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Research Article

### ChatGPT and Co-Constructed Learning: Postgraduate Perspectives on Using Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education at a Third-Culture University

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#### About Article

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#### ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping teaching and learning in higher education (HE), yet its educational meaning is context-dependent. This article reports part of a study of Chinese postgraduate perspectives on generative AI (GenAI), with a specific focus on ChatGPT as a learning technology in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) transnational setting. A mixed-methods study generated insight from 103 postgraduate students at a UK joint-venture university in China, indicating that students positioned ChatGPT as a learning assistant rather than a substitute for learning. Meanwhile, they expressed acute awareness of ChatGPT's academic reliability and accuracy, emphasising the need for verification practices and boundaries between legitimate learning support and inappropriate substitution. Interpreted through the lens of Third Culture Universities (TCUs), an idea describing complex and evolving international campuses, the findings illustrate how GenAI becomes deeply embedded within a learning ecology shaped by imported academic norms, EMI demands, technology, and transnational quality assurance. Rather than advocating prohibition, the study highlights the need for curriculum-integrated guidance, staff development, and explicit AI literacy teaching. It concludes by proposing a curriculum-centred approach that foregrounds responsible use, transparency, and verification as core learning outcomes in the GenAI era.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents new dimensions to teaching and learning, for example, in how universities are often concerned about it enabling students to outsource content to non-human chatbots, via Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) to complete assessments. However studies have been forthcoming, such as Day (2025), a precursor to this paper which challenged that academic outsourcing is not as obvious an issue as it may seem, and rather students, in particular those in AI-literate societies, such as China, are not cheating, but forming relationships with AI that are deeply personal, mediated and seen as both humanising and reciprocal (Day, 2025; Hill *et al.*, 2021). This suggests a deeper study is needed into how AI tools, such as ChatGPT, shift the way we consider the boundaries of assessment, and what steps need to be taken to minimise disruption from AI technologies in universities, and avoid unintentionally assuming the worst of our students across higher education (HE) systems of thought (Pokkakillath & Suleri, 2023). Investigations into AI use by students in HE describes fluidity with respect to GenAI; digital literacy with respect to such tools produces considerations for future curriculum design, such as how we embed responsible AI teaching into the classroom to capitalise on student ability and, more vitally, how this usage changes across learning cultures (Strzelecki, 2023). Hence, an interesting landscape unfolds with respect to AI use in Chinese HE settings; many of the most popular tools, including ChatGPT, were developed in Western contexts. However, the significance of examining ChatGPT use within this institutional and linguistic context warrants more explicit attention. English Medium Instruction (EMI) transnational universities, which are sometimes described as 'joint' ventures, for example Sino-British joint-ventures which are UK launched ventures to establish campuses with a Chinese partner university, located within the mainland of China. These campuses often operate within a nexus of imported curricular standards, external quality assurance regimes, and local educational traditions, generating distinctive academic pressures that shape how generative AI is perceived and deployed (Day & Zhang, 2026).

This consolidates and describes the concept of the Third Culture University (TCU), which has been introduced by Day & Zhang (2025a), and provides a productive theoretical lens for interpreting these dynamics. Proposed to describe the complex institutional formations emerging from transnational higher education partnerships, the TCU is neither wholly domestic nor fully foreign, but instead represents a hybrid academic space shaped by overlapping regulatory systems, epistemic traditions, linguistic practices, and pedagogical expectations, which are anything but 'joint ventures'. Rather, within such institutions, curricula are frequently imported or co-designed across borders, quality assurance is externally benchmarked, and English often operates as the primary medium of instruction despite being an additional language for most students. This layered hybridity generates distinctive negotiations around authority, legitimacy, and academic practice, as students and staff operate between educational cultures rather than fully within one. Conceptualising the university as a 'Third Culture University' therefore describes a space that foregrounds the relational

and negotiated character of learning in transnational settings, offering a framework for understanding how technologies such as generative AI become embedded within, and shaped by, these intersecting academic, linguistic, and institutional influences.

Students are required not only to demonstrate disciplinary competence, but to articulate complex ideas in an additional language under assessment frameworks aligned to overseas partner institutions, which naturally draws them towards using AI technologies to mediate their skills, support wellbeing and level the playing field (Day, 2023). These layered expectations heighten both the appeal and the risk of AI tools: ChatGPT may function as a linguistic scaffold, cognitive partner, cultural mediator, or academic skills drafting aid, yet its use simultaneously raises acute questions regarding authorship, academic integrity, and epistemic authority. In such Third Culture University settings, AI adoption cannot be understood simply as technological uptake; rather, it becomes entangled with issues of language mediation, transnational accountability, and the negotiation of academic norms. Investigating postgraduate engagement with ChatGPT in this context is therefore not peripheral but essential to understanding how AI reshapes learning practices at the intersection of globalised higher education and digitally mediated knowledge production. Two research questions, therefore, shaped the data analysis of this article:

*RQ1:* What do Chinese postgraduate students feel about using ChatGPT in teaching and learning?

*RQ2:* How embedded and transformative is AI and ChatGPT in teaching and learning processes for students studying in a Third Culture University in China?

This paper seeks to add original insight in its integration of generative AI research with the emerging theoretical construct of the Third Culture University (TCU), moving beyond generic debates about misconduct to situate ChatGPT within the hybrid sociolinguistic, regulatory, and epistemic ecology of Sino-foreign TNE. By focusing on Chinese postgraduates in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) joint venture university, the study reframes AI not as a disruptive shortcut but as a socially embedded actor within a complex institutional network. Its significance lies in demonstrating that students position ChatGPT primarily as a scaffold, assistant, and language mediator under EMI pressures, while simultaneously articulating clearer direction around ethical boundaries around substitution, verification, and academic integrity. In doing so, the paper challenges deficit-oriented assumptions that generative AI inevitably promotes outsourcing, instead foregrounding student reflexivity, caution, and negotiated legitimacy. The rigour of the study is evident in its longitudinal mixed methods design and triangulated data sources. The research demonstrates transparency through clear strand delineation within a larger project, originality verification procedures, and explicit ethical governance and IRB approval discussed below. Inductive thematic analysis is systematically documented, and theoretical strengths support a carefully substantiated argument that responsible AI use in transnational universities is fundamentally a curriculum and pedagogy issue, offering conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions to global higher education debates on AI integration.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consequently, there is a need to study the rapid mainstreaming of GenAI and ChatGPT in everyday study (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2023). Likewise, to explore how students perceive ChatGPT as a learning technology, which can mediate understanding, writing skills, independent study, and engagement with course expectations (Holmes *et al.*, 2019; Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023; Giannakos *et al.*, 2024).

### 2.1. Joint-venture universities and third culture learning contexts in China

This is salient for globalised educational ventures in China, including UK/US-China joint-venture universities, where institutional expectations around assessment, feedback, referencing conventions, and quality assurance are often imported and enforced through moderation and external scrutiny (Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). In such environments, “integrity” is experienced not only as compliance but as a set of learning norms that students must interpret and perform, sometimes in tension with culturally embedded practices of borrowing and face (Waters & Day, 2022a; Day, 2025a). These pedagogic negotiations are further shaped by the long-standing presence of Internet technologies, which can destabilise or blur boundaries in HE by expanding access to knowledge, communities, and alternative epistemologies within systems of thought and learning globally in the digital era, which is increasing intercultural, blending different traditions or creating entirely new learning traditions, such as how Burmese and Thai students have both faced new challenges as a result of digital censorship within South Asia, which has transformed their learning freedoms (Phyo *et al.*, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; Waters & Day, 2022b).

### 2.2. Gen AI and ChatGPT as learning technologies in higher education

GenAI, and ChatGPT in particular, has become intertwined with teaching and learning practices, not simply because it introduces new risks for assessment, but because it introduces new forms of learning support that can sit alongside, supplement, or compete with institutional pedagogy (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Giannakos *et al.*, 2024; Pradana *et al.*, 2023). Beyond assessment concerns, AI tools can be used to preserve and translate languages, scaffold writing and revision, support accessibility, and even provide pathways into early-intervention counselling or wellbeing guidance (Day, 2024; Low *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; European Commission, 2022). For universities, this creates a dual imperative: (i) develop ethical and transparent guidance that supports learning with AI, and (ii) ensure that assessment and academic assurance systems remain credible (UNESCO, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This is difficult in practice because GenAI tools evolve quickly, frequently outpacing institutional understanding, training capacity, and policy cycles. While many discussions focus on ChatGPT as a new disruption, some research notes that the enabling technologies have existed for years; what has changed is the

visibility of these systems, their ease of use, and the scale of adoption, thereby amplifying institutional uncertainty as well as public debate about how learning and assessment should work (Perkins, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Lee & Yilmaz Soylu, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2023).

### 2.3. Pedagogical value and limits: Reliability, hallucinations, and verification practices

A key pedagogic challenge is that ChatGPT is simultaneously powerful and fallible, often rooted in imagination when it underperforms, which is an issue when students assume it is accurate and truthful (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Lee & Yilmaz Soylu, 2023). Studies discussing “misuse” often highlight that GenAI outputs can be error-prone and inconsistent, making them unreliable as a substitute for academic work, but the same limitation is pedagogically significant because it requires students to develop critical verification habits, epistemic vigilance, and disciplinary judgement (Huang *et al.*, 2023/2025; Sahoo *et al.*, 2024; Weidinger *et al.*, 2022). Put differently, the problem is not only whether students should use ChatGPT, but whether they know how to use it well as a learning partner: checking claims, interrogating sources, refining prompts, and recognising the limits of plausible-sounding text (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng *et al.*, 2021; Mills, 2024). Concerns about computational hallucination dominated early discussion, and can therefore be reframed as a learning issue: students may adopt confident-looking explanations without recognising uncertainty, which may weaken learning rather than strengthen it if uncritically relied upon (Khosravi *et al.*, 2023; Huang *et al.*, 2023/2025; Sahoo *et al.*, 2024). This also suggests that universities may overestimate the tool’s ability to emulate complex disciplinary reasoning, while underestimating its potential to reshape the learning process through drafting, ideation, feedback, and language mediation, whilst likewise presuming students are not acutely aware of the limitations of the technology (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Salvagno *et al.*, 2023; Baig *et al.*, 2024).

### 2.4. Reconfiguring roles and pedagogy in HE: Educators, students, and AI literacy

This reframing aligns with wider debates about how AI challenges the meaning of HE and the roles of educators and students (Holmes *et al.*, 2019; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2023). Rather than assuming replacement, emerging scholarship asks what becomes valuable when text production is easy: explanation, critique, synthesis, methodological reasoning, and reflective judgement (Giannakos *et al.*, 2024; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023). This has prompted calls for clearer university policies and staff development that can define appropriate use and support students to use AI tools responsibly to enhance learning, rather than merely policing outputs (Al-Zahrani, 2023; Kramm & McKenna, 2023; UNESCO, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; European Commission, 2022). At the same time, technology adoption is not uniform. Research suggests usage patterns may vary by gender and level of study, and may be shaped by how teachers frame acceptable practices and embed GenAI into learning tasks, likewise shaped by growing digital agency amongst university students (Crawford *et al.*, 2023; Strzelecki & Arabawy, 2024; Stöhr *et al.*, 2024; Baig



*et al.*, 2024; Pradana *et al.*, 2023; Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021; 2022).

## 2.5. Patterns of adoption and equity: Gender, study level, discipline, and modality

The modality of study and learning design may influence how students use emergent technologies; for example, students engaged in distance learning, or engaged in a campus culture that works across geographical boundaries and is mediated through technology, such as joint ventures, ensures increased reliance and, potentially, adoption of AI tools, which matters for designing equitable learning support and consistent expectations (Sevnanarayan & Maphoto, 2024; Stöhr *et al.*, 2024; Baig *et al.*, 2024). Strzelecki (2023), for example, argues that students' acceptance and use of ChatGPT follows an underlying process related to their own experiences, an insight that becomes pedagogically useful when designing induction, AI literacy, and curriculum scaffolding (Ng *et al.*, 2021; Long & Magerko, 2020; Mills, 2024). This invites more critical exploration of how, where and why students use these technologies, and what their motivations are, in such use, as well as what universities need and require in their future planning and development approaches going forward.

## 2.6. Institutional responses: Policy, staff development, and capacity for responsible educational use

However, literature shows some such policy discussions within international universities remain anchored in prevention frameworks, which require us to consider how these can be repurposed toward learning-focused guidance: clarifying legitimate learning uses, teaching students disclosure norms, and building literacies for evaluating AI-generated content (UNESCO, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; European Commission, 2022). Birks and Clare (2023), for instance, emphasise the complexity of policy design in a rapidly shifting domain, yet that complexity also reflects a pedagogic opportunity: universities can treat GenAI as a prompt to redesign assessment for learning, strengthen feedback cultures, and explicitly teach the skills that GenAI cannot reliably automate (e.g., critical reasoning, methodological transparency, disciplinary voice) (Lee & Yilmaz Soylu, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2023). From this perspective, the debate around student use of AI needs to extend beyond malpractice and consider more critically the implications of teaching and learning at a curriculum design level. AI may reshape how students plan, draft, revise, collaborate, and seek help, altering the texture of learning and teaching itself (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Giannakos *et al.*, 2024; Baig *et al.*, 2024). It also raises questions about uncritical reflection: because ChatGPT produces fluent text, students may mistake coherence for correctness, unless educators teach structured checking routines and reflective prompts that keep learners looped in to understanding the changes and advances in the technology (Loos *et al.*, 2023; Ng *et al.*, 2021; Mills, 2024; Huang *et al.*, 2023/2025). Related work suggests AI still struggles to generate consistently authentic-sounding disciplinary responses, which may create both challenges and pedagogic leverage points for educators seeking to design tasks for student assessment that

privilege reasoning processes over surface fluency (Elkhatat, 2023; Bender *et al.*, 2021; Weidinger *et al.*, 2022).

Where GenAI may offer clear learning advantages is in domains such as coding support, structured problem-solving, and iterative explanation, often aligned with STEM learning activities, while simultaneously making authorship and process harder to see if assessment is designed around final products alone (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This strengthens arguments for joined-up institutional approaches that include students, teaching staff, and professional support roles, not only to uphold standards, but to develop capacity for responsible educational use (Grassini, 2023; Chan, 2023; UNESCO, 2023; European Commission, 2022; Crompton & Burke, 2023). However, building comprehensive AI policy and training frameworks remains difficult because the field is evolving rapidly, requiring ongoing revision, infrastructure investment, and clear stakeholder responsibilities (Smith & Johnson, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Across this shifting landscape, a consistent theme is the need to understand how students experience AI in their learning lives, how they decide when it helps, when it harms, and how institutional context shapes those choices (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Stöhr *et al.*, 2024; Baig *et al.*, 2024; Pradana *et al.*, 2023).

## 2.7. Emerging research in Chinese HE: Ethics, learning spaces, and digital divides

Research on AI in Chinese HE remains comparatively emergent and is often concentrated among researchers with local access, especially given pandemic-era disruptions (UNESCO, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2023). Day (2023), for example, foregrounds culturally nuanced ethics in AI implementation, including how AI-mediated dialogue might interact with students, and enable them, in Asia where loss of face is a cultural concern, to engage with sensitive topics, such as mental health stigma (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; European Commission, 2022). Related work extends this focus to learning spaces and self-study practices, showing how AI may change the ways students use libraries and manage independent learning, deal with censorship in academic settings and foster reciprocal relationships (Day, 2024; Day, 2025b; Giannakos *et al.*, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

These studies indicate that GenAI is not only a classroom issue but a broader learning ecology issue, shaping where learning happens, how students seek help, and what "study" looks like as boundaries between institutional teaching, peer support, and AI assistance become more porous and, indeed, encultured (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023). Within this ecology, digital divides may intensify: if students are not explicitly taught how to use ChatGPT critically and ethically, it may function as a shortcut; if they are taught responsibly, it can act as a learning partner that supports access, feedback, and confidence (Day, 2024; Zeb *et al.*, 2024; UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2023; Mills, 2024). This underscores the central rationale for the present study: the need to understand student perspectives on ChatGPT in the particular context of international joint venture universities, where imported academic norms meet local learning cultures in a rapidly changing technological campus, which is shaped moment-by-moment by those with power, on



the ground, and yet carried, digitally, to parent universities far from the venture itself (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019).

## 2.8. Third Culture Universities and GenAI: ChatGPT as a nonhuman actor in network reassembly

Day & Zhang's (2025) Third Culture University (TCU) framework offers a useful sociological lens for interpreting why ChatGPT is not "just another tool" in transnational HE settings, such as these joint ventures, which rely upon digitality to operate (Holmes *et al.*, 2019; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023). In their account, Sino-foreign joint-venture universities should not be understood as straightforward hybrids of "Chinese" and "British/Western" models. Rather, they are dynamic spaces in which curricula, governance, and everyday academic practices are continually negotiated and reassembled through shifting relationships among multiple actors. This includes not only students and staff, but also policies, accreditation and quality assurance standards, campus infrastructures, and educational technologies (UNESCO, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). In this framing, agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actors, and institutional life is maintained through ongoing performance; when actors enter, exit, or change roles, or when technologies and policies shift, the network is reconfigured, echoing the work of Bruno Latour (2007).

Placing GenAI into this framework foregrounds ChatGPT as a particularly consequential nonhuman actor (Giannakos *et al.*, 2024; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023). ChatGPT does not merely support learning tasks; it can reshape what competent student work looks like, how students interpret standards, and how teachers design teaching, feedback, and assessment, potentially even itself determining culture that exists within such universities (Lee & Yilmaz Soylu, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). In Day & Zhang's (2025) terms, new actors can trigger cycles of translation in which roles and relationships are redefined, and reshape the very nature of the campuses, which are inherently and intrinsically facilitated by technology: technical stakeholders, then, renegotiate what counts as legitimate practice, and the balance of influence within the institution is redistributed (European Commission, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). In TCUs, where educational paradigms are already co-constructed moment-by-moment" through intercultural negotiation, GenAI intensifies this reassembly by introducing an always-available text generator, language mediator, and study partner into the learning ecology, which can also be used to shape assessments and deliver teaching assistance (Kohnke *et al.*, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023). This is particularly relevant in EMI contexts within China, where teachers and students alike may already be navigating translingual and transnational expectations about academic discourse, authorship, and demonstration of knowledge, suggesting ChatGPT is potentially one route for both to enable new forms of navigation and practice (Kohnke *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Day and Zhang (2025) emphasise that TCUs develop localised practices (including translingual pedagogies) that transcend simple East/West binaries, and that epistemic equity becomes a contested and negotiated concern within these cosmopolitical networks. If so, then ChatGPT can be interpreted as altering

the terms of participation in these networks: it may lower linguistic barriers for some students, shift how students access disciplinary knowledge, and change the distribution of who can produce academically fluent text quickly (Kohnke *et al.*, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023).

At the same time, it can create new asymmetries, such as uneven access, uneven AI literacy, uneven ability to verify outputs, which again fits the TCU framing of contested reassembly rather than linear technology adoption (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng *et al.*, 2021; Mills, 2024). For the present study, Day and Zhang's (2025) TCU framework helps justify two linked claims. First, understanding student perspectives on ChatGPT is not reducible to measuring usage frequency or evaluating compliance; it is a way to observe network reassembly in action, how learners interpret institutional expectations, how they position ChatGPT relative to teachers and peers, and what they believe counts as acceptable learning support in a TCU setting (Stöhr *et al.*, 2024; Baig *et al.*, 2024). Second, it situates policy questions and student misconceptions as pedagogic questions: if TCUs are sustained through ongoing performance among heterogeneous actors (people, standards, infrastructures, technologies), then effective institutional responses to GenAI must also operate at the level of pedagogy, guidance, and learning design, not solely at the level of enforcement, and certainly suggesting that universities, in particular those built around digital mediation, such as international campuses, require critical focus on how to mediate and embed tools such as ChatGPT into the curriculum (UNESCO, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; European Commission, 2022).

## 2.9. ChatGPT and global HE

ChatGPT warrants focused study as a specific GenAI system because it has quickly become a dominant, widely accessible conversational interface to large language models in higher education, shaping student learning behaviours even where institutions have not formally adopted or regulated it (UNESCO, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023). Its chat-based design supports iterative explanation, drafting, revision, translation, and feedback-like dialogue; core learning practices rather than niche technical uses (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Kohnke *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, the tool's fluent, authoritative-sounding outputs can invite over-trust and reduce critical checking, and the western-focused language and dominance within the model likewise present teaching and learning implications (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023). This urgency is reinforced by emerging evidence that AI chatbots are already prompting changes in assessment thinking and teaching practice, and relatively little has been identified about the tool in global settings (Farazouli *et al.*, 2024). For these reasons, examining ChatGPT directly offers a concrete and policy-relevant route to understanding how one highly influential GenAI tool is being integrated into learning, what benefits and limitations students perceive, and what forms of guidance and AI literacy are needed to ensure educational value (UNESCO, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, there is an emergent pattern within the academic landscape that indicates growing interest in how students are adapting, co-constructing, and developing academic skills around AI.



### 3. METHODOLOGY

Accordingly, this study explores this third culture international landscape setting by examining how postgraduate students in a UK joint-venture university in China narrate ChatGPT's place within their learning practices. It explores the meanings students attribute to ChatGPT (e.g., as tutor, translator, drafting partner, or study scaffold), the limits they perceive in its reliability, and the strategies they used, or wished to be taught, to use it critically and responsibly (Huang *et al.*, 2023/2025; Sahoo *et al.*, 2024; Ng *et al.*, 2023). Through Day & Zhang's (2025) lens, these accounts become more than opinions about AI; they are evidence of how a nonhuman actor is being domesticated into (or resisted within) a cosmopolitical educational network, with implications for how universities evolve their pedagogical practices and institutionalised norms in the GenAI era (Luo & Day, 2026; Giannakos *et al.*, 2024; Crompton & Burke, 2023).

#### 3.1. Study aim and design

This article draws on data gained from a year-long, longitudinal mixed-methods project examining Chinese postgraduate students and their experiences of learning technologies and digital culture, within which AI was one of several themes explored in a wider project using a classroom-embedded pedagogical research approach. Therefore, the project generated data through authentic teaching and learning activities and capturing how students' technology practices and internet behaviours developed over time. This structure reflects mixed-methods principles of combining scope and depth to examine complex educational phenomena as they evolve (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Within the project programme, the AI component was organised into four inquiry related strands, one related to AI and teacher training, one on AI and language learning, one on AI, cheating and reciprocal culture practice, and one on AI, ChatGPT and responsible practice. This enabled iterative attention to different dimensions of student meaning-making as the technology landscape shifted.

The present article reports only one bounded subset of that programme: AI, ChatGPT and responsible practice strand, with specific emphasis on student engagement with AI-assisted IELTS reading and writing preparation. To align with COPE expectations regarding transparency and to minimise the risk of redundant publication, it is disclosed that other outputs have been developed from separate strands of the same overarching project, including two currently unpublished manuscripts (AI and teacher training, one on AI and language learning) and one published article focused on AI and cultural practice (Day, 2025a). Each output addresses distinct research questions and analytic purposes and is written from non-overlapping evidence drawn from strand-specific sub-datasets. As an additional safeguard, a second-coder audit-checked data allocated to quotes, tables, and analytic claims to confirm that material reported here is not duplicated across manuscripts, as was similarity measurement tools used to assess potential text reuse. As there was potential similarity in topic of this paper, to the published one, given the shared focus on teaching, albeit not focusing on ChatGPT, the researcher tokenised both documents into contiguous 7-word n-grams ("shingles") and calculated the proportion of shingles

shared between the texts as an indicator of verbatim or near-verbatim overlap, using Python and ensuring originality. This demonstrates recommended quality practices in mixed-methods and qualitative research, and consistency to COPE protocols for handling large datasets (Bryman, 2016).

#### 3.2. Study design

Epistemologically, the work is informed by a broadly constructivist–interpretivist orientation, treating student perspectives on AI as socially situated, culturally mediated, and co-constructed through educational experience (Charmaz, 2014). Accordingly, the qualitative emphasis within the mixed-methods design is intended less to produce universal generalisations than to illuminate how learners interpret, negotiate, and incorporate AI into language-learning activity in a particular institutional and cultural setting. The dataset analysed in this paper consists of qualitative contributions generated through a substantial online forum task within the wider mixed-methods framework, where students of varied academic confidence engaged in a shared cohort discussion and interacted with one another. Analysis is restricted to posts relevant to AI-assisted language learning, consistent with guidance on mixed-methods integration and strand-specific reporting (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). The study was designed to capture both overarching patterns and "close-up" accounts of how Chinese postgraduate students understand contemporary AI developments, particularly ChatGPT, focuses teaching and learning lived experience. To do this, a mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative and qualitative strands to build a more complete account than either could provide alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Mixed methods are appropriate for educational settings where meanings, norms, and behaviours are layered (Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Greene *et al.*, 1989; Fetters *et al.*, 2013).

#### 3.3. Setting and participants

Data were generated at a Sino-British joint-venture university in China. Participants were 103 Chinese postgraduate students, recruited from one programme, as part of a longitudinal project exploring digital culture, practice and lived experience in the learning context consistent. The cohort was predominantly female, typically 22–25 years old, and all participants were Chinese nationals. Using a relatively homogeneous group supported a focused reading of culturally situated and institutionally specific patterns relevant to academic practice, but likewise carries with it causal bias, a limitation specific to working with a particular group, thereby limiting generalisation scope (Patton, 2015).

#### 3.4. Data sources and ethics

To capture both scope and depth, four complementary data sources were used: first, a survey utilising quantitative and short qualitative responses was deployed, attuned to a LIKERT style. This structured questionnaire was distributed to the full cohort to gather reported attitudes and experiences regarding a variety of aspects of AI, aligned to the four strands discussed above and, in the context of this paper, specific exploration of ChatGPT as aligned to the research questions



is reported (Bryman, 2016). Second, a focus group discussion, driven through seminar-based group work (approximately one hour) supported exploration of shared perspectives and interactional sense-making (Morgan, 1997). Meanwhile, the researcher engaged classroom naturalistic observation occurred during a 90-minute lecture on generative AI and during subsequent seminar activities to record situated responses and interactional dynamics (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Finally, an online forum cultivating digital ethnographic material was used, to create a dedicated online discussion space extended participation beyond the classroom and captured reflective, asynchronous contributions (Kozinets, 2020). Using multiple instruments enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening confidence that interpretations were not artifacts of a single mode of data generation (Denzin, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collection of surveys were issued to all 103 students, producing an 85% response rate (88/103). Students were then invited to post follow-up reflections in the online forum; 76 contributed engaged dialogue on varying topics, which were self-selected by the students. All procedures followed established ethical standards, with IRB approval and informed consent secured in line with relevant guidance (BERA, 2018) and under direction of the host university, and ethics approval ID ER-AOFE-11000068720230222195423. Students received both a participant information form, consent form and digital consent statement before engaging in the forums; once data was collected, and anonymised, the forums and their responses were deleted, to prevent reverse identification of their dialogues and data. This provided scope and support for students to feel their rights to privacy were upheld.

### 3.5. Analysis strategy and quality checks

The analysis reported in this paper draws on the survey dataset and the online forum (VLE) contributions, as these provided the richest sustained commentary for the focal claims about ChatGPT and teaching, as well as learning. Qualitative responses were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, with sensitising principles drawn from grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Charmaz, 2014). In practice, this involved iterative familiarisation, line-by-line coding, constant comparison, and progressive consolidation of codes into themes that were revised as the reading deepened (Saldaña, 2021; Miles *et al.*, 2014). Memoing was used to track analytic decisions and to test emerging interpretations against the dataset (Charmaz, 2014). To strengthen trustworthiness, interpretations were checked through triangulation across available sources (survey, focus group discussions, observation notes, and forum posts), and themes were evaluated for coherence, distinctiveness, and explanatory fit (Denzin, 2012; Tracy, 2010). This combined strategy demonstrates a credible basis for forging an account

that remains grounded in participant meaning while still attentive to broader contextual patterns shaping learning and academic practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The inductive thematic analysis was conducted by the lead researcher, who undertook iterative, line-by-line coding of the full qualitative dataset (survey open responses and forum posts) across multiple cycles of engagement. In the first cycle, initial codes were generated close to participants' language to preserve emic meaning; in subsequent cycles, codes were refined through constant comparison, clustered into candidate categories, and progressively consolidated into higher-order themes. Sensitising principles from grounded theory informed this process not as a formal theory-building exercise, but as an analytic discipline encouraging openness to emergent meaning, memo-writing, and systematic comparison across cases. As a single-coded response, there is potential for researcher bias, but much of the research presented is purposefully built around the lived experience of students, from a pragmatic perspective of research alignment. Discrepancies were discussed in analytic reflection, with attention to evidentiary grounding rather than numerical agreement, leading to clarification, merging, or redefinition of several thematic labels. An audit trail comprising coding logs was maintained to document decision points and ensure transparency. This structured yet flexible process strengthens confidence that the reported themes are both inductively grounded in participant accounts and analytically robust.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 outlines a range of views related to using ChatGPT in a learning context, so to improve academic study. A common perception was expressed regarding the general attitudes of Chinese postgraduates towards AI in HE teaching and learning, with most respondents (85%) in the survey either agreeing or strongly agreeing that AI will change the way students learn in universities in the future. Indeed, a further 30% agreed or strongly agreed that they were already using AI tools and applications to aid and support their study in an English Medium of Instruction (EMI). Surprisingly, however, at the time of the study, 2023, when ChatGPT was gaining notable popularity and visibility globally, only 37% of students agreed or strongly agreed they knew what it was, and an even lower 25% agreed or strongly agreed that they had experimented with the technologies to help learning or self-study. As a result of the demonstration and discussion of the technology, as part of the seminar, then, 57% agreed or strongly agreed that ChatGPT might serve as a useful teacher to help their learning.

### 4.1. Survey overview: Perceived impact of ChatGPT and baseline use in EMI HEI

**Table 1.** An Overview of Chinese Postgraduate Students Views on ChatGPT and Learning

Total Respondents N = 88 Scale: Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree					
Question/Statement	Sg-Dis.	Dis.	N.	Agr.	Sg-Agr.
I believe artificial intelligence will change the way students learn in universities.	1 (1%)	5 (6%)	8 (9%)	33 (38%)	41 (47%)



I already rely on artificial intelligence tools and applications for studying in EMI.	10 (11%)	18 (20%)	33 (38%)	18 (20%)	9 (10%)
I am familiar with ChatGPT, an AI tool that recently became very popular.	17 (19%)	20 (23%)	18 (20%)	24 (27%)	9 (10%)
I have experimented with, or tried to use, ChatGPT to help me to learn or study.	31 (35%)	22 (25%)	13 (15%)	14 (16%)	8 (9%)
I view ChatGPT as a teacher I can learn from.	7 (8%)	9 (10%)	22 (25%)	31 (35%)	19 (22%)

#### 4.2. ChatGPT awareness-adoption gap and the effect of classroom demonstration

Building upon the findings outlined above, we can observe several intriguing insights into the complex relationship between Chinese postgraduate students and ChatGPT technologies in HE; what is especially surprising is that AI technologies are already embedded into many aspects of Chinese life, from facial scanning technologies in supermarkets, to fully integrated lifestyle applications for food, shopping and transport (Waters & Day, 2022a). The stark contrast between the general acknowledgment and agreement regarding AI's future impact (85%) and the relatively low adoption rate of specific tools like ChatGPT (25%) suggests a significant gap between awareness and practical application in teaching and learning, which may indicate that international universities in China have not invested considerably in policy in and around teaching responsible use of AI.

Tables 1 shows distributional patterns pointing to a nuanced interpretive landscape. The prominence of neutral responses across items relating to reliance on AI, familiarity with ChatGPT, and viewing it as a "teacher" suggests not apathy but epistemic hesitation. In a rapidly evolving technological moment, particularly as over the previous year's institutional policies are still forming and this itself creates ambiguity and uncertainty amongst students. Such students may have lacked stable criteria for evaluating what constituted appropriate or legitimate use. Neutrality, therefore, can be interpreted as a marker of cognitive and normative suspension: students neither fully endorsing nor rejecting AI integration, but awaiting clearer pedagogical framing. In EMI contexts, where academic writing is already mediated through a second language, such hesitation may also reflect concern about how AI supported language production would be judged within externally benchmarked assessment regimes. Rather than indicating disengagement, neutrality may signal a careful calibration of academic risk.

The awareness and adoption gap deepens this interpretation. Although 85% anticipated AI reshaping university learning, only a quarter had experimented with ChatGPT, and a substantial proportion expressed uncertainty about its function. This divergence suggests that macro level technological optimism coexists with micro level uncertainty about practice. Within a Third Culture University setting, characterised by hybrid norms, imported quality assurance, and heightened sensitivity to academic integrity, students may adopt a cautious stance until boundaries are clarified. Neutral responses, then, may index structural ambiguity: limited institutional guidance, evolving discourse around plagiarism and authorship, and uncertainty about how AI mediated text would be evaluated. Read in this way, the survey data capture a cohort negotiating not merely a tool, but the legitimacy of new forms of knowledge production. The descriptive statistics thus

become indicative of a transitional moment in which students are actively interpreting, testing, and suspending judgement on the role of generative AI in their academic lives.

A further layer of interpretation concerns the relationship between technological familiarity in everyday life and pedagogical integration within higher education. While AI-driven systems are deeply embedded in many aspects of contemporary Chinese society, from payment systems to logistics and platform governance, their presence in academic learning cannot be assumed to follow the same trajectory. The relatively modest levels of reported experimentation with ChatGPT suggest that transfer from lifestyle AI to academic AI is neither automatic nor frictionless. Academic spaces are normatively regulated environments, governed by expectations around authorship, originality, and intellectual labour. Students may therefore differentiate between passive consumption of AI-enabled services and active delegation of cognitive work. The survey results indicate that awareness of AI's societal prominence does not equate to confidence in its academic legitimacy. This distinction is analytically significant, as it challenges deterministic narratives that assume rapid educational adoption simply because a technology is culturally visible.

In addition, the data may reflect a generational moment of transitional digital authority. Students are positioned between traditional expectations of independent scholarly production and emerging discourses that frame AI as collaborative augmentation. The relatively high agreement that ChatGPT could function as a "teacher" following classroom demonstration suggests that structured exposure and pedagogical modelling shift perceptions from abstract awareness to situated evaluation. This indicates that attitudes toward AI are not fixed but responsive to institutional framing. The descriptive statistics therefore capture a cohort in the process of sense-making, where beliefs about AI are being actively shaped through classroom interaction, peer discussion, and emerging policy signals. Rather than reading the survey as static measurement, it can be understood as a snapshot of evolving academic subjectivities in a transnational university context adapting to the early phase of the GenAI era.

#### 4.3. Barriers to uptake: Curriculum integration, language, and platform ecology

This disparity could be further attributed, therefore, to several factors. Firstly, there might be a lack of structured integration of AI tools within the curriculum being designed in the setting the study was undertaken within, leaving postgraduates uncertain about how to effectively incorporate these technologies into their learning processes. Secondly, potential language barriers, such as ChatGPT being perceived as a western language tool, or cultural and geopolitical differences, for example the reluctance to use western-owned



Internet tools due to firewall censorship in China, could be hindering the adoption of predominantly English-based AI tools in Chinese HE contexts.

The dramatic increase in positive sentiment towards ChatGPT after the seminar demonstration (from 37% showing general awareness to 57% noting and agreeing potential usefulness) highlights the critical role of university policy makers in determining the degree of digital skills exposure in shaping students' perceptions. This shift underscores the importance of proactive initiatives by educational institutions to introduce and teach responsible use of AI tools within the academic community.

#### 4.4. Boundary-making: Legitimacy and student success

Table 2 outlines a range of views related to using ChatGPT in a dishonesty context, so to circumvent traditional modes and mechanisms of academic study. Interestingly, the views on the true usefulness of ChatGPT were quite varied, in the opinions of those engaged in the study. For example, 42% of the sample felt neutral on whether ChatGPT could

help them to write essays or practice examinations, and during the discussion that took place during the seminar, students seemed to think it dubious and unlikely that an AI could really satisfy the complex learning requirements of their degree. Consequently, in an anonymous survey of their views, only 25% agreed or strongly agreed that they would consider using, or had used, ChatGPT to write essays for them. Perhaps reflective of being in a setting where rules and laws are generally more conservative and authoritarian, 50% of students agreed or strongly agreed that using ChatGPT should be considered plagiarism or malpractice, with a further 36% neutral on the matter, but not disagreeing either. Students disagreed that ChatGPT should be banned from universities and use in coursework, with 40% feeling this way, and a further 32% identifying neutrally. This may, of course, be because 37% of students agreed or strongly agreed that there were easier ways to cheat in Asia, such as by using ghost writers, a practice that has been shown to exist in settings whereby students are required to write and learn in EMI and as such hire additional help to satisfy course demands.

**Table 2.** An Overview of Chinese Postgraduate Students Views on ChatGPT and Dishonesty

Total Respondents N = 88 Scale: Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree					
Question/Statement	Sg-Dis.	Dis.	N.	Agr.	Sg-Agr.
I believe ChatGPT could help me write essays or practice for examinations.	11 (13%)	12 (14%)	37 (42%)	20 (23%)	8 (9%)
I would consider using, or have used, ChatGPT to write essays for me.	24 (27%)	23 (26%)	19 (22%)	15 (17%)	7 (8%)
Using ChatGPT should be considered plagiarism or academic malpractice	4 (5%)	8 (9%)	32 (36%)	21 (24%)	23 (26%)
ChatGPT should be banned from universities, and coursework, in my opinion.	15 (17%)	20 (23%)	28 (32%)	15 (17%)	10 (11%)
There are easier ways to cheat in Asia than using ChatGPT, such as ghost writers.	11 (13%)	13 (15%)	32 (36%)	20 (23%)	12 (14%)

Table 2 describes more than catalogue attitudes toward potential misconduct; it reveals how students are actively reasoning through the moral and epistemic boundaries of AI use in a transnational academic setting. The high neutrality rate (42%) regarding whether ChatGPT could help with essays or examination practice, for example, should not be read as indecision alone. Rather, it may reflect epistemic doubt about the intellectual adequacy of AI-generated content for postgraduate-level work. Seminar discussion suggested that students perceived AI outputs as structurally coherent but conceptually shallow, raising concerns about disciplinary specificity and critical depth. This scepticism complicates dominant policy narratives that assume students will readily substitute AI for their own labour. Instead, many participants appeared unconvinced that generative AI could meaningfully replace the cognitive and interpretive work required within their programmes. Neutrality here may therefore signal evaluative testing rather than temptation.

The ethical dimension of the findings further underscores this complexity. That 50% of respondents considered AI use to constitute plagiarism or malpractice, with only a small minority actively disagreeing, indicates that students are not operating in a moral vacuum. However, the substantial proportion selecting neutral suggests that the concept of plagiarism itself is under renegotiation in the GenAI era. Students may be grappling

with unresolved distinctions between assistance, collaboration, translation support, and authorship substitution. In EMI contexts, where linguistic mediation is already embedded in academic practice through proofreading, tutoring, or editorial support, generative AI introduces ambiguity into existing hierarchies of legitimacy. The reluctance to support an outright ban, despite recognising malpractice risks, further suggests that students differentiate between tool and use. Rather than advocating prohibition, they appear to favour conditional legitimacy shaped by rules, transparency, and guidance. This position reflects a pragmatic ethics rather than a permissive one.

Finally, the reference to ghostwriting as an "easier" method of cheating situates ChatGPT within a broader ecology of academic workaround practices rather than as a singular disruptive threat. In transnational EMI institutions, where linguistic performance carries high stakes, alternative forms of academic outsourcing have long existed. The survey responses imply that students perceive generative AI not as inventing dishonesty but as entering an already stratified landscape of pressure, opportunity, and risk. This contextualisation is important: it challenges technologically deterministic claims that GenAI uniquely erodes integrity, and instead frames AI as interacting with pre-existing structural tensions around language, assessment, and performance. The findings therefore



reveal not widespread intent to cheat, but an ethically aware cohort negotiating shifting definitions of authorship and responsibility within a hybridised Third Culture University environment.

#### 4.5. From “tool” to “assistant”: How students describe learning uses of ChatGPT

The findings outline a notable discrepancy between perceiving ChatGPT as helpful and intending to use it. Interestingly, many students in the sample seemed to suggest ChatGPT usage might impact their studies negatively, which correlated with their low indicated intention to use it. This may suggest that students have, or had been taught, stronger responsible AI ethical considerations, or intuited them through digital nativity and literacy, which significantly shaped their decisions. However, mixed opinions on banning ChatGPT reflect the overall uncertainty surrounding its role in HE, as evidenced by the neutral responses across multiple questions. The perception that there are easier cheating methods in Asia may explain why fewer students intend to use it for academic misconduct. Meanwhile, a range of views were put forward by the sample; a consensus that ChatGPT could be useful and appropriate in learning, with students demonstrating an ethical line between uses, such as for generating ideas and structuring their coursework. However, many did not consider it practical for writing an entire paper due to the potential for incorrect information and being caught out. They seemed to suggest that ChatGPT was not seen as sophisticated enough to satisfy their assessment objectives. For example, Student A remarked:

*I probably wouldn't consider using ChatGPT for my paper. It can provide me with some ideas and inspiration when I write my thesis. And help me when I don't know how to structure the article. But it's not practical to write a whole paper with it. Because some answers are incorrect, I will not rely on them completely for my paper writing.*

#### 4.6. Functions of ChatGPT for EMI learners: Teaching support, feedback, and study efficiency

There was a consensus, however, that ChatGPT offered useful summary skills and automation for learners struggling to engage in a course studied in a language that was not their native mode of communication. Student B identified that they felt it can “reduce mistakes in college students' homework, especially in the course content of EMI, and improve the efficiency of learning. On the other hand, if college students rely too much on the use of AI, their creativity will be reduced.” Collectively, those engaged in the study reflected tentative positivity about the potential of ChatGPT's superiority over traditional search engines for certain tasks. Yet, the students seemed to suggest they were aware of its limitations in providing consistently reliable information, highlighting that to use it for cheating wouldn't necessarily be wise, because it simply wasn't effective. Indeed, Student C was aware of a need for critical evaluation of AI-generated content because of this:

*I was exposed to ChatGPT last December when a friend excitedly showed me how magic and convenient it is for writing an essay. I tried it many times to explore how "knowledgeable" and "intelligent" it would be. I must admit that it works better*

*than the traditional ways of searching for information through Google and Baidu. But I gradually realized that the answers given by ChatGPT sometimes are just free chat rather than credible information source.*

#### 4.7. Affective and cultural dimensions: Loss of face, non-judgmental support, and confidence

Across the sample, there was a consensus that ChatGPT is best used as an assistant, rather than a tool to engage in outright dishonesty, so something that can be deployed in partnership to their learning. As Student D remarked:

*Maybe I'll use ChatGPT to help me write my paper in the future. But I think it will only be at the level of subsidiarity. I think it's a great tool to give us some guidance and ideas. We can use what it offers to write what we want to say. I think this is a very efficient writing method, which can help us to save some time to browse the literature to some extent, and we can trigger our own views and opinions through the content it provides.*

Students within the sample, it seemed, appreciated ChatGPT's ability to provide initial ideas and guidance, which can be particularly helpful for overcoming writer's block or brainstorming new projects, and this was a common perception amongst the students engaged in the study. By quickly generating relevant content, ChatGPT was foremost a tool to them that saved time, predominately during the initial research phase of their coursework. For some, it was felt this allowed them to focus more on critical thinking and developing their own arguments. This experimentative approach to using the platform reflected an awareness of the pitfalls of dishonest practices, as students seemed to identify ChatGPT could be used to enhance their work but would not be especially effective at replacing their role as student. Ultimately, use of ChatGPT seemed to foster more personalised learning experiences, helping students develop understanding and reassurance that they were on the right track in their critical expression of thought, against learning outcomes in their coursework. As Student E reinforced:

*Due to the limitation of our knowledge, it is difficult for us to think of some useful ideas. The knowledge of artificial intelligence is very wide, which helps us to carry on the paper. But actually, finishing the papers and exams still requires our own efforts. We can't get any help in the exam, so we still have to memorize the knowledge by ourselves. The paper, too, even if AI gives you the direction, the final research needs to be done by yourself and give you reasonable data.*

What was clear is that the group of students engaged in the study did not see ChatGPT as an effective tool and considered it a poor substitute for personal understanding; they instead felt and found it most useful for exam preparation. Put another way, responses highlighted ChatGPT's potential for promoting personalised learning experiences as an assistant. As Student E remarked:

*As ChatGPT technology advances and is applied, it will have the following impact on education: Personalized Learning: ChatGPT can provide a personalized learning experience based on students' learning styles, needs, and interests. By identifying students' learning levels and knowledge background, it can automatically adjust course content and difficulty to help students*



*better grasp knowledge.*

ChatGPT enabled, it seemed in the perspective of some of the students, a customisable ability to adapt and support individual preferences. Indeed, themes of loss of face and embarrassment came up in several instances across the study. Student F remarked that they saw the benefits of ChatGPT not as a tool to cheat, but to help self-driven learning because it was “*Non-judgmental and patient: ChatGPT will not judge you for your lack of knowledge or understanding of a topic. It will patiently explain concepts until you fully comprehend them.*” This echoes the work of Day (2023), which suggests AI in Asian settings is engaged with over teachers, to avoid loss of face amongst students. To those within the study, this was seen as a significant advancement in the way they learn and are taught by non-humans. Indeed, Student F suggested “*ChatGPT is an AI language model and not a human teacher, so it may not have the same level of emotional intelligence and personalization as a human teacher.*”

The use of the technology, it seemed, was angled more towards improving aspects of study. Student H, identified that “*...use of chat GPT varies from person to person and I think it has been a very good teacher for me. As a non-native English speaker it is a very good teacher for grammar correction. Sometimes it can also give us very original ideas and help us to improve our thinking skills.*” Those in the study also seemed aware that the information contained within the data used to train ChatGPT may not be that accurate. Indeed, Student J remarked “*With the continuous development of technology, AI has made it easier for higher-education students to access information. ChatGPT made it faster and easier to access and disseminate information. But there is no denying that it will also bring great challenges to education.*” Students' perceptions of ChatGPT in educational settings, then, were most focused around how it could be used successfully to learn, rather than cheat, and those in the study seemed acutely aware of the distinct between the two.

#### **4.8. Teacher and institutional positioning: Reluctance, policy vacuum, and normalisation over time**

Many remarked that ChatGPT was a customisable tool that could be adapted to individual learning needs, making it a significant advancement in non-human teaching methods when compared to what they had access to previously. Interestingly, when presented with an opportunity to consider how to abuse ChatGPT, many instead frequently highlighted it was useful for differentiation, allowing for tailored content difficulty that would help EMI students improve their understanding of course materials. Chinese students in the sample ChatGPT more as a potential teaching assistant that could augment traditional learning methods. They appreciated that AI had a non-judgmental nature, which made sense given the high-pressure nature of Chinese HE; competitiveness and personal embarrassment were both difficult features of the habitus they occupied, and several implied statements aligned to that. ChatGPT, interestingly, was associated with patience. It was something useful for explaining complex topics that they could not understand if taught in a classroom, or in a language that they were not quite fluent in, which helped reduce embarrassment and loss of face when seeking clarification.

Therefore, the students seemed aware that it was only useful as a tool if they used it responsibly. As Student K noted it:

*...allows learners to access learning through multiple channels, at any time and from any place, and in the interaction between people and smart tools, it can strengthen the 'student-centred' relationship and change the learning ecology. For university students, the way they learn can change dramatically. For example, artificial intelligence can personalise teaching and learning to suit the student's knowledge, ability level and potential inclinations.*

Indeed, those engaged in the study who were familiar with using AI technologies, seemed to position ChatGPT as a sounding board. Generative AI tools, therefore, had become part of an iterative learning process, rather than replacing it. As Student L mentioned:

*When I needed to design a set of questionnaires to survey students' classroom satisfaction during my internship, I tried using ChatGPT for the first time to help me with the design. I was given many sets of questionnaire designs through ChatGPT. This gave me a lot of inspiration for questionnaire design and also taught me how I should approach questionnaire design.*

However, in the view of Student M, Chinese teachers within universities appeared reluctant to promote the tool, were unclear on the potential benefits, and had negative views about the technology:

*We do not need to demonize ChatGPT. In China, there are many teachers in a state that they do not know ChatGPT and do not want to know. They just blindly prohibit students from using ChatGPT. In fact, ChatGPT was like computers in the 1990s. When computers were first introduced, many parents didn't know much about them. Just heard that they can play games on the computer, so they forbid their children to use it. From the development of these 30 years, the computer has been an indispensable tool in people's life. So the attitude towards ChatGPT should be the same. It is just a tool, and its good or bad only depends on the method and purpose that people use.*

#### **4.9. Discussion**

The findings suggest a clear difference between broad endorsement of AI's future impact on learning and students' day-to-day engagement with ChatGPT as a specific tool.

#### **4.10. From general AI optimism to ChatGPT-specific uptake: Why exposure matters**

While most respondents expected AI to reshape university learning, fewer reported familiarity with ChatGPT or experimentation with it at the point of data collection. Substantially more students agreed that ChatGPT could function as a useful teacher for their learning. This pattern implies that adoption is not simply a matter of students independently discovering tools; it is mediated by institutional exposure and pedagogical framing. When students encounter ChatGPT through guided teaching, where affordances, limitations, and appropriate learning uses are discussed, it becomes easier for them to position the tool as a learning support rather than an ambiguous or risky technology. For TCUs, and international education in particular, this points to a curriculum opportunity: purposeful induction activities and



staff modelling of responsible use may be a decisive factor in turning abstract awareness into informed educational practice.

#### 4.11. TCU/EMI context: Curriculum integration, language mediation, and platform ecology

Students' accounts also indicate that perceptions of ChatGPT are shaped by the specific conditions, and that these conditions, in the study, may have a lot to do with the framing of a Third Culture Universities operating through English Medium Instruction within China. Even where AI is embedded in everyday life, students described uncertainty about how to integrate ChatGPT into legitimate study routines, which may reflect limited curricular integration and uneven guidance from educators. In EMI settings, a tool that operates primarily through English can be simultaneously attractive and intimidating, especially to students who are already being compelled to learn in a language that is not their native one (Low *et al.*, 2023). Hence, it may support academic language development, but also feel culturally and technologically "external," especially within a digital environment shaped by access constraints and platform politics. These contextual factors help explain why adoption may lag behind general AI awareness. The implication is that responsible integration cannot be generic or imported wholesale from Western policy templates; it must be translated into the local learning ecology of joint-venture campuses, taking account of EMI pressures, digital access realities, and the ways students already negotiate institutional expectations across cultural frames.

#### 4.12. ChatGPT as study "assistant" rather than essay replacement: Co-constructed learning practices

Across qualitative responses, students rarely described ChatGPT as doing learning for them, or as something they wanted to abuse. Students emphasised boundary-setting: ChatGPT could generate ideas, propose structures, and offer starting points, but it could not replace their responsibility for understanding, accuracy, or disciplinary judgement. Student A's account is illustrative: they valued the tool for ideas and inspiration and for shaping the structure of writing, yet rejected full reliance because some answers are incorrect. Similarly, Student D described use at a subsidiary level; guidance and prompts that can trigger personal viewpoints. This suggests teaching and learning policy should be adapted to accommodate and integrate ChatGPT into the classroom, while still requiring assignments that test and challenge the student to write what they intend to say. These accounts support an interpretation of ChatGPT as part of a co-constructed learning process: the tool accelerates early-stage thinking and provides scaffolding, but students remain aware that genuine academic achievement depends on individual effort and critical engagement.

#### 4.13. ChatGPT learning benefits: Support, feedback-like interaction, and efficiency gains

A prominent theme in the findings is that ChatGPT's perceived educational value is closely tied to EMI learning conditions. Students repeatedly highlighted language-related benefits, including grammar correction, clearer expression, and support with academic discourse. Student H described

ChatGPT as a "very good teacher" for grammar correction and as a source of "original ideas" that could extend thinking. Student B emphasised reduced mistakes and improved efficiency, while also warning that excessive reliance could reduce creativity: an observation that aligns strongly with a "responsible use" framing rather than uncritical enthusiasm. Students also indicated that ChatGPT can be more immediately useful than traditional search engines for certain tasks, particularly when the goal is explanation, synthesis, or drafting support. However, this perceived advantage was frequently coupled with caution about reliability. Students seemed aware the tool can sound convincing even when wrong, students need explicit support in developing verification habits and evaluation strategies. In this sense, ChatGPT's greatest contribution may not be the production of text, but the way it can scaffold learning conversations; provided learners are equipped to co-construct and refine what it produces, and this is embedded into curriculum shape and design.

#### 4.14. Affective support, face, and help-seeking: The value of a non-judgmental "teacher"

Beyond functional support, student accounts point to an affective dimension that matters in high-pressure learning cultures. Several responses suggest that ChatGPT offers a private, non-judgmental space for question-asking and repeated clarification, which may be especially meaningful where learners fear embarrassment or loss of face. Student F described this directly, emphasising that ChatGPT "will not judge you" and will patiently explain concepts until understanding is achieved. This implies that GenAI may reshape help-seeking behaviour by lowering emotional barriers to asking "basic" questions: particularly in EMI settings where linguistic insecurity can discourage participation. At the same time, students also recognised the limits of nonhuman support in shaping their campus life, echoing Day & Zhang (2025) in suggesting this shaped the cultural and learning practices of their study. Student F noted that ChatGPT may lack the emotional intelligence and fine-grained personalisation of a human teacher. This duality likewise suggests a constructive pedagogic direction: institutions can treat ChatGPT as a supplementary support for confidence-building and revision, while designing teaching practices that keep interpersonal guidance, disciplinary judgement, and feedback dialogue central.

#### 4.15. Implications for curriculum, staff development, and responsible-use policy in TCUs

Taken together, the findings indicate students can articulate responsible boundaries around ChatGPT use: they value it most for scaffolding and efficiency, but remain cautious about accuracy and the need for personal understanding. This creates a strong platform for curriculum-level integration that emphasises AI literacy rather than prohibition. Student M's critique of blanket bans is instructive. For international universities reflecting TCU qualities, this points to three practical priorities. First, universities should embed explicit guidance into modules: showing legitimate learning uses, for example prompted outlining, language support, concept explanation and teaching verification routines, for example



cross-checking, source evaluation, reflective prompting. Second, staff development is necessary so that teachers can model responsible practices and design learning activities that leverage AI without outsourcing the learning outcomes. Third, policy should be written as a teaching document as much as a compliance document: clear expectations, disclosure norms where relevant, and a shared vocabulary for “support” versus “substitution.” The seminar protocol in the method of the study suggests that even modest, well-designed interventions can shift student perceptions quickly, moving them from uncertainty to informed, responsible debate. In short, the most productive institutional response in a university is not to treat ChatGPT as a threat to be contained, but as a learning technology that requires curricular framing, pedagogic skill, and transparent governance to ensure value.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This conclusion summarises the study’s key contributions on ChatGPT in teaching and learning, acknowledges the main limitations, and translates the findings into practical recommendations for curriculum design, AI literacy, and institutional policy in TCU/EMI contexts.

### 5.1. Limitations and interpretive boundaries

This study is subject to several constraints. The sample size is modest and drawn from a single programme cohort, with slanted demographics, limiting representativeness and restricting claims of broader generalisability. Participation was voluntary and self-organised, creating the possibility of self-selection bias: students with stronger views, higher confidence, or greater interest in educational technology may be over-represented, or simply may have responded more to lines of enquiry. In addition, because AI use can be perceived as a sensitive topic in assessment-adjacent contexts, responses may be influenced by social desirability effects, with participants more likely to report “responsible” positions than they would enact privately. These limitations mean the findings should be interpreted as contextualised insight into one setting rather than a population-level estimate.

### 5.2. What the study adds about ChatGPT in teaching and learning

Despite these constraints, the findings provide an important corrective to simplified assumptions about student motivations. Students did not describe ChatGPT primarily

as a replacement for learning; instead, they framed it as an assistant that can support idea generation, structuring writing, language development, clarification, summarising, and iterative improvement. The repeatedly knew that outputs require human judgement and verification. The shift in attitudes following the seminar demonstration further indicates that institutional mediation matters: when ChatGPT is introduced through guided exposure, worked examples, teacher modelling, and explicit discussion of limitations, students more readily recognise legitimate learning uses and are better positioned to adopt responsible routines. Collectively, the results point toward ChatGPT as a tool that can complement learning in EMI contexts when it is framed pedagogically and embedded within clear curriculum norms and co-construction structures (Day, 2025).

### 5.3. Implications for curriculum, staff development, and responsible-use policy

The central implication for universities is that responsible AI use should be treated as a curriculum and capability issue rather than only a compliance issue. Where students lack structured opportunities to learn how to use ChatGPT well; conversely, when educators model bounded learning uses and institutions provide coherent guidance, ChatGPT can function as an accessible learning scaffold that supports explanation, language mediation, and out-of-hours study without displacing student agency. This is especially important because students are already navigating imported academic norms alongside local digital ecologies and EMI demands in international universities; clarity and consistency reduce confusion, inequity, and avoidable risk.

### 5.4. Recommendations for responsible AI integration in international universities

Table 3 translates the discussion into implementable actions by specifying what to do, who should lead it, and the likely benefit. It is designed to prevent diffusion of responsibility and to help institutions coordinate work across curriculum teams, faculty, learning development, libraries, quality functions, and educational technology services. The recommendations can be read as a sequence: begin with curriculum integration and AI literacy foundations (1–3), extend to EMI-supportive pedagogy and process-focused assessment (4–6), then sustain practice through course-aligned tools and ongoing pedagogic evaluation (7–8).

**Table 3.** Recommended University Priorities for ChatGPT

#	Recommendation	Implementation steps	Key leads	Expected benefit
1	Curriculum integration	Map AI use across modules; introduce consistent expectations and learning activities that model appropriate ChatGPT use.	Curriculum leads; module convenors	More equitable uptake; clearer norms; better out-of-hours support
2	AI literacy training	Teach prompting, verification, and reflective use (e.g., cross-checking, citing, “explain your reasoning” prompts).	Learning developers; librarians; faculty	Higher-quality learning; reduced over-trust; stronger critical judgement



3	Responsible-use guidance	Publish plain-language faculty-specific guidance defining “support vs substitution” and disclosure norms where relevant.	Policy/quality teams; academic integrity leads	Shared vocabulary; fewer misunderstandings; improved trust
4	Differentiated instruction	Use ChatGPT as optional scaffold for EMI learners (grammar feedback, summarising, explanation at different levels).	Faculty; EAP/ELT units	Improved language confidence; reduced barriers; better participation
5	Assessment for process	Redesign assessment to value process (drafts, oral defence, reflection logs) and evaluate how students use AI responsibly.	Assessment boards; faculty	Maintained standards; evidence of contribution; learning-focused use
6	EMI language support	Provide approved workflows for translation/transcription and writing support, with verification and citation routines.	EAP/ELT; faculty	Safer language support; clearer boundaries; reduced dependency
7	Learning assistant pilots	Pilot custom chatbots/curated prompts in the VLE to explain complex concepts and direct students to course resources.	EdTech; faculty; IT	Scalable help; consistent explanations; reduced staff load
8	Pedagogic research culture	Support ongoing evaluation of AI–student co-construction through classroom research and student feedback loops.	SoTL groups; programme leadership	Evidence-informed policy; agile updates; local relevance

The insights developed in Table 3 are consolidated in Figure 1. The Responsible AI Curriculum Integration Framework, a wheel that presents ChatGPT adoption as a whole-system teaching and learning issue rather than a single policy decision. The centre represents the institutional goal: responsible AI use is made explicit in curricula and supported through shared expectations. So, practice must be consistent across modules instead of informal or uneven. The circular format signals interdependence; universities can begin with any segment, but durable integration comes from aligning multiple levers, so they reinforce one another over time. Each outer segment names a practical lever for educators and leaders: embedding AI consistently in curricula

- i. Teaching AI literacy and verification routines
- ii. And publishing clear responsible-use norms and disclosure expectations
- iii. The model highlights pedagogic and equity-focusing, including using AI for EMI scaffolding and differentiated support
- iv. And approving safe language-support workflows
- v. Crucially, it foregrounds an assessment shift: grading should privilege reasoning and process evidence rather than polished end-products alone
- vi. Finally, it recognises enabling conditions, piloting course-aligned AI helpers in the VLE
- vii. And maintaining an ongoing cycle of evaluation and updating through pedagogic research
- viii. So that policy and practice stay relevant as tools and student behaviours evolve.

### 5.5. Concluding remarks

Overall, the study suggests that Chinese postgraduate students are not simply adopting ChatGPT as a shortcut, but are actively negotiating how it can function as a learning assistant within institutional expectations. This determines the sense of value and cohesion shaping student identity



**Figure 1.** A Model of Responsible AI Curriculum Integration Framework in Higher Education

(Zhang, 2025). Students valued ChatGPT as a tool and valued their study. Consequently, this suggests a need for universities to move beyond prohibition toward curriculum-integrated guidance, explicit AI literacy and co-constructed assessment designs that evidence process, hence teaching them about digital technologies alongside disciplinary knowledge (Day, 2019). This, then, means we should aim to situate ChatGPT at the core of how we, as educators, support learning, while ensuring it is used responsibly, so academic standards remain credible.



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