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Research Article

The Use of Generative AI by Students with Disabilities in UK Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Survey of 125 Students

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Abstract

Higher education's response to generative artificial intelligence (AI) has moved quickly from curiosity to policy, yet questions of who benefits from these tools and who is excluded remain under-examined. Students with disabilities — a population long under-represented in higher education and demonstrably reliant on assistive technologies — may have much to gain from generative AI, but also face specific risks from it; empirical evidence on their actual practices is scarce. This study asks how students with disabilities at a UK university use generative AI in academic writing, what concerns they hold about it, and what institutional support they want. A mixed-methods online survey, anchored in a five-element generative AI literacy framework, was distributed to all 1,797 students registered as disabled at one UK university during February and March 2024. The survey returned 125 valid responses, a 7.0 % response rate. Closed items were analysed descriptively; open-text responses were coded inductively through content analysis. Seventy-eight percent of respondents reported using generative AI in their studies, with ChatGPT (53 %) the dominant tool, supplemented by rewriting applications such as Grammarly (10 %) and translation services. Respondents used these tools across the full writing pipeline — explaining concepts, structuring arguments, summarising readings, and refining prose. Concerns clustered around the accuracy of AI outputs, threats to academic integrity, and the inequity introduced by paid subscriptions. Participants voiced strong demand for involvement in institutional AI policy (M = 4.03 on a five-point scale) and for university-provided training (M = 3.95). The paper closes with policy and pedagogical recommendations for building a more inclusive institutional response to generative AI.

Keywords

generative AI; students with disabilities; academic writing; higher education; AI literacy; ChatGPT

1. Introduction

Under-representation of disabled students in UK higher education has been a long-running policy concern, and the statutory duty on universities to advance equality of opportunity for this group remains only partly fulfilled (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). Generative artificial intelligence arrived in this context: a class of technology that, within months of its public release, reshaped what students could produce in academic writing and how quickly they could do so.

Public release of ChatGPT in November 2022 made the capabilities of large language models tangible to a mass audience for the first time. A system that could respond to a short prompt with coherent prose, rewrite text in different registers, summarise long documents, and produce working code became, within months, a mainstream study tool. Receiving a coherent, well-formed answer on demand

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redefined what many users — students included — understood AI to be capable of (Ferguson, Schroeder, Winters, & Zhou, 2023).

The novelty was not all welcome. ChatGPT and its successors generated immediate worries about accuracy, currency of information, and a documented tendency toward confident fabrication. Privacy concerns followed (Ferguson et al., 2023), as did legal disputes over the use of copyrighted material in training corpora. Perrigo (2023) documented the exploitative labour conditions under which training data had been filtered. Wider critiques of the environmental footprint and resource intensity of large language models (Crawford, 2021; Luccioni, Jernite, & Strubell, 2023) compounded an already complicated public reception of ChatGPT and its competitors, Google Gemini among them.

Education was one of the principal sites of this controversy. The pedagogical promise of generative AI included making information more accessible, personalising learning, and supporting critical thinking (Farrokhnia, Banihashem, Noroozi, & Wals, 2024). Specific instructional uses for teachers were also identified (Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023). Set against this was a serious anxiety about plagiarism (Cotton, Cotton, & Shipway, 2024; Farrokhnia et al., 2024; Playfoot, Quigley, & Thomas, 2024). The text produced by generative systems cannot be detected reliably by existing similarity tools, leaving educators with an enforceability gap. UK institutional responses ranged from cautious openness to outright restriction; even those that issued clear guidance struggled to enforce it. Concerns extended to whether AI use erodes the authenticity of student writing or dampens the development of critical thinking (Cardon, Fleischmann, Aritz, Logemann, & Heidewald, 2023; Habib, Vogel, Anli, & Thorne, 2024), and to the bias, privacy, and equity-of-access issues that travel with the technology into higher education (Grassini, 2023). Using generative AI safely, the consensus suggests, requires literacy (Zhao, Cox, & Cai, 2024).

Within this contested terrain, the possibility of net benefit for students with disabilities has been raised but not systematically tested. Addy, Kang, Laquintano, and Dietrich (2023) argued that generative AI may provide new modalities of support for this group. Evmenova, Borup, and Shin (2024) made a similar case at the level of learning difficulties as a whole. Upadhyay (2024) extended the argument from learners to employees, framing customised assistive support as one of the technology's clearer commercial value propositions. Adnin and Das (2024) found that visual question answering features hold particular promise for blind users, while also noting that policy and design need to be revisited to make the technology equitable for this specific user group. There is, plausibly, real scope for generative AI to support reading, summarisation, and interactive scaffolding — domains where students with dyslexia and related conditions experience pronounced difficulty (Zhao, Cox, & Cai, 2024). Several UK universities, including the institution that hosted this study, have begun deploying generative AI chatbots within learning management systems; Google Gemini was the tool integrated locally during the data-collection window. Whether such deployments meet the specific needs of disabled learners remains, however, an empirical question rather than a settled fact.

Empirical evidence is the gap. Surveys and adoption studies of student generative AI use have begun to appear from the UK and internationally (Almasaad, Alajlan, & Alebaikan, 2024; Acosta-Enriquez, Arbulú Ballesteros, Huamani Jordan, López Roca, & Saavedra Tirado, 2024; Chan & Hu, 2023; Malmström, Stöhr, & Ou, 2023; Chegg, 2024; Freeman, 2024; JISC, 2024), and qualitative work such as Zhao, Cox, and Cai (2024) has provided fine-grained insight into how AI is being incorporated into writing practice. None of these, however, has focused on students with disabilities as the primary unit of analysis, though Malmström et al. (2023) noted anecdotal benefit for students with learning difficulties in their open-text comments. The study reported here is designed to occupy that gap. Drawing on the AI-literacy framework for academic writing developed in our earlier qualitative work (Zhao, Cox, & Cai, 2024), the research addresses three questions:

(1) Which generative AI tools are used by students with disabilities, and for what purposes?

(2) What concerns do these students hold about generative AI?

What forms of institutional support do they want?

2. Literature review

2.1 Generative AI in education

Empirical investigation of student practice has lagged the public debate. As ChatGPT's capabilities and limits were being argued in commentary, policy documents, and editorial pages, the underlying question of who was actually using it, how often, and for what purposes received comparatively little systematic attention. That picture has begun to fill in. National and international surveys (Almasaad et al., 2024; Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2024; Chan & Hu, 2023; Malmström et al., 2023) report broadly positive student attitudes and rapid adoption. Chegg (2024) and Chan and Hu (2023) document significant majorities of students using generative AI in their learning. Freeman's (2024) data from February 2024 — concurrent with the present study's fieldwork — found that two-thirds of UK students had used some form of AI and a third had used it for assessment, with notable patterns of digital divide: students from more deprived postcodes used AI less.

ChatGPT dominates the surveyed landscape. The pattern reported in Freeman (2024) is one of widespread initial use,

often to clarify a concept, alongside a long tail of more imaginative applications. Most UK students, on Freeman's evidence, believed their institution had a clear policy on AI, and there was strong demand for further training: only 22 % were satisfied with the level of support they had received. The JISC (2024) and Chegg (2024) data corroborate the appetite for institutional engagement.

Qualitative work has added depth. Zhao, Cox, and Cai (2024) interviewed UK students about their AI use and identified a more authentic and granular picture of how generative AI is woven into different writing stages. The studies show broad uptake, complex use, and unmet demand for guidance — and none takes disabled students as its central focus. The present paper is positioned in that gap.

2.2. Generative AI for students with disabilities

Although direct empirical investigation of this population is sparse, theoretical and design-oriented work has accumulated. Starcevic (2023) and others have argued for the technology's potential to support disabled students. Four domains stand out in the literature.

Reading. Generative AI can scaffold reading for students whose disabilities — dyslexia in particular — make text processing slow or error-prone (Brewer, Urwin, & Witham, 2023; Schiavo, Mana, Mich, Zancanaro, & Job, 2021; Tamdjidi & Billai, 2023). Summarising long texts into concise, jargon-light passages aids comprehension of core concepts (Say, 2024) and supports engagement with course materials (Tamdjidi & Billai, 2023).

Writing. Dysgraphia and related conditions create difficulty with planning, organising ideas, and revising for meaning and form (Graham, Harris, & McKeown, 2013; Harris & Graham, 2016; Roitsch, Gumpert, Springle, & Raymer, 2021). Generative AI's role in clarifying instructions, helping set writing goals, and producing structured plans (Onufer, 2024) addresses precisely these pressure points, with downstream effects on coherence and grammatical accuracy (Botchu, Iyengar, & Botchu, 2023; McCarthy & Yan, 2023; Sullivan, Kelly, & McLaughlan, 2023).

Social engagement. Communication difficulties can isolate students with learning disabilities from peer interaction (Brewer et al., 2023; McMurtrie, 2023). AI-based conversational tools allow rehearsal of real-life interactions in low-stakes settings (Almufareh, Kausar, Humayun, & Tehsin, 2024), supporting confidence and skill transfer.

Teaching. Quality-of-teaching gains include using AI to check accessibility of materials, identify early indicators of learning difficulty (Johnson, Smart, & Mahar, 2023), and produce personalised teaching strategies (Bozkurt et al., 2023). The result is a more directly and indirectly supportive learning environment (Chen & Zhu, 2023; Michel-Villarreal, Vilalta-Perdomo, Salinas-Navarro, Thierry-Aguilera, & Gerardou, 2023).

The optimism is not unqualified. Visually impaired learners may struggle to interact with text-based chatbots (Tlili et al., 2023). Generative models trained on under-representative datasets are prone to producing generic outputs that fail the specific needs of marginalised users (Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major, & Shmitchell, 2021; Jafry & Vorstermans, 2024), increasing rather than reducing the cognitive load on those users (Botchu et al., 2023; Venkit & Wilson, 2021). Early ChatGPT versions confined interaction to text — a limitation for students with dyslexia (Botchu et al., 2023). Facial-recognition components lack adequate training data on autistic users and consequently misinterpret affect, producing tailored support failures (Nacheva & Czaplewski, 2024). Linguistic models have been shown to encode disability-related terms with negative valence (Venkit & Wilson, 2021), reinforcing the bias problem (McMurtrie, 2023; Rocky Mountain ADA Center, 2023).

Voice is also under-represented. The empirical work that does exist on disabled students' use of generative AI is contradictory. Chen and Zhu (2023) suggest that AI tools may worsen attention for students with ADHD through over-simplification; Addy et al. (2023) contend the opposite, arguing that generative AI helps neurodivergent students distil core concepts and build differentiated learning plans. The inconsistency reflects, in part, the fact that the studies do not centre disabled students as principal informants — Chen and Zhu's (2023) work, for instance, draws on K-12 students with mixed health conditions. The present study is designed to take disabled students themselves as the unit of analysis and source of knowledge.

2.3. Generative AI literacy

Digital literacy as a construct has expanded with the technologies it tracks, encompassing computer, information, media, and now AI literacies. Long and Magerko (2020) proposed a seminal 17-element AI literacy framework, supplemented by guidelines for explainable AI design. Generative AI has rendered some of those elements differently relevant and exposed new ethical surfaces. Zhao, Cox, and Cai (2024) responded by proposing a specifically generative-AI literacy model with five elements:

1. Pragmatic understanding — selecting the appropriate tool, learning to use it effectively (including prompt engineering), and interpreting outputs critically against the model's known limits in accuracy, currency, citability, and bias.
2. Safety understanding — using AI in ways that protect personal information and recognise privacy risk.
3. Reflective understanding — assessing the impact of AI use on one's own learning and identifying signs of over-dependence.

4.Socio-ethical understanding — recognising the broader implications of AI, including intellectual property concerns, information-culture effects, exploitation in the supply chain, equity of access, environmental impact, and the concentrated social power of large technology companies.

5.Contextual understanding — judging appropriate use within a specific situation and making one's use explicit when expected.

The framework foregrounds the obvious mechanical question of prompt engineering while insisting that ethical and reflective dimensions sit beside it. Identifying these elements is not equivalent to claiming that all listed societal concerns matter equally — that remains contested — but the framework usefully scaffolds an empirical investigation of how the literacy is unfolding in practice. We adopt it here as such a scaffold, not as a measurement instrument.

3. Methods

The research used an inductive approach delivered through an online survey, on the grounds that empirical evidence on the population of interest is scarce and that exploration should precede confirmation. The instrument comprised three sections: respondent characteristics (gender, level of study, academic department, perceived English language competence, perceived digital competence, and use of generative AI); disability information (terminology drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2024) and refined in consultation with the institutional Disability and Dyslexia Support Services); and generative AI use, costs, perceptions, current concerns, and recommendations for institutional response. Open-text questions probed disability impact on writing, specific generative AI uses to address those impacts, and the support participants wanted from their university. The closed-question items also supplied data relevant to the AI-literacy framework outlined above. The complete instrument is provided in the appendix.

Distribution was census-style. All 1,797 students registered with a disability at the host UK university during February and March 2024 received the survey. The response yielded 125 valid returns, a 7.0 % response rate. Numeric data were summarised descriptively; qualitative data were coded inductively, with codes generated from the data rather than imposed from a pre-existing scheme. Ethical approval was issued by the University of [Anon], and informed consent obtained at the survey's start. No identifying information was collected.

4. Results

4.1. Barriers to writing

Of the 125 respondents, 105 described the way their disability shaped their academic writing; 18 declined to answer the open question, and two reported no effect. Table 1 summarises the principal barrier categories drawn from the open-text responses.

Table 1. *Barriers to writing experienced by respondents (n = 105).*

Main barrier	n	%
Proofreading (spelling, grammar)	31	30 %
Reading	23	22 %
Making their intended meaning clear	22	21 %
Structuring ideas	18	17 %
Perception of being slower than others	18	17 %
Concentration	17	16 %
Getting started on a writing task	14	13 %
Energy / motivation	14	13 %
Time management	11	10 %
Staying on topic	11	10 %
Understanding the assessment brief	10	10 %

Note. Open question; respondents could report more than one barrier.

Affective language saturated the responses. The verb struggle appeared 38 times and feeling overwhelmed recurred across accounts. Disability-linked accounts of writing were not partial complaints but holistic ones, as one respondent put it: “I am a much slower writer, and I struggle to put my thoughts into full sentences. I also struggle to vary my written tone for appropriate use, I can either write extremely formally or extremely informally.” Another captured the recursive nature of the difficulty: “It impacts in more ways than I can list. My entire process of how I do my academic writing will be very different to that of someone who is not autistic because our internal processes are different. I don't really know how to answer the question. It's hard to list specific effects because the entire process is probably different in a lot of ways.”

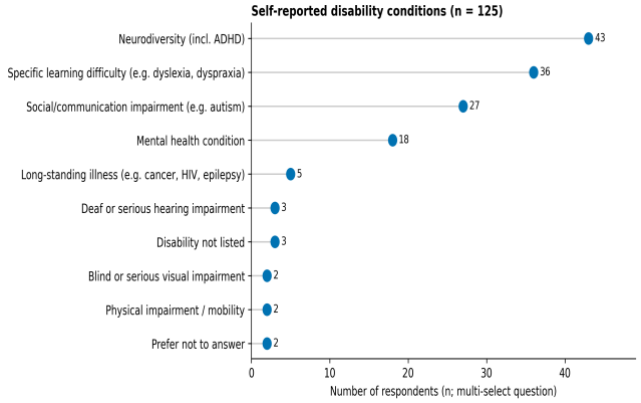

Figure 1. *Self-reported disability conditions (n = 125). Multi-select question — totals exceed 125.*

4.2. Use of generative AI

Adoption was high. Of the 125 respondents, 97 (78 %) reported using generative AI; 28 (22 %) reported infrequent use or no use at all; the proportion paying for a subscription was small, with 91 % of respondents reporting that they did not pay for generative AI services.

Motivations clustered around future utility rather than enjoyment. On a five-point Likert scale, respondents endorsed "Learning to use generative AI effectively is important for my future career" at M = 3.73, "Using AI has improved my working efficiency" at M = 3.54, "Using AI has improved my academic performance" at M = 3.16, and "Using AI has made me more engaged in learning" at M = 3.06 (Figure 2). The pattern suggests instrumental rather than intrinsically engaging adoption.

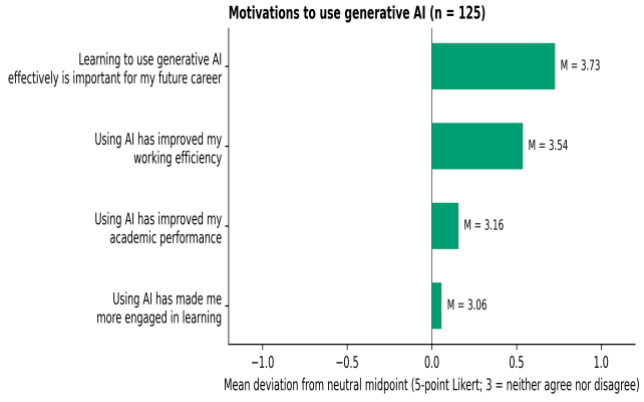

Figure 2. *Motivations to use generative AI (n = 125). Likert means shown as deviation from the neutral midpoint.*

Tool selection was uneven. Chatbots dominated (n = 83, 66 %), with ChatGPT (n = 66, 53 %) far ahead of Gemini (n = 11, 9 %), Copilot (n = 5, 4 %), and Claude (n = 2, 2 %). Rewriting applications were the next most common category — Grammarly (n = 13, 10 %), Quillbot (n = 3, 2 %), Wordtune (n = 1, 1 %). Translation tools — Google Translate (n = 5, 4 %), DeepL (n = 4, 3 %), and one unspecified product (n = 1, 1 %) — were used predominantly by students who needed to comprehend English-language readings.

4.2.1. ChatGPT

Respondents described five distinct functions ChatGPT served across their writing.

Explaining topics (n = 19, 15 %). Participants found ChatGPT useful for decoding complex topics and rendering jargon accessible. Two illustrative comments: "I use ChatGPT to do the initial step of explaining complex things that I have studied" and "Mostly ChatGPT as I enjoy the flexibility of being able to ask questions to the AI and receive extended answers." The tool was applied to rubric standards, in-class questions, text messages, and academic concepts.

Identifying learning resources (n = 10, 8 %). ChatGPT formulated search terms and broadened search scope. One respondent: "Things such as ChatGPT can be useful when finding resources and papers on specific content, as scouring the Internet for specific data or research is a tiring task, especially with ADHD."

Summarising learning materials (n = 18, 14 %). Compression of long readings into navigable summaries was particularly valued by respondents reporting difficulty with concentration. One explained: "ChatGPT is really good at making information concise. I use it for this reason, as when my depression and anxiety is bad it can be difficult to comprehend large texts; I lose focus, get mind blanks or simply don't understand information in such large doses. I also use ChatGPT to input large readings that are required on my course, to summarize the key points for me as reading large passages are extremely hard, as well as understanding most academic language."

Structuring writing (n = 22, 18 %). The most-cited single function. ChatGPT offered a starting point that mitigated the executive-function difficulties of getting underway, especially for respondents with ADHD: "I also have combined ADHD which makes it difficult for me to focus on a laborious activity such as writing. ChatGPT is my one go to for how to structure essays"; "ChatGPT is incredibly helpful for getting ideas for what to write about and how to plan out my essays."

Refining writing (n = 25, 20 %). The largest use cluster. ChatGPT restructured fragmented sentences and tuned word choice to academic register. One respondent: "I use ChatGPT to give me options for writing in a more academic way. I input a sentence or paragraph and ask ChatGPT to rewrite it and take note of what it has removed and changed, to then change my own work." A deaf respondent reported a related use that fell outside the five main categories — applying ChatGPT to correct transcription errors produced by dictation software —

illustrating how generative AI can compound with other assistive technologies rather than substitute for them.

4.2.2. Rewriting and translation tools

After chatbots, rewriting applications were the second most common category — most prominently Grammarly (n = 13). Stated reasons divided into three: precision of word choice (n = 3, 2 %), sentence coherence (n = 3, 2 %), and grammatical accuracy (n = 10, 8 %). The tool's role was often complementary to ChatGPT — Grammarly applied to polish, ChatGPT applied to restructure. As one respondent summarised: "[I use Grammarly to] avoid making silly grammatical mistakes" alongside ChatGPT, used "to reword their writing to make it make more sense."

Translation tools — Google Translate (n = 5), DeepL (n = 4), and one unspecified — were used by respondents working with non-English source material and by international students refining English-language output. Some open-text comments specifically linked translation to comprehension support.

4.3. Concerns about adopting generative AI

Awareness of generative AI's controversies was high, and concerns were patterned (Figure 3). Top-ranked on a five-point scale was misuse for "bad purposes such as deepfakes" (M = 4.03), closely followed by inaccuracy of outputs (M = 3.69) and risks to academic integrity (M = 3.57). Equity in pay-for-access was also salient (M = 3.15). Concerns about workforce displacement (M = 3.03), bias (M = 3.03), opacity of training and operation (M = 3.02), exploitation of low-paid labour (M = 2.95), privacy (M = 2.83), environmental impact (M = 2.50), and authorial voice (M = 2.42) were less highly weighted on average, though present.

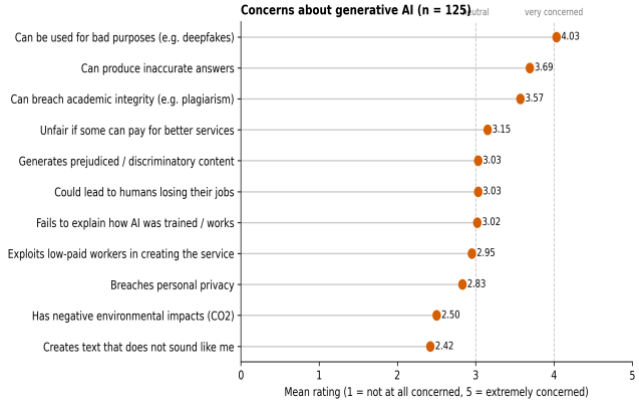

Figure 3. *Concerns about generative AI (n = 125). Means on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all concerned, 5 = extremely concerned).*

A minority of the sample — 28 students (22 %) — reported infrequent or no use. The wider concerns above were echoed by these respondents, who additionally cited their own lack of expertise as a barrier. Two respondents specifically described a worry that ChatGPT would erode the development of their own voice in writing.

4.4. Support sought from the university

Respondents expressed strong appetite for ethical, well-trained adoption rather than for prohibition. On the same five-point scale, the highest-rated item was "Students should be involved in determining University AI policy" (M = 4.03), with university-provided training a close second (M = 3.95). Endorsement of the proposition that generative AI confers unfair advantage was moderate (M = 2.87), and outright support for a university ban was low (M = 1.88; Figure 4).

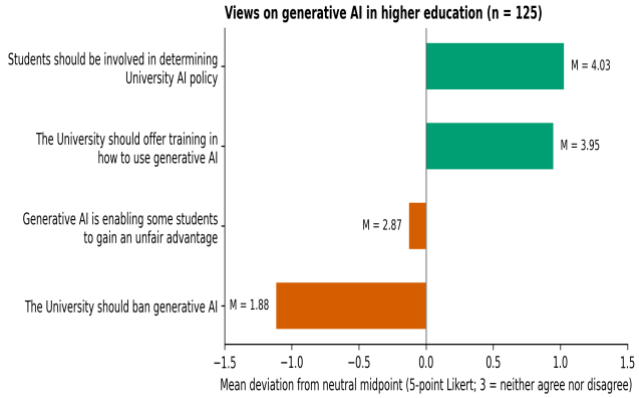

Figure 4. *Views on generative AI in higher education (n = 125). Means on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).*

Asked openly what training they wanted, 41 respondents (33 %) named training in how to use generative AI; 27 (22 %) and 10 (8 %) specified training on avoiding misuse and ethical use respectively. Smaller groups asked for more granular guidance: writing prompts (n = 15, 12 %), search and referencing applications (n = 12, 10 %), summarisation (n = 7, 6 %), and exposure to a wider range of tools beyond the most familiar (n = 4, 3 %). Disability-specific training was named by a small but meaningful group (n = 7, 6 %): "I'd like to know which AI tools the university recommends for people with learning difficulties as an aid"; "I would like to know how Generative AI might be helpful to students with adhd and autism rather than how it might be used broadly in academic settings."

5. Discussion

This study contributes the first systematic empirical evidence — to our knowledge — on how students with disabilities are using generative AI in academic writing within

a UK higher-education context. Three findings stand out.

First, generative AI is already woven into the writing practices of the majority of this population. Seventy-eight percent of respondents reported some use, distributed across explaining concepts, identifying resources, summarising readings, structuring arguments, and refining prose. The pattern is dominated by ChatGPT and supplemented by Grammarly and translation tools, with very limited paid subscription uptake. This is consistent with the general-population picture documented by Freeman (2024), Chegg (2024), and Chan and Hu (2023), and offers specific evidence for what had been anecdotal in earlier work (Malmström et al., 2023): students with disabilities use these tools heavily across writing tasks.

Second, the use is emotionally significant. The open-text responses are saturated with affect — struggle, overwhelmed — and the AI tools function not only as productivity aids but as scaffolds against the anxiety and disability-linked exhaustion of academic writing. Where prior literature has speculated that generative AI may benefit disabled learners (McCarthy & Yan, 2023; McMurtrie, 2023; Tamdjidi & Billai, 2023), the present study puts specific evidence behind it: students describe ChatGPT as the bridge between executive-function difficulty and a usable starting draft.

Third, students are aware of the wider critique. The five-point scales on concerns return high means on accuracy (M = 3.69) and academic integrity (M = 3.57); but the most highly weighted concerns are about effects on themselves directly — wider societal harms (environmental, supply-chain, voice) score lower. The pattern echoes Zhao, Cox, and Cai's (2024) AI-literacy framework: pragmatic and safety dimensions are well developed in students' accounts; socio-ethical and contextual dimensions are less so. There is scope to raise awareness of these dimensions.

Three less prominent findings deserve note. The dominance of ChatGPT, with very limited use of alternatives, suggests an under-developed pragmatic literacy in tool selection — students have not generally surveyed the range of options. The misalignment between the institutionally recommended tool (Gemini, locally embedded) and the student-preferred tool (ChatGPT) is significant: a recommended product that students do not adopt cannot deliver the safety and policy benefits universities intend it to. And, against fairness arguments (Freeman, 2024), unauthorised use of unsanctioned tools risks producing unequal exposure to risk among an already marginalised group (Almufareh et al., 2024).

Implications for institutional response follow directly. Generative AI is, on this evidence, functioning as effective assistive technology for many disabled students, often outside institutional knowledge or sanction. Disability support services and central university policy bodies are advised to attend specifically to the support needs of students with ADHD, specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyspraxia), and autism spectrum conditions — the largest groups in the present sample. Clarity in policy matters as much as permissiveness: respondents reported an ongoing uncertainty about what is and is not acceptable, and a strong desire to participate in formulating that policy themselves. Disciplinary differences in assessment make universal guidance hard to produce, but the absence of disability-specific guidance is, given these findings, a concrete and addressable gap. Training emerged as a priority for one-third of respondents. Given the cost barrier reported, subscription provisioning by the university — analogous to existing assistive-technology procurement — would represent a low-friction equity intervention.

The study's contribution comes with limitations that need plain acknowledgement. Non-response bias is plausible: only students using or interested in generative AI, or with strong opinions about it, may have responded. The 125-response sample represents a 7.0 % response rate from the eligible pool at one institution — respectable for an online disability-focused survey, but the absolute n still constrains disaggregation by disability category and limits cross-sectional comparison (for example, between international and home students, or between undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts). The female skew reflects the institution's overall student population but constrains gender-based analysis. The study is also single-institution, single-country; the policy environment, available institutional tools, and existing support architecture all shape what student practice looks like in any particular setting. Future work building on this should test the findings across institutions and cohorts, and follow disabled students longitudinally as the tools and policies around them evolve.

6. Conclusion

Generative AI has become a routine part of academic writing for students with disabilities in UK higher education, often without institutional knowledge. ChatGPT, used across the full writing pipeline from concept-explanation to final polish, is central to that practice, supplemented by rewriting and translation tools. Students value the support these tools offer, hold informed concerns about accuracy and academic integrity, and want to be consulted on policy rather than face a ban. Inaction carries real costs: disabled students will keep using these tools outside institutional knowledge or sanction, and the equity and safety risks that pattern creates will persist. A concrete alternative exists: with clear policy, accessible training, disability-specific guidance, and subscription support, universities can bring generative AI within their formal support frameworks rather than leaving it as an unofficial workaround.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Nicki James Shepherd: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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