

Enhancing Administrative Productivity with AI in Higher Education

Administrative assistants in tertiary education can greatly benefit from the latest AI and automation tools to streamline their work. These technologies are increasingly being adopted in universities worldwide to handle routine tasks, improve decision-making, and enhance student and staff services. In fact, a 2024 survey found over 70% of higher education administrators hold a positive view of AI's potential to improve efficiency (even if full adoption is still emerging) ¹. AI-driven tools are already being used to **automate administrative tasks** and data analysis in academia, allowing staff to save time and focus on higher-value work ². Below, we outline the best approaches for using AI in an administrative role, key tools to consider (like ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, NotebookLM, Fathom, and Gamma), examples of how academic institutions are applying these tools in South Africa and internationally, and guidelines for using AI safely in your institution.

Best Approach to Using AI in an Administrative Role

Implementing AI effectively starts with a strategic approach. As an administrative assistant, you should aim to use AI as a supportive “co-pilot” that augments your productivity rather than replaces your judgment. Here are some best-practice steps:

- 1. Identify Repetitive and Time-Consuming Tasks:** Begin by pinpointing tasks in your workflow that are routine, labor-intensive, or prone to delays. Common examples include drafting emails and reports, scheduling meetings, taking meeting minutes, organizing data, or answering frequently asked questions. These are strong candidates for automation or AI assistance.
- 2. Start Small and Pilot AI Tools:** Introduce AI gradually into your daily work. You might start by using a tool like ChatGPT to draft a memo or summarize a long document. Experiment with AI on low-stakes tasks to build confidence and see how it fits your style. For instance, some therapists and executives use ChatGPT to convert rough notes into polished documents or to outline meeting agendas ³ ⁴. Starting with a pilot approach allows you to evaluate the tool's output and adjust your prompts without risking critical work.
- 3. Use AI as an Assistant, Not a Decider:** Treat the AI as a smart assistant that can generate content and suggestions, but **always apply your own oversight**. You remain the decision-maker. AI can draft an email or suggest a scheduling plan, but you should review and edit those outputs. By letting the AI handle the heavy lifting on repetitive tasks (like first-draft writing or data collation), you free up time for more strategic responsibilities that require human insight ⁵. For example, ChatGPT can quickly produce a meeting summary or a list of policy options, enabling you to focus on important decision-making and interpersonal communication ⁵.
- 4. Iterate and Refine Your Prompts:** Getting useful results from AI often depends on how you ask. Learn to craft clear prompts and give context. If an AI draft isn't satisfactory, refine your instructions or provide additional details. Over time, you'll develop prompt templates for common tasks (e.g. “Summarize the attached report and highlight five key takeaways for our department meeting”). This iterative approach helps the AI better meet your needs.

5. **Maintain Human Oversight and Verification:** Always double-check the AI's work. AI tools can sometimes produce incorrect information or a wrong tone ("hallucinations" or bias). It's crucial to **verify facts, figures, and sensitive content** against original sources. Ensure that any document or email generated by AI is accurate and aligns with your institution's style before you send it out. Think of the AI's output as a draft—useful for saving time, but in need of your review and polish.
6. **Integrate AI into Workflow Thoughtfully:** As you become comfortable, look for more opportunities to integrate AI. For example, you might use an AI scheduling assistant to propose meeting times or an AI note-taker in every Zoom meeting to capture minutes. Many modern productivity platforms (email, calendars, project management tools) now have AI features or integrations—leverage those to keep your workflow smooth. Always ensure, however, that any integration complies with your IT policies (more on safety below).
7. **Stay Updated and Collaborate:** AI capabilities are evolving rapidly. Keep learning about new features in tools like Microsoft 365 Copilot or Google's AI offerings, as they can often do more over time (e.g. generating charts in Excel or creating slide decks from a prompt). Share insights with colleagues who are also experimenting with AI. An internal community of practice can exchange prompt ideas, success stories, and cautionary tales, which helps everyone use AI more effectively.

By following these steps, an administrative professional can gradually and safely incorporate AI to handle mundane work. The goal is to **boost your personal productivity** while maintaining the quality and accuracy of your output. Next, we'll look at specific AI tools that are highly relevant for administrative tasks.

Key AI Tools for Administrative Productivity

A variety of AI-powered tools are now available to assist with administrative and personal productivity tasks. Below is a list of recommended tools – including **ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, Microsoft's Copilot, Google's NotebookLM, Fathom, and Gamma** – along with how each can be used in an administrative context:

- **ChatGPT (OpenAI):** A versatile language model that can generate human-like text and converse in natural language. ChatGPT is useful for drafting emails, writing reports, brainstorming ideas, translating or simplifying text, and answering questions. For example, you can paste a long policy document and ask ChatGPT to summarize the key points, or have it draft a first version of a newsletter article. It can also help with creative tasks like slogan ideas or proofreading content. By automating many writing tasks and providing quick information retrieval, *ChatGPT allows admins to focus on more strategic work* ⁵. Always review the output for accuracy and tone, but this tool can save significant time in daily communications and documentation.
- **Google Gemini:** *Gemini* is Google's advanced generative AI platform that combines text intelligence with image and data capabilities. It's integrated into Google Workspace apps and is positioned as a secure, enterprise-ready answer to ChatGPT. Administrative staff can use Gemini in various ways. For instance, within Google Meet, Gemini can act as a real-time note-taker, transcribing and summarizing meeting discussions so you can be more present in the conversation ⁶. In Google Docs or Gmail, you can prompt Gemini to draft announcements or condense long threads. In Sheets, Gemini can help analyze data or create charts via natural language commands ⁶. At Wake Forest University, admins used Gemini to *automate meeting*

notes and speed up data analysis in Google Sheets – cutting an 8-hour task down to 30 minutes ⁶ . Because it's part of Google's ecosystem, Gemini operates within your institution's Google environment, which means data stays within approved boundaries and Google's safety controls (per their CIO, it provides *"private and secure generative AI at scale"* with appropriate protections ⁷).

- **Microsoft 365 Copilot:** *Copilot* is Microsoft's AI assistant integrated into the Office 365 suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, Teams, etc.). It uses OpenAI's GPT-4 model along with Microsoft Graph data (your files, emails, calendar) to help generate content and answer queries *within your organization's secure cloud*. Copilot can draft Word documents from a brief prompt, build PowerPoint slides based on a topic outline, analyze Excel data to provide insights or create charts, and even summarize long email threads in Outlook ⁸ . For an administrative assistant, this means repetitive chores like formatting documents, creating first drafts of reports, or extracting action items from meetings can be done in seconds by Copilot. It's designed to respect enterprise security – for example, Copilot will utilize your SharePoint/OneDrive files to give context but *won't expose any data outside your organization's compliance boundaries* ⁹ . Faculty at some universities use Copilot to speed up report writing, and staff use it to automate routine paperwork and email responses ¹⁰ . Keep in mind that Copilot is a paid add-on (as of 2025, Microsoft's enterprise Copilot costs about \$30/user/month ¹¹), but it comes with robust privacy safeguards and could be well worth the efficiency gains.
- **Google NotebookLM:** *NotebookLM* (formerly known as Project Tailwind) is an AI-powered research and note-taking assistant from Google. Think of it as an AI that you can train on your own documents. You upload or select a set of documents (e.g. meeting minutes, policy PDFs, or a collection of your notes), and then NotebookLM allows you to query them in natural language and get summaries or answers **grounded in those source materials** ¹² ¹³ . This is extremely useful for an administrator dealing with lots of institutional documents – for example, you could upload a set of HR policies and ask NotebookLM questions like "What is our procedure for academic travel approval?" and it will generate an answer with references from the policy documents. It can also produce summaries or even brainstorm ideas based on the content you provide ¹⁴ ¹⁵ (e.g. upload a strategic plan and ask for a bullet-point summary or suggestions for implementation steps). A key benefit of NotebookLM is that it's *"grounded" in your provided content, which reduces hallucinations and keeps the answers contextually relevant* ¹³ . Google also emphasizes privacy with this tool – the AI model only accesses the documents you choose to share with it, and *your files and interactions are not used to train Google's models or visible to others* ¹⁶ . This makes it safer for institutional use, as you can leverage AI on sensitive documents without those documents leaving your controlled environment. NotebookLM is still experimental, but some universities (e.g. those in Google's early adopters program) have begun using it to summarize lengthy reports and assist in drafting policy documents ¹⁷ .
- **Fathom (AI Meeting Assistant):** *Fathom* is a popular AI notetaker that works with video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. It automatically **records, transcribes, and summarizes meetings**, which is a boon for an administrative assistant who often has to take meeting minutes. With Fathom enabled in your calls, you can concentrate on the discussion and let the AI capture what's said. Within moments after the meeting ends (often in under 30 seconds), Fathom generates a summary of the key points and action items ¹⁸ . It can also tag important moments or decisions during the meeting. For example, if your department meeting had a decision on the budget, Fathom's summary will highlight that. These summaries can be edited and shared, saving you the trouble of writing minutes from scratch. Fathom even allows you to ask questions of the transcript (like "What did we say about the upcoming conference?") and will give an answer or pull up the exact quote – essentially *"ChatGPT*

for your meetings,” as the company describes ¹⁹. By using Fathom, you reduce the cognitive load of note-taking and ensure nothing important is missed or forgotten. Always review the AI’s notes for accuracy (especially if multiple people were talking or if there were technical terms), but in general this tool can save **20+ minutes of note-writing per meeting** and integrates with task managers or CRM systems to log action items automatically ²⁰. It’s a free or reasonably low-cost tool, though you should ensure any meeting recordings are handled in line with privacy policies (Fathom promises compliance and does not store data beyond the user’s account, but verify this for your needs).

- **Gamma:** *Gamma* is an AI tool for creating presentations and visual documents quickly. As an administrative professional, you often need to prepare slide decks for meetings, training sessions, or reports for leadership – Gamma can automate much of this process. You simply type in what you need (for example, “Create a 5-slide presentation on the department’s Q3 accomplishments with visuals and one slide on challenges ahead”), and Gamma will generate a draft slideshow with design, layout, and even suggested images/text content. It uses smart templates and design AI to produce professional-looking results without you needing advanced PowerPoint skills ²¹. This can save you a lot of formatting time. You can easily refine the output by regenerating specific slides or editing the content, but the bulk of the work – choosing a consistent style, adding icons or graphics, outlining points – is done for you. Gamma ensures presentations are engaging and coherent, giving non-designers the ability to produce quality slide decks quickly ²². Of course, sensitive data should be added carefully, and you’ll want to double-check that the slides accurately reflect your information (AI might sometimes phrase things differently than expected). Still, for routine presentations or drafts, Gamma can be a huge time-saver and can also generate other formats (like visual documents or webpages) to share information creatively.

These tools each target different aspects of an administrative assistant’s workload – from writing and data analysis to meetings and presentations. You don’t need to use all of them at once; choose the ones that fit your institution’s tech ecosystem and your specific duties. For example, if your university is a Microsoft shop, Copilot might be the most seamless choice; if you use Google Workspace, then Gemini and NotebookLM would integrate naturally. Many of these tools can be used in combination as well (e.g. using Fathom to get a meeting transcript, then pasting key points into ChatGPT or Copilot to draft a follow-up email). The common theme is that they **automate repetitive work and provide quick insights**, enabling you to be more efficient and proactive.

How Academic Institutions are Applying AI and Automation

International trends: Around the world, universities and colleges are embracing AI to improve both academic and administrative functions. One major area is the use of AI **chatbots and virtual assistants** to handle inquiries and support services. Universities have deployed chatbots to answer student questions about admissions, financial aid, course registration, IT support, and more on a 24/7 basis ²³ ²⁴. This reduces the load on administrative staff and provides instant responses for students. For example, Georgia State University’s chatbot (“Pounce”) answers thousands of questions from prospective students, helping reduce summer melt (when admitted students fail to enroll) and improving student performance by keeping them informed ²⁵ ²⁶. Many institutions also use internal-facing chatbots to help staff – for instance, “many colleges use chatbots to handle daily administrative tasks, answer HR questions, and improve communications between staff members.” ²⁴ In other words, AI assistants aren’t just for students; they can streamline internal workflows (like an HR chatbot that employees can ask about leave policies or IT issues).

Generative AI in university offices: Besides chatbots, staff are leveraging generative AI tools (like the ones described above) for writing and research tasks. Faculty and admin staff at Boise State University reported using Google's Gemini AI to brainstorm content ideas for marketing and communications ²⁷ . At San Diego State, faculty use Gemini and NotebookLM to help draft lecture materials and analyze research, while administrators use them to summarize reports and accelerate data analysis ²⁸ . In one notable example, Wake Forest University's Provost's Office combined Gemini and NotebookLM to summarize lengthy documents and assist in crafting university policies, significantly cutting down the time required to digest information ⁶ . These examples show that *AI is being used to augment human work* – the AI might pull together a summary of student feedback, but a staff member will use that summary to make decisions or write policy, faster than they could by reading everything themselves.

South Africa and African institutions: South African universities are also proactively exploring AI for both education and administration. A standout case is the **University of Johannesburg (UJ)**, which implemented a comprehensive AI chatbot named **"MoUji"** to assist with student administrative processes. Launched in 2020, MoUji uses AI (built on Amazon Lex) to simulate human-like conversations and is integrated with UJ's student information systems ²⁹ ³⁰ . It can instantly answer common questions related to **applications, registrations, financial statements, course timetables, and more** – tasks that would otherwise flood the admissions and admin offices ³⁰ . Crucially, MoUji isn't just a basic FAQ bot; it can perform actions like checking a student's application status, retrieving their exam schedule, or helping reset a portal PIN because it's securely tied into the university's data ³¹ ²⁹ . By offering 24/7 self-service support in multiple channels (web, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp), this AI assistant eased the burden on UJ's staff, **reducing email/phone inquiries by a huge margin and saving the university significant costs** (they used to spend an extra R800k on temporary staff each admissions season) ³² ³³ . Other South African institutions are following suit or at least piloting similar solutions. The University of the Free State, for example, deployed an AI chatbot that substantially cut down live chat requests and support tickets by handling student queries automatically ³⁴ .

On the **operational side**, universities in the region and beyond are looking at AI and **robotic process automation (RPA)** to streamline back-end tasks such as data entry, invoice processing, scheduling of classes, and generating routine reports. For instance, automated scheduling tools (like AI-driven timetable generators) can optimize classroom allocations, and AI analysis on student data can help administrators identify trends (such as predicting which students might need academic support based on performance data) ² . South African higher education is aware of these potential benefits – a recent analysis noted that *AI-driven tools are being employed to personalize learning, automate administrative processes, and analyze student performance data in universities* ² . At the same time, institutions are cautious about challenges like data privacy and equity. The **Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA)** in 2023 issued guidance on generative AI, urging universities to craft policies that allow innovation in using tools like ChatGPT while guarding against misuse or breaches of academic integrity ³⁵ ³⁶ . Many universities in South Africa (and globally) have since drafted AI policies or task forces – typically these policies encourage exploring AI for efficiency and learning gains, but underscore that AI output should be verified and that students/staff should disclose AI assistance in academic work when required ³⁷ ³⁸ .

In summary, academic institutions internationally are **embracing AI and automation to improve administrative efficiency**: from chatbots that handle thousands of queries, to generative AI that helps write and summarize, to AI scheduling and analytics that inform decision-making. The result can be faster service for students and reduced workload for staff. As an administrative assistant, tapping into these same tools can help you mirror those productivity gains in your daily role. The key is to do so in a way that aligns with your institution's guidelines and to remain conscientious about accuracy and confidentiality.

Using AI Tools Safely and Responsibly in Your Institution

While AI tools offer significant productivity benefits, it's vital to use them **safely, ethically, and in accordance with institutional policies**. Here are important considerations to ensure that your use of AI is responsible and doesn't put your organization at risk:

- **Adhere to Data Privacy and Security Policies:** Before using any AI tool, understand your institution's rules on data handling. Many AI platforms send input data to the cloud for processing, which could be a concern if that data is sensitive (e.g. student records, personal identifiable information, confidential plans). **Never input confidential or sensitive information into consumer AI tools** unless you have permission and trust their security. For example, you should not paste a list of student names and grades into ChatGPT, because that data would leave your secure environment. Whenever possible, use enterprise-approved versions: if your institution has access to **ChatGPT Enterprise, Microsoft 365 Copilot, or Google's AI tools under organizational accounts**, prefer those over personal accounts. Enterprise AI offerings usually promise not to use your data for training and to keep data within certain regions or compliance frameworks. Microsoft notes that Copilot works *within your organization's trusted cloud, leveraging data from OneDrive/SharePoint but "without exposing content outside your organization's compliance boundaries."*³⁹ *This kind of design is important for protecting information. Similarly, Google's NotebookLM and Gemini, when used under institutional Google Workspace, follow admin-controlled policies on data access*^{40 41}. *Always double-check the terms: for instance, OpenAI's free ChatGPT does save conversations for model training by default, whereas ChatGPT Enterprise does not – a critical distinction for privacy.*
- **Follow Institutional AI Guidelines:** Many universities now have guidelines or codes of practice for using AI. These might include rules like requiring disclosure if content was AI-generated, or prohibiting use of AI in certain decisions without human review. Make sure you're aware of any such policies at your workplace. For example, some institutions allow staff to use AI to draft documents **as long as the staff member validates and remains accountable** for the content. USC's IT department, in rolling out Microsoft Copilot, explicitly reminds users that *over-reliance on AI without human oversight can lead to inaccuracies, and that faculty/staff must follow info security standards and treat AI outputs with the same scrutiny as if they wrote them*³⁸. In practice, this means if you use AI to help write a policy memo, you should verify every fact and ensure the final text meets all compliance and tone requirements, just as you would if you authored it from scratch. Always **own the output** – AI is a tool, but you are responsible for the final product.
- **Beware of "Hallucinations" and Errors:** Even advanced AI models can sometimes produce incorrect statements, made-up references, or biased content. This is known as AI "hallucination." Do not assume the AI is always correct. If you ask ChatGPT to draft an email with statistics about enrollment, double-check those numbers against official reports. If Copilot creates a spreadsheet formula, test it on known data. Think of AI suggestions as a helpful starting point that might occasionally be wrong. It's best to use AI in areas where you can quickly verify the results. If you use it in areas outside your expertise, exercise extra caution. For important communications or decisions, have a second person review the AI-assisted content if possible.
- **Keep Human Judgment in the Loop:** Some tasks should **not** be fully handed over to AI. For instance, deciding on hiring a candidate or evaluating a student complaint are sensitive processes where AI might introduce bias or miss context. Use AI for what it's good at (speed and pattern recognition) but combine it with human judgment for nuance. If you use an AI to analyze survey feedback from students, let it highlight trends, but you should interpret those trends in

context. Always ask, “Does this result make sense? Is it fair and aligned with our values?” If an AI output seems odd or inappropriate, trust your instincts and either refine the prompt or do the task manually.

- **Respect Ethical and Legal Boundaries:** Remember that using AI doesn’t absolve you of ethical responsibility. Plagiarism rules, for example, still apply – if you use AI to gather text from somewhere, ensure it’s properly attributed if used publicly. When generating content, be mindful of copyrights (don’t have AI reproduce large chunks of copyrighted text) and privacy (don’t publicize private data). In South Africa and many other countries, data protection laws (like POPIA or GDPR) require careful handling of personal data – inputting personal data into an AI service could be considered a form of processing or sharing, so only do so in compliance with these laws. Use AI outputs in a way that does not discriminate or create harm; AI can inadvertently reflect biases in its training data, so be the ethical gatekeeper for anything it produces.
- **Adopt a “Transparency when Needed” Policy:** In internal work, it might not always be necessary to announce “AI helped with this,” but in some cases transparency is encouraged. If you’re in a context where stakeholders care (say, drafting a policy document or official report), it might be worth noting that you used AI as a tool, similar to how one might note using a template. At the very least, keep a personal log of how AI was used for important tasks, in case questions arise. In academic settings, students are often asked to disclose AI assistance to avoid academic dishonesty; for staff, it’s less formal, but being open with your team about using AI can help share knowledge and demystify the tools. It can also allow your institution to highlight productivity improvements (some universities publicly share stories like “our admissions office saved X hours using an AI assistant”). That said, always frame it as assistance to *your* work, not a replacement for it.
- **Adopt Tools with Official Support:** Whenever possible, use AI tools that your IT department or institution officially supports or has vetted. Many universities are launching pilots of tools like Microsoft Copilot or have subscriptions to services (e.g. an institutional license for an AI transcription service). Using approved tools means they’ve been checked for security and there’s likely vendor support or IT support if something goes wrong. If a tool is not approved and you find it really useful, consider reaching out to IT or leadership about trying it in a controlled manner – they might be open to it, especially if you can show a clear benefit. Always avoid tools that are clearly against policy (for instance, an unvetted app that asks for your university login credentials – that’s a red flag). Stick to well-known, reputable AI services and read their privacy policies.

In conclusion, **using AI safely** comes down to combining the power of these advanced tools with your own professional judgment and your institution’s guidelines. When used thoughtfully, AI can be a game-changer for personal productivity in administrative roles – helping you draft, analyze, and organize faster than ever. By staying within safe boundaries – protecting sensitive data, verifying outputs, and adhering to policy – you can reap the benefits of AI while mitigating the risks. Academic institutions in South Africa and around the world are learning that the best results come from a *responsible adoption* of AI: embracing innovation with eyes open to the challenges. As an administrative assistant, you can lead by example, showing how these tools improve efficiency, while also upholding the accuracy, integrity, and confidentiality that your role requires.

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