



Dr Aaron Cheng

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Why schools shouldn't ban smartphones from the classroom

*Calls to bans smartphones in schools have been increasing in recent years—driven by the view that they are sources of distraction. **Dr Aaron Cheng** challenges this position by drawing on his recent research, and argues that when used correctly, smartphones can be useful tools that enhance learning rather than detract from it.*

In October 2024, British Labour MP Josh McAlister introduced the Safer Phones Bill which aimed to protect children from the negative impacts of excessive screen time and suggested banning the use of smartphones in schools and raising the digital age of consent from 13 to 16. Since then, the bill has been “**watered down**”, and now calls on the education secretary to produce a research plan into the impact of use of social media on children within 12 months.

Banning smartphones in the classroom has become an **increasingly prevalent** trend in UK schools. Indeed, it is a trend seen worldwide as well, with countries such as France, China, and the United States increasingly supporting restrictions, arguing these devices fuel distractions, cyberbullying, and misinformation.

However, **research** my colleagues and I published in Information Systems Research suggests these bans miss a critical point: the real issue is not smartphones themselves but how teachers guide their use. Instead of bans, teachers should be properly equipped with tools and training to integrate the already ubiquitous devices in lessons—thereby turning smartphones into powerful learning tools rather than distractions.

By drawing on the international example in our research, I invite UK policymakers and educational leaders to consider an alternative to bans.

What previous research missed

Smartphone usage in the UK has **surged in recent years** from 44% in 2011 to 93% in 2024. Yet despite their ubiquity, we still lack a clear understanding of how smartphones affect classroom learning. Most prior research focused on broad technology investments in the classroom rather than how students use their personal smartphones during lessons. To address this, our research examined how different smartphone use shapes attention toward learning (versus distraction) and academic performance.

We conducted randomised controlled trials with over 1,000 vocational school students aged 14 to 23 in China. Students were randomly assigned to one of three policies: (i) complete ban, (ii) unguided smartphone use, and (iii) teacher-guided smartphone use. The experimental lectures focused on Chinese verbal lessons. In the guided condition, teachers asked students to use a pre-installed Chinese dictionary app to check pronunciation, definitions, and etymology. Under all conditions, students took identical quizzes before and after the lectures to measure performance gain. We also used video recordings to track how they spent time between learning and distractions, both on and off smartphones.

Guidance changes everything

The results revealed a clear contrast between policies. In classrooms where smartphones are allowed, students used smartphones for about 9 minutes in every 90-minute session regardless of the policy. But without teacher guidance, almost all that time (roughly 8.5 minutes) was lost to social media, messaging, and gaming, with only 36 seconds spent on learning. With teacher guidance, productive learning time on smartphones rose to nearly 4 minutes, while distraction fell to about 5.5 minutes.

This shift was not only statistically significant but educationally meaningful. Although banning smartphones slightly improved quiz scores compared to unguided use, teacher-guided smartphone use boosted performance substantially, improving quiz scores by an average of 32% of a standard deviation. Gains were especially pronounced among students who had struggled academically before the trial – their performance improved nearly 2.7 times more than that of their peers, indicating that well-guided smartphone use can help narrow educational gaps.

The school's headteacher, who observed the trials, summed it up: "By guiding students to use their smartphones constructively, we turned potential distractions into productive learning. This not only improved academic outcomes but also enhanced students' school experience, taught responsible IT use, and built trust between teachers and students."

Smartphones vs. Paper

We also tested whether smartphones offered unique advantages over traditional tools. In a follow-up experiment, we compared smartphone-assisted learning with equivalent paper-based resources. Smartphones significantly outperformed paper, thanks to instant access to information, interactivity, and convenience. This shows smartphones are not merely digital substitutes for textbooks but can enable different, often more engaging, ways of learning.

Uneven Benefits and Policy Implications

Notably, the benefits were not shared equally. Students majoring in information technology, those from urban areas, males, and lower-performing students benefited the most. This raises concerns about a potential “rich-get-richer” effect. Educators and policymakers need to develop targeted support strategies (e.g., training programs or subject-specific apps for students less familiar with digital tools) to ensure all students can benefit.

Further, our research examined only students aged 14-23, equivalent to GCSE aged secondary school students through university years in the UK. More research would need to examine the impact at younger ages, however, our findings show clear benefits to guided smartphone use from the age of 14, an age that young adults should arguably be becoming familiar with the digital aspects and tools of modern life.

A Balanced Way Forward

While our research examined an international example, it offers valuable insights and suggests that the prevailing narrative of smartphone bans might need closer examination, rather than reactive implementation based that ignores reality.

With smartphones now nearly universal — **100% of UK 16-24-year-olds** used one — outright bans seem increasingly impractical. A more effective strategy is to equip teachers with the right training and classroom tools to guide smartphone use. With thoughtful integration, smartphones can become powerful learning tools rather than distractions.

Banning smartphones also ignores the reality that they are already central to students’ daily lives. Used wisely, smartphones can foster real-time collaboration, instant access to information, personalised learning, and responsible digital citizenship — skills essential for the modern world.

Our findings strongly advocate a balanced, practical approach to smartphone use in education. Instead of banning them, educators and policymakers should focus on turning these devices into structured, valuable learning opportunities.

If we must ban something, ban the **use** of technology for distraction, **not the presence** of technology itself. Those who advocate bans often forget the ultimate purpose of classroom learning: it's about learning, not about smartphones. When smartphones can be used to assist and improve learning (and their benefits outweigh their costs), there's no reason to ban them.

- Check out the [Management With Impact Podcast](#) to discover more on this topic from Dr Cheng.
- This blog is based on: Zhe Deng, Zhi (Aaron) Cheng, Pedro Ferreira, Paul A. Pavlou (2025) [From Smartphones to Smart Students: Learning vs. Distraction Using Smartphones in the Classroom](#). *Information Systems Research* 0(0).
- This blog post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of the London School of Economics and Political Science Department of Management.
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