13eg Gynhadledd Dysgu ac Addysgu Flynyddol

13th Annual Learning and Teaching Conference

8-10 Gorffennaf 2025 | 8-10 July 2025

AI in HE: Reflections on Possibilities, Problems and Practicalities

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Artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education is now pervasive, and ubiquitous but perhaps often unnoticed. AI, specifically the kinds of intelligent chatbots exemplified by chapGPT accessing the raw power of Large Language Models, the underlying AI technology, such as OpenAI, can however be problematic.

Large Language Models can ‘hallucinate’, providing plausible but fictitious information, furthermore, they require considerable skill in drafting queries that give the precise answer required, the so-called engineering of ‘prompts’, and lastly they could provide responses that are dangerous, hurtful or harmful. These are all consequences of the underlying technology, which indiscriminately harvests and recycles the world’s digital resources, good or bad, right or wrong, nice or nasty. There are also aspects of colonialistic exploitation, environmental damage and threats to minority languages and cultures.

In higher education they raise concerns about plagiarism, reported as endemic, and questions about originality, creativity and the nature of intellectual property. There seems however little progress on curricula that might equip graduates for futures of pervasive AI or the critical AI literacy that might shape this. Emerging regulatory frameworks seem muddled and not always helpful.

This presentation looks at these generalised criticisms of educational AI and then explores current attempts to make it safer ethically and richer pedagogically. It will report on current technical developments and trajectories and on recent informal research with university learning technology professionals. The author leads research for Avallain, a global edtech company, working on these issues.

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