

Higher Education Library Technology

A draft 'maturity level' outline for AI adoption in UK HE and FE libraries

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Introduction

As part of Higher Education Library Technology ¹ (a free open access and open data community resource), Ken Chad Consulting has developed a draft AI 'maturity model' for UK Higher Education and Further Education libraries. It will also have relevance to libraries in other countries and other sectors such as health/NHS. This is currently (July/August/September 2026) being reviewed, challenged and validated via an online survey which you can take part in: Survey link:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NC79RHV>

The survey results will be analysed and results published (open access) on HELibTech later in 2026

Maturity level assessments are structured diagnostic tools used to evaluate an organization's current capabilities and help guide how capabilities can be enhanced to achieve a higher maturity level. The draft AI 'maturity model' is informed by work with libraries, published literature and the work by Jisc on institutional maturity models to support their Digital Transformation work ². While many libraries are experimenting with AI, library capability is not measured simply the number of AI tools deployed. Maturity depends on governance, workforce capability, integration with services, and alignment with library and institutional strategy and importantly changing student expectations.

Maturity levels framework summary

We believe this framework aligns well with the current direction of UK HE and FE. Libraries have largely shifted from asking **"Should we use AI?"** to **"How can we adopt AI responsibly while preserving trust, academic values, and equitable access to knowledge?"**

Our six-level model can be summarised as follows:

Level	Name	Characteristics
0	Unaware	No coordinated AI activity
1	Aware	AI recognised as important but largely unmanaged
2	Experimenting	Individual pilots and staff use emerging
3	Operational	AI embedded in selected library services
4	Integrated	AI incorporated into library strategy and institutional governance
5	Transformational	AI becomes a strategic capability underpinning library services, research support and digital learning

Maturity Levels in more detail

Institutions vary and there may not be an exact match to the levels described below. Libraries should find a level that best approximates to their current situation

Level 0 – Unaware

Student behaviour

- Students already use ChatGPT and similar tools extensively
- Library has little understanding of changing information behaviours
- Students receive inconsistent advice

Library staff

- Minimal awareness
- Individual curiosity only

¹ Higher Education Library Technology <https://www.helibtech.com/>

² Digital maturity model. Jisc 2026.

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/taking-digital-transformation-forward-in-your-organisation/digital-maturity-model>

- AI viewed largely as a threat

Policy

- None

Services

- Traditional information literacy
- No AI guidance

Challenges

- Lack of awareness
- Risk of becoming irrelevant
- No institutional conversation

Level 1 – Aware

The library recognises AI will change higher education.

Student behaviour

Students increasingly

- summarise articles
- generate search terms
- explain concepts
- write drafts
- ask AI instead of using discovery systems

The library begins observing these changes.

Library staff

Some staff begin using AI for

- meeting notes
- emails
- document summaries
- marketing

Adoption remains on an individual basis

Policy

Typically

- *institutional* AI policy exists
- library has no local guidance

Services

Occasional workshops, for example "Using AI responsibly"

Challenges

- Uncertainty
- Staff anxiety
- Fear of misinformation
- Copyright concerns

Level 2 – Experimenting

AI becomes an active programme rather than individual curiosity.

Student behaviour

Get library support for

- AI search behaviour
- Prompt engineering
- Information evaluation
- Citation practices

Information literacy evolves

Library staff

Pilot use includes:

- literature searching
- metadata enhancement
- collection analysis
- LibGuides
- FAQs
- marketing
- accessibility

Policy

Initial guidance

- approved tools
- acceptable use
- data protection
- confidentiality
- copyright

Services

Pilot projects, for example:

- AI chat assistant
- AI-supported enquiry service
- AI-assisted cataloguing

Challenges

- Skills gap
- Uneven adoption
- Tool proliferation
- Procurement uncertainty

Level 3 – Operational

AI becomes part of day-to-day library operations.

Student behaviour

Students expect:

- conversational discovery
- AI-enhanced search
- personalised support
- instant assistance

Library services adapt accordingly

Library staff

Routine use

- cataloguing assistance
- metadata generation
- collection management
- research support
- learning resource creation
- workflow automation

Staff understand

- prompt engineering
- verification
- bias
- hallucinations
- value of human oversight

Policy

Formal governance including:

- approved platforms

- procurement standards
- risk assessment
- accessibility
- equality
- human review

Services

Examples:

- AI discovery layer
- AI chat services
- AI-assisted systematic searching
- research consultation support

Challenges

- Integration
- Quality assurance
- Measuring value
- User trust

Level 4 – Integrated

AI becomes embedded across library strategy.

Student behaviour

Library understands AI is changing

- information seeking
- critical thinking
- digital literacy
- research practice
- assessment support

Information literacy becomes AI literacy

Library staff

AI supports

- acquisitions
- repositories
- preservation
- analytics
- licensing
- research data
- scholarly communications

Professional development becomes continuous

Policy

Comprehensive governance covering:

- ethics
- procurement
- transparency
- copyright
- intellectual property
- data governance
- vendor management
- environmental sustainability

Services

Integrated

- AI-enabled discovery
- research support

- learning analytics
- accessibility services
- knowledge management

Challenges

- Legacy systems
- Vendor lock-in
- Data quality
- Long-term sustainability

Level 5 – Transformational

The library helps shape institutional AI strategy.

Student behaviour

Students see the library as:

- trusted AI adviser
- digital scholarship partner
- critical evaluation expert

The library teaches

- AI literacy
- verification
- source evaluation
- responsible AI
- academic integrity rather than traditional database instruction alone.

Library staff

Staff operate alongside AI

Routine work is automated.

Professional expertise focuses on:

- judgement
- ethics
- research support
- knowledge curation
- partnerships

Policy

- Dynamic governance - distributed throughout all levels of the organisation
- Updated continuously
- Evidence-based
- Institution-wide influence

Services

Examples

- AI research assistants
- multimodal discovery
- personalised learning support
- AI-enhanced repositories
- institutional knowledge graphs
- semantic search
- automated metadata enrichment

Challenges

- Keeping pace with technology
- Maintaining public trust
- Ethical leadership
- Workforce redesign
- Sustainable funding

Cross-cutting dimensions

Rather than assigning a single maturity score, libraries can assess themselves across multiple dimensions. For example:

Dimension	Key Question
Strategy & Leadership	Is AI part of the library's strategic plan?
Student Experience	Are services designed for AI-enabled study behaviours?
Information Literacy	Has digital literacy evolved into AI literacy?
Staff Capability	Do staff have the confidence and skills to use AI effectively?
Operations	Is AI improving workflows and reducing administrative burden?
Collections & Discovery	Are collections discoverable through AI-enhanced search and metadata?
Research Support	Does the library support AI-enabled research, systematic reviews, and research data management?
Governance & Ethics	Are policies in place for privacy, copyright, bias, accessibility, and transparency?
Technology & Infrastructure	Are AI tools integrated securely with library systems and institutional IT?
Assessment & Continuous Improvement	Is AI use evaluated through evidence, user feedback, and measurable outcomes?

Key challenges facing UK HE and FE libraries

Regardless of maturity level, several challenges appear to be common across HE and FE libraries:

- **Changing student expectations:** Students increasingly expect conversational, AI-assisted discovery rather than traditional catalogue searching.
- **Information literacy:** Libraries must teach students how to evaluate AI-generated content, recognise hallucinations, cite AI appropriately, and understand the limits of generative models.
- **Workforce capability:** There is significant variation in AI confidence among library staff, requiring sustained professional development and support.
- **Policy and governance:** Institutions need clear guidance on acceptable use, privacy, copyright, intellectual property, procurement, accessibility, and ethical AI.
- **Technology integration:** Many library management systems and discovery platforms are not yet designed for seamless AI integration.
- **Data privacy and licensing:** Libraries must ensure institutional and user data are protected and that licensed content is not exposed inappropriately through AI tools.
- **Academic integrity:** Libraries have a key role in supporting evolving institutional approaches to assessment, attribution, and responsible AI use.
- **Measuring impact:** Demonstrating the value of AI investments through improved service quality, efficiency, student outcomes, and research support remains challenging.