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A Tool for Change in Higher Education: Empowering Student Learning and Wellbeing through Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how ChatGPT was used as a guided learning support tool in a Research Methodology course for third-year Communication undergraduates at a private Malaysian university. Rather than treating GenAI as a replacement for student effort, the paper focuses on how students used ChatGPT during the early stages of research proposal development, particularly when generating research ideas, drafting background sections, and shaping problem statements. Data were drawn from reflective essays and classroom-based learning materials submitted by 40 students after a structured ChatGPT activity. Thematic analysis identified eight connected themes: idea generation, time efficiency, confidence building, structured thinking, broadened research perspectives, motivation and engagement, writing and language support, and awareness of GenAI limitations. The findings show that ChatGPT helped students move past the difficulty of beginning an academic research work, reduced uncertainty in academic writing, and supported more organised thinking. At the same time, students were able to recognise the tool's limitations, especially its lack of reliable citations and the need to verify information through scholarly sources. The study argues that ChatGPT can contribute to student learning and wellbeing when it is embedded within clear pedagogical guidance, ethical expectations, and reflective practice. Its value lies not in producing finished academic work, but in supporting students to think, question, revise, and take greater ownership of their learning.

Keywords: *Generative artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, student learning and wellbeing, higher education, transformative learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has quickly become part of the everyday learning environment in higher education. For many students, tools such as ChatGPT are no longer unfamiliar technologies used only by specialists. They are now used to search for explanations, test ideas, improve sentence clarity, and obtain quick feedback when students are unsure how to begin an academic task. This development has created a difficult but necessary conversation for educators. On one hand, GenAI may support learning, improve confidence, and access to academic assistance. On the other hand, it raises concerns about academic integrity, authorship, over-reliance, and the quality of student thinking (Naidu & Sevnarayan, 2023; Roe et al., 2023; Shahzad et al., 2024; Cubillos et al., 2025).

This debate is especially important in media and communication education, where students are expected to read critically, write clearly, interpret social issues, and develop evidence-based arguments. In a Research Methodology course, these expectations become even more demanding. Students must move from a broad area of interest to a focused research topic, identify a problem worth studying, locate relevant literature, and write in a formal academic style. For third-year students, this process can be intimidating because

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research proposal writing requires both conceptual clarity and confidence in academic language.

ChatGPT offers a useful case for examining how GenAI may support this process. Existing studies suggest that GenAI tools can generate text, explain ideas, support language learning, and provide personalised feedback (Peres et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Zhang & Aslan, 2021; Jaboob et al., 2025). In writing-related contexts, ChatGPT may help students overcome the hesitation that often occurs when facing a blank page. This is relevant to students who feel underprepared for academic writing or lack confidence in organising research ideas (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Hassan et al., 2021; Ilham et al., 2020; Sağlamel & Aydoğdu, 2022). However, the same tool may also produce inaccurate, unsupported, or overly general responses if students use it uncritically.

This paper therefore examines ChatGPT as a tool for change in higher education, but the word change is used carefully. The purpose is not to suggest that GenAI automatically improves learning. Rather, the study asks (explores) how ChatGPT can support student learning and wellbeing when its use is guided, documented, and reflected upon. The study focuses on 40 third-year Communication undergraduates who used ChatGPT in a classroom activity to develop early components of a research proposal. Their reflective essays and activity records provide insight into how they experienced the tool, what forms of support they found useful, and what limitations they noticed after using it.

The paper contributes to current discussions on GenAI in higher education by grounding the analysis in students' own classroom experiences. It argues that ChatGPT is most valuable when it functions as an academic thinking aid rather than as a shortcut. When the tool such as ChatGPT is used responsibly, it can help students generate ideas, structure their thoughts, improve writing confidence, and engage more actively with research tasks. At the same time, meaningful learning still depends on human judgement, source verification, lecturer guidance, and students' willingness to revise and personalise AI-generated outputs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in Higher Education

GenAI refers to artificial intelligence systems that can generate new content, including text, images, audio, video, code, and other digital materials, based on trained models and user prompts (Law, 2024; Xiao et al., 2025). In higher education, GenAI is now used across a wide range of learning activities, from drafting and summarising to brainstorming, translation, design ideation, and research support. Tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, DALL-E, Doubao, ERNIE Bot, and other large language or multimodal models have expanded the ways students interact with information (Chiu, 2024; Rong et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025). This development suggests that GenAI is not simply an additional digital tool. It is becoming part of the infrastructure through which students approach learning tasks, especially (particularly) when they need immediate assistance.

The appeal of GenAI in higher education is closely linked to its speed, accessibility, and ability to respond to individual prompts. Prior research has shown that GenAI can assist with course learning, writing development, content creation, feedback generation, and research-related activities (Chiu, 2024; Jaboob et al., 2025; Maphoto et al., 2024; Salinas-Navarro et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2025). Chiu (2024) argues that GenAI is likely to reshape higher education by requiring students to develop AI literacy, interdisciplinary awareness, and readiness for future work environments. Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024) further suggest that GenAI can

support experiential learning and authentic assessment when tasks are designed to make students apply, question, and reflect rather than merely receive answers.

Despite these possibilities, GenAI also creates ethical and pedagogical challenges. Francis et al. (2025) caution that universities must consider academic integrity, authenticity, bias, equity, data protection, and environmental concerns. Similarly, Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024) highlight plagiarism, intellectual property, reliability, and the risk of weakening higher-order thinking. These concerns are not minor because GenAI tools can produce fluent text that appears convincing even when the information is incomplete or inaccurate. Zhu et al. (2026) add that successful use of GenAI depends not only on access, but also on students' beliefs, trust, expectations, and habits of continuous use. Therefore, GenAI should be understood as a conditional educational resource which (that) can support learning, but its value depends on how students are taught to use it.

b. ChatGPT as a Learning Support Tool for Academic Writing and Research Skills

Among GenAI tools, ChatGPT has attracted particular attention because of its ability to produce explanations, organise ideas, adjust tone, and respond quickly to user queries. These features are relevant to academic writing, which remains a source of difficulty for many university students. Students may understand a topic but struggle to express it in an academic format, connect ideas coherently, or formulate a research problem. Maphoto et al. (2024) note that students often turn to AI-supported writing tools because they feel unprepared or lack confidence in academic writing. Law (2024) also observes that ChatGPT can generate coherent and grammatically accurate text, which explains why students find it attractive for writing support.

In research-based learning, the potential of ChatGPT extends beyond grammar correction. It can help students identify possible angles, clarify background issues, and consider how a general topic may become a researchable problem. Jaboob et al. (2025) suggest that AI tools can support research activities by assisting with data collection, analysis, interpretation, hypothesis generation, and the identification of relationships among variables and concepts. Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024) similarly identify GenAI as a tool that contribute to reflective thinking, hands-on learning experiences and the facilitation of research work. For a Research Methodology course, these functions are useful because students are often unsure how to begin the transition from personal interest to academic inquiry.

The usefulness of ChatGPT, however, depends on how students perceive and use the tool. Ivanov et al. (2024) found that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence students' and lecturers' intention to adopt GenAI. Zhu et al. (2026) also show that students' beliefs play an important role in continuous use and academic performance. Xiao et al. (2025) found that students use GenAI mainly for text production, information retrieval, course learning, and research activities. These studies indicate that ChatGPT becomes educationally meaningful when students see it as relevant to their academic needs, but this perceived usefulness must be balanced with critical judgement.

There is also a need to distinguish between support and substitution. ChatGPT can help students generate a starting point, but it cannot replace academic reading, source evaluation, or the student's own interpretation. AI-generated outputs may contain inaccurate claims, weak citations, or statements that sound plausible without being properly evidenced (Francis et al., 2025; Salinas-Navarro et al., 2024). In addition, Maphoto et al. (2024) and Law (2024) caution that over-reliance on GenAI may encourage passive learning and superficial

writing. This means that students need to revise AI outputs, check the accuracy of information, and ensure that the final work reflects their own understanding.

c. Responsible GenAI Use, Student Confidence, and Wellbeing

Responsible use is central to any educational discussion of GenAI. Francis et al. (2025) argue that universities must balance innovation with integrity because AI-generated content complicates authorship, authenticity, and fairness. Maphoto et al. (2024) raise related concerns about integration of GenAI in academic context encompassing academic misconduct, over-reliance, and passive learning, while Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024) emphasise transparency, accountability, human agency, and careful pedagogical integration. These concerns are particularly relevant in writing-intensive and research-based courses, where students are expected to demonstrate originality, evaluate sources, and produce coherent academic arguments.

At the same time, responsible GenAI use can support student confidence and learning wellbeing. For students who struggle with academic writing, ChatGPT may reduce the emotional pressure associated with beginning a complex academic task. Jaboob et al. (2025) found that GenAI applications positively affect cognitive achievement, while Maphoto et al. (2024) report that GenAI can support writing development through guidance and feedback. Zhu et al. (2026) further suggest that continuous GenAI use may improve task and technical performance when students hold positive beliefs about the tool. These findings show that GenAI can make learning tasks feel more manageable, especially when students use the tool to clarify ideas and build confidence.

Wellbeing in this context should not be understood only as reduced stress. It also includes students' sense of agency, their willingness to continue working when they are uncertain, and their confidence in engaging with academic expectations. Chiu (2024) argues that higher education should prepare students for a GenAI-powered society through AI literacy and hands-on assessment. Wong and Looi (2024) similarly describe future education as a human-AI collaborative ecosystem. This perspective positions students not as passive users of technology, but as learners who must understand when, why, and how AI can support their academic development.

Nevertheless, confidence must not become dependence. GenAI can make writing easier, but it can also encourage cognitive offloading if students allow the tool to make decisions for them. Xiao et al. (2025) found that although most university students actively use GenAI, a substantial proportion of them are not highly proficient in using it effectively and responsibly. This points to the need for guiding university students on the basic knowledge and common methods of using GenAI such as structured training in prompt-writing, citation awareness, source verification, ethical disclosure, and critical revision. When these practices are embedded in teaching, ChatGPT can support (the) confidence and wellbeing of university students without weakening academic integrity.

METHODOLOGY

This study used an exploratory qualitative design to examine how students experienced ChatGPT as a learning support tool in a Research Methodology course. A qualitative approach was selected because the study was concerned with students' reflections, perceptions, and meaning making rather than with measuring performance scores. The focus was on how

students described their own learning process after using ChatGPT to support early research proposal development.

The participants were 40 third-year Communication undergraduates enrolled in a Research Methodology course at a private Malaysian university. The course required students to develop early components of a research proposal, including research ideas, background of the study, and problem statement. This learning context was appropriate because research proposal writing often requires students to organise ideas, read academic sources, identify a problem, and write in a structured scholarly manner. These are also areas where students commonly report uncertainty.

Data were collected through three classroom-based learning stages. First, students completed a pre-activity review in which they reflected on their prior experience with GenAI tools, their reasons for using or not using ChatGPT, and their expectations of AI-supported learning. Second, students participated in a hands-on ChatGPT activity. They used prompts to generate research ideas, background information, and possible problem statements. During this activity, they documented the prompts they used, saved the AI-generated responses, explained how they revised or personalised the outputs, and included screenshots as evidence of the process. Third, students submitted a reflective essay comparing their perceptions before and after the activity. Their reflections focused on usefulness, limitations, confidence, writing support, and research thinking.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher read the reflective essays and activity documents repeatedly to identify recurring meanings and patterns. Initial codes were developed from students' descriptions of how ChatGPT supported or limited their learning. These codes were then grouped into broader themes related to idea generation, writing support, confidence, motivation, structured thinking, prompt-writing skills, broader perspectives, and responsible use. To strengthen trustworthiness, the analysis compared different forms of student-generated evidence, including reflection texts, prompt records, screenshots, and revised outputs.

The study used student reflective learning materials produced during the classroom activities. Before analysis, all student identities were anonymised using alphanumeric pseudonyms, and the data were handled confidentially. The study followed ethical principles for research involving human participants and human data, including anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and responsible use of student-generated materials. This study is part of a research project that has received ethics approval from the university (Reference Code: SUREC 2022/012).

The activity was designed as a guided intervention rather than an unrestricted use of ChatGPT. Students were first reminded that AI-generated responses should not be submitted as final academic work without checking, editing, and acknowledgement of use. They were encouraged to treat ChatGPT as a conversational learning aid that could help them test possible directions, but not as an authority on academic evidence. This procedure was important because the study examined not only whether students found the tool useful, but also whether they could recognise the need to make their own decisions after receiving AI-generated suggestions.

In analysing the reflections, attention was given to both positive and cautious responses. Statements that described convenience, speed, confidence, or motivation were not taken as evidence of learning by themselves. Instead, they were interpreted together with students' explanations of how they revised, verified, and personalised the content. This

approach helped to avoid an overly favourable interpretation of GenAI use. The coding process therefore considered how students navigated between reliance and independence, whether they copied outputs directly, modified them to suit their topic, questioned the accuracy of information, or used the responses to strengthen their own understanding of research proposal writing.

RESULTS

The analysis identified eight themes which are idea generation, time efficiency, confidence building, structured thinking, broader research perspectives, motivation and engagement, writing and language support, and awareness of GenAI limitations. Although most students had some prior familiarity with ChatGPT, three students reported that they had not used the tool before the classroom activity. Across the reflections, students generally described ChatGPT as helpful during the early and uncertain stages of research proposal development, while also recognising that its responses required checking and revision.

a. ChatGPT as a Tool for Idea Generation

Many students used ChatGPT as a starting point for brainstorming. They explained that the most difficult part of proposal writing was often deciding how to narrow a broad interest into a researchable topic. ChatGPT helped them see possible directions and compare different ways of framing the issue. One participant stated, “ChatGPT helped me generate ideas more quickly because I could see different possible directions for my topic. It gave me a clearer starting point before I continued developing my own research idea” (P14). Another reflected, “Before using ChatGPT, I was not sure how to begin my research topic. After using it, I could understand the topic better and think of more suitable research problems” (P18).

These reflections suggest that students valued ChatGPT because it reduced the hesitation that often occurs at the beginning of research work. The tool did not remove the need for decision-making. Instead, it gave students several possible entry points, which they then had to judge, adapt, and develop further.

b. Improving Time Efficiency in Research Proposal Writing

Students also reported that ChatGPT helped them save time when drafting initial sections such as the background of study and problem statement. They did not describe the tool as a finished source of academic content, but as a basic framework that helped them understand how points might be arranged. For example, P5 commented, “ChatGPT saved me time because it gave me a basic structure for my problem statement. I still needed to edit it, but it helped me understand how to arrange my points.” Similarly, P7 explained, “It made the writing process faster because I did not need to start from zero. I could use the ideas as reference and then rewrite them based on my own understanding.”

This theme shows that the benefit of speed was linked to the ability to begin an academic writing task. Students still needed to revise, personalise, and align the output with their own research focus. In this sense, ChatGPT helped them save time from initial drafting to refinement.

c. Enhancing Confidence in Academic Writing

Several students connected ChatGPT with improved confidence. They felt more secure when they could compare their own ideas with the suggestions generated by the tool. P19 wrote,

"Using ChatGPT made me feel more confident because I could compare my own ideas with the suggestions given. It helped me know whether my direction was suitable." P20 added, "I felt more confident writing my proposal because ChatGPT showed me how the sentences could be structured in a more academic way."

The confidence described here was both cognitive and emotional. Students gained a better sense of structure, but they also felt less anxious about making mistakes. This is important because academic writing difficulties are often experienced not only as technical problems, but also as feelings of doubt and hesitation.

d. Supporting Structured Thinking and Prompt-Writing Skills

Students also learned that the quality of ChatGPT's response depended on the quality of their prompt. P12 observed, "I learned that I need to give clear prompts. When my question was too general, the answer was also too general. After I changed the prompt, the response became more useful." P2 similarly stated, "ChatGPT helped me organise my thinking because I had to be clear about what I wanted before asking the question."

This theme suggests that prompt-writing encouraged students to clarify their own thinking. Before asking ChatGPT for help, they had to decide what they wanted to know, what context to provide, and what form of answer would be useful. In this way, prompt-writing became part of the learning process rather than a separate technical action.

e. Broadening Research Perspectives

Another recurring theme was that ChatGPT helped students view their topics from wider angles. P16 explained, "ChatGPT gave me different perspectives that I did not think about before. It helped me see my topic from a wider angle." P4 similarly noted, "It helped me explore more possibilities for my research. Some of the ideas were useful because they made me think deeper about the issue."

These comments indicate that ChatGPT supported exploratory thinking. It introduced alternative keywords, issues, and directions that students could consider before finalising their research focus. However, students still needed to decide which ideas were academically relevant and feasible.

f. Increasing Motivation and Engagement

Students described ChatGPT as helpful when they felt stuck or uncertain about how to move forward with their work. P35 wrote, "ChatGPT made me feel more motivated because I could get ideas immediately when I was stuck. It made the research process less stressful." P33 added, "It helped me continue writing instead of giving up when I did not know how to start."

These responses show that ChatGPT contributed to persistence. The tool provided immediate support at moments when students might otherwise stop working. This does not mean that the tool solved the research problem for them, but it made the task feel more manageable and encouraged continued engagement.

g. ChatGPT as a Writing and Language Support Tool

Beyond idea generation, students used ChatGPT to improve grammar, sentence structure, academic tone, and clarity. P10 stated, "ChatGPT helped me improve my sentences and make them sound more academic. It also helped me correct grammar mistakes." P7 also explained,

"I used ChatGPT to check whether my writing was clear. It gave me suggestions on how to improve the wording."

This theme is important for students who have ideas but find it difficult to express them in formal academic English. ChatGPT provided language options that students could learn from and adapt. However, the reflections also show that students still needed to review whether the revised wording accurately represented their intended meaning.

h. Awareness of Limitations and the Need for Critical Evaluation

Although students generally viewed ChatGPT positively, they also recognised its limitations. P3 cautioned, "ChatGPT is useful, but I cannot fully depend on it because sometimes the information may not be accurate." P6 noted, "The main problem is that ChatGPT does not give proper references, so I still need to search for journal articles by myself." P39 added, "I think ChatGPT can help at the beginning, but we still need to check the information and make sure it is reliable."

These comments show that students were not accepting AI-generated responses uncritically. They understood that ChatGPT could provide a starting point, but not a complete academic source. This awareness is central to responsible GenAI use because research writing requires evidence, source evaluation, and independent judgement.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that ChatGPT can support research methodology learning when it is used within a structured and reflective classroom activity. Students did not use the tool only to produce text for academic writing. They used it to begin thinking, compare possibilities, revise ideas, and understand how academic writing might be organised. This is an important distinction because much of the concern surrounding GenAI in higher education focuses on replacement and the fear that students will allow AI to do the work for them. In this study, the more useful pattern was collaboration. Students used ChatGPT as a first layer of support and then adjusted the outputs according to their own understanding.

One clear contribution of the study is its focus on the beginning stage of research proposal writing. For many students, the difficulty was not simply a lack of effort. It was uncertainty about how to move from a broad topic to a focused research problem. ChatGPT helped by offering possible angles and making the first step less intimidating. This finding is consistent with Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024), who discuss GenAI as a support for task clarification, problem-solving, and learning engagement. In this course context, ChatGPT appeared to function as a form of cognitive scaffolding which gave students temporary support, especially at the beginning of a research proposal writing, while they developed their own direction. This concur with Maphoto et al. (2024) that students often turn to AI-supported writing tools because they feel unprepared or lack confidence in academic writing.

However, scaffolding is only useful when it is eventually removed or reduced. The lecturer's role remains essential because students still need guidance in judging whether an AI-generated idea is feasible, researchable, and supported by literature. This point is important for curriculum design. GenAI should not be introduced as an independent solution to academic writing difficulties. It should be embedded in activities where students must document prompts, compare outputs with scholarly sources, explain revisions, and justify their final decisions. This result support Chiu's (2024) argument that higher education institutions should prepare students for a GenAI-powered society through the development

of AI literacy and hands-on assessment practices. In the classroom activity, students learned that prompt-writing affects the usefulness of the response. They also learned that vague questions lead to vague answers. This means prompt-writing is not merely a technical skill. It is connected to metacognition because students must first understand what they are trying to ask. When students reformulate prompts, they are also reformulating their own thinking.

Time efficiency emerged as another major benefit. Students appreciated that ChatGPT reduced the pressure of starting from a blank page. This supports earlier studies suggesting that GenAI can assist with assignment preparation and writing development (Maphoto et al., 2024; Salinas-Navarro et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the results suggest that efficiency should not be interpreted as task avoidance. Students who used ChatGPT responsibly still had to revise, personalise, and verify the material. The tool was useful because it helped them reach the stage of revision faster, not because it removed the need to think.

The study also shows that ChatGPT can support confidence and wellbeing. Students described feeling more capable when they could see examples of academic structure and language. This is relevant to literature on academic writing difficulties, where lack of preparedness and low confidence are recurring issues (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Hassan et al., 2021; Ilham et al., 2020; Sağlamel & Aydoğdu, 2022). In this study, confidence was not only about writing better sentences; it also reflected students' belief that research proposal writing was achievable. This sense of possibility encouraged them to persist, even when they felt stuck or uncertain about how to move forward.

At the same time, confidence must be carefully managed. If students become too dependent on ChatGPT, the tool may weaken their ability to make independent academic decisions. For this reason, lecturers should encourage students to ask critical questions about AI-generated suggestions such as, is the idea relevant to the research problem? is it supported by the literature? does the wording reflect my intended meaning? and what evidence is needed? These questions help turn AI use into a reflective practice rather than a shortcut.

The results further indicate that ChatGPT broadened students' perspectives by introducing possible keywords, issues, and angles. This aligns with research that links GenAI to creativity, ideation, and knowledge exploration (Chiu, 2024; Rong et al., 2025). However, broadening perspectives is only the first stage of academic work. A wider range of ideas can be useful, but it can also overwhelm students if they lack criteria for selection. Therefore, AI-supported brainstorming should be followed by academic narrowing, where students evaluate the relevance, scope, evidence base, and feasibility of each idea.

Students' awareness of ChatGPT's limitations is one of the most encouraging findings. Participants recognised that the tool could produce inaccurate or unsupported information and that it did not provide reliable academic citations. This supports the concerns raised by Francis et al. (2025) and Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024) about reliability, transparency, and academic integrity. It also shows that students can develop critical awareness when GenAI use is made visible in the learning process. Rather than banning the tool entirely, educators may obtain better learning outcomes by requiring students to show how they used it and how they checked its outputs.

Overall, the study supports the view of ChatGPT as a form of augmented intelligence. Dave and Mandvikar (2023) describe augmented intelligence as a collaboration between human and AI capabilities. In this study, ChatGPT extended students' ability to brainstorm, organise, and revise, but it did not replace their judgement. This resonates with Wong and Looi's (2024) discussion of human-AI collaborative learning ecosystems. The future of GenAI

in higher education should therefore not be framed only as a problem of detection or prohibition. It should also be approached as a question of pedagogy on how students can be guided to use AI ethically, critically, and productively?

CONCLUSION

This study examined how ChatGPT supported student learning and wellbeing in a Research Methodology course for third-year Communication undergraduates. The results show that ChatGPT helped students generate research ideas, develop problem statements, organise early proposal sections, improve writing confidence, and practise clearer prompt-writing. Students also reported that the tool made the research process less stressful because it gave them a starting point when they were unsure on how to begin (when they were unsure how to begin).

The contribution of the study lies in showing how GenAI can support the early and uncertain stages of academic work. ChatGPT was useful not because it produced final answers, but because it helped students move from uncertainty to a more structured thinking process. The study also shows that GenAI can support student wellbeing by reducing writing-related anxiety and encouraging persistence. However, this benefit depends on responsible use in which students must still evaluate AI-generated content, verify claims through scholarly sources, and revise outputs using their own judgement.

The results therefore support the idea of ChatGPT as augmented intelligence rather than a substitute for human learning. It can help students think, question, draft, and revise, but it cannot replace academic reading, ethical decision-making, or lecturer guidance. For higher education institutions, the key issue is not only whether students use GenAI, but how they are taught to use it. Clear guidelines, transparent assessment expectations, prompt documentation, source verification, and reflective learning tasks are needed to ensure that GenAI strengthens rather than weakens academic development.

The practical implication is that GenAI activities should be designed with transparency. Students can be asked to keep prompt logs, annotate AI-generated outputs, identify what they accepted or rejected, and provide scholarly sources to verify key claims. Such practices make the learning process visible and reduce the risk of passive dependence and eventually help students develop the habits required for responsible academic work in a technology-driven environment.

For communication education specifically, ChatGPT may be useful because it mirrors several professional practices in the field. Communication students are expected to generate ideas, evaluate audience needs, frame issues, and revise messages for clarity and persuasiveness. These practices already involve drafting, feedback, and refinement. When guided carefully, GenAI can become part of this iterative communication process. Nevertheless, communication professionals also require ethical responsibility, sensitivity to context, and evidence-based judgement. Therefore, the use of ChatGPT in communication programmes should not be separated from discussions of authorship, credibility, bias, and public trust. Students should learn that clear writing is not sufficient if the underlying information is inaccurate or ethically problematic.

The results of this study highlight the importance of designing assessments that make the learning process visible. If students are only assessed on the final written product, it becomes difficult to distinguish between meaningful AI-supported learning and uncritical AI dependence. In contrast, requiring prompt records, screenshots, reflective explanations, and

revised outputs allows lecturers to see how students interacted with the tool. These artefacts can show whether students improved their prompts, rejected unsuitable suggestions, checked information against scholarly sources, and rewrote the material in their own academic voice. Such process-based documentation can also reduce anxiety around AI detection because the emphasis shifts from suspicion to transparency and learning accountability.

Another implication concerns the relationship between GenAI and student wellbeing. The students' reflections suggest that wellbeing in academic writing is closely connected to momentum. When students are unable to begin, uncertainty can quickly become discouragement, especially in research-based courses where expectations are abstract and cumulative. ChatGPT appeared to reduce this barrier by providing immediate conversational feedback. However, the educational value did not come from emotional reassurance alone. It came from the way reassurance was connected to action whereby students could ask a question, receive a possible structure, revise the wording, and continue developing their proposal. This finding suggests that AI-supported wellbeing should be understood as productive confidence, where students feel more able to engage with demanding academic tasks rather than avoid them.

In conclusion, ChatGPT can be a meaningful tool for change in higher education when it is integrated thoughtfully. Its value lies in helping students participate more confidently in academic tasks while still developing critical thinking, ethical awareness, and independent scholarly judgement. Through responsible GenAI usage, it can support not only academic excellence, but also more inclusive and resilient learning experiences.

The study is limited by its exploratory qualitative design and by its focus on one course, one student cohort, and one institutional context. The results should therefore be interpreted as contextual insights rather than broad generalisations about all higher education students. Despite this limitation, the study provides practical evidence that structured GenAI use can help students approach academic writing, such as research proposal writing, with greater confidence, responsibility, and critical awareness.

Future studies may extend this work by comparing perspectives across different disciplines, examining lecturers' experiences or (and) perspectives, or analysing how students' AI literacy develops over multiple semesters. Additionally, further research could investigate whether guided GenAI-supported activities lead to sustained improvements in the quality of research proposals over time, particularly in comparison with traditional forms of writing support.

BIODATA

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