



Online School Spotlight

Leading the way with AI at Minerva Virtual Academy

By Bethany Ewen-Firman, AI Lead

While the global education sector is still locked in debate over AI policy, Minerva Virtual Academy (MVA) has already moved past the 'if' and 'how' questions and appointed a dedicated lead whose entire job is making sure it works.

Bethany Ewen-Firman explains why MVA created a dedicated AI Lead role and how this reflects the school's wider approach to innovation and responsibility.



Why was the role created?

Since ChatGPT arrived in November of 2022, AI tools have been embraced by students faster than institutions can evaluate or even learn how to use them effectively. Online schools, by their very nature, are on the front line of that wave.

Rather than adding AI strategic oversight to an already full role, we created a dedicated AI Lead, a role I was keen to step into to ensure our approach remained ethical, safe and meaningfully beneficial for staff and students.

“We didn't want to just police AI; we wanted to pioneer it. By appointing a dedicated AI Lead, we've been able to focus on moving AI out of the shadows. MVA is not just using and teaching tech, we are modelling the ethical, responsible leadership that defines the future of education.”

Suzanne Lindley, Principal

What is the role of an AI Lead?

The title might suggest something predominantly technical; however, the reality focuses far more on humanity than technology. The role acts as a critical link between technological possibility and classroom reality; between institutional risk and educational opportunity; and between operational efficiency and ethical usage, ensuring that as AI is utilised, the heart of the teacher-student connection remains unchallenged.

One thing AI cannot replicate is empathy, which is why a decade of classroom teaching hasn't just been useful in this role, it has been essential in supporting staff and students.



What does it look like in practice?

In practice, the role is about leading with values and building an ecosystem of responsible AI use. This is achieved through our multi-layered approach, including, but not limited to:

Accountability

- Participation in the Good Future Foundation’s AI Quality Mark, a programme holding schools to the highest standards of responsible AI integration.
- Vetting every tool against our core values, ensuring they are Pedagogy-driven and rooted in Principled Innovation.

Staff Empowerment

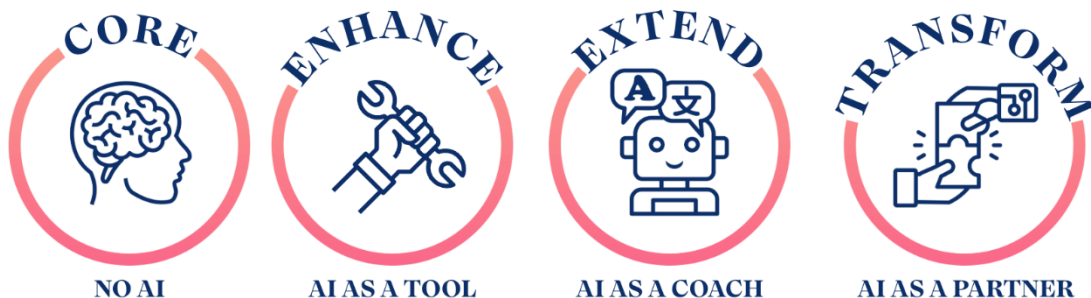
- A monthly training programme and professional development newsletter to build a shared professional culture.
- Supporting staff to find secure alternatives to any tools that fail to meet our values or safety standards.

Student Capabilities

- AI literacy sessions that establish ethical boundaries before students gain access to tools.
- The Student AI Guidance Hub, a central resource for guidance, FAQs, the human-bounded ‘Sandwich Method’, and example use cases.
- The MVA AI Usage Framework: A guide helping students recognise if AI should be used as a Tool to enhance, a Coach to extend, or a Partner to transform their learning.
- Secure, school-governed tool access through a structured learning journey, building habits in a ‘walled garden’ at KS3 with MagicSchool, and moving toward increased autonomy in KS5 with Google’s Gemini and NotebookLM.

Continuous Evolution

- Constant research into the weekly evolution of AI ensures we lead rather than react, a level of continuous development that a ‘bolt-on’ responsibility would find difficult to sustain.





What has been the impact?

The difference a dedicated AI Lead role makes isn't measured in tools or policies, but in the transformation of our culture at MVA.

Nowhere is that clearer than through our AI Club, where students recently took 2nd place in the global Create.Code.Change.Competition. Their vibe-coded app, addressing UN Sustainable Development Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, impressed judges for its design and commitment to accessibility. Students who began using AI to polish a sentence are now building apps that solve real-world problems.

In the classroom, students who once saw AI as something to hide are learning to cite their usage openly, reflecting on how and why they used it for each task using our transparency framework. The conversation has shifted from using AI is cheating, to AI can be a powerful tool, when used responsibly. That change doesn't happen by accident; it happens when expectations are clear, consistently modelled, and built on trust.

For staff, reduced administrative burden has meant more energy directed into the connections that define great teaching and mentoring at MVA, where it matters the most.

“In a short space of time, having a dedicated AI Lead has made a remarkable impact on our whole school community, including staff, students, and parents. The progress made is supporting MVA to navigate an increasingly AI-focused world responsibly.”

Jack Child, Assistant Vice Principal Academic

By centring the role on pedagogical experience rather than technical skill, MVA has ensured that as technology becomes more powerful, the education remains, above all else, deeply human.

Interested in being our next Spotlight school?

We're always on the lookout for innovative approaches and success stories in the world of Cambridge online education. [Click here to register your interest](#) to be featured in an upcoming edition of *Online School Spotlight*.