

Governing the Timing of Generative AI Assistance in Undergraduate Academic Writing: A Comparative Policy Analysis of Universities in China and the UK

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Abstract

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is becoming increasingly embedded in undergraduate academic writing, creating new challenges for universities seeking to balance educational innovation, academic integrity, and equitable learning opportunities. While institutions have introduced a growing number of policies regulating GenAI use, most discussions focus on whether students may use GenAI rather than when such assistance becomes educationally appropriate. Yet the timing of GenAI intervention may shape writing and learning in different ways across the writing process.

This paper argues that intervention timing represents an overlooked dimension of institutional GenAI governance. To explore this issue, the study adopts a comparative qualitative design combining policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews in universities in China and the United Kingdom. Policy documents are analysed to examine how institutions define acceptable and unacceptable forms of GenAI-assisted writing, while interviews with students, educators, and administrators explore how these expectations are interpreted and enacted in practice.

The paper suggests that universities may exhibit different governance tendencies regarding intervention timing, including varying emphases on disclosure, detection, process-oriented guidance, and outcome-oriented regulation. It also highlights the possibility that unclear timing expectations may contribute to inequalities associated with AI literacy and policy interpretation.

By reframing GenAI governance as a question of intervention timing rather than simple permission or prohibition, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on higher education governance, policy implementation, and human-centred AI.

Keywords

Generative Artificial Intelligence, Academic Writing, Comparative Higher Education, Higher Education Governance, Intervention Timing

1. Introduction

Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has rapidly transformed discussions surrounding teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education. Universities worldwide are increasingly confronted with a difficult governance challenge: how to support technological innovation while maintaining academic integrity, educational quality, and fairness. This challenge is particularly visible in undergraduate academic writing, where writing is not merely a means of producing text but a central process through which students develop disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, and authorial identity [1]. As GenAI systems become increasingly capable of generating fluent and persuasive academic prose, universities have responded by introducing a growing number of policies, guidelines, and regulatory frameworks intended to govern their use.

However, despite the rapid expansion of institutional AI policies, significant uncertainty remains regarding what exactly should be governed. Existing policy debates frequently focus on whether students should be permitted to use GenAI and under what conditions such use remains academically acceptable [2]. Across both China and the United Kingdom, universities have developed policies emphasising

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academic integrity, responsible use, disclosure requirements, and, increasingly, AI-detection mechanisms. Yet these discussions often overlook a more practical question that students and educators encounter in everyday academic work: when should GenAI intervene during the writing process?

This question matters because the educational implications of GenAI assistance are unlikely to be uniform across different stages of writing. Assistance during brainstorming may support idea generation and reduce barriers to participation, whereas extensive intervention during drafting or argument construction may raise concerns regarding authorship, learning, and academic independence. The same technology may therefore be interpreted as educationally beneficial or problematic depending not only on how it is used, but also on when it is used. Nevertheless, institutional policies rarely provide explicit stage-based guidance regarding the temporal boundaries of GenAI intervention, leaving students and educators to negotiate such boundaries in practice.

This paper argues that intervention timing represents an overlooked dimension of institutional GenAI governance. Rather than conceptualising governance solely through the binary distinction between permitted and prohibited use, the study proposes that universities are increasingly engaged in governing the timing, conditions, and legitimacy of GenAI assistance throughout the writing process. Understanding how such governance is formulated, interpreted, and enacted requires attention not only to policy texts but also to the experiences and perceptions of the actors who engage with them.

Accordingly, this paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do universities in China and the United Kingdom define and regulate appropriate timing of GenAI intervention in undergraduate academic writing through institutional policies and guidance?

RQ2: How do students, educators, and administrators interpret and negotiate timing-related expectations surrounding GenAI use in practice?

RQ3: What governance tendencies and potential inequalities emerge from different approaches to regulating the timing of GenAI assistance?

To address these questions, the paper combines policy document analysis with semi-structured interviews. Policy analysis is used to identify how universities formally articulate expectations regarding GenAI-assisted writing, while interviews explore how such expectations are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within everyday academic contexts. Through comparing Chinese and British universities, the study seeks to identify emerging governance tendencies and explore how different institutional approaches shape understandings of acceptable GenAI intervention.

This study contributes to existing discussions in three ways. First, it introduces intervention timing as an analytical lens for examining GenAI governance in higher education. Second, it connects formal policy frameworks with their interpretation and enactment in practice. Third, it contributes a comparative perspective on how universities in different national contexts respond to a shared governance challenge. More broadly, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions concerning human-centred AI, policy implementation, and the future governance of AI-assisted knowledge work.

2. Related Work

Research on GenAI in higher education has expanded rapidly since the release of ChatGPT. Existing studies generally identify both opportunities and risks associated with AI-assisted writing. GenAI may support idea generation, improve writing efficiency, and reduce linguistic barriers for students[3, 4]. At the same time, concerns have emerged regarding academic integrity, over-reliance on AI systems, and the potential weakening of critical engagement in learning processes[5, 6].

These concerns are particularly significant in undergraduate academic writing. From an academic literacies perspective, writing is not simply a process of producing text but a socially situated practice through which students develop disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, and authorial identity [1]. Consequently, debates surrounding GenAI are not limited to questions of technological adoption but also involve broader questions concerning learning, assessment, and educational purpose.

In response to these developments, universities have begun introducing institutional policies and guidance governing GenAI use. However, governance approaches vary considerably across contexts.

Some recent studies have observed an increasing emphasis on academic integrity, compliance, and institutional oversight in Chinese universities' responses to GenAI[7]. In the United Kingdom, institutional guidance has often focused on transparency, disclosure, and the responsible use of GenAI in academic work[8, 9]. These differences raise an important question about how universities determine when AI assistance is considered acceptable during the writing process, a question that remains underexplored in existing research.

Despite these growing policy responses, an important gap remains. Existing research and institutional discussions tend to focus on whether GenAI should be used rather than when AI intervention becomes educationally appropriate. Yet the implications of AI assistance may differ substantially across stages of writing, from brainstorming and outlining to drafting and revision. This study addresses this gap by examining how universities govern the timing of GenAI intervention and how such expectations are interpreted and enacted in practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative design informed by an interpretivist epistemology. Rather than treating GenAI governance as a fixed set of institutional rules, it examines how universities construct, communicate, and enact expectations regarding the appropriate timing of AI assistance in academic writing. Questions concerning when GenAI may legitimately enter the writing process are highly contextual and often involve competing interpretations among different stakeholders. As Mason[10] argues, qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to exploring how people make sense of complex social phenomena within specific social settings. At the same time, a comparative approach enables the study to identify how similar governance challenges are addressed differently across institutional and national contexts [11]. Comparing universities in China and the United Kingdom therefore provides an opportunity to examine how different educational traditions and governance cultures shape understandings of acceptable and unacceptable moments of GenAI intervention in undergraduate writing.

To address these questions, the study combines policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Policy documents constitute an important starting point because they are the primary means through which universities formally articulate their expectations regarding GenAI use. Following Bowen[12], documents are treated not merely as sources of information but as socially produced artefacts that reflect institutional priorities, assumptions, and regulatory logics. This is particularly relevant to the study of timing because temporal boundaries are often first defined through written guidance. Universities may permit GenAI during brainstorming and idea generation, discourage its use during drafting, require disclosure at particular stages of writing, or impose restrictions on AI-generated content in final submissions. Analysing policy documents therefore allows the study to identify how institutions formally construct acceptable moments of AI intervention and how these expectations are justified within broader discourses of academic integrity, learning, and assessment.

However, policy texts alone cannot explain how such temporal expectations are understood and enacted in practice. Semi-structured interviews are therefore conducted with students, educators, and administrators. This method offers sufficient flexibility for participants to discuss emerging and contested issues while ensuring a degree of comparability across interviews[13, 10]. Interviews are particularly valuable in the context of GenAI governance because many institutional guidelines employ broad concepts such as “appropriate use”, “responsible use”, or “meaningful learning”, leaving considerable room for interpretation. Exploring how different stakeholders understand these concepts makes it possible to examine how temporal boundaries are negotiated in everyday academic settings. Following Brinkmann[14], interviews are used not simply to collect factual accounts of behaviour but to investigate how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences.

The combination of policy documents and interviews enables the study to move beyond the formal content of governance documents and examine the relationship between intended governance and lived practice. Rather than assuming that policies are implemented in a straightforward manner, the study

recognises that policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by those who encounter them in specific institutional contexts[15]. Bringing these two sources together therefore makes it possible to explore whether formal expectations regarding the timing of GenAI use are reflected in practice, contested by stakeholders, or adapted to local circumstances. This approach also allows themes identified in one data source to be examined across the other, generating a richer understanding of how timing-related governance operates across different institutional settings.

Data analysis will follow an iterative process of thematic interpretation. Consistent with Mason's[10] understanding of qualitative analysis as both an organisational and interpretive activity, policy documents and interview transcripts will be read repeatedly, coded, compared, and revisited throughout the analytical process. Particular attention will be paid to how institutions and participants construct temporal understandings of GenAI use, including notions of acceptable timing, inappropriate intervention, disclosure, responsibility, and academic integrity. Following Thorne's[16] applied interpretive approach, the analysis will focus not only on what participants explicitly say but also on the meanings, assumptions, and tensions embedded within their accounts. Themes will be developed through continuous movement between policy texts and interview data, allowing interpretations emerging from one source to be examined against evidence from the other. Cross-case comparison will then be used to identify recurring governance tendencies as well as contextual differences between Chinese and British universities[17].

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study adopts methodological triangulation through the integration of multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives[18]. In addition, it follows what O'Cathain et al.[19] describe as "following a thread", whereby themes identified in policy documents are traced through interview accounts and vice versa. This iterative process supports a more nuanced understanding of how formal policies and everyday practices interact, while helping to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in multiple forms of evidence rather than a single source of data.

4. Expected Findings and Contributions

As a position paper, this study does not report empirical findings. Instead, it outlines a research agenda for examining how universities govern the timing of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) assistance in undergraduate academic writing and identifies several anticipated areas of contribution.

First, the study is expected to provide a comparative account of how universities in China and the United Kingdom formally define acceptable and unacceptable moments of GenAI intervention throughout the writing process. Existing institutional policies often focus on whether AI use is permitted but provide less clarity regarding when AI assistance becomes educationally appropriate[9]. Through policy document analysis, the study is expected to identify different governance tendencies concerning brainstorming, drafting, revision, disclosure, and assessment.

Second, the study is expected to reveal how these formal expectations are interpreted and enacted by different stakeholder groups. Previous research suggests that policy implementation is rarely straightforward and often involves processes of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation[15]. Interviews may therefore highlight areas where institutional policies are understood differently by students, educators, and administrators, particularly when guidance relies on broad concepts such as "responsible use" or "appropriate assistance".

Third, the study is expected to contribute to ongoing discussions about educational fairness and academic integrity in the age of GenAI. Emerging research has suggested that students' ability to benefit from AI tools may vary according to differences in digital literacy, prompting skills, disciplinary knowledge, and access to technological resources[2, 20]. By focusing on the timing of AI intervention rather than AI use in general, the study may provide a more nuanced understanding of how governance approaches influence opportunities and constraints for different groups of students.

Taken together, these contributions aim to shift current discussions beyond the binary question of whether GenAI should be permitted in academic writing. Instead, the study argues that the educational implications of AI use depend significantly on when, how, and under what conditions AI enters the

writing process. Understanding these temporal dimensions may help universities develop more context-sensitive governance approaches that better align institutional policies with educational goals.

5. Limitations and Conclusion

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a limited number of universities in China and the United Kingdom and therefore does not aim to produce statistically generalisable findings. The purpose is instead to generate contextualised insights into how GenAI governance is understood and enacted in different institutional settings. Second, institutional policies and practices surrounding GenAI are evolving rapidly. As universities continue to revise their guidance in response to technological developments, the findings should be understood as reflecting a particular moment within an ongoing governance process. Finally, the study relies on policy documents and interview data and does not directly observe students' writing practices. While this design is appropriate for exploring governance and interpretation, it cannot capture every aspect of actual GenAI use during writing.

Despite these limitations, the paper argues that timing represents an important but underexplored dimension of GenAI governance in higher education. Current policy debates often concentrate on issues of permission, prohibition, detection, or disclosure. However, questions concerning when AI assistance becomes educationally appropriate may be equally significant for understanding how universities balance innovation, academic integrity, and learning. By combining policy document analysis and stakeholder interviews within a comparative framework, the proposed study seeks to provide a richer understanding of how temporal boundaries of AI assistance are constructed, negotiated, and enacted across different higher education contexts.

As GenAI becomes increasingly embedded within academic writing practices, universities will face growing pressure to move beyond simple regulatory responses and develop governance approaches that recognise the complexity of human–AI collaboration. The comparative perspective proposed in this paper offers one possible route towards that goal and provides a foundation for future empirical research into the evolving relationship between AI, writing, and higher education governance.

Declaration on Generative AI

The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT during the preparation of this manuscript for language editing, structural refinement, and proofreading. All interpretations, arguments, and final editorial decisions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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