Case Study 21: University of Westminster

A Community Led Approach to Capacity Building in Generative AI in University Staff

What issue were we trying to address and why?

The University, like others, faces a critical challenge in integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into teaching and workflows. Before 2020, advanced digital tool use was fragmented and led by a small group of early adopters, leaving many staff feeling excluded or overwhelmed. Rapid technological change outpaced existing support, and digital imposter syndrome - where academics feared technology might expose skill gaps - was widespread (Specht et al., 2021). Time constraints and ethical concerns, such as academic integrity and over-reliance on AI, has added further resistance. The abrupt shift to online teaching during the pandemic exposed institutional weaknesses in digital preparedness. The university recognised then that scalable, equitable transformation required a holistic strategy that closed the gap between innovation and widespread adoption while protecting pedagogical quality.

What we did

Research conducted during the pandemic (Specht et al., 2021) led to the adoption of a community-led approach to digital development. All staff, regardless of experience or confidence, were supported to engage with new technologies.

Building on successful learning models from the pandemic, the university has implemented a multi-faceted approach to AI integration grounded in inclusivity, ethical use, and pedagogical relevance. A key outcome was the AI Policy Framework, which set guidelines for ethical AI use across colleagues and students. It mandated transparency, staff training, and accountability measures. To build confidence, a programme of consultations, workshops, symposia and online courses supported AI-enhanced curriculum design. Early adopters were repositioned as mentors to promote peer learning and reduce intimidation (Specht & Saunders, 2023). Students were also central to the process. Initiatives like Making Sense of Generative AI invited students to co-design policies, ensuring implementation reflected their needs and perspectives.

AI tools were embedded within familiar systems to minimise disruption. For example, Blackboard Learn Ultra's AI Design Assistant was used to automate rubrics and quizzes, and Copilot was rolled out across Microsoft applications. Grammarly was made available to all students and staff. Alongside tools, targeted guides were developed, for example, using AI to support independent study and wellbeing.

Who was involved

Engagement spanned all levels of the institution. Professor Gunter Saunders, Director of Digital Capability Development and AI Leadership, led strategic initiatives and interdisciplinary collaboration. Over 200 academic staff participated in training, with several schools leading pilots in their subject areas. Students helped evaluate tools and contributed to policy design.

External partnerships were key. Collaborations with JISC, Anthology, and Microsoft provided access to tools like TeacherMatic and Learnwise. This collaborative ecosystem has sought to balance technical innovation with ethical governance.

Measures of success

By October 2024, 68% of academic staff reported using generative AI tools - up from 21% in March 2023. There was also a marked increase in written reflections on AI use in teaching, showing a cultural shift. Data from March 2023 to May 2025 revealed growing student adoption of generative AI (Saunders et al., 2024). Westminster's community engagement was further recognised when it recently won the Microsoft Cloud Challenge 2025, focused on AI development.

How do you plan to develop the intervention/activity?

Future work will consolidate progress and respond to emerging challenges. The university plans to expand its AI toolkit, including rolling out Learnwise's Module AI Assistant (MAIA) for 24/7 student support, and piloting Microsoft Office 365 Copilot in Professional Services. Ongoing professional development will remain central, with AI literacy training for tools like Adobe Creative Cloud. Workshops on Generative AI resistant assessment design will help staff ethically integrate AI while maintaining academic rigour. Governance structures will remain adaptive, with policy updates informed by research and practice. Longitudinal studies will track AI's impact on graduate outcomes and inform curriculum evolution.

Community engagement will deepen, as will collaboration with partners like Anthology to reinforce ethical standards through frameworks like Trustworthy AI.

Westminster's digital transformation shows that successful AI integration is about more than adopting technology - it requires a cultural shift. By addressing psychological barriers, fostering collaboration, and keeping pedagogy central, the university is turning AI into a catalyst for innovation. Colleagues and students now increasingly see AI not as a threat, but as a partner in enhancing education.

Looking ahead, the university aims to lead responsibly in the digital age - balancing innovation with accountability through adaptive policies, ethical governance, and a commitment to inclusive, future-ready learning.

References

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