The impact of Generative AI (GenAI) on learning and cognition: How does cognitive offloading affect the learning process

Opening date for Expressions of Interest: 8th June 2026
Closing date for questions related to Expressions of Interest: 18th June 2026
Closing date for Expressions of Interest: 30th June 2026

Overview

Background

The EEF's mission is to break the link between family income and educational achievement. To do this, we generate and mobilise evidence that supports educators to improve practice and boost outcomes, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils.

The EEF is commissioning an innovative research project or projects to better understand **how learners' use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) impacts their cognition**. We are inviting research teams interested in undertaking this work to submit an expression of interest.

Commissioning aims

Context

GenAI has become widely used by the general public in recent years: for example, large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, released in November 2022. Consequently, GenAI is being increasingly used in teaching and learning: in a 2025 National Literacy Trust report, 2 in 3 13-18 year olds reported using GenAI to support literacy and learning. Existing evidence that has informed our thinking is summarised in an appendix in this document; please see for more detail.

There is potential for GenAI to support learners and enhance learning, but also risk of negative impact. Importantly, those impacts, positive or negative, will likely depend on how it is used. We are keen to address this fundamental and complex area of enquiry – the impact of GenAI on learning and cognition – and the conditions under which impacts are beneficial, harmful or inequitable for different groups of pupils, including disadvantaged learners.

Uses of GenAI for learning

GenAI can be used in different ways to support the learning process. Some common uses within the learning process might be: synthesising or summarising information; elaboration or explanation (expanding or rephrasing concepts); guided reasoning or modelling solutions (to provide worked examples); providing formative feedback; metacognitive support to guide students through planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning, including via Socractic questioning; providing and supporting personalisation and differentiation. Quality characteristics of EdTech interventions that can support disadvantaged learners specifically are further outlined in a 2025 systematic review.

The list above is not exhaustive, and we are interested in proposals that cover one or more of these uses and the rationale for the uses proposed.

Cognitive offloading

We are particularly interested in how cognitive offloading (Risko and Gilbert, 2016), as a mechanism, relates to the uses outlined above and to cognitive outcomes. For the purposes of this commissioning round, cognitive offloading refers to the delegation of cognitive processes that would otherwise be undertaken by the learner (e.g., recall, planning, reasoning, drafting, evaluation, or problem solving) to a GenAI system. We would like to establish whether there are positive impacts from cognitive offloading via the use of GenAI: for example, does this support learners to acquire more knowledge than if they didn't use it. Conversely, we are also interested in how and when cognitive offloading is harmful and interferes with the learning process. This may look like overreliance on the technology, insufficient challenge to progress conceptual or skill development or a lack of sustained learning.

Ultimately, we hope that this line of enquiry will help us understand to what extent (if any) cognitive offloading helps or harms learning. And, which cognitive processes are worth protecting from AI-enabled offloading and which could be supported by AI, to help schools and educators in making evidence-informed pedagogical choices.

Ideally, proposals for this research project would focus on uses that aim to support learning and be designed to collect information on both positive and unintended or negative outcomes. We are keen to understand if there are emerging differences in impact for socio-economically disadvantaged learners, based on the way that these learners are using GenAI, including the amount of access and the support that they receive.

Evaluation considerations

We expect to commission several substantive research projects in this round. Projects should have a strong theoretical basis grounded in cognitive science and established theories of learning. We welcome innovative evaluation designs that aim to generate evidence on the impact of GenAI and the mechanisms through which it drives change in learning and cognition in school-aged learners.

The fundamental principles that any proposal should follow include: strong causal inference, a credible counterfactual for estimating impact, transparency in research design, and replicability. We expect that proposals will be rigorous mixed methods evaluations including the use of theory-informed approaches where these are appropriate to understanding the process and impact of GenAI use. Purely descriptive or correlational studies are unlikely to be competitive. Trials/experiments could be either lab based or classroom based (although we will prioritise those with the greatest potential to usefully inform pedagogy) and could include randomisation at the setting, classroom or learner level, depending on the research objectives and questions.

We welcome proposals that comprise multiple 'experiments' or staged designs. For example, first to understand the impact on a proximal outcome and then explore subsequent impact on other longer-term outcomes, or to first study the impact in one cognitive domain or subject area and then test the subsequent transferability of impact to a novel situations or domains.

We recognise that it will not be possible to comprehensively cover the broad scope of the impact of GenAI on learner cognition via this funding call. We expect that commissioned studies will draw initial conclusions that help us to strengthen the evidence base, begin to inform teachers, and lead to further research in the future.

Outcome measures

We expect that a primary outcome/s will be a proximal, pupil-level cognitive outcome.[1] We are especially keen to address those elements expressed in learning outcomes, such as *working memory; knowledge acquisition; understanding of key concepts, and problem solving*. We expect that the outcome will be aligned to the specified area of the learning process that the GenAI is being used for and is therefore likely to impact. Proposals should provide a strong rationale for which outcomes from the above list are prioritised. We welcome proposals prioritising one or multiple outcomes.

Secondary outcomes could include further cognitive outcomes as well as non-cognitive outcomes, for example, *motivation, self-efficacy* and *resilience*.

[1] For example, *short-term memory; working memory; attention; inhibition; critical thinking; metacognition; idea generation; knowledge acquisition; problem solving*.

Neither of these lists is exhaustive and we welcome proposals which include other primary and/or secondary outcomes, so long as they focus on the impact on cognition and learning. We are also interested in which primary and secondary outcomes are being selected together and the rationale for this.

Proximal and longer-term considerations

We want to build on the existing evidence base, which – in the main – currently includes studies with proximal outcomes that are often closely aligned to the purpose of a specific AI tool or product (either via an attainment measure captured immediately after a short period of usage and/or closely aligned to the specific purpose of the product).

Research funded through this call will likely include more proximal pupil-level cognitive outcomes. However, proposals should also seek to address medium to long-term impact. We are keen to understand emerging evidence on whether there are potential short-term gains from the use of GenAI but longer-term null or negative impacts (or vice-versa).

This balance might be achieved through a study over a shorter time frame, focused on more proximal cognitive outcomes, with tracking of continued use of GenAI after the initial experimental period to understand, for example, longer-term knowledge retention. We recognise the practical challenges of isolating longer-term impacts in a context of widespread GenAI use and therefore welcome pragmatic approaches to longer-term follow up that prioritise theoretically meaningful indicators of sustained learning over perfect experimental control.

Definition of GenAI

We would like this research to be as generalisable as possible rather than solely aligned to specific GenAI products: for example, avoiding education-specific tools, such as AI tutors or lesson planning assistants, developed for educators and learners for a specific purpose. We aim to generate evidence on these tools and products in other areas of our work.

For this project, we are interested in how general use GenAI tools such as LLMs ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini can be tested with school-age learners, in a way that complies with safety standards.[2] For example, study modes of LLMs may be designed in a way to generally support learning and could therefore be a promising and still generalisable product use to test. We welcome research proposals which outline how any wider safety factors which are not already inherently part of a tool – for example, related to data

[2] www.gov.uk/government/publications/generative-ai-product-safety-standards/generative-ai-product-safety-standards

privacy and protection, security, intellectual property, safeguarding – will be addressed in the study design.

Age of learners

Much of the global evidence base on the impact of GenAI on learning has focused on university students (Fan et al., 2024; Stadler et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). Proposals should focus on a group of learners within the 13-15 years age range (this could be across the range or one year group within it). This is to support gaps in the existing evidence base with school-age learners while permitting ethical research: e.g., ensuring that children are above the age of digital consent. We think that a long-term research study with Year 11 pupils may be more challenging due to GCSEs. We are interested in learners and settings in England only.

Study setting

We encourage studies designed as school-or classroom-based studies but are also open to receiving proposals for lab-based studies. The strongest proposals are likely to be for projects that have direct conclusions on the learning process and demonstrate utility for schools and teachers. Proposals should clearly explain the relevance, rationale and strengths and limitations of the proposed study setting, and how it aligns with the research scope.

For example, proposals for lab-based studies may wish to clarify how the proposed design and findings would be applied or interpreted in a real-world learning context; and proposals for school-based studies may wish to consider the practical feasibility of the design and potential confounding (also relevant for lab-based studies with follow-up components). This includes confounding use of other GenAI LLMs and/or specific EdTech tools, and consideration around the broader school and home environment that may interact with the effects.

Proposals should carefully consider what it is feasible to control for in the short-term and a medium to longer-term period, based on the widespread use of GenAI both in the classroom and by learners at home.

Research questions

Full proposals should include research questions to illustrate how the research would address the shorter- and longer-term cognitive impact for learners using GenAI. We are particularly interested in how cognitive offloading through the use of GenAI influences and intersects with the learning process.

We particularly encourage research questions that are underpinned by a clear theory of change, with well-aligned outcomes and contextual factors that explicitly consider impacts for disadvantaged pupils.

Contextual factors

Where relevant, evaluators should propose additional research activities that support the interpretation of the findings and test the theory of change. At a minimum, we expect evaluators to collect data on participants' prior experience of AI. For some projects, collecting data on learners' use of AI (e.g. analysis of scripts), on their perceptions and motivations, and on other contextual factors that may influence use (e.g. the role of the teacher or home environment) may be relevant. Throughout, evaluators should particularly consider the relevance and interpretation of the findings for disadvantaged learners. The appointed team will be expected to refine the proposed methodology and research questions in consultation with relevant stakeholders and education experts.

Outputs and timeline

We expect that the main output of these projects would be research report/s published on the EEF's website, with any participating schools anonymised. We also expect evaluators to produce a peer-reviewed study plan that will be published on our website.

We are open to researchers proposing a project timeline appropriate for their proposed research question and design, taking into consideration the pace of the GenAI context. We would like projects to include rapid reporting to keep pace with the field of GenAI. Projects with sequential designs or longer follow-up periods may take longer to complete. In such cases, interim reports with iterative findings and learnings are expected.

As part of the design for this research, it may be useful for teams to consider:

- Drawing on existing literature to ensure that the approach is robust and theory-led.
- Stakeholder engagement during the set-up phase to ensure that the proposed evaluation approach is feasible and acceptable.

Commissioning process

Who should apply?

Research teams with experience of conducting experimental studies in education, with a strong grounding in the theory of learning, and ideally also AI in education, are invited to submit expressions of interest.

We are interested in expressions of interest from single research teams and/or consortia with complementary expertise and where the consortium can demonstrate that they will work well together to ensure the quality and efficiency of the project. This call for

expressions of interest is open; researchers do not need to be part of EEF's panel of evaluators.

We accept applications from legally constituted organisations and not from individuals. The organisation does not have to be based in England, but if not based there, we would expect you to demonstrate the partnerships and knowledge required to work with English schools.

Research management

The EEF will oversee the management of funded projects, and research teams will be expected to follow the EEF's guidance for evaluators, where relevant to the study design.

The study may be supported by an independent Study Advisory Board, who will provide feedback and advice to the research team around the design of the study whilst ensuring the highest standards of rigour and research quality. Additionally, the Study Advisory Board will ensure alignment with relevant ethical procedures and contribute to mitigating any conflicts of interest that may arise.

Members of the Study Advisory Board will be selected jointly by the appointed research team and the EEF.

What does a successful application look like?

The application process is divided into two separate phases, an **i) Expression of Interest (EOI) phase** and a **ii) Proposal phase**, each with their own considerations.

At a high level, a successful **EOI** (first stage) should:

- Provide a **high-level overview on the research aims, proposed approach (design, population and outcomes),** and **relevance (who the research will be useful for and how).**
- Involve a **strong team with prior experience of research in the relevant subject** (i.e. AI/EdTech, cognitive and learning theories) and **methodological expertise** which could include experience in conducting lab-based experiments in cognitive science with school-aged children and/or classroom-based experiments in education settings with school-aged children. Please include full CVs of all proposed team members, highlighting relevant expertise.
- Be no more than **2,000 words long**, excluding references and CVs (indicative length, the focus should be on quality rather than quantity).

In addition to the above, a successful **full proposal** (second stage) will:

- Provide **clear aims and rationale for the study**, its relevance for teaching and learning and the potential implication and impact.
- Summarise any **existing evidence relevant to the research question**. This should include a description of the mechanisms through which each GenAI use case would be expected to impact on the outcomes of interest. Please include a Theory of Change: this can be a written description at this stage; it is not required for it to be in the EEF's usual Theory of Change format.
- Provide detail on the **proposed design**, including:
    - Describing the proposed **impact evaluation approach** (e.g. parallel or cross-over randomised controlled trials, and the level of randomisation, e.g. settings, class, individuals).
    - Provide **power and sample size calculations** and justifications for the assumptions.
    - Describe the **proposed outcomes and how they might be measured**. This should include principles highlighted in the EEF's Statistical Analysis Guidance (where relevant).
- Where relevant for the proposed study design, research teams may wish to refer to the principles highlighted in the EEF's IPE Guidance.
- Research teams should outline what aspects of their research questions or proposed methodology require further refinement and why, i.e. **where there are uncertainties.**
- Describe key **ethical considerations** for the research design, including the use of GenAI by learners, to the extent that they are known at this stage.
- Describe the research team's approach to considering issues of **diversity and inclusion** in their research design and implementation. This could include, for example, reflections on whether some groups are expected to be more or less able to engage with or benefit from the approach, and how that can be explored through design. It may also include reflections on the team's approach to carrying out culturally and racially sensitive fieldwork.
- Represent **good value for money**. No indicative budget will be provided as part of the invitation to tender for this study and proposals will be assessed on their value for money in relation to the proposed evaluation design. We expect this project to fall outside the scope for VAT. All applications must attach a budget spreadsheet with reasonable disaggregation across phases and cost categories. Our grant funding is restricted to cover activities supporting your proposed project and cannot be used to cover costs that have already been incurred. The EEF will provide a budget template at proposal stage.
- Be no more than **7,000 words long**, excluding references (indicative length, the focus should be on quality rather than quantity).

What criteria will be used to award funding?

The EEF will assess applications in line with the two phases presented above. Research teams with a successful **EOI** will be invited to submit a more in-depth **Proposal**. Each respective phase will be scored by the EEF's team under the following criteria.

Phase 1 – Expression of interest

EOIs will be assessed against the following criteria, for which an equal weighting will apply:

I. The proposed team has prior research and/or subject-matter knowledge in the nominated topic area
II. The proposed team has an excellent track record in the proposed research and evaluation methods relevant for this area of investigation
III. The proposed approach to answering the research question is well defined and aligned with the outlined scope of this research project

Table 1 – Scoring criteria

Scoring criteria	
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements with limited supporting information
2	Meets some of the requirements with reasonable explanation
3	Fully meets the requirements with detailed explanation and evidence
4	Exceeds the requirements with extensive explanation and evidence

Phase 2 – Proposal

Proposals will be assessed against the following criteria, each with their respective weighting and under the same scoring scale as for EOIs (see Table 1 above for reference).

I. **Capability and relevant experience of core project team (35%)**

- **Team track record -** The proposed team demonstrates a track record of delivering similar research and evaluations (i.e., in line with the methodologies the team is proposing).
- **Research experience -** The proposed team demonstrates experience in conducting relevant research in the area of interest.
- **Subject expertise -** The proposed team demonstrates understanding of the evidence/existing research, context and expertise that are relevant for the project.
- **Definition of roles and responsibilities -** The proposal describes a clear structure of the core research team, defining roles and responsibilities that are in

line with their experience and expertise as well as the specific tasks involved in the proposed research activities.

II. **Methodology and approach (40%)**

- **Research objectives -** The proposed research questions are well defined, including clearly describing the population, definitions, and outcomes, where applicable.
- **Research design -** The proposed design is robust with a credible counterfactual for estimating impact, and results can make strong causal inference to support answering the identified research questions.
- **Uncertainties to resolve in the set-up phase** - The proposal describes which, if any, aspects of the research questions or design are uncertain, and how any uncertainties will be addressed during the project set up phase, including planned research activities and/or participant engagement strategies.
- **Outcome measures** – The proposed outcome measures are feasible, appropriate, and well-justified, including adequate consideration of instruments, data collection methods and sampling procedures. If new research instruments will be designed, an appropriate strategy for developing these is proposed.
- **Timeline** - A feasible timeline for the project (including key project stages and activities) is proposed.

III. **Approach to research governance (10%)**

- **Ethics, data protection and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) -** The proposal describes the research team's approach to research ethics and data protection, including but not limited to detailing key ethical considerations, GDPR compliance, specifying legal bases for processing personal and special category data, and the team's approach to EDI and how they can be incorporated into the design and execution of the evaluation.
- **Risk assessment -** Key risks to project delivery are identified and appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks are proposed.

IV. **Value for money (15%)**

- **Project costs** - The proposal is clearly costed using the provided budget template and instructions. Costs are in line with the evaluation design and relevant assumptions on costing model are provided.

- **Value for money** - There is evidence that the proposal demonstrates value for money. The proposed budget demonstrates careful management of available resources, efficiency, and effectiveness to achieve desired evaluation milestones.

The EEF may follow-up with research teams that submit strong proposals to arrange a meeting and discuss proposals further before coming to a final decision.

How to apply

Interested applicants should submit their **EOI** by completing this application form **by 5pm on 30th June**.

If you have any questions, please contact amy.ellis-thompson@eefoundation.org.uk and celeste.cheung@eefoundation.org.uk before **9am on 18th June.**

On 23rd June *we will publish on the ITT webpage a list of responses to questions, which all interested applicants can then use to inform their EOI submissions. We will plan to address questions via this central response rather than individual follow ups unless we need more information to respond.*

Timeline

The timeline for the commissioning process will be as follows:

Deadline for questions during EOI window	18th June 2026
Questions from EOI stage published on webpage	23rd June 2026
Deadline for EOIs	30th June 2026
Shortlisted applicants invited to submit full proposals	16th July 2026
Deadline for full proposals	2nd September 2026
Selected applicants notified	16th September 2026
Set up meetings	20th September – 2nd October 2026
Project submitted to EEF's Grants Committee for review and sign off	November 2026
Project commencement (pending Grants Committee sign off)	November 2026

We are keen to fund innovative studies that provide findings as soon as feasible and if a staged design may report in a staged manner. We are open to discussing this and would encourage teams to propose a suggested timeline based on their capacity and proposed research design.

Appendix A: Existing evidence

Empirical research has included both all-purpose LLMs such as ChatGPT and education-specific GenAI-based products. Whether GenAI has a positive impact on learner outcomes is variable depending on the type of GenAI, subject area, use case, age of learner and outcome measure used. Research on the impact of GenAI on learner outcomes has frequently involved studies which look at short-term learning effects in higher education (Han et al., 2025). As LLMs are rapidly updated, even relatively recently-published research may refer to, for example, an older version of ChatGPT which has since been iterated with the aim of improving the user experience.

The global evidence base on the impact of AI on learning outcomes includes several recent meta-analyses with positive findings. Zhu et al (2025) looking at 26 studies across primary, secondary and higher education, found an overall positive effect on students' learning outcomes. Ma & Zhong's 2025 meta-analysis of 34 studies concluded that GenAI has a significant positive impact on overall learning outcomes and significantly reduced the external cognitive load of learners.

Han et al's 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis (68 studies, 80% from higher education) noted that most current studies report a positive effect of GenAI on learning outcomes, though these effects vary depending on contextual factors, and current research often lacks robust methodological design, including long-term impact evaluations. Knowledge acquisition and critical thinking were the focus of over half of studies included. Dong's (2026) meta-analysis identified GenAI technologies as having a greater impact on educational outcomes than traditional approaches; noting positive impact on higher-order thinking abilities, and writing skills, whilst noting differences in outcomes in different countries.

However, research has also identified 'cognitive debt' in relation to LLM use: for example, in a study in which adults used ChatGPT for essay writing, LLM users showed the weakest brain connectivity via neuroimaging software and lower self-reported ownership than comparison groups (Kosmyna et al., 2025). Other studies using ChatGPT for essay writing (Fan et al., 2024) identified a risk of 'metacognitive laziness' for LLM users in comparison to participants with human teachers. When GPT-based AI tutors were used for secondary school-age maths in a high school in Turkey (Bastani et al., 2025), a group of learners using standard ChatGPT and a group using a GPT-based tutor with prompts designed to scaffold support both demonstrated improved performance initially, in comparison to a control group. However, there was a subsequent reduction in performance for learners using the general ChatGPT, which provided more immediate answers.

EEF research

The EEF's research on GenAI has looked at reduction in teacher workload via two studies. An evaluation on the use of ChatGPT found that teachers using ChatGPT experienced significantly lower lesson and resource preparation time than a comparison group and a second evaluation (reporting in 2026) used a similar study design to look at the impact on teacher workload of Oak National Academy's Aila: an AI-powered lesson assistant designed to support teachers with lesson planning and resource creation.

EEF-commissioned research has also analysed the global evidence base via a mixed-methods review (systematic review with meta-analysis) on the mechanisms underpinning EdTech interventions that can support socioeconomically disadvantaged learners (available here). Although the majority of studies focus on more established EdTech products (e.g. intelligent tutoring and adaptive learning systems) rather than those using GenAI, the review highlights core principles of effective implementation of EdTech to support attainment.

References

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Han, X., et al. (2025). The impact of GenAI on learning outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis of experimental studies. *Educational Research Review, 48*, 100714.

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Haßler, B., Huntington, B., Klune, C., Lester, J., Bhutoria, A., & Mansour, H. (2025). *Understanding quality characteristics of EdTech interventions and implementation for disadvantaged pupils: A systematic review with meta-analysis*. Education Endowment Foundation. https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/pages/quality_characteristics_of_edtech_-_systematic_review_with_meta_analysis_v.1.0.0.pdf

Additional reading

Richmond, T. (2025). *EducAItion, educAItion, educAItion: Could Generative Artificial Intelligence pose a risk to educational standards?* Perspectives Paper: Social Market Foundation. https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/EducAItion-educAItion-educAItion-Sept-2025-correct.pdf