

"I Use AI, But I Am Not Sure If It Is Making Me Better": GenAI Literacy, Self-Regulation, and HR Workforce Readiness

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Abstract: The integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) into higher education raises a practical question for talent acquisition: whether students are developing the literacy, self-regulation, and professional judgement required for responsible AI use in future HR work. This study applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of thirty management undergraduates recruited via purposive sampling from selected state and non-state universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, with particular attention to Human Resource Management (HRM) oriented learning and workforce readiness. Guided by the GenAI Human Resource Readiness Framework (GHRF), introduced as an original theoretical contribution, the analysis generated three main finding areas: GenAI literacy as self-constructed and unevenly developed, self-regulation as personally negotiated practice, and GenAI involvement as closely connected to perceived HR workforce readiness. Within the third finding area, responsible AI use emerged as part of students' developing HR professional identity, while readiness was experienced as tool confidence without sufficient professional wisdom. The findings suggest that students are not simply adopting GenAI as an academic convenience; they are also negotiating uncertainty, dependency, ethical boundaries, and the relevance of AI to future people-management decisions. The study contributes to AI literacy and HR education by showing that GenAI readiness requires more than tool familiarity. It calls for structured curriculum support, HR-specific AI ethics cases, and professional guidance that connects classroom-level GenAI use with responsible AI-integrated HR practice.

Keywords: *GenAI Literacy, HR Education, HR Workforce Readiness, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Self-Regulation*

Background of the Study

The question of how management undergraduates engage with Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools - how they understand, regulate, and connect their use to developing professional identities is one of the defining pedagogical challenges of this decade. The urgency is heightened still further for students of Human Resource Management (HRM): as artificial intelligence becomes more deeply entrenched within core HRM functions such as talent acquisition, performance appraisal, learning and development, and workforce analytics, organizations are increasingly concerned about the preparedness of new graduates to responsibly and critically work with these systems (Tambe et al., 2019).

Sri Lankan context makes this issue particularly urgent because GenAI adoption is developing faster than formal institutional guidance in higher education. International evidence shows that universities are still uneven in how they regulate GenAI use, with policies ranging from restriction to guided integration, while students and lecturers continue to face uncertainty around disclosure, assessment integrity, privacy, and responsible use (An et al., 2025; Miao & Holmes, 2023). This policy uncertainty is especially relevant in Sri Lanka, where national AI development is now being positioned as part of digital transformation, innovation, and economic progress, yet university-level GenAI guidance remains comparatively underdeveloped and uneven across institutions. The Department of Digital Economy's national AI strategy consultation signals the country's intention to promote responsible AI adoption, while Sri Lanka's Personal Data Protection Act, No. 9 of 2022, strengthens the legal importance of privacy and data governance in AI-mediated professional practice (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2022). For HR education, this creates a specific readiness challenge: students are expected to enter workplaces where AI may influence recruitment, performance management, employee analytics, and learning systems, but their current academic preparation may not yet provide structured guidance on how such tools should be used ethically, critically, and professionally.

Most Sri Lankan research into GenAI and higher education has been conceptual in nature, simply documenting that students are using these technologies frequently and perceive them as being largely helpful (Dissanayake et al., 2025; Premkumar et al., 2024). Yet to be empirically investigated is the human element of how students make

sense of these day-to-day interactions with AI. What influences whether they use GenAI as a partner in thinking or a means to finish a task? Moving beyond general academic engagement, it is critical to understand how these emerging technological habits translate into specialized career preparation. Accordingly, how do HRM students experience the connection or disconnect between current AI practices and professional readiness? These irreducibly phenomenological questions motivate the present study.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing use of GenAI tools among management undergraduates, limited empirical attention has been given to how HRM-oriented students in Sri Lanka construct GenAI literacy, regulate their AI use, and connect these practices to future HR workforce readiness. Existing studies largely describe awareness, adoption, or perceived usefulness, but they do not sufficiently explain the lived experience of learning, ethical uncertainty, self-regulation, and professional identity formation in AI-mediated HR education. This creates a practical and theoretical problem: universities and professional bodies are expected to prepare AI-ready HR graduates, yet they lack qualitative evidence on how students currently experience and interpret responsible GenAI use in relation to HR work.

To systematically address this empirical gap, the present study is guided by three interconnected objectives. Primarily, it seeks to explore how management undergraduates actively construct and experience GenAI literacy within the nuanced context of HRM education. Building upon this foundational understanding, the research further examines the mechanisms through which students negotiate self-regulation when deploying GenAI tools for academic and professional learning purposes. Ultimately, the study investigates how these students interpret the role of their GenAI involvement in shaping their perceived workforce readiness for future AI-integrated HRM practice.

Literature Review

GenAI in higher education and the Sri Lankan context

Students worldwide access GenAI applications – ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot being the frontrunners, to help with summarization, ideation, assignment writing and code writing (Kasneci et al., 2023). Students in Sri Lanka also use them frequently, particularly during peak times such as assignment due dates, and these patterns vary by area of study (Premkumar et al., 2024). However, scholarly articles view students' use of AI tools as a behavioural metric rather than an experiential reality. However, the experiential dimensions of GenAI adoption, specifically how students construct meaning around these tools, navigate ethical dilemmas, and reconcile tensions related to their emerging professional identities, remain largely underexplored in empirical research. This is a gap that needs addressing, especially in HRM students, as they are entering a profession where making ethically sound decisions on matters that affect people is key (Tambe et al., 2019).

GenAI literacy: Conceptualization and limits

Understanding how GenAI works, being able to evaluate its outputs, and developing an ethical rationale for using it are all components of AI literacy (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng et al., 2021). For HRM students, this also includes understanding how these algorithms can inherit bias in recruitment, performance evaluations, and workforce metrics. What we do know is that students do not seem to formally learn AI literacy in school & other higher education institutions and have instead picked up these skills on their own (Essien et al., 2024). Research has yet to provide qualitative insights into how this disjointed approach to gaining AI literacy is experienced by students and what it feels like to navigate consequential professional tools without authoritative guidance.

Self-regulation and motivation: SDT perspectives

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) illuminates the quality of AI engagement. Autonomously motivated students use AI as a thinking partner, questioning outputs, iterating prompts, and reflecting on accuracy, whereas controlled motivation produces surface-level task completion (Zhou et al., 2024). However, SDT does not adequately account for the phenomenological experience of self-regulation in the absence of institutional norms; specifically, it overlooks the improvised moral reasoning that students deploy when formal rules are lacking.

HR workforce readiness in the AI era

HR workforce readiness refers to graduates' preparedness to function within AI-augmented organizations, encompassing AI fluency, ethical responsibility, adaptive decision-making, and change leadership (Cockett, 2024; Society for Human Resource Management, 2024). Even though Sri Lanka's national AI strategy is identifying HR professionals as a priority readiness group as per the data published by the Ministry of Digital Economy (2024), the experiential gap between how students currently engage with GenAI and what AI-integrated HR practice demands has not been qualitatively examined, which this study directly aims to bridge the existing gap.

Theoretical Lenses

The GenAI HR Readiness Framework (GHRF), introduced here as an original contribution, integrates three theoretical traditions. Interpretative Phenomenology (Heidegger, 2007) holds that experience is always situated in social and institutional worlds, directing inquiry toward the taken-for-granted structures that shape how students encounter AI tools. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides motivational vocabulary for understanding the quality of AI engagement - specifically, whether it is autonomously value-driven or instrumentally compliance-driven. AI Literacy Theory (Long & Magerko, 2020) frames the multi-dimensional competences required for critical AI use beyond mere tool proficiency.

The GHRF posits that HR workforce readiness, conceptualized as an embodied experience, is fundamentally shaped by three interconnected experiential domains: (1) the domain of GenAI literacy experience, encompassing the process through which students acquire knowledge of, comprehend, and critically assess AI; (2) the domain of self-regulation practice experience, which involves students managing their AI usage independently; and (3) the domain of professional identity construction experience, wherein interactions with AI are integrated into the evolving identity of the HR professional. These domains function as interpretative lenses, rather than causal assertions, thereby guiding the analysis toward the most pertinent factors influencing professional development.

Methodology

This study employs interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2012), a qualitative methodology concerned with how individuals make sense of significant experiences. Given its idiographic commitment to analysing individual cases prior to establishing group-level patterns, IPA is particularly well-suited to the educational GenAI context. Furthermore, the methodology's inherent focus on ambivalence, contradiction, and identity development perfectly captures the nuanced reality of students navigating both positive and negative engagements with artificial intelligence. Ultimately, IPA's double hermeneutic approach, which requires researchers to interpret the participants' own meaning-making processes, aligns seamlessly with the reflexive nature of human-AI interactions.

Purposive sampling recruited 30 participants across state universities and non-state institutions in the Western Province, seeking maximum variation across programme type (16 HRM; 14 Business Management), institution type, academic year (Years 1–4), and GenAI usage intensity. Although IPA studies often use smaller samples because of their idiographic depth, this study used 30 participants to capture variation across programme type, institution type, academic year, and GenAI usage intensity. To preserve IPA's idiographic logic, analysis first treated each interview as an individual case before moving to cross-case patterning. The sample size was therefore used to support interpretive variation rather than statistical generalisation. The Western Province was selected because it contains a high concentration of state and non-state higher education institutions and comparatively stronger digital access, but the study does not claim statistical representation of all Sri Lankan undergraduates; rather, it was designed to provide rich, information-oriented cases suitable for IPA. Gender composition was 18 females and 12 males, consistent with Sri Lanka University Statistics report of 2023 of the University Grants Commission - Sri Lanka (2026) enrolment data. Interpretive sufficiency was judged at participant 27 after no substantially new superordinate themes or meaning patterns were identified in the coding memos. The final three interviews were retained in the analysis and served to confirm, refine, and nuance the existing thematic structure rather than introduce new thematic categories.

In-depth semi-structured interviews averaging 47 minutes (range: 38–61 minutes) were conducted between January and March 2026, face-to-face or via Zoom, in English and Sinhala. The interview guide covered: initial GenAI encounters; the phenomenology of a typical AI-assisted study session; reasoning about responsible use; self-assessed AI literacy; and the imagined connection between current practices and anticipated HR careers. Non-English interviews were professionally translated with back-translation verification for analytical fidelity.

Analysis followed Smith et al. (2012) the six-step IPA procedure: repeated reading and noting; emergent theme development per transcript; cross-transcript clustering; superordinate theme identification; subordinate theme specification; and final reporting. NVivo 14 managed coding. Trustworthiness was established through member checking (seven participants verified case summaries), a full analytical audit trail, and reflexive bracketing. Ethical approval was obtained (Ref: ERC-2025-HRM-049); participants are identified by pseudocode (P01–P30).

Findings

The analysis generated three main finding areas aligned with the study’s research questions and objectives: GenAI literacy, self-regulation, and perceived HR workforce readiness. Within the third finding area, responsible AI use emerged as an important interpretative bridge between students’ present academic engagement with GenAI and their imagined future roles in HRM. For this reason, responsible AI use is not treated as a separate research question. Instead, it is positioned as part of how HR students made sense of professional readiness in AI-integrated people-management contexts.

Table 1 : Alignment Between Research Questions, Objectives, and Findings

Research Focus	Research objective	Main finding area	Analytical focus
How do management undergraduates construct and experience GenAI literacy?	To explore how management undergraduates construct and experience GenAI literacy in the context of HR education.	GenAI literacy as self-constructed and unevenly developed	Students developed GenAI literacy through trial and error, peer learning, online exposure, and repeated academic use rather than through formal institutional instruction.
How do they negotiate self-regulation in GenAI use?	To examine how students negotiate self-regulation when using GenAI tools for academic and professional learning purposes.	Self-regulation as personally negotiated practice	Students created personal rules around prompting, verification, dependency, and acceptable use, often without clear university-level guidance.
How do students in HRM perceive the interaction between GenAI involvement and HR workforce readiness?	To examine how HRM students interpret the role of GenAI involvement in shaping their perceived readiness for future AI-integrated HRM practice.	GenAI involvement and HR workforce readiness	HRM students connected GenAI readiness with fairness, bias awareness, ethical responsibility, and practical exposure to AI-enabled HR tools, but felt underprepared for professional application.

GenAI literacy as self-constructed and unevenly developed

Addressing the primary research objective concerning the construction of GenAI literacy, the analysis reveals that participants experienced this capability as something they had largely built for themselves. Rather than describing formal instruction, structured workshops, or clearly communicated university guidance, participants referred to experimentation, peer advice, social media exposure, and repeated academic use as their main sources of learning. Consequently, GenAI literacy emerged less as a taught graduate capability and more as an improvised competence developed under conditions of uncertainty.

"Nobody taught us how these tools work. I just started using ChatGPT because my friends were. You figure it out as you go. But I still don't really know if I am using it correctly or not." (P08, Year 2)

The phrase "correctly or not" reveals awareness that standards for AI engagement exist, alongside chronic uncertainty about where those standards reside. HRM students described practising critical evaluation, cross-checking outputs, questioning AI arguments, but this was unevenly distributed: younger and Business Management students more frequently accepted outputs uncritically under time pressure. Ethical awareness was

present across the sample but untethered to any institutional framework; most participants experienced ethics as personal moral intuition, collectively describing AI use as a "grey area" (P22, Year 2) in the absence of clear guidance.

This finding extends the existing Sri Lankan qualitative literature (Dissanayake et al., 2025; Premkumar et al., 2024) by revealing its phenomenological texture: not merely an absence of institutional guidance, but a lived experience of navigational stress and epistemic uncertainty. The prevalence of the "grey area" metaphor is analytically significant; it signals a shared experiential condition of ethical disorientation that is not simply ignorance, but the reasonable response of moral agents operating without authoritative frameworks. This aligns with finding by Essien et al. (2024) that AI competence in business education is largely acquired incidentally, but extends it to the HR context, with greater urgency given the ethical stakes of AI in people management decisions.

Self-regulation as moral improvisation

Addressing the second research objective concerning the negotiation of self-regulation, the analysis reveals that students managed these practices through personal rules rather than through shared institutional procedures. Participants did not describe a common code of AI conduct or a consistently applied university policy. Instead, they developed individual boundaries around when GenAI could be used, how far its outputs could be trusted, and what forms of use felt academically or ethically acceptable.

"I made my own system. I never use AI to write the main argument. I use it for background research and to check my reasoning. But that is my own rule. Nobody told me that. I invented it." (P04, Year 3)

"Invented" signals both agency and contingency: sophisticated practice built on personal moral reasoning rather than institutional socialisation - a fragile foundation for consistent professional conduct. Many participants described a visceral anxiety about dependency: "Sometimes I catch myself going straight to the AI before I even think about the problem myself. That scares me. What happens when I am in a job, and I cannot trust it?" (P11, Year 2). Self-regulation was contextually modulated far more stringently under high-stakes assessment than routine study, revealing an instrumentally rather than intrinsically motivated regulatory orientation.

"Self-regulation as moral improvisation" gives qualitative depth to SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) autonomous-versus-controlled motivation distinction. Where intrinsic professional values anchor AI regulation, as in many HRM accounts, practice is richer, more consistent, and more durable. Where regulation is purely instrumentally motivated by grade risk, it is situationally brittle: effective under assessment pressure but unlikely to persist once that pressure is removed in professional settings. Curriculum interventions must therefore cultivate intrinsic valuation of responsible practice through reflective pedagogy, not merely transmit external rules.

GenAI involvement and HR workforce readiness

The third finding addresses RQ3 by showing that HRM students did not interpret GenAI involvement only as academic tool use. They connected it to future HR work, especially where AI may influence recruitment, performance evaluation, employee analytics, learning and development, and workplace decision-making. However, their sense of readiness was ambivalent. Many participants felt confident using GenAI tools for study-related tasks, but they were less confident about applying AI responsibly in professional HRM contexts.

GenAI involvement and HR workforce readiness

"We learn in HR that you have to be fair to people. If we are going to use AI to make decisions about who to hire or promote, we have to understand the biases in those systems. That is an ethical thing. And I feel that responsibility more because I am doing HR." (P14, Year 3)

This disciplinary moral socialization was largely absent in Business Management accounts. Participants across both programmes also constructed aspirational AI identities, "That is not the kind of professional I want to be" (P19, Year 3), framing responsible practice as character rather than compliance. Those who had lapsed into irresponsible use described sustained moral dissonance: "I basically submitted what the AI wrote. I passed, but I felt terrible about it for weeks" (P07, Year 2). This phenomenology, guilt, duration, and moral ambiguity describe developing moral agents whose dissonance is a potent resource for responsible AI learning, if constructively engaged through pedagogy.

The finding that HRM disciplinary socialization functions as latent AI ethics scaffolding is among the most theoretically generative results. The HRM curriculum already contains the normative raw material of fairness, transparency, and employee well-being that students are independently extending to their reasoning about AI

governance. Curriculum developers need not construct AI ethics content from scratch; they need to explicitly activate and connect what is already latent in existing modules.

HR workforce readiness as aspirational but uncertain

Participants consistently distinguished between tool proficiency experienced as adequate and the professional wisdom required for ethical AI practice in HR contexts almost universally experienced as underdeveloped.

"I can use the tools. But what I don't know is how companies actually use AI in HR, the ethics, the legal side, and what biases creep in. On that side, I don't think the university has prepared me for that at all." (P03, HRM, State, Year 4)

Without exposure to real-world AI-augmented HR practice, participants lacked the professional imagination to identify and therefore develop specific readiness competencies: "Nobody has shown us how an ATS works, what it looks like to make a hiring decision with AI input. I don't know if I am ready, because I don't really know what I am supposed to be ready for" (P21, Year 3). Despite this, the dominant affective tone was motivated desire for institutional partnership: "I don't want to figure that out by myself in my first job" (P28, Year 3).

The tool competence–professional wisdom gap is given phenomenological substance here (Hyde et al., 2024). Practitioner case studies, HR-AI decision simulations, and employer guest lectures emerge from participant accounts as high-leverage pedagogical interventions. Participants are not passive complainants; they are active requesters of institutional support for a readiness journey they recognise is already underway.

Discussion

Past literature supports the alignment between the research objectives and the main findings of this study. Addressing the first research objective regarding the construction of GenAI literacy, AI literacy is not limited to technical awareness but includes the ability to understand, use, evaluate, and ethically judge AI-generated outputs (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng et al., 2021). This links closely with the first finding, where students' GenAI literacy was developed mainly through trial-and-error use, peer learning, and online exposure rather than formal institutional training. Regarding the second research objective on the negotiation of self-regulation, the findings are supported by self-regulated learning theory, which explains that effective learners actively set goals, monitor their progress, and control their learning strategies (Zimmerman, 2002). In this study, students showed similar self-regulation by creating personal rules around prompting, verification, dependency, and acceptable GenAI use. Finally, addressing the third research objective concerning perceived HR workforce readiness, the results are consistent with HRM literature, which shows that AI is increasingly reshaping recruitment, training, decision-making, and workforce development, while also raising concerns about bias, ethics, and professional readiness (Budhwar et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study examined how management undergraduates in Sri Lanka experience GenAI literacy, self-regulation, and HR workforce readiness in the context of AI-mediated learning and future HRM practice. The findings suggest that students are not merely adopting GenAI as a convenient academic tool; they are actively grappling with what responsible use means, the limits of AI-generated outputs, and the translation of current academic habits into professional competence. In answering the first research objective, the study concludes that rather than developing through formal institutional instruction, GenAI literacy is currently a fragile, self-directed process. Students are forced to self-construct their AI literacy through informal experimentation. Addressing the second research objective, this self-constructed literacy leads students to improvise personal rules of self-regulation to navigate ethical and practical ambiguities. While these self-imposed boundaries reflect a genuine ethical awareness, particularly among HRM students who view AI through the professional lenses of fairness, accountability, and bias, they remain unstable without structured university guidance. Finally, regarding the third research objective, this reliance on improvised literacy and private regulation creates a significant HR workforce readiness gap. Students possess academic tool confidence yet feel acutely unprepared to apply these technologies responsibly within complex, high-stakes HR environments. This study contributes to HR education by showing that GenAI readiness cannot be reduced to tool access or general digital confidence. For HRM students, readiness requires the ability to connect AI literacy with professional judgement, ethical responsibility, and people-centred decision-making. Within the limits of a purposively selected IPA sample, the study offers a focused qualitative account of how students are beginning to negotiate that readiness in a lower-readiness higher education context. Future research should extend this inquiry beyond the Western Province, include lecturers and employers, and examine whether students' self-regulation and HR AI readiness develop as they move into early career roles.

Practical implications to HR professionals

University HRM programme coordinators should embed a dedicated GenAI for HR Practice module that develops contextualized AI literacy beyond tool competence, builds professional imagination through real-world HR-AI scenarios and employer engagement, and creates structured opportunities for the reflective ethics practice that participants currently undertake unsupported. Critically, this content should be integrated with, not appended to, existing HRM ethics and theory modules to leverage the disciplinary scaffolding already present.

CIPM Sri Lanka is well-positioned to develop practitioner-facing AI literacy standards and CPD frameworks that bridge the readiness gap undergraduate education cannot fully close. Establishing a national AI competency benchmark for HR professionals aligned with Sri Lanka's national AI strategy (Ministry of Digital Economy, 2024) and the Personal Data Protection Act, No. 9 of 2022 (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2022) would create a shared authoritative framework that students, employers, and educators currently lack. The University Grants Commission should consider revising accreditation standards for management programmes to include measurable GenAI literacy outcomes, transforming what is currently a fragmented, individually negotiated competence into a structured, institutionally guaranteed graduate attribute.

For practicing HR professionals, findings underscore the urgency of creating structured AI onboarding experiences for graduate hires, rather than assuming tool competence translates to professional wisdom. Mentoring, simulation-based training, and deliberate reflection on AI ethics in talent decisions are low-cost, high-leverage interventions that the present generation of HR graduates is actively requesting.

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