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Unveiling higher education students' experiences of using artificial intelligence: a cross-institutional qualitative study

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Presentation abstract

Higher Education (HE) has yet to fully embrace the potential of artificial intelligence (AI), likely due to lack of funding, a general reticence to take risks or adopt innovations, limited empirical research and theoretical groundings, together with an emerging understanding of the role of such technology in HE (Wheeler, 2019; McGrath et al., 2024). Lack of digital literacy (such as AI literacy) among educators and students also poses a significant barrier (Lincoln and Kearney, 2019, cited in Essien et al., 2024; Mah and Groß, 2024; Tully et al., 2025). Those who use AI in education may fail to recognise the constructivist and developmental nature of learning, imposing instead behaviourism-based teaching methods and an objectivist epistemology (Bates et al., 2020). Research on AI in education is developing as AI technology evolves (McGrath et al., 2024). There is a tendency to focus on the negative implications of AI in learning and teaching, but there are calls for greater consideration of its strengths (Bates et al., 2020). Research tends to favour positivist paradigms (Budhathoki et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024) over understanding students'

subjective experiences of engaging with AI, which offers important insights into its potential impact in enhancing and hindering learning.

Consequently, a team of researchers from four UK-based HE institutions explored students' experiences of using AI in their studies. Following delivery of a learning-development themed AI workshop, used partly as a recruitment strategy, we used a qualitative approach that allowed for sensitivity to the social processes in which experiences are embedded (Creswell, 2009).

Thematic analysis will give rise to themes that capture how students are using AI, possible barriers to accessing it, and affective dimensions that may hinder/facilitate engagement. By sharing these themes, we hope to provide a more granular perspective, unearthing nuanced and authentic insights from students from multiple institutions into how they are (or are not) using AI. The findings will have implications for how learning developers can best support the use of AI to enhance learning, while addressing accessibility, inclusivity, and affective considerations.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; qualitative research; AI literacies.

Community response

This presentation shared initial outcomes from a cross-institutional research project exploring student engagement with generative AI (GenAI) for learning purposes. Drawing on qualitative data, the research provided a nuanced picture of students' perceptions, behaviours, and ethical considerations in relation to AI tools, challenging dominant narratives that often frame student use of AI in terms of misconduct or superficial engagement.

Perhaps reassuringly for many of us, the outcomes of the research suggest that students are approaching use of GenAI with creativity and caution, and that their use is strategic in order to support specific aspects of learning, such as summarising lecture content, generating ideas, and managing procrastination. Interestingly, this might suggest a level of digital literacy and self-awareness that is often underrepresented in broader discussions about AI in education. In the research, students expressed a clear sense of ownership

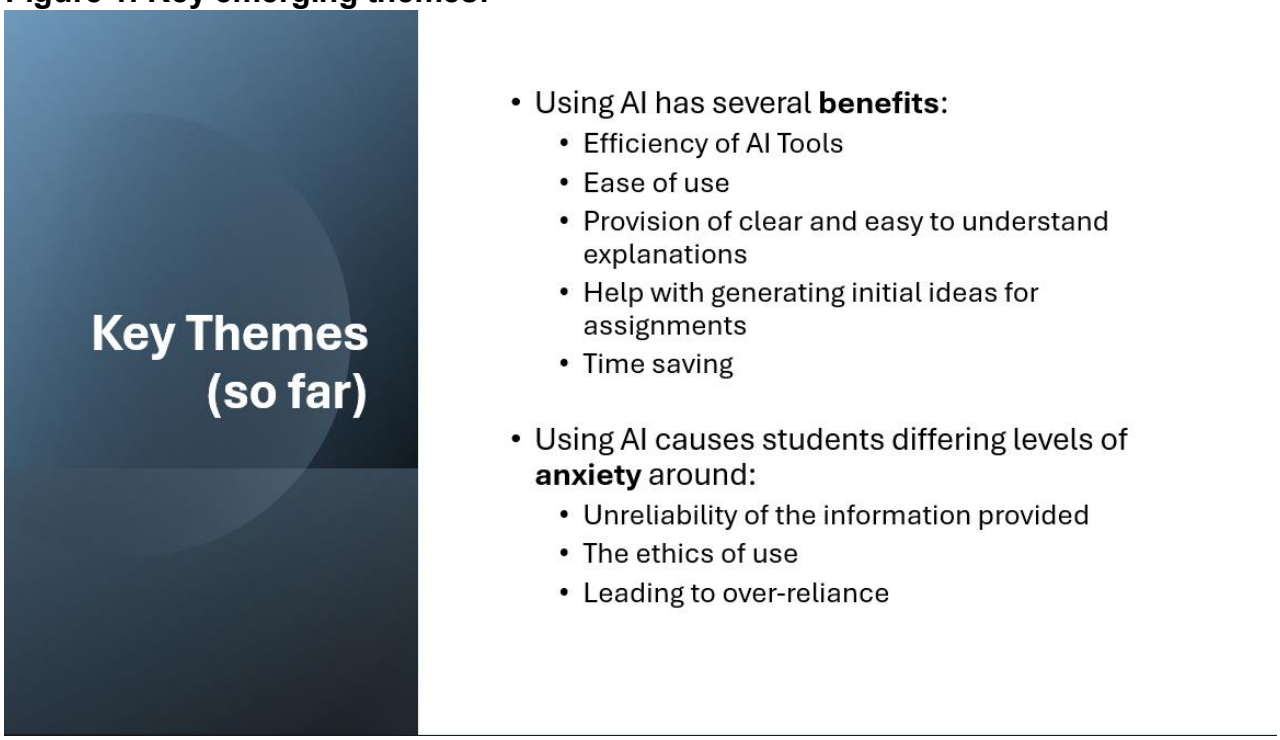
over their academic work, with many indicating that AI had not necessarily improved the quality of their coursework but had instead served as a functional tool.

The presentation also addressed the broader pedagogical and ethical implications of GenAI. It responded directly to themes raised in Mark Carrigan's keynote, particularly the importance of co-creating understanding with students around the utility and limitations of AI. The presenter proposed that the research questions and resulting data could serve as the foundation for pedagogical resources aimed at supporting learning developers and educators in navigating the complexities of GenAI use with students.

A particularly important dimension of the session was its call for deeper engagement with the political economy of AI. The presentation highlighted the need to critically examine the colonial and imperial characteristics of dominant GenAI models, as well as their significant environmental impact – issues that are often overlooked in mainstream discourse. This raises questions about the alignment between institutional commitments to decolonising curricula and promoting education for sustainable development, and the realities of engaging with technologies developed and controlled by large corporations whose practices may conflict with these values.

In discussion, participants placed a strong emphasis on the importance of embedding critical AI literacy into educational practice. This includes not only technical proficiency but also the ability to interrogate the ethical, social, and political dimensions of AI. By foregrounding student voices and promoting collaborative inquiry, the research offers a valuable framework for institutions seeking to support responsible and reflective engagement with emerging technologies.

Figure 1. Key emerging themes.



Next steps and additional questions

This research makes an important contribution to contesting assumptions about students' engagement with AI and calls for further experiential understanding of perceptions and use to inform development and literacy support initiatives for both students and staff. Structured support and clear guidance on ethical use, as well as on potential limitations of AI tools, are all impactful measures that can be taken to provide conditions for greater shared AI literacy within and across institutions.

Authors' reflection

This collaborative project brought together academics from four different institutions across different disciplines, but who all shared an interest in uncovering how students in HE engage in AI, beyond the assumptions and fears that students use AI unethically. What this research revealed was that students, although mostly embracing the use of AI due to its ease of use and efficiency, are very much aware of AI's limitations and most are concerned with over-relying on AI. A paradox was identified by some students, who realised that even though AI might appear to save them time, it actually did not in the long run as they had to check all the information provided by AI to make sure that it was

accurate. Thus, students are generally aware that they should not blindly trust AI output; in most cases, they should rather be critical of it.

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Pauldy Otermans is a Reader (Education) in Psychology at Brunel University of London and a female tech leader in the UK. She is the Director of the Education Hub and Employability Lead for the Faculty. Her research focuses on a variety of topics in the field of teaching and learning but mainly focuses on two areas. The first is using AI in education which encompasses how AI can be embedded within the curriculum and the development of AI literacy. The second focuses on authentic assessments which includes staff and students' perspectives on authentic assessments, and embedding transferable skills development in the curriculum and assessments.

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