

What Students' Use of AI Reveals about Academic Advising and Judgement

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is now widely discussed in higher education in relation to learning, assessment design, and academic integrity. Much of this discussion, however, treats students' use of AI as a set of discrete academic practices, rather than as part of broader decision-making that spans learning and everyday life. This piece argues that students' academic and non-academic uses of AI increasingly shape one another, influencing how they approach uncertainty, manage emotional pressure, and make judgements when learning feels high-stakes.

Informed by academic advising and personal tutoring conversations, it shows that students are not using AI solely to generate outputs, but to talk ideas through, test interpretations, and steady their thinking when confidence and academic identity are in play. These practices closely resemble the relational and cognitive work advisers already support and reveal how AI is now being used to sustain the emotional work of learning that underpins sound judgement.

A simple practice-based framework is presented describing four overlapping modes of student AI use – instrumental, dialogic, metacognitive, and affective-regulatory – each aligned with established advising functions. The framework highlights how AI is increasingly woven into the reflective and decision-making processes that advisers already support. Rather than positioning AI as a threat to advising, academic integrity or professional judgement, the piece argues that advising conversations can help students recognise how AI shapes their thinking and develop the boundaries and judgement needed to use it well.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI, Artificial Intelligence, emotions, advising, framework

"We had the experience but missed the meaning." T.S. Eliot (1943)

The most revealing thing about generative AI in higher education is not its novelty, but its familiarity: what it makes visible about how students already navigate learning and uncertainty. Students use generative AI in many everyday ways: to draft and refine writing, summarise ideas, manage volume, and sometimes even to help them decide what to wear and where to eat. But when you sit down and speak to students about their AI use, a more telling pattern comes into view.

They also turn to AI to talk ideas through, test interpretations, and steady their thinking when learning feels complex or high-stakes in ways that closely mirror the conversations at the heart of effective academic advising and personal tutoring. AI is being used not only to produce work, but to support the kinds of sense-making, reassurance and decision-testing that advisers have long recognised as part of learning under uncertainty (Lowenstein, 2005). Seen in this light, students' use of AI is not a challenge for advising practice, but a potentially valuable extension of it. It offers another means through which students can rehearse ideas, clarify thinking, and build confidence before bringing those questions into human conversations. For some students, particularly those who find it difficult to access support or who are hesitant to ask for help, this low-stakes sense-making, reassurance, and decision-testing may provide an important bridge into the kinds of dialogue that academic advising has always sought to foster.

That matters, because these are precisely the moments when students most need support, yet they are increasingly navigating them quietly and alone. These moments in learning are shaped as much by anxiety around getting it wrong as by questions of skill or knowledge (Newton, 2014; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). The challenge for academic advising is not that students are replacing tutors with AI, but that many of these early sense-making processes now occur privately before students bring their questions into human advising conversations. The question, then, is how academic advising and personal tutoring can more explicitly recognise these practices, and how we can help students develop the judgement, boundaries, and confidence needed to use AI well in these circumstances.

What advising conversations are already telling us

In personal tutoring and advising meetings, students rarely arrive saying, *"I don't understand the content"*. Instead, across advising conversations a familiar pattern appears. Students describe difficulties in ways that sound more like this:

*"I can't get started."
"I don't know if this is any good."
"I'm worried I've misunderstood the task."*

Advisers will recognise this pattern immediately. The difficulty is not simply cognitive; it is shaped by anxiety, discomfort with challenge (Pekrun, 2006), and concerns about what struggling might say about who they are as learners. Learning stalls not because students cannot think, but because thinking feels risky, overwhelming, or hard to sustain alone (Damasio, 1994, Nussbaum, 2001).

Increasingly, students are turning to AI in exactly these moments. Some do so confidently, using it to rehearse ideas, test language, or regain momentum. Others are far more tentative: unsure where to start, uncertain about what is allowed, and anxious about admitting to any AI use at all. Despite its pervasiveness, AI use remains something many students still downplay or hide, even when it is being used thoughtfully and legitimately.

In advising conversations, students increasingly describe using AI first to "check whether their thinking makes sense" or to "work out where to begin" before deciding whether they need to seek tutor feedback.

For advisers, this creates a familiar dynamic. Important learning work is happening, but often just out of sight, shaped by emotional pressure, uncertainty, and concerns about judgement.

The institutional paradox advisers now sit within

At an institutional level, AI is often framed through assessment design: tasks where AI is banned, tasks where limited use is permitted, and assessments where AI is deliberately integrated.

All these approaches are legitimate. From an advising perspective, however, they also create a tension. AI is clearly embedded in students' learning lives, but it has not yet become just another tool in the learning repertoire, something to be used openly, with judgement and care across contexts. Instead, it remains something to be managed, disclosed or justified (Perkins, 2024).

This places advisers in a familiar position: working at the boundary between formal rules and lived student experience and supporting students to make sense of expectations that may feel fragmented or opaque. In practice, this ambiguity often pushes early sense-making about AI into the informal learning spaces described earlier, where students experiment privately, often without bringing questions into advising conversations.

How students are already using AI through an advising lens

When we listen carefully, students' use of AI aligns closely with the core functions of academic advising. It is helpful to think about this across four overlapping modes, each of which advisers will recognise.

Mode of AI use	What this involves for students	What this looks like from an advising/tutoring perspective
Instrumental use: <i>"Do this for me"</i>	Students use AI to summarise readings, improve phrasing, generate examples, reformat text, or manage volume and time pressure.	This is the most visible form of AI use and the one most often addressed through guidance and regulation. Advising conversations tend to focus on boundaries, academic integrity, and appropriate attribution.
Dialogic use: <i>"Talk this through with me"</i>	Students ask AI to explain ideas back to them, test interpretations, rehearse explanations, or help articulate thinking that feels unclear or unfinished.	This closely mirrors early-stage advising and personal tutoring conversations, where students are supported to clarify understanding, explore ideas safely, and gain confidence before committing to a position.

Metacognitive use: <i>"Help me think about my thinking"</i>	Students compare approaches, identify gaps or weaknesses, question assumptions, check whether an argument holds together, or decide between possible next steps.	In advising practice, this is the work of helping students slow down, reflect, and make choices about how to proceed. The focus is not on answers, but on supporting students to tolerate uncertainty and decide what to do next.
Emotional regulation: <i>"Help me stay with the task"</i>	Students use AI to break work into manageable steps, reduce overwhelm, regain momentum after difficult feedback, or rebuild confidence when motivation dips.	Advisers will recognise this as emotional and relational support work: normalising challenge, helping students persist, and reframing difficulty as part of learning rather than evidence of failure (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Table 1: Modes of AI use and what this looks like in personal tutoring and academic advising.

It is this final mode – emotional regulation – that is least often named, yet most deeply aligned with advising practice. Students are not only asking AI what to think but using it to help them remain engaged with thinking at all. What students' use of AI brings into view is how often it is being used to support the emotional work of learning that advisers already recognise as central to sound judgement.

Advising as guidance, not gatekeeping

From this perspective, generative AI does not replace academic advising; it makes its value more visible. Students are already engaging in advising-type conversations with AI before bringing them into human spaces. They rehearse ideas, test language, explore options, and steady themselves when work feels uncertain or high-stakes.

These dynamics resonate strongly with established principles of academic advising and personal tutoring. Frameworks such as the *UKAT Professional Framework for Academic Advising and Personal Tutoring* (2026) emphasise reflective dialogue, empathy, and non-judgemental support as central to effective tutoring relationships. Students' private use of AI suggests that many are seeking a similar exploratory space for thinking through uncertainty before bringing ideas into advising conversations. What AI cannot replicate is the relational continuity at the heart of effective advising: the accumulated knowledge of a student across time, the ethical responsibility for their development, and the trust that allows genuinely difficult conversations to happen. These are not incidental features of advising; they are its core value, and they remain irreducibly human.

The opportunity here is significant. Used well, AI can extend the kinds of reflection and preparation advisers already support, helping students arrive at conversations better able to articulate what they are wrestling with and what they need next. The risk is not that students do this, but that they do it in isolation, without shared reference points for quality, limits, or

when it is time to stop asking questions and start making decisions. Recent work on AI, trust, and judgement in assessment reinforces the importance of supporting students to make these distinctions explicitly (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023).

This is where personal tutoring and academic advising can play a crucial role: not as gatekeepers of AI use, but as guides in how to use it well. Bringing these practices into advising conversations requires a small but important relational shift. Students often assume that AI use will be judged primarily in terms of compliance or misconduct, which can discourage open discussion. Advisers therefore need to signal early that the purpose of the conversation is reflective rather than evaluative: exploring how AI shaped the student's thinking, what it clarified, and where it may have narrowed possibilities. In this way, AI becomes a shared object of reflection within the advising relationship rather than something students feel they must disclose defensively. Advisers can help students recognise when their AI use is supporting their thinking, when it is narrowing it, and how to notice their own patterns of reliance, avoidance, or overconfidence.

There are, of course, considerations to hold in view. Used uncritically, AI can smooth over uncertainty, simplify complex thinking, or offer reassurance without depth. But these are not reasons to retreat from its use; they are reasons to teach discernment explicitly. Students need to decide when to trust a response, when to question it and when to step away, and advisers need the confidence and shared language to support those decisions constructively. At times advisers may need to challenge these tendencies as well as guide them, encouraging students to remain with uncertainty rather than bypass it too quickly.

Supporting advisers to feel confident in these conversations is therefore part of the broader professional development context for advising and tutoring practice.

A small shift with significant implications

One practical change advisers can make is to shift the question from:

“Did you use AI?”

to:

“How did AI help you think? What worked – and what didn't?”

This reframes AI use as part of the learning process rather than a moral test. It invites reflection on judgement, limits, and responsibility, the very capacities academic advising exists to develop, and helps normalise open conversations about AI use in all its forms.

Advisers might extend this reflection with prompts such as:

*What were you hoping AI would help you with at that moment?
Did the response expand your thinking, or narrow it?
What did you decide to keep, question, or ignore?*

AI has not made learning less human. If anything, it has made the emotional and relational labour of learning more visible.

Students are already using AI to manage uncertainty, regulate emotion, and rehearse judgement; sometimes skilfully, sometimes clumsily, but often silently. Academic advising and personal tutoring can bring that work into the open, not to control it, but to support it well. The task for advising is not to police AI use, but to help students recognise how it shapes their thinking and develop the judgement needed to use such tools thoughtfully, critically and with confidence.

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About the Author

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