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Writing a Thesis in the Era of ChatGPT: Lived Experiences of PhD International Students at UK Universities

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the thesis-writing experiences of international PhD students in UK universities, with particular attention to the challenges they encounter and their use of ChatGPT as an academic writing support tool. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 19 international doctoral students across four UK institutions, the study employs thematic analysis using NVivo to examine both writing practices and perceptions of AI-assisted tools. The findings indicate that the primary challenges are not linguistic but cognitive and rhetorical, including difficulties with idea development, structuring coherent arguments, engaging in critical analysis, and articulating an academic voice. Participants generally viewed ChatGPT as a useful tool, particularly for editing and brainstorming; however, they also expressed concerns about its potential long-term effects on independent thinking and academic writing development. Uncertainty regarding the ethical boundaries of AI use, especially in relation to academic integrity, further complicated their engagement with the tool.*

Keywords: academic integrity, academic writing, ChatGPT, international PhD students, thesis writing challenges

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INTRODUCTION

British universities are the second most popular destination for international students, after the United States (Bolton, Lewis, & Gower, 2024). While studying abroad offers many benefits, it also presents various challenges. International students often experience both sociocultural and academic difficulties during their time abroad (Oduwaye, Kiraz, & Sorakin, 2023). Sociocultural challenges refer to the obstacles students may encounter when they attempt to integrate into the host society and adapt to its cultural norms (Shah, Lopes, & Kareem, 2019). Academic challenges, by contrast, are related to the educational context (Oduwaye et al., 2023). These may include difficulties in understanding lectures, participating in classroom discussions, delivering presentations, and producing written academic work such as assignments or dissertations.

For international students, receiving a study offer from a UK university is typically conditional on passing the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and achieving the institution's required score. However, passing a language proficiency test, even with a high score, does not guarantee that students will not encounter academic challenges in English-medium higher education contexts (Neumann, Padden, & McDonough, 2019). In the UK, PhD students are generally required to submit a thesis of approximately 75,000 words (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015), a task that can be particularly demanding for nonnative English speakers (L2 writers). Odena and Burgess (2017) note that doctoral thesis writing poses significant linguistic and rhetorical challenges for international students and highlight the limited number of studies that have explored international PhD students' experiences of thesis writing among UK universities.

Although existing research has examined the academic writing challenges faced by international doctoral students, little attention has been given to how emerging artificial intelligence-based tools may shape their writing practices. Empirical research investigating international PhD students' perceptions and use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, during the thesis writing process is lacking (Zou & Huang, 2024). The present study seeks to address this gap by pursuing two key objectives. First, it examines the challenges encountered by international PhD students during the thesis writing process. Second, it explores their perceptions of ChatGPT as a writing tool and investigates how they use it in their academic writing.

Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What do international PhD students at UK universities find difficult about academic writing?
2. How do international PhD students at UK universities perceive and use ChatGPT as a writing facilitator in their thesis writing process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing as a concept

Although a substantial body of research has focused on academic writing, the concept of “academic writing” remains poorly defined and is often misunderstood in the literature (Molinari, 2019). This could explain why some institutions and supervisors in the UK may struggle to define what academic writing entails and what it requires from students, particularly international PhD candidates who may come from different educational backgrounds (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). Academic writing can be defined as a formal style of writing that demonstrates a student’s ability to engage with scholarly literature, construct coherent arguments, and critically evaluate ideas (Molinari, 2019; Tahira & Haider, 2019). Critical thinking is central to academic writing because it requires students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information rather than merely summarizing it (Mitchell, Prior, Bilbro, Peake, See, & Andrews, 2008).

If the concept is confusing to institutions and supervisors, the following question arises: Would the international student be able to grasp it? University teachers have varying interpretations of “critical thinking” (Mitchell et al., 2008), and opinion is divided on whether it is a largely Western concept or can be learned by non-Western students with appropriate guidance (Atkinson, 1997; Norris, 1995; Paton, 2005; Davies, 2013). Maringe and Jenkins (2015) report that some students from the East may initially perceive critical thinking as 'saying negative things about other people’s work' (p. 612). It is reasonable to conclude that UK universities may not effectively support international students in improving their writing skills if they fail to provide an “epistemological understanding” of what academic writing entails (Molinari, 2019, p. 20). There is a paucity of research on international students’ conceptualization of academic writing (Mumin, 2022; Sulaiman, 2022; Singh, 2015).

Academic writing: a complex process

For a doctoral student whose first language is not English, writing a thesis can be a challenging task (Gupta et al., 2022; Zhao, 2017). According to Tang (2013), the challenges faced by L2 writers can be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, and psychological aspects. Linguistic challenges tend to diminish as the writer gains experience (Zhao, 2017). Mumin (2022) reported that international postgraduate students reported improvements over time, with focus shifting from grammar to the criticality and depth of writing.

Academic writing is a cognitively demanding process encompassing activities such as comprehending, analyzing, elaborating, synthesizing, mind mapping, ordering, articulating, clarifying, editing, criticizing, structuring, and sense-making (Rugg & Petre, 2004, pp.129-130). Manchón et al. (2007) categorize these into planning, formulating, and revising. Planning involves generating and organizing ideas; formulating is the act of writing; and revising addresses language and cohesion. For some L2 writers, revising can be cognitively demanding (Williams, 2004).

PhD students in the UK must meet rigorous standards in their thesis submissions, and failure to do so results in them not being awarded the degree (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015; Odena & Burgess, 2017). Studies report that the high stakes associated with thesis writing contribute to significant stress among international doctoral students (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2001; Marnani, 2024). Marnani (2024) examined writing anxiety among PhD students at U.S. universities and reported that anxiety can lead some students to delay. While the study did not focus specifically on thesis non submission, it suggests that anxiety may contribute to delays in completing writing tasks. Similarly, Odena and Burgess (2017) report that some international PhD students in the UK face challenges in meeting thesis deadlines, highlighting that stress and writing difficulties are relevant factors.

ChatGPT as a writing tool

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has led to the creation of writing assistance tools such as Grammarly, Jasper, and ChatGPT. Owing to its dialogic nature and versatility, ChatGPT, launched in 2022, has surpassed other tools in popularity (Koltovskaia, Rahmati Hooman & Saeli, 2024). Its ability to engage in multiterm conversations and produce contextualized texts is a key feature (Javaid, Haleem & Singh, 2022). ChatGPT has been described as “revolutionizing academic writing and research across various domains” (Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024, p. 10) and is expected to have a profound impact on the dissertation-writing process (Story, 2023).

While research on AI writing tools is growing, the use and perception of ChatGPT by PhD students remain underexplored (Abdulazeez, Reppa, & Mok, 2025; Gupta et al., 2022; Zou & Huang, 2023). This study contributes to this emerging area by investigating how international PhD students in the UK regard and use ChatGPT in their academic writing practices. The literature on academic writing combines theoretical frameworks, such as the cognitive-process model of writing (Rugg & Petre, 2004; Manchón et al., 2007), with thematic studies exploring the practical challenges faced by international students, including linguistic, cognitive, and psychological aspects (Tang, 2013; Mumin, 2022; Zhao, 2017). Integrating these perspectives allows a comprehensive understanding of international PhD students’ experiences and highlights gaps in research on AI tools such as ChatGPT.

METHOD

The present study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative data were collected through interviews. This methodological choice can be justified for two main reasons. First, interviews are valued for their effectiveness in exploring questions about personal values and in uncovering human experiences in their authentic, natural contexts. Second, because some learners find speaking easier than writing, they tend to provide more detailed and elaborate responses in conversational settings (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

To provide respondents with ample opportunities to fully elaborate on their answers, I employed semi structured interviews (Yin, 2012).

The participants were international PhD students (N = 19) who were recruited from four British universities. To ensure maximum variation in the sample (Patton, 1990), I aimed to recruit students from diverse disciplines and nationalities. The key demographic and academic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Specifically, it provides information on each participant's gender, country of origin, native language, area of research, current stage in the PhD journey, and the university with which they are affiliated.

Table 1: Background Information on the Participants (N = 19)

Participant	Gender	Nationality	First Language	Research Field	PhD Year	University
S1	M	Algerian	Arabic	Criminology	3	B
S2	M	Kenyan	Swahili	Education	3	A
S3	M	Vietnam	Vietnamese	Applied Linguistics	2	A
S4	F	Netherlands	Dutch	Applied Linguistics	2	B
S5	M	Libyan	Arabic	Applied Linguistics	2	B
S6	M	Ghanian	Akan	Education	2	A
S7	F	Senegal	Wolof	Applied Linguistics	2	B
S8	F	France	French	Environmental Sciences	3	C
S9	F	Russia	Russian	Education	3	B
S10	M	Pakistan	Punjabi	Statistics	2	C
S11	M	Libyan	Arabic	Chemistry	3	B
S12	M	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Health Care	3	D
S13	M	Belgium	French	Education	3	B

Participant	Gender	Nationality	First Language	Research Field	PhD Year	University
S14	F	Nigeria	Hausa	Computer Sciences	2	D
S15	M	China	Mandarin Chinese	Oceanography	3	D
S16	F	Kuwait	Arabic	Applied Linguistics	2	C
S17	M	Morocco	Arabic	Management	1	D
S18	M	Brazil	Portuguese	Applied Linguistics	2	A
S19	F	India	Hindi	Education	1	C

Participants were primarily recruited using a purposive sampling technique. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), purposive sampling is defined as the recruitment of individuals who are, or have been at some point, involved in the phenomenon under study. To be considered a participant, the student had to meet two main criteria. First, they had to be an international student. Second, they must not be a native speaker of English. As an international PhD student at a British university, I was able to establish contact with participants mainly through social events and students' union activities. I could have interviewed more students; however, I reached a point where participants no longer provided new information, and the same ideas began to recur. I considered this to be the saturation point and decided to stop recruiting additional participants (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017). The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used to transcribe the interviews. The transcribed data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, which, as shown in Table 2 below, led to the emergence of seven themes.

Table 2: Emerging Themes across Interviews

Theme	Theme Description	Number of Participants
1	Synthesizing and organizing information	14
2	Unclear understanding of the concept of critical thinking	13
3	Uncertainty in expressing personal opinions	14
4	Recognition of ChatGPT's valuable support alongside creativity concerns	14
5	Ethical uncertainty around using ChatGPT for editing	12

Theme	Theme Description	Number of Participants
6	ChatGPT as a tool for improving and editing writing	15
7	Using ChatGPT for idea generation and brainstorming	11

FINDINGS

Synthesizing and organizing information

With the exception of two interviews, all the participants reported experiencing some degree of difficulty with academic writing. Only three students attributed these challenges to selecting appropriate vocabulary or academic phrases, which explains why linguistic issues did not emerge as a distinct theme. Instead, most participants (n = 14) reported difficulties related to synthesizing and organizing information, indicating that their challenges are primarily discursive and cognitive rather than linguistic. The participants consistently emphasized that grammar and vocabulary were not the main sources of difficulty. Rather, they described academic writing as a cognitively demanding process that requires sustained thinking and the integration of ideas from multiple sources. This is illustrated by S2, who contrasts academic writing with informal communication:

The process involves much thought. Synthesizing information from different sources is a difficult task, especially when you have to ensure proper citation. It's not something you can sit down and do spontaneously, like chatting with a friend on WhatsApp. It is very different from informal chatting or writing a fiction story. (S2)

S2's comparison highlights the perceived complexity of academic writing and emphasizes that synthesis is viewed as an intentional and effortful process. This suggests that students understand academic writing as requiring higher-order thinking skills, including evaluation and integration, rather than simple language production. Difficulties related to organization and coherence were also prominent. As S7 explains,

Paraphrasing from sources without repeating myself is challenging. Organization is also important to me because I always expect my writing to be neat and structured. However, I find it difficult to arrange ideas into paragraphs that read well. I find it hard to communicate my ideas effectively in writing and to convey exactly what I mean. (S7)

This excerpt demonstrates a tension between the students' awareness of organizational expectations and their difficulty in meeting them. Although S7 values clarity and structure, the challenge lies in translating ideas into coherent written paragraphs. This finding indicates that the difficulty is not a lack of ideas

but rather difficulty in structuring and articulating those ideas in accordance with academic norms. Similarly, S9 explicitly frames the challenge as one of genre rather than language:

I'm not necessarily struggling with the English language itself but rather with academic writing as a genre. The challenge lies in organizing my thoughts and synthesizing the content I read in well-written academic English paragraphs. (S9)

S9's statement reinforces the interpretation that students perceive academic writing as a specialized genre governed by conventions. This supports the view that their difficulties stem from adapting to academic discourse practices, including synthesis, cohesion, and paragraph development. S1 further elaborates on the nature of these challenges by linking them to the technical complexity of academic content:

Synthesizing the information I have gathered from different sources can be challenging. At times, the content is too technical, leaving you with hardly any margin to paraphrase it in your own words and produce a paragraph that reads well. I mean a coherent paragraph that is written in a style that is not heavy—where the sentences are, to a large extent, natural-sounding. I have no issue with grammar or vocabulary, but the challenge lies in style and coherence. (S1)

This account illustrates how synthesis involves managing multiple competing demands, including accuracy, originality, and stylistic appropriateness. The emphasis on coherence and readability suggests that students are negotiating not only what to say but also how to say it within accepted academic conventions. Overall, these findings indicate that synthesizing and organizing information constitute a central challenge for international PhD students. The difficulties reported are less related to linguistic competence and more closely associated with the cognitive demands of academic writing, particularly how to integrate sources, structure arguments, and produce coherent academic prose.

Unclear understanding of the concept of critical thinking

Among the 17 students who reported challenges with academic writing, 13 identified the unclear and poorly defined nature of critical thinking as a factor that complicates the writing process. The participants consistently indicated that their own understanding of critical thinking did not align with that of their supervisors, which contributed to uncertainty and frustration. This misalignment suggests that critical thinking is treated as an assumed competence within doctoral supervision rather than an explicitly taught or negotiated practice.

As illustrated in the excerpt below, S4 describes receiving repeated requests to “engage with the literature in a critical way” without a clear explanation of what

this entails. When attempting to critique previous studies by identifying methodological limitations, the participant reported that such evaluations were challenged by the supervisor:

My supervisor always asks me to engage with the literature in a critical way, but I do not know exactly what he means. For example, when I try to highlight the methodological limitations of some studies—such as a small sample size or the lack of thorough statistical testing—he comments that even a small sample can yield valid findings and that not all researchers are required to use inferential statistics. Honestly, I'm not sure how he defines critical thinking in academic writing. (S4)

This account illustrates how students may struggle to interpret supervisors' expectations when evaluative judgments are contested rather than clarified. Rather than providing a shared framework for what constitutes acceptable critique, the feedback described by S4 appears to problematize the student's evaluative stance without offering concrete guidance, thereby reinforcing ambiguity around the meaning of critical thinking. A similar sense of confusion emerges in S6's account, which highlights tensions between disciplinary conventions and supervisory expectations. S6 explains that they relied on an established operational definition commonly used within their field, only to be asked to explain why the concept had been defined in that way:

I don't think my supervisor and I are on the same wavelength in regard to understanding critical thinking. At times, he asks me to critically evaluate some technical definitions that everyone in my field uses. On one occasion, I said, "This is a very technical definition that everybody is using. How would you like me to critique it?" He responded, "You could discuss the scholar's academic background and explain that they defined it this way because that's what they studied and taught at university." Honestly, I wasn't convinced, and I thought that by doing that, I would end up speculating and trying to subjectively read somebody's mind. (S6)

This excerpt reveals uncertainty about the boundaries between legitimate critique and speculation. S6's discomfort suggests that the expectations surrounding critical thinking may be perceived as ambiguous or even contradictory, particularly when students are encouraged to critique authoritative definitions without clear criteria for doing so. This ambiguity may be especially challenging for international students who rely on established disciplinary norms as a guide for acceptable academic practice. Participants also reported that institutional writing courses had not resolved their confusion. Rather than providing explicit explanations of critical thinking or modeling how it can be enacted in academic writing, these courses were perceived as insufficiently practical or explanatory:

The writing classes we are attending are not helping us in this regard. They do not attempt to explain this elusive concept or demonstrate how it translates into practice. As a result, most of us remain confused. For me, this is a new concept; in my home country, it is not as widely emphasized as it is here. (S15)

S15's account highlights the cultural and educational situatedness of critical thinking. The participants' reflections suggest that critical thinking is not a universally understood concept but is embedded within particular academic traditions. The absence of explicit instruction may therefore disproportionately affect students whose prior educational experience does not emphasize this concept in the same way. This cultural dimension is further illustrated in S11's narrative, which describes an early misunderstanding of critical thinking as synonymous with aggressive criticism:

I'm going to share something that I now find embarrassing—and it even makes me laugh. When I started my MA in the UK, I was once called upon to give a presentation. I was under the misapprehension that critical thinking meant being extremely harsh in your criticism of previous studies... Critical thinking was not a concept I had encountered in my home country, and I truly thought it was all about attacking other people's ideas... Critical thinking is a concept heavily emphasized in the British academic system, but you're often left to figure out for yourself what it actually means, and people seem to understand and interpret it in different ways. (S11)

S11's reflection demonstrates how a lack of explicit guidance can lead to fundamental misinterpretation of academic values and practices. The experience described highlights how critical thinking may be implicitly defined and unevenly interpreted within the British academic context, which leaves international students to infer its meaning through trial and error.

Overall, these findings suggest that students' difficulties with critical thinking stem not from an inability to engage critically but from the implicit, contested, and culturally situated nature of the concept itself. The lack of shared definitions and explicit instructional support appears to contribute to ongoing uncertainty, with implications for students' confidence and effectiveness in academic writing.

Uncertainty in expressing personal opinions

Fourteen participants reported uncertainty regarding how to construct arguments and express personal opinions in academic writing. They expressed confusion about whether it is appropriate to use the first-person pronoun "I." Participants indicated that inconsistent advice from supervisors, native speakers, and editors contributed to this uncertainty, suggesting that expectations around

authorial voice are neither clearly articulated nor consistently applied. S8 further noted that reviewing completed doctoral theses did not provide clarity, as practices varied considerably, reinforcing the perception that there is no single, explicit convention. S8's account illustrates the extent to which this uncertainty is shaped by conflicting and sometimes contradictory guidance:

Seriously, when I'm making an argument in my thesis, I don't know which pronoun I should use. Sometimes I use "I," and one of my supervisors says, "You're not an authority in the field—don't use 'I'." The other supervisor does not seem to mind it. Sometimes I use the passive voice, but when I ask native speakers to look at it, they say to avoid the passive. Even when you look at theses here in the UK, some use "I," while others use the passive. The other day, I came across a thesis where the solo author was using "we" in the methodology chapter. It's all very confusing. Even when you ask supervisors or the lecturers on the pre sessional course, you don't obtain a clear answer. (S8)

As with critical thinking, participants attributed their confusion to the limited guidance provided in pre-sessional courses and institutional writing classes. Rather than offering concrete explanations or modeling acceptable practices, these courses were perceived as avoiding definitive guidance, leaving students uncertain about how to enact authorial voice in their writing:

Even the academic writing training sessions on our doctoral program do not dispel confusion. I always ask whether we should use "I," "we," or "the researcher" when writing, but I never obtain a definitive answer. (S5)

S5's account suggests that institutional reluctance to prescribe rules may unintentionally disadvantage students who are unfamiliar with the implicit conventions of Anglo-Saxon academic writing. For international PhD students, the absence of explicit instruction may lead to heightened anxiety and repeated self-monitoring during the writing process. This uncertainty is further echoed in S19's account, which points to a disconnect between abstract encouragement and practical guidance:

We are encouraged to express our voice in the thesis, but we don't know how to go about it. If you use "I," supervisors ask you to avoid it. When you ask for alternatives, you honestly don't obtain clear or definitive answers. In this area, I am very confused. (S19)

Taken together, these findings suggest that uncertainty in expressing personal opinions is not simply a stylistic concern but reflects deeper ambiguities surrounding authority, disciplinary norms, and the implicit nature of academic writing conventions. For international PhD students, navigating these unspoken

expectations may complicate the development of a confident academic voice and contribute to ongoing uncertainty in the writing process.

Recognition of ChatGPT's valuable support alongside concerns about creativity and overreliance

Fourteen participants acknowledged the practical benefits of using ChatGPT in their academic writing. They emphasized that the tool reduces stress and saves time, which is particularly valuable during the demanding write-up stage of a PhD. At the same time, participants expressed concern about the potential for overreliance, suggesting that habitual use could hinder the development of independent scholarly thinking and creativity. These accounts indicate that students perceive ChatGPT not only as a convenience but also as a tool that must be navigated thoughtfully to avoid undermining their academic growth. S11 captures this tension succinctly:

Undoubtedly, for a PhD student, ChatGPT is very helpful, especially if you are in the write-up stage. However, you should avoid getting into the habit of using it all the time, as it can stifle your creativity in writing. I try not to rely on it too much to ensure that I develop my own original ideas and writing skills. (S11)

The excerpt shows that although ChatGPT is generally regarded as an effective tool, students are well aware that overreliance on it might have a negative effect on their ability to think creatively. S19's account reinforces this idea and highlights, on the one hand, the pressures of time constraints and, on the other, the desire to preserve writing confidence.

Personally, I am using ChatGPT, but I am aware that if I become too reliant on it, my creativity in writing will diminish. I am currently doing a PhD, and it is a stressful and laborious process where time is at a premium. However, I am determined to stop using it once I have completed my PhD. Honestly, I do not want to lose my writing confidence and creativity. (S19)

Here, the participants' reflections highlight the perceived risk that excessive reliance may reduce self-efficacy. Moreover, awareness of both the benefits and limitations of ChatGPT shows that students carefully weigh short-term efficiency against long-term skill development. S1 explains that he uses ChatGPT as an editing tool. He views the corrections and feedback from the tool as a learning opportunity.

Student 1 uses ChatGPT mainly for editing purposes. He is relieved that he no longer needs to rely on a native speaker to proofread and edit his writing, as he had to when completing

his master's degree ten years ago. However, he is aware that overreliance on ChatGPT could negatively affect his writing skills. To mitigate these potential drawbacks, he approaches ChatGPT as a learning tool. He carefully reviews the feedback it provides and reflects on it to improve his writing over the long term. (S1)

This account illustrates a proactive approach to integrating AI into academic writing. By reflecting on ChatGPT's output, the participant shows an awareness of metacognitive control, ensuring that the tool supports rather than replaces critical thinking and stylistic choices. This approach suggests that students can use AI as a form of scaffolding rather than as a substitute for independent academic work.

In summary, these findings show that although ChatGPT is a valuable support tool, international students approach it with a degree of caution, as they are aware that habitual overuse may negatively affect their development as independent, creative, and critically engaged writers. The dual perception of ChatGPT as both helpful and potentially constraining reflects the complex negotiations among efficiency, skill development, and academic integrity in doctoral writing practices.

Ethical uncertainty around using ChatGPT for editing

Twelve interviewees who used ChatGPT for editing purposes shared a sense of concern and confusion. They believe that they are using the AI tool responsibly and that the work they submit is genuinely their own. However, they have misgivings about informing their supervisors that they are using ChatGPT as a proofreader. They are worried that supervisors might perceive them as lazy or overly reliant on the tool. They are also concerned that supervisors might believe that they are passing off ChatGPT's texts as their own. S9 clearly illustrates this uncertainty:

I mainly use ChatGPT to edit and proofread my writing. I am using it responsibly and ethically. However, I must admit that there is some confusion. I have never shared this with my supervisors for fear of being misunderstood. I have three supervisors. During our meetings, one of them occasionally suggests that I can use ChatGPT, while the other two remain silent. They neither show approval nor disapproval. Because of this uncertainty, I have chosen to keep quiet about the fact that I'm using it. You never know how it might be perceived. To be on the safe side, I will continue using it responsibly, but I will not mention it to them unless they ask directly. Honestly, I believe the university should issue clear guidelines to dispel this kind of unnecessary confusion. (S9)

This excerpt shows that students are highly aware of the social and evaluative aspects of academic writing. Differences in supervisors' attitudes create uncertainty, leading students to manage their use of AI through strategies such as

selective disclosure or remaining silent. S11 reinforces this point by highlighting the perceived reputational risks associated with disclosing ChatGPT use:

A fellow international PhD student is using ChatGPT for editing purposes. He said that his supervisors encouraged him to make the most of this tool, which he described as a blessing and a saviour. In my case, I do not think I'm comfortable bringing this up with my supervisors. I do not know — they might think I'm using ChatGPT to write for me. It is better to avoid all kinds of misunderstandings. (S11)

Here, the participants' hesitation to disclose AI use reflects a concern about being judged or perceived as taking shortcuts. This example also shows that ethical guidelines around AI use in academic writing are not clearly or consistently communicated, which leaves students to interpret and manage them on their own.

Overall, these findings suggest that ethical uncertainty around ChatGPT is not only an individual issue but also a broader structural and cultural concern within doctoral education. Inconsistent guidance from supervisors and institutions requires international PhD students to interpret expectations on their own, which may increase stress and discourage them from acknowledging their use of the tool. Clearer policies and open discussions could support more responsible AI use while helping students maintain confidence in their academic integrity.

ChatGPT as a tool for improving and editing writing

Fifteen participants primarily use ChatGPT to refine their academic writing by checking their grammar, improving their sentence structure, and enhancing their clarity. They often prompt it to rephrase specific sentences or suggest ways to improve coherence and flow between ideas. While they find it helpful, they engage selectively with its feedback, choosing only the suggestions that align with their intended meaning and style. S1 illustrates this careful engagement:

When I finish writing a paragraph in my own words, I ask if it is okay in terms of language. Then, I ask for suggestions on how to improve it. I always pay attention to its suggestions, but sometimes I do not find them convincing and choose to keep my original sentence as it is. (S1)

This excerpt demonstrates that participants critically evaluate ChatGPT's suggestions rather than accepting them uncritically. The act of selecting, retaining, or modifying recommendations reflects sophisticated engagement with AI as a supportive tool that complements, rather than replaces, human decision-making. S9 further highlights the strategic and iterative nature of this engagement:

I also ask it to edit my writing and check for grammar mistakes. It helps me spot things I might have missed as a nonnative speaker. Occasionally,

I mention that I want to establish links between ideas and sections and ask for suggestions on how to do that. However, I should mention that I don't take all its suggestions on board; it's a pick-and-choose process for me. I discuss ideas with ChatGPT, usually asking for multiple suggestions; then, I choose the one that works best for me. (S9)

This account illustrates how ChatGPT is employed not only for surface-level corrections but also to support higher-order writing tasks, such as coherence and logical flow. The participants' selective engagement demonstrates reflective decision-making, suggesting that AI tools can serve as a scaffold for developing writing skills for nonnative speakers.

Overall, these findings suggest that ChatGPT functions as a strategic aid, supporting both surface-level and higher-order aspects of academic writing. Students use it to enhance clarity, coherence, and grammatical accuracy while maintaining control over meaning and style. The selective and reflective engagement reported by participants indicates that AI can serve as a learning scaffold rather than a substitute for independent academic authorship.

Using ChatGPT for idea generation and brainstorming

With respect to this theme, participants reported using ChatGPT primarily to brainstorm and organize their ideas. The tool assists in generating, refining, and structuring content, which helps produce clearer and more persuasive writing. Additionally, ChatGPT provides valuable background information on unfamiliar topics, enabling users to engage more confidently with new subject matter. For example, S7 explained that they use ChatGPT for initial idea generation and outline creation: "I use ChatGPT for brainstorming ideas and creating outlines" (S7).

This quote shows that ChatGPT helps students externalize and structure their thoughts, reducing the cognitive load associated with planning complex academic texts. By providing prompts and potential structures, the tool acts as cognitive assistance. In other words, it helps students approach writing tasks more systematically and with greater confidence. S14 provides insight into how ChatGPT assists in structuring and presenting ideas:

I mostly use it for brainstorming. I often ask for guidance on how to structure my writing to make it more convincing and engaging. It helps me organize my ideas and think about how to present them more effectively. (S14)

This finding demonstrates that ChatGPT supports not only the generation of ideas but also the rhetorical organization of writing, helping students consider audience engagement, argument flow, and persuasive presentation. This finding indicates that the tool contributes to higher-order writing skills, such as organization, coherence, and strategic thinking.

S18 highlights the use of ChatGPT when engaging with unfamiliar topics and managing complex information:

When I have ideas, I ask it to help me structure them so I can sit down and start writing. I also use it when I need to write about topics I'm not familiar with, as it provides the background information and ideas I need. Additionally, it helps me organize my thoughts when I have many ideas, making the writing process more manageable. (S18)

This excerpt underscores that ChatGPT serves as a confidence-building tool, enabling students to engage with new or complex subject matter by providing scaffolding that clarifies the organization of ideas. It also reduces cognitive overload when students deal with multiple ideas, allowing them to focus more effectively on argumentation and expression.

Overall, the excerpts shown above indicate that ChatGPT is used strategically for idea generation, planning, and cognitive organization. The tool helps students manage the complex demands of academic writing by scaffolding both the conceptual and structural aspects of their work.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study show that academic writing places considerable demands on PhD international students in the UK. Notably, the students' challenges are not related primarily to grammar or vocabulary. Instead, they struggle to generate ideas, synthesize information, and organize it effectively to produce coherent and well-structured writing. These findings corroborate the results of previous studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2024; Altinmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Wu & Buripakdi, 2022). Gao (2012) attributed the aforementioned challenges to linguistic disparities and distinct rhetorical practices between the students' first language and the conventions of English academic writing.

The concept of critical thinking is challenging for many students. They often feel that their understanding of critical thinking differs from that of their supervisors, which frequently leads to confusion. Supervisors often flag students for insufficient critical engagement with the literature. Conversely, students may be flagged for being overly harsh in their critiques and asked to moderate their tone. Andrew (2003) confirms that divergent interpretations of the concept between the student and the supervisor can result in much confusion and difficulty. It is well documented in the literature that university students unfamiliar with the Anglo-Saxon education system often experience confusion regarding the concept of critical thinking and what it entails (Aston, 2024; Li, 2024).

The study revealed that the students experienced confusion in terms of expressing their own academic voice in their writing. The conflicting feedback they receive from teachers and supervisors adds to the complexity. They are

uncertain about the most suitable way to express their opinions. Specifically, they are unsure whether it is acceptable to use the first-person pronoun “I” or whether the passive voice would be preferable. Li (2024) stresses that international students experience confusion when they express their arguments in writing. Hyland (2016) attributed this challenge to the cultural differences between students’ practices in their first language and those of English academic writing.

The results of this study revealed that ChatGPT is viewed positively by international PhD students. It is considered a helpful tool that can assist them in many ways. These findings align with those of many previous studies conducted in different contexts (e.g., Taecharungj, 2023; Zou & Huang, 2024). Students primarily use ChatGPT for two purposes: as an editing aid and as a tool to brainstorm and generate new ideas. The literature identifies these as the most common uses of the tool (Shen & Chen, 2025; Yan, 2023). However, it is important to note that students have some concerns about ChatGPT. They worry that using it may undermine their ability to think independently in the long term. This concern was also shared by students in other studies (e.g., Buripakdi & An, 2024; Zhao, Cox, & Cai, 2024). Students who are using ChatGPT for editing purposes expressed confusion. Given the absence of clear guidelines from their universities, they are uncertain whether their actions are acceptable or might constitute a breach of academic integrity. Hardie, Ryan, and Baxter (2025) confirm that the lack of clear guidelines on the use of ChatGPT is causing confusion among students.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore the writing difficulties experienced by international PhD students in the UK while also examining their perceptions of ChatGPT and how they use it in the academic writing process. Students’ writing challenges were not predominantly linguistic but rather related to idea generation, information synthesis, and the organization of coherent arguments. The study revealed confusion around the meaning of critical thinking and how to express one’s own voice in academic writing. ChatGPT was viewed positively as an assistance tool in the writing process. It is mainly used for editing purposes and brainstorming. However, it is important to note that students highlighted issues related to its use. They expressed concern that their critical thinking skills and their ability to compose writing in their own style might have diminished because of excessive reliance on ChatGPT. Students also reported confusion about whether their use of the tool for editing complied with academic integrity norms. Consequently, they called for universities to provide clear policies regarding this practice.

The findings of this study can be translated into a number of recommendations for UK universities. It is important for UK institutions to recognize that some international students come from cultural and educational backgrounds that differ significantly from those of the Anglo-Saxon system. If we consider the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956), which in its

weaker and widely accepted form suggests that language influences patterns of thought and meaning-making, it is reasonable to conclude that an international student who is studying in English, a language different from their own, is also engaging with a new educational system and a different way of thinking. In the context of academic writing, this may involve adapting to new conventions of argumentation, critical engagement, and authorial voice that are embedded within English-medium academic discourse. Therefore, it is incumbent upon universities to ease international PhD students into both the academic expectations of the UK system and those of their specific discipline.

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