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Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Perceptions from the French Management Context

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Abstract:

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is rapidly transforming French management higher education, presenting both opportunities and ethical challenges. This mixed-methods study investigates divergent stakeholder perceptions of GenAI legitimacy (students, faculty, and deans) through the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions of Suchman's triadic model. Empirical findings reveal that the perceived legitimacy of GenAI in higher education coexists with forms of illegitimacy, reflected in persistent tensions across pragmatic, cognitive, and moral dimensions. The discussion shows persistent tensions between short-term utility and long-term ethical concerns, and argues that sustainable integration of GenAI requires institutional strategies prioritizing the reduction of perceived illegitimacy. By embedding the analysis of illegitimacy into legitimacy theory, this study extends conceptual tools for future research and offers actionable insights for guiding responsible GenAI adoption in higher education.

Keywords: Generative AI, Legitimacy, Higher Education, Illegitimacy, Pragmatic, Moral, Cognitive.

[Department statements, if appropriate, will be added by the editors. Teaching cases and panel reports will have a statement, which is also added by the editors.]

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1 Introduction

The public release of ChatGPT on November 30, 2022, marked a pivotal inflection point in the evolution of Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Bouteraa *et al.*, 2024). Generative AI (GenAI) technologies (capable of producing coherent text, images, audio, video, computer code, and even design prototypes from natural language prompts) rapidly transitioned from experimental tools to widespread technological and societal phenomena (Sabherwal & Grover, 2024). Within a year of its release, GenAI shifted from a niche innovation embraced by early adopters to a mainstream technology integrated into one-third of organizations (McKinsey, 2023); a figure that rose to nearly one-half by 2024 as applications expanded across multiple business functions (McKinsey, 2024). The unprecedented accessibility and versatility of these systems have then prompted a profound re-examination of value creation and distribution processes in digital age organizations (Biedova *et al.*, 2025; Wessel *et al.*, 2025).

Higher education (HE) has found itself at the epicenter of these debates (Van Slyke *et al.*, 2023). GenAI carries both positive and negative implications for the three core activities of faculty and institutions: teaching, research, and administration (Barros *et al.* 2023; Mohammadi *et al.*, 2026). Students, for their part, call for clear policies on the use of such technologies rather than outright bans, and they expect equal access to them (Johnston *et al.*, 2024). As a result, institutions, educators, and students are simultaneously attracted to GenAI's transformative potential and unsettled by the existential challenges it poses. Despite these ambivalences, GenAI tools have proliferated across campuses, becoming informally embedded in everyday academic practices, administrative workflows, and instructional design (Barros *et al.*, 2023). Recent studies conducted in 2024 and 2025 indicate that students increasingly rely on GenAI for tasks such as brainstorming, translation, summarization, and improving writing, with reported usage rates ranging from 80% to 92% depending on the source (Mulford, 2025). Within HE faculty, the use of GenAI is increasing, with applications ranging from curriculum development and the automation of administrative workflows to the enhancement of teaching practices (Mulford, 2025). Far from remaining a peripheral or illicit presence, GenAI is rapidly evolving into a foundational layer of the academic experience, reshaping how knowledge is accessed, created, and assessed within HE (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023). As these technologies move from ad hoc experimentation to large integration, crucial questions emerge about their formal acceptance, governance, and the alignment of their use with academic values. The dual movement, oscillating between restriction and integration, suspicion and appropriation, highlights the contested nature of GenAI within HE institutions, raising important questions about their institutionalization (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). Can universities simply adopt a "hands-off" approach, which could lead to uses detrimental to both teaching and learning? Alternatively, should they develop policies that promote the responsible and effective use of GenAI technologies? If the latter approach is preferred, the first step involves understanding how the legitimacy of GenAI technologies develops differently among the various stakeholders. Understanding the way GenAI is legitimized is therefore essential to reconcile its pragmatic adoption with sustainable policy frameworks. In this context, legitimacy transcends mere adherence to formal rules and encompasses a broader social acceptance of these technologies as pedagogically and ethically sound.

In information systems (IS) research, the concept of legitimacy is often used to analyze technology adoption processes, particularly in relation to how organizations secure stakeholder support for IT innovation projects (Kaganer *et al.*, 2010; Sherer *et al.*, 2016). However, most of these studies have examined the intention to use of early-stage technologies, where legitimacy is treated as a condition for enabling adoption rather than as a dynamic process unfolding after deployment and large adoption (Bunduchi *et al.*, 2025; Randhawa *et al.*, 2024). GenAI, by contrast, represents an emerging technology (Rotolo *et al.*, 2015) that, despite its novelty, has already been adopted at scale and embedded in everyday work practices, especially across HE. This rapid and widespread diffusion raises important questions about how legitimacy is constructed once a technology is already pervasive and how it continues to evolve as practices stabilize. Yet little is known about the legitimacy of technologies that transition so quickly from emergence to systemic integration, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of technology legitimation in HE. Drawing on Suchman's (1995) framework, this article explores GenAI legitimacy through three interrelated dimensions: pragmatic legitimacy, which reflects the perceived usefulness of GenAI for various stakeholders; moral legitimacy, which assesses whether its use aligns with prevailing ethical norms and values; and cognitive legitimacy, which concerns the extent to which GenAI is viewed as a natural and taken-for-granted component of academic life. These dimensions do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Greenwood *et al.*,

2017). A technology may then be perceived as pragmatically effective but morally questionable, or cognitively inevitable yet pragmatically underdeveloped (Radder, 2004). In HE, unpacking these tensions requires a nuanced, multi-level approach that considers the diverse perceptions of key stakeholders (students, faculty, and deans) across varied institutional contexts. This prompts the following research question: How is the legitimacy of GenAI in HE articulated across pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions?

By examining the legitimacy process within the context of French HE in management, a domain marked by the coexistence of pedagogical innovation and institutional conservatism, this research illuminates the ambivalent and evolving status of GenAI. It contributes to a broader understanding of how emerging technologies are not simply adopted or rejected, but rather debated, negotiated, and continuously reframed through collective meaning-making processes. In this perspective, legitimacy is not a fixed state but a dynamic and contested terrain, particularly when the technology in question disrupts the foundational assumptions of education itself.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The literature review traces the evolution of the concept of legitimacy within management studies and explores how Suchman's (1995) triadic model has been applied in IS research, especially to address technological challenges in HE. The empirical section details the data collection process within French HE in management unfolded in two distinct stages: an online survey conducted among students, faculty, and deans, between February and March 2024, subsequently complemented by 22 semi-structured interviews with faculty members identified as early adopters of GenAI. Our empirical findings reveal that the perceived legitimacy of GenAI within French HE coexists with forms of illegitimacy, reflected in persistent tensions across pragmatic, cognitive, and moral dimensions. Students value GenAI for its efficiency but denounce it as a source of unfairness, intellectual dependence, and academic dishonesty. Faculty members view it as a useful pedagogical and research assistant while questioning its alignment with ethical and academic values. Deans, meanwhile, acknowledge its strategic and operational potential but remain cautious about data protection, automation myths, and the erosion of human expertise. The discussion illuminates the tensions between short-term pragmatic acceptance and long-term moral apprehensions, emphasizing the need for institutional strategies aimed at reducing illegitimacy to enable stable, cognitive legitimacy. The conclusion argues that integrating GenAI sustainably requires a redefinition of academic roles and pedagogical practices oriented toward ethical stewardship and reflexive technology use, thus situating GenAI as a complementary educational tool rather than a threat.

2 Literature Review

Max Weber (1968) was the first theorist in management science to emphasize the importance of legitimacy within organizations. According to him, actors behave in reference to a model or maxim they perceive as obligatory or exemplary. An "order of legitimacy" exists, shaped by how subordinates view the power structure in place. Authority is perceived as legitimate insofar as it is legal, aligned with social norms or traditions, or derived from the charisma of the leader. One of Weber's key contributions was to distinguish between different sources of power and to show how subordinates view authority as conforming to an established structure. Scholars such as Parsons (1960) and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) have described legitimacy as a broader process that includes a societal dimension. This perspective moved beyond a narrow understanding of legitimacy as the recognition of formal or informal authority, and instead emphasizes the alignment between organizational objectives and the prevailing values of the broader social system. In other words, for an organization to be perceived as legitimate, its behavior must be congruent with the values and expectations of its environment. This socio-cognitive dimension of legitimacy was further developed by the neo-institutionalist movement (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). For instance, Meyer and Rowan (1977) demonstrated that an organization's legitimacy depends on whether its structures, processes, and procedures are designed and implemented in ways considered compatible with dominant cultural models and shared beliefs. In this view, legitimacy emerges as an ambivalent evaluative process, what Oliver (1991, p. 160) refers to as "social alignment", reflecting the degree to which organizational behavior resonates with societal norms. Importantly, the perception of legitimacy may vary depending on the actors making the judgment (Tost, 2011; Bitektine, 2011).

In his integrative model, Bitektine (2011, p. 156) emphasizes the plurality of stakeholders who can serve as sources of legitimacy. Beyond external actors, such as investors, customers, suppliers, and advocacy groups, employees also play a critical role. They interpret the organization's structural features, internal

arrangements, and actual social and economic outcomes. Their perceptions of whether organizational changes align with or disrupt existing cultural models significantly influence the degree to which they adopt supportive, indifferent, or resistant behaviors (Boiral, 2003).

Empirical research has further shown that legitimacy strategies can fail to sustain IS or organizational change initiatives throughout their implementation. For instance, Erkama and Vaara's (2010) case study of a corporate restructuring in the automotive sector, revealed how legitimacy-building narratives were persistently countered by delegitimation efforts. In this view, legitimacy emerges through rhetorical and discursive contestation between project proponents and opponents (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Importantly, legitimacy depends not only on the stated goals of a project but also on how the change is enacted in practice and evolves over time. It is, therefore, most accurately understood as a dynamic process of meaning-making among stakeholders with competing perceptions and interests. In this sense, the term "legitimacy" can be considered as less revealing than the term "legitimation" (Suddaby *et al.*, 2017, p. 451).

Although the legitimacy of IT innovation projects is now recognized as a critical issue in MIS, few studies have adopted it as a central theoretical lens (Siraz *et al.*, 2023, p. 925; Flynn & Du, 2012, p. 213). However, some studies highlight the significant influence of legitimacy on IT adoption and implementation processes (Flynn & Du, 2012; Hussain & Cornelius, 2009; Kaganer, 2010). For example, Flynn and Du (2012) observed how legitimacy seekers, such as project managers, actively sought support throughout the project from various legitimacy providers, including key users and senior managers, to ensure the continuity and acceptance of the initiative. This aligns with broader findings in organizational theory, which suggest that users are more likely to trust and engage with new technologies when those technologies are endorsed by individuals or institutions perceived as legitimate authorities (Elsbach & Stiglioni, 2018).

Recent advances in the literature have used the triadic model of Suchman to understand the legitimacy of technologies involving social concerns. Wiener *et al.* (2023) demonstrated that users' normative perceptions of fairness, transparency, and autonomy significantly shape legitimacy evaluations of algorithmic technologies, which in turn influence usage behaviors. Bunduchi *et al.* (2025) developed a legitimacy-based model explaining user acceptance of controversial technologies, emphasizing individual perceptions as critical drivers of legitimacy judgments.

While AI has long been recognized for its transformative potential in reshaping business practices (Siau & Wang, 2020), it has now become central to IT innovation projects. Chen and Wang (2024) recently emphasized the pivotal role AI plays in establishing organizational legitimacy across multiple dimensions. First, it contributes to pragmatic legitimacy by enabling firms to transparently demonstrate their financial performance and social responsibility to stakeholders (Huang & Rust, 2018). Second, AI enhances moral legitimacy by promoting transparency in processes and aligning corporate actions with broader ethical and societal values (Di Vaio *et al.*, 2018). Third, it supports cognitive legitimacy by serving as a symbol of alignment with cutting-edge technologies (Srinivasan & Swink, 2018) or organizational innovativeness (Da Motta Veiga *et al.*, 2023), while also facilitating the development of meaningful social connections with stakeholders (Chen & Wang, 2024). Through these mechanisms, the adoption of AI enables companies to position themselves as competent, trustworthy, and attuned to the expectations of their environment.

Building on these insights into the legitimizing role of AI in organizational contexts, the emergence of GenAI introduces a new layer of complexity, particularly within HE where its implications for learning, teaching, and skill development demand closer examination (Huo & Siau, 2024). GenAI tools are arguably among the most controversial technologies in HE today, largely due to the ethical and moral concerns they raise, particularly as these systems are capable of producing text on par with, or even superior to, that of human authors (Van Slyke *et al.*, 2023). To understand the legitimacy of GenAI in HE institutions, this paper draws on the triadic framework of legitimacy suggested by Suchman (1995), which remains the most widely used model in the field. This framework extends beyond traditional institutionalist perspectives by encompassing instrumental, psychological, and societal dimensions. *Pragmatic legitimacy* refers to stakeholders' perceptions based on self-interest and utility. *Moral legitimacy* involves a normative assessment aligned with individual and collective values, what is perceived as the "right thing to do." *Cognitive legitimacy*, meanwhile, is grounded in widely shared beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions within a given professional or institutional environment (Flynn & Du, 2012, p. 214). In parallel, Tost (2011) emphasized the importance of analyzing legitimacy at different levels of individual perceptions.

The use of GenAI in HE raises numerous ethical and academic integrity issues (Johnston *et al.*, 2024; Albakri & Buzial, 2025). One could even say that these practices have caused a crisis of legitimacy for

universities (Liu, 2024). However, to our knowledge, no study has used Suchman's tripartite model to examine this phenomenon. Following this insight, our empirical research applies Suchman's framework across three distinct levels of analysis: students, faculty members, and academic leadership (e.g., deans), to explore how GenAI is perceived as legitimate - or not - within each group. However, despite the centrality of legitimacy in institutional and organizational research, recent scholarship has emphasized the need to extend the conceptual lens beyond the dichotomy of legitimacy versus illegitimacy to fully capture the complex dynamics in between (Siraz *et al.*, 2023). Illegitimacy, defined as the generalized perception that a social entity is inappropriate, undesirable, or lacking properness within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs, emerges as a crucial driver of institutional change and resistance (Tost, 2011). Tost (2011) developed an integrative model of legitimacy judgments that explicates how individual-level dynamics move judgments from legitimacy to illegitimacy, thereby motivating social actors to seek institutional transformation. Complementing this view, Siraz *et al.* (2023) elaborated a conceptual framework that theorizes a legitimacy-illegitimacy continuum containing nuanced states such as conditional legitimacy, unknown legitimacy, and conditional illegitimacy. This framework demonstrates how partial acceptance or contested evaluations highlight the instability of the reference frameworks adjudicating legitimacy and illuminate the discursive and strategic challenges faced by subjects attempting to (re)construct legitimacy. Thus, integrating the concept of illegitimacy enables a more comprehensive understanding of how emergent technologies such as GenAI in HE are perceived, contested, and either resisted, beyond a simplistic binary interpretation of acceptance or rejection.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Settings

The French HE landscape in management science is characterized by a dual structure comprising both traditional public universities and a network of private business schools, each with distinct historical trajectories and roles. Business schools were the first to offer structured management education in France, beginning in the 19th and early 20th centuries, largely under the initiative of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Public universities entered the field later, with the first master's degree in management established in 1955, followed by the creation of institutions such as the University of Paris-Dauphine in 1968, which focused on organizational management (Carton *et al.*, 2018).

Recent reforms in French HE, driven in part by European Union modernization agendas and comparisons with the U.S. system, have significantly impacted university governance and autonomy. These reforms include changes to internal governance structures, funding models, and the integration of research into institutional missions (Chatelain-Ponroy *et al.*, 2014). Business schools, in turn, have diversified their program offerings to include bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. They are also heavily engaged in management research, driven by publication-based performance incentives and international rankings.

This dual system makes the French context particularly compelling for analysis, as it brings together diverse institutional logics, pedagogical practices, and stakeholder perspectives. Such diversity not only illustrates a wide spectrum of adoption contexts but also offers a comprehensive vantage point for studying how GenAI is appropriated and legitimized in practice. In French HE in management, GenAI has risen rapidly (Many, 2025), creating a need for in-depth research into its implications for teaching and learning, particularly from human-centered and context-sensitive perspectives (Barros *et al.*, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Peres *et al.*, 2023). Examining institutions with distinct governance models and historical trajectories thus enables a more holistic understanding of the legitimacy of GenAI, that moves beyond purely institutional or financial explanations to incorporate pedagogical and normative dimensions.

3.2 Data Collection

A mixed-methods design was employed to integrate both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. This design was chosen to offer a more comprehensive understanding of GenAI legitimacy than either method could provide alone, and to address the research question from both exploratory and confirmatory perspectives (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2013). Mixed methods are widely recognized for enhancing data triangulation and are particularly well suited to investigating emerging and complex phenomena, such as the one examined in this study (Turner *et al.*, 2015).

Over a five-month field study, we collected quantitative and qualitative primary data from both public universities and business schools. In addition, we gathered archival materials, which complemented the

primary dataset (Tamboukou, 2014) and provided a broader and deeper knowledge (Corti & Backhouse, 2005) for refining our understanding of GenAI legitimacy in French HE.

The overall process of data collection unfolded in two distinct stages (see Figure 1). The initial stage involved an online survey conducted between February and March 2024. The objective was to obtain a broad overview of how GenAI is used by students, faculty members, and deans within French HE institutions in management. The second stage involved administering interviews from March to June 2024 and collecting secondary data, which continued until July 2025. Through this phase, we aimed to explore in greater depth how early-adopter faculty members perceive the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy of GenAI in their teaching practices.

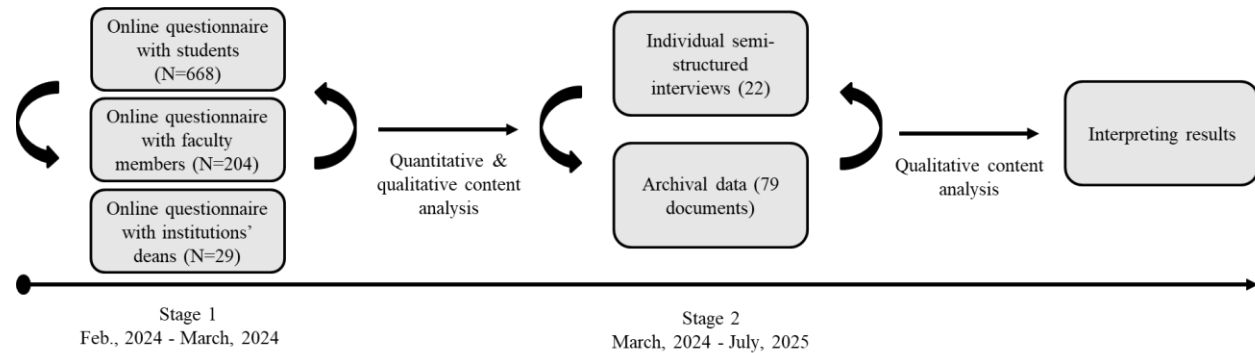


Figure 1. The Sequential Design of the Data Collection Process

During the first stage, we developed three distinct but parallel survey instruments, one for each target group (students, faculty members, and deans). These questionnaires were designed ‘in mirror’ to ensure comparability while being tailored to the specific roles and perspectives of each group. Each survey also included two open-ended questions: (1) “What fears or limitations do you see regarding the extensive use of GenAI in HE?” and (2) “What opportunities or advantages do you see regarding the extensive use of GenAI in HE?” These open responses were intended to surface perceived risks and benefits, thereby contextualizing the quantitative findings. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the respondent profiles for each sample.

Table 1. Detailed Profile of the Respondents’ Groups

Students	668 valid answers (587 incomplete answers, excluded) Main age group: 21-24 years old (51%) Gender: 53% female, 46% male Nationality: 89% french Type of institution: 64% public school or University, 31% Business School Level: 49% bachelor students, 48% masters students, 2% PhD students Main disciplines: management (38%), marketing & communication (16%), finance (9%), information systems (6%)
Professors	204 valid answers (168 incomplete answers, excluded) Main age group: 45-54 years old (32%) Gender: 50% female, 48% male Nationality: 89% french Type of institution: 60% public school or University, 30% Business School Level: 49% bachelor students, 48% masters students, 2% PhD students Main disciplines: management (27%), marketing & communication (26%), HR (10%), information systems (12%)
Deans	29 valid answers (10 incomplete answers, excluded) Type of institution: 62% Business School, 38% public school or University

The second stage of data collection involved twenty-two semi-structured interviews with faculty members of both business schools and public universities. One participant simultaneously held the positions of professor and dean at the time of the interview. Our focus on professors is justified by their dual role as both users and mediators of GenAI in HE (Honigsberg *et al.*, 2025). They engage with these tools in teaching and research, making their practices particularly influential in shaping institutional norms of adoption. Moreover, their use of GenAI directly affects how students, colleagues, and deans perceive the

legitimacy of these technologies, positioning professors as key actors in their integration into HE (Owoseni *et al.*, 2024).

We deliberately targeted early adopters professors, those who engage with GenAI regularly and intensively in a spirit of critical experimentation. This perspective enabled us to capture emerging, innovative uses of the technology and to better understand the dynamics of legitimacy at play. To reach our targeted population (early-adopter faculty members) and establish a representative sample, we relied on the snowball sampling method. This approach is commonly employed in qualitative research to access hard-to-identify individuals (Bailey, 2019). It begins with a small set of initial participants, often drawn from the researcher's prior professional or personal contacts, who are then asked to suggest other individuals with similar characteristics relevant to the study. These newly recruited participants may, in turn, recommend further participants, thereby expanding the sample iteratively and reaching data saturation (Parker *et al.*, 2019). In this study, the snowball sampling process was initiated with three faculty members (colleagues of two of the authors) who were recognized, within their respective universities, as early adopters of GenAI. Their early and sustained engagement with GenAI had been established through prior professional interactions (round tables and workshops), enabling them to articulate informed reflections on their practices. These initial participants can be considered as "knowledgeable agents" (Gioia *et al.*, 2013, p. 17), that is, actors who "know what they are trying to do" (p. 17) and are able to explain their intentions and experiences in relation to GenAI. They served to initiate the snowball sampling process, which subsequently expanded through participant referrals beyond the authors' immediate professional circles. Theoretical saturation was reached after 22 interviews, when no new insights, themes, or issues emerged from the data (Bowen, 2008).

The interview guide balanced core questions, follow-up prompts, and exploratory probes, following a semi-structured format that allowed participants to reflect freely and share detailed insights into their experiences. Interviews lasted between 32 and 65 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and fully transcribed for analysis. Lastly, we enriched the interviews with archival data from 79 sources, including public studies (5), press articles (13), institutional guidelines (23), reports (3), and presentation materials (2) from both public universities and business schools, as well as online forums (2), MOOC content (2), video footage (10), and professional articles (19). The archival dataset was constructed through a step-by-step selection process based on four established criteria used to assess the quality and sufficiency of pre-existing qualitative data (Sherif, 2018). First, materials were selected for their explicit relevance to the research focus, that is, their direct engagement with the uses, perceptions, and concerns surrounding GenAI in HE, as reflected in institutional guidelines issued by universities and business schools, and professional articles addressing GenAI-related practices in academic contexts, for example. Second, documents were assessed based on the accuracy and descriptive quality of their content (see also Cheong *et al.*, 2023), privileging sources that provided detailed accounts of GenAI uses, and debates, such as MOOC content, video footage, and online forums. Third, trustworthiness was assessed based on the transparency of the documents, including the explicit statement of study aims and objectives, as well as the clear identification of the authors' credentials and institutional affiliations. Fourth, the selection emphasized timeliness, focusing on documents produced during the period of rapid diffusion of GenAI in HE (from March 2023 to July 2025), corresponding to the emergence and progressive legitimacy-illegitimacy process of GenAI-related practices observed in our empirical fieldwork. This secondary material offered continuous and repeated access to detailed insights into professors' uses of GenAI in academic contexts and illustrated how HE institutions have progressively incorporated these practices into their guidelines. Such complementary data supplemented our primary datasets (Tamboukou, 2014), enabling a more nuanced interpretation of participant narratives and providing richer context for refining our understanding of the interviews (Corti & Thompson, 2004; Corti & Backhouse, 2005).

An overview of the data sources employed in this second stage is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collected During the Second Stage

Interview number (Date and duration)	Respondent's Institution	Archival data (Total number)
Interview 1 (March 24; 0:32)	Public University	Interviews from Professional articles (19)
Interview 2 (March 24; 1:00)	Public University	MOOC (2)
Interview 3 (March 24; 0:45)	Business School	Video footage (10)
Interview 4 (March 24; 0:55)	Public University	Online forum (2)
Interview 5 (March 24; 0:45)	Business School	Institutional (internal) guidelines (23)
Interview 6 (April 24; 0:50)	Business School	Institutional (internal) study reports (3)
Interview 7 (April 24; 0:55)	Business School	Institutional (internal) presentations (2)
Interview 8 (April 24; 0:40)	Public University	Public studies (5)
Interview 9 (April 24; 1:00)	Public University	Press articles (13)
Interview 10 (April 24; 1:00)	Public University	
Interview 11 (April 24; 1:10)	Public University	
Interview 12 (April 24; 1:05)	Business School	
Interview 13 (April 24; 1:00)	Public University	
Interview 14 (May 24; 1:00)	Business School	
Interview 15 (May 24; 1:15)	Public University	
Interview 16 (May 24; 1:00)	Public University	
Interview 17 (May 24; 1:00)	Public University	
Interview 18 (May 24; 1:05)	Business School	
Interview 19 (May 24; 1:10)	Public University	
Interview 20 (May 24; 0:45)	Public University	
Interview 21 (June 24; 1:10)	Business School	
Interview 22 (June 24; 1:00)	Business School	

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of the first dataset followed a twofold approach. First, we conducted exploratory data analysis using SPSS on the quantitative results of the survey. As no standardized scales were employed, we limited our analysis to descriptive statistics and group comparisons. Specifically, we used t-tests and ANOVAs to explore potential differences between respondent and institutional types. However, no statistically significant differences were found. Second, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the two open-ended questions of the questionnaire. Qualitative data were analyzed using an abductive, single-coder approach augmented by a Large Language Model (Google Gemini 2.5 Pro in this final version) to enhance analytical efficiency and consistency. This hybrid human–AI research design facilitated an iterative dialogue between empirical material and theoretical constructs (Suchman, 1995), while preserving the interpretive depth characteristic of qualitative inquiry applied to a relatively large corpus. The analysis unfolded across three interrelated phases. In the first phase, all verbatim responses (26,300 words corresponding to 127 pages of text) were compiled and organized into four corpora based on participant group (students and professors) and thematic focus (perceived fears and opportunities). Within a human-in-the-loop process, the LLM conducted an initial round of open coding, generating concise in vivo-style labels capturing the core meaning of each response, in line with foundational principles of grounded theory. The researcher then systematically reviewed and refined the LLM's coding proposals to ensure coherence across sub-themes (e.g., loss of critical thinking, gains in productivity). For example, codes such as “cheating,” “plagiarism,” and “intellectual dishonesty” were consolidated into a more abstract sub-theme. This iterative cycle combined the LLM's capacity for efficient data reduction with the interpretive rigor of the human analyst, ensuring that emerging themes remained grounded in their empirical context. In the second phase, the resulting sub-themes were deductively mapped onto Suchman's (1995) framework of organizational legitimacy. Each sub-theme was categorized as reflecting pragmatic, moral, or cognitive legitimacy, or illegitimacy, depending on the rationale expressed in the

underlying responses. For instance, concerns related to cheating were interpreted as expressions of moral illegitimacy, whereas doubts about the reliability of AI outputs were associated with cognitive illegitimacy. This phase enabled theoretical abstraction while maintaining close alignment with participants' articulated concerns. In the final phase, the relative salience of each legitimacy-illegitimacy dimension was assessed by calculating the frequency of sub-theme occurrences and aggregating them at the category level. Representative quotations were then selected to illustrate the most salient themes, with minor edits applied to ensure readability and preserve anonymity. These excerpts serve as interpretive anchors, linking analytical categories to participants' lived experiences.

For the second dataset, we adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a widely recognized method well suited to exploring emerging phenomena for which knowledge and understanding are still in the process of being developed (Makri & Neely, 2021). We conducted a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to explore the extension of the theoretical framework of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy to the domain of GenAI in HE. Based on the transcribed interviews and secondary material, our analytical process drew on prior research to develop an initial interpretation of how participants conceptualize GenAI legitimacy-illegitimacy in their instructional practices. This was followed by axial coding, through which we refined the initial themes and examined their interrelationships. Finally, we engaged in selective coding to connect these refined categories with the three core dimensions structuring our research framework. The coding process was highly iterative and collaborative. The research team reviewed transcripts line by line, engaged in regular discussions to refine the codes, and examined relationships between empirical observations and theoretical constructs (Charmaz, 2006). This recursive engagement enabled us to identify deeper patterns and construct a robust, grounded interpretation of how legitimacy-illegitimacy is experienced and negotiated in practice.

4 Findings

Datasets collected during stages 1 and 2 from the French HE in management highlight different perceptions and tensions among students, faculty, and deans at the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive levels. Table 3 provides illustrative excerpts for each theme identified through our datasets analysis, highlighting perspectives from the three categories of actors examined in this research. Data table 3-1 focuses on students and shows that GenAI benefits from pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy as a useful and increasingly normalized learning tool, while also facing persistent perceptions of pragmatic, cognitive, and moral illegitimacy notably related to reliability, academic dishonesty, and intellectual dependency. Data table 3-2 presents faculty members' perspectives and shows that the legitimacy of GenAI is articulated across the three dimensions, while also being challenged by pedagogical effectiveness, critical thinking, and alignment with academic norms. Finally, Data table 3-3 reports deans' views, highlighting a form of legitimacy anchored in strategic and operational considerations at the institutional level, alongside persistent perceptions of illegitimacy linked to governance challenges, data protection, and fairness.

Table 3. Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of GenAI Among Students, Faculty and Deans: Three Data Tables

Table 3-1	
Themes	Representative quotations
Perceived legitimacy of GenAI among students	
<i>Pragmatic Legitimacy</i>	
Students perceive GenAI as a concrete and effective tool that directly serves their interests by enhancing productivity, improving the quality of their work, and supporting their learning process	Time saving, productivity, and efficiency (145 occurrences): AI is perceived as enabling the automa of repetitive tasks and increasing overall speed and productivity (Phase 1) "One of the benefits of AI is faster output which has greatly helped me as a student. I now generate ideas faster and get work done in much less time" (Archival data: HEPI Policy Note 61, 2025)
<i>Pragmatic Illegitimacy</i>	
GenAI is perceived as producing standardized outputs and unreliable information	"AI leads to a kind of standardization of thought structures and how we express them, like when GPT formats things in bullet points, for example" (Stage 1, open response) The most prominent challenge, reported by 62.16% of respondents, was the inaccuracy of generate content (Archival data: Nature Briefings, Scientific Reports, 2025)
<i>Cognitive Legitimacy</i>	
Students perceive GenAI as an inevitable and necessary development, reflecting the natural evolution of both academic and professional environments	Only a small minority of students (3.4%) have already recognized and integrated GenAI as an indispensable professional skill for their future careers (Stage 1) Generative AI is perceived by students as a new professional norm that individuals must adapt to in order to avoid becoming obsolete (Archival data: Students' voices on generative AI, 2023)
<i>Cognitive Illegitimacy</i>	
GenAI is perceived as fostering a form of dependency that weakens students' intellectual autonomy and, ultimately, threatens the very essence of cognitive learning	"A classmate already relies on it heavily; he sometimes loses confidence in his own abilities, for instance when conducting research, as he feels unable to work without it" (Stage 1, open response) "With such easy access to so much information, we don't really think anymore — we don't make the effort to understand or analyze things by ourselves." (Stage 1, open response)
<i>Moral Illegitimacy</i>	
GenAI is perceived as fostering academic dishonesty and inequity by facilitating cheating and plagiarism, widening disparities in access and performance, undermining the authenticity of certified competencies	Cheating, plagiarism, and intellectual dishonesty (52 occurrences); Injustice and inequality (16 occurrences); Falsification of competencies and devaluation of degrees (14 occurrences) (Stage 1) "Some people may rely too much on AI technologies to generate ideas causing them to lose the capacity or willingness to think by themselves." (Archival data: Students' voices on GenAI, 2023)
<i>Actions undertaken to mitigate perceptions of illegitimacies</i>	
Training initiatives for AI skills, personalized learning approaches, and institutional policy frameworks on GenAI	53% of students want education on ethical AI use as well as clearer, standardized policies on when ; how AI tools can be used (Archival data: Inside Higher Ed, Students voice survey, 2025) 58% of students do not feel that they had sufficient AI knowledge and skills; 48% do not feel adequate prepared for an AI-enabled workplace (Archival data: DEC Global AI Student Survey, 2024)

Table 3-2

Themes	Representative quotations
Perceived legitimacy of GenAI among faculty members	
<i>Pragmatic Legitimacy</i>	
Faculty members perceive GenAI as a pedagogic and research assistant (time-efficiency, improved understanding and quality assignments, creativity, etc.)	"It now takes me only three minutes to produce a new two-hour exam. And what's more, an exam th different from the ones I've given over the past ten years" (Stage 2, Interview 8) "AI at the Service of Your Research": A video tutorial on how to use ChatGPT to analyze a qualitativ data corpus (Archival data: 2024, https://urlr.me/vzSK7d)
<i>Pragmatic Illegitimacy</i>	
Teachers are concerned about hallucinations and the overall reliability and quality of GenAI-generated outputs, which are perceived as detrimental to the interests of both faculty members and students	"Sometimes it hallucinates, it invents sources or data, like references and numbers that don't exist" (Stage 2, Interview 14) Deskilling and intellectual atrophy (58 occurrences) (Stage 1)
<i>Cognitive Legitimacy</i>	
Professors view as their responsibility to train students in generative AI, perceived as a new and unavoidable component of the academic environment with which they must engage	"It is our responsibility to prepare students for the professional world, including the use of GenAI, w they will be expected to master in their future careers" (Stage 2, Interview 5) "We have to move with the times and keep up with technological advances by learning to use these ourselves" (Stage 1, open response)
<i>Cognitive Illegitimacy</i>	
Teachers perceived GenAI as an opaque "black-box" whose non-human logic feels alien to genuine creativity and the construction of thought	"As a teacher, my role is to teach students how to think, how to conduct research, how to read artic and books. But faced with these tools, I wonder how I can still do that" (Stage 2, Interview 3) "With ChatGPT, I don't know 'who' is speaking. It's actually the dominant US way of thinking, which doesn't matc h with my usual approach of confronting multiple perspectives" (Stage 2, Interview 6)
<i>Moral Legitimacy</i>	
Faculty members consider that GenAI may serve as a pedagogical support tool, contributing to more inclusive teaching practices and learning environments	AI may "level up" opportunities for dyslexic students (Archival data: <i>Guardian survey of academic integrity violations</i> , 2025) GenAI contributes as inclusive tools (disability, foreign language, cultural or social gaps) supporting learning (Stage 1, open response)
<i>Moral Illegitimacy</i>	
Faculty members perceive generative AI as conflicting with the core ethical values and norms of the academic system, including critical thinking, transparency, and intellectual honesty	"The most worrying thing is that students are content to just copy and paste, which raises real conc about their ability to develop independent thinking" (Stage 2, Interview 19) "I've noticed a growing intellectual laziness, along with a decline in critical distance and independent thinking" (Stage 1, open response)
<i>Actions undertaken to mitigate perceptions of illegitimacy</i>	
Individual and collective training initiatives for both students and teachers	"It is essential to train students in the critical and informed use of these tools, which in turn requires teachers themselves be adequately prepared beforehand" (Stage 1, open response) "Workshops are organized by teachers for teachers, showcasing practical 'take-away' uses of Ger that can be readily implemented in their teaching" (Stage 2, Interview 7)

Table 3-3

Themes	Representative quotations
Perceived legitimacy of GenAI among deans	
<i>Pragmatic Legitimacy</i>	
Deans perceived GenAI as both a practical tool for automating routine tasks	Of the 29 deans included in the sample, 19 reported that generative AI tools enable significant time savings through the automation of administrative tasks (Stage 1) Almost 45% of non-teaching staff members reported using AI for administrative purposes within their institutions (Archival data: AI and HE, Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2025)
<i>Pragmatic Illegitimacy</i>	
Deans expressed mixed concerns about the overall impact and contributions of GenAI on teaching and research	"We should be cautious about the myth of total automation, which would be a serious mistake" (Stage 1, Interview 18) Student assessment needs to be entirely rethought, for example, in online oral exams, unsupervised coursework, and final dissertations. It's a difficult challenge to take on (Stage 1, open response)
<i>Cognitive Legitimacy</i>	
Deans reflected on the role of HE institutions in fostering innovation within an increasingly competitive environment	Most deans described themselves as "active in the field of GenAI," motivated by competition between institutions and the fear of falling behind technologically (Stage 1) "Deans need to anticipate change, differentiate their institutions from competitors, and attract students by developing new training programs tailored to this objective" (Stage 2, Interview 11)
<i>Cognitive Illegitimacy</i>	
Deans are concerned about the growing dependence on GenAI at the expense of human skills	"I'm worried that GenAI may turn into an all-purpose tool, with students and teachers not always exercising critical judgment toward its results" (Stage 1, open response) 25 of the 29 deans identified overconfidence in GenAI-generated results as a key risk (Stage 1)
<i>Moral Legitimacy</i>	
Deans perceive GenAI as a means of demonstrating the institution's social responsibility	Responsible use of GenAI is a way to demonstrate a sustained policy of raising awareness among students about environmental concerns (Stage 1) Universities are raising students' awareness of the reasoned, ethical, and sustainable use of AI (Archival data: AI and HE, Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2025)
<i>Moral Illegitimacy</i>	
Deans have raised concerns regarding the fairness and ethical legitimacy of integrating GenAI into pedagogical and academic practices	Deans reported that plagiarism (14/29) and algorithmic bias (18/29) threaten fundamental academic values, particularly learning integrity (Stage 1) Headline: At Sciences Po Paris, students are prohibited from using ChatGPT, with violations subject to disciplinary sanctions (Archival data: Les Echos, 2023)
<i>Actions undertaken to mitigate perceptions of illegitimacy</i>	
Designing GenAI tools and infrastructures dedicated to HE, and distribute charters and best-practice sheets promoting the responsible use of GenAI	The French inter-universities ILAAS RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation) project, aiming at mutualizing server infrastructure and GPU resources (Archival data: 2025, https://www.ilaas.fr/) 35 universities have launched an alliance with Mistral AI and EdTech France to promote reliable and secure AI (Archival data: L'Express, 2025)

4.1 Perceived Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of GenAI among Students

Our data analysis reveals that students' perception of GenAI is characterized by a significant and multifaceted tension across several dimensions of Suchman's legitimacy. First, our findings indicate the existence of a clear conflict within the pragmatic dimension. Pragmatic legitimacy is explicitly expressed through students' appreciation of GenAI's capacity to enhance productivity, save time, and improve efficiency in learning tasks. Quotations (Table 3-1) describe the tool as instrumental in generating ideas more rapidly and supporting task completion, emphasizing its tangible contribution to individual performance and learning comfort. In contrast, pragmatic illegitimacy is present in students' criticism that GenAI produces standardized, impersonal, and often unreliable outputs. This concern is reinforced by the recurrent reference to inaccuracies in AI-generated information, which leads students to question the practical reliability of the technology despite its usefulness.

A similar tension exists within the cognitive dimension. Cognitive legitimacy emerges in statements where students depict GenAI as an inevitable and necessary step in the evolution of academic and professional environments, compelling them to adapt to avoid obsolescence. This consideration is in line with the leitmotiv of universities to train students in the use of new work tools. The technology is viewed as a symbol of progress and modernization, and its integration into learning practices is seen as a natural adaptation to emerging professional standards. However, cognitive illegitimacy also appears strongly: several students describe dependence on GenAI as weakening intellectual autonomy and critical thinking,

while the prevailing idea is that technology should remain a tool to assist us but should not become a form of enslavement. Expressions of overreliance reveal unease about losing the ability to conduct research or analyze information independently, highlighting a perceived erosion of learning agency, weakening student's intellectual autonomy and core cognitive skills. This result is in line with recent research on GenAI that observed the "metacognitive laziness" phenomenon (Nguyen, 2025; Fan *et al.*, 2024), where individuals may engage less in critical thinking and self-regulation of their learning processes.

Finally, the data points unequivocally to the existence of moral illegitimacy, where GenAI is strongly associated with academic dishonesty, plagiarism, and the potential to devalue certified competencies. This dimension is multifaceted, comprising student concerns about cheating, plagiarism, and intellectual dishonesty (52 occurrences); injustice and inequality in access and outcomes (16 occurrences); and the falsification of competencies leading to the devaluation of degrees (14 occurrences).

A critical finding from our analysis, however, is the conspicuous absence of a corresponding positive dimension in the data provided. The framework of student perceptions lacks evidence of a moral legitimacy, a viewpoint where GenAI could be seen as upholding or promoting ethical or moral principles in academic work. This asymmetry creates a significant imbalance, suggesting that while the pragmatic and cognitive value of GenAI is contested, its moral standing is, from the students' perspective, predominantly negative. In response to their perceived legitimacy, there is a strong student demand for mitigation perceptions of illegitimacies with many students asking for education (53%) on ethical use of AI literacy (58%) defined as "human proficiency in different subject areas of AI that enable purposeful,

4.2 Perceived Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of GenAI among Faculty

Parallel to student perceptions, the perceived legitimacy of GenAI among faculty members is also defined by significant tensions across pragmatic, cognitive, and moral dimensions. In the pragmatic domain, a clear conflict emerges. Pragmatic legitimacy is established as faculty members recognize GenAI's potential as a valuable pedagogical and research assistant, citing its efficiency in tasks such as producing "a new two-hour exam" in just "three minutes" and improving the quality of assignments. This view is directly challenged by a sense of pragmatic illegitimacy, rooted in concerns about the unreliability of AI-generated outputs, particularly "hallucinations" that invent "sources or data...that don't exist at all," which are seen as detrimental to academic integrity.

A similar dichotomy is evident in the cognitive dimension. Faculty acknowledge a cognitive legitimacy, viewing it as their professional responsibility "to prepare students for the professional world" where they will be expected to master GenAI. This is juxtaposed with a significant perception of cognitive illegitimacy, where educators perceive GenAI as an opaque "black-box." This "Big Brother syndrome" is exemplified by the sentiment, "With ChatGPT, I don't know 'who' is speaking," suggesting the tool's non-transparent processes can hinder the development of genuine creativity and the construction of nuanced, well-reasoned thought.

Most notably, and in contrast to the student data, the moral dimension among faculty is fully contested. The data indicates the presence of moral legitimacy, where faculty consider that GenAI may "level up" opportunities for dyslexic students" and serve as an "inclusive tool" to bridge disability, language, or cultural gaps. This positive moral framing is in direct tension with a potent sense of moral illegitimacy. Faculty express grave concerns that GenAI conflicts with the core ethical values of academia by fostering a "growing intellectual laziness" and a "decline in critical distance and independent thinking" (58 occurrences), thereby threatening the principles of transparency and intellectual honesty. Unlike the student data, all six dimensions of legitimacy and illegitimacy are present in the faculty perceptions, creating a complex and fully formed set of professional tensions regarding the integration of GenAI into HE.

In response to these perceived illegitimacies, the data indicates a clear direction toward proactive mitigation through education. Actions undertaken are characterized by individual and collective training initiatives aimed at both students and faculty. These efforts emphasize the need for teachers to be "adequately prepared beforehand" so they can effectively "train students in the critical and informed use of these tools." Such initiatives often take the form of peer-led workshops that showcase practical, "take-away" applications of GenAI for direct implementation in teaching, signaling a grassroots effort to navigate the challenges and harness the potential of this technology responsibly.

4.3 Perceived Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of GenAI among Deans

From a leadership perspective, the perceived legitimacy of GenAI among deans is shaped by strategic institutional concerns, revealing again tensions across pragmatic, cognitive, and moral frameworks. On the pragmatic level, pragmatic legitimacy is derived from viewing GenAI as a practical tool for enhancing operational efficiency through the "automation of administrative tasks," with nearly 45% of non-teaching staff reportedly using AI for such purposes. This is countered by a sense of pragmatic illegitimacy, where deans caution against the "myth of total automation" and express concerns about the profound impacts of GenAI on core academic practices like "online oral exams, unsupervised coursework, and final dissertations."

In the cognitive sphere, legitimacy is driven by the prevailing idea that HE has become a competitive market in which institutions must therefore innovate and create value. Deans feel compelled to be "active in the field of GenAI," motivated by inter-university competition and a "fear of falling behind technologically." This strategic necessity is in tension with cognitive illegitimacy, which manifests as a concern over the "growing dependence on GenAI at the expense of human skills." A significant majority of deans (25 out of 29) identified overconfidence in AI-generated results as a key risk, fearing it may "turn into an all-purpose tool" that erodes the critical judgment of both students and faculty.

The moral dimension is also fully contested from the deans' viewpoint. Moral legitimacy is framed as an expression of institutional values, where the responsible use of GenAI serves to demonstrate "a sustained policy of raising awareness among staff and students about environmental concerns" and social responsibility. Conversely, moral illegitimacy arises from significant ethical concerns. Deans report that "plagiarism (14/29) and algorithmic bias (18/29) threaten fundamental academic values," leading to concrete policy actions such as the highly publicized prohibition of ChatGPT at institutions like Sciences Po Paris.

To address these multifaceted illegitimacies, deans are undertaking structural and policy-level actions. These mitigation strategies include designing university-specific GenAI tools and infrastructures, such as the French inter-universities ILAAS RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation) project, and establishing "charters and best-practice sheets." Furthermore, 35 universities and some major Business Schools have initiated a partnership with Mistral AI and EdTech France, aiming to "promote reliable and secure AI" within the HE ecosystem, signaling a move towards institutionally managed and ethically grounded AI integration.

5 Discussion

The objective of this research was to understand how the legitimacy of GenAI in HE is articulated across pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions. Indeed, the concept of legitimacy offers a comprehensive framework to examine phenomena such as user engagement, participation, acceptance, and resistance within IS, which are often studied separately and without integration (Flynn & Du, 2012; Bhattacharjee & Hikmet, 2007). Approaching IS through the lens of legitimation emphasizes a dynamic, process-oriented perspective grounded in everyday work practices. Incorporating the concept of legitimacy and its counterpart, illegitimacy, into studies of GenAI in HE thus enables a multifaceted analysis that moves beyond instrumental utility to consider the normative and cognitive factors influencing stakeholders' perceptions. This comprehensive approach provides a robust framework for understanding both the adoption and contestation of emerging technologies in academic contexts.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

In contrast to digital transformation models centered on executive leadership or third-party providers, this article adopts a multi-level perspective to capture the "fragmented institutional reality" (Bitektine, 2011) inherent to disruptive technologies. By simultaneously integrating the perceptions of students, faculty, and deans, we respond to critical calls in the literature emphasizing that human and cultural factors are too often overlooked (Carroll *et al.*, 2023; Vial, 2019). By demonstrating that the legitimacy of an innovation such as GenAI is not a fixed state but a dynamic and contested terrain, our findings align with the recommendations of Mousavi Baygi *et al.* (2021), who conceptualize digital transformation as a fluid socio-technological process. This perspective moves beyond the binary view of technical adoption to analyze how legitimacy is continuously negotiated and redefined through collective meaning-making processes within the institution. While current digital transformation research focuses predominantly on

success strategies and factors facilitating adoption, this article explores the underlying institutional resistances. We reveal a "grey area" where the legitimacy of innovation is continually negotiated through tensions relating both to the opportunities afforded and the ethical concerns raised.

This article contributes to existing models, such as Suchman's (1995), by demonstrating that the legitimacy of a disruptive innovation like GenAI is not monolithic, but rather emerges from a complex negotiation between perceived utility, ethical considerations, and alignment with the foundational missions of education. In this respect, our findings support Bitektine's (2011) conceptualization of legitimacy as a multidimensional and potentially conflicting construct.

However, the major theoretical contribution of this study lies in the introduction and application of the concept of illegitimacy to the analysis of GenAI adoption in HE. While prior research on technological legitimacy has extensively explored pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions, very few studies have systematically examined the "grey area between legitimacy and illegitimacy" (Siraz *et al.*, 2023). The distinctive innovation of GenAI, as a technology capable of producing and synthesizing complex content on demand, generates new socio-technical tensions: it brings disruptive potential to the heart of academic practices and calls into question the traditional balance between efficiency, ethics, and professional norms. The proposed articulation between legitimacy and illegitimacy thus makes it possible to move beyond a binary analysis of technology acceptance, situating debates within evolving and contradictory processes in which the same digital artifacts are alternately valued or delegitimized according to their usage contexts and collective representations.

To better understand the legitimacy of GenAI, it is necessary to move beyond a substantive approach (one that focuses on the supposed intrinsic nature of what is considered "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong") toward a procedural perspective. In line with Edgar Morin's reflections on ethics (2004), the legitimacy of GenAI hinges on how it is used and regulated. Responsible pedagogical practices, along with training and experimentation that encourage thoughtful, intelligent use, become vehicles of legitimacy in action, transcending *a priori* moral judgments. A critical and responsible approach to AI education, one that safeguards cognitive independence and strengthens human capabilities, is therefore more essential than instruction centered solely on technical proficiency (Huo & Siau, 2024).

Finally, our findings also draw attention to the temporal consequences of GenAI use, particularly with regard to cognitive development and learning processes in higher education. A major topic for teaching is the cognitive debt or metacognitive laziness among students linked to the use of GenAI (Fan *et al.*, 2024). By providing immediate and highly fluent responses, GenAI can reduce the productive friction that typically stimulates analytical and reflective thinking. While such tools may lead to short-term improvements in performance, they also raise concerns about a medium-term erosion of critical thinking and learning autonomy. Rather than rejecting these technologies outright, our findings point to the need for pedagogical approaches that deliberately reintroduce cognitive effort and reflection into GenAI-supported learning activities. To counter these effects, one possible avenue is the development of training designs that actively engage students in the learning process and place greater emphasis on medium-long-term educational objectives over immediate outcomes. From this perspective, examining both the legitimacy and illegitimacy of GenAI use across different temporal horizons and among different stakeholders (students, teachers, and deans in our research) appears interesting for the development of sustainable training programs.

5.2 Practical Contributions

While a consensus on pragmatic and cognitive tensions provides a common ground across students, faculty, and deans, the underlying stakes and perspectives diverge significantly, culminating in a fractured understanding of GenAI's moral dimension. All three populations recognize the pragmatic efficiency of GenAI while fearing its unreliability; however, the perceived risks escalate from individual academic performance (students), to pedagogical and assessment integrity (faculty), to the institution's overall academic reputation (deans). Similarly, while all groups express cognitive concerns about dependency, the focus shifts from a fear of losing personal skills (students), to a concern for the erosion of student learning and critical thinking (faculty), to a strategic threat against the institution's core educational mission (deans).

The most critical divergence, however, occurs along the moral axis. The complete absence of moral legitimacy in the student data suggests their relationship with GenAI is perceived primarily as instrumental, with ethical considerations centered on academic dishonesty. This stands in stark contrast to

faculty and deans, who both articulate a positive moral case for the technology. Yet, their justifications differ fundamentally: faculty's view is practice-oriented and grounded in pedagogical application, such as leveraging GenAI as an "inclusive tool" to support students with disabilities. Deans, on the other hand, frame moral legitimacy from a strategic and reputational standpoint, linking responsible AI use to broader institutional goals of social and environmental responsibility. This progression, from an individual and instrumental view to a pedagogical application and finally to a systemic and strategic policy, is also mirrored in the actions taken to mitigate illegitimacy. Students seek clearer rules and training; faculty develop peer-led pedagogical strategies; and deans implement institution-wide policies and infrastructures. This reveals not just a difference in opinion, but a fragmented institutional reality where each stakeholder group is attempting to solve a distinct problem shaped by their specific role and responsibilities within the academic ecosystem.

These empirical findings enable us to formulate several managerial recommendations directed at HE leaders. As this research was conducted within the specific context of French higher education, we do not claim that our findings can be directly generalized to other national settings. However, we do not consider France to be an exceptional case, and several of the recommendations proposed here may also resonate with universities and higher education institutions facing similar challenges related to the adoption and governance of generative AI.

First, deans should acknowledge the diversity of perceived forms of legitimacy across stakeholder groups and adapt institutional policies accordingly, taking into account the specific expectations of students, faculty, and administrative teams. To navigate these divergent perceptions, academic leaders may draw on leadership-oriented digital transformation frameworks that emphasize executive alignment, coordination across organizational units, and active cultural engagement. One illustrative example is the Executive Action Strategies of Engagement (EASE) framework proposed by Müller et al. (2025), which highlights how successful digital transformation depends on leadership's capacity to unite executive teams, orchestrate IT–business alignment, and actively shape organizational culture. Concretely, this calls for multi-level AI policies, designed to reduce this fragmentation of legitimacy. At the institutional level, a set of rules shared by all stakeholders (ethical principles, expectations and guidelines) should ensure collectively recognized legitimacy. At the individual level (faculty, administrative staff), people must have sufficient autonomy to appropriate these tools in their own way. Indeed, excessive rigidity would amount to denying their professional skills and would be counterproductive. Finally, training and support mechanisms must be implemented to address the potential issues faced by individuals. In line with the work of Suchman (1995) and Bitektine (2011), such multi-level policies would enhance acceptance and compliance from the three populations.

Second, the central role of faculty members in legitimizing GenAI highlights the need to strengthen resources devoted to their continuous training, including support for the ethical and critical management of these tools. In this regard, the design and dissemination of institutional charters on the use of GenAI in HE have become a widespread practice. For instance, a national charter is currently under development in France: involving numerous universities, it is being co-constructed under a Creative Commons license.

Thirdly, taking into account the three facets of legitimacy requires different temporal horizons. While practical legitimacy can be achieved quickly, moral and cognitive legitimacy require time and negotiation between the parties concerned. It is time for deans to open up genuine debates on the use of GenAI by involving teachers, students, and administrative staff together. It is essential that each category of stakeholders understands the expectations and fears of the others.

Finally, we argue that the notion of illegitimacy should be emancipated from its often negative interpretation. Just as resistance to change can be viewed as a call for managerial action to restore trust or employee recognition in information systems project management (Meissonier & Houzé, 2010), illegitimacy should be regarded as a strategic indicator that helps anticipate potential dysfunctions. Its early consideration may facilitate the implementation of preventive measures, crucial for avoiding institutional crises and ensuring the responsible and sustainable integration of GenAI into academic practices.

All these approaches should allow the development of AI literacy within institutions which is likely to strengthen the legitimacy of the tool, as it helps to develop critical judgement among users. Thus, it would mitigate the risk of cognitive dependency and lack of ethics (Huo & Siau, 2024).

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Our research presents several limitations, both conceptual and methodological. First, while we explored the notion of GenAI legitimacy, the concept itself remains multidimensional and occasionally ambiguous within the management literature, which may lead to polysemous interpretations of the data collected. Although foundational, Suchman's (1995) tripartite schema faces several constraints. Because of its popularity and its application across a wide range of theoretical and empirical contexts, the concept has gradually accumulated layers of additional meanings, which in turn have made it vulnerable to conceptual stretching, inconsistent usage, and even misuse (Suddaby *et al.*, 2017). Researchers call also for a multilevel perspective, integrating individual, organizational, and field-level dynamics, which are insufficiently captured in the tripartite typology (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Some researchers even proposed different dimensionalizations of legitimacy judgments (e.g., instrumental, relational, moral), suggesting that the pragmatic–moral–cognitive structure does not fully align with how audiences actually reason (Tost, 2011). Finally, legitimacy strategies can be double-edged, as attempts to appear legitimate may backfire or trigger skepticism (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

Second, as our study focuses specifically on French HE in management, the findings may not be directly transferable to other disciplines or international contexts. Moreover, the rapid evolution of GenAI technologies also represents a constraint, as the observations, gathered primarily in the first half of 2024, may quickly become outdated. Comparative research across disciplines, countries, and types of HE institutions would be valuable to assess the generalizability of legitimacy dynamics and to identify context-specific drivers or barriers.

Third, from a methodological standpoint, the initial quantitative phase relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective perceptions. While the sample's diversity offers valuable insights, it may not fully reflect the complete spectrum of GenAI uses. The qualitative phase is based on a convenience sample of early adopters. Although it provides rich, illustrative examples of innovative practices, it does not support claims of statistics. Finally, the exploratory nature of the 22 interviews conducted enables a nuanced understanding of user experiences, but the findings remain inherently tied to participants' individual perceptions at a specific period. Longitudinal studies could explore how legitimacy perceptions of GenAI evolve as policies, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures adapt over time, particularly in response to shifts in regulatory frameworks and technological advancements. Further, integrating experimental or action-research designs could evaluate the effectiveness of institutional strategies aimed at fostering more reflexive, ethical uses of GenAI and managing the “grey area” between legitimacy and illegitimacy (Siraz *et al.*, 2023).

6 Conclusion

The diffusion of GenAI within French HE in management represents not a transient technological trend but a profound structural transformation that challenges the foundational purpose of academic degrees. This shift redefines curricular value from the mere acquisition of content toward cultivating the competencies necessary to critically engage with, validate, and ethically deploy AI-generated knowledge within complex, real-world contexts. Our triadic stakeholder study, encompassing students, faculty, and deans, reveals that GenAI's legitimacy hinges on four intertwined institutional levers: pragmatic utility, moral alignment, cognitive inevitability, and institutional governance, which together can transform GenAI from perceived existential risk to strategic educational asset.

We argue for deliberate institutional strategies structured around the acquisition, maintenance, and repair of GenAI's multifaceted legitimacy. Central to these strategies is the figure of the professor, whose unique role remains pivotal: they embody scholarly authority grounded in ongoing knowledge creation and irreplaceably human qualities such as critical judgment and ethical stewardship, attributes currently beyond AI's reach. Consequently, the legitimacy of GenAI cannot be disentangled from evolving conceptions of professorial legitimacy, which itself is undergoing a 21st-century redefinition. Effective integration of GenAI in HE thus depends not only on technology acceptance but on rearticulating the human-technology nexus in academic practice, ensuring that AI serves as a complementary force enhancing, rather than supplanting, core educational missions.

The necessity to actively manage legitimacy dynamics through coherent policy frameworks, inclusive pedagogical designs, and ethical oversight is paramount, especially to mitigate moral illegitimacy

concerns and to foster cognitive legitimacy by embedding GenAI reflexively into institutional routines. By embracing this complex legitimacy landscape, HE institutions can harness GenAI's transformative potential while safeguarding academic integrity and social trust, paving the way for an adaptive and forward-looking educational paradigm.

7 Declaration of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5) and Perplexity AI to enhance the quality of the English writing, specifically for copyediting, grammar refinement, and style improvement. They also used NotebookLM (Google) to assist in identifying and summarizing relevant passages from selected academic articles deemed important for framing the research context. Finally, the OpenAI O3 reasoning model was employed to support the labeling, quantification, and analysis of the responses to the two open-ended questions in stage 1 and the broad open-ended question in stage 2.

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