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No Clear Line in the Sand: Student Perceptions of Ethical and Practical uses of Generative AI

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Abstract
The discourse surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education has reached a critical juncture, often framed as a crisis. This paper, co-authored with undergraduate social science students, explores the nuanced and evolving role of generative AI (GenAI) in academic settings. Through a focus group discussion, we examine how students engage with GenAI as a means to enhance learning and augment cognitive practices, structure assignments, and managing time constraints. Our findings challenge dominant narratives that view AI use as binary—either wholly unacceptable or entirely embraced—highlighting instead a spectrum of engagement shaped by ethical considerations, institutional uncertainty, and evolving student competencies. Students express anxieties about AI detection, fairness, and broader socio-economic concerns, yet also demonstrate a pragmatic approach to integrating GenAI into their studies. This paper argues for a pedagogical shift: rather than positioning GenAI as an external threat, we suggest universities incorporate structured, transparent AI literacy into curricula, fostering informed and ethical usage. Our recommendations emphasise student collaboration to shape policy-making, create discipline-specific AI guidelines, and the integration of GenAI as a skill development tool.

Keywords
Artificial intelligence, GenAI, pedagogy, social science teaching

Introduction

Current discourse regarding the arrival and expansion of AI in higher education has reached a crescendo framed in a rhetoric of crisis (*Inside Higher Education* 18/4/2023; *Guardian* 15/12/2024; Song, 2024). Roe (2024) refers to the sudden foregrounding and visibility of what had pre-2020 been useful but hidden interactions as the 'AI moment'. For those of us who have sat through the many meetings devising strategies to AI-proof assignments or conversely building appropriate GenAI use into teaching and learning, it is hard not to avoid the existential angst provoked by such rapid developments in technologies. But as the *Times Higher Education* supplement noted "Institutions 'got it wrong' by putting all the attention on assessment when large language models first launched" (Times Higher Education 16/4/2024) and it is hard not to see that we have become somewhat obsessed by issues of 'cheating' (Coldwell, 2024), detection of 'cheating', and propriety of knowledge at the expense of the affordances of GenAI as a pedagogical tool.

This paper draws upon a collaborative focus group on GenAI and its use in universities where we drew together first-, second- and third-year social science undergraduate students from Bournemouth University (BU). The Social Science department at Bournemouth University has BA's in Criminology, Sociology and Social Anthropology in various combinations and the make-up of the focus group did not seek to differentiate between Anthropology and the wider social sciences as the degree programmes and units within them are intertwined with anthropological units appearing as core units on non-anthropology degrees, and interdisciplinary sociological and criminological units appearing as optional units for anthropologists. Students from across these programmes are co-authors to this paper reflecting both the fact that this paper would not exist without them, but also the need to incorporate student voices as we forge new paths through these complex issues. From a teaching perspective, these students' insights were revelatory. To be transparent, in the two hours in which we

talked - Weston and Djohari (the teaching staff involved) - had their minds changed. We had 'No AI permitted on this assignment' as the default setting on our assessed work, but we no longer see this as a tenable position for reasons discussed in this paper. There is certainly space for AI to be excluded from many assignments, but the idea that it could or should remain a default position is where we have been turned around. That is not to say we were entirely AI sceptical prior to this. We drew together the panel on 'Anthropological knowledge production in the era of AIs and fast evolving technologies' at the Royal Anthropological Institute's 2024 *Anthropology and Education* conference precisely because of an AI-agnostic position where we sought answers to questions that many in anthropology and across higher education are asking. The papers presented in this edited collection reflect the diverse positions this panel produced but also illustrate the lack of easy answers. In the face of a lack of easy answers our default position was to discourage AI use. This focus group with students made our previous position seem stubborn and untenable.

For greater context it is worth pausing to give a sense of the approach to GenAI in which these students are entangled. BU uses Turnitin for most assignment submissions, but we do not currently use Turnitin's AI checking tool due (at least in part) to the potential for false positives that Turnitin have themselves recognised (Turnitin, 2025). Drawing on wider BU guidelines social science modules leads can choose between four positions relating to AI. These are:

> **No Generative AI**
> The assignment must be completed entirely without generative AI assistance. Generative AI must not be used at any point during the assessment.
>
> **Generative AI assisted idea generation and structuring**
> Generative AI can be used for summarising, creating structures and generating ideas for content. No generative AI content is allowed in the final submission.
>
> **Generative AI task completion**
> Generative AI can be used to complete specified elements of the coursework as detailed below. Any generative AI content must be acknowledged. Any elements not specified must be completed without the use of generative AI.
>
> **Full Generative AI**
> You may use generative AI throughout the assessment to support your own work. You do not need to acknowledge which content is generative AI-generated.

Having chosen one of these approaches, staff can explain any nuances within these positions to make limits clearer if needed. These positions are included in course documents and discussed in lectures and seminars to make sure these rules are clear. AI use that falls outside these guidelines can be treated as an academic offence. However, for a minor infraction, teaching staff are more likely to deal with resulting issues regarding how it impacts the students meeting the Independent Learning Outcomes of the module without recourse to formal procedures. This is the current framework in which the students find themselves, but it has changed since last year and will doubtlessly be refined before next year's teaching too. This is very much a work in progress and staff and students must adapt continuously.

The experiences described come from the student authors' own experiences and observations relating to peer use of AI. We came to this project with a spirit of openness and collaboration that led to students feeling free to share without fear of sanction with a reassurance that anything shared that could be perceived as breaking our university's rules or crossing into ethically problematic areas would be appropriately obfuscated or omitted. We agreed at the beginning and end of the discussion that the best path was to avoid attributing any comment to any student. As such we have not only avoided attributing quotes or points to named students, but we also decided not to give pseudonymised names or numbers that might be superimposed correctly or incorrectly onto any student contributor. As a result, the student's voices are central to most of the insight here, and while the teaching staff (Weston and Djohari) took the lead in writing this up, the paper was then shared and amended in line with student feedback.

It is important to stress that the students involved were all committed students with regular seminar and lecture attendance, and they were invited because they are regular contributors in class and participate in extracurricular activities within the department. While this may be interpreted as a limitation in terms of scope of participants,

we believe their candid discussion of GenAI use in their own work and those of their peers, is itself eye opening to the creativity and extent of GenAI use among students.

Anxieties and Injustices

In retrospect, it was inevitable that the grey space that has emerged around GenAI use and the accompanying punitive university discourse that surrounds it would fuel student anxieties. Students spoke of themselves and their peers worrying over not knowing how AI-checking software is used to monitor their work and what it specifically looks for. Even if they had not used GenAI to write an essay, anxiety presented as a fear that their work might still have the markers that would flag it as GenAI. Such fears reflect an acknowledgement of the fallibility of AI, but also a lack of understanding of how work is checked for AI. The latter is not helped by educators giving vague explanations and/or deliberate obfuscation in order to maintain the spectre of a functional checking system to keep students 'honest'. This is despite the very real prospect of false positives in judging academic offences using AI (see Giray, 2024).

The anxieties over false detection is further compounded by the perceived injustices caused by uneven detection. Students raised concerns of fairness where some students 'get away' with unambiguous academic offences using AI, while others get penalised for more ambiguous use. For example, a student noted:

> "I find it really frustrating and unfair that some of my friends in my course use AI in their essays because I never have for content and so when I see my peers getting a higher grade for work they didn't complete independently, it feels unfair and demotivating."

But there is a large gap between this obviously valid concern about AI use and fairness and the more nuanced positions they personally adopt regarding what they consider acceptable, or much less problematic use of GenAI. There was a strong feeling among the students during the focus group that there is a widespread naivety among lecturers regarding the uses of AI by students. Notably, that lecturers seemed to adopt an all or nothing cheating/not cheating binary about AI use and assume that GenAI is used by students to generate an entire essay. Some students do use it this way – we know this, and students know this – but such students are not the norm. It was also clear through the conversation with first-, second- and third-year students that there was refinement in the ways in which competency in GenAI use grew year on year – from tentative first year use, through to more adept third year applications. This is a skillset they are developing in parallel to their formal academic studies with little to no input from teaching staff. Students did note occasional units where some limited AI use was encouraged, but they were exceptions rather than norms. Given that many students are going through these iterative steps on the path to AI competency, with or without the help of teaching staff, it seems quite rational to mirror this through scaffolded skills-based learning.

Moral binaries seem ill fitting here – the genie is out of the bottle. The sophisticated and nuanced use of ChatGPT and similar tools defies oversimplistic ideas that all or most GenAI use is contrary to good or productive academia. Given the creative and adept student use of GenAI, the assumptions that AI use runs contrary to knowledge acquisition seems blinkered. Students do appreciate that there is a dark side to AI use and there are some unambiguous academic offences that are sneaking through undetected ("I know someone who used AI for an assignment, and they've been absolutely fine"), but for most this is not what drives their moral choices. Concerns about AI cluster around non-academic issues, concerns that "ChatGPT has negative effect on the environment" (see Bertholet, 2024), that it stifles and steals from creative industries (Chesterman, 2024) and that more generally it will take away jobs ("I know someone studying cybersecurity. Is that job even going to be around in the future? It raises a load of questions over what jobs are going to be eradicated by AI").

In a world where some students' first encounter with a university can be a chat-bot popping up on our websites, and with AI now embedded in Google searchers or in MS Word offering helpful suggestions, there is also frustration about the annoying over-reliance on AI ("It's a bit like companies have had this annoying child to try and help you, but if anything it just makes it worse. Because this AI is still being figured out"). It is a tool – but one with drawbacks and unintended consequences in many shapes and sizes. Such complexities lend themselves to a careful yet informed approach when attempting to draw lines in the sand.

How AI is Currently Used: GenAI as cognitive augmentation

Contrary to the ubiquitous concern that the primary application of GenAI by students is to 'write essays' as a form of 'cheating', we found that AI was actually used to augment cognitive skills: to manage data more effectively, improve performance in class and essays writing, extend comprehension, and more efficiently manage time pressures. That is not to say that academic offences do not exist, the student contributors and lecturers were all aware of incidents of students engaging in unambiguously anti-academic use of ChatGPT to write reports with little input from the student themselves. As one student noted "I think also that there's a naivety among some lecturers that people used to say, "write me an essay" but people don't use it for that". Both the lecturers who see this as the central use of AI and the students who study without learning are seen as naïve. Instead, the adoption of a more pragmatic broad middle ground of use is the norm, where students utilise GenAI and have to navigate and self-impose their own limits:

> I think you have to use AI really, really carefully as a student and only to a certain extent, *like* with structure *like* with an idea, but don't then just copy the idea. But if you get the idea, that's fine, but then go find the references, go find the information and do it yourself. You can use it to point you in the right direction.

There is a broad array of uses students are currently playing with. These are the applications the students felt were useful and appropriate ways to improve their essays, study methods and class performance:

1. Structure for written work

Developing structures for written work was one of the most common uses of GenAI among the students. This is used to address and develop perceived skills deficits: "I've used it to help structure essays, not write them. How do I structure this with my list of points? You get the formatting from ChatGPT to figure out how to actually write academically". Assistance with structuring is particularly useful for students who struggle with transferring thought and ideas to paper. "I will just keep going on and on just like working myself in a circle because I have all these ideas, but I don't know how to put them down". In this case GenAI is adopted to facilitate making the mental leap from ideas to a plan.

2. Generating and developing ideas for written work

GenAI was also used for generating initial ideas for assignments that could be used for inspiration and to spark engagement. But it was also used once students had come up with their own ideas, by asking GenAI for suggestions on how a topic could be further expanded. The former, generating ideas, helped students start thinking their way into a topic. The latter helped them identify gaps, build additional layers of depth, or develop interesting tangents that could be used to deepen their topical engagement in their assignments. In this way GenAI fulfilled a role as a tutorial for bouncing ideas and getting suggestions to stretch their learning (see for example Hornbeck, 2025, this issue).

> Especially with something like the dissertation. […] I had ideas but no clue what to do with them. So, I gave it [ChatGPT] my ideas and read up on some ideas it gave me. Some of these ideas I thought 'that's useless' or 'that's got a bit of leg' and then changed it based on the reading. So, it's like a foundation, almost.

3. Simplifying and defining texts/words or essay questions.

This is probably the most straightforward application of GenAI used regularly by students. Students use it to breakdown essay questions and help them better understand key words and concepts. What might have once been done through a dictionary now is a click away, and since Google added AI results to web searches (Kumar 2024) it is increasingly hard to avoid AI stepping in to help us understand new terms.

> I've used it to simplify ideas – getting it to talk to me like I'm five. That's how it helps. Because if you can just describe it on basic level to me, then I'm able to go off and go 'OK, so that also connects to this topic and this topic.

4. Managing time constraints.

Many students are time poor, often juggling multiple expectations from social to club/society responsibilities, home life, and work. Inevitably there are occasions when tasks such as seminar readings don't get done in time. In this context, GenAI can be used to summarise seminar reading prior to the session so students attend with a basic grasp rather than attending with nothing. Speed is the key benefit here - "Yeah, I've used it to quickly get the points from a reading". This approach is seen as 'better than nothing' and at least allows students to engage

meaningfully in class discussions, even if with a less sound base then they would have had with a proper read. It can be used both to summarise readings or to find ideas for pre-raised talking points for seminars.

> If there's a reading that I got set and I've had no time to do it. I just put the question in and the link to the book. I rarely ever do that, but it came up with an answer and I wouldn't do it all the time, but with times like that it's quite useful, especially if it's a really long bit of reading.

From a teaching perspective, there is a dilemma here, as it is clearly better to read and properly engage with reflections on academic texts to develop study skills. Yet, there is also a value in being able to participate in seminar discussion, to listen and engage with peers and to extract what information they can in the time available. As seminar tutors, while it is not ideal, we do recognise how GenAI use in this way can be a positive response to occasional time constraints.

5. Conforming to word counts.

Writing to a word count is a frustration we all feel as academics and is a skill that comes with practice and much revising of documents. Students, many of whom will still be learning and refining these skills, use GenAI on finished drafts to identify repetitions and areas that could be cut, and also areas that could be expanded or added to.

> "I sometimes go under the word count, so I ask, 'how can I expand on this?' This is a great because it gives me points that I haven't considered before and then I obviously go on to do the research from that."

> "I have only ever used AI to cut down on the number of words I have written because I always go over word count. For anything else I am too scared to use it because I know of others who have had tough sanctions after being caught."

6. Grammar and language checks.

Academic writing is distinctive in style, being more formal and precise in language use. Students commonly use GenAI to develop an academic tone. When students arrive at university, they come from a breadth of educational backgrounds. Some require significant help to catch up with mid-pack, or to further their abilities to get closer to the front of the pack. This can be due to the varied standards of the education they receive, any additional learning support needs, or, as in the case of mature students, returning to education after some time out – but all lead to an unequal playing field. Developing an academic writing style is a common fear, particularly in the early stages of a degree. Alongside annotated feedback on essays from academic staff, students also ask AI for guidance, as a thesaurus to suggest alternative words, checking for grammar and readability. This can be interpreted as academic 'stabilisers', supporting students until they get their balance, ideally use that should diminish progressively as academic skills develop. If this is understood by academic staff it can be used to help develop, rather than replace these skills, and helps students learn how to adapt to an academic writing style.

7. Expanding reading comprehension.

The use of GenAI to summarise texts can be thought of as a tool to augment cognition when used to expand and build on initial understanding. Reading a text first to gather the main points and then getting AI to summarise is a way of identifying the points that might have been missed from the first reading, giving further explanations that deepen the students understanding of the text. This was particularly useful to a student with additional learning needs, and was developed into a personal strategy to support their own academic learning.

> "As I'm dyslexic, I do the reading, but I don't take anything in. So then if you say to it 'what's the key points of this article' it will bring up different things you didn't read or skimmed over."

Of all the examples, this demonstrates most clearly how students learn to adapt AI to their individual needs in order to enhance their academic engagement.

8. Bypassing mundane tasks.

We are often obliged to fulfil tick box exercises that appear to be a waste of our time. One student author noted they had used GenAI that morning for a repeating mandatory training session that required a lot of reading. They fed the material in and it told them which multiple choice boxes to tick. They recognised that this was actually a morally greyer area than other uses they put AI to, but against a backdrop of increased need for students to work alongside their study (Lessky & Unger, 2023) using such tools to find respite from mundane and repetitive tasks seems inevitable.

Morality and Justifications: What is Appropriate GenAI Use?

Some of the most interesting parts of our discussion were the obvious moral engagement students applied while making decisions about what counted as appropriate use of GenAI. As with many universities, the guidance at our institution is best understood as 'reactive', still in search of a coherent position with solutions spanning from 'university-wide' to 'assignment specific'. This bricolage of rules and advice leads to muddy waters where outside of specific assignments students have to make decisions themselves not only about what is allowed or forbidden, but also about what is morally right and wrong, and what helps them with their education and what undermines it. Our university policy gives lecturers the discretion to allow 'limited AI use', but this is ill defined. What counts as too much AI use? If educators cannot anticipate all the myriad of available uses, then these would inevitably fall outside of existing guidance. In the absence of a clear line in the sand, students are forced to find their own. The line that these students chose seems to be most readily summarised as "use it *but* make it your own".

There is a tension between generative AI giving an unfair advantage versus being able to help offer deeper learning. What is clear is that students *will* use it and given this they also need to know *how* to use it. They want more guidance on GenAI and they want clearer lines in the sand. They note that some courses, such as methods courses using lines of code, actively encourage them use AI to check that code. This was given as an example of clear delineation and guidance on appropriate use. It was also clear that as students progressed in their studies, they became more sophisticated in GenAI use. If early undergraduate use is fraught with anxiety and hesitancy, by the third-year students have incorporated it to assist with their studies. As educators we need to consider whether it is much better for us to take the lead from the beginning, by introducing all students to the most appropriate ways to use GenAI to assist them with their learning. This not only evens out the playing field but can do much to ease anxieties, changing the narrative to one of appropriate pathways to skill development. We have no doubt that there will be educators reading this decrying the loss of academic skills, but the reality across many universities is that the level of feedback, support and time both educators and students have to cultivate these skills is just not available due to rising cohort sizes, increased workloads and students with work/study balances skewed towards work, making it harder for them to seek one-to-one support in office hours. GenAI can help fill this void for more personalised learning support. With or without our input – that is how students are using it already.

This approach is not without bones of contention for students themselves. There remains a concern on the very *appropriateness* of GenAI. Some students take a moral stance to actively avoid using GenAI because of its threat to creative industries or environmental impact. AI use is a moral position. Concern was voiced on how AI learns and the veracity of the answers it gives and the impact it has on the environment. This broader distrust and dislike of AI and the 'tech-bros' behind it can make students strongly opposed to its widespread use. This is something that also needs to be considered when thinking about how universities move to embrace AI.

> "One thing that makes me anti-AI is how it draws from actual artists and uses that. Art needs references, but because there's also so much AI currently out there, it is now breeding with itself…making AI soup. Another reason is some of my friends do game design or are currently doing the game design degree and they don't like the idea of their own art being used, and someone was just typing a prompt and then benefiting from their work essentially."

One student was also moved to abstain from AI by the following heartfelt plea by a lecturer:

> "She said 'Please don't use AI for this – I would rather read your work than AI's work, even if it's bad', she said. 'I don't mind. Just submit it. And I would rather it be your own work and I can actually mark what you think rather than what the AI is saying you should think'."

Choosing those moments where we want students work or ideas without them being passed through an AI filter can still work if the rationale is made clear. We need to be active participants in these processes rather than sitting back and letting students do all the moral leg work in this brave new world of AI-assisted learning. "Systematising education provides a uniformity (linguistically, semiotically, and technologically) that foregrounds the efficiency of future interactions, structuring education so that we first learn how to learn" (De Ruiter et al., 2011, p.562). In a world where we can anticipate an adept use of AI giving graduates a competitive advantage in many workplaces, learning how to learn ought to now include AI as we move towards increasingly augmented cognition (Stanney et al., 2009).

Suggestions for the Future

As part our discussion we identified a number of suggestions for educators to consider going forward.

1. **Educators need to recognise that AI use can be diverse. It's not just about "writing essays".**

2. Students need to be properly consulted when drawing up guidelines on GenAI use. Educators do not necessarily have a full grasp on current GenAI use or what students find particularly helpful. By including students in the process, the most productive uses will be shared.

3. Educators need to give more nuanced guidance to help students learn how to use GenAI to develop academic skills rather than replace them. If we want to mirror existing AI use among students, it is worth considering a year-by-year incremental approach to introducing and refining AI competencies.

4. A firm policy is less confusing, but it needs to be specific to each faculty because acceptable usage will vary greatly depending on academic disciplines.

5. Educators need to be clearer on what 'limited AI use' is – and what is too much use? If academics are not clear, how can we expect students to be? Give the Do's and Don'ts'.

6. Educators should consider introducing AI use early on in year 1 as part of the curriculum, i.e., 'learning *with* GenAI', covering what and how to use it, positives and negatives of use, and reflective, conscious use of GenAI. This should also introduce wider concerns such as environmental concerns, creative theft as part of the background to AI.

7. Educators should consider the use of a GenAI checklist for all submissions that is framed through a pedagogic (rather than punitive) lens. Students should feel comfortable showing how and what they used GenAI for (i.e. structure, word, grammar, idea generation, expansion etc) with the aim that as they progress through their courses, they can track their progress in relying on it less and less. Educators could also use the checklists as a pedagogic tool, to identify where GenAI is being used most, and target skill development to those areas.

8. AI needs to be considered as part of pedagogical approach and not as an external 'threat'.

By way of a concluding thought, we feel it is worth bearing in mind Eaton's (2023) argument that we are entering a 'post-plagiarism' world where people are "compelled to grapple with questions about ethics and integrity for a socially just world at a time when advanced technology cannot be unbundled from education or everyday life" (p.1). In this projected near future world where hybrid human/AI work is increasingly likely to become normalised we must ask the question 'Are we preparing our students for the world we know/have known or the world they will need to navigate in the future?' If most students are ahead of most lecturers in terms of an AI-adoptive curve it feels more rational that university teaching staff should make this part of our pedagogical practice. There can, and should, be spaces where writing, thoughts and creativity are arrived at without help from GenAI, but these are the skills we already know and are in *our* comfort zones. Sticking solely to that comfort zone feels increasingly like trying to stand still while the world spins around us. When talking to students about their ethical lines they had drawn in the metaphorical AI sand, it became abundantly clear that the lines they are already drawing can help us navigate this new terrain. It took two hours for five students to persuade two lecturers to change their academic practice. Open and frank discussions that involve all those impacted by our pedagogical choices seems like the sensible means to finding our way(s).

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