Librarian Futures 04

Librarian Leadership on the AI Frontier

What can student and librarian perspectives on the role of AI in higher education tell us about librarian leadership in this new frontier?

Technology from Sage

Foreword

We stand at a remarkable juncture in academia, where artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping the landscape of research, teaching, and learning. This *Librarian Futures* report arrives at a pivotal moment, offering fresh insights into how students and librarians are adapting to this swiftly evolving environment. Notably, more than half of today's students already integrate AI tools, such as ChatGPT, into their academic workflows. This is a clear indication that AI has quickly transformed from a novelty into an essential companion for scholarly inquiry.

Yet, despite students' widespread adoption of AI, the report highlights an intriguing paradox: students trust librarians deeply but rarely seek their guidance on AI use. Only 8% of students report receiving librarian support in developing their AI skills, even though more than half would feel more confident using AI tools if recommended by a librarian. This presents a significant and urgent opportunity for librarians to bridge this gap, asserting themselves as indispensable guides in an increasingly AI-driven academic environment.

Interestingly, while students predominantly utilize ChatGPT, librarians demonstrate a broader, more nuanced engagement with various AI tools, ranging from specialized research assistants like Elicit to advanced AI-supported drafting and presentation software. Librarians are experimenting and embedding these technologies thoughtfully into their professional practice. Yet, this familiarity has not fully translated into confidence in advising students. Recognizing this discrepancy is essential, as it underscores both the challenges librarians face and the immense potential to enhance student learning and research through targeted, proactive support.

Further compounding the urgency, the report reveals that today's students often feel overwhelmed by their academic responsibilities, which is a feeling shared by over half of respondents. Alarmingly, nearly one-third express doubt that librarians could help alleviate their stress. Addressing this misperception should become a central mission for libraries, emphasizing their role as accessible, knowledgeable, and trusted educators in AI literacy.

Historically, libraries have proven remarkably resilient and adaptable to technological change. Now, as we move further into this era of AI integration, librarians must once again step decisively forward—not merely as custodians of information, but as proactive educators and advocates who lead the ethical, thoughtful, and effective integration of AI within academia.

This report serves as an important catalyst, urging libraries to seize their opportunity to redefine their roles, embrace AI expertise, empower students, and strengthen the library's vital place in the academic community—today and into the future.

Dr Leo S. Lo
DEAN AND PROFESSOR AT THE COLLEGE OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES AND LEARNING SCIENCES, THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

Executive summary

In this report, we compare and contrast survey data from approximately 1,000 students and 300 librarians to investigate perceptions of AI tools in higher education, how academic libraries are responding to AI, and student productivity and stress. We use these insights to propose a framework for librarians in navigating this AI frontier.

Evolving Student Habits

- AI has become irrevocably embedded in student research habits in an extraordinarily short period of time, but the academic library continues to have a vital role in the student research process.
- Students report generally high levels of confidence across all stages of their research journey, including using AI. Student confidence in using AI seems to be even higher than librarian confidence.
- Just 8% of students report that librarians have guided them on AI use.

Perceptions of AI

- Student and librarian enthusiasm for adopting AI tools is very mixed – although more were enthusiastic than not, significant numbers of both students and librarians were either ambivalent about the prospect or actively opposed. This suggests a looming gap in practice and, therefore, attainment.
- Librarians were more emphatic than students about the significance of the impact of AI on higher education and the future of work.

Use of AI

- Most students and librarians are now using ChatGPT (or other AI tools) regularly, with very few not having used it at some point in the last year.
- ChatGPT is the most used AI tool among students and librarians.
- Librarians use a more varied range of AI tools than students.

Paying for AI

- Most students are not paying for AI or have had AI purchased for them on their behalf.
- Few librarians are aware of students purchasing AI or having it purchased on their behalf.
- Most librarians see procurement of AI as the responsibility of other departments at their institution.

Student Stress and Productivity

- Most students experience being overwhelmed with some regularity, with common deleterious effects to their physical and mental health and academic performance. This connects to other research on youth mental health and the alarming rise of youth mental health issues.
- When students are overwhelmed, librarians are infrequently considered as people to approach.
- There are once again mixed feelings on whether AI assistants would help students to be more productive.

With "therapy/ companionship" now the most common AI use case (Zao-Sanders, 2025), is AI for student mental health potentially more transformative than AI for student productivity?

Introduction

Librarian Futures so far...

The *Librarian Futures* series of reports began in 2021 when we published our first instalment, examining librarian-student relationships in the modern-day academic library. We drew three main conclusions from the data presented in that first report. First is that many students are not fully aware of the range of services available to them through their academic library. The library is seen much more as a building and the books within, and less as a provider of services. This is at odds with the role librarians see for themselves. The second installment in the series sought to understand patron perspectives on the undergraduate workflow and collected data from hundreds of students across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Our data suggested that many students continue to experience difficulties across their workflow, reporting varying levels of confidence at every stage of the process. Despite this, few students turned to the library for support during their research journey, and librarians were rarely identified as staff that might help.

Secondly, our data demonstrated what many librarians instinctively knew: students by and large begin their workflows outside of the library. This suggested that librarians have a choice – meet students where they are and bring the library's collections and services directly into their workflow, or risk being disintermediated entirely.

The third major finding was that there is reason to be optimistic because, despite the above, students continue to have an enduring appreciation for their librarians and would welcome them into their workflow. **Almost 90% of students indicated an eagerness to have the library in their workflow** – an assistant they could call upon, without needing to leave their workflow.

We released a second instalment in the series in 2023, aiming to equip librarians with an even more detailed insight into student thinking and, what we came to term, 'the knowledge gap.' Our data again demonstrated that students certainly do see a role for their librarians in their studies, but suggested that perceptions of the library were somewhat outdated and focused on library collections rather than services. We further emphasised our findings from Part 1 on the student workflow, demonstrating clearly that the student workflow begins outside of the academic library. We concluded Part 2 by asking whether the key to engaging students with the academic library was to entice them back to the library, or to acknowledge that research behaviours have changed and instead work to bring the library to students – as Part 1 showed students would welcome.

In the third report in the series, we turned our attention to librarian skillsets. We demonstrated that librarians had wide-ranging skillsets that prepared them well to address emerging challenges (AI being just one of several), although many librarians did not feel that sufficient time or budget was dedicated to developing those skillsets at their institution. We also provided an insight into the skills librarians felt were particularly important to develop in the coming years to prepare for emerging challenges like AI, finding that many librarians think skills for student and academic outreach are just as important as digital literacies and critical thinking. After all, **students cannot benefit from library services if they don't know they exist**.

Librarian Futures now...

Until now, Part 3 of the *Librarian Futures* series was the only instalment to feature data collected after the release of ChatGPT, having taken place over summer 2023. AI's first real year in the mainstream however was characterised by deep uncertainty, as librarians, students, publishers, and vendors alike worked to understand what AI's arrival would (and would not) mean for us. Although there remain many unknowns in 2025, and the landscape of AI models and products is forever in flux, now is an excellent time to investigate both librarian and student perspectives on AI. Time has allowed opportunities to be identified, challenges to be better understood, opinions to develop, and plans to be drawn. That this is an ideal moment to survey librarians and their students is borne out by wider research.

In Clarivate's 2024 'Pulse of the Library' report, over 60% of academic libraries were found to be considering AI for their library, or drawing up plans to introduce it (Clarivate, 2024). This was a close mirror of the Association for Research Libraries' earlier findings (Lo and Vitale, 2024). Interestingly however, that same Clarivate report found that just 7% of libraries were found to be actively implementing AI at present, suggesting that many are stuck in a holding pattern approach.

Caution implementing AI is wise. Each stage of the implementation process – the evaluation and procurement of AI tools, the staff and student training involved, the rollout, the infrastructure required – will take time, money, and patience to be effective, and librarians will rightly be wary of rushing this. The potential consequences of poor AI implementation are various: risks to sensitive data, student privacy, institutional and departmental reputation, student and staff wellbeing, and so on.

What is clear, however, is that we cannot pretend that everything is as it was. **Whether libraries implement AI or not, students are using it**. Even at institutions where AI implementation is not taking place, academic libraries can still support student engagement with AI by offering training on those things librarians already do best – critical thinking, information and digital literacy, and effective research. If librarians do not engage with AI at all, students will bypass the library altogether and seek access and support elsewhere. When we have shown in previous reports that discovery now largely begins outside of the library, it has been noted that students naturally prefer systems that are quicker or easier to use. Providing instant responses to natural language prompts, AI arguably now represents the path of least resistance for students. If students see no viable or comparable alternative from the library, will they see any reason to use the library's services, or librarians' knowledge? And could we blame them if they did not?

That is not to say the solutions are simple. In writing this report, we are keenly aware of the financial pressures impacting higher education institutions and academic libraries worldwide, and we recognize that any institution implementing AI will inevitably incur significant costs through procurement, training, and ongoing maintenance. However, there are important caveats here. Firstly, in some institutions the budgetary pressures may be so significant that a radical reshaping of budget allocations is needed, presenting an opportunity to also reshape departmental remits and responsibilities. Ambitious librarians in more staid environments may seek to leverage such opportunities to support their reforms: consider Coventry's recent shift from paid textbooks to open educational resources. This dramatic shift would previously have been out of the question, but is now well underway and seen by many as pioneering. It may also not be necessary for the library to shoulder the costs of AI implementation alone in order for the library to lead in this space. The library can share the financial burden of AI costs with other institutional departments while still asserting itself as a natural source of guidance in effective and ethical AI use.

The aim of this report is to provide fuller, richer data on student perceptions of AI, their enthusiasm for adopting AI in their workflows, and their expectations on who should provide access. This will inform the transition from AI planning to rollout for libraries and support, where needed, cost-effective purchases that meet the needs of your students. The data contained herein will be of interest and of use to stakeholders across the entire higher education sector, giving an insight into how AI is regarded, understood, and employed by librarians and their students today.

Key Findings

Key Findings

For this report, we surveyed 998 students and 313 librarians. A breakdown of how those participants were recruited is included in the appendix. Throughout, we have indicated the total number of respondents for each question, and all percentages have been calculated based on the total number of responses to that specific question.

Each survey began with a section on demographics. A full breakdown of respondent demographics is presented in the appendix, but key considerations are presented here. Participants were predominantly located in either the United Kingdom, the United States, or Canada, and although other countries were represented in the sample they were in the minority. Care should then be taken in interpreting these results, as they primarily reflect institutions in countries defined as high income (Metreau, Young, and Eapen, 2024). Two thirds of student respondents were between the ages of 18-25. A proportion of these students will therefore be "AI natives" – put simply, they will have arrived at university already using AI and will not have known studying in higher education without it. This may have impacted their responses to questions on confidence, perceptions, and access. More than three quarters of student respondents are full-time students. In previous instalments, we have demonstrated that part-time students are more likely to make use of additional librarian support than full-time students. The significantly higher number of full-time students responding might therefore have influenced our findings and underrepresented the specific requirements of part-time students. Conversely, 93% of our librarian respondents are 31 or older, and 72% have been in the profession for over 10 years. They will therefore have spent most of their time in higher education without AI, and this will likewise affect their perceptions of and attitudes toward AI. Our results are much more likely to reflect the views of more established librarians, and more targeted work would be required to assess how the views of early-career librarians differ to those of later-career librarians.

01 Evolving Student Habits

Move over Google Scholar, ChatGPT's coming.

In the second instalment of *Librarian Futures*, we asked students to identify resources they had used at any stage in their research process and which they used first. The data demonstrated that Google was both the most widely used resource for students (68% used it at some stage of their research journey) and the most popular starting point for research (38% started their research journey there).

Since that report was published however, AI has well and truly entered the mainstream. To determine what impact this has had on student habits we asked, "When conducting research for your assignments and studies, which of the following sources or methods do you use at any time during the research process?" Respondents were free to choose multiple options.

As anticipated, AI has had a significant impact on student research habits. Over half of respondents (55%) reported using ChatGPT in their research process. Other AI assistants are represented in the data but are markedly less popular – 21% of students selected the generic "Other AI chatbot" option, while 11% selected "research assistant (e.g. Perplexity, Elicit)".

Our data suggests that **AI has not upended the research process completely**. Google remains the most used tool for research, with 67% of respondents selecting this option – put simply, whilst ChatGPT is being used extensively, Google is still used more. Over half of students surveyed (54%) use the university library website (almost as many as use ChatGPT), while just under half (45%) selected the virtual learning environment (VLE). Shortly behind was Google Scholar (44%), and the course reading list (39%). Finally, PubMed (14%) and Dimensions (12%) were among the least used resources.

Compare and contrast with our results from the second *Librarian Futures* report and an interesting story begins to emerge (Figure 1). AI's firm foothold in the student research process does not appear to have come at the expense of the academic library: use of reading lists (42% in 2022, 39% in 2025) and the VLE (47% in 2022, 45% in 2025) has remained steady, and use of the library website appears to have steeply increased (35% in 2022, 54% in 2025). Use of more "traditional" resources is still necessary for the successful completion of a course – ChatGPT cannot, after all, tell a student what resources their teacher or librarian has added to a reading list, nor is it a viable replacement for communication with a true subject matter expert. The academic library, and the services and resources they provide, remain an integral component in the student workflow.

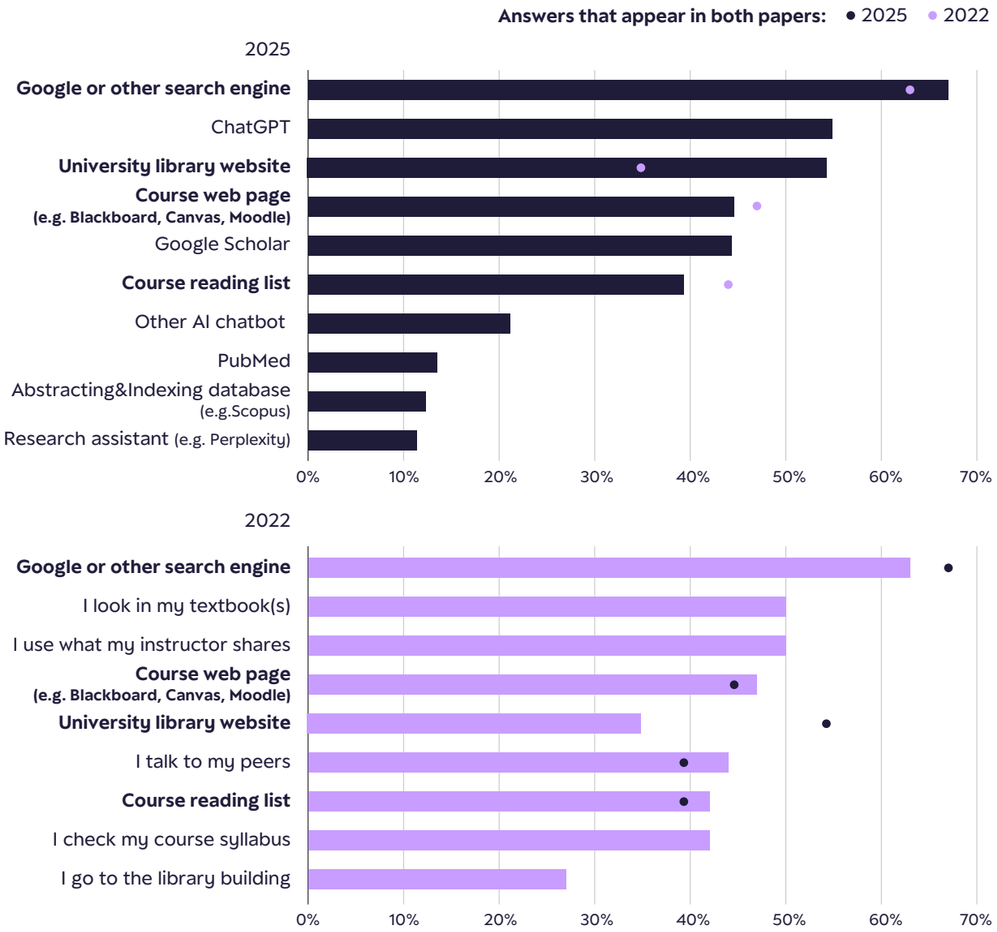
The story is much the same when examining where students begin their research. The most notable finding was that more than a fifth of students are now beginning their research process by using ChatGPT (18%) or another AI tool (3%). The problems with using AI for resource discovery are well documented, including a tendency to hallucinate information and references while presenting them as fact. AI can, however, help students generate

effective search queries, draw up plans for their research, refine alternative research questions, or chat through their thinking. Depending on how AI is used to begin research, it may be hinderance or help – a point that librarians can help students to appreciate and take heed of.

Use of Google as a starting point has not declined since 2022. Then, the generic phrase "I Google stuff" was chosen by 38% of student respondents, whereas in this more recent survey 37% of students selected either "Google or other search engine" and "Google Scholar" as their starting point. Once again, AI clearly now has a significant role on the student workflow but has not necessarily changed it beyond recognition. Instead, it again appears that AI has simply expanded the pool of resources available for students beginning their research. For librarians there are again encouraging findings in the data. Student responses suggest little change in the use of library resources as starting points. The proportion of students beginning with institutional resources has remained steady or marginally increased since *Librarian Futures* Part 2 (14% for the library website, 12% for the course reading list, 12% for the VLE). Although these numbers are not as high as we would perhaps like to see them, they do suggest that **the academic library remains the cornerstone of the research journey for a significant number of students.**

Figure 1. Data from Librarian Futures Part 2 compared with newly collected data (n=930) on:

Student research habits



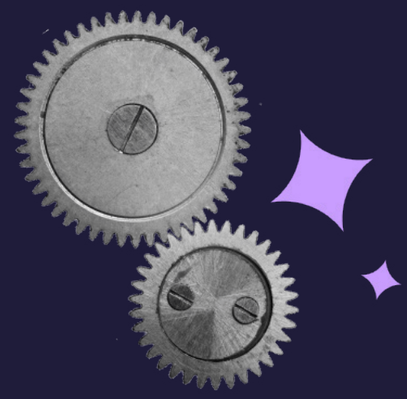
It is clear that AI, and particularly ChatGPT, has exploded in popularity, with students seeing it as this new, exciting, easy-to-use tool which is also covered a lot in the media. The question around AI being a good way to start the research process is interesting. AI is a good place to start, but people need to be aware that it's not perfect. The information it produces needs to be checked – it may sound convincing, but students need to be aware of 'hallucinations' and AI pulling information from incorrect sources.

We need more education for researchers on using AI responsibly, with libraries potentially implementing that during the first few months of a student's time at the institution. They can start their research there to get the ideas flowing, but then should build on that using other sources on their library portal, online journals, and verified resources. It is still the researcher's job to vet that information. Like AI searches, people often think the information that Google provides is always true, but that is not the case, and we should scrutinize anything we find in our online search. The internet can be a wild place!

With AI search tools like ChatGPT gaining traction, and the sudden rise in the survey results, the percentage of students using them will continue to rise. ChatGPT is second in the list now, after becoming the first major AI tool and gaining popularity with the media, though I would not be surprised if by this time next year, a new tool has come along and taken its place. It lacks the history and legacy of Google, so in this constantly changing market, it may be overtaken.

GARY BREWITT

TECHNICAL CONSULTANT
AT OPENATHENS



Student and Librarian Confidence

Figure 2. Student responses (n=930) to the question

How confident are you today in each of the following areas?

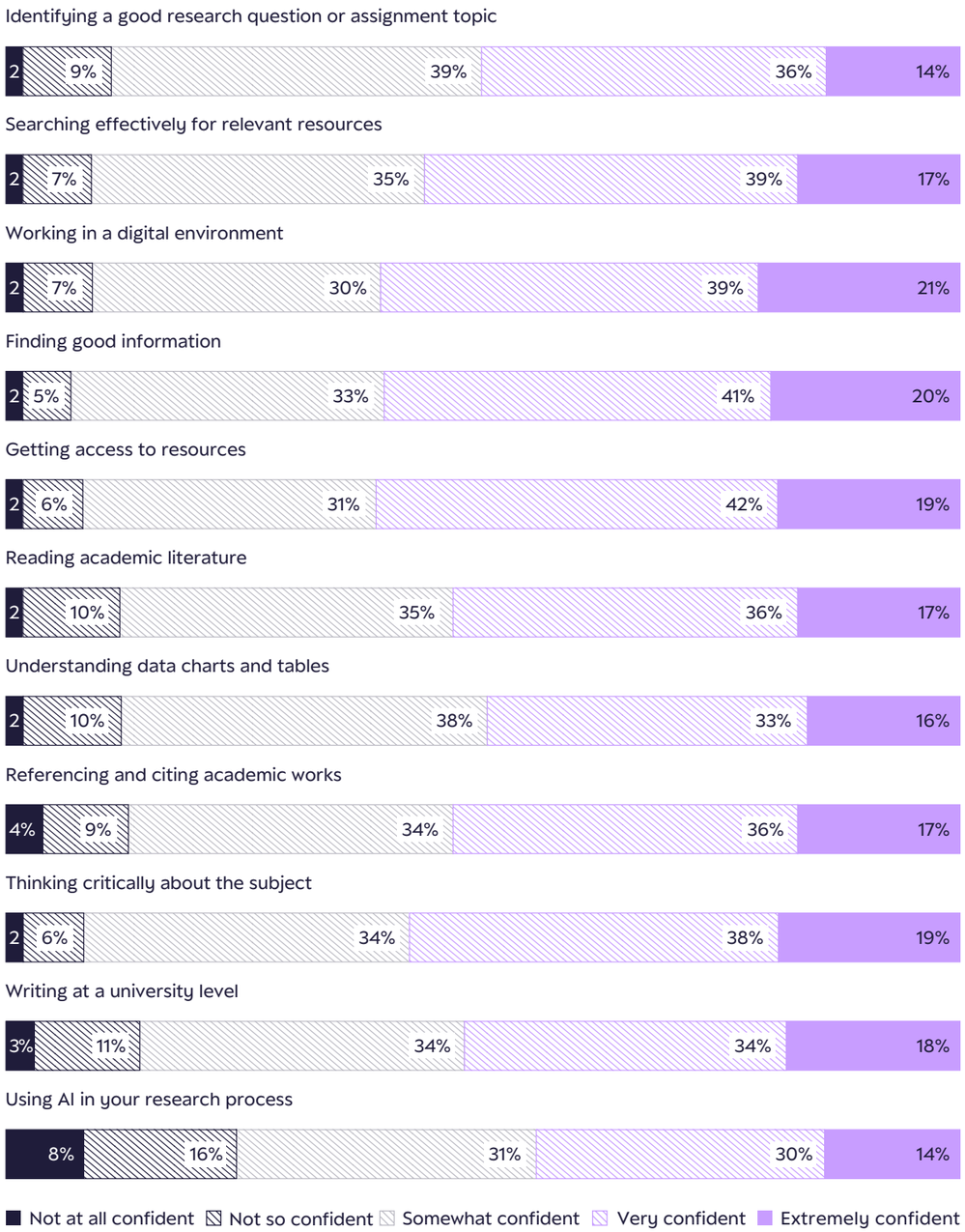
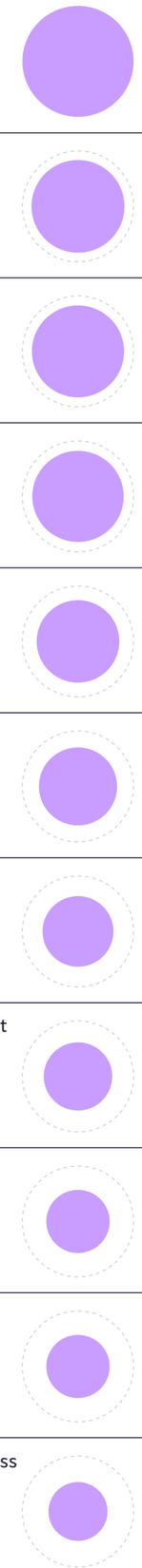


Figure 3. Proportion of student respondents who answered "librarians" (n=928) to the question:

Who, if anyone, helped you grow in each of the following areas?



We asked students about their confidence throughout the research process, again, following up on a theme we explored in the second *Librarian Futures* report. In this instance, we provided a slightly broader range of Likert responses to capture student confidence with greater specificity.

We observed relatively high levels of student confidence across most stages of the research process. Finding good information, getting access to resources, and working in a digital environment were the three areas in which student confidence was highest, with each of these three getting ≥ 60% positive responses (defined as either very confident or extremely confident). In almost every other area, more than half of students surveyed gave positive responses. There were two exceptions: "understanding data, charts, and tables" (49% positive) and "using AI in your research process" (44% positive). Negative responses were highest out of all categories for the latter, with almost one quarter (24%) of students indicating low levels of confidence using AI.

We asked librarians how confident they would feel advising students on each of the same subjects and saw analogous results. Librarian confidence is high across almost all stages surveyed, with especially high levels of confidence in helping students get access to resources (55% extremely confident, 37% very confident) and finding good information (53% extremely confident, 37% very confident). Librarians are ready and willing to provide guidance to students on research then – but do students look to them for this guidance?

As demonstrated previously in *Librarian Futures* Parts 1 and 2, our data once again shows that students are, by and large, bypassing the academic library and looking elsewhere for support. When asked who had helped them grow in the same areas outlined above, librarians were selected infrequently (Figure 3). Across every category, teachers were selected more than

librarians, suggesting that students see their teachers as providers of AI knowledge whereas they see librarians as providers of access. This is emphasised by the two categories in which librarians saw the most support: just over a quarter (28%) of students reported that librarians had helped them grow in "getting access to resources," and a fifth (20%) in "finding good information."

Across all other categories, librarians were selected by less than 20% of students. Of particular concern is that just 8% of students reported that librarians had guided their AI development. In a later question, almost half (43%) of students neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, "Librarians are equipped with necessary skills to answer my questions on AI." When we asked librarians how often they have been approached by students seeking advice on AI, **42% said they had never been approached at all**, with a further 25% saying it had happened on just a few occasions over the course of the year.

We first identified a knowledge gap in the original *Librarian Futures* report and expanded upon it in the second: many students continue to see the library first and foremost as a building and a collection and are unaware of the services offered by the library. Consequently, they do not look to librarians for guidance outside of discovery tasks and are likelier to report that librarians rarely help them. This accounts for the generally low numbers of students selecting librarians above, but the issue appears to be particularly potent regarding AI. Without urgent intervention, **the academic library is at risk of being disintermediated entirely**, at a time when librarians "have a crucial role to play in helping our communities understand and engage thoughtfully with [AI]" (Lo, 2025).

Yet the skills needed to use AI effectively – information and digital literacies, critical thinking and analysis, the ability to verify and cite appropriate sources – and the skills librarians already possess are well-aligned. Librarian expertise in information literacy and critical thinking can be recontextualised for the AI age, empowering librarians to meet these new challenges with their knowledge and insight. By embracing these skills, librarians can confidently reinforce their strengths and position themselves as natural leaders in AI guidance for students.

Librarians must embrace and keep up with AI technologies and the ethical considerations of their use. It is important to balance the benefits of AI with responsible usage, both in our professional practice and in effectively guiding students through this rapidly changing landscape. By promoting digital literacy, librarians play a key role in helping students effectively use and assess AI-generated content in their academic work and beyond.

PJ PURCHASE, UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN & DIRECTOR OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX

Being comfortable with new technology is challenging, even for seasoned professionals. My advice is to start small. I began my AI journey by using it to help generate ideas for a team-building event. You can try using it to source ideas for upcoming library displays or event themes. The more you use the tools, the more comfortable you'll become with them and what they can do.

ALEXIS SOARD, ASSOCIATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN, UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX

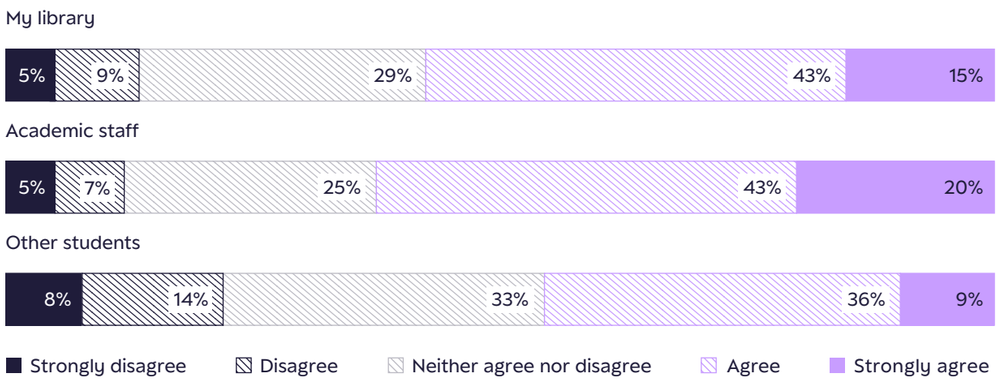
Why have so many students concluded that the academic library cannot help them with AI related issues? Student perceptions of librarian AI support might be tied to librarian's confidence in their own AI skillset, indicating that they are not proactively promoting this capability. Confidence in advising students on using AI was the exception to the generally high levels of confidence reported by librarians. Fewer than one third of librarians ranked this positively (9% extremely confident, 22% very confident). A far larger number of librarians said they were somewhat confident (45%), whereas almost a quarter rated their confidence negatively (21% not so confident, 3% not at all confident).

That such a small proportion of students currently seek librarian support is likely to be disheartening (if not entirely surprising) news for many librarians, who work tirelessly to communicate the value of the academic library to students and faculty alike. The data above underscores the extent of the challenge, but there is good reason to be optimistic. Students may not approach the library for support as often as we would hope, and there may be general uncertainty about the library's preparedness to discuss AI-related topics, but our data suggests that **when librarians speak, students trust them**. As seen in Figure 3 (p.17), over half of students would be more confident that an AI product is aligned with institutional policies if their library recommended it. Once again this emphasises the continued relevance and importance of the academic library in the AI age and shows that students value the insight their academic librarians provide.

For librarians planning the adoption and rollout of AI tools at their institution, it may be useful to know that **student confidence appears to be marginally higher for recommendations from academics**. Synchronous promotion of and support for AI tools from both librarians and academic staff, presenting a united front with clearly defined roles for both, is likely to generate higher levels of enthusiasm and confidence than either working alone. This, in turn, is likely to translate to increased adoption.

Figure 4. Student responses (n=904) to the statement:

I would be more confident that an AI product is aligned with my institution's AI policy if it was recommended and approved by...



When librarians speak, students trust them. As seen in Figure 4, over half of students would be more confident that an AI product is aligned with institutional policies if their library recommended it.

Library staff have been able to play a key role in the development of initial university-wide guidance on what students 'can, shouldn't and mustn't do' with regard to GenAI in their assignments. Our strong links across all academic disciplines and track record of student engagement and co-creation put us in a good place to help test and refine the guidance as it developed. We are now playing a major role in supporting students in how to use GenAI effectively. Rather than treating it as a standalone and rather scary new development, we perceive strong overlaps between the use of GenAI and longstanding Information Literacy principles. We've therefore embedded guidance into existing Information Literacy teaching sessions and drop-in events, such as advice on choosing good keywords (or good GenAI prompts), evaluating sources – whether from GenAI generated material or more traditional literature searches – and acknowledging and referencing well. We hope this approach removes some of the mystery and potential fear around GenAI and encourages students to see that they can apply the same good academic practices to both 'conventional' and AI-generated material.

DR JUDITH KEENE,
DIRECTOR OF LIBRARY SERVICES,
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02 Use of AI

Above we established that AI has cemented its place in the student workflow. In this section we examine how exactly AI is being used both by students and librarians. We begin by looking at how often AI is used.

Amongst both students and librarians, AI is now being used regularly (Figure 5). Over a quarter (28%) of students use AI daily or every couple of days, and the same proportion (28%) use it every week or so. Librarian usage is slightly lower across both categories, with librarians slightly more likely to use AI occasionally. Given the digital workload of the average librarian, proportionate use does not equate to volume – we imagine librarian use of AI could well exceed student use in a like-for-like comparison. A very small fraction of students (12%) and librarians (9%) report not having used AI at all during the past year.

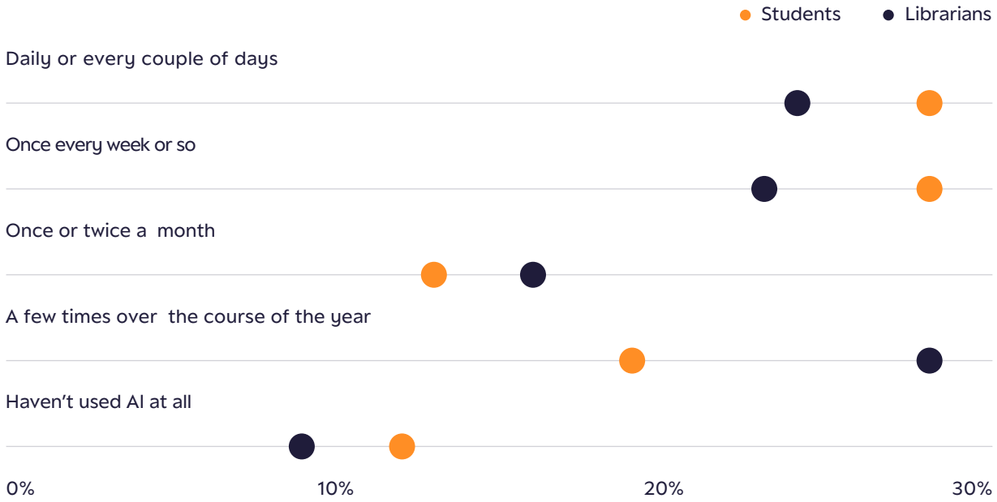
Of the AI tools students and staff are using, ChatGPT is by far the most popular. Most students (65%) and librarians (73%) have used ChatGPT in the past year to help with work. Next most popular with students are writing assistants like Grammarly AI (37%), followed by other chatbots like Claude or Microsoft Copilot (23%). Accessibility-focused AI tools were less used (10%), likely due to their specialised applications. AI tutors (10%) were also rarely used by students, as were research assistants like Elicit and Perplexity (10%).

Here, however, we note a few interesting points of divergence between students and librarians. Other chatbots are in much greater use among librarians than among students, with over half (58%) of librarians surveyed using at least one chatbot other than ChatGPT. This may be a consequence of institutional mandates, which are more easily enforced for staff than for students. IT departments can mandate staff looking to use AI to use tools like Microsoft Copilot, in the interest of privacy and data security. Although they can recommend the same course of action for students, they cannot prevent them. It may be there is simply no external pressure encouraging students to choose another AI service over ChatGPT.

Additionally, a far greater proportion of librarians (38%) have used AI research assistants than students. This is an encouraging finding, demonstrating that librarians understand the need for tools that combine AI with reliable, high-quality research and transparent sources. As evidenced by our data and as observed anecdotally in conversations with librarians, AI is now a major component of research processes, and it would not be possible or practical to prevent or forbid its use. The only alternative then is to seek better, more accurate, more reliable AI tools, and provide easy access to them. Otherwise, students will continue to use less effective AI in their research, less effectively.

Student use of AI at present is concentrated on a small pool of AI tools, rather than integrating it into every facet of their studies. Most students surveyed (72%) use between one and five AI tools. More students use no AI tools at all (20%) than use more than five (7%). For future research, it would be interesting to have students provide an exact number, rather than identify a range, to determine an average number of AI tools used by students. Based on the data herein, it is likely that most students use just a single AI tool like ChatGPT.

Figure 5. Student (n=912) and librarian (n=253) responses to the question:
How often have you used AI to help with your work during the past year?



Given the integration of AI across various domains of learning, development, and research, a proficient understanding of its potential applications in service provision is a crucial skill that librarians should endeavour to cultivate. Moreover, recognizing the variability in AI tools and the differing levels of reliability they offer, it is imperative to continue the long-standing tradition of librarians serving as a reliable resource and support for student success. Therefore, ongoing training and development focused on enhancing AI proficiency should be prioritized to ensure libraries remain relevant and integrated within the workflows of their patrons.

TIM OTTO, CONSULTANT,
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, CASSYNI

Reasons for not using AI

Both students and librarians who have not used AI were given the opportunity to tell us their reasons via an open response question. 394 students and 69 librarians responded to this question. Responses were reviewed and assigned at least one category following thematic analysis. We then used these coded responses to identify common themes for not using AI from both librarians and students. The quotes below are fictional vignettes for illustrative purposes, based on the accumulated responses to the survey question.

I trust myself more than I trust AI. I have the expertise, insight, and skills necessary to do my job, and when I have tried to augment my work with AI I have found that it is inaccurate and unhelpful.

LIBRARIAN

I have serious concerns about the ethics of AI, and its use of copyrighted material. I won't use it for this reason.

LIBRARIAN

The environmental impact of AI is absolutely appalling to me. I don't think it is justifiable to have these companies and products doing irreparable harm to the planet for the sake of my assignments.

STUDENT

I don't use AI for my studies because I don't want to be accused of plagiarism or academic misconduct. I'm worried that if I used AI, it would be clear in my writing and it would be detected.

STUDENT

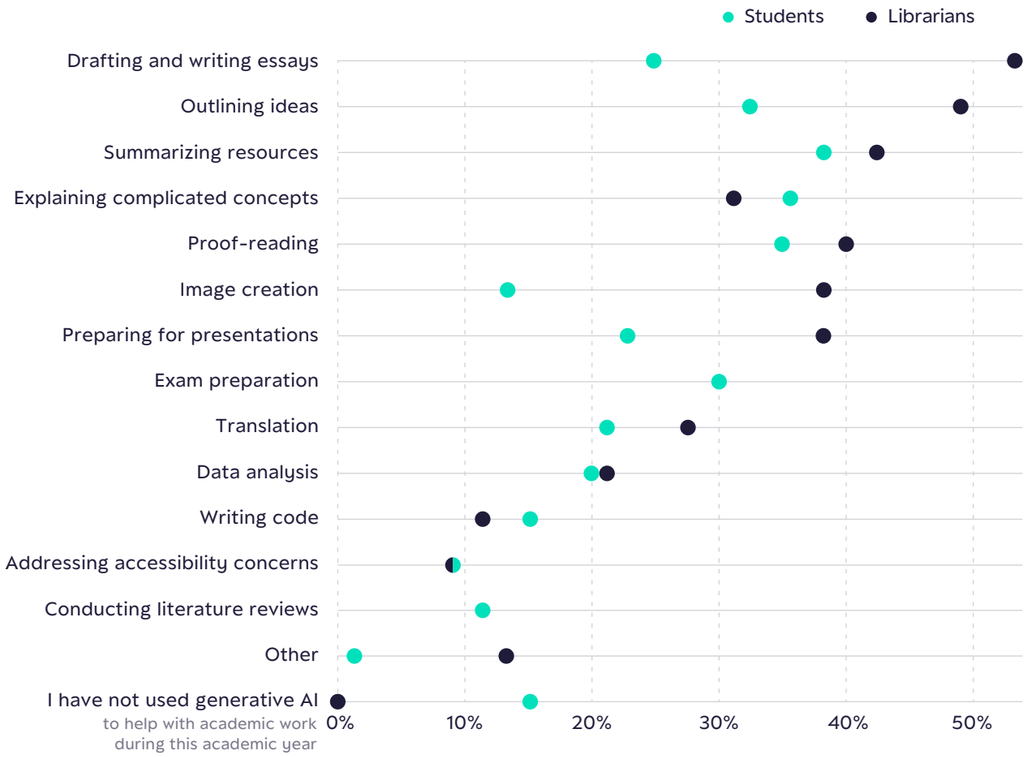
03 How Is AI Being Used?

The above confirms that AI is far more than a buzzword, or a trendy hook for webinars, conferences, and articles—AI has essentially become ubiquitous in higher education.

To understand more about the ways in which both students and librarians are using AI, we provided students and librarians with a list of possible uses for AI in academic work and asked them to select all that applied (Figure 6).

AI is most commonly used by students to simplify academic research. Summarising resources (38%) and explaining complicated concepts (36%) are the most popular uses of AI among students, closely followed by proofreading (35%)

Figure 6. Student (n=912) and librarian (n=235) responses to the question:
How have you used generative AI to help with academic work during this academic year?



and outlining ideas (32%). When viewed in the context of Figure 2, these uses are easy to understand. Though we have determined that student confidence across a range of research tasks is generally high, there are still significant numbers of students who are more ambivalent on tasks like academic reading (35% are "somewhat confident") and writing (34% are "somewhat confident"). Even among more confident students, it would be natural to look to quick, inexpensive sources of support to make these tasks simpler.

Perhaps more immediately concerning will be the relatively common use of AI for exam preparation (30%), drafting and writing essays (25%), and preparing for presentations (23%). It is inevitable that many students will use AI for these tasks, for both reasons of practicality and improved learning outcomes. Using AI in these tasks, however, is also likely to increase students' risk of engaging in academic misconduct, either inadvertently or deliberately. Chatfield's DUAL framework (2025) encourages using AI as a "cognitive catalyst," carefully augmenting human abilities with AI to complement rather than outright replace them. Students are likely to benefit from clear guidance on how to do this, helping them understand what is and is not acceptable use and when using AI may be genuinely helpful, and when it risks complicating or obfuscating their work. This will be key for students' own advancement, as much as the integrity of their education.

Fortunately, librarians are well placed to offer this support. In addition to the well-established skills librarians have, over half of librarians surveyed have used AI for drafting and writing documents and over a third (38%) have used AI when preparing for presentations. Librarians' documents and presentations will almost certainly not be graded in any way or subject to the same sort of scrutiny as student submissions, and using AI to streamline workflows may in fact be actively encouraged in a way it is not for students, possibly accounting for this proportionately higher usage. While the circumstances of librarian AI use may be different, it will inevitably equip librarians with a wealth of experience on uses and drawbacks that they can pass on to students.

It is easy for reports like this one to recommend clearer guidance for students, but more difficult of course for academic librarians to implement such recommendations. These issues are difficult, time-consuming, ever-evolving, and require clarity and clear communication. For AI users and non-users alike, understanding the affordances and challenges presented by AI will empower them to engage with AI-generated content and AI tools and services in a responsible and deliberate way. Librarians will be a crucial voice in this process, and in keeping with recommendations in the DUAL framework will be able to both support students in developing their critical thinking skills and support staff in incorporating critical thinking into their teaching.

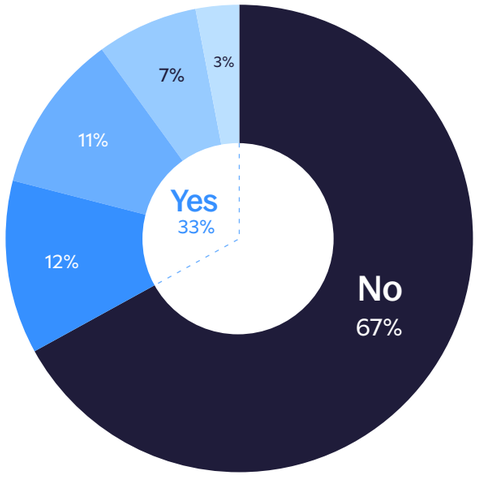
Our job isn't to dissuade students from using any particular tool or resource; it's to teach them how to use that tool effectively and accurately. Take a look at Google. Students often use Google instead of coming to the library for research. So, rather than tell them, "Don't use Google," we focused our efforts on teaching them how to use Google and find credible information. We have connected our institutions with Google Scholar, enabling students to access materials through the library more easily. It's the same with AI. Students will use AI whether we want them to or not. So, rather than telling them, "Don't use AI," we must teach them how to use it effectively in their research and writing processes or risk pushing them further away from the library..

ALEXIS SOARD, ASSOCIATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN, UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX

04 Paying for AI

Figure 7. Student (n=911) responses to the question:

Have you had access to any AI tools purchased on your behalf to help with academic work during this academic year?



If yes, who provides access to AI tools?
- Institutional library
- My university department
- Someone I know and I use their subscription
- I'm not sure who pays for it

Despite its widespread use, most students (78%) are not paying for access to AI, nor are they having access to AI tools purchased on their behalf (67%). Small proportions of respondents indicated that either their institutional library (12%) or university department (11%) paid for access on their behalf, while a small group (7%) knew someone who had purchased on their behalf and used their subscription. Some students (3%) reported having access to AI paid on their behalf but not knowing who had paid for it. Data from librarians suggests the same: just over a quarter (28%) were aware of AI access being purchased for students within their institution. Less than a quarter (22%) of librarians surveyed were aware of students who had personally purchased access to any AI tools.

Further, when presented a hypothetical AI assistant that could help with the research process, just 20% of librarians felt that it was the library who should pay. The majority of librarians (57%) felt that it was the responsibility of departments, schools, or colleges, and 31% felt that it was the responsibility of learning technology departments. 31% responded that no one should pay for access to AI assistants – perhaps on the basis that these are rolled into paid-for university tools, or perhaps because they do not feel that AI access is something a university should pay for at all.

Although libraries need not bear the cost of AI entirely on their own, having librarians involved in the procurement process will allow them to play a role in validating and curating AI tools for students. The most obvious problem with unpaid, non-curated access to AI is that students who pay will have access to better versions of AI models, or will be able to use them more often, or will be able to complete tasks other models cannot, or some combination of all the above. This guarantees an inequitable experience for those students who cannot afford access to AI tools. Students using AI, paid or unpaid, with no institutional oversight or contractual guarantees may also find themselves at the mercy of incredibly powerful AI companies with no guarantees of data privacy or security and no recourse in the event of incidents like GDPR breaches or copyright infringement. In the UK, CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) has called for librarians to participate in the creation of AI policies, to help institutions mitigate such risks (CILIP, 2024).

Having curated access to AI resources specifically designed to support teaching and learning will be a differentiator for universities,

Although libraries need not bear the cost of AI entirely on their own, having librarians involved in the procurement process will allow them to play a role in validating and curating AI tools for students.

and libraries should be unapologetic about the resource needed to deliver this effectively. This can justify student fees, and attract and retain students in a challenging market.

This is where librarian expertise in procurement would serve institutions especially well. Through well-established tender processes, and by negotiating as members of consortia, academic libraries are in an excellent position to ensure any AI purchases or subscriptions provide institutional pricing that will serve their entire university community and deliver the maximum return on investment. This is especially important at a time when, in both the UK and the United States, institutional budgets are coming under increased scrutiny and efficiencies are having to be made. Librarian rigour in evaluating tools would also ensure that students were accessing AI which handles user data responsibly and guarantees institutional user management mechanisms, providing the twofold benefit of making students safer and increasing their confidence in using AI too.

Although budgetary challenges will certainly complicate procurement and though librarian perceptions of AI are mixed, lack of investment in AI could contribute to inequitable access to learning resources and further disintermediation of the library. Next steps will not be simple for any institution, but this context may be useful for librarians considering the future of AI at their institution and seeking to make the case for increased library budgets to implement AI tools.

Without curated AI access, and contractual guarantees on data privacy and security, then there seem to be several possible consequences:

1. Some students won't use AI, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their peers who have paid.
2. Some students will use reduced-function AI for free, placing them at a disadvantage to their peers who have paid and exposing them to risks to their personal and private data.
3. Some students will pay out of their own pocket for access to AI that provides a feature-complete experience, and be exposed to risks to their personal and private data.
4. Some students will use AI tools for lower order contributions to their learning, using available AI tools to replace learning tasks rather than augment them.

The alternative is:

1. Institutions purchase access to AI that provides a feature-complete experience from a trusted vendor, and seek contractual guarantees as part of the procurement process.
2. Libraries and, crucially, **librarians** lead on the selection and deployment of these tools, ensuring they are used for higher order contributions to student learning.

05 Perceptions of AI

Looking for guidance

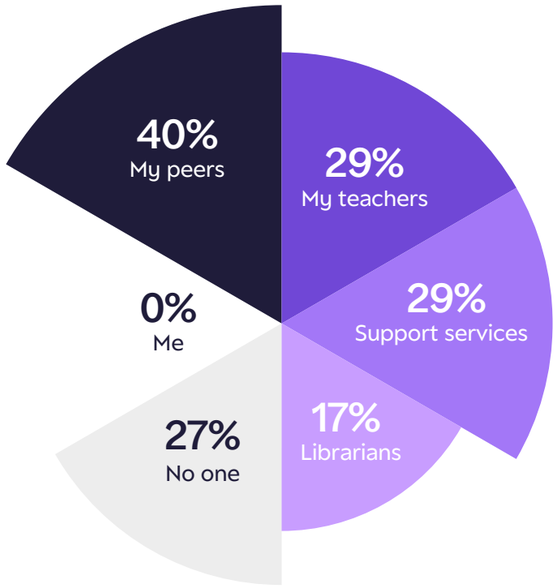
We next sought to understand student attitudes toward AI in their academic practice. We began by asking students to identify who they look to for guidance on AI use at their institution. As established in *Evolving Student Habits*, students are largely bypassing the academic library, particularly for AI guidance. Remarkably, when we asked students who they *would* look to for support, more students indicated that they wouldn't look to anyone at their institution for AI guidance (27%) than would look to their librarians (17%).

This result may come as a particular surprise to librarians as, when asked to identify who provides AI guidance at their university, most librarians (62%) selected themselves. As discussed previously, this is where librarian confidence is lowest — but this data suggests they are already doing this work. **By embracing their established skills in critical thinking and information literacy, librarians can feel empowered and more confident**, and can work to ensure they are seen as AI leaders for the entire institution. Without this, librarians risk "invisible labour," doing the hard work on AI but having it go unseen. This is also an important consideration for librarians who are reluctant to see the library pay for AI tools — with the library already providing so much support in this area, librarians are ideally placed to help curate AI tools.

Additionally, over half pointed to academic staff (53%) and support staff (53%). This clear disconnect between student and staff perception is once again demonstrative of a significant knowledge gap, with students unaware that the library is well-placed to support with AI. In *Librarian Futures* Part 3, more than half of librarians surveyed identified skills in student outreach as important skills to develop. As libraries move to implement AI, continuing to develop marketing and promotional skills will help to ensure that the full range of services offered by the academic library are visible to students and that students think of the library as the place to go for AI guidance.

Figure 8. Student responses (n=902) to the question:

At your institution, who would you look to for guidance on AI use?



Institutional policies

It is also apparent from the data that there remains significant confusion among students about what does and does not constitute acceptable use of AI. This may be a direct consequence of students turning to their peers more often for guidance than their teachers and librarians. Most students (64%) said that their institution did have an AI policy, while a small proportion believed it did not (13%) and almost a quarter (23%) did not know. In a later question, when asked to what extent they agreed that their institution "has clear guidelines on what constitutes acceptable AI practice," slightly over half of students either agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (15%), whereas only a small fraction either disagreed (12%) or strongly disagreed (4%). There were a variety of answers on whether students were permitted to use AI in academic work at all, with almost a quarter again (24%) not knowing, and nearly one third of students didn't know if it was necessary to cite AI if used in academic work (30%) or if their institution had pre-approved specific AI tools (30%).

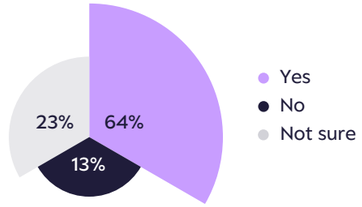
Students cannot effectively or responsibly use AI if they are not aware of the rules around its use, but without involving their librarians and teachers they are unlikely to develop this understanding. Coordinated, consistent, and coherent AI guidance will be necessary for every institution, but the above suggests that a strong communication plan to inform students about the support available through the academic library will also be necessary for interventions to succeed.

Students cannot effectively or responsibly use AI if they are not aware of the rules around its use.

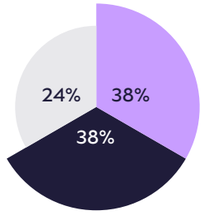
Figure 9. Student responses (n=906) to questions on:

The institution's policies on AI.

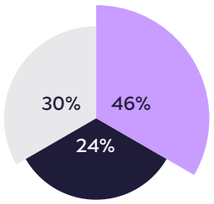
Does your institution have an AI policy?



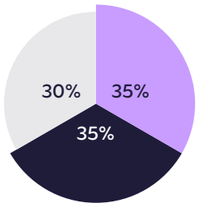
Are students permitted to use AI in academic work?



Are students required to cite AI if they use it in academic work?

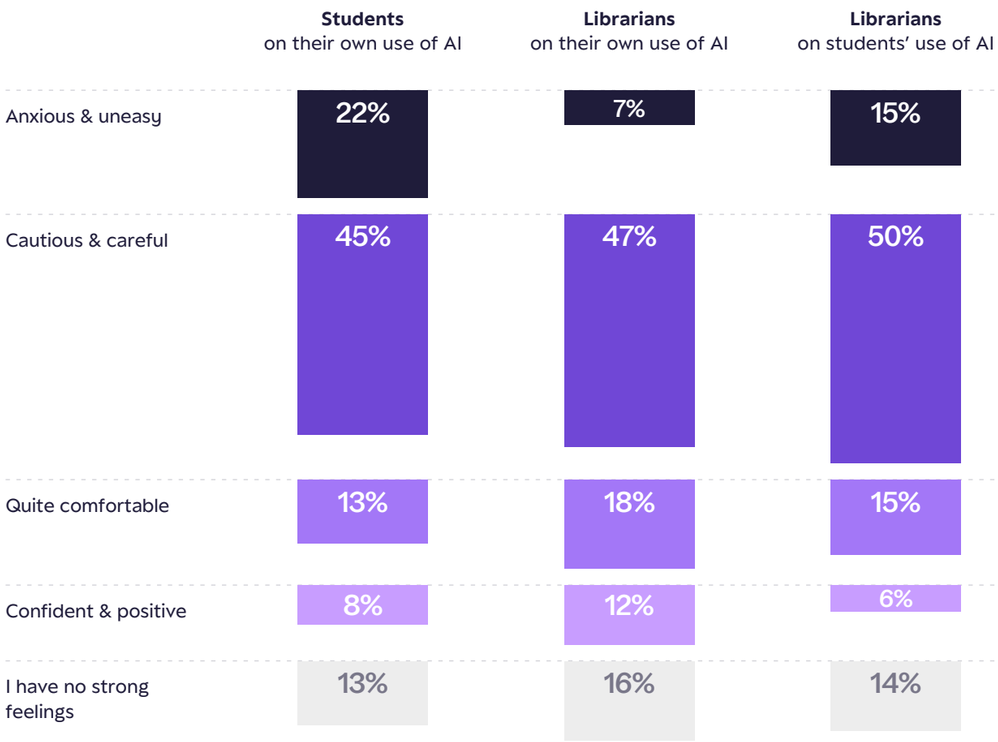


Has your institution pre-approved specific AI tools for students to use in their academic work?



AI anxiety

Figure 10. Student (n=906) and librarian (n=244) responses to the question:
How do you feel about using AI in your / your patrons academic work?



We see the uncertainty described above translated into student confidence. Students were asked to choose one statement that best described their personal feelings on AI (Figure 10). Confidence using AI is low (8%) while anxiety is significant (22%). That so many students are cautious and careful (45%) is likely to elicit mixed feelings: although we naturally hope that students are comfortable or confident in their studies, and we should aim to get them there with AI, both caution and carefulness are appropriate responses in the face of new and disruptive technology. That caution and care will likely serve students well as they undertake research and assessments. The aim should be to help students arrive somewhere between caution and comfort, helping them to exercise the appropriate care while being confident in their ability to engage with AI responsibly. This will lead not only to a better academic experience, but better prepare students for their careers after university – as 86% of companies expect AI and information processing technologies to have an impact on their business by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025).

86% of companies expect AI and information processing technologies to have an impact on their business by 2030.

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, 2025

We asked librarians about how confident they were about student use of AI, and how confident they were in their own use of AI (Figure 10). A slightly smaller proportion of librarians were anxious and uneasy about students using AI in their academic work (15%) and a slightly larger proportion were cautious and careful (50%), but otherwise results were similar. When asked for their feelings on their own use of AI, anxiety and uneasiness was lower (7%) while comfort (18%) and confidence (12%) were higher, but cautious continued to be the most popular response (47%).

Student perceptions of how AI has impacted their academic life are mixed. Almost half either agreed (32%) or strongly agreed (13%) that the impact of AI had been significant, while just under a quarter either disagreed (15%) or strongly disagreed (9%). The remainder neither disagreed nor agreed. Given that two-thirds of our respondents were between the ages of 18-25, and almost half were either first-year (21%) or middle-year (23%) students, some of these mixed feelings may be attributable to a number of respondents being "AI natives." In other words, they joined higher education in the last couple of years and have never known studying without AI, and therefore cannot judge quite how significantly AI has changed studying.

Alternatively, in earlier data we observed that use of library resources had remained steady in the face of AI's upsurge in usage. It may be that students recognise that AI does now play a role in their studies but don't see it as "transformational," merely another tool in their arsenal. In any case, librarians do not seem to feel the same way, as most either agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (27%) that the academic lives of students had been changed by AI.

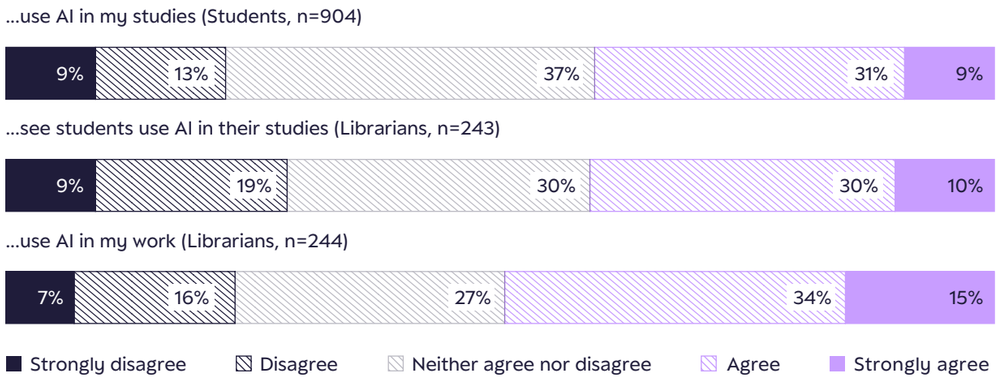
Librarians have a unique opportunity to serve as guiding leaders in the responsible integration of AI into academic work. While many students currently report limited use of AI and express caution or anxiety about incorporating it into their learning, personal experience shows the transformative potential of thoughtful AI use in library and research instruction. When introduced through systems that students find engaging, AI can elevate classroom conversations and spark deeper academic analysis and inquiry. The possibilities ahead are not just promising—they're inspiring.

DEREK MALONE, DEAN, OLIN LIBRARY – ROLLINS COLLEGE

AI enthusiasm

Figure 11. Student and librarian responses to questions about enthusiasm for AI:

I am keen to...

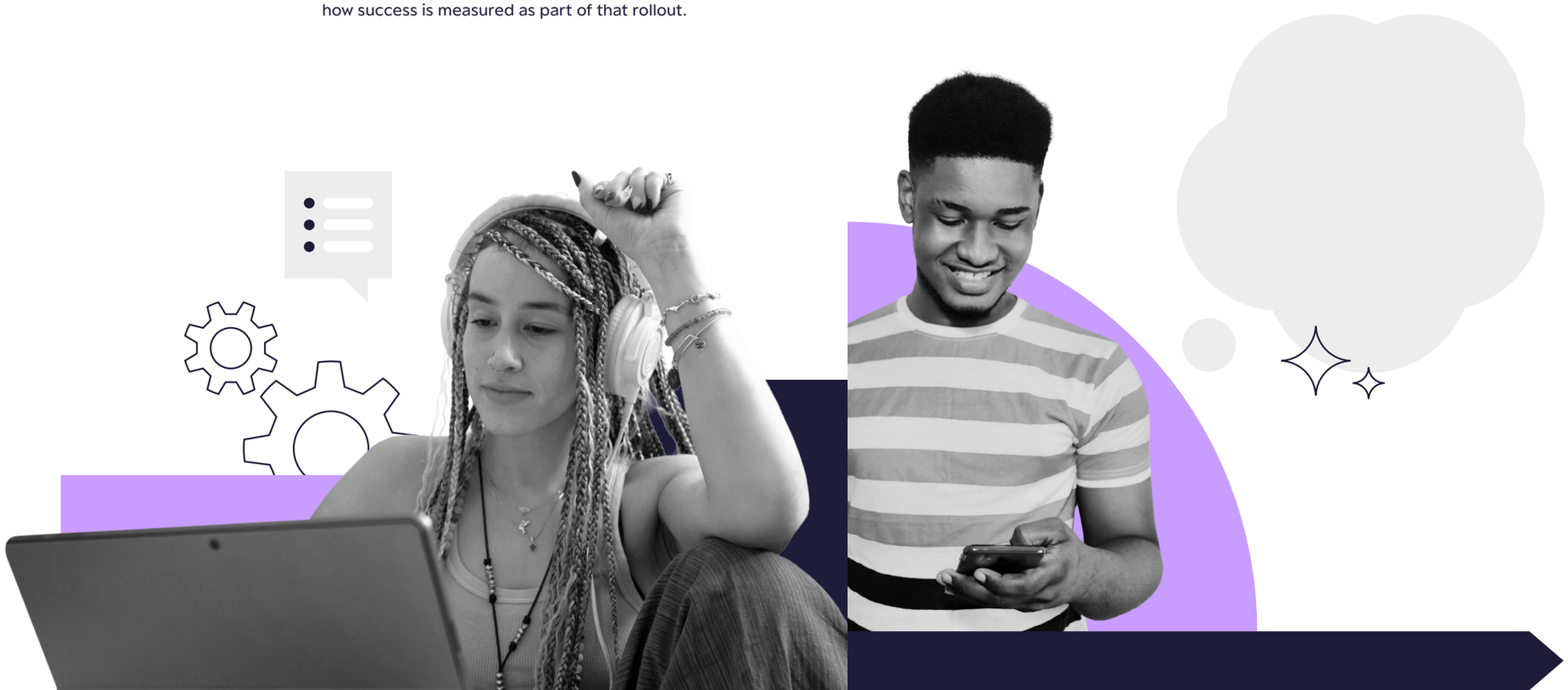


Enthusiasm for AI is similarly mixed as can be seen in Figure 11. Librarians were marginally more enthusiastic about the idea of using AI in their own work than they were about students using it in theirs, but roughly a quarter of those surveyed were unenthusiastic for either group to use AI. Student thinking was overall remarkably aligned with librarians.

Librarians considering purchasing or subscribing to AI tools and services may find this instructive as they consider their next steps. Although librarians will find many enthusiastic AI adopters at their institution, there will also be those resistant to change and unlikely to make use of such tools. This should inform plans for communicating AI rollout to students, but also how success is measured as part of that rollout.

Students are eager to use AI in their research, but many wrestle with how to do so while maintaining academic integrity and relying on credible sources. At partner institutions like Vanderbilt and Clemson University, we've seen that when students have access to AI grounded in full-text scholarly content, they're able to ask more thoughtful questions and produce stronger work. The con-versation around AI in education shouldn't be about if it belongs, but how to integrate it responsibly.

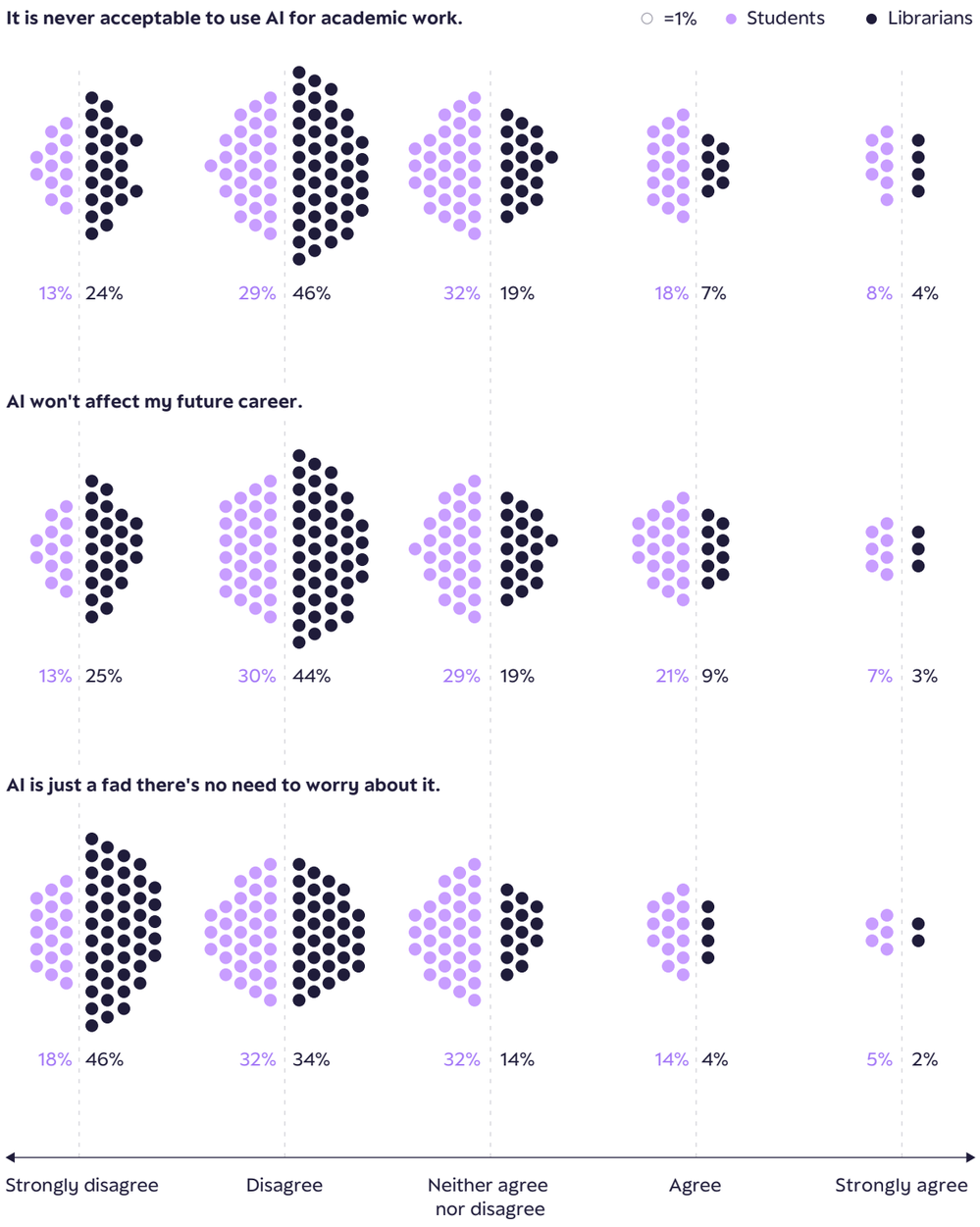
JOSH NICHOLSON, PHD CO-FOUNDER
OF SCITE AND CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER
AT RESEARCH SOLUTIONS



Provocations

Figure 12. Student (n=904) and librarian (n=246) responses to question:

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



To develop a fuller understanding of student and librarian feelings about AI, we offered a series of provocations and asked both groups the extent to which they agreed with them. In response to the provocation "It is never acceptable to use AI for academic work," students tended to disagree (13% strongly disagree, 29% disagree). Just under a third were ambivalent on the matter (32% neither agree nor disagree), while around a quarter either agreed (18%) or strongly agreed (8%). Once again the extreme range of student opinion is evident, suggesting significant groups of both AI promoters and detractors.

Surprisingly, librarians more resolutely disagreed with this sentiment than students did – almost three quarters of librarians surveyed disagreed (46% disagreed, 24% strongly disagreed). It is possible that students look to others at their institution to make these decisions for them, feeling that it is not their call to make. In developing AI guidance and strategies, it might be especially beneficial to establish a dialogue with students and encourage them to work with their teachers, their librarians, and their classmates to construct their own understanding of appropriate and inappropriate usage and develop their confidence in experimenting with AI. This approach will aid in the "demystification" of AI, a course of action recommended by Tom Chatwell as part of his DUAL framework (Chatfield, 2024).

The next provocation was "AI won't affect my future career." Opinions among students were once again remarkably split. Neutral responses (29%) and positive responses (21% agree, 7% strongly agree) were roughly tied, whereas slightly more students disagreed (30% disagree, 13% strongly disagreed). Though differences by subject area are outside the scope of this present research, this would be a useful line of inquiry to pursue in the future. Librarians more strongly disagreed that AI would not affect their career (44% disagree, 25% strongly disagree), though whether they felt AI would affect their career positively or negatively is not clear.

The final provocation was that "AI is just a fad, there's no need to worry about it." Half of students disagreed (31%) or strongly disagreed (18%), while most of the remaining students neither agreed nor disagreed (32%). The librarian response was significantly more emphatic – with 80% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This is not surprising, as many librarians will have seen seismic technological changes before and be conscious of their staying power and lasting impact. Given that so many respondents have over a decade of experience in the library, this pattern of technological scepticism and subsequent integration will be familiar to them.

06 The Story So Far...

What is clear from the data presented above is that, in every respect, the AI landscape is an immensely complicated one for librarians to navigate. For virtually every question we have asked, we have received hugely mixed responses, indicating vastly differing levels of comfort, enthusiasm, and knowledge. As expected, neither students nor librarians think as a bloc, and there is clearly a diversity of opinion on the issue of AI. While our data does indicate that there are strong levels of support for AI in the student and librarian workflows, there are still significant numbers of both students and librarians who remain opposed to the idea.

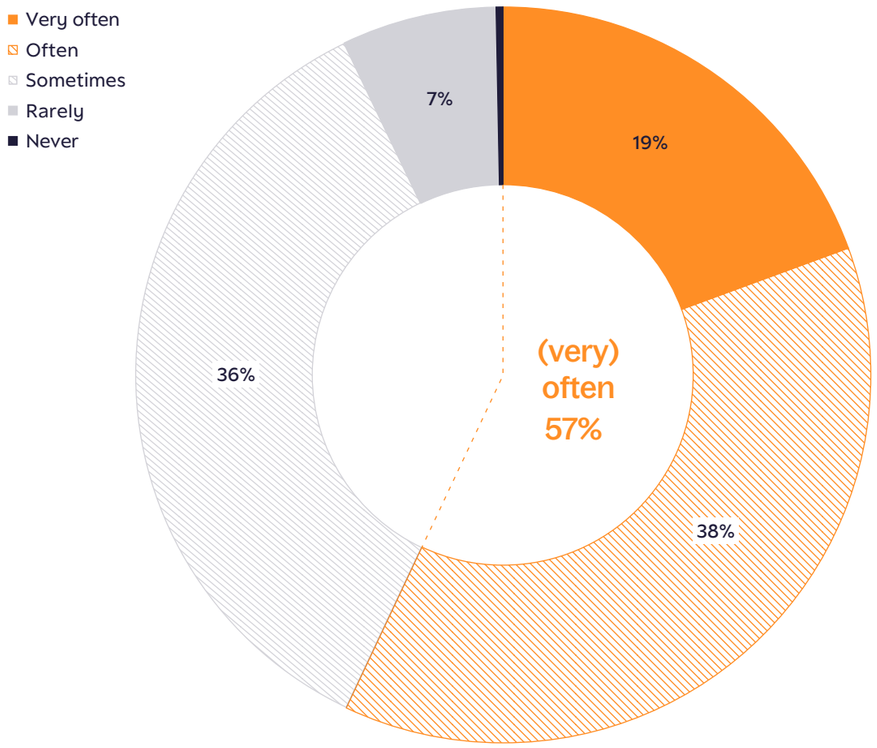
In the case of other new or emerging technologies, the solution is often to offer more training or support for those lacking confidence, and this would naturally lead to increased enthusiasm and uptake. Training and support, however, are unlikely to impact those who have concerns about the environmental impact of AI, or object to the ethics of AI's use of copyrighted material, or who do not trust AI companies to protect their privacy. Further, librarians aiming to assuage students would have to presuppose their concerns are unfounded – which may not be the case. Librarians, however, have a strong track record of advocacy – for example, transitioning publishing towards the open access model – and so, as AI's influence grows and becomes evermore embedded in higher education, librarians could become a critical voice in influencing the behaviour of students and AI companies alike.

This is what makes it so difficult, for librarians and vendors alike, to know how and where to take action. As institutions look to build and implement AI strategies, librarians will be forced to consider the wants and needs of both keen AI adopters and AI sceptics. This will place additional demands on both librarian's time and the library budget, at a time when neither of these are available in abundance. For this reason, highly targeted AI interventions which address specific problems and come at lower cost may well be a more popular solution than vast generalist applications (for example, ChatGPT Edu) that can do many things but require extensive training to be used well. In a bid to understand where AI interventions could be most useful, we asked students about their wellbeing and stress.

Librarians, however, have a strong track record of advocacy – for example, transitioning publishing towards the open access model – and so, as AI's influence grows and becomes evermore embedded in higher education, librarians could become a critical voice in influencing the behaviour of students and AI companies alike.

07 Student Stress

Fig. 13. Student responses (n=899) to the question:
How often during your studies do you feel overwhelmed?



We asked students how often during their studies they felt overwhelmed, and the results were concerning. Some amount of stress or pressure is to be expected as a student – studying for a degree is by its nature a challenging undertaking, and stress and pressure can be effective motivators. The aim should not be to make higher education a stressless, laid-back experience.

To be overwhelmed, however, is to move beyond simple stress, suggesting that the stress experienced is significant enough to challenge or override a student's ability to cope. Students should rarely feel overwhelmed, and yet this data suggests it happens regularly for most. Over half of students feel overwhelmed regularly (19% very often, 38% often). The effects of being overwhelmed are various. Half of students (50%) report that they either pay less attention in class or stop attending class completely. Almost as many (47%) report negative impacts on their physical and/or mental health, and a significant number (39%) have their social lives and relationships disrupted. The proportion of students who don't experience any negative effects on their life more widely is small (14%).

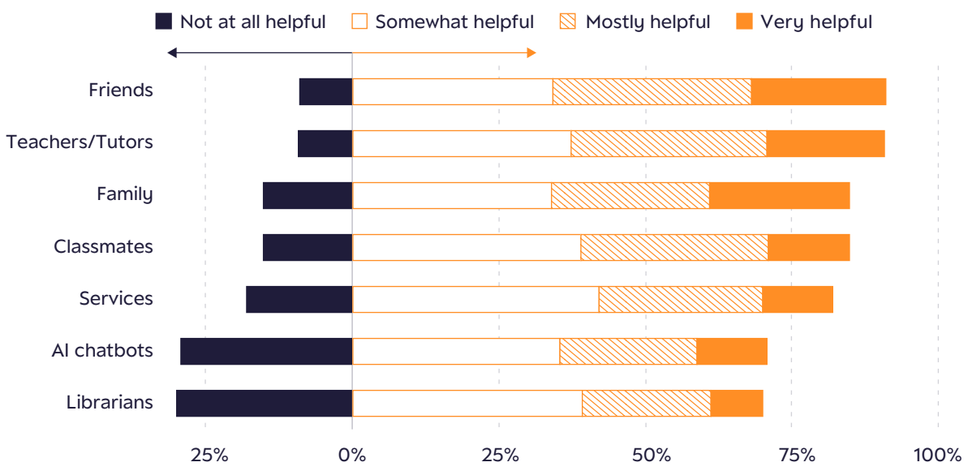
Being overwhelmed is both unhealthy and unsustainable, and if this issue goes unaddressed it will hamper student success and retention.

When overwhelmed, students seek support from people both outside of and within their institution, but predominantly friends (63%) and family (59%). Around a quarter of students would also seek help from both their classmates (27%) and teachers (24%). Librarians were the least selected group by students (6%). In fact, more students indicated they would reach out to no one (11%) or an AI chatbot (9%) than would reach out to librarians. With AI-powered mental health assistants growing in prominence and popularity, and with "therapy/companionship" being identified as the most common use case for AI in 2025 (Zao-Sanders, 2025), it is possible that in coming years this gap will only increase. Once again this may offer an opportunity for librarians – by curating AI tools designed to offer support to students, librarians will secure their role in student wellbeing even as the shape of that role changes.

Looking to understand why this might be, we asked students to say how helpful these same groups would be in helping manage workloads. The data in Figure 14 clearly shows that many students see a very limited role for librarians in helping them manage their workload. Librarians were the group most commonly selected as not at all helpful (30%), and the least selected as mostly (22%) or very helpful (9%).

Once again this would appear to be at odds with librarians' perception of themselves. In *Librarian Futures* Part 1, over half of librarian respondents agreed with the statement "The mission of the library is not about buildings and collections, but who librarians serve," demonstrating librarians' strong conviction in their ability to deliver a services-based approach for their students. In Part 3, reviewing data from skills management platform Skilltype, we showed that librarians identified with skills like project management, student success, and problem solving – each of which would serve librarians well when supporting students to manage their workload. In this present research, when librarians answered who at their institution would be helpful in supporting students to manage their workload, most librarians said their librarian colleagues would be helpful (17% extremely helpful, 47% very helpful). That said, librarians did more frequently identify academic staff and support services as helpful in this regard, and placed all groups at their university firmly above AI chatbots. In contrasting these results, we once again see a stark difference between students and librarians: **students are unaware of the services available to them through the academic library**, and there are fundamental differences in the way students view librarians and librarians view themselves.

Figure 14. Student responses (n=900) to the question:
How helpful would each of the following groups be in helping you manage your workload?



Students entering an academic environment face so many challenges, from building a new social community, to meeting the rigor of academic expectations to navigating an ever changing digital landscape - it's little wonder that 57% of student respondents reported feeling either often or very often overwhelmed. It's also notable that the chief reported impact of being overwhelmed is correlated with reduced time with staff, meaning that this is likely to be a self-perpetuating issue. It's clear that many students don't see the role that librarians can play in helping them manage and reduce their workload (though libraries are well equipped to do so), and it's worth further investigation to understand why this disconnect is happening. In these times of continued budget and funding struggles, it's crucial for librarians to be as visible to their community as possible, particularly to those students who would benefit from a closer relationship leading to better long term outcomes.

TALIA RICHARDS, VICE PRESIDENT, MARKETING, SPRINGSHARE

08 Research Obstacles

Finally, we sought to understand which areas of stress students experience when conducting their research. As can be seen in Figure 15, there was a wide range of answers with a particular problem area. Instead, it seems that each stage of the research process presents significant problems for a large proportion of students. Across every category, half of students surveyed reported experiencing problems at least regularly.

Reflecting on how rarely students report their librarians have supported their development, we hypothesised that the root cause of many of the barriers reported above could be traced to students not seeking out librarian input or guidance. We therefore expected that librarians would report rarely supporting their students across their research journey. In fact, librarians generally reported supporting students often across most stages of their research journey. Given the proportion of students to librarians, however, this is easily explained – a relatively small number of students making use of library services could still represent a significant cohort for small library teams.

That said, librarians reported supporting "often" at lower rates for several stages of the research process:

31%
of librarians said they help often with breaking down resources into easily understandable chunks.

16%
of librarians help students often with writing up the results of their research.

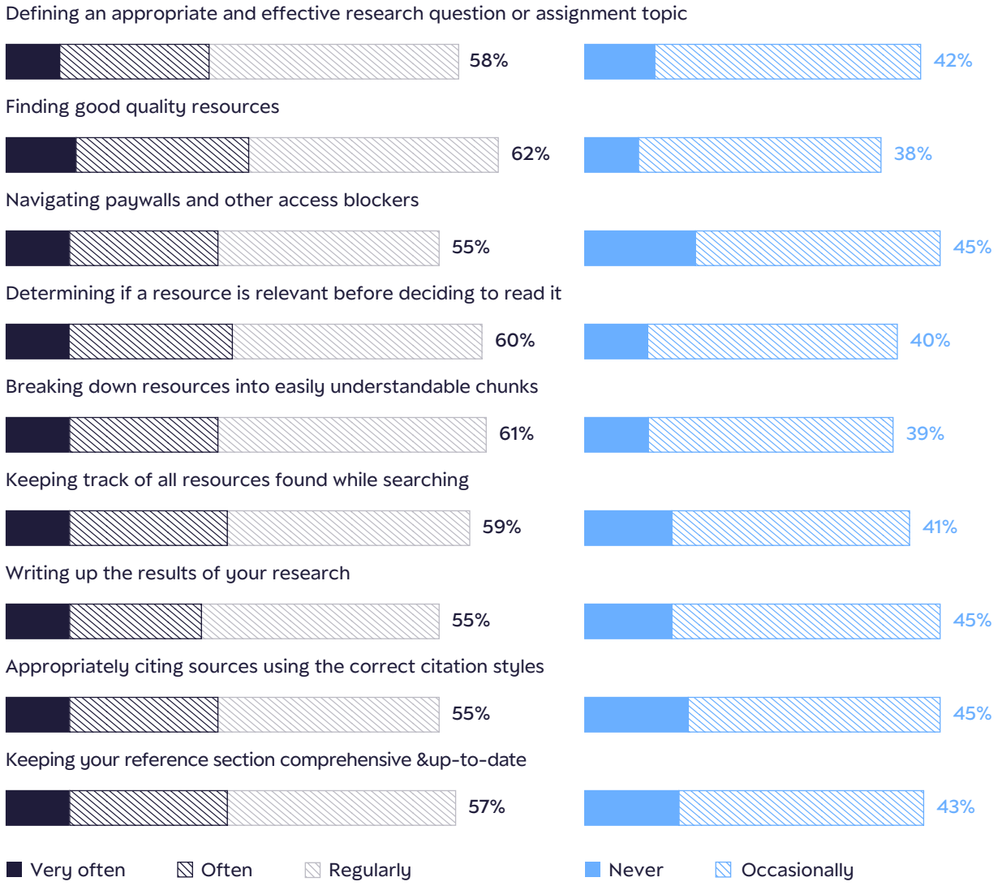
A substantial proportion of librarians also report rarely supporting students across several stages:

39%
of librarians seldom support with keeping reference sections comprehensive and up-to-date, and 11% never do.

18%
of librarians seldomly support with appropriately citing sources using the correct citation styles, and 11% never do.

36%
seldomly support students with writing up the results of their research, and 24% never do.

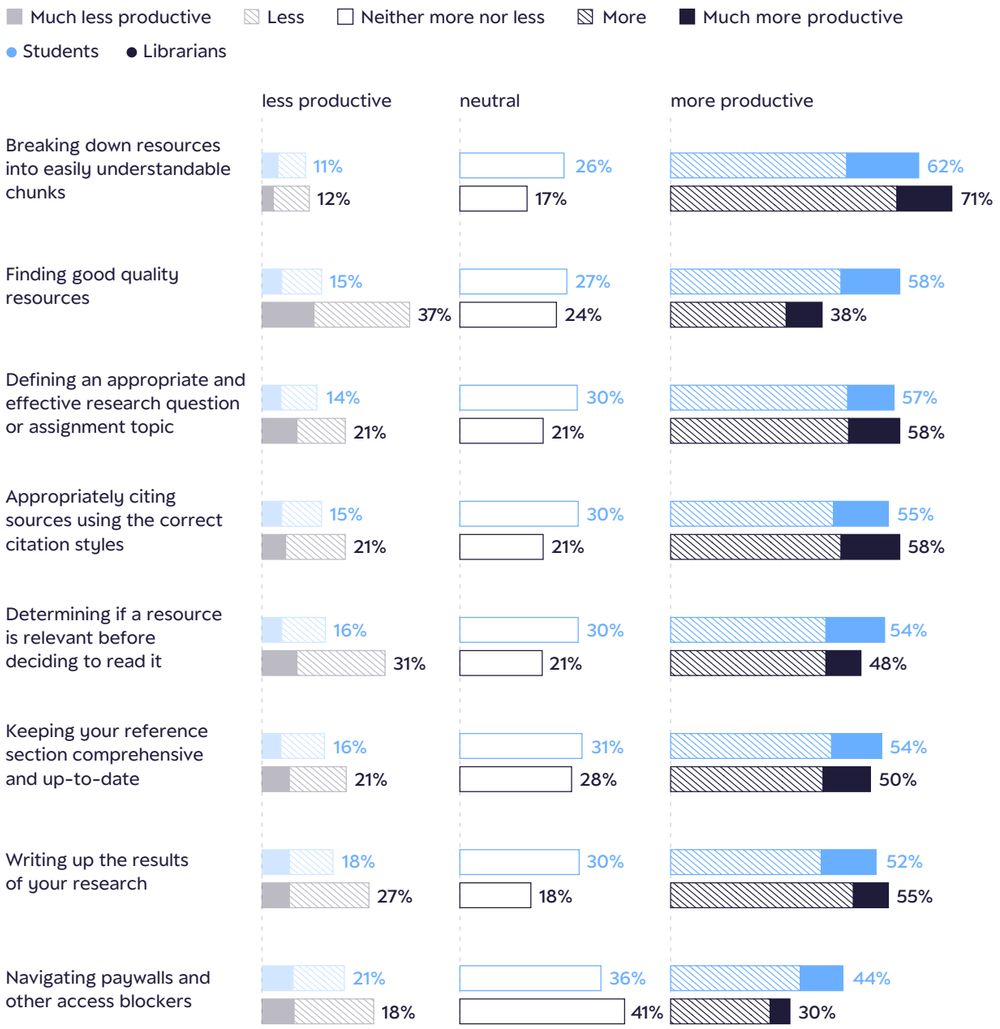
Figure 15. Student responses (n=896) to the question:
How often do you encounter obstacles or barriers during each of the following stages of the research process?



Given that students did not report significantly more problems in these areas than in others, it seems likely that some other factor is responsible. It may be that the knowledge gap once again accounts for these issues. Libraries provide access to a range of tools and services that simplify each stage of the research process – discovery systems, access brokers, resource lists, instant chats, LibGuides, reference managers etc. – but students who are not aware of these tools and services or who are unsure of how to effectively use them will not benefit from them. **If students think of the library as a building and a collection, they are unlikely to seek out these tools and services.**

Figure 16. Student (n=896) and librarian (n=232-236) responses regarding AI tools and productivity.

For each of the following stages of the research process, would having an AI assistant make you/your patrons more or less productive?



To gauge student expectations of the way forward in these cases, we asked if they thought an AI assistant to help with each stage would make them more or less productive (Figure 16). Again, we are presented with a very mixed picture. Across almost all categories (navigating paywalls and other access blockers being the exception), more than half of students thought that AI assistants would be helpful.

As observed elsewhere in this report however, substantial numbers of students do not feel strongly about AI's potential to improve their productivity. Once again, having to balance enthusiasm with apathy could prove confounding for librarians looking to make cost-effective purchases to support student workflows and wellbeing.

Librarians had their own ideas of how AI might support students to be more productive. Areas of both overlap and divergence are interesting to consider. Both students and librarians see value in using AI for tasks such as defining appropriate research questions, breaking down resources into easily understandable chunks, and referencing and citation tasks. Surprisingly, librarians also saw value in using AI to write up the results of research – more so than students.

Librarians differed from students however about using AI for discovery. Whereas 58% of students thought AI would be beneficial to their efforts to find quality resources, just 38% of librarians felt the same way. This is especially concerning when considered alongside the data on AI tools used by students: a very small proportion of students use AI tools that incorporate academic literature into their output (Elicit, Perplexity), and yet they see a role for AI in resource discovery. Meanwhile librarians, who more often use AI tools designed to be more reliable and research-focused, are more sceptical of AI's role in resource discovery.

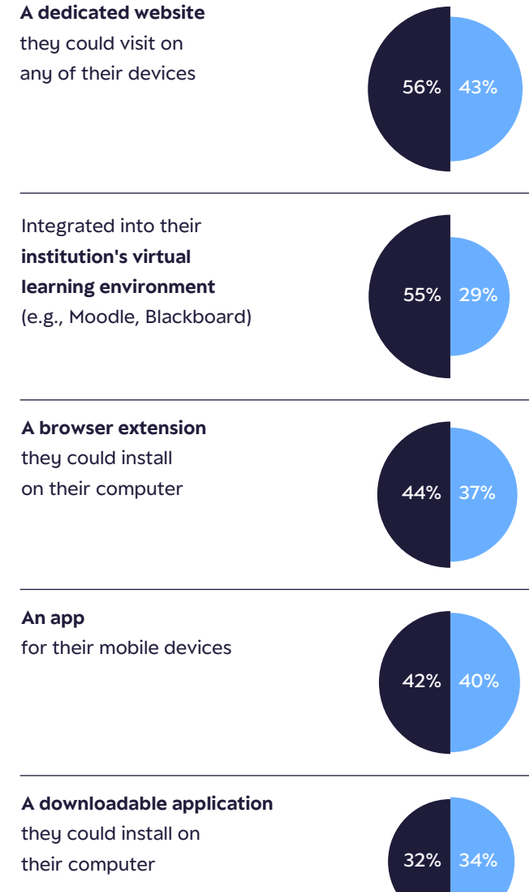
Librarian enthusiasm was lowest for AI tools that helped navigate paywalls and other access blockers, most likely because there are an abundance of library tools and products that already provide seamless access to students. There is little appetite among librarians for AI to be "bolted on" to existing solutions purposelessly.

Aiming to equip librarians with useful data to inform procurement of AI tools, we then explored preferences for accessing AI assistants like those detailed above. Both student and librarian preferences are for access via dedicated websites. Librarians were far keener than students that AI assistants be accessed via the VLE, which is understandable – it would likely allow some level of institutional oversight or control and would empower librarians to offer on-demand support to students.

Figure 17. Student (n=881) and librarian (n=229) responses on:

Preferences for AI access

- **Students** were asked: How would you prefer to access AI assistants?
- **Librarians** were asked: How would you prefer students to access AI assistants?



Conclusion

This fourth report provides librarians with a vantage point from which to better understand AI landscape as it exists now, and provide context and actionable information that will further empower librarians to navigate this unfamiliar territory. There is plenty of data above that has confirmed existing suspicions but just as much that has challenged our preconceptions and surprised us. Some key themes emerge from the data presented in this report.

The library risks disintermediation

A recurring motif in this report is that librarians perceive the role of the library very differently to students. Several years after our first *Librarian Futures* report, in which we identified the knowledge gap, and despite the continued and consistent efforts of librarians, students continue to think of the library as a building and collection, and few think of their librarians as AI authorities. Conversely, librarians see the library as a service provider and see themselves as AI guides at their institution.

This introduces a potent new risk for the academic library. If the library is thought to be unprepared for AI, or unequipped to handle AI, or simply resistant to AI, at a time when AI is asserting itself as a fundamental part of the student workflow, students will look for AI access and support elsewhere. The library will find itself at risk of being seen as old-fashioned and unsuited for the new AI age, and be faced with ever-diminishing budgets and relevance to those who do invest in AI at their institution.

Conversely, if libraries can insert themselves into a leadership role for AI in the university, they could use this generational moment of disruption to finally achieve their long-aspired transition to services provider.

Disintermediation is a possibility – but it is not an inevitability.

Librarians must be leaders on the AI frontier

The truth is that libraries are not unprepared for AI, unequipped to handle AI, or resistant to it – in fact, all the evidence presented here confirms exactly the opposite. Librarian enthusiasm for AI is high, higher even than student enthusiasm, and the skills necessary for effective AI use – critical thinking, information literacy – are the librarian's bread and butter. Put simply, AI fits neatly into the academic library's remit. Although budget is a significant challenge for libraries everywhere at present, investing in AI now is likely also a long-term investment in the relevance and status of the academic library.

Opinions are divided

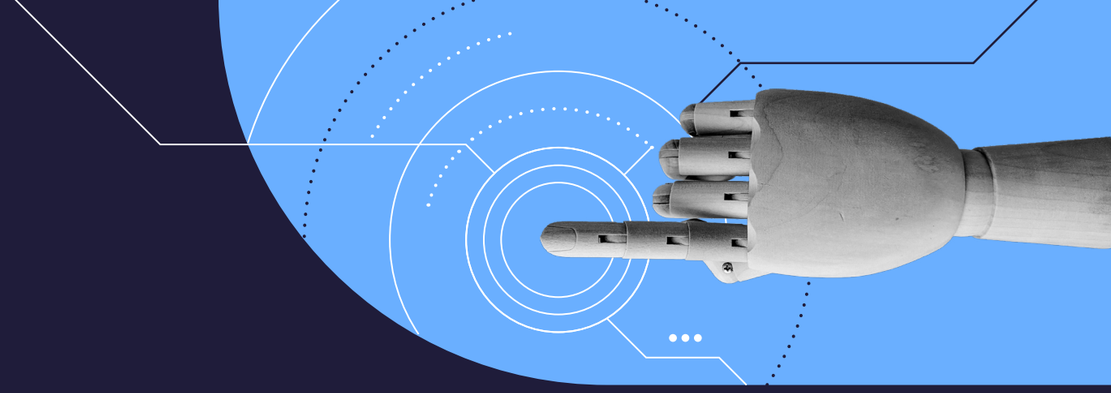
Neither students nor librarians think as one. This is, of course, not a surprise – but it is stark to see the broad range of opinions and feelings represented above. AI is generally welcomed both by students and librarians, who see its potential to streamline their work and make research easier.

There will however be many who continue to object to AI's use, and decision makers may find themselves in the unenviable position of having to justify spending time and money on implementing AI. The concerns of AI's detractors are neither trivial nor spurious. Institutions and individuals must be conscious of AI's potential for harm and should be prepared to explain their decision making. It might also be advantageous to detail the steps they will take to minimise potential risks and harms.

There are many reasons for optimism

Some of the data contained in this report may seem to suggest a perilous future for the academic library. What has become clear over the course of these reports, however, is that librarians are uniquely resilient when faced with new challenges, fantastically adaptable to rapid change, and determined to do what is best for their students come what may. Although times are tough for myriad reasons, armed as they are with a broad set of skills and profound confidence in their abilities, librarians ought to feel optimistic for the future of the academic library.

Call to action: Provocations



1. Use the budgetary crisis to fundamentally reshape your budget, securing buy-in and necessity for doing so, to free up resources (both staff & investment) for AI initiatives.

2. Evaluate the most appropriate AI initiative(s) at your institution, given researcher: student mix, socioeconomic demographics and internal contexts. This might be investment and training in AI tooling for researchers, for students, for both, or solely investment in a training provision for existing tools.

3. Reframe AI as part of your library's digital literacy and information ethics offer – not a standalone trend, but a natural extension of the library's historic role in helping students evaluate sources and navigate emerging technologies.

4. Partner with academic staff to deliver AI workshops or tutorials that use real student assignments. This sends a strong message that the library is not just an access point, but a site of co-creation and guidance in the AI age.

5. Trial lightweight AI pilots that solve specific, visible student pain points (e.g., citation generators, summarisation tools) and use the insights to build a longer-term case for investment.

6. Create student AI ambassadors in the library – peer-to-peer support roles that reduce pressure on library staff while improving uptake, especially among students sceptical of institutional authority.

7. Investigate AI tools that support student mental health.

8. Create a procurement framework for AI and encourage university to sign up to it. If the institution is adopting AI tools, this ensures the library has a seat at the table to review privacy, bias, and environmental impact concerns.

9. Set up regular 'AI drop-ins' or helpdesks – not to teach students what AI is, but to support them in applying it responsibly within their own subject context, referencing, and research practice.

10. Use GenAI to enhance your own workflows (policy drafts, outreach emails, event planning) and openly model this use to staff and students – demystifying AI through visibility and transparency.

Acknowledgements

Our mission at Technology from Sage is to serve the academic library and its students, and so we are profoundly grateful to the students and librarians who completed our surveys. These reports are only possible thanks to the trust, time, and insight of our respondents, and their willingness to share their honest thoughts with us.

We would next like to thank each of our librarian contributors for taking the time to lend their voices to our report. We are very grateful to Judith Keene, Leo Lo, Derek Malone, PJ Purchase, and Alexis Soard.

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Methodology

Key data points

1. Survey of 313 librarians and 998 students
2. Questions to librarians and vendor partners

Librarian survey detail

1. Survey administered globally online via SurveyMonkey platform
2. Responses collected 13th February 2025 to 14th March 2025
3. Participation was voluntary
4. Participant recruitment used two primary channels:
   - → Sage in-house contact list
   - → Technology from Sage in-house contact list
5. Responses were subsequently reviewed to filter out non-librarian responses, based on responses to demographic questions

Student survey detail

1. Survey administered globally online via SurveyMonkey platform
2. Responses collected 26th February 2025 to 3rd March 2025
3. Participation was voluntary
4. Participant recruitment handled by Dynata

Librarian and vendor partners

1. Library professionals and leaders were invited to provide comment by Technology from Sage staff
2. Contributors who agreed were sent segments of data with some prompting questions, but encouraged to comment on whatever aspects of the data were most interesting to them

Appendix

Student Demographics

How do you identify your gender?	n=996
Woman	57%
Man	41%
Non-binary	1%
Prefer to self-describe, below:	1%
Prefer not to say	0%

How old are you?	n=997
17 and under	2%
18 - 25	66%
26 - 30	14%
31 or older	17%
Prefer not to say	1%

Which of the following describes your current status?	n=983
First year undergraduate student	21%
Middle year(s) undergraduate student	23%
Final year undergraduate student	15%
Graduate/Postgraduate student	30%
Non-degree student (e.g. certificate or degree apprentice)	7%

In what country is your college or university?	n=984
Canada	32%
United Kingdom	34%
United States	33%
Other	11%

Are you studying full-time or part-time?	n=983
Full-time	79%
Part-time	16%
Prefer not to say	6%

Do your parents or guardians have a college or university degree?	n=983
Yes	61%
No	35%
Prefer not to say	4%

Librarian Demographics

How do you identify your gender?	n=312
Man	27%
Woman	68%
Non-binary	1%
Prefer not to say	4%
Prefer to self-describe, below:	1%

How old are you?	n=312
18 - 25	1%
26 - 30	3%
31 or older	93%
Prefer not to say	4%

How long have you worked in an academic library setting?	n=295
Less than a year	1%
1-2 years	3%
2-5 years	10%
5-10 years	14%
10+ years	72%

In what country is your college or university?	n=297
Canada	5%
United Kingdom	14%
United States	43%
Other countries (47 countries each comprising <2%)	38%

What is your role as a librarian?	n=297		
Reference	103	Head or Director	65
Faculty / Academic Liaison	102	Library Systems	52
Instruction	103	Cataloguing	42
Collection Development	89	Technical Services	43
Information Literacy	111	Circulation	42
Electronic Resources	82	Selector	23
Access Services	40	Special Collections	14
Acquisitions	50	Other (please specify)	26

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