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The fusion of AI and AT: The demands of inclusive education vs the possibilities of technology

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Abstract. Universal Design works on the environment and curriculum from the outset, proactively removing barriers for everyone [1]. AI is emerging in the educational environment, and a recent Irish national policy focuses on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Higher Education (HE). This AI policy links to a problem of practice (PoP) in my Assistive Technology (AT) role in HE. The fusion of AI and AT has raised issues that will be explored using the Bachi [2] 'What's the Problem Represented to Be' (WPR) thinking paradigm, which interrogates the governmental rationales that inform governing practices. This paradigm will explore how the presence of AI has created new possibilities for Students with Disabilities (SWDs), and emerging challenges are also evident. A WPR analysis will reveal the effects of an AI policy linked to my PoP, and the hindering and facilitating factors for its implementation and enactment, and any indicators of impact.

Keywords. Assistive Technology, Policy Analysis, Generative AI, Disability, Inclusion

1. Introduction

In this article, I will analyse the Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) policy recently published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The AI policy was chosen because it aligns with my Assistive Technology (AT) practice, which supports students with disabilities (SWDs) in Higher Education (HE). The presence of AI in AT has caused an AT-based problem of practice (PoP), so the HEA Generative AI Policy Framework (HEAGAIPF) will be analysed using the Bacchi [2] 'What's the Problem Represented to Be' (WPR) series of questions. These WPR questions will guide the analysis of the HEA policy to uncover the hindering and facilitating factors for its implementation and enactment.

2. What's the Problem Represented

WPR, developed by Carol Bacchi [3,4], shifts away from traditional policy problem-solving. WPR serves as an evolving critical framework rooted in Foucault's theories of

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governmentality [5,6]. It utilises Foucault's dual conceptualisation of "problematisation" [7,8]. First, as a method of "thinking problematically" to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and second, as the way "problems" are actively produced through governing practices [7]. Bacchi's [9] WPR framework moves beyond simply solving educational issues to interrogate how governing occurs in many forms that aim to shape behaviours in specific ways [9].

Unlike traditional policy analysis frameworks that treat problems as objective realities to be solved with neutral tools, the WPR approach recognises that policies actively construct the very "problems" they claim to address within practices [4]. WPR is suited for my practice-based analysis because it reveals how policy representation shapes my practice and allows me to challenge the underlying assumptions that govern my daily work [11]. Consequently, WPR will reveal how a PoP in my AT role will reveal governance insights.

2.1. Assistive Technology

The umbrella term 'Assistive Technology' is a transdisciplinary field that encompasses technologies, equipment, devices, apparatus and systems from medical to educational, used by people with disabilities (PWDs) [12]. Specifically, AT in education enables SWDs to participate as equals in learning experiences through technology [14–16]. AT in education can assist SWDs with core academic tasks, such as reading, writing, note-taking, as well as organisation and time management [17,18]. The AT that has prompted my PoP is called Genio, which SWDs use to record audio in class. This tool supports our neurodiverse students with note-taking, which many SWDs find challenging [18]. It has AI features that convert recordings into transcripts and a quiz feature that turns the class recording into a set of questions, so students can test their knowledge. Genio poses challenges, as AI within AT is new to Teaching staff and is raising questions about AI's place in the classroom. This PoP will be explored through the HEA policy using WPR to explore the educational behaviours impacted by AI in AT.

2.2. Policy and Practice

Policy can be 'broadly defined as including, but not limited to, official documents produced by governments and other educational institutions, which position educational issues in ways that reflect particular values and which can have a range of effects' [19]. WPR will unravel how the HEAGAIPF impacts my PoP.

2.3. The HEA Gen AI Policy Framework

This HEAGAIPF guides Irish HEIs through five core principles: Academic Integrity, Equity, AI Literacy, Privacy, and Sustainable Pedagogy. It emphasises human judgment and ethical stewardship to address pedagogical disruptions, such as those arising from assessment redesign. The document serves a dual purpose. As a policy, it establishes values-based standards, institutional accountability, and GDPR compliance. Then, as a framework, it offers a structured, adaptable national reference point rather than rigid rules, respecting institutional autonomy. By balancing national coherence with localised flexibility, the HEAGAIPF enables HEIs to develop their own AI practices while maintaining a unified commitment to ethical and academic standards. This dual approach

ensures that the integration of Generative AI remains both principled and practical across the Irish education sector.

2.4. Positionality

As an Assistive Technology Officer (ATO) in Irish HE, I operate within a Disability Service, advocating AT for IE for the rising number of SWDs, as AT serves as a facilitator of equity [20–24]. In terms of my positionality as an ATO in this policy analysis, I occupy the "space between" [25]. I am an insider who sees how AT and inclusion initiatives affect students in real life, yet I am an outsider to the high-level groups that write the HEA's AI policies, which impact my work [26]. This dual perspective allows me to draw my lived familiarity with the subject and to engage with a reflexive analysis that enables an interrogation of this AI and AT problem [4,25].

3. The WPR Framework

In my personal professional practice, it is often required to 'think problematically', and to behave as a 'policy problematiser' [2,27]. This opens up new perspectives for creative possibilities in addressing the representation of this problem [2]. This AI and AT problem representation provides the analytic target in the WPR template of interconnected questions and analysis (Table 1) [9].

Table 1. WPR template of interconnected questions

Number	Question/Process
Question 1	What's the 'problem' (AI and AT) represented to be in a specific proposal in the HEAGAIP?
Question 2	What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
Question 3	How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
Question 4	What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What is silenced?
Question 5	What effects (discursive, subjectification, objectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
Question 6	How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended?
Process 7	Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations as a practice of the self.

This article will facilitate questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and the process stage 7 to guide the analysis of governing practices.

3.1. Question 1

The purpose of Question 1 is to shift the paradigm from "problem-solving" to "problem-questioning" by identifying how specific proposals implicitly constitute and produce the very "problems" they aim to address [9]. The Gen AI problematisation provides a starting point for discursive reflection on how governing takes place [9]. Any proposal for change signals what needs to change and hence what is represented and produced as problematic [28]. The HEAGAIPF proposal states that Gen AI is a 'fundamental threat to academic integrity' [29]. By proposing that AI constitutes a 'threat', the policy defines the problem not as the technology itself, but as a risk to institutional values. Then the Gen AI problem is represented as 'institutions should design AI adoption with inclusion at its centre, not

as an afterthought' [29]. These represent a tension between AI advancing inclusion and fears about the risks AI poses to education. This opens a "space being governed", which stimulates the interrogation of how governing takes place [30].

Within the policy, Generative AI involves "risks" and "inclusion", which can be constituted as governable realities [2]. It advocates technological mechanisms, such as "equity audits" and "public registers of tools," to regulate student conduct by defining what constitutes ethical integration [2,29]. Proposing to "design AI adoption with inclusion at its centre" while for academic work "protecting the right of staff to decline its [AI] use where they judge it inappropriate to their learning or teaching" [29].

This frames the problem as avoiding passive neutrality and for staff "to decline tools or practices that cannot be made equitable" [29]. This represents Gen AI as creating a regulatory and ethical vacuum and a need for sector-wide guidance and national coordination as a problem as significant as the technology itself. This lack of guidance can lead staff to choose between concerns for AI risks or AI for inclusion, as caveats about AT with AI for SWDs are unclear.

In the context of Genio, the AT I offer SWDS, I have seen resistance from teaching staff, indicating governance gaps that lead to unregulated Gen AI use in education, raising fears about AI in AT, and thereby impacting IE via my practice.

3.2. Question 2

Applying Question 2 of the Bacchi [2] framework to the HEAGAIPF focuses on deep-seated assumptions that underlie this 'problem', using a Foucauldian archaeology to identify and interrogate the 'embedded knowledges' within the identified AI problem representation [31 p.456,2].

Although the HEAGAIPF includes a pillar on equity and inclusion, the terms 'disability' and 'assistive technology' are not mentioned. There is an assumption that word inclusion always involves PWDs. There is a risk that, as the definition of inclusion has expanded to address a broader demographic, the specific rights of SWDs become diluted within generalised institutional discourse [32,33]. The oversight of 'disability' fails to acknowledge the exclusionary history of education for PWDs [34–36].

In terms of Institutional commitment to equity and inclusion, the policy states that each institution should be "aligning with Irish equality law, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, and the UN Sustainable Development Goal on inclusive education (SDG 4)" [29]. The omission of these terms is a fundamental issue in explicitly ensuring awareness by institutions of AI in AT for SWDs, especially as AT is linked to a combination of Irish legislation, equality laws, and specific administrative circulars issued by the Department of Education [21,37–40]. Then AT are also anchored as a human right for SWDs in a powerful network of international human rights, including the SGD goals for IE [16,41,42].

This terminology gap creates a policy gap regarding AI's explicit role for SWDs, as well as AI's position relative to AT. As AT is essential for inclusion, and the current and future global demands are high, AT should be reflected in our education policies however, AT awareness is low nationally and internationally [43,44]. Research also indicates that university staff often lack a coherent understanding of disability, including AT, as well as how to support SWDs [45–47]. The journey from the exclusion of PWDS to inclusion has been long in our educational history, and despite the progress of inclusion, there are still awareness gaps about AT and disability. These omissions in the policy assume disability is included, yet overlook the specific facilitators of equity, such as AT, due to

a generic inclusive framework. The policy's emphasis on risk also inhibits inclusion-centred thinking and disability awareness.

In my AT practice, the absence of these terms means I cannot draw on the policy to support SWDs when staff raise questions regarding Genio as a support for SWDs, despite the Irish law and the UNCRPD advocating AT. The link between AT and AI needs to be explicit if the HEAGAIPF is to support disability-related inclusion at the micro level.

3.3. Question 3

In Question 3 of the Bacchi [9] WPR framework requires a 'genealogical sensibility', a way of thinking that argues everything has a history [48]. Applying this question will lessen the grip of a problem's present facticity, thereby destabilising what is currently taken for granted as truth and opening up possibilities for imagining alternative social and political arrangements [2].

The HEAGAIPF states that its focus is on teaching and learning [29]. The policy is explicit about AI-related risks within assessment, and plagiarism are emphatically mentioned [29]. While the HEAGAIPF encourages AI for inclusion, the policy "signals that responsible AI use in higher education is inseparable from equality of opportunity and respect for diversity" 14 [29]. Also, the HEAGAIPF encourages institutions to recognise that generative AI systems can reinforce or amplify existing and intersectional disadvantage 14 [29].

The short history of AI in education has signalled fears around AI, as AI-driven learning platforms would deskill the profession and replace them entirely with cost-effective software [49]. Educators are increasingly worried about their original "intellectual labour" being used to train Large Language Models (LLMs) without consent or compensation [50]. Also, ongoing concerns about students using AI to complete assignments, hindering the development of critical thinking, and undermining the authenticity of earned grades [51,52]. Although there are concerns, the policy does not state that AI-powered AT has existed in HEIs for several years and Google AT/ AI is currently supporting all students with live captions, voice typing and text to audio in NotebookLM [53–56].

Research already suggests that Generative AI can be helpful for SWDs in education [57,58]. AI as a technology for inclusive possibilities has become increasingly integrated into mainstream education [59]. This growing AI integration in education at universities supports the idea that AI is already embedded in academic practice [60]. The line between AT and AI is blurring as AI is already considered an AT by some SWDs for searching information and accessing learning resources [61].

The limited history of AI in education has raised concerns in teaching but has also mainstreamed support for inclusive education. In the HEAGAIPF, if the current presence of AI in AT had been acknowledged, this would have raised awareness of these tools to support SWDs. In my AT practice, if the policy focused more on positive awareness, it would support Genio as just another AI tool for inclusion rather than risk emphasis.

3.4. Question 4

Question 4 of the Bacchi [2] interrogates the silences within a problem representation to expose what is left unproblematic, thereby challenging the perceived inevitability of a specific policy framing and opening space for alternative conceptualisations.

The problem being represented in the HEAGIAFP is that institutions should support the adoption of Gen AI to facilitate inclusive possibilities. It clearly states that "Institutions are encouraged to recognise that generative AI systems can reinforce or amplify existing and intersectional disadvantage, and to incorporate inclusion and accessibility into decision-making from the outset" [29]. But as identified in the previous question, the AI already exists within an institution's digital ecosystem, bringing AT and AI to support all students, including those with SWDs. These Google and Microsoft AI tools within HEIs have mainstreamed learning supports to all students, however, this awareness is silent.

By mainstreaming AT, we uphold the principles of the Salamanca World Conference, ensuring an inclusive approach that fulfils the mandate of 'Education for All.' (EFA) [62]. In the context of EFA, all learners should have equal access to digital technologies, especially those at risk of disadvantage and those with additional learning needs [63]. Zorec et al. [64] argue that AT is no longer a niche tool and often stigmatised technology offered by specialised experts, instead, it is a fundamental pillar of inclusive education that requires a collective approach.

AI and its potential to mainstream AT support so AT is no longer niche, this could transform the current neoliberal mechanism whereby SWDs register with a disability service to access AT [65,66]. It can challenge the current funding structure for SWDs that uses the medical model as a gatekeeper to disability supports and, in turn, access to AT [67].

Exposing the silence regarding existing AI-infused AT in digital ecosystems challenges the neoliberal reliance on medicalised gatekeeping registration processes for disability support. Shifting toward a mainstream AI framework aligns with the Salamanca World Conference's vision by positioning AT as an EFA rather than a niche intervention. This transition from bureaucratic hurdles to a fully IE for the steadily rising number of disabilities in HE. Until then, Genio will be considered a niche tool, accessible only through the medical model, which limits its visibility and mainstream adoption to normalise this support.

3.5. Final stage, Process 7. Self-problematisation

In the final stage of Bacchi's [9] framework, "self-problematisation," requires researchers to interrogate their own assumptions and knowledge regimes. This encourages active engagement with their own belief systems by using the selected WPR questions to expose the cultural unconscious behind their work.

I have interrogated my PoP, the use of Genio by SWDs, an AT I offer that has AI, as it prompted resistance from some Teaching staff. The HEA policy was chosen as it linked to my PoP, as it proposed Gen AI as a 'fundamental threat to academic integrity' [29]. The problem is represented as 'institutions should design AI adoption with inclusion at its centre, not as an afterthought' [29]. In this stage, I will identify the embedded knowledges and self-deconstruct within the analysis.

As an ATO, a third-space professional interacting with teaching staff about SWDs recording in class, I may be assumed to be administrative staff [68]. Even though the EU, as of 2022, classified Assistive Technologists as teaching roles [13,69]. However, the binary role recognition in education causes me to be an outsider when entering the academic and pedagogical domain [70,71]. As the policy is primarily focused on teaching staff, there was no AT staff representation in its formulation. This may be a contributing factor to the omission of "AT" and "disability" in the HEAGAIPF, thus

impacting Genio for SWDs. Embedded divisions between Teaching and non-Teaching staff are known issues, and here they may impact the human rights access to AT and the lived experiences of SWDs. Without ATOs being involved in the HEAGAIPF, there was a lack of voice regarding disability and AT in the context of Gen AI. This analysis has prompted me to address these gaps in the HEAGAIPF and to connect with the policy authors to clarify them.

As well as being an ATO, I am a student and an AT user due to my dyslexia and ADHD. It may be assumed that being an ATO is just my job, and I'm not a user of AT. Disability and AT are situated within my lived experiences as a disabled educator and shape my professional practice [72]. This dual positionality ensures that disability and AT are not just technical requirements but are embedded within my lived experiences as a disabled educator, directly informing my AT practice [73]. As an agent of inclusion, leveraging my insider status to dismantle the deficit disability narratives. As I use AT for my own studies and work, I both see and experience the level playing field that AT offers, and how AI can advance this equality. Pieriboni, Buzzi and Leporini [74] states Gen AI can serve as an adaptive assistive technology, supporting a pedagogical role in mediating learning, enhancing interaction, and facilitating independent study. The refusal of AI-integrated AT by teaching staff can be interpreted as a form of ableism**,** as AT, even with AI, if institutional power is prioritised over the lived experiences and technological agency of SWDs [75,76]. The possibilities of AI for IE are emerging but need explicit direction and advocacy to mitigate ableism.

While in the HEGAIPF, I recognise the threats and risks of Gen AI, I also see the benefits of AI-enabled AT for SWDs, given my AT biases. The policy states the "immediacy and scale of the impact" that AI is already having, representing the "problem" as an urgent pedagogical crisis [29]. The same urgency can be said for the rising numbers of SWDs in education, so the insertion of AT and disability is vital for inclusive education.

As Gen AI is quickly emerging in education, it needs to be acknowledged with Assistive Technology in policy. Risks can be mitigated, awareness of AT needs to be raised, and the positive aspects of AI to contribute to the Salamanca message of Education for all, highlighted. In the next iteration of this policy, with the hopeful addition of AT and disability, this will alleviate my problem of practice for Students with disabilities and mitigate ableism.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the WPR analysis reveals that my problem of practice has manifested in multiple layers. Firstly, the HEA Generative AI Policy/Framework, as a flexible policy framework, offers an adaptable roadmap for Generative AI. However, replacing explicit "disability" or "AT" terms with the widely interpretable term of "inclusion" creates governing vagueness. Also, the policy uses a risk-first, inclusion-second approach, which sets a tone of fear rather than curiosity about how Gen AI can advance inclusion. Secondly, within my PoP, Genio itself and the resistance by teaching staff highlight that AT and disability awareness are a gap when accommodating inclusion and mitigating exclusion in the classroom. Thirdly, as an Assistive Technology Officer, my third space role may be perceived as administrative, which may cause a disparity in how Teaching staff see me as a peer who can consult on inclusive pedagogical matters.

Overall, WPR has shown a refractive shift between practice to policy, facilitating an interrogation of multiple barriers. The process has surfaced competing governances between inclusion and risk, which has motivated me to address the gap between practice and policy in my role thus impacting on the implementation and use of AT for students with disabilities.

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