



Is It Ethical for Teachers to Use AI for Student Feedback?

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Abstract

Providing feedback to students is an important yet time-consuming part of teachers' work. Advances in AI technologies, especially generative AI, have introduced innovative solutions to automate the feedback process. The use of AI for feedback has generated interest in higher education, mainly attributed to its potential to reduce teachers' workload and enhance feedback timeliness in response to the massification of university education. However, there remains a gap in empirical research that focuses on the ethical implications of this practice. In view of this, the paper draws on a diverse dataset (i.e., university policy reviews, social media posts and interviews with university teachers and students) to extrapolate eight key areas of ethical considerations regarding teachers' use of AI for feedback purposes. Building on these areas, we call for a more nuanced understanding of what it means for teachers to use AI for feedback, considering various contextual complexities such as the purposes of assessment, the features of student assignments, and the types of feedback automated by AI. The study also highlights the need to move beyond the binary question of whether teachers should use AI or not towards exploring how feedback activities and teacher AI use could be designed and operated in ways that maintain and even enhance care, trust, and human connections central to effective feedback processes. While the study focuses on teachers, promoting the ethical use of AI requires a collective effort from multiple stakeholders in and beyond higher education.

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Practitioner Notes

1. As AI tools become available as a way to support feedback provision, greater attention is needed to the ethical implications of this practice.
2. There is no simple binary answer to whether it is ethical for teachers to use AI for student feedback.
3. Ethical AI use in feedback depends on multiple factors, including communication of how AI has been used, assessment purpose, assignment type, student privacy, and the trust central to teacher-student relationships.
4. This study identifies eight key areas of ethical consideration that suggest potential directions for future research, policymaking, and teacher training.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, ethics, feedback, teacher, AI, educator

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Introduction

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have introduced innovative solutions to automate time-consuming tasks traditionally handled by teachers, such as grading and providing feedback on students' work. Since the 1970s, researchers and technicians have been working on intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) that imitate human teachers to provide immediate feedback to learners (Larkin & Chabay, 1992). More recently, the development of generative AI tools has created new possibilities for teachers to "outsource" their feedback practices (Roe et al., 2026). For example, teachers can prompt ChatGPT to produce detailed feedback comments simply by uploading students' work alongside a grading rubric to an online chat interface.

These developments have drawn attention in higher education, where the massification of university education has led to increased student numbers and heightened pressure on teachers to provide high-quality feedback. This pressure is further compounded by persistently high rates of student dissatisfaction with feedback (Henderson et al., 2019). A growing number of studies have noted this trend, acknowledging the potential of AI to reduce university teachers' workload and enhance student learning by instant feedback provision (Crawford et al., 2023; Pang et al., 2024).

Amid growing discussions about the use of AI for feedback, there is an emerging focus on the ethical implications of this practice. For example, in a time when AI-generated work submitted by students could be viewed as cheating, what are some ethical tensions around teachers' use of AI to generate feedback comments? Eaton (2024) noted that teachers' uncritical use of AI for grading and feedback could lead to many unintended consequences, such as violations of student privacy, unfair assessment, and students feeling disconnected from their teachers. However, in Luo et al.'s (2025) recent study that investigated the dilemmas reported by university teachers regarding AI use in assessment, only one out of 636 online posts was related to teachers' ethical use of AI for grading and feedback. Based on this finding, they argued that teachers direct most of their attention to students' use of AI in their coursework, yet many have not been reflective on whether their own use of AI is ethical. This highlights the need for rigorous studies to lay out key ethical considerations for teachers to support them in navigating the complexities in using AI for feedback.

This study frames feedback as an important part of teachers' professional duties and focuses on teachers' use of AI to generate feedback comments for their students. While this focus might initially appear to reinforce the uni-dimensional conception of feedback as merely information given to students, this is not our intention. Emerging studies have highlighted instances of student dissatisfaction with teachers using AI to assist in their everyday work, leading to significant disruptions to teacher-student trust (Luo, 2025; Yang, 2026). Such trust is essential for meaningful student feedback uptake and for fostering the relationships needed to build an effective feedback process. Therefore, the study does not argue that effective feedback relies solely on how teachers deliver it – rather, the study aims to emphasise that teachers' role in feedback is a vital aspect of the broader feedback process and the relationships it relies upon.

Research Question

Against This Context, the Study Seeks to Address the Following Research Question:

What Are the Key Ethical Considerations for Teachers When Using AI to Provide Students with Feedback?

In addressing this question, the study aims to reflect the diversity of AI tools that could be used by teachers for feedback purposes. This includes both specifically designed AI software for feedback that is not necessarily generative in nature (e.g., grammar correction feedback systems), as well as generative AI tools that, while not explicitly designed for feedback provision, can be leveraged for this purpose. For this reason, we have intentionally chosen to use the broader term “AI” in this study to encompass the wider spectrum of AI technologies influencing teachers’ feedback provision to students. Meanwhile, to ensure clarity in certain contexts, the term “generative AI” will be used when the literature, findings or discussion specifically pertain to this subset of AI technology.

The study matters because it offers timely insights into an important yet under-explored aspect of AI use in higher education, shifting the focus from students to teachers. While AI may enhance the efficiency and scalability of feedback practices, feedback is not merely a technical process of generating comments but rather a deeply relational practice that impacts students’ learning engagement, mental wellbeing, and trust towards their teachers and institutions. Without careful ethical considerations, teachers’ use of AI in feedback may lead to significant practical consequences. Findings from this study therefore contribute to a better understanding of the implications of teachers’ AI use in feedback and inform the development of institutional policies and professional development support around AI use for feedback purposes.

Literature

Using AI for Feedback

Feedback is a notoriously time-consuming part of teachers’ work and students often report dissatisfaction regarding the timeliness and quality of feedback they receive, especially in higher education (Henderson et al., 2019). Over the years, feedback research has evolved from emphasising a one-way knowledge transmission to a dialogic process where students also play an important role in seeking and acting on feedback (Shum et al., 2023). Despite the broadened views on feedback, providing quality feedback to help students learn remains a critical responsibility of teachers and an essential part of effective feedback processes (Chan & Luo, 2020).

Against this background, significant efforts have been invested in designing computer-based systems that use AI techniques to assess students’ work and simulate the role of a human teacher to provide feedback (VanLEHN, 2011). Known as automated feedback systems, they have been applied in different disciplines such as programming education (Keuning et al., 2018) and language learning (Ai, 2017). In view of the scattered knowledge in this field, Deeva and colleagues (2021) conducted a rigorous review of 109 automated feedback systems described in the academic literature from 2008 to 2019. The review concluded that these systems “still remain rather rigid” and users have very little control over the type or the content of feedback provided (p. 26). Deeva et al. (2021) noted that the feedback provided by 90% of these systems is corrective in nature, merely informing users whether their responses are “right” or “wrong”.

Although these early automated feedback systems are often limited to providing corrective feedback, the recent rise of generative AI has largely transformed the nature and quality of automated feedback. The advancement of generative AI has enabled the automation of more personalised, context-specific, and detailed feedback on complex and open-ended assignments

(e.g., essays, portfolios). The accessibility of generative AI tools through online chat interfaces has also significantly lowered the technical barriers for teachers to integrate technology into their workflow. Tools like ChatGPT have brought AI to mainstream awareness – what was once considered the domain of tech-savvy individuals has now become commonplace in our everyday conversations and education practices (Eaton, 2023).

Ethical Considerations Around AI-Automated Feedback

By ethics, Mahony (2009) defined it as a “philosophy of morality” that deals with “what we ought to do” (p. 983). Since 2020, we have witnessed growing efforts to develop ethical principles to guide AI use in education (e.g., Holmes et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). According to Holmes et al. (2021), these efforts mainly “focus on data and how that data is analysed”, highlighting issues such as the explainability of AI models, the use of secure AI platforms and the inherent bias in AI models (p. 506). Although these principles provide valuable guidelines, they remain too broad to adequately address AI use in education and have rarely been tailored to specific contexts, particularly the context of feedback.

Several studies related to ethics, AI and feedback deserve special mention. In their chapter introducing ethics in AI-based online assessment in higher education, Heil and Ifenthaler (2024) argued that the supposedly vital aspect of feedback – i.e. human interaction – could be replaced by AI if the machine is used to provide feedback for students. Also noteworthy is Otaki’s (2023) master’s thesis, which contributed empirical data on teachers and students’ opinions on using generative AI for feedback. By interviewing 17 university students and nine educators, Otaki highlighted several ethical concerns, including protection of student data, hallucination in AI-generated feedback, and disparity in access to advanced AI models for high-quality feedback.

While these studies have generated important insights, the ethical considerations of teachers using AI for feedback is not their primary research focus. Shum et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review outlining the competencies teachers need for the skilled use of automated feedback tools, but they did not specifically address the ethical dimensions. In this context, Pang et al. (2024) from this journal called for more dedicated research to “investigate the technical and ethical challenges in the higher education sector on how AI can be integrated into the feedback process”.

Some blog posts have attempted to outline ethical principles to guide teachers’ use of AI for feedback purposes. For example, Eaton (2024) proposed eight ethical reasons that teachers should avoid using AI apps for assessment, highlighting issues around students’ intellectual property rights, students’ privacy, and the potential for biased feedback from AI. Liu and Bridgeman (2023) presented an infographic to help teachers at Sydney University navigate their use of AI for marking and feedback. They emphasised that teachers must clearly communicate their use of AI to students and only use AI platforms approved by the internal governance framework. These blog posts reinforce the need for more rigorous studies with empirical data to understand the ethical aspects of AI-automated feedback.

Feedback Ethics

Although ethics in assessment (e.g., grade pollution, confidentiality of test items) has attracted sustained research attention, the ethical aspects of feedback have seldom emerged as an independent research focus. Instead, they are often subsumed under the discussion of

assessment ethics and mentioned in passing related to how assessment results are communicated. For example, Bazvand's (2023) study on student teachers' perceptions of assessment ethics highlighted "lack of transparency of feedback provision" as a significant ethical concern. Gao et al. (2022) and Fan et al. (2020) investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of assessment ethics and found that half of them viewed it unethical for a professor to only provide positive feedback to students.

One notable study was authored by Bozalek and colleagues (2016) who applied Tronto's political ethics of care to evaluate the quality of feedback texts. Five moral elements are considered central to the ethics of care – i.e. attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and trust. Bozalek et al. (2016) argued that these moral elements help frame feedback as a collaborative, dialogic and relational process rather than a one-way transfer of information from teacher to student. Compared to research on assessment ethics that often operates around validity and integrity issues, discussions around feedback ethics seem to emphasise the relational and communicative aspects.

Method

The study utilised four datasets to address the research question, including university policies, social media data, student and teacher interviews. The use of diverse datasets helps capture the ethical considerations from different angles. The research has obtained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the first author's institution (Approval No. 2023-2024-0134 and 2024-2025-0174).

Data Collection

University Policies and Guidelines

The first dataset includes institutional policies and guidelines on the use of AI from 50 leading universities based on the 2025 QS World University Ranking. The search was conducted between January and February 2025, using relevant keywords ([“AI”] or [“artificial intelligence”] + [“grading”] or [“feedback”] + [“teacher”]) on their institutional websites. Manual searches were also performed on the web pages of the Teaching and Learning Centre (if any) of each university. Web pages that provide specific policies or guidelines on teachers' use of AI for feedback purposes were saved as PDF files for later analysis. General AI policies and guidelines that do not specifically mention teachers' use of AI for feedback were not included (e.g., general statements on ethical AI use). At the time of data collection, only 14 out of the 50 reviewed universities had published specific guidelines on teachers' use of AI for feedback.

While the sample could be biased toward Western elite perspectives, these universities were selected because they play a leadership role in education innovation. With strong resources and expertise, they are often among the first to develop policies addressing complex educational issues (e.g., regulating teachers' use of AI). These universities' global influence makes them information-rich cases to be studied (Luo, 2024), providing an important source of guidance for mapping out ethical considerations surrounding teacher AI use for feedback.

Social Media Data

The second dataset includes social media data sourced from Reddit, one of the most popular online communities that allows users to write posts and engage in discussions with users who share similar interests. The anonymous feature of Reddit has attracted millions of users to candidly share their opinions, making it a useful data collection site for social sciences research (Proferes et al., 2021). Recent studies have highlighted the usefulness of Reddit data as it enables researchers to access more honest opinions from participants compared to traditional interviews on AI-related issues (e.g., Gorichanaz, 2023; Luo et al., 2025).

For this study, the search involved three sets of keywords on the Reddit website in October 2024 – i.e. [“AI”] or [“artificial intelligence”] + [“feedback”] + [“teacher”] or [“professor”]. Three topic posts, along with their responses, were selected based on the Reddit algorithm which ranked posts with high user engagement. This sampling approach allowed us to identify posts that are more likely to include lively discussions around teachers’ ethical use of AI for feedback. These active posts also indicate that these discussions are perceived as relevant, important, or contentious in public discourse, making them valuable for understanding the ethical considerations around this topic.

The three selected topic posts invite insights into the ethical dimensions of using AI for feedback. One post asked whether it is morally problematic for teachers to use AI for feedback (with 68 responses), another discussed the ethics of using AI for grading and feedback (with 31 responses), and the third was posted by a student complaining about his professor using AI to give feedback (with 791 responses). For the first two posts, the original posts as well as the responses ($n = 101$ in total) were extracted and compiled into an Excel file for analysis. Due to the extensive responses to the third post, only the 50 top-rated responses (ranked by the website’s algorithm based on “likes” to the responses) were extracted as they represent the opinions most commonly held and shared among users. An initial screening was conducted on the Reddit posts to remove meaningless responses that do not contribute to this study (e.g., simply replying “Yes”, emojis), resulting in 76 responses for subsequent analysis.

Teacher and Student Interviews

The final two datasets include interviews with students ($n = 23$) and teachers ($n = 33$) recruited from higher education institutions located in Southern China (see Table 1 for demographics). At the time of data collection, none of the teacher participants reported the existence of internal policies regarding teachers’ use of AI for grading and feedback. There were also no stringent policies at the municipal or national level regulating teachers’ AI use for feedback purposes, although general guidance advocating for ethical AI use and data safety was in place. None of the participants’ institutions had provided dedicated internal AI-powered feedback platforms for teachers, but all teachers reported experience using general generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek to assist in their everyday work. The cultural context where the interviews took place could be characterised as proactive in fostering AI readiness among students and teachers. This is reflected in recent policies from the China Ministry of Education (2026) promoting “AI+Education” as part of a broader national agenda to compete in the global AI race. These policies encourage teachers to integrate AI into their teaching and assessment practices and highlight the importance of AI literacy in teacher professional development.

Table 1*Teacher and Student Participants*

		Student (n)	Teacher (n)
Disciplines	Arts and Humanities (e.g., history, creative arts)	4	7
	Social sciences (e.g., education, business)	11	13
	Applied sciences (e.g., engineering, medicine)	4	7
	Natural sciences (e.g., physics)	4	6
Gender	Male	5	12
	Female	18	21
Total		23	33

To allow for diverse perspectives, purposive sampling was used to include participants from different disciplines. Teacher participants were recruited from the researchers' professional network and snowballing, and they must have had direct experience with marking students' assignments since 2023 September (i.e. around one year after the public release of ChatGPT). Student participants were recruited by bulk emails sent through their universities. It should be noted that these interviews were conducted for two larger research projects which aim to understand students and teachers' assessment experiences in the AI age. In specific relation to this study, students and teachers were asked about their experiences and opinions regarding teachers' use of AI for grading and feedback purposes. Only responses related to these questions were extracted for analysis in this study.

Data Analysis

The first challenge in data analysis was determining what constitutes "ethical considerations" in the use of AI for feedback. Drawing on Mahony's (2009) definition of ethics as "what we ought to do" (p. 983), we focused on identifying statements across data sources that satisfy these criteria – (1) eligible statements are related to teachers' use of AI to provide feedback for students, and (2) they advise, address, or comment on what teachers should or should not do in this context, or they reflect concerns and values associated with (1).

To prepare for data analysis, data from different sources (the policies, the social media posts, and interview data) were imported into NVivo software. The data were stored under a single project account but saved into separate data folders under this account. This arrangement allows for easy comparison and tracking of data across different datasets.

The formal data analysis involved several stages, and an example is provided in Table 2 to illustrate the main coding process. First, texts under each dataset were read thoroughly to identify and highlight statements fulfilling the predefined criteria. This step streamlined the large volumes of data by focusing specifically on those relevant to the research question.

Second, using an open coding approach, the highlighted statements from each dataset were coded to capture their primary meanings. The open codes from each dataset were then reviewed and compared to identify patterns. Those representing similar ethical considerations were aggregated into broader meaning clusters.

The final stage involved reviewing, refining, and merging these meaning clusters into eight overarching themes that represent key areas of ethical considerations. At this stage, evidence for each theme was triangulated by cross-referencing codes, meaning clusters, and raw data across different datasets. For example, codes related to “professionalism considerations” identified in policy documents were checked against the interview and social media data. This triangulation process helped reveal whether a theme was representative across datasets or specific to a particular source. During this triangulation process, it was found that all the themes were supported by data from at least two data sources, with half of the eight themes substantiated by all datasets (see Table 3).

Table 2

Coding Example

Theme	Meaning clusters	Open codes
Professionalism considerations (Description note: This theme covers the ethical tension between teachers' use of AI for feedback and their professional responsibility, identity and development)	Teachers' professional responsibility under question	- Teachers fail to fulfil professional obligations - Students question whether teachers deserve their pay if feedback is outsourced to AI - Teachers miss the opportunity to foster connections with students through feedback
	Teachers' professional identity and development under question	- Delegating the task undermines teaching as a profession - Use of AI for feedback poses a threat to teachers' professional development (undermining critical thinking) - Allowing teachers to use AI for their work while prohibiting students from doing so creates a double standard, threatening how teachers are viewed as professionals

To ensure theme clarity and distinctiveness, the data and codes under each theme were continuously reviewed to ensure that each theme represented a unique ethical consideration without significant overlaps. Although the themes are not intended to be entirely mutually exclusive, each maintains a clear focus. For example, although security and accountability considerations may address related issues, security considerations focus on the use of secure platforms and information protection, whereas accountability considerations centre on teachers' responsibility and control. Each theme was assigned a descriptive note (see Table 2 for an example) to clearly articulate its focus, which helped clarify the boundaries between themes and facilitated the review process.

Results

The data analysis process resulted in eight themes representing the key ethical considerations around teachers' use of AI for feedback purposes. In this section, we present each theme in detail, drawing on examples across the datasets to illustrate each theme.

Professionalism Considerations

One key ethical consideration emerging from the data pertains to the tension between teachers' use of AI for feedback and their professional duties as educators. The ethical use of AI for feedback extends beyond technical considerations to include concerns about its potential to undermine the teacher's professional role and challenge the perception of teaching as a respected profession.

The tension between outsourcing feedback to AI and maintaining teachers' professional responsibilities was observed across all datasets. Some students expressed in the interview and on social media that teachers who rely on AI for feedback fail to fulfil their professional obligations. For example, one student remarked on social media, "Providing feedback is a role assigned to the teacher. If they can't be bothered doing this, then perhaps they aren't worth being paid". In response to a post complaining about a professor using AI to generate feedback, one of the top-rated responses was "you could do the assignment and ask GPT to grade it yourself. That's 20 (USD)/month, a hell of a lot less than you pay them". This sentiment appears particularly intense at a time when higher education is becoming more expensive, especially for international students and students enrolled in taught master's programs. In University CO's guidelines on teachers using AI for feedback, it emphasised that "evaluation and grading of students is among the most important tasks entrusted to faculty" and that the integrity of the assessment process depends on the role of teachers.

The use of AI for feedback also raised significant concerns about teachers' professional identity and development. This perspective was reflected in both the interview and social media datasets, in which some teachers argued that delegating such a key responsibility to AI undermines teaching as a profession. One teacher argued, "I think teaching is a professional job, and using AI to perform one of my job functions does undermine my ability to claim to be a professional." Others connected the issue to students' use of AI for coursework, contending that if AI use is prohibited for students, it should also be prohibited for teachers (e.g., "Morally speaking, [...] if it is permissible for you to use AI in that way, then it is permissible for a student to use AI to do the intellectual labour you ask of them on any assignment." [Social media post]) Beyond these concerns, some interviewed teachers viewed their use of AI for feedback as a threat to their professional development, stating that dependence on AI could undermine their ability to critically evaluate students' work – a skill that they regarded central to their role as teachers.

Accountability Considerations

Accountability highlights the ethical consideration of ensuring teacher accountability and control when using AI for feedback. The data reveals a widespread expectation that teachers should be held accountable for the quality of feedback provided to students, especially when AI is involved in the feedback process. In this context, teachers' responsibility to oversee and validate AI-generated feedback comments is also highlighted in the data.

The role of human control emerged as a key theme across different datasets, which emphasised the importance of teachers reviewing AI-generated feedback and applying teacher judgement to ensure its accuracy and relevance. Teachers and students expressed greater receptiveness to teachers using AI for feedback when “human is still in the loop” and when “AI is used in conjunction with human feedback”. Among the university policies under review, we also noticed a recurring emphasis for teachers to review and revise AI-generated feedback before sharing it with students.

Apart from human control, the issue of accountability has been frequently discussed in the data. Accountability is linked to the concept of responsible AI and emphasises the attribution of responsibility in the design and application of AI in education. In the dataset, references to accountability predominantly centre around teachers. Four institutions have explicit statements holding teachers accountable for using AI to generate feedback, stipulating that “instructors remain ultimately responsible for the use of the tool” (University NA). One student in the interview remarked that “teachers must remain answerable to the feedback provided; otherwise, there will be much meaningless feedback copied and pasted from AI.”

Transparency Considerations

Another key ethical consideration pertains to the transparency, openness, and consent regarding how AI is used by teachers to provide feedback. Findings reveal that transparency is mainly manifested through the expectation that teachers clearly communicate whether and how they use AI for feedback purposes, as well as the need to obtain student consent for submitting their work to AI.

Transparency is regarded as essential to the ethical use of AI across our datasets. Eight universities have advised teachers to be transparent with students regarding their AI use in feedback. University SI, for example, required that teachers be transparent about where and how they use AI for assessment feedback and grading. Interviewed students also elaborated on the need for transparency – as one argued, “I think we deserve the right to know whether our teachers have used AI to generate feedback. It feels like being ‘cheated’ when I thought the feedback came from the teacher but, in reality, it was from AI.” Discussions on Reddit echoed these expectations. Two Reddit posts noted that the conversation for now is not about whether to use AI for feedback but how to use it appropriately – and “transparency is a big part of appropriate use”. Some teachers emphasised the need to be specific about their AI use in the interview:

It’s not just about telling students that I will use AI to assist in the feedback, but also about how I will first draft the key points for feedback and then ask AI to organise them. [...] The human’s role is still there. Students can recognise the efforts put in by the teachers rather than perceiving it as mere laziness.

Consent emerged as another critical aspect of transparency. Four universities have explicitly noted the need for student consent before uploading their work to AI for feedback. For example, University AU stated that “uploading student work directly into an AI platform without their consent is not permitted”, and University SY required teachers to obtain written consent from students in advance. However, practical challenges around consent were noted. Teachers were concerned that obtaining informed consent would add significant workload to them, undermining the time-saving benefits of using AI. To address this, University SY suggested a more feasible approach

related to “passive consent” – i.e. allowing students to opt out if they do not wish their work submitted to AI.

Effectiveness Considerations

Effectiveness considerations reflect a key line of discussion in the data about how teachers’ use of AI for feedback might impact the quality of education, including its impact on teacher-student relationships, the quality of feedback itself, and the critical role feedback plays in informing teaching practices.

The potential impact on teacher-student relationships calls into question the ethics of teachers using AI to provide feedback. Drawing on the social media data, the study recorded concerns about how using AI for feedback will “erode the trust and credibility essential to the student-teacher relationship”. One student complained that when they received AI-generated feedback, “it feels so disingenuous and unethical, and it feels like such a slap across the face for all the effort I put into this class and my assignments”. Teachers also shared these concerns, arguing that “I always strive to give personalized feedback and it really pays off in terms of relationship building. I guess that’s something an AI couldn’t emulate”. University MO’s guidelines urged teachers to consider how using AI for grading and feedback might impact the creation of human connections, which are described as “the backbone of rich university experiences”. These comments highlight the ethical challenges of maintaining the human connection and trust that feedback fosters, which many believe AI is incapable of replicating.

The use of AI also triggers concerns about the quality of feedback provided. Students in the interview have criticised that AI-generated feedback is often “too general” or “not meaningful”. Teachers similarly observed that AI struggled to provide feedback on complex assignments, commenting that “The interconnectedness, cohesion, quality and more is not really there.” University JO reiterated that “monitoring the quality of feedback generated by AI tools ... is essential.” As one student suggested in the interview, while he is open to teachers using AI for feedback, the teacher should set up consultation hours so students can ask for clarifications of feedback if needed.

Another recurring concern stems from the integral role feedback plays in supporting teachers’ ability to refine their teaching practices. For example, one teacher shared on Reddit that assessment heavily informs her instruction and “I need to read student work myself to determine how I should teach and, if necessary, reteach, course content”. The view resonated with other teachers who also described feedback as “an essential part of ‘actual teaching’”.

Inclusivity Considerations

When teachers use AI to provide feedback, ensuring that the feedback is fair, unbiased, and promotes empathy and support is an important ethical consideration. One critical aspect of inclusiveness in AI-automated feedback pertains to the systemic biases in AI systems. For example, University MI provided an example where a scoring system trained on business plans from male-led startups might unfairly penalise plans designed to address challenges specific to women. Such biases not only undercut fairness in assessment but also result in feedback that is misleading and oversimplified. Questions about the reliability of AI systems further complicate the issue – as University MI questioned, “Given the same system, the same input, and the same rubric, would the system provide identical scores and feedback?”

The issue of inclusiveness also extends to how AI is used for feedback across student populations. One interviewed teacher shared her experience where multiple teachers co-taught the same class, with some using AI to generate feedback and others not. This inconsistency has led to fairness and favouritism issues, as students receiving AI-generated feedback felt they were treated differently compared to peers receiving feedback from teachers. The favouritism issue might worsen if the quality of feedback received from these students also varies.

Meanwhile, AI also offers opportunities to enhance inclusiveness by helping teachers refine their feedback language. During the interviews, two students noted that sometimes teacher feedback is overly blunt and lacks sensitivity, which negatively impacts their self-esteem. If teachers leverage AI to make their feedback sound more caring, it will enable such feedback to resonate with students in a more positive manner.

Security Considerations

Based on the data, teachers' ethical use of AI for feedback is also intertwined with adopting secure AI platforms and protecting sensitive student information.

One frequently mentioned aspect under this theme is the use of secure AI platforms, as mentioned in the policies of five universities. Some institutions have developed their internal AI platforms for staff and students, requiring staff to use "the University's internal, secure platform of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools" (University ME); others have provided a list of institutionally approved AI systems, requiring staff to rely on "third-party technologies that have been approved through our internal governance framework" (University SY); still others prohibit teachers to "upload student work ... without ensuring that the system has appropriate data protections" (University MO). However, without proper support and training, what is meant by "secure AI platforms" could be ambiguous to teachers if the institution expects individual teachers to identify such platforms.

The study recorded concerns about disclosing students' private information (e.g., names, ID numbers, emails) when their assignments are submitted to AI platforms. Drawing on the social media data, teachers expressed discomfort with the idea of "giving student work to a machine learning algorithm from a student privacy standpoint". To address this problem, University MI and University MO advised using only data-protected platforms and anonymising students' assignments before submitting them to AI.

Data also touch upon intellectual property issues and the ethical use of student data. Notably, one interviewed teacher teaching creative arts believed that it would not be acceptable to submit students' artwork to AI systems, as that could violate intellectual property rights and lead to legal issues. University ME stated that students' work remains the intellectual property of students and should not be uploaded to any third-party software.

Contextual Considerations

Ethical considerations surrounding teachers' AI use extend to the context in which feedback is provided, including the purposes of assessment, the complexity of the assignments, and the types of feedback.

Seven universities have noted the need for context-sensitive approaches to AI use in providing feedback. As University JO argued, teachers need to consider the type of assignment, the

feedback they wish to provide, and the level of customisation when selecting AI tools. One teacher mentioned in the interview that enhanced caution is required when the assignment involves sensitive content that may render the student or the person identified in the student's work vulnerable. Some examples include students' reflections on personal events (e.g., childhood trauma), patients' medical histories, and unpublished legal cases.

Four universities explicitly distinguished between using AI to automate feedback for formative and summative purposes. For example, University CO stated that while AI "may have selective utility in assisting in providing feedback for low-stakes formative assessment [...], we currently do NOT recommend it be used in summative evaluation of student work". Similarly, University SY believed that for assessments that count toward the final grade, "AI must not be used to determine the first stance of feedback comments".

Some teachers argued in the interview that the use of AI should be allowed for corrective feedback (e.g., identifying grammar errors) but not feedback for more complex tasks such as essays. Likewise, University UST proposed the use of AI to identify common mistakes and "provide feedback relative to those mistakes". The same viewpoint was echoed in students' interviews, in which they expressed greater acceptance of teachers outsourcing feedback for more structured tasks with clear right or wrong answers.

Policy and Resource Considerations

The policy and resource dimensions of teachers' AI use also emerged from the data as a key ethical consideration. Findings point to the need for teachers to carefully consider the resources available to them, such as access to secure AI platforms and adequate training, when making decisions about integrating AI into their feedback practices. In other words, teachers' use of AI should align with policies and governance regarding how, when, and to what extent AI is utilised.

Despite the availability of general AI policies, the study found that only 14 out of the top 50 universities have developed specific guidance on teachers' use of AI for feedback purposes. In particular, two universities have developed stringent guidelines requiring teachers to obtain explicit approval from the university management team before using AI to generate feedback. For example, University NA mandates that teachers seek "prior approval by Head of Department or relevant Deanery, under the oversight of Chair of the AI-COP [Community of Practice]".

It has been noted that teachers often operate within the constraints of institutional policies, but these policies are frequently ambiguous or poorly communicated. None of the interviewed teachers mentioned having knowledge of (or access to) internal policies that govern their use of AI in providing feedback. A few teachers even admitted that they had not given much thought to the ethical implications of using AI for feedback, which reveals the need for greater ethical awareness and targeted training for teachers. Teachers in the interview unanimously expressed a strong desire for more coordinated guidance and clearer communication of such guidance to inform their feedback practices.

Institutional resources and feedback policies are also found to impact the ethical use of AI for feedback. For example, some interviewed teachers reported that their institutions mandated the use of secure AI platforms but did not provide access to such platforms or offer clear guidance on how to identify a secure option. One teacher posted that their department had a stringent policy requiring feedback to be provided to students within two weeks, which incentivised the

outsourcing of feedback to AI due to the increasing class size and the workload faced by teachers. University MC pointed out that teachers need training, additional time, access to tools and ongoing support before they can appropriately use AI for different pedagogical purposes.

Summary of Findings

The findings highlight eight areas of ethical considerations regarding teachers' use of AI for feedback, which are further summarised in Table 3. This table condenses the key points from the findings, aiming to enhance their clarity and accessibility for readers.

Table 3*Summary of Findings with Data Source Attribution*

Theme	Ethical Considerations (Summary from Findings)	Data Sources
Professionalism considerations	– Feedback provision is traditionally viewed as a key aspect of teachers' work. Reliance on AI for feedback may conflict with teachers' professional responsibilities and undermine their professional identity. – Dependence on AI for feedback could threaten teachers' professional skills, especially their ability to critically evaluate students' work.	Social media University policies Teacher interviews Student interviews
Accountability considerations	– AI-generated feedback could be inaccurate, highlighting the importance of human oversight and monitoring during AI use. – Teachers are seen as bearing accountability for their use of AI in feedback.	Social media University policies Teacher interviews Student interviews
Transparency considerations	– Transparency forms a key part of ethical AI use, requiring teachers to reflect on how they communicate their use of AI for feedback to students. This may include being transparent about the platform being used, how it is used to provide feedback, the precautionary measures used to protect student data and privacy, and the role the teacher plays in this process. – Informed consent is interwoven with transparency expectations. An environment where students feel safe to provide or decline consent is encouraged.	Social media University policies Teacher interviews Student interviews
Effectiveness considerations	– Teachers' use of AI for feedback may affect the trust and connection central to teacher-student relationships. – Concerns arise regarding the quality of AI-generated feedback. – Reliance on AI for providing feedback to students could limit opportunities for teachers to improve their teaching due to reduced direct engagement with student work.	Social media University policies Teacher interviews Student interviews

Theme	Ethical Considerations (Summary from Findings)	Data Sources
Inclusivity considerations	– Systemic biases in AI systems may result in biased feedback for students. – Fairness issues arise when the use of AI is applied unevenly across student populations (e.g., students receiving AI-generated feedback feel treated differently compared to those receiving human feedback). – AI could be used to refine feedback language to promote inclusivity.	University policies Teacher interviews Student interviews
Security considerations	– Teachers are advised to use secure AI platforms, but what is meant by secure platforms often remains vague to teachers. – Submitting student work to AI for feedback risks disclosing private information (e.g., student names, emails). – Questions of intellectual property rights emerge when student work (especially creative artworks) is uploaded to AI platforms.	Social media University policies Teacher interviews
Contextual considerations	– Caution is required when the assignment involves sensitive content that may render the student or the person identified in the student's work vulnerable (e.g., student reflections on childhood trauma; patients' medical histories). – The ethicality of AI use may depend on the context in which feedback is provided, including the purposes of assessment (e.g., formative, summative), the complexity of the assignments (e.g., creative writing, standardised responses), and the types of feedback (e.g., corrective feedback, formative feedback).	University policies Teacher interviews Student interviews
Policy and resource considerations	– Teachers may need to carefully consider the resources available to them, such as access to secure AI platforms and adequate training, to make informed decisions about integrating AI into their feedback practices. – Teachers' use of AI should align with policies and governance regarding how, when, and to what extent AI is utilised. However, teachers often face challenges due to ambiguous or poorly communicated policies. – Institutional resources and feedback policies impact the ethical use of AI for feedback (e.g., unrealistic expectations for teachers in terms of feedback turnaround time may pressure teachers to rely on AI for feedback).	University policies Teacher interviews

Note. Data source attributions reflect the primary sources for each theme as identified in the findings. Some themes draw on evidence from all four datasets; others draw primarily on two or three. Source labels correspond to: University policies ($n = 14$ institutions with specific AI feedback guidelines); social media (Reddit posts and responses); teacher interviews and student interviews (interviews with teachers and students in Southern China institutions).

The eight ethical considerations outlined in Table 3 reveal the complexities and tensions around teachers' use of AI in feedback practices. Building on these considerations, the discussion that follows will situate the key findings within ongoing scholarly conversations in this field and point to areas requiring further attention.

Discussion

Is it ethical for teachers to use AI to generate feedback for students? This is arguably one of the most controversial questions when it comes to teachers using AI in support of their everyday work. Tensions around this issue are clearly reflected in the data presented above, in which students expressed negative emotions, with some accusing teachers of being unworthy of their pay and even disingenuous. Indeed, unlike other tasks such as lesson planning, feedback has long been recognised as a deeply relational practice (Bozalek et al., 2016; Heron et al., 2021), which makes the use of AI in this context especially sensitive.

The study does not aim to provide a definitive answer on whether it is ethical for teachers to use AI to generate feedback, nor could it. Instead, we argue that the ethicality of such practice is shaped by a myriad of factors, categorised under the eight main themes of ethical considerations in the findings. Building on the findings, here we highlight a few key areas for further deliberation on this matter.

First is the need for a more nuanced understanding of what teachers using AI for feedback actually entails. Without such clarity, it is easy to overgeneralise teachers' different practices of using AI, making it difficult to evaluate the ethical implications meaningfully. As captured in our theme "contextual considerations", teachers' use of AI for feedback could mean very different things depending on the purpose and form of feedback, the stage of AI use, and the sensitivity of student work. For example, is AI used to provide corrective feedback (e.g., fixing grammatical errors) or more comprehensive quality judgments of students' work? Is the feedback used for summative purposes or formative purposes? Is AI used to generate initial feedback comments, or is it used to polish the feedback text crafted by teachers? The nature of student assignments also matters – our findings highlight the sensitivity of certain types of student work, such as personal reflections, patient case analyses, and creative artworks, which often involve deeply personal or creative dimensions. AI used in these different feedback contexts would likely entail very different implications on student learning, teacher-student relationships, and feedback effectiveness.

Second is the need to move beyond the binary question of whether teachers should use AI or not toward exploring how feedback activities and teacher AI use could be designed and operated in ways that maintain – and even enhance – the care, trust, and human connections that are central to effective feedback processes. Banning teachers from using AI is not an enforceable solution, as monitoring their use would be neither realistic nor desirable. Liu (2025) argued that the problem is not that the other party uses AI, but that "people may perceive the use of AI as suggesting that the other person doesn't care about the work or the person". Several students in this study also

expressed that teachers' use of AI for feedback made them feel as though their learning and effort were undervalued and not respected.

A possible way forward, as implied in the findings around “transparency considerations”, is to encourage teachers to be transparent about whether, why, and how AI is utilised in their feedback provision. To achieve this, Gonsalves (2026) advocated for dialogic transparency where transparency is not viewed as something the teacher transmitted to students but as something they build with students. This opens up space for more teacher-student dialogues around the ethical boundaries of using AI for feedback, as well as opportunities for students to understand the considerations behind teachers' AI use to boost trust. Although feedback provided in the form of written feedback seems to be most heavily influenced by AI at this stage, feedback could come in many different forms and modalities – for example, Heron et al. (2021) noted that “feedback talk” that takes place in moment-to-moment interactions in class “can in some cases be the richest, most abundant form of feedback available” (p. 2). Dialogic forms of feedback hold promise for fostering care in student feedback experiences.

Third is the need to remain cautious about the uncritical conceptualisation of feedback as merely comments delivered to students in a time when AI becomes capable of generating human-like outputs (Winstone et al., 2026). In recent years, studies comparing the quality of AI-generated feedback comments and those provided by human teachers have proliferated (see Literature Review section). Yet, these studies often reduce feedback to the quality of information conveyed and ignore how students perceive, engage with, and act on such feedback. Beyond student learning, several teachers in this study also emphasised how feedback provision offers important opportunities for them to reflect on their teaching and professional development. While these understandings of feedback are not new, they deserve to be revisited and emphasised as the widespread use of AI shifts much attention toward framing feedback as mere comments.

Finally, while this study focuses on the ethical use of AI, it does not aim to deter teachers from using AI to support their work. Rather, our discussions must be grounded in the complex realities faced by teachers. For example, our study reveals the tension between some students' dissatisfaction with their teachers outsourcing feedback work to AI and national policies that strongly encourage teachers to integrate AI to enhance their work efficiency (China Ministry of Education, 2026). Other factors mentioned in the data include the heavy workload, ambiguous institutional guidance, and growing class size that some teachers need to account for. While the study focuses on teachers when discussing the ethical considerations around using AI for feedback, promoting the ethical use of AI requires a collective effort from multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, AI developers, institutions, and students, to create a supportive ecosystem.

Implications

On a knowledge level, the study contributes to understanding the potential ethical considerations involved when teachers use AI to assist in providing feedback to students. The ethical use of AI for grading and feedback purposes has been discussed widely but mostly in an anecdotal manner. Unlike research that adopts a solely top-down approach to map out such ethical considerations (e.g., by reviewing policies), this study draws on data from diverse sources to enable a more comprehensive picture.

On a research level, the eight areas provide a potential foundation for developing future research instruments to measure and support teachers' ethical feedback literacy in AI use. Although the study may not have fully explored some interesting points mentioned in the findings (e.g., AI's influence on teacher-student relationships, public perceptions of teacher professionalism in the AI age, teacher autonomy in AI use), it introduces ideas that future research could develop further and address at a deeper level.

On a practical level, the ethical considerations provide some directions for policymakers, teacher training, and practitioners to begin examining the ethical dimensions of AI use in feedback. As noted in the findings, only 14 out of 50 universities had published relevant guidelines on teachers' AI use in feedback and none of the interviewed teachers reported knowledge of any internal guidance on this matter. The eight areas identified in this study do not constitute ready-made policy guidance, but they identify ethical tensions and contextual conditions that policymakers will need to grapple with as they develop such guidance. The study also holds potential to raise teacher awareness of the ethical dimension of their AI use for feedback, given prior research which indicated that teachers might not be fully aware of the ethical implications of their own use of AI but instead focused much attention on ensuring students' ethical AI use (Luo et al., 2025).

The key points highlighted in the Discussion suggest potential pathways for future engagement, including the need for a more nuanced definition of what teachers' AI use for feedback entails in policymaking, the importance of dialogic transparency in communicating teacher AI use to students to foster trust, and recognition of the ethical tensions experienced by teachers as they navigate conflicting pressures in their professional realities (e.g., policies, access to secure AI, workload). While the study is mainly grounded in higher education, the findings could be cautiously extended to other educational levels to navigate this issue. This study offers a starting point for continued dialogue on this topic and highlights the need for a broader recognition of the ethical complexities around teachers' AI use in feedback.

Limitations

One key limitation pertains to the dataset used in this study. While the study incorporated various data sources, we must acknowledge that the identified ethical considerations only reflect perspectives specific to our sampling. For example, the use of popular social media posts and the voluntary nature of interview participants may have introduced response bias, as those with strong opinions on AI were included in the sample. The ethical considerations are also likely to be influenced by participant characteristics – while the sample covers students and teachers from different disciplines, we did not collect demographic data on their AI literacy, their existing perceptions of feedback, and their beliefs about AI use. These factors, alongside broader contextual factors like national AI policies and cultures, may have influenced the participants' input. The policy data is also limited to 50 elite universities, which could be expanded in the future to include a broader range of institutions. The rapid evolution of AI policies in higher education should also be considered as both a limitation and a direction for future research to update the status quo as well as identify areas for improvement.

Another limitation pertains to whether the ethical considerations reflect the actual decision-making navigated by teachers in practice. Interviews may not effectively capture how teachers actually use AI for feedback purposes. Future studies might consider conducting case studies of teachers with first-hand experience using AI for feedback to observe how they navigate its use. Additionally,

it would be beneficial to include the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as developers of specialised AI-powered feedback systems, to understand how ethical considerations are featured in their design process. It would be interesting for future studies to examine how various contextual factors (e.g., institutional resources, stakeholder collaboration, training) influence the ethical use of AI for grading and feedback purposes as well.

Conclusion

The study explores a timely and contestable topic on the ethical dimensions of teachers' AI use for feedback. A key contribution of this study is the identification of eight areas of ethical considerations that can be used by teachers and policymakers to reflect on, evaluate, and navigate this emerging practice. Building on the findings, we argue for moving beyond a singular understanding of teachers' AI use in feedback as if all teachers use it under the same conditions or in the same ways. Instead, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of what teachers' AI use for feedback means and entails, highlighting the need to consider different contextual complexities that shape the ethicality of their practice.

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