Stellenbosch
UNIVERSITY
IYUNIVESITHI
UNIVERSITEIT

Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor:
Research, Innovation and Internationalisation
ISekela leSekela Ngqonyela:
kuPhando, uYilo lweZinto eziNtsha nezaMazwe ngaMazwe
Kantoor van die Viserektor:
Navorsing, Innovasie en Internasionalisering

MEMORANDUM

To: SU staff (academics, researchers, supervisors, support staff) and students.

From: Professor Sibusiso Moyo, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Internationalisation[i]

Subject: Responsible Use of Generative AI in Referencing Practices

Date: 21 May 2026

The use of hallucinated or fabricated references, particularly those generated by Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools, undermines the credibility and integrity of scientific literature and written research outputs.

The recent withdrawal of South Africa's Draft National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy (SA News, 2026) as well as reports of academics and lawyers citing fabricated AI-generated sources (Mashinini, 2026) highlight the reputational risks associated with the uncritical and unverified use of GenAI tools.

A fabricated reference refers to a source that does not exist, while hallucinated references are AI-generated citations that appear plausible but are inaccurate or simply made-up. These references are difficult to detect as they are often correctly formatted, attributed to real authors and have plausible publication dates (Topaz *et al.*, 2026). Studies indicate that AI tools may generate referencing errors in approximately 30-90% of cases (Chelli *et al.*, 2024; Jones, 2025; Topaz *et al.*, 2026).

Stellenbosch University (SU) is not immune to this phenomenon. Since 2024, the University has encountered several cases involving fabricated references in scholarly outputs, including course and research assignments, theses and journal publications.

SU recognises that GenAI tools and Large Language Models (LLMs) can be valuable in supporting productivity. However, their use requires careful scrutiny. Staff and students are encouraged to critically assess and verify and check all references generated or suggested by these tools.

The inclusion of hallucinated citations constitutes poor scholarly practices, and is in itself unethical, as these false references may be used to support flawed arguments and can compromise the integrity, reliability and trustworthiness of research (Bauchner & Rivara, 2026; Resnik & Hosseini, 2026). Additionally, fabricated citations may be unintentionally included if sources are not verified, thus continuing the citation of these false sources.

While the responsible use of AI is encouraged, the inappropriate or unverified use of AI-generated content—including fabricated references—constitutes a breach of scholarly

integrity; such cases are subject to institutional investigation and may lead to disciplinary action for both staff and students.

SU therefore encourages all SU staff (academics, researchers, supervisors, support staff) and students to familiarise themselves with the University's Position Statement on the Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence in Research and Teaching-Learning-Assessment (2024), in particular Principle 1c (Responsibility), which emphasises that users of these tools remain accountable for verifying and evaluating information generated by AI, given its propensity to produce inaccuracies or fabricated references.

A range of resources and support services is available to assist SU staff and students in the responsible and critical use of GenAI tools and LLMs: https://libguides.sun.ac.za/ai

---

How to guard yourself when using AI and LLMs for referencing:

1. **Use fit-for-purpose tools**

Source literature directly from trusted academic databases and use reference management software (e.g., EndNote, Mendeley) to organise and format citations. Avoid relying on GenAI tools as a primary method for generating references. Library and Information Service provide access to an EndNote licence for electronic reference management. Consult the Library Guide for guidance on installing the reference management tool and managing your references according to established referencing styles and best practices: https://www.su.ac.za/en/library/research/reference-management

2. **Verify all references:**

Regardless of the tool used, you are responsible for ensuring that every reference is accurate, complete, and corresponds to a real, accessible source.

3. **Apply the "garbage in, garbage out" principle:**

Reference managers can format citations correctly, but their accuracy depends on the quality of the input data. Always check and correct metadata (e.g., authors, titles, DOIs, dates).

4. **Ensure consistency in referencing style:**

Use approved styles (e.g., SU Harvard, APA 7th) and ensure consistency throughout your reference list. Current GenAI tools cannot reliably generate consistent, accurate references.

5. **Understand tool limitations:**

Reference managers work with verifiable, user-supplied data, while GenAI tools may generate plausible but incorrect or fabricated references due to limited access to curated scholarly sources.

6. **Seek SU Librarian support when needed:**

To reduce the risk of including hallucinated or invalid citations, researchers and students are encouraged to consult their respective faculty librarians if they are uncertain about the reliability of any source. SU faculty librarians are the designated experts in evaluating the quality, authenticity, and trustworthiness of academic literature: https://www.su.ac.za/en/library/about-us/faculty-librarians

7. **Uphold accountability:**

Using any tool does not absolve your responsibility as an author. Failing to check references may be considered poor academic practice and could lead to institutional penalties.

References:

Bauchner, H. & Rivara, F.P. 2026. Fabricated references: a new threat to editorial integrity. *The Lancet*, 407(10541):1765–1766. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(26)00798-1

Chelli, M., Descamps, J., Lavoué, V., Trojani, C., Azar, M., Deckert, M., Raynier, J., Clowez, G., Boileau, P. & Ruetsch-Chelli, C. 2024. Hallucination Rates and Reference Accuracy of ChatGPT and Bard for Systematic Reviews: Comparative Analysis. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 26(1):e53164. DOI: 10.2196/53164

Jones, N. 2025. AI hallucinations can't be stopped — but these techniques can limit their damage. *Nature (London)*, 637(8047):778–780. DOI: 10.1038/d41586-025-00068-5

Mashinini, N. 2026. *South Africa's AI policy cited fake research, created by AI: what lessons need to be learned*, 29 April. Available: https://theconversation.com/south-africas-ai-policy-cited-fake-research-created-by-ai-what-lessons-need-to-be-learned-281671 [18 May 2026].

Resnik, D.B. & Hosseini, M. 2026. Hallucinated citations produced by generative artificial intelligence may constitute research misconduct when citations function as data in scholarly papers. *Accountability in Research*, DOI: 10.1080/08989621.2026.2645390

SA News. 2026. *Minister announces withdrawal of draft AI Policy*, 26 April. Available: https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/minister-announces-withdrawal-draft-ai-policy [18 May 2026].

Topaz, M., Roguin, N., Gupta, P., Zhang, Z. & Peltonen, L. 2026. Fabricated citations: an audit across 2·5 million biomedical papers. *The Lancet*, 407(10541):1779–1781. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(26)00603-3

[i] This memorandum was developed with contributions from C.J. Robertson (Division for Research Development), Prof L. Swartz (Psychology), C. Macleod (Division for Research Development) and K. Van Deventer (Library and Information Service). It is issued by the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Internationalisation.