

The SECURE Framework

Responsible AI Chatbot Implementation in Careers and Employability Services

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As AI-powered chatbots become increasingly embedded in careers and employability services, practitioners and managers need a principled approach to guide implementation. The SECURE framework, developed through empirical case study research and a review of international evidence, offers six core principles for responsible, human-centred chatbot adoption.

<p>S Safety & Ethics</p> <p>Student wellbeing comes first — above efficiency, cost savings, or innovation. Robust privacy protections, bias monitoring, clear competence boundaries, and strong governance structures must be established before deployment.</p>	<p>E Evolution</p> <p>Treat chatbots as evolving, not static. Build in usage analytics, regular conversation log reviews, user feedback loops, and iterative improvement cycles. Avoid a 'deploy-and-forget' approach.</p>	<p>C Complementary</p> <p>Design chatbots to complement, not replace, human advisers. AI excels at scale, availability, and consistency; humans excel at empathy, complex reasoning, and therapeutic relationships. Create clear, seamless pathways between both.</p>
<p>U User-Centredness</p> <p>Prioritise real user needs throughout the entire lifecycle — from co-design with students and practitioners through to governance, review, and iteration. Anticipated use rarely matches real-world behaviour.</p>	<p>R Reliability</p> <p>Define purpose, target outcomes, and explicit boundaries before implementation. Be clear about what the chatbot will and will not do. Set measurable success criteria and revisit them regularly.</p>	<p>E Explicitness</p> <p>Build trust through transparency. Users must know from the outset they are interacting with AI. Be clear about data use, limitations, and how to access human support. Avoid deceptive design or excessive anthropomorphism.</p>

Key messages for practitioners and managers

- Implementation is an organisational development project, not just a technical procurement decision — it requires process redesign, staff training, culture change, and sustained governance.
- Chatbots are most effective when fully integrated into existing digital ecosystems and workflows, not deployed as standalone tools.
- Equity must be an ongoing priority: monitor whether different student groups engage differently, and actively mitigate digital divides.
- Invest in people alongside technology — staff development and change management are as important as the technical build.
- Regularly interrogate the chatbot as an expert user: check for accuracy, bias, and gaps, especially as LMI and user expectations evolve.
- Where chatbots connect to external LLMs, integrate curated, authoritative data sources (e.g. LFS, ASHE) to ensure consistent, accurate responses.

Reflective questions for your service

- What specific problems are we trying to solve — and is a chatbot the right solution?
- How will we ensure human advisers remain central, and not sidelined, by AI adoption?
- What governance, accountability, and ethical review structures do we have in place?
- How will we monitor for bias, and how quickly can we respond when issues arise?
- What does success look like — and how will we measure it with students, not just for them?