INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION

IHE Student Advisory Board: AI Project Report

Student use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education

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Contents

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a student-led focus group examining how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is currently used by students in higher education, alongside the ethical, educational and regulatory considerations arising from its use. The discussion forms part of the IHE Student Advisory Board (SAB) AI project, which aims to build a clearer evidence base of student experience and inform sector-wide dialogue with policymakers and regulators.

The findings indicate that AI is already embedded in students' academic practices, most commonly supporting research, planning and written work. Students recognise its capacity to improve efficiency and accessibility, particularly for those with additional learning needs. However, its rapid adoption has outpaced institutional response, resulting in uneven guidance and persistent uncertainty around acceptable use. Three overarching conclusions emerge. First, institutional approaches to AI remain fragmented, with variation both within and across providers. Second, while AI can enhance inclusion, it may also introduce new inequalities linked to access, confidence and technical understanding. Third, students are not resistant to AI but are seeking clearer frameworks that enable responsible and effective use.

The most significant priorities identified through the discussion are the need for transparent and consistent guidance, the integration of AI literacy into curricula, and a reassessment of current approaches to assessment in an AI-enabled environment.

Background and context

AI is rapidly reshaping higher education, with implications for teaching, assessment and employability. In response, the IHE SAB initiated a project in 2026 to better understand how students are engaging with AI and to ensure that policy responses are grounded in lived student experience.

The project aims to capture how students are using AI tools, explore their views on associated opportunities and ethical challenges, and identify gaps in institutional provision. It also seeks to inform recommendations for providers and contribute to sector-wide dialogue with bodies such as the Office for Students (OfS).

This focus group forms a central component of that work, offering detailed qualitative insight into students' experiences across different disciplines and institutions.

Methodology

The report draws on a structured focus group discussion involving SAB members and invited facilitators. The session was facilitated to encourage open, reflective and anonymised contributions, with prompts covering AI usage, ethical considerations, fairness, authenticity and institutional responsibilities.

Participants were asked to describe their own experiences rather than general perceptions, enabling the discussion to focus on lived realities. Contributions were captured through a live transcript and subsequently analysed to identify recurring themes, areas of consensus and points of divergence.

While the focus group provided rich qualitative data, there are limitations. The sample size was relatively small. Contributions were self-reported and varied in depth depending on participant confidence. Additionally, institutional contexts differed significantly, which influences how students experience AI and its governance.

Key findings and themes

AI as a support tool for academic work

The most consistent finding across the discussion is that students primarily use AI as a support tool rather than a substitute for learning. Its value lies in improving efficiency, helping to organise tasks and facilitating access to information.

Students described using AI to identify sources, summarise content, structure assignments and refine written work. One participant characterised it as functioning like "a senior clerk" that can "fetch and carry" relevant materials, enabling the student to focus on analysis and writing.

Similarly, others emphasised its role in breaking down complex tasks and supporting time management. A participant noted that AI could "create plans" and help organise research into manageable steps, particularly for those who struggle with structuring their work.

This emphasis on efficiency suggests that AI is not replacing academic effort but reshaping how that effort is distributed. Routine and time-consuming tasks are increasingly delegated to AI, allowing students to concentrate on higher-order skills.

The implication for higher education is that AI is already embedded in study practices. Rather than attempting to restrict this use, institutions need to guide it effectively to ensure it supports, rather than replaces, meaningful learning.

Accessibility and emerging inequalities

Participants highlighted significant benefits of AI for accessibility, particularly for neurodivergent students and those facing language barriers. AI was described as helping to maintain focus, reduce cognitive overload and support comprehension.

Several students emphasised that AI can prevent them from becoming overwhelmed during research, allowing them to avoid "rabbit holes" and stay focused on relevant material. This function was seen as particularly valuable for students with ADHD or similar learning differences.

However, while AI can enhance inclusion, there was also strong concern about new forms of inequality. Access to paid tools was identified as a potential dividing line between students. One participant reflected that there is "a paywall... [which] might close the playing field, but it doesn't level it."

Differences in confidence and skill using AI also contribute to uneven outcomes. Students who understand how to use AI effectively may gain significant advantages over those who do not.

These findings suggest that while AI has the potential to be an equalising force, it may also exacerbate existing disparities unless institutions actively intervene to provide equitable access and training.

Inconsistent and unclear policies

A dominant and recurring theme throughout the discussion was the lack of clarity and consistency in institutional policies governing AI use. Students reported a wide spectrum of experiences, ranging from highly detailed guidance to minimal or contradictory instructions.

In some cases, requirements were limited to declaring AI use without clarity on how this would influence assessment. In others, expectations differed between modules or lecturers, leaving students uncertain about what is permitted in practice.

This lack of clarity is compounded by differences in how AI is defined. While some institutions provide detailed definitions and examples, others offer little guidance, leaving students unsure about what constitutes acceptable use.

The result is a fragmented landscape in which students are required to navigate expectations independently. This not only creates confusion but also undermines confidence in institutional processes. Greater alignment and transparency would help to establish shared understanding and reduce ambiguity.

Fairness, assessment and trust

Closely linked to policy issues are concerns about fairness in assessment. Students expressed strong anxieties about whether work produced with AI is judged on the same basis as work completed independently.

One participant questioned whether it is fair that AI-assisted work is "marked the same as me, who's spent months doing something," highlighting a perceived imbalance in effort and output.

Concerns were also raised about the reliability of AI detection tools. Participants noted that current systems do not consistently identify AI-generated content and may produce false positives. One student described being questioned about AI use because their natural writing style resembled AI-generated text, illustrating the potential for misclassification.

These issues contribute to a broader lack of trust in assessment systems. Students are uncertain whether they are being evaluated fairly and whether others may be gaining an advantage through AI use – whether that usage has been declared or not.

For institutions, this highlights the need to move beyond detection-based approaches and to rethink assessment design in ways that account for AI use while maintaining academic integrity.

Demand for AI literacy and clear guidance

While much of the discussion highlighted inconsistency and uncertainty, there were also clear examples of institutions beginning to establish more structured and effective approaches to AI use. These examples demonstrate what students perceive as good practice and provide insight into how institutions can respond constructively.

In particular, some students described institutions that have already developed relatively sophisticated frameworks for AI use. These include clear definitions of different types of AI, guidance on acceptable and unacceptable uses, and formal mechanisms for disclosure.

In these contexts, students reported greater confidence in understanding expectations. The presence of clear documentation, combined with examples of appropriate use, appeared to reduce uncertainty and support more responsible engagement with AI tools.

In addition, structured authorship and declaration processes were seen as constructive when implemented transparently. For example, some students described systems where they were required to explain how AI had been used in their work, including the

nature of prompts and the extent of reliance on the tool. This approach was perceived as enabling ethical use.

In some cases, AI literacy has already been embedded within taught modules or supported through additional workshops. One participant described how their programme includes a dedicated section on AI within a skills module, alongside teaching on ethical use.

This approach appears to address two key challenges identified elsewhere in the discussion: lack of understanding and uneven levels of confidence. Students in these contexts reported feeling better equipped to use AI appropriately and less concerned about unknowingly breaching expectations.

Importantly, these examples also demonstrate a shift in how AI is framed. Rather than being treated solely as a risk, institutions adopting these approaches are positioning AI as a legitimate tool that requires guidance and critical engagement. This aligns with student perspectives that AI is already embedded in their learning and should be supported rather than ignored or prohibited.

The implication for the sector is that providing comprehensive guidance and embedding AI literacy are not only feasible but have a demonstrably positive impact on student confidence and engagement. These examples offer a practical foundation for developing more consistent approaches across providers.

Critical thinking and the purpose of higher education

Participants expressed concern that overreliance on AI could undermine the development of critical thinking, originality and independent learning. While most students described using AI in a supportive way, there was recognition that it can be used in ways that diminish engagement with the learning process.

One student articulated this concern clearly, asking whether reliance on AI "defeat[s] the purpose of going into higher education… we're there to learn, not to be dependent."

There were also concerns about the standardisation of responses. When students rely heavily on AI-generated content, outputs may become more uniform, reducing diversity of thought and individual voice.

At the same time, some participants highlighted positive potential. AI was seen as enabling creativity in certain contexts, suggesting that its impact depends heavily on how it is used.

The implication is not that AI inherently undermines learning, but that its use must be carefully framed to support, rather than replace, intellectual development.

Institutional responsibility and the need for system-level change

Students placed considerable responsibility on institutions to respond proactively to the challenges posed by AI. This extends beyond policy development to include consistency, training and alignment with future employment contexts.

There was a strong call for greater alignment across the sector. One participant suggested that "everybody has different rules... we should probably have the same rules for everyone," reflecting frustration with fragmented approaches.

Students also emphasised the importance of preparing them for a workforce in which AI is increasingly embedded. Institutions must strike a balance between protecting academic integrity and ensuring that graduates are equipped with relevant skills.

This points to the need for coordinated responses at both institutional and sector level, informed by ongoing engagement with student experience.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the SAB recommends that providers:

1. Develop clear and transparent AI policies

- Define acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI
- Clarify how AI use affects assessment and grading
- Provide consistent guidance across modules and departments

2. Embed AI literacy in the curriculum

- Link AI use to employability and professional skills
- Include training on prompt engineering and practical application
- Ensure all students develop baseline AI competencies

3. Review and adapt assessment design

- Move beyond detection-based approaches
- Design assessments that prioritise critical thinking and originality
- Consider reflective components on AI use

4. Address inequalities in access

- Provide access to AI tools or equivalent institutional alternatives
- Ensure all students receive training regardless of prior experience
- Monitor emerging disparities linked to paid vs free tools

5. Explore sector-level alignment

- Share best practice across providers
- Consider common principles or guidance frameworks
- Engage with regulators to support consistency

Conclusion

The discussion highlights a sector in transition. AI is already embedded in how students work, yet institutional approaches have not fully adapted to this shift.

The central message emerging is not resistance to AI, but a call for clarity, fairness and support. Students recognise both the opportunities and the risks. Where guidance is limited or inconsistent, uncertainty persists; where it is structured and embedded, students are better able to engage productively.

For providers and policymakers, the challenge is to move beyond reactive restrictions to proactive support, and beyond uncertainty and fragmentation towards a coherent, student-centred approach. By embedding AI literacy, clarifying expectations and adapting assessment practices, the sector can ensure that AI enhances, rather than undermines, the quality and integrity of higher education.

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