Artificial Intelligence Report

February 2026

Contents

Privacy Statement

Exeter Students' Guild is committed to the protection of the personal data of students. All data in this report has been given with full understanding of its usage and consent for publication.

All data has been handled, stored, and shared in line with GDPR guidance. For further information, please see our the Guild's privacy policy.

For any further information, please contact insights@exeterguild.com.

Referencing

If you wish to reference this report, please use 'Exeter Students' Guild' as the author/organisation.

Key Dates

Survey Window: 02/02/2026 – 15/02/2026
Report Completed: 06/03/2026
Report Published: 10/03/2026

Introduction

Survey Superheroes gathers monthly feedback from 1000 student volunteers regarding their opinions on a variety of pre-planned and developing issues in exchange for financial compensation.

The Student's Guild Insight Team uses this feedback to influence decisions by the University, inform our projects and empower students to create change for their community.

One of our key topics for February was Artificial Intelligence. We wanted to find out:

1. How much experience do students have with AI?
2. How are students using AI in their studies?
3. How is AI being used by students for mental health?

This report will analyse the feedback given in relation to the above questions and provide recommendations for both the Student's Guild and the University of Exeter to action in order to improve [topic].

All text in quotations marks are comments provided by students showing their individual thoughts and opinions; they have been included as they largely reflect the quotes within the same topic.

Summary

84% of students reported having used ChatGPT, with Google Gemini (39%), and Microsoft Copilot (35%) being the net most popular AI tools (Fig. 1). The most common reasons for using AI were because it was a fast and easy option (31%), using it for academic purposes (28%) and generally feeling at a potential disadvantage in not using it as well it being automatically integrated into most search engines with its use recommended (Fig. 2). Whereas, students that choose not to use AI cite reasons such as the environmental impacts (58%), preferring self-reliance (20%), and ethical concerns (11%) (Fig. 3).

The majority of students (60%) reported having no experience using AI prior to starting university (Fig. 4). Most students (79%) said that they have been provided with false information by AI in the past, with only 11% stating that they have never received false information from AI, and 10% of students who were unsure; highlighting a need for the university to address a potential AI literacy gap amongst students (Fig. 6).

The most common responses for how students use AI in their studies were to help understand a concept (71%), to correct grammar (46%), for feedback on a draft (45%), to assist with research (45%) and to summarise readings (43%) with only 8% of students never having used AI for academic work (Fig. 7). A relatively high proportion of students across all faculties indicated either the support was not helpful or that they haven't received support but would like to (Fig. 9). Approximately 35-42% of students in each faculty strongly agreed, with a further 40% somewhat agreeing, that AI usage had been clearly explained to them; however around 10% of students in each faculty disagreed (Fig. 10).

A majority of students (60%) reported that AI skills are an important part of their education, compared to 24% who do not (Fig. 11). The majority of students across all faculties agree that AI is replacing the use of their critical analysis skills (Fig. 13). 37% of students reported worrying fairly to very often about their work being flagged or penalised due to AI use, with 37% who rarely or never think about these consequences and 26% who do not think about this very often. 33% of students would not change anything about how AI is currently used on their course, but 13% of students reported needing clearer guidelines and 6% of students feeling that it should either be banned or made harder to use.

39% of students reported that they hadn't used AI for any non-academic purposes (Fig. 16). Among those that do, the most common reasons included seeking advice on a personal issue (18%) and understanding medical symptoms (18%), as well as using AI to gain insight into their emotions, with some students also using it to feel less alone or seek help for depression (4%) (Fig. 16).The main reasons as to why students don't use AI is because they value interpersonal connection for personal issues, have data privacy concerns, or have more ethical or environmental worries (Fig. 18). Students that do use AI for mental health or medical problems most commonly reported it is due to its accessibility and

constant availability (18%), quick responses (17%) and that it is a cheaper than therapy (5%) (Fig. 19).

40% of students reported that they probably would have used AI for mental health or medical advice even if they had not encountered it in a learning environment (Fig. 20). The majority of students (55%) would appreciate workshops or training on how to use AI, 9% want clearer, faculty-specific guidelines and support on how to not get falsely accused or how to deal with that process (Fig. 21). 10% of students feel that AI should be banned at university, with 10% citing environmental and ethical concerns as further reasons not to use it (Fig. 21).

Analysis

1. How much experience do students have with AI?

Which AI tools have you used?
Please choose all that apply, including tools you've used outside of studying

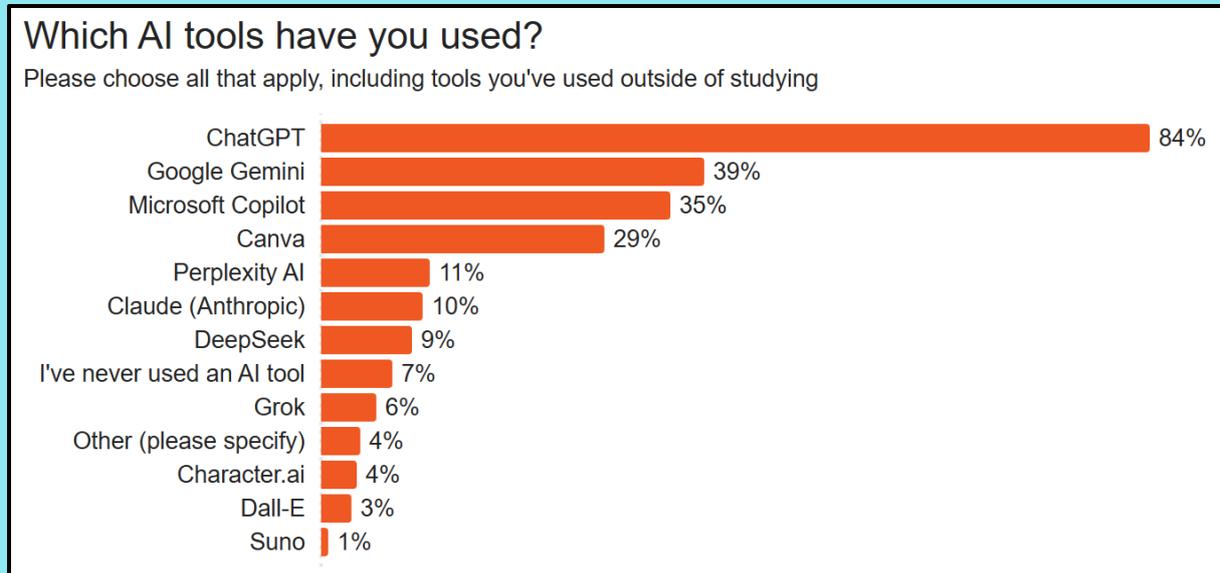| Tool	Percentage
ChatGPT	84%
Google Gemini	39%
Microsoft Copilot	35%
Canva	29%
Perplexity AI	11%
Claude (Anthropic)	10%
DeepSeek	9%
I've never used an AI tool	7%
Grok	6%
Other (please specify)	4%
Character.ai	4%
Dall-E	3%
Suno	1%

Figure 1 – Question 1: Which AI tools have you used?

84% of students reported having used ChatGPT at least once, making it the most popular AI tool among University of Exeter students (Fig. 1). This could be due to the widespread promotion of ChatGPT or because students have less familiarity with other AI resources. 39% of students reported using Google Gemini, with an additional 35% having tried Microsoft Copilot (Fig. 1).

29% of students stated that they had used Canva, which differs slightly from the other AI tools listed (Fig. 1). Canva is a graphic design tool, rather than an AI chatbot, enabling users to create posters, presentations, and videos, which can be useful for certain coursework assignments. Similarly, 3% of students cited Dall-E, an image-generating AI, which may have been used for both academic and recreational purposes (Fig. 1).

Character.ai was reported by 4% of students, a surprising finding, as it differs from other AI tools by focusing on persona-based dialogues, allowing users to engage with AI-generated characters with distinct personalities (Fig. 1).

What motivated you to first use AI tools?
Open text response themes

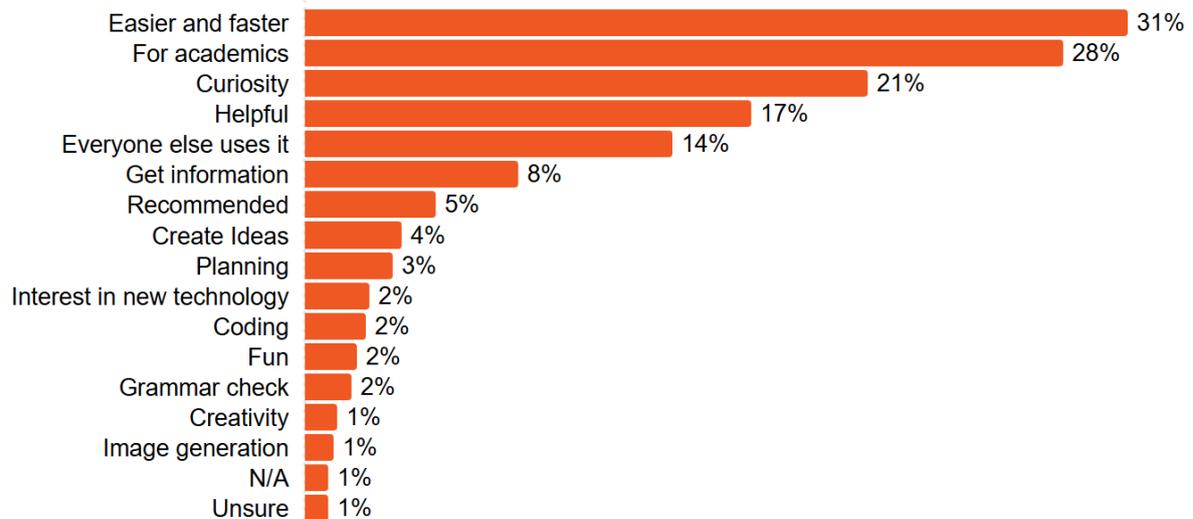| Theme	Percentage
Easier and faster	31%
For academics	28%
Curiosity	21%
Helpful	17%
Everyone else uses it	14%
Get information	8%
Recommended	5%
Create Ideas	4%
Planning	3%
Interest in new technology	2%
Coding	2%
Fun	2%
Grammar check	2%
Creativity	1%
Image generation	1%
N/A	1%
Unsure	1%

Figure 2 – Question 2: What motivated you to first use AI tools?

When asked what motivated them to first use AI tools, 31% of students reported doing so because it was a fast and easy option (Fig. 2). Specifically, some students preferred to use AI to ask questions rather than consulting their professors, while others found it beneficial when they were unsure how to phrase their questions.

"It provides fast information. I have specific questions, and then I have the precise answer. Also, if I am not sure how to ask for something, AI still understands the idea of what I want, which make even easier the way for researching." ~ Masters, HLS

"Sometimes it is easier to ask AI a 'stupid question' rather than asking a lecturer. I also have had some 'AI-Integrated' courseworks that require me to use artificial intelligence. It is is also quite helpful with checking answers sometimes." ~ Year 3, ESE

"To make my life easier, also feel as if I'd be at a disadvantage not using AI when so many other people are and it affects quality of work and marking." ~ Masters, ESE

An additional 28% of students stated that they used AI for academic purposes, including summarising readings, correcting grammar, or breaking down complex themes (Fig. 2).

"I've never agreed with them, but really struggle with my focus. I tried using it to summarize a reading but it was unhelpful and too vague so will not be using it again, especially because of the environmental damage it causes." ~ Masters, HASS

"Undergrad studies first led me to use AI tools, starting with sites like Quillbot and Grammarly for enhancing my work, but also led to tools like ChatGPT and Gemini to help me look for information and gain knowledge about particular topics." ~ Masters, HLS

"It was helpful explaining and breaking down difficult concepts from school work, and it also helped me with homework during secondary school. Overall I just found it a helpful tool to aid my learning." ~ Year 1, HLS

"Hearing other students talk about how easy it made certain repetitive and pretty menial tasks. Also time pressures around certain assignments or pieces of writing. When it comes to using it to draft emails, I wanted to make sure I came across as good as possible so would use it to critique my work." ~ Year 4, HLS

Overall, initial motivations for using AI included feeling at a potential disadvantage if they did not use it, being recommended to use it, or being "forced" to do so through assignment specifications or the automatic integration of AI into most current search engines.

Why do you choose not to use AI tools?

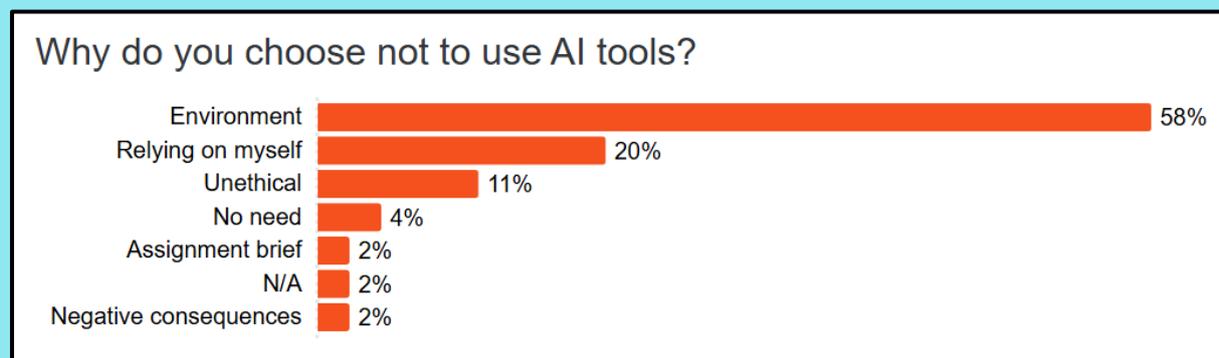|	
Environment	58%
Relying on myself	20%
Unethical	11%
No need	4%
Assignment brief	2%
N/A	2%
Negative consequences	2%

Figure 3 – Question 3: Why do you choose not to use AI tools?

On the other hand, when asked why they choose not to use AI, the environment (58%), relying on themselves (20%), and believing it to be unethical (11%) were the most common themes mentioned (Fig. 3).

Many students reported that using AI goes directly against their morals due to the ethical concerns surrounding plagiarism of original work, job displacement, and data privacy. Others have significant worries about its impact on the environment.

"I don't agree with using AI. I think it raises ethical concerns, both for the environment and for people, and I don't like to use it in an academic setting as I feel like it doesn't allow genuine learning to take place" ~ Year 2, HASS

"Terrible for independent thought and critical thinking. Terrible for the environment. Scalps and steals information. Against all of my morals." ~ Masters, HLS

"I purposely avoid using generative AI as many factors about it go against my values. I disagree with its processing of all public material when people have not opted into its use (i.e. copyright issues, plagiarism of original work and art, job displacement). Another part of why I am against it is because of the significant environmental consequences." ~ Year 2, HASS

Other students reported a large dissatisfaction with how AI use has become more normalised, as well as a greater confidence in their own skillset compared to using AI, and concerns about receiving inaccurate information.

"I hate how reliant and accepted casual AI use has become. you can find the same information from actual trusted resources by doing some quick research." ~ Year 1, HASS

"Confidence and understanding. I like to use my own brain power and critical thinking skills." ~ Masters, HLS

"I'd rather do my own research on things, so I know what I find out is likely to be true." ~ Year 1, HASS

Generally, students who don't use AI cited external factors, such as environmental concerns, whereas those who reported using AI do so for more personal reasons, including improving their academic work. A grey area exists for students who use AI due to being at a potential disadvantage, essentially being pressured into using it.

Did you have experience using AI in a learning setting before starting university?

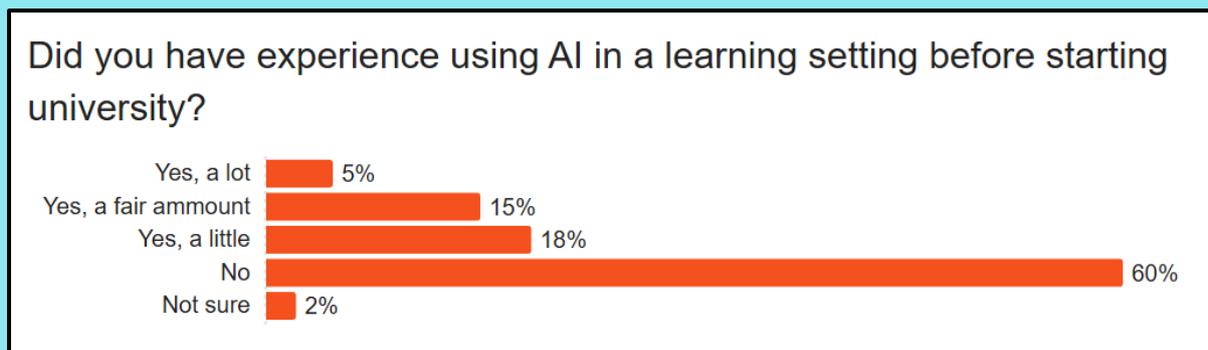|	
Yes, a lot	5%
Yes, a fair ammount	15%
Yes, a little	18%
No	60%
Not sure	2%

Figure 4 – Question 5: Did you have experience using AI in a learning setting before starting university?

The overwhelming majority of students (60%) reported having no prior experience using AI before starting university (Fig. 4). While this may initially suggest a lack of digital preparedness, this result may actually be attributed to the relatively recent development of accessible AI tools. Many widely used generative AI platforms, such as ChatGPT, only became publicly available in the past few years, meaning that exposure during secondary education would have been limited. Furthermore, it is also possible that a significant number of respondents are in their later years of study and therefore completed much of their schooling before AI tools were widely integrated into regular life. On the other hand, many students may have unknowingly interacted with AI tools, including recommendation systems or automated feedback tools, without identifying them as AI, leading to potential underreporting.

18% of students reported that they had previously only used AI in a small amount (Fig. 4). This limited usage may be a result of the less advanced and accessible AI tools at the time.

Only 5% of students used AI quite a lot before university, which suggests that prior engagement with AI is uncommon (Fig. 4). This group of students may have had more experience due to an innate interest in technology, higher digital literacy, access to more resource-rich learning environments, or being educated in different countries with different AI advancements.

Did you have experience using AI in a learning setting before starting university?

	Yes, a lot	Yes, a fair ammount	Yes, a little	No	Not sure
UK		10%	18%	67%	
International (Rest of World)	15%	38%	17%	28%	
International (EU)	14%	14%	27%	41%	5%

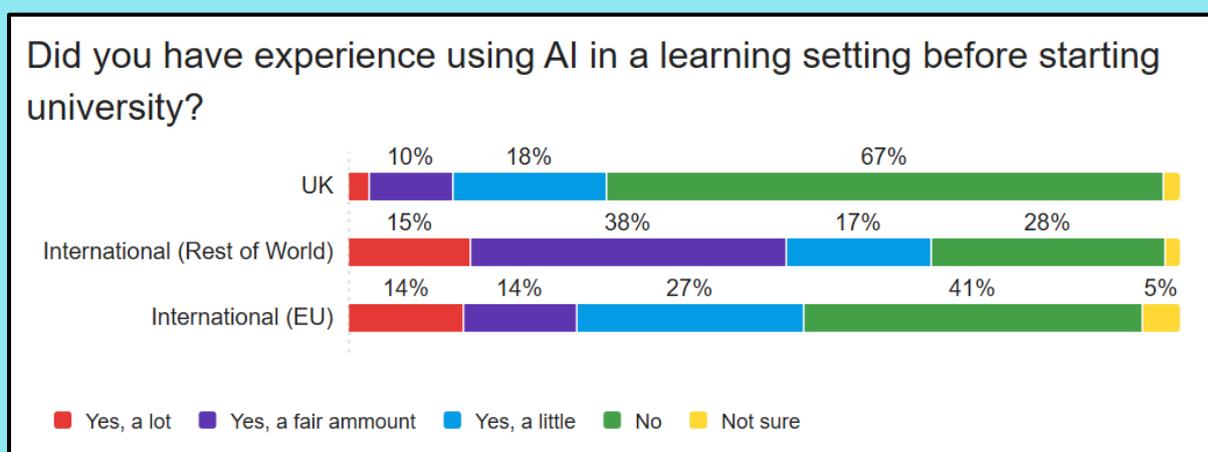Legend: ■ Yes, a lot ■ Yes, a fair ammount ■ Yes, a little ■ No ■ Not sure

Figure 5 – Question 5: Did you have experience using AI in a learning setting before starting university? (Breakout: Domicile)

When analysed by domicile, notable differences appear (Fig. 5). International students reported significantly higher levels of prior AI use compared to UK students, with 15% of students from the rest of the world and 14% from Europe indicating more frequent engagement before university (Fig. 5). Specifically, students outside Europe reported the highest proportion using AI a fair amount (38%) (Fig. 5). This may be due to an earlier adoption of AI technologies in certain education systems and day to day life, for example in countries in Asia or in the United States.

Conversely, UK students cited the highest proportion of individuals with no prior AI use (67%) (Fig. 5). This could be attributed to a slower integration of accessible AI platforms or a more cautious stance to emerging digital technologies.

Overall, these findings suggest that prior AI experience may be shaped by educational context and geographic background.
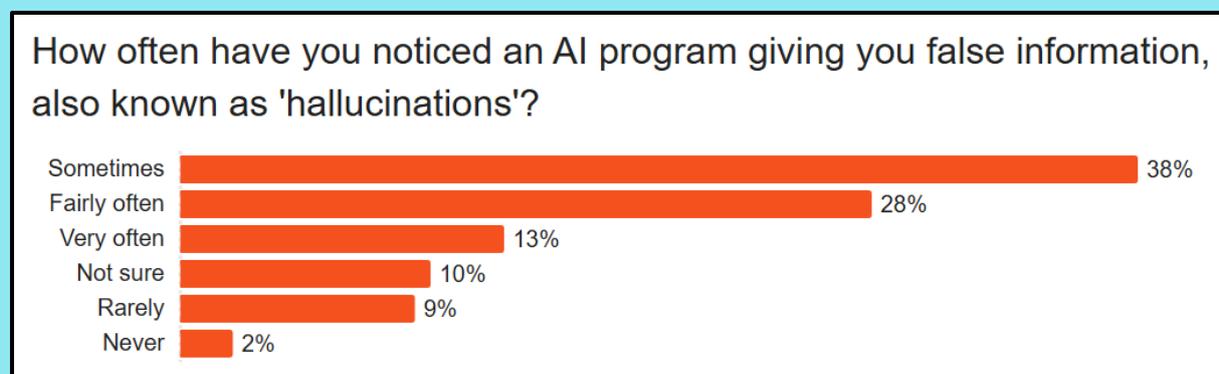

Figure 6 – Question 8: How often have you noticed an AI program giving you false information, also known as hallucinations?

A substantial majority of students (79%) reported that AI has provided them with false information in the past (Fig. 6). On one hand, this high percentage reinforces concerns regarding the reliability of AI-generated information and highlights the risks of reliance without verification. On the other hand, it also implies that many students possess sufficient critical awareness to recognise inaccuracies. A more serious concern arises for those who may lack the critical thinking abilities necessary to distinguish credible information from false outputs.

11% of students stated that AI has rarely or never given them false information (Fig. 6). While this may reflect a positive user experience, it could also suggest a blind acceptance of AI outputs. More concerning is the 10% of students who were unsure whether AI has given them a false output (Fig. 6). This uncertainty may reflect limited digital literacy or a lack of confidence in AI-generated content that needs to be addressed.

Overall, these findings highlight a potential gap in AI literacy among students. The University, therefore, needs to prioritise AI education of students, ensuring that they have the necessary skills to use AI responsibly and to avoid potential academic misconduct or general harm.

2. How are students using AI in their studies?

Having examined students' prior exposure to AI and their perceptions of its reliability, we decided to ask how students currently use AI in their studies, whether that be for idea generation, grammar, or research. We also explored whether they have received any guidance from the University about AI usage and how they feel about the rising utilisation of AI in academic environments.

What have you used AI for during your studies so far?
Please choose all that apply

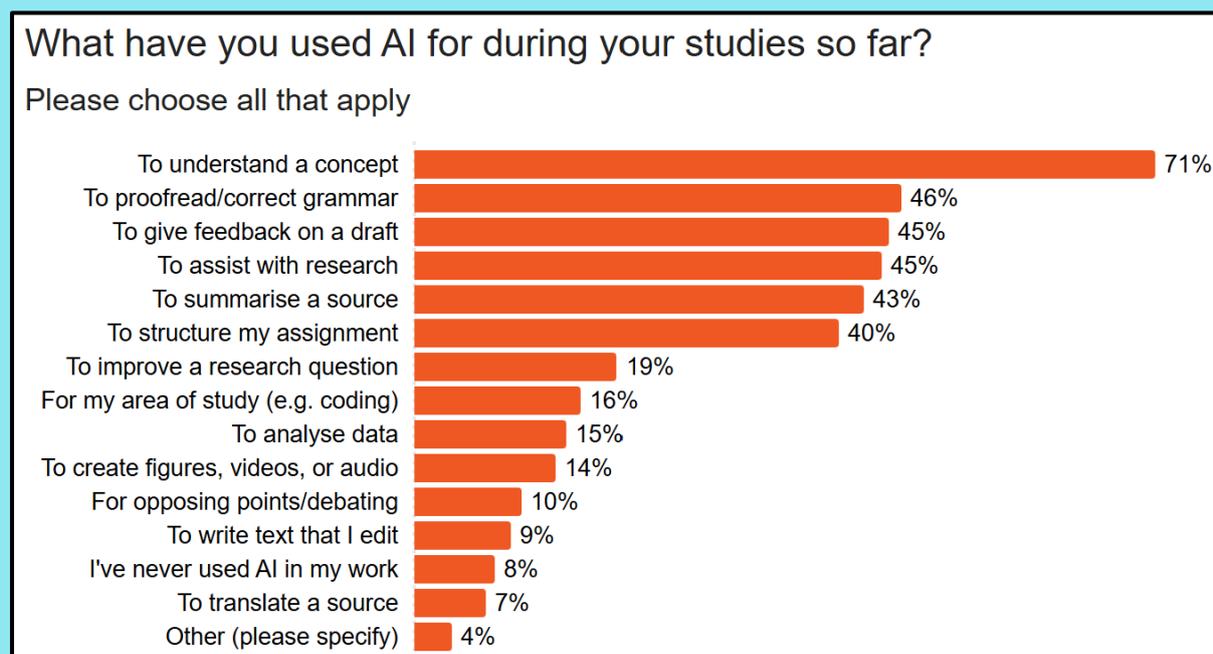| Category	Percentage
To understand a concept	71%
To proofread/correct grammar	46%
To give feedback on a draft	45%
To assist with research	45%
To summarise a source	43%
To structure my assignment	40%
To improve a research question	19%
For my area of study (e.g. coding)	16%
To analyse data	15%
To create figures, videos, or audio	14%
For opposing points/debating	10%
To write text that I edit	9%
I've never used AI in my work	8%
To translate a source	7%
Other (please specify)	4%

Figure 7 – Question 4: What have you used AI for during your studies so far?

Students were asked how they have used AI in their studies, with the most common response being to help understand a concept (71%) (Fig. 7). This suggests that students are primarily engaging with AI as a learning support tool rather than a task shortcut. The use of AI for these clarifications may indicate a potential nervousness or embarrassment surrounding asking questions in real life, as well as a potential rise in the need for more personalised explanations. Reliance on AI also raises questions about the delivery of course material, the openness of professors, and the willingness of students to engage with the learning material.

Other frequently cited uses included correcting grammar (46%) and receiving feedback on a draft (45%) (Fig. 7). These responses suggest that students are using AI in the perfecting stage of their assignments. While this use may enhance clarity and make writing more efficient, there is also a risk of overdependence that could potentially limit long-term improvement in writing proficiency.

AI was also used to assist with research (45%) and to summarise readings (43%) (Fig. 7). Although these functions can improve efficiency, especially in deadline-heavy periods, they could also introduce potential academic integrity considerations. Using AI for research could lead students to falsely reference their sources, encounter non-existing sources, or have a limited overview of their

research subject. Summarisation tools can be a great aid, however, they need to be smartly used to ensure skills like critical analysis and understanding are still being trained.

Only 8% of students reported never having used AI for their academic work, suggesting that AI practices are widely embedded in current academic environments, reinforcing the need for clear guidance and student training to ensure an equal playing field.

It is also important to contextualise all these findings within the diverse circumstances of the student population. For students who balance academic study with employment, caregiving responsibilities, or other time-intensive commitments, AI may act as a great support tool. In these cases, AI can streamline more routine or administrative aspects of study, providing these students with more time for deeper critical engagement needed for other academic tasks. From this perspective, AI does not necessarily diminish academic standards but may in turn enhance accessibility, provided it is used ethically and transparently.
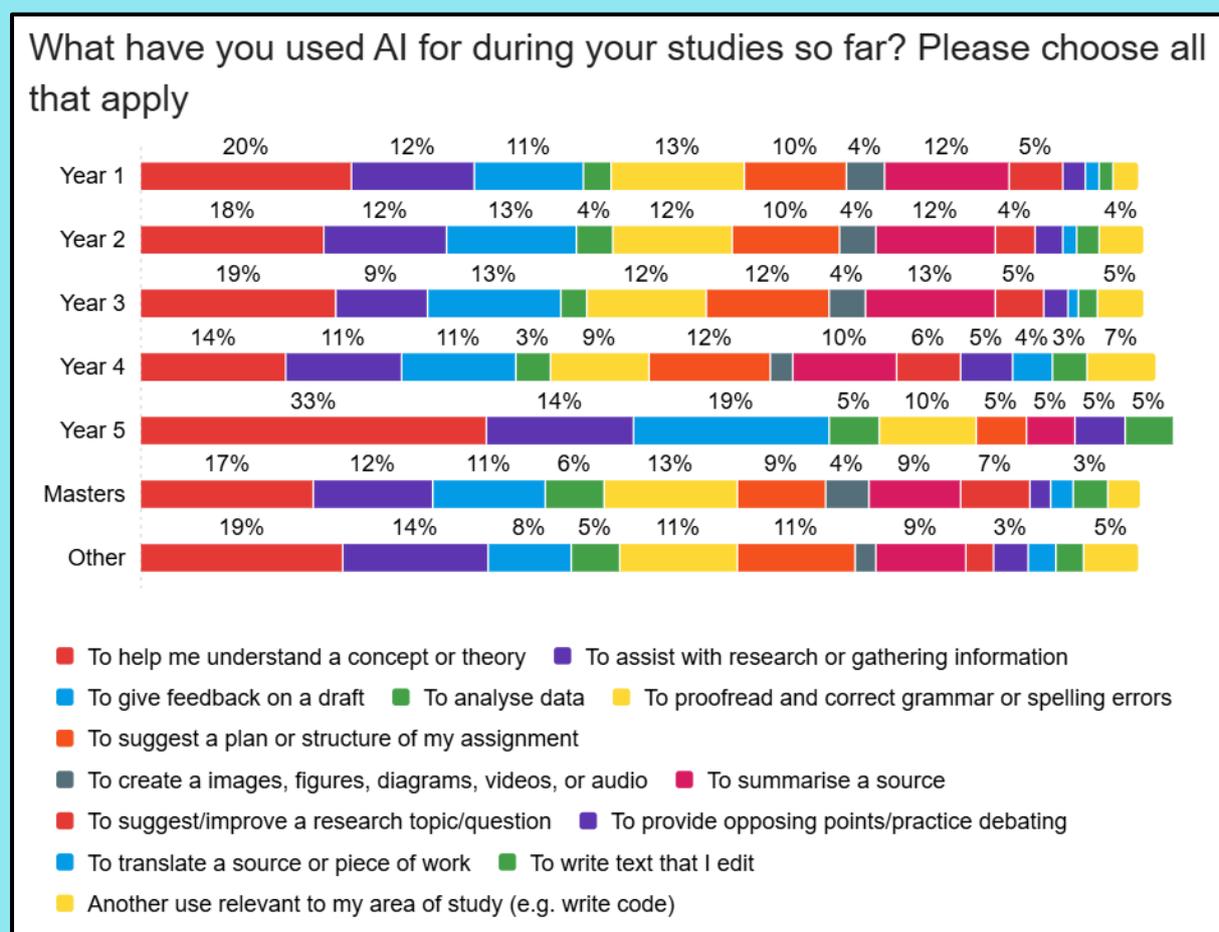

Figure 8 – Question 4: What have you used AI for during your studies so far? (Breakout: Year of Study)

When assessing AI use by year of study, a generally consistent pattern of responses emerges, with a notable exception of Year 5 students (Fig. 8). In this group of students, a significantly higher proportion (33%) reported using AI to

understand a concept or theory (Fig. 8). This may reflect the nature of longer, academically rigorous courses like Medicine or Integrated Masters, where students are exposed to highly complex, conceptually demanding material. For these students, AI can serve as a supplementary learning tool, helping them clarify advanced topics or consolidate knowledge under a large time pressure.

On the other hand, AI can give them wrong information or incorrect explanations, which is especially concerning for these students as it could potentially lead to harm in the future. This further emphasises the importance of AI/digital literacy among students and highlights a critical issue that needs to be addressed by the University so that students are fully supported in their studies.

Overall, the proportion of students using AI for research purposes remained relatively stable across year groups, ranging from 9-14% (Fig. 8). This suggests that AI-supported research practices are evenly integrated throughout degrees, rather than decreasing or increasing with knowledge and seniority.

Interestingly, Year 5 students also reported a slightly higher use of AI for draft feedback, with 19% citing this kind of use compared to approximately 11% in other years (Fig. 8). This suggests that advanced students, facing more independent and high-stake assessments, are using AI more to refine their work.
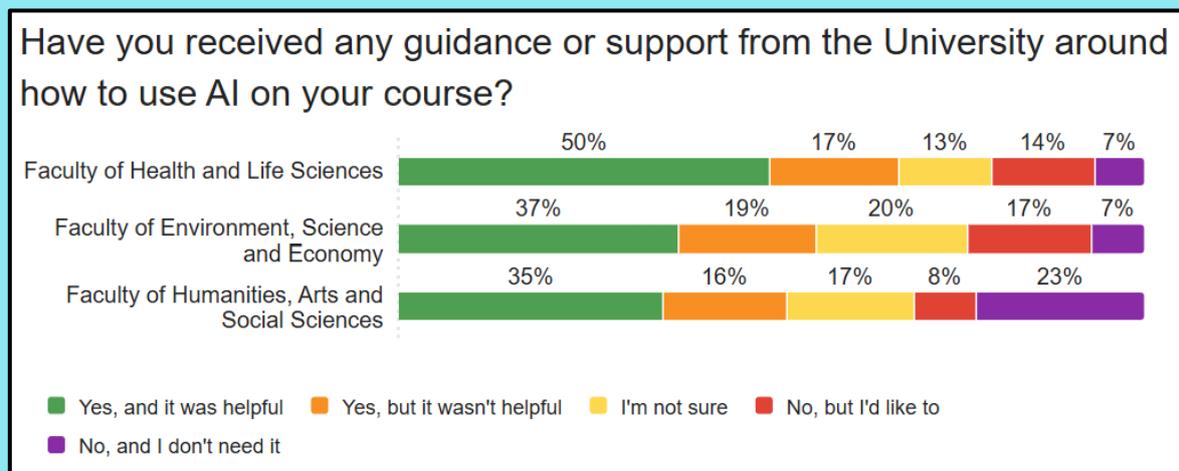

Figure 9 – Question 6: Have you received any guidance or support from the University around how to use AI on your course? (Breakout: Faculty)

Among faculties, HLS students (50%) reported the highest proportion of receiving helpful AI guidance outside of INTO students, whereas these numbers were lower but relatively similar across HASS and ESE students (35-37%) (Fig. 9). These differences may indicate variations in how faculties are embedding AI literacy into their curricula, as well as the perceived usefulness of AI in these different subject areas.

Interestingly, HASS students reported the largest proportion of students stating they had not received guidance and did not require it (23%) (Fig. 9). This may suggest a greater confidence in navigating AI or, alternatively, a lower need for AI in their academic practices.

A relatively high proportion of students across all faculties indicated that the University's AI support was not helpful (Fig. 9). Additionally, a notable number of students reported that they had not received support but would like to, with this proportion being the highest among ESE students (17%) (Fig. 9). Together, these findings highlight a potential gap between the University's AI support and student expectations.
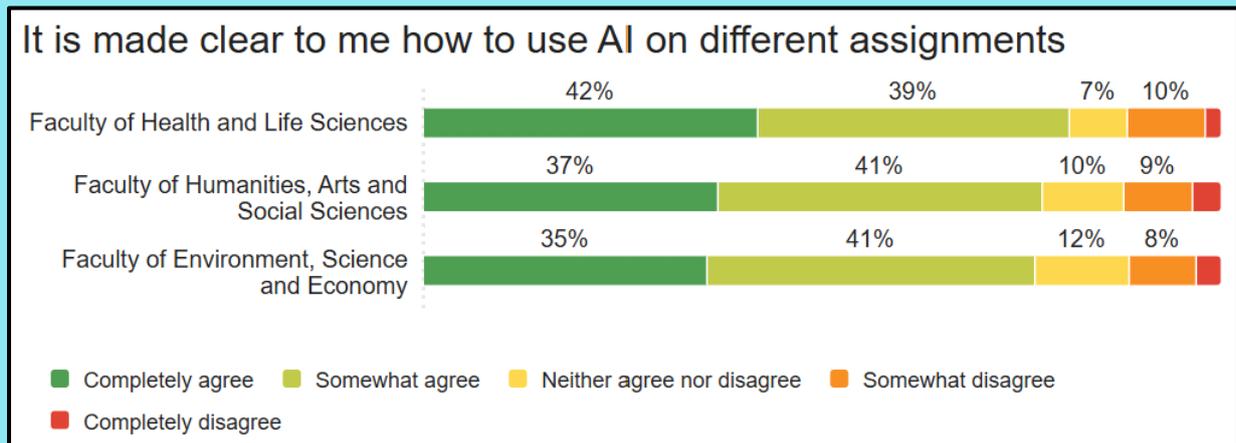

Figure 10 – Question 7a: It is made clear to me how to use AI on different assignments (Breakout: Faculty)

Across faculties, responses were relatively consistent. Approximately 35–42% of students in each faculty strongly agreed that AI usage had been clearly explained to them, with a further 40% somewhat agreeing (Fig. 10). This indicates that the majority of students perceive at least a moderate level of clarity regarding AI expectations. However, with the large percentage of students citing that they somewhat agree, it is important to add more detail to AI guidelines to ensure that all students have full confidence in their studies.

Around 10% of students in each faculty reported that AI usage had not been clearly explained to them (Fig. 10). This finding is significant, as unclear guidelines can lead to unintentional academic misconduct.
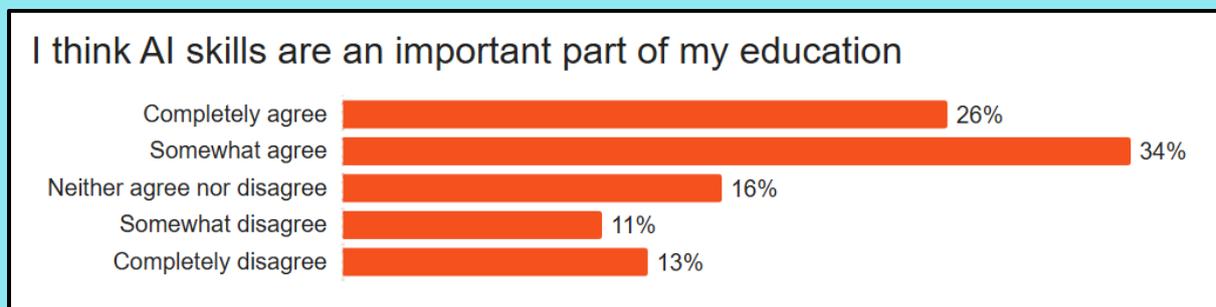

Figure 11 – Question 7b: I think AI skills are an important part of my education

A majority of students (60%) reported that AI skills are an important part of their education (Fig. 11). This suggests a growing recognition of AI literacy as a valuable graduate attribute. This finding also implies that AI literacy is not merely an academic tool, but also a broader, relevant skillset to future careers.

This view is contrasted by 24% of students who do not consider AI to be an important part of their education (Fig. 11). This difference may reflect varying career aspirations or academic subject areas, with students in more technology/innovation-based subjects potentially having a larger interest in AI. Another reason may also be varying concerns over overreliance on technology.

Overall, these results showcase a divided response on the educational value of AI and implies a consensus on its value has not yet been reached among students.
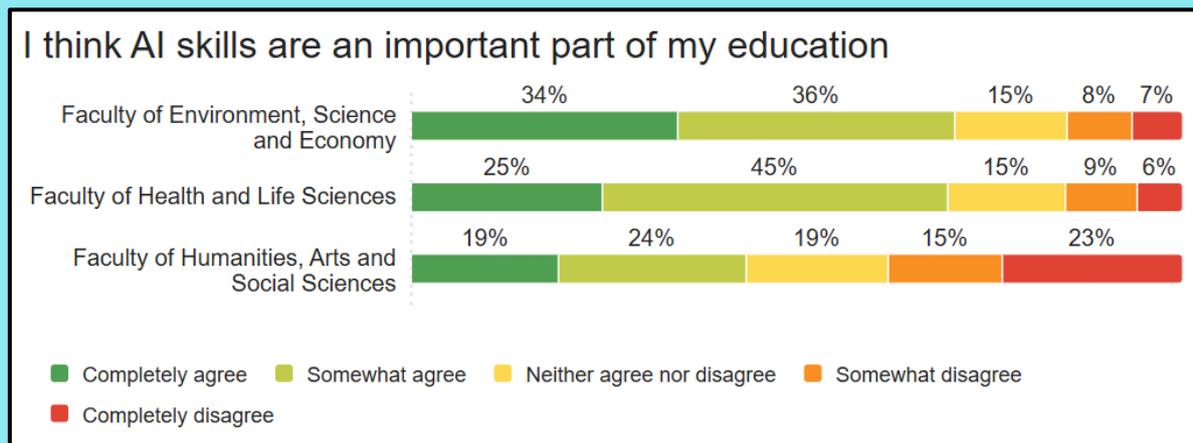

Figure 12 – Question 7b: I think AI skills are an important part of my education (Breakout: Faculty)

When analysed by faculty, a clearer pattern of responses emerges (Fig. 12). HLS and ESE students reported the highest levels of agreement that AI is an important part of their education, with approximately 70% somewhat to completely agreeing (Fig. 12). This may reflect the increasing integration of AI in healthcare, scientific research, and corporate industries. For these students, AI literacy is not only an academic tool but also an emerging, essential professional skill.

In contrast, HASS students reported the highest level of disagreement with the statement (23%) (Fig. 12). This may be due to differing subject priorities, where more human-centred/subjective analysis is more emphasised than technological integration. Some of these students may perceive AI as less applicable to their future careers or be worried about the risks to their academic integrity.
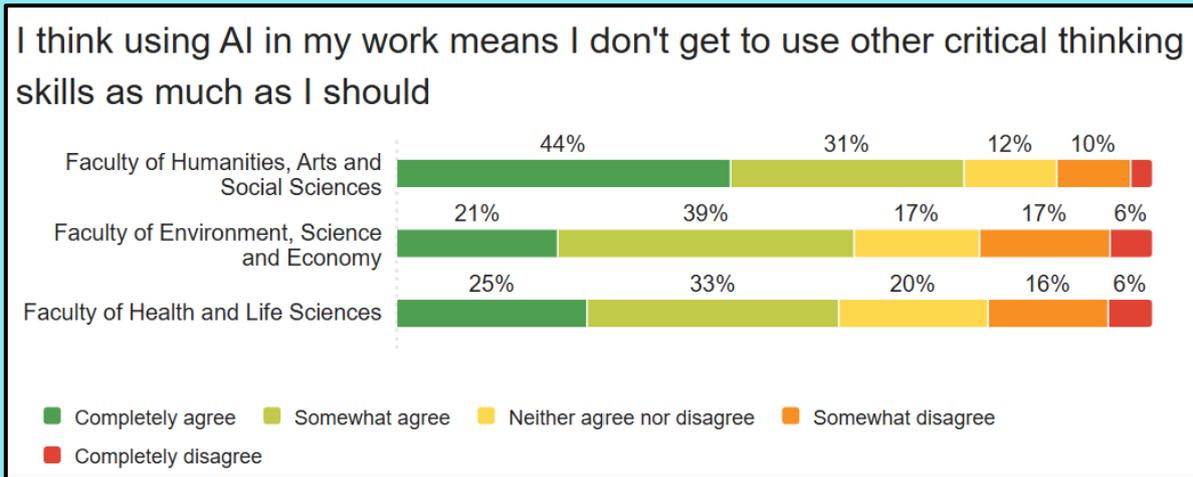
Figure 13 – Question 7c: I think using AI in my work means I don't get to use other critical thinking skills as much as I should (Breakout: Faculty)

When we assessed whether students feel as though AI has replaced their ability to use their critical thinking skills by faculty, a distinct pattern of responses appeared (Fig. 13). HASS students reported the highest levels of agreement with AI replacing the use of their critical analysis skills, with 75% somewhat to completely agreeing (Fig. 13). This may reflect the central part of studying HASS subjects such as History, Classics, or Art History, where independent critical thinking skills are essential for success. On the same note, these students also had the lowest disagreement rate with the statement (22%), further supporting the notion that critical thinking skills are important for these students (Fig. 13).

On the other hand, ESE and HLS students reported a similar pattern of responses, with 60% (ESE) and 58% (HLS) somewhat to completely agreeing that they don't use their critical thinking skills as much due to AI (Fig. 13). While these percentages still reflect most students in these faculties, they are still lower than those reported by HASS students (Fig. 13). These results reflect the differences in teaching and how courses are lead across different faculties, where more science-based subjects may have more lenient AI policies or recommendations. There was a relatively high percentage of students who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, which implies a lack of interest in the impact of AI or potential uncertainty due to minimal previous use.

Overall, most students recognise that AI has in some way reduced the use of their critical thinking skills, however, more data is needed to assess how big of a priority this is for students across various faculties. This could provide the University or Guild with the necessary information to support students in the most beneficial and effective way. This may include providing critical analysis workshops for those who want to rely on AI less, or alternatively creating AI training sessions to guide students on how to use it in the most effective and ethical way for their work.

Do you worry about your work getting flagged or penalised because of the use of AI?

Very often	14%
Fairly often	23%
Not very often	26%
Rarely	17%
Never	20%

Figure 14 – Question 9: Do you worry about your work getting flagged or penalised because of the use of AI?

37% of students reported worrying fairly to very often about their work being flagged or penalised due to AI use (Fig. 14). Notably, this proportion is identical to the percentage of students who said they rarely or never think about these consequences. An additional 26% indicated that they do not think about this very often.

These findings suggest a clear difference in student perceptions of AI use. For over a third of students, the risk of getting accused or penalised because of AI is a recurring concern, which might change how they approach assessments, the extent on how they use AI tools, or even the level of transparency they adopt in acknowledging their AI use. This elevated level of concern may stem from uncertainty around the University's policies or inconsistencies in professor advice.

Conversely, an equally large proportion of students remain relatively unconcerned. This may reflect a confidence in their academic ability and integrity or more awareness and understanding surrounding the AI policies in place. With only 26% reporting only occasionally thinking about AI consequences, AI use may be more context or time dependent, potentially increasing in deadline-heavy time periods.
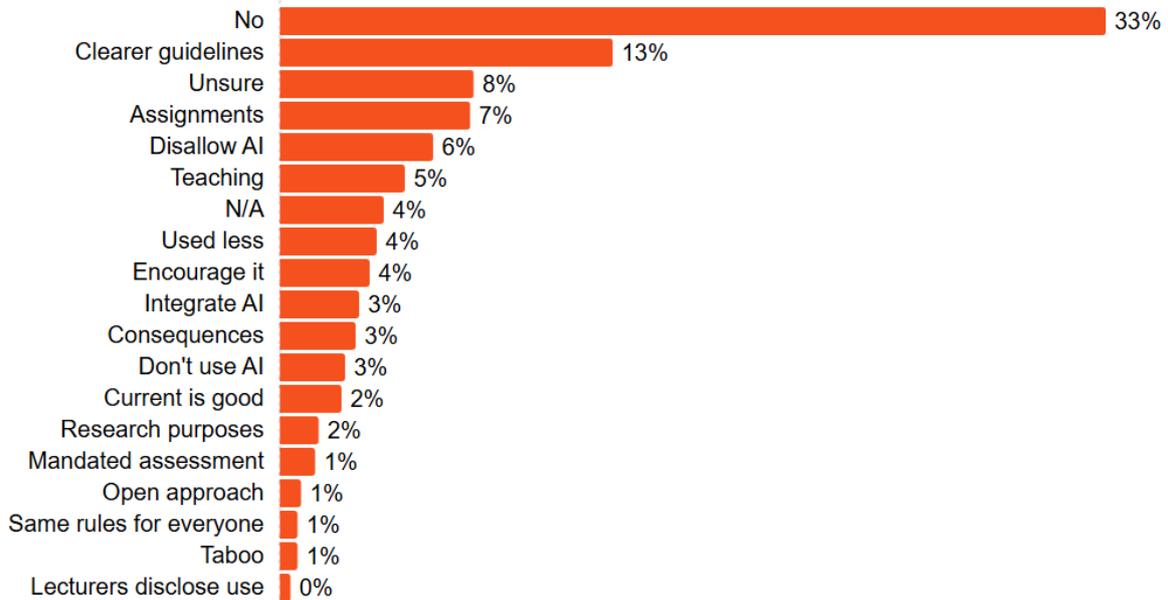
Figure 15 – Question 10: Is there anything you would change about the way AI is currently used on your course

Overall, 33% of students would not change anything about how AI is currently used on their course (Fig. 15). Consistent with previous results, 13% of students reported that clearer guidelines are needed to improve their confidence. Students suggested improving current policies, as well as providing training on how to use it in the most ethical and effective way for both writing and studying harder concepts. Many students said that they would prefer if AI wasn't used, but they also acknowledged that banning it completely would be hard to implement and that it can also be beneficial in some ways. Additionally, students suggested standardising AI guidelines across modules to ensure consistency and to minimise confusion.

"Clearer guidelines on use for each assignment. I wish AI wasn't used so often. Because of environmental impact etc. But also I do think it is easy to rely upon ad can reduce peoples ability to actively think for themselves" ~ Year 4, HLS

"It adds anxiety when submitting work that I did myself and the turnitin score comes back high. We were told we could use AI in my creative writing module and I feel that fully takes away from what creative writing is. I think even the idea that other students could be using AI for creative work is disgusting. What are they actually learning? If they are using AI then the AI should get the degree not them." ~ Year 2, HASS

"I think better guidance on how it can help my course specifically would be much appreciated. As part of my course, much time must be meant studying and memorising and I have heard from peers that use AI to help them with this. I think this is a good idea and should be looked into by the university and guidance on how to do so made." ~ Year 1, HLS

"Some of my lecturers/tutorial leads have given advice on how to best use AI to aid our learning on the course. It would be helpful if this advice was given for all my modules." ~ Year 2, ESE

6% of students had a harsher view on AI use and thought that it should either be banned or that courses should move towards a form of teaching and testing that makes it harder to use AI, including discussions, debates, or in-person examinations.
Some reported that the differing uses of AI across the student population puts some students at a disadvantage. Other students had a more individual view, stating that they are not sure what the University should do as they personally don't use AI.

"Course should move towards more demonstrable forms of knowledge (discussions, examinations etc) to encourage people not to use it. Currently those who don't use it are worse off." ~ Masters, ESE

"I don't think it should be allowed for writing and I have experienced a lot of unfairness due to some people using AI and I didn't." ~ Masters, HLS

"My course does not advocate for the use of AI, which I believe is appropriate for something as subjective as history, due to the misinformation often spread." ~ Year 2, HASS

"I'm not sure since I don't use it for my course." ~ Year 2, HASS

5% suggested that teaching about AI could be changed in different ways. This included having AI-minimal assignments, however, they also acknowledged that just because an assignment discourages AI use, does not mean students will not use it.

Additionally, students reported that some people do not fully disclose their AI use, which further disadvantages those who don't use it, especially when AI checkers cannot detect it. They also highlighted certain grammatical features commonly associated with AI that they previously liked to use but discontinued due to concerns about getting flagged.

Students on courses part of the HASS faculty reported that AI use is very taboo on their course, emphasising differences in AI encouragement across different faculties.

> "I'd just like to know what's being checked for when it's being marked because I'm worried my work will be flagged for AI use when I haven't used it." ~ Year 2, HASS
>
> "I feel its fairer to have things involving minimal AI, which I like about my course. However I feel people use AI more than they're allowed without declaring it or being caught, which feels like an unfair advantage." ~ Year 3, ESE
>
> "In English, AI is very taboo and frowned upon, which I think is correct. However AI like ChatGPT loves using Em Dashes, which I like to use in my work as well. Overall, I think programmes like Turnitin are useful, but is not the best at catching the people who use it, and may flag people who don't. It also doesn't have the best reliability, in one of my papers it told me I plagarised the word 'the' from a fanfiction." ~ Year 2, HASS

3. How is AI being used by students for mental health?

We asked students whether and how they use AI outside of academic contexts, focusing specifically on mental health and medical-related problems. In addition to examining the extent of use, we examined student's motivations for using AI for personal issues, as well as the reasons as to why some students choose not to rely on it in these contexts.

Have you ever used AI for any of the following: Please choose all that apply

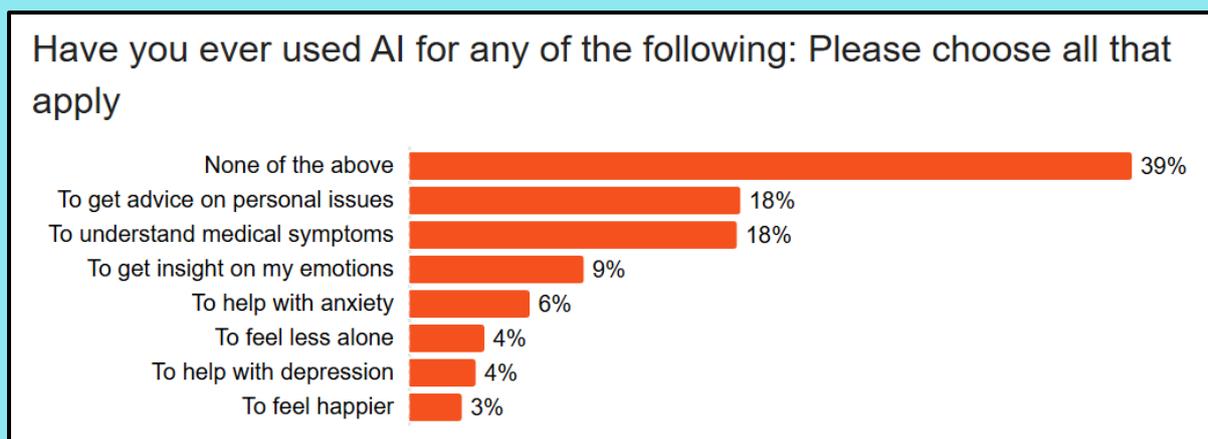| Category	Percentage
None of the above	39%
To get advice on personal issues	18%
To understand medical symptoms	18%
To get insight on my emotions	9%
To help with anxiety	6%
To feel less alone	4%
To help with depression	4%
To feel happier	3%

Figure 16 – Question 11: Have you ever used any of the following?

39% of students reported that they hadn't used AI for any of the listed non-academic purposes (Fig. 16). While this may reflect a majority that genuinely do not use AI for these reasons, it is also possible that this percentage encompasses students who use AI in ways not captured in the listed response options.

Among those who do engage with AI for personal reasons, the most common reasons included seeking advice on a personal issue (18%) and understanding medical symptoms (18%) (Fig. 16). These results suggest that nearly 1 in 5 students view AI as a source of informal guidance.

A further 9% reported using AI to gain insight into their emotions, indicating that some students use AI in a reflective way (Fig. 16). Although smaller in percentage, the responses relating to feeling less alone (4%), seeking help for depression (4%), and to increase happiness (3%) are important to note (Fig. 16). These responses point to instances where AI is being used in emotionally vulnerable contexts and highlights a group of students that require more attention in these areas.

Overall, the data suggests that most students do not use AI for mental health or medical reasons, however, it also showcases a meaningful minority that integrate it into areas normally associated with professional, interpersonal help. It is important to make students aware of the limitations AI has in these contexts as opposed to qualified medical and mental health professionals.
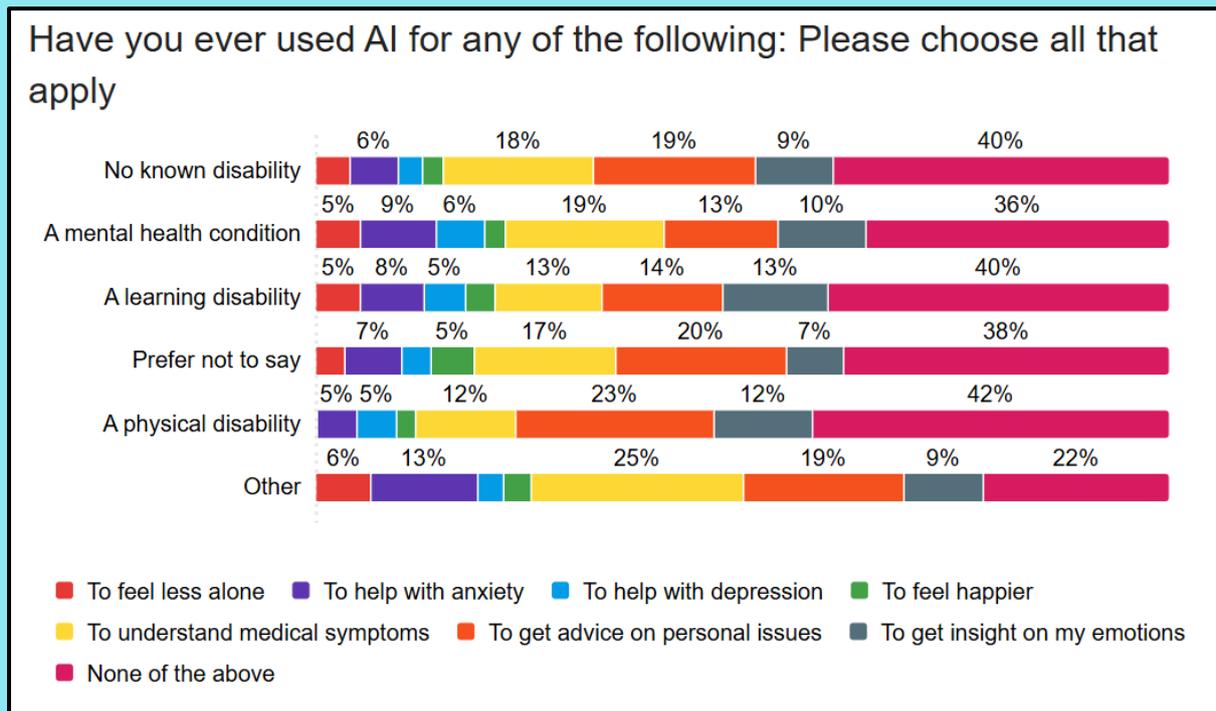
Figure 17 – Question 11: Have you ever used any of the following? (Breakout: Disability status)

When we dissected responses based on disability status, several different patterns emerged (Fig. 17). Reported uses of AI to feel less alone and to help with depression appeared relatively consistent across groups. This may indicate that for certain needs, AI is perceived similarly across different populations.

There were wider differences in responses for different areas. Use of AI to help with anxiety ranged from 5-9% for most groups but increased to 13% among students identifying with the "other" disability group (Fig. 17). A similar pattern was evident in responses for understanding medical symptoms, where this group also had a comparatively higher rate of AI use (25%) (Fig. 17). The grouped responses for health and anxiety related responses may reflect unmet support needs, greater complexity with health queries, or additional barriers to accessing adequate professional care. These results suggest that students in less defined or recognised disability categories or alternatively undiagnosed/self-diagnosed students may turn to AI as a supplementary or alternative informational resource more than other students.

In contrast, students with a physical disability reported the highest percentage of AI use for obtaining advice on personal issues (23%) (Fig. 17). This may highlight the role of AI as an accessible and flexible support tool, particularly for individuals who may encounter practical and social constraints in seeking in-person guidance.

Overall, students in the "Other" disability status category were the least likely to not use AI for any of the listed reasons (22%), compared to around 40% in other groups.

Together, these results suggest AI acts as a supplementary support mechanism for students whose needs may not be fully addressed by current institutional or healthcare structures.

Why do you choose not to use AI for these things?

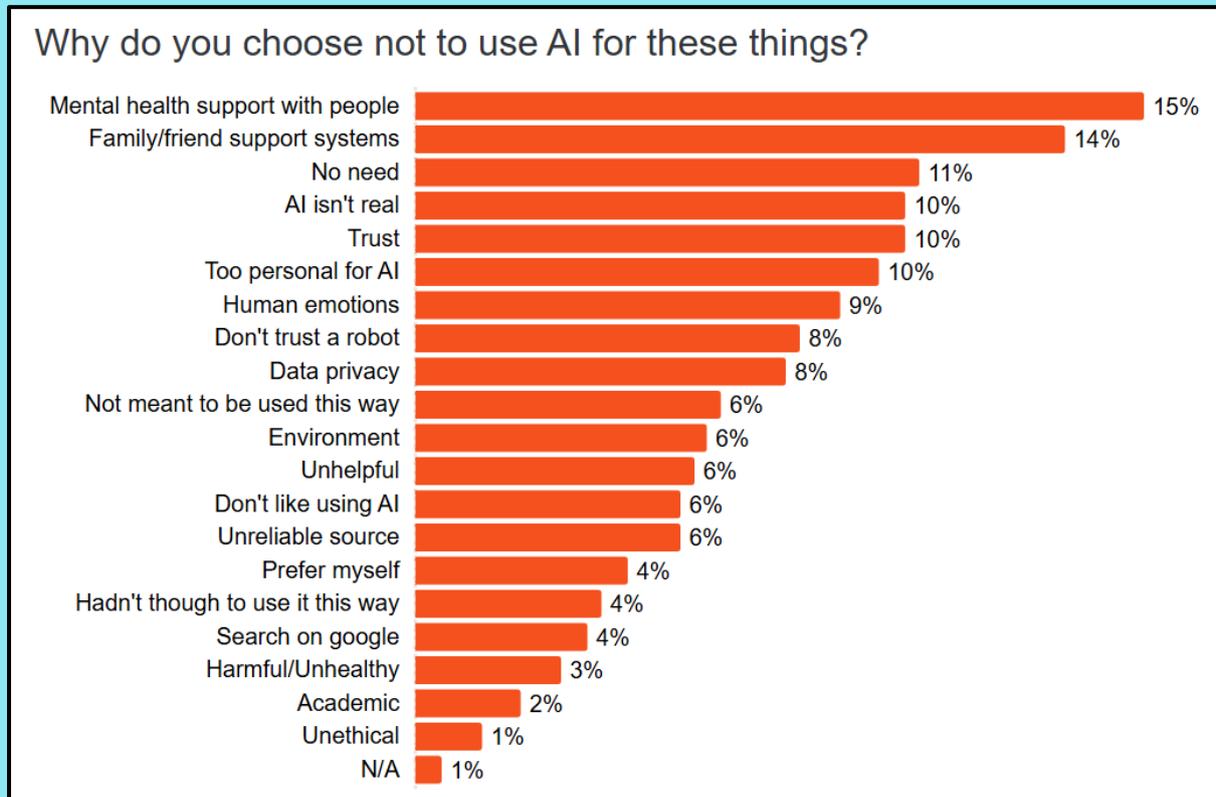| Category	Percentage
Mental health support with people	15%
Family/friend support systems	14%
No need	11%
AI isn't real	10%
Trust	10%
Too personal for AI	10%
Human emotions	9%
Don't trust a robot	8%
Data privacy	8%
Not meant to be used this way	6%
Environment	6%
Unhelpful	6%
Don't like using AI	6%
Unreliable source	6%
Prefer myself	4%
Hadn't though to use it this way	4%
Search on google	4%
Harmful/Unhealthy	3%
Academic	2%
Unethical	1%
N/A	1%

Figure 18 – Question 11a: Why do you choose not to use AI for these things?

The main reasons as to why students don't use AI is because they value interpersonal connection for personal issues, have data privacy concerns, or have more ethical or environmental worries with AI use in general.

15% of students cited having mental health support with people as the reason why they do not use AI for mental health or medical problems (Fig. 18).

Students also reported concerns over the way AI can easily be manipulated or be misleading. Some stated that professionals who have studied for long periods of time have more training and knowledge to adequately support them in this way.

Some students also reported that AI may give inaccurate responses because it does not understand the emotional weight of words as opposed to humans.

> "Because a professional who's studied and dedicated time to help with these issues should be utilised, not a generative machine. There's also been many studies/ articles warning against using AI for emotional wellbeing - and a rise of AI psychosis." ~ Other, HLS
>
> "I have people I would speak to about these things and I know they're inaccurate with medical topics." ~ Year 5, HLS
>
> "Again, I find it morally unethical, it is better for people to speak to other people about issues than a machine that doesn't understand emotions or the weight of words." ~ Year 2, HASS
>
> "I think using AI for anything human / emotion related is going down a slippery slope in a world where human connection seems sparser than ever. We could risk relying on therapising our emotions with AI and then not talking to another human. To me it just seems innately wrong." ~ Year 4, HASS

14% of students reported having strong family relationships and friendships that they can go to instead. Another 9% of students stated that AI does not understand human emotions fully, and that is why they do not use it.

> "Because AI isn't a trained professional therapist or counsellor and it can be easily manipulated to give bad answers and can harm the mental health of people who can be at risk." ~ Year 3, HASS
>
> "I don't think it's a good resource for this. I would prefer to speak to a family member or friend or a GP but I understand other people may not have these things to turn to." ~ Year 1, HLS
>
> "Because It's unrealistic and doesn't consider humane ways of thinking, also I think having good friends and family connections mean I don't need to rely on stuff like that." ~ Year 3, HASS

Other students cited trust (10%), AI isn't real (10%), and their problems being too personal for AI (10%) as reasons for why they don't use AI for medical and mental health problems.

> "I don't feel comfortable putting that kind of personal information into an AI tool, and I don't think it's constructive or helpful in the long run, especially for significant personal difficulties." ~ Year 3, HASS
>
> "Because it's not real and I don't want it being trained off my personal information, I know where to go to get real advice on these things." ~ Masters, HASS
>
> "I don't believe AI programs actually protect my privacy. Besides when it comes to mental health and asking for advice to better my mental wellbeing, why would I ask something that never felt emotion before?" ~ Year 2, ESE

Why do you choose to use AI to help you with this?

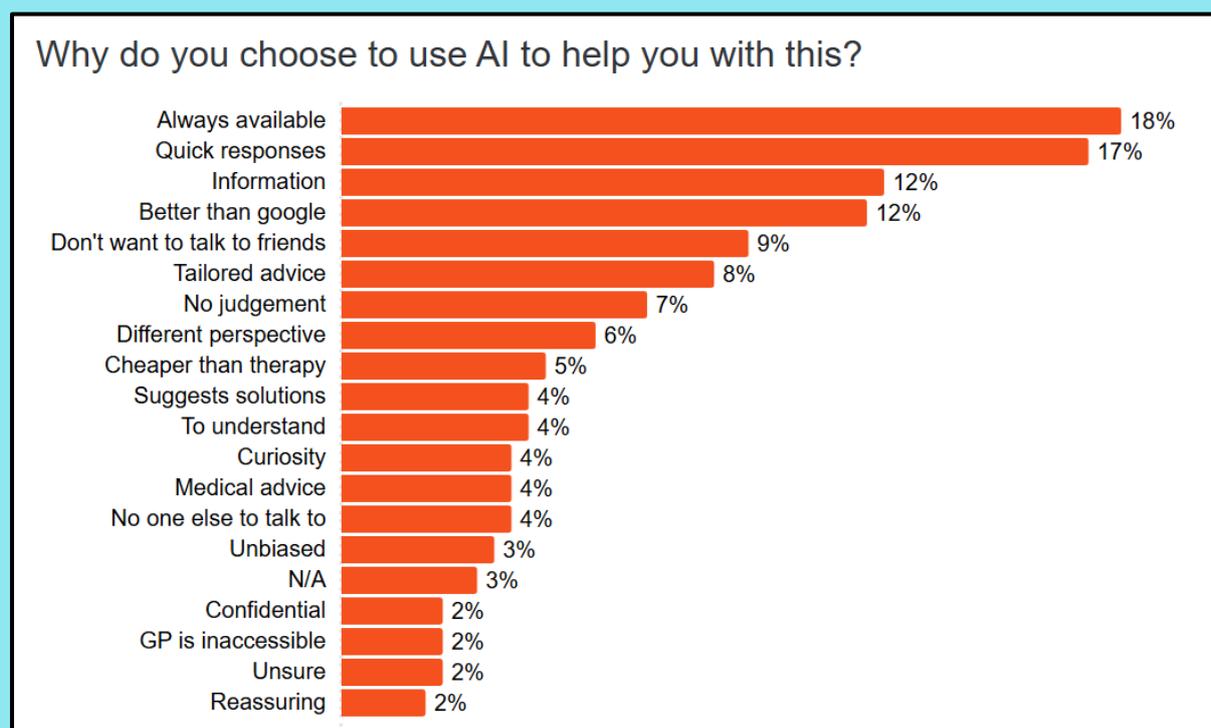| Category	Percentage
Always available	18%
Quick responses	17%
Information	12%
Better than google	12%
Don't want to talk to friends	9%
Tailored advice	8%
No judgement	7%
Different perspective	6%
Cheaper than therapy	5%
Suggests solutions	4%
To understand	4%
Curiosity	4%
Medical advice	4%
No one else to talk to	4%
Unbiased	3%
N/A	3%
Confidential	2%
GP is inaccessible	2%
Unsure	2%
Reassuring	2%

Figure 19 – Question 11b: Why do you choose to use AI to help you with this?

We also asked students why they do use AI for mental health or medical problems and found that most often it is due to its accessibility, including its constant availability (18%) or quick responses (17%) (Fig. 19). Students reported that AI is quicker at gathering tailored information than Google. They also reported that search engines usually give them ads or unrelated content instead of useful information.

Others stated that sometimes they just need quick advice to calm their stress and that AI has been able to fulfil that role.

> "AI gathers a bunch of resources and gives you the facts, it's easier than having to scroll through loads of sources." ~ Year 1, HASS
>
> "Sometimes it's more helpful than researching it myself. IE I ask it about medication and (medical) drugs that I can / can't mix and its effects. It's easier when I receive a clear answer rather than look through the internet." ~ Year 2, ESE
>
> "Google and search engines are not as helpful as they used to be. Most of it nowadays is either AI, ads, or phishing sites that are blatantly trying to steal your data. It's sad, as I'm not that old, but I remember the Old Days when searching things actually was helpful! I only used AI once to help me understand a medical issue better so I could then research it myself in detail." ~ Other, HLS
>
> "Sometimes it is about getting a quick response for something to help calm my stress." ~ Masters, HASS

9% of students reported that AI helps them talk through their problems when they don't want to discuss them with friends or family (9%) and face potential judgement (7%) (Fig. 19). Others cited that AI is cheaper that standard therapy, highlighting that AI acts as a resource for those who want help but can't afford it (5%) (Fig. 19). This insight emphasises the need for cheap/free, accessible, and adequate mental health services and medical centres provided or advertised by the University for students, especially in highly visited areas in the city.

> "Cheaper than a therapist. Not burdening friends and family." ~ Masters, HLS
>
> "Cause I was afraid or scared to ask someone else." ~ Year 2, ESE
>
> "Because often it's late at night and I don't want to bother friends or family. I feel it's more impartial to ask AI than my loved ones." ~ Year 4, HASS
>
> "Something to express feelings to without the consequence of anyone actually knowing about it." ~ Year 3, HLS
>
> " I didn't felt the stress or pressure of a real person that will judge me." ~ Year 2, ESE
>
> "I didn't want to speak to another person about my issues because I feel embarrassed talking about my emotions/problems however I wanted advice without bias or causing concern." ~ Year 1, ESE

Adequate, accessible services are especially important for those who don't have anyone else to talk to (4%) (Fig. 19). It is therefore crucial to ensure that all students are receiving the support that they need. Adequately trained professionals are needed to ensure students won't be judged, but also so they can pick up on things students may not be able to fully explain themselves.

> "Sometimes I'm not sure how to phrase something and want to discuss a sensitive topic so I'd ask it for advice on this but only if I have no one else around to talk to, or I'm worried about judgment." ~ Masters, ESE
>
> "Because I had nobody around who I could talk to about what was going on." ~ Year 2, ESE

12% of students use AI to gain more information, with some students using it as a preliminary advisor for their medical problems. While this may be a relatively good way to prevent unnecessary GP/hospital visits, it may also lead to certain conditions or medical problems going underdiagnosed. Additionally, different students may have varying health literacy levels. Students studying healthcare/biology-based degrees may have a larger insight into their medical problems and may be better at critically assessing AI's medical advice as opposed to students who have less knowledge in this area. However, all students are at a certain risk of misinformation.

2% of students use AI because their GP is inaccessible, highlighting a more large-scale system-wide reason for student AI use.

> "Sometimes before going to appointment i would like learn more so that i can tell doctor more about whats going. " ~ Masters, HASS
>
> "So I can decide wether symptoms are serious enough to see a doctor or weather it out." ~ Year 2, ESE
>
> "My GP surgery is near impossible to get an appointment at unless you're in serious pain so this is a good option (you have to take it with a pinch of salt though)." ~ Other, HLS
>
> "I was dealing with a new medication and needed more information than the Drs gave and the NHS website wasn't covering everything i needed to know." ~ Year 1, ESE

Do you think you would have used AI for this type of support if you hadn't encountered it in a learning environment?

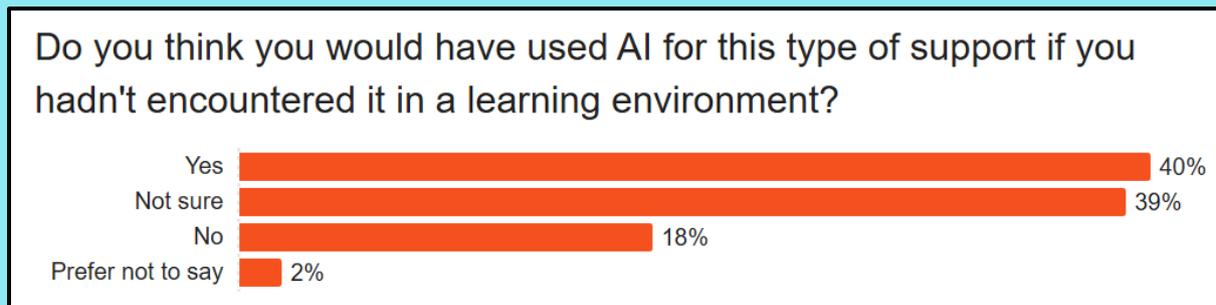|	
Yes	40%
Not sure	39%
No	18%
Prefer not to say	2%

Figure 20 – Question 12: Do you think you would have used AI for this type of support if you hadn't encountered it in a learning environment?

40% of students reported that they probably would have used AI for mental health or medical advice even if they had not encountered it in a learning environment (Fig. 20). A further 39% indicated that they are unsure, while 18% stated that they likely would not have used it.

These findings suggest that exposure to AI within academic settings may play a meaningful role in normalising its use beyond coursework. For a substantial number of students, the inclination to use AI for sensitive personal matters appears relatively independent of institutional introduction, suggesting that societal visibility of AI tools may have more of an effect on its adoption.

The large number of students (39%) reporting uncertainty is particularly significant (Fig. 20). This may suggest that students are unsure of the impact institutions have on what they do in their personal time.

The smaller percentage of students (18%) who would not have used AI regardless suggests a minority remain firm in their boundaries surrounding the role of AI in their lives (Fig. 20). This may stem from a preference for personal interaction or an awareness of its limitations and risks.
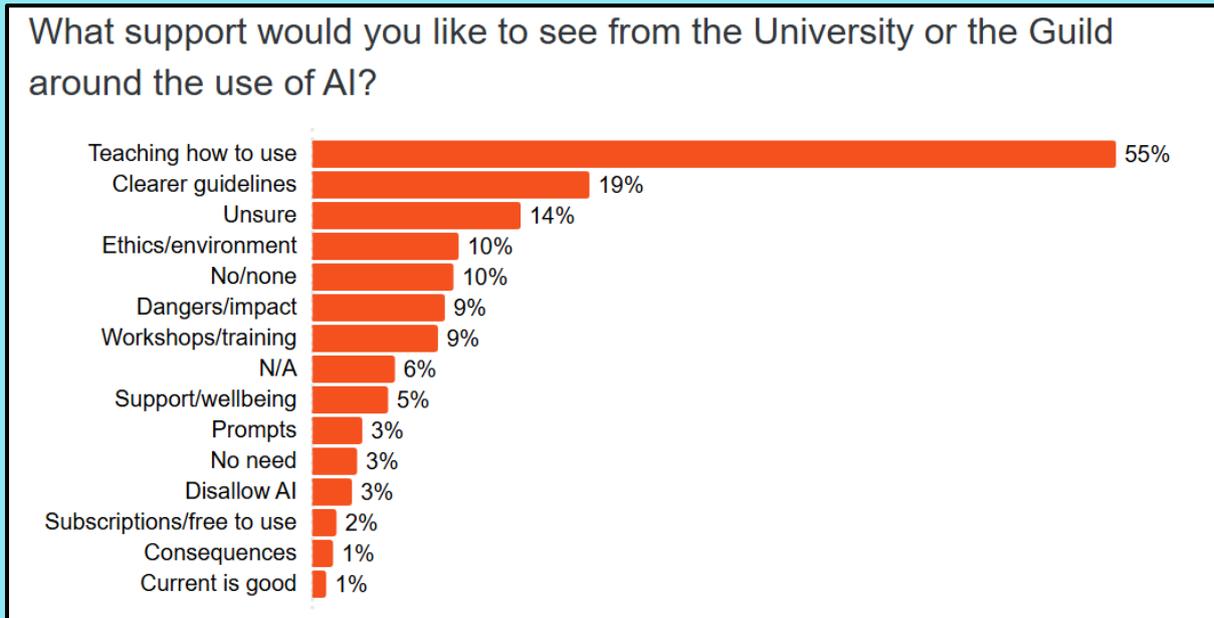
Figure 21 – Question 13: What support would you like to see from the University or the Guild around the use of AI?

Finally, we asked students what support they would like to see from the University and Guild (Fig. 21). The majority of students (55%) would appreciate workshops or training on how to use AI, with many students highlighting that guidance on how to create prompts, especially for First years, would be helpful.

"Provide some course of building helpful and good prompts to train AI and not be dependent on it." ~ Masters, ESE

"Upskilling for first years especially, how to you it, why to use it, how to use it appropriately in a uni setting." ~ Year 3, HASS

"Guidance around environmental effects of AI use, importance of skill development and retention, importance of not overly relying on AI, importance of proper AI use in the workplace." ~ Year 3, HASS

19% cited clearer, faculty-specific guidelines would be beneficial in standardising AI use across different modules and courses (Fig. 21). Others would benefit more from support on how to not get falsely accused or how to deal with that process.

> "Department specific advice on how we can most effectively AI can help us learn/understand content better (e.g. in maths vs essay subjects)." ~ Year 2, ESE
>
> "More guidance or a detailed guide on how to cite it if I have used it as the current guidance is unclear." ~ Masters, HASS
>
> "More support/reassurance as I think a lot of us are worried about being falsely accused of using AI to compelte summative assessments." ~ Year 3, HASS

Some students remained firm in their opinions against AI, stating that it should be banned (10%) (Fig. 21). Others suggested educating students on the negative impacts of AI, like environmental impact (10%) and dangers of AI (9%) may naturally help them gravitate away from using it.

> "I'd like a hardline policy against AI without leniency. As a university, Exeter pride itself on its sustainability and respect for the natural world. It is contradictory to have such lenient AI policies. It will not only harm the environment, but severely lower the quality of students, work, and research going on here." ~ Masters, HASS
>
> "Revealing the truth about AI to students like the ethics and how they affect our environment as not a lot of students know about that" ~ Other, ESE

Conclusion

1. How much experience do students have with AI?

Overall, the findings reveal a complex and evolving relationship between students and AI. While just over one third of students of experimented with AI tools, the majority started university with little to no prior experience of generative AI, suggesting that wide-spread student AI engagement is a relatively recent development (Fig. 4). This can be attributed to the fairly recent development and deployment of accessible AI tools. Usage appears to be largely motivated by convenience, accessibility, providing additional academic support, and a perceived competitive advantage (Fig. 2). On the other hand, not using AI is more commonly associated with ethical concerns, environmental considerations, and confidence in personal ability (Fig. 3).

The data also highlights large disparities in prior exposure based on geographic background, with international students reporting higher levels of AI familiarity than UK students (Fig. 5). This suggests that accessible AI tools may have been available for a longer period of time in countries outside the UK.

Notably, although a higher proportion of students report encountering false information from AI tools, indicating a certain level of critical awareness, a minority remain unsure about the accuracy of its outputs (Fig. 6). This uncertainty, combined with varying levels of previous experiences, creates a clear gap in AI literacy among our students.

Together, these findings highlight an area where students would benefit from structured guidance on responsible AI use. In doing so, the University can ensure that AI becomes a tool that enhances learning rather than undermines academic integrity or widens inequalities.

2. How are students using AI in their studies?

Overall, the findings demonstrate the AI is now deeply embedded within students' academic practices, with only a small minority reporting that they haven't used it for their studies (Fig. 7). Students primarily engage with AI as a learning support tool, particularly to understand complex concepts, however, it also has diverse applications, including idea development, grammar correction, draft feedback and research purposes (Fig. 7).

While AI can be an efficient and accessible tool for some students, particularly those managing external commitments or navigating demanding courses, it also raises concerns surrounding overreliance, reducing critical thinking skills, academic integrity, and providing misinformation. Differing opinions on AI use are apparent across faculties, with HASS students expressing greater concern about

AI replacing critical skills, while HLS and ESE students are more likely to view AI literacy as a professionally relevant or necessary skill (Fig. 12, 13, 15).

Although most students report receiving some sort of guidance on AI use as part of their course, a certain portion remain uncertain, dissatisfied, or worried about being penalised (Fig. 9, 14).

The data also indicates that the issue is shifting away from whether students use AI but rather how they're supported in doing so responsibly (Fig. 9, 10, 15). The University should therefore be encouraged to move beyond reactive policies and instead adopt a proactive, transparent, and faculty-sensitive approach to academic AI use.

Ultimately, AI is reshaping academic culture, and the challenge for universities is not to eliminate or ban its presence but to guide its integration in a meaningful way that prepares students for an increasingly AI-driven professional landscape.

3. How is AI being used by students for mental health?

Altogether, the findings reveal that while the majority of students do not use AI for mental health or medical concerns, a minority are integrating it into personal or sensitive areas of their lives (Fig. 16). Nearly one in five students report using AI for personal advice or understanding medical symptoms and a smaller but significant proportion uses it for emotional reflection or anxiety and depression support (Fig. 16). This demonstrate that AI is no longer functioning as just an academic support tool but is being integrated into roles traditionally associated with interpersonal or professional care.

Responses across disability status further suggest that AI may be acting as a supplementary support mechanism for students whose needs are not being fully met by current systems in place (Fig. 17).

Motivations for emotional use are largely rooted in accessibility, speed of responses, affordability, lack of judgement, or not burdening other people (Fig. 19). Students value AI's ability to be constantly available and provide quick, tailored responses, especially in times where professional services are inaccessible, costly, or emotionally difficult to approach (Fig. 19). On the other hand, those who do not use AI for these purposes, state that they prefer human connection for more sensitive matters or have trust and privacy concerns regarding its use in these areas (Figure. 18).

Importantly, some students explicitly acknowledge that AI cannot replace professional expertise or human empathy in this area (Fig. 18). On one hand, the data reveals that AI is filling a gap in mental health and medical service support, especially for those who require immediate or low-cost guidance, however AI

reliance in vulnerable contexts raise concerns about misinformation, underdiagnosis, and ethical implications (Fig. 18, 19).

Ultimately, the results emphasise the urgent need for clear communication about AI's limitations in mental health and medical contexts alongside greater investment into accessible, adequate, and visible professional support services (Fig. 21). Because the University cannot fully eliminate the use of AI in these contexts, it should instead focus on ensuring students are equipped with the necessary skills to accurately and appropriately utilise its outputs.

Recommendations

Enhancing AI Literacy and Digital Skills

- Include compulsory, course-specific Ai literacy sessions in First Year modules
- Provide teaching sessions on prompt creation, output analysis, and identification of AI misinformation
- Create a central AI skills hub with support staff, as well as an online website with guidance, online videos, and examples
- Run an AI awareness campaign on AI education misinformation

Academic Guidance and Policy Standardisation

- Develop a faculty or course-specific AI policy template that can be included in all module handbooks
- Standardise AI acknowledgement and citation guidance with worked examples
- Provide a clear explanation of Turnitin AI detection

Adapting Teaching and Assessment Methods

- Incorporate reflective components in coursework, requiring students to explain their methods or thinking process
- Include more oral or in-person assessment elements where appropriate including presentations or debates
- Offer and increase awareness of critical thinking skills workshops

Student Wellbeing and Mental Health Support

- Increase visibility of existing university mental health and medical services through campus campaigns, social media posts, or direct outreach
- Improve signposting for external wellbeing and medical support including the student health centre, NHS, and helplines
- Review barriers to accessing professional support, as well as limitations of current university services and adjust provision accordingly

Ethical and Environmental Responsibility

- Educate students on both the limitations and benefits of AI use, making sure they have a well-rounded view
- Align AI policy communication with the University's sustainability commitments and raise awareness on its stance

External Resources

If you want to read some more around this topic, you could start with the following articles:

- [AI and the future of Universities](#), HEPI
- [Are students really that keen on generative AI?](#), WONKHE
- [What gets lost when the first draft is always polished?](#), WONKHE
- [What does authentic assessment mean in the context of AI?](#), WONKHE
- [Higher education needs a plan in place for student 'pastoral' use of AI](#), WONKHE
- [The choices universities and colleges make about AI are political](#), WONKHE

If you are a current University of Exeter student, please find some resources below to help you with the usage of Artificial Intelligence:

- [Enabling AI at Exeter: Your guide to using AI confidently and responsibly](#), University of Exeter
- [Understanding AI](#), University of Exeter Library
- [Digital Skills](#), University of Exeter Library
- [Responsible use of AI in Research](#), University of Exeter

Demographics

Our panel of 1000 students is demographically representative of the University of Exeter's student population but, due to varying response rate on a month-to-month basis, the demographics of this data change survey-to-survey.

The demographics of this report's respondents are illustrated below.

*PNS = Prefer not to Say

Category	Panel Total	Response Total	Category	Panel Total	Response Total
Faculty			Gender		
ESE	363	228 (63%)	Female	721	475 (66%)
HAS	379	245 (65%)	Male	236	127 (54%)
HLS	248	151 (61%)	Non-Binary/ Genderfluid	31	18 (58%)
INTO	10	3 (30%)	PNS*	12	7 (58%)
Campus					
Streatham	831	525 (63%)	Identification with Gender Assigned at Birth		
St Luke's	142	88 (62%)	Yes	946	594 (63%)
Distance	27	14 (52%)	Sometimes	22	13 (59%)
			No	23	15 (65%)
Domicile			PNS*	9	5 (56%)
UK	739	498 (67%)	Ethnicity		
International (EU)	47	22 (47%)	White	625	424 (68%)
			Latin	13	11 (85%)
International (Rest of World)	214	107 (50%)	Black	36	18 (50%)
Mode of Study			Asian	240	121 (50%)
Full-Time	951	599 (63%)	Arab	12	8 (67%)
Part-Time	49	28 (57%)	Mixed	51	33 (65%)

Study Level		
1st Year	250	139 (56%)
2nd Year	228	161 (71%)
3rd Year	172	123 (72%)
4th Year	54	38 (70%)
5th Year	13	9 (69%)
Masters	220	118 (54%)
Other	63	39 (62%)

Age Bracket		
Under 20	553	362 (65%)
21-30	396	232 (59%)
31-40	35	22 (63%)
41-50	15	11 (73%)
51+	1	0 (0%)

Widening Participation		
Parent	17	8 (47%)
Carer	21	18 (86%)
Care experienced or care leaver	4	2 (50%)
Estranged from family	12	6 (50%)
Refugee or asylum seeker	1	1 (100%)
None of the above	945	592 (63%)

Other	11	5 (45%)
PNS*	12	7 (58%)

Sexual Orientation		
Gay	18	11 (61%)
Lesbian	24	19 (79%)
Bisexual	142	90 (63%)
Pansexual	18	12 (67%)
Asexual	19	14 (74%)
Queer	30	19 (63%)
Heterosexual	636	394 (63%)
Other	2	2 (100%)
Unsure	23	15 (65%)
PNS*	88	51 (58%)

Disability Status		
No known disability	647	433 (67%)
Learning disability	110	72 (65%)
Physical disability	45	29 (64%)
Mental health condition	190	124 (65%)
Other	23	18 (78%)
PNS*	56	39 (70%)