**HEPI**

Report

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# *Student Generative AI Survey 2026*

## Rose Stephenson and Charlotte Armstrong

# About the authors

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# Acknowledgements

# Executive summary

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is now firmly embedded in the student experience. This third HEPI / Kortext Student Generative AI Survey, based on responses from 1,054 full-time undergraduates in the UK, shows that AI use among students is now near universal and continues to reshape learning, assessment and institutional practice. In addition, the Survey shows that a small proportion of students are using AI to support their wellbeing.

## Key findings:

❱ **AI use is now almost universal.** Some 95% of students report using AI in at least one way and 94% say they use generative AI to help with assessed work. Almost all students are therefore engaging with AI as part of their studies.

❱ **Students increasingly utilise AI for core academic tasks.** The most common uses include explaining concepts, summarising academic material and structuring ideas. While fewer students report directly generating text than in 2025, this may reflect a shift towards more task-specific AI tools rather than a reduction in overall reliance.

❱ **Assessment has changed substantially.** Nearly two-thirds (65%) of students say assessment has changed significantly in response to AI. In addition, some students articulate a sense of anxiety about false accusations of misconduct.

❱ **AI improves the student experience for many – but not all.** Almost half (49%) of students believe AI has improved their student experience, particularly by saving time, improving understanding and providing instant support. However, a minority feel AI has worsened their experience, citing concerns about fairness, skill erosion, social isolation and future employment.

- **AI is affecting loneliness and students are using AI to support their wellbeing.** Overall, around 40% of students say AI affects their loneliness, with positive and negative impacts reported in roughly equal measure. Around 15% of students report using AI for companionship, advice or to address loneliness.

- **Institutional approaches are shifting but remain inconsistent.** A roughly equal proportion of students (37% and 36%) agree and disagree that their institution encourages them to use AI. Students attending Russell Group institutions are most likely to agree that their institutions encourage the use of AI (39%) – this is an increase from last year (26%).

- **Students see AI skills as essential, but institutional support lags behind.** While over two-thirds (68%) of students believe AI skills are essential to thrive in today's world, fewer than half (48%) feel their teaching staff are helping them to develop these skills for their future careers. Arts and Humanities students are particularly likely to feel under-supported.

# Recommendations

Institutions should:

1) **Provide structured AI induction and transition support for all students.** A third of students are arriving in higher education without prior experience of using AI. Without structured support, these students risk being disadvantaged. Providing training for all students – including clear expectations on the use of AI in assessment and a critical awareness of the limitations – will ensure students are able to approach their studies with a more even level of AI literacy. A focus on how to use AI to enhance learning, rather than outsourcing it, is key here.

2) **Consider revamping their curricula to explicitly teach AI knowledge and skills, at both the general and subject-specific levels.** This should include core AI literacy (critical evaluation, ethical awareness and responsible use) as well as discipline-specific applications from coding and data analysis to creative practice and clinical decision-making.

3) **Publish clear, accessible and assessment-specific guidance on AI use.** The Survey shows that institutions are increasingly embracing AI, but students still feel uncertain about what is acceptable. There is a particular anxiety articulated about being falsely accused of cheating. Clear expectations for assessments – that sit within an overarching framework – should be a minimum expectation. Further, going beyond this by facilitating 'AI-free' assessments alongside assessments that expect students to use AI will provide clarity and reassurance for students, maintain academic integrity standards and allow students to be assessed on the AI skills they will need in the future. As part of embedding AI in the curriculum (see recommendation 2), provision should be made for students to develop and practise these AI skills before assessments. However, institutions should also ensure they continue to specifically teach traditional skill sets, such as essay writing, that may be

underdeveloped in some students who have already become reliant on AI.

4) **Ensure the AI tools necessary or advantageous for course content or assessment are accessible to all students.** By providing these tools directly to students, institutions can direct them towards more ethical or 'ring-fenced' tools.

5) **Ensure staff have access to AI training – and the time to invest in developing their own skills.** Training should be available to all staff to develop their AI literacy and skills. Providing ongoing opportunities for teaching staff to develop discipline-specific skills in the ever-evolving world of AI will ensure students leave their courses equipped to use AI in their future careers.

As part of its work to identify gaps in the current evidence base, the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce should:

6) **Support research to understand the impact of students using AI for friendship, company, advice or to tackle loneliness.** This is a burgeoning area of AI use and the impacts on student wellbeing – both positive and negative – need to be monitored and understood.

# Introduction

This is the third edition of the HEPI / Kortext Generative AI Survey. The 2024 Survey demonstrated that AI use was becoming normal among the student body.[1] The 2025 Survey reiterated this and showed that AI use was becoming even more mainstream, with respondents explaining that this was driven by AI's ability to save them time and improve the quality of their work. The 2025 Survey also showed a disparity between students' expectations that institutions should provide them with AI tools and those actually being provided. However, this Survey also showed a significant increase in the proportion of students who felt that staff were well-equipped to help them with AI compared to 2024.[2]

This report, the third in the series, seeks to establish how much has changed in the last 12 months. Questions and options have been added to understand how students may be using AI to manage wellbeing and loneliness, how students are using AI compared to traditional sources and how AI is being taught in their institutions. Further, this report includes two case studies, one which outlines the impact of using AI tools to develop diagnostic skills in medical students and one that explains a whole-institution approach to AI adoption.

# Methodology

To collect the data for this Survey, 1,054 full-time undergraduate students were polled through Savanta in December 2025. (Savanta was also used for the previous Survey, and UCAS were commissioned to undertake the polling for the original 2024 version of this Survey.) The responses were weighted on demographics such as gender, institution type and year of study to ensure the results are representative of the wider student population and comparable with the 2025 Survey. The margin of error is approximately 3%. The order in which the questions are presented here is different from the order in which they were originally presented to students.

Where data are emboldened on graphs, this indicates a significant difference between 2025 and 2026. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. An asterisk after a question (*) denotes a new question for the 2026 Survey.

Minor grammatical edits that do not change the meaning have been made to some free-text responses. The full results are available on the HEPI website.

# Survey results

## Student use of AI

The first question asks students if and how they use AI tools. The results in Figure 1 show that the proportion of students using AI in at least one way has risen from 66% in 2024 to 92% in 2025 and is now, in 2026, at 95%. However, the proportion of students using AI to generate text with tools such as ChatGPT has fallen in this year's Survey from 64% in 2025 to 56% in 2026. The reason for this drop is unclear; it may be that students are using more specific AI tools for different tasks. Despite this drop, generating text remains the most popular use of AI. Using AI to summarise, note-take or quiz textbooks with tools such as Kortext is the second most popular use of AI, followed by enhancing or editing writing using tools such as Grammarly.

For 2026, three additional options were added to this question to examine the use of AI tools for wellbeing. The percentage of students using AI for friendship, company, advice or tackling loneliness is 15%. The data also show that 8% of students are using counselling or therapy where the service is provided solely by AI and 4% of students are using these services where the counselling or therapy is provided partly by AI.

There continues to be an equality challenge in relation to AI tool access. Students from a household with the social grade of A, B or C, where the chief income earner works in a managerial or professional role are more likely to use some AI tools than students from a household with the social grade of C2, D or E, where the chief income earner works in a manual role or is unemployed. The tools with a significant difference in usage are shown in Figure 2. It is unclear what is driving this disparity, particularly given there is a free version of ChatGPT, suggesting that cost is not always the underlying barrier.

# Figure 1: 'Which of the following have you used artificial intelligence (AI) for this academic year? (Include AI used for any purpose, including your studies, employment, hobbies and so on)'
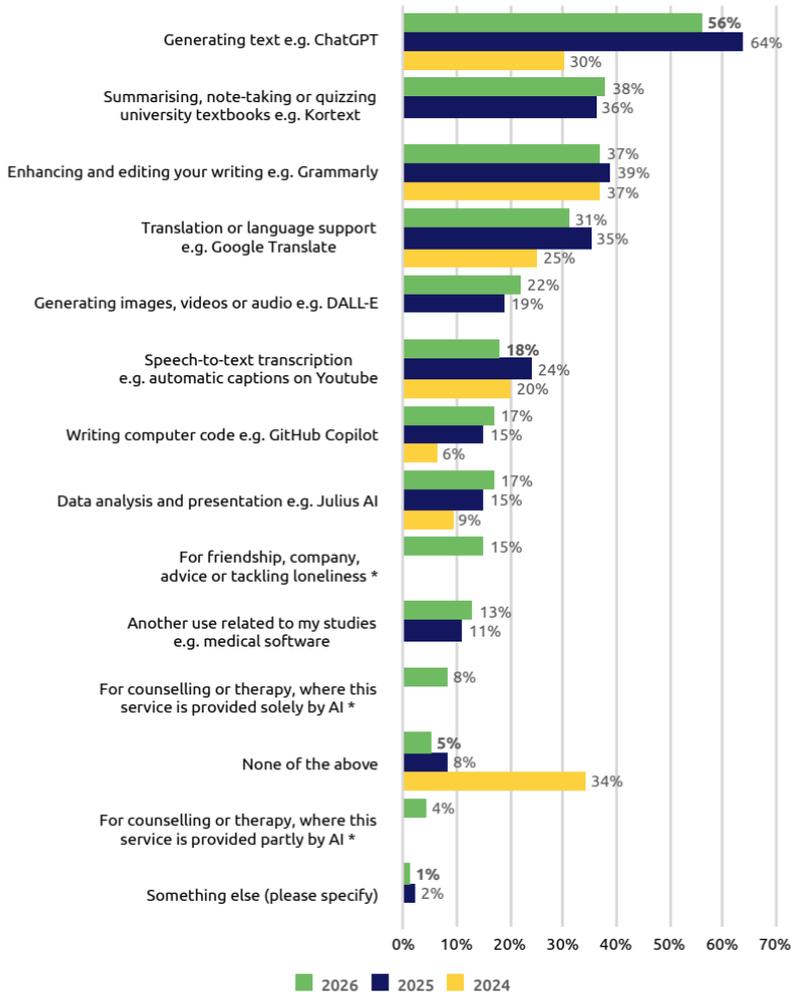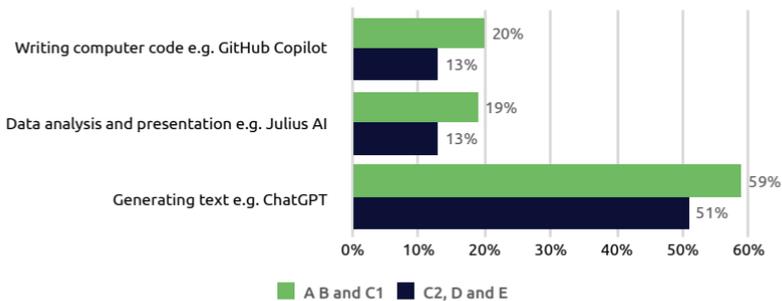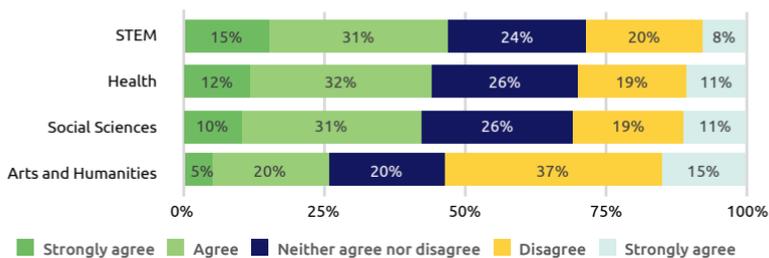
| Category | 2026 | 2025 | 2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Generating text e.g. ChatGPT | 56% | 64% | 30% |
| Summarising, note-taking or quizzing university textbooks e.g. Kortext | 38% | 36% | |
| Enhancing and editing your writing e.g. Grammarly | 37% | 39% | 37% |
| Translation or language support e.g. Google Translate | 31% | 35% | 25% |
| Generating images, videos or audio e.g. DALL-E | 22% | 19% | |
| Speech-to-text transcription e.g. automatic captions on Youtube | 18% | 24% | 20% |
| Writing computer code e.g. GitHub Copilot | 17% | 15% | 6% |
| Data analysis and presentation e.g. Julius AI | 17% | 15% | 9% |
| For friendship, company, advice or tackling loneliness * | 15% | | |
| Another use related to my studies e.g. medical software | 13% | 11% | |
| For counselling or therapy, where this service is provided solely by AI * | 8% | | |
| None of the above | 5% | 8% | 34% |
| For counselling or therapy, where this service is provided partly by AI * | 4% | | |
| Something else (please specify) | 1% | 2% | |

Legend: ■ 2026  ■ 2025  ■ 2024

## Figure 2: AI tools used this academic year – differences by social grade



Figure 2: AI tools used this academic year – differences by social grade

| Tool | A B and C1 | C2, D and E |
|------|------------|-------------|
| Writing computer code e.g. GitHub Copilot | 20% | 13% |
| Data analysis and presentation e.g. Julius AI | 19% | 13% |
| Generating text e.g. ChatGPT | 59% | 51% |

In similar results to last year, around 42% of all respondents agree or strongly agree that content created by generative AI would get a good grade in their subject. When examined by subject (Figure 3), students taking arts and humanities subjects are significantly more sceptical that content created by AI can get a good grade in their subject, with only 25% agreeing or strongly agreeing. However, there has been a significant change in the perceptions of students taking social science subjects. This has risen from 33% of these respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing in 2025 to 41% in 2026.

Figure 3: 'Content created by generative AI would get a good grade in my subject'



| Subject | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly agree |
|---------|---------------|-------|---------------------------|----------|----------------|
| STEM | 15% | 31% | 24% | 20% | 8% |
| Health | 12% | 32% | 26% | 19% | 11% |
| Social Sciences | 10% | 31% | 26% | 19% | 11% |
| Arts and Humanities | 5% | 20% | 20% | 37% | 15% |

*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' are excluded (between 0% and 3% depending on the subject).*

In the next question, Generative AI was defined as tools that: 'generate text, images and other content in response to prompts; examples include ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft Copilot'. Students were asked whether they had used generative AI for assessments.

Where the options were the same as last year, most of the results remain similar (Figure 4). Almost two-thirds of students are using AI to explain concepts and half are using AI to summarise articles. Around 40% of students use AI to suggest ideas for research and to help them structure their thoughts.

*Figure 4: 'When thinking about using generative AI to prepare assessed work, which of the following have you ever done?'*
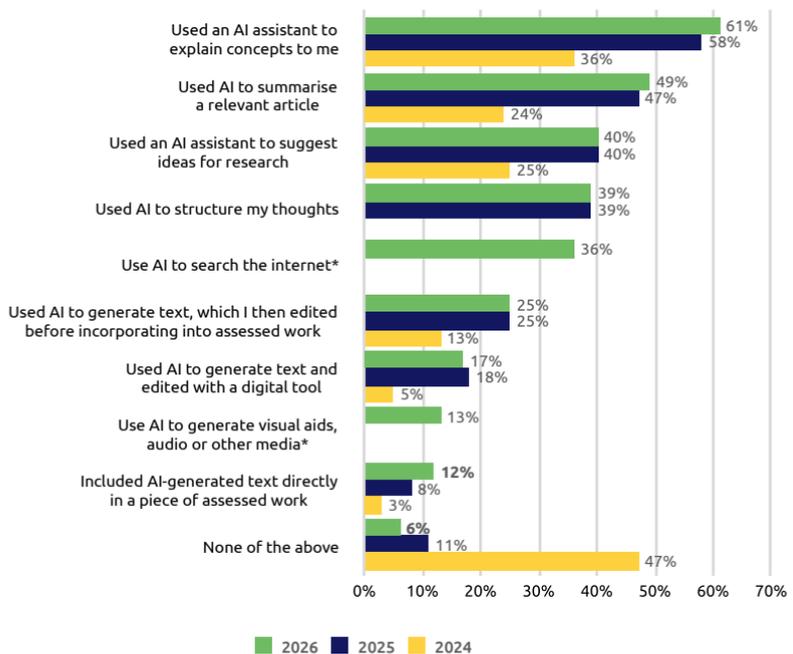


*Those putting 'I don't know' (less than 1% of responses in 2026) are excluded*

There is a change in the proportion of students who include AI-generated text directly in a piece of assessed work, with 12% stating they have done so. This has increased from 8% of students in 2025 and 3% of students in 2024. The percentage of students using AI in assessment continues to increase. Just over half of students were using AI to help complete their assessments two years ago. This rose to 89% of students in 2025 and is now 94%. It is therefore fair to conclude that almost all students are now using AI to help complete their assessments.  Many of these students will be encouraged or required to use AI in assessments as providers pivot to teaching and assessing AI skills.

Two new options were added to this question for 2026. The results of these questions show that 36% of students are using AI to search the internet and 13% of students are using AI to generate visual aids, audio or other media.

*Figure 5: 'Which of the following would you typically consider an acceptable use of generative AI for assessed work?'*

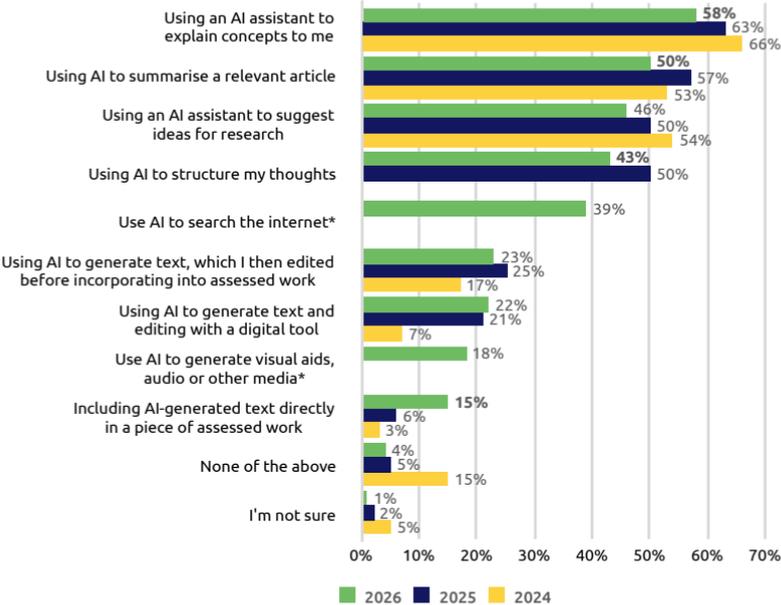*Student Generative AI Survey 2026*

Figure 6 compares students' use of AI in assessments and how acceptable they believe this to be. As in previous years, there is a higher degree of acceptability than use for most options, however these two categories have become more closely aligned over time. In 2024, the average difference between use and acceptability was 16 percentage points, with acceptability higher than use in all cases (except for using AI-generated text without editing, where acceptability and use were equal). In 2025, the average gap across all uses had narrowed to six percentage points. Again, students generally rated acceptability higher than use. In 2026, there is an average difference of just four percentage points, with use creeping above acceptability in some cases, although each time within the margin of error.
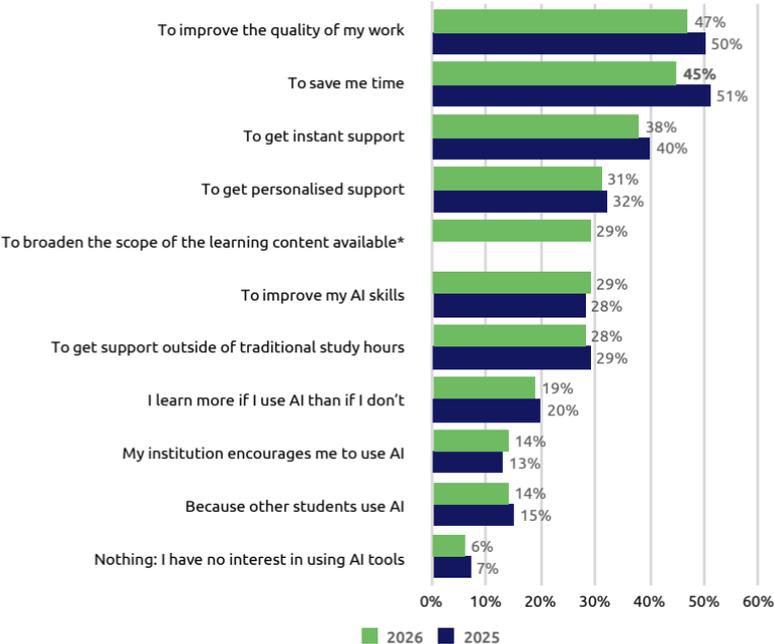
*Figure 6: Acceptance versus use*
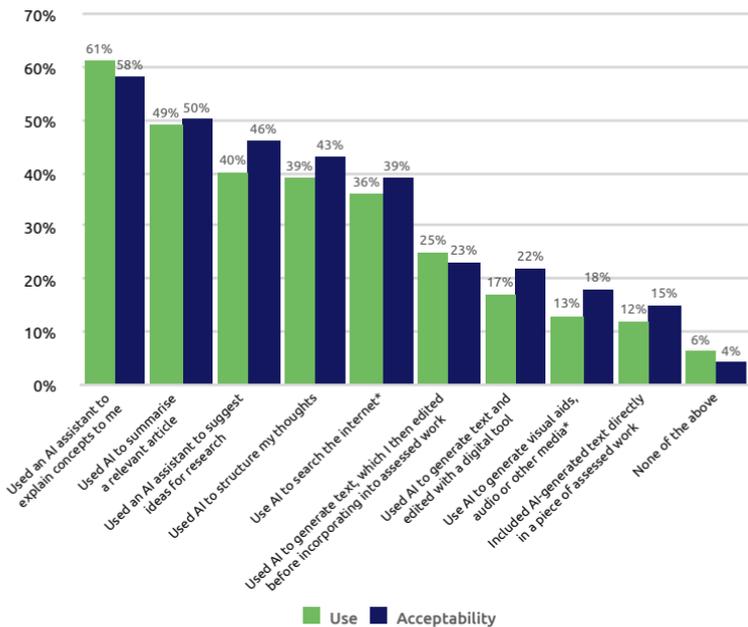


*Those putting 'I don't know' (less than 1% of responses in 2026) are excluded.*

This trend may reflect the natural time lag in the adoption of new technology. It seems that in the earlier Surveys, some students were aware of AI tools and had views on their acceptability, even if they were not yet using the tools themselves. Over time, usage has increased to converge with the acceptance rates. It will be interesting to continue monitoring this over time to see if AI use becomes more acceptable or whether AI use goes beyond the collective acceptance levels. None of these uses of AI receives more than two-thirds support, suggesting there is still scepticism and uncertainty about what acceptable AI use looks like. (New options have been added to these questions each year, so while the overall trend of these two variables converging is of interest, the data should be compared with caution.)

*Figure 7: 'Which of the below, if any, are reasons which make you more likely to use AI tools for your studies?'*



| | 2026 | 2025 |
|---|---|---|
| To improve the quality of my work | 47% | 50% |
| To save me time | **45%** | 51% |
| To get instant support | 38% | 40% |
| To get personalised support | 31% | 32% |
| To broaden the scope of the learning content available* | 29% | |
| To improve my AI skills | 29% | 28% |
| To get support outside of traditional study hours | 28% | 29% |
| I learn more if I use AI than if I don't | 19% | 20% |
| My institution encourages me to use AI | 14% | 13% |
| Because other students use AI | 14% | 15% |
| Nothing: I have no interest in using AI tools | 6% | 7% |

The Survey continues to ask students about the factors that encourage or discourage their use of generative AI tools (Figure 7). Respondents could select as many answers as they wanted. The findings remain largely similar to previous years of the Survey. However, the percentage of students who use AI to save time decreased from 51% in 2025 to 45% in 2026. The reason for this is unclear, though one suggestion is that students are becoming more sceptical of AI's benefits as they become more familiar with it.

This 2026 Survey included an additional option to the responses: '*To broaden the scope of the learning content available'*. A total of 29% of respondents gave this as a reason that would make them more likely to use AI tools for their studies.

There is a difference in response rates based on the respondents' working status (Figure 8). Students who work in paid employment are more likely to report using AI to develop their AI skills (from 23% to 38%, with a general if inconsistent rising response rate based on the number of hours worked). Those who are not in paid employment are less likely to state this (19%). Relatedly, 12% of respondents not in paid employment state they have no interest in using AI tools, a response rate significantly higher than any other group.

*Figure 8: Reasons respondents are more likely to use AI – differences by working status*
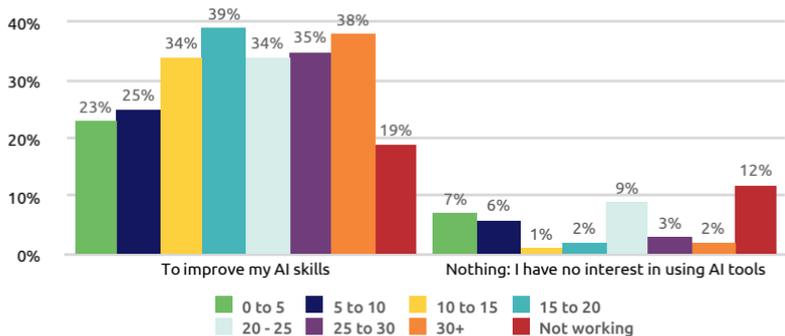
The factors pushing students away from using AI have changed since the 2025 Survey. While the risks of being accused of cheating, getting false results or biased results remain the most frequently cited factors for students to be less likely to use AI, the percentage of students concerned about these factors has dropped significantly since 2025 (Figure 9).

*Figure 9: 'Which of the below, if any, are reasons which make you less likely to use AI tools for your studies?'*



| Reason | 2026 | 2025 |
|---|---|---|
| Being accused of cheating by my institution | 42% | 53% |
| Getting false results / hallucinations | 35% | 51% |
| Getting biased results | 32% | 37% |
| The environmental impact | 23% | 15% |
| My institution discourages or bans the use of AI | 21% | 31% |
| I will learn more if I do not use AI | 20% | 18% |
| It is not fair to other students who do not use AI | 19% | 21% |
| Not enough is done to protect my data privacy | 18% | 23% |
| Tools are too expensive | 17% | 20% |
| AI models trained without the authors' consent | 15% | 16% |
| I think the benefits of AI have been oversold* | 14% | |
| AI is hard to access, e.g. not integrated into the VLE* | 12% | |
| I generally dislike new educational technologies* | 8% | |
| Nothing: I am fully comfortable using AI tools | 5% | 4% |

Additionally, significantly fewer students state that institutional bans or discouragement of AI make them less likely to use AI tools (31% in 2025 but only 21% in 2026). This may signify that more institutions are embracing the use of AI. It could also suggest students are less concerned about being penalised for using AI, although free text responses demonstrating an anxiety about being accused of cheating would make this seem less likely. In contrast, students are increasingly concerned about the environmental impacts of AI use, with nearly a quarter (23%) now citing this as a reason they are less likely to use AI tools for their studies.

For this round of the Survey, there are additional questions that explore how students combine AI use with traditional sources. The question defines traditional sources as any sources that do not involve AI, including webpages, textbooks, lecture notes and course materials.

As Figure 10 illustrates, the student body splits roughly into thirds here: 34% lean more towards traditional tools, 37% lean more towards AI tools and 29% use traditional and AI tools evenly. It is notable that 8% of students state they mostly use generative AI and rarely use traditional resources.

*Figure 10: 'Which of the following options best captures how you typically work with generative AI?'*
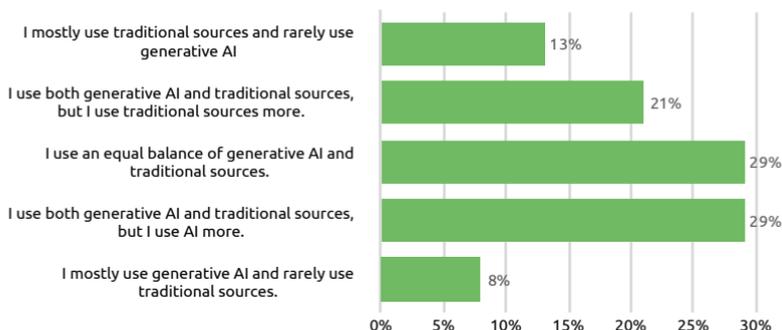
Respondents were also asked about how frequently they use AI to discover and understand traditional sources (Figure 11). Just over half of students (53%) reported doing so on a weekly basis.

*Figure 11: 'How often do you use AI to discover and understand traditional sources?'*



## How AI has impacted the student experience

For 2026, the Survey also introduced a question on the effect of AI on the student experience – as shown in Figure 12. The percentage of students who feel AI has made their student experience better (either somewhat or significantly) is 49%. A minority of students, 16%, feel that AI has made their student experience either somewhat or significantly worse. Some 35% of students feel that AI has not had a significant impact on their student experience.

*Figure 12: 'Overall, how do you believe the use of generative AI has impacted your student experience?'*
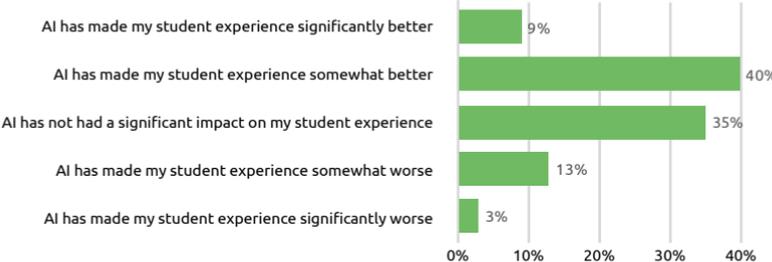
There was a subsequent open-text element to this question, inviting students to expand on why they had given that response.

Students who feel their student experience has been made somewhat or significantly worse responded with the following themes:

1) A small number of students criticise their institution's assessment changes resulting from the use of AI tools.

> All of our exams were changed to be more difficult with no extra support to stop the use of AI.
>
> Because they made the assignments much harder. I would rather [there was] no AI and more manageable assignments.

2) Several students also express concern about being falsely accused of cheating.

> Even if I don't actively use AI to contribute to my work. You have the anxiety of avoiding certain words in essays because it might flag up as AI.
>
> Constant worry that my work will flag AI detection, even though I have never used AI to write an assignment.
>
> It has completely changed the way essays and assignments are graded and viewed, people with good literacy skills often get accused of AI.

3) A few respondents feel that the uneven use of AI within the student body was unfair and disadvantaged those who choose not to use AI tools.

> Other students are using AI in their essays, while I am doing my work without it. They're scoring higher for not even doing their own work, it's not fair.

*Other students use AI to blow off work and attempt to get a passing grade while I work hard on all of my assignments. It's unfair.*

4) A common response from students was to express a general dislike of AI and concern about its impact on their skills and learning.

*My grades have dropped because AI is mitigating my ability to think critically.*

*It encourages you to think less.*

*It is making us all lazy.*

*I feel like I'm not getting the full experience due to AI.*

*I think it's making it too easy.*

*It has made me less likely to do independent research.*

*I'm not using my brain at all.*

5) Some students also express concern about the effect on their social lives.

*AI is an alternative. Instead of going to the library or communicating with others for research, I'm using it [AI], which leads to me losing independence and socialising skills.*

*Because it encourages people to study alone.*

*Just feel isolated.*

6) A small number of students are also concerned about the effect of AI on future job markets.

*I feel like creative subjects are now seen as less important as people can generate images / music / art with AI now instead of having to do it themselves.*

> *Because I'm studying Concept Art and AI is threatening my future career.*
>
> *The potential of AI will greatly reduce white collar jobs.*

Students who felt their student experience had been made somewhat or significantly better responded with the following themes:

1) A large number of students specifically highlight using AI to develop ideas, understand and write assignments.

> *It helps me organise my coursework when I need to think about my ideas and how to structure.*
>
> *Because using AI has helped me understand concepts that I didn't understand beforehand.*
>
> *AI tools allowed me to quickly summarise dense readings and generate drafts or outlines for assignments, saving hours of tedious work and letting me focus on critical analysis and deeper understanding.*
>
> *It's helped me tremendously to get many sources to write essays about, rather than spending most of my time scouring the internet for data that takes hours upon hours.*

2) A number of others said they find AI tools help them to complete their work more quickly.

> *Because it's good to use in class for fast answers.*
>
> *Because it takes the pressure off when writing assignments.*
>
> *Because it helps me to get a lot of tasks done on time that wouldn't have been possible.*

3) A common response from students was also to highlight the round-the-clock access to AI tools as something that has improved their student experience.

*Sometimes if I'm stuck or confused on something AI will give me instant clarity rather than waiting for help.*

*Because it has allowed me to work and ask questions on subjects I am confused on by asking questions without judgement and I can ask as many times as I want without being turned away.*

*AI makes the student experience better because it helps provide instant and personalised help with my studying and writing.*

*Makes me feel like l have a study buddy.*

4) While students who feel AI made their student experience worse comment that it could reduce their social opportunities, those who feel AI positively impacts their experience comment conversely – that it helps them to complete their work sooner, giving them more time to do other things.

*Saves me time when researching so I can enjoy time with friends more.*

*Because it means I don't have to spend as long reading textbooks which means I can have a better social life.*

*Saves time, can indulge in hobbies instead.*

5) A small number of students refer to using AI specifically to combat loneliness.

*It's because it's like having a friend close by.*

*I converse when I feel lonely.*

*It keeps me company.*

*Because it gives someone to help me and talk to when I don't have anyone.*

For 2026 the Survey introduced specific questions about the use of AI, wellbeing and loneliness, the results of which are shown in Figure 13.

AI led to 21% of students feeling less or significantly less lonely and 20% of students feeling more or significantly more lonely, with 59% of students stating that AI did not have an impact on their loneliness. Therefore, around 41% of students state that AI impacts their level of loneliness, although the responses are evenly split between this being a positive or negative impact.

*Figure 13: 'How does generative AI impact your level of loneliness?'*
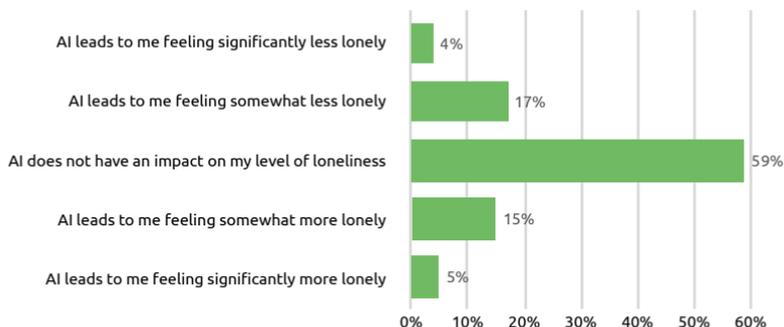


The Survey also asked students how often they felt lonely. The data above were analysed against this cross break, however there did not seem to be a link between how frequently students felt lonely and whether they reported AI as having had an impact on their loneliness.

## Prior experience of using AI

As seen in Figure 14, around half of students (51%) agree or strongly agree they have experience using AI at school. This is a significant increase from the previous year (44%), indicating that AI use is increasingly part of the school and university experience. However, it should be noted that a third (33%) of students disagree or strongly disagree with the statement '*Before arriving in higher education, I already had experience using generative AI at school*'.

As AI becomes embedded in teaching and learning in higher education, this highlights a need to ensure students receive training as they
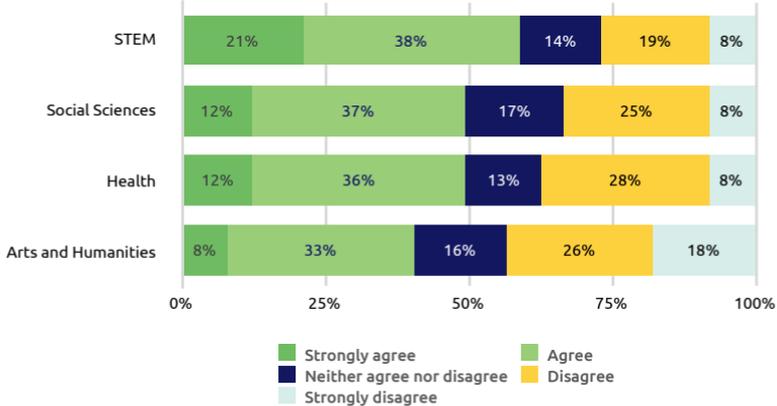
transition, so this group is not at a disadvantage. Additionally, 'prior experience' is not necessarily the same as sustained engagement, or even fluency with AI tools. Many students may have informally explored AI tools at school, but have not received any formal training or guidance in these tools.

*Figure 14: 'Before arriving in higher education, I already had experience using generative AI at school'*



| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2026 | 15% | 36% | 15% | 23% | 10% |
| 2025 | 14% | 30% | 14% | 25% | 16% |
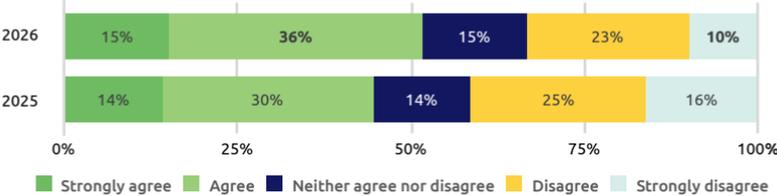
*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (1% of responses in 2026) are excluded.*

*Figure 15: 'Before arriving in higher education, I already had experience using AI at school' – differences by subject area*



| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| STEM | 21% | 38% | 14% | 19% | 8% |
| Social Sciences | 12% | 37% | 17% | 25% | 8% |
| Health | 12% | 36% | 13% | 28% | 8% |
| Arts and Humanities | 8% | 33% | 16% | 26% | 18% |

*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (between 0% and 2%) are excluded.*

Responses for previous AI experience were also analysed by subject area (Figure 15), showing that STEM students have the most experience using AI in school (59%). However, there is an increase in the number of students of all subjects who report having experiences of using AI in school.

As in the 2024 and 2025 Surveys, Figure 16 shows there is also a substantial gender divide in use, with men some 12 percentage points more likely to have experience of using AI at school, although the gap has narrowed slightly.

*Figure 16: 'Before arriving in higher education, I already had experience using AI at school' – differences by gender*



| | | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Women | 2026 | 12% | 34% | 15% | 25% | 13% |
| | 2025 | 13% | 25% | 15% | 26% | 20% |
| Men | 2026 | 19% | 40% | 15% | 20% | 5% |
| | 2025 | 16% | 37% | 14% | 22% | 10% |
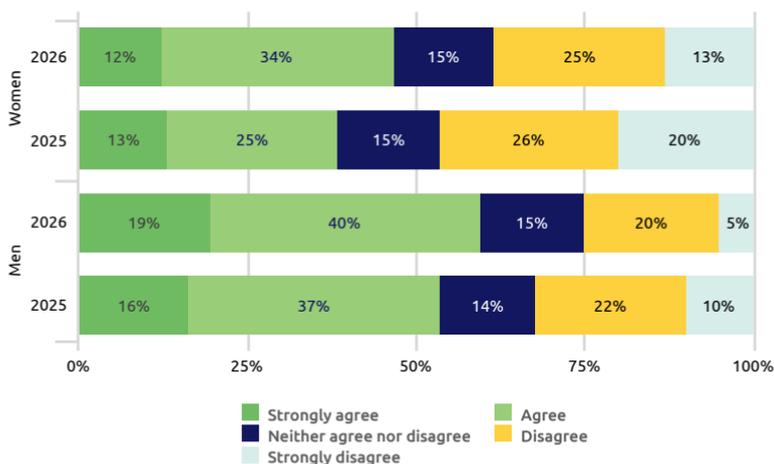
*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (1% in 2026) are excluded.*

## Institutional approaches to AI use

As illustrated in Figure 17, while in 2025 only 28% felt 'encouraged' by their institution to use AI, this rises to 36% in 2026. In fact, there is now an equal proportion of students who agree that their institution encourages AI use as those who disagree.

*Figure 17: 'My institution encourages me to use generative AI'*
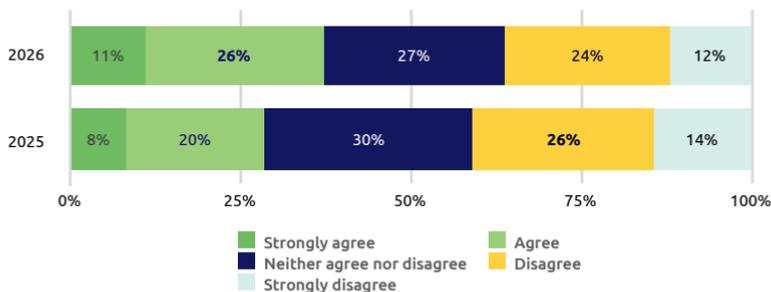


*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (1% in 2026) are excluded.*

The Survey also considers which groups of institutions encourage their students to use AI (Figure 18). Unlike in the previous year, students at Russell Group institutions are now most likely to feel as though their institutions encourage the use of AI (39%). This figure is significantly more than for students at pre-1992 institutions (30%). This is also a significant increase on the previous year's findings (13 percentage points) when students attending Russell Group institutions were (joint with pre-1992 institutions) the least likely to feel encouraged.

*Figure 18: 'My institution encourages me to use generative AI' – differences by institution type*
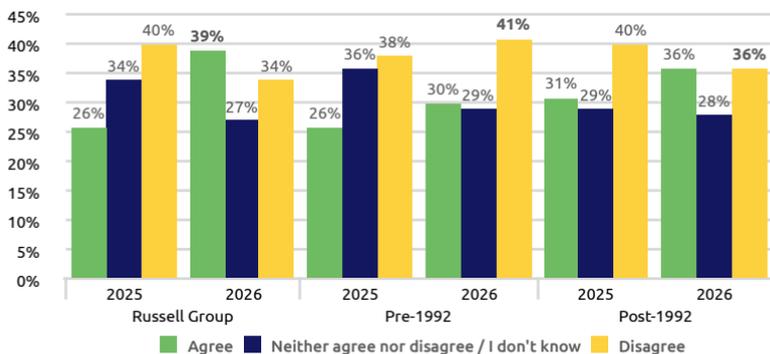
In the 2024 and 2025 Surveys, students were asked whether the wider availability of AI tools had led to changes in how their institutions assessed them (Figure 19). In 2024, only a third (32%) said it had, including 23% of students who said it had only changed 'a little'. (The wording of the 2024 question was different to 2025 and 2026).

In 2025, 56% of students agree or strongly agree that assessments have changed. The 2026 Survey demonstrates that the transformation of assessments has continued, with 65% now indicating agreement or strong agreement with the statement. Only 11% of students now feel as though their institution's assessments have not seen significant change.

There were free-text responses that suggest some students perceive their institution has made changes to their assessments, resulting in these being more difficult, although the number of students responding in this way was small. Changes to assessment practices due to AI were preceded by broad changes to assessment practices by providers in response to COVID restrictions.

During this time, many institutions had moved from more traditional exam-style summative assessments to a 24-hour take-home digital format, often with an 'open-book' element. Some institutions reverted to traditional formats after the lifting of pandemic restrictions, while others maintained the at-home digital format.

This approach to assessment raised concerns about academic integrity even before generative AI became common, and the growing concerns about AI and integrity may have pushed more institutions – at least initially – back to traditional exam-style assessments. However, we are now also seeing institutions embrace AI in assessments – defining (and facilitating) assessments that exclude AI to develop and test traditional skill sets, alongside assessments that include AI use by design to develop and test AI skills. This will be an interesting area for further research.

Figure 19: 'The way I am assessed by my institution has changed a lot in response to generative AI'
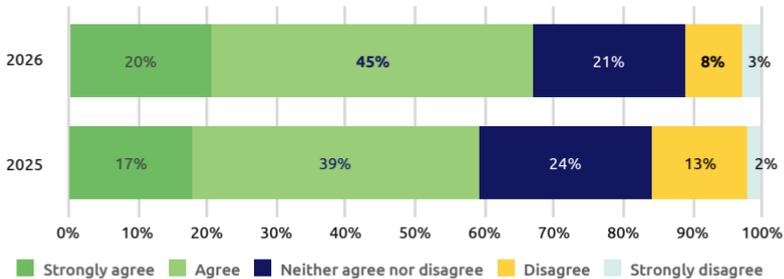


Alongside the impact of AI on assessment, there has also been debate about how far institutions can and should support students to develop AI skills while in higher education. For 2026, students were asked whether they agreed that AI skills are essential to thriving in today's world (Figure 20). They were also asked to what extent they felt their lecturers and other teaching staff have helped them to develop these skills (Figure 21). This latter question had two parts: '*My lecturers (or other teaching staff) have given me support to improve my generative AI literacy skills*' and '*My lecturers (or other teaching staff) help me to develop my AI skills for use in my future career*'.

Figure 20: 'To thrive in today's world, it is essential to understand and be able to use generative AI effectively'
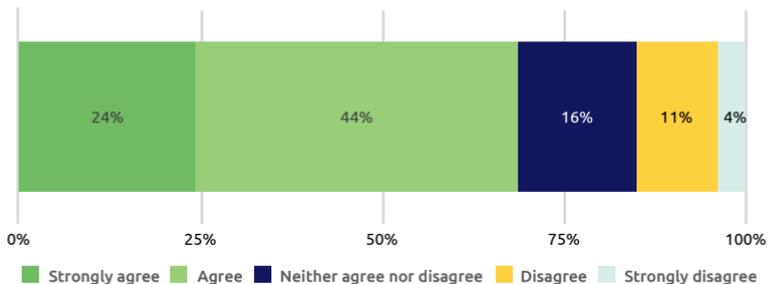


*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (1% in 2026) are excluded. Results shown are for all respondents.*

Figure 20 shows that students overwhelmingly see understanding and using AI as vital for their futures.

A substantial majority (68%) of students believe generative AI skills are essential to thrive. This indicates that students perceive AI tools as a necessary skillset for their future careers and lives. However, there is a clear gap between the perceived importance of AI and the support students feel they receive in developing these skills. Only 48% felt as though their teaching staff were helping them to develop these skills for their future career. This 20 percentage point gap highlights a current mismatch between the perceived importance of AI tools and the delivery of these skills. Potentially, it indicates that universities have yet to effectively embed the development of AI skills within the curricula.

The results for the question on improving generative AI literacy skills and the question on developing AI skills for their future careers were similar within the margin of error. (Results for the question '*My lecturers / teaching staff help me to develop my AI skills for use in my future career*' are shown in Figure 21.) This may reflect that, while policymakers and the higher education sector often distinguish between AI skills and literacy, students do not view these as distinct categories.

*Figure 21: 'My lecturers / teaching staff help me to develop my AI skills for use in my future career'*



| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
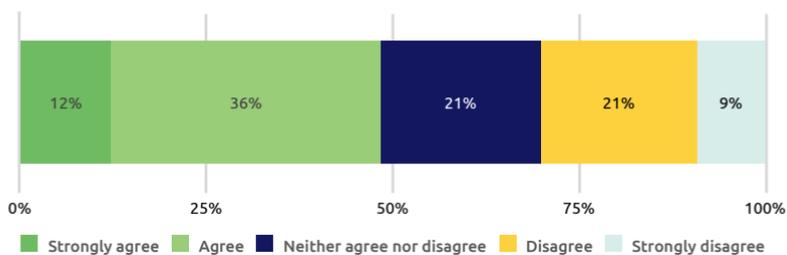
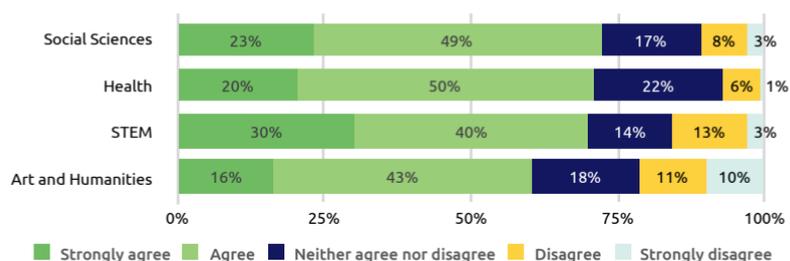*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (1% in 2026) are excluded.*

Students who are studying Arts and Humanities subjects are significantly less likely to feel as though their lecturers and teaching staff are helping them to develop their AI skills for use in their future careers (Figure 22). While it is difficult to know the cause of this difference, one possible explanation could be that Arts and Humanities sectors have been more cautious about adopting generative AI than other sectors, due to concerns – particularly within creative industries – about copyright, plagiarism and job losses.

*Figure 22: My lecturers / teaching staff help me to develop my AI skills for use in my future career – differences by subject*
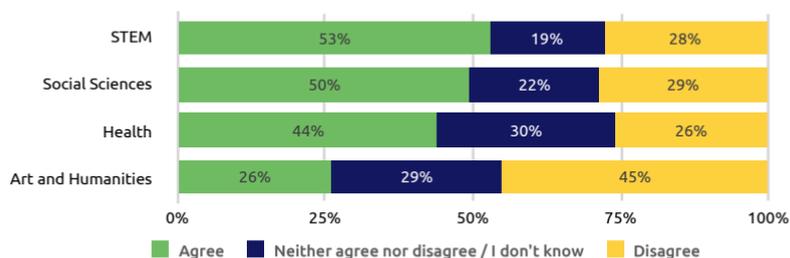


Indeed, Arts and Humanities students are less likely to agree with the statement that AI skills are essential to thrive in today's world (21%) compared with other subject areas (8% Health, 16% STEM, 11% Social Sciences) – as shown in Figure 23.

*Figure 23: 'To thrive in today's world, it is essential to understand and be able to use generative AI effectively' – differences by subject*



*Those putting 'I don't know / Not applicable' (between 0% to 3% in 2026) are excluded.*

## Case study one: Using AI to teach tomorrow's doctors

Researchers from Queen Mary University of London, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the University of Campinas in Brazil and McMaster University, Toronto set out to understand how medical students learn, diagnose and make decisions with AI tools in real clinical-style scenarios.

Their study tested the Isabel Clinical Educator by giving students virtual patient cases and comparing how different teaching methods shaped diagnostic accuracy and confidence. The four approaches were:

1) Clinical cases only;

2) Clinical cases with feedback from the lecturers;

3) Clinical cases with AI support and no feedback; and

4) Clinical cases with AI support and feedback from the AI tool and the lecturers.

## What happened?

Students who combined AI support with human feedback performed best. Those using AI alone not only scored the lowest – they were also the most confident, despite being the least skilled.

Professor Rakesh Patel, one of the researchers leading this study, compared this overconfidence to giving learners a powerful sports car before they have learned how to drive. Without the experience to ask the right questions, students leaned too heavily on the tool and missed key diagnostic nuances – such as when AI is trained mostly on populations from the Global North.

Professor Patel's message is clear: AI is transformative only when used at the right time, with the right training and under strong governance. Safe, effective and ethical use depends on preparing learners to understand both the tool's power and its limits.

Earlier in this report (Figure 7), 47% of students state they are more likely to use AI tools 'to improve the quality of their work'. It is interesting to reflect that the medical students in case study one, undertaking clinical cases with AI support (and not feedback), were the most confident in their abilities, despite being the least skilled in the cohort. There is, therefore, the possibility that AI is giving students a false sense of confidence while undermining their skills development.

## Institutional approaches to AI provision

One way institutions can support students with their AI skills is by providing AI tools. Figure 25 shows that, over the three waves of this Survey there has been a clear increase in the number of institutions providing AI tools to their students (from 9% in 2024, to 23% in 2025 and 38% in 2026). This is a substantial adoption of AI tools within institutions over a relatively short period. However, this number is still a way off from matching the percentage of students (50%) who think their institution should provide these tools – illustrated in Figure 24. A comparison between these two questions for 2026 is available in Figure 26.

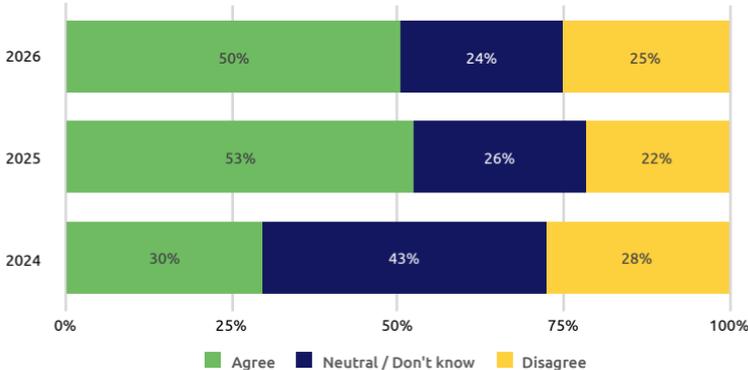*Figure 24: 'My institution should provide AI tools for me to use'*



| | Agree | Neutral / Don't know | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2026 | 50% | 24% | 25% |
| 2025 | 53% | 26% | 22% |
| 2024 | 30% | 43% | 28% |

*Figure 25: 'Does your institution currently provide generative AI tools for you to use?'*
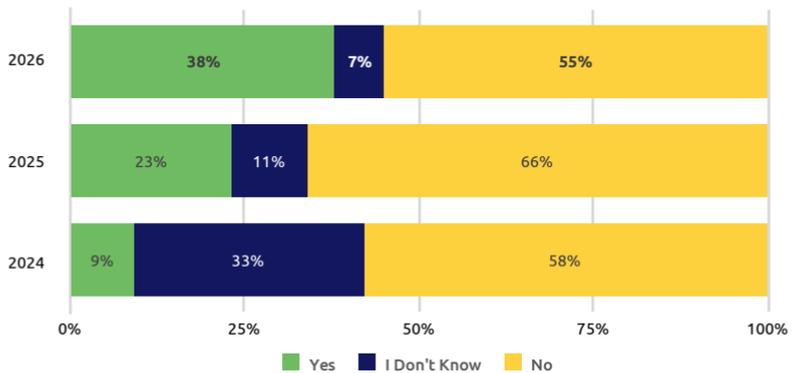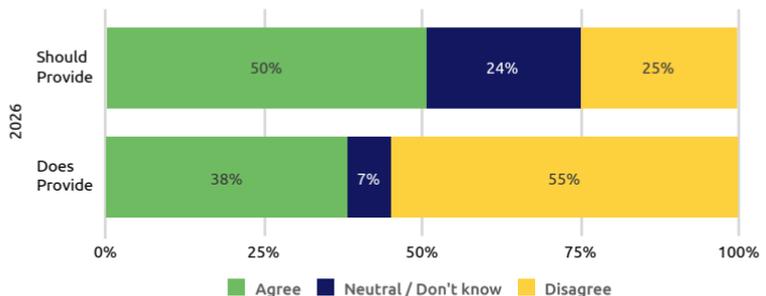


*Figure 26: 'Should your institution provide AI tools / does your institution currently provide generative AI tools for you to use?'*



Students were given a free text box and asked which tools their institution provided. By far the most common response to this is ChatGPT, followed by Microsoft Copilot. This is consistent with the 2025 Survey findings. Some respondents specified the premium version of ChatGPT, while others did not. It is therefore not clear whether those students who responded with ChatGPT mean that their institution pays for the premium version or whether they are referring to being allowed to use the free version. This difference is potentially significant, as

the premium version of ChatGPT offers enhanced data protection and privacy safeguards that institutions may prefer their students have access to. Basic Microsoft Copilot access comes with a subscription to Microsoft Office, which many institutions have, so the popularity of this response is logical, however it raises a question about how many institutions are actively providing AI tools for their students, and how many students are able to access these tools as a consequence of their wider tech ecosystems. Other tools mentioned included more generalist tools such as Google Gemini and Perplexity, as well as study, writing and integrity tools such as Grammarly (a grammar and spellchecker) and Turnitin (which has a tool for detecting plagiarism and AI use). Some respondents also listed in-house large language models developed by higher education institutions.

## Case study two: A whole-institution approach to embedding AI skills

Aston University has developed an institution-wide strategy to ensure both staff and students are equipped with the AI capabilities needed for a rapidly evolving digital world. This includes the following three elements:

### AI availability

Aston was an early adopter of mainstream AI tools, rolling out Bing Chat Enterprise (now known as Microsoft Copilot) to all staff in 2023. All students and staff have access to Adobe Creative Cloud software, including AI features, as well as a number of subject- and research-specific tools.

### Institution-wide AI training

Aston's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) team and academic experts co-developed a custom AI training programme, including an accessible AI 101 course for all staff, ensuring consistent baseline AI literacy.

For students, AI training is embedded into the Aston Power Skills initiative. This provides training on four essential skill areas that students must pass, including AI and digital skills. Instead of being delivered as an 'add-on', Power Skills are situated within the curriculum of each course – with course leaders deciding how best to organise delivery for their subject. The curriculum includes the history of AI and reflective tasks tailored to each discipline.

## Grassroots innovation

Aston has also launched a creativity challenge – inviting staff to pitch, 'Dragon's Den style' to the leadership team for project funding. Three of the five funded projects are AI-focused:

1) a project developing more consistent and personalised feedback to students;

2) using a large language model to effectively match funding calls with individual academics and creating a personalised mailshot to alert the academic of each relevant opportunity; and

3) using AI to match students with placement opportunities.

By taking a whole-institution approach that blends broad AI access, embedded training and grassroots innovation, Aston University is building a sustainable culture of confident, responsible AI use. This foundation positions both staff and students to adapt and thrive as AI capabilities continue to evolve across disciplines and professional contexts.

# Conclusion and policy recommendations

The 2025 edition of this Survey highlighted how AI had become embedded within the world of higher education. In the year that has followed, its use has only become further entrenched.

There are numerous results from this year's Survey suggesting that, in 2026, we have reached a somewhat polarised AI landscape. These results include:

❱ the proportion of students who agree their institution encourages AI use (37%) and those who disagree (36%);

❱ the equal distribution of students who felt that AI made them feel more lonely (20%) and less lonely (21%); and

❱ the relatively equal proportion of students that lean towards using traditional sources (33%), using an equal balance of sources (29%) and favouring AI sources (37%).

Further, the qualitative results demonstrate that, even among students who embrace AI, individual learning experiences vary widely. Two contrasting statements from respondents stand out. One student responded:

> *AI tools allowed me to quickly summarise dense readings and generate drafts or outlines for assignments, saving hours of tedious work and letting me focus on critical analysis and deeper understanding.*

And another said:

> *I'm not using my brain at all.*

There is a striking contrast here between a student who is utilising AI to advance their learning and a student who is outsourcing their learning to AI. It is the role of institutions to develop skills within their student bodies to use AI to their advantage, rather than disadvantage, and to provide the impetus for them to do so. The Survey demonstrates that large numbers of students are arriving at higher education already using AI and institutions have adapted to and, in some cases, are now encouraging the use of AI by both staff and students. However, there is much work to be done to level the playing field for students in terms of access to AI and skills development.

There are four further conclusions that can be drawn from the 2026 Survey:

1. Institutions are no longer predominantly sceptical of AI for teaching and learning. However, they are not wholly supportive either. Student perceptions of their institution's attitudes paint a picture of a sector in transition, with fewer students reporting their institution bans or discourages AI use, but respondents are evenly split over whether their institution encourages it.

2. Students like AI because it saves them time, they feel it improves their work and it gives them access to round-the-clock support. However, they remain concerned about being accused of cheating. A growing number of students are also concerned about the environmental impact of AI use.

3. There remain persistent digital divides in both attitudes to AI and competency using it. This is found in terms of subject (Arts and Humanities students are less positive about AI tools); socio-economic group (favouring more advantaged students); and gender (with the gap between men and women having narrowed, but men remaining the more frequent users).

4. There is a gap between Arts and Humanities students and those studying other subject areas, both in their use of AI and their attitudes towards it. Arts and Humanities students are more

sceptical about the usefulness of AI for their future, less likely to have experience using it at school, and less likely to feel their lecturers are helping them to develop their AI skills. However, the subject groupings used in this analysis are broad. There is space for further research into the specific variations of attitudes towards AI among students studying different subjects.

# Recommendations

Institutions should:

1) **Provide structured AI induction and transition support for all students.** A third of students enter higher education without prior experience of using AI. Without structured support, these students risk being disadvantaged. Providing training for all students – this includes clear expectations on the use of AI in assessment and develops critical awareness of the limitations of AI – will ensure students are able to approach their studies with a more even level of AI literacy. A focus on how to use AI to enhance learning, rather than outsourcing it, will be key here.

2) **Consider revamping their curricula to explicitly teach AI knowledge and skills, at both the general and subject-specific levels.** This should include core AI literacy (critical evaluation, ethical awareness and responsible use) as well as discipline-specific applications from coding and data analysis to creative practice and clinical decision-making.

3) **Publish clear, accessible and assessment-specific guidance on AI use.** The Survey shows that institutions are increasingly embracing AI, but students still feel uncertain about what is acceptable. There is a particular anxiety articulated about being falsely accused of cheating. Clear expectations for assessments – that sit within an overarching framework – should be a minimum expectation. Further, going beyond this by facilitating 'AI-free' assessments, alongside assessments that expect students to use AI, will provide clarity and reassurance for students, maintain academic integrity standards and allow students to be assessed on the AI skills they will need in the future. As part of embedding AI in the curriculum (see recommendation 2), provision should be made for students to develop and practise these AI skills before the assessments. However, institutions should also ensure they are continuing to specifically teach traditional skill sets, such as essay writing, that

may be underdeveloped in some students who have already become reliant on AI.

4) **Ensure the AI tools necessary or advantageous for course content or assessment are accessible to all students.** By providing these tools directly to students, institutions can direct them towards more ethical or 'ring-fenced' tools.

5) **Ensure staff have access to AI training – and the time to invest in developing their own skills.** Training should be available to all staff to develop their AI literacy and skills. Providing ongoing opportunities for teaching staff to develop discipline-specific skills in the ever-evolving world of AI will ensure that students leave their courses equipped to use AI in their future careers.

As part of its work to identify gaps in the current evidence base, the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce should:

6) **Support research to understand the impact of students using AI for friendship, company, advice or to tackle loneliness.** This is a burgeoning area of AI use and the impacts on student wellbeing – both positive and negative – need to be monitored and understood.

# Endnotes

1   Josh Freeman, *Provide or punish? Students' views on generative AI in higher education*, HEPI Policy Note 51, February 2024 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/01/provide-or-punish-students-views-on-generative-ai-in-higher-education/**

2   Josh Freeman, *Student generative AI Survey 2025*, HEPI Policy Note 61, February 2025 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-generative-ai-Survey-2025/**

# HEPI

## Report

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**Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is now firmly embedded in the student experience. This third HEPI / Kortext Student Generative AI Survey, based on responses from 1,054 full-time undergraduates in the UK, shows that AI use among students is now near universal and continues to reshape learning, assessment and institutional practice.**