

10:15am, Bethany's student story

For the past few years as a student, all I've heard is "we have to move with the time and acknowledge AI" or "AI isn't going away no matter how much we try and ignore it."

AI development came in waves, and then suddenly influxes of AI tools like Claude, Perplexity, Snapchat AI, Gemini, Copilot and of course the fan favourite, ChatGPT managed to seep their way into our everyday lives and then into our study.

But despite this journey there was apprehension about these tools that support students in the academic experience.

I spent many evenings furiously typing away and deleting sentences at my laptop trying to get my essays to fit in the word count (I am a certified yapper) and couldn't quite figure out what to delete.

There were times where I debated about throwing chunks of my essay into our good friend ChatGPT just to get it to fit or where I weighed up the costs of losing marks because I wrote too much.

Trying to get hold of any academic support at that time of night is impossible and of course I wouldn't expect anyone to be working then. But ChatGPT works exactly the same hours I do, whether it's 9am or 3am.

So yes, I turned to ChatGPT for help.

I asked the simple question "please could you suggest ways that I could reduce the number of words I use."

ChatGPT suggested using conjunctions (big no), making things plural – I did this one, and I got quite close to the word limit.

So here I used another AI to ask a question as there was no one else to turn to get support for reducing my word count. I didn't want to lose valuable content but I didn't want to lose marks for being over the limit.

And when it comes to how my friends use AI, I've sat with them and they've asked ChatGPT to reword their assignment briefs as the layout is confusing or they've used it to support them planning their essay or structure.

Others have used AI to identify key areas that will support them to achieve all the learning objectives when completing assignments and essays or even exam preparation.

Students are turning to AI to create scenarios to support their learning by providing a source to apply their knowledge. Yet despite all this, we're repeatedly told AI is wrong or we're cheating.

There is an expectation that we must know how to solve a problem or pluck the knowledge from somewhere but when somewhere is not available, what is the next step?

We're encouraged to seek academic advice and support but when students are working part-time jobs to fund their study and their shifts coincide with office hours and their lecturers' email replies are too slow, what do they do?

Sit and twiddle my thumbs because there is no one available?

Hope I can ask someone else to explain something to me a different way and I hope I get it this time?

We're not using AI to write assignments because we're lazy or we left it to the last minute.

We're using AI to build upon the knowledge we have and seek help when help isn't there.

We're using AI to give another perspective on a problem we've spent weeks trying to solve.

We've used it to summarise a textbook chapter as we didn't have time to read it between working shifts at full-time job, whilst attending my placements and conducting my caring responsibilities at home.

I didn't have time to read it as I was catching up on some much-needed rest on the 3-hour commute to campus after waking up at 3am to catch a flight to make the journey in 2 hours instead of 7.

We're using AI to support our learning, not in spite of it.

I spend so much time advocating for students using their initiative to find answers in the moment when staff are not available. Surely this is the innovation we want our students to graduate with.

And with university resources stretched to their limits, we are in need of more support for students at "unsociable" hours.

And you're probably thinking "we've got guidance for that" – the document you're referring to is probably a 30 page policy, buried somewhere on the university webpage. No one has time for reading a policy when all you need is a simple yes or no.

Now, I missed the initial email from Mack inviting me to speak today, and I also missed the second one.

However, after a quick 15-minute chat last week and the task of writing roughly 500 words about the pressures students face and why they turn to AI for help, I was able to quickly turn around a short speech. So to finish I have a question for you: which part of this was created by AI?

11:45am, Gemma's student story

Studying a creative degree at university and doing a creative writing dissertation, I didn't want to use AI to replace my ideas.

I saw it as writer's fraud, and I wanted to see myself reflected in my work and take pride in that.

And this was re-enforced to me by my teachers and peers.

In my final year, a teacher told us that despite our essay being AI-supported, she would be "disappointed" in the class if they used AI because we should be "using our brains."

However, I did use Grammarly, as I was losing marks on spelling and punctuation. I needed to use it to support my learning and I could justify it in my head that this didn't touch my ideas or creativity. But this wasn't something I voiced loudly to my teachers or peers.

I am concerned that AI is going to cause people to devalue human creativity but, I haven't knowingly seen AI out-compete human creativity. Not yet at least.

However there's no escaping that AI clearly has uses as a tool. All the research shows that our students use AI primarily for accessibility, productivity, and to save time.

Their lives are busy, busier than they'd want them to be. So they use AI to cope. What a university might consider cheating is the new coping.

But there is an identifiable moral line our students walk when it comes to choosing how they use AI.

Not only is it a moral quandary of integrity, but it can also be labelled as cheating, and it has very real consequences.

My friend is currently studying a humanities masters and was recently called to a daunting viva where she was accused of using AI in her dissertation, except she hadn't.

And there was a real possibility she wasn't going to be able to graduate with her cohort if the investigation wasn't carried out in time.

Anxiety levels were high, she was stressed, worried, all her work was in disrepute and the idea of graduating with her friends was slipping out of reach.

Another one of my friends is studying business. She heard the story of my friend on the humanities Masters and panicked.

So she used AI but not to generate content but instead uses an AI checker to check her essays for AI that she hasn't even used. The threat of a disciplinary panel and being unknowingly accused of using it, wasn't worth the stress.

We know students are using it, we wouldn't be here today if we didn't think that, but the trust between staff and students to discuss how and why and when they're using it isn't there.

Students are scared to admit they use AI. But would students have been scared to say they were using the internet, Google or the calculator a decade or two ago? I'm not so sure.

A student on placement told me they're being actively encouraged to use AI in their workplace, they're amazed by all the skills they're learning and the efficiency of their time.

They're freed up to think creatively, to think critically and to do the human part of their job, not to sit at a desk all day staring at numbers.

But if AI becomes an expected digital literacy skill, there's some serious knowledge and skill gaps for students when they are applying for and entering the workplace.

Students care deeply about employability in a turbulent job market, so should universities. And AI skills need to be part of that core offer for those who want to explore them.

At our Guild, our Education Officer Francis has run an AI assembly to consult student voices and bring them in front of University professionals.

Whilst most students were interested, one student had not used AI, and when offered a hypothetical AI tool by the university, he said he wouldn't use it as it doesn't interest him.

It's not a one size fits all. Other student concerns were data privacy, deepfakes and transparency of staff use.

We are gaining nothing by being divided on how students should be using AI and a lack of clear guidance and fear mongering is preventing students from being able to freely engage in the discourse.

We should have clear guidance on AI over different course disciplines.

We need to equip all of our students with the knowledge to engage critically on AI as a topic.

We must platform student voices to inform decision making at university level.

Because right now, students like me are left to figure it out alone – caught between the fear of being penalised and the fear of being left behind.

1:45pm, Jeena's student story

Today, I want to tell you a story about a student.

She's an international student studying in the UK. She worked hard to get here.

She left her home, her family, and invested a huge amount of money and hope into what she believed would be the opportunity of a lifetime.

Like many international students, English isn't her first language. So, she works harder than most people realise; rereading sentences, checking grammar, trying to make sure her work sounds "academic enough."

One day, while preparing an assignment, she asks her tutor a simple question:

"How can I improve my grammar?"

The advice was simple.

Use tools. Use technology. Make sure the work reads professionally.

So, she does exactly that.

She uses AI to help correct grammar and improve clarity. Not to generate ideas. Not to write the assignment. Just to make sure her English reads properly.

She submits her work to the highest standard she can, just like any other assignment.

And then a few weeks after submitting, something happens that she doesn't expect.

She receives an email that reads "academic misconduct"

Specifically, it says she's committed misconduct because she used AI and now she's confused.

Because the same technology that was suggested as a tool to help her communicate is now being used as evidence against her. She doesn't fully understand what she did wrong. And when she asks questions, the answers are not always clear.

What exactly counts as AI assistance? Where is the line between editing and misconduct? If English is not your first language, how are you supposed to navigate these grey areas?

For many international students, that line isn't clear at all.

But the consequences are made very clear.

The lines are drawn the moment the academic misconduct process begins, but they're not drawn clearly to prevent students from getting to this point.

And for an international student, this process doesn't just affect grades.

It affects immigration status.

It affects visas.

It affects whether they can stay in the country at all.

Because while the investigation continues, everything else stops.

Resits cannot be booked, results cannot be finalised, graduation cannot be confirmed.

And the entire time they're in that academic misconduct process they hear the tick tock, tick tock of their visa clock.

I've spoken to students whose final dissertation submissions, their PGMPs, were flagged for AI use. Not proven misconduct. Just flagged.

But that alone meant they couldn't book their graduation. The investigation took weeks. Sometimes months.

By the time the outcome arrived, the graduation deadline had passed.

They had completed their degree, but the anxiety and uncertainty meant they never walked across the stage. They missed that opportunity to celebrate with friends, with family, and when the whole experience felt tarnished.

And in some cases, the pressure is even greater.

If the process runs close to the visa expiry date, the student may not even be allowed to stay in the UK while the case is resolved.

They are asked to return home.

Imagine this.

You've spent years studying here.

You're accused of something you don't fully understand and whilst the investigation is still ongoing, you are told to leave the country and appeal from home.

One student I spoke to recently told me something that has stayed with me.

She said:

“I feel like the system already decided I was guilty before I even had the chance to explain.”

Her case began because an AI detection tool suggested that parts of her work might be AI-generated.

A detection tool.

We know these tools are imperfect. Many universities acknowledge this.

Yet students often feel that these tools are treated as evidence rather than indicators.

So, the question we need to ask ourselves is simple.

Is this the system we intended to create?

A system where students are encouraged to use new technologies; but not clearly guided on how?

A system where confusion becomes misconduct?

And where international students, already navigating language barriers and immigration pressures, carry the highest risk?

This conversation about AI in education cannot just be about technology.

It has to be about fairness. It has to be about clarity.

And it has to recognise that behind every misconduct case is not just a piece of software or a policy question.

There is a student.

A real person.

A real person with big ambitions and dreams, trying to succeed in a system they believe in.

A system and a course that was sold and promised to them.

And sometimes that student is left wondering whether that system believes in them too.

Thank you.

3:40pm, Lee-Ann's student story

When I entered higher education at 35, I didn't have a diagnosis, a learning support plan, or even the vocabulary to explain why learning had always felt harder for me.

The only tool I had was the free basic version of Grammarly, and I clung to it like a life raft. Grammarly, extenuating circumstances and just me, guessing my way through academic life and assuming everyone else found it as easy as they made it look.

I never left education after that. I stayed.

I moved through it slowly, awkwardly at times, always feeling like I was piecing together a map everyone else had been given from day one.

I stayed because I loved learning, even when learning didn't seem to love me back.

One moment from those early years still sits sharply in my mind.

We were on a coach coming back from a module trip when someone decided to turn the journey into an impromptu quiz. Answers flew across the bus, confident, polished, immediate.

Meanwhile, my brain was still processing the first question while the next two had already been asked. I sank into my seat thinking quietly: maybe I don't belong here.

And as those words sank in on the coach, that was the moment when I first heard the words ChatGPT.

Someone laughed and said, “If you’re stuck, just ask ChatGPT, it’s quicker than any of us but be careful it’s cheating especially in History.”

And I remember thinking: There’s a tool that can answer in seconds what takes me minutes or hours, but I can’t touch it.”

I am now 40, juggling single parenthood, full-time caring responsibilities, and postgraduate study. I finally received my diagnosis in that time too - dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD. Everything clicked into place. Suddenly, the years of slow processing, overwhelm, exhaustion, and self-criticism weren’t character flaws.

They were symptoms. They were clues.

But what should have been a moment of relief quickly became complicated.

Because when my cohort saw the support, I was now entitled to, the tools, the adjustments, the recognition of how my brain actually works, the atmosphere shifted.

When they saw I now had Grammarly, I heard: “must be nice to get a free editor.” “That’s basically cheating, it’s a form of AI” they told me.

When they saw me using an AI tool called Glean, someone joked, “must be nice, your laptop does the learning for you.”

And when I was finally allowed to access extenuating circumstances without having to justify my entire life, someone said, “I wish I had an excuse like that.”

As though fifteen silent years of struggling had been a luxury. As though these tools put me ahead, instead of finally bringing me to the same starting line as everyone else.

But here's the truth that unsettled people the most: Even all of those supports combined couldn't do what ChatGPT could.

Grammarly fixed spelling but couldn't help me deliver that perfect sentence. Glean helped me process lectures. Extenuating circumstances gave me breathing space.

But ChatGPT did something none of them ever had: it helped me understand.

It slowed academic language down to a pace my brain could breathe in.

It let me ask the same question ten different ways. It turned my scattered thoughts into something structured. For the first time in education, I didn't feel behind. I felt level.

ChatGPT became the most useful reasonable adjustment that I was never offered.

AI became something else entirely.

It began helping me understand things no one ever explained. What am I entitled to as a single parent? As a full-time carer? As a postgraduate navigating systems not designed for people like me?

It helped me write letters, shape emails, and even build PowerPoints on days when my brain simply wouldn't cooperate. It made me feel like I wasn't wasting people's time. Like I didn't have to apologise for needing more time, more explanation, more scaffolding.

But there's another truth too: I am incredibly detached some days.

Being a student can be lonely. On days without a single face-to-face interaction, everything feels heavier. I'm someone who fills their cup through connection, through people.

And strangely, AI became a buffer.

Not a replacement, but a soft landing on days when the world felt too fast or too far away.

What all of this has shown me is simple: AI isn't here to replace learning. It's exposing the places where learning was never accessible in the first place.

For some people, AI looks like a shortcut. But for people like me it feels like finally being invited into a room everyone else walked into without thinking.

If we truly want AI to enrich education, then access must be equal, and students must have the power to drive the amendments that shape AI policy. Because understanding where AI can help and what must stay human is the only way we create a learning environment that works for everyone.

No student should wonder if they belong at university, because when we get AI literacy and assessment right, the answer can finally be yes. Yes, you do.