Departmental Guidance on AI for Students in Sociology

About this document

Generative AI (henceforth 'AI') presents a wide range of political, social and environmental questions, and in educational settings it raises new and complex issues relating to research plagiarism ethics, data privacy, and more. Some (but not all) of these issues are outlined below. This guidance is intended to help undergraduate and postgraduate students navigate questions about AI use in their academic work within the Sociology Department. It sits alongside other guidance issued by the School of the Humanities and Social Sciences (see this guidance), the University (see this guidance), and other relevant bodies.

In this document, when we refer to 'AI,' we are referring to a family of technologies that generate data based on user inputs; examples include tools that output new text or image content based on prompts. This includes large language model 'chatbots' (e.g. ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Grok, Claude, DeepSeek) but also generative functions embedded in other interfaces, software or websites (e.g. summarisation functions in Adobe Acrobat, Semantic Scholar or JSTOR; use of the 'COPILOT' function in Excel formulae; video creation via OpenAI's Sora app; AI-powered analysis in some statistical software packages).

The Sociology Department recognises that these technologies raise complicated questions, which are likely to change even over the course of this academic year given the nature of the AI industry. We therefore welcome open dialogue about AI between all members of our community. We have organised an ongoing AI Forum for this reason. All students and staff are welcome to attend these sessions to deepen our understanding of AI together, pose specific questions, or raise particular issues.

Departmental AI Policy in Sociology

For the 2025 – 2026 academic year and onwards, there are several changes to departmental policy that all students need to be aware of:

1. All Sociology students must be aware that, in our department, some uses of AI constitute academic misconduct (even if declared). We do not distinguish between the input of AI and the input of another human being in drawing the line between permissible help and plagiarism. A level of assistance that would be inappropriate if received from a person will also be inappropriate if received from AI. Please see *Departmental Guidance on AI for Students in Sociology* for more detailed information.

   For instance, you **must not use AI** to:

   - Generate text to include in your work or rough drafts on which to base your writing
   - Generate ideas or arguments for your research/essays/dissertations
   - Generate data for your research (e.g. fake interview transcripts)
   - Generate your research design and methodology (including interview questions)
   - Generate interpretations or substantive conclusions from your data

- Generate any output based on personal data from your research (e.g. interviews, observations, survey responses, etc.)

While we do not recommend use of AI, as it can impede learning processes, **AI may be used** in limited ways. You may only use AI to:

- Search for existing literature (though it is best not to rely solely on AI)
- Proofread your own writing for spelling, punctuation and grammar (though it must not change any content and you should retain your own writing style)
- Summarise publicly available literature or non-personal data for a better understanding of it (though you should not rely on summaries alone, especially for required reading or other important texts)
- Assistance with technical aspects of analysing of large-scale data sets (provided you understand and can explain the analytical steps yourself)
- Transcribe anonymised interviews using a system deemed sufficiently trustworthy and that complies with GDPR (this requires prior approval by the departmental ethics committee)

2. All Sociology students (undergraduate, MPhil, and PhD) must submit a **departmental AI declaration form** with any assessed written work, **regardless of whether AI has been used or not**. Making undeclared use of AI in an assessment constitutes academic misconduct. You can access the departmental AI declaration form here: [insert link]

3. If you are suspected of making undeclared and/or inappropriate use of AI in assessment, an investigation will be conducted and depending on the outcome, you may be sanctioned. Investigations may include technical evaluations and oral examinations. **Sanctions vary but can include extreme penalisation of your grade (e.g. a mark of 0), and discontinuation from your degree.**

4. Permissible use of AI will not be penalised.

5. In some cases, student research (i.e. dissertations/theses) may be given explicit and prior approval to use AI in a way that would not normally be allowed. Please see the *Departmental Guidance on AI for Students in Sociology* for detailed information.

6. It is good practice to acknowledge any use of AI in any of your work, but for non-assessed work, such as supervision essays, this can be done informally (e.g. you could include a single-line declaration before or after the text of a supervision essay).

7. All students must recognise and think carefully about the privacy concerns implicated in the use of generative AI. This is especially important because our discipline often engages with sensitive personal data gathered from research participants. Many members of the Sociology Department are committed to exploring the implications and social issues relating to generative AI. We encourage our students, as emerging sociologists, to engage with these questions too.

Further guidance for responsible use of AI: Departmental policy in detail.

1. Declaring AI use or non-use

All students (undergraduate, MPhil and PhD) must submit a declaration with any coursework assessments, regardless of whether they have used AI or not. Making an inaccurate declaration in respect of AI use constitutes academic misconduct.

It is good practice to acknowledge any use of AI in any of your work, but for non-assessed work, such as supervision essays, this can be done informally rather than through a declaration form (e.g. you could include a single-line declaration before or after the text of a supervision essay, or verbally state that your question or answer was inspired or informed by AI use in the case of a supervision or seminar discussion, etc).

If you are suspected of making undeclared and/or inappropriate use of AI in assessment, an investigation will be conducted and depending on the outcome, you may be sanctioned. Investigations may include technical measure and oral examinations. Sanctions may vary but in some cases could result in extreme penalisation of your grade (e.g. awarding a mark of 0) or even discontinuation from your degree.

This approach to declaration follows from University-wide guidance that "A student using any unacknowledged content generated by artificial intelligence within a summative assessment as though it is their own work constitutes academic misconduct, unless explicitly stated otherwise in the assessment brief." You can read more about the University's approach to AI here, which you should engage with while bearing in mind that on a more local level within the University, departments and courses are developing their own tailored guidance that is more fit for purpose within specific context.

2. AI-related academic misconduct in the Sociology Department

The policy of the Sociology Department is that some uses of AI in the course of your academic work are permitted, while others constitute academic misconduct. If you choose to use AI during your studies, it is your responsibility to know the current boundaries of responsible and appropriate use, as broadly outlined here, and stay within them. If in doubt, consult with your supervisor before usage. Some examples to illustrate this are provided below, but are subject to change; since AI technologies and the norms around them are both new and developing quickly, we cannot provide exhaustive and definitive lists of forbidden uses.

In general, we do not distinguish between the input of AI and the input of another human being in drawing the line between permissible help and plagiarism. A level of assistance that would be inappropriate if received from a person will also be inappropriate if received from AI. Any attempt to replace your own intellectual efforts on tasks that we consider basic academic requirements of our students constitutes academic misconduct, even if it is declared. For instance, you **must not use AI** to:

- Generate text to include in your work or rough drafts on which to base your writing
- Generate ideas or arguments for your research/essays/dissertations

- Generate data for your research (e.g. fake interview transcripts)
- Generate your research design and methodology (including interview questions)
- Generate interpretations or substantive conclusions from your data

You must also adhere to research ethics and laws around privacy and data protection (see the 'Protecting privacy' section below) and therefore not use AI to:

- Generate any output based on personal data from your research (e.g. interviews, observations, survey responses, etc.)

However, AI can be used in limited ways to supplement or polish your work. You may use AI to:

- Search for existing literature (though it is best not to rely solely on AI)
- Proofread your own writing for spelling, punctuation and grammar (though it must not change any content and you should retain your own writing style)
- Summarise publicly available literature or non-personal data for a better understanding of it (though you should not rely on summaries alone, especially for required reading or other important texts)
- Assistance with technical aspects of analysing of large-scale data sets (provided you understand and can explain the analytical steps yourself)
- Transcribe anonymised interviews using a system deemed sufficiently trustworthy and that complies with GDPR (this requires prior approval by the departmental ethics committee)

If you choose to use AI during your studies, we encourage you to bear in mind ongoing issues around ethics, social impact and so on, such as those outlined later in this document. Also, consider the limitations of AI – e.g. its habit of producing factual inaccuracies or its tendency towards a generic writing style. You will be held responsible for any flaws or shortcomings in your work resulting from your use of AI, such as factual errors.

3. Protecting privacy

AI can compromise the privacy of your own and other people's data by retaining data, and thus violating privacy; your inputs may at some point form part of the outputs provided to others. It is important that you understand these risks.

In some cases it is possible to protect privacy well while using AI, such as when using a trusted and fully-closed system. However, it is difficult to be confident of this. Some AI models claim to be "closed", that they don't use "personal" data for training, or that you can limit how data is used for training. Please do not assume these claims are true, and check them thoroughly—especially since AI often behaves contrary to its creators' intentions.

Whether or not you use AI yourself, it is University policy that you must take care to prevent privacy being violated by AI note-taking bots in any online meetings you host—including preventing their use by others. See this guidance on preventing bots from joining Teams meetings.

You should not input any unpublished materials that are not your own work into AI models, including lecture materials, other students' essays, or research papers not for circulation). This may violate the privacy and intellectual property rights of the authors or subjects of the

material, and potentially harm them in other ways; it also risks degrading trust within the academic community.

When conducting any research, you have certain legal and ethical obligations. Inputting any private data (e.g. participant data from research or private communications) into AI for any reason (e.g. to transcribe, summarise, analyse, translate, or proofread) could breach research ethics and/or data protection laws, particularly if the data is confidential or sensitive.

4. Approval for exemptions

In some cases, student research (i.e. dissertations/theses) may be given explicit approval to use AI in a way that would not normally be allowed. Examples might include:

- Transcription of interviews by a system deemed sufficiently trustworthy and that complies with GDPR (the departmental ethics committee will make this judgement, not the student researcher);
- Generation of 'synthetic data' as part of a research project on the role of synthetic data in social science research, e.g. comparing real and synthetic data (not a research project using it as if it were organic data from real people).

As well as properly declaring any such use, you must have sought and received permission via explicit and detailed approval for each and every exemption to the normal guidelines before using the AI in these ways. Exemptions related to the collection and generation of research data must be declared in the ethics application and approved by the Departmental Ethics Committee. This includes AI-based transcription of interviews or the generation of synthetic data. Requests for exemptions relating to other uses of AI that would normally be prohibited must be submitted to the Director of Undergraduate Education, the MPhil Director, or the Director of Postgraduate Education, as appropriate to the student's degree.

Failure to properly seek and receive departmental approval constitutes academic misconduct – you must not, for instance, breach departmental policy and then try to seek approval afterwards, or receive approval for one specific use of AI and then use AI in an additional, different way that would breach the guidelines.

Some issues around AI

In general, we do not recommend use of AI as it can impede learning processes and prevent students from achieving their full potential. We also encourage all students to consider the ways that AI is implicated in a range of social contexts and inequalities. Below, we list some key thinking points and highlight some of their implications and connections to student learning and education.

AI and plagiarism

AI is implicated in plagiarism in two main ways: firstly, AI can reproduce trained data without proper attribution or respect for intellectual property rights (potentially without the user being aware); secondly, users can pass off AI outputs as their own work (either intentionally or through sloppy working and acknowledgement/attribution practices).

On the one hand, you should be careful to follow policy on the use of AI and avoid academic misconduct; in particular, this means acknowledging your use of AI. However, by itself this may not be enough to avoid plagiarism—you must also be careful that, for instance, you have not taken inspiration from a suggestion that AI has provided, which you have not realised is distinctively based on someone else's original work.

AI and bias

AI tends to reproduce biases present in its training data, by nature of the way it works; research has demonstrated that various AI models associate certain jobs with men or women more strongly than is supported by actual economic data, and certain descriptors (such as 'lazy') with racialised vernacular speech. When efforts have been made to counteract this bias, new forms of bias are often introduced – e.g. Google Gemini produced images representing the Third Reich as racially diverse due to hidden parameters intended to prevent overly-White outputs. Some models have also been shown to have a pro-AI bias, expressing more positive assessments of the same text when it is labelled as AI-generated. Some of these biases have been shown to become worse as models become larger.

Within education generally, these questions of distortionary biases and stereotypes should be concerning, particularly given that AI is often treated as objective and authoritative. Given the nature and subject matter of sociology as a discipline, we should be all the more attentive to and critical of these issues in our work. Likewise, AI's statistical reproduction of patterns found in training data may reproduce widespread misunderstandings of key terms or texts, and may struggle to suggest more original perspectives on a topic.

AI and the environment

AI has a range of environmental impacts. Data centres use electricity, some of which is generated through burning fossil fuels, and also largely rely on water-based cooling systems; there are also considerations in terms of material extraction and disposal of electronic waste. These have negative environmental impacts both globally (due to climate change) and for communities local to data centres (who often face water shortages and other detrimental impacts).

Figures and comparisons for the scale of environmental impact are easily skewed one way or another by picking particular data points (e.g. using certain models or functions, focusing on per-query or total impacts, reporting historical usage or projecting future usage, etc). More recent/advanced models may produce better results but are generally more energy-intensive in producing them, rather than more efficient. All current projections of leading AI companies themselves are that they will need to consume growing amounts of energy, and thus face serious difficulties in reducing their carbon emissions. Moreover, increasing scale of usage may drive increased total impact even if efficiency breakthroughs mean that per-query impact declines.

In particular, when considering AI usage within an educational context, note that data reporting the impact of a 'typical' query are based on short, simple, text-based prompts (e.g. straightforward factual questions under 100 words); use-cases such as generating a graph from data or asking for feedback on an entire essay require vastly more energy use. Also, search engines significantly increase the environmental impact of each search when they generate AI overviews, so you may want to consider turning them off or using a search

engine that allows them to be suppressed by default and generated only on request (such as DuckDuckGo).

AI and the economy

AI's most prominent economic threat is its consequences for workers. It may displace human labour, resulting in unemployment. Even if new jobs replace those that have been filled by AI, there is no guarantee that they will be equally 'good quality' jobs in terms of pay, conditions, or the actual day-to-day experience of work. The actual production of AI has often involved hyper-exploitation of workers in poorer (and often formerly-colonised) countries; in particular, content moderators have been exposed to graphic and disturbing content without adequate warning or support, leaving many traumatised.

AI is also contributing to other economic risks and harms such as wealth inequality, the consolidation of economic monopoly power, and the instability of financial markets. Even Sam Altman, OpenAI CEO, has warned that there is an investment bubble in AI. So far, many leading AI companies have proven unable to generate a profit or even cover the costs of their AI investments and services, despite rising user fees. There is also little evidence of improved efficiency: more recent models are generally more expensive rather than cheaper.

Within education, these considerations pose the question of whether reorienting teaching and learning to normalise extensive AI use may exacerbate distributive injustice and make us complicit in our own deskilling. Similarly, we risk becoming overly dependent on tools that may not be economically sustainable and thus may not always be readily available and affordable.