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Feedback on feedback: Student use of AI to interpret educator feedback

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The increasing availability of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping how students engage with learning and feedback in higher education. While existing research has largely focused on AI-generated feedback and hybrid human–AI feedback approaches, less is known about how students independently use AI to interpret educator feedback. This study investigated how Computer Science students use GenAI tools to understand and act upon educator feedback. Drawing on feedback literacy theory, an exploratory mixed-methods survey was conducted with 140 undergraduate and postgraduate Computer Science students at an Australian university. Overall, 89.0% of respondents reported using AI at least occasionally to interpret educator feedback, primarily to explain unclear comments and suggest improvements. Although students generally perceived AI explanations positively, many also recognised that AI could occasionally misunderstand educator intentions. The study contributes to emerging discussions on AI-mediated feedback literacy by conceptualising GenAI as an intermediary interpretive layer between educator feedback and student action, with implications for feedback design and the development of critical AI literacy in higher education.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), feedback literacy, educator feedback, student engagement, computer science education, higher education, mixed-methods survey

Introduction

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot is reshaping learning and assessment practices in higher education. Students are increasingly integrating these tools into their everyday learning, using them to seek explanations, clarify concepts, plan tasks, and reflect on their learning experiences. As these tools become more accessible and embedded in educational settings, they are also beginning to influence how students engage with educator feedback.

This development is occurring within a higher education environment characterised by increasingly large and diverse cohorts, extensive assessment requirements, and growing marking workloads. These pressures may affect educators' capacity to provide feedback that is sufficiently detailed, timely, and tailored to individual students. When feedback is brief, delayed, or difficult to interpret, students may seek additional support from readily accessible GenAI tools. Understanding this practice is therefore important for rebalancing the respective roles of human educators and algorithmic systems while ensuring that feedback design remains human-centred, pedagogically meaningful, and responsive to students' needs.

Feedback is widely recognised as an essential component of learning and improvement in higher education. However, its value depends not only on the quality of comments provided by educators but also on students' ability to understand, interpret, and act upon those comments (Carless & Boud, 2018; Dawson et al., 2024). Students may struggle to engage meaningfully with feedback when comments are unclear, overly brief, technically complex, or difficult to translate into future actions (Carless & Boud, 2018). Receiving critical feedback can also trigger feelings of confusion, disappointment, or anxiety, requiring students to manage the emotional dimensions of feedback engagement (Carless & Boud, 2018). In large and diverse educational settings, opportunities to seek clarification or discuss feedback with educators may be limited. Consequently, students may turn to alternative sources of explanation and support, including GenAI tools.

GenAI tools may offer new ways for students to make sense of feedback. In practice, students may increasingly transfer tutor comments into AI systems and ask for explanations, simplifications, translations, or suggestions for improvement. In these situations, AI functions not as the source of feedback but as an interpretive layer through which students attempt to understand educator comments. This emerging practice has the potential

to improve the accessibility and comprehensibility of feedback and support students in identifying possible actions for improvement. At the same time, AI-generated interpretations may oversimplify feedback, distort educator intentions, or encourage over-reliance on AI explanations without critical evaluation.

This issue is particularly relevant in Computer Science education. Students routinely engage with technically complex concepts, programming tasks, and project-based assessments that often require detailed and context-specific feedback. Understanding and acting upon such feedback can be challenging, particularly in large and diverse cohorts, potentially encouraging students to seek clarification through GenAI tools. Despite growing interest in GenAI and feedback practices, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how students independently use AI to interpret human educator feedback and what benefits and risks they perceive in doing so.

The present study therefore investigates how Computer Science students use AI tools to interpret educator feedback and explores the perceived benefits and risks associated with this emerging practice. Drawing on the feedback literacy framework developed by Carless and Boud (2018), the study examines how AI may influence students' capacity to appreciate feedback, make evaluative judgements, manage emotional responses, and take action based on educator feedback. By examining this emerging practice, the study seeks to contribute to growing discussions on AI-mediated feedback practices and inform the design of feedback practices that remain meaningful and interpretable in increasingly AI-mediated learning environments.

AI and feedback literacy

Feedback is widely recognised as a critical component of learning and improvement in higher education. However, the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on the quality of comments provided by educators but also on students' ability to understand, interpret, and act upon those comments. Carless & Boud (2018) conceptualise this capability as feedback literacy, which involves appreciating feedback, making judgements about work quality, managing emotional responses, and taking action for future improvement. Rather than viewing feedback as a one-way transmission of information from teacher to student, feedback literacy positions students as active participants in the feedback process.

Similar ideas are reflected in research on self-regulated learning, which argues that effective feedback should support learners in monitoring their progress, understanding their performance, and identifying strategies for improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Research on evaluative judgement further emphasises students' capacity to independently assess the quality of their own work and make informed decisions about future learning (Tai et al., 2018). More recent scholarship has shifted attention from what educators provide to what students actually do with feedback, including seeking clarification, making sense of comments, and applying feedback to subsequent learning tasks (Dawson et al., 2024). Collectively, these perspectives suggest that effective feedback is not merely information delivered by educators but a process that requires active interpretation and meaningful student engagement.

Despite the recognised importance of feedback literacy, many students continue to experience difficulties in engaging with feedback. Feedback may be perceived as unclear, overly brief, technically complex, or difficult to translate into future actions. Opportunities for immediate clarification may also be limited, particularly in large classes. As a result, students may seek alternative ways of understanding and making sense of feedback, including through GenAI tools.

The rapid growth of GenAI has introduced new possibilities and challenges for feedback practices in higher education. Recent studies have examined AI-generated feedback, hybrid human-AI feedback approaches, and students' engagement with GenAI-supported feedback. Research suggests that students often value GenAI because it is immediate, accessible, and capable of providing explanations in understandable language, although educator feedback is generally regarded as more trustworthy and meaningful (Henderson et al., 2025).

Studies investigating students' engagement with ChatGPT feedback indicate that learners may engage cognitively with AI feedback while their behavioural and metacognitive engagement remains relatively

superficial (Zhan & Yan, 2025). Similarly, research on hybrid feedback practices suggests that GenAI can help students clarify, simplify, and interpret teacher feedback (Zhang & Wang, 2025). Other scholars argue that AI-supported feedback systems should complement rather than replace human feedback (Banihashem et al., 2026). Taken together, these studies suggest that GenAI has the potential to make feedback more accessible and understandable, while also raising questions about how students evaluate and engage with AI-generated interpretations.

These questions are particularly relevant in Computer Science education. Students in computing disciplines routinely engage with technically complex concepts, programming tasks, and project-based assessments that often require detailed and context-specific feedback. Understanding and acting upon such feedback can be challenging, particularly in large and diverse cohorts. Consequently, students may increasingly use AI to interpret technical tutor feedback, project comments, and assessment advice.

Studies involving novice programmers suggest that students with stronger prior knowledge may use AI productively, whereas struggling students may become dependent on AI suggestions or develop an illusion of competence (Prather et al., 2024). Students may also accept AI-generated explanations without critically evaluating whether those explanations are technically accurate or pedagogically appropriate (Jacobs et al., 2025). Similarly, research suggests that students require judgement and feedback literacy skills when interpreting LLM-generated explanations in programming education (Cucuiat & Waite, 2024). Previous research on automated programming feedback has primarily focused on systems that identify errors rather than on how students meaningfully interpret and use feedback (Keuning et al., 2019).

The multilingual and international student context further highlights the complexity of this issue. Research indicates that multilingual and second-language learners often experience difficulties in understanding and acting upon feedback, particularly when comments are perceived as unclear or difficult to interpret (Ziqi et al., 2026). Studies further suggest that students frequently use GenAI tools to simplify, clarify, or translate teacher feedback into more understandable language (Zhang & Wang, 2025). Research on multilingual feedback literacy also indicates that students' engagement with feedback may vary across linguistic and educational contexts (Boudouaia et al., 2026).

In large and diverse Computer Science cohorts, AI tools may therefore provide valuable support by improving the accessibility and comprehensibility of educator feedback. At the same time, AI-generated explanations may oversimplify meaning, distort educator intentions, or reduce opportunities for deeper engagement with feedback.

The literature also highlights important risks associated with AI-supported feedback processes. Students may over-trust AI-generated interpretations without critically evaluating their accuracy or contextual appropriateness and may develop dependency when AI explanations appear convincing but are conceptually incomplete or partially incorrect (Prather et al., 2024). These concerns suggest that students require judgement when working with AI systems rather than accepting AI outputs uncritically (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023). In this sense, the increasing use of GenAI does not diminish the importance of feedback literacy; rather, it reinforces the need for students to critically engage with both educator feedback and AI-mediated interpretations of that feedback.

Although existing research has examined feedback literacy, AI-generated feedback, hybrid human-AI feedback practices, and student engagement with GenAI, limited empirical work has investigated how students independently use AI to interpret human educator feedback after assessment. In practice, students may increasingly transfer tutor comments into GenAI systems and ask for explanations, simplifications, translations, or suggestions for improvement. This emerging behaviour positions AI not as the provider of feedback but as a secondary interpretive layer between educator feedback and student action.

Research focus

The present study investigates how Computer Science students use AI to interpret educator feedback and explores the perceived benefits and risks associated with this emerging practice. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Computer Science students use GenAI to interpret and understand educator feedback?
RQ2: What benefits and risks do Computer Science students perceive when using GenAI to interpret educator feedback?

By examining this phenomenon, the study contributes to emerging discussions on AI-mediated feedback literacy and seeks to inform the design of feedback practices that remain meaningful and interpretable in increasingly AI-mediated learning environments.

Methodology

This study employed an exploratory mixed methods design to investigate how Computer Science students use GenAI tools to interpret and understand educator feedback. A mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how students use these tools, as well as the benefits and challenges they perceive. Combining quantitative and qualitative data enabled the study to capture patterns of AI use alongside students' experiences of this emerging practice, providing a more comprehensive understanding of AI-mediated feedback literacy.

Context and participants

The study was conducted in a large Computer Science school at an Australian university. Participants consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in four core units covering programming, IT project management, IT professional practice, and databases. These units included programming tasks, written reports, and group projects, with feedback commonly provided through marking rubrics and written comments. More than 500 students were invited to complete an anonymous online survey through announcements distributed within their online learning environments. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

Data collection

Data were collected through a short anonymous online survey administered using Qualtrics and designed to take approximately three to five minutes to complete. The survey contained 17 items across four sections and comprised multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and optional open-ended questions. The survey design was informed by Carless & Boud's (2018) feedback literacy framework and aligned with the study's research questions.

The survey employed conditional branching so that participants only viewed questions relevant to their experiences. Section A collected demographic information and explored students' prior use of GenAI for interpreting educator feedback. Section B examined dimensions of feedback literacy, including appreciating feedback, making judgements, managing affect, and taking action based on feedback. Section C, completed only by students who reported using AI to interpret educator feedback, explored how students used AI in this context, including explaining unclear comments, simplifying language, generating action steps, suggesting improvements, and summarising feedback. This section also examined students' trust in AI-generated explanations and whether they had experienced situations in which AI misunderstood tutor feedback. Section D explored reasons why some students chose not to use AI for feedback interpretation. An optional open-ended question invited participants to describe what would help them use feedback more effectively in future assessments. No personally identifiable information was collected.

Table 1
Survey structure and alignment with research questions

Section	Focus	Example items	Related RQs
A	Demographics and prior AI use	Unit enrolled, student status, frequency of AI use	RQ1
B	Feedback literacy	Understanding feedback, emotional responses, taking action	RQ2
C	AI-mediated feedback interpretation	Clarifying feedback, simplifying language, trust, misunderstandings	RQ1, RQ2
D	Non-use and future support	Reasons for not using AI and suggestions for improving feedback use	RQ2

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns of AI use, including the prevalence, frequency, and purposes of using GenAI to interpret educator feedback. Responses to Likert-scale items were summarised using distributions across response categories to examine students' engagement with feedback and their perceptions of AI-mediated feedback interpretation. Responses to the open-ended question were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring experiences, perceived benefits, and concerns associated with using AI to make sense of educator feedback. Quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently integrated during interpretation to provide a richer understanding of how students engage with AI as an interpretive tool for educator feedback.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted under The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics approval (HREC 2025/HE001132; Sub study 020, Version 1a). Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that their decision to participate or not participate would have no impact on their studies. All responses were anonymous, no personally identifiable information was collected, and findings are reported only in aggregated form for research and educational improvement purposes.

Results

A total of 140 responses were received. Among participants who provided demographic information (n = 99), most were international students (n = 83, 83.8%), with 12 domestic students (12.1%) and four participants (4.0%) preferring not to disclose their status. The findings should therefore be interpreted within the context of a predominantly multilingual and international cohort. The total sample is also not statistically representative of the total population, so is presented as indicative data as a basis for further investigation. Because some survey questions were optional and the survey employed conditional branching, the number of valid responses varied across items and is reported for each analysis. The results are presented according to the two research questions.

AI use for interpreting educator feedback

Most participants reported using GenAI to interpret educator feedback. Among respondents who answered this question (n = 100), 64 students (64.0%) indicated that they regularly used AI tools such as ChatGPT for this purpose, while 25 students (25.0%) reported occasional use. Only 11 students (11.0%) indicated that they had never used AI to help interpret tutor feedback (Table 2). Overall, 89.0% of respondents had used AI at least occasionally to make sense of educator feedback. These findings describe patterns within the study sample and should not be interpreted as estimates of AI use across the broader student population.

Table 2
Frequency of AI use for interpreting educator feedback (n = 100)

Frequency of use	N (Number of students)	Response Percentage (%)
Yes, regularly	64	64.0
Yes, occasionally	25	25.0
No	11	11.0

Students generally reported positive engagement with educator feedback (Table 3). Among respondents who completed the feedback literacy items (n = 87), most agreed that tutor feedback helped improve future work (86.2%) and helped them identify areas for improvement in subsequent assessments (79.3%). Furthermore, the majority indicated that they revisited feedback after receiving marks (74.7%), took action based on tutor comments (85.1%), and applied previous feedback to future submissions (80.5%).

Table 3
Selected feedback literacy findings (n = 87)

Statement	Positive responses (%)
Tutor feedback helps me improve future work	86.2
I feel confident understanding tutor feedback	77.0
Tutor feedback helps me identify improvements	79.3
I revisit tutor feedback after receiving marks	74.7
I take action based on tutor feedback	85.1
I apply previous feedback to future submissions	80.5
Critical feedback can cause confusion, discouragement, or anxiety	43.7
I try to use critical feedback constructively	89.7

However, feedback was not always emotionally straightforward. More than two-fifths of respondents (43.7%) agreed that critical feedback could sometimes make them feel confused, discouraged, or anxious. Despite these emotional challenges, most students reported trying to use critical feedback constructively (89.7%).

How students use AI to interpret educator feedback (RQ1)

Among students who had used AI for feedback interpretation and completed this section of the survey (n = 73), the most common use was asking AI to explain unclear feedback (65.8%), closely followed by suggesting improvements (64.4%). Equal proportions of AI users asked AI to turn feedback into actionable steps (41.1%) or simplify feedback language (41.1%), while 35.6% used AI to summarise feedback comments.

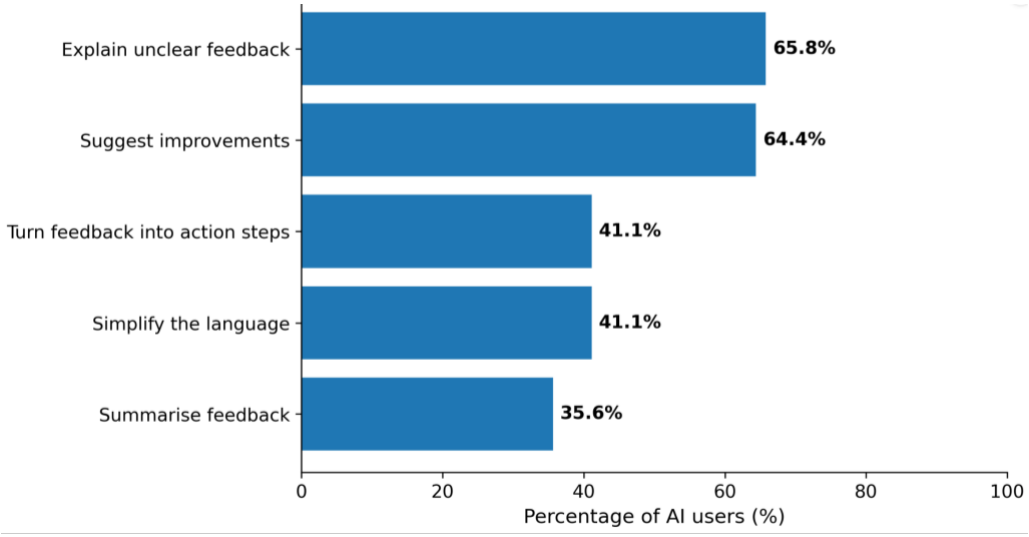


Figure 1. Purposes for using AI to interpret educator feedback (n = 73)

These findings suggest that students primarily used AI as an interpretive and action-oriented tool rather than as a replacement source of feedback.

Perceived benefits and risks of AI-mediated feedback interpretation (RQ2)

Most AI users reported positive experiences with AI-mediated feedback interpretation. Sixty-two of the 73 AI users (84.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that AI helped them understand tutor feedback more clearly. Similarly, 58.9% agreed or strongly agreed that they trusted AI explanations of tutor feedback.

However, students also recognised limitations. Approximately two-thirds of AI users (65.8%) reported that AI had sometimes, most of the time, or always misunderstood tutor feedback, suggesting that students approached AI with a critical lens and were aware that AI-generated interpretations may not always accurately reflect educator intentions.

Table 4
Perceptions of AI-mediated feedback interpretation (n = 73)

Statement	Positive responses (%)
AI helps me understand tutor feedback more clearly	84.9
Trust AI explanations of tutor feedback	58.9
AI has misunderstood tutor feedback at least sometimes	65.8

Among students who had not used AI to interpret educator feedback and completed this question (n = 9), the most commonly reported reason was that they felt able to understand feedback without AI support. Some also preferred seeking clarification directly from their tutor or did not trust AI-generated explanations. Although this group was small, these responses suggest that students make different judgements regarding the necessity and trustworthiness of AI for feedback interpretation.

Open-ended responses further indicated that students valued clearer explanations, more actionable guidance, and opportunities to seek clarification about feedback. Several comments suggested that AI was particularly useful when feedback was perceived as brief, unclear, or difficult to interpret.

Discussion

This study explored how Computer Science students use GenAI to interpret educator feedback and examined the perceived benefits and challenges associated with this emerging practice. Three key findings emerged. First, 89.0% of respondents reported using GenAI at least occasionally to interpret educator feedback, suggesting that AI-mediated feedback interpretation is already a common learning practice among Computer Science students. Second, students primarily used AI to explain unclear comments and suggest improvements. Third, although students generally perceived AI explanations positively, many also recognised that AI could occasionally misunderstand educator intentions.

The widespread use of AI for feedback interpretation in this sample suggests that feedback practices in higher education are increasingly becoming AI-mediated. Consistent with previous research, students appear to value AI because it is immediate, accessible, and capable of providing explanations in understandable language (Henderson et al., 2025; Zhang & Wang, 2025). At the same time, many students reported experiencing confusion or anxiety when receiving critical feedback, indicating that AI may serve an important interpretive function when feedback is perceived as difficult to understand or act upon. The immediacy of GenAI may also be particularly attractive when educator feedback is received too late to inform a subsequent assessment task. However, because the present study did not directly investigate when feedback was received, the relationship between feedback timeliness and students' use of AI should be examined in future research.

Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on AI-generated feedback and hybrid human–AI feedback approaches, this study indicates that students are increasingly using AI to interpret educator-generated feedback. Rather than acting as the provider of feedback, AI may also function as an intermediary interpretive layer through which students seek to understand, clarify, and act upon educator comments. Importantly, students may not be merely passive recipients of AI-generated explanations. Asking AI to explain feedback,

generate possible actions or suggest improvements and recognising when an AI interpretation may be inaccurate can require students to review, compare, question, and make judgements about both the original feedback and the AI-generated explanation. These activities may provide opportunities to practise elements of feedback literacy, particularly evaluative judgement and taking action. However, the present study does not establish whether such engagement produces sustained development of feedback literacy over time, which should be investigated through longitudinal research.

Despite these potential benefits, the findings also highlight important challenges. Approximately two-thirds of AI users in this sample reported experiencing situations in which AI had misunderstood tutor feedback. This finding reinforces concerns that AI-generated explanations may be inaccurate, incomplete, or insufficiently sensitive to disciplinary context (Jacobs et al., 2025; Prather et al., 2024). Consequently, the increasing use of AI does not diminish the importance of feedback literacy; rather, it reinforces the need for students to exercise evaluative judgement and critically examine AI-generated interpretations rather than accepting them uncritically.

The findings also indicate that AI-mediated feedback practices are not universal. Among the small group of students who had not used AI to interpret educator feedback and completed this question (n = 9), the most commonly reported reason was that they felt capable of interpreting feedback independently. Some also preferred seeking clarification directly from their tutor or did not trust AI-generated explanations. These findings suggest that students currently exercise different forms of evaluative judgement regarding when and whether AI should be incorporated into feedback processes.

The findings have several implications for practice. Educators may need to recognise that students are already using AI to interpret feedback and consider how feedback can remain clear, actionable, timely and interpretable in increasingly AI-mediated environments. Institutions may also need to provide guidance on the appropriate and critical use of GenAI for feedback interpretation and support students in developing evaluative judgement and AI literacy skills alongside feedback literacy.

The study did not directly examine the quality and nature of the original educator feedback that students entered into GenAI systems. It is therefore not possible to determine whether students used AI primarily in response to unclear or limited feedback, or whether they also used AI to extend their understanding of detailed and highly effective feedback. Future research could analyse examples of original educator feedback alongside AI-generated interpretations and students' subsequent actions. Such research could identify which characteristics of educator feedback encourage productive AI-supported engagement and which may increase the risk of misunderstanding or oversimplification.

Educators' assessment expertise and professional development needs were also beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that educators may require support to design feedback that remains meaningful when students use GenAI to interpret it. Future research should therefore examine educators' assessment and feedback expertise, their awareness of students' AI-mediated feedback practices, and the professional development needed to help them create feedback that supports both feedback literacy and critical AI literacy.

Conclusion

The rapid adoption of GenAI is reshaping how students engage with learning and feedback in higher education. This study found that 89.0% of respondents reported using GenAI at least occasionally to interpret educator feedback, most commonly to clarify unclear comments and identify areas for improvement. At the same time, students recognised that AI-generated interpretations may occasionally misunderstand or oversimplify educator intentions.

The findings suggest that feedback practices are increasingly becoming AI-mediated. Rather than replacing educator feedback, GenAI appears to function as an interpretive layer between feedback and student action. This study therefore proposes a model of AI-mediated feedback literacy in which students use AI to make

sense of feedback while simultaneously requiring the evaluative judgement to critically examine AI-generated explanations.

The study contributes to emerging discussions on feedback literacy and GenAI by shifting attention from AI-generated feedback to how students independently use AI to interpret human feedback. Practically, the findings suggest a need for educators and institutions to recognise that students are already integrating AI into feedback processes and to support the development of both feedback literacy and critical AI literacy. As AI becomes increasingly embedded within educational practices, preparing students to engage thoughtfully and critically with AI-mediated interpretations of feedback may become an essential component of meaningful feedback engagement in higher education.

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