Use of generative AI in assessments: Guidance for postgraduate research students

This guidance aims to support postgraduate researchers to understand where generative AI may, and may not, be used in work submitted for assessment or review as part of a postgraduate research degree award.

If there is any conflict between this guidance and the Research Degree Regulations or University Research Ethics policies, those documents will take precedence. Where applicable, policies or guidance from a funding body may also take precedence.

If your degree is part of a collaborative partnership or awarded jointly with another institution, you will also need to ensure you comply with your partner institution's guidance. This may mean that you are not able to use AI as described in this document.

This guidance does not cover the use of AI in the conduct of your research – this is covered by the AI & Research Integrity policy.

The SHU Digital Skills Hub (staff intranet) contains further guidance on use of AI including specific guidance on Microsoft CoPilot Enterprise.

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(Update: Paragraph added to section 2.4 on personal data and GDPR)

Contents

1. Where this guidance applies

Any work you generate or submit for assessment during your research degree must meet the expected standards of academic and research integrity. For postgraduate research students, these expectations are governed by the Research Degree Regulations, the Research Ethics Policy and Procedures, and the Policy and Procedures for dealing with allegations of research misconduct against doctoral or masters research students (referred to here as the research misconduct policy).

This guidance applies to:

- your application for approval of research programme (RF1)
- your application for confirmation of doctorate (RF2), your confirmation of doctorate report and any material used in your oral assessment
- your thesis, including if applicable:
  - the practice-based elements of your thesis
  - work published as part of your article-based thesis
- complementary studies modules in Professional Doctorate programmes
- any drafts of work submitted to your supervisors for review.

2. Considerations before using AI tools

In all cases you should discuss with your supervisors before using generative AI tools.
The use of generative AI in assessments is permitted for limited functions as described below; however, you must take care not to breach the research misconduct policy or the AI & Research Integrity policy.

You should also consider the potential unintended consequences outlined below:

2.1. Reliability of the output

An AI tool does not evaluate or verify the content of its output. AI tools can make up or 'hallucinate' references. They do not evaluate the source or accuracy of information, and any bias in the data it draws from may appear in the output.

2.2. Award criteria and examination performance

If you do use AI, you should be aware of the potential risk that you might not be able to evidence the degree award criteria[1] to the satisfaction of your examiners. In particular, the requirements to critically investigate and evaluate a topic and to make an independent and original contribution to knowledge and/or professional practice. Use of AI may impact on your ability to defend your thesis in your viva examination if you have not fully understood the AI-generated aspects within your thesis. This could apply even where you have rewritten the output such that it can be considered your own words. For example, you will need to be able to evidence an understanding of the literature and the sources you have quoted in your thesis, and you may be asked by your examiners to place your project within the context of existing research and describe how your thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge and/or professional practice.

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[1] The requirements for award of a postgraduate research degree are set out in the University's Academic Quality Framework and our Research Degree Regulations (R1.4).
All postgraduate research degrees require the candidate to:

- critically investigate and evaluate an approved topic,
- demonstrate an understanding of research methods appropriate to the chosen field, and
- present and defend a thesis by oral examination to the satisfaction of the examiners.

Additionally, doctoral level awards require the candidate to make an independent and original contribution to knowledge and/or professional practice.

2.3. Authorship of your work

You must take full responsibility for the content of the work you submit to ensure you have created the work with integrity. Generative AI should not be used such that your thesis, or other work submitted as part of your degree, cannot be considered your own work. When submitting your thesis for assessment, you are required to declare that:

I certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

You should not cite generative AI tools or use them as sources. The Principles of Good Research Practice for Publication and Authorship sets out good practice in attributing authorship, noting that anyone listed as an author should be accountable and take responsibility for the publication. AI tools cannot take responsibility for their output and therefore cannot be identified as authors.

2.4. Placing your research in the public domain

Note that uploading your work to generative AI can place it in the public domain. The AI & Research Integrity policy and guidance on use of AI in research cover the sharing of information with AI tools in more detail, including compliance with UK data protection laws, intellectual property, commercial sensitivities and participant consent.

PGR students must not upload personal data or any information that could directly or indirectly identify individuals into AI platforms or tools. All data must be fully anonymised prior to use. Uploading identifiable data would constitute a breach of GDPR and may be treated as research misconduct under University ethics policies. Such breaches carry serious consequences for both the researcher and the institution. Students are therefore required to handle data responsibly and ensure participant confidentiality is never compromised.

You should also consider the policies and requirements of academic publishers and ensure that your use of generative AI, including placing your research in the public domain, will not affect your ability to publish your thesis or other work. See for example guidance from Cambridge University Press.

The SHU Digital Skills Hub (staff intranet) contains further guidance on use of AI including specific guidance on Microsoft CoPilot Enterprise.

3. Use of generative AI in PGR assessments

While generative AI tools may be used as aids to inform your thinking and support your learning, the AI output must not be submitted as your own work.

In all cases, before using an AI tool, you must consider the nature of your research and the content of your work. For example, use of AI tools may not be permitted where your thesis contains personal, commercial or otherwise sensitive information, or where use of AI tools is not permitted under a contractual agreement (see AI & Research Integrity policy).

3.1. Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS)

The Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS) has been created through an institutional working group at Sheffield Hallam University. AITS uses 5 descriptors to communicate the way in which AI may be used, and has been used, in assessments. The full list of AITS descriptors is available at the end of this document.

As a general guide for PGR assessments, AI use is permitted up to AITS 2 of the Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS). However, there are some restrictions to this. AITS 2 allows AI use "*for shaping parts of the activity. This includes initial outlining, concept development, prompting thinking, and/or improving structure/quality of the final output.*" For postgraduate research degrees, AI tools should **not** be used for concept development. This is a core part of the learning for postgraduate researchers and use of AI in this manner will undermine your development as a researcher and the integrity of your work.

3.2. Examples where generative AI would be permitted

The university already allows limited use of proofreaders to ensure a thesis is at the required standard of English (Regulation R12.4). Generative AI tools may be used in a similar way – to check spelling, grammar and punctuation, or to help clarify meaning and improve standards of English of text you have written yourself. You must ensure that this does not affect your ability to assert authorship of your work.

Your Learning Contract may include an agreed reasonable adjustment that involves the use of assistive technology AI tools to support you in writing your thesis, and this will be acceptable providing it does not breach the policies referred to in section 1.

3.3. Examples where generative AI would not be permitted

While generative AI tools may be used to check grammar and punctuation or to help clarify text you have written, they must not be used to generate text that cannot be submitted as your own writing.

AI tools must **not** be used to:

- generate new text or new arguments, or to develop concepts.
- change or correct the content of what you have written - e.g. to correct factual errors or to change arguments you have put forward.
- make substantial changes to your original text – e.g. re-writing paragraphs.
- translate text you have written in a language other than English.

3.4. AI-related research

If your research project requires you to interact with AI tools, the output may be included in the work submitted as part of your degree provided it is declared in line with the guidance below.

4. Declaring your use of generative AI

You must acknowledge use of generative AI in your work. Failure to acknowledge use of AI tools could constitute research misconduct.

The candidate declaration for your RF1 and RF2 forms and thesis asks you to select one of two options:

- I confirm that no AI tools were used in the preparation or completion of this assessment. This submission aligns with AITS 1 of the Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS).
- I used AI at AITS 2 (AI for Shaping) of the Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS). I acknowledge the use of <insert AI system(s) name and URL> to <brief description of how you used the tool>.

If your research project involves the use of AI, you may in addition select:

- [For research projects involving AI only] AI-generated materials have been included in this submission. I acknowledge the use of <insert AI system(s) name and URL> to <brief description of how you used the tool>.

  Example declaration: I used AI at AITS 2 (AI for Shaping) of the Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS). I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Copilot https://copilot.microsoft.com/ to check the spelling and grammar in all sections of my thesis.

5. Microsoft Copilot Enterprise

Access to Copilot Enterprise is included with your Hallam Microsoft licence. The Enterprise version differs slightly from the standard version and has enhanced data security.

Ensure you sign in using your Microsoft username in the format username@hallam.shu.ac.uk to access the Enterprise version.

Specific guidance on accessing and using Microsoft Copilot Enterprise is available on the SHU Digital Skills Hub (staff intranet).

6. Further information

If you have any questions, please discuss with your Director of Studies in the first instance.

Questions regarding ethical use of AI in your research, or use of AI that involves submitting research findings/data, should be directed to your local research ethics lead.

The SHU Digital Skills Hub (staff intranet) contains further guidance on use of AI including specific guidance on Microsoft Copilot Enterprise.

A list of related policies and guidance is in the annex.

Annex 1: Policy and procedures for dealing with allegations of research misconduct against doctoral or masters research students

Proven research misconduct could result in failure at final assessment (Research Degree Regulations R14.3). Under the university's research misconduct policy, inappropriate or unacknowledged use of AI could constitute research misconduct as a result of:

5. Plagiarism - the presentation of documented words or ideas of another as one's own work, without attributions. It may be deliberate or occur unintentionally as the result of poor academic skills, but in either case it constitutes misconduct. It can take many forms from cutting and pasting from journal articles, books or internet sites etc.

6. Contract cheating - submitting work bought or commissioned from others

7. Misrepresentation of research data and/or interests/expertise and or involvement in the research. This includes bestowing gift /honorary authorships (e.g. including as authors individuals such as external examiners, who have had little or no involvement in the research in order to improve the chances of publication or improve the status of the publication or to enhance the individual's career). This also includes failure to acknowledge individuals who have made intellectual contributions to the research and its publication or including as authors individuals who have not given their permission to be included.

Annex 2: Sheffield Hallam University – Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS)

From Guidance on AI in Assessment

AITS	Descriptor	Transparency Statement	AI Contributions	Human Contribution
1	No AI	Artificial Intelligence (AI) has not been used for any part of the activity.	AI is not used for any part of the activity.	All aspects of the activity are human generated, created, edited, and developed.
2	AI for Shaping	AI has been used to shape the initial and/or final parts of the activity.	AI is used for shaping parts of the activity. This includes initial outlining, concept development, prompting thinking, and/or improving structure/quality of the final output.	Most of the activity is human developed/generated. AI ideas and suggestions are refined and reviewed. AI outputs are used for discrete and specific goals/outcomes.
3	AI for Developing	AI has been directed for enhanced development of concepts and outputs.	AI is used to undertake detailed development of many or most aspects of an activity and outputs of that activity.	The human takes a significant role in the enhancement, refinement, and critical review of AI generated elements, combining or curating for any outputs.
4	AI for Enhancing	AI has been implemented for all elements of the task.	AI is used extensively throughout the task to achieve goals and outcomes.	The human directs the use of AI for effective outcomes within an activity. Critical thinking is evidenced for any outputs.
5	AI for Innovating	AI has been used for all elements of a task or piece of work, and it has been used in new, creative, and innovative ways through advanced techniques.	AI is implemented in an advanced and innovative way throughout all aspects of the activity.	AI is used creatively and critically by the human. The human uses AI a co-creator with a critical thinking approach to generating novel AI activities and outputs

Purvis, A. (2025). Artificial Intelligence Transparency Scale (AITS). National Teaching Repository.

Annex 3: Sheffield Hallam policies and information

Information for researchers
Policy and procedures for dealing with allegations of research misconduct against doctoral or masters research students
AI & Research Integrity policy
Checklist for AI use in research
AI in research
Data protection for researchers Also Staff intranet link
Use GenAI responsibly in your research (podcast)
General assessment guidance (NB some aspects may not apply to PGR assessment)
Making the most of generative AI
Library information on Editing and proofreading
General policies and guidance on use of AI tools
Digital Skills Hub and Copilot Enterprise (staff intranet)
Data Protection and AI (staff intranet)
Policy for the use of AI (staff intranet)