ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

From compliance to connection: A human-centred ethical discernment approach to ethical GenAI use in higher education

Dianne Stratton-Mayer, Megan Axelsen
University of Southern Queensland

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping higher education, yet institutional responses have often prioritised compliance and detection over meaningful student support. While students increasingly engage with GenAI in their learning, responsible use requires more than confidence or technical proficiency. Emerging evidence suggests students want to engage with GenAI responsibly but frequently experience uncertainty, a challenge that is fundamentally one of human-centred learning design rather than academic integrity alone. However, supporting students to become confident GenAI users cannot itself be assumed to be an ethical goal, given the technology's potential to reproduce bias, exacerbate inequity, compromise privacy and diminish human agency.

This paper proposes a human-centred ethical discernment framework grounded in connection, collaboration and compassion. Drawing on insights from qualitative research into undergraduate students' experiences of GenAI and a practitioner-led redesign at the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ), the framework integrates storytelling, visual pedagogy and embedded guidance, and structured dialogue to support learner agency and ethical decision making. Informed by care ethics, virtue ethics and justice, the framework positions students as accountable decision-makers capable of using, limiting or rejecting GenAI in response to context, consequence and responsibility. Rather than positioning academic integrity as a compliance exercise, the framework emphasises authentic relationships, learner agency and contextually embedded learning experiences. It offers a relational approach to supporting ethical GenAI engagement while preserving human judgement, accountability and meaningful connection within increasingly digital learning environments.

Keywords: generative AI, academic integrity, ethical discernment, learner agency, higher education, visual pedagogy, educator-student dialogue, qualitative research

Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has rapidly become embedded within higher education, transforming how students search for information, develop ideas and approach assessment (Brickhill et al., 2025; Leão et al., 2025). Institutional responses have largely focused on compliance, detection and regulation, with less attention given to how students develop the judgement and ethical capability required to navigate increasingly GenAI-mediated learning environments (Eaton, 2023; Kizilcec et al., 2024). Emerging evidence suggests that students generally want to use GenAI responsibly but frequently experience uncertainty about appropriate practice, particularly where institutional expectations are unclear or inconsistent (Campbell & Waddington, 2024; Stratton-Maher & Kelly, 2026).

This uncertainty raises questions that extend beyond academic integrity compliance. Responsible engagement with GenAI requires students to consider not only how GenAI may be used, but whether its use is ethically appropriate in a particular context and what consequences it may have for learning, fairness, accountability and professional practice (Floridi et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2022). Supporting ethical GenAI use therefore requires learning experiences that develop critical judgement and ethical decision-making alongside technical capability.

A human-centred ethical discernment framework grounded in connection, collaboration and compassion is proposed. Drawing together insights from qualitative research into undergraduate students' experiences of GenAI and a practitioner-led redesign of academic integrity resources at the University of Southern

Queensland (UniSQ), the framework integrates storytelling, visual pedagogy, embedded guidance, and structured educator-student dialogue to support ethical decision-making. Ethical discernment is understood as the capacity to recognise ethical tensions, consider potential benefits and harms, and justify whether, when and within what boundaries GenAI should be used. The framework seeks to reposition academic integrity from compliance to connection by supporting students as accountable ethical decision-makers rather than simply compliant users of technology.

From compliance to connection: A human-centred ethical discernment approach

Traditional approaches to academic integrity have typically focused on communicating institutional expectations through policies, procedures and compliance-based training. While these approaches establish standards for acceptable practice, they may do little to support students as they interpret and apply those expectations within authentic learning contexts, particularly as GenAI introduces new forms of uncertainty. Gallant (2017) argues that academic integrity is fundamentally a teaching and learning issue, suggesting that educational approaches should prioritise developing students' ethical judgement rather than simply preventing misconduct. Human-centred learning design places learners' experiences, relationships and decision-making at the centre of educational design (De Silva et al., 2024). Supporting ethical GenAI engagement therefore becomes less about communicating rules and more about designing meaningful learning experiences that develop ethical discernment, professional judgement and accountable decision-making.

The framework is informed by care ethics, virtue ethics and justice. Care ethics foregrounds relationships, attentiveness and responsibility to others, aligning with the framework's emphasis on connection and compassion (Noddings, 2013). Virtue ethics emphasises honesty, integrity and accountability (Vallor, 2016). A justice-oriented perspective prompts consideration of equity, discrimination and whether the benefits and harms associated with GenAI are distributed fairly (Floridi et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2022). Together, these perspectives support ethical discernment as a context-sensitive process requiring students to justify decisions about GenAI use rather than simply comply with institutional requirements.

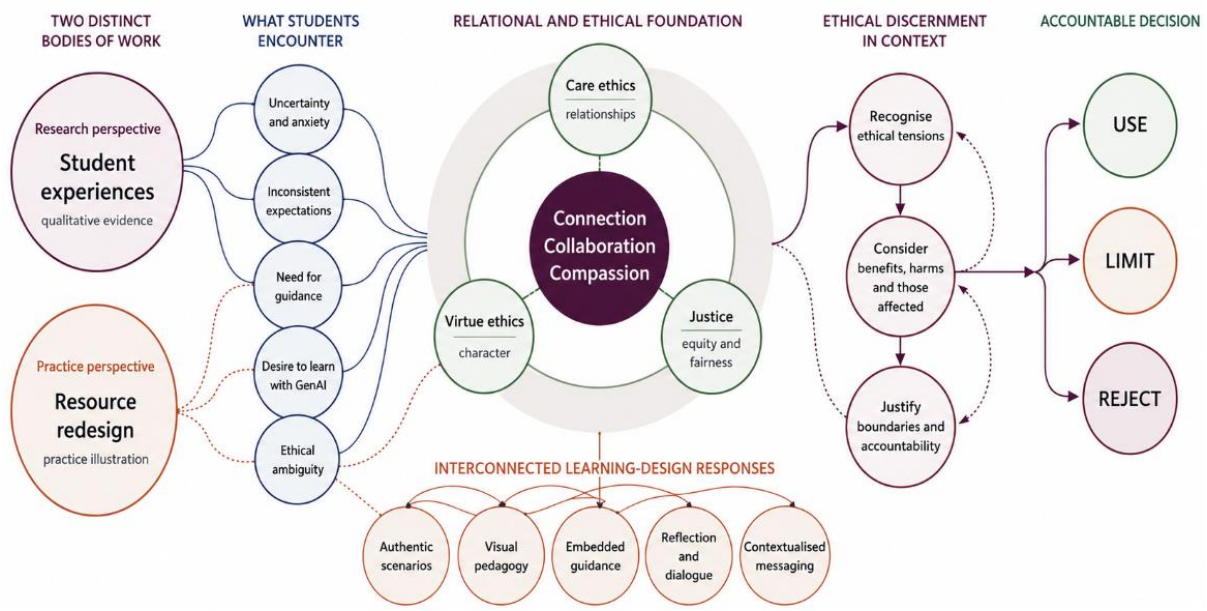
Research in multimedia learning and visual pedagogy suggests ways of supporting ethical discernment. Mayer (2024) argues that well-designed combinations of words and visuals can support understanding of complex concepts. Storytelling and visual narratives can further support this work by encouraging learners to explore authentic situations, consider multiple perspectives and engage in ethical reflection (Fischbach, 2024; van der Sluis, 2025). Within the proposed framework, storytelling, visual pedagogy, embedded guidance and dialogue are brought together to make ethical tensions visible and support students to explain and justify decisions about whether GenAI should be used, limited or rejected in a given context.

Operationalising human-centred learning design through research and practice

Separately from the earlier qualitative study, academic integrity resources at UniSQ underwent a practitioner-led redesign to better support ethical GenAI use. Rather than creating additional policy documents, the initiative focused on redesigning the learning experience itself by embedding guidance within authentic assessment contexts and encouraging ongoing dialogue between educators and students. The framework is represented as an interconnected model (Figure 1). It brings together students' reported experiences from the qualitative research and learning-design strategies evident within the practitioner-led redesign. Student experiences of uncertainty, inconsistent expectations and a need for guidance are considered alongside storytelling, visual pedagogy, embedded guidance and dialogue. These elements are intended to support ethical discernment, learner agency and professional judgement.

Figure 1

A human-centred ethical discernment framework synthesising student research and practice-based learning design



Note. The framework brings together qualitative research into students' experiences of GenAI and a practitioner-led redesign of academic integrity resources. Connection, collaboration and compassion provide the relational lens through which these perspectives are synthesised. The proposed capabilities require future empirical evaluation.

The practice perspective within the framework is illustrated through the practitioner-led redesign of academic integrity resources at UniSQ. This redesign included a series of interactive, comic-style visual narratives and guidance resources designed to communicate academic integrity expectations, practical study strategies and pathways to student support. Across the illustrated resources, students were encouraged to consider why academic integrity matters to their professional credibility, identify practical strategies for protecting the originality of their work, and select ethical sources of support when experiencing academic pressure. Rather than presenting misconduct only as a breach of institutional rules, the resource connected ethical choices with honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility and future professional identity.

The qualitative research provides a separate example of how assessment-specific guidance was experienced by students. Within the first-year nursing assessment examined by Stratton-Maher and Kelly (2026), students encountered explicit instructions and scaffolded sentence starters within the assessment task sheet. Students described using ChatGPT to support idea development, writing structure and clarity while also recognising the need to independently verify AI-generated information, preserve ownership of their written work and remain accountable for the submitted assessment. Participants described moving from initial uncertainty towards more selective and critical engagement and articulated concerns about misinformation, dependency and academic integrity.

By bringing these two bodies of work into dialogue, the proposed framework shifts attention from positioning students as potential offenders towards supporting them as accountable ethical decision-makers. It extends the practice-based strategies by proposing that students should be supported not only to interpret academic integrity expectations, but also to question, limit or reject GenAI use when it may compromise academic, relational or professional responsibilities. Future research should evaluate how the framework influences student understanding, ethical discernment and academic integrity outcomes across different educational contexts.

Implications for learning design in the age of GenAI

For educators and learning designers, the framework suggests that supporting ethical GenAI use should begin with the design of learning experiences, not only the communication of rules. While policy development and assessment redesign remain essential, these responses alone are unlikely to address the uncertainty students experience when navigating GenAI-assisted learning. The educational goal should therefore extend beyond explaining what is permitted to developing students' capacity to recognise ethical tensions, consider potential benefits and harms, and justify whether, when and within what boundaries GenAI should be used. Assessment-specific guidance, authentic scenarios, visual resources and structured dialogue may support this process by making expectations and their ethical implications visible within the contexts in which students are required to make decisions.

Ethical capability includes the confidence to question GenAI outputs, recognise bias or potential harm, maintain human accountability and decide not to use the technology when its use would compromise academic, relational or professional responsibilities (Floridi et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2022). Building on existing visual, narrative and human-centred approaches to academic integrity education (De Silva et al., 2024; Fischbach, 2024; Gilliver-Brown & Ballinger, 2017), the framework integrates storytelling, visual pedagogy, embedded guidance and structured dialogue within a relational foundation of connection, collaboration and compassion. This integrated approach is intended to support students to identify ethical tensions and justify decisions to use, limit or reject GenAI.

Although developed by bringing together research and practice from a single institutional context, the design principles may be adaptable across disciplines and educational settings; however, their application must remain responsive to disciplinary expectations, professional responsibilities and the particular risks associated with different uses of GenAI. More broadly, GenAI literacy and academic integrity should not be viewed as separate educational priorities. Both require learning experiences that develop critical thinking, transparency, professional judgement and accountability while preserving the central role of human relationships and decision-making.

A central challenge for higher education is supporting students to determine whether, when and under what conditions GenAI use is ethically appropriate. The human-centred ethical discernment framework responds by shifting the focus from compliance to connection and positioning students as accountable decision-makers capable of using, limiting or rejecting GenAI in response to context, consequence and responsibility.

Conclusion

Uncertainty surrounding GenAI can be understood not only as an academic integrity issue, but also as a human-centred learning design challenge. Bringing together qualitative research into students' experiences and a practitioner-led redesign of academic integrity resources, this work proposes a human-centred ethical discernment framework grounded in connection, collaboration and compassion. Through storytelling, visual pedagogy, embedded guidance and dialogue, the framework is intended to support students to justify decisions to use, limit or reject GenAI in response to context, consequence and responsibility. Rather than positioning students as potential offenders, the framework conceptualises ethical capability as a relational and developmental graduate attribute. Future research should evaluate its application across different disciplinary contexts.

References

Brickhill, M., Andrews, G. & Nieuwoudt, J. (2025) Developing student agency towards academic integrity through an educative approach: Exploring students' experiences and perspectives. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *23*, 951–975. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09567-y

Campbell, C., & Waddington, L. (2024). Academic integrity strategies: Student insights. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *22*, 33–50. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09510-1

De Silva, D., Jayatilleke, S., El-Ayoubi, M., Issadeen, Z., Moraliyage, H., & Mills, N. (2024). The human-centred design of a universal module for artificial intelligence literacy in tertiary education institutions. *Machine Learning and Knowledge Extraction*, *6*(2), 1114–1125. https://doi.org/10.3390/make6020051

Eaton, S. E. (2023). The academic integrity technological arms race and its impact on learning, teaching, and assessment. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, *48*(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.21432/cjlt28388

Fischbach, S. (2024). Academic integrity graphic novel mini-cases. *International Journal for Educational Ethics*, *20*, 5. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-024-00152-9

Floridi, L., Cowls, J., Beltrametti, M., Chatila, R., Chazerand, P., Dignum, V., Luetge, C., Madelin, R., Pagallo, U., Rossi, F., Schafer, B., Valcke, P., & Vayena, E. (2018). AI4People—An ethical framework for a good AI society: Opportunities, risks, principles, and recommendations. *Minds and Machines, 28*(4), 689–707. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-018-9482-5

Gallant, T. B. (2017). Academic integrity as a teaching & learning Issue: From theory to practice. *Theory Into Practice*, *56*(2), 88–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1308173

Gilliver-Brown, K., & Ballinger, D. (2017). "The integrity games": An interactive story education approach to teaching academic integrity. *ATLAANZ Journal*, *2*(1), 68–81. https://doi.org/10.26473/ATLAANZ.2017.2.1/004

Kizilcec, R. F., Huber, E., Papanastasiou, E. C., Cram, A., Makridis, C. A., Smolansky, A., Zeivots, S., & Raduescu, C. (2024). Perceived impact of generative AI on assessments: Comparing educator and student perspectives in Australia, Cyprus, and the United States. *Computers and Education. Artificial Intelligence*, *7*, Article 100269. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100269

Leão, C.P., Alves, A.C., Ferreira, A.C. (2025). Engineering students and academic integrity: Perceptions of ethical challenges in qualitative research. In: Machado, J., Trojanowska, J., Antosz, K., Leão, C.P., Knapcikova, L., Sover, A. (Eds.). *Innovations in Industrial Engineering IV.* (pp. 402-416). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-94484-0_33

Ma, C., Chong, A. Y. L., Thatcher, J. B., & Phang, C. W. (2026). Rethinking artificial intelligence and ethics: Uncovering unexamined assumptions and assessing their implications. *Information Systems Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.70042

Mayer, R. E. (2024). The past, present, and future of the cognitive theory of multimedia learning. *Educational Psychology Review*, *36*, 8. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09842-1

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt7zw1nb

Stratton-Maher, D., & Kelly, J. (2026). Learning with AI, not from AI: Ethical and pedagogical implications of ChatGPT in undergraduate education. *Nurse Education Today*, *158*, Article 106961. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2025.106961

UNESCO. (2022). *Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137

Vallor, S. (2016). *Technology and the virtues: A philosophical guide to a future worth wanting*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190498511.001.0001

van der Sluis, H. (2025). Visual narratives in higher education: A scoping review of comic, manga, graphic novels and cartoons as educational tools. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 18*(1). https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v18i1.1574

Stratton-Mayer, D., & Axelsen, M. (2026). From compliance to connection: A human-centred ethical discernment approach to ethical GenAI use in higher education. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Poole, T., Lai, P., Lake, P., Moore, O., & Li, L. (Eds.), *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2026. Brisbane (pp. 821–825). https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2026.3386

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.
The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution license enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.

© Stratton-Mayer, D. & Axelsen, M. 2026