Unveiling Higher Education (HE) Students' Experiences Of Using Artificial Intelligence (AI): A Cross-institutional Qualitative Explorative Study

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Session overview

- Explore the concept of Generative AI

- Examine the context of AI in education

- Introduce the aim, rationale and design of the study

- Present some preliminary findings from the study and contextualise them in current research

AI Text Generators

- 'an artificial intelligence (AI) powered chatbot that creates surprisingly intelligent-sounding [and human-like] text in response to user prompts, including homework assignments and exam-style questions' (Stokel-Walker, 2022)

- AI text generators:
  - ChatGPT
  - Copilot
  - Gemini
  - Claude.ai
  - Poe
  - PI

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Context of AI in HE

- HE has **yet to fully embrace** the potential of AI, likely due to lack of funding and a general reticence to take risks or adopt innovations (Wheeler, 2019).

- **Lack of digital literacy** among educators and students also poses a **significant barrier** (Bukoye, O'Dea and Kremantzis, 2024; Mah and Groß, 2024).

- Educators using AI in HE 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).

Rationale for the study

What is the experience of students from UK HE institutions of using AI in their study?

- Tendency to **focus on the negative implications of AI** in learning and teaching, and calls for greater consideration of its strengths (Bates *et al.*, 2020).

- Current research on AI in HE tends to **favour positivist paradigms** (Budhathoki *et al.*, 2024; Zhao *et al.*, 2024).

- Limited research exploring **students' perceptions of using AI** (Thomson *et al.*, 2024).

- **Need for qualitative research** to understand students' subjective experiences of engaging with AI, which offers important insights into its potential impact in enhancing and hindering learning (Thomson *et al.*, 2024).

Methodology of the Study

- Collaboration with Buckinghamshire New University, University of Huddersfield, Glasgow Caledonian University and Brunel University

- Semi-structured interviews have been conducted

- Students came from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds and academic disciplines

- Mixture of both men and women and of home and international students

- Ages: 19 - mid-50s

Key Themes (so far)

- Using AI has several **benefits**:
  - Efficiency of AI Tools
  - Ease of use
  - Provision of clear and easy to understand explanations
  - Help with generating initial ideas for assignments
  - Time saving

- Using AI causes students differing levels of **anxiety** around:
  - Unreliability of the information provided
  - The ethics of use
  - Leading to over-reliance

Efficiency of AI Tools

"It's, you know, everyone want to be their life easy, you know ... And in this a **big amount of information** in our current world, we have a like a **big massive data** actually and information in all disciplines and **we cannot go through all** these and then everyone wants to have like sort code method, you know, the **shortcut way** to reach an end and **have their work done**. "
(DRS, 10 December 2024).

"So when you type on Google and find the related field, it's **going to take a lot of time and effort** to do that. **Using AI is going to be much more efficient**, yes."
(TN, 4 May 2025)

"if you want to put one word in, but you want to see what's available out there, you want to do a **quick search**. It **pops everything up**."
(NF, 10 December 2024)

"if I'm doing an essay and it's on, it's on a very broad topic that I need to obviously research, if I go on Google Scholar, I could be there for maybe like an hour two hours just flicking through ..., but if you were to just use AI to just like **do a quick search** ..., then it could **do it way quicker** and it **could even maybe summarize** that article or summarize that book or whatever."
(AT, 8 May 2025)

Provision of clear and easy to understand explanations

"So people are basically using for like **saving their time** and also have like a **quick understanding** of the thing ... sometime when in classroom like student are struggling to understand the things and **they go to this AI** and then they and they might get like you know in **a more easy way of describing things** or getting things like **knowing in an easier way than in their classroom**."
(DRS, 10 December 2024)

"I use a lot for uni as in in the sense of it **breaks down my assignment brief**. I don't understand or it **clarifies a lot of things**. If I'm not, if I'm unsure ... Literally, if you tell it to **break it down** for you and explain to you like a 10 year old, it will do that. So when it, I feel like it **helps me understand stuff a little bit better**."
(AA, 9 May 2025)

"I think it's **the quickness and the ease of access**. I think it's **the clarity of the information**, the way that's laid out. I like to see bits of information in bullet points, so it always seems to generate small amounts of information really specifically, **very clearly** and you can just work through it, and take what you find useful and then build on that yourself "
(MC, 16 December 2024)

Ease of Use

"It's **quick, it's easy**. You can essentially get it to do what you want it to do."
(TA, 7 April 2025)

"You can just use it like you are chatting with your friend. You can chat and get your things done. It's **quite easy and handy**."
(DW, 25 March 2025)

"So I would say **using ChatGPT is easy** because it's the most used AI tool maybe one of the most used and it doesn't need like you can just type anything you want to ask ChatGPT and it will find it for you."
(TN, 4 May 2025)

"I: And how easy or difficult have you found using AI?

BG: **Really easy**. I'm not particularly a Luddite in it, but I'm not an IT expert either. But no, it's been **really easy** and you can't particularly break it. So just play with it. And I like trying to see how it will do things so yeah.

I: Why do you think you found it so easy?

BG: I think it's **quite self-explanatory**. I don't think they're particularly hard to learn. I mean, some of them like even Research Rabbit has less functionality than even Word Microsoft Word you know. So, it's not particularly hard to understand how to do. It's **quite easy**. It's **step by step**. So, and I haven't bothered reading manuals or anything like that. I've just got in played with it. So yeah, if I can do it, I'm sure others can."

(BG, 3 December 2024)

Help with generating initial ideas for assignments

"So, it gives me **some ideas of what to write**. For example, if I have a lab report or an assignment from one of my modules, I ask AI to **break it down** for me into smaller, digestible bites so I can understand it. Explain it to me like I'm five years old, basically."
(MAC, 6 March 2025)

"Basically **they [AI tools] will give me idea** to do this. Then once I got the idea then I write up then I say can you rewrite that for me or rephrase that. You know, so will be all is my work but still **his typing and his idea**."
(SA, 17 January 2025)

"And also the ones that are essays for example, **I use AI to generate some ideas** of which theories I can include in my essay if it is relevant to the topic."
(TZ, 12 March 2025).

"When I study, I use it as a source that I can seek information and when I need **some kind of idea** from something new that I haven't ever read about, I will go to see it on the AI first to know what the concept, **what the idea** and what the people are talking about that first. And then, when I have something more specific in my mind, I can go to take a look on the journal or article or from the textbook...I want to just know **the main points of the information** that I'm thinking about, so AI is going to help me, **my first check** first."

(TN, 4 May 2025)

AI is Time Saving?

"It's going to benefit us by giving us more motivation to learn and understand things, as we **can get answers in seconds**. **Time is money**, and we need to save time to do our work."
(DA, 6 December 2024)

"I think it has quite good benefits because, even though like I said, we are quite a lazy generation, I generally think that with everything that's going on in life, we kind of have less time to do things. So I think it's actually useful when **we generally don't have time and we generally need that quick answer**. So yeah."
(TA, 7 April 2025)

"And that **just saving time**. I think that's one of the biggest things is **the saving time** on searching and yeah, gathering that information.... So I can write about that area or just checking that there's no previous or newer research and just doing that at a touch of a button to save so much time as well so."
(BG, 3 December 2024)

"I think **it has saved me some time**, although has it really because then I've kind of gone round and round in circles trying to work out how to use it. You know, some of the platforms are tricky to use and **I spent a lot of time** just kind of going round down rabbit holes and rounding circles where maybe it would have been easier to have not used it in the first place."

(DC, 4 December 2024)

Contextualising the findings in the literature

- Recent qualitative research has found that students perceived ChaptGPT as **useful in scaffolding their understanding** in the same way a lecturer would (Wardat *et al.*, 2023).

- Students' attitudes toward AI tend to be **positive**, as it provides them **help with generating ideas** as a starting point (Chan and Hu, 2023; Thomson *et al.*, 2024).

- **Saving time and efficiency** are also highlighted by students in other studies as significant benefits of using AI tools (Lai *et al.*, 2024; Thomson *et al.*, 2024; Otermans, Roberts and Baines, 2025).

Unreliability of the information provided

"I know that the **information from the AI is not always correct**, and we have to find our own way to rethink about that or maybe find and correct the information...We have to justify it."
(TN, 4 May 2025)

"Yeah, yeah, I think you have to be really careful with how you use it because all the information that you get **is not accurate** all the time that **I'm very cautious** with it because sometimes I'll put information in there but I know I would have to **double check** that information...one thing I would say about AI is that even though it's really good, you always **need a human to fact check** it because **it's not reliable**."
(SM, 28 February 2025).

"*J:* And would you say, do you see it as being reliable?

SA: No, no. Like let's say 70-80%. You always **not give you the good answe**r and you need to if that's very important things you need to repeat at different AI. **Don't rely on this one**...**I don't trust**; I don't trust that much for important things."

(SA, 17 January 2025)

The ethics of use

"**I don't give my assignments to AI**. I don't give my assignments to ChatGPT … Because if I do that, and if someone else is also putting theirs…it may reference my assignment and give it to them … If someone is **too lazy**, he'll just put his assignment over there and get the sample done, and then he'll use the human eyes to humanise it so that **AI doesn't get caught**. That's **the laziest approach**, if someone is taking."
(DW, 25 March 2025)

"[…] we're just not allowed to copy and paste and that's completely fair … To be fair, I feel like everyone should be allowed to use AI how they want to use it, but I think it's just **the plagiarism of it that's wrong**."
(SM, 28 February 2025).

"Yeah. So **I would never put my writing into AI**, I am still **really unsure**, I don't really want to feed it my work, I don't want it to be open to be copied or to be used in some way, and I'm really aware of like **plagiarism** and **breaking rules**. I don't like to break rules and, at the moment, the university that I go to has got really wishy washy policies around AI and what you can and can't use. So although my peers, they're all much younger than me, although I know that they're using it, **I don't want to be caught out**. I don't want to think **I've done something wrong**. I want this piece of work to be my piece of work **and I want to be proud of it**. I don't want somebody to **cast any sort of shadow of doubt that I've used AI** to generate it or write it or, you know, in some way I do some cheating or wrong-doing to **sort of damage that credibility of it**."

(MC, 16 December 2024)

Leading to over-reliance

"I feel like it's going to actually **decrease**, like the **intelligence** of students. I feel like students are going to **rely heavily on AI**, that they're not even memorising information themselves, and that they're just using that **to do their work for them**. Yeah, I think **AI is very dangerous** for students in the future."
(SM, 28 February 2025).

"I feel good because it's brilliant and **quick** but on the other hand **you can rely on it too much**. It took me a while to **find a balance**."
(MAC, 6 March 2025)

"if people start to completely **blindly rely** on ChatGPT then it will be a problem for all like people will say OK ChatGPT decide this… they're not going to… check whether it is true or not true."
(NA, 20 November 2024)

"I I think it's not a good thing at all to be **too reliant** … So I think that's why I say like it should be a tool. You **can't use it to replace**, it's artificial intelligence, like you can't use it to replace **human intelligence and creativity**."
(AT, 8 May 2025)
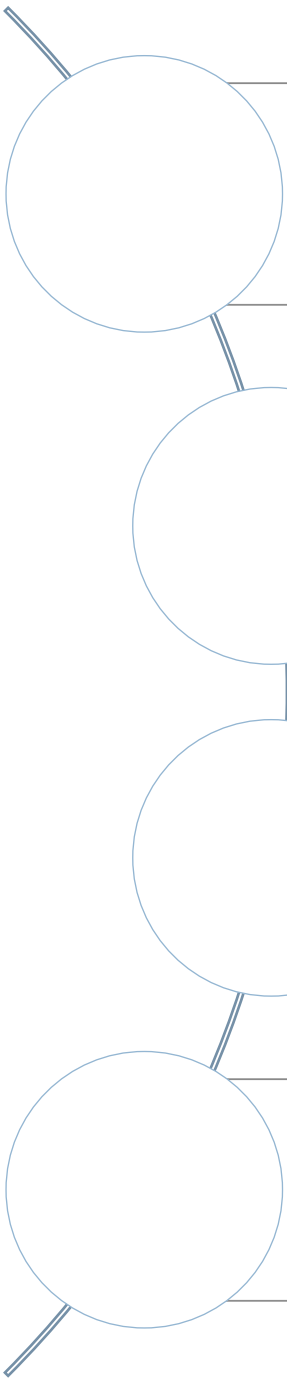
Contextualising the findings in the literature

- Ethical concerns around students' use of AI, particularly relating to **plagiarism**, have been raised (Steponenaite and Barakat, 2023); however, it appears that students share the same concerns, but in more nuanced ways, e.g. fearing plagiarism accusations due to lack of clarity on institutional guidelines (Thomson *et al.*, 2024).

- Students have also raised concerns regarding the **reliability of AI**, which may impact on their perceived usefulness (Ayanwale and Ndlovu, 2024; Malik *et al.,* 2023).

- **Over-reliance on AI tools** is also a concern expressed by students (Malik *et al.,* 2023; Thomson *et al.*, 2024), as it may lead to laziness and even addiction (Thomson *et al.*, 2024).

Concluding remarks

- Most students engaging with AI tools in their studies were **critical** of the information provided by AI.

- Participants stated that they mostly used AI only as a starting point to **generate ideas**.

- Efficiency and ease of use made AI appealing but they were **anxious** about accusations of plagiarism.

- **A paradox:** Even though most students viewed AI as time saving, giving them access to large amounts of information, they still needed to check outputs for accuracy, which, it could be argued, was just as time consuming as researching through traditional means.

Initial Recommendations for Practice

Lecturers should not assume that students use AI for cheating; most students are very much aware of the limitations of AI.

Universities need to provide clearer guidance on how students should engage with AI in their studies.

Students are keen on being taught how to use AI ethically and appropriately in their studies.

Increasing AI literacy influences AI receptivity (Tully, Longoni and Appel, 2025); rather than limiting the use of AI, increasing AI literacy among students could improve awareness of its potential and limitations, rather than it being deemed a magical resource.

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