High Level Principles for Postgraduate Researchers on the Use of **Generative AI** during Doctoral programmes

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IRISH UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION

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The Sub-Committee gratefully acknowledges all input and feedback provided by doctoral candidates, supervisors and other specialists within our universities.

Note: This is a principles-based document that is intended to be tailored to each institutional context with respect to already established policies, procedures, regulations and aligned resources.

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1.0 Context Setting

1.1 Definitions

According to the EU AI Act, an AI system is:

> **"a machine-based system that is designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment, and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments".**

Generative AI ("Gen AI") is a category of AI that can create new content such as text, images, video and music. There are many dedicated Gen AI tools and their availability is evolving rapidly. Gen AI capabilities are now also embedded in tools used regularly for research. It is not always apparent to the user that Gen AI capability is being deployed in a tool. For these reasons, and because the field is evolving rapidly, a list of definitive tools is not provided here. It is imperative that when Gen AI capabilities have been accessed that such use is declared.

1.2 National Context

Generative AI can enhance academic research by accelerating literature discovery, assisting with coding and modelling tasks, supporting data interpretations, synthesising complex information, supporting data analysis, and improving overall accessibility to knowledge; however, its outputs require careful verification, critical evaluation, and transparent use to ensure academic rigour, originality, and reliability. Key concerns relate to the threat Gen AI poses to research integrity and intellectual property, if not used with good judgement. Several Irish national initiatives have addressed the issue of responsible use of Gen AI in education and Higher Education Institutions have further developed statements, policies, regulations and training. A postgraduate researcher (PGR) should observe and comply with local Gen AI-related policies and procedures.

Examples of the national initiatives include the National Academic Integrity Network's Generative Artificial Intelligence: Guidelines for Educators and their Framework for Academic Misconduct Investigation and Case Management. Ireland's QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) has published the results of a national survey on perspectives and usage of Gen AI. The HEA also published a report based on research with diverse voices within HEIs providing detailed sectoral perspectives on Generative AI in Higher Education Teaching and Learning and Generative AI in Higher Education Teaching & Learning Policy Framework. Furthermore, the National Research Integrity Forum published a National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland in 2024. Furthermore, the National Digital and AI Strategy 2030 commits to ensuring that learners at all levels acquire the digital literacy skills necessary for the AI-driven environment.

These publications contribute to our emerging understanding of the impact of Gen AI on education in general, and on research integrity in particular. A specific consideration of the doctoral research context is, however, also required because Gen AI directly impacts the integrity, originality, and future relevance of doctoral research; all of which are considerations for the examination and award of level ten degrees. This set of high level principles was consequently developed by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) Deans of Graduate Studies, in consultation with doctoral researchers and colleagues in individual member institutions as a guide to the use of Gen AI during the period of registration for a Doctoral Degree.

1.3 Function of this Set of Principles

The function of this document is to set out high level principles on the use of Gen AI for postgraduate researchers (referred to as PGRs in this document) who choose to engage with Gen AI as part of their doctoral research endeavours. As the Gen AI landscape changes, so too might this set of principles and so they may need to be updated over time. The principles are not intended to be a set of regulations and do not replace any institutional guidance or policy on the topic. Postgraduate researchers are strongly encouraged to also consult guidance in their individual institutions, especially in relation to which tools are sanctioned and for which uses. Conversations between PGRs and research supervisors are encouraged to consider how best to support, where and when appropriate, the use of Gen AI within the research programme as well as to ensure that any use of Gen AI has been appropriately declared.

2.0 The Principles

2.1 The Primary Principle

Research is a human endeavour and research culture is reliant on human-human interaction in which knowledge is created, shared and advances made. The primary principle for postgraduate researchers (PGRs[1]) using Gen AI technology is that they are ultimately responsible for the creation of the thesis content. If a PGR uses Gen AI, they should do so thoughtfully, ethically and transparently in a way that supports the research without compromising the integrity and originality of the scholarship. Gen AI tools should only be used in the doctoral research context following consultation with the thesis supervisor(s) and with their approval. In some disciplinary areas, use of Gen AI tools may not be considered appropriate; use must be guided by disciplinary norms.

2.2 Ethical Foundations

- **Transparency is Paramount:** The use of Gen AI in doctoral research should be clearly described in a manner consistent with disciplinary norms. AI functionality in general is increasingly embedded in tools used on a regular basis but this is not always obvious. The PGR should keep a sufficiently detailed record of the tools that have been used, taking embedded AI functionality into account where possible, and the extent of their contribution.

- **Authorship and Originality:** The research thesis and any associated publications/ research outputs represent the candidate's own intellectual contribution. Gen AI can be a powerful tool, but it does not replace critical thinking, analysis, or original ideas. The core research questions, arguments, insights and content should be the candidate's. Gen AI should not normally be used to generate text or data, unless of course this is the focus of the research topic itself. In such cases, where Gen AI may be the actual topic of the research, it may be used in ways that are not recommended for non-AI related topics. Understanding authorship in contexts where AI is used can assist in assessing who authorship should be attributed to (see, for example, Fritz 2025[2]).

1 Different terms are used to refer to researchers conducting doctoral or master's level research. For consistency, we use the term 'postgraduate researcher' (PGR) as an umbrella term.

2 Fritz, J. (2025). Understanding authorship in Artificial Intelligence-assisted works. Journal of Intellectual Property Law and Practice, 20(5), 354-364.

- **The Viva Voce:** The viva voce is a crucial mechanism for the PGR to demonstrate complete ownership of the research presented for examination as well as its originality. The PGR should be aware that during the viva voce examiners may ask about or request documentation on the use of Gen AI throughout the research cycle.

- **Respect Intellectual Property[3]:** PGRs should be mindful of copyright and licensing when using Gen AI-generated content or when training models on specific datasets. University ethical, GDPR, research integrity and legal policy should be followed. PGRs should never upload research data or thesis content to Gen AI tools that are not sanctioned for use by their university and should carefully consider how sanctioned tools might use such content.

- **Bias Awareness and Mitigation:** PGRs should recognise that Gen AI models are not neutral and can reflect biases, stereotypes, or harmful generalisations present in the training data. Any AI-generated content should be critically evaluated for potential biases and strategies adopted to mitigate their influence on the research.

- **Sustainability:** Users of Gen AI should be cognisant of and seek to keep apprised of the tools' negative effects on the environment and on human and fundamental rights. It may be appropriate to actively monitor environmental and other costs arising from use of Gen AI.

2.3 Methodological Rigour

- **Critical Evaluation:** Gen AI outputs should be treated with healthy scepticism and not accepted at face value. All AI outputs should be verified and cross-referenced with established literature. PGRs must apply their own expert judgment, in consultation with their supervisor(s).

- **Record Keeping:** An appropriate record should be kept of the prompts used for Gen AI tools and their version numbers throughout the entire research cycle.

- **AI as a Tool:** Gen AI, if adopted, should be used to support the research process, not to bypass fundamental understanding. PGRs must be able to explain underlying concepts, theories and frameworks, previous research, methods, and to critically engage with the subject matter.

3 Gen AI technology has been criticised for not respecting intellectual property. The point being made here is that PGRs should not contribute even further to this problem.

2.4 Responsible Use

- **Purposeful Integration:** Gen AI should be used responsibly and purposefully to address specific research questions or overcome particular challenges. Using Gen AI simply because it is available should be avoided. PGRs should consider if and how it can genuinely enhance the quality and efficiency of their work, without compromising integrity.

- **Explore and Experiment Responsibly:** The use of Gen AI is not universally appropriate and may even be frowned upon in some disciplines. PGRs should only be open to exploring the potential of Gen AI tools and techniques where it is appropriate to the discipline and in a controlled, sustainable and ethical manner. It is important to understand the limitations and potential pitfalls of each tool that is utilised, including limitations on reproducibility. PGRs should be aware that changes made to closed source AI tools are impossible to track and this can have implications in relation to reproducibility.

- **Seek Guidance and Feedback:** PGRs should discuss the use of Gen AI with their supervisor(s) and peers from the beginning of their research journey and regularly throughout and should only use Gen AI tools in their research work with their supervisor's agreement.

- **Avoid Overreliance on AI Tools:** The postgraduate research journey can at times be an isolating experience. Care should be taken so that the use of AI does not displace human interaction and the broader social and networking experiences which add to the richness of the postgraduate research experience.

- **Stay Informed:** The field of Gen AI is rapidly evolving and the technology is becoming more embedded in research tools that are used every day. PGRs should keep up to date with their knowledge of new tools, new functionality, ethical considerations, and best practices relevant to their research area. Where possible, candidates should attend training on the topic and should seek advice, through supervisors, on finding the recommended training resources available within their institution. Researchers should be aware of which tools have been sanctioned by their institution and for which tasks and should be aware of how content entered into sanctioned tools is used.

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