



STUDENTS AS
CO-CREATORS

A Learning & Teaching Research Collaboration

AI and Academic Voice: Student Perspectives on Support, Control, and Ownership

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1. Executive Summary

This project explored how students understand and experience academic voice within an increasingly AI-mediated writing environment. While discussions surrounding Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in higher education frequently focus on plagiarism, academic integrity and misconduct, comparatively little attention has been paid to how students themselves perceive the influence of AI on their own writing practices and identity as writers.

To address this gap, two student-led semi-structured focus groups were conducted, one online and one face-to-face. Discussions explored students' understanding of academic voice, ownership of written work, patterns of AI use, learning, confidence, ethical boundaries and expectations for AI in the future. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings demonstrated that participants generally viewed academic voice as something rooted in personal thinking, individual experience and authentic expression. Although AI was widely regarded as a valuable support tool for planning, structuring, editing and developing ideas, participants consistently distinguished between using AI to support learning and allowing AI to replace independent writing. Students also described both positive and negative impacts of AI on confidence. While AI frequently provided reassurance and helped improve clarity and organisation, several participants expressed concerns that excessive reliance could undermine independent thinking, reduce confidence when AI was unavailable, and contribute to long-term dependency. Overall, participants recognised clear ethical boundaries regarding acceptable AI use. AI-assisted brainstorming, grammar checking and structural guidance were generally viewed as appropriate, whereas generating complete assignments or submitting AI-generated text without substantial personal input was considered unacceptable.

The project highlights the importance of supporting students in developing responsible AI literacy while continuing to strengthen independent academic writing skills.

2. Background and Aims

Background

The rapid emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has significantly influenced higher education, particularly in relation to academic writing, assessment and student learning. The accessibility of tools capable of generating and revising text has led to widespread debate around academic integrity, authorship and assessment design. While much of the early discussion has focused on concerns regarding plagiarism and the authenticity of student work (Cotton et al., 2024; Perkins, 2023), there is increasing recognition of the importance of understanding students' own experiences and perspectives when developing inclusive approaches to AI use (Tiili et al., 2023).

Academic writing involves more than the communication of information; it is closely connected to identity, ownership and participation within academic communities (Lea and Street, 1998). Academic voice reflects how students position themselves, communicate ideas and demonstrate individual perspectives through writing (Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998). As GenAI tools become increasingly capable of producing sophisticated written responses, questions have emerged about how students understand the relationship between AI assistance and the development of their own academic voice.

Research highlights both opportunities and challenges associated with GenAI in education. AI tools can support students through idea generation, feedback, language development and improving the structure of written work (Kasneci et al., 2023). This may be particularly valuable for students developing confidence as academic writers. However, concerns remain regarding over-reliance, reduced opportunities for independent thinking and potential impacts on students' confidence and writing development (Farrokhnia et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023).

These tensions highlight the importance of developing AI literacy within higher education. Rather than viewing GenAI solely through the lens of academic misconduct, universities need to support students in engaging with AI critically and ethically. AI literacy involves the ability to evaluate AI outputs, recognise limitations and make informed decisions about appropriate use (UNESCO, 2023). This requires approaches that maintain student agency, creativity and authentic engagement with learning (Bearman, Nieminen and Ajjawi, 2023).

This project therefore explored students' experiences of academic writing within an AI-mediated environment, focusing on perceptions of academic voice, ownership and authenticity. By examining how students understand the opportunities and challenges of GenAI, the study aims to contribute to discussions about how universities can support students in developing confidence, independence and authentic academic expression while engaging critically with emerging technologies.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore how students perceive the impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence on academic voice, ownership, confidence, learning and writing development.

Objectives

The study aimed to explore:

- how students define and understand academic voice within an AI-mediated writing environment;
- how AI influences students' perceptions of ownership, authorship and authenticity in academic work;
- how students integrate AI tools into their academic writing practices;
- the perceived benefits and challenges associated with AI use for learning and writing development;
- how AI influences students' confidence, independence and sense of themselves as academic writers;
- students' perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI within higher education.

3. Methods

Research design

This project adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured focus groups to explore students' perceptions of AI in academic writing. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate given the study's interest in capturing participants' lived experiences, interpretations and the meanings they attach to their use of AI within academic writing.

Participants and recruitment

Two student-led focus groups were conducted, comprising one face-to-face discussion and one online discussion. Each focus group included three participants, giving a total of six participants across the study. Participants were recruited through a combination of Blackboard (BB) announcements and messages, a dedicated noticeboard section on BB, lecture announcements, and face-to-face recruitment by student researchers within classes.

Participants were recruited from the Foundation Year and were nearing the end of their second term at the time the focus groups took place. Participants were students of Languages, History and social sciences, backgrounds aged between 18-24 with representation from both male and female students. All participants indicated that they had previous experience of using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools.

Data collection

Semi-structured questions enabled participants to discuss their experiences while allowing flexibility for participants to introduce additional perspectives. The discussion guide explored six key areas: academic voice, ownership and control, AI practices, learning and skill development, ethics and boundaries, and future perspectives regarding AI. The questions were prepared in advance by the research team, and the student co-researchers who led the focus groups followed these up during the discussions, probing and adapting as appropriate. Prior to the focus groups, the student co-researchers received training on managing focus groups, including facilitating discussion and probing responses, so that sessions could be conducted consistently and effectively. The focus groups were led by student co-researchers rather than academic staff in order to encourage more open and truthful sharing of ideas, as participants were anticipated to feel more comfortable speaking candidly with peers. Participants were encouraged to use a nickname during the focus groups to support anonymity and help create a comfortable environment in which they could share their experiences openly.

Ethics and consent

Ethics approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants were provided with an ethics-committee-approved participant information sheet detailing the aims of the study, what participation would involve, and their rights as participants. Participants were asked to give written consent for the recording and analysis of their data. To protect anonymity, participants entered the focus groups using a nickname rather than their real names, and identifying details were removed during transcription. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Responses were coded manually before being organised into overarching themes representing common patterns across participant experiences. Coding was conducted both independently and collaboratively, and the team agreed on the final coding and themes.

4. Results

Findings: Student Perspectives on GenAI and Academic Voice

The thematic analysis identified eight overarching themes relating to students' experiences of AI-assisted academic writing. Overall, students demonstrated a nuanced understanding of Generative AI (GenAI), recognising its value as a supportive learning tool while expressing concerns about authenticity, ownership, dependency, and the preservation of academic voice.

Academic Voice, Authenticity and the Limits of AI Replication

Academic voice was understood by participants as an expression of personal identity, experiences and ways of thinking rather than simply the use of sophisticated academic language. Students described their writing voice as something natural and connected to how they communicate and express ideas. As one participant explained, *"My writing language... [is] the words that I usually use in day-to-day conversations"* (Online FG, P.1), while another highlighted the importance of reflecting *"how I speak or how I think and how my ideas are reflected"* (Online FG, P.2).

Although students recognised that AI could produce structured and academically appropriate writing, they questioned whether it could genuinely reproduce individual voice. Participants suggested that AI could imitate style but could not generate personal meaning or lived experience. One student explained that *"it can be structured in a similar way, but it can't necessarily make up an answer that's going to come from your true academic voice"* (Face-to-face FG, P.B). AI-generated writing was often described as generic or artificial, with participants commenting that *"with AI it's very generic"* (Face-to-face FG, P.C) and that it could appear *"almost too perfect sometimes"* (Online FG, P.1).

AI as Support Rather Than Replacement

Across both focus groups, students primarily positioned AI as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for independent writing. Participants described using AI for planning, organising ideas, improving structure, checking grammar and supporting referencing. One student explained, *"I'll use AI to help me structure out my paragraphs and arguments"* (Face-to-face FG, P.B), while another described using it to generate starting points: *"It gives me some ideas or like topic sentences, and then I expand on those topics"* (Online FG, P.1).

Students emphasised that AI was most valuable when it supported their own thinking rather than produced work on their behalf. As one participant stated, *"It's a tool that you can use... it depends on how you use it"* (Face-to-face FG, P.A). Responsible use was therefore associated with maintaining personal involvement and control over the final work.

Ownership, Authorship and Maintaining Control

Ownership emerged as a central concern in students' discussions of AI use. Participants generally believed that authorship remained with the student when AI suggestions were evaluated, adapted and incorporated into their own ideas. One participant explained, *"The relationship between my ideas and the final text depends on how I use AI"* (Face-to-face FG, P.A).

Conversely, students viewed complete reliance on AI-generated text as reducing ownership and limiting learning. Generating assignments entirely through AI was criticised because *“you’re not learning anything”* (Face-to-face A), while copying AI responses directly was seen as problematic: *“Putting in the question and just copying it word for word”* (Online FG, P.1). Maintaining control over ideas and the final written product was therefore viewed as essential to preserving authenticity.

AI, Learning and Academic Development: Support Versus Dependency

Students identified several educational benefits of AI, including improving understanding of assignment questions, developing writing skills, and supporting grammar and vocabulary. One participant explained that AI helped because *“it highlights those mistakes and obviously I know for future to pay closer attention”* (Face-to-face FG, P.C).

However, students also recognised the risks of excessive reliance. Participants expressed concern that overuse could reduce independent thinking and limit opportunities to develop academic skills. One student suggested that AI *“doesn’t really allow you to develop on your own, to make your own mistakes”* (Face-to-face FG, P.B). AI was therefore viewed as most beneficial when used as a scaffold for learning rather than a substitute for critical engagement.

Confidence, Ethics and Future Perspectives

Students described mixed emotional responses towards AI. While many valued the reassurance it provided before submission, others reported that AI-generated writing could create self-doubt. One participant explained, *“Sometimes it does make me question if my work is good enough”* (Face-to-face FG, P.C). Similarly, some students expressed concerns that dependence on AI could weaken confidence when the technology was unavailable.

Students demonstrated clear ethical boundaries around AI use. Planning, brainstorming, grammar checking, and feedback were generally considered acceptable, whereas replacing personal writing or submitting AI-generated work was viewed as inappropriate. As one participant stated, *“When you start using it to replace your own words, that is a problem”* (Online FG, P.3).

Looking ahead, students expected AI to become increasingly normalised within academic writing but emphasised the importance of guidance to ensure it supports rather than replaces learning. Overall, students did not reject AI; instead, they positioned it as a valuable educational tool when used critically, ethically and with continued student ownership of ideas and academic voice.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that student's approach GenAI neither with wholesale enthusiasm nor with outright resistance, but with a measured, ethically aware pragmatism. They positioned AI as a supportive tool that could enhance their writing while recognising its potential to undermine authenticity, ownership and the development of an independent academic voice. This balanced orientation resonates with early accounts of student perceptions, which similarly report cautious optimism alongside concerns about integrity and over-reliance (Tlili et al., 2023).

A central finding was students' conceptualisation of academic voice as an expression of personal identity and lived experience rather than polished language. This aligns with theorisations of writing as a discursive act of identity (Ivanič, 1998), with conceptions of voice as the writer's positioning of

self within academic discourse (Hyland, 2002), and with the academic literacies understanding that writing is bound up with identity and epistemology rather than reducible to technical skill (Lea and Street, 1998). Students' perception that AI could imitate style but not generate personal meaning suggests that, in their terms, authenticity lies not in surface form but in the writer's own thinking. Where they described AI output as "generic" or "too perfect," they were effectively identifying the absence of the discursive self (Ivanič, 1998), implying that AI-generated writing is stylistically competent yet without identity.

Students consistently framed AI as a scaffold for their own thinking (planning, structuring, generating starting points and checking language) rather than as a producer of finished work. This aligns with literature positioning GenAI as a source of educational support (Kasneci et al., 2023) and with arguments that AI should be integrated in ways that preserve student agency and authentic engagement (Bearman, Nieminen and Ajjawi, 2023). Their distinction between using AI to support thinking and using it to produce work on their behalf reflects the integrity principle that what matters is not tool use per se but the transparency and authorship of that use (Perkins, 2023).

Ownership emerged as a defining concern, with students locating authorship in the evaluation, adaptation and integration of AI suggestions into their own ideas, and viewing complete reliance as diminishing both ownership and learning. This reflects the academic literacies emphasis on the writer's relationship to the text (Lea and Street, 1998) and the need to protect "uniquely human" capabilities in digital assessment (Bearman, Nieminen and Ajjawi, 2023). Their concern that overuse could reduce independent thinking and limit opportunities to "make your own mistakes" directly echoes worries about declining higher-order skills and weakened learning processes associated with over-reliance (Farrokhnia et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023), framing AI as a scaffold rather than a substitute in developmental as well as ethical terms.

The mixed emotional responses students reported (reassurance alongside self-doubt), highlight a tension less frequently foregrounded in the literature: that AI can simultaneously bolster and undermine writer confidence, with exposure to polished AI output becoming a source of anxiety in itself. Their ethical boundaries (acceptable for planning, brainstorming and feedback; unacceptable for replacing personal writing or submitting AI-generated work) align with established integrity expectations (Cotton et al., 2024; Perkins, 2023), while their call for guidance underscores the importance of AI literacy: the ability to evaluate AI outputs, recognise their limitations and make informed decisions about their use (UNESCO, 2023).

Taken together, the findings suggest that students are reflective users, capable of articulating meaningful boundaries around AI use. Their emphasis on voice, ownership, and authenticity,

indicates that, from the student perspective, the central issue is not whether AI is used but whether its use preserves the writer's authorial presence and learning. This reinforces the case for assessment and curriculum design that integrates AI in ways which protect student agency and authentic expression (Bearman, Nieminen and Ajjawi, 2023), while developing the AI literacy needed to navigate its use critically and ethically (UNESCO, 2023). Rather than approaching GenAI solely through a lens of academic misconduct, institutions may benefit from drawing on students' own nuanced understandings to shape guidance that supports, rather than suppresses, independent academic voice.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that students do not view AI simply as a shortcut for completing assignments. Instead, participants described AI as a tool capable of supporting writing, organisation and learning while simultaneously recognising the importance of maintaining ownership, authenticity and independent thinking.

Although AI frequently enhanced confidence and improved writing processes, participants also acknowledged potential risks associated with excessive dependence. Maintaining clear ethical boundaries therefore emerged as an important aspect of responsible AI use.

Recommendations

- Develop clear institutional guidance distinguishing appropriate and inappropriate AI use in terms of supporting or suppressing voice.
- Embed AI literacy within academic skills provision.
- Continue supporting development of academic voice alongside responsible AI use.
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss ethical AI use.
- Undertake larger studies involving students from multiple disciplines and institutions.
- Investigate how perceptions change over time as AI technologies continue to evolve.

The findings suggest that future approaches to AI should prioritise balanced integration, enabling students to benefit from technological support while preserving independent learning and authentic academic writing.

7. Dissemination

The findings from this study have already been disseminated through internal and external academic forums. Within the University of Westminster, part of the findings were presented at a Talk Teaching event, with a particular focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The discussion explored the implications of GenAI use for diverse student groups, including considerations around accessibility, academic confidence, digital literacy and the importance of ensuring that AI-supported practices do not undermine students' opportunities to develop their own academic voice.

The findings were also presented at the FYNAC2026 conference, where discussion focused on supporting students within the Foundation Year to develop academic voice in an increasingly AI-mediated educational environment. The presentation explored how students understand authenticity, ownership and agency when using GenAI, and considered how practitioners can support students in developing confidence as academic writers while engaging critically and ethically with emerging GenAI technologies.

8. Research Team Reflection

This project provided a valuable opportunity for collaboration between academic staff and student researchers. Working as a research team enabled us to bring together different perspectives, with student co-researchers contributing their lived experiences of using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) and academic staff contributing research expertise and knowledge of higher education contexts and GenAI literature. This partnership strengthened the research process and

supported a more meaningful understanding of students' experiences of AI-assisted academic writing.

Lecturer Reflection

From the lecturer perspective, working closely with the student co-researchers was a particularly valuable aspect of the project. Students contributed important insights into how their peers understand and navigate issues of academic voice, ownership and authenticity when using AI, while their involvement in the focus groups helped create an open and comfortable environment that encouraged participants to share honest reflections about their experiences. As a result, the focus groups generated rich qualitative data that highlighted the complexity of students' relationships with AI. Although thematic analysis was rewarding, completing the analysis within the available timeframe proved challenging, particularly given the overlap between themes such as confidence, independence and ownership. In future projects, we would establish clearer deadlines and allocate more dedicated time for analysis earlier in the research process. Overall, this project has influenced my understanding of AI in higher education by shifting the focus beyond concerns about academic integrity towards broader questions of student agency, inclusion and learning, highlighting the importance of supporting students to develop critical AI literacy while continuing to nurture their own academic voice.

Student Reflection

From the perspective of a student, I believe the project went well as it not only gave us a vital insight into our peers' views on AI and their individual experiences with it but also gave us important insight into what it is like working with a lecturer, as this was a first for all the student co-creators. A key factor towards our success in the study was the effectiveness of the focus groups, as they provided us with clear qualitative data that enabled us to organise and create a clearer picture. One issue we faced was getting participants to commit to taking part in the focus groups; although this issue was resolved and we managed to get the three participants per focus group, allowing an effective study to take place. The biggest obstacle we faced as a group was communication and scheduling, which I believe hindered the productivity of the group. Looking back on this, for further group projects, I believe implementing consistent and effective communication will be crucial to a productive group. Regardless of this, the team was cohesive and worked as a unit, allocating roles and each playing a vital part towards the study. The project gave us an understanding of effective ways of collecting qualitative data and how to visualise and tell a story with the collected data, a vital skill. Overall, the project showed us that students' experiences with AI are unique to the individual, although we can see similar trends amongst the participants, such as students' use of AI as a supplement to their work and to be more time-efficient when trying to meet a deadline.

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