Navigating Ambiguity: A Comparative Study of AI Policies and Student Ethical Frameworks in Romanian, Bulgarian and Swiss Higher Education

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Abstract

This research examines the intersection of institutional Artificial Intelligence (AI) policies in Romania, Bulgaria, and Switzerland with the real-world perceptions and experiences of students using these technologies in academic writing.
Institutional frameworks across these countries increasingly emphasize a balanced approach, promoting responsible use through transparency, mandatory disclosure, and data privacy. If several institutions mandate detailed documentation of AI use, other universities are establishing regulations that differentiate between permitted aids – like brainstorming and editing – and prohibited actions, such as generating entire works.
In contrast, student experiences reveal a significant alignment gap, as learners often navigate these GenAI tools through personal experimentation and peer learning due to inconsistent or nascent formal guidance. Students primarily justify the use of ChatGPT and/or other AI writing tools as a means to increase efficiency and linguistic quality, particularly for non-native speakers, utilizing tools for text refinement, translation, and overcoming writer's block. However, they remain highly cautious, framing ethical boundaries around intellectual ownership and expressing concerns regarding AI "hallucinations," over-reliance, and the potential decline of critical thinking skills.
The findings suggest that while policies focus on regulation and academic integrity, students prioritize practical utility. This highlights a critical need for more adaptive institutional frameworks that move beyond mere prohibition to foster comprehensive AI literacy in European Higher Education.

Keywords: *Higher Education Policies, Academic Writing, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Student Perceptions, Ethical Frameworks*

1. Introduction – AI Use in Academia

The landscape of university policies regarding Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has evolved rapidly since the release of ChatGPT from OpenAI in late 2022, and it moved from initial reactions of concern and uncertainty to more thoughtful strategies for effective integration [1], [2]. According to current literature, the majority of higher education institutions (HEIs) have adopted an "open but cautious" approach. They seek to balance the innovative potential of generative AI (GenAI) in writing with considerations regarding academic integrity, ethical usage, and data privacy [1]. Most universities have avoided banning GenAI tools completely, recognizing that such prohibitions are largely unfeasible and potentially counterproductive [1], [2]. Rather than adopting uniform institutional policies, universities have opted for more flexible, and inconsistent, approaches, in order to distribute responsibility across various levels of the academic hierarchy.
The most common approach is the one in which the institution delegates decision-making authority to individual faculty members, allowing them to determine the terms of AI use based on the specific objectives of their courses and the framework of their disciplines [1]. The advantage of this method is represented by the flexibility it grants the instructor, who can calibrate the most appropriate AI policy for their discipline and course objectives. However, the method is highly inconsistent and can turn even a single institution into a very uneven environment: students can deal with different – and sometimes contradictory – rules from one course to the other.
Another approach would be the opposite, a restrictive policy imposed by the institution: forbidding AI use unless an instructor permits it in the syllabus. While this method could help create an ethical ecosystem, students would not have the opportunity to engage with AI tools in an official manner. Inevitably, they would use AI, even though it is prohibited.
The last case is when universities allow the use of GenAI tools, provided that students follow strict citation and attribution rules [1], [2]. This transparency regarding the nature and extent of AI involvement treats AI as a legitimate research assistant and holds students responsible for the final submission.

This disparity in regulation is defining the current worldwide academia. At the international level, there is a significant difference in the perception of GenAI between institutions operating in various states. Moreover, at the national level, even where governments have begun to issue recommendations, these rarely translate into coherent independent policies, due to institutional autonomy. And at the institutional level, students are often confronted to ambiguity in AI regulations and recommendations provided by professors.

2. Project TRAI – A Three-fold Perspective

In order to map this landscape empirically, the present study selected three countries – Romania, Bulgaria, and Switzerland – as comparative case studies, all participating in a MAPS (Multilateral Academic Project, funded by SNF – Swiss National Science Foundation) project titled *TRAI*, "Exploring the Triad of Academic Writing, Critical Thinking and AI Literacy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Undergraduate Thesis Writing" (https://trai.uvt.ro/). The project aims to understand, analyse, describe, and extract information relevant to Higher Education regarding the relationships within the triad formed by academic writing, critical thinking, and the use of artificial intelligence, since students are already widely using Large Language Model tools, such as ChatGPT, even though institutional policies regarding their use are still under development. For each country, all publicly available AI-related policies and guidelines issued by higher education institutions were identified and analysed, with the aim of producing a comprehensive picture of how GenAI is currently being regulated (e.g. ZHAW – Zurich University of Applied Sciences, ETH Zurich, University of Bern and University of Zurich for Switzerland; Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and American University for Bulgaria; West University of Timisoara, Politehnica University of Timisoara and "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy for Romania).

3. AI Institutional Regulations

In HEIs from Romania, Switzerland, and Bulgaria, institutional policies regarding the use of GenAI revolve around several principles: transparency in use, human accountability for outputs, and the preservation of academic integrity. A common statement emerges from the official regulations: AI may assist students in research and writing, but it may not replace their critical thinking and authorship. Most institutions across the three countries position GenAI as a legitimate tool, capable of supporting tasks such as brainstorming, text editing, language refinement, but they explicitly forbid its use in in ways that would substitute the student's own intellectual contribution, particularly in the production of original arguments, critical analysis, or written works submitted for assessment.

In Bulgaria, an interesting aspect extracted from the institutional policies is related to the necessity of developing AI literacy among both students and professors. There is a strong recommendation for taking AI literacy courses for the academic community, in order to understand the limitations and ethical risks of the AI technology. Moreover, both faculty and students are required to disclose AI use to maintain intellectual honesty (see American University in Bulgaria, [3]). Overall, the Bulgarian institutions focus on an ethical commitment of academia.

In the Romanian context, institutions tend to require students to produce formal written declarations attesting to the degree and manner of AI use (see especially the West University of Timisoara case, [4]). The prioritization of an administrative procedure reflects a commitment to transparency, it risks tipping into administrative overreach, a factor that is actually traditionally embedded in the Romanian educational system. In a higher education system already marked by significant bureaucratic overload, the risk is that transparency becomes an end in itself, reduced to a signed form rather than a reflective practice. However, the three Romanian institutions examined in this study represent different academic profiles – a comprehensive, theoretically oriented university, a medical university, and a technical university – and their AI policies reflect, perhaps unsurprisingly, the distinct epistemological cultures. The medical university adopts the most permissive approach among the three and explicitly enumerates the tasks for which GenAI is considered appropriate, such as: generating outlines and structures for scientific articles or thesis chapters, assisting with the formulation of clear and concise paragraphs, correcting grammatical, stylistic, and logical coherence errors, and refining academic language to meet the precision standards required for publication in high-impact international journals [5]. This granularity reflects a field in which writing is understood primarily as the communication of knowledge, and the institution does not seek to develop academic writing skills per se. The comprehensive university has a more decentralized approach, creating a general framework and delegating decision to individual faculties, allowing each to develop guidelines calibrated to the specific demands and conventions of

their discipline. This flexibility acknowledges the differences between specific fields of knowledge (for instance, Philology vs Computer Science), but imposes the risk of inconsistency [4]. The technical university has a median position, emphasizing transparency and process documentation, but raising awareness regarding authorship and intellectual property [6].

Swiss institutions have adopted a proactive strategy, and the country is the most policy-rich ecosystem among the three countries examined, in terms of both the volume of available institutional documents and the degree to which they address the specifics of GenAI. Swiss higher education institutions appear to be considerably more advanced in their policy development. They have moved beyond general ethical statements and now have detailed, practical frameworks that address the technical, legal, and pedagogical aspects of AI use. For instance, the University of Bern requires students to "create a log that keeps track of which tools are used for which section" [7]. ZHAW, University of Zurich and University of Bern state that the use of AI tools in the context of academic work, however minor or peripheral, must be explicitly acknowledged and documented [8], [9].

To sum up, the Swiss institutional culture underlines an emphasis on technical process documentation. Many Swiss universities require verifiable evidence of the writing process itself – including logs of AI interactions, records of the prompts submitted at different stages of the task, and successive versions of the text, that allow reviewers to trace the evolution of the paper from initial AI-assisted draft to final submission.

Policy Aspect	Bulgaria	Romania	Switzerland
Responsibility and decision-making	Human	Human	Human
Disclosure and transparency	Mandatory at the beginning of assignments, proper citation needed	Mandatory for every task – in some cases, students fill in a transparency statement regarding the use of tools based on GenAI	Mandatory, often requires logs or transcripts as annex
Syllabus	Teachers must define specific permissions in the Syllabus	Teachers must define AI rules in the Syllabus for every task	Departmental specific guidelines
Data Privacy	Adherence to GDPR	Adherence to GDPR	Adherence to GDPR

Table 1. Summary Table of Institutional Policies

4. Students' Perceptions

In order to examine the extent to which these institutional policies actually are implemented and internalised, three students were interviewed from each of the countries included in the study, resulting in a total of nine interviews across the three national contexts (three from ZHAW, three from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", three from West University of Timisoara). This interview component aimed to see students' perspectives regarding the use of GenAI and whether the institutional policies are sufficiently spread among students. More specifically, the interviews aimed to analyse students' own understandings and experiences of GenAI use in academic writing, their awareness of the policies from their respective institutions, and their assessments of whether GenAI can change an more epistemological dimension: how the use of AI tools shapes their relationship to knowledge itself, whether engaging with AI-generated text changes the way they read, evaluate, and assimilate information; whether the externalization of certain cognitive tasks to AI affects their sense of intellectual ownership over the final work.

An important note is the temporal context of the interviews: conducted in 2025, they took place at a moment when several of the institutional policies examined in this study were either newly issued or still in the process of being formally implemented. This is why student experiences reveal a significant alignment gap, as learners often navigate these GenAI tools through personal experimentation and peer learning due to inconsistent policy.

Among the students interviewed, ChatGPT appears to be the most widely used AI tool, but students often combine it with more specialized applications, like Perplexity for evaluating sources, and DeepL for translation and the refinement of academic language.

Despite the differences in national policy contexts and institutional cultures, the students interviewed across Romania, Bulgaria, and Switzerland develop several common beliefs or practices:

- Autonomy: Students permanently position themselves as the decision-maker in any AI-assisted task – the one who sets the direction, evaluates the outputs, and has the responsibility for the final submission.
- Assisted Writing: The role of the student in the writing process becomes more and more that of an editor – AI-assisted writing means that AI tools are used for literature review, evaluating, correcting, and refining the text.
    - A major application of AI is improving the academic language of a text and translating content between languages. Students who are not native speakers of the language they are writing in often rely on AI to correct grammar or choose appropriate vocabulary.
    - AI acts as an advanced search engine that helps students find relevant literature for their topic.
    - Students frequently use AI to summarize academic papers or abstracts, using these summaries as a preliminary filter to assess whether a source is relevant enough to their topic.
- Risks in Academia: Students are concerned about AI dependency [12], AI hallucinations and academic integrity, and therefore are aware that they need to verify information provided by AI.

A closer reading of the interviews reveals that students from Bulgaria, Switzerland, and Romania slightly differ in how they engage with AI tools, especially because of their distinct disciplinary contexts. Among the Bulgarian students interviewed, AI use is predominantly related to technical and often repetitive tasks (such as document formatting in LaTeX, debugging and optimizing programming code). Moreover, Bulgarian students tend to have a selective approach: they use AI only in areas where they already have a background knowledge to recognize, intuitively, whether the output is plausible and consistent with what they know. This technically oriented pattern of AI use reflects the disciplinary profile of the Bulgarian students interviewed. Swiss students exhibit a more sophisticated model, viewing themselves as a “conductor of an orchestra”. What is more, there is a high level of technical literacy regarding AI among Swiss students: they are aware of prompt engineering techniques and often use one AI to optimize prompts for another AI to ensure a better output. Among the Romanian students interviewed (predominantly from the fields of Languages and Literatures) use AI for thematic brainstorming (e.g., exploring certain motifs; see also [10]) and explaining complex theoretical concepts. In this case, AI functions less as a writing assistant than as a thinking partner Also, the responses showed a strong emphasis on the fear of “imposture”, which reflects a more personal anxiety related to intellectual property, authentic authorial voice and domain-specific standards. The ethical dimension of AI use in this field is experienced more as a question of personal and professional integrity.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

From the institutional policies examined in Romania, Bulgaria, and Switzerland, three common principles emerge: citation of AI-generated content, fact-checking, banning presenting AI-generated work as one's own independent contribution. A strong consensus among interviewees is represented by the belief that AI should primarily function as a tool, instead of replacing intellectual work.

All institutions examined are consistent in their position that AI outputs do not represent scientific sources and may not be treated as such. Where AI has contributed to a text students have to acknowledge the use of AI in accordance with established academic citation standards. However, since standard citation formats were not originally designed for AI outputs, students are often left to navigate ambiguity about how precisely to cite a tool rather than an author. Nevertheless, university policies require students to verify the accuracy of any content produced or suggested by an AI tool since students are fully responsible for the factual integrity of their work. This fact-checking practice acknowledges that AI outputs are not yet reliable sources and that students need to develop the critical evaluation skills necessary for this task.

The convergence between the three countries marks the fact that there are common shared values prioritized by institutions, but there is an uneven development of implementation [11], which leaves a considerable interpretive space for both faculty staff and students to navigate.

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