



REPORT: EXPLORING STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON GENERATIVE
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AT UON: A SURVEY-BASED STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Staff are the backbone for academic institutions but have many conflicting priorities on their role which means that they often have limited time to develop skills when new innovations are introduced. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has made a significant impact in the education sector and in addition to many potential benefits also means that it is now a topic that is impossible to ignore. Time must be spent by staff to understand the potential impact on their personal role, the students and the wider institution. It may be possible that subsequent efficiencies in personal workload may be achieved but raising awareness of ethical issues is now critical. Conversations with staff along with survey results need to be used to shape the support and guidance that are needed for individuals to be effective in their role and that of supporting others in the institution.

This paper highlights some of the key issues (positive and negative) within The University of Northampton and provides a baseline for understanding the staff experience. It will be later combined with the student results to provide a complete picture of the current UON position.



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GenAI Images:
Stable Diffusion.
April 2024
Prompt: Futuristic
learning environment

HEADLINES

Demographics

The first UON staff AI survey was distributed between Feb 2024 – April 2024 and completed by 70 respondents. Most survey participants were either fulltime academic tutors (43%) or professional services staff (36%).

Usage

More staff (59%) had used GenAI tools as part of their role, than those who had not (41%). However, those using Gen AI tools regularly (Daily, most days and weekly users only) only amounted to a combined 38%, The remainder of 62% used GenAI tools a few times a month or less.

For those using tools, ChatGPT was the most common GenAI tool used by staff, with other chatbots Google Gemini and CoPilot also popular. Other more specialist tools such as Research Rabbit, Semantic Scholar, and Consensus were used to support specific tasks.

Of the staff surveyed nearly twice as many were positive (48%) as negative (25%) about the use of GenAI tools, however a similar number (25%) had no strong feelings one way or another.

Staff identified a range of uses for GenAI ranging from generating ideas (most popular) to research and collaboration (least popular).

“Gives a starting point when I struggle to get started”.

“Speed – what would take 30 mins can be drafted in seconds, I can then adapt in minutes.”

STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON USING GENAI IN THEIR OWN ROLE.

Both users and non-users agreed that the following are important in the use of GenAI tools. (In order of combined agreement scores)

- Developing critical GenAI literacy
- Copyright issues
- Training in the use of GenAI tools
- Availability of GenAI tools for all staff
- Privacy of information
- Personal choice in use of GenAI tools
- Staff trained in the use of GenAI will have more opportunities in the future

There was general agreement on some of the main issues on GenAI regardless of whether staff had used it before or not. Staff indicated that it was important to develop their critical GenAI literacy and would like to be trained in the use of GenAI to support their role. Tools such as the Jisc Discovery tool (<https://blogs.northampton.ac.uk/learntech/2024/04/11/getting-started-with-ai-a-guide-to-using-the-jisc-discovery-tools-new-ai-question-set/>) allow staff to better understand their current position and opportunities for progression.

Some respondents showed a mixed response regarding GenAI depending on whether they had used it before or not. Users of tools tended to indicate that more staff use should be made of the opportunities (85%) compared to 60% of current non-users. Current users also showed higher awareness of the privacy issues in GenAI (80%) compared to 65% of non-users. Non users tended to indicate that they had a lack of awareness of how the tools could support their work (61%) compare to 33% of users. This indicates the importance of sessions and materials which raise awareness combined with relevant case studies.

Focusing on non-users, 57% do not feel the need to use GenAI tools with 36% indicating that they do not know how to use any of the tools. 25% are concerned that using GenAI tools would limit their creativity and 25% are concerned about the data which is being gathered regarding their interactions.



GenAI Image: Stable Diffusion model.

“AI is helpful to quickly generate image descriptions to make them more accessible.”

“As a person who is dyslexic I fully appreciate the benefits of GenAI, many of the ‘dyslexic apps’ are AI based, I believe their introduction has helped many access and succeed in HE who would have previously struggled. I feel these tools help even out the playing field and enable assessment to assess knowledge and understanding rather than writing ability.”



GenAI Image: Stable Diffusion model.

STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON USING GENAI WITHIN THE WIDER INSTITUTION AND WITH STUDENTS.

Generally, 48% of staff were positive about the introduction of GenAI within education with 25% of staff being more negative. The remainder had no strong feelings either way.

The respondents generally felt more positive with students using GenAI. 79% felt that the tools could help students organise their thoughts; plan their work (78%) and would generally have a positive impact on their learning (64%).

72% felt that students should be taught how to use the tools but also be supported in their use through explicit guidance in the assignment brief (78%). Longer term, respondents felt that GenAI will have a positive impact on student learning (64%) and that those who develop skills in this area will be better prepared for employment (64%). It was also noted that there was a feeling by some respondents that

GenAI was 'levelling the playing field' for students and making education more accessible to a wider group of students:

Only 20% of respondents feel that they know enough about GenAI to support student in how to use the tools correctly. This possibly indicates that in addition to raising personal digital capability around GenAI, there is also a need for tutors to be provided with extra guidance on how to use the tools with students. Whilst 71% of staff feel that GenAI could help students with assessed work they also noted some concerns and reservations with regards to the assessment process. 57% felt that assessments need to be updated as a result of GenAI, with 33% noting a negative impact on assessment – 25% feel that students should not use GenAI as part of their assessments.

There is also some concern with staff using GenAI in the assessment process with only 36% feeling that using GenAI to help generate feedback will help staff to be more efficient. 41% indicated that GenAI could be used to assist with marking student work. More work will need to be done to understand the reasons for staff not wanting GenAI to be used in this way.

“I think we need to learn about it, we need to teach our students about it and we need to think about and model ethical use of it in our work.”

“It is fair to say that the genie has well and truly been let out of the bottle. HE should now embrace this technology and ensure both staff and students are correctly trained in its best use.”





GenAI Image: Stable Diffusion model.

CONCLUSIONS

This was the first whole UON staff survey on GenAI and reflects the position during the first quarter of 2024. It shows a mixed staff response to the use of GenAI in both personal use and in use with students. Whilst the benefits were noted for both groups, this is also tempered by concerns such as ethics, undermining skills, and improper usage / lack of understanding. Development sessions for both staff and students along with comprehensive written support and video material need to be prioritised. It is essential that groups such as the University AI forum and the Centre for Active Digital Education work throughout the University (and gather material from the wider education sector) to maintain the knowledge base which will maximise the opportunities and minimise the risks.

“The rise of GenAI use in HE will result in more cheating and as GenAI becomes better, students will end up with degrees that they do not understand the basics of and staff will lose their ability to be knowledgeable about bad, good or excellent assessments.”

“Rather than trying to design out GenAI, we need to think about how we can make sure assignments test the learning outcomes within the current landscape of GenAI. Staff need to know much more about GenAI to enable them to develop appropriate assessments.”



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