Supporting the ethical and equitable use of Generative AI (GenAI) for Formative and Summative Assessment: a transnational perspective

The project aimed to explore how universities could better support students to use GenAI in their assessments in an ethical and equitable manner, that could motivate and support their continuous learning. The convenience of GenAI has motivated and will continue motivating students to use it in responding to their assignments on a wide range of topics. However, there is a lack of understanding of whether and how students perceive, plan to and actually use GenAI in a morally responsible and fair manner. The ethical and equitable use is essential to promote fair and inclusive learning experiences for all students.

The proposed time scale for the project is between 1st March 2024 to 30th March 2025. The interim project needed to be submitted to QAA by 19th July 2024, and the final report needed to be submitted by 30th March 2025. All deadlines were met without delay.

The project started with 5 partners: King's College London, Imperial College London, the University of Huddersfield, Uni. of Birmingham and Uni. of Central Queensland, Australia. All partners worked together on the proposal. However, just half way through the project, Uni. of Central Queensland decided to withdraw from the project due to work commitments. However, the partners felt that it was important to involve an international partner in the project since the focus of the project was on a transnational perspective. The PI invited Uni. of Galway to join the project, and subsequently they accepted the invitation.

The proposed project outputs included 1) case studies for different types of assessments, in different subject disciplines, and in different university contexts; 2) examples of co-created authentic assessments that integrate GenAI tools and 3) a flowchart to guide students through the assessment process and themes based on the focus groups. Most of the desired outcomes were achieved, apart from the second one. This is mainly because, at the time during the project period, the case studies and student comments collected via focus groups indicate that very few assessments integrated GenAI tools. Additionally, many students were still in the process of exploring the tools. Nevertheless, we added the following additional outcomes, based on the positive feedback from the delegates when sharing the project findings at a dissemination event with the wider academic community, hosted at King's College London (Jan. 2025): 1) an illustration – driving AI: your ethical route through assignments; and 2) themes and a framework for GenAI application in assessments. As agreed, the outcomes will be hosted on the QAA website and will be shared with the public.

As one of the main aims of the project was to gain a profound understanding of the perceived views of university students and their usage of GenAI in their assessments, a qualitative approach was adopted, and data was collected using focus groups. Data collection took place between March to September 2024. With regard to ethics, the initial plan was for the project lead applying for an ethical approval at their institution on behalf of all partners. However, due to a lack of existing institutional agreement covering all partner institutions, as well as the time constraint for getting one arranged in time, all partners ended up gaining their ethical approval locally, and each partner was responsible for planning, organising and running their own focus groups within their institution. To ensure consistency and thematic consistency, one partner (Huddersfield) drafted a list of initial principal interview questions. They were checked, modified and approved subsequently by all partners.
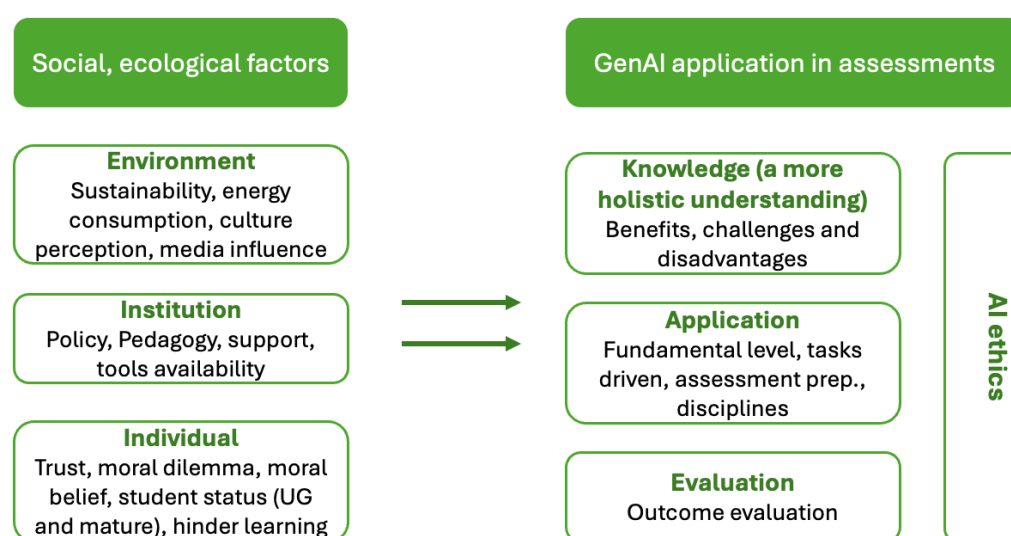
Permission was asked to record the focus group discussions and was granted each time. In total, we have conducted 20 focus groups, with a total of 80 participants, across all partners.

Partners	Focus groups conducted	Participants in total
King's College London	3	15
Imperial College London	7	27
University of Huddersfield	5	22

University of Birmingham	5	16
Total	20	80

As the focus groups took place across multiple months, partners conducted transcriptions and subsequently prepared for data analysis alongside the data collection. The actual data transcription and analysis were carried out primarily by our student helpers, under the supervision, and also with the support of the project leads at the individual partner institutions. Each partner institution recruited 2 (or 4) student partners (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate taught and PhD students) to work on the QAA project.

The partners then adopted a thematic analysis method to identify and code themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) individually. This method aimed to complete six steps: data familiarization, data coding, theme searching, thematic review, defining each theme, and naming themes. Once the initial themes were generated locally, the partners shared the themes, and subsequently compared, summarised and/or synthesised the themes together (fig.1).

We grouped our themes largely into two categories: social, ecological factors and GenAI application in assessments. The first category contains themes that impact students' understanding and applications of GenAI in their assessments. The second category describes the themes relating to their actual usages. Please note that the AI ethics is integrated into other themes and is not presented as a standalone theme.

With regard to the dissemination plans, the partners have delivered and were involved in two dissemination events. One was organised by the PI and took place at Kings College London in January 2025. All partners attended and presented their findings. The event was well attended, with approx. 100 attendees. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. All partners subsequently shared their presentation slides with the wider community via QAA. Some partners (Uni. of Hud., and Uni. of Galway) also attended QAA conference (online) in March to share their findings with the conference delegates.

Throughout the project period, we have encountered various challenges. Apart from those mentioned already (e.g., ethical approval, the withdraw of one partner), we experienced the following. The most challenging one was meeting deadlines. The duration of the project was short (e.g., 12 months). Since we had to work on the project in our own time and alongside our normal full-time job, meeting all key deadlines was challenging. As the PI, I found it most effective to maintain open communication and send regular reminders. Additionally, providing timely and clear guidance to all partners was crucial. The monthly meeting was also very helpful. It

provided a good platform and opportunity for partners to exchange ideas and to comment on the ideas proposed by each other. Secondly, it was challenging to organise and conduct focus groups during the summer vacations, as many students were away from the campus. To deal with the situation, we extended the data collection period and promoted the call for participation through various channels repeatedly. The incentives were also helpful. The end result was satisfactory. Finally, it was a deep learning in terms of budget management. Throughout the project, the PI had to manage some unexpected challenges, such as adjusting for shifting priorities and unforeseen costs. Additionally, the PI needs to familiarise themselves with how the host university and school conduct grant management, as well as how each partner can be reimbursed for local expenses, particularly in the international context. Thanks to the support provided by the KBS post grant manager as well as QAA, the PI has sorted out the difficulties and challenges in this area.

Reflections from the partners:

University of Birmingham:

Participation in the QAA research project was a great opportunity to collaborate with like-minded colleagues; it also has provided significant insight into the dynamics of academic collaboration. We were grateful to receive the invitation to participate as it enabled us to collaborate on a topic of mutual interest and to meet colleagues across different universities. Additionally, his project had synergies with our shared role of GenAI co-leads for our Business School.

A key lesson learned is the necessity for clear task division and effective communication. Balancing existing professional commitments alongside project responsibilities led to an enhanced appreciation for structured delegation. For example, while one colleague concentrated on core project content, the other could focus on supplementary materials. Engaging with colleagues from various institutions was beneficial in fostering professional connections that surpassed typical networking interactions. Collaborative work in small groups not only allowed for the sharing of ideas but also enriched our understanding of the subject matter.

Generally, the experience underscored the value of project management skills (and we are very grateful to our coordinator and principal investigator Christine), particularly in coordinating diverse perspectives and terminologies across institutions. Such clarity is essential for aligning objectives and ensuring effective collaboration.

In summary, involvement in the QAA research project has strengthened essential professional skills and enhanced networking capabilities. The experience has provided a solid foundation for future collaborative efforts, as well as empowering us to participate in and bid for other externally funded pedagogical projects.

University of Galway:

Although University of Galway joined this QAA project at a relatively late stage, being involved was a rewarding and valuable experience. Having the opportunity to present our case studies at the "Student Perspectives on the use of Generative AI in Assessment" event, hosted by King's College, London on 15 January 2025 was particularly worthwhile. It was helpful for the development and refinement of our case studies to hear comments and feedback from peers and to be able to network with project partners and other UK colleagues in person at the event. As international partners in the project, this was an especially satisfying outcome of our involvement in the project.

While the case studies we produced were our primary contribution to the research project, we learned a great deal from our project colleagues' design and implementation of focus groups to gather and assess student

perspectives on GenAI and its role in assessment in higher education. The results of these focus groups were informative and enlightening, but it was also very valuable to hear about how colleagues had carried out this research. Continued engagement between university staff and students will be key to navigating and understanding the role that GenAI will play in higher education, and our project's focus groups provide exemplars for these crucial interactions.

We are very grateful to have been invited to participate in this engaging research project and look forward to carrying the experience forward in our university and into future research collaborations.

Imperial College London

This was our first involvement in a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, and it has been a highly rewarding experience. A particularly valuable aspect of the project was the dedicated time to meet with project partners from across the sector to engage in thoughtful and challenging discussions about our practices around generative AI and assessment. The learning and professional development that takes place during such a collaboration is perhaps the most useful aspect, as there are multiple views and experiences with colleagues representing a variety of institutional and disciplinary contexts, which helps to give a richer and more rounded picture of the topic under investigation.

The most enjoyable part of the project was working in partnership with students. We did this in two main ways: by conducting focus groups to learn about students' experiences of working with generative AI tools; by engaging some of our students as partners to help interpret the empirical focus group data and to transform the findings into student and educator-centred case study resources. As these resources will be made available on the QAA website, we worked with students to ensure they were designed with an external audience in mind. The work we have done on this project will help us to engage in further collaborative, cross-institutional projects with student partnership at the centre of the methodology.

It was also great to be invited to present the findings from this QAA work at the *Developing Enhanced Strategies for Student Success in Online and Distance Education in an AI-Enabled World* conference. There were many thought-provoking questions, and it was valuable to hear different perspectives from across the higher education sector.

University of Huddersfield

Working as part of the collaborative enhancement project enabled us to take a deep dive into student perceptions around the use of AI, in particular through the funding of focus group work and subsequent analysis. We had previously conducted internal research in this area, but being part of the project meant we could bring some externality and wider thinking to our work, and it was very useful to be able to draw down funding for student participation and facilitation and build the qualitative research approach in partnership with our students' union colleagues. This in turn helps us to develop support and guidance in a way which works for our students, but with the benefit of valuable external input via the collaborative project's partners. While it was a shame that our Australian institution had to withdraw from the project partway through, it was good to work with colleagues from Galway and from across the UK and hear about their experiences.

We have particularly enjoyed working with colleagues from other institutions, and must thank Christine O'Dea for including us in this project and for her expert leadership. This has given us an excellent external view of student perceptions beyond our own stakeholders and enabled us to build new networks across the sector. We too have learned a great deal about navigating the challenges of collaborative research partnerships, from research ethics considerations and finance/budgeting to the logistics of meetings and working with a common

research framework. It has also been a great opportunity to share our work on a national platform via QAA facilitation.

It was particularly good to meet everyone in person at the London conference, and since then, we have had a few follow-up calls from participants in Universities like Huddersfield, looking for help with their own work in this area.