

The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence

COMP90087

Subject Report



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Centre for
Artificial
Intelligence
and Digital Ethics



INTRODUCTION

The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (COMP90087) is a graduate subject designed for students completing a Master of Computer Science, Information Systems or Information Technology. The subject was created by members of Centre of AI and Digital Ethics (CAIDE): Prof. Tim Miller (CAIDE co-founding director), Dr Simon Coghlan (CAIDE deputy director) and Dr Marc Cheong (CAIDE deputy director). COMP90087 was proposed in response to interest expressed by School of Computing and Information Systems (CIS) and Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT), underpinning the strong need for ethics education within the University of Melbourne's technical postgraduate degrees.

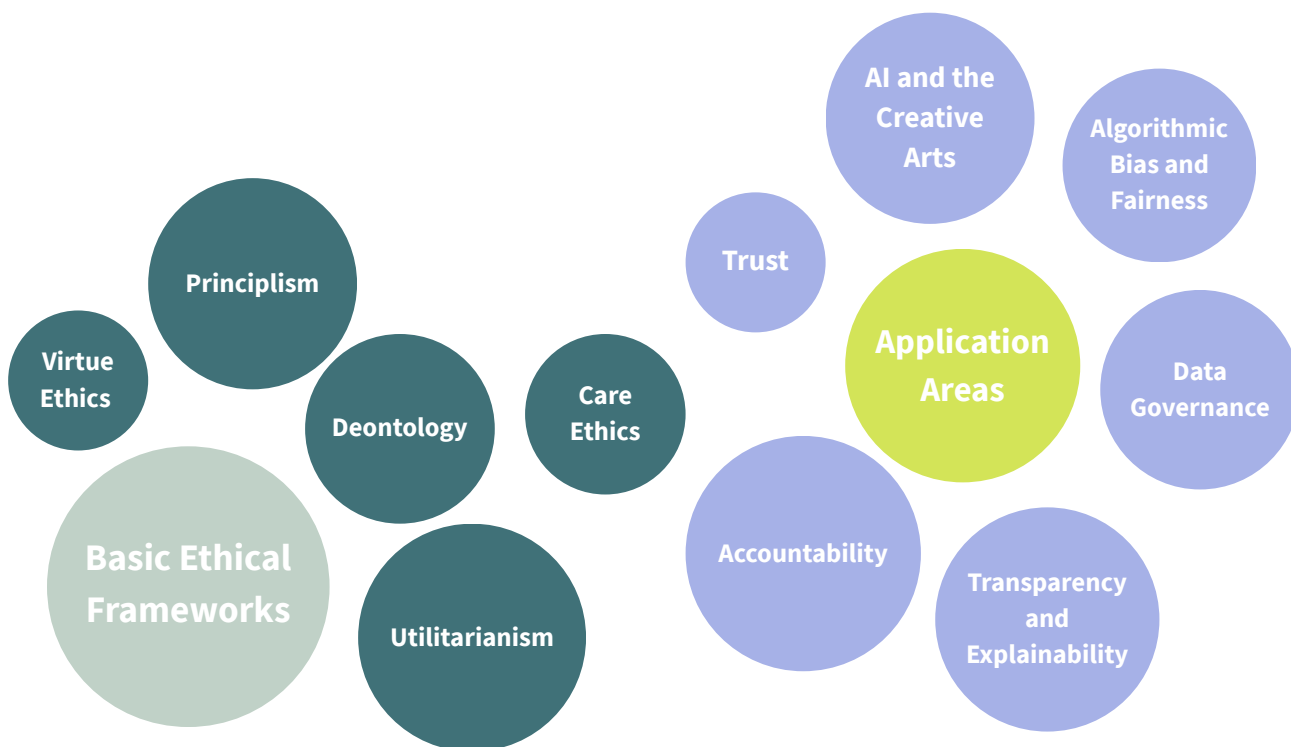
The primary aim of COMP90087 is to entrust the future of AI to ethically conscious professionals. The subject equips students with the tools to critically examine, analyse, and apply ethical perspectives to design, enabling them to deploy digital technologies responsibly. These skills are taught in the context of social and ethical issues arising from the modern technology landscape.

COMP80087 was established in 2021 and has become popular among students. Enrolments have increased at an average rate of 28.23% per year from 2021 to 2025. (Cheong and Coghlan, personal communication, 26 August, 2026) This increase can be attributed to a range of university factors, including, but not limited to, subject popularity and that some masters programs have made the subject compulsory. Students have described the subject as an important interdisciplinary elective which has clear applications in industry and everyday life.

The subject coordinators have created various models of the subject. However, the core pillars have been maintained in each iteration. These include the history of AI, philosophical ethics, issues surrounding AI, and practical approaches to contribute to sustainable innovation.

As the reach and power of digital technologies grow, especially in the wake of the widespread adoption of Large Language Models (LLMs) and social media, Cheong and Coghlan (personal communication, 26 August, 2026) argue that universities have a responsibility to provide accessible digital ethics education.





COMP90087 integrates basic ethical frameworks and their real-world technological applications, broken down into 11 main conceptual areas, as displayed above. (Cheong, personal communication, August 12, 2026)

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Artificial intelligence is changing the way we live, work and make decisions, but it also raises important ethical and social questions. This subject gives students the knowledge and skills to understand both the technology and its impact on people and society.

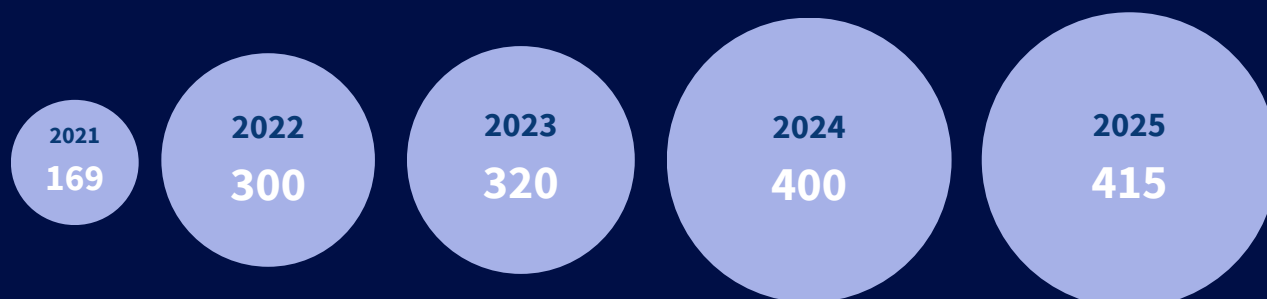
It begins with the history of AI, including its early ambitions, periods of slow progress, and recent breakthroughs such as large language models (LLMs). Students learn how to think critically about AI using major ethical theories, including approaches based on character, rules, principles and virtues. They explore real-world issues such as explainable and trustworthy AI, bias and discrimination, algorithmic justice, accessibility, environmental impacts, privacy, accountability and the future of AI.

By the end of the subject, students will be able to recognise ethical problems, evaluate different viewpoints, and make informed decisions about how AI should be designed, used and governed responsibly.



Dr Simon Coghlan
COMP90087 Subject
Coordinator

STUDENTS TAUGHT EACH YEAR



COMP90087 has steadily increased in enrolments since its 2021 pioneering class. The subject is offered in Semester 1, hence, enrolments for each year are only representative of students who took the subject in this study period. Between 2021 and 2025, the average increase in students was 28.23%. The subject coordinators anticipate future annual enrolments will be between 300 and 400 students. (Cheong and Coghlan, personal communication, 26 August, 2026)

SUBJECT APPRAISALS

INTERVIEW WITH 2026 COMP90087 STUDENT AMBASSADORS*

*Names of students have been anonymised for privacy reasons

Why did students choose to take this subject?

Past students expressed that they had already interacted with AI ethics but lacked the philosophical grounding behind their applications. Student A (personal communication, 19 August, 2026) explained that, as technology professionals, there is an obligation to consider the consequences of deployments, so the choice to take this subject as a Master's elective seemed rather intuitive. COMP90087 has recently become compulsory within some Master's programs. (Coghlan, personal communication, 26 August, 2026).

What were students' experiences of taking COMP90087?

COMP90087 is assessed through tutorial participation, essays and a final exam. Whilst the subject places a strong emphasis on theory, students described the subject as well-structured, informative and impactful. Student B (personal communication, 19 August, 2026) expressed that

COMP90087 has profoundly shifted his decision-making: "...the ethical frameworks [taught in COMP90087] I use nowadays...have made my daily life better. I judge my actions not only based on outcomes but whether I've been following moral rules".

Do students think they are now equipped to manage the ethical and social implications of their work?

The world of technology is rapidly changing. Whilst this subject is not an exhaustive philosophy course, students predominantly agreed that COMP90087 helps to create a firm foundation in ethical critical thinking. For example, Student B (personal communication, 19 August, 2026) noticed that their peers were more conscious of privacy clauses embedded within the technology they deployed and used. Ultimately, COMP90087 has played a vital role in establishing a dialogue between Master's students about the social and ethical implications of their work, which will hopefully continue as they enter industry.

ASSESSMENT	FORMAT	NOTES
IN-CLASS ESSAY	Written, timed	Applies ethical reasoning to a set scenario
RESEARCH ESSAY	1,500 words	Independent analysis of an AI ethics topic
EXAMINATION	Written exam	Covers theories and case studies from lectures

SUBJECT DESIGN

COMP90087 aims to entrust the future of AI to ethically conscious professionals who can critically examine, analyse, and apply ethical perspectives to design, develop and deploy of digital technologies responsibly; Apply established ethical theories to reason about social and ethical issues related to technology; And describe the social and ethical issues raised by technology in various contexts. (The University of Melbourne, 2026) The table above depicts the 2026 assessment structure, which aims to meet these objectives. This structure has changed since previous years.

The subject design enables a breadth of topics to be explored with the subject inviting in multiple guest lectures to talk on the application of ethics in various fields, such as social media, medical AI, large language models, and image generation.

These topics are emphasised in tutorial exercises where students have expressed enthusiasm for the ability to engage with case studies in an application of ethics models on familiar technologies in a new and constructive way (personal communication, 19 August, 2026)

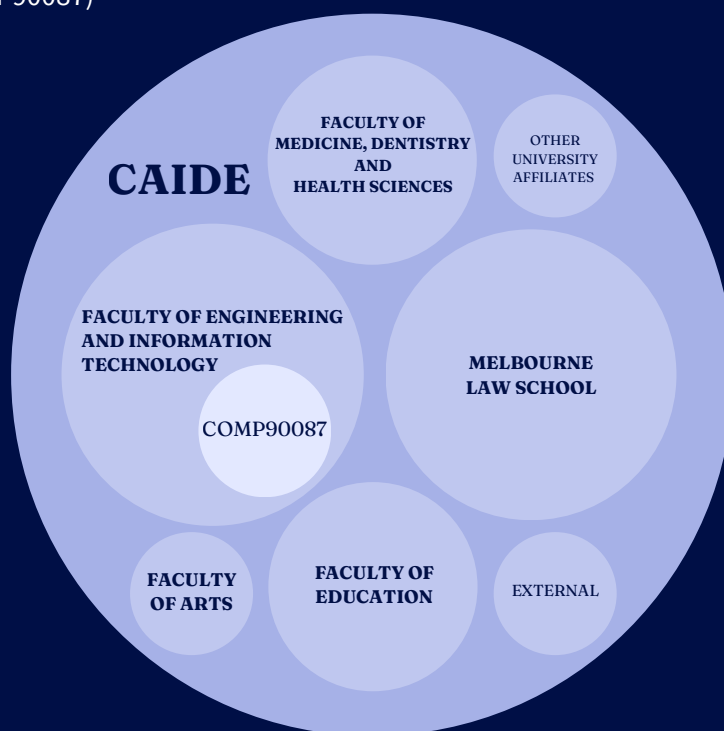
ADAPTING TO NEW TECHNOLOGIES

“We slowly introduced concerns with GPT and other Generative AI technologies in our case studies, and thanks to Simon D’Alfonso and Sarita Rosenstock, we currently have an entire module dedicated to the ethics of Generative AI. Students are able to better unpack the nuances of these technologies on various areas, from art and design, to HR hiring systems.” (Cheong and Coghlan, personal communication, 15 April, 2026).

GROWING WITH THE FIELD

COMP90087 has developed around “growing societal and ethical problems raised by artificial intelligence and other technologies [that have] become a major focus of many organisations” (The University of Melbourne, 2026).

Students have responded well to the subjects commitment to self improvement, with one past student expressing excitement when reflecting on new developments in the field and possible case studies that could be included in future course material (student A, personal communication, 19 August, 2026). Another alumni emphasised how important it is to provide students with a practical ethics education in a time where many students come from industry and may struggle to navigate the ethical frameworks they have been introduced to in an academic environment (student B, personal communication, 19 August, 2026).



COMP90087 AND CAIDE

IN THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION

CAIDE has brought to fruition an expansive teaching portfolio that spans across all of its member faculties. It is in this union of interdisciplinary teaching and accessibility that CAIDE offers a multitude of learning platforms to advance literacy in AI ethics. This includes:

- Workshops and training for civil society and not-for-profit groups
- Student Study (subjects part of an undergraduate degree)

COMP90087 is one example of CAIDE’s efforts to integrate the arts with technology, introducing students to philosophical frameworks that previously would not have been taught within CIS or FEIT.

EFFORTS FOR THE FUTURE

As educational pioneers, maintaining a strong position in emphasising the importance of ethical considerations in technological development is key for safeguarding our future.

The University of Melbourne—through the School of Computing and Information Systems, the Faculty of Engineering and IT, and the Melbourne Law School—is a pioneer of digital ethics education. In collaboration with CAIDE, COMP90087 aims to foster a future of sustainable and thoughtful technological innovation. “The blossoming of digital technology in the 21st century has put us in a state of rapid and rather perplexing change” (Cheong and Coghlan, 2026, p. 113)

CAIDE and COMP90087 are the University’s responses to these changing times. The growth of technology needs to be met with an ethical education, and with the help of COMP90087 demonstrating success, this education can become central to future studies (Paltiel, Cheong, Coghlan & Lederman, 2023).

FINAL REMARKS

It's essential to acknowledge the complexities and challenges of navigating the intersection of technology, business and human values. However, there is a beacon of hope in the form of individuals and organisations who choose to act with integrity, respect and empathy. The question is no longer whether we can build smarter technology, but whether we can do so wisely and justly.

— Adapted from the replies of llama3.2:3b, minstral-0.3-7b, and ChatGPT (GPT-4o), respectively, to the prompt “How to conclude a book on digital ethics with an example” cited in Transition to Digital Ethics by Marc Cheong and Simon Coghlan

We wish that students will remember the lessons we've taught, well after they graduate, and continue having that 'little voice of reason' speak to them in their future tech endeavours.

—Cheong & Coghlan, personal communication, 15 April, 2026

PROJECT TEAM & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This CAIDE subject report was produced by CAIDE Interns, Jessica Tilbury, Alice Jones, Jack Floyd and Emily Chen Gaffy with collaboration from the CAIDE and COMP00087 team: Dr Simon Coghlan, Dr Marc Cheong and Abi Ward.

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