# The rise of artificial intelligence in UK higher education



The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in UK higher education has garnered significant attention, following a recent survey revealing that an overwhelming 88 per cent of students have used generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, for their academic assessments. This figure marks a sharp increase from just 53 per cent reported a year ago. The findings, published in a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Kortext, underscored a dramatic shift in student behaviour, prompting experts to call for universities to reassess their evaluation methods and policies regarding AI usage in academic settings.

The survey, which polled a representative sample of 1,041 full-time undergraduate students, indicated that the proportion of students utilising any form of AI for their studies skyrocketed from 66 per cent in 2024 to 92 per cent in 2025. Josh Freeman, policy manager at HEPI and the report's lead author, described the rapid uptake as “almost unheard of” and warned that institutions needed to adapt quickly: “Every assessment must be reviewed in case it can be completed easily using AI,” Freeman stated. He noted that this evolution would necessitate substantial retraining initiatives for academic staff to understand the implications of generative AI.

Describing the implications for higher education, Freeman added, “Institutions will not solve any of these problems alone and should seek to share best practice with each other.” The survey revealed that students frequently use AI tools for various purposes, including explaining concepts, summarising articles, and generating research ideas. The two primary reasons cited by students for their reliance on AI were the time-saving aspect (51 per cent) and the enhancement of work quality (50 per cent). However, concerns about academic integrity persist, with nearly one in five respondents (18 per cent) admitting to including AI-generated text directly in their submissions.

Responses also highlighted notable differences in AI usage among various demographics. Students studying science-related subjects were more inclined to use these technologies compared to their counterparts in the social sciences and humanities. The survey indicated that only 29 per cent of humanities students believed AI-generated content could achieve good grades, contrasted with 45 per cent of those studying science, engineering, or medical disciplines. The data also revealed a concerning digital divide: students from wealthier backgrounds were more likely to frequently engage with AI tools.

As students grapple with the evolving landscape, many expressed a lack of clarity regarding university policies on AI usage. While the number of students who felt their institutions were “well equipped” to support AI use increased from 18 to 42 per cent over the past year, a significant portion still found the guidelines vague. “It’s still all very vague and up in the air if/when it can be used and why,” remarked one student, echoing a sentiment shared by others who reported receiving mixed messages from faculty regarding the acceptability of AI.

Dr Thomas Lancaster, a computer scientist at Imperial College London, emphasised the competitive disadvantage faced by students who choose not to utilise generative AI tools. He noted a very small minority of students who resist AI due to ethical concerns, but highlighted that they may be hampering their own academic and career prospects.

The discussion surrounding AI in higher education has gained further complexity following comments from science secretary Peter Kyle. His statement suggesting that it is acceptable for schoolchildren to use AI for homework—albeit under supervision—has drawn attention to the broader implications for educational policy.

Universities UK responded to the findings, acknowledging the necessity for institutions to prepare students for a workforce increasingly shaped by AI. A spokesperson for the organisation stressed the importance of balancing education with the risks posed by rapidly advancing technology, affirming that universities have codes of conduct to address academic misconduct and emphasize the implications of cheating from the outset.

As undergraduates increasingly navigate this new landscape, the findings from HEPI's report prompt a pivotal moment for higher education institutions to reassess their critical evaluation strategies and academic integrity policies in light of the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence in student work.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/HEPI-Policy-Note-51.pdf> - This document provides insights into students' views on generative AI in higher education, including their attitudes towards its use and the challenges it poses to academic integrity. It supports the discussion on how students perceive AI's role in their studies.
* <https://www.anthology.com/en-emea/news/new-survey-from-anthology-reveals-the-perceptions-and-realities-of-ai-in-uk-higher-education> - This article highlights concerns among UK university leaders about AI creating new challenges in identifying plagiarism and its potential benefits in enhancing student experiences. It corroborates the need for universities to reassess their policies on AI usage.
* <https://www.aiprm.com/ai-in-education-statistics/> - This resource provides statistics on AI usage in education, including instances of cheating and the integration of AI into teaching practices. It supports the discussion on the prevalence of AI in academic settings and concerns about academic integrity.
* <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/01/provide-or-punish-students-views-on-generative-ai-in-higher-education/> - This article discusses students' perspectives on generative AI, including their expectations for future use and their views on institutional policies. It aligns with the findings on students' reliance on AI for academic purposes.
* <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/Universities-UK-response-to-HEPI-report-on-AI-in-higher-education.aspx> - This response from Universities UK emphasizes the need for institutions to prepare students for an AI-driven workforce while addressing the risks associated with AI. It supports the call for universities to adapt their policies and practices in response to AI adoption.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/science-secretary-sets-out-vision-for-science-and-innovation> - This government news release may touch on broader educational policies, including the integration of technology like AI into learning environments. It could provide context for discussions around AI use in schools and higher education.