

Generative AI and academic skills support at UCL: an institutional approach

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Abstract

The release of OpenAI's ChatGPT-3.5 to the public in November 2022 marked the beginning of a new era in which generative AI (GenAI) tools are widely available. This has prompted a need for academic skills support for students' use of GenAI in Higher Education. This article outlines UCL's approach to developing this support, with a particular focus on referencing and acknowledging GenAI. It includes achievements to date, current initiatives and discussion on challenges and perspectives for the future.

Key words: artificial intelligence; generative AI; referencing; academic skills; higher education.

Introduction and context

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has long been utilised in many capacities, but the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT-3.5 to the public in November 2022 marked the beginning of a new era in which generative AI (GenAI) tools are widely available to the general population. This has impacted on many aspects of society, and the implications are particularly complex in education.

This article outlines UCL's response to the increasing prevalence of GenAI, particularly its approach to academic skills support for GenAI, with a focus on acknowledging and referencing GenAI. It includes achievements to date and current initiatives and concludes with a discussion on challenges and perspectives for the future.

University College London (UCL) is ranked in the top 5 universities in the UK (1) and has the highest student numbers of all research-intensive UK universities (2). More than 60 departments make up 11 faculties across the university, with approximately 51,000 students and 16,000 staff. UCL's approach was therefore of significant interest in the sector, and its commitment to

Open Science principles ensured its policy and resources were made openly available to others (3).

Following the release of ChatGPT, UCL established a cross-institutional AI scoping group, which included senior leaders, academic experts, and support services staff, to ensure a UCL-wide approach to generative AI in education. With its early development of guidance in this area, UCL was a sector leader and informed the Russell Group's principles on the use of generative AI tools (4). Within UCL's AI group were 4 workstreams, each with a distinct area of focus: academic skills, assessment design, policy development and opportunities. This article discusses the work of the Academic Skills Workstream, which comprised members from UCL's support services, including the library, and academic staff, including AI experts.

Academic skills support

UCL chose not to ban use of generative AI, but instead advocated for responsible and ethical use. Supporting the development of AI literacy among students and staff was therefore a priority and was the brief for the Academic Skills Workstream. As AI lit-

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eracy is an emerging area, it is not easily defined, but it includes understanding its capabilities and limitations, having the skills to use it productively and effectively, the ability to critically evaluate AI tools and outputs, and to use it responsibly, ethically and transparently (5, 6).

Gathering evidence

The Academic Skills Workstream included representatives from UCL Library Skills, UCL Digital Skills, the UCL Academic Communication Centre, academic departments and UCL Arena (UCL's centre for support for teaching staff), and so provided input and perspective from a wide representation of UCL staff groups. However, an informed approach to AI literacy support also required an understanding of the student experience and viewpoint. In March 2023 the Workstream therefore ran a series of student focus groups, recruiting participants through the Student Union Academic Representatives network, ensuring balanced involvement from students across disciplines and level of study. The focus group aims included gaining an understanding of students' experience of using GenAI tools, their thoughts on its ethical use, their perspectives on the clarity, fairness and utility of UCL's initial guidance, and suggestions and expectations for how UCL could support ethical use through resources and training.

The activities of the Workstream were also informed by the AI group's collaborative monitoring of developments across the sector, including through literature and attendance at relevant events.

Priorities

The focus groups identified a need for students to receive timely, mandatory guidance on the ethical and appropriate use of GenAI, integrated into their academic programmes through in-person and online training (7). The workstream agreed and delivered on initial priorities of a webpage to provide a single point of access to all information, a teaching toolkit for academic staff to use with their students, a self-paced online introductory module on GenAI, and guidance on acknowledging and referencing the use of GenAI in academic work. The Academic Skills Workstream also consulted on the work of the Assessment Design Workstream to expand academic integrity guidance to include the use of GenAI.

Acknowledging use of generative AI and referencing generative AI

At UCL, the library provides training on referencing and the use of reference management software, as well as maintaining detailed online guidance for referencing (8). Responsibility for leading on the development of UCL recommendations for acknowledging use of GenAI and referencing GenAI therefore was recognised to be the library's remit.

UCL does not mandate the use of a single referencing style. While many academic departments specify a required style, others allow students to choose. The library maintains detailed guidance for the Harvard referencing style, which is widely used across UCL and beyond, receiving over 1 million views in 2023 (9). Despite this disconnected approach to the choice of referencing styles across the institution, a consensus position on acknowledging GenAI and referencing GenAI was desirable to facilitate the development of guidance, which in turn was critical to support students' transparent use of GenAI.

Challenges

As GenAI has evolved rapidly, there is as yet no consensus on how to acknowledge its use or to reference it. To inform the development of such guidance at UCL, a review was undertaken of guidance where it existed at other Higher Education institutions, from publishers and in standard referencing styles. At the time of the review (June 2023), many did not yet have guidance publicly available.

In line with many other institutions, initial UCL guidance advocated for acknowledgement of the use of GenAI to include extensive description of the processes and output generated from GenAI tools. This was challenged by student feedback in focus groups. Students were concerned about the difficulties of fully describing their use of GenAI when they utilise multiple prompts and it becomes more difficult to distinguish between AI-generated and non-AI-generated work, and whether their assessed mark would be impacted if they were transparent about their use of GenAI. On the other hand, in discussion with the broader AI group and at faculty and departmental level it was clear that many staff felt they would not be able to judge the merit of a student's 'own work' without seeing in as much detail as possible the extent to which they had used GenAI, and exactly how they had used it.

There were additional challenges when it came to guidance on referencing GenAI, with differing opinions as to whether GenAI could be considered as an author and cited as such (10). Consultation with the broader UCL AI group and different disciplinary experts revealed exceptions that needed to be considered, highlighting the need for flexibility.

A flexible approach

We therefore decided to present UCL's guidelines on acknowledging and referencing GenAI (11) as recommendations, rather than policy, to allow for a flexible approach which could be adapted according to the context. They include minimum requirements for acknowledging the use of GenAI, with further suggested requirements which may be stipulated by a department, academic programme, member of teaching staff or for a particular assessment.

We have taken the standpoint of many academic publishers and the MLA referencing style (12) that an AI tool cannot be classed as an author, as it cannot take responsibility for its work, and therefore should not be cited as such. In addition, citing AI-generated content does not satisfy one of the key functions of a reference list, which is to enable the reader to identify the original source. UCL's recommendations, therefore, are not to cite AI as an author nor include it in the reference list. Exceptions are accepted, such as reference to a formally published output generated by AI, where GenAI is being quoted directly, or where a standardised referencing style requires GenAI sources to be cited as an author and included in a reference list.

To ensure the guidance on acknowledging the use of GenAI would not be interpreted in isolation from guidance on the principles of the ethical and responsible use of AI or misinterpreted as legitimising its use, introductory text outlining considerations for using generative AI in academic work is included in the guidance.

Current and future developments

Since producing UCL's guidance on *Acknowledging the use of AI and referencing AI*, the library has been developing further guidance and support for AI literacy in relation to the library research process, in line with the LibrarySkills@UCL information literacy framework

(13), and in consultation with colleagues in the Academic Skills Workstream.

Considerations around the use of GenAI have been introduced into existing library skills training sessions where relevant. These sessions highlight the importance of using tools to inform and assist the research process, rather than as tools to generate an assignment or research outputs, and focus on thinking critically about responsible use and the impact of using GenAI on the learning process. The library has also addressed the use of GenAI as a source of information in online learning materials and guidance (14, 15). Guidance will soon be expanded to cover evaluating information in the context of GenAI and using GenAI to inform the process of searching for information, including for systematic reviews. All guidance will continue to be reviewed and updated.

Discussion

While it is perceived that many students across UCL are utilising GenAI tools in various contexts to inform their work, few are acknowledging its use. Reasons for this should be investigated. It is possible this is owing to lack of awareness of the guidance, but it is more likely owing to students' concerns as identified in the early focus groups: that transparency about their use of GenAI might have a negative impact on their assessed mark, issues with acknowledging in detail being too complex where use of AI tools is so fully integrated into workflows, and/or the extra work involved in acknowledging GenAI use making it impractical. Where the benefits of utilising GenAI tools for productivity are outweighed by the effort of ensuring complex acknowledgement of its use, such recommendations become obstructive. These issues will only increase as GenAI is increasingly integrated into existing technologies, which may result in users being unaware they are utilising AI. This will make acknowledgment of its use unsustainable.

Since February 2024, staff and students at UCL now have access to the Enterprise version of Microsoft CoPilot, which utilises GPT-4 and can generate text and images, with the added security of commercial data protection. With UCL facilitating this access, and so endorsing its use, it is critical that students are equipped with AI literacy skills to use it effectively and

responsibly. This poses a further challenge, as AI literacy is new not only to students but to staff who must develop skills themselves to be able to support students. A culture of supportive collaboration is essential. Within the department in which UCL Library Services is based (LCCOS (Library Culture Collections and Open Science)), an AI group has been established with a remit to identify opportunities and concerns relating to AI in the context of its services and support, and to help inform relevant LCCOS guidance on AI, including further incorporating AI guidance into existing skills offerings. LibrarySkills@UCL guidance and online materials are licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, enabling sharing across communities beyond UCL.

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