

Artificial Intelligence Literacy and Graduate Employability: A Cross-Disciplinary Study

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Abstract:

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the skills that employers expect from university graduates, prompting renewed attention to AI literacy as a determinant of employability. This paper synthesizes recent theoretical and empirical literature to examine how AI literacy relates to graduate employability across disciplinary contexts, including business and management, STEM fields, and the humanities and social sciences. Drawing on established AI literacy frameworks and graduate employability models, the paper argues that AI literacy functions less as a standalone technical competency than as a meta-skill that interacts with self-efficacy, career adaptability, and discipline-specific practice to shape labour-market readiness. Evidence reviewed indicates that AI-literate students report greater career adaptability and confidence navigating AI-mediated work, but that the strength and nature of this relationship varies markedly by discipline, institutional support, and access to applied learning opportunities. The paper also identifies a persistent gap between employer expectations of AI-related competence and graduates' self-assessed readiness, alongside equity concerns tied to uneven access to AI education across fields of study. The paper concludes with recommendations for embedding cross-disciplinary AI literacy instruction, applied assessment, and employer-linked learning pathways into higher education curricula to strengthen graduate employability in an AI-mediated labour market.

Keywords: artificial intelligence literacy, graduate employability, higher education, cross-disciplinary education, career adaptability, digital skills

1. Introduction

The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies across industries has transformed the competencies that employers expect university graduates to bring into the workplace. Where digital literacy and general computer proficiency once sufficed as markers of technological readiness, employers increasingly seek graduates who can understand, apply, and critically evaluate AI systems within their professional domain (Wut et al., 2025). This shift has elevated AI literacy, broadly defined as the competencies needed to understand, use, monitor, and critically evaluate AI applications, from a niche technical skill to a core dimension of graduate employability (Laupichler et al., 2022; Long & Magerko, 2020).

Graduate employability itself is a multidimensional construct, encompassing not only discipline-specific knowledge but also transferable skills, career self-management, and the capacity to adapt to volatile and uncertain labour markets (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Tomlinson, 2017). As AI becomes embedded in organisational processes across sectors, from data-driven decision-making in business to AI-assisted diagnostics in healthcare and generative tools in creative and communication industries, the relationship between AI literacy and employability has become a pressing question for higher education institutions (HEIs) responsible for preparing graduates for this transformed labour market (Rasul et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2025).

This paper undertakes a cross-disciplinary review of the relationship between AI literacy and graduate employability. It addresses three questions: (a) how is AI literacy conceptualised in relation to employability, (b) how does the relationship between AI literacy and employability outcomes vary across academic disciplines, and (c) what curricular and institutional strategies can strengthen AI literacy as a driver of graduate employability across fields of study. The paper proceeds by reviewing theoretical foundations, comparing disciplinary contexts, synthesising empirical evidence, and discussing implications for curriculum design, equity, and policy.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Defining and Framing AI Literacy

AI literacy is most commonly defined as the set of competencies that allow individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies, communicate and collaborate effectively with AI systems, and understand how such systems function (Long & Magerko, 2020). Building on this foundation, Ng et al. (2021) proposed four cognitive dimensions of AI literacy, organised along an ascending scale similar to Bloom's taxonomy: knowing and understanding AI, using and applying AI,

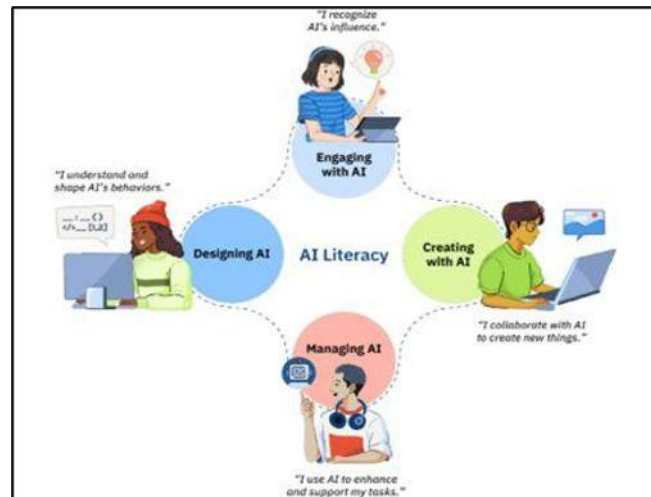


Fig.1. AI Literacy Framework Draft

evaluating and creating with AI, and navigating AI ethics. More recent frameworks have expanded this dimensional approach; the AI Literacy Heptagon, for example, identifies seven equally weighted dimensions, spanning technical knowledge, application proficiency, critical thinking, ethical awareness, social impact understanding, integration skills, and legal and regulatory knowledge (Hackl et al., 2026).

A recurring distinction in this literature is between generic AI literacy, the high-level understanding needed to critically evaluate AI's societal impact and use common applications responsibly, and domain-specific AI literacy, which integrates technical and contextual knowledge for professional practice in a given field, such as engineering, medicine, or business analytics (Hackl et al., 2026). This distinction is central to a cross-disciplinary study of employability, because the competencies that make a graduate AI-literate, and therefore employable, may differ substantially between a computer science program and a humanities program, even as both draw on a shared conceptual foundation.

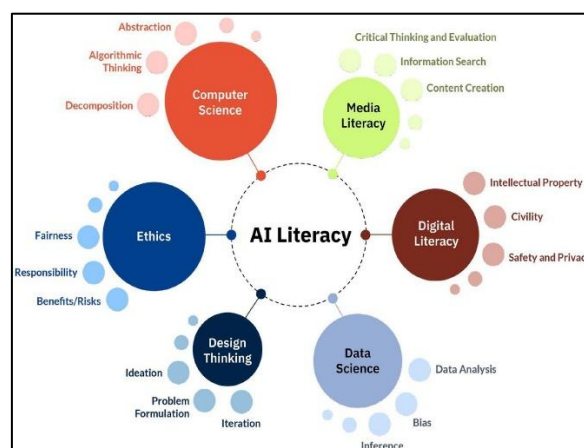


Fig.2. Core Dimensions of Artificial Intelligence Literacy

2.2 Graduate Employability: Concepts and Frameworks

Graduate employability has traditionally been conceptualised through models such as the CareerEDGE framework, which situates employability as a function of career development learning, experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence, mediated by self-efficacy and self-confidence (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Human capital theory frames employability primarily as a function of accumulated knowledge and skills that increase a graduate's productivity and marketability (Becker, 1964), while signalling theory emphasises how educational credentials communicate a graduate's underlying ability to prospective employers independent of the specific skills learned (Spence, 1973). More recent employability scholarship draws on the career resources framework, which integrates human capital, social capital, psychological resources, and career identity as joint predictors of career success (Underdahl et al., 2023).

Employability research has consistently found gaps between the competencies employers value and those students believe they possess. Comparative studies of employer, educator, and student perceptions have found statistically significant discrepancies in the perceived importance of communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills, alongside general agreement that discipline-specific technical knowledge alone is insufficient for long-term labour-market success (Underdahl et al., 2023; Waldenu employability perceptions study, 2020). These perception gaps provide an important backdrop for understanding how AI literacy, as an emerging competency, is being incorporated into, or overlooked within, existing employability frameworks.

2.3 Linking AI Literacy to Employability: Theoretical Rationale

Several theoretical mechanisms link AI literacy to graduate employability. First, from a human capital perspective, AI literacy represents an emerging form of technical capital that increases a graduate's productivity in AI-mediated work environments, independent of discipline (Becker, 1964, as extended by recent AI-era employability scholarship). Second, career adaptability theory suggests that AI literacy influences employability less through direct technical knowledge than through its effect on students' perceived AI readiness, which in turn shapes their confidence and flexibility in adapting to new, algorithmically mediated work demands (ScienceDirect career adaptability study, 2026). Third, self-efficacy theory suggests that AI-related confidence, rather than AI knowledge alone, may be the more proximal driver of employability-related outcomes, since self-efficacy shapes whether graduates actively seek out and apply AI competencies in professional contexts (ScienceDirect career adaptability study, 2026).

Taken together, these theoretical strands suggest that AI literacy should not be treated as a simple, linear predictor of employability. Rather, its influence is mediated by psychological variables such as self-efficacy and readiness, and moderated by contextual variables such as discipline, curriculum design, and institutional support, a pattern that recurs throughout the cross-disciplinary evidence reviewed in the following sections.

3. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on AI Literacy and Employability

Because AI is being integrated into professional practice at different rates and in different forms across fields, the relationship between AI literacy and employability cannot be assumed to be uniform across disciplines. This section compares evidence from business and management, STEM fields, and the humanities and social sciences.

Table 1. AI Literacy Requirements Across Academic Disciplines

Discipline	AI Skills Required	Employability Benefit	Primary AI Applications
Business	Analytics, Decision Support	High	ChatGPT, Power BI, CRM AI
STEM	Programming, ML, Data Analysis	Very High	Python, TensorFlow, CAD AI
Healthcare	Diagnostics, Clinical Decision Support	High	Medical Imaging AI

Humanities	Critical Evaluation, Ethics	Moderate	Content Analysis
Social Sciences	Data Interpretation	Moderate	Survey Analytics
Education	AI-assisted Teaching	High	Intelligent Tutoring Systems

3.1 Business and Management Education

Business and management education has been among the most active sites of research on AI literacy and employability, largely because business graduates enter labour markets in which AI-driven analytics, automation, and decision-support tools are already widespread. Research on business and management students has found that AI literacy alone is not a sufficient predictor of career adaptability; rather, AI readiness, students' perception that they are prepared to work with AI, functions as the more proximal mechanism linking AI-related learning to career-relevant outcomes, with AI self-efficacy moderating this relationship (ScienceDirect career adaptability study, 2026). This suggests that business curricula focused solely on technical AI content, without building students' confidence and perceived readiness, may fail to translate into improved employability.

Employer-facing research in business education similarly emphasises that AI's rise has created a new strategic challenge: providing credible evidence of graduates' capabilities in relevant business contexts, since AI tools can obscure the visibility of a student's independent judgment (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB], 2026). This has prompted calls for business schools to redesign courses and assessments so that graduates' reasoning and decision-making remain visible and defensible, reinforcing employer trust in the credibility of AI-literate business graduates.

3.2 STEM Disciplines

In STEM fields, AI literacy is often treated as an extension of existing computational and quantitative competencies, and empirical studies have found that STEM students report more frequent engagement with AI tools such as large language models than students in other fields (Cross-national LLM engagement study, 2025). A cross-national survey of 318 students found that AI literacy benefits and use frequency varied significantly by discipline, with STEM majors reporting significantly higher use of large language models than peers in other fields, alongside strong correlations between literacy and both perceived benefit and optimism about AI (Cross-national LLM engagement study, 2025).

This heightened engagement, however, does not guarantee smoother translation into employability outcomes. Even in vocational and technical programs, research has found that AI literacy positively predicts sustainable digital learning behaviour, but that students are not always able to translate this learning behaviour into improved practical performance, suggesting a persistent gap between the acquisition of AI-related knowledge and its application in job-relevant tasks (Vocational college AI literacy study, 2025). This finding cautions against assuming that technical familiarity with AI, common among STEM students, automatically confers a corresponding employability advantage.

3.3 Humanities and Social Sciences

AI literacy research in the humanities and social sciences remains comparatively underdeveloped, but emerging evidence suggests that generic AI literacy, rather than deep technical fluency, is more relevant to employability outcomes in these fields. Because humanities and social science professions typically value critical thinking, communication, and ethical reasoning over computational modelling, several frameworks argue that AI literacy in these disciplines should emphasise critical evaluation of AI outputs, awareness of algorithmic bias, and ethical reasoning about AI's societal impact, rather than technical proficiency in building or fine-tuning models (Hackl et al., 2026).

At the same time, research on students' perceptions of generative AI suggests that gender and field of study jointly shape adoption patterns, with students in information systems and economics reporting higher usage rates than students in some humanities fields, pointing to uneven exposure to AI tools even within the broader category of social science education (Rispler et al., 2025). This unevenness has direct implications for employability, since humanities and social science graduates who lack structured opportunities to build AI literacy may enter increasingly AI-mediated communication, policy, and creative industries at a comparative disadvantage relative to peers in more technically oriented fields.

4. Empirical Evidence on AI Literacy and Employability Outcomes

4.1 AI Literacy, Self-Efficacy, and Career Adaptability

A consistent empirical finding across disciplines is that the pathway from AI literacy to employability outcomes runs primarily through psychological variables rather than through technical knowledge alone. In a study of business and management students, AI literacy was found to contribute to career adaptability specifically when students perceived themselves as AI-ready, with AI self-efficacy positively linked to career adaptability and also moderating the relationship between AI literacy and adaptability (ScienceDirect career adaptability study, 2026). This pattern indicates that career adaptability develops through readiness and confidence rather than through AI knowledge in isolation, a finding with direct implications for how universities design AI-related coursework.

Complementary research has linked perceived AI literacy directly to employability self-assessments among university students, finding that students who rated their own AI literacy more highly also rated their employability more highly, even after accounting for academic performance (Wut et al., 2025). Because this relationship relies on self-perceived rather than objectively measured AI literacy, it raises the possibility that confidence-building interventions, not only technical training, may be an efficient lever for improving employability outcomes across disciplines.

4.2 Employer Perspectives and the AI Skills Gap

Evidence from employer-facing research reveals a persistent AI skills gap between what employers expect and what graduates believe they can deliver. A large-scale survey of 800 university students across multiple provinces in Pakistan found critical gaps in AI awareness, practical competencies, and career guidance, concluding that traditional education systems remain unable to equip graduates for a technology-driven job market (Employer perceptions employability study, 2013/2024 update). A broader systematic review synthesising 107 studies published between 2012 and 2025 similarly found that graduate employability is increasingly affected by AI-driven change, intensifying skills mismatches, outdated curricula, and limited institutional support, while automation and AI-enabled tools heighten demand for digital literacy, adaptability, and cross-cultural competencies (Graduate employability in the AI and globalisation era study, 2026).

These skills-gap findings are echoed in business-education-specific research, which frames the challenge less as a lack of AI knowledge and more as a lack of visible, verifiable evidence that graduates can exercise sound judgment when working alongside AI tools, a concern that has prompted calls for redesigned assessment practices that make students' reasoning processes transparent to employers (AACSB, 2026).

Table 2. Employer Expectations Compared with Graduate AI Readiness

Skill	Employer Expectation	Graduate Readiness
AI Tool Usage	Very High	Moderate
Critical Thinking	High	Moderate
Ethical AI Use	High	Low
Problem Solving	Very High	Moderate
Communication	High	Moderate

Digital Collaboration	High	Moderate
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4.3 Institutional and Curricular Moderators

The strength of the AI literacy-employability relationship also appears to depend on institutional and curricular context. Research on academic management innovation in higher education has proposed AI literacy as a meta-skill embedded within institutional structures, arguing that quality assurance, digital infrastructure, and governance practices jointly shape how effectively AI literacy translates into improved graduate outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained institutional settings (Frontiers academic management innovation study, 2026). Similarly, comparative research on AI literacy frameworks has found significant cultural and organisational differences in how institutions define, evaluate, and apply AI-related competencies, suggesting that the same nominal AI literacy curriculum may produce different employability effects depending on the institutional environment in which it is delivered (Lintner, 2024, as cited in Frontiers academic management innovation study, 2026).

5. Challenges and Equity Considerations

The cross-disciplinary evidence reviewed above surfaces several equity concerns. Because AI literacy instruction has developed unevenly across fields, with STEM and business programs generally further ahead than humanities and social science programs in embedding structured AI content, students in less technically oriented disciplines risk graduating with weaker AI-related employability signals through no fault of their own curricular choices (Rispler et al., 2025; Hackl et al., 2026). This disciplinary unevenness compounds existing equity concerns related to gender, socioeconomic background, and institutional resourcing, since research has found that gender and field of study jointly influence patterns of AI adoption among students (Rispler et al., 2025).



Fig.3. How AI Is Changing Workplace Learning

A second challenge concerns the gap between self-perceived and objectively measured AI literacy. Because much of the employability-relevant evidence relies on self-reported AI literacy and self-efficacy, there is a risk that confidence, rather than genuine competence, drives observed associations with employability outcomes (Wut et al., 2025). This raises the possibility that some graduates may present as AI-ready to employers without possessing

the underlying critical evaluation skills that AI literacy frameworks consider essential, a mismatch that could undermine employer trust in AI-related credentials over time (AACSB, 2026).

A third challenge is the risk that AI literacy instruction remains disconnected from practical application. Evidence from vocational education contexts has shown that AI literacy can be positively associated with learning behaviour without translating into improved practical performance, indicating that curricular exposure to AI concepts is not, by itself, sufficient to build employability-relevant competence (Vocational college AI literacy study, 2025). Addressing this gap requires deliberate curricular design that connects AI literacy instruction to applied, discipline-specific tasks rather than treating it as a generic add-on module.

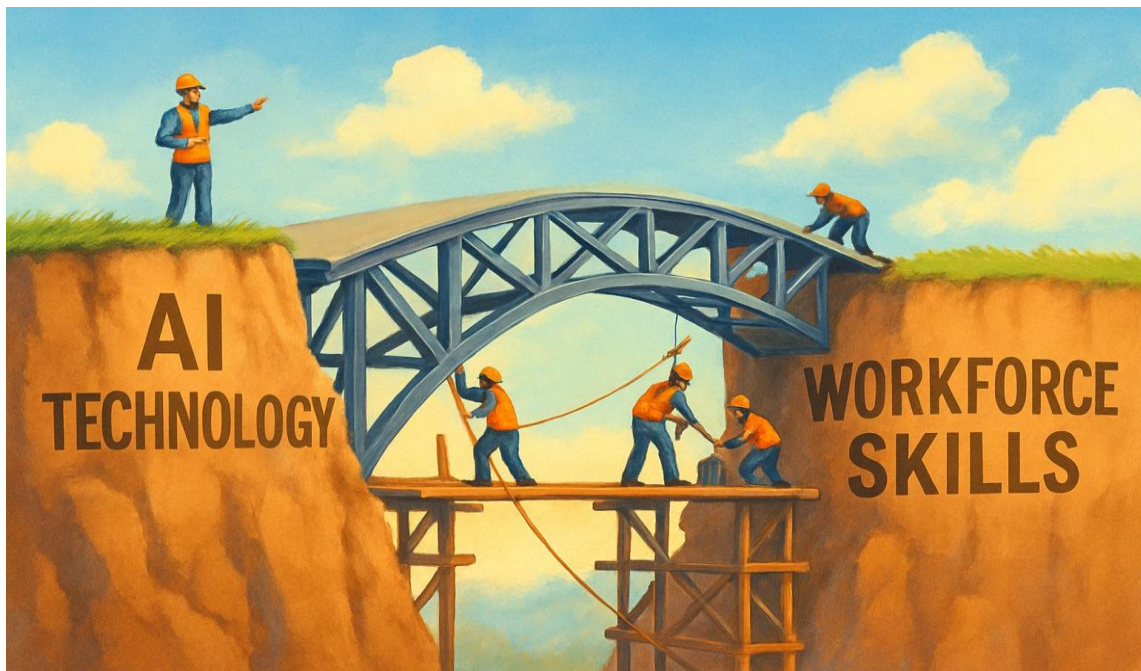


Fig.4. AI skills gap strains enterprise readiness

6. Implications for Curriculum and Policy

6.1 Embedding Cross-Disciplinary AI Literacy

Given the disciplinary unevenness documented above, higher education institutions should consider embedding AI literacy instruction across all fields of study, rather than concentrating it within computing and business programs. This can be achieved by adapting the generic and domain-specific distinction within AI literacy frameworks, ensuring that humanities and social science curricula emphasise critical evaluation, ethical reasoning, and communication about AI, while STEM and business curricula extend into applied technical and analytical competencies (Hackl et al., 2026).

6.2 Building AI Self-Efficacy Alongside Technical Content

Because self-efficacy and perceived readiness appear to mediate the relationship between AI literacy and employability more strongly than technical knowledge alone, curricula should incorporate structured opportunities for students to practise applying AI tools to authentic, discipline-relevant problems, with formative feedback designed explicitly to build confidence alongside competence (ScienceDirect career adaptability study, 2026).

6.3 Designing Employer-Linked, Evidence-Based Assessment

To close the gap between employer expectations and graduate self-perception, institutions should design assessments that produce visible evidence of students' judgment and reasoning when working with AI tools, such as annotated decision logs, oral defences of AI-assisted work, or applied capstone projects co-designed with

industry partners (AACSB, 2026). Such approaches address both the skills-gap and the self-efficacy inflation concerns identified in Sections 4 and 5.

6.4 Monitoring Equity in AI Literacy Provision

Finally, institutions should monitor AI literacy provision and outcomes across demographic and disciplinary groups to ensure that the benefits of AI-related curricula are distributed equitably. Given the documented influence of gender and field of study on AI adoption patterns, targeted outreach and scaffolded support may be needed to ensure that students in under-resourced programs or underrepresented groups are not systematically disadvantaged in the AI-mediated labour market (Rispler et al., 2025).

Table 3. Institutional Strategies for Enhancing AI Literacy and Employability

S.No.	Recommendation	Expected Outcome
	Integrate AI literacy into all curricula	Better employability
	AI ethics education	Responsible AI use
	Industry partnerships	Practical AI experience
	AI-based projects	Enhanced portfolios
	Faculty development	Better AI instruction
	Career-oriented AI training	Increased job readiness

7. Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that AI literacy functions as a meta-skill that interacts with, rather than simply substitutes for, established predictors of graduate employability such as self-efficacy, career adaptability, and discipline-specific competence. Rather than a uniform technical requirement, AI literacy takes on different forms and different employability implications depending on disciplinary context: in business and STEM fields, it intersects with existing analytical and quantitative training, while in the humanities and social sciences it is more closely tied to critical evaluation, ethics, and communication. This cross-disciplinary variation implies that a single, generic AI literacy module is unlikely to serve all students equally well.

A second key insight is that the pathway from AI literacy to employability is psychologically mediated. Multiple studies converge on the finding that self-efficacy and perceived readiness, rather than raw AI knowledge, are the more proximal predictors of career adaptability and employability self-assessments. This has an important practical implication: interventions that build AI knowledge without corresponding opportunities for applied practice and confidence-building may under-deliver on employability outcomes, even if they succeed in transmitting technical content.

Finally, the persistent AI skills gap identified in employer-facing research suggests that graduate employability in an AI-mediated labour market depends not only on what students know, but on whether that knowledge is made

visible and verifiable to employers. This reframes AI literacy not merely as an individual competency to be taught, but as an institutional design problem, requiring universities to rethink assessment, curriculum sequencing, and industry partnerships in tandem.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This review is subject to several limitations common to the literature it synthesises. Much of the empirical evidence relies on self-reported measures of AI literacy, self-efficacy, and employability, which are vulnerable to social desirability bias and may not correspond closely to objectively assessed competence or to actual labour-market outcomes (Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications study, 2025). Longitudinal research tracking graduates from AI literacy instruction through to actual employment outcomes, rather than self-assessed employability, is needed to substantiate causal claims.

In addition, cross-disciplinary comparisons in the current literature are uneven, with substantially more empirical attention paid to business, management, and STEM contexts than to the humanities, social sciences, health professions, and creative disciplines. Future research should prioritise comparative, multi-institutional studies that measure AI literacy and employability outcomes using consistent instruments across a wider range of disciplines, and should examine how emerging agentic and multimodal AI systems reshape both the content of AI literacy curricula and the skills employers value in graduates over time.



Fig.5. AI-Enabled Workplace Requiring Cross-Disciplinary Skills

9. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence literacy has emerged as a significant, though unevenly understood, dimension of graduate employability in the contemporary labour market. This paper has shown that the relationship between AI literacy and employability is neither uniform across disciplines nor reducible to technical knowledge alone, but is shaped by self-efficacy, career adaptability, institutional context, and the visibility of graduates' judgment to employers. Business and STEM fields have made the most progress in embedding AI-related competencies, while the humanities and social sciences remain comparatively underdeveloped in this regard, raising equity concerns about uneven preparation for an AI-mediated labour market. For higher education institutions, the central task is to move

beyond generic AI literacy instruction toward discipline-sensitive, confidence-building, and assessment-integrated approaches that make AI literacy a genuine and verifiable driver of graduate employability across all fields of study.

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