



*Portfolio: A Reflective and Critical Analysis of
the First-year Doctoral Research Journey*

Executive Summary

This reflective and critical analysis outlines the evolution of my research focus during the first year of my DBA programme, centred on *the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on business students' perceptions of degree value and career preparedness*. At the outset, my primary interest lay in examining how the market requirements for business analysts have changed over recent years. I sought to understand shifts in skill expectations, recruitment trends, and role definitions. However, as my inquiry deepened, I became increasingly aware of the transformative role of AI in shaping this profession. AI is not only altering the number of available business analyst positions but also redefining the functional scope, competencies, and strategic value of the role. This realisation highlighted the substantial challenges faced by aspiring professionals and entry-level practitioners, particularly those preparing to enter the job market for the first time. It also drew my attention to a broader issue—how current business students navigate career decision-making and planning amidst uncertainty brought about by rapid technological change.

A turning point in my methodological approach came through the module *Converting Research into Practice*, which provided me with essential tools for translating conceptual ideas into actionable research design. The module's emphasis on designing effective interview questions and implementing semi-structured interviews proved particularly valuable. This approach allowed participants the freedom to express their perspectives fully, while still maintaining alignment with the core research objectives. Engaging with business students through these semi-structured interviews offered unexpected insights: while many participants discussed AI's direct influence on required technical and analytical skills, several also raised concerns about its ethical implications in the workplace—issues such as fairness, bias, and transparency in AI-driven decision-making.

This first-year journey has broadened my understanding of the interplay between technological innovation, higher education, and employability. It has underscored the urgent need for universities to adapt curricula to integrate AI literacy, practical application, and ethical awareness, ensuring that graduates are not only technically equipped but also critically prepared to navigate the evolving demands of the AI-influenced business environment. These reflections form the foundation for the next stages of my doctoral research, where I aim to deepen the investigation into how educational institutions can proactively bridge the gap between academic preparation and the realities of an AI-driven labour market.

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Background context and relevance

When I first began my DBA journey, Dr Caroline Jawad recommended several academic books for me to read. These works, filled with specialised terminology, introduced me to fascinating theories and new perspectives on how to approach scholarly work. At the same time, their dense and complex language made them challenging to read, and I occasionally questioned whether I would be able to successfully complete the DBA programme (Batchelor, D., & Di Napoli, R., 2006).

As the year progressed, attending classes, participating in school-hosted conferences, and engaging with professors and fellow students gradually eased my doubts. The professors demonstrated great willingness to support us, often providing extensive feedback on my draft papers (Sibomana, E., 2021). While the volume of revision suggestions could feel overwhelming, I came to appreciate them as a safeguard—helping me avoid persisting too long on the wrong path. Conversations with senior doctoral candidates also played a significant role in shaping my perspective. I learned that encountering various challenges during the doctoral process is normal, and there is a shared understanding of the importance of collaboration. This made it easier for me to seek advice openly whenever I faced difficulties. My first major shift in research direction came after a discussion with a peer who had conducted a similar study; their experience made me realise that my original topic would make it extremely difficult to find suitable participants. This prompted me to make a decisive change. Later, the final scope of my interview participants was determined after thorough discussions with both my professors and several doctoral colleagues (Wisker, G., et al., 2010).

The culture of openness and enthusiasm for academic discussion within the programme has been invaluable. It has not only shaped the evolution of my research direction but has also made my first year of the DBA a journey that I did not have to travel alone. Through this collaborative environment, I was able to refine my focus towards my current topic—*the impact of artificial intelligence on business students' perceptions of degree value and career preparedness*. This shift was motivated not only by academic considerations but also by the increasing real-world relevance of AI in reshaping both professional roles and the educational pathways that prepare students for them (Reich, J. A., 2021).

Moreover, as a business student myself, the interdisciplinary nature of combining AI with business studies sparked significant interest and motivation in my research. This perspective required me to engage with both technological and business domains, deepening my understanding while also challenging me to recognize and reflect on my own positionality and potential biases. Acknowledging these influences early in the process has been crucial in ensuring that my analysis remains balanced, critical, and

grounded in the diverse realities faced by business students in an AI-driven world (Holmes, A. G. D., 2020). The following section therefore considers the role of reflection in my research journey, illustrating how it has influenced my understanding and methodological decisions.

The role of reflection in research

For me, reflection has served as a form of “navigation system” throughout my doctoral journey, enabling me to organize my experiences, clarify my thoughts, and evaluate the decisions I have made. It ensures that my research is both meaningful and credible.

Reflection is a deliberate habit that proves especially valuable in complex or uncertain situations, as it helps researchers draw learning from their experiences (Nyamubi, G. J. , 2021). It also enables them to link personal insights with a broader context, transforming these insights into useful resources for professional practice. In the case of my study on the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on business students’ perceptions of degree value and career preparedness, reflection has not only enhanced the quality of my research but has also helped me to recognise my positionality and limitations.

One of the clearest examples of this was in recognising my own biases (Gough, B. , 2017). Initially, I assumed that business students would universally perceive AI as a positive, value-adding tool that would enhance the relevance of their degrees. However, through reflection, I realised that this assumption overlooked students’ anxieties, such as increased job competition and the risk of skills becoming obsolete. Acknowledging these potential blind spots encouraged me to adopt a more balanced approach, ensuring that my research questions and interpretations remained open to diverse perspectives.

Reflection took many forms, depending on the resources available and the stage of my research (Corlett, S., & Mavin, S., 2018). My most consistent tool has been maintaining a reflective journal, which has become a vital instrument for sharpening my critical awareness. Doctoral research is a long and complex process, which can easily lead researchers astray through bias or distraction. Writing regularly in my journal has acted as a safeguard, reminding me of my objectives and helping me remain aligned with my research focus. For example, during the first year’s literature review stage, I engaged with a wide range of academic sources as well as social media commentary from experts and practitioners. Opinions about AI’s role in education and employment were often polarised—some argued it would lead to mass unemployment, while others emphasised its potential to create opportunities. Reflective writing forced me to critically evaluate these views and ask: *How do they influence my own assumptions? Am I leaning too much towards one narrative?* This process trained me to approach information with greater scepticism and balance.

Reflection also shaped the practical side of my methodology, as tools like reflective diaries can support researchers in spotting gaps and improving their work. Initially, my approach to interviews was underdeveloped (Dodgson, J. E., 2019). I assumed a few broad questions would suffice. However, reflecting on my pilot interviews revealed that vague questions limited participants' responses, preventing me from capturing the complexity of their perceptions. By refining my questions—for example, asking, "*How has AI influenced your confidence in future career prospects?*"—I was able to generate richer and more meaningful data. Reflection therefore became an iterative mechanism for methodological improvement.

Beyond methodological refinement, reflective writing also helped me manage the emotional pressures of doctoral study. Balancing coursework, research, and personal life often brought self-doubt, particularly when I encountered strong claims on social media suggesting that AI would completely transform business education. Recording these anxieties in my journal helped me process them and develop coping strategies, such as setting smaller goals and sharing challenges with peers. These practices strengthened my resilience, allowing me to persevere in what is undoubtedly a long and demanding academic journey.

Reflection was not limited to solitary journaling but was also embedded in dialogue and collaboration (Corlett, S., & Mavin, S., 2018). Discussions with professors and colleagues frequently prompted me to reconsider aspects of my research design. For instance, one peer suggested that AI might affect students from different disciplines in distinct ways, which encouraged me to incorporate participants' academic backgrounds into my analysis. Similarly, pilot interviews taught me how to guide conversations more effectively so that participants moved beyond "yes/no" answers and shared their authentic perspectives. These experiences resonate with Schön's (1983) notion of *reflection-in-action*, where learning and adaptation occur during the process itself.

Perhaps most importantly, reflection has fostered a sense of belonging within the academic community (Nyamubi, G. J., 2021). Engaging in discussions with peers and professors, and listening to the diverse experiences of students during interviews, reassured me that I am not navigating these challenges alone. This sense of shared purpose deepened my reflection, allowing me to consider broader issues such as the psychological impact of AI on students and the ethical dimensions of technology adoption. These exchanges not only broadened my outlook but also reinforced my confidence in pursuing my chosen topic.

In sum, reflection has been a continuous and multifaceted process—whether through journaling, dialogue, or methodological experimentation. It has strengthened my capacity for critical analysis, improved the fairness and depth of my research, and supported my personal growth as a researcher. By integrating reflective practice into each stage of my study, I am becoming a more flexible, responsible, and resilient doctoral candidate, better equipped to address the complexities of researching AI in

business education.

The role of positionality in research

My positionality as both a business student and a researcher has significantly shaped the way I approach this study. Being a business student myself, I am already aware of the profound influence AI is having on the career environment for business graduates. This awareness not only motivated my interest in the topic but also made me eager to engage with peers in order to reflect on my own career planning (Reich, J. A., 2021). At the same time, I remained careful not to impose my personal views during interviews. To avoid influencing participants' responses or judgements, I refrained from sharing my own opinions, and I ensured that all perspectives were fully documented, even when they differed greatly from my own. This deliberate effort helped me maintain a more objective stance in the data collection process.

In terms of cultural context, my participants were Chinese students studying in the UK, sharing the same background as myself. This similarity allowed me to establish rapport and create a more comfortable environment for interviews. It reduced barriers in communication and likely encouraged participants to speak more openly about their thoughts and experiences. My initial stance towards AI was relatively negative. I believed that AI would eliminate many entry-level office positions, which traditionally provide new graduates with a learning pathway to progress gradually in their careers. However, during the interviews I discovered that many participants held a far more optimistic view of technological change. They argued that newcomers to the workplace might in fact be more willing to embrace AI, and more proactive in integrating it into their work, compared to employees who have stayed too long in their comfort zones. This contrast between my initial assumption and their perspectives was a valuable reminder of the importance of recognising personal biases and remaining open to unexpected insights.

In terms of positioning, I experienced both insider and outsider roles simultaneously (Reich, J. A., 2021). On the one hand, sharing the same background with participants made it easier to build trust and allowed them to speak more freely. On the other hand, I was also an outsider, approaching them as a researcher, which required me to maintain professional distance and critical awareness. This dual positioning proved advantageous rather than problematic, as it created both empathy and objectivity within the research process.

Reflecting on my positionality also helped me identify and correct potential flaws in my methodology (Holmes, A. G. D., 2020). In the early stages, my interview questions

unintentionally carried a degree of bias, subtly guiding participants towards certain responses. I recognised this issue during a trial interview with a peer and revised the questions to ensure that they were more neutral and open-ended. This adjustment improved the credibility of my data collection and reinforced the importance of reflexivity in research design.

Overall, acknowledging my positionality has been essential in navigating this study. It has allowed me to balance my personal connection to the topic with the need for academic rigour, while also highlighting how my own background and assumptions interact with the perspectives of participants (Lake, J., 2015). By consciously reflecting on these dynamics, I have been able to create a more balanced, transparent, and trustworthy research process.

The role of reflexivity in research

Reflexivity is often understood as an ongoing process of critical self-examination in which researchers consider how their own identities, assumptions, and actions influence every stage of the research (Owens, A., et al., 2020). It is more than simple reflection; it involves sustained awareness of the relationship between the researcher and the research context, and requires constant questioning of how knowledge is being produced.

My shared identity with participants—as a fellow business school student—had a notable impact on the research process. This similarity often helped interviewees feel more relaxed, creating a sense of ease in conversations. At the same time, I was mindful of the need to maintain academic rigor. To avoid interviews becoming overly casual, I deliberately used academic vocabulary in my questions. This encouraged participants to organize their responses more systematically and to engage with the topic in a professional way.

During the interviews, reflexivity also meant recognizing the ways in which I, as a researcher, was learning from participants. On some occasions, interviewees introduced me to AI tools or shared personal experiences of using AI, which broadened my own understanding of the topic. These moments reminded me that the research process is not one-directional; instead, it is a collaborative exchange that can enrich both researcher and participants.

Reflexivity was also crucial in shaping the boundaries of my study. While my focus was on how AI affects business students' perceptions of degree value and career preparedness, some participants digressed into issues such as copyright and ethical debates around AI (Patnaik, E., 2013). Although these points were thought-provoking, I recognized that they fell outside the scope of this study. Maintaining reflexivity helped me acknowledge these contributions respectfully while keeping the analysis centred on

my research objectives.

The role of reflexivity also extended into analysis (Bibi, H., Khan, S., & Shabir, M. , 2022). Since AI's impact on business education and employment can be understood in both optimistic and pessimistic ways, I was aware of the risk of unconsciously favouring interpretations that aligned with my initial assumptions. Reflexivity required me to remain open to all perspectives, and to remind myself that the research aim was not to prove a personal viewpoint but to present a balanced account of students' lived experiences (Ugwu, C. I., et al., 2021).

Importantly, reflexivity highlighted the reciprocal nature of my interviews. While I took care not to express my personal opinions during conversations in order to avoid influencing responses, the questions themselves often stimulated participants to think more deeply. Several students acknowledged that they had not considered certain issues until they were asked about them in the interview. For me, these interactions not only revealed the value of carefully designed questions but also demonstrated how research can serve as a mutually beneficial process of critical engagement.

In sum, reflexivity has been essential in strengthening the quality of my research. It has helped me remain aware of how my identity, assumptions, and behaviour influence the study, while also allowing me to learn directly from participants. This continuous process has ensured that my project remains both balanced and grounded, and it has enhanced my ability to approach the topic of AI in business education with greater objectivity and depth.

Emic and etic stances

In qualitative research, the concepts of *emic* and *etic* are often used to describe two complementary perspectives through which data can be understood (Gannon, M. J., et al., 2022). The emic stance refers to an insider view, focusing on how participants themselves perceive, describe, and make sense of their experiences. It prioritises participants' voices and seeks to capture their meanings as authentically as possible. In contrast, the etic stance represents an outsider view, where the researcher applies analytical frameworks and theoretical perspectives to interpret participants' accounts. While the emic stance brings richness and authenticity, the etic stance contributes critical distance and broader contextualisation. Both perspectives are valuable, and a balanced integration of the two can enhance the depth and credibility of research findings (Galperin, B. L., et al., 2022).

In this research, adopting both emic and etic stances was crucial for ensuring that the

voices of participants were authentically represented while also situating their experiences within broader academic debates (Yanto, E. S., & Pandin, M., 2023). From an emic perspective, my shared background as a fellow business student enabled me to build rapport with participants. Before each formal interview, I engaged in small talk about campus life and personal experiences, creating a relaxed atmosphere that made the conversations feel more like natural dialogues rather than rigid question-and-answer sessions. This insider positioning encouraged participants to share their views more openly and in greater depth, as they felt I could relate to their experiences and concerns (Utkirov, A., 2024).

At the same time, an etic stance was necessary to maintain objectivity. While recording responses, I ensured that every viewpoint was captured in full, regardless of whether I personally agreed with it. Instead of evaluating participants' perspectives, I focused on systematically documenting them and later analysing them through an academic lens. This outsider perspective helped me avoid over-identifying with participants' positions and ensured that my interpretation remained balanced.

Balancing these two stances was particularly important during the writing stage (Galperin, B. L., et al., 2022). On the one hand, an emic stance required me to listen empathetically and acknowledge the diversity of participants' voices. On the other hand, the etic stance reminded me to filter out content that fell outside the scope of this study and to centre the analysis on the research questions. By linking participants' experiences to relevant theoretical frameworks, I was able to transform individual insights into findings with broader academic relevance.

Overall, combining emic and etic perspectives allowed me to capture both the richness of students' lived experiences and the analytical rigour required in doctoral research. The interplay of these stances ensured that my study not only preserved the authenticity of participants' voices but also contributed meaningfully to the wider literature on AI, degree value, and career preparedness.

Research Paradigms

When I first encountered the concept of research paradigms, I felt overwhelmed by their abstract terminology. Words such as *ontology*, *epistemology*, and *methodology* seemed distant, and I initially perceived them as theoretical jargon that served little purpose beyond academic formality (Hallebone, E., & Priest, J., 2017). At that point, I could not yet see how these concepts connected with the practice of doing research.

As I began reading introductory texts on paradigms, I noticed that scholars generally describe them as overarching worldviews that guide how knowledge is defined and

pursued. For example, paradigms provide assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and about how knowledge can be acquired (epistemology). This academic framing helped me to see that paradigms are not just theoretical debates but foundational orientations that determine the types of questions researchers ask, the methods they choose, and the ways they interpret findings (Chountalas, P. T., & Lagodimos, A. G., 2019).

I gradually understood the distinction between key paradigms such as positivism, which emphasises objective measurement and replicability, and interpretivism, which stresses the importance of meaning-making and subjective experience (Chountalas, P. T., & Lagodimos, A. G., 2019). I also encountered critical realism, which seeks to bridge the gap by acknowledging an objective reality while recognizing that our understanding of it is always mediated through human interpretation (Costley, C., 2018). These distinctions, which I had once dismissed as unnecessarily complex, became clearer as I reflected on their practical implications for my own research design.

A turning point came when I connected these theoretical insights with my doctoral project on the impact of AI on business students. Initially, I leaned towards a positivist orientation, believing that statistical data on employability outcomes or skill demand would provide the most reliable answers. However, exposure to interpretivist and constructivist perspectives helped me realize that students' lived experiences, perceptions, and anxieties could not be adequately captured through numbers alone. This recognition pushed me towards qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, which allow participants' voices to be represented in greater depth (Lim, W. M., 2023).

At the same time, I began to appreciate the warnings in the literature that researchers cannot claim a "neutral" position (Brand, V., 2009). Paradigms reflect a researcher's values, assumptions, and worldview, meaning that every study is situated within a broader philosophical stance (Ugwu, C. I., Ekere, J. N., & Onoh, C., 2021). This resonated with my own positionality as a Chinese international student researching peers who share similar backgrounds. Recognizing this positionality aligned with what the literature describes as the importance of reflexivity—acknowledging how one's paradigm shapes not only research design but also interpretation.

Gradually, my perception of paradigms shifted from seeing them as intimidating abstractions to recognising them as practical and essential guides (Antwi, S. K., & Hamza, K., 2015). They help ensure consistency between research questions, methods, and analysis, while also making a study's philosophical underpinnings transparent to the academic community. In this sense, paradigms are not merely academic labels but critical tools that influence both the rigour of scholarship and the way we, as researchers, understand the world.

Mixed Methods

In contemporary research, mixed methods design is often described as an approach that purposefully combines both qualitative and quantitative strategies within a single study (Pillow, W. S., 2010). The rationale is that integrating different forms of data can provide a more comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomenon than either method could achieve alone. Scholars highlight that quantitative research is generally valued for its ability to measure and generalise patterns, while qualitative research is emphasised for capturing depth, context, and meaning. Mixed methods research therefore seeks to harness the strengths of both, reducing the limitations of relying on only one approach.

There are various designs within the mixed methods tradition, such as sequential exploratory, sequential explanatory, and convergent parallel designs (Lim, W. M., 2023). Each reflects a different ordering and integration of qualitative and quantitative components, depending on the research question and the role of each data type in the analysis (Costley, C., 2018). Importantly, the choice of design is not merely a technical decision but one that reflects a researcher's paradigm commitments—whether leaning towards pragmatism, critical realism, or other philosophical orientations that value methodological pluralism.

My initial methodological thinking was heavily influenced by the practical nature of my topic (Utkirov, A., 2024). At first, I considered adopting a purely qualitative approach, believing that interviews with business students would provide the richest insights into how they perceive the value of their degrees under the influence of AI. However, as I reviewed the literature, I noticed that many studies on employability and higher education outcomes incorporated statistical evidence, often using surveys or secondary data. This made me aware that relying exclusively on qualitative data might limit the perceived validity or transferability of my findings.

A turning point came through class discussions and feedback from supervisors, where the value of triangulation was emphasised. I came to appreciate that integrating survey-based data could help demonstrate broader trends in students' perceptions, while interviews could contextualise and explain these trends at the individual level. This realisation led me to consider a **sequential exploratory design**: beginning with qualitative interviews to uncover themes in depth, and then using a survey instrument to test the prevalence or variation of these themes across a wider population (Poba-Nzaou, P., et al., 2021).

At the same time, reflection on my positionality as a Chinese international student reinforced this choice (Nyamubi, G. J., 2021). I recognised that while my interviews with Chinese peers could provide rich insider perspectives, supplementing these with broader quantitative data would make my study more balanced and less vulnerable to

the critique of cultural or sample bias (Utkirov, A., 2024). The combination therefore offered both depth and breadth, ensuring that the voices of participants were authentically captured while also situating their experiences within measurable patterns.

Ultimately, my decision to adopt mixed methods reflects both a pragmatic stance and a commitment to academic rigour. Pragmatism resonates with my research aims because it allows flexibility in choosing methods that best answer the research question rather than adhering rigidly to one paradigm. At the same time, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data enhances credibility, transparency, and relevance—qualities that are crucial when investigating a rapidly evolving issue such as the impact of AI on business education and graduate employability (Segbenya, M., et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This reflexive work has documented my first-year doctoral journey, reflecting on the intellectual, methodological, and personal transformations that have shaped the development of my research project. What began as an initial curiosity about changes in business analyst roles evolved into a broader and more meaningful investigation of how artificial intelligence influences business students' perceptions of degree value and career preparedness. This shift reflects not only academic refinement but also my growing recognition of the profound ways in which technological change intersects with higher education and employability (Sibomana, E., 2021).

Throughout this journey, concepts such as reflection, positionality, and reflexivity have functioned as essential tools for navigating complexity (Utkirov, A., 2024). They have allowed me to critically examine my own assumptions, confront potential biases, and engage with participants in a way that balances empathy with academic rigour. Similarly, the engagement with research paradigms has enabled me to situate my project within a broader philosophical context, transforming abstract terminology into meaningful guidance for aligning research questions, methods, and interpretation.

My decision to adopt a mixed methods approach represents both a methodological and philosophical milestone. By integrating qualitative and quantitative strategies, I am better positioned to capture the richness of students' lived experiences while also situating these within broader patterns and trends. This approach reflects a pragmatic stance that values flexibility, balance, and credibility, ensuring that the study contributes not only to theoretical understanding but also to practical discussions on curriculum development and career preparation.

Looking ahead, the insights gained during this first year provide a strong foundation for the next stages of my doctoral research. They remind me that academic inquiry is not a

linear process but an evolving dialogue between theory, evidence, and lived experience. More importantly, they reinforce my belief that rigorous research must remain attentive to both intellectual contribution and real-world relevance. As I continue this journey, I aim to deepen my exploration of how universities can better equip students for an AI-driven labour market, and in doing so, to contribute meaningfully to both scholarship and practice.

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