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From confusion to clarity: Helping first year students understand and navigate university GenAI guidance

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Abstract

This vignette shares the experience of implementing a school-wide intervention to help new students navigate the complex, and rapidly evolving, policies and guidance around Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage. Details of the intervention will be provided, and the experience of its implementation will be discussed. The dissemination method and feedback received will also be shared to support and enable others to follow a similar approach.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), student support, assessment, AI Assessment Scale (AIAS)

Introduction

Universities are increasingly recognising the need to embrace Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in teaching and assessment to enable graduates to develop the relevant knowledge and skills for an AI-enhanced workplace (QAA 2024; Vettori & Warm, 2025). However, to protect the integrity and quality of their qualifications, universities must also develop policies and practices to guard against GenAI misuse. Interpreting these policies and practices can be particularly challenging for first year students who come from a wide range of backgrounds and with variable experience of using GenAI. Further underpinning the need for clear guidance is the recognition that whilst new students are often socially digitally experienced, the often-made assumption that they are digitally experienced for learning is incorrect (Morgan, 2023). To maximise learning, and avoid the daunting, but rapidly increasing (Grove, 2024; Goodier, 2025), academic misconduct process for AI misuse, it is important for universities to support students in understanding these policies and practices.

The particular problem of GenAI guidance

Communicating acceptable use of GenAI is challenging. Many universities have moved away from the initial knee jerk reaction of 'Don't use GenAI!' to defining what is, and what is not, acceptable. This change in approach is complex and circumstance-specific. A dichotomous 'is' or 'is not' allowed is also increasingly being superseded by an AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) which sets a clear framework around the use of GenAI (Perkins et al., 2024). The one in use at the Robert Gordon University, based on Perkins et al. (2024) is briefly outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Robert Gordon University AI Assessment Scale

AIAS's are, however, open to wide interpretation by students, and application may be variable depending on the specific aims and context of the activity or assessment. Communicating expectations to students is therefore important to encourage responsible GenAI use that supports learning, but which doesn't result in misuse. The timing and format of this communication is also important - during first year induction, or through sharing an online resource, may initially come to mind. Our own experience has found this ineffective; online resources are often ignored, and students quickly reach limits for digesting and engaging with new information during induction. An alternative communication mechanism was therefore developed to encourage interaction in understanding the requirements and nuances of GenAI policy and practices.

Communicating GenAI policies and practices

The alternative communication came in the form of a bespoke virtual learning environment (Moodle) quiz which combined explanations and examples with multiple-choice and 'select the missing word' style questions to test understanding. To ensure engagement, this quiz was attached to the drop box of a first semester module for all students. This meant the student's drop box was not released, and they could not submit their summative assessment, until they had achieved a mark of 100% on the quiz. Students were allowed unlimited attempts, and a small amount of time was dedicated to the quiz within one teaching period to encourage early completion. The timing of the quiz was carefully considered, with this being done a few weeks into semester one, once first year students had settled into the university environment and had relevant context from initial teaching experiences and information on assessment requirements. This was specifically timed to take place post-induction to ensure student focus was solely on the GenAI material itself and not competing for attention with other induction resources.

The quiz opens with a brief explanation of what GenAI is providing exemplar uses within the world of business before communicating and assessing understanding in the following key areas:

- Explanation to aid understanding of how GenAI use is permitted within any given assignment.
- Where use is permitted, further explanation on how and when that use is permitted. This also covers an explanation of the university GenAI Assessment Scale and how GenAI use must be acknowledged.
- Explanation of assessments which do not permit use of GenAI.
- Detail of the implications of using GenAI when it is not permitted or using it in ways which deviate from permitted use.

In closing, the quiz provides links to university support for writing resources including advice on permitted tools for writing support (Turnitin Draft Coach) and further advice around academic integrity.

Feedback

Feedback from students on the usefulness of the quiz has been very positive. Tutors who operationalized the completion of the quiz within teaching space reported positively on how this was received by students with many students noting new understandings. In addition, the completion of the quiz in class was found to generate useful open dialogue around GenAI use generally and within the context of the specific module. Finally, since the introduction of the quiz, the number of cases referred through the academic misconduct process based on concerns of GenAI misuse, have more than halved. Although further research is needed to confirm the impact of the quiz on this reduction, the feedback available suggests that the quiz is a key contributing factor.

Future developments

The GenAI quiz has evolved annually and is now in its third year of use. Developments over this time have been the introduction of a section on how GenAI is being used in the workplace and the importance of developing the necessary skills to succeed in this environment. Changes have been made to reflect developing university policies or practices, such as moving from a dichotomous AI being allowed or not allowed in assessments and the introduction of the AIAS scale. New first-year students will continue to complete an updated quiz each year. In addition, when there are key changes made to policy or practice continuing students will also complete an updated quiz in future academic years. Continual and regular reflection on the quiz content will be required moving forward to respond to the fast-paced changes in AI and specifically thinking on AI in education.

Final thoughts

GenAI and understanding of its potential value and risks to education, is evolving at high speed. In this environment, where universities need to make regular changes to their policies and practices, educators are encouraged to take an active approach, as outlined in this paper, to ensure students understand these changing requirements. Regular reflection and engagement in current AI discourse is also important to ensure content remains best practice with current suggested useful resources being the recent book by Illingworth and Forsyth (2025) entitled ‘GenAI in Higher Education: Redefining Teaching and Learning’ and resources shared by QAA (2026).

Biographies

Dr Shonagh Douglas is Principal Lecturer for Academic Development and Student Experience at Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University. In this role she works on various initiatives to develop the attributes of students and to improve student experience. Shonagh is also an educational researcher with publications across a range of mediums, including journal articles and various educational blogs.

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Erica Cargill is Associate Dean for Academic Development and Student Experience at Aberdeen Business School. She has overall responsibility for the delivery of curricula from undergraduate to MBA, working with around 3000 students

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