



Conflicting Perspective on GenAI in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Student Use and Marker Responses in an ODeL Context

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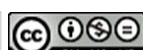
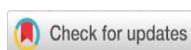
Markers and students' perceptions;

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ABSTRACT

The surge of GenAI in higher education has sparked mixed reactions among students, markers, and scholars. Guided by Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, this qualitative case study investigates conflicting perceptions of GenAI use in an ODeL context, where limited dialogue and increased transactional distance hinder effective communication. Data were collected through open-ended online questionnaires from students and structured evaluation forms from markers. Results show that students use GenAI to improve grammar, vocabulary, idea generation, and structural quality, which promotes cognitive development and helps overcome writer's block and low confidence. However, students fear being stigmatised by markers and often self-censor due to unclear institutional policies. Markers, on the other hand, question the authenticity and depth of GenAI-incorporated content, viewing it as generic and lacking critical engagement. This leads to biased assessments, ethical dilemmas, and strained student-marker relationships, worsened by unreliable GenAI detection tools and the absence of institutional guidelines. The study concludes that GenAI's influence on transactional distance depends on institutional readiness to integrate and regulate its use responsibly. Therefore, institutions should develop transparent GenAI policies, provide literacy training, and promote open dialogue to ensure fair assessment, reduce bias, and reframe GenAI as a transformative pedagogical tool rather than a threat.



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INTRODUCTION

In the digital world, today's students are digital natives who consume, produce, and interact with online content daily. Students scan documents, access learning management systems (LMS), attend virtual classes, read digital textbooks, and switch between social and academic platforms. They perform a range of technology-mediated tasks that require not only internet access but also a critical set of digital literacies (Deb, Bayen, & Sharma, 2025; Taguchi & Zhao, 2025). In this digital ecosystem, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools such as Grammarly, Jasper AI, Claude, QuillBot, ChatGPT, DeepL Write, and Google Bard, for example, have gained popularity in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Aldreabi et al., 2025; Chan & Zhou, 2023; Krause, Panchal, & Ubhe, 2025), as they provide real-time feedback, writing support, language translation, and content generation (Perifanou & Economides, 2025; Zhan et al., 2025). These tools have become prominent in Open Distance eLearning (ODeL) contexts, where learner autonomy, asynchronous instruction, and minimal lecturer contact require alternative forms of support (Lai & Sundqvist, 2025). While GenAI tools offer potential support for academic development for English

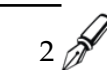
Additional Language (EAL) students, their use in assessment practices generates controversy and conflict.

Current literature presents conflicting perspectives, framing GenAI both as a learning aid and as a threat to academic integrity. Some scholars argue that GenAI provides cognitive support, language assistance, and access to knowledge (Law, 2024; Tang, 2024; Qi, Liu & Xu, 2025). Others contend that it draws criticism for enabling passive learning, encouraging overreliance, and eroding critical thinking, originality, and cultural identity (Bozkurt et al., 2024; Naqvi et al., 2025). Within African contexts, scholars highlight the Eurocentric bias of GenAI outputs, which perpetuates digital neocolonialism and often excludes indigenous perspectives, local knowledge systems, and epistemologies (Nyaaba, Wright & Choi, 2024). These conflicting perspectives grow amid global cases of GenAI misuse and institutional responses that range from limited acceptance to outright prohibition, revealing a lack of clear policy stance in many universities (An, Yu & James, 2025; Luo, 2024).

In the South African context, conflicting perspectives emerge within the university under discussion (UniD – pseudonym), an ODeL institution based in Gauteng with a student population exceeding 370,000 across the continent (Fynn, 2021). The UniD's Academic Development module (ADM20B – pseudonym) serves approximately 18,000 first-year students annually, many of whom are EAL speakers from diverse backgrounds. Students in this module increasingly use GenAI tools in their assignment scripts. ADM20B is assessed by 36 external markers, most of whom hold PhDs. UniD requires all markers to hold at least a master's degree in a language- or linguistics-related field. However, markers face new challenges as GenAI content becomes widespread and harder to detect, disrupting established assessment practices and definitions of authorship. According to Combrinck and Loubser (2025) and Feuerriegel et al. (2024), newer GenAI tools are equipped with humanizing features that generate content closely aligned with the writing style typically associated with students. This serves as yet another deterrent, strategically designed to mislead GenAI gatekeepers and obscure underlying realities.

UniD integrates Turnitin into its Moodle LMS, alongside an academic integrity declaration certificate that students must sign when submitting assignments. Although Turnitin is widely adopted, its AI detection features are limited in identifying content generated by various GenAI tools (Ardito, 2024; Perkins et al., 2024a). Consequently, its ability to detect GenAI work is restricted. In response, some markers in ADM20B turn to external tools like Copyleaks and Originality. AI and GPTZero, Sapling, as well as Writer.com's AI Detector. These tools are used not only due to institutional limitations but also as gatekeeping mechanisms to scrutinize suspected GenAI content in student submissions. Currently, UniD, like many institutions, lacks a clear and enforceable policy on GenAI use, leaving markers uncertain about how to respond to its presence in student submissions. Conflicting perspectives remain evident, as students view GenAI tools as accessible academic support in the absence of real-time lecturer feedback, while markers and lecturers raise concerns about originality, cognitive engagement, and academic rigor.

The present study, located in the South African ODeL context, addresses a critical and underexplored area by creating an empirical gap by analyzing the experiences and students' perceptions as well as regarding GenAI use. While earlier investigations have focused on student use of GenAI, cognitive decline, ethical considerations, or policy debates, these studies have often been conducted within contact-based institutions. In contrast, this study extends existing scholarships by foregrounding the perspectives of both key stakeholder groups within a resource-constrained ODeL environment, thereby providing context-specific insights that remain largely absent from current debates. This study is based on Moore's Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) (1972, 1993), which focuses on the interplay between structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy. Further, this study explores how students and markers experience and respond to GenAI in academic work within the wider discourse on digital pedagogy and GenAI



ethics, as well as assessment practices within an ODeL context. This research seeks to answer the following central questions:

- 1) What are students' perceptions of using GenAI to support their learning and completion of assignment scripts?
- 2) How do markers perceive and respond to the presence of GenAI content in students' assignment scripts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

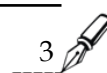
Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Moore's TDT (1972, 1993) as the basis to interrogate the pedagogical complexities of teaching and learning in an ODeL institution. TDT is well suited to the context of UniD, where instruction in the ADM20B module is delivered online and learning is mediated through multimodal platforms. The theory enables a systematic examination of the psychological and communicative gaps that emerge in the absence of traditional classroom interaction. TDT identifies three interrelated variables that influence the degree of transactional distance: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. These variables shape the quality of the learning experience and determine how students and markers manage pedagogical separation. In ADM20B, many students are in their first year of study and must navigate the academic writing process in an unfamiliar digital environment. The abrupt shift from in-person learning to virtual learning can create disorientation, especially where scaffolding is limited. In TDT, dialogue refers to the interaction between lecturers, students, and markers. In ODeL environments, this is often limited or replaced by automated systems. GenAI tools offer instant support but may reduce essential human interaction, making students feel unsupported and increasing transactional distance. Structure relates to how rigid course design and assessment are. In ADM20B, standard rubrics often clash with the adaptable nature of GenAI. Instead of embracing GenAI as a learning aid, institutions may frame it as a threat, leading students to use it without guidance and face possible ethical risks. Learner autonomy reflects how much control students have over their learning. While GenAI can enhance this autonomy, unclear institutional policies cause confusion about acceptable use. This lack of guidance turns autonomy into a burden rather than a benefit. Together, these factors influence how effectively students engage with online learning in GenAI-integrated contexts. These dynamics suggest that GenAI can either bridge or widen transactional distance depending on how institutions respond. When policy, structure, and dialogue align to support responsible use of AI tools, transactional gaps may be reduced. However, in the absence of supportive mechanisms, GenAI risks reinforcing isolation, misunderstanding, and uneven power dynamics. TDT therefore provides a critical lens for analyzing ADM20B learning contexts at UniD. It enables the study to engage with core questions about access, communication, and agency in digitally mediated education.

Contextual Background of GenAI in ODeL Context

The upsurge of GenAI in HEIs has introduced sophisticated yet user-friendly tools that are transforming knowledge creation and dissemination. GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, Jasper AI, Claude, DeepL Write, and Google Gemini provide functionalities including text generation, language support, research assistance, and conversational interaction (Namoun et al., 2024; Simkute et al., 2025). In ODeL contexts, students increasingly rely on these GenAI tools daily, driven by factors such as isolation, asynchronous delivery, and delayed feedback (Selwyn, 2024; Selwyn et al., 2023). This shift marks a significant change in how knowledge is produced, accessed, and engaged with, as GenAI assumes a central functional role beyond mere convenience.

Students depend on GenAI to formulate ideas, improve grammar, structure essays, and generate translation tasks that help reduce institutional shortcomings, especially for learners from linguistically diverse backgrounds (Aslanyan-Rad, 2024; Dilzhan, 2024). In ODeL settings, where



real-time support is limited and feedback mechanisms are constrained, GenAI supports learner autonomy and scaffolded writing, particularly among ESL students (Dwivedi et al., 2024). However, alongside these pedagogical benefits, this integration raises ethical and academic concerns. Recent studies highlight issues such as breaches of academic integrity, superficial learning, and cognitive decline, where students rely on GenAI instead of independently developing skills (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025). In contrast, lecturers and markers express resistance due to challenges in assessing authorship and perceive diminishing academic rigor amid unclear institutional policy guidelines (Abubaker et al., 2025; Duah & McGivern, 2024). These conflicting perspectives reflect inconsistent messaging and fragmented policies, creating confusion and uneven enforcement within HEIs. This literature review explores the gaps surrounding GenAI within the current GenAI era. Most existing studies are based on contact institutions, with limited focus on the lived experiences of ODeL students and markers. This creates a mismatch between research and practice, overlooking how GenAI is used in contexts with limited support, delayed feedback, and diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds.

Students' Perceptions of GenAI in ODeL Context

GenAI corresponds with the learning preferences of today's students (Generation Z), digital natives, technologically adept, well-versed in digital technologies and systems, and accustomed to online learning environments (Bagdi et al., 2023; Singh & Kushwaha, 2021). Students' constant exposure to digital tools makes it natural for them to interact with GenAI systems. Technology is an integral part of their daily lives, making it unsurprising that they turn to GenAI when facing academic pressure (Carrigan, 2024; Chakraborty, 2024). Generation Z values speed and efficiency, and GenAI meets these expectations by providing instant responses (Chan & Lee, 2023). Tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and Google Gemini are already familiar to them, as they quickly address a range of learning needs (AlSagri et al., 2024). Research indicates that students hold positive attitudes toward GenAI tools for study, academic writing, and future employment prospects (Alshahrani & Ward, 2023; Daher & Hussein, 2024). Since students already use platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), the promotion of GenAI tools through these channels increases their interest (Kizito, 2023). When faced with academic tasks, students often download GenAI apps from app stores to support their understanding (Nikolic et al., 2024). This reflects a growing interest in learner autonomy supported by GenAI literacy (Kozan & Richardson, 2023; Nkadimeng & Jantjies, 2024). The daily use of GenAI has permeated educational settings and influences various behavioral dimensions and learner autonomy. Students increasingly embrace GenAI and its cognitive capabilities. It appeals to them by making learning more engaging, enjoyable, productive, and supportive in terms of language assistance (Cohen & Henry, 2019; Ramzan et al., 2023). In their seminal study, Chan and Hu (2023) reported insights shared by some participants:

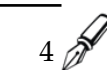
When I have doubt and couldn't find other people to help me out, ChatGPT seems like a good option (Chan & Hu, 2023, p. 9).

ChatGPT can generate short texts based on the words entered by the user to help students memorize the words (Chan & Hu, 2023, p. 9).

When I have doubt and couldn't find other people to help me out, ChatGPT seems like a good option (Chan & Hu, 2023, p. 9).

I would use it to help improve my writing (grammar, paraphrasing...), consult some questions or let it give some feedback on my writing (Chan & Hu, 2023, p. 10).

In ODeL contexts, where feedback is often delayed and students may experience geographical and emotional isolation, GenAI tools frequently serve as substitute tutors. High transactional distance, as described by Moore (1972, 1993), may prompt students to seek immediate and responsive tools like GenAI to bridge communication gaps. GenAI is increasingly emerging as a metacognitive aid in this process. However, while it offers clear benefits, not all students use it, resulting in uneven advantages that tend to exclude technophobic students



(Khasawneh, 2023; Selwyn, 2016). Students rely on these tools to bridge academic gaps and enhance their learning experience. They use GenAI to generate ideas, rephrase content, structure essays, and simplify complex texts, which increases productivity and lowers anxiety related to writing tasks (Cotton et al., 2023; Dehouche, 2021). Some students even see GenAI as a thinking partner or surrogate tutor. However, others feel uncertain or uneasy about whether using GenAI crosses ethical boundaries when institutional guidelines are vague or lacking (De La Osa & Remolina, 2024; Laine et al., 2025). Studies show that many students are uncertain about whether using GenAI counts as academic misconduct (Eaton, 2021; Park, 2023). Plagiarism remains a central concern. In hindsight, many students do not equate the use of GenAI with cheating because it generates original content, often without their full awareness or understanding of the databases and sources it draws from (Akkas et al., 2024; Alimardani, 2024). This highlights the need to teach academic integrity in ways that include GenAI usage and misuse (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Zlotnikova et al., 2025). Digital inequality and the digital divide also impact how students access and engage with GenAI. Students from privileged digital backgrounds use these tools critically and confidently, while others may rely on copy-paste use due to a lack of digital training, awareness, or academic writing confidence (Nkadameng & Jantjies, 2024; Prinsloo et al., 2023). In light of students' existing use of GenAI, often for valid as well as productive reasons, the responsibility lies with institutions to guide students regarding its ethical use as well as transparently. According to Kizito (2023) and Park (2023), policies should clearly define ethical and acceptable use and clarify whether students must disclose their use of GenAI in assignments, including in what fashion and manner.

Markers' Perceptions of Students' Use of GenAI in an ODeL Context

Markers are at the forefront of assessment, providing individualized feedback and identifying academic gaps in student learning. Explicit marking serves as a powerful tool for educational enrichment, as it not only clarifies assessment expectations but also deepens students' understanding through constructive feedback, reflection, and continuous improvement (Maphoto, 2020; Maphoto & Sevnarayan, 2021). According to the University of South Africa (2019), markers are guided by assessment policies and quality assurance frameworks that uphold principles of fairness, reliability, consistency, transparency, academic integrity, and accountability. Constructive and timely feedback remains a cornerstone of this process. However, the emergence of GenAI technologies has disrupted these practices, challenging the very foundations of assessment and pedagogical engagement (Giannakos et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2024). Although markers operate within institutional policies, there is evidence of a policy vacuum around GenAI use. While policies may broadly reference academic integrity, they often fail to articulate clear guidelines on GenAI content, leaving markers uncertain about expectations and protocols (Duah & McGivern, 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). This regulatory ambiguity exacerbates the challenges markers face when encountering student submissions suspected of GenAI usage.

A growing body of literature identifies increasing concern among markers about the pedagogical implications of unchecked GenAI use. Many have expressed frustration over reduced student engagement, increased instances of plagiarism, and a general decline in the quality of academic work (Carrigan, 2024; Hoernig et al., 2024). Cotton et al. (2023) support this view, arguing that the pedagogical value of assignments is diminished when students rely on GenAI tools to complete assessments. Ethical concerns around fairness, authorship, and the detectability of GenAI content further complicate the picture. At the heart of the issue is the lack of institutional coherence and preparedness. While some institutions adopt Turnitin as a plagiarism detection tool, it is largely ineffective in identifying nuanced or reworded GenAI content (Hanafi et al., 2025; Perkins et al., 2024b). This has led many markers to rely on emerging GenAI detectors such as GPTZero, Turnitin's AI-writing indicator, or ZeroGPT (Ardito, 2024; Perkins et al., 2024b). However, these tools also face criticism for producing false positives or missing sophisticated GenAI outputs (Ferrara, 2024; Perkins et al., 2024b). This creates a "cat-and-



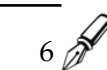
mouse” dynamic, where markers shift from pedagogical facilitators to academic gatekeepers or “AI police.” A study by Razi et al. (2024) highlights markers’ apprehension as well as skepticism toward the adoption of GenAI in academic contexts. Participants in the study expressed the following concerns:

Where is ChatGPT getting the information? But what exactly is the evaluation process for this information? How I will show that this information is valid and they are quality information. So if we are not sure about these things, and maybe by mistake or by some silly algorithmic function, it pulls out some inferior information, if I may use the word, and you just fly with that information, then we might be facing another pandemic of misinformation (Razi et al., 2024, p.2).

Who owns the work that the AI produces? And then, whenever you feed it where it’s like the questions of mine that I have, you know, fed it to see what it does. Will AI claim some kind of ownership of that? Where or what will happen with that writing in the future? (Razi et al., 2024, p.17).

I think a lot of people believe what it tells them, and if there are no safeguards, it could cause a lot of misinformation. And I think misinformation tends to snowball, so I don’t know what guardrails exist on ChatGPT on where it’s pulling its information from. [...] Fact-checking is also a big mountain to climb, so I don’t know if the Internet can truly ever be fully fact-checked. But if it’s not being fact-checked, I think a lot of people stand to lose from it, and I think that’s when it becomes harmful. So, I think it’s harmful for people who believe anything that technology tells them without doing their own research (Razi et al., 2024, p.9).

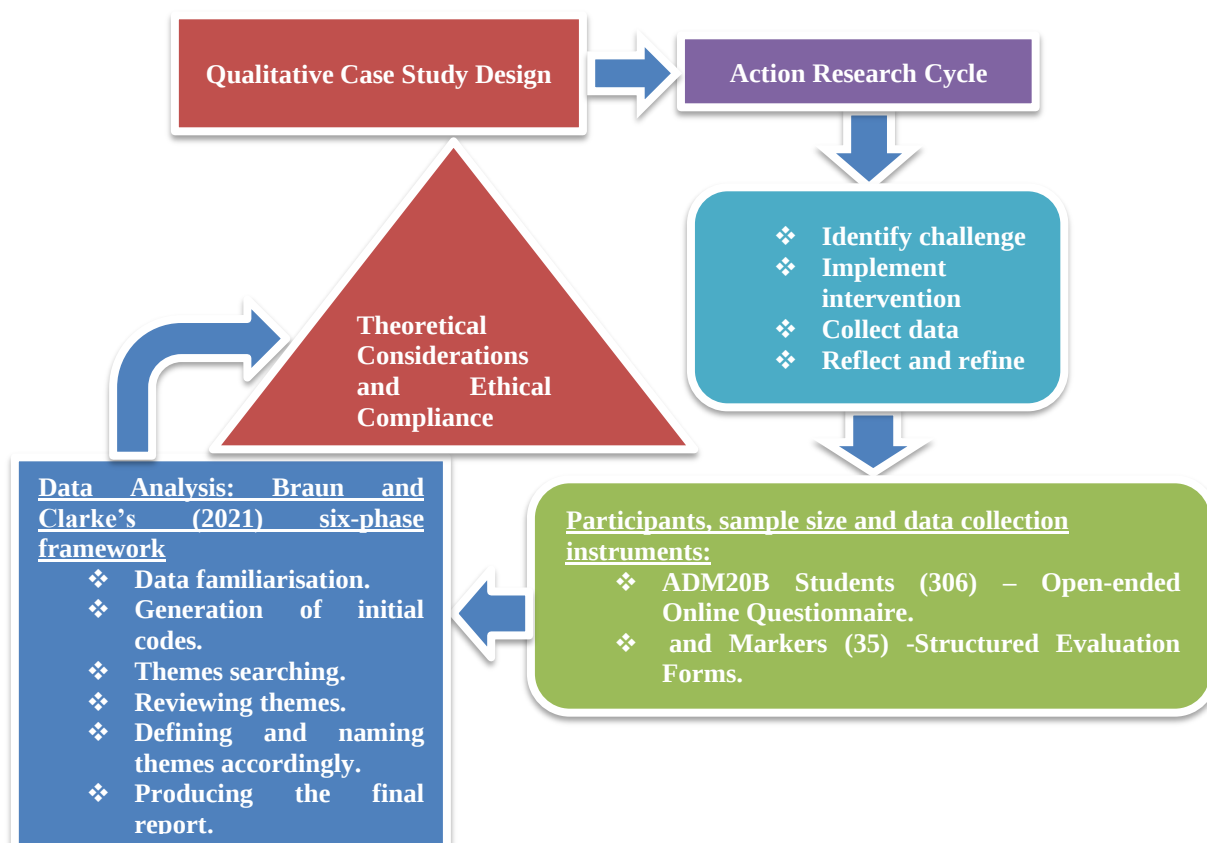
Markers no longer enjoy the relational and developmental aspects of feedback value and assessment; instead, they are entangled in ethical dilemmas with limited institutional support. In some cases, technophobia and distrust of GenAI further alienate markers from adopting new tools, even when these tools might enhance assessment design (Mahmoud et al., 2025). Importantly, perspectives among markers are not monolithic. Some acknowledge the potential benefits of GenAI in supporting students with differentiated or accessible content, provided that its use is transparent and ethically framed (Blonder & Feldman-Maggor, 2024; Francis et al., 2025). These markers advocate for GenAI literacy and student training, rather than blanket prohibition. Others, however, resist GenAI altogether, viewing it as a threat to core academic values and a shortcut that undermines deep learning (Bozkurt et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024). There is also concern that GenAI reduces learner agency, promotes cognitive offloading, and diminishes the opportunity for authentic academic skill development (Iqbal, 2025). For instance, when GenAI functions as a ghostwriter, students may graduate without ever acquiring essential skills in academic writing, argument construction, or critical reasoning – skills that are central to higher education’s mission. These concerns are further magnified in ODeL contexts. In such settings, where assessments are often asynchronous and rely heavily on written submissions, GenAI use becomes difficult to track. Markers must rely on trust, yet this is increasingly undermined by the blurring of authorship and the difficulty of proving misconduct without conclusive evidence (Gonsalves, 2025). The result is a complex tension: markers are expected to uphold academic integrity but are often under-equipped, under-trained, and unsupported in doing so. GenAI tools can mislabel genuine student work, leading to ethical conflicts about whether and how to penalize students (Perkins, 2024b). Without targeted investment in GenAI-specific policy, training, and detection tools, markers are left navigating this terrain alone, often resorting to personal judgment, which risks inconsistency and bias. The debate is shifting toward collaboration with GenAI in ODeL institutions, with growing acceptance of its hybrid use in assessments. This requires a focus on GenAI literacy and institutional adaptation, moving beyond views of threat or misconduct.



RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach and Design

The current study adopts a qualitative case study approach informed by action research principles to explore conflicting perspectives on the use of GenAI in HEIs within an ODeL context. Below is a flowchart of the research method:



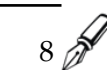
This approach facilitates a context-sensitive knowledge of background, perceptions, and pedagogical responses from both students and markers while addressing the complexities of GenAI integration in academic work. Action research, as defined by Cohen et al. (2017), Coghlan (2019), and Mertler (2024), is a cyclical and reflective process involving the identification of educational challenges, the implementation of purposeful interventions, the collection of data, and the ongoing refinement of practice through critical reflection. Within this study, action research is employed as both a methodological orientation and an analytical framework, positioning lecturers, students, and markers as co-constructors of knowledge and active participants in the transformation of teaching and learning practices. Through iterative cycles of inquiry, the study examines the pedagogical, ethical, and technological implications of GenAI use in an ODeL environment. Focus is placed on how students use GenAI to complete assignment scripts and how markers detect, interpret, and respond to such content. This inquiry aims to uncover underlying tensions, affordances, and contradictions that emerge in the context of GenAI-mediated learning, where traditional concepts of authorship, assessment, and academic integrity are increasingly being redefined. Situated within a qualitative case study, this action research approach contributes to the evidence-based refinement of pedagogical practices in digitally mediated HEIs, providing in-depth insights into the ongoing transformations of HE in the GenAI era.

Sample and Participants

In action research, the concept of sample denotes a purposively selected segment of a larger population, chosen for its potential to yield meaningful, context-specific insights (Meyer & Mayrhofer, 2022). Qualitative research prioritizes the depth, richness, and relevance of data over sample size, with even small groups contributing sufficient analytical power when aligned with the research objectives (Lim, 2025). While Delamont (2016) recommends approximately 36 participants for ethnographic inquiries, Vasileiou et al. (2018) argue that as few as 15 participants may be adequate for qualitative research, provided they generate sufficiently rich and diverse data. In this study, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify participants most likely to contribute insightfully to the research questions. The sample consisted of two distinct groups within UniD's ODeL context. The first participant group comprised 306 students enrolled in the ADM20B module, selected from a total of approximately 18,000 students. These students responded to open-ended online questionnaires aimed at exploring their perceptions, challenges, and experiences related to the use of GenAI in academic writing. The second participant group consisted of 35 markers responsible for assessing student assignment scripts in the ADM20B module. Evaluation forms were distributed electronically, and 18 markers submitted responses. Their input was based on their experiences, engagement with GenAI-related content, and their roles in evaluating student submissions. This selection was aimed at capturing a range of perspectives on the pedagogical and ethical implications of GenAI use in assessment. The use of a smaller, focused participant group aligns with the study's qualitative action research design, which seeks to generate deep, experiential understanding rather than statistical generalization. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all responses were anonymized throughout the research process in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data Collection

This study employed two primary data collection instruments: open-ended online questionnaires for students and structured evaluation forms for markers. According to Ricci et al. (2019), open-ended questionnaires play a critical role in qualitative research by encouraging participants to share information freely, without constraints or fear of judgment. In contrast, Picard et al. (2025) maintain that structured evaluation forms help validate and organize qualitative data systematically, enhancing its reliability. Data collection was carefully designed to align with the research questions and the qualitative case study approach informed by action research principles, allowing for a balanced and in-depth exploration of student and marker perspectives on the use of GenAI within an ODeL context. To address the first research question, open-ended online questionnaires were administered to students enrolled in the ADM20B module at UniD by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Department. This format allowed participants to provide detailed responses, generating rich narrative data suitable for qualitative analysis. To address the second research question, structured evaluation forms were distributed to markers by the same department. These forms were designed to capture detailed accounts of markers' experiences with suspected GenAI content in student assignments, including their observations, concerns, and responses. The involvement of the ICT Department ensured that both instruments were administered in compliance with UniD's data collection protocols and institutional requirements, maintaining consistency and accountability throughout the process. The combined use of these instruments supported triangulation, strengthening the credibility and depth of the results. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Data were anonymized and securely stored in accordance with ethical research standards. This approach enabled the researcher to gather detailed, contextual insights from both groups, advancing the study's objective of exploring conflicting perspectives on GenAI in digitally mediated higher education.



Data Analysis

The data were subjected to thematic analysis, employing Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. This approach involved data familiarization, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and labeling, and the production of the final report. Thematic analysis was applied to responses from both the open-ended online questionnaires completed by students and the structured evaluation forms submitted by markers. To ensure methodological rigor, the analysis was further informed by Moore's TDT (1972, 1993). Codes and emerging patterns were organized under the core dimensions of TDT: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. This theoretical lens provided a conceptual framework to explore how psychological and communicative gaps between students and markers influence online learning experiences. The data were interrogated to determine how GenAI use either widened or narrowed transactional distance in an ODeL context, depending on the nature and quality of engagement between students, markers, and the instructional structure. The integration of Braun and Clarke's analytical method with TDT yielded both data-driven themes and theory-informed interpretations, providing a comprehensive view of the dynamics in GenAI-mediated academic writing and assessment. The dual-level analysis enabled a strategic synthesis of student and marker perspectives, clarifying how GenAI tools affect learner autonomy, feedback processes, academic integrity, and communication within online higher education. The trustworthiness and reliability of the results were strengthened through methodological triangulation, combining multiple data sources (students and markers) and analytical lenses (inductive thematic coding and deductive TDT categorization). This integration ensured that the data were not only categorized meaningfully but also analyzed within a broader theoretical and pedagogical context, enhancing both the empirical value and theoretical contribution of the study to GenAI discourse in digitally mediated HEI contexts.

Theoretical Considerations and Ethical Compliance

The current study, carried out at a South African ODeL university, adopted a qualitative case study design, involved students from the ADM20B module, and included academic markers. Ethical clearance was obtained (Ref#: 2024_RPC_081), and all voluntary participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, with the data securely maintained in compliance with the code of ethics. Recognizing the asynchronous nature of ODeL, data collection was flexible and reflective: students completed open-ended online questionnaires, while markers provided structured evaluation forms. These instruments supported the study's focus on student and marker agency and addressed transactional distance in online learning. The research upheld strong ethical, methodological, and theoretical foundations to explore GenAI use in academic writing and assessment.

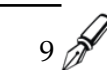
RESULTS

This section presents the results, organized according to the research questions. The following themes emerged:

Students' Positive Perceptions of GenAI Usage as an Academic Support Tool.

In the current digital era, students in an ODeL context are progressively using GenAI tools for academic support. As digital natives, they are generally proficient with technology and find GenAI appealing due to its immediacy and accessibility. Despite the availability of module support through virtual classes, feedforward and feedback tutorial letters, digital media resources, discussion forums, and a Telegram group, many students still rely on GenAI for generating assignment responses. The ease of access and the promise of quick answers drive its adoption.

The figures below illustrate unedited student responses that were thematically categorized to address the first research question.



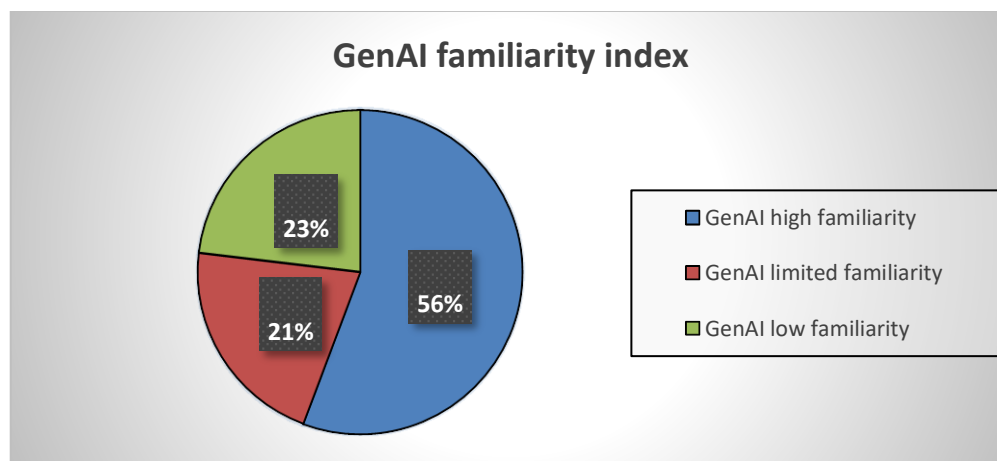


Figure 1. Students' GenAI familiarity

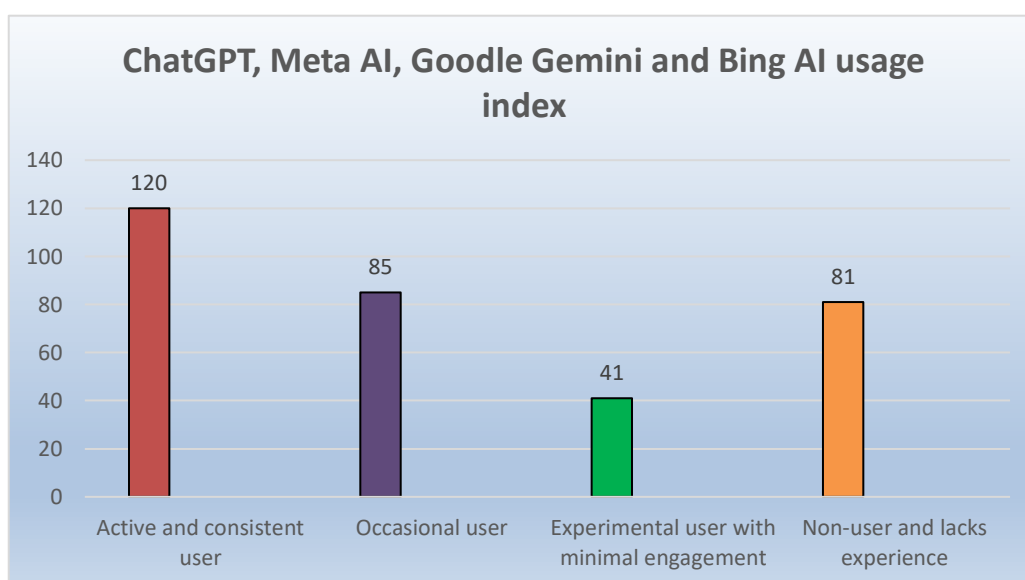


Figure 2. Students' GenAI usage index

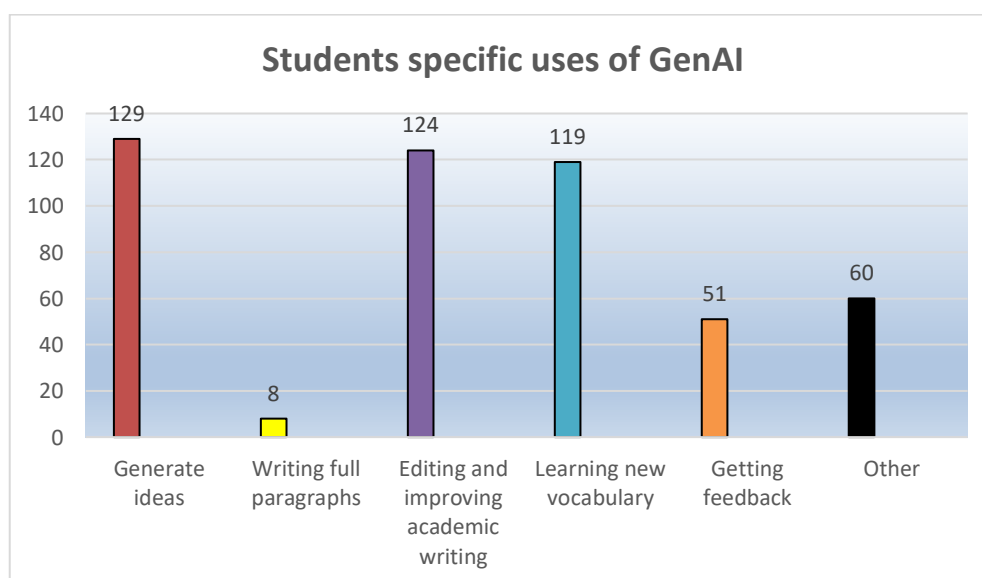


Figure 3. Students' specific uses of GenAI

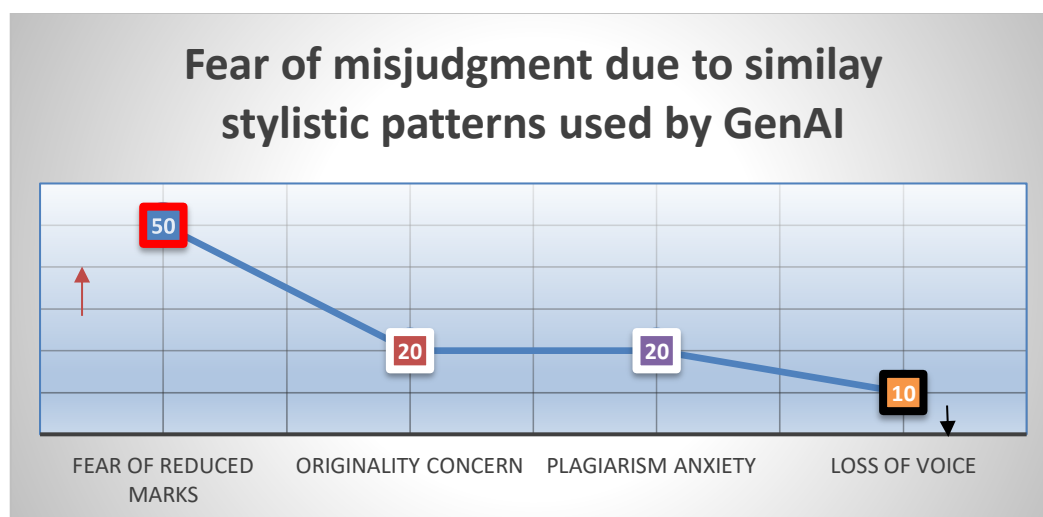


Figure 4. Students' fear of judgment relating to GenAI usage

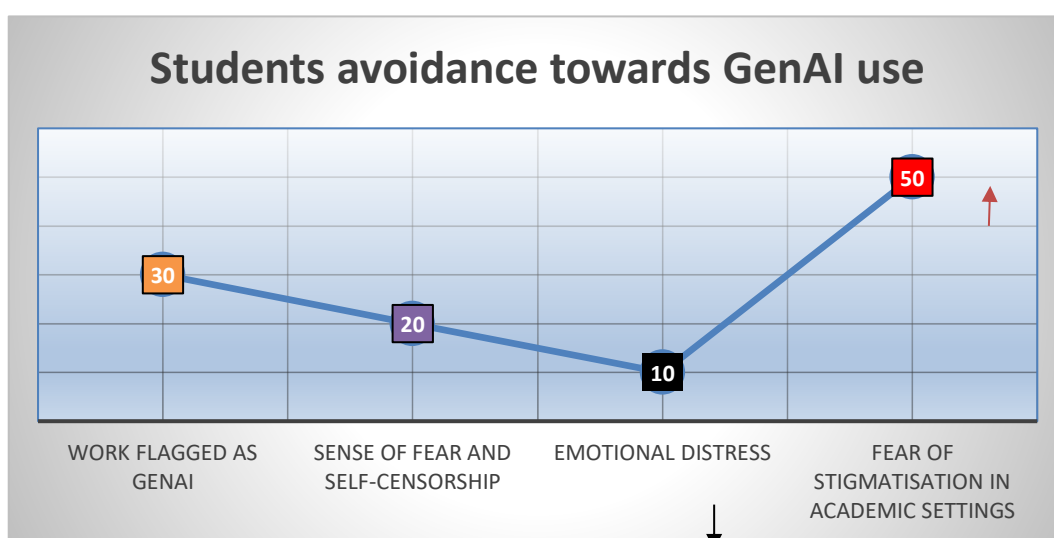
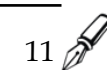


Figure 5. Students' avoidance of GenAI use

The data presented in the figures reveal a consistent pattern in students' adoption of GenAI tools. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of students are familiar with GenAI and demonstrate a clear understanding of its core functions. Building on this, Figure 2 shows that most of the students are active and consistent users of GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Meta AI, Google Gemini, and Bing AI to support their academic writing. These tools serve multiple purposes that contribute to academic development and enrichment. Figure 3 highlights a key finding, namely that many students rely on GenAI to generate ideas, learn new vocabulary, receive feedback, and support other academic activities. This reliance appears to reflect common challenges such as writer's block or a lack of confidence in their academic writing abilities. In this context, GenAI serves as a supportive resource that helps students overcome early writing difficulties and enhance the comprehensiveness of their performance. However, the data also reveal some troubling patterns. As illustrated in Figure 4, a substantial number of students report feeling unfairly judged when their writing resembles the clarity, coherence, or formality often associated with GenAI outputs. They believe that their natural writing style is frequently mistaken for AI-generated content, which has led to penalties or reduced marks in some cases. As shown in Figure 5, this perception has contributed to a growing sense of being stigmatised in academic settings, fear and self-censorship among students. Many now avoid using certain words or sentence



structures and worry their work will be flagged as AI-assisted. This cautious approach is rooted in past negative experiences and emotional distress.

Markers' Negative Perceptions of GenAI Usage Relating to Pedagogical Erosion.

Markers responsible for assessing ADM20B assignment scripts are primarily lecturers from various higher education institutions. Many express strong and critical views on the use of GenAI in academia. Those from traditional academic backgrounds often associate GenAI with a decline in cognitive engagement, a loss of academic rigour, and erosion of student originality. Their concerns extend beyond academic dishonesty to include broader pedagogical implications, such as weakened critical thinking and disrupted trust in the assessment process. The figures below reflect how markers perceive and respond to GenAI content when assessing students' work within an evolving digital academic environment. This analysis addresses the second research question. The data are presented in their unedited form and have been thematically categorised accordingly.

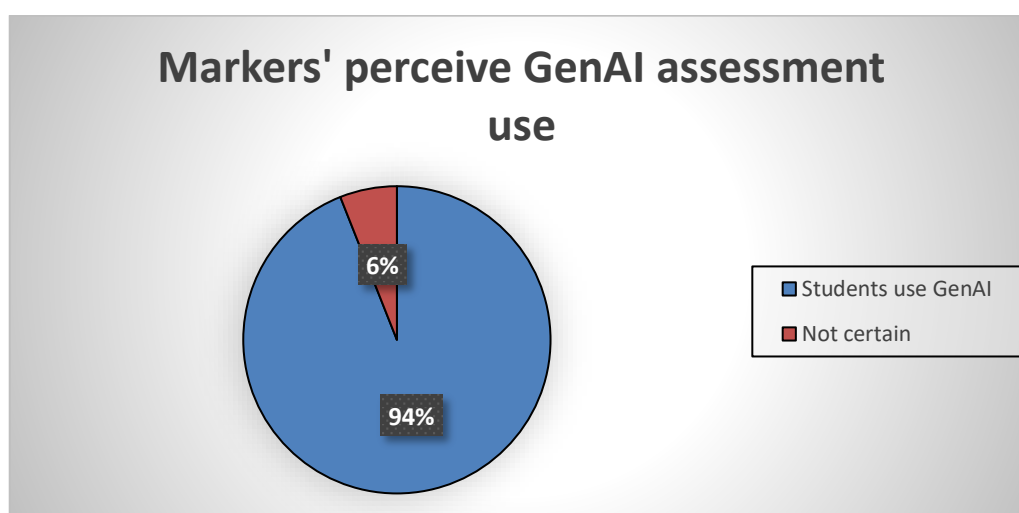


Figure 6. Markers' perceptions of students' GenAI usage

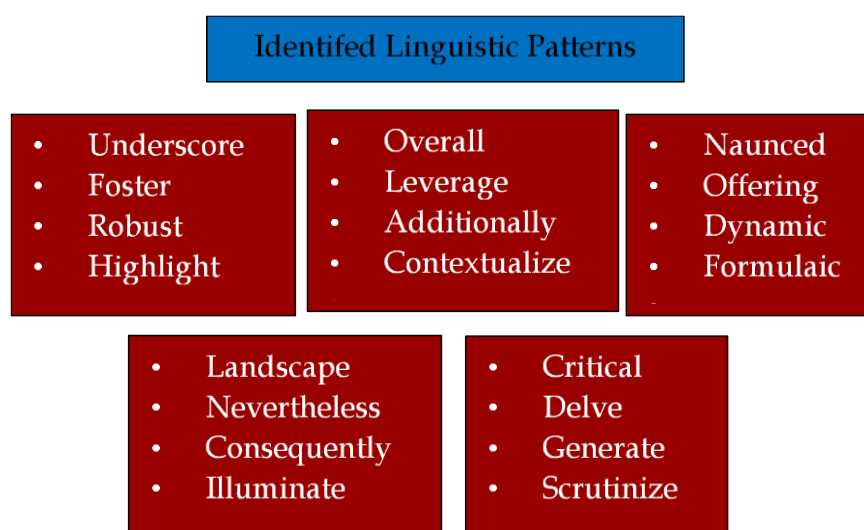


Figure 7. Common linguistic patterns identified by markers

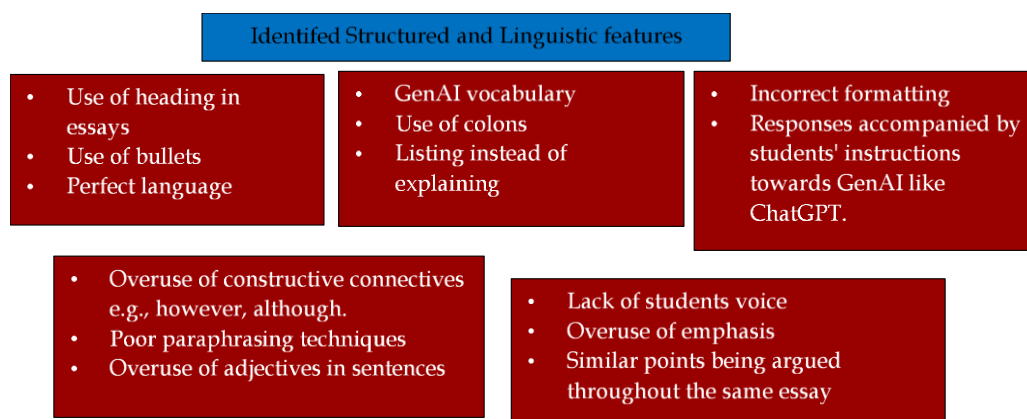


Figure 8. Structured and stylistic features observed

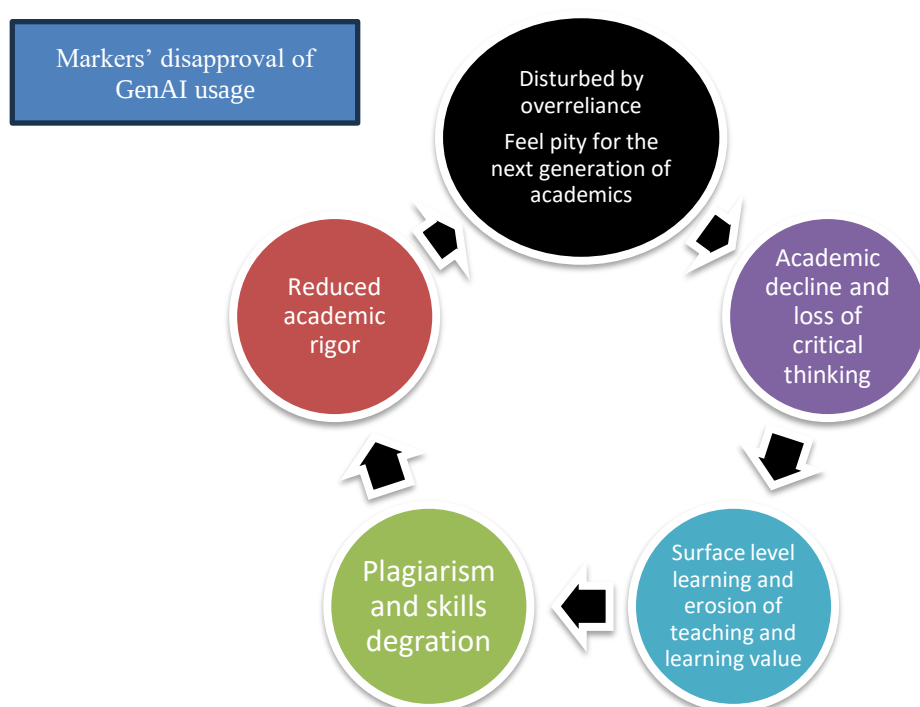


Figure 9. Markers' reactions to GenAI usage

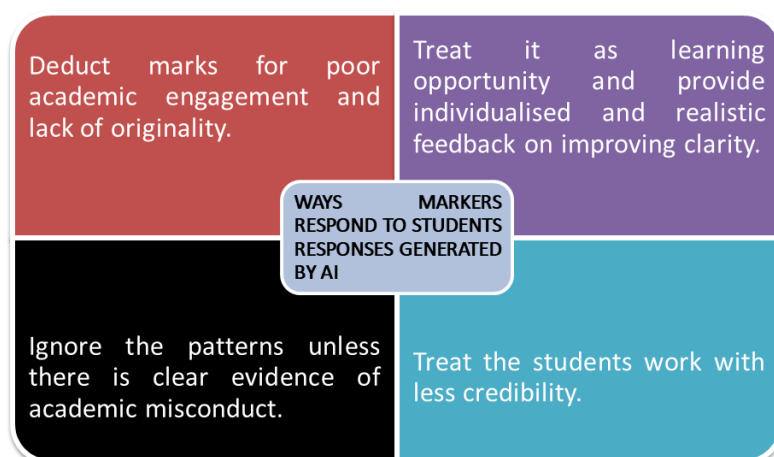
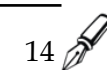


Figure 10. Markers' approaches to assessment when confronted with GenAI usage

Figures 6 to 10 present a detailed outline of markers' views and responses to the use of GenAI in students' academic work. As shown in Figure 6, the majority of markers consider that students frequently use GenAI tools in assignment scripts. This perception informs their growing concern about the integrity of student submissions. Figure 7 highlights a critical issue: the repeated use of similar linguistic patterns (delve, landscape, underscore, robust, dynamic, etc.) produced by GenAI may cause markers to misidentify authentic student voices as artificial. This tendency promotes compliance and threatens distinctiveness, leading to potential stigmatization of students who write with clarity and structure. Building on this, Figure 8 presents structural and stylistic features commonly associated with GenAI-assisted work. Markers reported noticing overly polished responses, excessive use of headings, mid-sentence colons, and bullet points replacing expected paragraph formats. These features disrupt academic conventions and raise questions about students' own writing capabilities. Figure 9 explores the emotional responses of markers to the growing presence of GenAI in assessments. Many express concerns about the decline in independent thinking and voice ethical discomfort when GenAI work receives similar marks to original student efforts. They also report suspicion when there is a noticeable gap between a student's language skills and the sophistication of the submitted work. Finally, Figure 10 outlines the actions markers take when they suspect GenAI use. Most respondents indicated that they begin deducting marks once stylistic or linguistic patterns suggest GenAI assistance. However, a smaller group reported that they do not penalize unless there is clear evidence of academic misconduct.

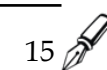
DISCUSSION

The results of the first research question corroborate existing literature on students' familiarity with and functional understanding of GenAI tools. Consistent with Perifanou and Economides (2025), Selwyn (2024), Selwyn et al. (2023), and Zhan et al. (2025), ADM20B students possess a solid foundational knowledge of how GenAI works and its application in academic settings. As digital natives, students embrace GenAI for its immediacy and convenience, a pattern also observed by Aldreabi et al. (2025), Chan and Zhou (2023), Deb et al. (2025), and Taguchi and Zhao (2025). Beyond familiarity, students use GenAI strategically to generate ideas, enhance vocabulary, and improve structural cohesion in their writing. These usage patterns mirror those reported by Kozan and Richardson (2023), Nikolic et al. (2024), and Nkadimeng and Jantjies (2024), suggesting that GenAI is becoming a globally adopted academic support tool rather than a passing trend. Importantly, students view GenAI as a cognitive aid that helps them overcome common academic challenges such as writer's block and low self-confidence. In this regard, the results align with Law (2024), Tang (2024), and Qi, Liu, and Xu (2025), who note that GenAI plays a significant role in scaffolding early writing efforts. However, this reliance signals a deeper issue: the erosion of trust in one's academic voice. As echoed in Chan and Hu (2023, p. 10), one student shared, "I would use it to help improve my writing (grammar, paraphrasing...), consult some questions, or let it give some feedback on my writing." This dependency implies that, in the absence of GenAI, students may struggle with self-directed engagement and the cognitive demands of critical writing tasks. This tension is further compounded by students' perceptions of being unfairly penalized for producing writing that resembles GenAI outputs. According to students, markers often associate polished language, coherence, or formality with GenAI work, regardless of the actual source. These perceptions echo concerns raised by Akkas et al. (2024), Bittle and El-Gayar (2025), and Zlotnikova et al. (2025), where markers are seen as reluctant to embrace the pedagogical value of GenAI. Although students did not explicitly confirm whether their usage of GenAI was within ethical boundaries, their responses highlight a wider mistrust by markers. This mistrust has led to increased fear, emotional strain, and altered academic behavior. Some students reported deliberately simplifying their work to avoid being flagged for suspected GenAI use, even when their work was independently produced. Such self-censorship represents a significant cognitive regression, as students begin to prioritize "safety" over growth.



These behaviors are not isolated but are shaped by institutional uncertainty. As observed by Kizito (2023) and Park (2023), most university policies have yet to establish clear, consistent guidelines on GenAI usage. The policy vacuum encourages inconsistency in assessment practices, leaving students vulnerable to subjective judgments. From a theoretical perspective, these results can be meaningfully interpreted through Moore's TDT (1972, 1993). GenAI tools, when used ethically, have the potential to narrow the psychological and communicative gap between students and learning content in ODeL contexts during independent and asynchronous study. They offer immediate and personalized assistance that can support students' academic engagement and reduce feelings of isolation. However, this potential is constrained by broader institutional dynamics. Marker skepticism, existing assessment practices, and delays in feedback, often within a 24-to-48-hour turnaround timeframe, may unintentionally widen transactional distance. This reality calls for urgent institutional reflection on how GenAI is integrated, regulated, and pedagogically framed in higher education.

Based on the results from RQ 2, markers' perspectives on the prevalent use of GenAI in students' work align with studies by Carrigan (2024) and Hoernig et al. (2024), which suggest that overreliance on GenAI signals a pedagogical decline with significant academic implications. Markers express genuine concern and frustration, noting that GenAI overuse reduces student engagement, increases plagiarism, and undermines the quality of academic work. This concern is reinforced by Cotton et al. (2023) and Iqbal (2025), who similarly argue that the educational value of assignments is compromised when students depend on GenAI tools to complete assessments. In addition to pedagogical decline and quality concerns, a second critical issue emerges: markers feel increasingly burdened by the need to "police" student submissions. Their frustration stems from the lack of effective GenAI detection tools, which complicates their role in maintaining academic integrity. This finding is corroborated by Ardito (2024) and Perkins et al. (2024b), who highlight that the blurred lines of authorship increase the challenge of identifying the student's voice, heighten scrutiny, and reinforce gatekeeping and surveillance practices. Institutional plagiarism detectors such as Turnitin often fail to detect GenAI content, pushing markers to adopt alternative tools like GPTZero, Turnitin's AI-writing indicator, or ZeroGPT. These tools, however, introduce additional complexity into the marking process and reinforce the perception of a "cat-and-mouse" dynamic between markers and students. Importantly, this dynamic reflects a systemic issue: the lack of a clear institutional policy on what constitutes GenAI plagiarism. Without such guidance, markers are left in a precarious ethical position, unsure of how to respond to suspected GenAI use. At times, this uncertainty leads to the unfair stigmatization of students whose high-quality writing is misinterpreted as AI-generated. Ferrara (2024) and Perkins et al. (2024b) support this concern, highlighting that GenAI detectors are criticized both for false positives and for failing to catch more sophisticated outputs. Consequently, students with legitimate writing capabilities may be penalized based on flawed detection methods. Moreover, many markers claim they can detect GenAI use based on stylistic features such as polished language, structure, or lack of personal voice. While this may be true in some instances, Gonsalves (2025) cautions that without conclusive evidence, such suspicions remain speculative and should not form the sole basis for penalizing students. This finding reveals a deeper institutional gap: while markers are expected to uphold academic integrity, they are often under-equipped, under-trained, and unsupported in navigating the complexities introduced by GenAI tools. Perkins (2024a) further argues that GenAI detection systems can mislabel genuine student work, creating ethical dilemmas regarding fairness and due process in grading. These combined results highlight that the root of the problem lies in the absence of comprehensive GenAI policies within HEIs. There is an urgent need to integrate GenAI into assessment frameworks in ways that are pedagogically sound, ethically just, and practically implementable. The discomfort and ethical dilemmas faced by markers, specifically the inconsistency in how they respond to suspected GenAI use, emphasize this need. While some markers deduct marks based on stylistic cues, others wait for clear evidence before taking any



action. This inconsistency is problematic and requires coordinated institutional intervention (Bozkurt et al., 2024; Blonder & Feldman-Maggor, 2024; Francis et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2024). GenAI training for lecturers, students, and markers may help conscientize users and improve ethical use, as well as understanding of GenAI literacies.

CONCLUSION

This study presents conflicting perspectives on how students and markers view and interact with GenAI in academic contexts within ODeL contexts. Students demonstrate functional and strategic use of GenAI tools to enhance their assignment responses by improving vocabulary, generating ideas, and enhancing structural quality. GenAI tools support cognitive development and help address common academic challenges such as writer's block and low confidence. However, overreliance on these tools may erode trust in one's academic voice. This tension is further amplified by students' fear of being unfairly penalized for polished or coherent writing, leading to self-censorship and altered academic behavior. In contrast, markers express concerns about declining academic integrity, reduced student engagement, and increased plagiarism associated with GenAI overuse. Their role is further complicated by inconsistent detection tools and the lack of explicit institutional policies and guidelines, resulting in ethical dilemmas, inconsistent assessment practices, and strained student-marker relations. Such difficulties collectively highlight the urgent need for HEIs to develop clear GenAI policies, establish consistent academic integrity guidelines, and provide GenAI literacy training for both staff and students. Additionally, assessments should be redesigned to promote authentic engagement and reduce dependence on generative tools, while the use of GenAI must be balanced with human judgment and pedagogical insight. Institutions should also support markers through professional development and ethical marking frameworks that reflect the realities of GenAI integration. Theoretically, these results affirm Moore's (1972, 1993) Transactional Distance Theory, illustrating how GenAI can either reduce or widen the psychological and communicative gap in asynchronous learning, depending on its implementation. GenAI is not inherently a threat; rather, it is a transformative pedagogical tool whose impact is shaped by institutional readiness, ethical integration, and critical literacy. Failure to address these challenges risks deepening transactional distance, promoting mistrust, and diminishing the educational value of assessments. Responsible and transparent incorporation of GenAI into academic practice is therefore essential for sustaining pedagogical integrity, supporting students' development, and empowering lecturers, students, and markers in HEIs. A key limitation of this study is that the findings are derived from a single ODeL institution and, therefore, cannot be generalized across all higher education contexts. Nevertheless, the results provide valuable and contextually rich insights into the ever-changing educational challenges associated with the integration of GenAI in ODeL environments, which may inform future research and policy development in similar settings. Future research should include comparative studies across multiple institutions to explore differences in GenAI use between ODeL and contact universities, thereby extending the scope and transferability of existing results. Quantitative investigations are needed to assess the impact of GenAI on student performance and writing quality, offering empirical evidence to complement qualitative insights. In addition, this study recommends longitudinal studies, as they would provide valuable insights into how policy development influences the integration and acceptance of GenAI over time within evolving higher education contexts.

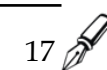
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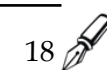


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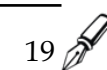
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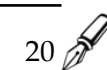
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