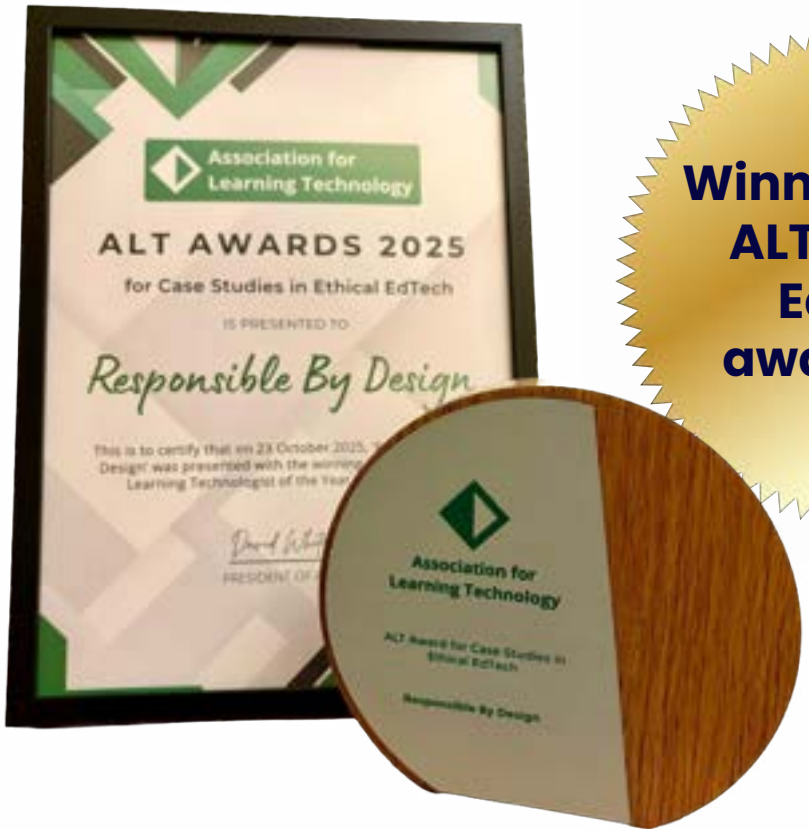
The Open University

Responsible by Design

GenAI & Ethics at The Open University



Winners of the ALT Ethical Edtech award 2025

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Learning Design

Responsible by Design

More GenAI resources can be found on the Open University Learning Design blog.

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How to use this framework

Use this framework to identify where planned student use of generative AI (GenAI) in learning, teaching and assessment may need ethical design attention.

The framework is simple to use: for any planned GenAI activity, scan the framework pillars and note where there may be a risk. There is no hierarchy to the pillars; they are all equally important. You do not need to address every area in every activity, as this may add unnecessary complexity. Focus on the issues most relevant to the task, learning or assessment context and student experience.

Where a risk is identified, use the design response bank to choose a practical adjustment. This might include adding a reflection, comparison, verification step, opt-out route, alternative non-AI activity or clearer guidance for students.

The aim of this resource is to help module teams make small, purposeful design decisions that support responsible and equitable use of GenAI.

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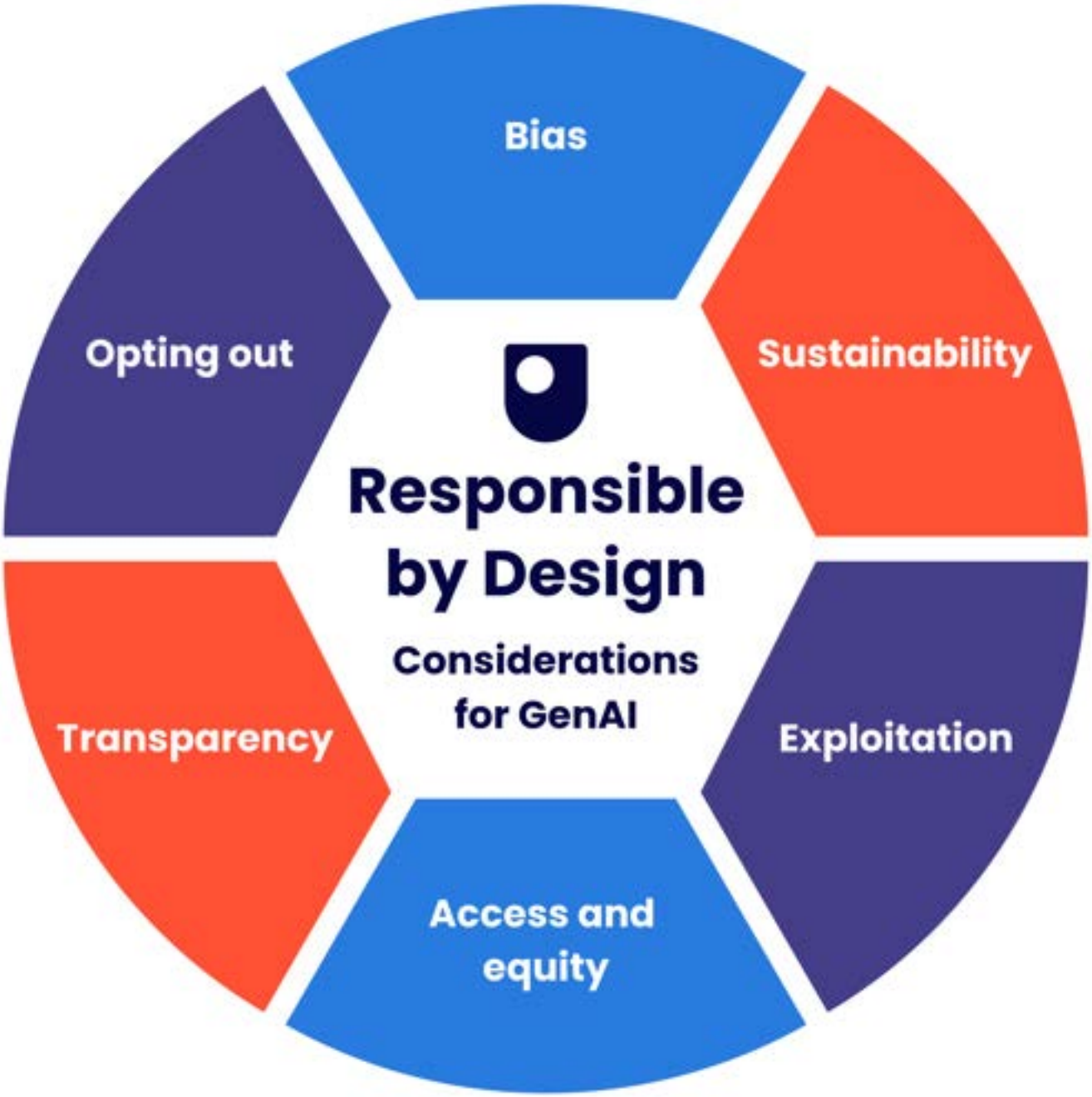

Responsible by Design framework

Pillar	Considerations	Design recommendations
Bias	Can students actively question bias, assumptions, stereotypes, missing perspectives or overly affirming responses in AI outputs?	Build in comparison, bias audit or revision for another audience or context.
Sustainability	Does AI use align with the intended learning outcomes, add clear value, and remain proportionate in terms of environmental costs?	Use AI only at clearly defined points, avoid unnecessary high-impact uses and ask students what AI adds to learning.
Exploitation	Are students aware that AI depends on existing creative and intellectual work and often-hidden human labour?	Include discussion of provenance, consent, ownership, reuse or hidden labour.
Access and equity	Could paid tools, connectivity, confidence, knowledge, prior experience or tool quality affect workload or student outcomes?	Provide beginner support, low-stakes practice or alternatives. Design success around critique, not quality of AI outputs.
Transparency	Are students clear whether AI use is allowed, what AI contributed, what they should verify, and how they must attribute use?	Support students in understanding how to acknowledge, verify and take responsibility for AI-supported work.
Opting out	Can students make an informed choice about whether and how to use AI, including opting out entirely, while still demonstrating equivalent learning?	Provide equivalent AI and non-AI routes and opportunities to demonstrate learning without AI assistance.

Design response bank

Bias

This pillar supports students to critically examine how bias, assumptions and perspectives can shape GenAI systems and outputs.

Considerations

- Can students actively question bias, assumptions, stereotypes, omissions or missing perspectives in GenAI outputs?
- Are opportunities for critique built into the task itself, rather than addressed only through warnings or guidance?
- Are students encouraged to recognise how GenAI tools may reinforce their own existing assumptions or biases, for example by offering agreeable or affirming responses?

Design recommendations

- Encourage students to evaluate GenAI outputs with the same critical judgement they would apply to any human-produced media or information sources.
- Include a short 'bias audit' of GenAI outputs using questions such as: ‘What kinds of people or contexts are overlooked?’ For example, AI tools often generate outputs influenced by WEIRD datasets (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic perspectives).
- Ask students to revise GenAI outputs for a different context, deciding which elements to trust, adapt and reject. Rewriting AI outputs can help students recognise the assumptions and perspectives reflected in them.
- Use role-based critique: for example, consider how an AI output might read to a person whose experience is not represented within it.
- Design activities which encourage students to experiment with prompts that compare, critique or challenge viewpoints, recognising that GenAI tools can sometimes produce overly affirming outputs.

Design response bank

Sustainability

This pillar supports students to make informed decisions about when GenAI use is purposeful, proportionate and justified, including consideration of its environmental impact.

Considerations

- Does GenAI use enhance the learning activity? Is it justified by a clear pedagogic purpose?
- Are students supported to use GenAI in proportionate ways without unnecessary overreliance? Can they reflect on when GenAI use may be justified and when it may be excessive?
- Are students supported to consider the environmental impact of AI use?

Design recommendations

- When designing activities, ensure AI use is proportionate by weighing the educational benefits against the wider costs, including environmental impact.
- Support students in considering whether and how GenAI adds meaningful value to learning. For example, ask them to reflect on what AI use contributes that a non-AI approach would not, or vice versa.
- Encourage students to reflect on the wider environmental costs of increasing AI use, including water and energy usage, demand for critical minerals used in hardware, and pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from data centres. Many of these costs have a disproportionate impact on the Global South.
- Consider whether image or video generation is necessary for the task, as this has a greater environmental cost than short text generation. Where appropriate, provide pre-generated examples or shared outputs rather than encouraging repeated generation by large numbers of students.
- Ask students to engage with the task before using an AI tool, for example by independently generating initial ideas for prompts. Provide structured guidance, model prompts or frameworks, where appropriate.

Design response bank

Exploitation

This pillar supports students to understand how GenAI systems rely on human labour and intellectual works, and to critically examine the ethical questions this raises, including those of exploitation, ownership, consent and attribution.

Considerations

- Are students aware that GenAI tools rely on human labour?
- Are students able to discuss questions of copyright, ownership, consent, provenance and reuse?
- Do activities encourage evidence-based consideration of the role of human labour and creative/intellectual work in AI systems and outputs?

Design recommendations

- Support students to understand that AI systems rely on human labour, including manual data preparation and filtering. This can be explored through short case studies, discussions or critical reflection activities, for example, highlighting that the work is often done by people who are poorly paid and subject to violent or disturbing material without proper support.
- Encourage students to consider the creative and intellectual source material on which GenAI tools have been trained. Much of this material has been used without obtaining consent from, or offering payment to, its creators. Discussions may include copyright, ownership, consent, authorship, attribution and responsible reuse where relevant to the subject area.
- Encourage informed critique of labour and ownership issues by using balanced, evidence-based language to support critical understanding.
- Where appropriate, position these discussions within broader conversations about digital technologies, data practices and creative industries rather than treating AI as entirely separate from other ethical issues.

Design response bank

Access and equity

This pillar seeks to ensure that opportunities to learn with GenAI are not shaped by unequal access to technology, knowledge, experience or confidence.

Considerations

- Will students' ability to complete the activity be affected by unequal access to AI tools, paid features, hardware or internet connectivity?
- Does the activity recognise that students may have different levels of confidence with GenAI, and that confidence may change over time and across contexts?
- Could differences in experience or confidence create inequalities in student workload or the quality of the learning experience?

Design recommendations

- Design activities so that success depends on critical thinking, analysis and judgement rather than access to particular AI tools or the quality of AI-generated outputs.
- Promote equitable participation by avoiding unnecessary reliance on paid tools or specific platforms. Test the task on multiple AI tools or platforms if possible.
- Design activities that expose students to different ways of engaging with GenAI, from reviewing AI-generated outputs to direct prompting and critique, so that students can develop informed judgement about its use in different contexts.
- Provide appropriate support for beginners, including worked examples, guidance on prompting and evaluating outputs, and opportunities for low-stakes practice.
- Where appropriate, offer non-AI alternatives or pre-generated outputs that enable students to achieve the same learning outcomes.

Design response bank

Transparency

This pillar supports students to understand, acknowledge and take responsibility for how GenAI has been used within their learning and assessment activities.

Considerations

- Does the task clearly indicate whether GenAI use is permitted, expected, optional or disallowed?
- Does the task actively build responsible academic integrity practices by encouraging students to express how GenAI has been used and what they have contributed?
- Are students encouraged to verify the details of GenAI outputs?

Design recommendations

- Clarify what parts of the task GenAI tools should and should not be used for, where possible.
- Ask students to document how they used GenAI and what decisions they made. For example, ask them to write a short reflection on what they accepted, changed, verified or rejected from AI outputs.
- Provide supported practice in acknowledging and/or citing GenAI use, including modelling what to include in a reference list or short AI use statement.
- Direct students to check claims, sources or recommendations provided by GenAI.
- Make clear that responsibility for accuracy, appropriateness and academic integrity remains with the student.

Design response bank

Opting out

This pillar recognises that students may wish to engage with AI in different ways, including limiting or declining direct AI use, and should be able to do so while achieving equivalent learning outcomes.

Considerations

- Are students given guidance on how GenAI use may support learning to inform their choices?
- Have students been offered a meaningful alternative to GenAI use, where possible?
- Does the non-AI route offer an equitable learning experience for students with the same level of support and access?

Design recommendations

- Clearly explain why GenAI use has been designed into the task. This will help students understand how its use contributes to their learning goals and allow them to make a more informed decision about whether and how to engage.
- Include opportunities for students to reflect on their use of AI in relation to the task. Encourage them to consider whether AI adds sufficient value to learning to warrant its use, or whether a non-AI approach may be more appropriate.
- Wherever possible, provide an alternative, non-GenAI route that is equivalent in learning outcomes and workload and is presented as an equally valid choice.
- Avoid treating non-AI routes as remedial or secondary. Make clear that opting out of GenAI use will not disadvantage students.
- If the task is designed to require analysis of a GenAI output, consider providing a pre-generated example for students.
- Following an AI-based task, include at least one related task where all students are asked to explain or reproduce their learning without GenAI assistance.