

**History and AI:
A Survey of History
Students in UK Universities**

Preliminary Project Report

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Executive Summary

This report gives an overview of anonymous survey responses from more than six hundred students studying history degrees at UK universities in 2026. The survey explored their attitudes and experiences of artificial intelligence (including, but not limited to, generative artificial intelligence), patterns of use, and institutional support. Our findings suggest that students make a clear distinction between the use of AI to support learning, and its use as a replacement for independent intellectual engagement and critical thinking. Students frame their use of AI as being selective and pragmatic, with reported use for planning, explanation, accessibility support, language assistance, and organisation. This version of use sits alongside a deep scepticism about its academic value, ethics, reliability, and impact on learning. There was widespread concern about false information and ‘hallucinations’, environmental impacts, academic integrity, and diminished critical thinking. Moreover, many contributions highlighted issues related to increased anxieties, interpersonal tensions, and complex perceptions of how other students are engaging with AI.

Initial reflections on our data suggests that:

- AI use is common across the student population but is mostly support-oriented rather than direct text creation/submission.
- Students overwhelmingly believe that overreliance on GenAI damages critical thinking, creating a fundamental tension with the perceived value of a history degree and their academic development.
- They do not believe that GenAI-generated work would result in good grades for history assessments.
- They are highly concerned about ethical issues, environmental impacts, hallucinations, and being falsely accused of inappropriate use of GenAI.
- Their responses indicate that they are more familiar with institutional policies around AI (often specifically related to academic integrity and misconduct) than they are with receiving support around developing their own GenAI skills and practices. However, they generally do not want history departments to normalise or require high levels of AI use.

Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has quickly become a significant issue in higher education, with it being no overstatement to say that it has prompted an existential crisis across the sector. While GenAI offers [new opportunities for research](#), as well as [for teaching and learning](#), its potential for undermining the traditional tenets of academia has garnered much attention. Much of the discussion around GenAI has focused on concerns related to [academic integrity and assessment design](#), its [impact on teacher identities](#), and the need for [educators to develop skills in attempts to 'keep up' with technological advances](#).

For the higher education sector as a whole, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [curated a range of resources relating to GenAI](#). Specifically for history, while the American Historical Association has generated what they describe as '[Guiding Principles for Artificial Intelligence in History Education](#)', the Royal Historical Society has taken a different approach – and, recognising the speed at which technology advances and thus renders articles or advice outdated, instead produced [a reading guide covering GenAI, the humanities, and history](#). Partly due to the ever-changing landscape, there remains a lack of national guidance for historians navigating these issues in teaching and learning – particularly subject-specific guidance that is informed by student voice.

Our survey aimed to explore the perspectives of a significant group that are often overlooked in such considerations – gathering the experiences and opinions of a wide number of students themselves about AI and the perceived implications for their own learning, teaching, and assessment. As an academic discipline, history offers a particularly significant case study due to the central prominence of critical thinking, evaluation of evidence, interpretation, and originality of argument.

The project leads, as convenors of [History in Practice](#) and the [History UK Pedagogy Forum](#), have been leading conversations with colleagues across higher education institutions in the UK (and beyond) who shared the challenges they have faced in speaking with their own students about how and why they were choosing whether to engage with AI. One of the main issues identified with staff speaking with their own students about AI use was succinctly summarised by one respondent to our survey: *"I'm just too scared to ask [about*

acceptable use of AI] because of my anxiety on the off chance that instead of getting guidance I get reported for cheating when I haven't done anything wrong." Therefore, our aim in designing and distributing this anonymous survey was to access students' own beliefs about and experiences with AI, free from the perceived threat of any repercussion from their institutions and staff who were likely to be marking their assessed work.

Methodology

Between March and June 2026, our survey gathered over 600 anonymous responses from students enrolled on history degree programs in UK higher education institutions. Representatives from all UK higher education institutions that teach history degrees were contacted by the project leads, with requests that the survey be shared with their students. We received responses from students representing 31 higher education institutions across the UK. We acknowledge that those students who took the time to respond and share their thoughts about GenAI are likely to hold particularly strong views on the subject (or were especially incentivised by the potential to win a randomly allocated gift voucher!). However, while there are some valuable small-scale studies occurring in individual institutions, we believe that the data collected through this survey is the current single largest record of history students' views on AI across the sector – and certainly substantial enough to raise some significant issues for further discussion and consideration.

Respondents were drawn from a range of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, covering all regions of the UK as well as pre- and post-92 institutions. Our student respondents represented a range of gender identities and ethnic backgrounds, predominantly aged twenty-one or younger. First- and second-year students formed the largest groups of respondents, although all years of study were well represented in our data. The survey questions were a mix of fixed-response and open-ended questions, containing Likert scales and free-text responses. The latter in particular generated extensive commentary and offered fascinating insights into student perspectives that developed and contextualised the quantitative results.

Our survey contained a mix of questions about artificial intelligence (AI) in general and more specifically generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), which were adapted from a previous survey by the [Higher Education Policy Institute](#). Broadly speaking, AI is the vast umbrella term for the wide field where machines perform tasks, solve problems, and make decisions – relevant examples might include translation, transcription, or recommending books/articles/etc. for research. GenAI is a specific subset of AI focused on generating content, such as text or images, based on user prompts – for instance, summarising academic articles, simulating feedback on a draft, creating a study plan, or even suggesting text in response to a question/title. As our questions covered attitudes and experiences with both AI and GenAI, we use the appropriate terminology where relevant.

Patterns of AI Use

Over 60% of respondents reported having used at least one form of AI in the past year for any reason, with responses selecting translation, summarisation tools, editing work, speech-to-text technologies, and generating text as the most common uses. However, that figure dropped to 42% when asked to report on GenAI use specifically in the preparation of assessed work. Students most commonly reported either no use at all or purely support-focused use of GenAI in the preparation of assessed work – such as explaining concepts, suggesting primary and secondary sources, structuring ideas, or drafting essay plans. Qualitative responses supported the quantitative data, suggesting that many students use GenAI in ways they describe as pragmatic and supportive, a tool to aid things like study organisation rather than as a direct replacement for academic work.

Overall, a substantial minority of our respondents reported using GenAI in assessment preparation, but this was almost exclusively reported as a study support and workflow tool rather than primarily as a direct essay-writing machine or submitting GenAI-produced text as their own work.

Student Attitudes Towards ‘Acceptable Use of GenAI’

Reflecting the above, our data suggests that there are quite specific and narrow areas within the student population where GenAI use is generally considered acceptable as an educational aid. Practices that our respondents deemed to be more acceptable included the explanation of concepts, summarisation of relevant articles, and brainstorming ideas for research and possible essay structure. However, students tended to strongly reject practices that involved the generation of assessed content or replacement of independent critical engagement. Students therefore appear to distinguish sharply between GenAI use as either an ‘acceptable’ support tool, or the ‘unacceptable’ replacement of critical thought and text generation. Free-text comments further suggest that, where students do choose to engage with GenAI, they rationalise such use as a response to time pressure, increased workload, lack of immediate human support, and the appeal of personalised assistance (for broader discussion of such issues, see [Jones and Peplow, 2026](#)).

Differences in Responses by Academic Year of Study

Preliminary analysis suggests that academic year of study does not appear to have a strong impact on students’ responses. Where differences did appear across academic years, they mainly related to prior exposure to AI before university, perceptions of institutional policy and support, and demand for training and guidance.

The most apparent difference, [perhaps unsurprisingly](#), is that current first-year students appear to have arrived at university with far more prior exposure to AI than later-year groups. This likely reflects that newer students entered university after AI tools had become more well-known and widely available. Similarly, on questions whether their assessments had changed in response to GenAI, students further along in their degrees are arguably better placed to compare assessment practices over time. Students in later years were therefore less likely than first-year counterparts to respond to that question with ‘*I don’t know / Not applicable*’ or ‘*Neither agree nor disagree*’ – in both cohorts, about a third agreed or strongly agreed that their assessments had changed a lot in response to GenAI.

Interestingly, MA/PGT students were far more likely than undergraduates to agree or strongly agree with the statement *'My institution should provide AI tools for me to use'*. The positive responses for this statement gradually increased from first- to final-year students, with a significant jump then to MA/PGT students. One potential reading of this might be that, as students are closer towards considering what life after university might look like for them (i.e., obtaining a job), they are more likely to perceive benefits of familiarity with AI tools for their working environments. It was also noticeable that MA/PGT students' desire for formal support and guidance, such as training sessions or workshops, was significantly higher than undergraduate cohorts. This may reflect that such interventions have already become part of undergraduate programs, in a way that they perhaps are not so embedded for MA/PGT courses. It may also reinforce points raised elsewhere, that 'acceptable' use of GenAI is generally conceptualised as being a form of support for students where it is otherwise less visible or available. In other words, that MA/PGT students possibly desire institutionally provided AI tools more strongly because their courses inherently contain less formal support and guidance than undergraduate equivalents.

Academic Integrity and AI Detection

A recurring theme from student responses related to uncertainty surrounding the detection of GenAI use, with many respondents expressing concern that universities may not be able to identify GenAI use consistently. Others feared false accusations, particularly given the now numerous reports that [GenAI detection software generate inaccurate results](#). More than two-thirds of our student respondents revealed that they worried about being wrongly accused of inappropriate GenAI use – but less than half expressed confidence in staff and institutions to correctly determine whether GenAI had been used in assessments. In the context of a highly pressurised environment in higher education, with [students expressing anxieties about the need to 'make the most' of their degrees and to obtain jobs at the other side of it](#), fears of incorrectly being penalised for inappropriate GenAI use appear to be escalated even further. From the student perspective, it appears that AI is not only an ethical or pedagogic matter, but also an issue of surveillance and trust.

Student Attitudes - Critical Thinking, Accessibility, and Environmental/Ethical Concerns

Qualitative free-text responses to our survey reveal exceptionally strong feelings from some students about AI. Themes raised include robust defences of human creativity, concern for the integrity of history as an academic discipline, scepticism regarding commercial technology companies promoting AI, and anxiety about future assessment practices. A minority reported positive experiences with AI, including as accessibility support, but at the same time emphasised the need for responsible and critical use.

The strongest consensus in our survey data related to concerns raised about the negative impact of GenAI use on critical thinking. Students frequently and fiercely argued that the study of history is fundamentally based upon interpretation and evidence-based reasoning, with many believing that over-reliance on GenAI reduces the opportunities to use and develop these skills. Notably, despite widespread concerns that GenAI will increase academic misconduct, students overwhelmingly rejected the suggestion that AI-generated work would achieve a good grade as part of a history degree.

Similarly, the [environmental impact of AI](#) emerged as one of the most prominent concerns raised by our respondents. Students repeatedly referenced things like high energy consumption, data centres, and sustainability. Moreover, ethical concerns which were raised included issues such as [copyright](#), training data, [labour practices](#), and the broader implications of automation.

However, several respondents highlighted some positive uses of AI. For instance, students with dyslexia, ADHD, and those facing language barriers described AI as a valuable support tool that helped with their comprehension, summarisation, and organisation. These points highlight the need for nuanced policy approaches that also recognise the potential of AI to support students facing such additional challenges. Our data therefore demonstrates how there is not one consistent and uniform view on AI across the student body, and that these different views and experiences – as well as differing conceptualisations of appropriate/inappropriate use – are present and sit alongside each other within the student body at all times. Many of our respondents reflected on the tensions and

interpersonal issues created by this, such as those who felt their peers were gaining unfair advantages through use of GenAI – either in actually producing academic work or in reducing time pressures to allow for other activities (career development, socialising, etc.).

Institutional Policy and Support

Although many students indicated that their institutions had policies related to AI, fewer believed they had received appropriate training or support for AI use. Students often requested clearer guidance, practical examples, and opportunities to discuss ethical issues and disciplinary expectations. Interestingly, when asked if their institutions provided access to AI tools, 84% either said no or that they did not know. The remaining 16% who responded positively to this question is less than half the roughly 38% of UK undergraduates across all courses who reported to [a Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\) survey](#) that their universities actively provide them with AI tools. There are various possible reasons for this, including that other academic disciplines are currently likely to more actively embed AI into their courses than history – but the fact that comparatively so few of our student respondents reported awareness of AI tools being available to them does suggest a deeper reluctance to actively engage with AI use in our discipline.

Reflections

Overall, our survey data suggests that history students are developing sophisticated positions on AI, which has become a significant issue in their studies and interpersonal relationships. This suggests some interesting juxtapositions in comparison with other student cohorts. For instance, the previously mentioned [HEPI survey](#) of undergraduates across all courses found that 94% of students reported independently using GenAI to help with assessed work – whereas a comparative question in our history-specific survey saw less than half of that figure report having used GenAI for their assessed work (42%). Rather than viewing AI as wholly positive or negative, as we may perhaps have expected (or positions that we ourselves hold), many of our respondents drew clear distinctions between what they perceive as beneficial or harmful uses. While some uses are viewed with cautious positivity, substantial concerns regarding ethics, impact on critical thinking,

and institutional practices remained apparent across responses. Therefore, our data suggests that although there is widespread criticism of AI, this is combined with a sizeable proportion who positively report on their pragmatic use of it as a support tool. Students' comments indicate a desire for balanced policies and approaches that maintain academic standards while recognising technological realities.

Some preliminary reflections on our collected data suggest that:

1. Students generally do not seem to be consciously and deliberately using GenAI to contravene the Intended Learning Outcomes of the tasks they are doing. They remain committed to the idea that critical thinking and independent work is important and a central component of their historical training. However, there is a significant 'grey zone' of students using it for support, reassurance, or to facilitate what they see as a strategic approach to academic work.
2. Students are particularly concerned about the potential impact of GenAI on the history discipline as it appears to undermine independent critical thought, weighing evidence, and interpretation.
3. The growing prominence of AI is creating significant issues around trust – both between students and institutions, and students and the academic staff they engage with. Students accept and agree that policies around GenAI use should exist but perceive the support and guidance they are receiving as deficient. Being falsely accused of inappropriate use of GenAI remains a live concern and appears to be having a negative impact on the student experience.
4. Within an increasingly diverse student body, students experience and understand the potential of AI differently. For instance, for some, AI has important potential in terms of increasing accessibility, particularly for neurodivergence and language barriers.
5. Human marking matters both symbolically and pedagogically. Students strongly reject suggestions of any marking being conducted by AI and view human assessment as integral to academic legitimacy.

However, this is very much a starting point for further and ongoing conversations about AI and university students.

This report marks the beginning, not the end, of this ongoing project. The findings presented here are necessarily preliminary and represent a first attempt to capture history students' perspectives on AI at scale across the UK higher education sector. We think that the data raises really important questions about disciplinary identity, critical thinking, accessibility, trust, assessment, and student support, all of which deserve further investigation. We are continuing to develop this project and see this report as an opening comment rather than the final word. Not least, as GenAI technologies continue to develop, so will the ways in which students, educators, and institutions respond to them. We are also planning to talk with history staff about their experiences of teaching and learning within this new, AI-inflected context.

We therefore invite colleagues, departments, and organisations with an interest in these issues to join the conversation. We are really keen to hear from those who would like to discuss the findings we have outlined here, share experiences from their own institutions, contribute evidence, or explore opportunities for collaboration. Understanding the impact of AI on the study of history will require sustained engagement across our discipline, and we hope that this report serves as a useful starting point. You can contact us at sarah.jones@bristol.ac.uk and simon.peplow@warwick.ac.uk.