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Reading at university in the time of GenAI

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Concerns around Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in higher education have so far largely centred on assessment integrity, resulting in fundamental questions about students' broader engagement with these tools remaining underexplored. This paper reports on the findings of a survey that forms part of a wider study, comprising the first empirical investigation of GenAI use by university students as a method of engaging with their academic readings. Our survey of 101 students shows that over half of all students surveyed used GenAI to some degree as a method of engaging with their unit readings. Our findings suggest that students turn to these tools in response to time constraints and conceptual difficulties, while maintaining complex attitudes toward their use: most welcome their availability, yet few report trusting or relying on GenAI-generated interpretations or summaries of texts. Importantly, our data reveals substantial demographic variations in usage patterns, with international students and those taking subjects as electives showing significantly higher rates of AI use to assist with reading. This suggests GenAI tools may be serving as important mediators for attempting to overcome epistemic barriers to learning, particularly for students who face additional linguistic or disciplinary challenges.

Keywords: academic readings, generative artificial intelligence, higher education, philosophy education, reading, summariser

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Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has become a prominent concern in higher education, particularly regarding its implications for student assessments (Luo, 2024; Kumar et al., 2024). However, its uses by students extend far beyond assessment contexts. One such reported function of GenAI is as a tool for analysing texts (Chan & Hu, 2023). Platforms such as Adobe AI, Google Scholar, Co-Pilot, ChatGPT, and dedicated tools including ChatPDF and NoteGPT, all offer summarisation and text analysis features, providing new ways for students to interact with academic material. While much has been written about GenAI as a writing aid, there is very limited work on AI relative to reading. One example of such work is a large-scale UK survey of 1250 students which notes that 53% think it is acceptable to use for summarising articles and 36% use it as a 'private tutor' to explain concepts (Freeman, 2024). However, despite this evidence of the growing prevalence of AI reading support, the extent to which students are using these tools, as well as any consequent impact on their learning, remains

unknown.

This pilot study examines the use of GenAI tools by philosophy students in the context of Australian higher education. Philosophy was chosen as the focal discipline because its readings typically require students to critically engage with dense, abstract, and conceptually challenging texts. These characteristics are those likely to shine the most light on questions about how GenAI tools might support or hinder student learning. The study's focus on a single discipline also allows for an in-depth exploration of these issues, while laying the groundwork for broader investigations into the role of GenAI in higher education. This study was designed to investigate the degree to which students are using GenAI tools to engage with their university readings. More specifically, we sought to understand the frequency of GenAI use, student attitudes toward these tools, and how these tools are being integrated into learning practices.

Methods

The survey design was informed by 20 in-depth interviews with students from three large Australian universities as part of a broader study (Ethics Approval: HAE-24-061). Insights from these interviews directly shaped the survey's design, including the demographic variables and attitudes towards readings within philosophy. Of the 33-item survey, many concerned attitudes to philosophy generally and only seven questions concerned GenAI (see supplemental materials).

The survey was distributed to undergraduate students in 18 philosophy units across the three large Australian universities. Unit chairs facilitated distribution through learning management systems, with several also promoting the survey during lectures. Ethics approval was obtained from all three universities, and participants were required to read and agree to a plain-language statement outlining the study's purpose and their rights before providing their anonymous responses.

Based on enrolment indications provided by unit chairs, the survey was provided to approximately 800 to 1000 students; a total of 125 responses were received, of which 24 were excluded for containing only demographic information. This left 101 responses for analysis, representing a range of demographic categories and study contexts, detailed in the findings below. We provide descriptive statistics. We also compared cohorts by attendance mode (online/face-to-face); enrolment location (domestic/international); language spoken at home (English/alternate); and gender. $\chi 2$ tests were used to examine associations between categorical variables in non-normally distributed data, such as the frequency of GenAI use and attitudes toward its availability (SPSS version 30). P-values were set at standard threshold: $p \leq 0.05$).

In this paper we only report on the questions concerning GenAI. See supplemental materials for full response rates to the questions concerning GenAI and the full series of inferential calculations.

Findings

Demographics

Participants spanned a range of demographic categories. The majority were domestic students (83.2%), and ages ranged predominantly between 18 to 24 years (83.2%). Gender,

disability status, and primary language use varied across the sample. Further demographic details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant demographics

Demographic	Number of Participants
University of origin	
University A	29
University B	39
University C	33
Enrolment location	
Domestic	84
International	17
Taking Philosophy as:	
Part of major	52
An elective	49
Age	
18 - 19	38
20 - 24	46
25 - 29	2
30 - 39	5
40 - 49	6
50 and over	4

Demographic	Number of participants
Gender	
Woman	47
Man	38
Non-binary	8
Gender diverse	4
Prefer not to say	3
Gender isn't listed	1
Main language spoken at home	
English	81
Other languages	20
Identifies as disabled, neurodivergent, or as having a mental health condition	
Yes	29
No	67
Prefer not to say	5

On the importance of readings

Students demonstrated a strong recognition of the importance of unit readings, with 79.1% of respondents indicating agreement that 'the unit readings are important to complete' (40.9% strongly agree, 38.2% somewhat agree). Only a small proportion of students expressed disagreement with this statement (10% combined), while 10.9% maintained a neutral stance.

Time-related constraints emerged as the predominant challenges to completing readings, with 65.7% (n = 71) of students citing a general 'lack of time' as an impediment. This was followed by specific time-allocation conflicts: work commitments (49.1%, n = 53) and social life obligations (42.6%, n = 46). Family obligations were reported by 19.4% (n = 21) of respondents. Content-related challenges were less prevalent but notable, with 33.3% (n = 36) finding the readings 'too complicated' and 13.9% (n = 15) reporting the readings 'aren't interesting'.

Frequency of use and attitudes towards GenAI with respect to philosophy readings

More than half of all surveyed students (54.5%, n = 55) reported using GenAI tools to engage with their philosophy unit readings to some degree. Within this majority, usage patterns varied considerably: 19.8% (n = 20) of students indicated they used these tools 'frequently' or 'very frequently', while 20.8% (n = 21) reported moderate usage ('occasionally' or 'sometimes'), and 13.9% (n = 14) used them 'infrequently'. The remaining 45.5% (n = 46) of respondents indicated they 'never' used GenAI tools for reading comprehension support or text summarisation.

Student attitudes toward GenAI were predominantly positive, with 76.2% (n = 77) of

respondents indicating they were glad that AI existed and that they could access these tools, while 23.8% (n = 24) expressed the opposite view. We compared frequency and attitudes across different demographics. The complete inferential comparisons are available in supplemental materials. Here we report the significant analyses. χ2 analysis showed significant differences in attitude towards AI between international and domestic students (χ^2 = 6.371, df = 1, p = .012; df* = 1, V = .251) with 100% of international students responding that they were glad AI was available to them compared with 71.4% of domestic students.

Significant differences also occurred between cohorts regarding frequency of use (Table 2). Those who spoke English at home used GenAI less frequently to summarise philosophy readings than those who spoke another language at home (χ^2 = 24.000, df = 5, p < .001; df* = 1, V = .487). There were also significant differences between international and domestic students in relation to GenAI usage frequency (see Table 3). International students were significantly more likely to use AI than domestic students (χ^2 = 21.963, df = 5, p < .001; df* = 1, V = .466).

Table 2: GenAI use by language spoken at home.

Language spoken at home		GenAI use					
		Never	Infrequently	Sometimes	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
English	**%**	54.3	13.6	9.9	8.6	6.2	7.4
	n	44	11	8	7	5	6
Non-English	**%**	10.0	15.0	0.0	30.0	30.0	15.0
	n	2	3	0	6	6	3

Table 3: GenAI use by location of enrolment.

Enrolment location		GenAI use					
		Never	Infrequently	Sometimes	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
International	**%**	5.9	11.8	5.9	23.5	35.3	17.6
	n	1	2	1	4	6	3
Domestic	**%**	53.6	14.3	8.3	10.7	6.0	7.1
	n	45	12	7	9	5	6

Influence of GenAI with respect to their philosophy subject

The survey also explored students' perceptions of how GenAI tools affect their learning, engagement with unit readings, and confidence in their philosophy studies. Table 4 summarises the key findings. 17.8% strongly agreed and 22.8% somewhat agreed that GenAI tools improve their understanding of a topic. However, far fewer students felt that GenAI made them ‘smarter’, with only 7.9% strongly agreeing and 8.9% somewhat agreeing with this statement. When asked whether GenAI tools contribute to their philosophical development, opinions were similarly divided: only 4% strongly agreed that GenAI makes them better philosophers, whilst 40.6% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Significant differences occurred between cohorts regarding the impact of GenAI on their philosophy studies (Table 4). International students were more likely than domestic students to agree that AI made them more comfortable learning new things ($\chi^2 = 11.139$, df = 4, p = .025; df* = 1, V = .371), and were also more likely to agree that AI improved their writing ($\chi^2 = 9.988$, df = 4, p = .041; df* = 1, V = .365). Domestic students were the most likely to disagree that they trusted AI, while international students were more likely to be in a neutral position ($\chi^2 = 9.831$, df = 4, p = .043; df* = 1, V = .320) Students taking philosophy as an elective were also more likely than philosophy major students to agree that AI improved their understanding of a topic ($\chi^2 = 17.920$, df = 8, p = .022, df* = 1, V = .459).

Table 4: Students' perceptions of how GenAI tools affect their learning, engagement, and confidence.

Perception Statement	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
	%	%	%	%	%
GenAI tools improve my understanding of the topic					
Overall	17.8	22.8	13.9	5.0	16.9
Elective	33.3	16.7	10.4	4.1	14.6
International	29.4	47.1	11.8	5.9	0
GenAI makes me smarter					
Overall	7.9	8.9	19.8	10.9	33.7
Elective	16.7	12.5	16.7	8.3	29.2
International	5.9	17.6	41.2	17.6	11.8
GenAI improves my writing					
Overall	6.9	21.8	12.9	9.9	22.8
Elective	10.4	29.2	8.3	12.5	16.7
International	17.6	35.3	11.8	17.6	0.0
GenAI makes me more comfortable learning new topics					
Overall	11.9	22.7	16.8	7.9	20.8
Elective	18.9	23.0	12.5	10.4	16.7
International	17.6	53.0	17.6	5.9	0.0
I trust GenAI					
Overall	3.0	10.9	23.8	18.8	38.6
Elective	4.2	18.8	23.0	16.7	29.2
International	0.0	11.8	53.0	17.6	17.6

Table 4: Continued …

Perception Statement	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I rely on GenAI					
Overall	3.0	6.9	10.9	13.9	58.4
Elective	4.2	10.4	10.4	16.7	5.0
International	0.0	17.6	23.5	35.3	23.5
GenAI makes me a better philosopher					
Overall	4.0	11.9	14.9	12.9	40.6
Elective	8.3	12.5	14.6	14.6	31.3
International	0.0	23.5	41.2	11.8	5.9

Discussion

Readings play a foundational role in higher education, serving as a key medium through which students engage with disciplinary knowledge. However, university level texts are infrequently mere vehicles for conveying information; they are often dense, conceptually complex works that require students to grapple with abstract arguments and nuanced ideas. While these characteristics make readings valuable for developing critical thinking and interpretive skills, they also present significant challenges. Our findings confirm this tension: while students overwhelmingly recognise the importance of engaging with these texts (79.1% agreement), they face substantial barriers to doing so effectively, both practical (65.7% citing time-based constraints) and epistemic (33.3% citing the readings being too complicated or holding related concerns).

The emergence of GenAI tools in this context presents both challenges and opportunities (Bearman et al., 2024; Robinson & Hollett, 2024). Our findings indicate that more than half of surveyed students (54.5%) are already utilising these tools to engage with philosophy unit readings. While this high adoption rate might suggest students are simply outsourcing the labour of reading comprehension, our data points to a more nuanced interpretation. The demographic patterns in GenAI usage suggest that students may be using these tools to overcome barriers to learning and to self-scaffold their interactions with readings. For example, international students and those taking philosophy as electives – groups potentially facing greater conceptual and linguistic barriers – reported higher rates of GenAI use for reading support.

These patterns have potentially important implications for educational equity. The strong positive sentiment toward GenAI availability (76.2%) suggests these tools are making students more comfortable with challenging content, potentially lowering anxiety barriers to engagement with complex reading material. By providing alternative entry points to challenging texts, GenAI tools may help democratise access, particularly for students who face epistemic barriers to traditional engagement with reading materials. However, this optimistic interpretation must be balanced against potential risks. While GenAI may help students overcome initial barriers, over-reliance on AI-generated summaries could potentially impede the development of critical reading and interpretive skills that are essential to philosophical education.

Overall, these results highlight the ambivalence students feel about the broader intellectual

contributions of GenAI, particularly in a discipline like philosophy, where critical engagement with texts is paramount. The students themselves recognise this; their high valuation of required readings provides an important context for understanding students' engagement with GenAI tools. Students may be turning to technological solutions not from disengagement with course content, but rather as a response to practical constraints on their time, and reading comprehension challenges. Further research is needed to better understand if students who utilise these technologies are bypassing traditional reading practices, or if they are supplementing their engagement with course materials through technological means.

This pilot study does have a number of limitations. There were a low number of respondents; the inferential statistics therefore come with necessary caveats. While the survey was informed by interviews, it is a nonetheless a simple capture of attitudes towards readings, perceptions of GenAI, and self-reported use. However, given the lack of data focusing on GenAI in readings, the contribution of the article is to provide a snapshot into the potential role of GenAI as a summarising tool.

Conclusion

This pilot study provides novel insights into the use of GenAI as a medium for students to engage with their unit readings. However, it is only a first step in understanding how GenAI tools are reshaping reading practices in higher education. As these tools become increasingly sophisticated and widely available, understanding their impact on student learning and engagement will be crucial for developing approaches that harness their potential while preserving the essential skills and habits of mind that higher education aims to cultivate.

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No AI assistance was used during any part of the writing process.

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