Position Statement

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Position statement

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GAI (GenAI) represents the latest technological revolution among a series of previous revolutions. Like the advances in personal computing in the 1970s and 1980s, the internet revolution of the 1990s, and the mobile and social innovations of the 2000s and beyond, the knee-jerk reaction to new technology has been to express concerns about the potential adverse effects of this technology on developing minds and the economic prospects of our workforce. This is not a new concern; with each technological wave we fall into the same 2500-year-old trap as Socrates, who, horrified by the educational advancement known as writing, fretted that: If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. Like the ability to write, GenAI skills aren't just 'nice to have'; they are vital to ensure students are ready to excel in a world increasingly driven by AI. As industries and jobs evolve, those who do not have these skills will be disadvantaged.

Yet leaning too heavily on GenAI does trigger a valid debate about its influence on students' education and cognitive development. Relying too much on AI for problem-solving and creative tasks might stunt the development of critical thinking and analytical skills – the cornerstone of higher education. Without experiencing the challenge of critically analysing complex information or creatively solving problems, it is possible that GenAI might lead to a reduction in deep, active learning. Active learning has been shown to improve formal reasoning skills and enhance the ability to generalise knowledge in new situations. Therefore, a reduction in active learning might foster a passive learning style, turning students into consumers rather than creators of knowledge. The core of university education – prompting students to question ideas, think critically, and dive deep into subjects – may be watered down if AI turns into the main way students interact with academic content, and thus the very tools meant to enrich learning could unintentionally stifle the intellectual and creative processes that traditional educational methods aim to nurture.

Nevertheless, GenAI cannot and should not be ignored. Our primary foci must now be to identify where AI has the potential to genuinely enhance learning and to determine which tasks we should still prioritize for learning – or learning using traditional methods. For instance, is it imperative to learn to code if a machine can perform such functions on our behalf? Is it still important to maintain the ability to spell and write with grammatical precision, or to scour literature to formulate an argument? Our secondary focus must be to integrate this knowledge into our curricula to ensure students get the best possible educational experience and are prepared for the rapidly-changing technological landscape into which they will graduate.