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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Capabilities for studying with artificial intelligence, co-designed by students, staff and industry

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If university students are extensively working with artificial intelligence (AI) as part of their university education, then they also require the capabilities to effectively study with AI. Given that much of the literature on AI literacies and AI competencies is concerned with preparing students for their future professions rather than with study itself, there is a need for insights into what these foundational capabilities should be. A collaborative, participatory approach, which emphasises students as partners, brought together students, academics and professionals from the educational technology industry in a series of three two-hour workshops. Six hours of structured discussions resulted in the production of two texts: a set of concerns about studying with AI and a list of foundational capabilities. These texts may serve as starting points for conversations about what students might wish to try or become competent in during their university study.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, students as partners, study skills, AI literacy, AI competency, participatory research

Introduction

There is wide agreement that universities need to teach students how to engage with AI (Bearman et al., 2023), thus preparing them for a digital world. However, most frameworks in the literature are premised on preparing students for work or life (Hackl et al., 2026; Ng et al., 2021) and are thus concerned with what is often referred to as AI literacy (Chiu et al., 2024; Hackl et al., 2026; Ng et al., 2021) or sometimes as AI competencies (Chiu et al., 2024). There is much less emphasis on what students currently know and do for their own learning, even though generative AI has become a ubiquitous part of university study (Chung et al., 2026; Stephenson & Armstrong, 2026). If AI engagement is a day-to-day proposition for many students, then universities should teach students the fundamentals to ensure they are working with AI in beneficial ways. The question remains: what capabilities do they need for studying with AI?

This paper explores how a student–academia–industry collaboration can develop a shared understanding of what fundamental capabilities are required to study with AI. Such research is premised on the value of a collaborative approach, one which foregrounds students' voices and experiences. We take the perspective that understandings are enriched when academics and students grapple together over shared challenges. We also take the view that industry professionals who develop and work with technology bring valuable insights

from professional settings. Moreover, as our focus is on study capabilities rather than preparing for some future professional role, we acknowledge that students themselves know most about their own study needs and circumstances.

AI literacy and AI competencies

In order to clarify why and how this research offers something in addition to what has come before, we briefly review work on AI literacy and AI competencies. A substantial body of AI literacy literature precedes the rise of generative AI and has been extended both conceptually and empirically in recent years. Across this work, AI literacy is broadly held to be: "a set of competencies that enables individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace" (Long & Magerko, 2020, p. 2). This definition immediately indicates the general overlap between AI literacy and competencies—competencies can be seen as the particular activities that an individual should be able to do effectively in order to be AI-literate. Chiu (2025, p. 3225) offers one perspective as to the distinction: "AI literacy is about knowledge and understanding; AI competency is about skillful application and optimisation." However, Ng et al.'s (2021) exploratory review of AI literacy definitions identified four categories of AI literacy: knowing and understanding AI; using and applying AI; evaluating and creating AI; and AI ethics. Again, these categories encompass what AI literacy means in general terms. The rise of generative AI changes some of this foundational work on AI literacy; for example, "generative AI literacy" is seen as shifting the evaluating and creating category to be more about "effectively utilising GenAI tools for creative purposes rather than developing AI systems from scratch" (Xu et al., 2025, p. 116).

The AI literacy literature represents a sizeable and important body of work, which is also contested. For example, in contrast to the somewhat instrumental ideas outlined above, some argue that literacies should not be framed as neutral technical competencies but as socially situated practices embedded within social, cultural and power relations (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Indeed, a recent integrative review of AI literacy in higher education (Hackl et al., 2026) emphasises critical perspectives and acknowledges the differences in disciplinary contexts. However, the emphasis of the AI literacy literature in higher education is on preparation for graduate life, rather than what students need to do in the immediate term. Moreover, this literature tends to present views of AI experts or draws from reviews of the literature. We are mindful that student perspectives are often left out of the AI conversation (Jensen et al., 2025) and the higher education research literature (McGrath et al., 2025). Thus, our project addresses both these issues: we examine the capabilities needed for studying with AI, and we take a participatory approach to our research.

Capabilities for studying with artificial intelligence

The work on AI literacies and competencies seems very distant from the types of day-to-day know-how required to study with AI. A large-scale survey of over 8,000 students at four Australian universities indicates that students are using AI in varying degrees to: edit writing; generate ideas; summarise materials; get feedback on work; find information; create code; create visual images; and create software applications (Chung et al., 2026). Some students choose not to employ AI in their studies; and some choose not to engage with AI at all (Stephenson & Armstrong, 2026). If AI literacy concerns "knowing and understanding" of AI technologies and AI competency concerns "skillful application and optimisation" of these technologies (Chiu, 2025, p. 3225), then the *capabilities* required to study are somewhat different. They reflect the capability to employ or not employ AI as is beneficial for the individual student, which *may* entail literacies and competencies but is targeted at a very particular purpose – study.

We use the term "study" here to refer to the practices that students do in the pursuit of their university qualifications. Study includes reading, doing activities, and completing assessment tasks, all of which aspirationally lead to learning. While students may be working with AI in ways that interfere with their own learning despite their intention (Walton et al., 2025), our starting contention is that students themselves are best placed to describe the general capabilities which they find beneficial for study. Our interest here was directed towards what a student might need to be able to do in the *middle* of their degree, which we framed as the second year of study of a typical undergraduate course.

Participatory research

This project is part of the overall project, AI in Higher Education (aiinhe.org/), a four-university consortium focussing on student voice. In this phase of the project, our starting premise was to work with students as partners, to the benefit of ourselves and of our participants (Cook-Sathers, 2014). We employed a co-design methodology, which engaged participants in working together as a means of producing practical resources or insights. Co-design also served as a research methodology, in that we were seeking original insights through dialogic workshops (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017). We refer to these workshops, as is common parlance, as "co-labs." This paper presents a particular co-lab, which was originally framed as an invitation to discuss how students learnt with AI. As a consequence of the discussion, the group created two concrete resources which are outlined in the next section. We were guided by the research question: how do students, academics and educational technology industry representatives jointly characterise how students study with AI?

Methods

The research was structured across three interconnected two-hour workshops in August 2025. Ethics approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Ethics Committee, approval number 48076.

Participants and recruitment

In line with Matthews and Dollinger's (2023) view that student partnerships allow students to "speak for themselves" rather than be representatives of others, we invited students to contribute their perspectives and experiences. Similarly, we invited educators and industry representatives who had an interest in discussing the topic with students. The aim of the workshops was to generate shared insights about how students learn with AI.

Most participants attended multiple times. Across all three workshops, 16 undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students, 11 teaching academics, and seven educational technology industry representatives, a total of 35 participants attended (see Table 1). Twenty-two participants attended more than one workshop. Among them, 17 participants, including eight students, five academics, and four industry representatives, attended all three workshops. The student and academic participants were from four Australian universities across the discipline areas of Business, Health, Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). The seven industry representatives were all from different companies that provide educational technology services and products for Australian universities.

Table 1. *Participant attendance at co-labs*

	Student	**Staff**	**Industry representative**	**Total**
All workshops	*16*	*11*	*7*	*34*
Workshop 1: experiences	9	9	7	25
Workshop 2: skills and capabilities	7	6	2	15
Workshop 3: review and refine	7	11	7	34

Workshop design

Workshops were interwoven with full-group discussion, mixed-role breakout groups, and individual reflection at the end. Both full-group and breakout group discussion activities were supported through the use of shared prompts and writing (using Padlet). In order to ensure diverse and free-flowing discussion, small breakout groups deliberately mixed universities and roles. For example, we strived for a group to contain two students and two academics per group, with an industry member. We also aimed to ensure that students and staff came from different institutions. The breakout groups were not facilitated although a research team member was present to record the session; rather, participants conducted their group themselves by making use of the verbal and written instructions as they wished. Participants returned to a full-group discussion after each breakout group activity to share ideas.

Conversations were captured both through transcripts and Padlet. The latter was regarded as a coalescence of the ideas reached by the group: sometimes these were consensus notes and sometimes individuals added their own thoughts directly onto the prompts. These were synthesised by the research team between sessions and presented back to participants at the next workshop. We brought our own interpretations to what our participants offered but tried to let their views and opinions be captured in the text, even when we may not have always agreed with them.

Workshop content

Workshop 1 focused on sharing lived experiences. It was structured around two breakout group activities mediated by Padlet. In the first breakout group activity, participants were encouraged to discuss and list concerns they had about AI with respect to its impact on student learning. They could also up-vote shared concerns by reading others' concerns. In the second breakout group activity, participants discussed real examples of AI being used to support learning in higher education and what advice or guidance they could give to students using AI. After the workshop, we collated these into summaries for presentation back to the group.

Workshop 2 moved the conversations towards actionable ideas to inform possible recommendations for designing degrees in a world with AI. Workshop 2 was also structured around two breakout group activities, presented on Padlet and referring to the summaries developed in Workshop 1. In the first activity, participants were asked to discuss and list what should students know to do with AI to support their learning by the middle of any undergraduate degree. In the second breakout group activity, participants were asked to discuss how the capabilities that were discussed in the first activity could apply to a particular task of study that students were involved in. Alongside the two activities, participants were encouraged to review the concerns raised previously, which had been synthesised into a list by the research team. After this workshop we thematicised the "things students ought to know" and concerns into categories, synthesising and condensing into two outputs intended as resources for others.

Workshop 3 focused on reviewing resources that had been developed from earlier sessions in two breakout group activities. We presented the two outputs, which brought together ideas from the participants into coherent lists, with descriptions back to the whole group for review. Participants rotated through breakout groups to discuss the importance of each identified concern and capability, as well as to suggest improvements or additional examples. A full text of outputs developed in the workshop process is available as Creative Commons (Matthews et al. 2026).

Findings

Our participants co-designed two texts. The first, which we present here in summary, articulates the concerns that participants felt should be understood when learning with AI. These represented the values that participants felt important to frame any conversation of studying with AI. These concerns are specific to study and learning and are distinct from, yet overlapping with, issues of assessment and academic integrity. These values are to be paired with the second text, which outlined a list of capabilities that a second-year student should have.

There were four general categories of values that participants felt were important. The first described the need to emphasise human learning in study. Participants were concerned about: the impact of overuse or misuse of AI as undermining the discomfort necessary for learning; or the development of thinking skills; or the opportunities for embodied, interactive learning; or the impacts on student wellbeing. For example, one comment on the Padlet read: "everything becoming dehumanaized [sic], losing track on what it means to 'learn' and why we learn." The second series of concerns revolved around safeguarding what students knew and how they expressed themselves, raising problems of perpetuating misinformation, data privacy, and loss of their own voice. For example, a Padlet comment read: "Providing information that is fabricated, out of the context of the subject, or just from unreliable sources. And people taking this information for granted, as true." The third category concerned limits on innovation and experimentation, due to the threat of being caught cheating or the bureaucratic requirements associated with licensing AI software. The final category

contained concerns for widening educational disadvantage associated with AI. We emphasise, again, that these concerns contain values that are meant to underpin the resource.

We next present the full text of the "learning with AI capabilities" resource as developed in the co-design process. The research team massaged the wording by clustering the ideas offered by the participants into four categories and presenting each capability in a learning outcome format with an active verb. There was a general feeling that students should not necessarily do these well, or even at all, but that they should know how or where to start. Thus, over the course of the co-lab, we as researchers chose the word "capabilities" rather than "skills" or "competencies" because, in contrast to AI literacies or competencies, the items on this list were not seen as necessary but rather the types of study skills that a student might employ if they were useful in their particular circumstances.

Table 1.
Learning with AI capabilities - text

These capabilities are for students to learn *how to study with AI within their university studies*. They are driven by the principle of using AI to support not replace human judgement or responsibility. They are intended to be adapted according to the needs of the student and the discipline or to serve as a foundation for further conversation.		
1. SUPPORTING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING *As part of their university degree, students should be able to use AI to support studying, including to:*	1.1	Explain content in different ways to support deep learning
	1.2	Create study tools such as flashcards, practice tasks, exemplars, etc
	1.3	Access AI feedback on their work or thinking that enables deeper understanding and judgement about the quality of work and learning
	1.4	Elaborate on explanations of assignments and instructions from educators
	1.5	Explore or explain rubrics and criteria from educators in different ways
	1.6	Manage language including grammar, reducing word count, etc
	1.7	Develop language fluency for those who have the language of instruction as an additional language
	1.8	Assist with timetabling and life administration that frees up more time for study
	1.9	Assist in the improvement of effective study habits and approaches, including self-reflection on learning
2. PRODUCING OUTPUTS WITH AI *As part of their university degree, students should be able to work with AI to produce outputs, including to:*	2.1	Exercise judgement about when to use and not use AI in the production of outputs
	2.2	Direct an AI to produce quality academic outputs more quickly, for example in reviewing or summarising the literature
	2.3	Prompt to produce relevant and helpful outputs

	2.4	Critically analyse AI outputs including cross checking
	2.5	Express data or concepts visually in an AI, such as data maps as well as image generation
	2.6	Work with an AI to direct software, such as coding
	2.7	Craft communications such as emails or other forms of writing
3. BRINGING AUTHENTICITY INTO INTERACTIONS *As part of their university degree, students should be able to engage with AI as part of a learning, professional or disciplinary community, including to:*	3.1	Discern between when engaging with AI versus engaging with people is required
	3.2	Produce high level professional tasks relevant to future employment
	3.3	Role play or debate with an AI actor or agent to deeper learning through simulation
	3.4	Create “real world” experiences or examples
	3.5	Request other perspectives from the AI to help understand a problem
	3.6	Relate to others through an AI such as developing social media networks
4. LEARNING HOW TO WORK WITH AI *As part of their university degree, students should be able to make decisions about AI use based on an understanding of how AI works, including to:*	4.1	Ensure human creative control within an AI interaction
	4.2	Collaborate with people where AI is part of the process
	4.3	Identify and manage the personal data that underpins AI function
	4.4	Describe use of AI in outputs
	4.5	Select, manage and critique multiple AIs
	4.6	Personalise an AI to self

Discussion

The collaboratively produced texts that are intended to support students studying with AI provide: 1) insights into what students, academics and educational technology representatives jointly construct as being useful AI study capabilities for students in their second year; 2) resources that can serve as starting points for conversations about what students might wish to try or become competent in during their university study; and 3) a demonstration of how student perspectives can be harnessed within the AI-in-higher education conversation. They capture concerns as well as possibilities, trying to balance out some of the tensions that run through how students see themselves working with AI in their university degrees (Bearman et al. 2026; Chan & Hu, 2023; Fawns et al. 2026; Hu, 2026).

Thus, returning to our original question — what AI capabilities are needed for study? — the findings provide strong, albeit not comprehensive, insights into what students should be able to do. The largest practical

contribution of the co-lab text is that it draws from students' own activities and experiences to present a foundational list of study skills with AI. It is worth noting again that these are not prescriptive: for example, timetabling could be seen as valuable for some and not valuable for others. However, this resource could provide a starting point for universities to consider an AI skills curriculum that they might wish to introduce in introductory study-skills programs. Such introductions are relatively scarce in the literature: one example is from Biederbeck and Kohls (2026, p. 476) "covering AI fundamentals, tool orientation, basic and advanced learning scenarios and interactive virtual workshops." Their curriculum, however, appears more technical in focus: our participants offer a different, highly practical alternative.

Having outlined the practical value of our participants' constructions, we now turn to the scholarly implications of the research. The findings suggest all three cohorts emphasised human control of AI. They articulated concerns with misuse and overuse of AI, which they felt would have deleterious impacts on learning. For students, staff and industry, a key part of learning to work with AI was to maintain "human creative control," and they also identified the need to "exercise judgement about when to use and not use AI" and to "discern between when engaging with AI versus engaging with people is required." All of this speaks to both a strong belief in the value of human agency and a concern that AI might diminish this agency. At the same time, as researchers, we note that human agency is not quite as straightforward as it seems, as people cannot be disentangled from their contexts.

While the capabilities in Table 1 can be read as another list of AI competencies, we argue that they should not be understood as discrete skills separate from the ethical and social concerns identified by our participants. And this speaks to the sociocultural perspective that literacy – and for that matter human agency – is embedded in social contexts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Deciding when to use or not use AI, critically analysing AI outputs, maintaining human creative control, making transparent use of AI, or discerning when engagement with people is required are all capabilities that point to AI engagement as a situated and value-laden practice. In this sense, ethical, social, epistemic and power-related concerns are not separate competencies that sit alongside AI capability. Rather, they are woven through how students judge AI outputs, protect their own voice and agency, and make decisions about responsible use. This helps explain why the human dimensions of learning were not peripheral to participants' accounts of AI capability, but central to how they understood responsible and meaningful learning with AI. At the same time, it also explains that, while human direction and judgement are critical to ethical AI use, humans themselves exist embedded in communities and contexts in ways they take for granted. Thus, any software, including AI, exerts effects on humans that may go unnoticed.

To give a concrete example of this, we as researchers noticed that only one participant raised the question of bias within the discussion of concerns. More frequently, participants were concerned with how correct the AI was – that is, they were concerned with what AI outputs meant for their use. There was much more limited discussion of how AI outputs can influence the collective understanding of how certain populations are represented in more or less favourable ways, such as medical students always being presented as men and so on. We note that algorithmic bias is a sizeable issue for AI (e.g., Hall & Ellis 2023): outputs will, for example, overlook certain types of people, leading to feelings of exclusion (Perrotta et al., 2024). However, such problematic representations may not be obvious. Given the corpus on which the AI was trained reflects the biases of the community, people may be particularly unaware of potential inequities because they cannot see them in their own society. We also note the emphasis of school sector AI literacy frameworks, such as the OECD draft (2026) which draws on media literacy ideas of how messages are created, who they target and how they are shaped by sociocultural, political and economic forces. If we were to add to this list of capabilities, we would note that to engage well with AI, students may need to attend to the *how* as well as the *what* – what might be called praxis. Developing praxis may be a particular issue for students who are working with AI (Walton et al., 2025). This reflects the fact that our participants are well situated to comment on some important aspects of studying with AI but not others.

Limitations

Any list has its limitations, and the texts produced by our participants are no exceptions. We propose that they are generative, dynamic documents rather than a fixed set of learning outcomes to be implemented within a curriculum. In addition, there are the typical limitations surrounding any study of this nature. Participants are

derived from a group of self-selected participants from four Australian universities: participants were not intended to be representative (Matthews & Dollinger, 2025) but to bring their own experiences and perspectives to the question at hand. Moreover, the workshop series was short, spanning six hours in total and taking place over three weeks. We ourselves synthesised the recorded thoughts of our participants but did so swiftly and may have inadvertently omitted or compressed important ideas. We underline again the importance of reading these texts with those limitations in mind.

Conclusions

Studying with AI presented a clear and present reality for many of our student participants. They engaged in thoughtful discussion with academics and industry representatives as to what capabilities might be required, against a backdrop of attending to concerns about keeping human.

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