Conference Proposal Submission

Proposal Title

From Overwhelmed to Empowered: Generative AI as a Companion for Digital Inclusion

Keywords

Digital inclusion, Generative AI, Higher education, Copilot, Essential digital skills

Abstract

In a workshop, an older student, initially overwhelmed and teary-eyed, shared that they were crying not out of sadness, but from the joy of discovering how artificial intelligence (AI) could transform their higher education journey. This paper examines how AI enhances digital inclusion by supporting students in developing essential digital skills at the university level. Grounded in constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) and humanist (Rogers, 1983) educational principles, and aligned with the Jisc Digital Capabilities Framework (Jisc, 2022), the workshops offer interactive, learner-centred experiences focused on core digital toolkits. By integrating AI tools like Copilot, the programme provides personalised and adaptive learning paths that cater to students' individual needs. This approach addresses various forms of exclusion, including language barriers, educational disparities, socioeconomic challenges, balancing education with work or family responsibilities, and varying levels of prior digital exposure. While the programme is currently focused on gathering qualitative feedback and anecdotal evidence to inform its development, these early insights strongly indicate its potential to significantly boost student confidence and promote a more equitable and inclusive academic experience. Plans are in place to incorporate more formal quantitative evaluation as the initiative evolves.

Session Description

This session explores the potential of generative AI—particularly Microsoft Copilot—to enhance digital inclusion and support students in developing essential digital skills within higher education. Rooted in constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) and humanist (Rogers, 1983) educational principles, and aligned with the Jisc Digital Capabilities Framework (Jisc, 2022), this initiative uses interactive workshops to provide accessible, learner-centred training on core digital toolkits. These sessions are especially valuable for students facing barriers such as limited prior exposure to digital tools, language challenges, or socioeconomic disadvantages.

The workshops explicitly introduce students to Copilot and focus on its use as a companion tool, encouraging interaction through natural language rather than technical jargon. For example, students are guided in using AI to generate flashcards, paraphrase texts, or test

their understanding of a topic—transforming AI into a means for formative, self-directed learning. Rather than emphasising prompt engineering, the sessions highlight accessible questioning and iterative learning (Beetham and Sharpe, 2019).

Assessment and feedback are not the primary focus of the workshops, but AI is introduced as a useful tool for formative self-assessment. Students are invited to compare their own work to model answers and use AI to reflect on what constitutes a strong or weak response. While these workshops currently focus on light-touch, formative applications of AI, early experimentation indicates significant potential for deeper integration of AI-driven feedback tools in future iterations.

Ethical and responsible AI use is embedded in every session. Discussions cover data privacy, misinformation, and the limitations of AI models, including hallucinations and the constraints of commercial censorship in enterprise tools. Students are encouraged to critically evaluate AI outputs, understand institutional policies, and treat AI as a fallible partner—not a source of absolute truth (Selwyn, 2023).

The workshops also tackle the issue of digital inequality. Many students cannot afford premium AI subscriptions, but institutional access to Copilot offers a high-quality alternative. This programme recognises the importance of equitable access and makes students aware of the trade-offs and opportunities of different AI ecosystems. In doing so, it echoes wider concerns about the uneven impact of digital technology rollouts in education, particularly among marginalised learners (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020).

This session addresses four of the APT2025 sub-themes:
- Generative AI for inclusion and accessibility (primary),
- Transforming assessment and feedback using Generative AI,
- Responsible and ethical considerations, and
- Generative AI in teaching practice.

Ultimately, this work seeks to support inclusive pedagogy and digital equity while fostering a critical, reflective, and practical approach to integrating generative AI into academic life.

References

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