

The Use of GenAI by University Students: Attitudes and Perceptions

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Abstract:

The world is now moving towards increased use of artificial intelligence (AI). To address the learning needs of millennial students, teachers need to understand students' use of GenAI. This paper reports the results of a small-scale survey which investigated students' attitudes towards the use of GenAI, their actual use of GenAI, and their perceptions of the usefulness of these digital tools.

Two mass emails were sent to a total of 174 PhD/Master's degree students at an English-medium university in Hong Kong to solicit participation in an online questionnaire survey. With a satisfactory response rate of 25.3% for an online survey, a total of 44 completed questionnaires were received. The questionnaire consisted of 20 forced-choice questions and two open-ended questions. The forced-choice questions solicited participants' responses on their general use of AI for their studies and work, the frequencies and purposes of their uses, their perceptions of the relative ease of use of GenAI, etc. The open-ended questions probed into the difficulties students encountered and the solutions they adopted to solve their problems. The answers to the open-ended questions served to supplement the information collected from the forced-choice questions and provided more detailed and elaborate feedback from the respondents.

The percentages of respondents who had chosen each option for each forced-choice question was calculated, and a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the written answers to the open-ended questions. Themes relevant to some overarching topics (e.g., reliability of AI answers, difficulties in creating prompts) were generated and analysed. No statistical analyses were performed, as comparisons across different questions or across different respondents were not considered necessary for the purpose of the study.

The results of the questionnaire showed that the majority of the respondents used AI quite frequently and that they found AI easily accessible. However, most of them were not satisfied with the answers provided and complained that AI sometimes provided fake or inconsistent information. Some of them also found it difficult to construct adequate and appropriate prompts. To solve the problems encountered, students would revise their prompts, consult academic sources for cross-referencing, compare answers from different AI tools, and avoid providing unnecessary hints to the AI tools. The results of the survey showed that students were aware of the possible pitfalls of using GenAI and they did make an attempt to ensure academic integrity while using GenAI. It is suggested that teachers hold workshops and training sessions to improve their students' literacy in the use of GenAI and that they themselves be taught how to use GenAI properly so that their students can benefit from the new technologies without surrendering academic integrity.

Keywords: GenAI, attitudes, perceptions, difficulties and solutions

