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Generative Artificial Intelligence and university study: a guide for students by the Study Advice team at the University of Reading

Dr Georgia Koromila
University of Reading, UK

Presentation abstract

In this showcase, we took our new student-facing generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) guide as a departure point for discussion around AI literacy support. We hoped to reflect with colleagues on resource development processes, including how we benefitted from wide-ranging and intersecting feedback, and how we navigated issues of policy. The motivation for the guide stemmed from our initial engagement with generative AI tools as they became widely available and highlighted in public and academic discourse. In addition, we quickly realised that AI was causing anxiety to colleagues and students, who expressed frustration with policy not keeping up with the need for clarity on emerging issues. Clearly, our students needed guidance on how to engage with this technology safely and ethically.

In building this resource, we aimed to strike a balance in tone and degree of complexity. Inspired by current reflections in Learning Development and higher education circles, we tried to highlight the range of emerging questions and implications that one should consider when exploring this technology in order to be in a position to harness its potential. We included examples and scenario-based exercises to encourage a critical approach.

The guide reached its published form after extensive scrutiny. Feedback from colleagues and students at the University Working Group on AI helped shape decisions around language clarity, content focus, selection of examples, and messaging on academic integrity. This was an empowering process, as it helped us feel secure in our stance whilst official institutional policy remained elusive.

So, what now and what next? The guide is being used by colleagues and students and received positive anecdotal feedback. We recognise, however, the need for regular updating in this fast-moving field. New themes for developing our guide include: AI for research, specialised AI-powered tools, and rules for acknowledging AI use.

Keywords: GenAI literacy; student-facing online guidance; GenAI policy; LD advocacy.

Session overview

This entry was initially intended as a resource showcase to get feedback on our guide (University of Reading, 2024) and share with colleagues our experience in preparing it. It ended up, however, being a solitary entry, without other resources there to populate the session. As a result, there was opportunity to expand the scope into reflection and discussion on the challenges and opportunities presented to us Learning Developers when we are tasked to enhance student GenAI literacy.

At the beginning of the session, the participants were encouraged to review the online resource. This was supplemented by a reflective presentation of the guide-making process and new opportunities it opened for our team. A key reflection point was that the guide helped us claim a seat at the table, where discussions take place around GenAI policy and practice in our institution, e.g. in working groups and communities of practice, which now allows us to continue learning, engage with developments, and voice our position. The other point of reflection was around what is missing from the guide and what is important to do now to support students, hoping to gain inspiration from feedback and ideas shared at the session (and the conference more generally). From the discussion that followed, a takeaway message seems to be that talking with students and colleagues can be challenging but also an effective first step to gauge the realities on the ground, which can reveal barriers and misconceptions, as well as innovative ways to approach GenAI.

Community response

Over the last 12 months, university staff have been battling with the dichotomy between ensuring students learn the fundamental skills and knowledge expected to meet the

benchmark expectations for their degrees and allowing students to engage with the plethora of available, easy-to-access generative artificial intelligence sources, the use of which could be considered key transferrable skills for graduate employment.

The resource guide identifies the need for students to think critically and reflectively regarding the use of generative AI, and in particular consider the moral and ethical implications of relying on a third-party generative model to construct responses.

The guide also shows that, while AI is developing rapidly, the academic and reflective skills required by students when negotiating and generating AI content will remain the same: the consideration of both ethics in relation to the student's own position and the inherent bias that could be coded into the programmes.

DALL-E3's interpretation of the interaction between the new study guide, university students, and generative AI shows a high-resolution image; however, there are numerous discussion points regarding issues such as equality and diversity with the content generated. Many of which are discussed as limitations in the guide.

Figure 1.DALL-E3's interpretation.

Author's reflection

Sharing our guide and the process of its development was a useful exercise, as it required taking stock, evaluating our decision making, and identifying ways forward. We are grateful for the reactions, comments, and questions offered by colleagues at the conference, as these inspired us and helped us prioritise next steps towards enhancing our support for students with the use of GenAI tools.

Comments during the discussion highlighted the need to obtain a more nuanced and representative picture of how students are engaging with GenAI tools (or not) and why, including distinctions among different student groups. For example, it was mentioned that doctoral students may feel pressure to engage with cutting edge technologies to future proof their work and prove they are at the forefront of their discipline, which may be the root of anxiety. As our guide is mainly addressing study practice and assessment preparation, it has become clear that we must fill a gap going forward, by offering tailored support for research students. We have already trialled materials and activities on the role of GenAI in research as part of our Masters Dissertation Fair. For the upcoming year, we are planning workshops as part of our university's doctoral training programme, and aim to supplement our online guide with more specific themes and examples linked to research practice.

Another participant raised the importance of working together and the challenges of speaking with colleagues who resist engagement with the developments in the field of GenAI. We should, indeed, try to have these conversations and maintain a balanced perspective that recognises the need to understand this technology, including what it can do and the issues that come with it. As pointed out in the community response section, our guide emphasises the limitations of GenAI before highlighting the role of criticality and agency as qualities needed for its safe and ethical use. As such, the guide's content and approach have helped initiate and mediate conversations with colleagues around GenAI. Taking further steps from such initial discussions, we recently started building an internal resource bank at the library with colleague contributions; this community project can help us sustain a local GenAI discussion and support forum. In turn, this initiative led us to plan a new collaborative section in our guide: representatives from different teams will contribute with small parts, aiming to showcase the wide range of potential tasks where

GenAI can be used and examples of relevant tools for each task area. We expect this new section to increase the guide's depth and applicability.

We recognise, however, that we are working alongside a wide network of support and that the implications of GenAI are far-reaching. For example, at the community response section above, there is mention of employability as a core driver for engagement with GenAI. Understanding perspectives from our colleagues in career support and how different disciplines may be tuned differently to applications of GenAI tools may be key here.

We also recognise that online guidance can only be part of a wider-ranging approach to promoting GenAI literacy. Therefore, we plan to diversify our efforts this year by offering to students more opportunities for interaction and guided experimentation in settings such as seminars and hands-on workshops.

Acknowledgements

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The contributors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: DALL-E3. The tasks performed by DALL-E3 include: image generation to visualise discussed themes. The authors have complied with the JLDHE's principles of AI use.

References

University of Reading (2024) *Generative artificial intelligence and university study*. Available at: https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/generative-AI-and-university-study (Accessed: 11 October 2024).

Author details

Georgia Koromila is a Study Adviser at the Library, University of Reading. Originally from the discipline of Archaeology, Georgia is a developing Learning Developer with interests in interdisciplinary collaboration, decolonising practice, inclusivity, global perspectives and working with international students, and, more recently, developing GenAI literacy. Georgia is a member of the ALDinHE Reflection Community of Practice.

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