that, it's brain poison. If it's used for grammar or to organise an essay more neatly or to save time this is potentially useful but these possible benefits pale in comparison to the risk of its more toxic effects in learning.

Students worried how using genAI affected, as one put it, "actual acquired knowledge". For example, a student said,

> When I use [genAI] to summarize something that I'm supposed to learn, I don't know what I'm learning, I don't know what I'm supposed to get from it, it's just something that is out there and I need to do something with the information.

Several commented that users tended to assume genAI was correct. As one student explained,

> People don't question AI, basically. Some people just take it at face value. If it says 200 people live in this town, I believe that 200 people live in this town. It might be 400 if I count them, but AI says otherwise. So I'm kind of afraid of that.

Many participants believed, as a student put it, "many people lack critical thinking because of AI". However, several students explained that genAI usage was connected to time pressures, the need to be "effective", and struggles with difficult texts. Two mentioned using genAI to cope with neurodivergence. In a focus group, a student recounted that when they read a "demanding" text, "it takes me three minutes to understand the first sentence. And then I see that it is going to take me weeks to read this entire text, which is one of 10 texts that I should read." Another participant agreed, saying, "It's just effective. Why should you sit and flip the pages of a shitload of articles that you don't really understand, when you can ask AI to summarise and get a clear picture of what they are saying?"

Numerous participants were concerned about individual deskilling. As a student wrote, "[genAI] may make it a little too easy to get information. You take the easy route." Another stated genAI "prohibited me from actually reading and finding out myself what is important in the text, to develop reading skills". Still another was "afraid of the long-term development, where I become worse in certain skills that I now am very strong in". Teachers believed that using genAI "will affect the learning process negatively (to endure, to read and write, to process, to create implicit knowledge)."

Most participants thought genAI use in higher education was inevitable. GenAI was, as a teacher stated, "there in front of the students" and, as a student said, "part of the technological future". Teachers had to "normalise [genAI's] use in teaching and learning activities", as one commented, while accepting that "there will be a lot of misuse and cheating whatever I do in class". Students were convinced that, as one wrote, "The technology is only going to get more advanced and prevalent". Several described "feeling dependent" on genAI. For example, one wrote genAI "gives a dopamine kick because everything takes less time". Explaining they used genAI to summarise texts and edit essays, they reflected, "I think it rewards bad behaviours - or rather ones that make the learning process more difficult in the long run."

GenAI's impact on individual autonomy worried many participants. In one student's words,

> On the whole, AI undermines free thinking. It can work if it is used with caution and skill for brainstorming, but at the end of the day, a university education is about developing and building your own capacity for independent thought. AI is too often used wrongly and it encourages laziness in one's studies which I think can be dangerous for society as a whole.

Effects on moral character preoccupied about a fifth of research participants (22%, $n = 47$), who worried that genAI made users "lazy". A student in a focus group explained,

> We're kind of moving away from the analogue and time-consuming kind of activities, we're so used to everything being done at the front of our brain. Everything is *now*. So when we're in a group project, for example, and we have to actually think back into what we already know and how we can apply it and how we can be making it into this new thing, that's too much energy. It's too long a process. As we all discussed here, mostly [an assignment] is very time-constricted. Or we're stressed. Or overwhelmed. So we don't take the time to sit down and brainstorm together and try to come up with something together. Instead, we turn to AI, because we think, computer, internet, lalala, *they* have the answers. And that's an easier way to get the things we *could* all come up with together.

Cheating was another concern. Teachers, who pondered changing or had already changed assessment formats, worried about what to do if they suspected but could not prove genAI misuse. Many observed it was "virtually impossible to say whether a student has used AI in the writing of assignments." Students expressed anger that classmates submitted assignments done by genAI. In a focus group, some said there should be more appeals to conscience and "shaming" around genAI usage. One explained, "Nobody wants to work with somebody who's been caught plagiarising or pretending like they're some advanced academic and maybe it's just AI's fault."

Some participants raised genAI's negative effects on relationships. As a student noted, "I trust my classmates a lot less now". Several provided examples of classmates using genAI in group work without informing the group, which they experienced as a betrayal and "detrimental to the trust and ethics of academia." A few participants suspected that teachers used genAI but withheld it from students. One said,

> I feel like and this is just a hunch that I have, but I feel like a lot of researchers and teachers at the department, at the university, they have had the time to be able to play with AI and use it and know, kind of, what its limits are and be able to say, well this is good and this is bad. But students are not given that kind of room to test it out.

Many participants said genAI was rarely or "never" discussed. During a focus group, teachers said they kept silent about genAI partly from time pressure and partly because of their own uncertainty. Students talked about a "culture of secrecy" surrounding genAI. One explained, "because the university has a very hard attitude toward using genAI, many students are scared to talk about how much they use it." Usage was, as some said, "a blurry grey zone". A student recounted,

> Some people I know who use it also feel kind of guilty. They're like, oh, I know that I shouldn't be using it, or I know that this probably isn't good. Or like, oh, it's really bad for the environment, or whatever. But I'm still like, I didn't manage my time, or I feel stressed, or I just don't want to deal with it, so I'm going to use generative AI.

Some participants worried about genAI increasing isolation. Several students said they would rather consult a chatbot than asking classmates a question. While some believed this was positive (since genAI was "objective"), others thought it, as one said, "[it] takes away this personal perspective of talking things over with people, with a team." Teachers cautioned about genAI's "detrimental effects on the group". As one wrote, genAI use "can affect the learning situation of all students. For instance, if some students don't read the textbook or articles, but rather use genAI to summarise their contents, groupwork and seminars will suffer also for the rest of the group that did put in an effort to actually read."

Many participants wondered whether using genAI was, as a teacher wrote, "a benefit in the long run." Teachers worried that students "may stop seeing the point of doing research". Three teachers raised "the huge environmental cost, the theft of data that is necessary for those LLMs to be trained". Twenty percent of student participants who raised ethics (32 of 158) voiced concerns about genAI's effects on society and the future. As one said, "tech gets smarter, people get dumber." Preparedness for future employment, "unwanted competition in my line of work" and unethical behaviour from using genAI in specific professions created apprehension. Three students worried about genAI's environmental impact. One observed, "There should be more information about the effects on the climate that genAI has. Not many know about the amount of energy it takes for the servers to run."

86 percent of the 209 participants who raised ethics (*n* = 179) did not describe themselves having an active role in determining ethical genAI use. Teachers were more likely to see themselves as ethical agents than students. Most of the latter wanted teachers and university leaders to provide more "lectures", "guidelines" and policies. For example, a student wrote,

> Having directly heard from classmates that they use prohibited [genAI] methods in their studies, accompanied by comments like "because surely everyone does it", I am left with a bitter taste in my mouth. I really do think the faculty is doing their best to handle the issue, but I hope some kind of clearer, official guidelines can be put in place sooner rather than later. That, or maybe an extra effort to have in-between discussions among students included in course introductions.

Toward Partnership Ethics

Of the 209 respondents who raised ethics, most wrote survey comments reflecting dominant ethics such as egoism or utilitarianism. Focus group discussions followed a similar pattern. For example, many participants deliberated whether genAI helped the individual, identifying areas for potential assistance while worrying about "cognitive outsourcing". How genAI affected some greater social good, from the classroom to the university to society in general, concerned 61 percent (88 students and 39 teachers).

22 teachers and 8 students (14 percent) indicated that collective experimentation, discussion, and reflection were useful for navigating genAI. They emphasised, as a student wrote, "It's important that we continue to talk about AI and get rid of the stigma surrounding this subject". The key was, a teacher said, establishing a "learning culture" to support decision-making. Students and teachers stressed engagement and motivation as crucial. A few noted, as a student said, that discussions should include the "good arguments about how dangerous it is for our climate, and that also has an ethical foundation for just abstaining from using it entirely."

13 participants (eight teachers and five students) shared examples of classroom activities that helped them make decisions about genAI. For example, a teacher wrote that they asked students to "compare and critically discuss and assess the output by AI", whether that was "code for R or Stata or discussion of a substantial topic". In conjunction, they explained how LLM chatbots work, "discussing possibilities, weaknesses and challenges of AI". Students gave examples of "seminars" where they were asked to compare work by genAI with work they did themselves. These activities helped them realise, as one said, "how faulty a lot of the information was", and to appreciate, as another said, that genAI "used the concepts incorrectly, it oversimplified too much so that it was wrong in certain places".

The focus group discussions underscored participants' enthusiasm for dialogue about genAI. Participants engaged directly with each other, asking questions, commenting on each other's experiences, and sharing stories ranging from enthusiastic embrace to abstention. Several hoped for follow-up after the interviews concluded. One student remarked it would be "uplifting" "for students to be able to see that our opinions and stuff are actually being kind of included in things".

Discussion

This study contributes to empirical research investigating how genAI is affecting relations of teaching and learning in higher education, in particular students' and teachers' ethical perceptions of genAI (non)use. As seen in previous research (Malmström et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2024), participants in our study were familiar with genAI and many used it in their university coursework. In our study context, as in other international settings, genAI's environmental impact was not discussed in university policy (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Driessens & Pischetola, 2024; Erhardt et al., 2025).

Practical Implications

31 percent of those who participated in our research (209 of 669 individuals) brought up ethics, which suggests the ethics of genAI (non)use are an important concern. As in other empirical contexts (e.g., Bozkurt, 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024), academic integrity was a focus, especially for teachers. Overall, students tended to be more positive than teachers about genAI but agreed it was wrong to submit an entirely AI-generated text as their own (see also Malmström et al., 2023). Research participants wanted the university to offer more guidance, a pattern also found in other studies (e.g., Encheva et al., 2025; Isiaku et al, 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2025; Xia et al., 2024).

Most students and teachers who raised ethics articulated concerns beyond academic integrity. A major preoccupation was how using genAI affected the individual's cognitive and personal development. Students and teachers worried about genAI leading to the loss of critical thinking skills, creativity, and autonomy, all findings that resonate with previous research (Chan & Hu, 2023; Encheva et al., 2025; Isiaku et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Olsson, 2026; Rahman et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2024). Many described a tendency for users to assume that genAI produced unbiased or "objective" responses, a propensity noted elsewhere (Xia et al., 2024). Significantly, our participants frequently spoke about genAI in relation to moral character, a result that resembles the "moral judgements" described in an Australian focus group study (Bearman et al., 2025). A small number saw genAI as a way for the individual to be "effective". Many more worried that using genAI made people "lazy". Unlike in Bearman et al.'s case, where most students

"generally wanted agency" and "resisted dependency" (2025, p.9), in our study location several students talked about becoming dependent, suggesting usage diminished their sense of agency.

As Duah & McGovern described in their UK study (2024), Bearman et al. in their Australian one (2025), and Encheva et al. in their Dutch one (2025), many were unclear about when genAI usage moved from assistance to unethical behaviour. This led to silence about genAI in our research context. Teachers, already confronted with larger and more diverse student groups, found it difficult to address genAI in class. Students, many of whom already suffered from stress and anxiety, felt uncertain and even fearful of wrongdoing – a finding echoing a "fear culture" among Dutch university students (Encheva et al., 2025). Feelings of suspicion, mistrust, resentment and helplessness festered, especially between classmates. Such sentiments drove desires for the university to "do more", despite the institution's position that decisions should be made at department, program, and course levels (University of Gothenburg, 2023).

Although many participants worried about negative social consequences, few talked about genAI degrading the environment. Some who did stated explicitly that most people were ignorant of genAI's environmental consequences. The absence of this information in most course and university policies sustained such ignorance (Erhardt et al, 2025). Swedish higher education institutions emphasize sustainability, often with explicit reference to the environment (e.g., University of Gothenburg, 2024), yet neglect environmental impacts in genAI guidance (University of Gothenburg, 2023).

Most research participants, and especially students, could envision genAI uses that were good for the individual and society (if not the environment), even as many worried genAI could cause damage in these domains. As in a Dutch case study (Encheva et al., 2025), many believed genAI use is inevitable – even though scholars have suggested refusing or banning genAI for ethical reasons (Carrigan, 2024; de Fine Licht, 2024). Indeed, human history contains many examples of societies backing away from technologies, including through negotiated agreements, as with chlorofluorocarbons.

Theoretical Implications

Moral philosophy tells us to expect divergence in what people consider ethical conduct and why they hold such views. Such was the case among our participants. A significant group focused on what was good for the individual. However, we see little evidence indicating these participants viewed individual good primarily in instrumental terms (cf. Newell et al., 2024). While some students talked about genAI making them more efficient at completing coursework, many more worried about genAI limiting opportunities for learning and encouraging "bad behaviour". Most who thought about ethics in terms of what was good for the individual were concerned about individual capacities, skills, conscience, and moral character. Contrary to teachers' perceptions documented in existing literature, the students participating in our study were strongly committed to learning as an intrinsic good (cf. Encheva et al., 2025).

Many participants talked about genAI and ethics in terms of the collective good, with the locus of the collective varying. Teachers tended to focus on the classroom, students and academia as relevant social groups. This likely relates to the fact that teachers are present in universities as professionals responsible for education. They are tasked with instilling knowledge and skills in students (see de Fine Licht, 2024). Students, in contrast, attend university primarily with

opportunities and futures outside academia in focus. Unsurprisingly, they were more likely to articulate concerns about genAI's impact beyond the university.

Ethics focused on the individual or the "greater good", readily recognisable as egoism and utilitarianism, have inherent flaws (see Deigh, 2010; Merchant, 2018). A focus on the individual good tacitly authorises inequality, "privileging the few at the expense of the many" (Merchant, 2018, p. 266) by ignoring that individuals have differential access to wealth and/or other structural advantages. Utilitarian ethics have the potential to avoid this problem but raise questions about who or what decides the greatest good for the greatest number. Utilitarianism can lead to a tyranny of the majority or the validation of immoral conduct in service to the greater good (Deigh, 2010, p. 99; Merchant, 2018, p. 266). Neither of these ethics takes the environment into account. As Merchant puts it, they assume nature "consists of free goods from an inexhaustible tap whose wastes go into an inexhaustible sink" (2018, p. 264).

Few participants indicated they had a role in determining guidelines for ethical genAI use. However, 22 teachers and 8 students found collective experimentation with and discussion of genAI valuable. Some described classroom exercises where they compared what humans could do with what genAI did and discussed the technology's "possibilities, weaknesses and challenges". Occasionally this included environmental damage. By engaging in what de Fine Licht calls a "reasonable and inclusive process" for making decisions about genAI (2024, p. 4), these participants began implementing partnership ethics.

Focus group interviews - those with students and those with teachers – confirmed the value of openly discussing genAI. Importantly, participants broke the silence around genAI use. Students described which applications they used and how. They found affirmation in peers' experiences. A number shared how repeated use led them to lose enthusiasm about genAI. Teachers bonded over stories about (not) detecting cheating and experiences using genAI in course preparation and research. They deliberated whether their genAI use contributed to corporate exploitation and whether more classroom discussion of genAI might facilitate teaching goals. In these conversations, genAI (non)use became not a problem to be solved but "a condition to be navigated" (Corbin et al., 2025 p. 11). Participants encouraged each other to move away from wishing someone else would do the work of negotiating ethical dilemmas.

Open discussions about genAI, in which participants share experiences, concerns, anxieties and insights, exemplify the relationships and processes Merchant argues are the foundation of partnership ethics (2018). Participants in such discussions are active agents who see one another as partners in a shared task that respects and transcends the immediate context. Such dialogues offer opportunities for identifying ethical assumptions and working together to negotiate cooperative agreements about genAI use. They facilitate making "purposeful, responsible, ethical and sustainable" decisions about genAI (non)use (Fitzgerald et al., 2025 p. 2).

Implementing partnership ethics is not easy, as Merchant candidly acknowledges (2018, p. 273). In higher education, classroom expectations, habits and cultural norms can pose barriers (Darcie et al., 2024; Sagy et al., 2019; Yusuf et al., 2024). The Swedish context manifests contradictory tendencies that could support partnership ethics or render it more difficult to achieve. Students referring to teachers by first name rather than title, the requirement for students to be represented in contexts where decisions about education are made, and the inclusion of student-facilitated seminars in most courses are conducive to partnership ethics. They facilitate agency and

communicate that students are important actors in higher education. Less conducive to partnership ethics is that lectures are the most common teaching form, students mostly receive individual grades for assignments and course grades are always individual, and few courses include reflection journals. These (non)practices promote more passive, individualised, and unreflective learning experiences, diminishing institutionalised opportunities for ethical judgement. GenAI technology is rapidly changing. Any attempt to provide guidance must be capable of addressing future change (see also Corbin et al., 2025). Partnership ethics, we contend, offer a holistic orientation for decision-making. Non-hierarchical, non-dominating discussion, negotiation, and reflection support co-creation of shared agreements based on (or in consideration of) all partners' vital needs.

Implementation strategies

Several concrete strategies for implementing partnership ethics emerge from our study. As Rahman et al. write, "institutional culture…plays a vital role" in genAI (non)integration (2025, p. 5). At the institutional level, universities could do more to ensure information about genAI's environmental impact reaches students and teachers. Higher education institutions could also increase the support they provide to teachers asked to create and implement course policies, recognizing ethical (non)use of genAI requires continual deliberation and negotiation. Faculties and departments can organise opportunities for collegial discussion and exchange. Allocating time and resources is crucial, given the structural pressures already impinging on teachers (see de Fine Licht, 2024; Olsson, E. et al., 2024) and the reality that genAI is not a problem to be solved but an ongoing development to be addressed and negotiated.

Students in our study expressed a strong desire for both information and dialogue. Universities can promote student participation at all levels of genAI governance, from central support to the development and implementation of course policies. In the Scandinavian context, where higher education institutions have structures for student representation in educational decision-making, this step is readily achievable. Such a move signals that students' experiences and ethical concerns matter. It also offers students opportunities to recognize their agency in determining genAI (non)use.

Active learning and relational pedagogies are conducive to partnership ethics (see Owusu-Agyeman & Pillay, 2023; Sagy et al., 2019). In classrooms, frequent discussions between teachers and students and between students and their peers can support the non-hierarchical, non-dominating, dialogic and cooperative relations central to partnership ethics. For example, during course introductions teachers can invite students to share their experiences and perspectives on genAI use, including the ethics and feasibility of existing course policies. Before each assessment and when students ask relevant questions, teachers can return to these discussions. Collective reflection on genAI's broader consequences – for instance, how society might be affected if all students relied on genAI and the environmental implications of common uses such as finding inspiration and summarising text – can be part of these dialogues. At the end of the course, a final activity might include reflection on what participants learned about the ethical opportunities and risks of using genAI and how problems they encountered could be addressed in subsequent course iterations. Students and teachers could also reflect together on partnership ethics as an approach to managing genAI (non)use.

Our research participants suggested classroom activities aligned with partnership ethics. They include exercises in which students read and discuss AI-generated outputs, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and implications for learning, and asking students to compare their own writing with text produced by genAI to identify flaws in generated outputs while gaining a deeper appreciation of their own abilities as writers. Other activities could focus attention on the social and environmental consequences of genAI use. For example, teachers could provide research on genAI's environmental impact and ask students to reflect on whether a given output is worth the water, electricity, and labour used to produce it. Such exercises highlight genAI's opportunities, risks, and trade-offs for mutually-interdependent entities.

Many participants expressed concerns about genAI in group work. Teachers could help students engage in dialogue about if, when, and how genAI is used. For example, participants highlighted "genAI shortcuts" as an area of contention, with some students talking about efficiency and others about laziness. Students can deliberate whether using genAI for brainstorming, reading, or making sense of challenging ideas in group work is ethical or appropriate. They can collectively decide how such uses are documented and disclosed. Teachers can support students in how to address situations where a group member may have violated the agreement and provide guidance on when to seek outside help, whether from classmates or teachers. In a context where students increasingly feel isolated (Olsson, T. et al., 2024) and question whether their classmates are doing the work themselves, such practices will foster collaborative relations and trust.

Conclusion

Responses to anonymous online surveys and five focus group interviews with students and teachers from the social science faculty of a Swedish public university indicated that ethics were central to genAI's impact on relations of teaching and learning. Research participants' concerns included and extended beyond academic integrity, the topic that dominates much academic research on genAI in higher education (Bozkurt, 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2024; Overono & Ditta, 2025; Perkins et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). In addition to cheating in courses, participants worried about genAI's impact on moral character and personal development, classroom and peer learning relationships, societal development or dumbing-down and, to a lesser extent, genAI's environmental impact. In analysing their perspectives, we have considered whether Merchant's partnership ethics, with its principles of mutual interdependence, respect for diversity, inclusiveness, accountability, and a shared commitment to long-term sustainability, could guide decision-making about genAI (non)use. Partnership ethics facilitates moving beyond a narrow focus on honesty and compliance to consider genAI's pedagogical, social, and environmental implications. It proposes that all members of academic communities jointly navigate the uncertainties of genAI, foregrounding the agency of teachers and students, and working to co-create shared values through ongoing dialogue.

Our research has several limitations. We conducted a case study and findings reflect a particular time and place (Sweden during the 2024-2025 academic year). We focused exclusively on a social science faculty, and our research concerned a rapidly evolving technology. We had comparatively low response rates to the surveys and low participation of teachers in the focus group interviews. Research participants self-selected and we cannot know whether their views

were held by non-participants. We find significant resonance between our study context and the international scholarship on genAI, yet more research is needed to determine how generalisable our findings may be.

Turning to further research, our results suggest several promising avenues for inquiry. Studies that explicitly investigate the ethics of genAI (non)use in particular contexts while attending to the fact that humans disagree about ethics would be revealing. Of particular interest would be explorations of genAI and ethics in settings with strong commitments to Indigenous science. A comparative study of how learning cultures affect the ethics of genAI in higher education, using for example the cultures of learning continuum (Sagy et al., 2019), would be illuminating. When it comes to implementing partnership ethics, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) or similar experimental study could provide robust empirical evidence about the utility of the approach outlined here. Finally, our inquiry focused exclusively on undergraduate and postgraduate students and teachers. It would be desirable to widen the scope to PhD education. Doctoral supervision, at least in the social sciences and humanities, traditionally relies on a dialogue-based approach. From this perspective, applying Merchant's partnership ethics would be an extension of existing learning cultures to foster ethical (non)use of genAI in research training and thesis writing.

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