Academic Support or Misconduct? Chinese International Students' Experiences with Generative AI in UK Higher Education

Zhixi Li, University of Glasgow, School of Education, United Kingdom, 2888177L@student.gla.ac.uk

Abstract
As Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT become more common in higher education, they are changing how students approach academic work and expectations. This shift raises questions about how agency, authorship and critical judgement are experienced in learning environments where Generative AI plays a role. Drawing on the framework of networked learning, which sees learning as resulting from interactions between people, resources and tools, this study explores how such interactions may be altered when students rely on Generative AI systems that operate outside of collaborative learning networks. Focusing on Chinese international students in the UK, who often face challenges related to language, academic norms and institutional trust, the research investigates how they use, interpret and respond to Generative AI tools in academic writing. Drawing on constructivism learning theory and posthumanism perspectives, it conceptualises student Generative AI relations not as a simple or straightforward process but as an evolving process influenced by tools, cultural expectations, and university policies. These theoretical lenses allow for a more critical and situated understanding of how Generative AI influence students' agency, perceptions of authorship and sense of ethical responsibility in academic work. The study adopts a three-stage design. First, an online survey explores the scope and purpose of students' use of Generative AI across various academic tasks. Second, a screen-recorded writing task observes how students interact with Generative AI in real-time during an authentic academic activity. Third, semi-structured interviews capture students' views on university rules, ethics and how they make choices. This design helps reveal both students' visible writing choices and the less obvious thinking behind them. At the time of submission, data collection is still underway and will be completed by early 2026. Preliminary findings will be shared at the Networked Learning Conference to support broader discussions around student agency, academic integrity and ethical engagement with Generative AI in university settings shaped by digital tools. By focusing on the lived experiences of a specific student population, this research aims to contribute to ongoing theoretical and practical discussions on how learning, identity and authorship are changing.

Keywords
Generative AI, Chinese international students, Academic writing, Student agency, Networked learning

Introduction

As Generative AI becomes increasingly embedded in higher education, it is reshaping not only how students learn, but also how they engage with knowledge, authorship, and institutional expectations (Gourlay, 2024). This study explores the uses of Generative AI in academic work by Chinese students studying in the UK. By approaching such tools through a networked learning perspective, which sees knowledge as emerging from collaborative participation, it seeks to address questions around agency, authorship and autonomy. It may also offer insights into how Generative AI changes how students find and work with academic ideas.

Central to networked learning is the concept of collaborative participation, which views learning as an emergent property of interactions across people, texts, tools, and contexts (NLEC, 2021a; Jones, 2011). In this view, agency and knowledge are not transmitted but co-produced through interactions within heterogeneous learning ecologies. However, the rise of Generative AI technologies raises concerns about a possible a shift back to more individualised or centralised forms of learning, rather than engaging with peers or co-constructing meaning with educators. Students may rely on Generative AI systems that produce single or ready-made answers, rather than engaging in dialogic knowledge construction (Gourlay, 2024). This shift may constrain rather than support distributed participation, especially when the learning process becomes individualised, opaque, and detached from

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collaborative meaning-making (Gourlay, 2024). These tensions form a critical backdrop for investigating how students navigate authorship, trust, and agency in environments involving Generative AI tools.

Unlike traditional forms of peer interaction or dialogic learning, which involve multi-directional exchanges among students, educators, and texts, ChatGPT condenses vast amounts of pre-existing textual data into singular outputs. These outputs are generated through pattern recognition and statistical inference, rather than active negotiation or feedback. As a result, students may receive answers that appear authoritative but offer limited opportunities for contestation or collaborative refinement. This can reduce the distributed nature of learning interactions, as students are no longer working together with others to build understanding but instead relying on a single Generative AI-supported node (Bender et al., 2021; Gourlay, 2024). While such tools may provide efficiency or clarity, they also raise questions about how meaning is shaped, who participates in shaping it, and whether these processes align with the principles of networked learning.

This study aims to focuses on how students themselves make sense of the choices and dilemmas involved in using them. These choices may reveal tensions in how students relate to knowledge and institutional norms. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of such everyday practices may show how students' roles and involvement in learning are changing in digital academic settings, particularly when mediated by Generative AI tools whose workings are hard for students to understand (Jones, 2011; Bayne, 2016).

Research context

The growing use of Generative AI tools in higher education is changing how students engage with learning, particularly in relation to authorship, academic judgement, and personal agency. In many cases, students do not construct meaning through interaction with peers or educators but instead receive text from automated systems. This change raises questions about who can be considered the author of academic work, and how students position themselves when using Generative AI tools (Gourlay, 2024; Sabbaghan and Brown, 2024).

For Chinese international students, these questions may be especially important. Many of them face challenges related to academic language, writing expectations, and unfamiliar learning norms when studying in UK universities (Weale, 2024; Wang, 2018). Generative AI tools can be helpful in addressing some of these difficulties, but students may also feel uncertain about when and how to use them appropriately. They may not always understand what is allowed or valued in their institutions. These are not just technical decisions but involve academic judgement and values.

While students may also rely on a single human source, such as a tutor, human interactions often involve feedback, negotiation, and the possibility to contest or refine shared meaning. In contrast, Generative AI systems typically deliver polished outputs without disclosing the origins of information or allowing for dialogic development. Generative AI tools offer instant but static responses, whereas peer or tutor conversations often involve shared context and co-constructed understanding. These differences matter when considering how knowledge networks are structured and how agency is experienced within them (Jones, 2011; NLEC, 2021b; Gourlay, 2024).

Researchers have studied how Generative AI is used in education, but much of this work focuses on how the tools function or how universities are setting rules (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; George and Wooden, 2023). There is still limited knowledge about how students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds make sense of these tools in their everyday work. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on how Chinese international students use, reflect on, and evaluate Generative AI in academic settings.

Research questions

Following the earlier discussion of issues of authorship, participation, and trust in contexts where Generative AI is used, the following research questions were developed to explore how these issues are experienced in practice by Chinese international students. They reflect the theoretical ideas discussed earlier, while also understanding the everyday decisions students make when using Generative AI.

This study investigates: ① What academic tasks do Chinese international students use Gen-AI for, and what influences their frequency and purpose of use? ② How do Chinese international students perceive the influence of Generative AI on their academic performance, critical thinking and independent learning? ③ What strategies do they employ to mitigate potential risks to academic integrity?

Theoretical Framing

From a networked learning perspective, this study uses networked learning as an analytical lens to examine how students' engagements with Generative AI unfold across academic, social and digital settings, rather than treating AI as an isolated digital tool. These networks involve not only digital platforms, but also peers, educators, and institutional structures that influence how knowledge is shared, evaluated and constructed (Jones, 2011; Wilson

et al., 2023). While students' interactions with Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT may appear individualised, the tool itself operates as a condensation of an expansive, distributed knowledge network (Bender et al., 2021). From a networked learning perspective, this raises a critical tension: rather than participating in negotiable and socially accountable learning networks, students may increasingly orient towards a singular, non-transparent source of academic support. This shift invites questions about whether such AI-mediated interactions meaningfully support forms of distributed agency and participation that are central to networked learning (NLEC, 2021b).

To understand how students engage with AI tools like ChatGPT in constructing academic work, the study draws on constructivism perspectives. Constructivism emphasises that learning happens when students actively build understanding through interaction and reflection. However, Palincsar (1998) points out, this process is shaped by institutional expectations and disciplinary norms, which are often implicit. From this perspective, students' reliance on Generative AI may reflect to manage ethic risk in academic environments where expectations are opaque. While AI tools can support surface-level task completion, there is a risk that such use may bypass opportunities for deeper engagement and collaborative knowledge-building, especially when students lack access to dialogic support from peers or educators. This tension resonates with networked learning concerns about participation and support under which meaningful learning relationship.

In addition to constructivism, the study uses posthumanism theory to analyse how students interact with and respond to Generative AI tools. Posthumanism scholars argue that technologies do not solely assist human actions, but actively participate in shaping practices, meanings and identities (Bayne, 2016). From this view, a student's Generative AI assisted output is not just individual work, but the shaped by a mix of technical, cultural and academic rules. This lens can help illuminate why students might feel uncertain about authorship, effort or fairness when using Generative AI.

Method design

To explore the multiple layers of how Chinese international students use generative AI in academic work, this study adopts a three-stage, mixed-method research design.

Phase 1: Pre-Task Online Survey: The first phase uses a short online survey to map out broader patterns of Generative AI usage, with an anticipated sample of approximately 100-150 participants. This includes what types of academic tasks students apply Generative AI to, how often they use it, and what they believe its purpose is. This phase addresses Research Question 1 and part of Research Question 2, offering a broad picture of tool uptake. The responses will inform sampling for later phases, ensuring diversity in students' behaviours and beliefs.

Phase 2: Screen-mediated task observation: Participants are asked to complete a short academic writing task during a screen-recorded session. This stage draws on constructivism perspectives, which emphasise learning as embedded in practice and interaction. By observing tool use in context, the study captures moments of hesitation, revision, or decision-making that may not be evident in survey responses. The writing task also reveals how students structure authorship when working with non-human agents, linking to Research Questions 2 and 3. This stage responds to critiques in networked learning and posthumanism literature that call for closer attention to the material and social arrangements shaping meaning-making practices (Bayne, 2016; Wilson et al., 2023).

Phase 3: Post-Task Semi-Structured Interviews: This study will include follow-up semi-structured interviews with 8 to 10 participants chosen to show different ways they used Generative AI during the writing task. Interviews with a subset of participants offer insight into how they understood the task, what they considered acceptable or risky, and how they interpreted institutional norms. This phase relates to Research Question 3, particularly around agency and academic integrity. It also reflects the networked learning emphasis on understanding learning through the interplay of individuals, technologies, and institutional discourses. Drawing on posthumanism insights, the interviews examine how students shaped decide what counts as fair or original work, and whom they rely on when AI becomes part of the learning process.

Preliminary findings

This study is currently in the data collection phase. Data collection will finish in early 2026. Initial insights and reflections from this process will be shared at the Networked Learning 2026 Conference to invite feedback and guide the next steps in analysis.

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