

Interview Transcript: AI in Academic Life Among Malaysian University

Purpose: Teaching transcript for qualitative coding and discussion in a statistics or research methods class.

Participants: Student A: Aina, Year 2, Non-STEM programme. Student B: Faris, Year 3, STEM programme.

Setting: Semi-structured group interview conducted on campus after class. Names are pseudonyms.

Key: I = Interviewer, Aina = Student A, Faris = Student B

I: To begin, can you describe how AI tools fit into your normal academic routine?

Aina: For me it is already part of the routine, but not in a dramatic way. I use ChatGPT mostly when I feel stuck at the beginning of an assignment. In my programme we write a lot of reflections and case analyses, so sometimes I know the topic but I do not know how to organise the points. I ask AI to give me a possible outline or to explain the concept in simpler language. After that I still write the answer myself because I know my lecturer can recognise when the voice is too perfect. It helps me start, but I do not feel comfortable submitting something that sounds like it came from nowhere.

Faris: Mine is more technical. I use Copilot and ChatGPT when I write code, check formulas or troubleshoot. I also use Perplexity when I want sources because it gives links. In engineering assignments, AI can save time when the error is something small, like a missing bracket or a wrong function. But it can also give very confident wrong answers. I learned that after it suggested a solution for a circuit problem that looked elegant but violated the condition in the question. Since then I treat it like a fast senior friend, not like a final authority.

I: You both mentioned using AI at the beginning of a task. Does it change how you think through the assignment?

Aina: Yes, but there are two sides. On a good day it helps me see the structure. It may show that a question has different angles, for example policy, ethics and student experience. That makes my thinking broader. But on a bad day, especially when deadlines are near, I notice that I accept the first structure too quickly. I do not struggle with the question long enough. Before AI, I would read the notes, highlight things and maybe discuss with a friend. Now there is a temptation to ask the tool first. I think that can weaken the slow thinking part.

Faris: I agree about the temptation. For coding, if I ask too early, I may not understand why the code works. The assignment is completed but my learning is shallow. However, when I ask after I have tried, it becomes very useful. I can compare my logic with the AI response. Sometimes I ask, "What assumptions am I making?" or "Where might this method fail?" That kind of prompt makes me think more critically because it challenges my approach.

I: How do you decide whether an AI answer is trustworthy?

Faris: I never trust it immediately for factual or technical answers. I check the textbook, lecture slides or documentation. If it is about coding, I run the code and test edge cases. For maths, I recalculate. The issue is that AI writes in a very smooth style. It looks correct even when it is not. Some classmates are persuaded by the confidence of the language. I think the danger is not only plagiarism. It is false confidence.

Aina: For writing, I look at whether the answer is too general. AI often gives a balanced paragraph that sounds reasonable but has no local context. For example, if I ask about Malaysian university students, it may talk about "students worldwide" or mention issues that do not fit our campus. I check whether the examples match our context. I also look for claims that need evidence. If it says "many students believe", I ask, where is the evidence? That question is something I learned from research methods class.

I: Do you think using AI has improved your critical thinking, reduced it or both?

Aina: Both, depending on how I use it. It improves my thinking when I use it to question my own draft. Sometimes I paste a paragraph and ask it to identify weak reasoning, missing evidence or alternative interpretations. That is useful because I get immediate feedback before showing my lecturer. But it reduces critical thinking when I use it to avoid confusion. Confusion is uncomfortable, but it is also where learning happens. If AI removes that too quickly, maybe I only learn the surface.

Faris: For me it improved some parts, like debugging and comparing solutions. I can ask for two methods and then judge which is more efficient. That trains evaluation. But it reduced patience. I notice I get irritated when I cannot solve something immediately. AI makes speed feel normal. In real engineering problems,

speed is not always the main value. Accuracy, safety and understanding matter more. So I need discipline to slow down.

I: What about academic integrity? How do students around you interpret the boundary between help and cheating?

Aina: The boundary is not always clear. Most students know copying a full answer is wrong. But many grey areas exist. Is it wrong to ask AI to improve grammar? Is it wrong to ask for examples? What if AI gives a sentence and I change half of it? Different lecturers say different things. Some allow AI for brainstorming but not for writing. Some do not mention it. When the rules are unclear, students create their own rules, usually based on what they think can be detected.

Faris: In my faculty, the boundary depends on the assessment. For coding, tools are everywhere. Even professionals use them. So banning AI completely feels unrealistic. But submitting generated code without understanding it is a problem. I think students should be asked to explain their code orally or include a short reflection on what AI helped with. If you can explain and defend the work, then it is more honest.

I: Have you changed the way you study because of AI?

Aina: Yes. I use it like a private tutor when I revise. I ask it to quiz me on theories or to create scenarios. For example, in communication studies, I ask for a situation and then I identify the theory that applies. That is helpful because I can practise without waiting for someone. But I also worry that the examples become repetitive. AI tends to give clean cases. Real exam questions can be messy. So I still need past-year questions and lecturer feedback.

Faris: I use it for self-testing too. I ask it to generate questions at different difficulty levels. Sometimes I ask it to act as an examiner and challenge my answer. The best use is when I force it to ask me questions rather than give me answers. That feels more active. But I have to design the interaction. If I just type "explain this", I become passive.

I: Do you see differences between students in how they use AI?

Faris: Yes. Students with stronger basics use AI better. They know what to ask and they can detect nonsense. Students with weaker basics may rely on it more because it gives them a finished-looking answer. The gap can become bigger. AI does not automatically equalise learning. It may advantage students who already know how to evaluate.

Aina: Language also matters. Some students use AI because they are not confident writing in English. I do not think that is wrong. It can help them express ideas they already have. But if the tool changes their meaning or makes the writing too formal, their own voice disappears. For Malaysian students, switching between Bahasa Melayu, English and sometimes Mandarin or Tamil is normal. AI may not understand that mixed academic identity very well.

I: What emotions do you associate with AI use in academic work?

Aina: Relief, mostly. When I am overwhelmed, it makes the task feel possible. But there is also guilt. Even when I use it only for planning, I sometimes wonder whether I am being lazy. There is anxiety too, because universities talk about detection. Students become scared even when they use AI responsibly. I think the conversation should be less about catching students and more about teaching proper use.

Faris: I feel efficiency, but also dependence. When the internet is down or the tool gives a poor answer, I realise how much I have started to expect instant assistance. That worries me. I do not want to graduate as someone who can only solve problems with a chatbot beside me. At the same time, ignoring AI is not realistic because workplaces will expect us to use these tools.

I: What guidance would help students use AI more critically?

Faris: I would like lecturers to show examples. Not just say "use AI ethically", but demonstrate a good prompt, a bad prompt and how to verify the output. Maybe show an AI answer with errors and ask students to critique it. That would train judgement. Also, assessments should reward process. If marks only focus on final answers, students will optimise for final answers.

Aina: I agree. I also want a disclosure template that is simple. For example, students can state: I used AI for brainstorming, grammar or checking counterarguments. It should not feel like confessing a crime. Another useful thing is teaching students how to keep their own voice. AI can polish language, but the argument should still come from us.

I: Imagine a first-year student asks you how to use AI wisely. What would you tell them?

- Aina:** I would say, try first before asking AI. Even ten minutes of your own thinking matters. Write your messy ideas first. Then use AI to organise or challenge them. Do not let the tool decide what you believe. Also, check whether the answer fits your course, your lecturer's expectations and the Malaysian context.
- Faris:** I would tell them to use AI as a coach, not a contractor. A contractor does the work for you. A coach asks questions, gives feedback and points out weaknesses. If you cannot explain the final work without AI, then you have not learned enough. Also, keep evidence. Save prompts or notes so you know what came from the tool and what came from you.
- I:** What kinds of classroom activities would make AI use more visible without making students feel punished?
- Aina:** I think lecturers can ask students to bring one AI output and critique it together. Not to embarrass anyone, but to show that an answer can sound fluent and still be weak. In a tutorial, students could identify unsupported claims, missing Malaysian examples or sentences that hide assumptions. That would make critical thinking practical. It also reduces the fear because everyone sees that AI is not magic. It produces material that needs judgement.
- Faris:** For technical courses, I would like comparison tasks. For example, solve a problem manually, then ask AI for a solution, then compare the steps. Where are they the same? Where does AI skip reasoning? Where does it use a method we have not learned yet? That kind of activity makes the tool part of learning rather than a shortcut. It also reveals whether students understand the concepts or only recognise the final answer.
- I:** Are there situations where you think students should avoid AI completely?
- Aina:** Yes, especially during early reading and personal reflection. If the assignment asks what I think about an issue, I need to sit with my own reaction first. AI can make my response sound mature before I actually understand my position. For reflective writing, the danger is not only cheating. It is losing contact with your own experience. I would use AI later for clarity, not at the moment when I am forming my view.
- Faris:** I would avoid it during foundational practice. In programming, the first struggle with syntax and logic is important. If AI removes every small difficulty, the student may never build mental models. Later, when the problems become complex, they will not know what is happening under the surface. So maybe the rule is: use AI more after you have built enough basics to challenge it.
- I:** How do you think AI will affect your confidence after graduation?
- Faris:** It gives me confidence because I can learn new tools faster. If I join a company and need to understand a new library or workflow, AI can help me get started. But real confidence should come from knowing how to verify, not from always having answers. I want to be the kind of graduate who can say, this output is useful, but this part is risky.
- Aina:** For me, confidence is connected to communication. AI helps me express ideas more clearly, especially in English. But I do not want employers or lecturers to think my ability is only because of AI. I want to use it to strengthen my voice, not replace it. That balance is important for students who are still developing academic identity.
- I:** Last question. Overall, has AI made university learning better or worse for you?
- Aina:** Better, but with conditions. It gives access to support, especially when students are shy to ask questions. It can help with language and confidence. But it can also make learning feel like producing output. University should not only be about output. It should be about becoming someone who can think, judge and communicate. AI can support that, but it can also distract from it.
- Faris:** I would say better if the student has discipline and the lecturer designs assessments carefully. Worse if everyone pretends nothing has changed. AI is now part of academic life. The real question is whether we use it to avoid thinking or to think more carefully. That choice is not only individual. It depends on rules, teaching methods and the culture of the classroom.