EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers transformative potential to enhance productivity, accelerate discovery, and foster innovation. This report reviews current policy and guidance for using AI in research across a sample of UK universities and organisations, synthesising key principles and best practices to provide a snapshot overview of existing institutional guidance on AI in research for upholding best practice, integrity and trust in research.

Approach

A sample of 44 Universities and 23 national bodies in the UK, including representation from across academic disciplines and across the four nations, were included. Internet searches were conducted for publicly accessible strategy, policy or guidance available for each higher education (HE) institution and research organisations in September 2025. The analysis was based on information available through open internet searches and does not include content requiring login credentials. The absence of publicly accessible guidance or policies in this sample was not interpreted as evidence that no internal policy exists.

Findings and Observations

1. A Landscape with Strong Foundations but Uneven Provision

Across the **44 universities** sampled, there is significant variation in readiness to support AI use in research:

- **61% (27/44)** provide only student-focused or assessment-related AI guidance
- **27% (12/44)** offer research-specific guidance for staff, separate from education, addressing issues like research integrity
- **14% (6/44)** also provide detailed AI guidance enabling researchers to become competent, informed users of AI tools that go beyond permission frameworks
- **Only one institution** demonstrated a fully integrated, strategic framework plus policy and guidance dedicated to research-based GenAI use

HE institution guidance reviewed was more generally focused on managing potential risks of widespread adoption of AI in research. In contrast, the 23 national bodies reviewed (funders, learned societies, national research organisations, government-facing groups) typically adopt an enabling, forward-looking posture, framing AI as an engine for UK competitiveness, innovation, and capability building.

2. Opportunities for Research Excellence

While institutions acknowledged AI's usefulness for ideation, literature review, coding, analysis, and communication, the sample showed that guidance was fragmented and often problem-focused (misconduct, plagiarism, disclosure), rather than opportunity-focused.

Review of the guidance documents highlighted cross-cutting integrity concerns that are rarely addressed in depth, including:

- Maintaining **human reasoning, critique, and cognitive skills** in AI-assisted research.

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- Ensuring **fair and equitable access** to AI tools and upskilling opportunities across the research workforce.
- Understanding the **ethical considerations** underpinning model training, including embedded assumptions, potential biases, and the mechanisms by which AI models generate outputs.
- Supporting **scientific validity, reproducibility, and diverse epistemologies** in AI-enabled research.
- Acknowledging **environmental and socio-economic consequences** of embedding AI in research workflows.

With dedicated, cohesive guidance, researchers can be supported to use AI responsibly, capitalise on its opportunities and understand its limitations.

Emerging Themes

1. Developing research-specific AI policy

Findings from the guidance documents reviewed indicate limited coverage of research focused priorities. There is scope to articulate research-focused approaches to AI that extend beyond academic integrity or policies for education to cover researchers. This highlights an opportunity to more clearly articulate how AI may support high-quality research across disciplines.

2. Creating visible, unified institutional landing pages

Within the sample, institutions lacked a single, coherent entry point for AI guidance. Establishing clear, messaging and unified landing points enhances transparency, improves accessibility for researchers, and communicate strategic intent.

3. Establishing high-level principles for research

The review found that the variation in localised guidance creates an opportunity to develop shared principles that can anchor a consistent institutional culture around AI use. Such principles can strengthen coherence across faculties, departments, and support services.

4. Expanding meta-research and evidence-gathering on AI in research

The long-term effects of AI on research are not yet well understood. Monitoring impacts on research quality, trustworthiness, skills, reproducibility, and innovation can inform future policy and strengthen institutional credibility. institutions can help fill this gap by generating evidence on emerging impacts

Overall Implication

This analysis highlights a contrast between sector-level guidance, which typically frames AI in terms of strategic potential, and institutional guidance, which more often situates AI within existing academic integrity or misconduct frameworks as opposed to considering the implications for research integrity. This variation indicates scope for institutions to adopt more forward-looking approaches, strengthening research integrity while supporting capability development and innovation. More cohesive, inclusive, and researcher-enabling AI governance has the potential to enhance institutional practice and contribute to the credibility, trustworthiness, and excellence of the wider UK research sector.

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