



Assessing critical and ethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for social work practice

Teaching and Learning Conference 2026

University of Portsmouth

Introduction

Aim: Create an authentic assessment to enable students to develop a critical and ethical approach to using AI in social work practice.

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Social Work Education

'Universities often see AI through the lens of academic integrity - for example, in relation to plagiarism by students - rather than as a tool that could aid learning'

'Less attention paid to potential opportunities, ethical issues, and implications for practice'

'Variability in AI use between education providers and employers – students can receive mixed messages about AI use'

Rothera & Macdonald (2025)

Current use of AI in Social work practice

Of the social workers (n-155) that responded to the survey:

- 40% said they have used AI with direction from their employer (either piloted or implemented).
- 24% said they have used GenAI without direction from their employer.
- 37% had not received any learning and development opportunities related to AI, while just 13% reported receiving guidance in relation to ethical use of AI in practice and 16% in relation to data protection and privacy.

Rothera & Macdonald (2025)

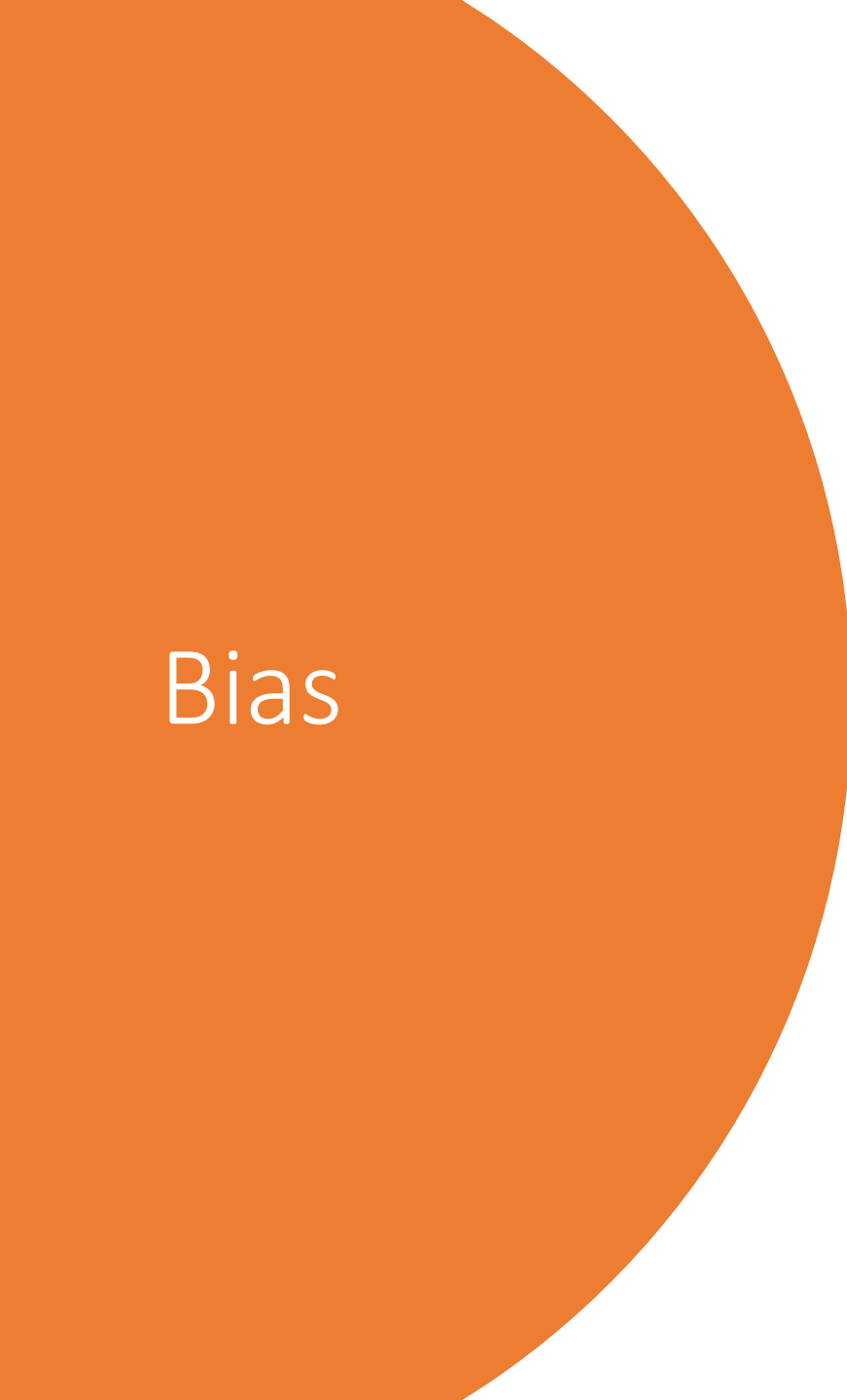


Benefits

“The opportunity [of AI] lies in its potential to ease practitioners’ workloads, reducing stress and the burden created by high caseloads and limited support -realities faced by many local authorities.

When used safely, with the right checks and balances, AI can be a valuable tool to enhance efficiency while allowing practitioners to focus on relationship-based practice.” (social worker)





Bias

“We are going into this too quickly and not thinking enough about the inbuilt biases of AI, e.g., marginalised communities may become more marginalised. Social work is a nuanced activity that involves all of your body and senses and not just the fingers you use to type.” (social worker)

“It needs legislation and safeguards. For help with recording case records from voice notes following a visit or meetings AI could be really helpful but will still need a human to edit and tweak. There is a risk that the human won't (social worker).”



Inclusive

“As a dyslexic and undiagnosed ADHD person, AI changes social work completely. I have been on the verge of leaving the profession a number of times due purely to the admin aspect. I have integrated AI into my daily life and seen how my anxiety has fallen. In addition, I have seen my work improve as I am able to properly express what I am trying to convey.” (neurodivergent social worker)

“I have ADHD, so AI helps me plan my time and keep track of tasks.” (neurodivergent social worker)

“AI helps with grammar and spelling.” (neurodivergent social worker with dyslexia)

“I have autism, and the logical approach used by AI is welcomed.” (neurodivergent social worker)

Critical thinking



“Critical thinking must be encouraged and fostered as well as ensuring staff know they are accountable for their work, not a piece of software.” (social work employer)



“In our home visit write-ups, we’ve got a section for the analysis, which is always left blank. We’ve trained [customised GenAI] to never fill that in, so the Social Worker is forced to analyse everything and write that analysis. We’re not going to have AI doing the thinking for our social workers.” (social work employer)

The 5-step blueprint

Cooner (2026)



Embed AI literacy: make AI a core competency for all students and professionals



Redesign the curriculum: move assessments from knowledge based to critical thinking



Leverage AI tools: use AI for better teaching, like VR simulations and feedback



Build collaboration: work with developers, regulators, and service users



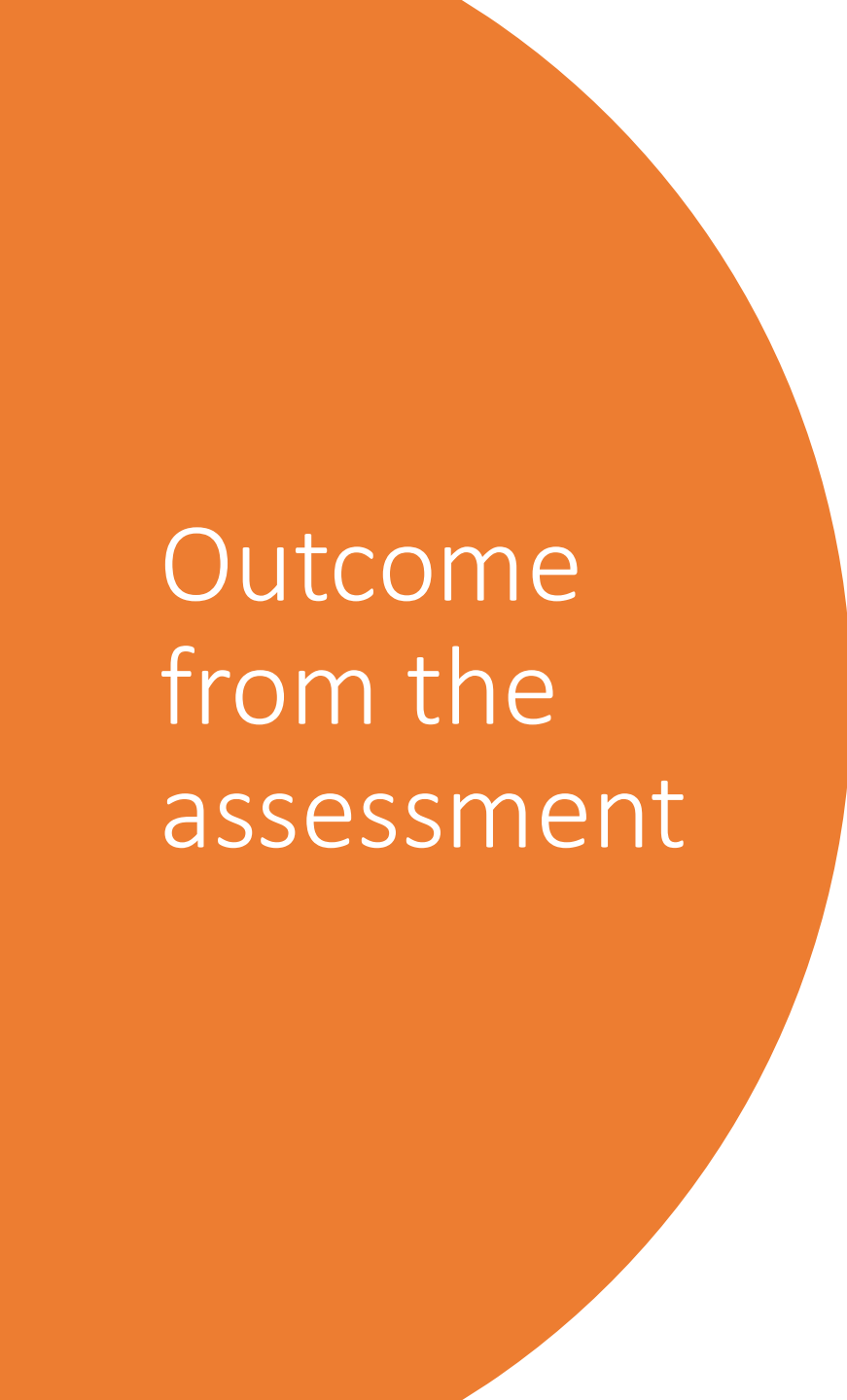
Prioritise ethics: focus on bias, social justice and algorithmic transparency

Authentic Learning and Assessment

Using a case study, students completed a child sexual exploitation toolkit (known as CERAF) using Copilot

Prompt:

- *I am a social worker*
- *The aim is to assess the child in the case study using the Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (CERAF)*
- *This assessment is for my manager*
- *The format must follow the structure of the CERAF*
- *This is the case study: (copy your case study into Copilot).*

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Outcome from the assessment

'May overlook the child's lived experience: AI can summarise events but cannot fully capture emotions, trauma, or the child's perspective'.

'Insufficient focus on empowerment: AI cannot actively promote the child's voice, agency or involvement in decision making'

"AI promises efficiency benefits and trend recognition, yet it cannot substitute human decision-making; ethical challenges in terms of privacy - prejudice and accountability should be resolved"

"AI outputs should be tested, questioned and contextualized, not treated as authoritative conclusions."

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Student perspective

Amy

Conclusions

- Realism and cognitive challenge
- Live assessment with the students
- Teaching uncertainty
- Preparing for different perspectives

References

- Haider, S., Ferguson, G., Flynn, A., Giraud, J., & Vseteckova J. The emerging use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work education and practice: A rapid evidence assessment of the literature. Open University
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- Villarroel, V. *et al.* (2018) 'Authentic assessment: creating a blueprint for course design', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(5), pp. 840-854